

This is all that remained of a home in Marsh Harbor after Category 5 Hurricane Dorian moved over Great Abaco and slowed to a pace of 1 mile per hour. Fly fishers around the world have pitched in to help these communities rebuild.



THE MIGRATION

BRIAN IRWIN / PHOTO

# GROUND ZERO AND RISING

**T**HIRTEEN YEARS AGO, I FISHED THE FLATS THAT RING GREEN TURTLE CAY—PART OF THE ABACO ISLANDS IN THE BAHAMAS. BY DAY I PLAYED TUG-OF-WAR WITH FAT BONEFISH, BY NIGHT I RELAXED AT THE OPULENT GREEN TURTLE CLUB, NIBBLING ON CONCH FRITTERS AND SIPPING BOAT DRINKS. TODAY, THE CLUB IS DECIMATED, ALONG WITH EVERYTHING ELSE ON GREEN TURTLE CAY, AND ON ADJACENT GREAT ABACO, LITTLE ABACO, THE WEST END OF GRAND BAHAMA, AND DOZENS OF SMALLER OUTLYING CAYS. MORE TRAGICALLY, HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE ARE DEAD OR STILL LISTED AS MISSING.

On September 1, 2019, Hurricane Dorian intensified to a Category 5 storm and crawled into position over the Abacos. It packed sustained winds of over 185 miles per hour and its movement slowed to a pace of one mile per hour as it idled over the town of

Marsh Harbour, destroying several fly-fishing lodges and almost everything else in its path.

More than 75,000 people were left homeless. The Bahamian government officially reported 61 confirmed deaths, but more

## REBUILDING A FLY-FISHING PARADISE IN THE WAKE OF HURRICANE DORIAN

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than 600 are still missing and probably dead. An entire community of Haitian immigrants living in a shantytown called The Mudd are gone, with no relatives left to even list them as missing. A 23-foot-high storm surge barreled through their makeshift homes rolling containers, and container ships, through its path. Now all that exists is a single home footprint, kitchen tiles still intact with one toilet standing proud. I photographed this. When I returned the next day to the site, someone had stolen the toilet.

Just a few miles away from March Harbour, FLY FISHERMAN contributing editor Oliver White built his dream lodge, the world-famous Abaco Lodge on the edge of The Marls, a vast region of shallow mud flats and mangroves on the west side of

Great Abaco. Now Abaco Lodge is basically gone, and flood debris fills what was once the most idyllic freshwater infinity pool in the fly-fishing world.

The lodge maintenance man rode out the storm at the lodge and when the roof of the main lodge collapsed, he managed to escape with his small child, but his wife was trapped and drowned. Their friend who sought shelter there was also trapped, but he managed for many hours to keep his nose just above water in order to breathe. He died from his injuries just 24 hours later.

Not only is there no infrastructure left to support the once-vibrant fly-fishing community there, it remains unclear how the fishery will rebound from the devastating storm.



## FLIGHT RELIEF

When I traveled to Great Abaco on a medical aid mission, there were no commercial flights available, but pilot Chris Allen offered to fly me there along with a cargo of food and medical supplies. Allen is a fly fisher and former Air Force pilot who's flown C-141 cargo planes to all seven continents. He now owns a fleet of five twin-prop planes, and has made a business flying vacationers and fly fishers to the Abacos and all over the Bahamas. His clients are gone, so for now he's repurposed his planes into relief vehicles. He flew me to Treasure Cay, arranged to borrow one of the few operable vehicles on the island, and offered a habitable place to stay to I could offer medical relief to the people who had once made my vacation dreams come true. After long days of seeing horrible medical problems and hearing amazing stories of survival and perseverance, I retired to the flats to think and to watch for signs of bonefish.

One of Allen's objectives is specifically to help Little Abaco, the north island that was cut off from the south island by a bridge washout. All the supplies enter via the port on the south island, but they rarely make it north to Little Abaco. Allen is filling that gap by rebuilding Little Abaco. He has measured the dimensions of hundreds of homes there, and coordinated community meetings to plan the rebuilding effort. The supplies, from shingles to Sheetrock, are purchased, shrink-wrapped, and delivered directly to each home. The United Way and private donors he's organized pay the bill.

## RETURN OF THE BONEFISH

Local guides I spoke with said the bonefish returned to the flats just days after the storm, but the mangrove forests are badly damaged. Dr. Aaron Adams, director of science and conservation at Bonefish & Tarpon Trust (BTT) says that "after a Category 4 hurricane, the mangroves typically take 10 to 15 years to recover. This was worse. An initial run-through of the shoreline showed extreme mangrove mortality. The extent of damage is so severe, I'm concerned we don't have enough of a viable seed source remaining to recover quickly."

