

Let 'Em Grow: Scalloping Best Practices¹

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Introduction

Each summer, recreational scalloping attracts participants from far and wide to Florida's Gulf Coast. Coastal counties that serve as vessel launch points receive significant economic benefits from this fishery (Hall-Scharf et al. 2018). However, the biology of the bay scallop and the environmental stressors it endures have led to limited populations of bay scallops along Florida's Gulf Coast (Granneman et al. 2021). Therefore, it is essential to implement best practices for harvesting bay scallops so that future generations can continue to enjoy scalloping. This publication gives recreational scallopers tips on how to sort through scallops in the water so that only those of harvestable size are taken and the smaller ones are returned immediately to the same spot where they were taken. Selecting only the larger scallops for harvest and returning the rest unharmed supports scallop population replenishment. Improving harvesting techniques can help sustain this valuable fishery and ensure that a popular recreational activity can continue for many summers to come.

Background

The bay scallop, *Argopecten irradians*, was once abundant along Florida's Gulf and Atlantic coasts (see Figure 1). In 1994, commercial harvesting of this fishery closed, and regulations were imposed on recreational harvesting (Granneman et al. 2021). Unfortunately, due to habitat loss, recruitment failures, harmful algal blooms, water quality issues, and overharvesting, bay scallops are now only found

in limited populations along Florida's Gulf Coast (Geiger et al. 2010; Granneman et al. 2021).



Figure 1. Bay scallop (*Argopecten irradians*) is a bivalve mollusk that occurs in limited populations along Florida's Gulf Coast. Credits: Brittany Scharf, UF/IFAS

This highly dynamic species typically lives for 18 months (Geiger et al. 2010). The bay scallop's first peak reproduction period occurs in the fall, after the recreational harvest season (Granneman et al. 2021). Unfortunately, this harvest removes many scallops from the system before they can reproduce.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) manages recreational bay scallop harvest along Florida's coast. The number of vessels participating in Florida's recreational bay scallop fishery, the size minimum of individual scallops harvested, and the overall quantity of harvested scallops are not limited. However, there are regulations in place, including bag limits, season limits, methods of taking, and designated zones. In contrast to

1. This document is FA262, one of a series of the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences, Program in Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences and the Florida Sea Grant College Program. Original publication date May 2024. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. © 2024 UF/IFAS. This publication is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

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Florida's regulations, other bay scallop fisheries in the United States limit the harvesting of scallops that are at least 15 months old and enforce a size minimum (Granneman et al. 2021). For more information about regulations regarding the recreational harvesting of Florida's bay scallops, please visit [the FWC website](https://www.fwc.com).

The derby-style nature of the fishery and the variability in bay scallop sizes have led to questionable harvesting practices in Florida. Confusion among anglers regarding measuring whole scallops by the gallon is also common. Florida regulations limit per-scalloper harvest by volumes of either whole scallops or shucked meat, and the maximum take is sometimes unequal by both measures (Geiger et al. 2010; Granneman et al. 2021).

Simulations that test reductions in bag limits and a later start for the harvest season indicate that these management tools could benefit Florida's bay scallop fishery in the long run (Chong et al. 2023). Implementing a later season, in other words pushing back the harvesting period to begin later in the year, would better align with the reproductive cycle of scallops. Florida's bay scallop typically lives for around a year and starts reproducing in early fall. Delaying the season would allow more scallops to spawn before being harvested, bolstering the population for the future (Chong et al. 2023). Additionally, a rolling bag limit would be another effective way to safeguard the scallop population. Beginning the season with a lower limit, such as one gallon per person when scallops are smaller, and gradually increasing the limit, say to two gallons as scallops grow, would help ensure that enough scallops were left to mature and reproduce to maintain populations (Chong et al. 2023).

Florida Sea Grant's Scallop Sorter Tool

To encourage sustainable harvesting practices, Florida Sea Grant has developed scallop sorting tools, shown in Figure 2. The user-friendly design of these voluntary tools addresses the challenge of inconsistent scallop measurement and assists scallopers in identifying larger individuals underwater during the catch retrieval process. The primary objective is to selectively retain larger scallops while releasing the smaller ones. This strategic approach contributes to conservation efforts by allowing scallops to survive and reproduce in the fall. Furthermore, opting for larger scallops not only supports conservation goals but also maximizes the harvestable meat content.

Scallop Sorter tools are available free of charge (while supplies last) to recreational scallopers interested in

participating in this sustainable scalloping effort. For more information, please contact Florida Sea Grant— <https://www.flseagrant.org/fisheries/scalloping/>.



