

LIVING

INSIDE
Section D

Ann Landers	2
Around the Bay	2
Comics	6

September 20, 1993

MONDAY



Sting of 'jellyfish king' felt in many pocketbooks

By KEVIN SPEAR
Orlando Sentinel

PANACEA, Fla. — As Jack Rudloe paws through beach sand, a commercial fisherman wearing a "Roadkill Cafe" cap barges up, a beer in one hand, a writhing blob in the other.

"Jack, what the hell is this? He's slimy."

"It's an ear snail," says Rudloe, rising to his feet. "Rub them on your cuts. The mucus has antibiotics."

The fisherman studies the snail's pale fleshiness. "I've been stung by too many damn things in this ocean," he says finally, and the two share a silence of appreciation for things that sting.

Rudloe, 50, is one of best-known environmentalists and characters in the Florida Panhandle, an "extremist," according to one local paper, "whose sting has been felt in the pocketbooks of many area real estate people and developers."

He's a defender of coastal habitats who scours the Gulf of Mexico for live marine specimens to sell. He's a noisy anti-capitalist with wildly creative business ideas. He's a very good talker but an equally good listener.

Those searching for a sense of life along the Panhandle coastline often seek out Rudloe at his home south of Tallahassee — and usually find him soaked to the knees and instantly engaging.

In "A Border of Blue: Along the Gulf of Mexico from the Keys to the Yucatan," writer Frederick Turner says of Rudloe:

Sting

▶ Continued from 1D

"When I'd first eyes on Jack ... I'd thought there was something odd about his appearance, something unkempt and even asymmetrical. When I said good-bye ... I thought him one of the handsomest men I'd ever met."

For the past 30 years Rudloe has collected marine creatures, from anemone to zebra shrimp. He sells them through his nonprofit corporation to biological and medical researchers around the world.

He has written several books, including one on sea turtles and another on the Big Bend coastline, where the Panhandle meets the Florida Peninsula. And he writes for National Geographic and other magazines.

But there's another side to Rudloe. He careens like a mini-hurricane into environmental battles and unlikely business schemes.

For instance, he calls Carol Browner, Florida's former environmental chief and now the Clinton administration's Environmental Protection Agency director, "a scum bag" who "sold out" to development interests.

He has shown up at local zoning meetings waving mullet in officials' faces.

"This is what you make your living on," he'll spout, reminding them that coastal wetlands targeted for development are vital breeding grounds for the fish on which the region's economy depends.

"That seems to be an incomprehensible step that does not compute," he says in recalling officials' reaction. "And they take it very personally, as in, 'How dare you interfere?'"

Rudloe's business, Gulf Specimen Co., offers a children's tour so they can look at and touch the sea creatures awaiting shipment to researchers.

But most environmental education leaves a bad taste in Rudloe's mouth — too much "Save the Whales" sloganeering and warm, fuzzy gimmickry.

He wants to open an environmental center where activists could sit at banks of telephones and pepper highway officials, developers and paper mill operators with phone calls.

"Point fingers at the bastards," he says.

Back on the beach near his Panacea home, Rudloe leaves the ear snail and "Roadkill" fisherman. Trudging through loose sand, he glances at a string of new waterfront homes.

He used to imagine a hurricane sweeping these beaches clean but has since decided the homes would just grow back like weeds.

"Typical slum by the sea," he mutters as he throws his bucket and shovel into a decade-old Toyota caked with salt. The car has 200,000 miles on it and a crumpled hood, but Rudloe considers every new mile a blow to carmakers' greed.

He drives to a tidal flat on the south shore of Ochlockonee Bay, a sulfury smelling spot that he treasures.

Dragonflies swarm in the late afternoon air. Walking across the muck and shoal grass is like walking on a very soggy carpet. Dusty, a pet dog, plops along behind.

With an "ah ha" of delight, Rudloe plunges his hand into the water to retrieve a beer bottle covered with slipper limpets. Then he spots and grabs a small horse-shoe crab. And shovels up a worm.

While no longer challenging, specimen collecting is what Rudloe still likes doing best. When his sons, Sky and Cypress, were very young, he toted them along in specimen buckets.

Most of his time lately has been taken up "pounding the keyboard." But he's also working on a plan to provide Gulf fishermen with an alternative catch — and himself with an easy retirement:

"I want to become the jellyfish king."

Rudloe believes he can turn an environmental ill into a gourmet treat by pickling cannonball jellyfish — 2-pound blobs that thrive in polluted waters.

In Asia, jellyfish are considered a treat, particularly the ones that crunch like a pickle. Rudloe says that's what his cannonballs do. "Come on up," he says as he pulls into the driveway of his home. "Try some."

