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GULF REEF FISH ANGLERS SHOULD LOOK FOR MORE REQUIREMENTS

Offshore bottom fishing will have some new requirements this year. Sometime in early 2008 look for new rules in both the commercial and recreational fisheries in “federal” waters – the Exclusive Economic Zone – from 3 to 200 miles offshore.

The Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Fishery of the Gulf of Mexico (Reef Fish FMP), developed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, is to be amended to reduce released fish mortality. From a long series of options to reduce discard mortality (particularly undersized red snapper), the council, and subsequently the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, selected rules to require certain hooks, dehooking devices and venting tools.

Non-stainless circle hooks will be required when fishing with bait, and every vessel must have a dehooking device and a venting tool onboard.

The evidence that circle hooks - compared to regular “J” hooks - cause less injury to fish is clear, and these studies were obviously important in the final rules:

- For many species, circle hooks reduce hooking mortality rates more than J-style hooks.
- Reduction in release mortality associated with the use of circle hooks results primarily from the tendency of circle hooks to jaw-hook fish.
- Some studies indicate catch rates and mean length at capture for red snapper are greater for circle hooks compared to J hooks; however, some researchers have found similar mean length at capture, but lower catch rates for red snapper caught with circle hooks compared to J hooks.
- More red snapper caught with rod-and-reel gear die from hook mortality caused by J hooks than all other causes combined, including depth, stress and handling.
- Preliminary data suggest that venting increases survival in red snapper caught in deep water.
- Ease of hook removal is a major contributor to release survival.
- Venting, when properly executed, increases survival of released fish.
- Large hooks in general result in some size selectivity towards larger fish; however, they do hook smaller fish as well.
- There is no industry standardization of hook size.

But why did the council and NOAA reject a sub-option that incorporated results of studies which showed large circle hooks did not catch smaller fish well but did work well with larger fish, since the best way to prevent the death of undersized fish is not to hook them? Language in the final rule states the case for large hooks:

Cooke and Suski's (2004) review found large hooks in general result in some size selectivity towards larger fish; however, they do hook smaller fish, as well. Specifically for red snapper, Gledhill and Driggers (2006), found the mean length at capture was greater when caught with circle hooks (Mustad 15/0) compared to J hooks. They also found a significant difference in fish length between circle hook sizes (Mustad 11/0 versus Mustad 15/0), with larger hooks catching larger fish. Thus selecting a minimum hook size could possibly reduce the number of undersized fish discarded. Sub-option IV would require the largest minimum hook size, and therefore is expected to reduce discards the most relative to the other sub-options.

One reason that this sub-option was rejected was an enforcement problem of needing to actually measure hooks, since manufacturers use different size classifications. However, fisheries enforcement agencies measure the size of net mesh every day without major problems. Anglers who have used the larger (15/0, 16/0) circle hooks with big, tough baits usually find that they catch almost no small fish. This option could have been one of the best tools in the bycatch mortality reduction toolbox.

The guidance given on the soon-to-be required dehooking equipment is currently:

Dehooking devices are commonly available at fishing tackle outlets, or may be made by fishermen. As proposed, the hook removal device must be constructed so the hook to be secured and the barb shielded, without re-engaging during the removal process. That would require the dehooking end to be blunt and all edges rounded.

The device would have to be of a size appropriate to secure the range of hook sizes and styles used in the reef fish fishery. This probably will not allow use of the "flipper" style dehookers (at bottom in photo) that are familiar to most coastal anglers, since it does not shield the barb. Dehookers with coils on the end (2nd and 3rd from top) tend to pull the hook by the barb, so they should satisfy this requirement. It remains to be seen whether just having some long-nosed pliers (at top in photo) on board will satisfy the rule. Anglers will want to check the language on the final regulation when it is issued.

