

The  
**Midnight Pass**



SOCIETY, INC.

"MIDNIGHT PASS - PASS IT ON!"

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MIDNIGHT PASS POSITION PAPER

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MIDNIGHT PASS- A DOORWAY

SYNOPSIS

Midnight Pass, one of just four Gulf-to-bay doorways in Sarasota County, was artificially closed in 1983. The inlet had been an integral, functioning element of the ecosystem of Little Sarasota Bay. The vast majority of the "Critters of the Sea" must spend at least part of their life cycle in an estuarine environment. To do so, they need an aquatic passageway connecting Gulf to bay. Their survival depends on it. As a marine doorway, Midnight Pass played an essential role in accommodating the migratory habits of fish, shrimp and mammals. The sealing shut of this doorway has adversely affected the marine communities of both Gulf and Bay.

People used Midnight Pass as a doorway, too. Recreational boaters more conveniently reached the Gulf to fish, to circumnavigate either of Siesta or Casey Keys, or to just "go for a ride." Boater safety and welfare was also enhanced by Midnight Pass; it was a welcome sight... a handy entrance to the safe harbor of Little Sarasota Bay for boaters caught offshore in the Gulf during one of our sudden summer storms.

Commercial fishermen depended upon this salt water doorway to get to and from their fishing grounds in the Gulf of Mexico. Alternatively, they waited within Little Sarasota Bay for the fish to come through the inlet to their nets.

Closing Midnight Pass has harmed the commercial fishing industry in Sarasota County and has made sport fishing and recreational boating less desirable, too. The restoration of Midnight Pass will reestablish the multi-faceted benefits of this inlet as an aquatic connection between the Gulf of Mexico and Little Sarasota Bay.

BACKGROUND

The vast majority of the fish and shrimp inhabiting the Gulf of Mexico must spend at least part of their life cycle in an estuarine environment like Little Sarasota Bay. Most frequently it's during their juvenile period when they need the food and shelter resources provided by the seagrass meadows of these protected waters. Conversely, many Bay-dwelling critters need access to the Gulf of Mexico for spawning purposes. The passes on Florida's west coast provide the vital Gulf-to-bay link needed by the "Critters of the Sea."

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Historically, there have been four inlets in Sarasota County linking its bays to the Gulf of Mexico:

NEW PASS. Aptly named, this is the newest pass in Sarasota County; the inlet was created during a major hurricane in 1848. Recognized by the Army Corps of Engineer as a navigation channel, New Pass has needed frequent maintenance over the years.

BIG PASS. Originally called Big Sarasota Pass, this inlet was also well named. It is big and wide and deep. While a near-shore sand bar is in a state of continual flux causing, at times, navigational difficulty for boaters, Big Pass has never had to be dredged to maintain tidal flow.

MIDNIGHT PASS. Its predecessor pass was named Little Sarasota Pass to differentiate it from Big Sarasota Pass to the north. A pass has been in this locale for all of recorded history and, perhaps, for as long as the barrier islands themselves. For a more complete history, please see the SAFETY VALVE and INTRACOASTAL papers.

VENICE JETTIES. This inlet was known long ago as Casey's Pass and was located north of the current site. The only "hardened" inlet in Sarasota County, this pass is also recognized and maintained by the Army corps of Engineers as a navigation channel.

These four passes have all played an important role as passageways between Gulf and bay. But the artificial closing of Midnight Pass in 1983 reduced our "doorway" natural resources by 25%! For boaters and fishermen this loss was an inconvenience, a recreational and/or an economic hardship. But the marine critters were denied a natural asset they counted upon for their very survival. This is one more "Man-created" stress on a marine community already sorely abused in our pursuit of "progress" and population accommodations. While some of the "doorway demand" can be made up by the other local inlets, the destruction of each such natural resource takes its toll on the well-being of the marine community.

## MARINE COMMUNITY

Fish and shrimp and mammals regularly used Midnight Pass as a transit route. While their appearance in Gulf or bay may seem capricious, their actions are well motivated, driven by a biological clock. Following is a review of just a few species known to take advantage of the Midnight Pass doorway.

MULLET. A most familiar fish in Little Sarasota Bay, cooler water temperatures will trigger them to school-up and move into the Gulf to spawn. Black Mullet will spawn from late November to January depending on water temperature. Silver Mullet don't spawn until the spring. The larvae return to the bay through the pass in the spring, taking up residence in the shallows. Adult Mullet will also often be seen circumnavigating a barrier island, apparently on a search for food.

