

Scary' Decline In Striper Stocks

By MARK ALAN LOVEWELL

Comments in italics are from the board of Stripers Forever.

A drastic decline in striped bass stocks has state and federal officials scrambling to protect the fish, but many recreational fishermen say the government isn't moving fast enough.

"It's really scary," said Cooper (Coop) Gilkes 3rd, owner of Coop's Bait and Tackle shop in Edgartown, who has seen the haul from the annual June catch-and-release striper tournament fall dramatically. "At one point we had somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 fish weighed in on one night. Last year there were 100 and it's like a staircase going all the way down to last year. It's just dropped every year."

Last year, Mr. Gilkes said the annual springtime sea worm hatch in the Island's coastal ponds — an event that historically attracts stripers by the hundreds — had "just about failed" after years of under-performance.

"It's mind-boggling that we could get to this point with everybody watching," he said.

Coop has been telling people about the decline for at least the last 5 or 6 years. At Stripers Forever we do an annual survey of anglers, and we have been seeing a decline in angler success for even longer than that, especially in the northern states. The ASMFC has simply refused to acknowledge the decline until just now. They use complicated population models to estimate the number of striped bass, and many people question the accuracy of these calculations, especially when they disagree with what people are experiencing on the water.

Mr. Gilkes's experience is supported by national data. In Massachusetts the Division of Marine Fisheries acknowledges that from 2006 to 2010 the catch of small stripers dropped by nearly 75 per cent. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) cited a 66 per cent decline in the estimated recreational catch from 2006 to 2009, and in March called for a drastic 40 per cent reduction in striped bass mortality for 2012 to help replenish the ailing spawning stock in the Chesapeake Bay.

But in an April letter to Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries director Paul Diodati, state Sen. James Timilty of Bristol and Norfolk County pushed for a 50 per cent reduction in striper mortality for this year. The move is backed by the fishing advocacy group Stripers Forever.

"As we look ahead to the season we must focus on protecting what is left of the large 2003 class of breeding females and work to avoid another total crash of the striped bass population," Senator Timilty wrote.

"It's a very smart move and why they will not act on it I have no clue," Mr. Gilkes said in his tackle store on Thursday.

For fisherman and Striper Wars author Dick Russell, Mr. Timilty's 50 per cent proposal would be a good start, but he isn't holding his breath.

"It's a bureaucracy and it takes time to put things in place," Mr. Russell said. "I'm glad that the ASMFC has finally woken up to the fact that we need to take some steps to address this but I just think it should happen now instead of postponing it for another year. It's definitely heading in the direction of [the declines of the 1970s] unless they take some pretty severe measures."

In an e-mail to the Gazette this week, Mr. Diodati said he has received some two dozen letters calling for a reduction in the 2011 harvest and that he shares the public's concern about striped bass. But, he claims, it is not "possible or prudent" to act this year, citing an updated stock assessment due to be completed at the end of the summer that would guide the agency's policy.

“Since there is no prior evidence showing that poor juvenile production is a result of excessive fishing mortality or low spawning stock abundance, it makes good sense to review that information prior to taking any management action,” Mr. Diodati wrote.

*There is also nothing to prove that the poor juvenile production is not being caused by excessive fishing mortality that has resulted in a depletion of spawning stock biomass – except the same ASMFC theoretical calculations that one fishery PhD said, “could easily be off by more than 50%.” Clearly it cannot be helpful to be killing the large female fish that the state of MA focuses its fishery on. Where is the harm in adopting the well established “precautionary principle”, which requires fisheries managers to take account of the uncertainty in managing stocks? Why is it not being applied to this situation? The point is that **they don’t know** why the stripers are declining. Would it not be prudent to exercise caution in this situation, especially in the known presence of massive amounts of illegal harvests and poaching of these striped bass? The ASMFC is proposing an addendum to the striped bass management plan that will have a goal of lowering fishing mortality, but not before 2012. Knowing this, MA has an opportunity to lead by example and should proactively reduce fishing mortality in state waters in 2011.*

He also said the ASMFC could at any point freeze state management programs for several years, potentially keeping Massachusetts catch levels far below reasonable limits indefinitely.

We think this is an unrealistic fear. We have had this sort of talk thrown in our faces many times while asking for conservation measures. In essence we just think it is a scare tactic employed to try to justify a continued excessive harvest.

“The interstate fisheries management program does not reward a state or offer incentives for taking proactive conservative actions,” he wrote.

The cause for the decline of the stripers is unresolved and hotly contested, but Mr. Diodati cautions that there are material differences between the current crisis and the devastating collapses of the 1970s.

“Today’s resource condition is much different and better than when striped bass stocks became depleted in the mid- to late-1970s,” he wrote. “Then, catches of large (and small) fish went virtually uncontrolled at the same time that young of the year production was plummeting.”

