

Two old salts talk Block Island fishing and it's not all good

by TODD CORAYER



At the February meeting of the RI Saltwater Anglers Association, **Don Smith** and **Peter Vican** engaged a crowd of 150 fishermen and women with a conversation about fish and fishing, being tied to the Jamestown bridge, 50- fish nights and clear signs of change around Block Island. These two men silenced a room, made it laugh and filled it with ideas.



Don Smith and Peter Vican talk strippers and a changing environment

It helped that together they've landed two of the largest striped bass ever caught with rod and reel.



Don Smith and Peter Vican with new RI record 75.40 lbs striped bass that he landed on July 19, 2008. He would go on to beat that record with a 77.4 lb monster bass on 6/19/11.

he would tie off to the old Jamestown Bridge and fish through the night. No cell phone, no VHF (until a few years later when his Dad conceded to his wife's concerns), no one to help start the motor or sight buoys on his way home.

Incredibly, somehow young people managed to survive while learning real life skills, not thumb and forefinger dances for imaginary battles on make believe video islands.

Don fished the hell out of that sweet spot under the bridge, "Until they blew it up," he said, in 2006 which may have helped connect these two characters.

Both saw the island as a new frontier. At some point, they started fishing together and staying partners has been an equal ingredient to their success.

"Was the fishing better on Block Island? Not really, but the fish were bigger," Peter said. Back in the day, they only seriously fished at night, in tight to the island's curvaceous and bony southern shore or maybe out deeper, depending on circumstances and bait.

Peter said, "If we were fishing for bass in the daytime, it was

because we didn't go home from the night before."

But that was then.

"I will say, in the last few years, the night fishing has gotten pretty bad out there," Peter said.

Did you ever think you'd hear that? For years, they put so many marks on their plotter where they caught bass over 40 pounds, they created a record and started seeing patterns.

"80 or 90% of the fish we used to see had the disease on them" Peter said about years past. "Now we see very little of them. Are they dead, are they too weak to migrate?" he wonders.

That's powerful stuff.

He continued, "The Hudson (River) fish, we're seeing Hudson fish going farther north, which means the last few years the Cape Cod Canal has been loaded with fish that used to go to Block Island."

"We never used to see big bass in the daylight out there, now you'll see forty pound bass in the daylight chasing bait," Don said.

"The whole type of fishing has changed out there," Peter said, adding, "The striped bass are not feeding on the bottom like they used to because there's no bait there. It's tougher to find those fish at night. The best fishing we're seeing is at five in the morning, just at dawn."



"The Church" an infamous spot on Block Island's southwest corner where big bass lurk

One cause might be the blanketing of invasive black sea bass. The rock piles, like their old reliable spot nicknamed, The Nest, are covered with sea bass. "They are like a vacuum," Don said. "The Nest was a winner and in the last five years, I bet we haven't taken two fish from that spot," he added.

For perspective, The Nest is where Peter landed that record 77.4 pound bass. They're seeing five pound schoolies where they never did before.

Black sea bass might be too fast for lazy bass. They're consuming all the bait. They're pushing out strippers. They're headed up here en mass from New York and New Jersey without the yellow plates. That's an ominous thought R.I. for striper fishermen.

Obviously gear is critical. Peter's boat has a complete Furuno system, which, all things being equal, he said was worth about three thousand dollars more than his boat. Classic.

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