

OUTDOORS

State seeking help with tarpon research

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May was made for tarpon fishing, as far as most Southwest Florida anglers are concerned. The season conjures up images of fabulous photos of the behemoth silver fish as well as exaggerated tales from those who don't have cameras aboard.

Now there's something more to think about during tarpon season – a contribution to research and ultimately improved fisheries management for the species.

A new state program makes it easy for recreational anglers to gather tarpon genetic samples in a way that's also easier on the silver kings. The state is hoping to cast a wide net, garnering more participation than it received in past years when anglers had to snip part of the tarpon's tail – not an easy thing to do.

This year, collection of information from tarpon is through a state-of-the-art kit in which anglers snatch a DNA sample by removing a few skin cells from the outside of the tarpon's jaw using an abrasive pad provided in the free sampling kit.

The new kits are quick to use, especially because the fish can remain in the water while the angler collects the sample.

"The scrub-pad rub on the side of the jaw

area picks up enough cells for us to use to do DNA analysis," said Wendy Quigley, an outreach staffer with the state's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg.

Anglers can request the kits on the Internet, through e-mail or over the phone. Or they can go by a participating tackle store. About 20 in Southwest Florida are listed at www.MyFWC.com

Some store owners are urging participation to the point that they're making a contest out of it.

Angler's Outlet customers, for example, can stop by the store on Del Prado Boulevard in Cape Coral and sign up when they pick up a kit. Then the angler who submits the most samples between May 1-31 wins a "treasure chest."

"We're trying to make it a fun tournament," store co-owner Capt. Greg Bowdish said.

The chest has goodies from the store as well as donated items from customers such as gift cards. Could there be a simpler tarpon "tournament"? "It's who can turn in the most kits," Bowdish said.

It's all for a good cause.

For at least seven years, biologists with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission have been studying catch-and-release mortality and population structure.

Nearly 100 percent of tarpon fishing is catch and release. The fish basically aren't edible, plus the state requires a pre-pur-



COURTESY PHOTO

An abrasive pad, left, part of a DNA kit, is used to scrub a few skin cells from a tarpon's jaw.

chased \$50 kill tag before anyone keeps one. But to hang your trophy fish on the office wall these days, you don't need to keep the fish anyway. All that's needed are measurements and photos for a skilled taxidermist to recreate the catch for mounting.

State biologists appreciate anglers' efforts to preserve the species and to collect data.

"We're trying to put our finger on the pulse of where the population is," said Luis Barbieri, head of the FWC's marine fisheries research program.

"To keep tabs on the tarpon helps with proper management procedures to keep fishing as good as it is now or better in the future," he said.

To that, angler Tom Smith says a proverbial "Amen."

"Tarpon is my absolute passion. It's one of the reasons I live here," said Smith, a Cape Coral angler who co-owns Angler's Outlet with Bowdish. "If we can protect our species and do it well, we can fish for years."

Research is the key.

Request a kit today and enjoy the tarpon

fishing even more this May. Plus what could be more of a motivator for a spouse or child who's reluctant to go fishing than telling them the pursuit of the silver king is in the name of preservation? ■

— Betsy Clayton is a freelancer based on Pine Island and also is Lee County Parks & Recreation's waterways coordinator. Contact her at boatingbybetsy@yahoo.com

HOW TO HELP

Get a free tarpon DNA sampling kit provided by the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute:

- ▶ E-mail tarpongenetics@MyFWC.com
- ▶ Call toll-free (800) 367-4461
- ▶ Go online to <http://research.MyFWC.com> and search for "tarpon"

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