



Addressing increased threat to U.S. sawfish through advocacy

Sonja Fordham



***AES Annual Meeting
New Orleans, Louisiana,
July 2026***

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Context

It's bad.

- Smalltooth sawfish have been driven to local extinction in most of their former range across the Atlantic
- Only the US & Bahamas are thought to still have viable populations
- Both of those are quite small



Premise

Spinning sickness mortality:

- increases risk to already endangered population
- makes it all the more vital to address key threats that can be more directly & immediately mitigated:
 - shrimp trawl bycatch
 - destruction of Critical Habitat



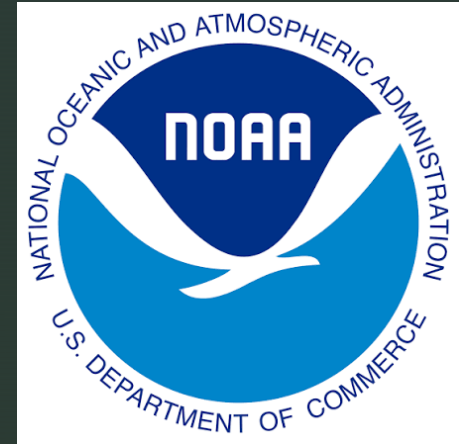
NOAA's Sawfish Obligations

Magnuson-Stevens Act:

- To extent practicable, minimize bycatch & associated mortality

Endangered Species Act:

- Ensure authorized actions do not "jeopardize" existence or adversely modify critical habitat
- Document incidental take & minimize impact



ESA Process



If a proposed project may affect listed species or their critical habitat:

- Conduct **Consultation** with other federal agencies
- Issue **Biological Opinion**
- No jeopardy ➡ **Incidental Take Statement** with conditions to minimize impacts
- Jeopardy ➡ stop project + **Reasonable & Prudent Alternatives**

Critical Habitat

- Plans for developments progressing despite various conservation commitments
- **Yesterday**, Administration finalized a rule to gut ESA habitat provisions



Focus on long-established top threat

- Shrimp trawl entanglement:
 - only fishery interaction ranked as a high severity threat in Recovery Plan
 - high rate of injury & mortality
- Observer coverage for Gulf shrimpers:
 - **only 1-2%, exceptionally low**
 - resulting inadequate data has led to very high levels of allowable take
 - must be higher to produce reliable mortality estimates



Why has observer coverage remained low?

- Shrimp fishing industry generally doesn't want it
- Their representatives have great influence with:
 - NOAA (responsible for ESA implementation)
 - Councils (develop shrimp management plans)
 - Elected officials (can intervene in various ways)



Yes, observers cost money

- Sometimes, industry pays
- This case has relied on NOAA
- It's not cheap
- NOAA can adjust their budget
- NOAA cannot lobby Congress
- NGOs can (within limits)
- Need leadership / initiative, a plan to promote in DC



NOAA's Shrimp Fishery Consultation/BiOp

- Process initiated in 2023 based on new info
- Significant delays since
- Sawfish advocates have been urging NOAA:
 - Prioritize completion
 - Incorporate Texas A&M findings