SNOOK. A sought-after game fish, Snook are basically non-migratory except for brief excursions into the Gulf where they will school near passes for spawning purposes. Following a late spring-early summer

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spawning season in the near-shore waters of the Gulf, the larvae are carried into the estuary on flood tides where they find their way to fresh water tributaries. At three to four inches in length, the juvenile Snook then take up residence in seagrass meadows. Exhibit #1 is an excellent representation of the life cycle of the Snook.

**BLUE CRAB.** A bay inhabitant, Blue Crabs are important to the commercial and recreational fisheries. They mate only once, after the final molt. After mating, the female crab migrates through the inlets to the high salinity waters of the Gulf to produce her eggs. The adult males tend to remain within the estuarine confines. The juveniles develop in the bays as well. See Exhibit #2.

**REDFISH.** Spawning occurs during the fall and winter months in the near-shore areas just off the barrier island passes. After the first spawning, adult Redfish tend to spend more time in Gulf waters than in the bays. The larvae are carried through the passes into the shallow estuaries by tidal currents where they inhabit the seagrass meadows and marshes. See Exhibit #2.

**PINK SHRIMP.** They comprise an important fishery for the west coast. Pink shrimp are also an important link in the marine food chain. Their life cycle and large biomass make them vulnerable to a disparate array of predators... many of whom are commercially or recreationally important themselves. Shrimp move through the passes to Gulf waters to spawn, mainly March to October. At the postlarvae stage the young shrimp return to the seagrass meadows in the bays. The grasses provide shelter from predators and suitable habitat for the species upon which they feed. See Exhibit #3.

**SPOTTED SEATROUT.** Most references describe the life cycle of the spotted Seatrout as limited within the estuarine area. Local fishermen, however, report regularly catching them in the near-shore waters of the Gulf. The adults do tend to congregate at the passes during spring and summer to feed on migrating shrimp and fish. They are said to spawn within the estuaries; their larvae move into the shelter of seagrass beds.

Spotted Seatrout are known to use inlets to escape temporary salinity declines and cold water. The passes are critical at these times because, without an escape route, they can die. Fleeing to or through other bays due to distance or similarity of conditions. Without easy access to an inlet, the embayment can become a "death trap." Spotted Seatrout are also known as highly non-migratory... they seldom leave their natal estuary or environs. Thus, the population in each embayment is separate and dependent upon local conditions. If that population is severely decimated, it is unlikely to receive recruitment from other areas.

**SOUTHERN FLOUNDER.** Flounder spawn in deeper offshore waters during late fall and winter. The juveniles move through the passes into the bays by late winter- early spring. While the young tend to stay in the shallows near passes, the greatest number locate in Cuban Shoal weed beds, especially those with muddy bottoms. Again, the seagrasses provide the small fry with protection from predators and a ready food source... a nursery habitat. See Exhibit #4.

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BAY ANCHOVY. Large schools are often found in estuarine and near-shore areas. Spawning occurs in the gulf during late winter and continues in the bays in early spring. Larval forms and juveniles use the estuaries as nursery grounds. Juveniles and adults inhabit the bays spring through fall but move through the passes to deeper water for the winter. The Bay Anchovy is preyed upon by most aquatic carnivores and by birds as well. Due to its large numbers it is an important food source in the ecosystem of the Bay. While they are capable of an off-shore life cycle, greater numbers are found in the bays than in the gulf. See Exhibit #4.

PINFISH & CO. There's an entire community of small fishes that are closely associated with the seagrass meadows of the bays. Pinfish, Spot, Pipe fish, Goby, Pig fish, White Grunt, Mojarra, to name just a few. Their full life cycle appears to be confined to the grass beds. Their greatest abundance, especially the smaller fish, is in Cuban Shoal weed meadows. They apparently prefer the density of blades this grass provides more than the larger-bladed types with larger biomass. While closely associated with bays throughout their life cycle, these fishes need the Gulf-to-Bay connection of passes. The passes assure an abundant food supply in their seagrass community. In the winter months most of them travel through the inlets to spawn in the near-shore areas.

OTHERS. The list of estuarine-dependent species seems inexhaustible. More than 100 fish species are known to inhabit these waters. If you add types of shrimp and other "critters," the number triples! Tarpon, Sheepshead, Gray Snapper, several types of Drum. The young of many Gulf-based species spend their juvenile period thriving in the estuarine nursery grounds.

