

Atkins Seafood owner advocates for sustainable fishing, regulations in Gulf of Mexico

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WAXAHACHIE

The rules and regulations for the recreational fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico are not as strict as laws commercial and charter fishermen abide by, contends one local fisherman and business owner.

Tres Atkins fishes a couple hundred days out of the year and wants what is best for the ecosystem and other fishermen, as the owner of Atkins Seafood he has dedicated his time outside the Gulf to advocate for sustainable fishing.

“I am an advocate. I’m a fisherman first. I wear just about every hat in the industry so that kind of makes me unique,” Atkins elaborated. “A lot of guys are just fishermen; some guys are chartered fishermen, some guys are recreation fishermen, and I’m all of it, and I own my own market and restaurant.”

Atkins is focused on establishing a system to prevent recreational fishermen from fishing more than what Mother Nature can replenish.

He explained there is a stigma against commercial fishermen who are over-taking without consequence. Atkins claimed, “it’s just not true.” He pointed out the problem lies with recreational fishermen in the private sector.

For example, the pool of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico is distributed between the commercial sector and recreational sector, which is then divided into private recreation and charter for hire. The commercial sector receives 51 percent of the fish while the recreational sector is allowed 49 percent.

“The commercial sector fishes their allocation, and once they’re done, they are done. The charter for hire fishes their allocation through a similar program, and once they’re done, they’re done. The private recs, they don’t have a fishery management plan that requires them to stop once they hit their science-based catch limit,” Atkins explained.

Atkins is arguing that the recreational sector is creating a non-sustainable ecosystem and it is impossible for individuals within that division to account for the number of fish caught each year with the current regulations placed by the state.

To put the strictness of the rules a commercial fisherman must follow, Atkins detailed the process he goes through for a catch.

He first has to declare online that he's going fishing and what kind of fishing he's doing. The government pings a signal once every three hours to detect Atkins' boat. And, when he comes back, Atkins sets a three-hour notification to let them know what exactly he has on board, so, when he is unloading, Texas Parks and Wildlife or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration personnel can witness the pounds of fish he logged in the real-time, online system.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act is the primary law that governs marine fishers. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "The key objectives of the act are to prevent overfishing, rebuild overfished stocks, increase long-term economic and social benefits, use reliable data and sound science, conserve essential fish habitats and ensure a safe and sustainable supply of seafood."

If a fisherman takes more fish than they are supposed to, they are penalized but not with a fine. Instead, the amount they can fish the following year is deducted by the difference of overage.

Eric Brazer, the deputy director of the [Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance](#), a national nonprofit, reiterated the main issue at hand.

"Our concerns aren't with the recreational fishermen themselves but more with the leadership and the managers," Brazer emphasized. "Recreational fishermen — we believe they deserve to have a fishery management plan that gives them stability and predictability so they can plan their trips in advance and know how much fish they can catch in a year."

Currently, a strict system is not in place. Brazer said he believes the best way to get rid of the flawed system for recreational fishermen is to give them a management system, which will get them toward a more sustainable and predictable system.

Brazer stressed how the nonprofit is determined to protect commercial fishermen and help the recreational sector.

"When it comes down to the rules, they are only as good as the enforcement behind them," Brazer elaborated. "The commercial fishery has a lot of rules and really good enforcement. The recreational fishery has fewer rules and much less enforcement."

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Lance Robinson, a deputy division director for the coastal fisheries division with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, shared the State of Texas utilizes a variety of restrictions on fishermen — including limits on recreational and commercial species, bag and size limits, seasonal and area closures, gear restrictions, to name a few. The implementation and modification of these

management regulations are based on both fishery independent and fishery dependent data collected by TPWD.

“These sampling programs are conducted under rigorous statistical protocols to ensure the data collected are robust and statistically valid,” Robinson elaborated. “These sampling programs are routinely evaluated by outside entities to ensure methodologies, protocols, and data analyses are statistically sound and being applied appropriately.”

The Texas Marine Sport-Harvest Monitoring Program is in place to manage saltwater fish and shellfish populations for both recreational and commercial harvest.

Coastal fisheries conduct over 700 interviews each year with anglers fishing the Gulf. Other Gulf states have implemented mandatory reporting but have reported compliance of 35 percent, whereas voluntary interviews in Texas have shown a 90-percent compliance rate.

“Part of this low compliance may be due to the ‘newness’ of their programs, but clearly, we believe our survey programs are effective in providing timely, statistically valid harvest estimates,” Robinson stated.

In addition to the department’s on-site interviews of recreational anglers, TPWD partnered with the Harte Research Institute of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi to provide an application-based reporting tool called iSnapper. This program allows anglers to self-report their trip and landing information.

Also, for the 2018-19 fishing seasons, the National Marine Fisheries Service has allocated a percentage of the total Gulf of Mexico recreational red snapper allocation to each state. This allows the states to manage the harvest of these fish in state and federal waters under the Exempted Fishing Permit, which temporarily rescinds federal regulations for recreational red snapper fish thus allowing for state management.

“Based on our analysis, we projected an 82-day federal-water season beginning June 1 and a 365-day state-water season,” Robinson elaborated. “Using data from our sampling program described above, we are monitoring harvest on a weekly basis and reporting these landings to NMFS bi-monthly.”

If the TPWLD anticipates reaching the allocation before the projected date, it will close the recreational red snapper fishery. “If we exceed our allocation we must deduct that amount from next year’s allocation before determining the season,” Robinson informed.

Updated reports for each state can be seen at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/state-recreational-red-snapper-management-exempted-fishing-permits>.

TAKING ACTION

Since 2004 — on and off — Atkins has sat in on meetings of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, which is comprised of the Gulf states: Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi. Each state has two representatives and one science professional present at the meetings, which are held quarterly. Atkins mentioned he has been a top-three finalist —

three times — to represent the state of Texas during the sessions and, once a Texas seat opens up again, he will re-apply.

Atkins said he provides personal testimony and insight to the council. He also relayed how some recreational fishermen that abuse the system are fishing in federal waters and catching an abundance of fish, all the while claiming they were caught in state waters.

“It’s horrible for the stock of fish,” Atkins emphasized.

Tom Harvey, deputy division director for the Texas Parks and Wildlife, shared how the first nine miles from the Gulf shoreline is considered state waters and is managed by the Texas Department of Fish and Wildlife, whereas any water outside of the nine miles is governed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.

Keith Guindon, a fellow fisherman and dear friend of Atkins, has even sued the federal government twice for not enforcing the Magnuson-Stevens Act when turning a blind eye and allowing recreational fishermen to bend the rules. Guindon won both times.

The group behind the justice is the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance, which was established in 2008 by Guindon. A group of fishermen organized it, and Atkins was also a founding member. To donate toward the cause, log onto shareholdersalliance.org.

For more information on recreational fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, log onto <https://tpwd.texas.gov/regulations/outdoor-annual/fishing/saltwater-fishing/>.

<http://www.waxahachietx.com/news/20180731/atkins-seafood-owner-advocates-for-sustainable-fishing-regulations-in-gulf-of-mexico>