Padding barefoot around a rustic kitchen, Rudloe recalls how a Wall Street Journal story about his cannonballs prompted a lot of calls. But "business school types" wanted Rudloe to borrow money,

take all the risk. No way. Rudloe will provide the expertise when someone else invests the cash.

Meanwhile, dinner is served: Beer, shrimp, pretzels and stubby little jellyfish legs. Rudloe apologizes for being fresh out of the jellyfish's more succulent body parts. Edward Keith, a local shrimper and Rudloe friend, tries legs for the first time.

"I'll have to say this turns me off," Keith says, waving a hand in front of his face to indicate eye-watering distaste. "It's like a rotten mushroom, and I don't like mushrooms."

Rudloe thinks the problem may be the taste left by decomposed oyster larvae that cling to cannonball legs before they are washed and pickled.

Whatever, Keith says, "It's kind of mushy."

This concerns Rudloe. His plans for cannonballs are based on them being just the opposite of mushy.

Rudloe's wife, Anne, tries a bite and offers an opinion.

"I think there's too much mush after the crunch," the marine scientist concludes. "The bottom line is, it's too gristly."

Rudloe chuckles and blames his poor cooking skills. No problem. He intends to find chefs with the skills to make salads, soups and other dishes with the jellyfish.

It's late. The king of cannonballs rises. Behind him the room is paneled with old cypress speckled with decay, which gives the boards a distinctive "pecky" look coveted by home builders and furniture makers — but obtained at no small cost to the very wetlands Rudloe champions.

"Nobody is pure," he admits.

The next morning he is traveling west to Carrabelle, to "tag and pitch" a ridley sea turtle caught by a fisherman near a seaside motel. Rudloe has a federal permit for handling turtles, so he is often called when one needs rescuing.

"We are the high priests of turtles," he explains.

With the ridley in his trunk, Rudloe visits a nearby packinghouse. The chain-smoking, red-faced owner is rinsing fresh shrimp through super-chilled brine. He says he gave up shrimping in the Gulf because of environmentalists and their rules.

"If I was younger, I'd whip eight of them everyday," he says with a smile.

Unfazed, Rudloe plunges ahead. He wants to use packinghouse equipment to process some jellyfish for a marketing test.

Jellyfish? The former shrimper seems partly amused, partly annoyed by the idea. But after fixing Rudloe with a laser-beam stare — perhaps a kind of Panhandle contract — he agrees.

"We'll work with you," he says before walking off with a customer.

On the way back to Panacea, Rudloe makes one more stop, near a stand of pine. After a short hike to the edge of a swamp, he stops and gestures about his private nature preserve.

He promises the 18 acres of cypress swamp, bordering the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, will never be touched by developers.

"This is my answer to the pecky cypress," he says.

Please see STING on 4D ▶

often comes to its defense

RUDLOE from E-1

medical researchers around the world.

He has written several books, including one on sea turtles and another on the Big Bend coastline, where the Panhandle meets the Florida Peninsula. And he writes for *National Geographic* and other magazines.

But there's another side to Rudloe. He careens like a mini-hurricane into environmental battles and unlikely business schemes.

For instance, he calls Carol Browner, Florida's former environmental chief and now the Clinton administration's Environmental Protection Agency director, "a scum bag" who "sold out" to development interests.

He has shown up at local zoning meetings waving mullet in officials' faces.

"This is what you make your living on," he'll spout, reminding them that coastal wetlands targeted for development are vital breeding grounds for the fish on which the region's economy depends.

"That seems to be an incomprehensible step that does not compute," he says in recalling officials' reaction. "And they take it very personally, as in, 'How dare you interfere?'"

Rudloe's business, Gulf Specimen Co., offers a children's tour so they can look at and touch the sea creatures awaiting shipment to researchers.

But most environmental education leaves a bad taste in Rudloe's mouth — too much "Save the Whales" sloganeering and warm, fuzzy gimmickry.

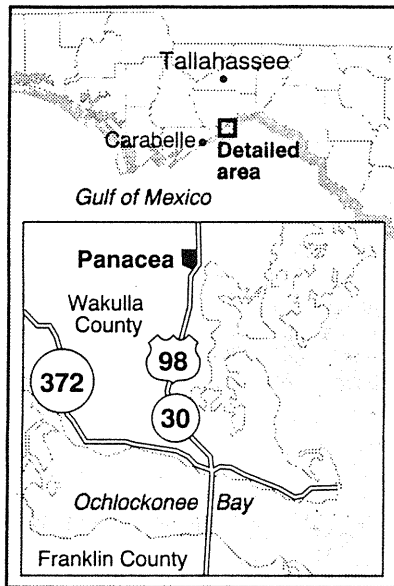
He wants to open an environmental center where activists could sit at banks of telephones and pepper highway officials, developers and paper mill operators with phone calls.

