

## **An Open Letter to the Bream Fishermen Association Membership**

Dear Members,

Many of you received a mailing or email in December 2011 announcing that we would not be meeting in January 2012 for our regularly schedule bi-monthly 'Eating Meeting'. The following pages provide an overview of past and celebrated accomplishments of the BFA and the current challenges facing the organization. As we proceed through our lives, we make mental notes of changes as they occur, whether they are new neighbors, new roads or a new landscape.

Have you ever thought about what the area, you call home, might have looked like a hundred years ago? Or what the same landscape will look like 100 years from now? One thing is certain as you read the following newsletter; the BFA have been stewards of our environment and by doing so have helped make conditions better today than they were.

Who exactly are these folks? What are they all about? To you, I say, read on:

The purpose of the Bream Fishermen Association is to support, develop, and implement programs which promote the conservation responsibilities as well as the recreational benefits of fishing, hunting, camping, and related outdoor activities; to improve the quality of our land, air, water, and other natural resources; and to advance the cause of wilderness protection and plant and wildlife preservation.

As you get through the long history of the BFA, you may get a better understanding of the culture of this group – and find that you wish to help us further these efforts. Our first official Membership Meeting will be scheduled for Wednesday, 1 February 2012, at our usual location, the Elebash Center (1624 E. Belmont Street). We will be serving dinner, updating the Membership on our new charter and Board Members, and have lined up a guest speaker.

I certainly hope you can join us, and hope you will consider remaining a member of this organization.

Sincerely,

Barbara Albrecht

Newly elected BFA President

## The Bream Fishermen Association - A Time Capsule

The Bream Fishermen Association (BFA) is a well-known and highly respected organization which has assisted the city, county, state, and region as environmental stewards in protecting our northwest Florida and south Alabama waters for over 40 years. Loosely organized in the mid 1960s by local fishermen who were concerned about the deterioration of regional water quality conditions, the BFA was officially chartered as a non-profit organization in January 1970. That was the same year that the United States Environmental Protection Agency was created as an outgrowth of the burgeoning environmental movement. The EPA opened its doors for business on December 2, 1970, less than eight months after the first Earth Day celebration, and 11 months after the BFA was established.



Photo 1. Cuyahoga River, Ohio, caught on fire several times between 1952 and 1969.

The BFA has been directed since its inception by Charles A. Lowery, a Colonel in the Army National Guard Signal Corps, who has always led by example. Colonel Lowery helped oversee the development of a volunteer-based water quality monitoring program in area waters to assist the health department and state biologists in identifying the causes of water quality impairment and degradation. Over the years, the BFA placed pressure on state and private organizations to do more to protect the health of our air and waters, and in doing so has been instrumental in protecting our area's natural resources.

Many BFA Members grew up in the area and recall a time in their youth when Perdido and Pensacola Bays were teeming with life; these were sandy-bottom systems with clear waters and sea grass meadows that extended in a patchwork across the entire water body. Gone are the days that Bayous Texar and Grande were crystal clear, and schools of fish, shrimp, and crabs could be seen among the grasses. This was also the generation that survived through hard times and fought for our freedom overseas. They remember a time when you could throw a cast net and have enough bounty from our

waters to feed an entire family. These memories, coupled with fortitude, fueled these men and women into taking action. As the saying goes, "Never underestimate what a small group of people can do when they put their mind to it".



Photo 2. Charles A. Lowery and JD Brown at the Annual Nov 2010 Fish Fry.

While out fishing, members would pick up trash if they came across it and note unusual water colors or smells from runoff. These sites were reported and followed up on by the members. In so doing, they assisted the Florida Wildlife Federation and the Game and Freshwater Fish Commission in identifying problems so that they could be corrected.

In 1972, in Nichol's Creek on the Yellow River, a fisherman caught two yellow bullhead catfish which had tumor-like lesions on their heads and flanks. The fisherman brought his findings to the BFA, who in turn consulted the newly arrived EPA scientists on Sabine Island. So unusual were these lesions, the fish were sent to the Smithsonian Institute for cataloging in the Registry for Tumors. The tumors were interesting enough to warrant a visit from several scientists at the Smithsonian Institute and the Washington office of the EPA to attempt to collect more specimens. This visit and subsequent visits thereafter were hosted by BFA members. Although no additional specimens were ever collected with the extent of lesions exhibited by the first specimens, some 200 additional specimens were collected and studied. The study's findings were captured in a scientific publication (Couch, J.A. and J.C. Harshbarger. 1985. Effects of carcinogenic agents on aquatic animals: An environmental and experimental overview. Journal of Environmental Science and Health. Part C: Environmental Carcinogenesis Reviews. Vol 3, Issue 1.pp 63-105) which linked the lesions found on the fish to environmental contaminants in the water.

