The Changing Face of Commercial Fishing In Charlotte Harbor: Triumph of Ice over Salt

Theodore B. VanItallie

Harbor Habitat

"Fishermen go where the fish are" and, by all accounts, the fish populations of Charlotte Harbor in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries were extraordinarily abundant. One of Florida's principal estuaries, the harbor in its pristine state must have provided an ideal habitat for many species of fish.

The photic zone—a relatively thin layer of water that can be penetrated by light—is an ocean's primary production area. In the photic zone, growth rate depends on the intensity of light and the supply of available nutrients. When its waters are sufficiently clear and placid, Charlotte Harbor is shallow enough to permit transmission of abundant light to the phytoplankton (minute plant life) and to the sea grasses that provide a habitat favorable to fish.

Three major rivers, the Myakka, Peace, and Caloosahatchee, flow into the estuarine system, delivering the nutrients needed to replace those used up by the harbor's teeming marine life. These freshwater streams also provide the zones of reduced salinity that some fish, especially juvenile forms, require.

Unfortunately, fish-nursery conditions in Charlotte Harbor are not as favorable as they once were. Ecologists report that, overall, the Harbor's sea-grass meadows declined by about 29% between 1945 and 1982. A little more than half of this reduction was found in Pine Island Sound, Matlacha Pass, and San Carlos Bay. An adverse impact on the estuary's sea grass—probably transient—appears to have resulted from dredging associated with construction of the Intracoastal Waterway and the Sanibel Causeway.

Later studies have shown short-term ups and downs in the health of the Harbor's sea-grass meadows (sometimes related to excessive rainfall or drought), but, since 1982, it has not been possible to document a long-term downward trend. One can only

speculate on what the total decline may have been during the 20th century, which saw an accelerating human population growth and a large expansion of phosphate mining operations in the Peace River basin.

Die-off in sea grass—when it occurs—is attributable in considerable part to overall changes in drainage patterns, dredging activities, and introduction of massive quantities of sewage pollutants and storm-water runoff, with a resulting increase in the dissolved and suspended load of particulate matter in the Harbor.

All of the foregoing factors—and others—could have acted to increase the water's turbidity, reduce its ability to transmit sunlight, and thereby contribute to the loss of sea-grass meadows in the deeper waters of the Harbor. The anticipated result: fewer fish.[1]

The Era of Salt

Let us now go back some three hundred years to a time when overpopulation and pollution in La Florida were not even dreamed of. Early in the 18th century, the shallow fishing grounds around Cuba and its nearby islands were already being over-utilized and depleted of their edible resources. In their search for more productive waters, Spanish-Cuban fishermen found Charlotte Harbor to be a rich source of mullet, redfish, pompano, grouper, whelk, sea turtles, and other marine animals. However, because of the long distance from Charlotte Harbor to Cuba, most of these products had to be processed locally to avoid spoiling. Racks were built and net-caught fish were split and hung on them to cure in the sun by air drying. Mullet roe was soaked in salt water and then dried and pressed.

In the first decade of the 1700's, the previously well- organized Calusa Indian society that, for centuries, had managed Charlotte Harbor and, indeed, much of South Florida, was in final decline. “Contact” with Europeans had brought disease and disarray, and Indian social organization was further disrupted by its vulnerability to the “demon rum.”

During the first half of the 18th century, as the remnant Calusa disappeared, a new mixture of Native Americans began to visit in the Charlotte Harbor area. These people were mostly Creek Indians, who were being dislocated by colonial expansion in Georgia.

In the latter part of the same century, faraway events had a profound effect on the Charlotte Harbor scene. In 1763, as a part of the comprehensive Treaty of Paris, the seven-year French and Indian War ended and, at the same time, Spain ceded Florida to English rule. During the next two decades, some Creeks and other Indians moved into the Florida peninsula, which was mostly unoccupied. Around this time, the word "Seminole" came into use; it probably derives from *cimarrones*, a Spanish term indicating unmanageability, applied to Creek Indians who lived in Florida apart from other Creek Indians in Georgia and Alabama.

