

Different Fisheries, Different Management Goals

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."

Five years ago, when this blog was still new, I wrote a series criticizing "A Vision for Managing America's Saltwater Recreational Fisheries," the report that kicked off the campaign to pass the so-called "Modern Fish Act."

That report, like the Modern Fish Act itself, mostly got things wrong, as it recommended weakening the conservation and management measures of federal fishery law in order to provide what it called "more access," which really meant more landings, for recreational fishermen. Yet, as I noted back then, the report was a strangely schizophrenic document which, at the same time that it tried to increase anglers' kill, recognized that an abundance of fish, which can only come from conservation-oriented management, is what the recreational fishery really needs if it is to thrive.

That much (and a few other things, like greater protection for forage fish), the report got right. It's hard to argue with its statement that "federal fishery managers set catch limits for recreational and commercial fishing at or near maximum sustainable yield. While this may be an ideal management strategy for commercial fishing, where harvesting the maximum biomass is desired, it is not an effective management tool for saltwater recreational fishing. Recreational anglers are more focused on abundance and size, structure of the fisheries, and opportunities to get out on the water..."

Recently, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* published a paper that sets forth that concept in more formal terms.

It argues that "policymakers and managers need to acknowledge the overriding recreational nature of most recreational fishing—fish are part of a multifaceted leisure experience, not primarily a source of food or personal income as in commercial fisheries. There is a need to move beyond dated paradigms, such as [maximum sustainable yield], to manage recreational fisheries. Countries such as the United States, however, continue to manage federal marine fisheries involving large recreational fishing sectors for [maximum sustainable yield]. A focus on bioeconomic management targets and models that measure the impact of policies on fishing opportunities and their quality as valued by the anglers themselves provide a much-needed step in the right direction."

The paper also notes that, "Beyond nutritional benefits, recreational fisheries provide a range of psychological, social, educational, and economic benefits to fishers and society that are not associated with commercial fisheries."

At the same time, the paper's authors acknowledge that "Despite high release rates, fishing for food is a strong motive

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and justification for recreational fisheries," and recognize that **"in many localities recreational landings now rival or even exceed the biomass removals by commercial fishermen."**

Thus, fishery managers must try to balance the tension between the many anglers who fish for reasons largely unconnected to harvest, and those anglers who fish mostly for food and place significant stress on fish populations.

As the paper notes, "a single fishery typically cannot satisfy the often-conflicting objectives of a heterogeneous group of recreational fishers."

It then goes on to explain how, in freshwater fisheries, the fact that discreet populations of fish reside in different water bodies allows each body of water to be managed to suit a particular subset of the angling community.

That works well for inland fishery managers, but on the ocean, where

a diverse array of anglers often target the same stock of fish, such an approach isn't an option.

At that point, it becomes necessary to change the formula a bit. Instead of managing a particular body of water to best suit a particular group of anglers, salt water managers must manage fish stocks to accord with how they are used.

With some species, that's easy.

Fish such as silver hake, better known as "whiting," yellowtail flounder and Atlantic herring are primarily commercial targets. Yes, anglers catch a few, but recreational landings are so low, and the recreational fishery so small, that such species can safely be managed for yield.

Other fish, such as tarpon, little tunny ("false albacore") and marlin, are recreational species. They might support small commercial fisheries and/or fall victim to commercial discard mortality, but both their social and their economic value is skewed so far toward the recreational sector that managing for anything less than abundance would be absurd.

FISH THAT SERVE MULTIPLE NEEDS

The problem comes with all of those stocks that lie somewhere in the middle, those that support both commercial and recreational fisheries, and are sought by anglers for both food and for sport. In such cases, managers need to take a deeper look, to see where the real balance of uses might be.

Scup, a small demersal fish caught off the southern New England and the upper Mid-Atlantic coasts, exemplify one extreme of such "mixed-use" fisheries. **(to page 39)**

