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## Striper Recovery: Not

*It's about rebirth, not destruction.*

**By Ted Williams**

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**The Atlantic Ocean was full of striped bass** in the early 1970s when I fished with master electrician-curmudgeon Jak Knowles. If they were over 16 inches in length, you could kill as many as you wanted. We did. He would insist that we toast each big fish with SS Pierce Red Label, which was okay except in blitzes.

We didn't believe in selling our fish, but we sure believed in eating them. And after our spring trip Knowles would give one to each of his customers, then claim as income tax deductions the cost of tackle, gas and near-weekly repairs to his ancient green Willys. Once an IRS agent visited him, then backed out of his house, hands in the air and shouting: "Okay. Okay. Okay." That's how it was when you argued with Knowles.

Carrying our fish was impossible, so Knowles would order me to tow them through surf and estuaries. I didn't argue. I can still feel the rope cutting into my shoulder as I raced the ebbing tide under gaudy Nantucket dawns that seemed endless as youth and the great, silver fish strung out like stars across the continental shelf from the Carolinas to the Maritimes.

No one told us you could kill too many stripers. In fact, the managers told us you couldn't. In 1973 when I complained to a high-ranking official of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries about the commercial harvest of striped bass, which peaked that year at 15 million pounds, he declared that there would always be "plenty of striped bass for both commercial and recreational fishermen."

With that, the Atlantic Coast striped bass population crashed. By 1980, instead of catching 40 fish a trip, you might catch five a season. Basically, they were gone. The states had proven their inability to protect the resource, so in 1984 Congress approved the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, which required the Secretary of Commerce to impose a moratorium on fishing for striped bass in any state not in compliance with a management plan hatched by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

The result, for the first time ever, was striper management. Suddenly there were highly restrictive commercial and recreational harvest regulations. For most states there was a recreational bag limit of one large fish a day. Over the next 11 years stripers proliferated. Knowles, who died on the dock with his boots on at 86, lived just long enough to see stripers start to come back. In the early 1990s, throwing long flies from boats, I began having 40-fish outings again. But with the size limit set at 36 inches, I was lucky to eat one fish a season.

All the gushing and oozing in the hook-and-bullet press about the managers' impressive "success story" made about as much sense to me as decorating a company commander for busting up drug traffic in his barracks. Then in 1995 ASMFC declared the stock "fully recovered" and approved Amendment V to the Atlantic Striped Bass Fishery Management Plan, thereby significantly increasing recreational and commercial harvest. When I told the managers that it was a reckless decision, they assured me that there would be plenty of fish for both commercial and recreational fishermen.

They didn't have it right this time either. Managing a healthy stock for abundance instead of maximum sustained yield--that is, maximum dead poundage on the dock--is utterly alien to the way fisheries managers think. Never have they attempted it; never has a constituency asked them to attempt it. The sensible, laudable and politically

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hopeless crusade by recreational anglers to win federal gamefish status for striped bass along the Atlantic Coast repulses managers. "It's wrong-headed," proclaimed one official of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

But what was wrong-headed was Amendment V. It might have worked had the number of recreational striper fishermen remained constant. (The commercial harvest has not increased as rapidly because it's mostly controlled by quotas.) In the 1970s, even before the crash, striper anglers were secretive and scarce--at least the serious ones who caught the fish. Few used boats. You saw them mostly on darkened beaches, hunched along the foam line like black-crowned night herons.

Even as stripers came surging back, populations of bluefish, tautog, winter flounder, scup, sea bass, sharks and tunas were bottoming out. Both commercial and recreational pressure shifted to stripers because they were available. In all other regions of the country recreational fishing pressure is falling off. But on the Atlantic Coast, thanks in large measure to the resurgence of stripers, it's increasing. In 1999, 13,218,936 pounds of striped bass were harvested by recreational fishermen--more than any other marine fish. Angler striped-bass-trip expenditures, adjusted for inflation, increased from \$85 million in 1981 to \$560 million in 1996--an annual growth of 35 percent. During the same period the number of directed striped bass trips increased from roughly one million to seven million--an average annual increase of 38 percent. The Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey, administered by NMFS, estimated an increase in sportfishing trips for striped bass from 247,000 in 1990 to 691,000 in 1997.

Strict one- or two-fish bag limits are meaningless under that kind of pressure. So, for the last seven years, we've been killing about all the fish as soon as they hit legal size. Legal size varies from state to state and sometimes from month to month, but it's usually around 28 inches, except in Delaware, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina where it's usually around 18 inches. "Since Amendment V we've seen the population trajectory flatten out," says John Carmichael, a North Carolina state fisheries biologist who serves on ASMFC's Striped Bass Stock Assessment Subcommittee. "But there seems to be plenty of spawning stock out there to maintain the population. We're getting good year classes, a lot of recruits coming in. The question now comes down to what do we want to get out of the population. Is the goal to just get a lot of fish, which is what we're producing right now, or do you want to also get bigger, older fish? If it's the latter, then of course you have to fish them less."