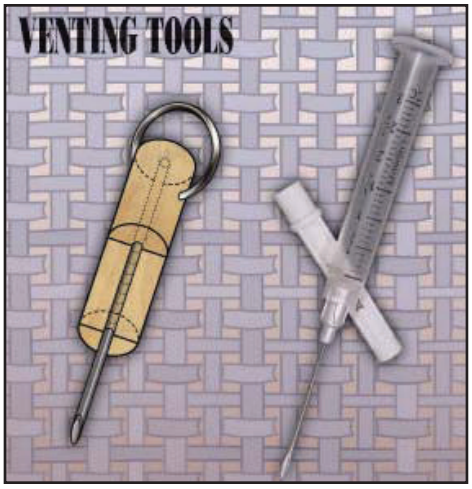
At least one venting tool would be needed onboard to deflate the swim bladders of reef fish that fishermen intend to release. The venting tool has to be a sharpened, hollow instrument, such as a hypodermic syringe with the plunger removed, or a 16-gauge needle fixed to a hollow wooden dowel. Use of a tool such as a knife or an ice-pick is not permissible.

For best results, the venting tool should be inserted into the fish at a 45-degree angle approximately 1 to 2 inches behind the base of the pectoral fin. For most fish, the right spot will be at the tip of the pectoral (side) fin when it is laid straight back against the body. The tool should be inserted just deep enough to release the gases, so that the fish may be released with minimum damage.

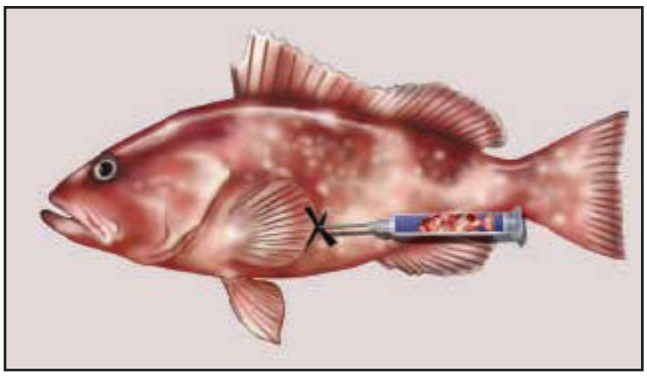
If the stomach of the fish is protruding from the mouth, don't puncture it! This just damages the stomach without releasing the internal gases in the swim bladder. It remains up to the angler to decide when to vent a fish: If it was caught from shallower sites, it may not be needed. Anglers are not being directed to apply these techniques to every fish, but to have the equipment if it is needed – on a fish-by-fish basis.

Hopefully, future bycatch mortality numbers will be lower than the current ones – from 2001-03 the Gulf recreational fishery averaged 0.98 million red snapper dead discards and the commercial fishery averaged 0.34 million red snapper dead discards.

Dehookers, courtesy Maryland DNR



Two examples of venting tools described by Florida Sea Grant (2005).



Anatomical location for inserting a venting tool into a fish with an over-expanded swimbladder (Florida Sea Grant, 2005).

Sources:

Venting: Guide to Releasing Fish. Florida Sea Grant. 2005. http://nsgl.gso.uri.edu/flsgp/flsgpg01002.pdf

Final Amendment 27 to the Reef fish fishery Management Plan and Amendment 14 to the Shrimp fishery Management Plan. June 2007.http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/RedSnapper/pdfs/FinalRFAmend27-ShrimpAmend14.pdf

NOAA CONSIDERING CHANGES AMBERJACK, GRAY TRIGGERFISH FISHERIES

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service has developed a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement to analyze the impacts of proposed management actions addressing overfishing of greater amberjack and gray triggerfish, and is seeking comments from the public on the options discussed. The document (337 pages) discusses options for both commercial and recreational fisheries and can be downloaded at http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/DEIS/PH28-30A-12_05_07.pdf

The Gulf of Mexico greater amberjack stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. Although the stock has been under a rebuilding plan since 2003, it is not recovering as projected. Action is necessary to end overfishing and adjust total allowable catch and harvest controls to bring the rebuilding plan back on course for recovery by 2012. The gray triggerfish stock is undergoing overfishing and is approaching the overfished condition. Action is necessary to set total allowable catch and harvest controls to end overfishing, to set management targets and thresholds and to set a rebuilding plan.

The primary purpose of the DSEIS prepared by NOAA Fisheries Service is to evaluate the effectiveness of alternative regulatory measures for the following actions relating to greater amberjack: 1) modify the rebuilding plan; 2) develop accountability measures for the rebuilding plan; and 3) change the recreational and commercial harvest controls (i.e., size limits, bag limits, trip limits, or seasons).

