

Killing the fish to save the fish

Coastal biologists have to use gill nets to get an idea of how many fish are in San Antonio Bay

BY TARA BOZICK - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

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PORT O'CONNOR – The life of a coastal fisheries biologist isn't all Jacques Cousteau glamour.

But the biologists at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Coastal Fisheries Department office in Port O'Connor track fish population trends and, ultimately, the health of San Antonio Bay.

The biologists end their gill netting surveys in mid-June, which they conduct twice a year – spring and fall – for 10 weeks each time. The results during each period represent a speck in the spectrum of data collected for the past 30 years.

Last Tuesday morning, the biologists entered the water between Port O'Connor and Seadrift by Lane Road to see what fish were tangled in the gill nets they left overnight.

"It gets pretty morbid this time of year," Norman Boyd, ecosystem leader of the San Antonio Bay system, warned about the warm June waters.

The Parks and Wildlife boat bounced atop the water to reach the first net between Turnstake and Steamboat Pass. Upon reaching the buoy-marked destination, Boyd measured the temperature, salinity and turbidity of the water, putting a sample in a small container.

The next step was to reel in the 600-foot-long net, removing the tangled fish along the way.

Boyd and fish and wildlife technician Jeremy Helms readied their gloves while fish and wildlife technician Theresa Krenek readied her pencil, clipboard and measuring station.

The first 20 minutes yields plenty of juvenile bull shark, mostly dead, and Boyd wondered where the game fish went the night before. Boyd untangles a bonnethead shark, the name derived from its bonnet-shaped head, and shows how many tiny spots cover its body. He throws it toward Krenek, who measures its length.

"You have to watch these sharks," Boyd said. "Sometimes they play dead and they aren't."

About halfway down the net, the men find their first game fish: a spotted sea trout. The rest of the net brings in plenty of gafftop trout and catfish. Boyd said it's unusual to have so few different species.

"It's one of the tools we use to keep an eye on population trends," Boyd said about the gill netting. "We obviously can't count how many fish are in the bay. We assume if we catch more, there is more."

Other sources of data include commercial landings and angler surveys. Many of the fishermen dislike Texas Parks and Wildlife for regulating the sport, but the angler surveys may be just as important as the gill netting to keep track of any problems in the bay, Boyd said.

If the biologists spot a problem, they may also conduct fishery-independent sampling and try to determine if a population decline is caused by nature or humans.

For instance, the flounder population trends have been down, Boyd said. The agency already changed size and bag limits, but there's been no change in the pattern.

One possibility could be that warming winter water temperatures affect the flounder spawning season, Boyd said. That, combined with fishing pressure, could lead to a problem.

"It's a tangled web," Boyd said, but added that while fisheries management isn't as complex as water management, both are related.

San Antonio Bay is the area's largest water user, needing a million or so acre-feet a year, Boyd said. The ecosystem leader has been trying to find local stakeholders for the Environmental Flows Allocation Process to determine the amount of freshwater that should flow.

"How much water comes down that river is everything to this estuary," Boyd said.

They then collected a second net near the Intracoastal Waterway. This one was full of hardhead catfish and some sheepshead, black drum and gizzard shad.

At the end of the day, the nets yielded an above average number of fish – 350.

Finished with collecting the nets, the boat pulls up to an island and drops off the baskets of dead fish for the wildlife to feed on.

"This is fisheries management in Texas," Boyd said. "The reality of it."

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