A WATCHMAN ON THE WILDERNESS COAST

As development comes to the Gulf, a self-taught biologist keeps a mission to preserve and educate from a ramshackle marine lab

By Ann Hyman
Times-Union staff writer

The Gulf Specimen Marine Lab in Panacea is no shiny tourist attraction. It’s a working-class cluster of sheds and buildings a couple of blocks off Panacea’s main drag, U.S. 98, that slides along the Gulf Coast from St. Marks to Apalachicola and beyond.

The lab’s main building, where a few sea creatures swim around in aquaria and a modest rack of literature is there for the picking, used to be a shack, a beach shack, recycled from a surplus barracks at a World War II installation along the coast.

Jack Rudloe lived in the shack 30 years ago.

“It was really a wilderness when I wrote The Wilderness Coast,” Rudloe said. “Panacea was a real primitive fishing village. There was a little general store, no shopping center, no

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malls. No lights on the bay." Undiscovered charm.

But the Wilderness Coast — officially so-called now because considerable stretches of it curving back south from Panacea toward Cedar Key have been bought by the Nature Conservancy and will, presumably, remain undeveloped — is no longer undiscovered.

Panacea isn’t primitive anymore. There’s a shopping center, one of the best restaurants — Posey’s — in a land of legendary captain’s platters, a modest flowering of weekend places.

And this is the ’90s. All that can be developed is likely to be developed. Condos, runoffs and bulkheads in paradise.

That pains Rudloe, a self-taught naturalist and biologist, and a feisty environmentalist.

He’s seen 30 years of “progress” and what it does to the coastal and marine environments.

“We’ve seen a lot of trash, we’ve seen a lot of habitat destruction, we’ve seen a lot of impact on the marine environment. We’ve seen major deforestation which has changed water patterns, nutrients flowing into the bays,” he said.

We were walking under the sheds that cover a series of shallow, less-than-state-of-the-art tanks that hold Gulf specimens that Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories sells to schools and research programs. Rudloe paused, scooted his fingers under the smooth sandy bottom of a tank, stirred up some sea worms, some tiny crustaceans. He picked up a sea urchin.

It looked like the kind that stings like a wasp in Caribbean waters, but Rudloe knew his urchins. No danger. He set the urchin back, near a sherd of an old scuba mask, covered with barnacles, gradually turning into part of the submarine scene.

“We have a certain amount of trash in the bottoms of the tanks to make the bottoms look natural, so the animals will feel at home. Beer cans here and there,” he said. Irony.

It’s not really to make the animals more comfortable, of course. It’s to give visitors an idea of what the bottom of the gulf really looks like.

Education is more and more part of the Gulf Specimen Marine Lab’s mission — it’s open to visitors daily. Rudloe says that school groups, elder hostel groups, church groups, science groups, as well as individuals, come to walk through the sheds. They can handle the sea squirts, the starfish, the hermit crabs in the shallow tanks, watch the groupers, the black sea bass go into a feeding frenzy with a little encouragement — sardines — from Rudloe. They watch the rays cruise their tank like delta-wing submarine space ships and they consider the awesome design of the ancient horseshoe crab.

“People are really curious about life in the sea. We’re trying to explain what the bob on the beach is,” Rudloe said. “I want people to know as much about the bob on the beach as I do. I want them to know that the bob on the beach is part of a huge, complex world unto itself.”

Rudloe has always known what he wanted to do in life, though he has not taken the traditional academic path.

“I started in biology at FSU in 1960. I decided I liked the biology, but I didn’t like the university. That’s had both its assets and its liabilities,” he said.

He has built the lab, begun in 1984, into prominence in the scientific community.


Rudloe’s wife, Anne Rudloe, who has the academic doctorate in oceanography from FSU — is also a writer, a commentator on Florida Public Radio, a newspaper columnist. The Rudloe’s have collaborated on work for the Smithsonian magazine and National Geographic.

Rudloe stopped by a long, narrow bin outside the sheds that covered the tanks. Hundreds, a thousand, maybe more fiddler crabs swarmed in the bin, winter brown as marsh grass.

"On an open tidal flat on a summer day in bright sunshine, they’ll be light and pale and multicolored," Rudloe said. "That’s how I started in this business, supplying fiddlers to Tulane, before I even started the lab."

A few steps from the fiddlers’ bin is a little building that may hold a big slice of the future of the Florida fishing industry.

There’s a tub of salt on a work table — it looks like ice cream salt — and Rudloe pokes around in it, pulls out a section of cannonball jellyfish, tears off a corner and nibbles at it.

"It has a crispy texture," he said. "The taste is whatever you add, sauces or whatever. It’s salted, so it doesn’t need refrigeration.

Rudloe went to Malaysia and China to study jellyfish harvest and handling because he believes a jellyfish fishery might help Florida’s fishing industry, battered by the gill net ban and other problems.

The jellyfish could be harvested for export, or — if American consumers could be convinced to try it, Mikey, it’s crispy — for domestic consumption.

Rudloe expects to talk about jellyfishing to a meeting of Mayport commercial fishermen at Monty’s Marina this winter.

It probably won’t be an easy sell, for fishermen or their customers.

But nothing’s been easy so far.

"Maybe it will work," Rudloe said, gnawing another taste off the edge of the jellyfish. "Maybe it will work."