





# Striped Bass *Past, Present & Future*

BY ED MITCHELL

*Above us the northern cross was hanging high in the night sky, cupped in the ancient glow of the milky way. We had been on the beach since dusk and even now in the small hours, no one wanted to head home. Hundreds of stripers were feeding quietly less than 50 feet from the shore. I had yet to see one less than 10 pounds landed and many were better than twice that size—big, strong fish, migrants following a timeless course northward along the coast.*

*As you released one of these thick-shouldered warriors, you couldn't help feeling a surge of emotion. For beyond the pure electricity of being near these magnificent creatures, every angler among us also was intensely aware of something equally poignant: That night a small piece of history was unfolding before our eyes. After 20 long years, striped bass stocks had finally recovered from the abyss. And, with luck, we now stand at the threshold of the halcyon years, the finest period for striped bass the Atlantic Coast has ever seen. Our gut reaction was to uncork the champagne and scream from the highest dune, toasting these wild fish on their way.*

*But there are still hidden currents yet to wade. Stripers are back, but what will their future be?*

**I**F HISTORY IS ANY JUDGE, the road ahead will be difficult, full of dangerous twists and turns. The last time striped bass returned after a long hiatus was back in the 1930s. They were greeted then with enthusiasm but hardly respect or common sense. For roughly the next 40 years we whacked away at their critical spawning grounds with an endless barrage of insults, including toxic contaminants, agricultural runoff, poor sewage treatment and outright destruction.

But the most destructive insult of all was overfishing. Stripers were hit hard and often in an insane fiasco fueled by short-sighted desire for profit and aided by equally short-sighted fisheries management policies. And don't think for a moment that only full-time commercial fisherman were to blame; dollar signs also blazed in the eyes of many so-called sport anglers, who set out night after night to convert every bass they could catch into cash.

Naturally we all hope that people are going to be smarter this time around, but you can't



just sit back with your fingers crossed. For one thing, with bluefish on the downswing and weakfish only a distant memory—courtesy of commercial practices in North Carolina—inshore recreational anglers are forced to focus heavily on bass.

Remember too that commercial fishermen coast-wide are in serious economic trouble after having depleted one species after another. You can bet your finest fly rod the recovering bass populations will soon get their attention. As if that were not enough, believe it or not, I have already heard people complaining that bass are going to be a real nuisance. Expect to hear them whine that stripers will eat too many flounder or too many shad or too many crabs or even the paint right off the bottom of your boat.

So there is still a lot of work that needs to be done if we want to keep our waters teeming with stripers. First, we absolutely must demand that fisheries management professionals allow the public a greater say in how the resource is used. Too often the future of

*Stripers are back, but what lies at the end of the rainbow?*



**H**ouse Resolution 393 would ban commercial fishing for striped bass on the Atlantic Coast. To get a copy of the bill, write to the House Document Room, B-18 Annex II, Washington D.C. 20515, or call (202) 225-3456.

If you wish to support this legislation, contact the member of Congress from your district and ask him or her to support the bill by co-signing it. Explain why it's in the best interests of the resource and most Americans.

Next express your opinions to the House Subcommittee on Fisheries Management, where the bill resides at this writing. The subcommittee chairman is Representative Thomas Manton of New York. Other subcommittee members are Representatives William J. Hughes (New Jersey), Jolene Unsoeld (Washington), Gene Taylor (Mississippi), H. Martin Lancaster (North Carolina), Dan Hamburg (California), Maria Cantwell (Washington), Earl Hutto (Florida), Gerry Studds (Massachusetts), Don Young (Alaska), Howard Coble (North Carolina), Arthur Ravenel, Jr. (South Carolina), Jack Kingston (Georgia), and Jack Fields (Texas).

You may contact any of these representatives by writing the Subcommittee on Fisheries Management, House Annex II, Room 579, Washington, D.C. 20515. You can also keep up to date on the status of the bill by calling (202) 226-3514.

A very important person to reach is the chairman of the full House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, parent of the Subcommittee on Fisheries Management. That person is Representative Gary Studds of Massachusetts, who also is a member of the subcommittee. You may write him in care of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, 1334 Longworth House Office Bldg., Washington D.C. 20515 or call (202) 225-4047.

striped bass and other fish has been decided behind closed doors.

