

Live Bluefish Matter

by CHARLES WITEK



Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, "I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim."

Anglers and bluefish have a complicated relationship.

We call them "yellow-eyed demons" when they show up in the surf, attacking lures meant for striped bass. And we call them worse things farther offshore, when they show up to ruin shark baits and mangle carefully-rigged - and expensive - ballyhoo intended for tuna.

But when they burst through the surface of a calm summer sea, leaping completely clear of the water before landing headfirst on a topwater plug, we have to admit, however reluctantly, that they are one of the great gamefish of our northeast coast.

Still, great gamefish aren't always great food fish, and that's certainly true with big blues.

Small bluefish, fresh from the sea and still lean from their travels, can taste pretty good. Even larger ones that have been feeding on squid, sand eels and butterfish in deep ocean waters can be enjoyable. But once bluefish invade inshore waters and begin feeding on menhaden, their flesh becomes too oily and strong-tasting for most people's palates.

Thus, most bluefish caught by anglers today are released. That wasn't always the case.

During the early years of the fishery, recreational fishermen killed most of their catch, even if they had no intention of eating them. I remember boats coming back to the dock in the 1960s and '70s, the anglers on board calling out "Who wants some bluefish?" even before the boats were tied up in their slips.

They got very few takers.

In those days, before states licensed their commercial fishermen, some of the unwanted bluefish were sold to local

restaurants. Some were given to (often, almost forced on) reluctant neighbors, while others fertilized gardens. Far too many ended up in a dumpster or were returned, dead, to the bay.

Because bluefish weren't in much demand as a food fish, the commercial fishery was small; through the 1980s, it only amounted to about 10% of the overall landings. As noted in the initial *Fishery Management Plan for the Bluefish Fishery*, released in 1989, "bluefish comprise a small percentage of all finfish harvested commercially along the Atlantic coast primarily because the

commercial bluefish market is unstable, easily saturated, and characterized by low dockside prices."

Because anglers so dominated bluefish landings, the original fishery management plan allocated 80% of the bluefish harvest to the recreational sector. When the management plan was amended in 1998, the allocation was amended as well, to 83% recreational and 17% commercial, with the proviso that if the commercial quota in any year was less than 10.5 million pounds, and recreational fishermen were not expected to land their entire quota in that year, a portion of the unharvested recreational quota could be transferred to the commercial sector.

That allocation was based on recreational and commercial landings during the years 1981 through 1989.

During those years, anglers in the New England/Mid-Atlantic region still killed most of their bluefish, releasing only 21% of all the fish caught. Since then, a conservation ethic has pervaded the fishery. In the most recent decade, 2008-2017, that release rate has tripled, with 62% of all bluefish caught returned to the water. (to page 31)

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