

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN MCMURRAY

Montauk, New York, saw heavy blitzes of striped bass in 2008; however, these blitzes have fallen off along most areas of our Atlantic coast. Let's examine the possible reasons—and if the fish are headed for another crash.

Striper Signals

If you care about fishing along the Atlantic coast for striped bass, be afraid—very afraid.

THERE IS ABUNDANT EVIDENCE THAT the Atlantic population of striped bass is crashing. But why should you listen to me, when I and virtually all my fellow striper advocates who aren't fish managers have been saying this for five years? And why should you listen to us when the trained professionals hired to tend the resource promise that everything is fine and dandy and when all we anglers can offer is anecdotal info—the most unreliable of all evidence, “barroom biology” as it has been called?

Before I answer those questions, here's another: Why should you listen to the managers who, relying on what they called “scientific evidence,” ran stripers to commercial extinction less than three decades ago, all the while assuring us that everything was fine and dandy? Finally, in 1984, Congress intervened with the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, a law requiring the Secretary of Commerce

to impose a moratorium on striper fishing in any East Coast state not in compliance with a management plan hatched by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), representing coastal states from Maine to North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia.

Because they were on a congressionally mandated rescue mission and, more importantly, because they had the help of sportfishermen who forced moratoriums, ASMFC managers did better. Rocket science it wasn't. Suddenly stripers had a chance to grow up and spawn, and the population rebounded spectacularly. But the ongoing media mantra that this was a “triumph” of fisheries management is like lauding a pilot for executing a perfect belly landing after he'd forgotten to deploy the landing gear.

Now the slaughter is on again, dwarfing anything we saw in the 1970s; and when it comes to mindsets, even a taxonomist

can't tell a state manager from an ASMFC manager. Both see fish as swimming wheat to be reaped at so-called “maximum sustainable yield.” Managing for abundance and healthy size and age structure instead of dead-on-the-dock protein has never occurred to them.

Let's get back to the apparent striper crash. First, fish crashes generated by professional fisheries managers take a good deal longer to manifest than five years, as we saw with the cod crash, the had-dock crash, the white-marlin crash, the swordfish crash, the tuna crash, the grouper crash, the snapper crash, the snook crash, the redfish crash, the weakfish crash, the winter-flounder crash, the fluke crash, the southern-flounder crash, the Atlantic-salmon crash, the Pacific-salmon crash, the steelhead crash, the river-her-ring crash, the menhaden crash, and the first striper crash, to mention just a few. Second, the more anecdotal evidence of

fish-stock decline that piles up, the more believable it gets.

At this writing, the statistics for the recreational striper catch in 2008 are considered preliminary, but the numbers are appalling. Coastwide, anglers landed (that is, released or killed) 14,107,835 fish, the worst year since 2000. Along the Atlantic coast, some guides had to cancel their seasons. Maine was down from 1,004,780 fish in 2000 to 518,988 in 2008; New Hampshire from 213,868 to 91,433; Massachusetts from 7,563,326 to 4,001,795; Virginia from 1,357,299 to 647,542; North Carolina from 293,080 to 136,699. In a commercial fishery, the value of fish increases as they get harder to catch, so you may see more fish caught as a stock declines. Recreational landings, on the other hand, tend to follow stock abundance; and, in fact, stock assessments are based on recreational landings.

The managers explain the dreadful fishing with anecdotal evidence of their own, claiming the stripers were just everywhere anglers weren't. One—a decent, competent man and a fine scientist—told me this: "Reports were that the fish were offshore in New York and New Jersey. Supposedly the water temperature was a bit below average [keeping them south]; and they had record recreational catches down there." But the preliminary recreational stats (which I don't believe he had seen) reveal no such thing.

Each year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinates a cooperative trawling expedition for wintering striped bass off North Carolina. This is not a population survey; it is strictly a tagging operation. Still, it's a good indicator of abundance. Since 1990 the best catch was 6,275 fish in the year 2000; the worst was 147 in 2009. The average from 1987 to 2006 was 2,212, but the average for the last three years was 516.

Even if the anecdotal evidence that the fish are just hanging out elsewhere is accurate, something is terribly amiss—most likely a lack of food in their historic range. Grossly malnourished bass showing

up in ever increasing numbers, especially in Chesapeake Bay, which produces 75 percent of the coastal population, would seem to confirm this.

