

Jack Curlett testimony on 4/27/12 to the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

**ACCESS DENIED: TURNING AWAY VISITORS TO NATIONAL PARKS
April 27, 2012**

Good morning,

Mr. Chairman, Committee members, and my soon to be congressman, Congressman Rivera, and yes I am a third generation member of the party of Lincoln.

My name is John J. Curlett, my friends call me Jack. I am a year around resident of South Florida, North Key Largo exactly, and have been since 1984. I am a recreational angler. I fish both offshore, as well as inshore, and I am here today on my own dime.

In 2005, when Biscayne National Park first started the process of redrafting their General Management Plan, which all national parks are required to do every twenty years, Biscayne National Park was also required to draft a Fishery Management Plan, as they shared jurisdictional responsibility of the park's waters with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. With the agreement of both, and with the assistance of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, a Fishery Management Plan Working Group was formed. That group was comprised of two-dozen local stakeholders, along with several environmental representatives.

I chaired that working group from January through September of 2005. During this same period of time, I also served on the boards of Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, the Ocean Reef Rod and Club and the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council. In fact, I am the recreational angling representative to that council. I still work with those same organizations today, along with the South Florida National Parks Trust, the Ocean Reef Conservation Association and the Wildlife Foundation of Florida.

I do this for one reason, and one reason only: I want to help make things better. Those things being the local habitat and fishery.

I am here today, as I have witnessed first hand, the degradation of our local habitat, and the depletion of our fishery.

We are here today because Biscayne National Park has, in its 2011 draft General Management Plan, designated a small portion, seven percent, of the park as a marine reserve, as a means to protect and preserve what is left of that depleted habitat and fishery.

When Congress originally established the National Park System, the intention was that the parks be protected and preserved for the common benefit of all of the people of the United States, not just for any one user group. To that end, national parks are held to a greater standard than some other federally owned parcels of land, or bodies of water, and therefore deserve a higher degree of maintenance and management.

The last scientific assessment of habitats and fish population in Biscayne National Park was conducted by the University of Miami, RSMAS, back in 1999. Even then, 13 years ago, it was found that 77% of the 35 individual fish stocks, that could be analyzed, were overfished. Have we any reason to believe 13 years later they have improved?

Today we have better fish finders and bottom reading machinery and better global positing devices to find and catch fish. On top of that, the number of recreational anglers has dramatically increased as well. I know, I am a recreational angler.

The main purpose of a marine reserve is not to intentionally deny access to anyone, but to protect the precious resources entrusted to the park's care. At the same time, offering rewarding experiences for all visitors, including boaters, sightseers, snorkelers, divers, kayakers, birders, and glass-bottom boat tour passengers. Visitors from all around the country, and all over the globe, visit Biscayne National Park, and they expect to see something that resembles a national park, not a terrestrial BLM piece of property, or just another body of open water. They want to see an aquatic Yellowstone, or a Yosemite. That is what they expect, and that is what they deserve.

Biscayne National Park is not there solely for the enjoyment of local residents. It is there for everyone. That is why it is called a national park.

My experience fishing in, and providing advice to the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, leaves me with the recommendation that a marine reserve is the right tool to use in Biscayne National Park. In fact, I keep hearing from the Keys community that they are encouraging NOAA to increase the number and the size of these same type sites throughout the sanctuary. Coincidentally, in the next few months we are going to see the scientific report

and results of a marine reserve, the Research Natural Area at Dry Tortugas National Park. Through a collaborative process with the National Park Service, NOAA, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and the angling community, an agreement was reached five years ago, after many years of negotiation, that we needed to close an area in and around the reefs in Dry Tortugas. The initial results are showing that fish sizes are larger, there are more of them, and there is a wider variety of species as well.

Biscayne National Park is in the fortunate, and unfortunate situation, of being right next to the bustling metropolis of Miami. This great park is available and accessible to millions of people. That access, though takes its toll. The park service has a responsibility to mitigate for such heavy use, and to protect this resource, if we ever want to see it recover from the decades of damage that it has seen.

All told, I am supportive of a marine reserve in Biscayne National Park, as a means to protect this unique resource, that exists in my backyard. I want my grandchildren, and your grandchildren, to be able to see and enjoy this incredible national park when they visit Miami.

I am Jack Curlett, and I am a recreational angler.

Here is a link to a related article in the media:

<http://www.keysnet.com/2012/05/02/444046/feds-hear-lots-of-input-on-proposed.html>