Spanish fishermen began to trade with the Creek Indians. The Spanish Cubans also built and operated coastal homesteads dedicated to marine production known as fish "ranchos." Indians were hired to harvest and cure the harbor's fish—notably mullet. Rancho operators introduced technological innovations for fishing such as oar-driven skiffs, metal hooks, large nets, salt for curing, and wooden barrels for shipping dried and salted fish. In this way, Cubans gained independence from north-Atlantic fish-food production called "Yankee Cod." Indeed, the Spanish living in Cuba preferred to eat fish caught in Florida.

During the brief reign of the British, all Florida Indians were labeled as Seminoles, and Spanish trade with the Seminoles became illegal and was considered to be smuggling, whereas fishing operations in Charlotte Harbor continued. Indians worked on most of the Cuban fish ranchos, which, at the time, employed some 400 people. In the 1770's, Bernard Romans, a Dutch cartographer retained by the British, explored and mapped the coasts of Florida, including Charlotte Harbor. He reported that, over a 3-year period, 1000 tons of dried mullet were shipped from Florida to Havana.

In 1783, at the conclusion of the American Revolution, England returned Florida to Spain. Spain promptly re-legitimized trade between the Seminoles and the Cubans.

By this time, the Cuban fishermen were packing fish in salt, which gave them a longer storage life than fish which were simply dried or smoked. However, salt remained expensive because of the high tariff that had to be paid on it. Revenue from the tariff went to the Spanish church and government, and fishermen were forbidden to make their own salt from sea water. Despite this interdiction, one imagines that some fishermen did, in fact, produce their own salt.

In 1784, soon after Florida again became Spanish, Jose Caldez, the head ranchero for Spanish fishing operations in the Charlotte Harbor area, set up his headquarters on an island just south of the Harbor, then called "Toampa"—the present-day Useppa Island. The island was renamed "Caldez Island" and Caldez's small village consisting of several palmetto houses was built on its west side. Three other Cuban fishing hamlets under his command were located on other islands nearby. He remained in charge of Cuban fishing activities well into the 1830's.

After February 22, 1819, Florida became a U.S. territory and the trading of certain Cuban goods to the Seminoles—guns, ammunition, and hard liquor (rum or whiskey)—became of concern to Federal troops and customs agents. Cuban trade with Indians was again outlawed.

During the next three decades, marked by the "Seminole" wars and the presence of U.S. troops in the vicinity of Charlotte Harbor, Cuban fishing activities ceased and their small settle- ments on some of the islands were abandoned. [2]

Then, after 1845, when Florida became the 27th state, a number of small fishing stations sprang up on Useppa (by then called "Guiseppe"), northern Cayo Costa (at Burrough's Ranch), Mondongo, Punta Blanca, and Pineland (then called "Browns"). At the same time, small-scale vegetable farms and citrus cultivation also were started in the Charlotte Harbor area.

During the 1850's, there might have been some commercial fishing in Charlotte Harbor (records are scarce for this period). But in 1861, the outbreak of the Civil War, which Florida entered on the side of the Confederacy, once again interrupted fishing operations.

Once the War Between the States was over, Cubans returned to Charlotte Harbor and fish ranches were again established on a few of its islands. In the 1870's, George Goode conducted a survey of fishing operations in the Charlotte Harbor area for the Smithsonian Institution and the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries.[3]

Goode identified four major fish ranches scattered on the outer islands. They were 1) the Captiva Fish Ranch run by Captain Pierce and 30 "Conchs" (people from Key West), who were producing 660,000 pounds of salted mullet and 48,500 pounds of mullet roe per year; 2) the operation at South Cayo Costa conducted by Jose Sega and 26 fishermen, producing about 25% of the output achieved by Pierce; 3) the ranch further north on Cayo Costa operated by Tariva ("Captain Pappy") Padilla, together with 23 Spanish Cubans and 1 American (Padilla's production was similar to that of Sega's); and 4) the ranch at Gasparilla Island's north end, at Peacon's cove, at which Captain Peacon from Key West and 30 Conchs were processing about 550,000 pounds of mullet and 44,000 pounds of roe per year. Salted mullet sold for 4 cents per pound and cured roe for 5 cents per pound in the early 1870's.

