I go to the Pegasus resort often for lunch, dinner, to go swimming, buy jewelry or just hang around. It is a beachside oasis of modern civilization amid the Chaos and village life in Wattala. The sand is orange and not fine but coarse. Off shore about a quarter to half a mile offshore you can see the surf breaking. This is due to a barrier reef just under the surface called the Pegasus reef hence the name of the resort. The reef runs north and south just offshore on the beach side the waters are about 50 feet deep on the outside the reef face falls to hundreds of feet. Now I will tell you about my youth as the relevancy came to mind as I looked out at Pegasus reef.

When I was younger in my teens and early 20’s I used to take my canoe along with my friend Tom paddling out to the channel at King’s Bay Yacht club that was far south of Miami on the mainland side of Biscayne Bay. The channel ran east and west. Near the channel there was Chicken Key a small Island. Tom and I would paddle out to the channel and dive for lobster, stone crabs and whatever else we could spear. The water was about 8 feet deep on the edge of the channel, and much less at low tide, it would then drop to 30 feet down the face of the channel where it was dredged out when it was made.

Since the water was shallow around the channel near shore few boats would stop for fishing or diving so no one but Tom or a few of us local boys knew about this stretch of Florida Lobster gold mine. First thing we needed was to steal large kitchen forks from our mother’s kitchen drawer. You see we used the large sharp forks to spear the lobster behind the base of the tentacles as they peered out from under the rocks. By th4 end of the trips the forks were so badly bent they had to be thrown out and mother knew there would be a lobster dinner whenever her kitchen forks disappeared. Back then you could paddle around the channel, but today you would be stopped by patrol and homeland security.

I went back the other day with the canoe, and sure enough within a few minutes of approaching the channel about a mile offshore a patrol boat sped up and asked what I was doing. A side note about being stopped by the patrol that day, and how I got sweet revenge for the patrol boat and crew ruining my visit to the old lobster mine.

I launch my canoe at a spot next to the Deering estate at the mouth of a small river. You have to walk the canoe out about 100 feet from shore because at that spot the bay water is only about 10 inches deep at hi tide and is a sand bar at low tide. That day was high tide so I was able to paddle right up to the shore to leave. As I was approaching the shore the same patrol boat came speeding up behind me with their loudspeaker ordering me to stop where I was and wait for them. What #$$^@&@s I thought. They obviously thought I had snatched up some lobster while out there and were going to bust me. They were about 600 feet off shore coming in fast they were also approaching the shallows where is was 10 inches deep. I halted as they ordered and watched as I knew what was going to happen. Sure enough they had no idea of the water way and their boat ran aground. They did not just run aground, they were traveling at a high rate of speed so they launched themselves onto the rocks for a good 50 feet. I could have stayed and answered their cries for help but I saw it as a small victory and left. After all it is perfectly believable that I could not be of any help anyway. Besides, did Jesus ever say “Go out and help those who want to persecute you?” Later that day you could see from the road they had Sea Tow helping them get off the rocks.

Back to Pegasus reef. The reason I thought of the lobster trips while seeing Pegasus reef is that I know that wherever there are rocky cliffs and reefs in warm waters there are Florida lobster. I had seen one or two at the street side fish markets My next move was to investigate the situation for exploitation. After all there was no patrol or coast guard, only the Navy who were not interested in small boats, only boats like the one I was making for an Indian Customer in the Andamen Islands.

I looked for lobster but could not find any at the local markets and I asked why. I was told two reasons by the local fishermen. One the current is too strong by the reef and traps get carried away, and even if you could use a trap there is no way to stop the poachers who will pull up any trap they see and there is no law enforcement to stop it. I asked then why doesn’t anyone dive and get them with a spear. The second reason they said was because no one locally knows how to dive, can afford the diving gear, and the current it is too strong to swim against; anyone who tries gets swept out to the Indian Ocean.

OK that answered my questions. But the more I visited the resort the more I thought about it. Then I remembered swimming against the current in the channel. I even swam against the current of twin propellers sucking me into them. Yeah that’s right. One time Tom and I were out sticking lobster and Tom waved to me to surface as there was a huge yacht bearing down on out position. We often needed to surface and swim to the side of the channel to let the boats go by, or be run over. But this time I had my fork stuck into the biggest lobster of the season. He was under a rock at the bottom of the channel. I figured I would hold onto the fork with one hand and a nearby rock with the other. Then when the yacht passed I would land my prize. But that was not what happened. The yacht huge and was going slow about 8 knots with big propellers.

As the yacht went directly over me I felt the displacement of water push me down to the bottom and I thought OK this won’t be so bad. As it passed, the propellers began to suck me up from the bottom. Then it really got serious when I thought I would lose my one handed grip because the other hand was pinning a lobster to the ground. I felt this was the end; I would be chewed up by the propellers and spit out like a mess of bloody flesh and broken bones. I reluctantly let go of the fork and got a better grip on the rocks and held on as my feet were pulled up within a few feet of the propellers. After the yacht passed I went back to the lobster with the fork still sticking in him and went to the surface raising the lobster on the fork above my head in victory as I broke the surface. At the rear of the yacht I could hear the passengers yelling obscenities at me like “ You %@#$^&@ idiot you nearly got killed !”

