

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

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TESTIMONY RELATIVE TO ATLANTIC STRIPED BASS CONSERVATION ACT REAUTHORIZATION AND RELATED ISSUES FOR HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS HEARING AT TOMS RIVER, NJ--APRIL 28,2000

Thanks for the opportunity to submit testimony relative to the most important inshore game fish from the Mid-Atlantic through New England. The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act was a milestone in fisheries management as the federal government finally got involved in assuring conservation of species which migrate primarily inshore along the coast and cross through many jurisdictions.

When I first became involved with striper conservation about 35 years ago, each state had it's own regulations which were designed not really for conservation but to ensure maximum harvest. When I innocently suggested to those involved in management at the time that the federal government should get involved in this migratory fishery for the common good, just as in interstate commerce, I was assured that the states would never give up their rights. There was little incentive for them to do so at the time, as striped bass were abundant and a series of good spawning years kept the population high despite virtually unlimited harvest of a readily available inshore species.

I was a voice in the wilderness during the 1960s while attempting to have the striped bass made a game fish in New York. At the time I testified before the state legislature that stripers, despite their present abundance, would not continue to multiply like Al Capp's schmoos in order to satisfy everyone's desires. We narrowly missed achieving game fish status when the Assembly speaker refused to let a bill already passed unanimously in the Senate come to the floor for a vote--and my prediction came true little more than a decade later when overfishing combined with a lack of spawning success resulted in the crisis which finally resulted in the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act.

That crisis could have been mitigated if the states had taken conservation actions beforehand. Given the huge economic value of the striper as a game fish and its relatively minor value as a commercial fish, I still feel that we're playing with dynamite by continuing the attempt to balance the two. Though the Act has led to one of the great marine conservation success stories of the 1990s, scientists issued warnings of overfishing of spawning size stripers last year and cutbacks were imposed this year. Yet, if the commercial portion of the catch were eliminated there would be no such need for denying the public their opportunity

for a relatively small harvest.

In looking back at the huge quantities of stripers landed prior to the Act, when the release of any bass over 16 inches along the coast (18 inches in New Jersey) or 12 inches in Chesapeake Bay was unusual, the recent recreational harvest based on two bass at 28 inches has been miniscule as release rates have been in the 90% range.

Yet, there are so many recreational fishermen seeking stripers that even under those circumstances the 8% mortality assumed for released bass is creating a possible overfishing condition on what was assumed to be a recovered stock. The first and most important step to avoid future problems and to provide the recreational fishing public with the fishery they deserve should be passage of Rep. Frank Pallone's striped bass game fish bill. It was over a century ago that Congress ensured preservation of recreational fishing in the nation's fresh waters by passing the Black Bass Act prohibiting interstate commerce in those game fish. It's well past time that Congress takes similar bold action in regard to the striped bass.

The Act has provided funds with which to conduct studies of striped bass, and Rep. Saxton deserves our thanks for bringing such previously ignored problems as striper interaction with bluefish to the forefront. That is but the tip of the iceberg in relation to realistic marine fisheries management. Ever since serving on the first Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, I've been urging a move toward ecosystem management rather than the present system of managing each species as if they existed independently in the ocean.

he ASMFC and the councils are seeking to rebuild all predator populations to historic highs, while completely ignoring prey species. Freshwater management, even in bodies as large as the Great Lakes, is based on balancing predators and prey. When I asked a saltwater manager what a vastly increased bluefish population would be consuming he assumed that if they found enough to eat when they were previously superabundant they'll probably do so again. That reply overlooked the fact that the sand eels which were available in huge quantities then have almost disappeared from the Mid-Atlantic. More importantly, it illustrates the fact that there is virtually no knowledge of predator-prey relationships in marine fisheries management at this time. How can we manage major food and game species when managers know practically nothing about sand eels and bay anchovies while continuing to manage menhaden to maximize commercial harvest rather than balancing that catch with the needs of the predators they're also trying to build up?

Though the ocean is a far more complicated than even the largest of lakes, the present state of computers should provide the opportunity to manage marine fisheries in similar fashion. I sincerely feel it's only a matter of priorities. When Congress became committed to putting a man on the moon, it was not only done but also accomplished within a decade. Today we probably know more about the surface of the moon than we do about the oceans that surround us and I regard that as a sad commentary on our priorities. If during this period of prosperity and budget surpluses we cannot find the funds with which to fuel a race to create marine ecosystem management the alternative may well be a future crisis which will impose the necessity to do so at much greater costs to society.

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