Figure 2. The Florida Sea Grant Scallop Sorter is a tool that recreational anglers may opt to use to select for larger scallops while underwater. Credits: Victor Blanco, UF/IFAS

HOW TO USE THE SCALLOP SORTER

1. Securely attach the scallop sorter band to a mesh bag or your wrist before entering the water*.
2. Hand-retrieve scallops using legal harvesting methods.
3. Place individual scallops onto the center hole of the sorter.
 - If the scallop **passes through** the hole, it is **too small** to keep. Please return it to the habitat from which it was retrieved.
 - If the scallop does not fit through the hole, the scallop is large enough to harvest. Enjoy!

**Note: It is recommended to use the sorter tool while in the water while scalloping and not to sort scallops on the vessel. This practice minimizes the time scallops spend in the sun and out of the water, ultimately increasing their chances of survival when they are returned to the seagrass beds.*

Create Your Own Scallop Sorter Tool

Recreational scallopers can employ alternative methods to select larger scallops during the season. Here are a few examples using readily available materials.

Beverage Can

For years, scallopers have used the bottom of a beverage can as a guide to select scallops on the boat (see Figure 3). The rule of thumb is that if the scallop fits into the bottom cavity, it is too small and considered a “no keeper.” It should be released back into the water.



Figure 3. The bottom of a beverage can be used to measure bay scallops.

Credits: Victor Blanco, UF/IFAS

HOW TO USE A BEVERAGE CAN TO SORT SCALLOPS

1. Obtain a traditionally sized, 12 oz. beverage can.
2. Hold the bottom of the can upright so the curved ring faces you.
3. Place the scallop in the bottom cavity.
 - If the scallop covers the ring’s rim, it is large enough for harvest. Enjoy!
 - If the scallop fits into the cavity but does not cover the ring’s rim, it is too small. Please return the scallop alive to the habitat from which it was collected.

Note: If the scallop covers the bottom of the beverage can, it is considered large enough for harvest.

PVC Ring

Another available option to build your own scallop sorter is a PVC pipe cut into rings (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. DIY scallop sorter using a PVC ring (two inches or larger) to support the scallop population.

Credits: Victor Blanco, UF/IFAS

HOW TO BUILD A PVC-RING SCALLOP SORTER

1. Select a PVC pipe with an inner diameter of at least 2 inches.
2. Cut one-inch-thick rings from the PVC pipe.
3. Drill a hole in each ring to insert a string that can then be attached to a mesh bag.

Other Creative Homemade Scallop Sorters

Anything made of a durable, waterproof material into which you can drill a two-inch-diameter hole to allow you to measure scallops can be made into a scallop sorter. Recommended materials to use to build your own sorter include waterproof materials like marine lumber (StarBoard®) or another durable hard plastic. If you choose a wood-based material, remember to apply at least a couple of coats of sealant or resin for protection. You can also involve children in decorating and customizing the sorters for each person in your group, adding to the tradition of scalloping as a family.

The base of your sorter can be crafted in any shape, even the shape of a scallop (see Figure 5). Regardless of the shape, be sure to include a hole and a string for attaching it to the mesh bag where you’ll deposit your collected scallops. Keep in mind that the hole in the sorter should be at least two inches in diameter, but if you like you can drill a larger hole. The larger the hole in your scallop sorter, the greater your support of the scallop population and the more you will be helping preserve the sustainability of the scallop harvest. Larger holes also increase the challenge and might even make scalloping more fun, especially for seasoned scallopers.



Figure 5. Make your own scallop sorter using materials available at home. You can make your sorter in any shape you like and decorate it for extra charm.

Credits: Brittany Hall-Scharf, UF/IFAS

Conclusions

Recreational scalloping is a popular summer activity in the Gulf of Mexico, but ensuring sustainable harvesting requires a well-rounded approach (Chong et al. 2023). While broader measures like a later start date and a rolling bag limit are beneficial for the fishery’s perseverance, the voluntary incorporation of a scallop-sorter tool can contribute to conservation efforts. This innovative tool allows scallopers to selectively harvest larger scallops and return the no keepers immediately without stressing them by displacing them far away from their original spots or by removing them from the water to measure them. Taking care of the scallops this way will aid in population replenishment and keep this valuable fishery going strong for years to come. Diverse options exist for scallop harvesters to construct their own scallop sorters, with a range of materials to suit any budget and designs limited only by the scalloper’s imagination.

For more information on how to store and prepare your scalloping catch, refer to the UF/IFAS EDIS publication: [Storing and Preparing Scallops](#).

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