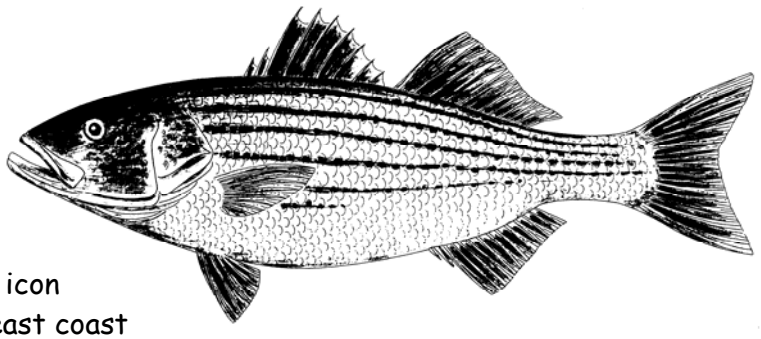
STRIPED BASS



The striped bass has long been a cultural icon of coastal communities along the northeast coast of the United States. Native Americans used to catch the silvery fish in great numbers all the way from Chesapeake Bay to the Gulf of Maine. If they didn't eat the tasty flesh they would use the fish as fertilizer to increase their corn harvests, a trick that later helped the Pilgrims survive two severe winters to gain a foothold in New England after they landed there in 1620. Today the striped bass is one of the most prized game fish along the eastern seaboard and supports thriving recreational and commercial fisheries. Indeed, Atlantic coastal states today are blessed with an abundant supply of *Morone saxatilis*, but such was not always the case. The striper nearly disappeared from coastal waters of the Atlantic, and it took a united, national effort to bring the fish back. The striped bass saga stands as one of the biggest failures and probably the greatest success story in fisheries management.

STRIPED BASS LIVE IN BOTH FRESH AND SALT WATER. The striped bass, also known as striper, rockfish or simply rock, is an anadromous fish. Like salmon, it is born in fresh water rivers but migrates to the ocean to feed and grow before returning to fresh water to spawn at about age four. Unlike salmon, striped bass don't die after spawning and can live 30 years or more and grow to over 100 pounds. Seventy to ninety percent of the east coast population originates in Chesapeake Bay. Stripers migrate north during the summer, where they are caught off Maine and Massachusetts, then migrate south in the fall, wintering in the estuaries of Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina. In spring, they push further upstream into shallow tributaries to spawn.

STRIPER FISHERY COLLAPSES IN THE 1980s. Catches of striped bass stayed fairly constant through the middle of the 20th century, but rose dramatically in the 1960s. Catches peaked at unsustainable levels in the mid-1970s, after years of fish being caught much faster than the population could replace them. With fishery managers too slow to react, by the mid-1980s the striped bass population had crashed. A stock that once yielded an annual harvest of 6 to 8 million pounds of fish was depleted to the point that, in 1989, only 220,000 pounds of fish could be landed. Fishermen and fishery managers alike were stunned that a fish that once was so plentiful could be brought so low. Many worried that it might never come back. The demise of the historic, legendary and extremely valuable striped bass fishery was such a calamity that it sparked a Herculean effort to restore it. States up and down the Atlantic seaboard took the painful but necessary action of declaring moratoriums in their respective fisheries, outlawing most, and in some cases all, harvest.

STRINGENT CONSERVATION MEASURES PAID OFF. In 1995, the stock was officially declared "recovered." The steps taken by states from Maine to North Carolina that drastically reduced or eliminated fishing mortality had turned the fishery around in about five years. The lesson was clear. If you give the fish a break, they will come back. The bigger the break, the

faster the recovery. Although virtually shutting down the recreational and commercial fisheries was hard on already beleaguered industries, the dramatic recovery of the bass has helped rejuvenate coastal communities and today all agree the sacrifice was well worth it.

Dealing with a recovered population presents new challenges for fishery managers, above all sustaining the stock at a size and with an age structure able to support revitalized fisheries. But while managers are squarely addressing the matter of controlling catches, underlying issues have come to light that could jeopardize the striper's recovery.

PROTECTING STRIPER'S FOOD SUPPLY IS KEY. The resounding success in rebuilding striped bass has been followed by worries that the newly resurgent fish are finding too little to eat of their most important prey species – menhaden. The menhaden is a small, silvery, filter-feeding fish omnipresent in the range of striped bass. They are harvested commercially in vast quantities and "reduced" into fish oil and fish meal. In recent years, approximately 500 million pounds of menhaden were harvested annually from the Atlantic, a large portion of which came directly out of the Chesapeake Bay, the striper's primary breeding ground. The diet of large adult striped bass is 70-80% juvenile menhaden, yet the number of juvenile menhaden is at an all-time low. It is questionable whether we can continue to remove menhaden in such large quantities without impacting the breeding stock of striped bass. Watermen frequently see "skinny fish," and many striped bass exhibit signs of disease, possibly caused by malnutrition.

A CAP FOR THE MENHADEN REDUCTION FISHERY. Fearing the collapse of the Chesapeake Bay's striped bass and other menhaden predators such as loons, ospreys, weakfish, and bluefish, fishing and conservation groups joined together in 2004 to urge fishery managers to curtail the menhaden reduction fishery. In 2005, managers agreed to an annual cap of 240 million pounds for the bay catch, the most recent 5-year average. The cap, which is set to expire in 2010, prevents the reduction fishery from expanding while research is conducted to determine a safe and sustainable level of harvest for the long-term, not just in the bay, but coastwide.

THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR MARINE CONSERVATION (NCMC) IS CALLING FOR THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS TO IMPROVE STRIPED BASS CONSERVATION: Management Plans for striped bass, menhaden and other species should be revised to consider predator-prey interactions. Fishery managers must put more precautionary measures into place as the menhaden cap expires and research continues. In the absence of better information, catch limits for key forage species such as menhaden need to be set much more conservatively than under the present single-species regime. The historic spawning river habitats of striped bass and key prey species should be restored to their natural productivity (i.e., reduce polluted run-off, open passage around dams). The use of circle hooks by recreational anglers should be encouraged, along with the use of more selective gear types (such as rod-and-reel) in the commercial fisheries.

For more information, contact the
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