

CONSERVATION WATCH

by Al Ristori



GAME FISH STATUS FOR STRIPED BASS LONG OVERDUE

An article in last week's New England edition which opposes game fish status for striped bass has stirred up indignation, while also bringing that issue back to the forefront.

The article was by Mike Flaherty, who states he's a recreational angler and has never sold a fish. He feels there are issues more important than commercial fishing, asking "what benefit is 100 percent of the striper allocation when we are left to catch yet more gaunt fish with red sores and lesions on them?" I don't know what cesspool Flaherty fishes in, but of the thousands of stripers I've seen over the last few years in the NY/NJ Bight area I've hardly encountered any that could be described as "gaunt" and lesions are rarer than my name being drawn in a raffle. Red spots aren't unusual on Hudson River bass, but there's no indication they're harmful and that stock is very healthy.

THE NEW JERSEY FISHERY

Flaherty derides New Jersey as a game fish state because the historic commercial quota was converted into bonus recreational quota which allowed anglers to take a third striper per day — but the state still went out of compliance with ASMFC rules last year. Actually, the commercial quota is entirely separate from the recreational bag limit issue which had to go through the legislative process. The commercial allocation which New Jersey is entitled to has to be allocated to the state's anglers in order to prevent it from being returned to the coastal commercial pool to be netted out. We've had to fight over the years to retain that quota even though only a tiny percentage was landed as most anglers don't even keep two bass — much less a third one. I've never even obtained the free permit for

my charter boat. Thousands of stripers which would have otherwise been netted were saved by that quota which served a conservation purpose and worked to the benefit of anglers all along the migratory path — and commercial states could do the same thing if they converted to game fish status.

STATE VERSUS FEDERAL MANAGEMENT

Like many other fishermen, Flaherty is confused by the management system. He quotes the Magnuson-Stevens Act which states that any allocation of fishing privi-



Mondo Leonetti took this fine black sea bass while fluke fishing aboard the Normal-H.

leges shall be "fair and equitable to all fishermen". Magnuson-Stevens applies to management in federal waters, but passage of Rep. Frank Pallone's Atlantic Striped Bass Game Fish bill would make that a moot point in striped bass — and the question of allocation of fishing privileges within a state is entirely up to the state. It's ironic that game fish status has been accorded to many formerly commercial species in the "conservative" south while "liberal" New England

remains largely shackled to the past.

Flaherty also speculates that if commercial fishermen manage to defeat the national game fish movement, even states with game fish laws will lose them. Once again, that confuses state and federal law. Furthermore, once game fish laws are passed the public will protect them. When a New Jersey assemblyman was suckered into cosponsoring a bill to allow netters to keep and sell their "incidental catch" of stripers, he never received so many letters and phone calls on any legislation and rushed to get his name off the bill which was quickly withdrawn.

"FAIR AND EQUITABLE..."

Ironically, the Magnuson-Stevens passage Flaherty refers to is one which recreational fishermen cite constantly while complaining that the public is allocated only 40 percent of the summer flounder, 22 percent of the scup, etc. when those fisheries were overwhelmingly recreational before being devastated by trawlers. Those words don't mean a thing when it comes to throwing a public resource to commercial interests. The most prominent example of not being "fair and equitable to all fishermen" is in Flaherty's Massachusetts which has been a striped bass "hook and line" state for decades. Does he want to get those wonderful gillnetters who recently destroyed the inshore run of big spawning cod in Massachusetts Bay back into striper netting?

I learned striper fishing on Cape Cod in the 1960s and never saw a striper caught which didn't go to market. Even professional people sold their fish as it just seemed to be a way of life at that time, but in other states it would be impossible to justify the elimination of netting if recreational fishermen didn't also give up the right to sell stripers.

It was well over a century ago that the Black Bass Act prohibited interstate shipment of those fish and led to elimination of commercial fishing in most fresh waters. The same thing happened to the market hunters. I suspect it would be unimaginable to most citizens today that, instead of reserving those public resources to the public, recreational fish-

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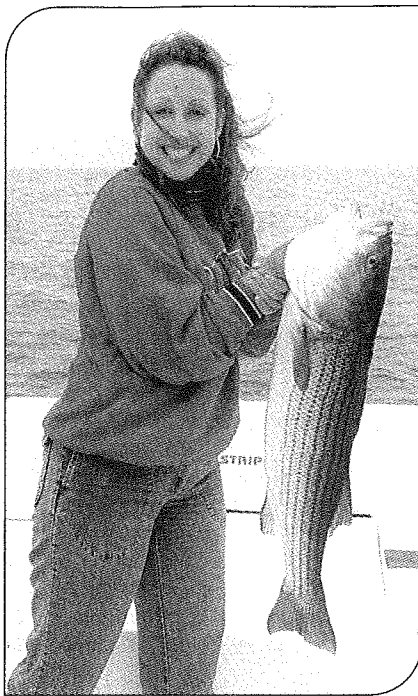
6 Avery Street, Mystic, CT 06355
(860) 572-0564 • Fax: (860) 536-1581



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Advertising Sales: Ted Field
Circulation Manager: Jason Jarvis
Office Assistant: Katrina Smith
Field Editors: Tim Coleman, Ed Nowak,
Charley Soares, Rod Teehan, Keith Reynolds

Corporate Headquarters
14 Ramsey Road, Shirley, NY 11967
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Vice President/GFO, General Manager:
Richard S. Reina

Corporate Administrator: Madalyn Lechner
Publisher: Fred Golofaro
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Selby Strong from Atlanta, GA landed this nice teen-sized striper while trolling the Watch Hill Reefs aboard the Taylor Marie.

ermen and hunters would be forced to share the allocation of whatever wasn't already destroyed with those who largely created the problem. Yet, the old and thoroughly discredited notion that the ocean's bounties are limitless has resulted in needless destruction of saltwater fisheries and a great deal of public expense and sacrifice in order to rebuild them.

