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## Study: Buoy gear not big a threat

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A two-year study by a Dania Beach fisheries scientist shows little bycatch and almost no lethal hook sets in the controversial southeast Florida buoy-gear commercial swordfish fishery.

David Kerstetter, a research scientist at Nova Southeastern University's Oceanographic Center, and several graduate students rode with several buoy-gear crews from Miami to Jupiter on nearly 60 night trips in the Florida Straits between 2007 and 2009. They recorded data such as catch and discards, depth, water temperature and catch-per-unit of effort.

What Kerstetter found surprised him.

“Just how little bycatch there was -- that's what surprised all of us the most,” he said. “We had snake mackerel, sharks and juvenile swordfish, but not more than in the recreational fishery. There was no billfish bycatch; no turtles. We didn't see any of it. I actually found the swordfish were not gut-hooked with j-hooks. We don't know exactly why.”

The straits have been closed since 2001 to commercial swordfishing with pelagic longline gear -- lines of baited hooks that stretch out for as long as 20 miles -- in order to protect juveniles which use the area as a nursery, and to cut down on the incidental catch of billfish, such as sailfish and marlin. But over the past 10 years, a commercial buoy gear fishery with about 45 federal permit holders has developed in southeast Florida waters.

These boats typically deploy up to a dozen lines with one hook apiece marked with buoys and baited with mackerel, mullet or squid that stretch for about a mile. The lines are not tied to the boat, but the boat drifts along with them while the crew waits for the buoys to move indicating a strike. Baits are deployed on standard j-hooks placed between 100 and 600 feet deep, depending on the location of water temperature breaks known as thermoclines where swordfish are known to feed. Veteran Jupiter buoy-gear and sportfisherman captain Tim Palmer said a good night's catch would be about 800 pounds of swordfish.

Some recreational and charter boat swordfishermen would like to see buoy gear banned from the straits because of user conflicts and the fear that the practice harms juvenile swords.

“I feel like they hijacked this fishery,” said captain Skip Smith, a Pompano Beach charter fisherman and founder of the Southeast Swordfish Club. “We see the j-hooks gut-hooking small fish. You're grabbing a little fish and pulling him right to the surface. Ghost gear can float out and take a turtle. They should be using circle hooks trying to protect the juveniles. There's unlicensed gear out there. We'd like to see some law enforcement.”

But Kerstetter said his research did not bear out some of those claims. He said the gear is

tended frequently so that unintended fish can be released alive quickly. And j-hooks, he said, tended to hook swords externally -- not deep in the gut where they could be lethal.

“I think a lot of the reports people are hearing of all the bycatch in the buoy-gear fishery did not bear fruit,” Kerstetter said. “They were certainly catching swordfish under the minimum size but not that many.”

Kerstetter said he would like to extend the study to include the recreational fishery to investigate bycatch and the effects of hook-and-line gear on swordfish.

“This report serves as a good starting point,” he said.

The debate over buoy gear is expected to heighten over the coming months as NOAA Fisheries officials contemplate whether to open the commercial fishery to hook-and-liners under a highly-migratory species general commercial handgear permit. The change would allow U.S. fishermen to harvest more of their internationally allocated quota, but it potentially could devastate South Florida buoy-gear fishermen.

Many paid tens of thousands of dollars for their federal permits, and an open-access policy with much lower permit fees would greatly devalue their permits. NOAA's highly migratory species advisory panel is expected to discuss the issue at a meeting May 11-13 in Silver Springs, Md.

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