

Hittinger: No Fluke (from page 1)

We normally don't target cod more than about one trip during August, but this year we targeted cod 7 days during August alone and this trend has continued into September.

We're not the only ones making a move away from fluke and concentrating on other species. Many of the boats that we talk to have done the same because of the very low availability of fluke in our local waters.

CLIMATE CHANGE OR OVERFISHING?

What is causing this very low population of fluke at a time when all of the scientists are telling us that due to ocean warming Southern New England waters are seeing an increase in warm water species like black sea bass, fluke, and scup and a decrease in cooler water species like winter flounder, cod and mackerel?

My opinion is that overfishing has much more to do with low abundance of fluke (and probably several other species) than ocean warming. The unbelievable part is that this overfishing, in my opinion, has been caused by regulatory mismanagement at the Regional Council level.

Decisions made at the New England Council drove stocks of cod on George's Bank so low that most of the fish biomass on the Bank in recent years is dogfish and skate. But with cod stocks so low on George's a dramatic reduction in commercial fishing for cod was recently implemented and we are seeing some benefit from those restrictions. This is because our cod population is part of the cod population centered on George's Bank.

MRIP IS CAUSE?

The fluke population is facing much greater commercial pressure since the beginning of 2019 when the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) recalibrated estimates of recreational catch going back more than 10 years and decided that recreational fishers had actually caught about double the fish originally estimated. This essentially led them to conclude that there must actually be twice as many fish in the ocean.

Based on this the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council decided that they would **increase the commercial quota for fluke by 68%**. This huge increase in quota has led to drastically greater commercial fishing pressure.

As an example, during most summers between 2005 and 2018 commercial fishing for fluke was allowed only 4 or 5 days per week and the daily limit was 50 pounds, to a maximum of 100 pounds, for most of June, July and August.

During 2019 and 2020 commercial fishing for fluke was allowed 7 days per week with a limit of 100 pounds per day and, because commercial fishermen were not able to catch enough fluke to fill this larger quota, daily commercial limits were increased during August 2020 to 150, then 200 and finally 300 pounds per day.

Yes, that is correct – **because there were so few fluke around that commercial fishermen were not catching enough to fill the quota, the daily catch limit was increased to encourage an increase in landings so that the commercial quota would not go unharvested!**

Meanwhile, those of us who are not dragging the bottom to catch fluke are switching to a different target species.



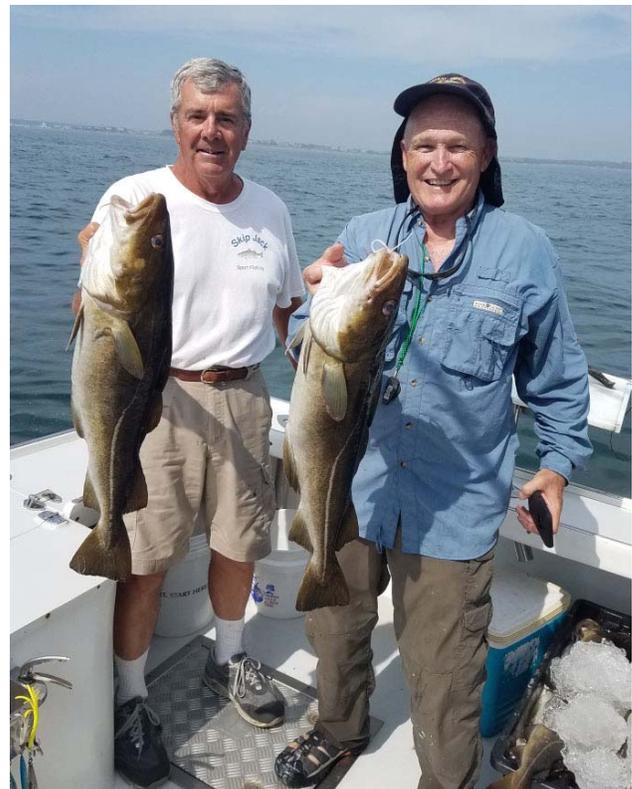
COD BITE ENCOURAGING

But how can it be that cod are at a higher level within 15 to 20 miles of Point Judith than are fluke?

Remember that according to the scientists the water is warming and cod are moving away. Well, as I stated earlier, the dramatic restrictions on commercial cod fishing to our north and east are helping our cod population rebound.

This situation makes me wonder about other fish species like winter flounder, weakfish (squeteague) and pollack. All of these species were very common catches in local waters as recently as the 1980s and 90s. Although we have seen 1 pollack and 3 winter flounder in the past two years we haven't caught a single weakfish in over ten years.

If our fish abundance is being driven by climate change then why don't we see more weakfish instead of less? I believe overfishing is the answer. (to page 19)



RISAA Members Rich Hittinger and Bob Murray with two 9 pound cod they caught off south Block Island while fishing aboard *Skipjack* on August 23.