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STRIPED BASS:

THE CLOCK IS TICKING AS ABUSES CONTINUE

By Fred Golofaro

I've been trying to back off a bit on preaching about the demise of our striped bass stocks for fear of making the message trite – “Here goes Golofaro again shooting his mouth off about striped bass.” I know there are some narrow minded industry folks who wish I would shut up – they've told me so – but every season that passes, the situation grows more dire. I can comfortably say that we are clearly headed down the same road we took in the early and mid 80s, and as most people know, that road ended with a total moratorium on the harvest of striped bass.

This time around, the problem, and the solution appear to be much more complex. The fishery, despite its fragile state, is being abused at every turn. There are so many factors at play, one has to wonder if the proposed 30 to 36 percent reduction that the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) is seeking for 2015 will be enough to stem the decline.

Part of the blame certainly falls on the shoulders of ASMFC for their failure to address the issue in a timely fashion. They were slow to react to the decline and their current efforts at reducing mortality are about three years too late in my opinion. It was obvious to anyone involved in the fishery then, as it is now, that the fishery was in trouble, but fishery managers at every level seem to put little value in the anecdotal references of those who spend a good part of their life hunting these fish. Instead, they rely on numbers gleaned from catch, mortality and recruitment data, numbers that to some seem arbitrary at best.

And then there is the system itself which has become too cumbersome, with too many boards, committees and steps in the process to get anything done in a timely fashion. They decided again last year to put off making any changes in reducing harvest, went back at it again this year and if we are lucky we will have something in place during 2015. Now they are debating whether to spread that 30-something reduction over as much as three years. The inability to react in a timely fashion is symptomatic of a system that is too convoluted.

As responsible as they are for this mess, it would be unfair to point fingers at just ASMFC when there are so many other contributing factors to the decline. Our own NYDEC does not need the blessing of ASMFC to reduce mortality in our waters, though some people are quick to point out that if other states along the Striper Coast are not sharing the burden, New York's efforts would be largely diluted. After seeing the slaughter that took place during the last bunker run, last year's sand eel bite, and the June 22 bunker bite off of Fire Island, it's hard to believe that a reduction in the bag limit would not have saved a lot of large, breeding stripers.

Then again, would it have mattered? Current regulations allow for one fish over 28 inches and one over 40 inches for recreational anglers, and two fish over 28 inches for party and charter boat patrons. Given the current state of the fishery, no one should be able to keep two big fish but that is almost irrelevant given the way bag limits are being abused. Last Sunday's fishing, as one angler put it, was "lock and load" and these were all big fish. One angler complained that he watched two guys put away at least six big fish in little more than an hour and a half – none went back into the water. Many other fishermen kept more than the one big fish they were allowed, some even showing up at tackle shops with multiple cows in their coolers. One person I questioned with five fish for himself and his partner was aware of the bag limit. He felt bad keeping those five fish but he raised another issue. They were able to release three other fish, but all of these fish had ingested large snag hooks and according to him, could not be released. They did not want to throw dead fish back.

That incident raises another issue – the moral dilemma. When big bass are feasting on the bunker schools, everyone knows how effective the snag and drop technique is. The obvious solution is to get your bunker back to the boat without having a bass inhale it (not always possible), re-hook the bait with a large circle hook, and if you want more of a crippled effect, clip a fin, add some weight and get the bait down below the main body of bunker. I can hear the cynics already but isn't at least worth a try. Let your conscience be your guide.

While we're on the subject of hooks, no one should be using anything but circle hooks when feeding clams or bunker chunks to stripers. This would seem like a no-brainer, yet I see very few people doing it. At least one bait and tackle dealer is trying to do their part in educating anglers to this aspect of the game. South Shore Marine Supply in Massapequa gives any customer who purchases a ½ bushel of fresh or frozen clams a free pack of circle hooks. Kudos to them and I wish more shops would get on the bandwagon.

Recreational anglers are also at fault where fishing in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is concerned. Fishing for striped bass beyond the three mile limit (outside state waters) is prohibited. The law was designed to provide a sanctuary for striped bass and it is abused on a regular basis. Last fall, party and private boats pummeled big stripers beyond three miles when the fish moved further offshore than they had been. Worse yet were the emails and phone calls from fishermen upset that they were told by mates not to throw fish back, even though they had already caught their two fish limit. Most of those are distributed to other passengers who failed to catch a fish or fill their limit, but one email revealed mates filleting three totes of fish after all other passengers had left the boat. You fill in the blanks.

