

Smalltooth Sawfish Conflict with Canopy Bungee Cords

NOAA Marine Fisheries has been encountering a new threat to smalltooth sawfish due to a specific type of boat lift canopy that is gaining popularity in Southwest Florida, including Cape Coral and Charlotte Harbor. These boat canopies are comprised of a laminated canvas stretched over the frame and held in place by bungee cords (see photo to the right).



While this popular feature may make the boat canopy storm ready, by easily unlash the bungee cords and removing the canopy, the bungee cords are finding their way into our waterways. Once there, they are becoming an entanglement hazard to smalltooth sawfish, an endangered species throughout Southwest Florida, including Cape Coral's saltwater canals (below are photos from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) sawfish research assignment in 2019).

In 2003 the smalltooth sawfish became the first elasmobranch (i.e., sharks and their relatives) to be listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Primarily due to its susceptibility as fisheries bycatch, the once abundant sawfish that occurred throughout Florida has retracted to near shore waters around Southwest Florida. In addition to man-made causes of decline, smalltooth sawfish are slow to recover because of their biology. Females produce a small number of young every other year, and both sexes have relatively slow growth and late maturity.

Glover Bight (located just east of Tarpon Point Marina) is an important nursery area where smalltooth sawfish frequent. From there, the juveniles disperse into shallow areas of the Caloosahatchee Estuary or Cape Coral's canals.



NOAA believes the plastic spheres make the bungees partially buoyant, causing them to sit upright along the bottom. This creates an unfortunate opportunity for a sawfish to become entangled as they swim along the bottom, searching for prey. The bungees may be unintentionally dropped in the water during installation or during hurricane season when residents disassemble them for storm preparation.

If you or your neighbors have this type of boat canopy, please take extra care when handling the bungees and help us share this information, so these and other marine debris are kept out of our waterways.

For general information about the smalltooth sawfish, please visit <http://www.sawfishrecovery.org>.

To report a capture or sighting, please contact the sawfish hotline at 1-844-4SAWFISH or sawfish@myfwc.com.