Gary Shepherd, the National Marine Fisheries Commission's rep on ASMFC's Striped Bass Technical Committee, agrees with Carmichael. "In terms of total number of eggs, the spawning stock is now probably as large as it's ever been," he told me. "But the big fish are getting cropped off. Most of them are gone by the age of about 15, and stripers can live to 30. So we're limiting their life span to about half."

That raises a disturbing question: Can a population with a grossly skewed individual size- and age-structure--in which virtually all individuals are removed before they have attained more than 50 percent of their age and growth potential--be said to be "recovered"? I submit that the answer is no. When a species evolves the capacity to spawn 15 or 20 times in a lifetime, there are good reasons for it even if we don't understand them. One of those reasons might be a hedge against natural catastrophes and resultant spawning failures, always a danger with anadromous fish and particularly with stripers, which are famous for largely missing year classes. But under present management they spawn once, and that's the end of them.

What's more, some biologists believe there's evidence of genetic selection for slow-growing and small fish. The larger fish also produce more eggs, so chances that the large-fish gene will be passed on to the population are nil under present management. Shepherd isn't sure if the biologists have it right about genetic selection. "Probably the only way to find out if they're right is to not fish on striped bass for 20 years," he says. "And if hundred pounders start showing up again, they're wrong. But you're not going to do that experiment."

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**In 1999 commercial landings of striped bass** totaled 1,103,812 fish, recreational landings 1,328,665 fish. But those stats are deceiving. For one thing, managers estimate that anglers caught an additional 12,514,721 fish that they released. For another, although commercial fishermen take just under half the fish, they are outnumbered by anglers by a factor of something like 500 to one. In my home state of Massachusetts, for example, there were 1,711 commercial striper fishermen on the water in 2000. In 1996, the most recent year for which data is available, the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that 886,000 anglers fished for stripers in Massachusetts.

Commercial striper fishermen take far fewer fish in the Northeast than they do in Virginia and Maryland. In 2000, commercials in Massachusetts harvested 40,256 fish weighing 779,736 pounds as compared with an estimated 175,533 fish weighing 2.5-million pounds by anglers. Commercial striper fishing in Massachusetts is relatively clean because it's all hook-and-line. On the other hand, it takes out the most valuable brood stock--fish over 34 inches, of which 98.4 percent are females. Scarcely anyone depends on stripers for income, and a lot of the people involved are recreational anglers paying for their gasoline. You send in your \$95, and you can start bashing. It's the same, or worse, in Rhode Island, New York and North Carolina. In Delaware, Maryland and Virginia--where a few people do depend on stripers--annual commercial quotas are, respectively: 193,447 pounds, 2,439,550 pounds and 1,701,748 pounds. And commercial fishermen from Maryland and Virginia who operate on the Potomac get to kill an additional 883,850 pounds.

The reason so few commercial fishermen can take so many fish, the reason we have reckless management like Amendment V and the reason gamefish status for striped bass gets shouted down everywhere outside New Jersey is that no one knows who the recreational fishermen are. They have a few effective organizations such as Coastal Conservation Associations and the Recreational Fishing Alliance but basically, sport anglers--whether they use bait, hardware or flies--are nonentities, political eunuchs. If they were required to purchase a saltwater fishing license--perhaps one for all 15 ASMFC states--there would be a record of their names, phone numbers and addresses and they could be organized to influence managers and politicians. But instead, they rail against the expense. To save the cost of one streamer fly or one surface popper anglers are willing to squander the health of the Atlantic Coast striper stock. It's hard to work up much sympathy for them or to get very angry at ASMFC for kowtowing to powerful, articulate, well-organized commercial fishermen. Anglers have no right to vent their spleens about the commercial slaughter if they don't try to limit their own kill, which is even larger. The "harvest" is bad enough, but it gets lots worse when you figure in needless mortality of the "discards," as the managers call released fish.

North of Boston, where Ipswich Bay collects the Merrimack River, I never fail to encounter a procession of dead and dying striped bass floating in or out on the tide. Source: bait anglers releasing shorts as they wait for their one 28-incher. Only a tiny fraction of the damaged discards ever show on the surface, reports Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries director Paul Diodati, and he has counted as many as 100 floaters on one tide. Using artificial plugs and single hooks baited with sand eels and sea worms, Diodati and his colleagues conducted a striper-hooking mortality study in a five-acre saltwater impoundment. They reported a 26 percent death-rate for single baited hooks and an overall death-rate of nine percent. Diodati's agency estimates that in 2000 Massachusetts anglers released seven million stripers, 571,000 of which died. Coastwide, recreational hooking mortality was estimated by ASMFC to be 1,031,454 fish.