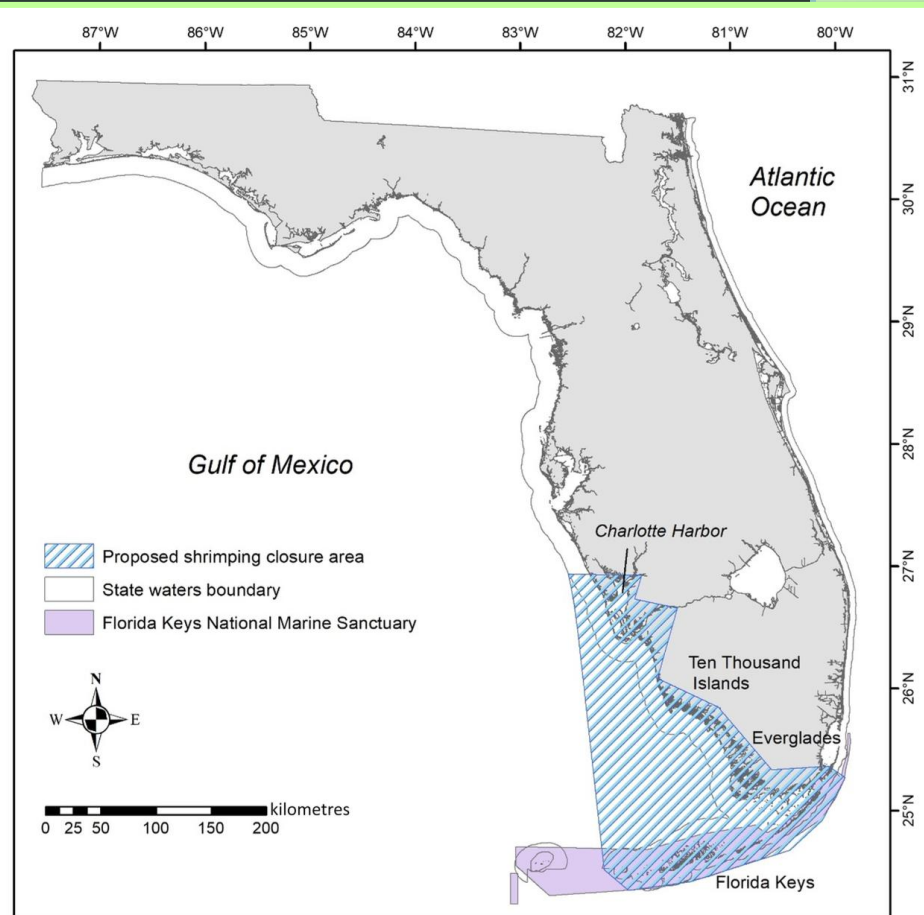
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In meantime, urging NOAA:
Heed scientists' advice for shrimp
trawling off SW Florida (from before
consultation initiation / spinning):

- increase observer coverage.
(including through electronic
monitoring), and
- expand areas closed to pink
shrimp trawling to protect
reproductive females

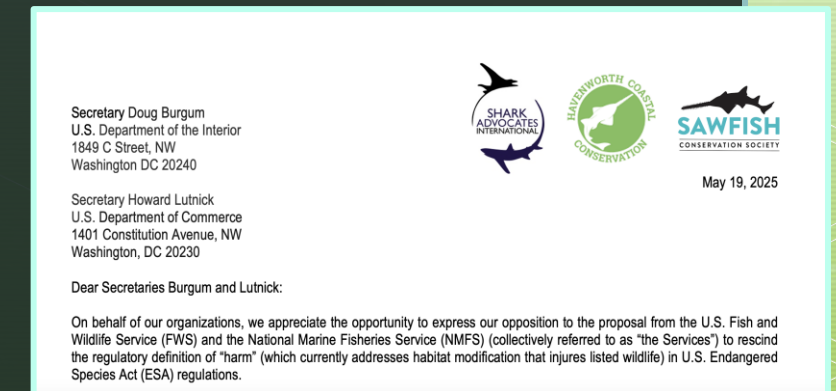
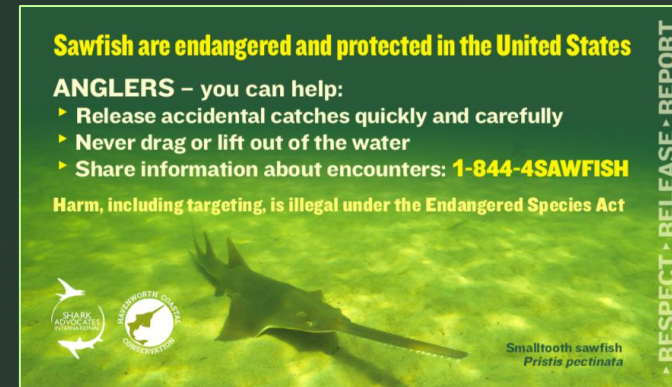
Commercial fishery bycatch risk for large juvenile and adult smalltooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*) in Florida waters

Jasmin Graham¹ | Andrea M. Kroetz^{2,3} | Gregg R. Poulakis⁴ |
Rachel M. Scharer⁴ | John K. Carlson³ | Susan K. Lowerre-Barbieri^{5,6} |
Danielle Morley⁷ | Eric A. Reyier⁸ | R. Dean Grubbs¹



Sawfish Advocate Activities

- Recovery Team participation
- Appeals to NOAA officials
- *(2022 letter not yet answered)*
- Public outreach
- Traditional & social media
- Testimony at Regional Fishery Management Council meetings
(include NOAA, manage shrimp)



New Working Groups

- South Atlantic & Gulf Councils
- Bycatch of ESA species in shrimp trawls
- Not necessary, NOAA has clear responsibility under ESA
- Could help given Council normally amends shrimp plans
- Could delay because stacked with / focused on industry
- Outspoken scientists & NGOs denied seats
- Usual / problematic treatment of stakeholders



