

Striped Bass – The Road Not Taken

By Dick Brame, CCA Atlantic Fisheries Consultant

For striped bass fishermen on the East Coast, there has been quite a bit of disturbing news recently regarding the most popular sport fish in America. Specifically, there have been two significant developments, and though it is easy to get lost in the technical language, it is important for serious conservationists to understand the game if CCA is to be successful in its efforts to bring this fishery back to its historical size and geographic distribution.

- The latest striped bass stock assessment showed that the fishing mortality rate for fully recruited fish (fish over 8 years old) was $F=0.62$. When factored with the estimated natural mortality rate (fish that die from causes other than fishing), that means about 43 percent of striped bass over 8 years old die each year as a result of both commercial and recreational fishing. According to the Atlantic Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan, no more than about 24 percent (the target) of those fish should be taken by fishing gear each year, and we must never take more than about 31 percent (the threshold).

In fact, should more than 31 percent be taken in any year, the management plan requires that immediate action be taken in the following year to end overfishing. According to the latest assessment, based on the best scientific advice available, we have been fishing over the target of about 24 percent since 1997, and, most recently, fishing at a rate 100 percent over the target and 50 percent above the threshold.

However, managers not only dodged their obligation under Amendment 6, which requires action if the mortality threshold is exceeded, they dismissed the $F=0.62$ figure number as “uncertain” and chose to wait an entire year to see what the next assessment says.

- However, the National Marine Fisheries Service apparently does put some credence in the latest mortality estimates, as they have put their efforts to open the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on indefinite hold until they can be sure that overfishing is not occurring. States control marine waters out to three miles. The area from three to 200 miles offshore falls under federal control and is referred to as the EEZ.

NMFS is clearly concerned that opening up thousands of square miles of federal waters to striped bass harvest can only increase the pressure on this already heavily fished stock, and so it is taking a cautious approach. CCA agrees with this approach, as do most anglers.

When NMFS originally proposed plans to open the EEZ last year, CCA members and concerned anglers expressed strong opposition at public hearings. In fact, keeping the EEZ closed was one of the issues that CCA National Chairman Walter Fondren raised at a meeting with James Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, during his visit with President George Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, last year.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

CCA pushed hard for conservative management of striped bass during the two year run-up to Amendment 6. We argued the Atlantic Coast striped bass population was not fully recovered, despite its apparent abundance, because the historic age structure of the population was not yet restored.

Striped bass can live up to 25 years or more. However, in its zeal to finally declare a victory for fisheries management, the ASMFC declared striped bass fully recovered in the mid-1990's, long before fish more than 15 years old comprised a significant portion of the population. CCA believed then, and still believes today, that striped bass harvest should have remained limited until the historic age structure began to fill out and anglers were seeing fish over 15 years of age, weighing in excess of 40 to 50 pounds.

Instead, the population was declared restored because the spawning stock biomass (SSB - the total poundage of sexually mature fish) had been restored to historic levels. Little emphasis was placed on the fact that the vast majority of that biomass was comprised of fish less than 10 years old. Most anglers believe a high spawning stock implies an abundance of large, old female fish. Most would be surprised to learn that the vast majority of the striped bass SSB resides in fish under 10 years old.

In the end, what this means is that the restoration of SSB had nothing to do with the presence of larger, older female striped bass in the population, but rather an

abundance of newly mature fish. While we may have had a high SSB, it is because most of the fish belonged to a very few, relatively recent year classes, rather than the older fish that have survived 15 or more years in the wild.

This population structure can create an unstable population that is very vulnerable to a sudden increase in fishing pressure or natural calamities, such as epidemic or consecutive spawning failures, both of which contributed to the population crash of the 1970s and '80s.

THE RIGHT ROAD

The only way to grow large, old fish is to reduce the mortality on the younger fish so they have a chance to grow up, a strategy in complete contrast to the manner in which the ASMFC is currently managing the striped bass fishery. Managers are taking what is arguably the premier inshore game fish on the Atlantic coast, and perhaps the only fish that gives shore-bound and protected-water anglers a chance to catch a true "trophy," and turning it into another pedestrian panfish that can often fit in a five-gallon pail.

With proper management, both high abundance and a fair chance of encountering a trophy fish (60 pounds plus) could have been realized, but managers sadly lacked the patience to attain such a complete recovery.

CCA's position supports precautionary management for striped bass. If there is uncertainty in the assessment, managers should take steps to reduce harvest sooner rather than later. As long as the fishing mortality rate stays high, the chance of restoring the historic age structure remains remote. Year-long delays to study a mortality rate that is twice the

target pushes the day when females more than 15 years old make up a significant portion of the spawning stock far into the future.

We need to support taking conservation action now to constrain harvest, rather than waiting a year or two.

Had fisheries managers taken the advice of thousands of CCA during the Amendment 6 public hearings and set the mortality target at a lower level, the restrictions they would have had to impose then would have been minor compared to what they may have to impose if the fishing mortality estimate of 2004 again exceeds the own threshold.

Is such quick action justified? Ask yourself this question: If the best scientific advice was that the fishing mortality rate was half the target ($F=0.15$) instead of twice the target, would managers have been as cautious about accepting the advice? Or, more likely, would they have fallen all over themselves to relax restrictions immediately?

The pressures placed on ASMFC and fishery managers are real. For every conservation-minded CCA member who works to recover this fishery the right way, there are vocal commercial fishermen who lobby to loosen the regulations as fast as possible to increase harvest. The crucial point to remember, and one that is frequently lost in the clamor of fishery management, is that if we manage the resource correctly, there will be plenty of fish for everyone.

If not, we'll be right back in the 1970s.

Glossary of Terms

The web of acronyms and scientific jargon used in fisheries management is enough to chase away even the most tenacious. Here are definitions for just a few of the terms found in this article.

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) – All waters from the seaward boundary of coastal states to 200 nautical miles. State waters extend out to three or nine nautical miles.

Fishery Management Plan (FMP) – A highly scrutinized and detailed management plan for a fishery. It includes extensive data and analysis from both scientific and user group input. A FMP equally includes necessary management measures for the longevity and total health of the fishery.

Spawning Stock Biomass – The total weight of sexually mature fish in a stock.

Year Class – Refers to the fish spawned and hatched in a given year.

Biomass – The total weight of a species, usually used as a measure of the health of a stock.

Fishing Mortality (F) - A measurement of the rate of removal of fish from a population by fishing. Fishing mortality can be reported as either annual or instantaneous. Annual mortality is the percentage of fish dying in one year. Instantaneous is that percentage of fish dying at any one time.