

The Striped Bass (*Morone Saxatilis*; around here aka as rockfish) is the iconic fish of the Atlantic Coast. Stripers fed pre Columbian coastal Americans then saved newly arrived European settlers, including Pilgrims, from starvation. Colonial era rivers and great bays from Maine to the Carolinas, including the Chesapeake, swarmed with schools of line sided fish. The grandfather of a good friend owned a market in Oxford, Maryland. His ledger for years around the turn of the 19th century recorded great bass weighing more than 100 lbs. bought regularly from fishermen. And these weights surely were accurate. The grocer was paying by the pound! Such fish had to be 30 or 40 years old. These were fecund, mature cows, containing millions of eggs; stripers that large are always female.

Fast forward to the 1980s. Striper populations were in such poor shape that a moratorium on their catch was mandated along the Eastern seaboard. The species rebounded within a decade. Subsequently sport and commercial fishermen were allowed to catch and keep fish under strict regulations. Everyone thought the striper's comeback was assured. The striped bass became the fish to catch along the Atlantic coast. Charter fishing boomed. Commercial pound and gill netters, as well as hook and line fishermen earned a good living taking these fish.

Into this piscine paradise stepped Jeff Nichols. Consumed by an obsession to catch huge bass with rod and reel Nichols became a fishing addict. And by his own admission a very good one. He ran a charter service out of Montauk NY whose ads boasted the guaranteed catch of a 40

pound striper for each client. Jeff fished at night, mostly on full or new moon tides. He knew all the submerged rocks, bottom holding areas and secluded reefs where these big “slobs” (in his vernacular) waited to ambush baitfish or smash his baits. He used live eels, top of the line hooks and custom tackle. No legal size fish was thrown back. He and his paying guests killed very large fish by the dozens; all were female stripers. Then he sold them, clandestinely, to toney restaurants in New York City and on Long Island. Nichols wasn't alone. He describes an entire sub-culture of black market striped bass fishing. Stripers could be sold at half the legitimate wholesale cost then turned into culinary delights which brought huge profit to the eatery and cash money to the poacher. Billed on the menu as “locally caught”, “ultra-fresh”, “sustainable” and “eco- friendly” such fish were marketed to trend embracing customers at top end prices. They were the piscatorial counterpart of free range chickens or organic beef.

Nichols said he poached stripers to pay for the lifestyle of an angling addict. Indeed, he often fished 24/7 three or more days in a row before unloading his catch. He lived in his van or on his boat. Nichols had few friends, no real relationships, no regular job and no money in the bank. In his own words he was a fishy smelling loser. It was a dangerous life too. Rip tides, fierce squalls, cranky engines and strong fish were valid threats. All these risks were magnified at night. Other commercial fishermen, fearful of competition, and perhaps about him “spilling the beans” to law enforcement, damaged his boat and physically threatened. Finally he was apprehended by a clever law enforcement agent and indicted with another, even greedier fishing outlaw. After two years of legal proceedings (during which he continued to fish and sell) Mr. Nichols was convicted. But during this period he had time

to reflect on how the wholesale slaughter of the striped bass breeding stock, toxic chemical exposure and diseases like mycobacteria have again pushed bass toward another population disaster. Spawning biomass and juvenile fish have declined over the past 5 years. The Chesapeake Bay, the most productive reproductive area on the coast, demonstrates declining water quality and significant pollution.. There has been an increasing watershed population explosion. Precious little has been done to clean up the water. Forage fish stocks such as menhaden have been greatly reduced by similar stressors and over fishing. Algae blooms due to farm and lawn fertilizers run off plus sewage treatment plant overflows have increased dead zones in the entire Bay. The Conowingo Dam is almost at capacity for trapped sediment and there are no real plans to deal with this looming catastrophe. Coastal fishery managers seem more interested in maintaining the fishery, both commercial and sport, for economic reasons than they are in preserving this magnificent fish. Finally at age 43 Jeff Nichols stopped poaching and awakened his conscience to write this book.

This is an uneven work. There are redundancies, typos, grammatical mistakes and incorrect words in measure enough to jar while pursuing Mr. Nichols fascinating tale. But it is a good read; sad in its facts and maddening in its implications. Poaching still goes on. We read about it in our papers... gill nets filled with huge pre spawning stripers in Eastern Bay, twenty thousand pounds of illegal fish going to market from Bay waters in just 2 years, the recreational slob with too many or too short fish in the cooler. Even a DC restaurateur caught and fined large for selling untagged fish. I urge anyone with an interest in striped bass and their waters to read this short book. It will be well worth while.

John Scanlon MD