

Why Ban Gill and Trammel Nets

What are gill and trammel nets? Gill nets are netting which capture fish by ensnaring or entangling them in the meshes of the net by the gills. The nets consist of a wall of virtually invisible monofilament netting, equipped with weight at the bottom and floats at the top. The fish swim into the netting and become entangled when their gill covers are caught in the mesh. **A drift net or trammel net** is an entangling net which captures fish or other marine animals by causing all or part of the head, fins, legs or other body parts to become entangled or ensnared in the meshes of the net. It is made of two or more panels suspended from a float line and attached to a single lead line.

Is it a traditional fishery? No, gill netting caught only 11% of our reef fish in 1990 and increased to 83% by 2003. Pot and line fishing is traditional, not gill nets. The big push toward gill nets started after Hurricane Hugo when many pot fishers lost their gear. Gill nets are relatively inexpensive and therefore some used these to replace lost gear. Also during this time sales representatives from a major commercial fishing gear supplier in south Florida visited the VI to promote entanglement net gear that they were no longer able to market in Florida because of the net ban passed in Florida in 1994.

Is it against the law? Yes, in July 2006 Governor Turnbull banned the use of gill and trammel nets. However, the ban was never enforced and therefore fishers still use the nets. Recently, the Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) made a decision that the ban should be enforced and as a result the Director of Fish and Wildlife (a division of DPNR) resigned because he did not agree with this decision. This issue of enforcing the ban has been written about in the press over the last several months but is especially current now that the Director resigned. Gill netting is also against the law in many other places including Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas and many islands.

How does this hurt our reefs? Gill nets catch everything over a fixed size, whether it is what the fisher wants or not. This can include endangered species like turtles, sharks, stingrays or anything else that is in the water. If the fisher was using a line or fish pot, he could throw the fish back alive. Gill netters just collect the entire catch, bring the net home, pick out the fish they want and discard the rest of the animals.

The gill netter selectively target large herbivorous reef fish especially parrot fish by setting the nets in highways that the fish use to travel from their feeding grounds to their resting grounds. This has resulted in the dramatic decrease in the number of parrot fishes on our reefs. Parrotfish are important to our reefs because they eat the algae that can overgrow our reefs.

Gill nets can also damage reef habitat by breaking or pulling up coral and other coral reef plants and animals. Derelict nets that have been abandoned by the fisher (often because it is caught and cannot be retrieved) continue to catch and kill fish long after it was abandoned.

Who recommended the ban? In 2002 a commercial fisher came to the St. Croix Fisheries Advisory Committee and told them that they need to do something to protect our fishery because "gill netting is destroying too many fishes and we must protect things for our children." Many have come out against the use of gill nets including the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. In addition, in Nov. 2005 staff from the Division of Fish and Wildlife gave a paper at the 58th Annual Meeting of the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute supporting the ban. In addition, the St. Croix Environmental Assoc., the St. Croix Assoc. of Dive Operators and the Women's Diving Assoc. have also come out against the use of gill nets. In a 2003 Caribbean Fisheries Management Committee did a census of fishers that showed that most of the fishers interviewed said that fishing was worse now than 10 years ago because net fishers were taking too many fish.

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