

VIEWPOINT

Tournament Control

Though you wouldn't know it from the reading, the facts confirm that an economic recovery is under way. Election-year politics cause the current economic outlook to remind many of the popular Irving Cohn song, "Yes, We Have No Bananas," where the facts of the matter are unashamedly subject to the way they are presented.


Such is also the case regarding the complex issue of billfish conservation. A powerful and well-funded lobby representing commercial fishing interests understands the realities of both the playground and politics: He who shouts the loudest is heard the most. And, unfortunately for recreational fishermen, the commercial fishing crowd is joined by an international chorus with which it has far more in common than the disparate interests of those who fish for fun.

The independent commercial fishermen returning with delights for their regional markets are important to all of us. It is the floating factories that ravage fishing stocks like a vacuum cleaner salesman attacking an intentional spill that exhaust the seas and shift the blame. Tragically, these global pillagers are unrestricted by boundaries or conscience while they point to tournaments and shout, "Blood sport!"

The number of billfish caught by recreational fishermen is but a bio-blip compared to the untold thousands killed as by-catch in the normal work of the international fleets. However, the photographs of billfish hanging on the weigh scales of tournaments around the world are lustily exploited as "evidence" that we who actually care the most care the least. As recreational fishermen, we can't afford to do little while looters tell the world they have the answer to inventory shrinkage. Here are two ways we can make a difference:

Prioritize release-format billfish tournaments. The Club Nautico de San Juan (Puerto Rico) is the oldest consecutively run billfish tournament in the world. Last year, in celebration of their 50th anniversary, organizers adopted an all-release tournament format. It was not an easy decision, but it was one they felt compelled to make. And it was supported by the club's members and participants. The tournament remains as popular as ever, and not a single fish is weighed. Tournaments that retain a catch component can take the important step of elevating their release divisions to a higher level of focus and prestige.

Demand modified-catch formats. Virtually every tournament in the world has taken major steps to reduce the capture of fish by setting challenging length/weight restrictions. A select few, such as the Bahamas Billfish Championship, are taking the extra step by having these restrictions escalate during the tournament itself as fish are caught. In other words, they reinforce the idea that you don't bring in anything smaller than the ones that have already been caught.

The Hatteras/Bertram Shootout will soon announce revised formats for the 2005 tournament which incorporate these critical steps. Along with the BBC, these tournaments — and others like them — are doing their part by tackling the most important fishing fact within our immediate control: Fewer fish at the weigh scale mean more fish to catch and release the next time. 



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