

Goliath Grouper Conservation

The recent interest of anglers targeting goliath grouper has caused the FWC's Division of Law Enforcement to examine its philosophy for enforcement of the goliath grouper regulations. Goliath grouper are a prohibited species; therefore the species receives greater protection to ensure its continued health. A portion of 68B-14.0036(2) (g) states "No person shall harvest in or from state waters, nor possess while in or on the waters of the state, or land, any Nassau grouper or goliath grouper." One must next look at the definition of harvest under 68B-14.002(6) to clarify proper catch and release techniques for this prohibited species

"Harvest" means the catching or taking of a fish by any means whatsoever, followed by a reduction of such fish to possession. Fish that are caught but immediately returned to the water free, alive and unharmed are not harvested. In addition, temporary possession of a fish for the purpose of measuring it to determine compliance with the minimum size requirements shall not constitute harvesting such fish, provided that it is measured immediately after taking, and immediately returned to the water free, alive and unharmed.

Looking at the above definition of harvest, it states that fish **immediately** returned to the water **free**, alive, and **unharmed** are not harvested. The later part of the definition describes temporary possession **for the purpose of measuring for compliance** of size requirements. Since goliath groupers are prohibited there is no reason to measure the fish, except for scientific purposes. Because of this, the release of the fish must be immediate. The skeletal structure of large Goliath grouper cannot adequately support their weight out of the water without some type of damage. If a large goliath is brought on-board a vessel it is likely to sustain some form of internal injury. Thus, if the fish is harmed it could be considered harvested by definition. Removing smaller goliaths from the water to remove hooks is not necessarily a bad practice, but this process must be done with care, using proper fish handling techniques, and as expeditiously as possible. The taking of photographs after removal of hooks and posing for pictures with goliaths is not considered an immediate release of the fish.

The same philosophy described above should be applied to the catching and handling of any large species of fish, such as tarpon. The FWC will be implementing a significant educational element as part of this enforcement philosophy to discourage the "boating" of large goliaths for photo opportunities, as well as educating the public that the retention of smaller goliaths for photographs is not considered an immediate release.

Law enforcement officers are encouraged to use their discretion and educate the public on this philosophy when dealing with goliath grouper. Officers will pursue criminal prosecution in egregious cases following an education period. Identifiable individuals who have posted pictures of inappropriately handled goliaths on various web forums and web pages may be contacted by law enforcement officers and investigators to educate them on the agency's conservation philosophy.

Understanding the importance of your contribution to marine resource management and conservation is vital to maintaining healthy fish stocks. You have a direct effect on the resource every time you go fishing. Adhering to fishing regulations means healthier fish populations. Good fisheries management means better fishing in the future!