

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON MARICULTURE AND TOURISM INTERACTION IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH CAROLINA AND FLORIDA

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Increasingly local seafood is being promoted to visitors as a unique feature of the coastal tourist experience. The goal is to strengthen the ability of the local fisheries industry to compete with low priced imported seafood through distribution and value-added product diversification. However, decline of wild capture fisheries (e.g., shrimp) has caused concern about the inability to meet increased tourist demand for local seafood. Although aquaculture is considered important to the U.S. seafood supply, growth of marine aquaculture (i.e., mariculture) has been limited by economic, regulatory, and socio-political barriers. Conflict over privatization of marine fish and waters and a focus by commercial fishermen, coastal residents, non-government organizations, and environmentalists on the negative effects of mariculture have generated damaging public perceptions about the aquaculture industry. Opposition in some areas where mariculture is developed include the impacts of infrastructure (e.g., buoys) on aesthetics and recreational boating. In this regard, understanding perceptions of stakeholders and the public (i.e., residents and tourists) is valuable to anticipating conflict, garnering support, and generating regional policies and strategies that respond to concerns about aquaculture.

The goal of this study was to identify the range of perceptions of community stakeholders, representing the tourism and seafood industries, regarding the presence of mariculture in Southeastern U.S. fishing communities previously profiled by NOAA. This study focused on three coastal communities in South Carolina (McClellanville, Isle of Palms, Beaufort) and three in Florida (Apalachicola, Sebastian, Cedar Key) that have substantial economic dependence on coastal tourism, a variety of marine fisheries-related industries, and different levels of investment in mariculture of clams and oysters. In both states, the mariculture industry is not highly visible because— the crops and structures that contain them are submerged, the farms are located in remote areas, or the industry is not as prominent as others in the area. Visibility of the industry is typically limited to the presence of boats engaged in harvesting or tending crops or growers selling their product at local festivals or farmers' markets. However, maricultured clams and oysters grown in nearby waters are becoming more prominent on local seafood menus in coastal tourist destinations.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 stakeholders in South Carolina and 28 stakeholders in Florida between November, 2013 and March, 2014. Stakeholders included representatives from the mariculture industry, ecotourism, tourism development offices, restaurants, hotels, marine resource agencies and coastal protected areas. All stakeholders were positive about the current level of mariculture in their community and supportive towards creating additional mariculture-related opportunities for visitors and residents.

There were some concerns about present and future conflict and the ability of shellfish growers to create opportunities for tourists. This presentation will highlight the emergent themes regarding existing and potential collaboration between the mariculture and tourism industries, identify areas of concern and conflict, and discuss the sequential mixed-method design of the study, whereby the qualitative themes were used to inform development of resident and visitor surveys.