The BFA developed good relationships (partnerships) with the USEPA, the FL Wildlife Federation, the Game and Freshwater Fish Commission (known today as the FL Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission), and the FL Dept of Environmental Regulation (FDER) and the FL Dept of Natural Resources (FDNR), which merged to become the FL Dept of Environmental Protection (FDEP) in 1993. They also worked with the University of West Florida's Dr. Tom Hopkins to identify problems in our area waters and solve these issues, helping to put UWF's Marine Biology Department on the map.

Expanding on their early efforts described above, the BFA Board and members developed a scientific program of water quality sampling. The members of the BFA understood the importance of scientific methodology in water sampling and the need for quality data and proper collection techniques, so data could be used to identify trends. In the 1970s and 80s, the BFA expanded their water sampling program to include 93 quarterly stations; each site was revisited every three months; and each BFA-obtained sample was measured for *18 parameters*. BFA Members and state biologists met frequently to discuss data and trends that were observed in the field. In this way, the BFA assisted the state with source identification of many pollutants and environmental issues.

Through these efforts, the BFA identified a problem in Brushy Creek. Brushy Creek in Escambia County, FL, was a routine water quarterly sampling station within the BFA/FDEP Ambient Water Quality Monitoring Program. Data collected in 1979 revealed high bacterial loads, which focused efforts on the creek and the source of these loads. Further investigation identified the source as a sewage wastewater treatment plant which serviced the City of Atmore, AL, and the surrounding area. The BFA wrote up and published their findings as a special report, dated Nov 1980. The City of Atmore addressed the problem by updating their wastewater treatment system.

Many individuals may not realize that the reason that FDEP has a Northwest District Office in Pensacola today is a direct result of the numerous trips the BFA Executive Board made to the state's capital, Tallahassee, in the early 1970s. That was the time when fish kills were measured in acres and miles. At the persistence and urging of the BFA, not only was the NW District established, it also housed a state-of-the-art chemistry laboratory outfitted with Department of Health chemists and FDER field biologists and environmental chemists. Then FDER District Director, Vivian Garfein, so supported the BFA in their community interests and volunteer efforts, that she arranged for the chemistry staff to begin their workday only after the BFA volunteers had completed their ambient water quality sampling efforts and returned their samples to the lab facility. In this manner, data quality objectives could be met and fulfilled. *(Many of the water quality tests must be initiated within six hours of sample collection to meet and qualify for state Quality Assurance/Quality Control (QA/QC) criteria.)*

Today, forty-plus years after the US Congress enacted the Clean Water Act (CWA), our nation's waters are in much better shape than they have been in decades past. Industrial discharges, which were the 'low hanging fruit', are now regulated, and guess what? It worked. Industry has done a very good job of cleaning up their pollutants. Of course, there is still more work to be done, but it is important to recognize the progress that has been made.

What does that mean locally, closer to home? Our bays, which were dying in the 1960s and '70s, are better today, in large part due to efforts by the BFA members who have been, and have taught others to be, stewards of our environment and resources. No longer do we experience fish kills covering acres or miles. We still have fish kills from time to time, but they are not so much industrial in nature; they include the over-use of fertilizers (if a little is good, then a lot must be better!) or a chemical spill, etc.





Photo 4. Fish kill in bayou.

The BFA helped to get industrial pollutants out of the bays. Yet, legacy contaminants persist in our waters, soils and sediments from former industrial activities. PCBs (poly-chlorinated biphenyls) were to industry what Penicillin was to the medical community in the 1950s. PCBs were used in electrical transformers and other oil-containing equipment because they were excellent insulators of electricity and would not catch on fire. They were used on dirt roads and race tracks to keep the dust down. As a result of their amazing longevity, they are still extensively found today as a legacy contaminant in soils throughout the county and sediments throughout upper Escambia Bay. Why Escambia Bay? Because of a spill that happened in the 1970s. USEPA Scientists were collecting water samples near the newly built I-10 Escambia Bay Bridge and detected high levels of PCBs. Further sampling took them up the river to the various industries, including the Monsanto Plant, and several industries above that location.

Eventually, the source of the PCBs was identified as the Monsanto Plant. Today, some 40+ years later, Escambia County is conducting a multi-year study to identify which areas in the bay contain the highest concentrations of these contaminants.

The biggest current threats to our waters come from stormwater runoff, sedimentation, and habitat alteration. These three areas of anthropogenic impacts combine to create a chemical/physical condition that cannot recover as long as the insult continues.

