

Lessons Learned: Menhaden Loss as ASMFC

by CHARLES WITEK



Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, "I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim."

Last month, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Atlantic Menhaden Management Board handed conservation interests a significant defeat, when it bowed to the demands of Omega Protein, supported by the Commonwealth of Virginia, and failed to adopt ecosystem-based reference points for Atlantic menhaden, arguably the single most important forage species on the Atlantic coast.

Adding insult to injury, the Management Board also increased the menhaden quota by 8%, and failed to allocate an equitable share of the menhaden resource to the various coastal states, instead allowing Virginia, and thus Omega, to monopolize about 80% of the menhaden harvest.

It was clear from the debate at the Management Board meeting, and from later observations made by Management Board members and others, that the loss can't be attributed to just one cause.

While Omega's ongoing efforts to preserve and enhance its income stream inspired most of the resistance to the ecosystem-based reference points, that effort was only successful because a number of factors directly or indirectly supported Omega's position, and helped to undercut the position of the conservation community.

History always repeats itself, and more important debates, involving menhaden and many other species managed by ASMFC, loom in the future. Thus, it is worth taking some time to dissect the factors underlying this defeat, so that the lessons learned can help conservation advocates achieve better results in the future.

1. Change is hard

Right now, at ASMFC and at the federal level, single-species management is the norm. Managers concern themselves solely with whether harvest is maintained at sustainable levels ("overfishing is not taking place") and whether the stock is large enough to maximize long-term, sustainable yield the stock is not overfished"). Even though every species is a part of and interacts with its environment, such interactions, including predator/prey relationships, are not explicitly considered.

The proposed adoption of ecosystem reference points for menhaden, whether the interim reference points rejected earlier this week or the menhaden-specific reference points that will hopefully be adopted in 2019, marks a paradigm shift for fishery management. By placing emphasis on menhaden's ecosystem role, and not merely focusing on sustainable harvest, ecosystem reference points would have shifted managers' focus away from maximizing harvest—and thus profits—and toward restoring healthy and fully-functioning coastal food webs.

The possibility of such a shift frightened Omega Protein, by far the biggest player in the menhaden fishery, as it very possibly could have led to reduced landings and reduced income, and at the very least would place a low cap on how far landings could increase (the menhaden industry is already complaining that the 8% increase was far too low, and that they should have been allowed to kill more).

As normally happens when corporate profits are threatened, the industry carried out an effective last-minute propaganda campaign focused on the possibility of lost jobs, rather than lost income.

No one likes to force people out of work, so that sort of campaign tends to be very effective at defeating conservation initiatives at ASMFC. Unless the case for reducing landings is

completely iron-clad, and sometimes not even then, ASMFC managers tend to avoid taking any actions that might impose economic hardship on the fishing community. Thus, they were susceptible to Virginia's/Omega's arguments that the interim reference points were not menhaden-specific, and imposed

inappropriate constraints on the fishery; such arguments were made more credible by an industry-funded study which questioned the need for forage fish management and cast doubt on the science supporting such reference points.

In the end, with the menhaden stock neither overfished nor subject to overfishing, the Management Board felt no urgent need to change its management approach.

2. The conservation community asked for too much

The management option most strongly supported by the conservation community would have established an interim fishing mortality rate target low enough to rebuild the population to 75% of the size of an unfished stock, and a fishing mortality threshold that would not have let the population slip below 40% of the size of such virgin stock.

Realistically, there was little to no chance that the Management Board would have actually set a quota that reduced fishing mortality to the proposed target rate. The economic impact would have been far too high. With menhaden neither overfished nor subject to overfishing, they would almost certainly have allowed the status quo to prevail, with perhaps even a slight increase in quota, and focused on preventing overfishing by maintaining a fishing mortality rate below the threshold level.

Everyone sitting on the Management Board was very cognizant of that fact. **(to page 31)**

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