

## FISHING/MONTY MONTGOMERY

# Striped bass population threatened by extinction?

With striped bass arriving in some numbers on the Cape, we ought to be filled with enthusiasm and good cheer, but this typist isn't. Based on no scientific evidence at all, which puts us right in there with the people who have titles, degrees and official positions, it's our best guess that the striped bass is declining, and will soon be threatened with extinction.

That, of course, doesn't sound reasonable when you read that so and so caught a ton of stripers last week (and sold them for a dollar a pound, in the round). The annual catch of striped bass, say the bureaucrats, continues to rise every year, so how can the species be threatened?

Pretty damned easy is how. The catch of haddock increased every year, until it nose-dived, and so did the catch of giant bluefin tuna, until it crashed. As far as we're concerned, the question isn't whether that will happen to striped bass, but, rather, which year it happens, '77, '78 or '79.

There are three reasons to predict a disastrous drop in the striped bass population: Fish kills in the major spawning areas are documented facts; enormous fishing pressure, most of it commercial, masquerading under the name of "sport," increases annually, and, last, perhaps best, the argument from history, comparing the catches of a dozen years ago with those of today.

Talk to a casual fisherman, a fellow that takes his vacation fishing and spends odd weekends during the summer going after bass. Ten years ago, he might take a dozen fish, one here and there, through the season. Today, he may never take one.

Talk to a serious fisherman, one who grew up surfcasting on Cape Cod. He will tell about seeing huge schools of bass offshore, of seeing them move in on the Outer Beach, of catches in the hundreds of pounds — on old-fashioned lures — from the beach. Where is he now? He's bought a boat because the fringes of the schools stopped coming in on the beach. And he and thousands of others now pursue the striped bass offshore.

Talk to someone about a "big" catch. They'll tell you about paying for vacations with bass that brought 5c and 10c a pound, about surface plugging in Cape Cod Bay and four men coming back with 3000 pounds of bass. Now they're wire-lining fish, and 500 pounds is a hell of a good day, and at 80c to a \$1.25 a pound, a very rewarding day.

Why don't the fish come in, in great numbers, to the old surf-casting hot spots, The Glades, the Sea Walk in Newport, the Worm Bed up on Plum Island? Has the ocean changed? No. No one knows why, and the optimist says that the bottom has changed or some minor problem has caused the fish to go elsewhere.

You want our best guess? There aren't fish out there in enough numbers to push the edges and the fringes of great shoals of bass onto the beaches. The fish are now pursued and caught in deep water, in distant tide rips, and at all depths. A dozen years ago, when the fishing was great, anglers worked the surface, taking the small percentage of fish that came to the top. They worked the beaches, taking the small percentage of the population that came inshore. The sportfisherman's catch was almost incidental as he picked fish off the top and the edges of the school.

To the enormous jump in value of striped bass, add the recent cyclical increase in menhaden in our waters, the once well-kept secret that offering a menhaden to a bass is like offering a banana split to a ten year old is now common knowledge) and you've had a slaughter of big, breeding-sized bass in the past five years that exceeds all reason.

Now, instead of plugging from the beaches, the same men and their under-studies are working the offshore water, and it's our best guess that they're working on the heart of the school, not the fringes. When that's gone, what will happen?

There will be considerable wringing of the hands in offices, that's what. There will be emergency restrictions, that's what. And there will be considerable prayer, profane or religious, that the remnant population of adult bass will breed successfully for several years.

The alternative, of course, is returning the fishery to sportfishing and home consumption, an idea so unpopular that it has no chance of occurring, ever. When the emergency regulations come into effect, as they already have with the tuna, someone will have the unpleasant task of allocating the scarce resource among sportfishermen and commercial fishermen. That task will be as unpleasant as writing regulations today, but, it can be put off until the last minute.