



It's No Fluke... There's No Fluke!

by Nick Sannicandro



If the 2020 season has shown me anything thus far, it is that fluke has been trending downward, in both size and numbers, during the past few seasons.

Speaking to fisherman from both boat and shore, they have all expressed the same concern, that fluke are increasingly harder to find, and keepers are even harder to come by.

Yes, there have been some monsters posted in the yearlong and special tournaments, and that is wonderful to see, but the overwhelming majority agree that fluke are becoming scarce.

Now around this time last year it was practically a foregone conclusion that striped bass would be either shut down or drastically changed in terms of limits/keepers. The internet and magazines were abuzz for months about this.

Here we have another very popular species of fish and not once has there been an article written, an internet topic started, or a political meeting scheduled to discuss the protection of this species of fish.

Striped Bass matter, yes they do very much, but why so much focus on just one species? All fish matter!

Rising water temperatures should not be the issue, since summer flounder are found anywhere from Nova Scotia to Florida. They are not a very fast developing fish, and will not begin to migrate until their second year of life when they are only around 10 inches.

The commercial industry however, has flounder as one of the most sought after fish, with about 13.7 million pounds taken in 2018. Gillnets and trawlers are the most common ways of mass catching fluke. Unfortunately with gill nets, the fish often do not survive even if being undersized, which has long baffled me as to how recreational fisherman are held to such a high standard when gill nets kill everything they touch, legal size/season or not.

The 80's saw fluke at its highest levels commercially anywhere between 21 to 38 million pounds and has never

recovered, crashing to a low in the early 90's and is currently near an all-time low, with trends projecting downward since 2011.

A 2013 and 2014 investigation found that large quantities of flounder were illegally taken as a "quota" through the Research Set Aside program, but there are thoughts that many other illegal poaching has occurred of a similar nature.

The Northeast stock assessment, last done in 2018, claims that summer flounder is not overfished nor experiencing overfishing, but does note a decrease in abundance and size since the late 2000's.

This is what's troubling about these data assessments. They report the fish are not being overfished, yet have seen a decrease in size and abundance. What does that tell us? What do your eyes tell you? Have you seen more fluke than ever this year? Have they all had great size to them?

These same reports said that bluefish were experiencing overfishing, yet this season bluefish have been in Rhode Island in some of the best numbers in years, and with some great size to them as well!

And therein lies the problem. We seem to rely too much on studies and charts, recreational limits/seasons that conflict with commercial seasons/limits (often giving commercial a greater advantage, earlier seasons, smaller minimum sizes, etc.) that have proven to be ineffective.

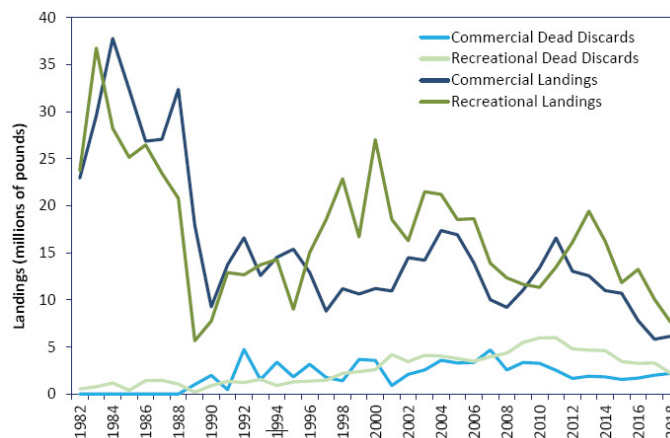
We often wait until things are drastically bad until the charts catch up to what is really happening, and then try to make drastic changes, instead of making rulings based on what our eyes tell us, based on what our root levels tell us at local bait shops.

Hopefully soon, before it is too late, the same crowds that were terrified that striped bass will soon become extinct, will vocalize and stand up for the rights of fluke the same way.

And hopefully we don't let scup and black sea bass continue to lull us to sleep in their abundance and we don't see them falling the way of the fluke. Because in the end, striped bass aren't the only fish that matter!

Summer Flounder Commercial and Recreational Landings and Discards

Source: 66th Northeast Stock Assessment Workshop, 2018



Summer Flounder Spawning Stock Biomass and Recruitment

Source: 66th Northeast Stock Assessment Workshop, 2018

