

Are we viewing striped bass release mortality in the right way?

by Charles Witek

About a week ago, a blog titled “About Those Dead Releases” made its way through the striped bass fishing community.

It addressed the recent benchmark stock assessment’s finding that 48% of all striped bass fishing mortality is the result of fish that died after being released by recreational fishermen, briefly discussed the origins of such figure, and then went into the factors that cause such release mortality.

It was an interesting piece, and I recommend that anyone with a concern for such things click on the above link and read it.

We ought to be thinking a lot about release mortality, because there is no question that the 48% number is going to play a big part in the upcoming striped bass debate.

Should a higher minimum size for bass be proposed—and it’s hard to imagine being able to rebuild the stock if that isn’t done—one of the arguments we’re sure to hear is that a bigger minimum size will lead to more release mortality, and thus that the limit should be left where it is.

Such argument sounds good on its face, but initial impressions are often deceiving.

Maybe, before taking a stand, we should be asking “Is increasing release mortality always a bad thing?”

Yes, I know, that sounds like heresy. But it might be best to think about some basic biology here.

The health of a fish population—of any animal population—isn’t dependent upon what happens to creatures *after* they die.

What matters is keeping the numbers that die—from all causes, and for any reason—within sustainable bounds.

So yes, as responsible and ethical anglers, we should be doing our best to minimize release mortality by using tackle and techniques that prevent harming and exhausting the fish, by releasing fish quickly and, preferably, without taking them out of the water, and by otherwise avoiding any preventable injury to released fish. When we do keep a bass, we ought to make sure that fish isn’t wasted.

But all of those things, while hallmarks of responsible angling, are only means to an end, and that end is reducing overall striped bass mortality.

Because it’s overall striped bass mortality—what the scientific folks refer to as “Z”—that matters, because if the recruitment of new fish into the population isn’t sufficient to make up for the fish lost to mortality of every kind, the striped bass population, and the quality of striped bass angling, can only decline.

Such overall mortality is a combination of natural mortality (“M”), which is pretty much out of our control, and fishing mortality (“F”), which can be managed. So in the real world, where Z always equals M + F, and fishing mortality is the only

thing that managers can regulate, overall mortality is kept within sustainable limits by limiting fishermen’s kill.

You’ll note that I wrote “fishermen’s kill” rather than “fishermen’s landings”, because a dead fish is a dead fish, and has the same impact on the population, whether or not it makes it back to the dock. And that’s why we might want to start reconsidering our attitude toward release mortality.

Because, yes, nearly 38,000,000 striped bass were released in 2017, and of those fish 9%—around 3,400,000—probably died shortly thereafter.

But that means that 91% of them—about 34,000,000 *lived*.

And when you’re trying to rebuild the stock, it’s the live fish that matter.

So here on the coast, where a 28-inch minimum size is currently the rule (I’m leaving Chesapeake Bay—which for the most part means Maryland—out of the discussion right now, just to keep the numbers constant, although Maryland was the single largest contributor to recreational striped bass mortality), any striped bass that meets that minimum may be legally tossed into a cooler, where mortality is an even 100%, and the survival rate is, correspondingly, zero.

When you look at it that way, the increase in release mortality that would, in theory, result from increasing the minimum size doesn’t look all that bad—9 percent instead of 100.

Just how many fish an upped limit might save, and how many more released fish would die is hard to estimate, because it’s impossible to guess what any new size limit might be. Right now, we’re hearing a lot of suggestions, with a slot limit of some sort, or a return to the old 36-inch minimum, probably leading the pack, but until the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission’s Atlantic Striped Bass Technical Committee comes up with a recommendation, all of those suggestions are just shots in the dark. No one has any idea what the size limit needed to rebuild the stock ought to be.

But just for the sake of argument, let’s say that the minimum size was raised from 28 to 36 inches, and apply that change to bass landings here in New York (again, using New York to avoid the Chesapeake Bay-related issues that we’d have to deal with if calculations were made on a coastwide basis).

New York’s estimated 2017 harvest was 472,321 bass. About 47.5% of those fish would have been between the current 28 inch minimum size and the hypothetical 36-inch minimum being used for this example (the data provided uses fork length, rather than the length-over-all used for the minimum size, so for the example, I used fork lengths between 27 and 35 inches, which should come close to the 28 to 36-inch over-all length). So by raising the minimum size to 36 inches, New York would reduce landings by nearly 225,000 fish. Even if 9% of those released fish—a little over 20,000—died, the total savings would be more than 200,000 bass, most of them part of the female spawning stock. **(to page 12)**



Capt. BJ Silvia properly releasing a striped bass