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Sponge fishing ban voted down in Keys

Spongers and opponents testified before the Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, which voted for regulation.

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THE MIAMI HERALD

KEY COLONY BEACH — Despite protests from Upper Keys recreational fishermen and charter boat captains, local marine officials have voted against recommending a ban on commercial sponging in the Keys and have passed a resolution that calls for regulations of the fishery, including a moratorium on the issuing of sponging licenses.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council met with fishermen last week to get further comments about the proposed sponge harvesting ban and to decide how to address the controversial activity in sensitive near-shore waters.

A group of Islamorada water enthusiasts has been lobbying for an all-out prohibition of the practice locally, claiming that it adversely affects water quality and wipes out critical refuge for millions of aquatic creatures.

Meanwhile, commercial sponge fishermen and sponging industry representatives have argued that the activity isn't polluting Keys waters and say banning it would rob them of their livelihoods.

Following testimony from spongers and their opponents, the 18-member council overwhelmingly voted against a sponging ban — only three members favored a prohibition — and chose to take a less radical approach to the fishery.

Council members are asking the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which regulates sponging, to coordinate a research program on sponges and the sponging industry in the Keys and adopt comprehensive sponging regulations. The council is also recommending that there be an immediate moratorium on the distribution of commercial sponging licenses except for spongers who have recorded landings in one of the previous three years.

Although the moratorium might sound like an inevitable ban in disguise, sanctuary officials say the recommendation could be interpreted a number of ways depending upon the commission, which has the ultimate say in the matter.

Sanctuary spokeswoman Cheva Heck contends that sponging licenses could be made transferable to keep the fishery open to newcomers or the moratorium could be implemented only temporarily to slow the number of people entering the profession. Although the commission has already banned sponging in both the Everglades and Biscayne Bay national parks, the agency could even wind up ignoring the sanctuary's recommendation and leave sponging completely unregulated in the Keys.

"The sanctuary is not recommending a ban, but the state is a free agent. There's nothing to say they couldn't deal with the issue an entirely different way," Heck said. "People from the sponging industry came ready to compromise but the advisory council was just not ready to support a ban after all the information they were given."

According to the council's recommendation, the sanctuary would conduct a field and literature research program on sponges and the industry, with a preliminary report to be completed no later than Dec. 31, 2001.

Study topics would include the impacts of commercial sponging on diversity of the ecosystem, and the significance of sponges related to water quality — a source of contention in water-conscious Monroe County.