This DSEIS also evaluates the effectiveness of alternative regulatory measures for the following actions relating to gray triggerfish: 1) establish minimum stock size and fishing mortality thresholds and set optimum yield; 2) develop a rebuilding plan; 3) develop accountability measures for the rebuilding plan; 4) manage the fishery on a regional basis; and 5) change the recreational and commercial harvest controls.

The regulatory measures evaluated in this DSEIS may be implemented through Amendment 30A to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico.

Written comments must be received no later than 5 p.m., Eastern Time, on Jan. 28. You may submit comments by:

• E-mail: 0648-AV34.DSEIS@noaa.gov. Include in the subject line the following document identifier: 0648-AV34-DSEIS.
• Mail: Peter Hood, Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701.
• Fax: 727/824-5308, Attention: Peter Hood.

Copies of the DSEIS are also available in printed form by contacting Peter Hood (address above).

KEMP'S RIDLEY TURTLES CONTINUE STRONG REBOUND

Luis Jaime Peña, curator of Conservation Programs at the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, TX, reports the latest information on the continuing efforts from both the U.S. and Mexico to restore the population of the world's most endangered sea turtle, the Kemp's Ridley. The Kemps Ridley nests only in the Gulf of Mexico; mostly on Mexican beaches. About 100 nests have been found on U.S. beaches in each recent year, mostly on Padre Island National Seashore, and a few at seven additional sites: Bolivar Peninsula, Galveston Island, near Surfside (Brazoria County), Mustang Island, South Padre Island, Boca Chica Beach, and Aransas/Matagorda Island National Wildlife Refuge.

The news remains good: while the number of registered nests fluctuates between seasons, the number of released Kemp's ridley hatchlings from the six major camps in Mexico has been climbing fairly steadily since 1996, and 2007 saw a record of over one million hatchlings:

Year	Hatchlings
1996	119,196
1997	149,567
1998	183,920
1999	227,040
2000	395,150
2001	317,127
2002	402,969
2003	476,138

2004 500,767
2005 630,737
2006 782,319
2007 1,023,675

Location	Registered Nests	Hatchlings Released
La Pesca	150	9,529
Tepehuajes	1,624	107,381
Rancho Nuevo	11,268	795,406
Barra del Tordo	1,213	3,577
Altamira	432	1,195
Ciudad Madero	345	6,587
Total	15,032	1023,675

Summary Nest Analysis

Location	Corral	Box	in situ	Taken by predators	Stolen	Total
La Pesca	137	0	0	10	3	150
Tepehuajes	1,553	8	47	16	0	1,624
Rancho Nuevo	7,124	73	3,588	483	0	11,268
Barra del Tordo	1,022	2	157	25	7	1,213
Altamira	429	0	0	3	0	432
Ciudad Madero	327	10	4	2	2	345
Total	10,592	93	3,796	539	12	15,032

The success of the Kemps Ridley program has made it a case study in environmental literature on endangered species recovery. Discussion has been initiated on the possibility of delisting the species within the next 10 years. For more background on the Kemp's Ridley story, visit http://www.seagrantfish.lsu.edu/pdfs/lagniappe/2007/03-01-2007.pdf and http://www.gpz.org/.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION REGARDING THE GULF OF MEXICO RED SNAPPER INDIVIDUAL FISHING QUOTA (IFQ) PROGRAM

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) informs IFQ participants that they should monitor their IFQ online accounts for important information, such as the distribution of shareholders' 2008 allocation and the dealers' 2007 annual report. In addition, NOAA Fisheries Service has provided an example below of how to calculate 2008 allocations.

Distribution of 2008 Allocation -- NOAA Fisheries Service will distribute the 2008 allocation (pounds of red snapper) to IFQ shareholders on Jan. 1, 2008. IFQ shareholders should log in to their IFQ online accounts on or after this date to view their 2008 allocation.

All landing transactions for 2007 must have been completed before 7 p.m. on Dec. 31, 2007. Any 2007 allocation not landed by Dec. 31, 2007, will not carry over into the next year and will be removed from IFQ accounts.

Calculating 2008 Allocation -- IFQ shareholders can follow the steps below to calculate their IFQ allocation for the upcoming year.

