

A Gordian knot; solution for nets?

By Craig Holt

The problem of more wisely managing N.C. saltwater resources may require a Gordian Knot solution. And it could happen soon.

Students of Greek legend will remember the Gordian knot story — a king (Gordius) hitched his wagon to the temple of Zeus with an intricate knot, one so intricately entwined no citizen could unloose it. Zeus, it was said, declared anyone who could untie the knot eventually would rule all Asia. For years no one could loosen the puzzling knot.

Enter Alexander the Great. He, legend says, simply drew his sword and hacked the knot asunder — and went on to conquer Asia.

For years saltwater anglers have tried to solve the knotty bureaucracy of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission and N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries in order to get the agencies to alter policies critics claim harm fisheries, tourism and, ultimately, the state's economy.

Why? The evidence seems clear. We've been bombarded for years with photos of red drum illegally left to rot in nets, sea birds entangled in monofilament and sea turtles caught in the stuff.

The Coastal Conservation Association of North Carolina and the Coastal Fisheries Reform Group have cajoled, petitioned and pleaded with DMF to do something (anything) to protect and conserve saltwater sportfish species from death by nets.

The DMF, it must be noted, is tasked by law (1997 Fisheries Reform Act) with managing coastal fishes for recreational *and* commercial use. DMF directors quickly refer to their dual responsibilities when it comes to their reluctance to change policies to please recreational anglers (1.2 million) instead of approximately 5,000 licensed commercial anglers.

Meanwhile, reds keep getting caught, creeks are wrapped up in nets preventing access by hook-and-line anglers to spotted sea trout and red drum, ducks and shorebirds become entangled, and endangered/threatened sea turtles keep dying in nylon-encased caskets.

Raleigh's legislative leadership kills attempts to curtail netting (a bill to give red drum and spotted seatrout gamefish status and protect them from nets never got out of committee this past session. Neither did a bill to protect menhaden from factory ships based *in another state*).

The DMF's advisory committees are, to put it mildly, a joke. Intended to offer a facade of fairness, helpful committee ideas never are implemented by a MFC that almost always favors netting.

An advisory committee member told us last week if a proposal would help specks or reds by curtailing netting, a commercial member will say: “We don’t have any data to support that” or “(the proposal) might work down south but not up here.” And the idea dies.

In short, nothing changes when it comes to state-managed saltwater resources. So the next step is, logically, federal intervention.

And that’s what the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center plans to do. It will sue DMF and MFC in federal court if, by Dec. 18, 2009, DMF doesn’t remove gill nets from N.C. waters (see Newsbreaker elsewhere in this issue). The last time a 4th District Court judge got involved in such an issue, surf anglers were banned from driving ORVs at OBX beaches because of six birds.

Will the same judge be inclined to wield his Gordian knot sword to DMF/MFC policy to save thousands of sea turtles? Stay tuned.