

SPORT FISHING

Bahamas Considers Granting Commercial Fishing Rights to Chinese

The Bahamian government is considering a joint venture that would grant Chinese commercial fishing vessels licenses to fish Bahamian waters.

By LARRY SMITH — A SPECIAL REPORT TO SPORTFISHINGMAG.COM NOVEMBER 14, 2016

The Bahamas government recently floated a proposal to give Chinese investors commercial fishing rights. Minister of Agriculture & Marine Resources, V. Alfred Gray authorized the Bahamas ambassador to China in writing to pursue talks with the Chinese. Gray's letter was leaked and published in the Nassau Guardian. The Bahamian Embassy in China also produced a draft summary of the proposal for discussion purposes. The ambassador, Paul Gomez, broached the matter with the Bahamas National Trust (BNT) and the Bahamas Reef Environmental Education Foundation (BREEF) at an event this past October.

The draft report prepared in July by the Bahamian Embassy in China calls for the creation of up to 100 partnerships with "the government of the People's Republic of China or its substantial representatives."

In return for \$2.1 billion in working capital, equipment and expertise over a 10-year period, China would be able to lease up to 20,000 acres of Crown land and all the joint venture companies would receive commercial fishing licenses. Current Bahamian law prohibits foreigners or foreign-owned vessels from engaging in commercial fishing. A "Bahamian" fishing vessel must be "bona fide owned by a citizen of The Bahamas, (who is) resident in The Bahamas, or a company registered in The Bahamas in which all the shares are beneficially owned by citizens of The Bahamas resident in The Bahamas," per the Bahamas Fisheries Act.

A public firestorm erupted when this proposal first became known shortly after the passage of Hurricane Matthew in early October. Since then, Gray has vigorously backpedaled and downplayed the deal. Initially he called the news reports "utterly false" and then said he had authorized a discussion, but there was nothing before the cabinet for approval. However, in November he suggested the proposal was still on the table and hoped the Chinese would not be deterred by widespread public criticism.

The proposal seems to indicate that rights would be considered to catch migratory fish in Bahamian waters (species were not specified). Although these are not traditionally exploited by Bahamians, they are an important resource for tourism.

A recent study by marine biologists Nicola Smith and Dirk Zeller has confirmed that the impact of tourism on Bahamian fisheries in terms of food and recreation is more significant than previously thought, with “obvious implications for effective conservation and resource management.” The study was published in a recent edition of NOAA’s Fishery Bulletin No. 114 (2015). Using a variety of methods, the researchers reconstructed the total Bahamian catch from 1950 (when year-round tourism took off) through 2010. The total came to 884,500 tons — a level 2.6 times higher than reported official landings. Recreational fishing accounted for more than half of this reconstructed total catch, followed by the commercial spiny lobster fishery (29%), and artisanal (12%) and subsistence (4%) fishing. Pelagic game fish (including billfish) accounted for the greatest proportion of catch during 1950–2010 (41%), followed closely by spiny lobster (35%). Queen conch, groupers and snappers each accounted for less than 10% of total catch.

And tourist demand for local fish (through recreational fishing and hotel restaurants) from 1950 through 2010 accounted for 75% of reconstructed total catches. Almost two-thirds of this demand was driven by recreational fishing by stopover visitors, and the remainder was a result of seafood consumption by both stopover and cruise visitors, the study said.

“Our findings debunk the notion, at least for The Bahamas, that catches from recreational fisheries are generally relatively small and, therefore, negligible when compared with the catches from other major sectors...The major issue is the open access nature of recreational fishing.”

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The Chinese fishing proposal is being discussed in China despite this underestimated long-term pressure on Bahamian marine resources. The Bahamas National Trust has said in a public statement on this proposal (November 5, 2016) that local fisheries were already under pressure, and noted that Chinese fishing fleets threaten the sustainability of global fisheries. The BNT said scientific assessments of pelagic fish stocks would be required before any informed discussion about a possible expansion of the fishery sector can take place.

The Bahamas Reef Environmental Education Foundation said the proposal prioritized short-term foreign goals over long-term Bahamian economic, social and environmental sustainability, and would undermine national sovereignty. “(We) put great effort into protecting our marine resources for the benefit of current and future Bahamians through regulations, marine protected areas, and by reserving this industry for Bahamians only. This proposed initiative would be a major leap backwards.”

Marine biologists at the University of the Bahamas said inadequate legislation and lack of enforcement made it “hard to imagine” that commercial fishing on such a scale would abide by any prudent catch limits. Lisa Benjamin and Dr. Adelle Thomas of the university’s Climate Change Initiative said The Bahamas could join the “long list of failed fisheries sectors” in the Caribbean “well within a ten-year period.”

The opposition Free National Movement has condemned what it calls a “secret deal” to give fishing rights and public land to the Chinese and has demanded that Minister Gray step down for his lack of transparency.

Prime Minister Perry Christie has so far avoided speaking directly to the proposal.

About the Author

Larry Smith writes a column called "Tough Call" for the *Nassau Tribune*. A former reporter and editor, Smith operates a communications agency and book distributor in Nassau. He was a member of the board of directors of the Broadcasting Corporation of The Bahamas from 2007 to 2012. Mr Smith has a degree in political science and journalism from the University of Miami. Read more on and keep up with the Chinese fishing proposal on Smith's blog, the Bahama Pundit.

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