

BAROTRAUMA

by Peter Miller



“ New technologies, like these innovative fish-descending devices, are easy to use, effective, and will help maintain our thriving bottom fishery so that it can be enjoyed for generations to come. ”

- Peter Miller



when anchored in certain wind, current, and tide conditions... practice is key.

Another good method for covering lots of area is using jigs. Jigging is effective for grouper, snapper, amberjack, and most any fish focused on structure. Another nice thing about jigs is they can be fished throughout the entire water column. Start jigging on the bottom and then work the jig all the way back to the surface. This gives you the opportunity to catch whatever species might be passing through.

Here in Florida we're incredibly fortunate to have a reef and bottom fishery on the up and up. We also have great conservation ethics. Fishermen in the Gulf are noticing better grouper and amberjack fishing than in previous years. Also, we see red snapper populations rebounding, as fishermen are reporting larger quantities and bigger fish. A sign that sport fish-

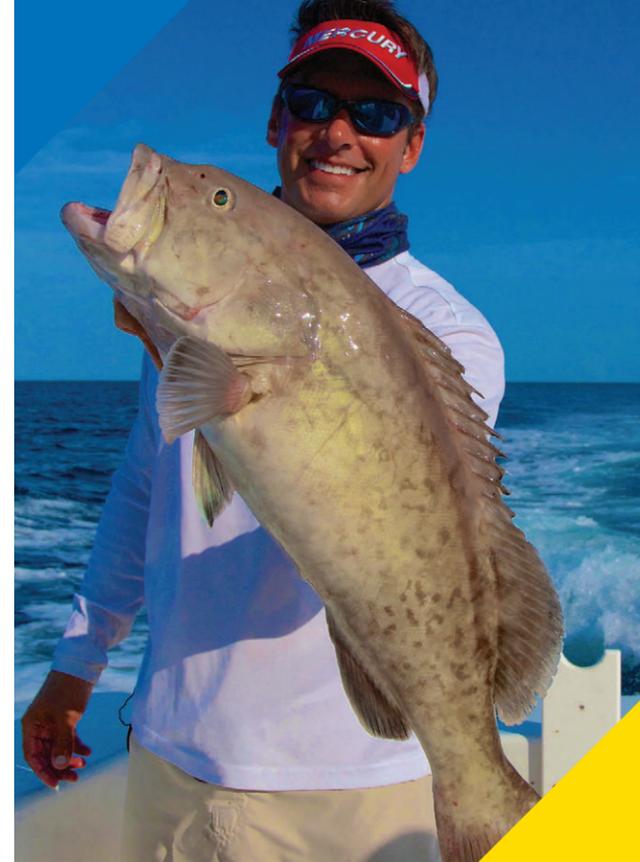
Undoubtedly, bottom fishing is one of the most productive and exciting types of angling we have here in Florida. Once you find the right bottom, the bite can be fast-paced and furious. More so than when fishing for pelagics, coordinates are paramount. GPS, or loran numbers, are the most important information for bottom fishermen. It's this type of fishing that's the most frustrating, but also the most rewarding! You might be fishing 25 feet from another boat, but if they are positioned over the structure, they'll be catching, while you'll be wishing you were.

The key with bottom fishing is to capitalize on bottom formation, depending on your area's geological features. Look for ledges, rock piles, and wrecks, as fish congregate to differentiation in bottom relief. Any interruption on a linear ocean floor will be an area where the fish are focused. This is especially true in offshore waters. The ocean floor might be desolate and unchanging for miles, but if you find some sort of variation, there's a good chance the fish will be there!

One method for finding new areas is to keep a close eye on your sonar while running from spot to spot. If you see a change in bottom, mark it on your GPS, and return to it. Sudden depth changes are a surefire bet for finding a new hot spot. When you find the structure, make short drifts and watch your sonar. Set up and anchor so that your baits drift into the strike zone, as grouper and snapper often hang closely on top of wrecks and ledges. It's also important to learn how your boat drifts, as well as how it swings

ermen are taking into consideration the future of our fisheries. Also, with management techniques improving, it's a given the fishing will only get better!

There are several practices that regulations and conscious-minded fishermen have implemented to maintain the great fishing we have available. One of these practices is the use of circle hooks. It's now mandatory to use circle hooks (non-stainless and non-offset) in the Gulf of Mexico when targeting reef fish including grouper, snapper, amberjack, sea bass, and tilefish. Also, circle hooks are mandatory above the 28 degree North latitude in Atlantic federal wa-



ters. According to the FWC, circle hooks are 90% more likely to hook fish in the mouth, rather than the stomach or the esophagus. Many bottom fish are slow growing and it's common to see hook marks in bottom fish's jaws. This is a great sign that anglers are successfully releasing fish to grow bigger and breed.

De-hooking tools are also mandatory in the Gulf, but this doesn't mean you need to go out and buy an expensive tool. These tools come in a number of shapes and sizes to fit your needs - even needle-nose pliers can be used as a de-hooker.

But even with the steps being taken by fishermen and management to improve our fishing, there's still one problem we face when cranking bottom fish up from the deep: barotrauma.

When pulled quickly from the depths, fish cannot adjust their body to the rapid pressure change. The telltale signs of barotrauma are a swollen swim bladder protruding from the mouth, bulging eyeballs, and a bloated stomach. Fish that are released with barotrauma symptoms cannot make the swim back down through the water column. Predators easily pick off the vulnerable fish. We've seen this unfortunate scenario in the Gulf, as dolphin become conditioned to wait for released snapper, snatching up the "floaters" as they flutter at the surface.

There are steps we can take to help released bottom fish to survive. One common method is venting, or releasing expanded gas from the fish by inserting a designated tool like the Novak Venting Tool, developed by Florida Sea Grant www.arcdehooker.com, through the side of the fish and into the swim bladder.

Given recent regulations, anglers have flexibility in choosing how to release their catch in order to increase survival rates. There is new release gear available that's easy to use and effective. Innovative new products for releasing unwanted or undersized fish include fish descending devices. One is known as the inverted utility crate; otherwise known as the fish elevator.

This consists of a weighted utility crate that can be loaded with fish and then lowered to the bottom until the fish can swim out freely. This is a great method if you need to release a number smaller fish. Check out www.floridaseagrant.com to learn more.

Some other types of fish descending devices have a weight and an attachment device. These devices are quick, easy to use and very effective. On most devices that you rig to a fishing rod, the device connects to the fish's mouth, then you send the fish down to the bottom or desired depth before a quick jerk of the rod releases the device. Simple enough - the fish is released out of the danger zone. Some options for fish descending devices include the Roklees Fish Descender www.ecoleaser.com and the Seaqualizer www.the-seaqualizer.com.

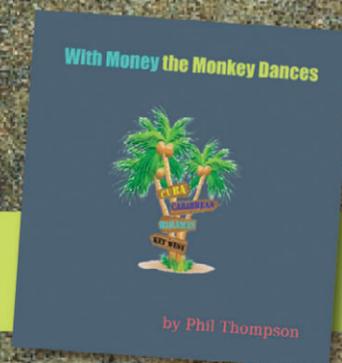
It's our responsibility to ensure future generations have access to the great fishing we have been working so hard to maintain! To stay up to date on the state of our fisheries and recent regulations, please visit www.myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater. And to experience our epic bottom fishing (charters and bookings), as well as travel ideas for the entire family, check out www.visitflorida.com. **G**

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