BTT is planning drone surveillance of the flats, comparing those images with ones taken prior to the storm. This will allow a full analysis of the damage. In addition, they've raised over \$400,000,



BRIAN IRWIN / PHOTO

At one time, retired Air Force pilot Chris Allen had a successful business taking fly-fishing tourists to Great Abaco. Now he uses his planes to bring food and medical aid.

some of which has been disbursed to subsidize out-of-work guides and also purchase building supplies to repair homes.

The good news is that mangroves are built to survive storms like this. The leaves and flowers are stripped, but hopefully the roots are stable. The biggest disruption of the habitat might be how the force of the storm surge restructured the flats. Dr. Andy Danylchuk, professor of fish conservation at University of Massachusetts Amherst, told me: "Heavy wave action can change the nature of the substrate, recontouring the sand flats and mud bottoms, potentially influencing the distribution of prey.

"Bonefish and their populations are resilient to natural cycles of environmental disturbances such as storm events. Heavy rains create an increase of freshwater discharge [from shallow flats and tidal creeks], which can temporarily displace bonefish from their nearshore habitats."

He said he's previously observed bonefish evacuating tidal creeks as storms and hurricanes approached, and those fish were back in the same creek after just a few days.

It's not clear what damage to the sea floor occurred from Dorian, nor is it clear what damage the offshore reefs sustained. (It's now understood that bonefish broadcast spawn on the reefs, not the flats.) What is clear is that the fly-fishing industry throughout the Abacos and Grand Bahama is in a time of turmoil. Due to the lack of infrastructure, White estimates it will take two years to rebuild Abaco Lodge. Deep Water Cay on

Grand Bahama may never be rebuilt.

Countless guides are out of work. The industry is now at a point where it needs to start from scratch, as there's little left in the way of accommodations, boats, food, or transportation. Residents are barely surviving and in no position to host guests. Many residents have fled to the U.S. or to other islands in the Bahamas. Some may never return.

The fly-fishing community in the U.S. has come together to help rebuild through many nonprofits and directed donations. White was the first to set up a GoFundMe called "Abaco Lodge Hurricane Dorian Relief Efforts" and raised nearly \$400,000, much of it already distributed in the form of \$25,000 grants to replace lost income for Abaco Lodge employees. More than \$380k directly benefited Abaco Lodge staff and their families.

The Yellow Dog Community and Conservation Foundation (YDCCF) raised more than \$350,000 to support relief and rebuilding efforts in the Bahamas through its campaign Double Haul for Dorian. One of its bigger contributions came through Josh Mills, who orchestrated #dozenfordorian, a volunteer fly-tying effort that auctioned flies and raised more than \$35,000 for YDCCF. To date YDCCF has dispersed \$118,000 to "support the immediate needs of the various people and communities in the initial days following the storm."

Of that, \$55,080 has gone to guides from Abaco Lodge, The Delphi Club, and a handful of local independent guides.

These subsidies have allowed these guides to feed their families until the fly-fishing tourism industry can be rebuilt.

To donate directly to Yellow Dog Community and Conservation Foundation (YDCCF) or the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, visit [www.ydccf.org](http://www.ydccf.org) or [www.btt.org](http://www.btt.org), respectively.

While the island resets, those who owned lodges in Abaco may have to decide if this market is still viable. Rebuilding is possible, but it's only a realistic endeavor if the island's infrastructure is also restored. According to local reports, the fishing appears to be excellent, and as soon as there's a system suitable to return clients to Abaco, the first fly fishers to return will have a resilient, thriving population of flats fish all to themselves.

## GOODBYE TO ABACO

My volunteer work following the catastrophe was one of the most chaotic settings I've ever been in. I was only in the Marsh Harbour clinic for an hour on the first day when the three victims of a head-on collision arrived. Two were dead on arrival. One had a femur fracture. The same day, another man presented with a diabetic infection and was soon unconscious. All four of them were flown to Nassau in air ambulances. Two alive, two dead, yet all four had to be flown to the capital because the refrigerator truck behind the clinic was full of corpses and there was no place to accommodate more bodies.

After turning in my prescription pad and saying goodbye to the nurses on my last day on Abaco, I headed to Marsh Harbour. A single sunflower-colored shack in town was selling food, recently offloaded that day from a supply ship. I ate some fries, the first rich food I'd had in almost a week. Most people here hadn't had any in over two months.

Before flying home, I drove the shoreline of Marsh Harbour one last time. I remembered the old saying that success isn't measured by how far you fall, rather how high you bounce when you hit bottom. As I scanned 100 acres of apocalyptic destruction, a single tree still stood in the front yard of a home that was no longer there. And in its limbs, tangled and tattered, but still proudly waving in the wind, was a Bahamian flag. ~

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