

Reel Time: All hands on deck

By **Rusty Chinnis** - March 21, 2022



Captain Scott Moore holds a snook that AJ Fernandez, left, and Henry Fernandez, right, collaborated on catching at Egmont Key. - Rusty Chinnis | Sun

This past week I had the pleasure of fishing with Captain Scott Moore, Tampa Bay Waterkeeper board member Adam Fernandez and his two boys, AJ and Henry, ages 7 and 5.



I've been a fisherman my whole life, having been fortunate to be raised by a father who enjoyed the outdoors and introduced me to fishing when I was 5 years old. During that day on the water memories flooded back as I watched the boy's enthusiasm and delight catching and releasing snook, trout and sheepshead. It also brought into clear focus why I commit time writing about working to protect water quality and habitat along the Suncoast. Often these days I can only wonder what kind of opportunities AJ and Henry will have when they grow up and what opportunities they might have to share time on the water with their sons or daughters. It's times like this that bolster my resolve to protect this special resource.

The fishing was good that day despite the high pressure and slick conditions we experienced on the backside of a front. We started on the east side of Egmont Key, where Henry and AJ landed snook and sheepshead. After catching several fish, we left what was becoming a very crowded area and crossed the bay to Rattlesnake Key on the south shore near the

Skyway bridge. It didn't take long before Moore had snook boiling at the back of the boat and AJ and Henry leaned into bent rods, filled with joyful enthusiasm, as they reeled in snook after snook. As we passed rods to the boys and unhooked fish, the conversation turned to the unprecedented loss of seagrass in Tampa and Sarasota Bay. I have fished Rattlesnake Key many times over the years, and when I mentioned to Fernandez how thin the grass looked in areas and that it appeared to be missing in others, Moore responded, "I've been fishing this part of Tampa Bay for more than 50 years and I would estimate that one-third of the grass has disappeared in just the last three years."

Suddenly it became clear that if AJ and Henry were to have a future of good fishing that it was time for "all hands on deck!" When I looked up the definition in Webster's dictionary, I realized the definition perfectly described the situation "of, relating to, or being a situation in which every available person is needed or called to assist." The problem is that waiting might equal being too late. This amazing habitat that was a gift to us is slipping away. It's not too late, but the clock is ticking. Everyone who values this resource needs to lend a hand and maybe most importantly, elect leaders who will work for the people and not for special interests. I've said it before but it's worth repeating, don't judge candidates by what they're promising to do to get elected, but instead how they've voted in the past. The information is public record and one of the best places I've found to vet politicians is at the website of the non-partisan [League of Conservation Voters](#), I cast my vote for candidates who have a proven record of voting in support of the clean water I drink and fish in.

While addressing water quality is most important, we need organizations like the [Sarasota and Tampa Bay Estuary Programs](#), [START](#), [Sarasota Bay Watch](#), [Tampa Bay Watch](#), [Suncoast Waterkeeper](#), [Tampa Bay Waterkeeper](#), [Vote Water](#) and [All Clams on Deck](#) to be spreading the word, educating young advocates and doing restoration work with fish, oysters and clams. I believe it rises to a moral obligation.

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