

NMFS reports dramatic drop in striper numbers in Massachusetts

By Capt. Jim White



The National Marine Fisheries Service recently released a report stating that the numbers of striped bass that have been harvested by recreational anglers in the state of Massachusetts has taken a dramatic drop, (almost 50 percent) in the last four to five years. The report used a newer version of the controversial Marine Recreational Fishing Statistics Survey (MRFSS) to make that assessment.

The MRFSS has always been the subject of a very poor system for gathering data and using it to manage the fishery. However, this version reportedly accounted for many of the short comings of the previous way MRFSS data has been used. In any case it certainly mirrors what many anglers have already reported to have seen and experienced over the last five years - a decline in the numbers of school size fish almost everywhere on the Cape, their traditional summering grounds.

This also reflects the poor year classes that have been reported in the Chesapeake Bay system over the last five years. Five of the last seven years have seen a declining number in the Young-of-the-year surveys with no indication that it will improve any time soon.

It's amazing how this kind of information never gets out to the public or published in any outdoor magazines, or never makes the news media. It's either ignored, pushed aside, or more likely deliberately discarded as being unfit for print. For those of you who are old enough to remember, it sounds like the late 70's and early 80's all over again.

In a recent article in this newsletter it was reported that the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, (ASMFC) had released their version on the current state of the striped bass fishery and that everything was nice and rosy, the birds were singing, the sun was shining, the flowers were growing, and everything in the fishery world was just "hunky-dory". The problem is, its not. It hasn't been for quite some time, and stating from (ONE press release) that our striped bass fishery is in fine shape is a disservice, as well as an abomination to those who pursue and rely on a healthy striped bass fishery.

It now also seems that we have conflicting data as well. How can there be a 50 percent drop in the catch rate from the summer time grounds of this fishery and still be in FINE shape as the ASMFC is still reporting?

The ASMFC hasn't reported the actual facts of anything, at any time, on any situation in more than 35 years that I've been following what they've written, stated, and reported as being fact.

At a recent meeting of that committee, they almost totally ignored the fact that millions of pounds of striped bass had been taken illegally in the winter fishery over a 3-state region. One of the suspects was reported as making \$6.5 million from the sale of illegally caught stripers during the closed season. He was fined a mere, \$150,000. Now I don't know about you, but I would certainly risk spending a hundred fifty grand to bring in \$6.5 million. That is pretty much a no brainer.

At the same meeting a motion was made to increase the commercial quota of striped bass in those three states by 10 to 25 percent. THE MOTION ALMOST PASSED!!! It ended in a tie vote, which killed the motion. There hasn't been much reported on that fact either. It wasn't until a cry came from the public, in numbers not seen in modern times, that the Commission requested that those who were charged in this piracy be prosecuted to the fullest extent the law could provide.

Recently in North Carolina, the Waterman's Association filed legislation and asked that if they don't reach their quota from now on, that whatever quota is remaining should be allowed to be rolled into the following years quota. Well, if you can't make your quota in one season, what makes you think you are going to make it the following season?

The fact is they haven't reached their annual quota in the last *four years*. Their numbers too, have been dropping, only they, as well as the ASMFC totally refuse to acknowledge the problem. They somehow believe that some miracle is going to occur and on some yet unknown day, the Tarot cards and the bone rolling is going to magically make millions of striped bass appear within their nets again. How ludicrous can you get? No one reports on those incidents either.

If you spend more than 10 minutes a week on the water, you too have seen a decline in the numbers of school size fish within our bay system. Yes, we've had some pretty good fishing for bigger fish the last three or four years. At the same time the school bass fishing has been going downhill at an accelerated pace. The school bass are no longer in the many different places that they once were. And each year those areas shrink and are getting smaller. The same thing happened during the last crash. If you had fished and spent time on the water then, you'd already know that as being fact.

When you talk to the guys who lived through the last decline almost all will tell the same thing, we are headed for another one in the not too distant future. When you talk to those who came into this fishery after it recovered, you hear a completely different assessment of the situation.

Why? Well, there are two totally different perceptions of reality. In the first one, there are people who have lived and seen this happen once already. It's like reading and turning the pages of a book. Page one follows page two, then page three and so on. On the other hand, we've got people who have no history in the fishery for forty or more years, so they haven't got a clue as to what to compare it too. How do you compare something to another thing if you haven't experienced it before? The answer is you don't.

If you want to know and be informed about what is happening to YOUR striped bass fishery, then you need to dig deeper than a simple press release put out by the Fox that is guarding the Hen House. In fact, the Fox is living inside the hen house. It's been there for over thirty five years if you've taken the time to look. Not much has changed in that time. **(to page 27)**