

Here in the Lowcountry, fishing for cobia on the Broad River is the highlight of a lot of people's entire year.



The cobia come to Port Royal Sound to spawn in the spring and early summer, and the fact that there are concentrated numbers of them creates a great opportunity for anglers to catch giant females.

It's also a great opportunity to kill off the species.

Welcome to the Great Lowcountry Conundrum: Good quality of life includes unfettered access to the water, but then unfettered access to the water reduces quality of life. Not only for the fish, but for the fishermen. It's a vicious circle.

Right now the cobia population on the Broad River is on the cusp of being overfished. Scientists aren't done with their studies – and they are never really done, are they? – but the indications are that we need to back off of the cobia fishing.

In their 2005 Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, the SC Department of Natural Resources listed overfishing as the primary concern in the management of cobia. "With the recent growth in the fishery," they state, "managers are concerned that the species could become over fished if growth in the fishery continues unchecked."

Right now the fisheries people don't know very much about cobia, its life cycle, or its spawning activities in Port Royal Sound. They want to do a lot more studies. But until we know more, we need to discourage the growth in this recreational fishery.

The charter boat captains quoted in a Beaufort Gazette column by Lee Stokes echo this sentiment.

"It seems prudent to me to tighten the limit and slot for cobia and to bring the species to game fish status as quickly as possible," says one captain.

Giving the cobia status as game fish would mean it could not be sold. Right now, red drum, tarpon, spotted trout and striped bass are the only ones that DNR considers game fish. The fact that cobia can be sold is added incentive for their capture.

"We must be smart enough to correct this while the health of the population is in good shape and not have to resort to emergency measures when it becomes decimated," the captain continues.

"If the cobia crunch does happen, the charter business will be in dire straits and we will have in effect, as you say, shot the golden goose. We must not be that short sighted."

Another charter boat captain has questions about DNR's data, but admits, "The one statistic that is inarguable is that we have a lot more fishermen every year, and no one can prove that the number of returning cobia can match that growth."

Adding to the pressure to protect the cobia fishery in Port Royal Sound is the fact that it is one of the only estuaries on the east coast where the fish spawn in such great numbers. Some fishermen would like to see changes to the catch limits. Right now you can catch two a day; they recommend backing down to one.

They would also like to see some thought go into changing the size limits. It turns out that the big ones – the ones you are allowed to keep – are the spawning females. So maybe it makes sense to require people to keep only the smaller fish.

There is another alternative – don't keep any of the fish. Practicing catch and release would go a long way toward preserving this population.

With all the state, federal and private money being poured into research on saving the cobia fishery, it would make sense for Beaufort County to get on the bandwagon.

We are heading in the opposite direction, however. It seems that Beaufort County officials want to make considerable improvements to the Broad River Fishing Pier.

That doesn't bother me. Putting in bathrooms and fish cleaning areas and a bait shop may be really good ideas.

The problem is that piggybacking on this plan for improving services at the pier is a plan for improving the nearby boat ramp.

At a point when we should be discouraging an increase in the number of boats fishing for cobia in the Broad River, we are doing the opposite.

Improving hours of access and increasing the number of parking spaces and providing other amenities at Broad River will only encourage people to go where they will cause the most damage.

There are plenty of other boat landings in Beaufort County where we could encourage people to go, and where we can improve parking and amenities.

And there are plenty of other waterways in Beaufort County where fishermen could go to catch crab, shrimp and fish (other than spawning cobia.)

Maintaining a good quality of life here in the Lowcountry requires that we all make some sacrifices. Having 24/7 access to your favorite fishing hole is a good thing. But it might be worth giving up if the result is a stable, sustainable cobia population.