

Striped Bass

Introduction

The Atlantic striped bass management program has enjoyed successes like no other. In a little more than 15 years, the resource has rebuilt from a historic low of about 20 million pounds to an historic high of 160 million pounds. This rebuilding did not occur without hardships. Both commercial and recreational fishermen alike have endured severe harvest restrictions and closures in some cases with the hope of seeing greater benefits in the near future. Fortunately, all of the sacrifices have paid off!

Life History

On the Atlantic coast, striped bass range from the St. Lawrence River in Canada to the St. John's River in Florida. Migratory populations under Commission management range from Maine through North Carolina. This fish is a long-lived (at least up to 30 years of age) species that normally spends the majority of its adult life in coastal estuaries or the ocean, migrating north and south seasonally, and ascending to rivers to spawn in the spring. Mature female striped bass (age four and older) produce large quantities of eggs (up to 500,000), which are fertilized by mature males (age two and older) as they are released into riverine spawning areas. The fertilized eggs drift downstream with currents while developing, eventually hatching into larvae. The larvae and post-larvae begin feeding on microscopic animals during their downstream journey. After their arrival in the nursery areas, located in river deltas and the inland portions of coastal sounds and estuaries, they mature into juveniles. They remain in coastal sounds and estuaries for two to four years, and then they migrate to the Atlantic Ocean. In the ocean, fish tend to move north during the summer and south during the winter. Important wintering grounds for the mixed stocks are located from offshore New Jersey to as far south as North Carolina. With warming water temperatures in the spring, the mature adult fish migrate to the riverine spawning areas to complete their life cycle. In general, the Chesapeake Bay spawning areas produce the majority of coastal migratory striped bass.

Atlantic coast migratory striped bass use coastal rivers as spawning sites and the lower portions of the rivers and their associated bays and estuaries as nursery areas. Adult habitats include coastal rivers and the nearshore ocean. These habitats are distributed along the coast from Maine through North Carolina. Use of these habitats by migratory striped bass may increase or decrease as the size of the population changes.

Commercial & Recreational Fisheries

Striped bass have formed the basis of one of the most important fisheries on the Atlantic coast for centuries. Early written accounts recorded their great abundance, and they have been regulated since European settlement of North America. Striped bass were so plentiful at one time they were used to fertilize fields.

Commercial fishermen harvest striped bass with a variety of gears including gill nets, pound nets, haul seines, and hook-and-line. Commercial harvest peaked at almost 15 million pounds in 1973, then declined to 3.5 million pounds in 1983, a 77 percent decrease. During early to mid-1980s, a number of states closed their striped bass fisheries in order to initiate rebuilding of the stocks. The commercial fishery grew slowly under a partial reopening of state waters in the early 1990s, with coastwide harvest rising from 825,000 pounds in 1990 to 2.01 million pounds in 1994. Most of this growth resulted from the fact that Maryland was permitted to impose flexible quotas that have risen with increasing stock size. Under recently restored fisheries, commercial harvest has grown from 3.7 million pounds in 1995 to six million pounds in 2000.

The growing popularity of saltwater recreational fishing since the 1960s and 1970s, and the lack of recreational harvest caps in most states, has led to the sport fishing sector landing a larger percentage of the total catch. Recent recreational harvest has grown from 3.1 million pounds in 1990 to a record high of 17.1 million pounds in 2000. The Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey, administered by the National Marine Fisheries Service, estimated that sport fishing trips for striped bass increased from 247,000 trips in 1990 to 691,000 in 1997.



