

SPORTFISHING

Greening Up Shark Tournaments

Goodbye banners, hello circle hooks and videos of prizewinning catches

By Russell Drumm

(June 3, 2010) Shark tournaments are an anachronism, critics say, at least the kind of kill contests inspired by the movie “Jaws” and by the exploits of Capt. Frank Mundus, Montauk’s own Monster Man, a fact he acknowledged with regret in retirement and worked hard to change.

Now, two self-proclaimed “shark huggers” from the East End have set out to inspire contest organizers here to abandon their old ways and adopt a “greener” catch-and-release approach to shark tournaments that seems to have gained a foothold in Florida.

Citing the differences between Southern and Northern fishing tournaments, local fishermen said this week that they had no problem with the catch-and-release concept, but questioned whether it was practical or economically feasible.

April Gornik and Rav Friedel, longtime environmental advocates from North Haven and Montauk, respectively, have joined with the Humane Society of the United States to introduce a model pioneered by Sean and Brooks Paxton, entertainers and conservationists known who call themselves “the shark brothers.”

The Paxtons are pushing a concept that involves a very fast chase boat, or boats, responding to the radio alert of “Shark on!” during a tournament. The boats speed to the location of a hook-up to videotape the action, including the successful tagging and release of the shark.

Sean Paxton was quoted as saying that the chase-boat-video approach was an effort to keep fishermen and spectators engaged by “taking the spectacle of dead sharks out of the sport and replacing it with a live video.”

On Tuesday, Ms. Gornik said the Paxtons helped host the Guy Harvey Ultimate Shark Challenge held off the west coast of Florida in April and May. She said they were working to replace the “strung-up



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The spectacle of sharks hanging from the scales could become a thing of the past if lower-impact approaches to shark tournaments gain favor.

shark money shot” with action videos.

The brothers have been working on a film about the late Frank Mundus, and following the success of the Florida tourney, they planned to visit Captain Mundus’s home port to share their ideas with the Star Island Yacht Club, the host of Montauk’s largest shark tournaments.

On Monday, Ms. Gornik echoed John Grandy, senior vice president of the Humane Society, who said in a telephone interview last week that the society’s more confrontational approach — banner-towing airplanes flying the society’s message over Montauk Harbor — was not getting the message across.

The Humane Society and Wendy Benchley, the widow of Peter Benchley, the author of “Jaws,” endorsed the Guy Harvey green tournament. Dr. Harvey is a trustee of the International Game Fish Association and founder of the Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation, a conservation group that promotes catch-and-release fishing.

Ms. Gornik said it was too late to change tournament plans for this year, but that she and Mr. Friedel had donated thousands of Mustad brand circle hooks to the Montauk Marine Basin for its 40th annual shark tournament scheduled for June 25 and June 26.

The snell, or shank, of a circle hook is curved as the name implies, and therefore less likely to snag in the gut or throat of fish. Circle hooks are more likely to be set in the jaw, causing less damage to the animal to be released back into the wild.

“Our main aim is to reduce mortality, not to keep people from having fun or making money,” Ms. Gornik said. She added that the traditional shark tournament scene was a jarring contrast to efforts to reverse the dramatic decline in shark populations around the world. Hawaii recently became the first state to outlaw the sale of shark fins, most of which are sold in Asia for shark-fin soup.

“Can America please not stand for that? We’re over the ‘Jaws’ thing,” Ms. Gornik said.

“Without taking on fishing per se, this approach supports the notion that sharks are in trouble,” the Humane Society’s Mr. Grandy added.

Carl Darenberg Jr. said the tournaments held from the Montauk Marine Basin had been billed as “tag-and-release” for years. “It’s always based on that. There are more releases than catches, and the weights are high,” he said, meaning that the minimum size for the various species has been kept relatively high to prevent the taking of juvenile fish.

“I think down the road we will go to more of the release type of tournament. The trouble is finding room for observers.”

He was referring to the fact that Southern tournaments run entirely on a catch-and-release basis use trained observers to ride on every boat to certify that landings are done by the book. All observers are

trained and certified by the International Game Fish Association. Mr. Darenberg said finding rooms for 100 or more observers in Montauk during the summer would be a challenge.

“I think circle hooks are a good idea. We should all be using them,” he said.

“It’s an economic thing,” said Jack Passie, former president of the Montauk Boatmen and Captains Association. “The Star Island tournament attracts a huge crowd in the middle of June when not many people are around. The bar and store business is phenomenal.”

“The people are attracted to the sharks that come in. In my own opinion, the few sharks that are brought in don’t make a big difference in the overall picture.”

“The thing that bothers me is the yahoo from the city who thinks he’s going to come out and win \$500,000, catches the biggest fish he’s ever caught, brings it in, and it’s a 125-pound blue shark” that should not have been killed, Captain Passie said.

“It’s a different mentality around here,” said Michael Potts, captain of the Blue Fin IV charter boat in Montauk. Captain Potts has been taking anglers offshore to compete in shark tournaments for years. He agreed that observer participation in the catch-and-release scenario would be difficult for “six-pack” boats licensed to carry a maximum of six anglers.

“What if I have a six-person charter? Where would the observer go?”

“It’s a mindset more than anything,” Captain Potts said. “I’m not saying it won’t work, but things take time to catch on.” He said green tournaments would reduce the interest in a lot of charter boat customers because they would not have anything to take home.

“You catch a top-of-the-line mako, and you can’t take it home,” Captain Potts said. Such tournaments, he said, “are not going to be charter boat-driven. The economy is tough, and to get a lot of people to put up money with zero chance to take home fish to eat narrows the field.”

On the other hand, the veteran charter captain said he had participated in catch-and-release tournaments. “The people enjoyed it, participants enjoyed it, and we did, too. It was enjoyable not to have to attempt to kill anything, no gaffs, harpoons, guns, just pliers. I would do it,” Captain Potts said.

The Star Island Yacht Club hosts the largest shark tournaments in Montauk. The first is scheduled for June 18 and June 19. Rich Janis, the tournament organizer, said yesterday that changing the tournament format, although perhaps inevitable — “obviously it’s headed in that direction” — was a complex issue.

He said the demographic of the participants was different than at the Southern tournaments, meaning that contests lasting more than two days are precluded here.

“They come from all walks of life,” he said of those participating in the Montauk tournaments. “There’s the retired guy with a lot of money, but also the 8-to-5 blue-collar guy who either can’t get an extra day off work or who arranges his vacation around it.”

Mr. Janis said the video boat idea would be a challenge in the Star Island contest with 200 boats fishing over hundreds of square miles of ocean. But mostly, he said, the hoisting of dead sharks, although the tournaments’ draw, gave a false impression.

“Two hundred boats fish two days. That’s 400 boats fishing to bring in maybe 20 or 25 sharks. The makos and threshers are consumed,” he said, and the blue sharks, not high on the menu in most households, are nonetheless donated — cut, packaged, and frozen — to Long Island food pantries. “These groups lose sight of that,” he said.

Mr. Janis said Star Island had accepted Mr. Friedel’s donation of 5,000 circle hooks and that they would be made available to tournament participants.