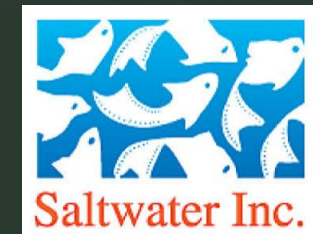
Missed Opportunities

- Federal funds used to help rebuild fishery after hurricanes without conditions for observer coverage
- NOAA Shrimp Futures Project focuses on helping US shrimpers overcome various challenges
- But NGOs not sought out / invited to engage despite concerns & expertise



Sustainable Seafood Initiatives

- Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Gulf Shrimp Re-Assessment upcoming
- Global Trust Certification Re-assessment ongoing
- Sustainable Fisheries Partnership, Cox's Seafood & Publix cooperating to put cameras on pink shrimp boats



SFP-led shrimp/sawfish monitoring project



- 7 Gulf shrimp boats equipped with vessel-mounted cameras
- 5 have completed monitored trips
- 1 vessel testing underwater trawl mounted cameras
- 2 more boats lined up, 2 more sought
- 1 sawfish interaction so far, well-documented, *stay tuned*
- 2,276 trawling hours monitored in recent season
- Exceeds historical annual average monitored by NOAA observer program on West Florida Shelf (1,965 hours)



Help Wanted

- Good Recovery Team work
- But it hasn't been enough
- Observer coverage quest particularly frustrating
- Conservation voices (to date) outweighed by industry
- Need counter-balance to the pressure for status quo



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How you can help

- See new AES Resolution for basics to politely express concerns / stridently demand action
- Write to Secretary of Commerce Lutnick or NOAA SE Regional Administrator Strelcheck
- Testify at a Gulf or South Atlantic Council or Bycatch Working Group meeting:
 - Agendas posted on Council websites
 - Public comment at every meeting
 - Usually unpleasant but vital



Live in Florida or another Gulf state?

- Contact state fishery directors (your reps on Councils)
- Request action by elected officials:
 - Governors
 - State legislators
 - Members of Congress



Economic arguments have sway

- In a dive group? Organize an event or letter, citing economic contributions
- Aquarium staff?
 - Appeal to officials from perspective of facility's value to community
 - Talk to Paula Carlson !



Terminally online?

Use your social media platforms to amplify concern & messages:

- Shark Awareness Day, July 14
- International Sawfish Day, October 17



Use your power as a consumer

- Thank Publix for helping to get cameras on shrimp boats
- Express concerns if your Costco / Whole Foods sells pink shrimp
- Engage in public consultation re: sustainable seafood certifications for Gulf shrimp fisheries (see me)



How you can help

Talk to me or
Tonya about
helping to oppose
or reduce
development of
Critical Habitat

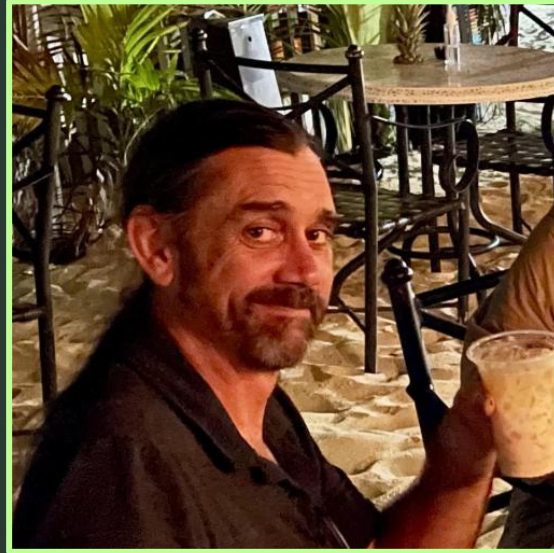


Conclusion

- The **extinction** threat is real
- Mitigating spinning sickness, preserving habitat & minimizing bycatch enough to recover the species requires big boost in engagement from conservationists
- Scientists, aquarists & divers have special, influential perspectives to add to pressing, ongoing debates
- We need your help now more than ever.



Gratitude for organizers & other heroes



Thanks also to our Symposium Sponsors!



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foundation



All activities performed under
authorization and guidance of
NOAA Fisheries Emergency
Section 7 Consultation
#SERO-2024-00402

and

ESA Section 10 permits
to Gregg Poulakis,
Tonya Wiley, John Carlson, and
Colin Simpfendorfer