

Testimony of Mr. Will Benson
October 2, 2019
The Coastal Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in the Florida Keys

Senator Rubio, ladies and gentlemen, good morning my name is Captain Will Benson and I am a lifetime resident of the Florida Keys. I am a fishing guide, filmmaker, husband and father of two children. As a young kid I grew up in a 13 foot aluminum skiff exploring the waters of the back country. As an adult I own and operate my charter business World ANGLING and guide clients approximately 275 days a year. I have been very lucky to grow up in the Florida Keys and consider my occupation a blessing because I do what I love and I'm passionate about it every single day. This is my 20th season as a professional guide. In the last 20 years I have witnessed many changes. With only a few exceptions I have watched as our fishery diminishes, the habitat declines, and the pressure mounts. The success that I have enjoyed as a professional fishing guide has been largely dependent upon the fact that the Florida Keys flats fishery is one of the best in the world.

There is no other fishery quite like that of South Florida and the Florida Keys. The convergence of the freshwater Everglades ecosystem to the grass flats of Florida bay out to America's only barrier Coral reef distinguish our fishery as one of the most diverse and unique in the world. I am here today to testify that this habitat that has given our community and my family so much is hurting. We have watched for 30 years as the grass has died in Florida bay. We are currently watching the last remaining parts of our coral reef die from a disease that we don't understand. In the past two years alone we have witnessed large scale algae blooms, a devastating hurricane and continued unsustainable pressure on the environment. As citizens we have been asked to invest in a new cleaner sewage system. As an independent charter fisherman we have been regulated by individual catch quotas, subject to restrictive zoning, and affected by

pressure from an ever increasing number of uneducated new boaters, jet skis, cruise ships, parasailers, large capacity ecotour companies and corporate charter operations designed to dominate google searches and put guides like me out of business. We watch every spring season as out-of-state guides, and mothership businesses descend on the keys waters to profit at the expense of independent, year-round local guides such as myself. For charter fisherman like me who take up other work in the off-season in hopes of keeping their passion for charter fishing alive during the high season, we are at a breaking point. We need leadership to chart a new course to a sustainable future. We need leadership to seriously take up environmental restoration of the Everglades in Florida bay. We need leadership to devote more resources to understanding the complex factors driving the decline of our habitat and fishery. And we need leadership to work with groups like the lower Keys Guides Association to develop a licensing program to secure our businesses. We need leadership from the National Marine Sanctuary to enact a bold new plan for environmental restoration and not draw out the same old tired game plan for hands-off conservation that has done little to improve our community, except for dividing fishermen from divers and allowing corporate consolidation of the fishing, diving and ecotour businesses. We need leadership to embrace the expertise and knowledge of some of the best most experienced fishing guides anywhere on the planet and partner with them for a sustainable future; not demonize them and label them as the problem. We are watching the health of our fishery slip away while we argue amongst ourselves and watch as excuses are made for do nothing policies.

But I have hope. As the pressure mounts the solution is becoming more clear. We need Everglades restoration now. Not tomorrow, not phased in over 16 years, but now. We need major support for restoration efforts that are hands-on like the micro fragmenting coral

restoration efforts currently underway. We need bold and even experimental approaches to rehabilitate our fishery. We need an ecosystem and habitat-based approach to management and regulation. All of these things are possible today and I know that because I have also witnessed firsthand that if given the chance, nature can do amazing things. Nature's resiliency is amazing. If we can summon the courage to truly address these problems I am confident that the Florida Keys will remain the very best place in the world to fish and our passionate, unique coastal community will continue to thrive.

Thank you.