1. Convert the amount of shares you hold from a percent to a number by dividing the percent by 100.

Example:
Amount of Shares (expressed as a percent): 1 percent
Divide 1 by 100.
1/100 = 0.01
Amount of Shares (expressed as a number): 0.01

2. Multiply the commercial quota (gutted weight) by the number of shares you hold. The commercial quota for 2008 is 2,297,297 pounds gutted weight (2,550,000 pounds whole weight).

Example:
Number of shares: 0.01
Commercial Quota: 2,297,297 pounds gutted weight
2,297,297 X 0.01 = 22,972 pounds gutted weight

Therefore, a shareholder who holds 1 percent shares would have a 2008 IFQ allocation of 22,972 pounds gutted weight.

2007 Annual IFQ Dealer Report -- NOAA Fisheries Service will publish an annual IFQ dealer report in each dealer's IFQ online account on Feb. 1, 2008. The report will include 2007 quarterly and annual information regarding the amount and value of IFQ red snapper received by the dealer, the associated cost recovery fees and the status of those fees.

If IFQ dealers notice any errors in the annual report, they should contact IFQ Customer Support at 866/425-7627 by March 1, 2008. If NOAA Fisheries is not contacted by March 1, then the dealer's acceptance of the report is assumed.

NOAA Fisheries Service reminds dealers that they should review their completed landings transactions at the end of each quarter for any inaccuracies. If any inaccuracies are found, contact IFQ Customer Support.

For more information on the IFQ program for the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery, log onto http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov and click on "Individual Fishing Quota Program for the Gulf of Mexico" or go directly to https://ifq.sero.nmfs.noaa.gov.

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE ANNOUNCES OPENING OF THE DEEP WATER GROUPER, SHALLOW WATER GROUPER AND TILEFISH FISHERIES

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) announces the opening of the 2008 commercial fishing year for the deep water grouper and tilefish fisheries in Gulf of Mexico federal waters at 12:01 a.m. (local time) Jan. 1, 2008. The commercial fishery for deep water grouper was closed, effective 12:01 a.m. (local time) June 2, 2007, through Dec. 31, 2007. The commercial fishery for golden tilefish was closed, effective 12:01 a.m. (local time) April 18, 2007, through Dec. 31, 2007.

For deep water grouper, the commercial quota for the 2008 fishing year is 1.02 million pounds gutted weight (lbs gw) with a 6,000 lbs gw trip limit for deep water and shallow water grouper combined. For tilefishes, the commercial quota for the 2008 fishing year is 440,000 lbs gw with no trip limit.

The new fishing year for the shallow water grouper commercial fishery will also begin Jan. 1, 2008. This fishery did not close during 2007. The shallow water commercial quota for 2008 is 8.8 million lbs gw, which includes a quota of 5.31 million lbs gw for red grouper. The trip limit is 6,000 lbs gw for deep water and shallow water grouper combined.

FAMILY PROFILE: CENTRARCHIDAE – SUNFISHES – Part 2

Bluegill – (*Lepomis macrochirus*): One of the most-studied and most-caught of all fish, the bluegill is a deep bodied, laterally compressed sunfish with a relatively small oblique mouth. The back is an iridescent olive green, the sides are silvery or bluish, and the undersides are yellow to white or silvery. Breeding males have more intense coloration, with a bright orange breast, a general bluish sheen to the body, more intense blue streaks on the head, and darkly pigmented fins. Coppernose bluegill, a Florida subspecies, have a copper-colored patch on the head and white margins on the fins.

Bluegill
Photo credit: Duane Raver, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The U.S. angling record for bluegill is 2.16 kg (4.75 lb) from Alabama. The Louisiana record for bluegill is 1.61 lb caught by Mike Lamb at the Yucatan off the Mississippi River in August 1999. Bluegill are one of the most popular gamefish and provide excellent fishing in well-managed farm ponds and lakes. Bluegill are most easy to catch while they are on or near the spawning beds. Commonly used baits include earthworms, crickets, catalpa worms, and artificial baits such as flies and small spinners. Small baits and hooks are necessary due to the small mouth of the bluegill. They are caught at various depths, but are known to feed heavily on surface insects, particularly around shoreline vegetation. They generally quit biting just after dusk.