Here's an example: The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the regulatory body that sets striped-bass management policy, voted to declare striped bass stocks fully recovered as of January 1995. That in turn will allow them to remove present conservation restrictions and greatly liberalize the rules. To that end they are putting the finishing touches on what they call Amendment #5 to the Striped Bass Management Plan. It provides the official framework for managing a restored striper population and recommends doubling present harvests.

Amendment #5 was to undergo a complete series of public reviews by last November 30th. With a couple of isolated exceptions, it never happened. The ASFMC then rescheduled public hearings for April of this year, but again failed to organize them.

My home state of Connecticut was fortunate enough to have one preliminary hearing in January. About 100 anglers attended on a cold, snowy night and resoundingly rejected the idea of doubling the harvest. At the time we all thought that when full hearings took place along the Atlantic Coast, anglers in other

states would voice the same sentiments and force the ASFMC to rethink the plan. Yet it now appears that full public hearings may never be held and the final plan will simply be voted into place by the ASFMC.

At the same time we are busy convincing fisheries managers to be more open, we must also convince them to be far more conservation-minded. Too often they have listened to the drumbeats of the commercial fishing industry and turned a deaf ear to common sense. As a direct result, many marine species are in grave trouble, and a few, like haddock, are even judged commercially extinct. Truth be known, striped bass are the only species the ASFMC has ever saved, and in that case they had to throw up their hands and ask Congress to do the real work. Somehow we have to stop this endless overexploitation of our precious resources.

It's time to make striped bass a game fish along the entire Atlantic Coast and remove once and for all the financial incentive to kill wild stripers. Many enlightened states already have done this, including Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. But in Massachusetts,





*The author  
with a  
striper in  
preparation  
for release.*

If you live along the Atlantic seaboard, you should be aware that your state regularly sends representatives to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC). Call your state department of natural resources or equivalent agency and find out who represents your state. Furthermore, ask if anyone from your state sits on the ASFMC's Striped Bass Management Committee.

Once you know your state's representatives to the ASMFC, contact them and let them know you are interested in stronger marine conservation. Tell them you (and your fishing club, if you belong to one) are eager to be kept informed of changes in marine regulations and how your state's delegates to the ASMFC vote on the various issues.

You can also contact the ASMFC directly by writing Mr. John Dunnigan, executive director, Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, 1776 Massachusetts Ave., Washington D.C. 20036. The phone number is (202) 452-8700.

Rhode Island, New York, Virginia, North Carolina and especially Maryland, home to the stripers' primary spawning grounds, the story is different.

One solution is for anglers in those states to work hard to change local laws. But there's another answer, too: A bill pending in the U.S. House of Representatives would stop all commercial fishing for striped bass along the Atlantic Coast. At this writing, the bill, H.R. 393, is before the House subcommittee on fisheries management.

How can you justify passage of such legislation? Easy: We already raise more than 7 million pounds of striped bass for the commercial market through fish farming in this country, so there is no real market need to kill wild stripers. And coastal stripers, unlike bass raised in aquaculture, are contaminated with PCBs. In fact, at the moment there really isn't enough market to fully support a large increase in the wild bass harvest. Increasing the catch under Amendment #5 would likely just lower the price per pound, which is hardly what commercial fishermen want to see happen.

That's reason enough to pass H.R. 393, but there's more: Recreational saltwater fishing has a far greater positive impact on the

coastal economy than commercial striped-bass fishing. It's estimated that saltwater anglers in the United States spend \$5 billion annually on retail items. In 1991 we spent \$635 million just on bluefish items alone. By that measure, it's easy to see that a wild striper is worth far more swimming in the surf than dead in a net.

Still, to make it fair, I personally feel a modest compensation package for those commercial fisherman most affected can and should be worked out. Striped bass presently bring between \$1.25 and \$1.50 a pound at the dock. If you deduct operating expenses, a commercial fisherman may earn about \$1 a pound from his catch. Multiply that by the 1.7 million pounds presently being harvested annually, or even the 3 million to 4 million pounds of stripers commercial fishermen might get under Amendment #5, and you will see the resulting total is not insurmountable. I venture to say that if every recreational saltwater angler on the Atlantic Coast chipped in 50 cents to \$1 a year, we could easily buy out commercial striped-bass fishermen.

Then we could turn to our fisheries managers, look them straight in the eye and demand the best damn fishery on earth!