

Salvaging Boats as Life Goes On


In the wake of Hurricane Irma, residents of Big Pine Key look to save lifetimes of memories on the water

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Boats were scattered and sunk at Dinner Key Marina in the Coconut Grove neighborhood of Miami after Irma hit the Florida Keys as a Category 4 storm.

 BIG PINE KEY, Fla. — We rolled down Hollerich Drive on Sept. 21, a swelteringly hot and sticky day, conspicuous not only because of the car emblazoned with BoatUS Catastrophe Response Team logos, but also because we were moving too quickly at about 7 mph.

“Would y’all mind slowing down a little?” asked a man, one of many working to make a dent in the rubble that was rows of homes before Hurricane Irma struck as a Category 4 storm Sept. 10. “You see the dust you’re stirring up?” He saw me in the back seat with my iPhone and notebook. “Not from here,” he said, eyeing my hat. “Red Sox.” I nodded and stammered something meant to be an apology — in part for the dust, and in part because of my offending Boston ball cap.



Scott Croft, vice president of public affairs for BoatUS, is shown near a catamaran the company insures.

“Yes sir, I’m sorry about that,” said the driver, Scott Croft, vice president of public affairs with BoatUS. Riding shotgun was Bill Pike, executive editor with [REDACTED] Power & Motoryacht, who apologized too. The man nodded and turned back to his mountain of debris, and we continued down the road, crawling behind Capt. Kevin Freestone, owner of the Big Pine Key TowBoatUS franchise.

The hammering, the growl of chain saws and the loud hum of generators drowned out any expletives we uttered while we took in the devastation. Residents were on rooftops patching or sorting through the wreckage. Piles of random items included a colander, a boat, a teddy bear, a washing machine and a chunk of metal roofing. American flags hung in front of or atop nearly every home, prioritized and replaced after the storm. Palm trees still had their fronds, but the mangroves were stripped, creating an eerie sense of winter on a 90-plus-degree day.

We stopped near the end of the road, in view of the Gulf of Mexico and a canal, and got out of the car. Freestone told us about how he came here with equipment immediately after Irma struck, so people could access Big Pine Key's only veterinarian.

"They said they couldn't open the office because there was a roof in the yard, so I jumped on the excavator and went over there and we cleared it for them," Freestone

said. “Because who knows if your pets get [hurt]; I got three of ’em myself.”

“You’ve got the three German shepherds,” Croft said. “And the birds.”

“If something would’ve happened, you know — so I just went over there and helped them out,” Freestone said.

“Small communities like this in the Keys, we all help each other.”



The home of Misty Klock and her boyfriend, Alan Cox, was badly damaged, but their boat weathered the storm.

Nearby, Alan Cox and his girlfriend, Misty Klock, were cleaning up the mess that Irma made of their home, which

had few walls left around the first story, like many of their neighbors' homes. "Watch out for nails," Cox said as we took in the damage, a warning that would be echoed at every home and business we visited. Klock amiably mentioned how nice the cross breeze was with the walls gone.

"Do y'all want a cold water?" she asked. Pike and I paused, knowing that our South Beach hotel in Miami had flowing taps while Big Pine Key was without power and under a mandatory boil advisory.

"No thanks," I said, looking at everything Cox owns scattered around, some of it lodged beneath a yacht-sized chunk of her roof. Much of what was missing would never be recovered.

Many of the 4,250 Big Pine Key residents we met referred to the things they had collected and built over a lifetime as "just stuff." Except when it came to their boats. The boats were a top concern for residents here, ranking just below food, water and safety, and well above homes.

Both Cox and Klock talked optimistically about digging out, slowly, and putting their lives back together, but their real issue was a 2005 Sailfish 218. "Only thing I cared about was the boat," Cox said. "We got real lucky. As long as the boat was OK, I was fine."

"It was missing one cushion," Klock said, laughing.

Their neighbor appeared across the canal.

"Hey, James! Did you just get here?" Cox called over.

"Yep," James answered, coming out onto his balcony and grinning. There were no tears. Only smiles. Cox yelled out,

“You just let me know if you need me to come help you move any of the big stuff.”

“Hey!” Klock called over. “We were wondering, did you have someone out to clean the bottom floor?” The entire first story of the neighbor’s house had no walls, making it look as if the house were on stilts.

“Yeah, Irma!” James called back, and the three of them laughed.

“We thought you must’ve had someone out because it’s so clean down there,” Klock said. She was right; not a single item was in what used to be the first floor of the neighbor’s home.