I have never understood why managers think they can minister to a predator without taking care of its prey. Eighty percent of a wintering striper's diet by weight is (or used to be) Atlantic menhaden. But one company—Omega Protein out of Reedville, Virginia—has been allowed to plunder menhaden to the point that a substantial part of the striper population is starving. In 2006 ASMFC reluctantly established a menhaden harvest cap for Chesapeake Bay of 109,020 metric tons—ineffective because, since then, landings have averaged 30 percent below that.

A study by the Chesapeake Bay Ecolog-

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ical Foundation, ongoing since 2004, has found that large, migratory female striped bass are remaining in the upper bay all winter, further depleting menhaden and thereby further stressing resident stripers. The big females are there, explains foundation president Jim Price, because they can't find menhaden along the coast. "Winter is the most critical time in a striper's life cycle because it has to feed heavily to develop its gonads," he says. "But many of the fish we see have shrunken bellies and are emaciated. In summer commercial fishermen have to throw out maybe ten percent of their bass. The fish are in such bad shape that the fillets are thin and white, not fit to eat."

Tag-recapture data from spring spawning grounds in Maryland and Virginia indicate a precipitous and continuing drop in striper survival. Fish captured in autumn are physiologically indistinguishable from fish starved in the lab for two months. This stress makes them

vulnerable to mycobacteriosis, a disease that causes loss of scales, skin ulcers, severe weight loss and lesions on head, spleen, kidney, liver, heart and gonads. At least 60 percent of the stripers in Chesapeake Bay are infected.

Apparently the plague is being assisted by commercial net fishermen who handle and release diseased fish, and then handle and release healthy shorts (non-legal-sized fish). It is moving quickly up the coast, and it seems to be transferable to humans, at least in the form of "fish-handler's disease," which manifests itself with lymph-node swelling, Lyme-disease-like joint stiffness and bacterial infection. As I write I'm looking at it on my left thumb. Believe me, you don't want it.

Fishing guides spew anecdotal information like squid ink; but when they all are saying the same thing independently, even managers need to listen. Two of the best and most experienced striper guides on the East Coast are Capt. Doug Jowett and Capt. David Blinken. Jowett, who has the perspective of guiding both in Maine and Massachusetts, offers this: "My contacts all the way to North Carolina are singing the same song—striped-bass fishing is in dramatic decline due to poor numbers of fish in every year class out there. The decline isn't just a one-year event. The biomass and year-class distribution have been declining for the past five years. There are certainly plenty of ASMFC failures. Seems like every fish they touch is or has been in serious trouble. Nobody says there aren't any striped bass. We're saying there's a problem looming for the stock. The system allows for fishing the biomass down."

And this from Blinken, who guides in New York and Massachusetts with forays

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into Rhode Island and Connecticut: “I think stripers are in massive decline. I saw fewer fish on the flats in 2008 than in any of the 17 years I’ve been guiding. Montauk (N.Y.) fishing was magical, but if you distribute those fish across the [migratory] range, that’s not a lot. The guys were coming over from Rhode Island and Connecticut because there was nothing on their side. The year before we were all getting a lot of big fish. Typically a year or two before the collapse of any fishery you get big fish; then it bottoms out. It’s like what happened with cod; the managers said there were plenty, but the inshore guys were seeing fewer and fewer fish. Last year was frightening. A good day on the flats you used to get 20 bass; in 2008 a good day was maybe seven.”

So what to do? First, the managers need to sharply reduce the fishing mortality rate, which (because they’ve plugged it into a logarithmic equation) they call “F.” But

convincing ASMFC to do this is a task no less challenging than summoning Neptune from the deep. Currently F is .31, which equates to removal of maybe 27 percent of the population. That’s above what the managers claim to be the safe target of .30 but below what they claim to be the danger threshold of .34. It’s a tight squeeze, but this is how managers think—maximize protein extraction.

Last summer, after implementing a new model, they reduced the danger threshold from .41, a statement based on their highly questionable supposition that there are even more fish than they had previously imagined. And in February 2009 half the ASMFC board backed a proposal by North Carolina to increase the commercial fishery by 25 percent, a measure that failed because of a tie vote.

