

John J. Curlett

ACCESS DENIED: TURNING AWAY VISITORS TO NATIONAL PARKS

April 27, 2012

My name is John J. Curlett. My family, friends, and creditors call me Jack. I am presently, and have been since 1984, a resident of South Florida, North Key Largo exactly. I fish both offshore as well as inshore. Literally, at my doorstep, I have the ability to fish in either the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, Everglades National Park, John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park or, why we are all here today, Biscayne National Park. I am a recreational angler.

In 2005 when Biscayne National Park first started the process of redrafting their General Management Plan, which all national parks are required to do every twenty years, Biscayne National Park was also required to draft a Fishery Management Plan, as they shared jurisdictional responsibility of the park's waters with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. With the agreement of both, a Fishery Management Plan Working Group was formed with the assistance of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Atmospheric Association and that group was comprised of two dozen local stakeholders and several environmental representatives. I chaired that working group from January through September of 2005. During this same period of time I also served on the boards of Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, the Ocean Reef Rod and Club and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council. I still work with those same organizations today, along with the South Florida National Parks Trust, the Ocean Reef Conservation Association and the Wildlife Foundation of Florida. I do this for one reason. I want to help make things better, those things being the local fishery, water and habitat. I am here today as I have witnessed first hand the degradation of our local habitat and the depletion of our fishery.

We are here today because Biscayne National Park has, in its 2011 draft General Management Plan, designated a small portion, seven percent, of the park as a marine reserve.

When Congress originally established the National Park System the intention was that it was to be preserved and protected for the common benefit of all of the people of the United States, not just for any single user group. To that end, national parks are held to a greater standard than some other parcel of land or body of water and therefore deserve a higher degree of maintenance and management. The last scientific assessment of habitats and fish population in Biscayne National Park was conducted by the University of Miami in 1999. Even then, 13 years ago, it was found that 77% of the 35 individual fish stocks that could be analyzed were overfished. Have we any reason to believe 13 years later they have improved. Today we have better fish finders and bottom reading machinery and better global positing devices to catch fish. On top of that, the number of recreational anglers has dramatically increased as well. I know, I am a recreational angler.

As I mentioned earlier, I serve on the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act was signed into law in 1990. Since that time numerous areas in the Sanctuary have been set aside as Sanctuary Preservation Areas (SPAs) and Ecological Preserves. All of these, just like the proposed Marine Protected Areas for Biscayne National Park are open to everyone but uses are restrictive to non consumptive uses. At first the local Monroe County residents were up in arms that they were being denied fishing in this resource. I know. I was one of them. I am a recreational fisherman. Over the past decade, like many other local anglers, I have seen fish populations increase in and around these SPAs, and as fish tend to swim and know no defined boundaries, they end up populating nearby and adjacent reefs and habitat. Fishing around these areas has never been better.

The main purpose of a marine reserve is not to intentionally deny access to anyone but to protect the precious resources entrusted to the park's care and at the same time offering rewarding experiences for all visitors, including boaters, sightseers, anglers, snorkelers, divers, kayakers, birders, and glass-bottom boat tour passengers. Visitors from all around the country, and all over the globe, visit Biscayne National Park and they expect to see something that resembles a national park, not a terrestrial BLM piece of property or just another body of open water. They want to see an aquatic Yellowstone, or a Yosemite. That is what they expect and that is what they deserve. Biscayne National Park is not there solely for the enjoyment of local residents. It is there for everyone. That is why it is called a national park. That responsibility is ours, yours and mine.

I stand here as one of the few if not the only resident of Florida on this panel. I am an avid and regular angler of these waters. Anyone who truly knows the waters of Biscayne National Park knows that the reef is in serious danger of collapse. No conscientious angler would agree that fishing in this area shouldn't be significantly curtailed. Strong tools need to be used in this park if it is ever to recover the reef coverage or fish numbers, species, and sizes that used to exist here. Bag limits and catch sizes just won't matter in this area, as the fish simply aren't there. A marine reserve is the most logical tool to apply in this area. Indeed, during my chairmanship on the Fishery Management Plan Working Group, we came very close to recommending a marine reserve of approximately 9000 acres. This recommendation was generated by the local stakeholders who sat on that committee, not a bunch of extreme environmentalists who've never been to the park or had a rod and reel in their hand.

My experience fishing in and providing advice to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary leaves me with the recommendation that a marine reserve is the right tool to use here. In fact, I keep hearing from the community that they are encouraging NOAA to increase the number and the size of these sites throughout the sanctuary.

These same results, I understand, are coming out of the marine reserve, or Research Natural Area at Dry Tortugas National Park. Indeed, through a collaborative process with the National Park Service, NOAA, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the angling community, we came to agreement over five years ago, after many years of negotiation, that we needed to close an area in and around the reefs in Dry Tortugas. The initial results are showing that fish sizes are larger, there are more of them, and there is a wider variety of species, too.

Biscayne National Park is in both the fortunate and unfortunate situation of being right next to the bustling metropolis of Miami. This great park is available and accessible to millions of people. That access, though takes its toll. The park service has a responsibility to mitigate for such heavy use to protect this resource if we ever want to see it recover from the decades of damage that it has seen. All told, I am supportive of a marine reserve to protect the incredibly unique reef tract that exists in my backyard. I want my grandkids kids and your grandkids to be able to see and enjoy this incredible resource when they visit Miami.