

The Gulf Fishermen's Association

June 27, 2008

Dear Ms. Payne,

This week I had the opportunity to visit the Georgia Aquarium. I'd like to complement you on the variety of sea creatures displayed, and also the way in which these creatures were displayed. I've been to all the major aquariums in the East and Southern U.S., and yours ranks number one in my book. I visit these aquariums not just as an interested tourist, but as a professional whose livelihood relies upon these same sea creatures. I am a commercial fisherman. I own a commercial longline vessel which operates in the Gulf of Mexico, catching Grouper and Snapper. Imagine my surprise, while entering your wonderful coral reef exhibit, to hear one of your employees admonishing all who would listen, not to purchase Grouper in a restaurant. I thought that possibly, since I missed the first part of the man's discourse, that I had misunderstood what he'd said. So I stayed to hear the entire lecture. As it turns out, I had missed some important details, but this only confused me more. The subject of the lecture was a specie of Grouper native to the Great Barrier Reef. The lecturer stated that the Grouper did not spawn until it reached 40 lbs., and because commercial fishermen were harvesting smaller fish, the Grouper were not reproducing, and vulnerable to overfishing. The lecturer then went on to tell the crowd that because Grouper were vulnerable to overfishing, they should not order Grouper when patronizing restaurants.

At the conclusion of the lecture, I had a conversation with the lecturer. When asked why he made no distinction between a Grouper specie landed halfway across the world and the Grouper your visitors would find at their favorite restaurant, he had no answer. Instead, he handed me a card entitled "Seafood Savvy", This card outlined what seafood should be purchased, and what seafood should be avoided. When I asked the man why Red Snapper should be avoided, he confused the Snapper with Redfish (Red Drum), a completely different species/fishery which is in a completely different state. Both Gulf Grouper and Gulf Red Snapper are tightly managed by the Gulf Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service. Commercial (as well as recreational) catches of these fish are tightly controlled and monitored by these organizations, both of whom have been charged with ensuring and maintaining *sustainability* of these fisheries. When asked why Grouper were to be avoided, your employee pointed to the asterisk appearing next to Grouper, which says "*** contaminant levels are often elevated in species with high fat content or large species". This is something which I, a grouper fishery veteran of over 30 years, have **never** heard mentioned before. Contaminant levels in Grouper ? I'd like to see some hard facts on that. Another specie listed to avoid is Vermillion Snapper, which is in direct **contradiction** to the National Marine Fisheries and Gulf Council's point of view that the Vermillion Snapper fishery (in the Gulf of Mexico) is in fact very healthy **and** under-harvested.

Please put yourself in my shoes and try to understand how I felt hearing what is at best misinformation. How many visitors to your fine institution hear this same propaganda everyday, and accept it as fact ? I am a member of a commercial grouper fisherman's association, the Gulf Fisherman's Association. Our group has teamed up with Environmental Defense, a large, non-profit organization dedicated to "protecting the environmental rights of all people, including future generations. Among these rights are access to clean air and water, healthy and nourishing food, and flourishing ecosystems -- Ed Small, Owner/Operator F/V Jill-L, Madeira Beach, Florida.