



Peter Miller and Capt. Russell Kleppinger steady a large tarpon before implanting a satellite tag.

# Tarpon Tagging

By: Capt. Peter Miller

Maintaining our wildlife so future generations have the same opportunities should be our biggest concern as recreational fisherman. In order to do so, we need a balance of scientific evidence and real-world information to make informed decisions on policy. The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust is one of the organizations working in collaboration with fisherman to gather facts that help manage sportfish stocks. I recently had the opportunity to head out and tag tar-

pon with Dr. Jerald Ault. Dr. Ault is an internationally renowned fisheries scientist and professor of marine biology at the University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine & Atmospheric Science. He is also on the board of directors of The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust. Here's information on tarpon conservation and the importance of tagging fish and collecting data.

Long regarded as the ultimate game fish, tarpon are part of a seasonal fishery

that is worth more than \$6 billion per year to the United States economy. Florida comprises a large portion of the fishery. Anglers travel from around the world to try and catch the "silver king." Known for acrobatics and stamina, tarpon can grow to over 250 pounds. Furthermore, tarpon are extremely long living, having a lifespan of over 50 years, which means this species takes many years to reach sexual maturity.

# World Record Tarpon

Thanks to ongoing conservation efforts and a deep respect among anglers, tarpon are growing larger. The following IGFA records are in danger of being broken, soon.

## All-Tackle Max Domecq

Weight: 286 lb 9 oz  
Length: 90.16 in  
Location: Rubane, Guinea-Bissau  
Date: Mar 20, 2003

## Mens 20 lb Gus Bell

Weight: 243 lb 0 oz  
Length: 80 in  
Location: Key West, Florida, USA  
Date: Feb 17, 1975

## Womens 6 lb Barbara Hewlett

Weight: 143 lb 8 oz  
Length: 75 in  
Location: Marathon, Florida, USA  
Date: Apr 24, 2002

## Mens Fly 20 lb James Holland

Weight: 202 lb 8 oz  
Length: 72 in  
Location: Chassahowitzka, Florida, USA  
Date: May 11, 2001

## Womens Fly 16 lb Heidi Nute

Weight: 152 lb 12 oz  
Length: 70 in  
Location: Flamingo, Florida, USA  
Date: Feb 8, 2014



Dr. Jerald Ault discusses tarpon tagging data with Peter Miller.



In the past, tarpon stocks were decimated. Most are killed due to human activity. Large quantities of tarpon are killed as bycatch from other fisheries including longlines and gillnets. Other factors leading to the depletion of fish stocks include habitat loss and pollution. Decline in bait stocks also play a tremendous role in falling numbers of predatory species.

Before conservation was considered a priority, recreational harvest of trophy fish was commonplace. Killing breeder size fish can have a dramatic effect on population. As is the case with tarpon, kill tournaments have been phased out in the United States. However, there are a number of areas including Mexico and the Caribbean that still host kill tournaments, usually targeting these fish during spawning season when they are full of milt and roe. Although rare, some countries in Latin America still harvest tarpon for meat. Scientists believe that a 200-pound tarpon can produce millions of eggs per year with only a few surviving to adulthood. Therefore, killing the breeder size large fish can have a severe biological impact.

Maintaining, conserving and understanding the lives of migratory species is a difficult task. Therein lies the problem with trying to preserve predatory species like tuna, sharks, and tarpon. Although we can regulate and police local waters, cooperation from other nations is unpredictable. The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust



## the Law

Tarpon can only be fished recreationally in Florida. The majority of recreational anglers practice catch and release since the fish is not considered to be of any food value. However, anglers can possess them for trophy purposes at the cost of \$50.00 per tag, per fish. Without this tag, possession is illegal.

is working to try and understand tarpon migration patterns so that we can present detailed information that can influence legislation. It is interesting to note that research conducted by The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust not only helps conserve game and forage fish stocks, it also provides insight into habitat change and weather patterns, even hurricane prediction.

On my tarpon tagging trip, we fished in Miami with local expert Captain Russell Kleppinger. Kleppinger is a tarpon specialist, and is credited with catching and releasing almost 600 fish in 2014, oftentimes working closely with The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust. On our trip, Dr. Jerald Ault came along to implant the satellite tags and explain the importance of this valuable fieldwork.

To place a satellite tag in a tarpon, the fish must be larger than 100 pounds. Smaller fish cannot handle the tag because it is implanted in the fish's flesh. Each tag costs \$6,000 to \$8,000 and are called "pop-up" archival transmitters. The tags transmit data which includes

water temperature, depth, salinity, and light levels for a set amount of time. After the designated time period, the tag pops off the fish and floats to the surface where it conveys information to satellites and then back to scientists.

The procedure for satellite tagging a tarpon takes a few steps. The idea is to fight the fish to the boat as quickly as possible in order to not tire it out. This means fishing with a very heavy drag and some creative boat handling. As soon as the fish is boatside, a tail rope is used and the fish is lipped. The boat is gently bumped in and out of gear into the current to keep water pumping through the tarpon's gills. A suitable spot for the tag is chosen and a scale is removed. The tag is then implanted with a long metal rod, similar to a harpoon.

On our trip we satellite tagged two tarpon, both around 110 pounds. Our fish traveled up the eastern seaboard where the tags fell off and relayed valuable information regarding tarpon movements. Even though tarpon provide such a

valuable recreational fishery around the world, there's still not enough evidence to provide conclusive results regarding spawning locations, overwintering areas and migration patterns. The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust is working hard to try and gain knowledge and insight into these invaluable sportfish and to develop cooperative international policy.

To learn how you can help The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust and to learn more about the valuable research Dr. Jerald Ault and other scientists are conducting, visit their website at [www.bonefishtarpontrust.org](http://www.bonefishtarpontrust.org). Donations to help purchase satellite tags are handled by the Center for Tarpon and Bonefish Conservation Research at the University of Miami. The Bonefish & Tarpon Trust will match any donation dollar for dollar. To book a trip with Captain Russell Kleppinger, call him at 786.290.3474. 