

Casting Comments
Clear and Present Danger in the Gulf

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Fisheries issues are rarely this black and white.

Most of the things we debate in fisheries management revolve around murky models and shifty statistics. All too often, politics and fisheries science are woven together into a perfect bird's nest of confusion, producing baffling regulations and counter-intuitive policies.

But when it comes to the unnecessary removal of tens of thousands of acres of prime marine habitat, the danger is clear and present. In this debate, there is no gray area.

In a knee-jerk response to the Gulf oil spill, the U.S. Department of Interior issued a directive in October of 2010 ordering that all non-producing rigs be plugged and any remaining structure removed within five years of the issuance of that directive.

It amounted to an order to dismantle what is generally regarded as the largest man-made reef in the world.

You have to assume that no one gave any thought to what might be living on or around those structures. You could be charitable and envision this was the decision of a faceless bureaucrat under tremendous pressure to be seen doing something in the aftermath of the worst oil spill in U.S. history. You would hope that someone, somewhere, would eventually take a breath and reevaluate the directive, which essentially is a death warrant for an irreplaceable amount of habitat and countless organisms that call those structures home. You would expect that the environmental community, with all its vast resources and professed concern for every living thing in the sea, would join the fray and protest the destruction as rigs and other structures are dynamited and removed.

You would think one or more of those things would happen, but you would be wrong. None has.

As anglers and divers around the Gulf can attest, the rigs and structures are coming out, and the pace is picking up. Like a pebble starting an avalanche, the directive has created its own momentum. It falls once again to the ordinary folks who enjoy our marine resources and know what's at stake to derail this short-sighted directive before it does any more damage.

Fortunately, solutions are in the works. CCA is proud to have supported Sen. David Vitter (R-La) as he filed legislation on Sept. 16 that would prevent rigs and other structures from being summarily removed from the Gulf of Mexico. The Rigs to Reefs Habitat Protection Act would not allow platforms to be removed until an assessment has been completed to determine whether there are coral populations or other protected species in the vicinity of the platform, and to identify any species that have recreational or commercial value. If it is determined that there is a substantial reef ecosystem around the structure, the decommissioning of the platform will be halted until it can be determined that removing it would not harm the reef ecosystem.

The Act further states that companies are exempt from the requirement to remove platforms from the marine environment as long as the owner commits to converting the platform into an artificial reef either by initiating discussions with applicable state governments regarding potential sites for the artificial reef or by taking steps to provide for “reefing in place.”

For reefing in place, the Act outlines several steps that must be taken, including removal of the top decks, maintaining an anode system and navigation aids, and paying into a Reef Maintenance Fund created by the Act. The Reef Maintenance Fund is to be available without fiscal year limitation and not subject to appropriation, for the maintenance of artificial reefs established under this program.

“More than ever we need to create habitat for marine life in the Gulf, not dispose of it,” said Sen. Vitter. “These idle rigs are serving a valuable purpose by supporting our fisheries, and it just doesn’t make sense to remove them.”

Also, in a guest column on page 44, you can read more about exactly what is at stake in this debate. John Hoffman, CEO of Black Elk Energy, is an avid diver who has seen firsthand the incredible ecosystems thriving on and around the structures. He has launched an initiative called Save the Blue that is working to keep those structures in the Gulf of Mexico and hosted a successful Save the Blue gala at the Aquarium of the Americas in New Orleans in September to raise awareness and show support. A contingent of CCA representatives was among hundreds of concerned people who attended. The level of concern in the room was palpable, heightened by live-feed video cameras stationed under a rig in the Gulf revealing steady swarms of fish parading past the camera all night. It was a glimpse into a world that may not be around much longer unless we can derail this misguided directive.