Critters counting on easy passage between Gulf and bay include: Octopus, Sea Hare, Sea Scallops, Horse Shoe Crab, Stone Crab, varieties of squid, Comb Jelly and Jellyfish. Dolphins and Manatees are frequent travelers between Gulf and Bay... often on food excursions.

MARINE COMMUNITY-- A SUMMARY. As the above descriptions and supporting exhibits clearly explain, the vast majority of marine animals in the Sarasota County region require easy Gulf-to-bay access... for breeding, for food, for protection from predators, for spawning, and to be able to escape hostile environmental conditions whenever they arise.

Closing Midnight Pass has devastated the local marine community. Those that were Little Sarasota Bay-based are all but gone. If the lack of seagrasses didn't chase them away, the lack of a doorway will. And remember the non-migratory spotted Seatrout: each embayment is a neighborhood on its own. The destruction of the population will be long-lasting as recruitment from adjoining embayments is not likely.

The Gulf-based critters fare far better since they can avail themselves of other saltwater doorways. But less is still less and eliminating one inlet out of four in Sarasota County puts additional stress on a marine population already in obvious and significant decline. Denying them access to valuable habitat on a coastline where habitat has already been severely reduced in our rush to accommodate people can

only make a bad situation that much worse.

Obviously, restoring Midnight Pass will immediately restore the Gulf-to-bay connection... the doorway. With the doorway restored, the embayments's environment will rapidly heal itself. In relatively "short order" Little Sarasota Bay will once again be the outstanding body of water it once was... and will once again be serving its natural purposes. Restoring this historic saltwater doorway will reopen Little Sarasota Bay to the diverse and abundant marine life that had always called this area home.

### PEOPLE

Like the "Critters of the Sea," people used Midnight Pass too. In a Society-sponsored "boat count" conducted in December, 1989, 1,350 boats were found to be housed between Stickney and Blackburn Points. For these locally-operated boats, Midnight Pass was easy access to the Gulf for fishing, for cruising, for fun. There are more than 16,000 registered boats in Sarasota County and every active boater directly or indirectly enjoyed the benefits of Midnight Pass. For access to/from the Gulf; for the clean, clear waters of Little Sarasota Bay; for the Pass area as a boating destination; for the safe haven it offered boaters in the event they were caught offshore in a sudden summer storm. Every spring hundreds of boats used to gravitate to Midnight Pass to dip-net shrimp migrating to the Gulf... just one more water-based event lost in the closing of Midnight Pass!

The doorway's been closed for over six years... no more Gulf access, no more safe haven. Midnight Pass is no longer an attractive destination. The Bay waters are often dark, murky and odiferous... boating is now an activity to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Boating in general is less enjoyable; destinations are limited, the water looks and smells bad. Boaters who circumnavigated either Casey or Siesta Key are now bay-bound or don't go boating at all. So traffic is much higher in the Bay... and so is boat-related pollution. Fishing is off, too. It's harder to get to the Gulf and Bay fishing is poor. As a local sportsman put it... "Fishing's lousy. And if you finally do catch something, you're afraid to eat it!"

While boaters in general may be inconvenienced by the absence of this doorway, the local commercial fishermen feel the economic sting of being denied historic Gulf access. Before the Pass was closed they could get to their fishing grounds in ten or fifteen minutes. And home in the same time. Since 1983, however, they report they must spend two to three hours just in travel time! And their out-of-pocket costs have more than doubled as a result!

The effect on the local fishing industry is especially significant in light of their concentration in this locale and the many, many years they've been working out of here. With the exception of a small facility operating from Siesta Key, the entire Sarasota County fishing industry is situated within the Midnight Pass area. Bay Sea food Co., near the Blackburn Point bridge, is the only wholesaler licensed to

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commercially process, distribute and ship fish. The Vamo fish house, almost opposite Midnight Pass, was in operation for a long, long time. A local commercial fisherman who worked out of there his entire life recalls his Father telling him that the fish house was in operation when he arrived in 1914! The Blackburn Point fish house was in operation for a similar period of time. Unfortunately, just recently the Vamo Road fish house was forced to cease operations... one more victim of "progress."

