

## WITEK: STRIPED BASS MANAGEMENT (from page 5)

Yet when you take a good look at the striped bass fishery, none of that makes any sense.

The first thing that managers need to acknowledge is that the striped bass fishery is primarily a recreational fishery.

Yes, there is a commercial component, but the most recent benchmark stock assessment found that it only accounts for about 10% of the overall fishing mortality, making it a relatively minor part of the overall fishery. Even if the commercial share of the fishery doubled, something that could arguably occur if the stock continues to decline and so leads to bass being less available to anglers, 80% of the fishing mortality would still be attributable to anglers.

In addition, the commercial harvest is relatively simple to control, as effort remains fairly consistent and reductions can be assured merely by cutting the commercial quota and assessing paybacks when such quota is exceeded. Regulating the recreational fishery, which is much more affected by local and coastwide abundance, weather, other angling opportunities, etc., is a far more difficult process.

However, one can start by looking at who actually fishes for striped bass. The National Marine Fisheries Service's recreational data query page readily provides that information, which in turn provides a blueprint for how striped bass ought to be managed.

To begin, the fishery is dominated by surfcasters and the private boat fleet, with surfcasters claiming the highest level of fishing activity.

For all of the past five years, 2015-2018, inclusive, anglers fishing between Maine and North Carolina made about 87.4 million fishing trips that primarily targeted striped bass. Of those trips, about 45.6 million, or 52%, were made by surfcasters, 40.3 million, or 46%, by fishermen on private boats, 1.4 million, or 1.6%, by charter boat anglers, and just 0.2 million, or 0.2%, by party boat fishermen.

Those numbers vary a little by region. **In New England, surfcasters account for nearly 60% of all trips made, private boat anglers for just 39%, charter boat fishermen for 1% and party boats for less than 0.1%.**

In the Mid-Atlantic, the surfcasters' share drops to 46%, while private boats can claim a bare majority of all striped bass trips with 51%. But charter and party boat trips are still a very small part of overall effort, at less than 2% and 0.3%, respectively.

(Note that, in all cases, rounding error might result in numbers not adding up to precisely 100%.)

Thus, while representatives of the charter and party boat industries are often among the most demanding stakeholders, the majority of whom often vigorously oppose needed conservation measures, they represent a very small minority of targeted striped bass trips. When considering how management measures affect recreational striped bass fishermen, the ASMFC would do well to tailor such measures to the 98% of trips taken by surfcasters and small boat fishermen, and not to the 2% of trips attributable to the for-hire industry.

It should also be noted that the for-hire striped bass fishery is not of one mind on striped bass management measures.

While party boats and larger "six-pack" charter boats tend to favor rules that facilitate harvest, there are also a significant number of charter boat operators who fish from smaller boats. They often call themselves "guides" to distinguish them from the rest of the for-hire fleet, emphasize the overall angling experience rather than merely dead fish on the dock, and are very strong proponents of effective striped bass conservation. Such "guides" trips are included in the charter boat totals, even though the guides' philosophy on striped bass management is closer to that of the surfcasters and private boat fleet.

It is also important to note that catch-and-release angling is a very strong component of the recreational striped bass fishery.

During the five years between 2014 and 2018, anglers between Maine and Florida caught slightly more than 17 million striped bass. Of those fish, only about 14.8% were harvested; the remaining 85.2% were released. Release percentages ranged from a low of 77.6% in 2014 (when the bag limit was still two fish in most places, which should have theoretically reduced the number of regulatory discards) to 91.5% in 2018 (when an influx of fish from the large 2015 year class increased the number of undersized fish in the catch).

Ultimately, the striped bass fishery can be characterized as a fishery that

1. Is dominated by the recreational sector;
2. Sees 98% of all recreational trips made by surfcasters and private boat anglers; and
3. Has a strong commitment to catch-and-release angling.

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