

Belize, Rising Tide – Hatchet Caye Resort Family Trip '16

In my 30 years of fishing Belize, there have been differing opinions from trusted guides about fishing in the aftermath of a severe tropical storm or hurricane. Generally, the opinions regarding fishing on the flats were:

1. disturbs regular feeding patterns and it takes a while for those patterns to re-establish themselves.....

Many times throughout the years we have fished after a heavy isolated rain squall or thunderhead has passed.....usually, the aftermath leaves the waters a glassy calm and fish active.

2. the second opinion was that the fish and conditions would be similar to the conditions following heavy rain squalls as mentioned above.

When we left Napa, Calif early in the morning of July31, we had no idea we were about to find out for ourselves the consequences of flats fishing in the aftermath of a hurricane.

Arrived in Belize City the early in the afternoon of Sunday, 7/31, with the expectancy of boarding the Rising Tide and, thirty minutes later, heading south toward our first anchorage. That's when we first heard the reports of a tropical storm forming in the Caribbean and heading in the direction of Belize. There was a lot of anxiety and uncertainty in Belize City as no one knew whether it would develop into a hurricane and move north into the Gulf of Mexico, or keep it's course straight for Belize. We stayed tied up in the marina to wait and watch.

Mon: storm was more threatening.....appeared to be gaining strength and continuing in the direction of Belize. Captain Dean began preparations in case the storm impacted Belize City. First mate, Noel, and I fished around the City. Lots of snook around Moho Caye, especially near the point. Saw at least 75 good sized fish.....20% over 10#. Water crystal clear and bright blue sky. Could not get an eat, even with our favorite "proven, guaranteed" snook fly – first time it has ever been refused. Really strange behavior – never seen so many large snook so concentrated..... AND COULD NOT GET AN EAT. Baby tarpon were mixed in – jumped four baby tarpon and released one small one. Decided to try for a "poor man's slam" knowing we could get a snook later. Went to Hen And Chickens Cayes.....after blowing a few casts to tailing bones, got the bonefish. Always exciting to see a bonefish tracking a fly in 6 inches of water and then, as it speeds up to eat, watch his body literally quiver with energy as it makes it final approach and grasps the fly. Saw three single permit cruising (no tails), but didn't get a shot. Back to Moho certain we would get a snook. Shade now covering the water on the South side.....think this made the difference..... jumped three....one in the 12-13# range tail walked for 15 feet along the edge of the mangroves – good stuff (didn't weigh – eyeballed the size). I think the shade helped – this water is usually murky, not gin clear – maybe the combination of gin clear water and deep blue sunny skies turned them off???. Fished a few docks on way back, but no action. Obviously, the fish we saw today were not impacted by the upcoming storm.....we spent the major part of the day casting to sighted fish.

Tues: Newly named Hurricane Earl heading direct to Belize City to arrive late tomorrow. The entire country goes into hurricane prep mode. Marte and I went 60 miles inland to Bull Frog Hotel in Belmopan to sit it out. Also, we wanted to get out of the crews way as they had many preparations to make.

Wed: Near midnight, Earl hit dead on Belize City.....lots of damage – 2-3 feet of water running in the streets and through many properties, roof's torn off, many homes with severe damage, etc. We were shocked to hear the docks at the Princess hotel and the Radisson with large concrete pilings were totally gone. Meca and Rising Tide survived

with minimal damage due to excellent preparation by Captain Dean. First mate Noel had the back portion of his home torn off. In Belmopan, it was a surreal experience hearing the reports from Belize City and watching TV. Earl hit Belmopan around 1:00am. We experienced howling winds, rain in torrents, and heard the screeching sound as the corrugated steel rooftop on the building next door was ripped off. With daylight came the calm. Looking out our front window saw trees down. Power off everywhere for about 24 - 36 hours, depending on the area.

Thurs: To give the crew a chance for cleanup, we remained in Belmopan at the Bull Frog.