A minimum size limit, at least where bait fishing is allowed, is stupid and wasteful. That's not to say that a maximum size limit--by which anglers have to release, say, fish bigger than 25 inches--is without dangers. It runs the risk of increasing harvest (because small fish are more vulnerable to angling) and thereby creating even more meat fishermen than already exist. But, with proper safeguards such as seasons, a maximum size limit could drastically limit hooking mortality because meat fishermen would get their fish and go home. Although Maine, Connecticut and New Jersey have figured this out, they can't stand the idea of not killing the big female breeders. In Maine you can kill one fish between 20 and 26 inches or one over 40; in Connecticut it's one between 24 and

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32 inches and one over 41; and in New Jersey it's one between 24 and 28 inches and one over 28. "A slot limit is very appealing when there's a big group of fish moving through the fishery in that slot size," remarks the Striped Bass Technical Committee's Gary Shepherd. "But the trick is to keep it fixed. And if there's a poor group of fish, you have to stick with that too, take the good with the bad."

Rip Cunningham, editor of Salt Water Sportsman magazine, has crunched some numbers for his state of Massachusetts, but the general idea applies coastwide. "Assume a slot limit 24-28 inches," he says. "In Massachusetts we are currently releasing 2,230,049 fish of this size each season. With [at least] eight percent mortality, 178,400 of them die. We're also taking 175,533 fish over 28 inches. So, with that slot limit, you could take 354,000 fish without any additional impact to the stock. If you had 23-28-inch slot limit, it goes up to over 400,000 fish; with a 22-28-inch slot limit it goes up to 450,000. You'd be doing nothing you aren't doing today except allowing people to take home a fish."

Circle hooks could go a long way toward reducing hooking mortality. And if you can train yourself to let the fish hook itself rather than hauling back on the rod, these hooks actually catch more fish. In virtually all cases they penetrate the lip only. There is ample evidence that circle hooks save fish of all species, but managers are reluctant to push them on the public because they're new and because no one has bothered to work up a definition of a circle hook--an easy-enough task. The situation is reminiscent of steel shot for waterfowl: It was new; the ammo companies wouldn't make it because it wasn't mandatory, and it wasn't mandatory because the ammo companies didn't make it. To its great credit the Recreational Fishing Alliance is one fishing outfit loudly demanding mandatory circle hooks for bait fishing.

Finally, on charter and party boats both intentional and unintentional mortality need to be drastically trimmed. Clients are defined as "recreational" anglers but they are a different breed of cat than the folks you see bobbing around the saltchuck or trudging flats and beaches. "Charter and party boats need a one-fish limit and only six fish a day--not per trip, but per day," declares legendary Montauk fly-fishing guide David Blinken. "Now they're allowed two fish per person per trip. They [the charters] have six guys on the boat plus the captain and mate, and they're taking 12 to 20 fish a day, all big breeders. They get the guys with the gold chains, beer bellies and slicked-back hair. I know lots of captains who want to release, but their clients want to kill, kill, kill. If the boats all switch at the same time, no one will lose business."

**I worry about the future of striped bass** because I know managers and their agencies. Rarely do they act for the resource. More often they react to the last and loudest special interest that shouted at them. Sometimes it's less their fault than the fault of our Pollyannaish public-comment process, which wrongly assumes the public knows something about how to manage fish.

"With overall abundance high, you start getting into opinion," says Shepherd. "You ask a waterman in Chesapeake Bay what he wants to see. He wants to see as many 18- to 25-inch fish as the system can produce. You talk to a surfcaster on Cape Cod about what he wants to see, and he says as many 50-pound fish as the system can produce." The trouble is that Shepherd and his colleagues are going to be hearing a great deal from watermen and relatively little from anglers. In this prediction, I pray I am proved incorrect everywhere--but especially on the Hudson River. Now that this, the greatest striper source after Chesapeake Bay, is less contaminated with PCBs Governor George Pataki thinks it would be a dandy idea to open up commercial fishing: "Commercial fishing on the Hudson was a way of life for generations of New Yorkers. We owe it to today's New Yorkers to assess whether it's time to reestablish this tradition."

A state-assembled advisory committee has declared that Hudson River shad fishermen, who accidentally kill about 23,000 pounds of stripers each season, should be allowed to sell them. "Being a bycatch in progress, it

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shouldn't have a major effect, since these fish are being caught now and discarded," proclaims a spokesman for the New York Dept. of Environmental Conservation. But, of course it would have a major effect. Only about 20 of the roughly 300 permitted shad fishing enterprises actually fish. With stripers, which bring far more than shad per pound, they'd get back on the water and launch a horrendous, targeted "bycatch" fishery.

"If you take more fish from the Hudson, you're going to have to give some up somewhere else," comments ASMFC's John Carmichael. "We're taking about what can be taken."

By the time you read this the ASMFC will probably have finalized its draft of Amendment VI, a document that will serve as the source for public comments and hearings up and down the coast. If the final version turns out to be as bad as Amendment V, anglers will have no one to blame but themselves.

The draft version of Amendment VI will be posted on ASMFC's website: [www.asmfc.org](http://www.asmfc.org). You can comment on it there or by writing: Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, 1444 Eye Street, NW, 6th Floor, Washington, DC 20005.

ASMFC wants to know how you think it should manage striped bass. If you don't say anything now, don't blame it for listening to those who do.