- Stormwater is a general term that includes heavy metals (mostly from cars), oil (cars), nutrients (yard fertilization), and a host of other chemicals that wash into our area surface waters during each rain event.
- Sedimentation is a result of our impacts to the riparian zones (areas which create a buffer between low lying marshes/creeks/rivers/bays and the upland system) in which we clear areas (denude areas) of vegetation to build roads/shops/homes/subdivisions. During rain events, the loosened soils wash off the landscape and into marshes/creeks/rivers/bays and physically smother any vegetation/organisms growing in the waters. In unfortunate synergy with the sediments, stormwater chemicals can bind to some sediments and create more harm.

- Lastly, habitat alteration is the third insult to our landscape which is quickly altering our water quality. As our area continues to grow, so too does the demand for housing and roads. Unfortunately, the art of road placement in our area does not follow natural ridges (as the stage coach drivers might have done 150 years ago). Instead we prefer straight roads from Point A to Point B. In siting these roadways, we often fragment the landscape, especially the low-lying areas which are found in our coastal areas (the Coastal Plain - our NW FL Landscape). When we build roads in low-lying areas, knowing that we are prone to the occasional flood from storms (we average 65" rain per year), it would be better to span these low areas with open piling bridges. Instead, we opt to build roads directly on the surface, which we raise with fill dirt, and install culverts which in turn become bottle necks during storm events, and accelerate flooding.

The BP Oil Spill (2010) was an assault on our beautiful Gulf of Mexico and may have altered the balance of the Gulf ecosystem (time and monitoring will tell the story), but every day our inland waters are impacted by the ordinary activities of all of us, industry and private individuals as well.

Unfortunately many of the water quality monitoring programs have had their funding cut back since we entered the economic recession. In January 2009, the FDEP quietly closed their Pensacola water chemistry department. Currently, the NW District does not have an environmental chemist on staff. The FL Dept of Health had their budget cut in half, and has had to drop many stations within their monitoring program; today their only stations monitored are amenity beaches (popular tourist locations with parking lots and rest rooms); they no longer sample swimming holes, canoeing creeks, or local hang-out spots. Today, the BFA has a tiny contract with the FDEP (\$1,200/year) to collect 48 quarterly stations. Each BFA-obtained sample is measured for *6 parameters*; other parameters have a short holding time or are deemed too expensive, and FDEP has not offered to cover the associated costs of paying another facility to analyze these parameters. Results are entered into a computer program, difficult for individuals to access, and rarely reviewed.

## The Changing of the Guard

As a natural outgrowth of their interest in fishing, and as an expression of their strong spirit of fellowship, the BFA has hosted fifty year's worth of fish fries – complete with hush puppies, coleslaw, and baked beans – on a shoestring budget. You have probably attended some of these memorable events. It has been a point of pride for the members that these events did not draw on the organization's funds intended for conservation programs. Early on, the members would catch all the fish for these events; today the fish are purchased. But all the costs are covered by the price of the meal. It has been a true labor of love for our BFA Board to coordinate bi-monthly fish fries for the membership (sometimes upwards of 200 people) which includes not only the shopping, prep work, and cooking, but then the major clean-up afterwards. These guys are truly something else! But it is time for something new, because the people who have been doing this are no longer able to continue.

Those of you who attended the BFA Annual Picnic in November might have noticed that none of us were getting any younger and some of the faces from years past were not there anymore. Many of our BFA Members have 'grown long in the tooth', and many are facing health issues of their own or find they are caring for their spouses or parents; either way, priorities have shifted. In early December 2011, Colonel Lowery announced that he would no longer be able to serve as President of the BFA. Furthermore, many of the other officers were also facing similar issues and would no longer be able to actively serve.

The BFA Board was faced with a difficult decision: dissolve the BFA, or select a new president and other officers.

The BFA Membership is strong with approximately 120 current members. But of those 120, we have perhaps 25 individuals who actively assist with fish fries, or are members of the water quality monitoring team, or handle the membership, newsletter, and treasury duties. Many more attend the fish fries, of course, but at present many of them have been not able or not willing to participate more actively.

After evaluating the options, and considering the available resources, the Board agreed to offer the Presidency to me, Barbara Albrecht, on the condition that I find others willing to serve as Secretary and Treasurer. In late December, at a special Board meeting, it was announced that Mary Gutierrez would be willing to serve as Secretary, and Nicole Frenk would be willing to serve as Treasurer. The Board then voted to continue the organization and turn over leadership to these three officers. Heads of the major committees agreed to continue their work under the new leadership, especially including the vital water quality monitoring team which is led by Richard Olsen.



Photo 3. BFA Annual Fish Fry Picnic, Nov 2010.