“Irma’s a good sweeper!” he joked, and they all laughed again. “But she’s not a good boat keeper.” His boat had wound up far from where he’d trailered her.

“You just let me know if you need any help moving anything,” Cox called over again.

Another neighbor, John Evans, was outside looking at his Pathfinder 2200 Tournament, which sat sideways atop its trailer. Evans was relieved that the engine, a Yamaha 150 outboard, seemed undamaged.

“You oughta go look at my other boat across the canal, the Tiara,” he said, leading us to his backyard. “Watch out for nails, now, they’re everywhere.”

The Tiara was perched on the seawall across the canal, up against a home, one of three boats that wound up well away from where they’d been secured before the storm.

“They had almost 10 feet of water here,” Freestone said. The national news had not prepared me for this. It focused on Key West, which wasn’t hit nearly as hard.

We got back into the car, and I asked Croft whether we would be away from people for the next few minutes.

“I’m just warning y’all because I’m gonna cry for a minute,” I said. It wasn’t the devastation, as awful as it was; it was the people worried about me taking a nail in the shoe, or being thirsty, when they had lost just about everything.

A little while later, we were at the Sea Center, a marina on Big Pine Key.

“You can’t drink the water,” said Shawn Zelko, who works with the TowBoatUS Response Team and as a mechanic at the Sea Center, where the indoor facility needed a complete gutting. “It’s still hell down here. There’s so many homeless people down here. There are a lot of people who still don’t have power.”

Zelko lost his barn, his home and the 17-foot Sea Hunt he self-insures and planned to fix. (He moved his horses to

safety during the storm.) He also lost most of his tools — stuff he could've recovered, but that languished for days underwater.

“They didn’t let people into the Keys,” he said. “I had access to a boat, but I couldn’t come in, so this stuff was sitting here rusting because you couldn’t touch it.” His Snap-on toolbox was rusted. The hand tools were OK, but the electric and power tools were a loss. Stacks of new Mercury outboards and BRP engines, all still in boxes, were ruined because the water covered them.

Zelko had planned to go out on his friend’s boat that weekend, but they’d all been too busy. His horses, now back, would stay in the repaired barn, fixed quickly because a church and a construction company owner from Key West had helped. He’d go riding through some of the hidden trails on Big Pine over the Columbus Day weekend, and finally be out boating with friends.

“Some people want to just get on their boats and disappear,” he said.



This sailboat is believed to have been on a mooring at the Dinner Key Mooring Field offshore of Dinner Key Marina before Irma hit. It ended up a total loss on the adjacent grounds of Carrolton School of the Sacred Heart in Coconut Grove.

BoatUS

Shell shock

At West Cahill Court, Croft pulled over to ask two women where the Freestones' house is. "You passed it up there a bit," a woman named Carol Hawkins answered. She noticed the BoatUS logos and asked whether we wanted to see her half-sunken catamaran. She turned down the cold water I offered to her before anyone could ask us whether we needed some.

Hawkins had arrived about an hour earlier with her daughter, Jennifer Hawkins-Dydra, and son-in-law, Jason Dydra. "We're here to clean up what we need and then get out," he said. "We have another house to stay in. We don't want to suck up the resources here."

"We're literally in shell shock," Hawkins said as we approached her partly submerged 1999 Glacier Bay. "It's still insured in my late husband's name."

Her eyes filled with tears. She glanced at me. "It's been less than a year."

They'd seen images of the property online and knew the boat was badly damaged, sticking up at an awkward angle from the canal. But seeing the hulls for the first time was something else. That boat is the tangible thing that keeps

Hawkins connected to her late husband. It holds all the memories of the times they'd shared on board.

Hawkins and her daughter assessed the lashing Irma doled out as Dydra fired up a chain saw to dismantle a palm tree that crashed into the home. "I was hoping there was no puncture to the sponson," Hawkins said. Then, she saw the hole. And the engines, which clearly had been submerged.

"I don't want to lose her," she said, tearing up again. "I just don't want to lose her."

"I have a feeling she's going to be OK," Pike said.

Debris was everywhere. Pieces of metal hung from trees. A neighbor asked whether the chunk of fence lying in the side yard belongs to him or to Hawkins. I spotted a medical insurance card from Louisiana.

"Do you think Irma brought it all the way from Louisiana?" Pike asked.

"Yes," Hawkins answered quietly. "Yes, I do."

She sat next to the boat for the next 45 minutes.

