

Thank God For Bluefish

We should be focusing on fish in the water, rather than extraction



by Capt. John McMurray

While it's probably not great for business for me to admit it, I've gotta be honest, on the striped bass front, it's been tough going this spring.

Lots of small fish around, but those 30-plus inch fish, (I'm talking specifically about the 2011's – the only good year class since 2003) are sparse.

Yes, we've had some good days and better fish here and there – I've done well over 50 trips thus far – but Jamaica Bay has been, ahem, *difficult*. Sure, I'm just talking about my little neck of the woods, and there've been more consistent, albeit short-lived, bites elsewhere, but overall, this spring has been what most consider to be below average.

Why that's the case, well, we can talk about how we've been hammering on the 2011s for a few years now, and we can talk about a declining striped bass population in

general, and how managers are trying to lower the bar on what we consider a "healthy" stock. And sure, we can talk about how menhaden (aka bunker) aggregations are a shadow of what they were in prior years, and that maybe that has something to do with the increase in menhaden harvest we've allowed. But that's all fodder for an entirely separate blog post.

The point is that the striped bass fishing hasn't been great for me. Because I more-or-less built my life around this stuff, as the season materialized I quickly became a pretty miserable person to be around.

Until, one day I looked at my phone and there was a text from my neighbor: "*some pretty cool stuff going on close to home.*" With little hesitation, I grabbed my 9-year-old boy from the couch and we were underway. Within minutes, I knew what he was talking about.

As the sun began to dip over glass like conditions, there were tails – lots of them – almost as far as the eye could see. Big freak'n bluefish cruising, daisy-chaining, and tailing in two-to-three-feet of water.

It only took one precision cast for my boy (he's got mad skills for a kid) before the water exploded.



Oliver with bluefish

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That high-pitched voice he has when he screams "WHOA!" is priceless... and, it is profound. Because that's my DNA right there. I don't think there's ANYTHING that can make me more stoked.

In the space of minutes, my entire disposition, my entire view on life had changed from crappy to awesome.

For the next two hours there was a lot of hooting and hollering as we threw topwater plugs at these tailing fish and witnessed some of the most extraordinarily violent surface strikes I'd ever seen. Thirty-five inch bluefish were airing out to get on the plugs. We ended that day with a solid 18 lb'er (on the BogaGrip), and while we caught *a lot*, we didn't kill one of them.

While the numbers of fish up on that flat ebbed and flowed, I stayed on this bite, putting flyfishers, spin fishers, and of course my kids, on those fish for a solid three weeks. Even had a film crew out and got some sick drone footage, so stay tuned for that.

It was pretty awesome fishing. It saved my spring. And, well, it may have saved me.

Seriously, thank God for bluefish!

And guess what? Out of all those trips, and all those clients, we took home only two fish the entire span of that bite. The rest of them, likely well over 100, went back in the water, so we and perhaps other anglers could catch them again. And that's a good segue into what I really want to get at here.

BLUEFISH MANAGEMENT

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) jointly manage bluefish.

How exactly they manage it is unique.

Currently anglers get about 80% of the fish and the commercial sector gets about 20%. That's all well and good, but when anglers don't catch and kill their entire quota – and most of the time we don't, because, as we all know, bluefish has evolved into mostly a release fishery – those uncaught fish get transferred over to the commercial side.

This is and always has been problematic for a number of reasons. For one, it's an administrative burden for staff. But more importantly, it just kinda sucks for anglers because, well, we're releasing those fish only so that, theoretically, they can be turned over to the commercial sector to kill.

In that context, the motivation to practice "conservation" with bluefish – releasing them because they are more valuable to us in the water than dead – disappears. **(to page 35)**