

# TROPIC

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## GOODBYE OYSTERS, HELLO JELLYFISH?

Jack Rudloe, who abhors every fight he starts, picks another one. "The commercial fisherman has no future in Florida," he says. "Unless the government gives him a hand up, there's going to be a *Grapes of Wrath* scene in the seafood industry.

"Everything's dwindling. The oysters are going to hell, and the good fish. There aren't even blue crabs out there. Everybody's grabbing for the scraps now, the leftovers.

"I don't see much hope — unless they declare a five-year moratorium on taking everything, by everybody, sports and commercial fishermen both. They'll jump on me for saying that, but that's how it is.

"Maybe we can eat jellyfish. Why not? They like 'em in Taiwan."

Jack Rudloe, environmental activist, started his career early. At age 8, he bit the leg of a camp counselor, trying to stop the fellow from slamming a sledge hammer against a snapping turtle.

He built on that excellent start to become at least a contender as the most controversial conservationist in Florida, an accolade for which there is much competition.

He has lived on the Gulf Coast of Florida for 31 years, made his living there, and fought most of his battles on the Gulf or near its shoreline.

Rudloe, a short, chunky fellow whom his wife Anne has nicknamed "The Marsh Messiah," at age 45 is well-scarred but still able. Maybe he does not bite now but he still screams, or litigates, or orates, or exaggerates or otherwise obstructs either man or machine endangering marine creatures, even those microscopic ones with the unpronounceable names.

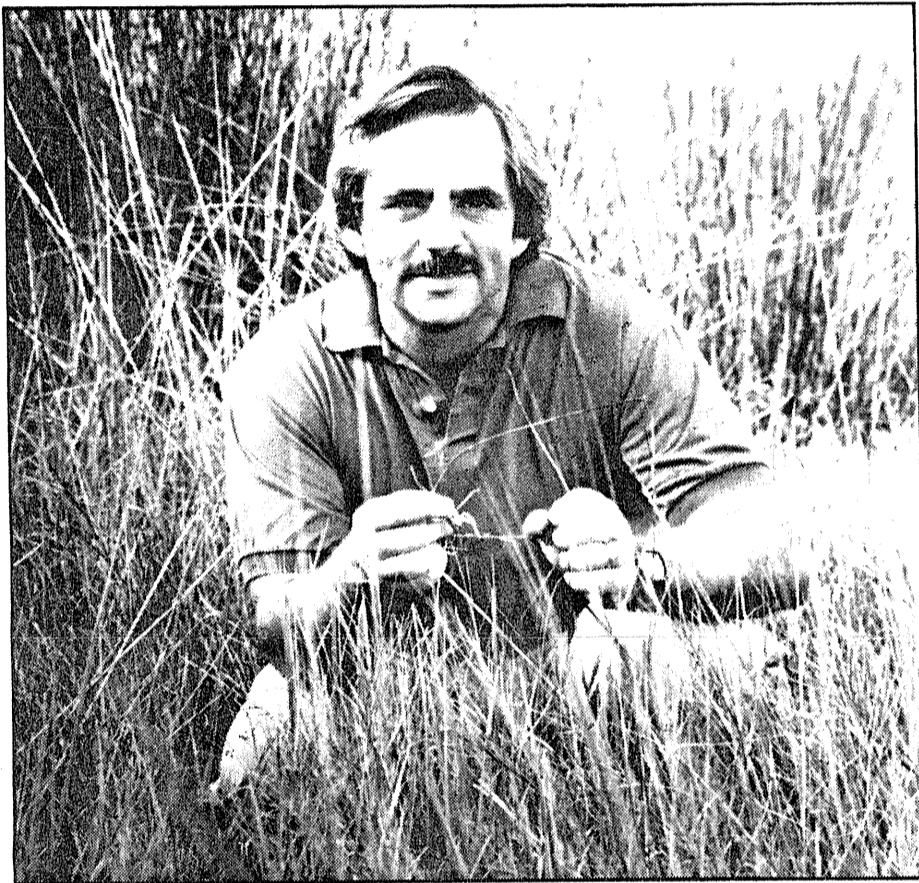
He is at heart a primitive and follows a kind of Indiana Jones strategy: open and blunt, dotting on high drama, and never mind a little stumbling here and there if it is necessary for the sake of the mission.

Rudloe has ranged over all of Florida and much of the rest of the world, writing books and articles for such magazines as *National Geographic*, *Audubon*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Reader's Digest*. His fourth book, *The Wilderness Coast, Adventures of A Gulf Coast Naturalist*, was published by E.P. Dutton this spring.