A macabre attraction

A little more than a week later, Big Pine Key was still "a war zone," according to a Facebook post by Daniel Hutchinson. Nevertheless, Keys officials reopened the region to tourists Oct. 1.

"It's been a road of recovery and continues to be so, but we've made enough progress where the infrastructure is ready to accept visitors," Stacey Mitchell, director of

marketing for the Florida Keys tourism council, said in a statement. “By the visitor coming down, they’re helping in the recovery and being part of that process.”

TowBoatUS co-owner Lisa Freestone, who is married to Kevin Freestone, did not share that sentiment. She thought local officials jumped the gun.

“It’s ridiculous,” she said. “They should not have let ’em in yet. They should’ve given us three more weeks.”

Traveling to Key West by car, tourists had no choice but to go southwest from Miami Beach on A1A through Key Largo, Islamorada, Duck Key, Marathon and, last, Big Pine Key before crossing to Cudjoe Key, where the eye struck, and then Sugarloaf Key before reaching Key West.

The wreckage all along the route fast became a sightseeing attraction for tourists, including in Big Pine Key, which saw stronger winds from Irma than any other place in the continental United States. Sustained speeds were 150 to 160 mph. The eye hit between Big Pine Key and Cudjoe Key, putting Big Pine in the storm’s nasty northwestern quadrant. “We rode the eye wall and had the worst winds,” Lisa Freestone said.

Since the area reopened, she said, she had seen cars with out-of-state tags inching down neighborhood roads, snapping pictures. She contemplated posting a sign: “If you don’t live on this road, we don’t want you here.”

“I think that was ...” her voice trailed off. “Totally not ready yet. Just because they feel the need to have tourists come in, they don’t think about it, but they have to drive through the hardest-hit areas to get there. They’re all talking about

Key West and the Upper Keys. You're not seeing or hearing everything out of the hardest-hit areas."

"It's an invasion of privacy almost," she added. "Why do you feel the need to take pictures of our pain and what we're going through? You know? It's just not right. They should've just given us a little more time."

In the more than 20 years that the Freestones have lived here, they've never seen anything like Irma.

"Hurricane Georges, that was bad enough, but nothing like this one," she said. "Hurricane Wilma was bad enough, but nothing like this one."

"I don't even think it's hit me yet," she added, having worked 18-hour days for seven days a week on salvage and recovery. "I had my one cry-fest while we were on the road headed north when Irma was hitting here, and since I've been home, I haven't had time to absorb it yet. We came and hit the floor running."



Shawn Zelko, who assists salvage operations with TowBoatUS on Big Pine Key, lost his home, his boat and his barn.

The Catastrophe Response Team

Pike and I took a couple of stools at a South Beach bar with the BoatUS Catastrophe Response Team, or CAT team. Some of its nearly 50 members out salvaging and assessing damage had come directly from Texas, where

they'd been working after Hurricane Harvey, and were on their 21st straight day.

Sitting among about a dozen CAT team members, we tried to convey how much Carol Hawkins' boat means to her. They listened and nodded. These guys had heard stories from 25 or 50 Carols a day for three weeks in a row. Every person has a story about her boat — what it means to her and why it's so important. Going to assess boat damage is not like assessing a wrecked car. Boats seemed to count as much as pets do, at least around here.

“They want to talk about the boat,” said team member D.J. Smith, on his 21st day of work, headed for day 40 as of Oct. 10. (By then he was in Puerto Rico, after Hurricane Maria hit there.) “They don't care about the house. But they want to talk about the boat.”

“People will get an emotional attachment to their boats,” added Tom Benton, also working on day 21.

“And it only takes one boat to wipe out a whole marina,” Smith said.

They slipped into memories of past catastrophes. As Croft said, each has its own personality. They've seen much worse than Irma — hard to fathom, but true.

“I've gone into streets in Louisiana and Charleston that didn't have electricity for 100 miles,” Smith said. Following one storm, Smith was in Moncks Corner, S.C., and found a 7-Eleven that was open. “There was nothin' on the shelf. All there was some Oreos and a six-pack. So I had Oreos and beer for dinner.”

“The first few days of Ike, there was no electricity,” Benton recalled. “There was one Mexican bar with food. They had generators all around and a limited menu, but it was full every night. There was nowhere else to go.”

During their 10- or 12-hour days they’re salvors and counselors.

“People just want to tell their story about their boat or Jet Ski,” said CAT team member Shawn McGee. “If you’re a good listener and spend five, seven minutes listening to people tell their story, you can do a better job for them.”

