

Of Slower Boats and Faster Fishing

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."



About a week ago, I was invited to speak at a local fishing club, to give them an update about changes in the regulations and laws that might affect their fishing. After all of the upcoming changes to this year's regulations were fully discussed, the conversation inevitably arrived at the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2017 or, as it's better known, the infamous "Modern Fish Act."

I described how that legislation sought to abolish annual catch limits recreational fisheries, and delay the rebuilding of important recreational stocks, with an aside about how Modern Fish Act supporters celebrated the recreational overfishing of Gulf of Mexico red snapper this year. By the time I was done, I saw a roomful of folks shaking their heads, with more than one asking something like "How can the industry be so stupid, to put their own futures at risk?"

The way I explained it, in a bit less detail, went a little something like this:

I've been fishing for a very long time.

How long?

Let's just say that when I started kindergarten in the fall of '59, I already sort-of knew how to cast. I wasn't good at it, but I could stand on the shore of a local town park and put my pieces of sandworm out where flounders could find them with a minimum of backlashes (because yes, I was using a revolving-spool reel—and old Pflueger Trump that still resides in my basement somewhere).

In the 58 years that have passed since then, I've seen a lot of things change. Boats are faster. Tackle is better.

Electronics that weren't even dreamed of in the Sputnik era are now—well, let's put it this way: I've got a color depthfinder with "structure scan" and GPS set up on a canoe...

And all of those changes affect how we view the biggest change of all—how we perceive a "good day" of fishing.

Back in the '60s, anglers seemed to have the odds set against them, and yet they caught fish—and caught them in numbers—largely without fishfinders, GPS (or its predecessor LORAN), graphite rods, braided lines or boats that cruised at 30-knots-plus.

Angling was primarily local; when I was young, my father bought an 18-foot Lyman Islander, a lapstrake wooden boat with a 60-horsepower engine. While small by today's standards, it was the biggest boat allowed to tie up at the town dock back then; anything larger had to be moored in open water. It seemed a generation beyond the 14-foot rowboats that made up most of the fleet.

We rarely fished more than two or three miles from the dock, and a trip from our Connecticut shore "all the way" across the Sound to Long Island seemed, at the time, almost like a crossing to Europe. Yet we caught all the fish that we wanted, and more.

We caught winter flounder year-round, or at least any time but the actual winter, when the boats were on land and the

harbors locked in ice. There was no need to chum, or to look for bars and holes on an LCD display; during spring and fall seasons, you just went onto the "flats"—mud-bottomed expanses alongside the dredged channel—tossed out an anchor and dropped down your bait, and the flounder would come. Usually by the pailfull, sometimes by the bushel and sometimes—when things were slow—just by the dozen or two.

Go to the same places today, at the same times, and you'd be lucky to land just two. Not two pailfulls, not two dozen, just two. And if everybody aboard got their two fish, you'd say that you did really well.

I talked about that sort of thing to the club, and about what "good fishing" and what that really means.

We tend to say we had a "good day" when we catch a lot of fish and, if we're talking about foodfish species like black sea bass, haddock, rockfish or snapper, when we come back to the dock with a cooler that is substantially heavier than it was in the morning. On those good days, we'll thoughtlessly comment that "there's a lot of fish out there" without thinking about how far we had to travel, and how much time, fuel and other resources we had to expend to have that success.

In a lot of cases, if we stopped to think about it, we'd realize that we're working a lot harder, going a lot farther and expending a lot more resources than we used to, in order to catch the same number of fish.

That should cause us a bit of concern.

Last summer, when the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission held meetings on new, more restrictive tautog management measures, party and charter boat captains flooded the New York meeting in an undisciplined mob, cursing and complaining that such measures weren't needed, because "There are plenty of blackfish [another, local name for tautog] in Long Island Sound!"

A party boat captain who sails out of Huntington, which sits almost directly across the Sound from my one-time Connecticut home, talked at great length about how many fish his customers were catching, and how healthy he believed the population to be.

I was the only person in the room who appeared to disagree, and who supported more restrictive measures. Based on my experience, the population has, in fact, crashed. I have a friend in Connecticut who I've fished with since the '70s; he gave up fishing for tautog a few years ago, because they had grown so scarce.

At first, I was disgusted with the other folks in the room, thinking that they were just denying reality so that they could milk a few more dollars out of a declining resource before fish grew too scarce to exploit. But as I thought about it a little more, I realized that we were just seeing things from very different perspectives.

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