"Point fingers at the bastards," he says.

He wants to be the 'jellyfish king'

Back on the beach near his Panacea home, Rudloe leaves the ear snail and "Roadkill" fisherman. Trudging through loose sand, he glances at a string of new waterfront homes.

He used to imagine a hurricane sweeping these beaches clean but has since decided the homes would just grow back like



weeds.

"Typical slum by the sea," he mutters as he throws his bucket and shovel into a decade-old Toyota caked with salt. The car has 200,000 miles on it and a crumpled hood, but Rudloe considers every new mile a blow to carmakers' greed.

He drives to a tidal flat on the south shore of Ochlockonee Bay, a sulfury smelling spot that he treasures.

Dragonflies swarm in the late afternoon air. Walking across the muck and shoal grass is like walking on a very soggy carpet. Dusty, a pet dog, plops along behind.

With an "ah ha" of delight, Rudloe plunges his hand into the water to retrieve a beer bottle covered with slipper limpets. Then he spots and grabs a small horseshoe crab. And shovels up a worm.

While no longer challenging, specimen collecting is what Rudloe still likes doing best. When his sons, Sky and Cypress, were very young, he toted them along in specimen buckets.

Most of his time lately has been taken up "pounding the keyboard." But he's also working on a plan to provide Gulf fishermen with an alternative catch — and himself with an easy retirement:

"I want to become the jellyfish king."

Rudloe believes he can turn an environmental ill into a gourmet treat by pickling cannonball jellyfish — 2-pound blobs that thrive in polluted waters.

In Asia, jellyfish are considered a treat, particularly the

ones that crunch like a pickle. Rudloe says that's what his cannonballs do. "Come on up," he says as he pulls into the driveway of his home. "Try some."

Padding barefoot around a rustic kitchen, Rudloe recalls how a *Wall Street Journal* story about his cannonballs prompted a lot of calls. But "business school types" wanted Rudloe to borrow money, take all the risk. No way. Rudloe will provide the expertise when someone else invests the cash.

Meanwhile, dinner is served: Beer, shrimp, pretzels and stubbly little jellyfish legs. Rudloe apologizes for being fresh out of the jellyfish's more succulent body parts. Edward Keith, a local shrimper and Rudloe friend, tries legs for the first time.

"I'll have to say this turns me off," Keith says, waving a hand in front of his face to indicate eye-watering distaste. "It's like a rotten mushroom, and I don't like mushrooms."

Rudloe thinks the problem may be the taste left by decomposed oyster larvae that cling to cannonball legs before they are washed and pickled.

Whatever, Keith says, "It's kind of mushy."

This concerns Rudloe. His plans for cannonballs are based on them being just the opposite of mushy.

Rudloe's wife, Anne, tries a bite and offers an opinion.

"I think there's too much mush after the crunch," the marine scientist concludes. "The bottom line is, it's too gristly."

Rudloe chuckles and blames his poor cooking skills. No problem. He intends to find chefs with the skills to make salads, soups and other dishes with the jellyfish.

It's late. The king of cannonballs rises. Behind him the room is paneled with old cypress speckled with decay, which gives the boards a distinctive

"pecky" look coveted by home builders and furniture makers — but obtained at no small cost to the very wetlands Rudloe champions.

"Nobody is pure," he admits.

Preserving nature is Rudloe's payback

The next morning he is traveling west to Carrabelle, to "tag and pitch" a ridley sea turtle caught by a fisherman near a seaside motel. Rudloe has a federal permit for handling turtles, so he is often called when one needs rescuing.

"We are the high priests of turtles," he explains.

With the ridley in his trunk, Rudloe visits a nearby packing-house. The chain-smoking, red-faced owner is rinsing fresh shrimp through super-chilled brine. He says he gave up shrimping in the Gulf because of environmentalists and their rules.

"If I was younger, I'd whip eight of them everyday," he says with a smile.

Unfazed, Rudloe plunges ahead. He wants to use packing-house equipment to process some jellyfish for a marketing test.

Jellyfish? The former shrimper seems partly amused, partly annoyed by the idea. But after fixing Rudloe with a laser-beam stare — perhaps a kind of Panhandle contract — he agrees.

"We'll work with you," he says before walking off with a customer.

On the way back to Panacea, Rudloe makes one more stop; near a stand of pine. After a short hike to the edge of a swamp, he stops and gestures about his private nature preserve.

He promises the 18 acres of cypress swamp, bordering the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, will never be touched by developers.

"This is my answer to the pecky cypress," he says.