Striped Bass *Morone saxatilis*

Common Names: striped bass, rockfish, rock, striper

Largest Recorded: 125 pound female, North Carolina, 1891

Oldest Recorded: 31 years old

Identifying Features: dark olive green varying to bluish above, paling on the sides and silvery belly; sides are barred with 7 to 8 narrow, longitudinal stripes; stout body; 2 well-developed, separated dorsal fins; and moderately forked tail

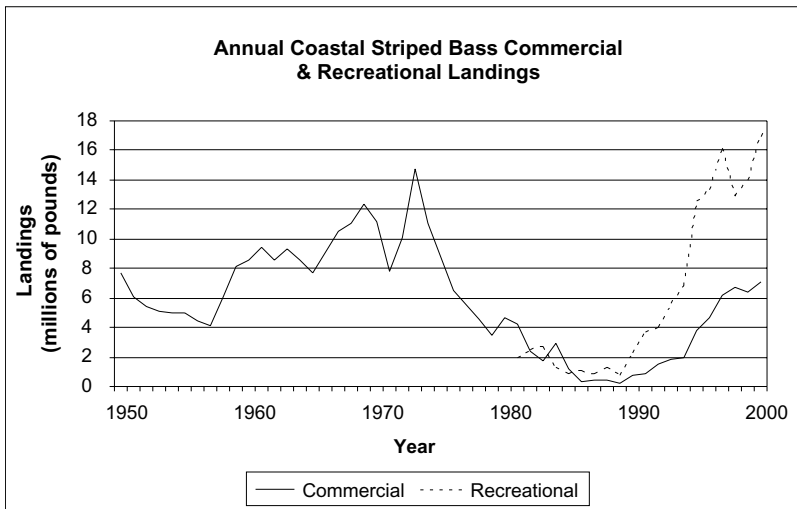


Atlantic Coastal Management

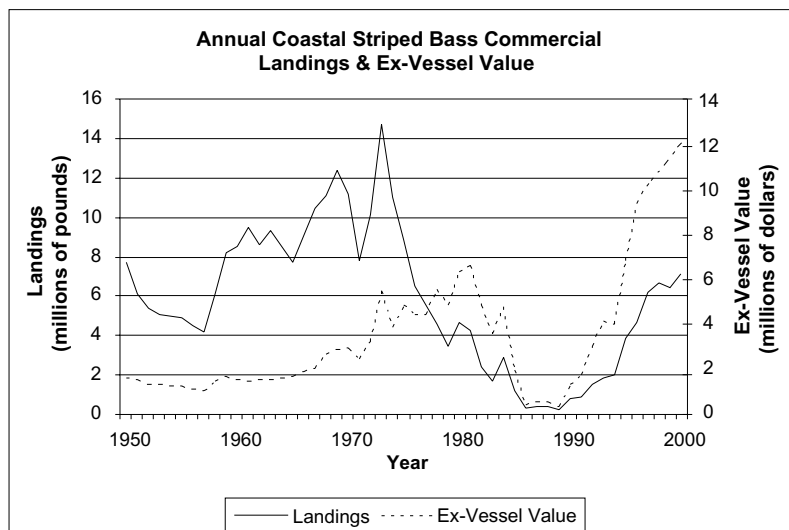
In 1995, as a result of required management actions under Amendments 4 and 5 to the Striped Bass Interstate Fishery Management Plan, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission declared Atlantic coastal striped bass stocks fully recovered. The Commission is currently in the process of developing a new amendment to the plan, which will provide for the management of a rebuilt stock. Striped bass fisheries would not be where they are today, however, without the support of the 1984 Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. This Act, which was the precursor to the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act, provided Atlantic coastal states with the necessary tools to effectively conserve and manage striped bass stocks.

The pay-off for the years of restricted harvest has been big. Total biomass, or the total pounds of fish in the fishery, has increased eight-fold over the last 20 years. Recreational fishing for striped bass is at an all time high. Commercial fisheries have also benefited with increases in commercial quotas, which are yielding greater economic profits.

Currently, states have implemented regulations under Amendment 5 to the Striped Bass Plan, while the National Marine Fisheries Service continues to implement a ban on possession and harvest of striped bass in the exclusive economic zone (3-200 miles offshore).



Source: Personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics and Economics Division.



Source: Personal communication from the National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries Statistics and Economics Division. Estimated ex-vessel value is reported in nominal terms and has not been corrected for inflation.