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Representative Paul Schmid, House Chair

Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture

Per your request:

Thank you for this opportunity to help further explain and lend insight into the management of wild striped bass. You asked me to provide you with background information regarding the difference between managing a species for commercial purposes vs. recreational interests and the consequential effects thereof.

I hope that my efforts will be brief enough to attract your attention and informative enough to keep it.

Please get in touch with me if you have any questions about the following or any other concerns or questions you may have with regards to the management of our unique wild striped bass fishery.

Cordially,

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TRANSITIONING COMMERCIALY MANAGED SPECIES TO GAME

MANAGED: Definitions, Justifications and Consequences by Dean Clark
per request of Committee Chairman, Paul Schmid

Understanding the competing factors in the management of wild striped bass requires an awareness of the underlying influences that motivate and impact management decisions. Generically, there are two opposing management philosophies – conservation vs. exploitation. Theoretically they exist under the one umbrella goal of regulating for the survival of the species. The fact is they are so different they share little in common. Each has its own and opposing agenda.

Conservation: Managing a species with conservation based goals mandates that the regulatory focus be on the recovery, the maintenance and/or the enhancement of the species and its prerequisite environs. This demands a long-term management commitment and is based on the selfish interests or conscience of supporters.

Exploitation: Managing a species for harvest is designed to achieve maximum market yield from the resource. Because the focus is on immediate and personal gain, biased management is motivated to act irrationally. Unfortunately, this behavior often contradicts the best interests of the greater group by depleting, degrading or destroying a common, limited resource such as striped bass. (see the 1968 essay on The Tragedy of the Commons by Garrett Hardin, for example)

A partial list of species that, in order to be protected from commercial exploitation, are now being managed under the stewardship of recreational interests as game species is included as herein as an **Addendum**.

Dead is dead. The species being harvested doesn't care who does the killing. It is management bias that determines their ultimate fate. This cannot be overstated. Pressure and influence on managers from self-interested constituencies, be they tree huggers or lumber interests, are influential and defining forces in wildlife management decisions.

Historically western civilization mismanaged limited natural resources as if they were limitless... Recall that we once had buffalo herds ranging across the Western prairies for as far as the eye could see and schools of striped bass so thick one could "walk dry-shod o'er them and nary get one's feet wet".

The attitude of being able to exploit resources at will came to a screeching halt when there were no more buffalo, the passenger pigeon was extirpated and we awakened to the realities of our finite natural world. "We have seen the enemy and they are us!"

In fact, it was as far back as the early 1700s that Massachusetts passed the first wildlife "conservation" laws in the country. The earliest public schools in the "new world" were paid for with proceeds generated by regulations governing the sale of striped bass... So regulating striped bass is not a new legislative issue at all! MA also passed the first laws regulating the taking of wild trout in order to protect them from commercial over-harvesting. Recreational fishing was then and for many years thence viewed as being "inappropriate". Times have changed but for many, regulatory thinking has not.

The reason wildlife/fisheries regulations exist is to protect our limited resources from abuse by ourselves. However, when the foxes are managing the chicken coop, things tend to favor the immediate hunger need of the foxes to the detriment of the chickens.

The decimated state of most of our current marine fish stocks is the direct result of commercially biased management. Marine fisheries are regulated under the Department of Commerce. This made sense way back when the only value derived from our oceans was measured in the commerce created by the catching and selling of fish at market.

However, with striped bass, as leisure time became a household luxury, a unique recreational striped bass fishing economy was created that began to rival and eventually far supersede the commercial market value of these special fish.

In the 1970s, because of management's refusal to reduce the obvious over-harvesting of stripers, they became so decimated that a killing moratorium had to be instituted. This created a new and unfamiliar dilemma for some managers. In those states where there was a management structure that included noncommercial representation, the need to stop the regulated overharvesting of wild striped bass was more readily embraced. These states and the federal government stopped striped bass from being commercially exploited and mandated they be managed as a game species. As a direct consequence of the harvesting moratorium stripers quickly recovered and an even greater, multi-billion-dollar recreational fishing economy was born.

Yet, as soon as the recovery was assured during the 1990s, with a commercial majority vote, the former, over-harvesting limits were fully reinstated. This short-sighted decision was the result of commercial bias leading to overly optimistic interpretations of the very inexact science relative to stock assessments. This all took place over the vocal objections of recreational conservationists that were lobbying for more restrictive and limited harvesting. Unnecessarily, these commercially mandated consequences have once again created a diminished striped bass fishery that continues to trend downward.

It is the foxes and chickens thing. States allowing commercial fishing for stripers have a majority vote on the ASMFC. All nine members of the Massachusetts Marine Fishery Advisory Commission, the oversight body of the Division of Marine Fisheries, either represent or have vested financial interests in the commercial fishing industry. It is a stacked management deck favoring commercial exploitation.

Commercial interests tend to only “value” fisheries with outmoded, wide brush, one size fits all mentality: dollars per pound at market. There are a few unique fisheries (such as striped bass) where this myopic, market-based measure of value is inaccurate, inappropriate and totally foolhardy.

One striped bass caught recreationally is worth over twenty times more to the State’s economy than the same bass caught commercially. More than half a million folks participate in the recreational striped bass fishery while only about 1200 commercial license holders ever report the selling of any stripers. Commercial permit holders represent only .13% (point one three percent) of the fishery participants yet they are allocated 31.5% of the harvest and they control management decisions.

The intractable solidarity of commercially biased management has greatly damaged what once was and could be again a billion dollar plus marine recreational fishing industry here in MA. However, it is because of the fox in the chicken coop reality that this will not happen until and unless the Legislature defines a change in management policy.

The Legislature must step in not to micromanage striped bass but to define a policy directive prioritizing conservation over exploitation by declaring them a game species. Only then will this special and unique fishery be protected from continued commercial overexploitation and undervaluation.

ADDENDUM

PARTIAL LIST OF EXAMPLES OF ANIMALS, BIRDS AND FISH THAT ARE NOW PROTECTED FROM COMMERCIAL HARVESTING AND HAVE BEEN DECLARED A GAME SPECIES TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEIR GREATER SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE

Animals: bear, elk, deer, moose, wild sheep, antelope, etc.

Birds: wild turkey, ruffed grouse, all ducks and geese, woodcock, doves, quail, sand hill cranes, ptarmigan, sage hens, spruce grouse, etc.

Fish: trout, fresh water bass, crappie, tarpon, pike, pickerel, muskellunge, redfish, most billfish, bonefish, snook, and striped bass in six east coast states, all federal waters as well as in California, Oregon and Washington.

Each of the above species was at one time threatened by commercial overexploitation and is now doing better than ever while being managed for enhancement as a “game species”. **Recreational interests advocate for good stewardship of our natural resources while commercial interests prioritize exploitation. This is wildlife management 101.**

The question is, what are the motivations driving current management objectives? In the case of striped bass in Massachusetts it is 100% commercially motivated self-interest. This has and still is proving to be myopically damaging. Please put our unique wild striped bass fishery in the game species column for the benefit of the fish, the half million recreational striper fishermen and the recreational striper fishing economy both real and potential. Thank you.