Goode (according to Gibson, but actually researched by one of his assistants) was enormously impressed by the high density of the fish population in Charlotte Harbor. Goode's Report noted: "...being in immense schools, the upper portion of the bay (harbor) affords inexhaustible feeding grounds which are exceptionally free of predacious fish. When leaping from the water in great abundance, the mullet make noises like the sound of thunder. This continues day and night."

The Era of Ice

In the late 19th century, the entire nature of commercial fishing in Charlotte Harbor was permanently transformed by the

construction in Punta Gorda of an ice factory. In 1886, Isaac Trabue had persuaded Florida Southern Railway, a component of the Plant System, to extend its line to Punta Gorda's dock area.[4] In 1891, Trabue constructed a new ice-manufacturing plant near the dock (named the Ice Factory Company). It was soon producing 15 tons of ice per day during the fishing season. Now it became possible to keep fish in fresh condition by packing them in ice immediately after the catch.

(figure 3.6.1) **Sites of fishing activities in Charlotte Harbor in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Adapted from Merald Clark's map in *Fisherfolk of Charlotte Harbor,* by R.F.Edic.** *Courtesy, IAPS Books* (bghs #04-0027)

In 1895, competitors formed the Punta Gorda Ice and Power Company, with a 25-ton ice manufacturing capacity. The company installed larger generators in 1901 and, by 1908, was selling electricity to the city of Punta Gorda under its new name, De Soto Manufacturing Company. At the time, De Soto advertised "pure ice" at 50 cents per 100 pounds.[4] In 1913, De Soto was sold to Southern Utilities, a subsidiary of the New York Ice Company. The local plant was renamed the Punta Gorda Ice and Electric Company. Then, early in 1926, Southern Utilities was purchased by the newly formed Florida Power and Light Corporation.[4]

The availability of an integrated railway system and insulated boxcars permitted the speedy transport of iced fish from Charlotte Harbor to cities throughout the eastern U.S. Use of ice to preserve fish quickly rendered obsolete the earlier techniques of drying and salting. During Punta Gorda Ice and Power's first full year of

operation, 3.6 million pounds of fish were shipped out of Punta Gorda.

(figure 3.6.2) **Ice House at Captiva Rocks, 1973.** (bghs #99-0112)

The first ice-making machine in Punta Gorda may have been based on the work of a Frenchman, Ferdinand Carré, who, in 1857, introduced ammonia gas rather than air or ether (a dangerously flammable chemical) as the refrigerant. During the Civil War, Carré's machine provided the Confederacy with badly needed ice when the supply of natural ice from the northern states was cut off.

The Punta Gorda Ice and Power Company also used ammonia as the refrigerant. After first being compressed in a large cylinder, the expanding ammonia gas supercooled an adjacent tank of brine. Then, when a series of steel buckets, suspended from the ceiling, each containing about 30 gallons of water, were immersed in the supercooled brine, the fresh water inside the buckets would freeze into blocks of ice. A similar method of ice making was used for many years by the Gault Gasparilla Fishery, located in Placida.[4]

In 1897, E. C. Knight (grandfather of Walter H. Monson, the Harbor's last run-boat captain) and L. B. Giddens joined together to establish the Punta Gorda Fish Company, in competition with several other dealers who were operating from Punta Gorda's old “long dock.” The long dock was abandoned after Henry B. Plant removed his Florida Southern Railway tracks in a dispute with Colonel Isaac Trabue, and the fisheries moved to the “new” railroad wharf at the end of King Street (now northbound US 41). The company was incorporated in 1928, with Harry Dreggors as its first

president. Harry L. Goulding joined the firm in 1939 and W. H. Monson, who had arrived in 1935, became president in 1940. In 1944, the corporation became a partnership with Dreggors, Guthrie and Monson the major partners.

