

Boca Beacon November 21, 2011

PTTS is Doing More Damage than Jigging ... a commentary by Richard Hirsch

I call for immediate and substantive Professional Tarpon Tournament Series rule changes, or else for the immediate termination of the entire series. The horrible PTTS fishing techniques and behaviors are destroying the Boca Grande fishery. PTTS is turning a wonderful natural resource (a public resource) into a very private profit-oriented threat to the fishery. It has turned many weekends into a commercial, free-for-all, which abuses the public assets. Port Aransas, Texas and nearby Homosassa have both suffered enormous collapses of their tarpon populations. The causes are many but, in essence, nobody raised the red flag before it was too late. Make no mistake that the rules and techniques employed by the PTTS pose a current threat to the continued return of tarpon to our waters.

It has been so easy to concentrate on the jigging aspect of the PTTS that we might overlook some of the other serious damages being done to the fishery by these people. But, we should not let the jig off the hook. The past legal challenges to the PTTS have mostly centered on user group fights (our type of fishing suffers due to their type of fishing,) or on gear questions (the frequency of snagging due to the jig), or on county, state or FWC suits. None have proved successful to date.

Many of us agree that it is a terrible mystery as to why the town, the county, the state, the FWC and the television sponsors of this private, profit-driven tournament have all sat by, for various reasons, and allowed the obvious degradation of the Boca Grande/Charlotte Harbor's fishery to continue.

Here are a few other aspects of the PTTS that deserve thought and right-minded action:

1. Tarpon are dying because of the PTTS techniques. We have evidence from many eyewitnesses that dead tarpon are regularly found floating in Boca Grande's waters directly following a weekend PTTS event. Rare are the reports of dead tarpon at any other time. Extremely rare. PTTS anglers generally hook their tarpon with very light lines which end up causing a much longer battle which in turn seriously fatigues the tarpon. The jigs themselves do damage, as many hookups are outside the mouth and damage scales and gills. Then the whole process of gaffing and roping the fish alongside of the boat is hurtful. Then the dragging of roped fish (often with heads out of water) to the weigh station is highly detrimental. And, finally, after all these extreme stresses, the fish are weighed and photographed at the beach. The combination of these behaviors is the reason we often see dead tarpon floating after a tournament. Did I forget to mention that highly-stressed fish are wonderful shark bait?

2. The fact that PTTS is a private for-profit tournament speaks volumes about the unregulated and destructive behavior of the PTTS owner, managers, captains and anglers. Most other fishing tournaments are primarily held for charitable causes. Most of the PTTS events pay the first prize team about \$35,000. However, it may be that the owner of the PTTS company, Mr. Joseph Mercurio, makes most of his money by broadcasting each of the individual events on Sun

Sports/FOX and on World Fishing Networks. Mr. Mercurio sells advertising space on each of his many regional broadcasts. His private revenue may be the leading factor causing the flagrant disregard for the health of the fishery. The PTTS rules need immediate change and if not, the PTTS needs immediate termination.

3. Boca Grande's history was, and to a smaller extent today, is centered around a much more sporting and traditional tarpon fishery ... not a money-grubbing, fish-killing, crowd that likes to play bumper cars in the Pass and screams with joy when a shark hits a hooked tarpon, or even chums up these sharks prior to the events, or delights in a low-skill/high-kill technique. The rules the PTTS follow are not changing with the times, they are greedily smashing a world-famous tradition and ruining this fishery.

