

SWORDFISHING: BACK TO THE FUTURE

By Ken Hinman

Now that we're seeing the first signs of a turnaround in the 30-year decline of Atlantic swordfish – not just on paper, but in the water - the battle for positioning in a recovered fishery is officially underway.

We've been hearing that swordfish are on the rebound since 1999, the last time scientists crunched the numbers for an Atlantic-wide stock assessment and reported the first upward trend in the population in about 25 years. But it didn't seem real until 2001 when, simultaneously, sport anglers and commercial harpooners celebrated banner years, with catches like they hadn't seen in, well, about 25 years.

For those of us who've devoted a big chunk of the last two decades to restoring this magnificent fish to its former glory, the resurgence of the rod-and-reel and harpoon fisheries is what we've been looking forward to. From the beginning of swordfish conservation efforts in the United States (circa 1983), a principal goal has been to revive the resource in order to restore and expand the handgear fisheries, driven into exile by the advent of longlining in the 1960s and '70s.

Sight-Fishing Challenge

As swordfish disappeared from coastal waters, so did most of the fishermen who'd pursued them in the age-old manner. When the fish were big and plentiful, they could be hunted like whales. In fact, swordfishing was more like hunting than fishing, since the fisherman had to sight the fish at the surface, where larger adults (usually well over 200 pounds) would bask in the warmer surface waters after a night of heavy feeding. Spotting the unmistakable double wake of the broadbill's dorsal and tail fins, anglers would show the bait, try and entice the behemoth to take it, and then endure an hours-long battle of wits and brute strength.

"It was intellectually challenging," remembers Chris Weld, chairman of the National Coalition for Marine Conservation (NCMC). "The fun of it was to be out on the wide ocean, hunting for a fish that was very elusive. Statistically, catching a swordfish was a rare event. There weren't very many people looking for them. There were very few people who knew what they were doing. We all had to learn by doing. In the first place, you had to go find the fish. In the second place, you had to get them to strike and take the bait, which was very difficult."

In those days (the '50s and '60s), according to Weld, an angler might spot 25 finning swords on a good day off New England or Long Island. But as multi-hook longlines took the place of harpoons in the commercial fishery, sightings dwindled to just a few and then none. Those fishermen who chased swordfish in the good old days will never forget it, and they miss it enormously. "They were great fighters, and smart," says Weld. "We regarded the fish as a thinking opponent." Thinking about what was lost for so many years is what kept anglers like Weld and organizations like the NCMC working so hard to get it back.

Then last summer, while the longline fleet hit on hard times, other fishermen re-emerged from the shadows. With news of big fish swimming on the surface off Cape Cod, harpooners took to the water and returned with dozens of swordfish. Northern anglers were inspired to dust off their tackle and try hunting again. In the southeast (mainly off Florida), where rod-and-reelers fish more like longliners, drifting squid-rigged lines at night, they reported unprecedented catches. The actual numbers are sketchy given the nature of the fishery, nevertheless east coast anglers were once again leaving the dock in search of swordfish and occasionally coming home happy.

Onerous Regulations

Although this was exciting news in most circles, when it reached government officials in Washington, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) responded as only it could. On December 26th, NMFS issued proposed regulations to restrict the recreational catch. The rules suggest a new monitoring program, whereby fishermen would call in on a toll-free line to report any fish landed. Fine. The U.S. is fishing under a restricted quota, and all fish must be counted against it. But the agency also wants to impose a retention limit of one swordfish, per boat, per trip. It's one thing to more effectively monitor what NMFS calls the "expanding" recreational fishery. It's quite another to put a lid on it now. Anglers, needless to say, were incredulous.

"There should be no limit on the number of swordfish that may be landed by the recreational or harpoon sectors." So says a joint letter to NMFS drafted by the NCMC and co-signed by the Recreational Fishing Alliance, American Sportfishing Association, National Fishing Association and International Game Fish Association. "The longline sector of the fishery is subject to the ICCAT-mandated minimum size and must halt fishing only if and when the total U.S. quota is filled. The recreational fishery should be managed under the same provisions, especially since NMFS should be fostering the growth of this fishery during the rebuilding period."