What's significant is that the fishing industry for the County is centered in this area and that the fishermen depended on this historic access to their fishing grounds. The artificial closing of this inlet has denied them the use of an historic natural resource.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The artificial closing of Midnight Pass has had an adverse impact on the marine communities of both Gulf and Bay.
2. Pleasure boaters have been denied the recreational benefits of an open, flowing Pass.
3. The Sarasota County fishing industry, small as it is, is centered in this locale. The commercial fishermen have lost the Gulf-to-Bay access through a natural resource which they historically enjoyed. This loss has resulted in an economic hardship.
4. Boaters in general no longer have the safe haven from a sudden Gulf storm that Midnight Pass afforded them.
5. Restoring Midnight Pass will immediately restore the saltwater doorway aspects of this historic inlet. There is every reason to believe that the environmental damage caused by inlet closure will be reversed, over time, through inlet restoration.

## REFERENCES

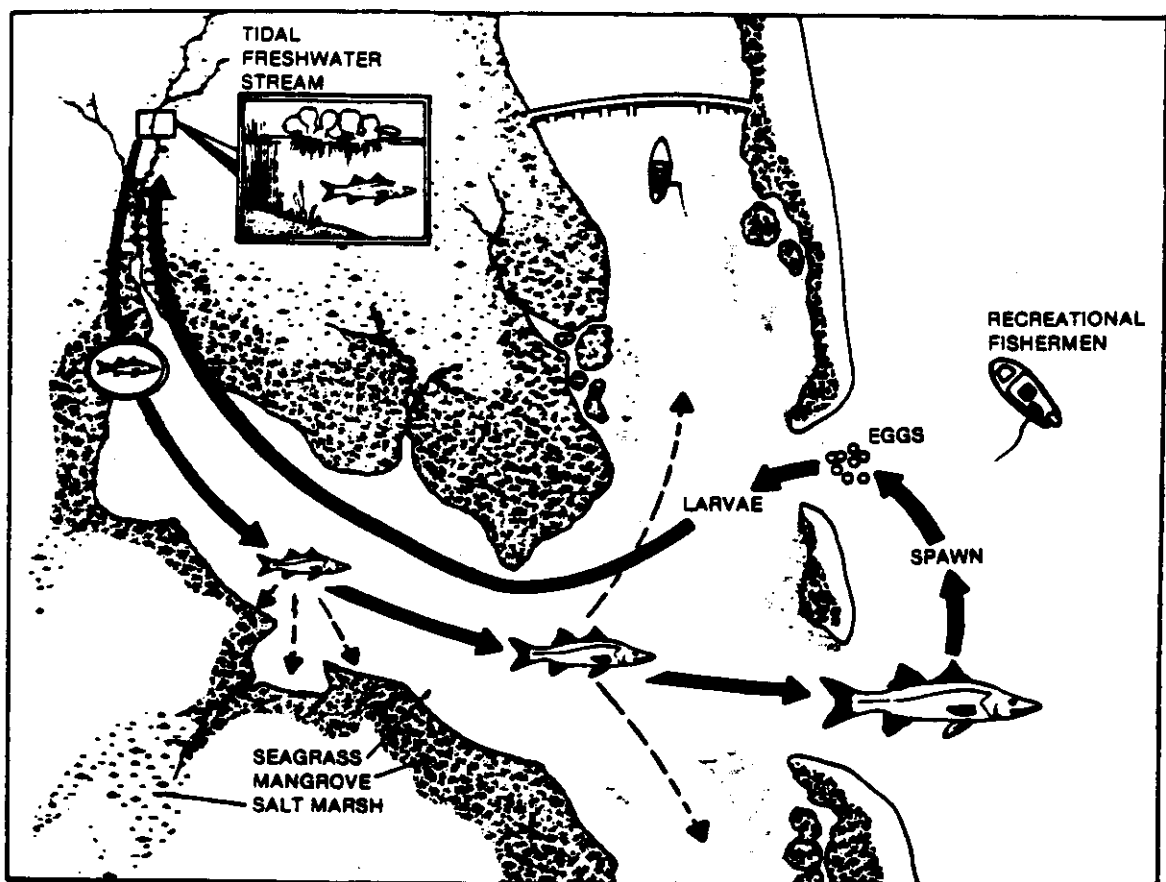
- A. Gulf Coast Ecological Inventory, 1982. Fish & Wildlife Service.
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- C. An Ecological Study & Environmental Evaluation of the Fishes of Sarasota Bay, 1980. Patricia Bird.
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- F. Commercial Fishing Activity & Facility Needs in Florida, 1979. A Multi-County Publication.
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- H. A Symposium on Estuarine Fisheries, 1966. Am. Fisheries Society.
- I. Trophic Relationships Among Concentrated Populations of Small Fishes in Seagrass Meadows, 1985. S. Huh & C. Kitting.
- J. Distribution of Fishes in Seagrass Meadows, 1983. Allan Stoner.
- K. Several discussions with commercial fishermen and local fishing guides, especially Vernon Frost who is a veritable fount of knowledge on Sarasota Bay, on the habits of fishes and "Where they is."

