

Follow the Fish

Written by Kathy Glasgow, BT Contributor; Photos by Silvia Ros
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Alan Sherman knows Biscayne Bay as well as any marine biologist, and what he sees isn't pretty



Captain Alan Sherman is not prone to banter or big talk. But if you want to know your chances of catching any particular fish in any part of Biscayne Bay on any certain day, Sherman will tell you straight, and he'll tell you how to go about it, and he'll be right. Sherman, one of the most prominent fishing guides in these parts, knows his way around the salt and fresh waters of South Florida as instinctively as a panther tracks deer.

He has been fortunate enough to live a large portion of his 66 years on the water, gauging the winds and tides, watching the birds, glimpsing fish darting and poking around manatee grass, fixing his lure and bait, and casting his line long, waiting to see what bites.

The uninitiated can't hear fishing's siren song. But true fishermen (I'm using the word generically to include both sexes) inhabit a halcyon world where actually catching fish isn't the point; true fishermen are innately able to communicate in unique, wordless ways, among themselves and even with water-creatures.

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One bright, balmy February morning, Sherman takes me on an excursion around Biscayne Bay. We set out from Pelican Harbor Marina in his 22-foot bay boat, the Get 'Em. There's barely a breeze, and the bay isn't jammed with hundreds of boats, as it is on weekends. We make our way south on water placid as green glass. "Ten years ago this water was brown," Sherman gestures around the boat. "There was a natural seagrass flat just under the surface, for hundreds of yards, all the way to the Miami Beach shoreline."

The entire underwater food chain flourishes amid the gently waving seagrasses. Small creatures feed on the microscopic organisms in the grass; the small are food for the larger creatures, up to the snapper and bluefish and mackerel and sea trout that hide among the seagrasses from predators, including humans. "Everything that lives in the bay needs the seagrass for something," Sherman says.



Boat propellers are the worst enemies of seagrass. And careless human boat operators, who mindlessly pilot through the grass flats (the bay is shallow, averaging some six feet deep), have been ripping up the grass and creating bare channels in once-luxuriant beds. Occasionally, and with human help, seagrass grows back and habitats thrive again. Given the bay's increasing boat traffic, though, seagrass is disappearing everywhere. Schools of fish move on or starve. "For most of my life, their homes stayed in the same places," Sherman notes, as if talking about families on his block. "Now they're changing all the time."

Thus Sherman, like all fishing guides whose livelihoods depend on finding the right fish at the right time, is always watching the water, always scouting. Sherman is a "variety fishing" guide.

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Depending on the season and weather, his clients catch sea trout, jack crevalles, ladyfish, bluefish, pompano, and Spanish mackerel, among others. (Some guides specialize in certain species most attractive to tourists, such as bonefish or tarpon; others concentrate on deep-sea fishing. Sherman also takes customers to Everglades National Park and freshwater spots like Everglades Holiday Park on U.S. 27 at Griffin Road.)

Seasoned fishermen will tell you that fish populations go through up and down cycles, but none will deny the long-range damage and dislocation wrought by human activity. No experienced fisherman doubts there are fewer fish in the bay today than ten (not to mention 40 or 50) years ago, and that there will be still fewer ten years from now, even with strict catch and size limits.

Yet Florida's recreational fishing industry remains highly profitable, with an economic impact in the state of more than \$8 billion in 2011, the most recent statistics available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (It may be worth noting, though, that in the ten years from 2001 to 2011, the number of people fishing, the number of fish caught, and the total economic impact of recreational fishing all decreased slightly.)



Sherman, having fished through ups and downs, and fully aware of the downward trend in fish populations, maintains a sanguine attitude. He even seems to relish the challenge. "There are plenty of fish to be caught," he asserts. "It's a matter of location and timing," and technology

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helps bring both together. On the bow of Sherman's boat there's a "trolling motor" that "lets me creep up on fish without scaring them"; on the stern is a remote-controlled shallow-water anchor, along with a sonar transducer that sends signals to a depth recorder showing computer images of the underwater landscape, including anything swimming or floating. There's also a GPS that maps the terrain and describes specific locations.

Even fishing lures have advanced technologically. Several years ago, Sherman and Arnold Markowitz, a former Miami Herald reporter, ace fisherman, and fishing columnist for the Waterfront Times, took a fishing trip together as a contest between Sherman's new-school lure and Markowitz's old-school version.

Sherman's lure was the well-known Cajun Thunder, shaped to be noisier more eye-catching to fish, gussied up with clicking beads. Markowitz used a classic popping cork model, which may require a bit more skill to make most alluring to a fish's sight and hearing, and to maneuver most effectively in the water, but which many fishermen swear by.

"At the end of the day," according to Sherman, "Arnold had caught a few more fish, but I had the biggest fish. More or less a draw."

Anyway, technology isn't the key to finding fish. "It's knowing where the fish hang out," Markowitz reminds me. "I don't think Alan worries too much about getting skunked because he knows Biscayne Bay intimately. Alan might have been skunked once or twice in his life," he adds, "but I doubt it."