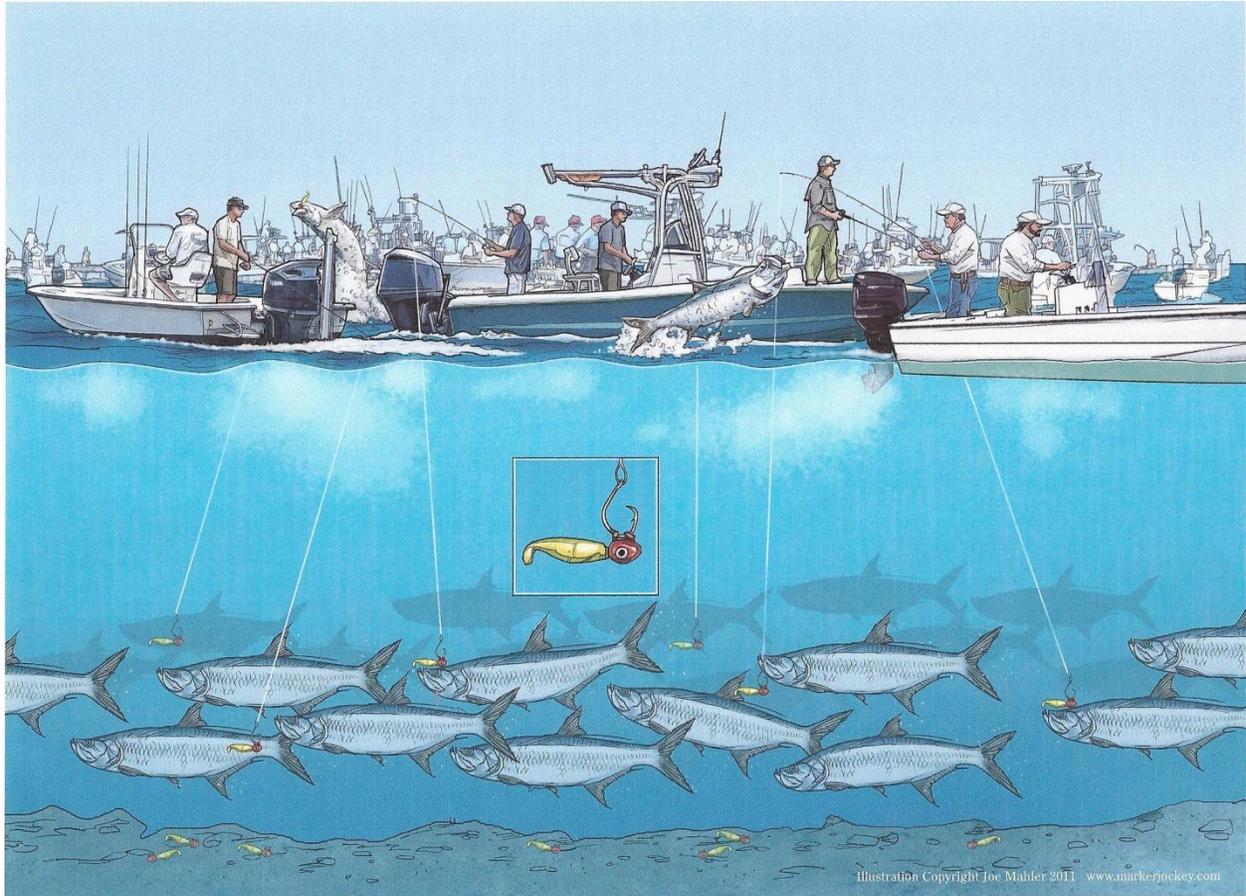
4. Biologists believe that the huge tarpon aggregations in the deep hole of the Pass tend to occur at one particular tide. Other knowledgeable locals believe that many of the PTTS events are scheduled specifically at this particular tide in order to fish into the tightly-packed aggregation with jigging gear (jigs will not be effective at any other time or place.)

In my mind, targeting the tightly-packed group of fish is the single most destructive aspect of the PTTS. If, as more and more captains and scientists have come to believe, this tightly-packed aggregation is a pre-spawning ritual, then the PTTS fishing style is focused solely on a vital aspect of the survival of this fish population.

It is disgusting that the PTTS laser targets a crucial life characteristic of Boca Grande's fishery. PTTS boats gun their motors to hang in fast currents directly above the pack of fish. Then they bomb the fish with leaded jigs. It is crazy and irresponsible to mess around with the 10-20,000 fish that are all stacked up in "the hole" in this manner. The PTTS rules require targeting this valuable part of the tarpon's life cycle by insisting that all boats fish only in a tightly-limited boundary.