Since I knew I could swim against a current, I made up my mind to go and see for myself if there were lobster on the reef. I was going to at least see for myself if there were lobster on Pegasus Reef. I could tie a rope around my waist to the boat and that would save me from being swept out to the Indian Ocean if the current was too strong. The resort rented me a diving mask, fins and snorkel intended for swimming inside the barrier reef. Inside the barrier reef there are pools separated from the currents. I don’t think they would rent me the gear if they knew what I had in mind.

I paid a local fisherman to take me to the outer reef while I dove to look for lobster. We approached from the beach side and I dove to see the sand bar runs up to the reef so there were no rocky cliffs on the calm side where lobster would gather. We went a few hundred feet to the outer reef where you could see it drops from light blue aqua to the deep blue sea. By the way you cannot do this during most of the year because the seas are too rough and murky. Only in the spring time does the water get calm enough to enjoy swimming or diving offshore (actually diving offshore is sometimes beautiful in the spring but always very dangerous from what I have been told and no one dives on the outer reef).

As is my way of defiance for the norm and sensible I told the boat driver to anchor on the shallow rock of the reef while I tie the rope to my waist and venture out to the seaside reef cliffs. I went down about 8 feet and immediately saw hundreds of lobster tentacles sticking out from the rocks like long thick hair coming out of the side of the reef. I was ecstatic. I hit the jackpot. I saw my fortune in being the first lobster business. I did not bring a fork to start sticking because this was just and exploratory trip, but I wish I had. I tried to go further but the current was pulling at my rope which was only about 20 feet. OK, I realized I needed a better survey of the area so against my drivers advice I took off the rope and went down the face of the reef about 40 feet. I have never seen so many lobster waiting to be plucked. I could see about 75 feet clearly each way on the reef face where every nook had at least two lobster tentacles sticking out everywhere.

By now it was time to go up for air. As I broke the surface I looked around and could not see the boat. I saw I was about 100 feet offshore from the reef shallows where the surf was breaking. As a wave brought me up I saw the boat about a quarter mile away. I realized the current had taken me ra in just a matter of a minute or two while I was entranced by the view of lobster heaven. I %@^^$$& this is just like when the yacht almost ran me over. I saw no hope and figured I would be just another smart ass tourist who paid no attention to the locals and was swept out to sea. But I knew I was a good swimmer and I knew not to fight the current. I gave up on trying to get to the boat and started swimming with the current but on an angle towards the reef. But even if I was to reach the reef it was rocky and the current swept over it with breaking 4 to 5 foot surf. I would certainly be shredded if I tried to land on the reef.

Luckily for me sharks are scarce near shore because they were fished out for their fins years ago. So there I was swimming parallel with the reef about a mile offshore without a boat. Off in the distance when a big wave would lift me up I could see the Port Of Colombo. I figured I could swim at an angle towards the port about five miles away and hope a ship does not run me over. That was my strategy to survive.

As I swam I saw the reef was disappearing to where I could see open water to the shore. What I saw was the mouth of the river that separated Wattala from Mattakkuliya. On one side of the mouth of the river was Crow Island where there was a Navy base that kept watch over the Port of Colombo. On the other side was the beginning of the Dutch Canal where we launched boats from the factory. I could see the lookout tower at Crow Island and knew I had gone about three miles south. I swam very hard at an angle toward the Dutch Canal side of the river mouth because I did not want to end up coming to shore on the Navy Station side. I managed to swim towards shore enough to make it between the openings of the reef at the river mount and was able to get to shore. The bad news is I did not make it to the Dutch Canal side. I could not avoid the Navy Station. Oh Well at least I was not swept out to se I thought and proceeded towards the Navy base shore.

As I approached the beach I noticed a lot of activity at the base. I wondered what was going on. Finally an hour swimming against the current and making it to shore I crawled out onto the Navy Yard beach. Within a few seconds I was surrounded by soldiers with their rifles pointed a few inches from my head. An officer came up and asked me who I was and why am I spying on the harbor? I told him my story and for my sake they believed me when one of the officers recognized me from the boat factory. I was released with a warning never to try that again.

I sat for a while then hopped on a trishaw back to Pegasus and returned the rented gear. I then walked back through the jungle path from the resort back to the factory to see a commotion outside the factory gates. It was Sam and Percy, the boat driver and a few others. As I walked up I could hear they were upset about something. I approached and asked what was going on. They turned to me and Sam hugged me. Apparently the boat driver had told everyone that I had been swept out to sea.

That ended my lobster diving adventures there. But I still think there is a way to exploit the lobster. Instead of traps with a floating buoy that can be poached. I would set out traps with buoys that floated up but stopped ten feet or more below the surface. Then mark each buoy with GPS. After a while I could visit the traps located by GPS then lower some sort of gaff to hook the submerged buoy and pull up loaded traps. Someday, ah yes someday.