

STRIPER CULTURE WARS (from page 8)

They made a good-faith effort to address the issues set out in the draft addendum, although their focus tended to be on what was best for their businesses, rather than what was best for the long-term health of bass stocks.

In the old days here in New York, and in a few other states today, that has been the default position of the commercial fishing fleet. However, the commercial fleet was notably absent from last Wednesday's meeting, leaving some members of the party and charter boat fleet to hoist the economic entitlement banner on their own.

Those representing the economic entitlement faction tended to support either slot limits that would allow customers to keep a bass between 28 and 35 inches, or perhaps between 30 and 38, or a supposedly "conservation equivalent" proposal not included in the draft addendum that would pair a 30-inch minimum size with a slightly shortened season that would run from May 1-November 30, and prohibit paid crew from retaining fish. The thought was that such limits would make it more likely that customers could catch a fish to take home, although the request was also couched in terms of avoiding release mortality.

A number of them also supported "sector separation," leading to regulations for the for-hire fleet that were different from those imposed on surf and private-boat anglers—because the for-hire fleet, after all, does feel economically entitled to special treatment.

However, what ought to be noted is that there is not only a culture clash in the greater angling community, but in the charter boat community as well. A number of charter boat captains, who cater to customers more interested in the experience of striped bass fishing than in killing fish to take home. But honesty compels me to say that the angling community isn't without its conflicts, too.

There is certainly a subset of anglers who feels entitled to take fish home, regardless of the health of the stock. Some will tell you up front that they will kill as many big bass as the law will allow which, if they're good anglers, is theoretically one fish per day from the middle of April through mid-December (in New York; many states have no season at all), although it's highly unlikely that anyone fishes every day of the season, and even more unlikely that they catch a legal fish every time they go out.

Some of those folks take their bass home and eat them; far too many illegally sell a least a part of their catch.

There is also a contingent that fish to inflate their egos, and live to post photos of their catch on the Internet, or to drive from tackle shop to tackle shop, hauling out their fish at each stop in the hope of having their photo pinned to the tackle shop wall.

Such anglers tend to oppose conservation measures for their own reasons although, since they rarely care enough to show up at meetings, their views are seldom heard.

Most anglers I meet, and most at the meetings, tend to take a more reasonable stance. They like to catch fish, and they like to take one or more fish home every season, but they don't want to do anything that might impair the bass' future. They want to see healthy stocks for the rest of their lives, and want to hand those stocks down for their kids and their grandkids to enjoy.

These are the people captured in the NMFS survey, who consider fishing with family and friends their most important goal, although just catching fish doesn't trail far behind. While they might like to eat bass from time to time, they're responsible enough not to elevate that desire above the needs of the striped bass itself.

A lot of surfcasters fall into that category, as they've learned through bitter experience that their limited, shorebound access to the resource means that bass have to be abundant if they are to catch them on anything like a regular basis. Boat fishermen can easily move from place to place, and can catch bass on the bottom in 60 feet of water as easily as they can catch them when the fish are blitzing bait in the shallows. Boat-based anglers can go to the fish, while surfcasters have to wait until the fish comes to them, which is far more likely when the population is healthy.

A lot of private boat anglers fall into that category, too, although they still kill more fish than the surfcasting crowd.

From there, we move on to the anglers who, like the late Lee Wulff, believe that, "**Game fish are too valuable to be caught only once.**"

They fish almost entirely for the experience, and seldom if ever take home a striped bass, although they are generally tolerant of those who do.

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