Due to the wide ranging migrations of this "silver king," what happens in Boca Grande does not stay in Boca Grande. Damage to the Boca Grande population can directly affect the entire tarpon population in the Gulf. The late and great Billy Pate succinctly said it best..."Their fish are our fish!"

With all this in mind, where is the conservation in the FWC's regulation? Unless the PTTS changes its rules immediately, many folks should support termination of the PTTS. If you are not clear about the number and location of these tarpon in the hole, ask a local captain if the electric fish finders show thousands of tarpon stacked one on top of the other in a tight-packed area at a certain tide. Mostly you will see large females on the bottom while smaller males hang above them. Now, do you see how bombing this tight aggregation of fish with heavy lead jigs is ripping off the fish scales and also is ripping off the entire fishery? These highly-destructive techniques (see the illustration) must stop before we look back and wonder where the tarpon have gone.



5. How does PTTS get away with this? A very good question! The courts have refused to get involved. The FWC has been strangely turning a blind eye. Charlotte County is actually listed as a PTTS sponsor. Tallahassee doesn't even register the PTTS as a problem. Do the authorities think this is just a "user group" (one style of fishing attacking another style) fight? Wrong. Do they think the PTTS is good for tourism and money? Wrong. A recent study shows that local anglers spend over \$100 million annually for just tarpon fishing in Charlotte Harbor, and \$100 million most likely far surpasses the amount of money returning to Charlotte Harbor from the PTTS. It is not falling into an individual's pocket. Or has the PTTS accomplished "regulatory capture" by hiring, paying, seducing and otherwise neutralizing the FWC's control of this highly-destructive event? Are we all neutralized as well? I hope not.

6. Spillover effect. The PTTS actively recruits new captains to join the event by enticing them with cash prizes. These guys show no commitment to Boca Grande and even less to conserving the tarpon fishery. It is pure resource exploitation. After buying big boats, they hunt the entire harbor and beach areas when the tournaments are not operating. Their inexperienced and aggressive habits are wrecking the entire fishery. Just watch 5-10 of the guys circle a small school of tarpon in the harbor. They cut off the fish, circle them, and then bomb them to the bottom. Nobody will get these tormented fish to eat a bait, a plug or a fly for a long time. Or

watch these same guys run down the beaches at high speed, exactly on top of the bars where tarpon try to swim. Is it lack of fishing knowledge or lack of seamanship?

7. Finally, make no mistake that due to the PTTS, Boca Grande's wonderful reputation is changing in front of our eyes. Most people I speak to now think of Boca Grande as the home of the plastic wrapped boaters who kill tarpon and play bumper cars in the Pass. There is nothing sporting about this free-for-all competition. The traditional pass captains, the harbor plug boats and the beach fly guys are no longer in the public's mind today. The PTTS' television series has promoted an entirely different picture. This PTTS group doesn't spend much money locally, nor do they buy homes. Yet their techniques are allowed to potentially ruin the world-class fishery. Beyond the dead fish seen after some of the events, is the larger potential damage the PTTS is doing to the well-known, tightly-packed schools of tarpon. If the high rev motors sitting on top of the schools, plus the bombing jigs continue to disturb the aggregation, the threat of these fish no longer returning to our waters is the becoming more likely.

Making money from a natural and public resource is not against any law that I know of, but threatening the continuity of the species is.

Please find a way to support any activities that call for rule change or termination of the PTTS. If you want to join a Petition for rule change or termination please email just your name and hometown to:

Contact: savethetarpon@gmail.com

Rick Hirsch is a dedicated tarpon angler and is active with various conservation groups including Oceana, The Nature Conservancy, Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, The American Museum of Natural History (NYC), Earthwatch, NRDC and the Center for Environmental Research & Conservation at Columbia University. None of the listed groups have endorsed these thoughts.