

FISHING

Goliath grouper: An uncertain future?



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Wilbur may not realize it, but he sure has a lot of friends. He could, in fact, be one of the most popular Goliath groupers, at least on Facebook.

That's right. Wilbur is a Goliath grouper, and he has a Facebook page.

According to his page, Wilbur is about 11 years old and lives in 110 feet of water on the Castor wreck off Boynton Beach. Scuba divers who visit the wreck love his friendliness. He frequently swims up to divers for a scratch under his chin and to pose for photo ops.

Suzanne Edwards, of Lake Worth, is a diver who would hate it if one day Wilbur was caught by a fisherman and invited home to dinner. Edwards was one of about 65 people who attended an Oct. 11 workshop on Goliath grouper in downtown Stuart.

To harvest, or not?

Wednesday in Tallahassee, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will wrap up a 16-city public workshop tour of the state discussing the future of the Goliath grouper. The workshops began in late July in Palm Beach County and covered the coastal regions of Florida in an effort to inform stakeholders like divers, anglers, researchers and commercial fishermen of a potential plan to open the fishery for limited harvest, and receive feedback from these groups.

It is part of the process the FWC uses to manage fish and wildlife stocks in Florida. First, a stock assessment is conducted. The most recent one for Goliath grouper was completed in

late 2016 (others were completed in 2004 and 2010). At the February FWC Commission meeting, commissioners directed FWC staff to gather public input on the possibility of a limited harvest in state waters. Staff is to report back to the commissioners at its December meeting, as long as all the information can be compiled by then. Disruption to FWC work flows caused by Hurricane Irma may delay the report.

At the Stuart meeting, more than half in attendance supported keeping Goliath grouper harvest prohibited. The workshop involved a brief Powerpoint presentation followed by a brief question-and-answer discussion period. It closed with a 34-question survey where those in attendance responded to multiple choice answers with a wireless remote control clicker.

When asked if there should be no harvest of Goliath grouper or whether the state should allow a limited harvest of Goliath grouper, 59 percent responded to keep the fish off limits to harvest.

In recent years, recreational anglers and lobster divers have complained about losing targeted catches like snapper, gag grouper, lobster and snook to opportunistic goliath grouper which grab them off their lines and spearguns.

Dive with a giant

There is still a clear division in how various groups would like to manage one of the state's most recognizable and largest marine fish. Scuba divers and dive charter operators throughout the state would like to see the prohibition on harvest — in place since 1990 because of overfishing — continue. They say the fish have become marine attractions to visiting divers and are therefore economically important. A 2016 University of Miami study indicated divers would be willing to pay \$100 for one Goliath grouper sighting and up to \$200 to visit a Goliath grouper spawning site. Between July and September, Goliath grouper are known to have large spawning aggregations off the coast of Martin and Palm Beach counties, as well as several sites identified in the Gulf of Mexico off Southwest Florida.

"I've been diving in South Florida for 37 years and it was only recently we began to see

goliath groupers on a regular basis," said Suzanne Edwards, of Lake Worth, who attended the Stuart workshop and carried a large poster of Wilbur pleading: "This is my friend Wilbur. Please do not MURDER him."

"Why do we need to harvest them? We're finally getting to see them again and we only get to see them for about two months out of the year," Edwards said.

Researchers who have studied Goliath grouper and other grouper and snapper species claim the fish's numbers simply do not support any kind of harvest.

"Fish are wildlife; They are not commodities," wrote Sarah Frias-Torres, an independent marine biologist and oceanographer, in a recent post on her blog, Grouper Luna. Frias-Torres helped document the spawning aggregations off South Florida when they were first discovered. "They are an integral part of marine and freshwater ecosystems. They are not numbers in stock assessment models, but animals with complex life histories."

Catch, or catch and release?

Capt. Mike Maher, of Vero Beach, has been a fishing guide and a commercial and recreational diver who has seen his share of Goliath grouper. He said he is not for or against a harvest of Goliath grouper, but was disappointed the workshop did not address one point: As anglers fish for other species which live on the same reefs as Goliath grouper, the apex predator will overtake the reef's ability to shelter other fish.

"The other fisheries are being harvested and thinned out while Goliaths are not," Maher said. "They can over proliferate, putting the whole fishery ecosystem out of balance reef by reef. To me, that is everything in a nutshell."

Maher loves seeing the fish when he takes customers fishing.

"If you want to see them in all their glory, drift Sebastian Inlet during the summer," he said. "I personally wouldn't want to take one and eat it."

Capt. Mike Murray, of Mattanza charters in Port Salerno, said he would support a limited harvest of Goliath grouper. One of the FWC proposals was to use a tag system similar to

how the tarpon "kill" tag works where an angler pays a fee to obtain a permit to take one per year. Murray said it gives the state a way to closely regulate how many are legally harvested and where. He said he would support up to \$100 per tag if he could purchase up to about four to use with charters,

FWC commissioners will likely discuss the results from the workshops at its scheduled meeting Dec. 6-7 in Gainesville.

Regulations

It is unlawful to harvest, possess, land purchase, sell or exchange Goliath grouper in state or federal waters.

Next step

Wednesday: Final in-person workshop to take place 6-9 p.m. at Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission headquarters, Bryant Building, Room 272, 620 S. Meridian St., Tallahassee. To view the online presentation and take part in the online survey, go to Goliath grouper workshop on the FWC website.