There isn’t a more reasoned, temperate striped-bass advocate than Dick Brame, the Coastal Conservation Association’s Atlantic States Fisheries coordinator. “The

danger threshold and the target are too close,” he submits. “With all the potential for error you could be over your threshold and not know it. And it’s clear that fishing at F .30 does not allow the stock to fully recover its age structure. You need F at .20 or .25 to get any appreciable numbers of those older fish. The plan says age structure will be restored to the extent practical, which means lowering F. However, ASMFC allows a large harvest of smaller fish in the producer areas. That doesn’t get you there. You can’t kill fish twice—when they’re young and when they’re old. You’d be surprised how many managers want to do this. They want to maintain a high population level, which implies lowering F, then allow this smorgasbord of size and bag-limit slots up and down the coast so you can’t see what the population’s doing. The striped bass is the ASMFC’s crown jewel; and in my opinion it’s becoming tarnished. At this point they’re not willing to do anything

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about it. There are a lot of things we don't understand; and uncertainty calls for caution."

One source of mortality managers don't factor in is the enormous illegal kill fueled by a thriving black market that, in turn, is fueled by commercial harvest and sale still permitted in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. Only on those extremely rare occasions when enforcement agencies make a major bust does the public begin to perceive the problem.

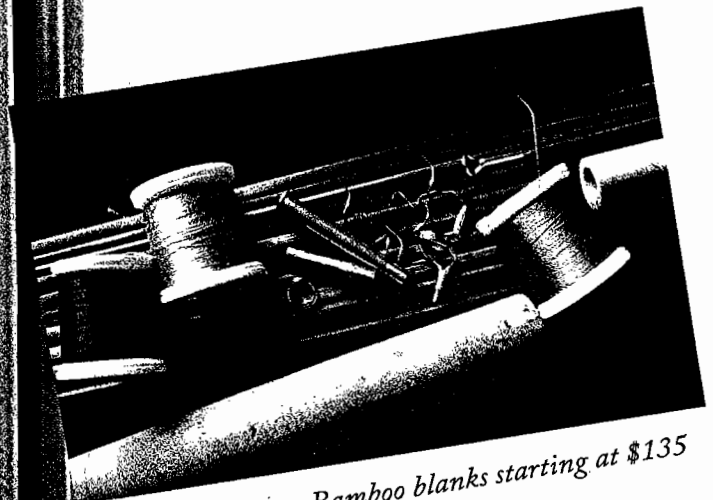
We got a glimpse in February 2009 when five watermen, nabbed by state and federal undercover agents in a five-year sting operation, pleaded guilty to poaching \$2.1 million worth of striped bass (or something like 600,000 fish) from Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River and illegally selling the fish to wholesalers with whom they conspired to generate phony receipts. Many more arrests are expected.

Hurtful as they are, at least the commercial striper fisheries in Maryland and Virginia target mostly small, nonmigratory males. Elsewhere breeding stock is being slammed. By far the biggest commercial slaughter occurs off Massachusetts, where half the population of Atlantic striped bass summers. The Massachusetts commercial season (by rod-and-reel) is perpetuated by Paul Diodati, director of the commonwealth's Division of Marine Fisheries, over the objections of anglers along the entire coast save about 4,000 in Massachusetts who pay only \$65 to sell bass at least 34 inches in length.

When last I complained about the Massachusetts "recremercial" striper season, as it is called in striper conservation circles (see "Plundering Stripers," FR&R January/February 2007), we got a nastygram from one of the most articulate, dedicated and effective striper activists on the East Coast ("Mort," I'll call him) blasting me mostly for calling Massachusetts "commercial striper fishermen" recreational anglers in disguise. We'd have run the letter had we not

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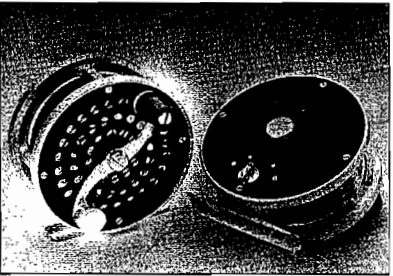
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published an even angrier, longer screed from the Recreational Fishing Alliance, which I'd offended by reporting facts it didn't want to know. So I'll take this opportunity to jointly make an important point and respond to Mort:

The Massachusetts commercial striper season is a grotesque charade

Dear Mort: Even the "real Ted Williams," as I have heard him called to my chagrin, didn't bat 1,000. So I'll comfort myself in the knowledge that you have approved of my past striper articles (and, in fact, been quoted in most). You might have approved of this one too had you not missed the central point. You are correct that those who legally sell stripers in Massachusetts are called "commercial fishermen." But I'll remind you of Abe Lincoln's observation: "If you call a tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?" Five? "No. Four. Because calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg." The Massachusetts commercial striper season is a grotesque charade performed, with few if any exceptions, by recreational anglers who take advantage of backward management by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. At the stubborn insistence of that agency's director recreational anglers can send in their lousy \$65 and kill off and carry breeding-age females at the rate of 30 per day.

