

WITEK: BLACK SEA BASS (from page 29)

It found that the black sea bass stock was not only healthy, but that spawning stock biomass was at 240% of the target level. It also, for the first time, refined the assessment to a regional level, dividing it into a northern and southern component, using Hudson Canyon as the dividing line.

Although the assessment did not precisely conform its analysis to the substocks identified in the tagging study, for practical purposes, it divided the population into the northern stock on one hand, and the central and southern stocks on the other.

That sort of separation made some kind of sense, since the huge 2011 year class that we observed off New York and Connecticut (and others observed farther north in New England) didn't seem to appear to be nearly as large in the southern region. And, while the southern population was doing OK, the northern population was far more robust.

The trick, then, was to bring black sea bass management into the 21st Century, so that it reflects both the new knowledge and realities on the water.

The ASMFC and the Mid-Atlantic Council are trying. In 2016, they allowed the southern states to enjoy relatively liberal regulations, while states between Massachusetts and New Jersey, which enjoyed the larger population of fish and accounted for most of the landings, were forced to bear a correspondingly larger responsibility for conserving the stock.



Now, ASMFC has produced a Draft Addendum XXX to the Summer Flounder, Scup, Black Sea Bass Fishery Management Plan for Public Comment, which has the potential to significantly improve the black sea bass management process. Its two key proposals would 1) see black sea bass managed on a regional basis, and 2) allow annual regulations to be based on a more nuanced, science-dependent approach, rather than the current rote exercise of comparing the previous year's estimated landings to the current catch limit, and making adjustments that look good on paper, but often fail in the real world.

Of course, as always, the Devil is in the details.

If regional management is adopted, it can be done in one of two ways. Allocation can be done based on numbers of fish, caught within either the past 5 years (2011-2015) or the past 10 years (2006-2015), with either two regions (Massachusetts-New Jersey and Delaware-North Carolina), three regions (Massachusetts-New York, New Jersey standing alone, and Delaware-North Carolina) or four (Massachusetts-Rhode Island, Connecticut-New York, New Jersey standing alone, and Delaware-North Carolina). Or it can be based on both the number of fish caught during a 5- or 10-year period and the available biomass, in which case the states would be split into a northern region consisting of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York, and a southern region consisting of all the other states, with New Jersey getting some additional consideration because it straddles the Hudson Canyon dividing line between the northern and southern populations.

Once ASMFC decides what it wants to do there, it must decide whether all states within a region must adopt the same

regulations, or whether conservation equivalency should remain an option.

There's little doubt that the discussions are going to be contentious. New Jersey is already trying to gain the best of both worlds. Paul Haertel of the Jersey Coast Anglers Association is advising anglers to support "options that would allow New Jersey to become its own region or to be placed in the southern region as opposed to remaining in the region with states to our north...JCAA supports the quotas being established based on the historical percentage of the harvest over at least the last ten years."

He then begins whining that, "In 2011 draconian regulations were forced upon us that resulted in New Jersey harvesting their fewest sea bass during this entire century. It would be wrong to use this year as part of the basis for developing quotas. There was relaxation of the regulations in 2012 at which time New Jersey was placed in the northern region. Then for 2013, New Jersey was forced to establish harsh regulations that resulted in us harvesting only 61% of our target quota...Those stringent regulations that NJ set in 2012 have hurt us every year since. Further, NJ's historical share of the harvest was 47.7% for the period from 2001 to 2010 and probably even more than that previous to those years."

Of course, he never explained how such regulations were any more "draconian" or more "harsh" than those adopted by New York, Massachusetts or any of the other states with large sea bass harvests. Then he made what, if he wasn't dead serious, would sound like intentional irony:

"We believe it would be very unfair to base quotas on years when New Jersey's share of the harvest was at or near its lowest and other states were at or near their highest levels," because all the while, he was arguing that the base years should include the times when New Jersey was at its highest levels and other states at their lowest because, well, you know that it's only really fair when New Jersey kills most of the fish.

But that's why "fairness," and historical arguments, although so often heard, are so often useless in fisheries management. Because allocations and regulations should be based on today's, and more importantly, tomorrow's realities, reflecting where the fish are and are expected to be. They should not reflect conditions that occurred in the past and, given current trends, are unlikely to be happen again.

In fact, the center of black sea bass abundance has moved to the north over the past decade or so, and any allocation of the black sea bass resource needs to reflect that reality.

Thus, instead of listening to the folks down in New Jersey kick their feet and threaten to hold their collective breaths until they turn blue, ASMFC's Summer Flounder, Scup and Black Sea Bass Management Board should endeavor to resolve the black sea bass issue by using the same approach that they have already used very effectively in the scup fishery since 2004—combine the states responsible for the vast majority of the landings into a single region, with a single recreational catch limit, and require all of those states to adopt the same regulations in order to constrain landings at or below a commonly-applied catch limit.

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