Smaller impoundments stocked exclusively with bass and bluegill or a bluegill/redear sunfish combination often provide better bluegill fishing than reservoirs and streams. Many farm-pond owners choose to manage for large bluegill by maintaining a bass-crowded population. Fall stockings of bluegill fingerlings will spawn the next year to provide ample forage for bass stocked in the spring. Pound for pound, the bluegill is one of the best fighting and best tasting fish. Many would argue that these scrappy fighters were put on Earth for fly fishing. Effective artificial flies include cork-bodied popping bugs, sponge-bodied spiders with rubber band legs, and a variety of wet flies, dry flies and nymphs.

Coppernose bluegill (the Florida subspecies) have been stocked in small impoundments, due to the purported faster growth over native bluegill. Opinions vary on the potential and risks this subspecies presents to native bluegill populations. Stockings over the years have shown little advantage in fish weight and growth over native bluegill. However, recent regulatory changes in Louisiana have allowed for coppernose bluegill to be cultured as a potential commercial aquaculture species, as opposed to their native bluegill cousins which are strictly recreational gamefish.

Bluegill are community spawners, and nests may be located very close together on unvegetated flats. In dense colonies, males compete for access to nest sites, with larger males generally having greater success. Nests are usually placed in an area with a sand or gravel bottom. Males prepare a nest by sweeping away silt and sand with their tail so that coarser substrata (gravel) are exposed. Males court females by rushing out toward them and then returning rapidly to the nest, all while producing a series of distinctive grunts.

After spawning, males actively guard the nest against predators, most of which are juvenile bluegill. In contrast to most sunfishes, male bluegill feed while defending their territory. Survivorship of young is generally higher in guarded than in unguarded nests. The normal male behavior of nest construction and guarding is energetically expensive and carries with it a certain risk of predation or injury. Perhaps because of this, bluegill have evolved two other mating tactics. Some males do not develop the typical nuptial coloration of breeding males, but instead look and behave like females, even to the point of pairing with a normal, nest-defending male. Termed “satellite males” because they often hover above a nest and descend slowly into the nest while a spawning female is present, these fish are not driven away by the nesting male. When a true female enters the nest and starts to spawn with the dominant male, the female mimic also fertilizes the eggs, and then abandons them to the nesting male for rearing. Spared the energetic expenses of nest construction and defense, the female mimics put more energy into gonadal growth and are therefore able to release much more sperm, thus increasing their odds of fertilizing the eggs. The second mating tactic involves what are termed “sneaker males.” Sneakers are smaller, have lighter body coloration, and lack the breast coloration of normal males. They hide just outside the margin of the nest until the normal male has enticed a female onto the nest. The sneakers then dart into the nest and attempt to fertilize the eggs. In this approach, sneaker males again devote much more energy to gonadal growth, rather than toward increasing body size, but do not mimic females.

Bluegill usually forage up in the water column, but may also utilize prey associated with the bottom, the water surface, or on plants. Initial prey of larval bluegill are rotifers and copepod nauplii. Once the larvae grow to a size that is more visible to predators, such as largemouth bass, they move back into the protective cover of aquatic plants. In these areas, juveniles feed primarily on aquatic insects, particularly midge larvae, and on small crustaceans (copepods and cladocerans). Large fish switch to a diet that includes both terrestrial and aquatic insects. Bluegill of all sizes, but especially larger fish, may also ingest plant material. Plants are most likely consumed incidentally to the capture of aquatic insects that live on them, although plant material may be useful as a source of roughage that aids digestion. In Lake Pontchartrain, major food items include small blue crabs and barnacle appendages. Especially in overcrowded populations, bluegill feed on eggs of their own or other species. Interestingly, bluegill individually select and capture prey using high-speed suction, rather than by using rapid swimming velocity to overtake prey.