Director Diodati at least gets an "A" for honesty. Unlike the recremercial fishermen he caters to, he doesn't pretend the season is legitimate. "The commercial [striper] fishery," he writes, "has also changed by attracting thousands of non-traditional participants who are lured by the thought of subsidizing an expensive hobby."

In 2008, Massachusetts recremercial fishermen reported landing 1,157,814 pounds of striped bass, 104.5 percent of their quota. Of the 3,599 who purchased permits only 1,207 reported landing even one fish.

"You know that's BS," declares Brad

Burns of Stripers Forever. "Those other 2,392 guys didn't buy their permits just to look at them. All they have to do is fork over that money, and they can legally transport up to 30 big striped bass at a time. Instead of requiring tags

Massachusetts uses the honor system. It escapes any reasonable thinking to imagine that there isn't a terrible abuse. On top of not wanting to report their catch and hitting their quota they want to avoid income taxes. Only 102 [recremercials] reported catching at least 3,000 pounds of stripers which, at \$3 a pound, is \$9,000 in gross income."

Massachusetts Rep. Matt Patrick (D-Falmouth) has recently introduced HD 245, a bill that would ban "commercial harvesting and sale of wild striped bass" in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, reduce the recreational bag limit from two to one fish per day, and impose a slot limit between 20 and 26 inches or over 40 inches. (While a locked slot limit can severely damage weak year classes, Patrick tells me he'll talk to managers and keep an open mind about making necessary amendments.)

This desperately needed bill has the recremercials shrieking like Sabine virgins. "We are deeply concerned about what we consider to be the privatization of our rights of access to the resources we all own and the current trend towards private ownership of our fisheries," proclaims the Cape and Islands Inshore Fishermen's Association under the apt site logo of a striper inside a red circle and crossed out by a red line. "This bill will do little more than place 100 percent of the access to striped bass in Massachusetts into the hands of an elitist group."

The association goes on to bemoan possible loss of the public's "right" to walk into any fish market and purchase wild stripers, this despite the fact that farm-raised, white-bass-striper hybrids are readily available for about the same price (an indication that there is little difference in flavor), are available all year instead of

just summer and contain few of the PCBs that have led to health advisories from Maine to North Carolina for consumption of wild stripers. Men and boys aren't supposed to eat wild striped bass more than once a month; and young girls and women who are pregnant or may get that way should consider never eating them.

Why do commercial fishermen, recreational anglers pretending to be commercial fishermen and their state and ASMFC facilitators and apologists imagine that people who don't fish have a "right" to eat wild stripers? If such a right exists, should not the general public also be able to purchase wild black bass, wild brook trout, wild Atlantic salmon, wild deer, wild moose, wild ducks, wild doves, wild turkeys, wild woodcock and wild grouse?

Virtually no species of commercially harvested fish is in good shape, stripers included. Commercial striper harvest doesn't make sense morally, biologically or economically. But all efforts in the U.S. Congress to make striped bass a gamefish get shouted down by commercial interests. It's hardly a radical notion; 6 of the 12 states under ASMFC management have already done it.

Director Diodati of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries avers that Rep. Patrick's bill hasn't got a chance, and maybe he's right. But when, echoing his fellow managers coastwide, he assures all hands that the stock of America's most important marine gamefish "continues to look good," maybe—in fact, probably—he's wrong. In any case, I can't help recalling the record of his and other state agencies in the days when Congress used to let them set their own standards for striper management. And I can't help recalling the famous defense uttered by Chico Marx in the face of both anecdotal and prima facie evidence: "Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?"

Ted Williams has been this magazine's conservation writer for more than 20 years. His latest book is *Something's Fishy*; order it at flyrodreel.com.

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