THE MIDNIGHT PASS SOCIETY

POSITION PAPER

MIDNIGHT PASS- A DOORWAY

THE LIFE CYCLE OF THE SNOOK

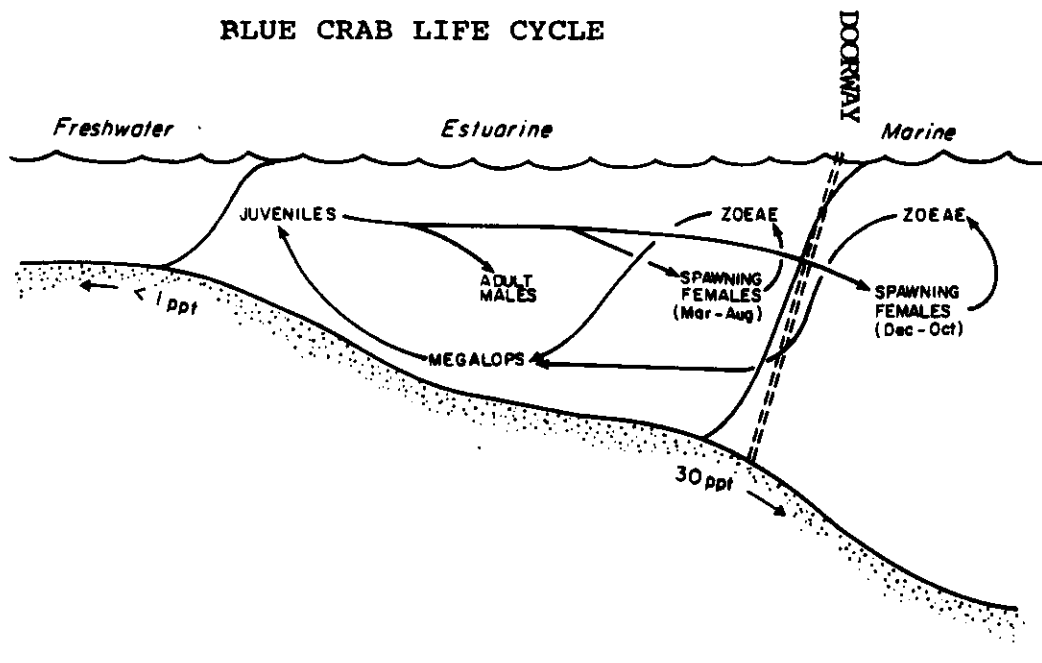


Graphic prepared by R. Lewis, Mangrove Systems, Inc.

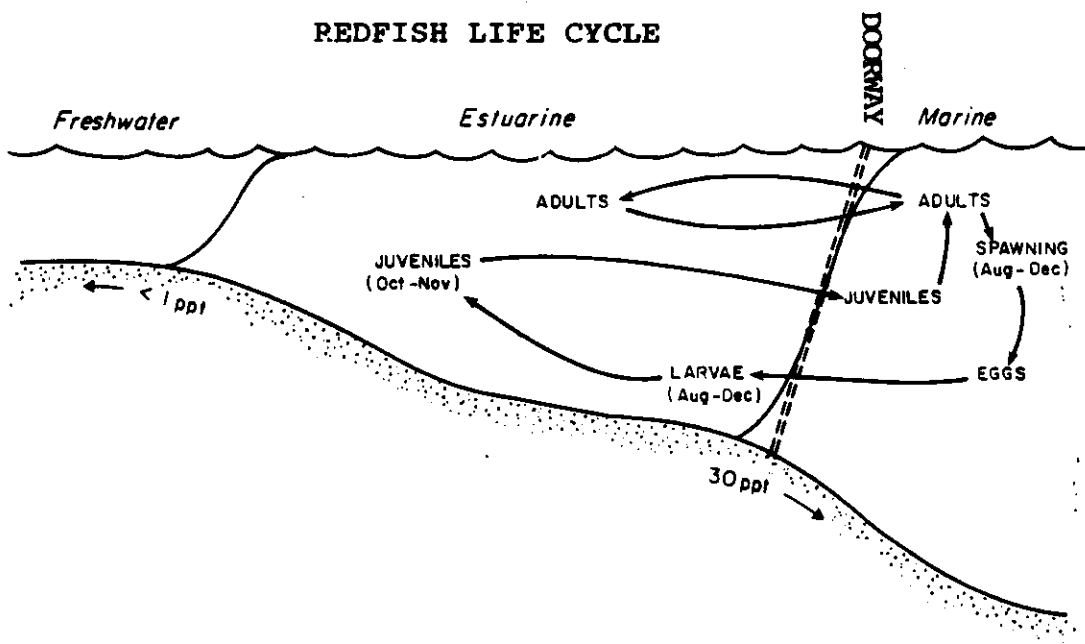
The life cycle of the Snook includes the need to migrate through passes to spawn in the near-shore waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The larvae are carried through passes into the bay where they find their way to back bay areas.

