

Commentary: Florida's Goliath groupers are worth more as friends than food

By Annie Roth, Graduate Student, University of California, Santa Cruz

Over the last decade, scuba diving with Goliath groupers has become one of Florida's most popular eco-tourist attractions. Every summer, hordes of thrill-seeking scuba divers travel to Florida's east coast to swim alongside these prehistoric looking predators.

Goliath groupers were fished to near extinction until 1990. Now, after decades of federal protection, scientists believe Florida's Goliaths are on the road to recovery. Unfortunately, they may not be on this road much longer.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is considering reopening the fishery temporarily for recreational anglers for the first time in 30 years. The FWC wants to allow the collection of 400 Goliath groupers over the next four years.

Scientists believe reopening the fishery would undermine 27 years of conservation efforts and reduce ecotourism revenue in Florida by millions of dollars. But there are many Floridians who support the proposal, most of whom are fishermen.

During a series of public forums held by the FWC last summer, many local fishermen expressed support for the proposal. They claim killing Goliath groupers would improve Florida's spiny lobster and snapper fisheries, which have been declining for years.

There is no evidence to support this claim. A 2009 report by researchers from Florida State University's Coastal and Marine Laboratory indicated that spiny lobster and snapper make up less than 4 percent of the Goliath grouper diet. Another study, published in January 2013 in the journal "Oryx," found that snapper and spiny lobsters' abundance doesn't increase when Goliath groupers are removed from their habitat. As top-level predatory fish, Goliaths maintain the health and balance of their prey populations, which studies have shown is beneficial to commercial fisheries.

FWC has stated its motives to reopen the fishery are purely scientific, that legalizing a limited harvest would allow scientists to collect biological information about Goliath groupers that would otherwise be unavailable. Multiple sources have questioned this claim. A press release by The Center for Biological Diversity said "the science that the commission hopes to gather by harvesting fish can be accomplished using a nonlethal catch-and-release program."

If FWC allows even a limited harvest of Goliath groupers, dive operators on Florida's east coast stand to lose a lot of money. In an interview with the advocacy group Open Protest, Jim Abernethy, owner of Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, said: "I can tell you without question that my business triples during the time of the year the Goliath grouper aggregation is here! My clients come from all over the world to see them."

During summer, massive schools of Goliath groupers gather off the east coast. Dive operators depend on these events to meet their bottom line.

According to FWC's own estimates, a single Goliath can generate more than \$1 million over its lifetime through ecotourism.

In a statement released by her conservation organization Mission Blue, marine biologist Sylvia Earle said "killing Goliath groupers will also kill growing economic benefits derived from divers who revel in the opportunity to be in the presence of these iconic animals."

There are dive operators who worry that reopening the fishery will cost them something more important than money: friends. Ryan Walton, owner of Deep Obsession Charters, has been diving with Goliaths for seven years. He has developed a working relationship with many residents of Shark Reef, including a 4-foot, 400-pound grouper he calls Shadow.

Keeping the Goliath grouper fishery closed is in the best interests of Florida's people, economy and wildlife. These animals keep commercial fish stocks healthy and generate millions of dollars in ecotourism.

FWC will hold more public forums in 2018. I urge all Floridians who care about their state's economy and marine ecosystems to attend one of these meetings.

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