

## WITEK: TIME BOMB (from page 7)

That observation is probably true. NMFS harvest estimates show that in 1981, anglers in the Mid-Atlantic, but almost all from New York and New Jersey, landed about 744,000 whiting, and by then the fishery was already well into its downward spiral. 1982, when about 595,000 fish were landed, was the last good year. The bottom fell out after that, with the catch estimate for 2017 just 82 fish (although, once again, the data is so scarce that the estimate is not reliable).

With the decline of the cod and the loss of the whiting, fishermen and that businesses that support them could scratch most of December, January and February off their calendars, too.

I won't even describe what has happened offshore. I've been chasing shark and tuna and such since the '70s, and watched the bluewater action sprint downhill, too; bigeye tuna and mako sharks are both in serious trouble. That doesn't affect most anglers, who stick close to shore, but it does take another option away from the for-hire fleet, and hurts the tackle shops and gas docks, too, because fishing offshore is expensive in terms of both fuel and gear. There are also a lot fewer party boat tuna trips being offered these days.

So New York anglers have seen their fishery, which used to provide pretty good action throughout the year, whittled down to perhaps seven months, and some of those are not too productive.

Their summer season is built mostly around fluke (summer flounder), with black sea bass and scup in supporting roles, a few bluefish and, along most of the coast, a late June/early July run of larger striped bass. Fluke season closes at the end of September, at which point striped bass and bluefish, along with some tautog ("blackfish"), support the great majority of anglers who fish from private boats or from shore; those three fish support a good chunk of the for-hire fleet, too.

Thus, the complex of fish that supports the recreational fishery has shrunk, in terms of both species and time. And it seems that there may be a ticking time bomb that could blow apart most of the supports that remain.

Right now, anglers in the northeast and mid-Atlantic are waiting for the release of benchmark stock assessments for both striped bass and summer flounder, the two most important recreational fish in the region.

Such release is being delayed by the current government shutdown, but will happen eventually, and when it does, the news may not be good.

There are already a lot of rumors circulating around the striped bass assessment; while nothing is certain at this point, it appears that the stock is overfished and that overfishing is occurring along the coast (although perhaps not in Chesapeake Bay). At the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, managers are already debating whether they ought to rebuild the stock and address such overfishing, assuming such problems exist, or whether they should rewrite the management plan to redefine what "overfishing" and an "overfished stock" mean, and so tell the world that the current stock size and harvest rate are not really bad at all.

If they do that, it will reduce the number of older, larger, more fecund fish in the spawning stock, and make the stock more vulnerable to collapse. But it will allow folks to kill more bass today.

### And the bomb will keep ticking along...

There are also problems with summer flounder. The population experienced at least six consecutive years of below-average spawning success; it has, as a result, declined, to the point that managers feared that it could become overfished. Remedial measures were put in place, and hopefully have done some good. If they have, and if recruitment has improved, the stock should begin to rebuild. But if that's not the case, the benchmark assessment may tell us that the stock has become overfished. If that occurs, a rebuilding plan will have to be put in place; any such plan would probably further restrict landings.

That won't go over well with some fishermen, and any such plan will be opposed by many in the fishing industry. At that point, do fishery managers make a real effort to rebuild the stock, knowing that doing so will cause economic distress? Or do they skirt as close to the edge of the law as they can, and try to minimize additional restrictions, even if taking that course might put the fish at further risk?

Already, here in New York, summer flounder landings fell from nearly 1.2 million fish in 2017 to about 0.56 million fish last season. That's a 53% drop in harvest in just one year, even though anglers were able to keep more fish, and enjoyed a longer season, in 2018. (to page 39)



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