

A Ticking Time Bomb

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."



At first glance, it all looks OK.

Here on Long Island, Fire Island Inlet is still filled with boats fishing for fluke on sunny July afternoons. The artificial reef that New York built just offshore is still be crowded with boats; the state even enhanced the reef, and a number of others, last season, with a sunken vessels and many tons of debris that will provide new fishing places for anglers.

Farther offshore, boats hover above long-sunken wrecks, seeking whatever might hide among their rusting hulls and rotting timbers.

As the waters cooled and autumn settles in, wader-clad surfcasters still dot the shores, and boats still troll slowly along the beaches.

Based on such sights, it would appear that in New York, saltwater fishing is thriving. But that appearance is probably wrong.

The quality of recreational fishing along New York's coast has long been in decline

Although a few species, such as black sea bass and scup, seem to be thriving, the state's anglers, and its angling industry, have been losing fishing opportunities for at least thirty years. Now, we face the very real chance that things will get worse, as some of New York's most important recreational species fall into decline.

New York is not alone. What is happening here is happening in neighboring states, throughout the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions.

Some fish, of course, are already gone

Thirty-five years ago, New York anglers took home an estimated 14.5 million winter flounder in a single season. Back then, there were no size limits, bag limits or seasons; the unofficial start of the flounder season was March 17, St. Patrick's Day, although a few party boats would start fishing sooner, and some pier and private boat anglers began roving the bays soon after the ice melted off, whenever the sun was warm enough to make it seem worthwhile.

Last spring, New York anglers caught so few winter flounder that the National Marine Fisheries Service lacked the data they needed to estimate landings. **The official estimate is just 25 fish**—yes, 25, where more than 14 million were taken not long ago—but NMFS acknowledges that such estimate is wildly inaccurate. Even so, we can bet that the total catch was probably well under a thousand, which would be **less than one-hundredth of one percent** of what had been landed before.

Coastwide, the news isn't much better. 1985 saw 32.2 million winter flounder caught along the entire East Coast; last season, the estimate was about 162,000—a 99.5% reduction. If you take Massachusetts out of the picture—there is still a viable fishery in and around Boston Harbor and Massachusetts Bay—anglers along the rest of the coast only landed 28,000 winter

flounder last year, a **99.9% reduction** from what they caught in 1984.

The loss of the winter flounder cost New York's salt water anglers, and the businesses that support them, the entire month of March and a good part of April, as there isn't much else to fish for at that time. It also impacted the fishing in May, when the migration of winter flounder out of the bay and into the ocean gave anglers, and particularly party boat anglers, one last shot at the popular food fish, and in October, November and even December, when many recreational fishermen again used to catch flounder as they returned to the inshore grounds.

Other states, such as Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Jersey, which once had thriving flounder fisheries, are feeling a similar pain.

Other fisheries haven't collapsed so completely, but are still shadows of what they were three or four decades ago. At one time, New York and its neighboring states hosted a year-round cod fishery. Writer Al Ristori recently described how it was just forty years ago.

"Then there were the cod. At Freeport, the Capt. Al (now sailing out of Pt. Lookout) reported fishing had been 'hot and cold' all week though Wednesday saw between 30 and 40 cod come over the rail with several fish in the 40 lb. catch included in the catch. Blue Fin II...fished an offshore wreck on Dec. 16 that produced 18 cod for 19 men with four over 40 pounds and the pool fish of over 50 pounds. A little further east, the Capt. Scotty from Captree was fishing open bottom...to catch over 20 cod from 20-40 lbs. that Wednesday."

During the height of winter, an angler might still pull a cod or two from the waters southeast of Block Island or out at Cox's Ledge. Sometimes—although it never really happened last year—a boat, or even the fleet, still happens across a concentration of fish and everyone limits out, mostly catching little "market" cod, and a pool fish that often don't break 15 pounds. But the South Shore of Long Island is largely dead, and the days when party boats loaded with fares sailed from New York, Connecticut and Rhode Island ports all twelve months of the year, and reliably caught cod even during the height of summer, are long gone.

Also gone is the winter fishery for ling and whiting, more properly known as red and silver hake, in New York Bight. At its height, the fishery went on both day and night, with party boats making up almost all of the fleet.

Ristori describes that fishing, too, saying, "The *Long Island Fisherman* magazine was reporting 'terrific' ling and whiting fishing. 'Catches run 50 or 60 fish per angler with 95% of the catch made up of whiting running 1-4 lbs.'"

He ruefully notes that, "One angler's catch of whiting in those days probably exceeds all of what is now hooked throughout the year on bottom fishing boats." (to page 16)