Adds the IGFA's Mike Leech: "If swordfish landings are limited by a trip limit, NMFS will never know what the full potential of the recreational fishery is." He points out that "a swordfish caught by an angler on rod and reel is far better environmentally and economically (than a longline caught fish), and rod and reel catches of swordfish will never be a cause of overfishing. NMFS should be promoting recreational swordfishing, not proposing ways to reduce the already insignificant sport landings."

To add insult to injury, NMFS had the gall to justify limits on rod-and-reel swordfishing by citing ICCAT's warning that increased catches of small fish – the Florida catches are occurring in areas permanently closed to longlining to protect juveniles - could slow the recovery. ICCAT first made this warning in 1990 when it set a minimum size limit. But NMFS did absolutely nothing to protect young fish – even as U.S. commercial fishermen killed and discarded between 30,000 and 40,000 undersize fish every year; a total of 36,902 as recently as 2000 – until the agency was sued by the NCMC in 1999. Closed areas implemented as a result in 2001 are projected to reduce juvenile bycatch by 42%, which means longline mortality may remain at over 20,000 fish per year.

In other words, it took all of 10 years for NMFS to rein in the longliners. Yet as soon as anglers start catching swordfish again – and we're talking at most hundreds of fish here, not thousands, and the little ones are released alive, whereas 75% of longline caught juveniles are thrown back dead – NMFS clamps down in a matter of months. Is it just me, or is there something terribly out of whack here?

Quota Not in Danger

Unlike other billfish, legal size swordfish are brought to the dock and then to the table. NMFS says it's worried that some of these fish will be sold illegally. But that's an enforcement issue. And there is no conservation issue here. There is no danger this small number of fish will put us over a quota that the longline fleet has been unable to fill since at least 1997, sometimes coming up hundreds of tons short. In 2001, we landed only about half our allocation. So where's the problem?

The problem is NMFS' lack of vision. Apparently the agency's forgotten what the swordfish fishery used to look like and why we're restoring it. Since the rod-and-reel fishery will never amount to more than a minimal portion of the total catch, it can't be viewed as a threat to longline dominance. On the other hand, because anglers led the crusade for conservation and restrictions on longlining, and because they are benefiting from rebuilding while the longliners still struggle, I don't know how else to interpret the NMFS action other than as pure vindictiveness.

Be that as it may, it is the rise in harpoon catch that is probably the more significant event. NMFS hasn't proposed a boat limit here, but we might expect one if landings continue to increase in 2002. The longline industry, which takes about 99% of the swordfish catch, has derided the notion of a return to commercial harpooning. Last June a spokesman claimed that "(n)o other gear type (other than longlines) – including the U.S. 'handgear' category – has ever had the capacity to catch more than about 10% of the current U.S. north Atlantic swordfish quota. In other words, realistically, there exist no other gear alternatives to longline fishing that could catch the U.S. quota of swordfish."

Wrong! In 1959, the northwest Atlantic harpoon fishery operating off New England and Maritime Canada caught 4,381 metric tons of swordfish, about equal to the current U.S. and Canadian quotas combined. The harpoon fishery averaged well over 2,000 tons a year from the beginning of the last century until the introduction of longlining and the subsequent decline in the 1960s and '70s. The truth is, a recovered population of Atlantic swordfish will be capable of producing yields comparable to the longline fishery; with less efficient gear, without all the bycatch problems and, most importantly, on a sustainable basis.

What NMFS should be doing right now, while the swordfish fishery is in transition toward an anticipated recovery, is creating a vision of what the fishery of the future should look like and work to make it a reality, rather than acting as if this fishery belongs to the longliners and the rest of us are encroaching on their turf. With the longline fishery scaling down, as it must in order to find a place in a changing world, the U.S. should actively promote the growth of other, more sustainable fisheries, not try to smother them.