In 1901, the Chadwick brothers—Steve, Clay, and Hubbard, who lived on Manasota Key—started the Chadwick Fish Company in Punta Gorda. By 1898, the Chadwicks had established a highly successful fishing operation in Lemon Bay and they often netted more mullet than they were able to process.

The Punta Gorda Fish Company, the Chadwick Fish Company, and the West Coast Fish Company constructed fish buying and storage houses—ice houses—throughout Charlotte Harbor. Many of these houses, as well as adjoining bunk houses for the fishermen, were built on stilts over the water or at the ends of docks overhanging the water.

(figure 3.6.3) **The run boat *Ray* at the Punta Blanca ice station.** *Courtesy, R.F. Edic* (bghs #99-0043)

The ice houses were designed to be serviced by "run boats" operated by the Punta Gorda fish dealers. As C. D. Gibson[5] describes the process, "These boats scheduled stops at two-day intervals, bringing fresh ice and taking away fish which the fishermen had delivered to each fish house's resident manager. Following receipt, the manager's function was to pack the fish in ice, awaiting the arrival of the run boat. From Punta Gorda, much of the fish was shipped by train to markets throughout the south and, in later years, to northern cities."

Once the new system was in place for collecting iced fish from the ice stations, now widely scattered throughout Charlotte Harbor, the traditional salt fisheries ceased to be viable. The Peacon Fish

Ranch at Gasparilla Island's north end closed down (see below), and the Padilla family at the northern end of Cayo Costa switched from salting and drying fish to icing freshly caught fish for delivery by run boats to mainland fisheries.

(figure 3.6.4) **Special run boat *Carroll* used to deliver ice and collect fish from the far reaches of the harbor.** (bghs #99-0108)

In Williams' and Cleveland's book on Charlotte Harbor history, entitled *Our Fascinating Past, Charlotte Harbor: The Early Years*,[4] the memories of Harry "Pete" Goulding, who fished with his father Joseph at the turn of the century, are recorded. "Run boats could carry thousands of pounds of ice or fish. They left Punta Gorda at 7 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday; stayed overnight at the farthest ice station; and returned to Punta Gorda by 1 p.m. on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The men came home Saturday afternoon and drew their earnings at the fish house for which they worked. Then, they and their families went shopping."

"Fancy fish—pompano, trout, mackerel, and king—were packed in wooden barrels made in a cooperage right on the dock. These went to northern cities. Bottom fish, or mullet, were placed in bins constructed in the boxcars with alternating layers of fish and crushed ice." Goulding states that "Fish began to die out when canals were dug and huge developments discharged sewage into the harbor. Silt and pesticides making their way into the harbor have killed the sea grass—the first link in the aquatic food chain."

The discovery in the 1880's of pebble phosphate in the Peace River just south of Arcadia generated a "phosphate rush," with fierce competition among fertilizer companies to acquire phosphate-bearing lands in the Peace River basin. The major player in this land-grabbing effort was a fertilizer conglomerate formed in 1899, called the American Agricultural Chemical Company, or AACCo for short. Once AACCo was mining and processing

phosphate ore, the company had to have a suitable deep-water port not too far from the mines, where the phosphate could be stored and loaded onto ocean-going vessels.

The site chosen in about 1903 was the south end of Gasparilla Island, which borders Boca Grande Pass, a deep-water channel linking the Gulf to Charlotte Harbor. In 1905, AACCo started construction of a railroad that, by 1907, extended from Port Boca Grande—as it became known—to Arcadia. By 1912, the line, called the Charlotte Harbor and Northern Railway (CH&N), extended all the way up to Mulberry. At Achan, east of Mulberry, CH&N joined the Atlantic Coast Line (or ACL), and at Bradley Junction, the Seabord Airline Railway,[6] which extended from Lakeland and Plant City to Tampa and Jacksonville.[7]

