

Source: University Of Florida

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1999/04/990426062257.htm>

Posted: April 26, 1999

## **Fishermen Are Killing Brown Pelicans With Kindness, UF Expert Says**

MIAMI---People who feed brown pelicans chunks of fish left over from a day of fishing are unwittingly contributing to a painful death for the birds, a University of Florida scientist says.

So UF and the Florida Sea Grant program are launching an educational campaign to let fishermen know they are hurting -- not helping -- the protected species, says Harrison Bresee, a marine agent based in the Miami-Dade County extension office, a part of UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

"The problem," Bresee says, "is that a lot of people get to a cleaning station, clean their fish, put the filets in their cooler and feed pelicans the leftover carcasses, thinking the free meal is helping the birds."

Actually, Bresee says, it's hurting them. Pelicans can't catch large-boned fish such as dolphin or grouper on their own. And they can't digest the bones of the larger fish. The birds fly off, bones caught in their throat or pressing against their stomach lining.

"If the bones make it into the pelican's stomach they can puncture the stomach and other organs," Bresee says. "If the bones get caught in the pelican's throat, they can block the passage of other food and the pelican literally starves to death.

"People that feed pelicans feel like they are doing something nice by giving them a meal," Bresee said. "But by feeding them, they are killing them with kindness."

That theme appears on the educational signs Bresee and other marine agents are posting at about 1,000 marinas statewide. The signs, produced with help from the Yamaha Contender Miami Billfish Tournament, are aimed at alerting fishermen to the dangers of feeding pelicans.

For those who can't resist feeding the birds, Bresee recommends giving

them boneless chunks or smaller fish that would be part of their natural diet: pinfish, grunts, small mullet. He also recommends disposing of the carcasses of larger fish by putting them in a covered waste bin or grinding them up so pelicans cannot reach the remains.

Harry Kelton, president of the Pelican Harbor Seabird Station in Biscayne Bay, has seen the harm humans can do to pelicans firsthand. He says 300 injured birds come in to the rescue station each year, and about 250 can be rehabilitated and returned to the wild.

It has only been in the past 10 years that the brown pelican has been upgraded to the protected species list from the endangered species list. During the 1970s the brown pelican was in danger of extinction because of many years of poor reproduction rates resulting from exposure to DDT, a now-banned pesticide.

Today, the coastal birds are common from Virginia south to Florida and from San Francisco south to Mexico, but during the summer can be found in more northerly seaports.

Kelton says humans are the pelicans' main threat.

"We're at the root of the problem," said Kelton, whose seabird station is also supporting the educational campaign. "There aren't any wild places left in Florida; we're surrounded by condominiums and sea walls, and pelican habitat is the prime habitat for building condominiums. So it's important not to do any more damage."

Bresee says the signs, printed in English and Spanish, should help prevent pelican deaths at a time that could be critical to the pelican population.

"Even though their habitat has been reduced and degraded over the years, the brown pelican population is starting to increase," Bresee said. "That is why it is important to educate fishermen about this issue."