OLD WRONGS AND THE ROAD AHEAD

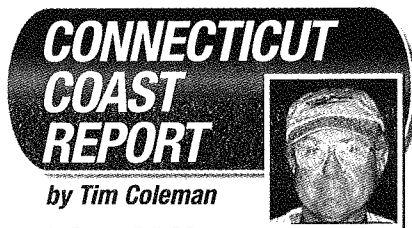
Game fish status for the most important inshore species of the Mid-Atlantic and New England is long overdue. As president of Save Our Stripers in 1969, I testified in Albany for a New York game fish law and stated that no matter how abundant the species was at the time they couldn't be counted on to reproduce like Al Capp's schmoos to satisfy our every desire. The Assembly Speaker was Perry Duryea, who owned a fish business in Montauk, and prevented the bill (which had passed unanimously in the Senate) from coming to a vote by making sure there were printing errors in it. Yet, Duryea insisted he'd be the first to take action if there ever was a problem with the species.

Duryea wasn't heard from when the problem did occur, and perhaps Flaherty is too young to remember what striper fishing was like a couple of decades ago. Even the Neanderthals among state officials had to agree to some actions to stop overfishing, but all that needn't have

occurred if game fish laws had been in place along with appropriate limits on catch just as is the case in freshwater fisheries and with game animals.

As the ASMFC demonstrated a couple of years ago by ignoring the overwhelming majority of comments at public meetings and by mail about not increasing commercial striped bass quotas to historic levels, special interests still hold sway over the public interest and conservation. Risking a fishery of huge economic and social importance so a relatively few commercial fishermen can supplement their income makes no sense to this ancient mariner who was a pinhooker in the past and now feels even more obligated to fight for conservation of the species.

A tightly restricted game fishery for striped bass will ensure the viability of that long-lived species even through a series of poor spawning years so future generations will be able to enjoy this wonderful recreation which is one of the few available to shore and boat anglers, both rich and poor. That's why I've been giving up my time for game fish status for four decades and why I'll continue the fight as long as anyone will listen!



NORWALK

Fisherman's World said fishing was in its winter over holder period much like the striped bass in our rivers. The only real news was some herring caught from both the Maritime Center and Calf Pasture pier. Better days are coming but probably not until spring.

STRATFORD

Stratford Bait & Tackle had a couple bits of news. One gent is catching lots of yellow perch and some schoolie stripers from his boat in the upper Housy on worms and very small jigs. Another guy, fishing the Derby Dam, all by himself, had bass from 20 to 34 inches on plastic shads. Nobody from this shop had any tales of herring caught locally.

MADISON

Captain Morgan's Bait & Tackle saw a few 12 to 15-pound salmon from the Shetucket come in the front door. People are traveling to the north in search of safe ice or getting a few trout from the deeper holes in the Hammo River. The only other activity was cashing in gift certificates or waiting for the shows to start.

OLD SAYBROOK

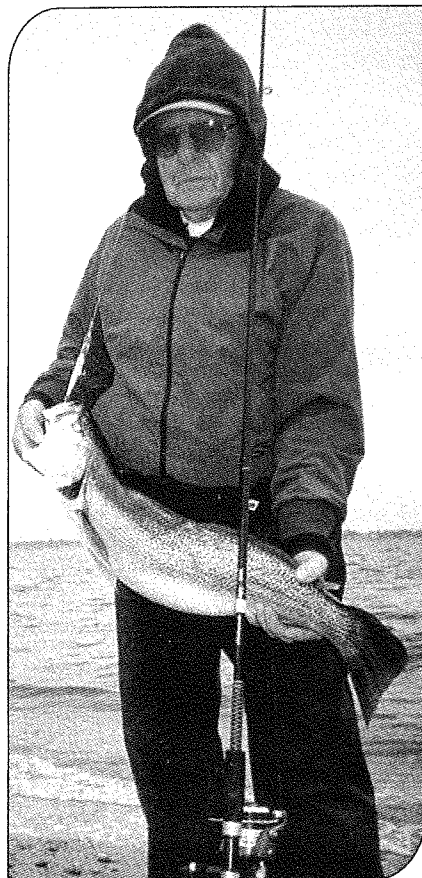
River's End Tackle Co. reported a few bass from the upper Thames but no safe ice around the shoreline ponds. If the water is clear the Farmington TMA is worth a trout trip if you must get out of the house. Don't forget the Rod Building and Fly Tying classes coming up soon.

PRESTON

The Fish Connection said there's been action with holdover bass in Norwich Harbor if weather isn't too drastic. The fish shift around, day to day, maybe moving to another hole since your last trip. Some were also caught south of the Pequot Bridge off the trash plant but not any of the other traditional places like Montville or the Trestle. Most were very small schoolies but they did hear about two 20-pounders the last week.

DOWN SOUTH

Key West has been warm but very windy since the day after Christmas when a tough cold front came through. Winds blew 20 to 25 on most days, coming down only slightly a few times. This writer got out in my Hydra-Sports on the reef edge in 136 feet of water with



George Barber of Mapleville, RI landed this nice 32-inch squeteague while casting a redwhite Rapala Magnum in Rhody's Greenwich Bay in May 2004.