Although AACCo used the CH&N to deliver phosphate and other exportable items to Port Boca Grande, it soon realized that the line's profitability could be enhanced by using its facilities to ship iced fish in insulated boxcars to cities in the southeast and northeast. Accordingly, around 1916, the Charlotte Harbor & Northern Railway (AACCo's proxy) built several fish houses for storage of iced fish along the railroad right-of-way on the eastern side of Gasparilla Island's north end next to the small fishing hamlet that came to be known as Gasparilla.[7]

(figure 3.6.5) **Two ice houses in Gasparilla, circa 1916, constructed by the C H & N Railway.** *Courtesy, R.F. Edic* (bghs #99-0039)

When local ice manufacture put an end to the salt fishery operated at the Peacon Fish Ranch (situated about half a mile to the south of where the CH&N's ice houses were constructed), many of the fishermen previously based at Peacon's Ranch moved to Gasparilla and began to catch fish for delivery to the new system of

ice houses set up by the Punta Gorda fish companies. According to Gasparilla Island historian Gibson,[5] the settlement at Peacon's Cove remained occupied until about 1916.

Gradually, Gasparilla became a bona-fide village, with a school, post office, and a general store operated by the town's leading citizen, Gus Cole. In 1916, AACCo shrewdly gave the village a large boost by constructing 16 houses for rental by fishermen and their families. At its peak—during the era between the two world wars—Gasparilla became a busy center of fishing activity with catches delivered to the two ice houses, from which the iced fish were transferred to insulated, ice-cooled CH&N boxcars for shipment north.

In the 1940's, refrigerated trucks gradually took over from the railroads much of the job of delivering iced fish to urban markets. In addition, Port Tampa began to displace Port Boca Grande as the preferred terminal from which to export phosphate.

In December of 1945, AACCo sold all its remaining lots on Gasparilla Island to Sunset Realty, a New York real-estate firm. In effect, the sale included all of the land on Gasparilla Island situated in Charlotte County, together with a large fraction of the undeveloped land in Lee County. As a part of the transaction, AACCo sold the little fishing village of Gasparilla to a real-estate company which had every intention, when the time was ripe, of bulldozing it out of existence and replacing it with an upscale development. In anticipation of Gasparilla's eventual demise, most of its residents soon moved away. In 1947, Gus Cole moved his IGA store to Placida, and Walter Gault, who for many years had operated a fishery in Gasparilla village, constructed a state-of-the art fish-packing and ice-manufacturing plant, Gasparilla Fishery, next to Cole's establishment. Until 1999, when it was permanently closed, the plant was operated by Gault's daughter, Eunice Albritton.[7]

(figure 3.6.6) **C H & N freight car taking on iced fish from Gasparilla ice houses**. *Courtesy, R. F. Edic* (bghs #99-0048)

Conclusions

What lessons can we draw from this brief examination of the history of commercial fishing in Charlotte Harbor? First, one has to be filled with admiration and respect for the people who carried out the difficult and demanding work of hunting, harvesting, and preserving fish. They did an important job well and with justifiable pride. Second, one cannot fail to be impressed by the way the discovery of ice making wiped out an entire industry of drying and salting fish, replacing it with a new system centered upon the prompt icing of fish and their early shipment in fresh state to distant urban centers. Finally, we must be constantly reminded that the natural resources available to us—fish included—are finite. We must make every effort to deal constructively with the burdens placed on the environment by an exploding human population, by industrial and urban pollution, and by over-utilization of our dwindling resources. In this case, the handwriting is not on the wall: it can be read in the waters of Charlotte Harbor.

Author's note

This article was adapted from a lecture given in Punta Gorda in 1999. For this reason, the reverse engineering required to reconstruct its various sources has been difficult. I wish to acknowledge with great appreciation the special help and advice provided by the late Captain Walter “Homer” Monson (Charlotte Harbor's last run-boat captain) and his wife, Norma, as well as the helpful editorial assistance of George Luer, Charles Blanchard, Richard Fifer, Bob Edic, Lindsey Williams, and Eunice Albritton. I am greatly indebted to Lindsey Williams and the late U. S. Cleveland for the information about the Harbor's history compiled in

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