

Take the Bait
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Troubled Trout

Last summer as the red tide epidemic swept through the Gulf Coast many of us that make our living from the sea suffered. Waterfront dwellers had to endure the stench and visual evidence of the silent killer that lingered for months leaving tens of thousands of fish dead and decaying wherever the prevailing winds pushed them. As we all watched in horror, the carnage continued for months and cleanup efforts often seemed futile. The red tide even swept offshore leaving vast areas now known as dead zones, where all the coral was killed and no longer able to support the very base of the food chain. The fact of the matter is that no one knows what kind of long-term effects the prolonged red tide will have on our fish stocks.

One thing was for sure, the red menace was an indiscriminate killer and all indigenous species were affected. Even though we didn't see kingfish washing up on the shore line we also didn't see the kingfish migration in the numbers that we had been accustomed to in the past. Why? The migration of the bait fish was affected by the red tide and created a ripple effect. Simply put, with nothing to feed on the fish simply passed us by. Prevailing winds can also be a factor in bait location, but once again no one really knows what lies ahead with the kingfish run for the spring.

One of my favorite inshore species the spotted sea trout was without a doubt the most vulnerable and took the hardest hit of all. Large areas in lower Tampa Bay that once produced bountiful quantities of sea trout are in fact barren and lifeless. The bait fish have been slowly returning and in my opinion are numerous enough to sustain life in

these areas, but the cold hard truth of the matter is that there are simply no fish moving back into the flats with any sense of urgency. Anglers in upper Tampa Bay and the Clearwater area have been getting some decent sea trout catches and larger trout seem to have been less prone to the ill effects of the red menace.

I cannot begin to tell you how disheartening it has been to spend countless hours drifting over pristine grass flats that once held an abundance of life only to see nothing. Now more than ever you are going to hear me preach about the proper conservation of this species. Once abundant the spotted sea trout needs all the help it can get to boost its population. Take only what you plan to eat and handle these fish as little as possible. They are not the most resilient fish around but they are in fact a game fish. Use a dehooker to release fish that are not wanted and avoid handling them at all if possible. If the fish swallows a hook cut your leader as close to the hook as possible and release them. Tugging on a gut hooked fish is a death sentence and for what? A five-cent hook! Simple gestures of conservation will ensure better catches in the future. It may take quite some time for our trout fishery to return to some sense of normalcy so they need all the help we can give them.

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