As a writer, he displays the wide-eyed charm of a sensitive discoverer. He incorporates an interest in lore and superstition with his reach for a scientific base, and it works.

James Dickey, a nationally acclaimed poet himself, describes Rudloe as "the poet of Florida's waters and wetlands."

Rudloe's livelihood, however, comes principally from collecting rare marine specimens for display by museums or aquariums (a giant toadfish captured in Suriname for the New York Aquarium, for example) and from gathering a great



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variety of other specimens for use in medical research (including work by the National Cancer Institute).

Despite all that, his basic geographical stretch has been from Brooklyn, N.Y., where he was born, to the Florida Gulf Coast near the big bend. He moved at 14, first to Carrabelle and eventually to Panacea, both fishing villages.

Though wife and co-worker Anne (they have two sons) has a Ph.D. in marine biology, Rudloe himself is mostly self-taught. He worked on shrimp boats ("Shrimpers learn to become part of the environment, to think like a shrimp," he says), combed the Gulf Coast observing and collecting old-timers' lore and lists on his résumé selective studies at such places as Harvard and Yale, but no degrees.

Foes sometimes focus on that, Rudloe cares not. As he describes it, with humor, there was sort of a photo-finish whether Florida State University could kick him out as a freshman before he quit.

A newspaper editorial once called him the most unpopular man in Wakulla County. "He's a nut. And he's an extremist," The Wakulla News wrote 10 years ago.

"That's changed," Rudloe insists. "A lot of people now feel the way I do, but they won't speak out."

The editorial also called him "the greatest force in North Florida for the preservation of that part of the environment that is most important to the chain of life that makes the sea productive and makes living in our area a pleasure."

For Jack Rudloe, life has been like that editorial comment. His obsessions sometimes have led him to the edge of bankruptcy, and sometimes to the edge of fame and fortune.

He sued the late financier Ed Ball 16 years ago. Ball at the time was perhaps the most politically powerful private individual in the state. Rudloe tried to force Ball to remove a fence from across the Wakulla River, lost, and then Ball sued Rudloe for court costs and won.

He has been arrested (a cruelty to animals charge that was dismissed), physically threatened, his business vandalized, his boat sunk, and has been sued for slander.

He has warred with the local Chamber of Commerce and the county commission, timber interests and developers, some elements of the fishing or seafood industry and assorted other

individuals.

He has fought off a number of efforts to close his business (Gulf Specimen Co. Inc.), one of which went all the way to the state Cabinet before Rudloe won.

This year, Rudloe and the Wakulla County Commission went at it again, this time over the polluting potential of a proposed marina (by a commissioner's brother).

With that, there was a revival of the county's challenge (an issue dating back to the mid-'70s) to the legality of a pipeline used by his company to pump in fresh seawater for its specimen tanks.

Rudloe's objections to the marina got official state attention. While he attended one hearing on the issue, someone or something sank his boat. When he suggested there might be a connection, he was sued.

The fight is a familiar one to Florida — the costs and standards of growth vs. the health of the environment and the quality of life it represents. In one way or another it has been replayed in every corner of the state.

Unfortunately for Rudloe, his fights — which he regards as being in the public interest — seem to take on such a personal quality (perhaps because they so reflect his own style and intuition) that he does not draw as widespread public or professional support as you might expect.

Dr. Robert Livingston of Florida State University, a respected marine biologist probably best known for his pioneering work in Apalachicola Bay, has similar general views on both Wakulla County and Florida, though he takes care as a scientist not to associate himself with Rudloe's fights.

"I've donated my time over the years down there and I blame the county commission," he says of Wakulla's environmental dilemmas. "They're not in the 20th Century. They've talked a lot, but never really done anything concrete."

Livingston wastes no fine points in summing up the state's problem, either. "You can't beat money, and Florida has sold out," he says flatly. "That's the bottom line. The way the seafood supply keeps dwindling is mind-boggling."

Rudloe, saying he feels all the accumulated mileage of his 45 years, talks about doing more writing from now on, about letting someone else run the specimen company and about pursuing broader interests.

"It's been a 20-year war here," he says. "There's no end to it."

That sounds like a declaration of peace, until you remember that he has just finished suggesting that nobody should fish in Florida's salt waters, for anything, for the next five years.

He is right about one thing. They will jump on him for saying that. No one else would even whisper such heresy. No one else, either, would enjoy the uproar the way Jack Rudloe will.