

EEZ BASSING BOLOGNA, AGAIN

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I was back out at Block Island recently, fishing by boat, and working on an upcoming editorial project. This was the first time I'd fished the Pork Chop by boat in a few seasons, and it pains me to say that little if anything has changed in regards to the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and striped bass.

Arriving an hour or so before sunset, we set up our first drift well inside the 3-mile line. The tide slacked out just after dark, then took its sweet time getting moving with a short-but-slow peak current sometime later that produced a flurry of action.

The night's score was good but not great, especially by Block Island terms, but it wasn't the catching that had me upset; it was the ongoing blatant disregard and what I feel is downright neglect for the law.

While I was part of 4 - or at most 5 - boats fishing legally, I counted between a dozen and 20 boats that were not just outside the 3-mile line, they showed blatant disregard for it.

As a matter of some brief background, on October 31, 1984, Federal waters (3 miles from the coastline) were designated as off-limits for the possession and targeting of Atlantic striped bass by way of the *Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act* — P.L. 98-613. This effectively enacted a protection zone outside of 3 miles from shore in the EEZ for striped bass to do their fishy thing, hopefully providing a safe haven for them to grow and continue to re-build the stock.

Unfortunately, when this law was enacted it was done so with a hard-and-fast line at 3 miles from shore in most places, with little to no thought put into how that line actually plays out in the real world. This meant that Block Island, in that it is an island situated more than 3 miles from the nearest mainland, was in effect an island of legal angling surrounded by waters which were off-limits to both targeting and possession of striped bass.

In order to make it legal for anglers to boat and harvest a striped bass inside 3 miles at Block Island, and then return to port in nearby Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut or New York, the **Block Island Transit Zone** was created which allows for the transport of catch from legal waters, through those which are illegal for possession, and back into legal waters once again.

Technically one must remove any angling devices (hooks, lures, etc.) from the end of any rigged rods while in the transit zone and also in possession of striped bass, as well as refrain from stopping the boat outside of a medical or mechanical emergency.

Now there are two major takeaways I want you get from the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, and that is that both the possession and targeting of Atlantic striped bass is illegal in Federal waters.

This means that you can be outside 3 miles from shore, honestly targeting other species such as fluke, black sea bass or bluefin tuna, and have a striped bass jump on your line (it must then be released as quickly and safely as possible) and not face any sort of prosecution.

However, this fact is used as an excuse to break the law, and it is NOTHING MORE THAN AN EXCUSE, as anglers claim to be targeting Species A when in reality they're nothing more than striped bass pirates.

I've heard so many tricks employed by dirty anglers to set up for the inevitable when boarded by the Coast Guard that it would make your head spin. As in so many other scenarios, if these unscrupulous anglers spent half as much time learning to become a better angler as they did in breaking the law, they'd probably be twice the angler in the end!

And then you have those who not-so-freely admit to fishing in the EEZ for striped bass, but they do so when called out for it under the guise of practicing catch and release. Here is where I must refer you back to the letter of the law wherein it states, "*Federal waters were designated as off-limits for the possession and targeting of Atlantic striped bass...*"

See there? It is BOTH the possession and targeting which is prohibited. So to simply say you're not doing anything wrong by just playing catch and release, especially in today's world where half of the annual harvest is attributed to dead discards (fish which perish after being released) is doubly irresponsible.

In the end I cannot say that I am wholly in favor or opposition to the line as it is currently drawn when it comes to the waters between Block Island and Montauk Point; that is a subject for another day. But what I can say, with absolute certainty, is that for the time being the law is the law and to simply ignore it with any excuse you can come up with so that you can sleep at night is not right in my book. If you object to the law, then take appropriate steps to change it. After all, isn't that a large part of what this country was founded on?

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