

# The Culture Wars of the Striped Bass Debate

by CHARLES WITEK



New York held its first meeting on the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s draft addendum to the striped bass management plan last month. As I sat in the crowd listening to the various people speak, it became clear that much of the striped bass debate - and of any fisheries management debate, for that matter - boils down to a near-tribal clash between cultures rather than a mere discussion of facts and ideas.

In the old days, the lines were pretty simple. Anglers sat on one side of the room, and commercial fishermen on the other. The anglers blamed the commercials for killing too many fish, and the commercials responded that they were working for a living, and providing food for folks’ tables, while anglers merely engaged in play. Fights were more about allocation than about the health of the fish stocks themselves.

That sort of thing went on for a very long time, and for some fishermen now on the far side of sixty, it’s still going on today.

But today’s debate has become far more complex than a mere commercial/recreational fight.

These days, anglers may be more likely to point accusing fingers at other anglers rather than at the commercial crowd, and while some commercial fishermen also engage in internecine fights, or pick bones with anglers, others - particularly the younger fishermen who want to stay in the business for the next thirty or so years - no longer raise knee-jerk objections to new regulations, and grudgingly support the management process.



Last month, the commercial bass fishermen said little or nothing at all.

But the recreational sector turned out in all of its diverse glory, making a plethora of comments that made it clear that the

angling sector doesn’t, and almost certainly never will, present a united front, and that the frequent calls for “unity” that we hear either represent an impossible dream or are a badly disguised effort from folks who are really saying, “Let’s all do things my way.”

It wasn’t just a simple contest between those who emphasized harvest versus those who promoted conservation. It wasn’t the typical science-deniers squared off against those who supported the findings in the most recent stock assessment. It also wasn’t a reprise of past meetings, where fishing-related businesses opposed management measures, while a majority of fishermen wanted to see actions taken, although there was a bit of that going ‘round.

Startlingly, there wasn’t even one explicit comment that “the

science is bad,” although there were hints of that in some people’s comments.

Instead, what we saw that night was in many ways a clash of cultures, worldviews and personal values, with elements reminiscent of football-team rivalries and, unfortunately, other elements that evoked images of street thugs defending their turf. While no one was physically removed from the room, there was enough going on that the law enforcement folks present had to issue a warning or two.

### The worst behavior came from those who seemed to feel the most entitled to harvest fish.

One for-hire captain rambled on for close to ten minutes (when the limit on each person was three), managing to loft personal attacks at several people, including me, without ever offering coherent comments on the specific options that the ASMFC wanted us all to discuss.

In the end, he seemed to justify his behavior by making the dubious statement that “God put the striped bass on Earth for people to use for food,” and suggesting that conservation-minded anglers perhaps worshipped the fish as some sort of “pagan god.”

The possibility that the bass evolved to survive in an ecosystem where human predation - and particularly technology-assisted human predation - was not a threat to their survival is apparently not a part of that deity-driven worldview.

And, of course, if you’re divinely chosen to kill fish for food, you’re relieved of any responsibility to maintain the future health of the stock. That places you in direct conflict with conservation advocates, who are concerned that today’s excessive landings can hurt tomorrow’s striped bass fishery. Thus, it’s OK to treat such apostates in a decidedly un-Christian manner, jeering them as they speak, taunting them when they return to their seats, attacking them personally and even inviting them outside for a brawl. (That’s one of the times that enforcement stepped in, to cool the “chosen one” down...)

### Catch & Release - Playing With Food?

The argument that people are entitled to take bass for food also leads to another dispute as to whether catch-and-release is ethical, as about 9% of all bass released don’t survive the experience. So should anglers just “play with” their fish if they’re not intending to eat them? There are those who say “No.” When I attended NMFS’ Recreational Fishing Summit in the spring of 2018, a representative of western Pacific anglers felt very strongly about that, saying “We don’t play with our food.”

Although he wasn’t talking about striped bass, there are bass fishermen who share the same sentiments.

There are also those who feel economically entitled to harvest fish. While they seek similar results as those who claim a divine right to kill fish, their behavior is notably less erratic and bizarre. (to page 31)