Sherman's business depends on his customers' success, but he defines success by more than just the number of fish in the cooler at the end of the day. "What I'm trying to do," he explains, "I'm trying to bring a special light to the experience. I'm a fishing guide but also a teacher, and more than just leading them to the fish, I'm also trying to get them to see the beauty around them. Take in the whole day, the wildlife, the peacefulness on the water -- maybe you'll see dolphins jumping, pelicans diving, speckled trout swimming just under the surface. You're scanning the water listening for sounds, watching how the tide is making the boat drift -- you're taking it all in."

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On the day Sherman is showing me around the bay, he wants to check on a school of bait fish he'd spotted four days earlier under the Julia Tuttle Causeway. If those small fish are still there, bigger ones won't be far away, and it might be a good bet to take his customers over there tomorrow. Sherman points out some cormorants and terns floating on the water nearby, poking their bills around and occasionally gobbling a pinfish. "I'm watching the birds," he tells me. "The birds will tell you where the fish are."

In what seems like a single fluid motion, Sherman grabs a rod and reel, baits it with a cute plastic shrimp, and casts the line several feet out. It takes about 15 seconds for a little spotted sea trout to bite. Sherman lifts it up thrashing and shining, silver with black spots, about eight inches. He gently unhooks and drops it, and it shoots back down into the seagrass below.

While the boat stays in place, unanchored in the quiet water, Sherman catches and releases a few more trout exactly the same size, with exactly the same effortless motion. I see the natural connection he has to the life under the bay's surface, as if he's tapped some wave of communication, a kind of understanding with the fish, formed over his years on the water.

A hundred yards later, threading the Get 'Em around the Julia Tuttle Causeway's thick pylons, Sherman can see that the community of bait fish he'd spotted earlier in the week has moved on. We turn northeast until I can see a large area dotted with the floating billiard-like balls holding crab traps in place and, here and there, metal stakes sticking out of the water sideways or uprooted and drifting. A few of the stakes are upright. They have little square platforms on top -- for birds to perch on while their droppings fall into the water, for the purpose of fertilizing seagrass beds transplanted here in 2015 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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No birds were around at that time. There was some seagrass that looked alive, but if there had once been a thriving flat stretching over to Miami Beach, it wasn't there anymore. This was a mandatory mitigation project as part of the dredging of Government Cut, according to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

"Since the planting, the site was surveyed in November 2015 and showed that more than 95 percent of the planted seagrass had survived," Jess Boyd of the DEP press office writes in an e-mail.



There have been several attempts at seagrass restoration in the bay, some ongoing. Sherman was asked to help monitor one project several years ago. Some of the projects have had some success, he says, but generally "seagrass restoration doesn't work. Too much damage has been done to be able to bring it all back. I'm just a fisherman, but I know what I see."

We circle northward and accelerate, the 250 hp Yamaha outboard elevating the bow. The cool breeze blows faint mist onto my face as we pass under the JFK Causeway and make a quick

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run past Pelican Harbor Seabird Station's wildlife rescue enclosures. Lined up along a pier above us, reminding me of a gaggle of reporters comparing notes, are pelicans, terns, cormorants. Proceeding north we pass a rusty-roofed boat that seems to bristle with weathered junk. It's a houseboat, but it's hard to believe anyone could be living somewhere in there between the piles of wood, cardboard, and tattered pieces of cloth.

We move on, slowly up the channel, obeying the many signs calling for idle speed in a manatee zone. Nevertheless, power boats and jet skis occasionally appear speeding toward and around us, their wakes roiling and rocking us.

A distinct smell wafts our way. Sherman tells me it's marijuana smoke, but to me it smells like skunk. I can't even tell where it's coming from; the weird houseboat is too far away by now. Then Sherman points about 200 yards southeast to a small craft, anchored in the middle of nowhere, two silent sitting figures shaded by a makeshift canopy -- an apparition of tranquility that seems out of place, and out of pace, with contemporary Miami.

Today Miami -- all of South Florida -- aims to squeeze every last dollar from every last millimeter of its gorgeous, receding shorelines. As we move northward, the high-rises on either side of the bay, faceted towers reflecting jeweled sun rays, rise aggressively, often cutting off sunlight to the landscape behind them.



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Prolonged shade on the water drives off or kills many forms of marine life, too, adding to long-term changes in the bay's ecosystem -- changes that eventually affect the health of fish, and to which only people who spend thousands of hours in or on the bay seem to pay attention. (That's not to mention the chemical and bacterial contaminants going into the bay from waterfront construction sites, residences, and offices. In Miami-Dade County, greed has even outpaced the market, with hundreds of new, near-empty condominium towers standing east of I-95, and hundreds more, with tens of thousands of units unsold, awaiting construction or under construction.)

"The money," Sherman says. "Everybody wants money. The last thing anyone thinks about with all this development is the sea. People must think it just takes care of itself. It doesn't."

At that, Sherman leans over and pulls out of the water a knotted length of red plastic rope that has gotten tangled in a bunch of seagrass. Nearby bobs a plastic water jug. A grandiose tiered motor yacht, maybe 100 feet long, is picking up speed to our east. In a few minutes, the Get 'Em is tossing in the turbulence from the yacht's wake.