Fri: Our cabbie picked us up and we returned to the marina in Belize City. We boarded did the Rising Tide and departed around 3:00 for our first anchorage. When we got close to the Robinson Pt Cayes, Noel and I took a skiff and ran ahead of the cruising Rising Tide to get a few hours fishing before dark. We were anxious to see what Earl had done to our favorite permit flats at Robinson Point Cayes. Fished four of the top permit flats near the Spanish Cayes.....winds about 15-20mph and tide rushing in – conditions good! However, no sign of marine life.....no permit, rays, starfish, or box fish that usually are visible on top of the shallow coral ridge that connects many of these cayes. Dearth of any marine life gave us some concerns about the impact of Earl on the flats. As dark settled in, we motored down to Colsen Cayes where Captain Dean had anchored the Rising Tide.

Sat: We decided that Noel and I would fish the first shift before breakfast as the captain had some repairs to make on the water maker (we had carried some needed parts down with us). This area, the 12 mile stretch from Bluefield to the southern end of Colsen, based on actual trip results for the last five years plus the valued opinion of Noel and Dean (who has been fishing the coastal permit flats from Belize City to Placencia from a mothership for over 20 years), are the most productive permit flats in Belize.....and therefore, anywhere in the world. After breakfast, Noel took Marte snorkeling and I fished with Captain Dean until lunch. After lunch, I fished with Noel while Dean cruised the Rising Tide south to our next anchorage at Blue Ground Range. We had to move south quickly as we'd lost four days and needed to be at Hatchet Caye Resort to meet our family on Monday.

Sat dinner: We discussed the day's results. Conditions were almost perfect today for successful permit fishing.....bright sun, 15mph winds, and good tides beginning at 6:00am til about 4:00pm when we hit a low tide. We fished the finest permit flats on the globe with experienced permit guides who knew these waters better than anyone. With all that going for us, we didn't see one permit.....nor did we see any rays, starfish, or box fish.....there was just no marine life on the flats. Our conclusion was unanimous – Earl had wiped out the flats. Offering some hope was that Marte and Noel had good snorkeling near the reef several miles south of where we were. Marte has snorkeled all over the world and she gave the snorkeling high marks (8 out of 10). And, she had the snorkeling all to herself – as it is much of the time when she snorkels with Noel in areas not frequented by the Belize tourist crowds.

Sun: I fished south with Noel before breakfast as the Captain motored the Rising Tide further down. Encouraging – we saw four fish and had one decent shot.....also, rays were moving and spectacular red and orange starfish were dotting the flats. We saw some local lobster fisherman that Noel knew and they told us that the impact of Earl had not been serious in this area. After breakfast, the captain and I began an exciting day of permit fishing. Before lunch, we found fish on almost every flat we poled.....singles, pairs, and three schools of 6 to 8 fish each, all tailing. Permit fishing doesn't get much better than this. Had three follows and one eat, a fish of about 14# that raced out over 200 yards of backing. After lunch, the captain again moved the boat south while Noel and I fished. The action kept on 'til almost dark.....we found several tails, including one school of about a half-dozen fish that occupied us for about 20 intense minutes.....got one follow, but no eats.

The conclusions on the day's activity left us without a definitive answer on the impact of Earl. There were two choices:

1. we had moved far enough south that Earl's impact was minimal and had not tore up the flats, or,
2. enough time had elapsed since the passing of Earl that the marine life had recovered and was returning to normal.

There was no doubt that the comparison of the two days pointed to a large impact on the flats by the passing of Earl.

We met our son and daughter and their families at Hatchet Caye on Monday. Including the five grandchildren, there were 11 of us. We tied the Rising Tide to the pier at Hatchet and we split between seven of us staying on the boat and four using the accommodations of the resort.

If you have any interest, when we return home in seven days, I will have a report on our time at Hatchet.....so concludes our Hurricane Earl report.