I have shared with you in this letter what I have learned from these wise men and women through my personal experiences. Now I would like to tell you a little bit about my background. I moved to Pensacola to attend UWF in 1983 and likely attended my first BFA meeting (and fish fry) in 1986. I worked at the USEPA for Dr. John Couch in the Pathobiology Department as a student intern and collected water quality samples with the BFA members on the weekends. We would go to the outfalls of industry (many discharge pipes went directly into the rivers) on early mornings during the weekend and collect samples, and then collect water quality parameters from nearby bridges above and below

outfalls. I raised bioassay organisms for effluent and sediment exposures at the lab, attended UWF marine biology courses, reared freshwater prawns (*Macrobrachia rosenbergii*) with one of my favorite people and BFA lifetime member, JD Brown, and learned an awful lot about our environment and how easily human activities can result in detrimental effects.

After graduating, I worked in bioassay labs where we tested industry effluent and contaminated sediments with various organisms to determine acute and chronic (sub lethal) effects. Life in the lab lead to an opportunity with the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry (SETAC) in which I assisted SETAC in coordinating science based solutions for & with industry, academia, business, government and non-governmental entities which faced issues in the national and international Whole Effluent Toxicity (WET) world. During those years we taught roughly 25 courses in many states covering the accurate way to collect samples, store samples, test samples, culture and care for organisms, and finally how to interpret the data after the tests were terminated. This experience prepared me for the a chance to work in the private sector, where I chased contaminants in surface & ground water, and helped identify and remove the source of the contamination (on land, in swamps, and in swift moving rivers). Not all contaminants and conditions are extreme or warrant extreme measures; one project required the development of a 5 acre orchard with species specific trees which harbor microbes that biochemically can alter this specific contaminant in the groundwater. This passive form of bioremediation, when plants are implemented is referred to as phytoremediation, can be used in many applications.

I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunities and challenges I encountered in the private sector, but an exhaustive traveling schedule became a bigger challenge when my own responsibilities to care for a parent became my priority. After Ivan, I accepted a position with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) which served to keep me closer to home and put me in touch with my own landscape in northwest Florida. The Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership (GCPEP) was organized through TNC and was recognized for bringing large land owners together and working in tandem to solve similar issues faced by these groups without jeopardizing each organizations mission. The GCPEP Partners worked closely to share resources and knowledge - which complemented one another, and were recognized (locally and nationally) by receiving multiple awards for stewardship practices; not an easy task for ten members who together enrolled over one million acres in NW FL and South AL in this partnership. The partners learned early on that being respectful of each other served the greater good. As the funding cuts hit our region, many wonderful programs\* were negatively impacted, including my position with GCPEP. By this time I had been working on building a program to assist the University of West Florida (UWF), Center for Environmental Diagnostics and Bioremediation (CEDB), with getting our area established as a Watershed Center. This regionally based program would have served to conduct water quality monitoring, aquatically based restoration projects, and support the GCPEP Partners by getting students on the landscape. Needless to say, funding cuts impacted our university very hard, and as a result I have spent the past 2+ years as a volunteer working to bridge the gap between various groups and agencies, so our resources can be better protected. I hope to bring all these experiences together, with your assistance, to continue and expand the work of the BFA. And there are plenty of opportunities for all of us to continue improving the waters and the natural environment of Northwest Florida.



*\*The FDEP also experienced budget cuts in 2011 and closed down the Coastal Aquatic Management Areas (CAMA) which provided oversight to 17,000 acres of state-owned submerged lands which are part of the Yellow River Marsh Preserve under CAMA, and were active partners with GCPEP.*

We are in the process of developing a website for the BFA, and are writing grants to conduct/enhance/increase the water quality monitoring program. As we sort through all the historical information in our archives, we are also organizing a new BFA Board with continued guidance from our past BFA Board. Should you wish to become more active with our group, be it in the water quality monitoring committee, or the newsletter committee, or any other aspect of our organization, we welcome your assistance and request that you contact us. I hope to gain your interest and support for our future efforts.

With that in mind, we would like to invite you to come to the first BFA Meeting under the helm of the new Board, which will be held on Wed, 1 Feb 2012, at 6:00 PM, at our usual location (1624 E. Belmont Street). We will be serving dinner, updating the membership on our new charter, and have an interesting speaker lined up.

We certainly hope you can join us and hope you will consider remaining a member of this organization.

Sincerely,

Barbara Albrecht

BFA President (Newly elected)



Photo 5. Chasidy Hobbs, Norm Richards, and Pat Chason during the 2010 BFA Picnic



Photo 6. Our beloved Ernie Rivers making the coleslaw.



Photo 7. Phillip Woolley and Olin Tisdale



Photo 8. Ferol Mathis (†) and Keets Rivers enjoying the sunshine in 2010