Local Catch: Commercial Fishing in Southwest Florida

Southwest Florida has a long tradition of commercial fishing in its rivers, bays, and Gulf waters. In 2010 over 15 million pounds of wild harvested shellfish and fish including shrimp, blue and stone crab, grouper, mackerel, and mullet among others were harvested by commercial fishermen in the five-coastal counties of Southwest Florida. In addition, approximately 146 wholesalers and 394 retailers bought and sold seafood in this region contributing to Florida’s multi-billion dollar seafood industry.

Did you know in 2010...

- 40% of the pink shrimp harvested in Florida was landed in Lee County?
- Collier County ranked second in the state for stone crab claw production?
- Over 1.6 million blue crabs were landed in Southwest Florida representing approximately 20% of the state’s total landings?
- Approximately 27% of the mullet landed in Florida came from Southwest Florida?
- Approximately 86% of the 1.4 million pounds of baitfish harvested in Florida were landed in Manatee County?
- Red grouper was the most common grouper harvested in Southwest Florida equaling over 697,000 pounds?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Pounds Landed</th>
<th>State Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>6,978,700</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manatee</td>
<td>4,709,673</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>1,758,649</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collier</td>
<td>1,517,484</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarasota</td>
<td>154,882</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FWC

Changing Times

While the region continues to harvest a variety of wild caught seafood commodities, the size of its commercial fleet and infrastructure to support it has declined dramatically in the past several decades. Regulation changes, coastal development and loss of working water fronts, competition from imports, natural disasters and attrition have contributed to these declines. Despite these trends, several communities still have a strong commercial fishing presence. For instance, Cortez and Ft. Myers and its surrounding islands are officially designated as working waterfront communities by the state of Florida because of their commercial fishing heritage.

Commercial Landings in Five Southwest Florida Counties: 1986-2011*

Fishing Responsibly

The fisheries in Southwest Florida are scientifically monitored and managed at the state level by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and federally by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. Closed areas and seasons, size and daily limits, trip tickets, and limited access into a fishery are all tools commonly used to manage Florida’s fisheries. In addition, managers establish annual catch limits and accountability measures to ensure the long-term health of the fisheries they manage. Fishermen use a variety of gear and methods to harvest their catch and they must also follow rules to minimize impacts to the surrounding environment and marine life.

To learn more about the sustainability of U.S. fisheries, visit: www.fishwatch.gov.
**Shrimp**
The most common type of locally harvested shrimp is pink shrimp, which is typically caught in the spring and late fall off Southwest Florida’s coast and further south near the Dry Tortugas. Shrimp are caught in large nets called trawls that are dragged behind boats. A large shrimp fleet is centered near Ft. Myers Beach, and in 2010 close to 3.4 million pounds of pink shrimp were landed there. During the summer local shrimpers often travel to the Texas coast to catch brown shrimp. Some rock shrimp, a deep water species, is also occasionally harvested locally.

**Blue Crab**
Fishermen catch blue crabs in rivers, bays and estuarine environments using wire-meshed traps. The blue crab season is open year round with the exception of a biennial ten day closure in the summer to account for derelict or lost traps. Crabs are sold live and/or steamed whole or their meat is picked and sold fresh or pasteurized.

**Stone Crab**
Stone crabs are one of Florida’s most valuable fisheries. Fishermen harvest stone crabs using traps mostly in offshore waters. Only the claws are harvested, and the crab is returned to the water alive. The stone crab season runs October 15 through May 15th, and claws are sold fresh or frozen already cooked.

Research from FWC shows approximately 13% of the stone crab claws harvested are regenerated, indicating that stone crabs survive the declawing process.

**Hard Clams**
Hard clams are one of Florida’s top aquaculture products. They are grown on submerged lands leased to growers from the state. Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island are home to several lease sites where Northern Quahogs or hard clams are raised. Unlike many northern states where it might take up to three years to reach market size, local producers can raise marketable clams in 15 to 18 months.

**Mackerel**
Two species of mackerel are harvested off Southwest Florida. King mackerel are commonly caught offshore December through March with hook and line gear. Spanish mackerel are caught using gill nets, which are only allowed in federal waters. Despite being a local catch, there is not a large market for mackerel in Southwest Florida, and much of it is exported outside the state.

**Grouper**
A variety of grouper species are caught offshore using bandit and longline gear with red grouper being the most common species harvested. Other species include gag, black and scamp. Because the grouper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico operates under a catch share system, locally caught grouper can potentially be available year round if fishermen have enough shares to last through the year.
**Snapper**

While not as prevalent as in the northern Gulf, red snapper is the most common commercial snapper landed in the region. Bandit gear is often used to catch snapper offshore, and the fishery operates under a catch share system. Like grouper, red snapper can potentially be available throughout the year. Other snapper species locally harvested include mutton, lane, mangrove and yellowtail.

**Pompano**

The pompano fishery varies seasonally, and historically the bulk of landings occurred from Charlotte County south to the Florida Keys. With the inception of the net ban in 1996, most harvest comes from federal waters in designated zones where gill nets are still allowed.

**Mullet**

Most mullet are harvested November through January in bays and other estuarine environments during the annual mullet run. Historically mullet were harvested with gillnets, these nets were banned in Florida state waters in 1996. Today cast and seine nets are the most common gear used. Two species of mullet are harvested locally; black and silver, but black mullet are the most common. Besides the meat, black mullet are also harvested for their roe, which is commonly exported to Asian markets.

**And Many More...**

A variety of other species are harvested commercially in Southwest Florida in smaller quantities including, but not limited to: sheepshead, sea trout, tilefish, pogies, ambjerack, cobia, tilapia (non-native), jack crevalle, mojarra, and baitfish.

**Finding Locally Harvested Seafood**

If purchasing local seafood is important to you, but you aren’t sure where to go the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has an Agricultural Product Database where you can search for specific Florida commodities by location.

If you have questions about whether the products you purchase are locally harvested talk to the people who are selling them to you. Instead of asking “where do you get your seafood from?” consider asking “where is it harvested?” as they might buy their products from a local processor, but the seafood itself could have been harvested in other locations. Legitimate fish dealers should be able to provide you with the details you are seeking. Ask for local alternatives if they do not have what you are looking for.

**References:**

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)
- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services

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