

The Big Bend Saltwater Classic: A Fond Adieu from OAR

For some months, rumors have been circulating that the Big Bend Saltwater Classic (BBSC) has shut down all operations. Sadly, the tournament's board of directors now confirms that the BBSC has canceled this year's tournament. Last year's Classic was the 30th in a stellar run that has thrilled (and yes, confounded!) anglers and their families every year since 1989. The Organization for Artificial Reefs (OAR) and the BBSC will keep everyone informed about whether the tournament will be resumed in 2020 and beyond.

As only the closest, most dedicated volunteers and board members who made the annual contest work—and work so well for so many years—can readily attest, putting on a non-profit event of the scale and quality of what the BBSC became is far from easy. In fact, the demands often stretched the tournament's all-volunteer staff muscles beyond their limits. Over the years, such demands took their inevitable toll on staff resources. Last year's shift of headquarters from Carrabelle back to the tournament's original launching pad—Shields Marina at St. Marks—was a valiant, necessary effort to save the tournament through a more judicious use of increasingly limited resources in the face of diminishing prospects.

The Organization for Artificial Reefs and the anglers and divers we serve have been the grateful, primary beneficiaries of a large portion of the BBSC proceeds during its 30 years., OAR pays tribute to the people and the sponsors who transformed this event into the largest and most professionally run saltwater fishing tournament in the Big Bend region. The vision of a small group of OAR members meeting for the first time in January 1989 eventually grew into a reality that none of the original founders—even the most starry-eyed optimists among them—ever imagined possible. These visionaries—who effectively knew nothing about how to start, much less run, a professional fishing tournament—staked a bet on two things, namely, their faith in their mission to build artificial reefs and the unbridled excitement that competitive saltwater fishing engenders in coastal communities throughout the Gulf region.

Because of OAR's creation of the tournament that became the BBSC and our close association with the Saltwater Classic since its inception, we know that many consider OAR and the BBSC synonymous. For that reason, we struggled with the decision we are announcing today. OAR, which has actually been a separate non-profit corporation for many years, is disassociating itself with the BBSC tournament organization. We must ensure that OAR's identity as a viable, independent contributor to the region's marine resources is recognized and understood by the community at large. Our goal is to continue the work of OAR, which requires fundraising from both governmental and private sources.

OAR has greatly valued its association with the BBSC and the resources it has provided. With this year's suspension of the Saltwater Classic by the BBSC, we need to offer current OAR members and future and potential donors a clear understanding and vision of the future. OAR is and remains a vibrant, viable organization that will continue to deploy artificial reefs throughout the Big Bend region for the benefit of our coastal economy and the anglers and divers who benefit most directly.

OAR was privileged to see its creation become a reliable economic engine, capable of underwriting the ever-increasing cost of building permanent, public artificial reefs throughout the Big Bend Gulf. During its 30-year run, revenue from the BBSC and other sources went into the construction of at least 28 reefs and thousands of tons of deployed materials off the Wakulla and Franklin County coasts. Today, OAR remains a robust, financially sound, grass-roots (and still all-volunteer) organization whose legacy will live on. Few tournaments in the world can match that achievement, especially given the all-volunteer workforce that OAR and the BBSC were obliged to apply in evermore creative ways to accomplish the myriad tasks at hand.

In closing, to all the many helpers of every stripe—from the T-shirt handlers, the ticket sellers, the young dockmasters, the auction-item wranglers, the number-crunchers, the problem-solvers, our generous and gracious hosts in Carrabelle and in St. Marks—we owe you a bottomless debt of thanks for your time and talent. And to our diverse family of sponsors, we'll never forget your unparalleled generosity and encouragement that kept us going for three decades. *Thank you one and all and tight lines forever!*

The OAR Board of Directors