

Global warming threatens sea life, wildlife expert says

By SAMMY FRETWELL - sfretwell@thestate.com

Dan Kipnis has fished off Florida for most of his life. He has organized tournaments for anglers and taken vacationers into the ocean to cast their lines.

But to go fishing, you need fish — and Kipnis, a long-time charter boat captain from Miami Beach, says rising global temperatures threaten sea life across the globe. In fact, climate change could have a more devastating effect on the ocean than many people realize, Kipnis said during a presentation Wednesday in Columbia.

“It’s easy to see an ozone haze over Columbia. But when people go to the ocean, they see something flat with a few ripples on it. And they don’t see what is in it.”

Off the South Atlantic Coast, certain species of grouper and snapper are among the types of fish in decline.

Kipnis spoke at the request of state environmental groups trying to raise awareness about global warming.

Kipnis, who has worked with former Vice President Al Gore on global warming, is paid \$1,000 a month by the National Wildlife Federation to get the word out. He spoke earlier this week in Georgetown, McClellanville, Beaufort and Hilton Head Island. He’ll be in Charleston today.

Two major threats of global warming to fish, he said, are from increasing acid levels in the ocean and rising sea temperatures.

Higher acid, the byproduct of increasing carbon dioxide emissions, “eats the shells” of crabs, certain types of plankton and krill that young fish rely on for survival, he said.

“You take bait out of the food chain, we don’t have much food for” bigger fish, he said, using graphics and videos of fish to illustrate his points. “That’s going to have a major effect.”

The degree of impact global warming has on fish remains a point of scientific uncertainty and debate. While many species of fish are in decline, overfishing is believed to be a major reason.

The U.S. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council recently proposed recreational and commercial harvest limits for gag grouper and vermilion snapper, both of which are considered overfished along the Atlantic Coast.

Still, Kipnis and officials with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources said Wednesday global warming can also hurt fish susceptible to changes in their environment.

Red drum, among the state's most popular sport fish, aren't spawning in great numbers this month at St. Helena Sound and Charleston Harbor because the water is too hot — but they should be this time of year, said Charles Wenner, a senior scientist with the DNR. Wenner said it shows how rising sea temperatures can affect fish.

The DNR's David Whittaker, assistant deputy director for marine resources, said higher earth temperatures could lead to droughts that kill marsh grasses young fish need to survive.

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GLOBAL WARMING

A definition.

- Global warming is caused by an increase in greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane.
- Those gases are trapped in the atmosphere every year, causing temperatures to rise.
- Power plants and automobiles are major sources of pollutants contributing to global warming.
- As the Earth heats up, polar ice melts and ocean temperatures rise.