Big Dinner Key Marina

Cleanup of the many sunken and battered boats was well underway when we got to Dinner Key Marina in Miami’s Coconut Grove neighborhood, but several hulls remained submerged. Sailboats were in the manmade mangroves, stripped bare and with masts sticking out from the waterline at awkward angles.

A 6-foot storm surge tore some boats loose from their pilings, and then 110-mph winds carried them away, creating what Croft called “a bowling ball effect” as they smashed into other vessels. Even boats that fared well had extensive damage to rubrails from battering pilings all day, but those owners felt they’d escaped the worst.

Mark Decker was reloading the equipment he stripped off his 34-foot Mainship trawler, Jerry Sue. “I got lucky, man,” he said. “We were prepared to lose it.”

Bob Patrick, 90, stood next to his 37-foot sailboat, unable to board because the dock leading to it had crumbled. “It’s just some rubrail damage,” he said, hopefully. “If these pilings had been higher, we’d have very little damage.” Patrick, who owns Marine Specialties in Provincetown, Mass., had watched his boat on camera during the storm. On this day, he stood next to her for close to an hour until a squall came through and his wife gently persuaded him to leave the dock.

Tracy and Michael Woodring, who live aboard their 1989 46-foot Nordhavn, said they also escaped the worst — a relief since Michael spent about 60 hours a week for the past year and a half doing upgrades that insurance wouldn’t cover.

“For a while we saw her on cameras, and then on YouTube videos, and that didn’t necessarily make me feel better,” Tracy Woodring said, laughing. “We’re really concerned about debris. We’re going to have Sea Tow come and pull her over there so we can check the stabilizer and prop and all the stuff you can’t see.”



Carol Hawkins is shown with her 1999 Glacier Bay, which was still insured in her late husband's name.

Boats everywhere

In Marathon, just above Big Pine Key, Driftwood Marina and Storage was a tangle of boats and debris. A hardtop was lodged in a tree, and boats were scattered throughout the yard in what Pike dubbed “boat salad.”

“We were crying for people in Hurricane Harvey, and we haven’t cried for ourselves,” said marina manager Shelly

Breedlove. “Living here, we expect hurricanes. It’s a lot of work, but we know things like this happen.”

Many of the 150 boats at the facility were in a jumble from storm surge that lifted and dropped them. A tornado hit Driftwood’s high-and-dry facility too.

“Some people live on these things in the water,” Breedlove said. “There are a lot of fishermen who had to pull their boats out because it’s their livelihood.”

Some boats were recovered a mile from where they’d been secured, Kevin Freestone said. “It’s like an apocalypse down here.”

As of Oct. 4, the Freestones were still working to pull the insured boats. Next, they planned to work on derelict vessels.

“It’s a mess,” Lisa Freestone said. “There are boats everywhere, and Kevin’s estimating probably close to three months left of this — 90 days, at least.”

The CAT team expected to be in the Keys for salvage and recovery until the end of the month, Croft said.

“The U.S. Navy salvaged a lot of boats on their military base in Key West,” Croft said. “Security issues did not allow anybody else in, but it’s fine. They took care of it.”

A difficult pick

Croft did not think BoatUS would have a handle on the losses that Harvey and Irma inflicted until early November at the earliest, and he said the total will be tallied for the combined storms.

“Claims are believed to be in the thousands,” Croft said of hull numbers. “It’s not turning out to be as bad as [Hurricane] Sandy, I can tell you that, but there will be claims in the thousands.”

Sandy wreaked havoc in the Northeast with its unprecedented storm surge, which reached as high as 9 feet in some areas of New Jersey, with waves up to 29 feet. The “superstorm” tore up the East Coast in October 2012, damaging or destroying an unprecedented 65,000 boats and inflicting \$650 million of boat damage. That staggering number was compounded by the fact that only about half of all registered boats carry any type of insurance, Croft said.

There are three ways to cover a boat: hull coverage, liability coverage or self-insuring, which basically means the owner picks up the tab for any damage. Hull coverage pays owners back if the boat is lost and covers repairs; liability pays for recovering the boat and getting it back onto the water, with owners paying for repairs. Self-insurance is what it sounds like: Owners are on the hook for everything.

Liability coverage is a smart choice for most boat owners, Croft said, because recovering a boat can be complicated after a big storm. When Irma tossed three boats from Dinner Key Marina onto a high school football field near Biscayne Bay, a boat in the end zone cost thousands of dollars to “pick,” Croft said.