The differences may or may not be as large as Mr. Diodati claims. In the late 1970s the collapse was blamed on everything from sunspots, to acid rain, chlorine discharge, and no-till farming around Chesapeake Bay. When the moratorium went into place, though, the fish sprang back almost immediately. We won’t know how well that will work this time until we try, and the time is right now!

Mr. Diodati said that the numbers of reproductively mature fish remains relatively high, even above management goals and insists that the problems in the striper stock are attributable in large part to poor water quality and disease in the Chesapeake where the fish spawn, rather than overfishing along the coast.

We have little confidence that this assessment of the number of mature fish is really accurate.

There are still some large fish left in the ocean, just as there were all through the 1970s and 80s, but there certainly appear to be a lot less of these fish available along the coast than there were 10 years ago, regardless of what the ASMFC claims. The assertion that it is water quality and not overfishing that is the problem is simply a guess. The ASMFC is planning to cut fishing mortality by 50% in 2012. If there is no correlation between spawning success and having a large spawning biomass, then why are they bothering? We probably won’t know for sure why the population is slumping until after the fact. The only really prudent course of action is to stop the killing now instead of taking this last opportunity to rape everything that can be raped. This

harvest-oriented mentality is why so many of our fish populations have collapsed, and it is one of the reasons why we need to take commercial fishing values out of the striped bass equation. Not one recreational angler that we know of has come forward and said, "No, don't cut my bag limit." The reality is that Mr. Diodati is playing to his constituency of part-time rod and reel commercial fishermen who want to sell their stripers again this summer. The toll that they take on the resource is staggering, and it is all large, breeding-age female fish. People who have actually seen a boat or pickup truck loaded with six or seven hundred pounds of large, prime-breeding stripers know what a travesty this fishery really is.

Mr. Gilkes, though, thinks that everyone is responsible for the decline, recreational fishermen included.

"My own personal opinion is I'd like to see them go back to 36 inches for recreational fishermen and one fish a day," he said. Currently recreational fishermen are allowed two fish a day with a 28-inch minimum. "I think that's plenty until they're back. It's not being managed right. I know what worked last time when they went to 36 inches and they brought her right back. I was shocked at how fast those fish came back," Mr. Gilkes said.

Mr. Russell also advocates the one-fish-a-day limit. Though he acknowledges that water quality in the six-state watershed of the Chesapeake Bay, which reaches far into Pennsylvania and includes Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, may be affecting the bass, Mr. Russell implicates two other major factors in the stripers' decline: poaching and the commercial menhaden harvest. As the Gazette reported in February, more than 10 tons of illegally gill-netted striped bass were confiscated by Maryland environmental police this winter and a video of hundreds of dead stripers caught as bycatch in North Carolina waters has surfaced on the Internet.

As for the commercial menhaden fishery – the small fish is a staple of the striper's diet – Mr. Russell said: "It's basically one company, Omega Protein, "referring to the Houston-based fish oil supplement and fish meal supplier, the largest of its kind in the world.

"It's true that the water quality is not very good but the menhaden abundance according to the AFSMC's own data has done down 85 percent in the last 25 years," he said. "The numbers are at historic lows, and the striped bass are not getting enough to eat."

With striper poised to begin any day, Mr. Gilkes, whose livelihood depends on the recreational fishermen, doesn't know why the fish have disappeared. All he knows is that he has had enough. "I just want them back," he said as he checked out a customer's lures on Thursday. "I don't care how they get them back. There are some very dark clouds forming and I don't like them."

Everyone has a theory as to how best manage striped bass. Stripers Forever believes that striped bass cannot sustain both the recreational and commercial harvest, that individuals fishing for their own personal use have the primary harvest rights to these fish, and that in socio-economic terms the recreational striped bass fishing industry is many times more valuable than the commercial one. Here is a quote from a Massachusetts guide from the Plum Island area, "Charter captains and striper guides are reporting a decline in their businesses, and are reporting that the numbers of anglers hiring them has fallen in direct relationship to the decline of the striped bass over the past few years. At one time Massachusetts was considered to have a world-class striper fishery attracting anglers from around the country and from around the world. This decline in anglers is not only affecting the businesses of the charter captains and guides, but is also creating a ripple effect and contributing to a decline in tourism and money being spent in local tackle shops, restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfast, inns, and other local business that depend on tourism for survival. As the stripers decline, so does the bottom line of the local businesses."

Striped bass should be a game fish with no commercial fishing allowed anywhere for them. But that won't happen soon enough, and for this year a 50% emergency reduction of both recreational and commercial fishing should be put in place.

If you think that action should be taken to reduce the catch of striped bass *this year* in Massachusetts, please send your e-mail to Paul Diodati, Director Division of Marine Fisheries today. Paul.Diodati@state.ma.us