MIDNIGHT PASS- A DOORWAY

BLUE CRAB LIFE CYCLE



REDFISH LIFE CYCLE



ADAPTED FROM LIFE CYCLE SCHEMATICS PREPARED BY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, JANUARY, 1980.



MIDNIGHT PASS- A DOORWAY

LIFE CYCLE OF SHRIMP

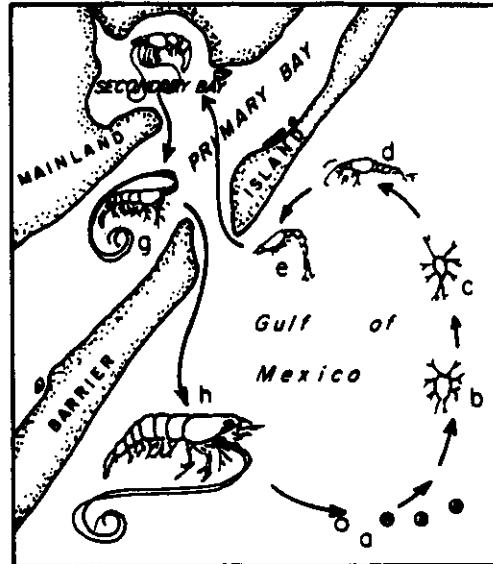
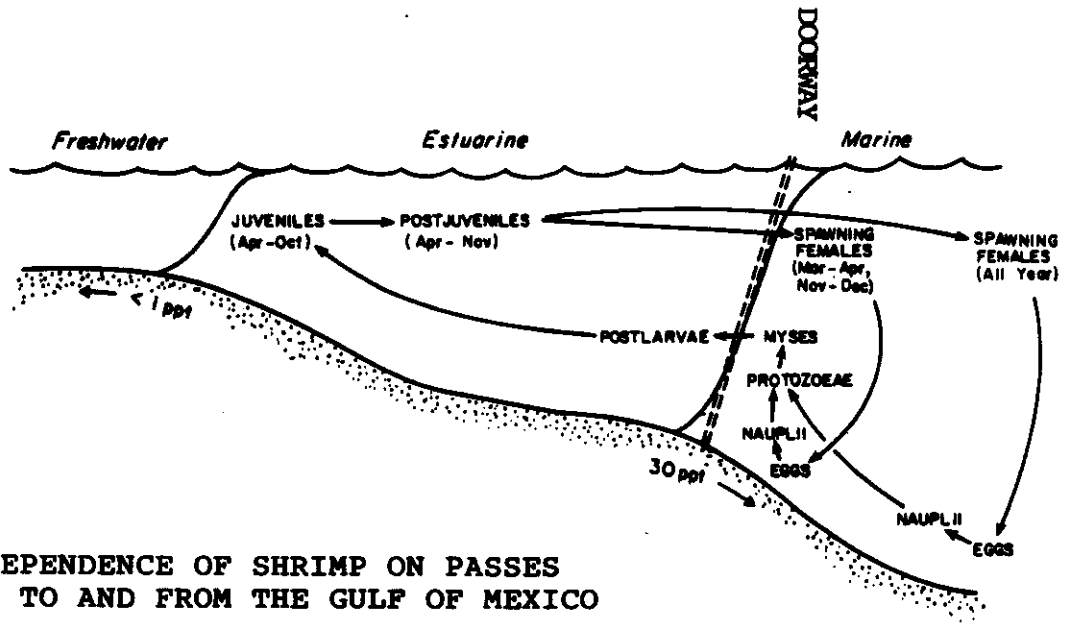


