


DNA tagging program has Brevard County roots click to change font size: -A | +A

BY MATT BADOLATO • FOR FLORIDA TODAY • OCTOBER 26, 2008

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When you release a fish, do you ever wonder where it will go? Will it stay put in the area it was caught or is it bound for distant waters? How big will it grow and will someone else catch it?

For tarpon fishermen, these questions can now be answered with a new method for tracking the gamefish. Using the same techniques used by forensic scientists to solve homicide cases, anglers are now being asked to take DNA samples of tarpon before they are released.

Created by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in cooperation with the Mote Marine Laboratory, the Tarpon Genetic Recapture Study aims to collect the DNA from tarpon around the state to see if they are caught again after being released, their migration patterns, and survival and growth rates.

Like humans, each tarpon has a unique DNA "fingerprint" that identifies it as an individual. By collecting a sample and comparing it to others, marine scientists can determine if the "tagged" fish was caught before.

Taking a genetic sample of a tarpon is not difficult. Using a small abrasive sponge, anglers need only to swab a few skin cells off their tarpon's large outer jaw before it is released.

The swab is placed in a vial containing a storage solution that keeps the DNA containing cells viable at room temperature until they are sent to the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute laboratory in St. Petersburg.

The free kits issued by the FWC are available at several local fishing retailers including Harry Goode's in Melbourne and Man Overboard Tackle in Indian Harbor Beach. Included are waterproof data sheets with pencils to record lengths, dates of capture, and the approximate location where the tarpon was caught.

Capt. Mike Badarack of Satellite Beach was one of the first anglers to begin DNA tagging on Florida's East Coast. He is now leading its promotion.

"When I first started with the DNA tagging program, there was nobody doing it from Jacksonville to Miami," said Badarack, a fishing guide specializing in light-tackle tarpon fishing between Sebastian and Port Canaveral. "It was all being done in the really popular tarpon fishing areas like Tampa Bay, Boca Grande and the Keys."

He believes the method is more effective than past systems, such as streamer tags -- numbered plastic strips inserted into the fish's back.

"It's fool proof," says Badarack. "With the old way, you were spearing a tube two inches into their body. Sometimes the metal in the tags would rust out or they would just fall off. Now you can just take a quick swab, write down the fish's length and where you caught it, and let them go. That means much less stress on the fish."

Any size tarpon can be sampled from any body of water, Badarack said. He is particularly interested in the Atlantic population of tarpon and whether they remain here year round and why they prefer certain Space Coast habitats.

"I want to know where all the baby tarpon in Turkey Creek and the Sebastian River head off to as they grow up," he said. "And the big fish we catch around the inlets; are they from the Caribbean or Mexico?"

As with all fish-tracking studies, angler participation is necessary. The possibility of a tarpon being recaptured and swabbed again by another person is low, so the more fish that are identified the greater chance a fish will be caught and "tagged" again.

"To up the odds of a successful recapture, we really need as many people on board as we can get," Badarack says. "In Tampa, Miami, Sanibel, and the Keys they have already recovered four fish since 2006, which is good news. One was caught 40 miles away and another only 100 yards from where they were originally tagged."

When an angler collects a skin cell sample, the vial must be sent to the St. Petersburg lab for processing and identification. Anglers can mail the samples to St. Petersburg and get the results the day after it is received.



Capt. Mike Badarack of Satellite Beach works to get a DNA sample from a tarpon caught in the Indian River Lagoon. (For FLORIDA TODAY)

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Badarack also has offered to mail samples for local anglers who can deliver them to him in Satellite Beach. Anglers will be notified via e-mail if the lab connects their fish's genetics with one previously caught, or if their specimen is caught in the future.

To become a volunteer, contact Badarack at 321-863-0561 or visit <http://research.myfwc.com>

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