Because of their planktivorous feeding habits, bluegill tend to suppress populations of large zooplankton and aquatic insects and thus indirectly cause an increase in small organisms such as phytoplankton, small-bodied aquatic insects, and small, more evasive zooplankton. Their impact as predators of crustaceans and insects is especially impressive given that a bluegill population may eat six times its own weight during a single summer. Bluegill are active during daylight hours, with a minor feeding peak in the morning and a major peak in the evening. Feeding activity also varies seasonally. There is greater food intake during periods of rising water temperatures in late spring and early summer, lower food intake during midsummer, and an increase again during the fall. Feeding location is determined by the balance between the abundance of their food and their own risk of being eaten. When given a choice, bluegill feed in areas providing the greatest energy return, switching from open water to vegetation as relative abundances of zooplankton and aquatic insects vary. Large bluegill tend to be more restricted in their movements, while small fish have larger home ranges.

In another interesting twist to the bluegill saga, they have been implicated as foreign invaders, and have also been enlisted in the U.S. war on terror. Japan's Emperor Akihito has said he "feels pained" that he introduced an aggressive non-native fish that has resulted in a threat to native species. During a visit to the Chicago Aquarium nearly 50 years ago, he was presented some bluegill which he thought could be bred for food. Unfortunately for Japan, some escaped from research centers, and have now spread throughout Japan's waterways where they have wiped out the Japanese royal bitterling and drastically reduced the number of some other native fish.

In the U.S., this hardy and plentiful fish have been used to guard against terrorist attacks to the water supply of San Francisco, Washington and New York. A small number of fish are kept in tanks which are constantly filled with municipal water, while a computerized system monitors changes in the fishes' vital signs and sends an alert when something goes wrong. Bluegill are highly sensitive to a wide number of toxins, so when they are exposed to chemical and biological agents, computers will send an alert by e-mail or mobile device, which are also known as "fish phones." New York's bluegills were recently put to work when the system found traces of a diesel spill before it was detected by any other devices of the Department of Environmental Protection.

- Craig Gothreaux

Sources:

Ross, Stephen T. 2001. Inland Fishes of Mississippi. University Press of Mississippi.

Douglas, N.H. 1974. FreshwaterFishes of Louisiana. Claitor Publishing.

Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association - http://www.laoutdoorwriters.com/index.asp?pg=fr_choose

Underwater Obstructions

In accordance with the provisions of R.S. 56:700.1 et. seq., notice is given that eight claims in the amount of $33,147.27 were received for payment during the period Nov. 1, 2007 – Nov. 30, 2007.

There were seven claims paid and one claim denied.

Latitude/longitude coordinates of reported underwater obstructions are:

29 12.755	89 59.497	JEFFERSON
29 14.907	89 36.390	PLAQUEMINES
29 22.458	89 43.383	PLAQUEMINES
29 23.021	90 42.549	TERREBONNE
29 42.564	89 48.922	PLAQUEMINES
29 46.260	93 12.940	CAMERON
29 48.815	89 39.577	ST. BERNARD
29 49.728	89 36.243	ST. BERNARD

A list of claimants and amounts paid can be obtained from Gwendolyn Thomas, Administrator, Fishermen's Gear Compensation Fund, P.O. Box 44277, Baton Rouge, LA 70804 or you can call (225)342-0122.

THE GUMBO POT

Corn, Shrimp and Crabmeat Bisque

Kacie Gauthreaux
Assumption 4-H contest winner

A classic, with an interesting touch (thyme and basil). The option for seafood stock is worth taking: just boil the shrimp heads and shells, and strain.

1 stick butter
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 cup onions, finely chopped
1/2 cup celery, finely chopped
1/2 cup bell pepper, finely diced
2 cloves of garlic, minced
1 quart heavy cream
2 teaspoons salt
1/2 teaspoon white pepper
1/2 teaspoon red pepper
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon thyme
1 teaspoon basil
1 pound lump crab meat
1 pound shrimp, peeled
3 quarts water or seafood stock
2 cans creamed corn

In a heavy 5 quart Dutch oven, meltbutter, whisk in the flour; over low heat make a light roux. Add onions, celery, bell pepper, and garlic; mix thoroughly. Add the heavy cream, corn and seafood stock (to desired thickness). Stir the mixture constantly as the stock is added so the roux transforms to a creamy consistently. Stir in the peppers and other seasonings. Cover the pot and begin simmering over a low to medium fire, stirring occasionally. Cook for about 40 minutes. About 10 minutes before ready to eat, add shrimp and crab meat. This is also the time to adjust the thickness of the bisque. Serves 8 people.

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