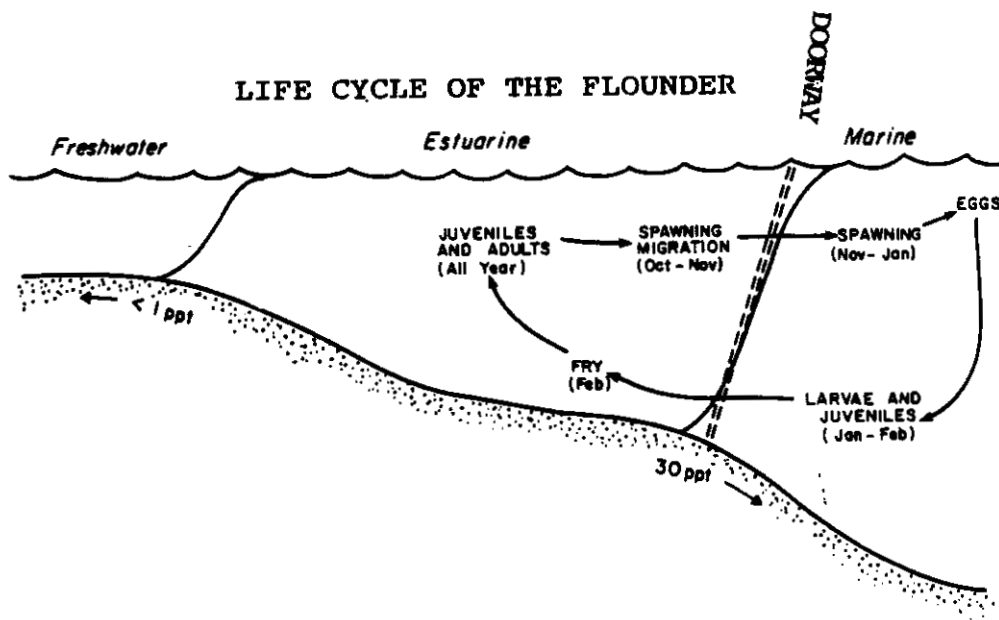
Fig. 5-29 Life History of Shrimp. a) shrimp eggs; b) nauplius larvae; c) protozoa; d) mysis; e) postmysis; f) juvenile shrimp; g) adolescent shrimp; h) mature adult shrimp. (a, b, c, d, and e after Heegaard, 1953)



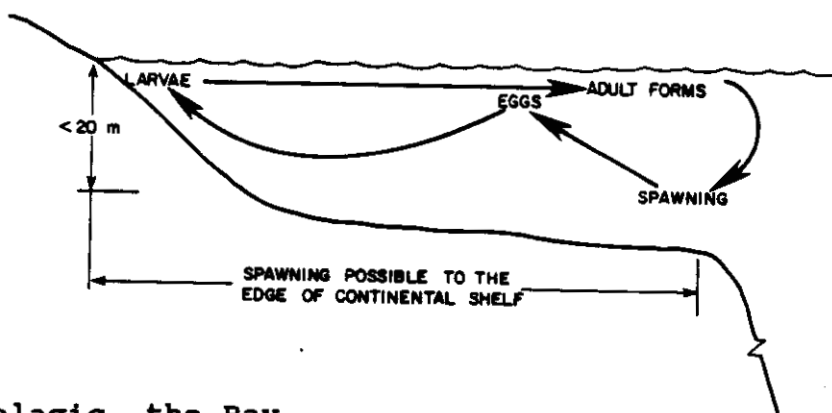
NOTE THE DEPENDENCE OF SHRIMP ON PASSES FOR ACCESS TO AND FROM THE GULF OF MEXICO

ADAPTED FROM A LIFE CYCLE SCHEMATIC AND GRAPHIC PREPARED BY THE U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

MIDNIGHT PASS- A DOORWAY



LIFE CYCLE OF THE BAY ANCHOVY \*\*



\*\* While pelagic, the Bay Anchovy is commonly found in estuarine waters.

ADAPTED FROM LIFE CYCLE SCHEMATICS PREPARED BY U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, JANUARY, 1980.