"That boat doesn't belong here," Sherman says. "The bay is too shallow for big boats like that to navigate." Especially at low tide, large, heavy boats churn up silt from the bay's bottom, turning the water brown and occluding the usually acute vision of fish; then killing their food supply as it settles and covers seagrass and other marine life.

As we near Haulover Marina, a brown pelican plops down on the Get 'Em's outboard motor, looking around like just another customer out for a day of fishing. "Don't have any food for you today," Sherman tells the bird, who nevertheless seems content to ride along for ten minutes or so.

Within the past decade, Haulover Marina has been remodeled and expanded to accommodate larger seagoing craft (as have most local marinas). It's just a ten-minute boat ride to the blue Atlantic, and several yachts, 100-plus feet long, are coming and going this day. Three party boats are there, too, waiting for their next offshore fishing trip. Two of them -- the Mucho K and the Hurricane -- although long ago converted from wood to fiberglass frames, still carry the same names they had in the summer of 1969, when Sherman got his first fishing job, as a part-time deck hand on the Cap Rudy.

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Sherman was born in Washington, D.C., the second of three children (he has an older sister, Phyllis, and younger sister, Marilyn). His father, Sam, was a World War II veteran who had served as a guard at the Nuremburg Trials. In 1955, when Alan was five and already a fisherman, the Shermans moved to South Beach. The family lived in an apartment two blocks from the water. Sam opened a grocery on Washington Avenue. He also made sure his wife, Louise, and children joined him on weekend fishing expeditions.

“Throughout my childhood and into my teens,” Sherman recounts, “we’d go every weekend we could. My mother would spend all day Friday cooking enough fried chicken to last us all weekend, we’d pack up the car, and drive out early Saturday morning. Sometimes we’d camp along the shorelines next to the Tea Table Relief Bridge, or the bridge in Everglades City. I remember staying at the motel in Flamingo and the Sands motel in Islamorada. We fished the freshwaters of the Tamiami Trail, the 20 Mile Bend, and Alligator Alley. We ate most of what we caught.”

By the early 1960s, the Shermans were living in a house in North Miami Beach, and Sam had bought an 18-foot boat, named SLAMP (initials of each family member). The weekend fishing trips continued up and down the north and south bay. Sherman also got into the habit, when school wasn’t in session, of rising before dawn and riding his bike to one of many nearby lakes and canals, or east to Greynolds Park, to fish with his best friend, Frank.

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From his first day of first grade at Sabal Palm Elementary to graduation day at Miami Norland Senior High, Sherman and school never clicked. These days he probably would be diagnosed as a slow learner, but he just never wanted to do anything except go fishing. “I struggled through school all of those years,” he recalls. “I daydreamed about the fishing I’d do when the weekend arrived, instead of paying attention to my classwork.”

One day close to high school graduation, Sherman remembers, one of his teachers asked him to stay after class. “He asked me what my plans were after I graduated. I told him I didn’t know. So he asked me what I was interested in, what did I enjoy? I said I liked to fish. He smiled, and then he said, ‘Son, you can’t earn a living fishing!’” After telling that anecdote, Sherman likes to add: “Well, he was almost right.”



Graduating at the height of the Vietnam War, Sherman opted for a six-year enlistment in the Coast Guard Reserve. He served five months of active duty in Virginia before returning to North Miami Beach for the rest of his commitment, which involved, among other activities, two weeks’ active duty every year.

He would be honorably discharged in 1974 as a second class petty officer. A few years later Sherman’s mother, Louise, died. She had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis a decade earlier. Sam, his father, eventually remarried and moved to Ohio, where he died almost 20

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years ago.

When Sherman got home from Virginia, it seemed like a good idea to get some kind of college degree, despite his lack of academic interests. As he stood in line to register at Miami-Dade Community College (now Miami Dade College), an acquaintance suggested that he major in marine engineering since he loved being on the water. So he started with a few basic classes while working part time -- brief stints at McDonald's, Burdines, and a drugstore.

It didn't take long for him to realize marine engineering involved incomprehensible subjects like math and science, so when he was offered the second mate job on the Cap Rudy, he was overjoyed. Soon he was promoted to first mate, full time, and he dropped out of school.

In 1977 he acquired a U.S. Coast Guard 100-ton ocean operator license, commonly referred to as a captain's license. After almost ten years as a first mate, learning the complexities of managing 40 wannabe (and sometimes drunk) fishermen for four hours on the open sea, Sherman became a captain on the 65-foot Hurricane. He would be in charge of the Hurricane's night fishing trips for the next 18 years.

Jay Cohen was a mate on competing party boats during Sherman's years captaining the Hurricane. "As a kid growing up," Cohen tells me, "Alan was one of the best captains there was. I grew up watching him." Now Cohen, like Sherman, runs his own charter fishing business, Reel Adventure Charters. "We're seagoing, while Alan is mostly inshore," Cohen says. "But I modeled my business on what he's doing -- a good solid family business."

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letters@hiscaynetimes.com