“We had to use a barge, a land crane, and get permission from the adjacent landowner to access her land. We had

to get permission to cut her trees down,” Croft said. “The landowner was very good to us. That doesn’t always happen. Now you can imagine if you didn’t have somebody working on your behalf, an insurance company to salvage that vessel and you had to go do that, and you had to pay for it. When that happens, people end up losing boats because they don’t have the money, they don’t have the expertise or knowledge, and they don’t know who to call.”

Boat owners pay less than \$100 a year for liability coverage, he said, versus the thousands of dollars it cost to remove that particular vessel.

“Boaters don’t understand they’re going to pay that out of pocket,” Croft said. “Some owners think they’re going to abandon the vessel, and that’s not easy anymore. They’re going to pay on one end or another. It makes sense for everybody to simply ... at least have a liability policy. They are very inexpensive, and they pay when you need them.”



BoatUS CAT Team member Terry Hill assesses boat damage after Hurricane Irma.
BoatUS

Cradle to grave

That's especially true when considering what goes into the process of salvage and recovery. The process that BoatUS dubs "cradle to grave" includes assessing, removing and getting boats to their final destination, whether it's a repair yard or a landfill.

"It looks at the salvage process from start to end," Croft said. "It looks at where the boat ended up, whether it's in

pieces or sunk, or in someone's backyard, and the end is whether that boat is going to be salvaged or repaired. There's a series of steps in between so the salvage can happen quickly and safely."

The process starts with how the boat will be removed, and what machinery is needed, from cranes and flatbeds to barges and chain saws. "Do we have to cut down trees? Do we have to remove six other boats before we get to our boat? And keep in mind, those six boats might not be our boats," Croft said.

Boats with liability coverage that can be repaired go to a liquidator, where the boat will later be sold, or to owners who foot the repair costs.

"The grave in that case is getting the boat back on the water, whether it's a marina buying the boat, the industry buying the boat or the insured buying the boat," Croft said.

"The grave is not the grave in that case; it's a new beginning for the vessel."

Then there are the boats that go to a landfill. After they are recovered, they're chopped up and loaded onto a barge or flatbed, with the engine blocks and hazardous materials being disposed of correctly. A crane with a crushing claw smashes what's left.

Each boat has a unique set of circumstances after a storm like Irma. Salvors sometimes need to be creative.

"They figure out how to get it out of a home, or out of a koi pond, which is what we saw in Irma," Croft said. "But if any part of that cradle-to-grave chain breaks, you have problems. You're going to be slow paying your customer,

which is first and foremost. You're going to cause problems for salvors, you're going to cause problems with barge and crane companies you contracted with, you're going to cause problems for the CAT team because they have to go to a property again and again. Those dominoes need to fall in a row."



Shelly Breedlove, manager of Driftwood Marina and Storage in Marathon, Fla., is shown with a tangle of boats and debris.

Boats and their people

I reached Hawkins by phone as she was driving back to Big Pine on Oct. 6 from her Sarasota ranch. It was her first visit since the initial one, and she said she was ultimately lucky even though her boat was totaled. She had bought it back from BoatUS and was planning repairs.

“BoatUS was right on top of it, and I’m just absolutely pleased with the service — and the fact that I can keep it makes me happy,” Hawkins said. “We took a tornado through there. I know that’s what wrecked the boat and lift.”

You can’t buy a boat like hers anymore, she said.

“I mean, we looked for a long time before we decided on that particular boat,” Hawkins said. “The bow of that boat is Kevlar. When it came up, the hull looked pretty ragged. I said, ‘If she floats, she’s going home.’ She’s 17 years old.” Hawkins, her husband and their daughter spent years dolphin fishing on her.

“It’s just the ride,” she said. “It’s the family boat. My son-in-law and daughter don’t want to let her go; she was pretty much raised on it the latter part of her life. It’s just designed as a good boat, and I couldn’t let it go. Couldn’t let it go.”

Much of the property, like the boat, is still in her late husband’s name. She has meant to change things, but has been “glazed over” since he died. A tornado struck her Sarasota cattle ranch in March, tossing the horses’ barn 12 feet away. Five days later, Florida Power & Light Co. accidentally set a fire, burning 15 acres of pasture.

“It was in our bull pasture, and our bulls are so funny,” Hawkins said. “They’d sit there and watch it, and if it got close they’d finally get up and move and then lay back down and keep watching.

“It was rather a mess, but nobody got hurt,” Hawkins added. “We just had so much happen, I have to laugh. I can’t let it get me down. I’ve got my boat home now, and that’s all that matters. That boat is special. It’s special to me.”

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