The Hudson River fishery is another issue unto itself. How do you justify an 18-inch size limit in the river when the same fish that make their way upriver to spawn are the same fish targeted by anglers in Long Island Sound, New England and along our South Shore when they leave the river? And for that matter, why is this fishery not catch and release? Why are we able to harvest fish on their

spawning grounds during the height of the spawn? Something is definitely wrong with this picture.

The illegal sale of striped bass is a major contributor to mortality. One restaurant on the Island was nailed last fall for illegally purchasing striped bass, but the problem is alive and well along most of the Striper Coast. What do you think a guy with six or eight big stripers is going to do with them?

On the commercial side, many readers were shocked and upset by the killing and dumping of stripers by draggers off of North Carolina and Virginia several years back. Guess what? The same thing is happening here off of the South Shore and Montauk when draggers hit a school of bass and far exceed their token by-catch. The result is a lot of dead fish dumped in their wake. I have seen the photos and heard the stories. I would like to believe that these skippers are trying to avoid towing nets where stripers are gathered, but the question begs are they targeting their allowed by-catch to cover fuel costs while sacrificing a lot of dead stripers in the interim? I wish I had an answer on how to solve this one but I'm at a loss. How do you keep them from making an honest living by towing for squid, fluke and butterfish?

Then you have the East End haul seiners who managed to circumvent the haul seine ban by setting nets perpendicular to the beach and using them as "gill" nets. On top of that, New York's commercial tagging program is a joke – ripe with abuses and loopholes that allow individuals to fill the tags of non-fishing tag holders. Both of these issues need to be addressed, the loopholes closed and the laws enforced.

The illegal spearing of stripers also contributes to mortality. One boat last year was caught with 1,000 pounds of stripers near Fishers Island. The culprits paid handily for their dirty work, but the damage had been done.

All of these pale in comparison to the damage done by illegal gillnetting in the Chesapeake where so many stripers were illegally harvested that the poundage had to be subtracted from the state's commercial quota.

Add all of this up and it is obvious the folks from ASMFC don't have a clue as to the extent of striped bass mortality or why would they continue to drag their feet on making the necessary changes to reduce striped bass mortality?

The morality issue carries over to those of us in the media as well. We have no issue with publishing the photo of an angler's biggest ever striper, or their first ever striper. That is an exciting moment in the career of any angler and who are we to deprive them of that experience. It always comes with the hope that it was the only big fish kept, in accordance with state regulations, and that maybe the next one they catch will be released. It is our policy to not publish photos of an angler with multiple stripers, and to always encourage readers to send us photos of fish that are released. Sadly, we don't get enough of them. We also don't begrudge someone keeping a fish for the table. If you don't eat fish, it is an easy call, if you do like fish – not so easy.

The majority of recreational anglers I've spoken to and heard from are encouraging ASMFC to adopt a one fish across the board bag limit, and an increase in the size limit from 28 inches to 32 or 34 inches. They have already approved as one of the options a one fish bag at 33 inches which would result in a 32 to 36 percent reduction in mortality. Remember too, that it was the one fish at 36 inches that resulted in the last great abundance of stripers.

Another option, which might ease the impact on party and charter boats, and those anglers who prefer a small fish to eat, might be to release all fish between 32 and 38 or 40 inches, with the option of keeping one fish between 28 and 32 inches OR one fish over 40 inches. Fish of that size are relatively easy to release in good condition, and saving fish of that size would ensure a healthy brood stock for the future.

Some folks out there insist that no big fish should be taken. It's a noble thought but not a practical one unless you're a fan of releasing dead fish. Anyone who has caught their share of big stripers knows that fish over 30 pounds are difficult to handle, often come to the boat totally spent and on their side, and cannot be properly revived from boats with high freeboard, in a moderate or rough surf, or from a jetty. A couple of weeks back, two big stripers that appeared in my Surf

Report were beached by two very experienced surf rats using standard surf gear. Both wanted to release their fish and each of them spent a half hour trying to revive their fish to no avail. Given that, I would encourage all anglers to release any big fish they catch when a healthy release is possible, since there will be times you won't have the option.

Whatever steps ASMFC takes, and whatever regulations each state settles on, unless the issues touched on here are addressed, one has to wonder if these management efforts will be enough to stave off another moratorium.