

WITEK: CATCH & RELEASE (from page 6)

Since the late 1980s, anglers have, on average, released about 90% of their catch. Even though only 9% of those fish are expected to die after release, 9% of millions of bass turns out to be a very large number. Yet high release rates, and the related release mortality, has been a characteristic of the fishery for a very long time.

Still, some members of the Management Board, mainly those who lived most of their lives in the past century rather than this one, and are still trying to cling to the management paradigms of their younger years, view catch-and-kill as the highest and best use of striped bass. Perhaps the most strident of those is Tom Fote, the Governor's Appointee from New Jersey, who raged at the May Management Board meeting that

"We can't bury our heads in the sand over this issue. We need to look at, how do we basically stop those huge numbers of fish being killed, which denies the public fish to take home to eat, because we're catch and releasing them, and killing so many fish..."

Two months earlier, at another Management Board meeting called to address new regulations requiring the use of circle hooks when fishing for striped bass with bait, Fote opposed a requirement that anglers who catch striped bass on bait while using traditional J-hooks release such fish. The proposed release requirement was meant to discourage anglers from trying to circumvent the circle hook rules by catching striped bass while supposedly targeting other species, but Fote would have none of that, saying

"I've got the Governor's Surf Fishing Tournament coming up on May 23rd. Summer flounder season will be open at that time from the surf also. I help people fishing in [sic] squid to catch summer flounder, particularly if they want to eat it.

"If they accidentally catch a striped bass, of the probably 600 kids that I have fishing, because it's a family tournament. I will have to make them release the fish, and I don't want to really do that...a lot of kids catch their first striped bass as an incidental catch."

It was a strange sort of argument. After all, a lot of kids' first striped bass are under the minimum size limit, but Fote *hopefully* wouldn't argue that kids shouldn't have to release short strippers. Deputy Chief Kurt Blanchard, representing the ASMFC's Law Enforcement Committee, made the perfect riposte to Fote's comment, saying

"There is no way that we would have the ability to enforce incidental take at that point..."

"To allow for that one-time effort that we may have an incidental catch, [is] to throw everything else out the window..."

"The other discussion about first time takes and things like that. I really think that this is, I spoke to this on the [Law Enforcement] Committee. I really think that *this is our opportunity to talk to young folks, and others that may be new to the fisheries, to talk about what conservation means*, and take the opportunity to highlight why you're returning that fish, caught incidentally, back to the resource, and what the means for the future of the stock." (to page 32)

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