OPINION...

Striped Bass Stock Assessment Shows We Are in Trouble

STRIPED BASS NEED US NOW MORE THAN EVER

by Tony Friedrich

Many striped bass anglers up and down the coast are very concerned about the status of the stock. Last month, a stock assessment workshop (SAW) held a public webinar, where a Stock Assessment Review Committee (SARC) was provided an opportunity to review the science surrounding the benchmark stock assessment set to come out in February 2019 at the ASMFC meeting. There is a lot of explaining to do in order to understand what I'm about to show you.

First and foremost, the SARC/SAW conclusions on the status of striped bass still have a very long process ahead. The final assessment and peer-review reports are still in draft. The main report will include the peer-review as well as potential changes from the Striped Bass Technical Committee. So, while the science is clearly there, we have a lot of obstacles to face before something meaningful can be done to save our beloved striped bass.

I'd like to revisit 2012 when harvest was reduced on the coast by 25% and in the Chesapeake Bay by 20.5%. Those reductions should have been in the neighborhood of 34%. But, **the young of the year numbers for the 2011-year class came out and showed one of the best recruiting years on record**.

The 2011-year class was supposed to save the stock. It was also a huge excuse not to take the cuts we needed. Furthermore, the bay states used the fact that female stripers start leaving the Chesapeake at age 3. So, it is a predominately male fishery. As the stock is managed on the population of spawning age females, males don't really count in the grand scheme of things.

So, rather than do what was needed, the reduction was chipped away to 25% and 20.5% respectively. All the coastal states besides New Jersey met the goal. The bay states, in particular, Maryland did not. In 2012, Maryland anglers harvested 1.26 million pounds of striped bass. As the robust 2011-year class matured, the harvest skyrocketed to 4.3 million pounds in 2016.

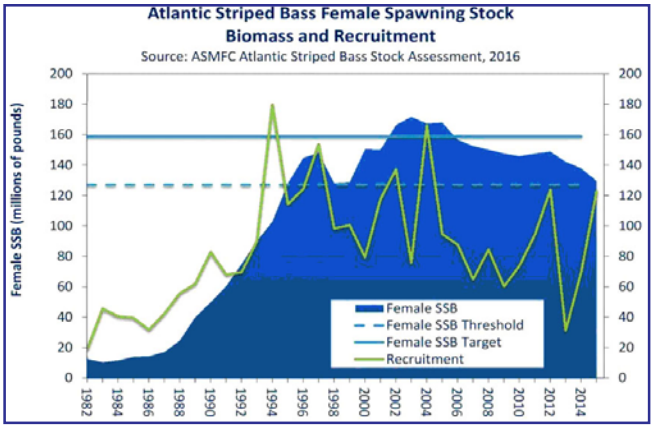
I'll ask the folks from the coast one very simple question. Did you see a dramatic rise in the number of striped bass in the 28 to 32-inch range? If you didn't, it is because Maryland anglers slaughtered the year class as soon as it became legal to do so. Apparently, not all the females leave at age 3.

The threshold female spawning stock biomass was based on its abundance in 1995. That makes a lot of sense to me. 1995 was the year the stock was declared recovered. It should be a valuable memory to hold dear. 1995 represents a time when all of the sacrifice played out in the most important fishery in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast coming back from the brink.

Did you see a dramatic rise in the number of striped bass in the 28 to 32-inch range? If you didn't, it is because <u>Maryland anglers slaughtered</u> the huge 2011-year class as soon as it became legal to do so, and overfished their quota taking 4.3 million pounds in 2016.

I do some work in the clean water arena. One of the greatest tricks ever played is to shift baseline. When an entity doesn't meet water quality standards, the standards can always be lowered. That's a lot easier than doing the hard work needed to meet the standard. Attempts have already been made to shift the baseline for striped bass.

About a year ago, I started hearing whispers in various meetings.



Striped bass are managed on biological reference points (BRPs). The dotted line is the threshold and the stock of spawning females that cannot fall below this number. Note that this chart is based on pounds of fish. *You will need to remember this morning forward.*

People were saying that the current biological reference points (BRPs) were unattainable. Then, things got worse. Entire models were developed for alternate management approaches. As you can guess, these models would have allowed for greater harvest.

I want you all to consider the ramifications of these events. If the BRP's are adjusted, that will be the new normal. If the threshold is lowered, 2018 is the new norm… shifting baselines at its best. The alternate models failed peer review at SARC/SAW. We dodged a bullet. It is striking to think that biologists would work so hard to make striped bass fishing worse, but that was the task that they were given by the Striped Bass Management Board. So the threat is still there. **(to page 27)**