

FISHERIES ISSUES

STRIPERS:

In the Neuse, and the same is true for other rivers in the CSMA, our striped bass stock has been reduced to 10% or less of its historic population. Because of this, stripers have been stocked in the river for several years now to try and re-establish a successful spawn. With so few of the native fish remaining, that effort has not been very successful. Some scientists make the argument that salinity, current, oxygenation, etc... are preventing the fish from having much success when they spawn. What is never addressed is the enormous amount of bycatch that is generated by gill netters targeting other species. The single largest cause of striper mortality is this loss to commercial bycatch.

A bill has been introduced in the NCGA that demonstrates the poor economic and environmental decision of allowing a striped bass harvest. It costs over \$600,000 to stock these fish each year, with most of that cost being paid for by recreational angler license fees. Netters are allowed to harvest stripers and that harvest is valued at roughly \$65,000. Less than 150 netters fish for stripers, so that is approximately \$400 per fisherman. Both economically and environmentally, this practice makes little sense. You cannot continue to devastate this fishery for such a minimal commercial interest.

If passed, this bill would make it illegal to possess striped bass from the CSMA. The ONLY way to ensure that will happen is to BAN NETS FROM AREAS CONTAINING STRIPED BASS. That, is the Neuse River in its entirety.

Also, the NCWF has changed the slot limit on stripers to: 2 fish over 26" effective next year (in joint and inland waters??) For all practical purposes, that ends the recreational harvest of these bass. To be fair, NETS MUST BE REMOVED.

FLOUNDER:

The flounder stock is in equal jeopardy. Their numbers are in rapid decline. It is true that the MFC recently passed restrictions on commercial flounder harvest. However, NCGA went to court and was granted an injunction on those regulations. A decision on this issue is still being awaited. IF the court rules in favor of the commercial fishermen, then the only way they can meet the required 40% reduction in their harvest of flounder is to BAN GILL NETS.

OYSTERS:

Oyster reefs (or oyster rock) have been reduced to less than 10% of their former areal coverage. The main reason for this is the oyster boats that dredge out the oysters. Other significant damage comes from pulling nets through the beds. While that may not be intentional, it nonetheless does significant damage. The trawl doors that drag the bottom to keep the nets open also directly damage the oyster rock. A second, indirect effect from the trawlers is that they suffocate oyster reefs from the plumes of silt they kick up.

HABITAT LOSS:

In addition to the damage to oyster rock caused by netters, submerged aquatic vegetation is being destroyed in the creeks when the gill nets are set there in the fall through spring. Either by dragging chains to scare the fish into the net, or by pulling the nets themselves, the destruction to SAV in our primary nurseries will have repercussions that affect shrimp, menhaden, mullet, trout, red drum, and flounder.

BYCATCH:

From juvenile spot, croaker, gray trout, and others caught in trawl nets to puppy drum, speckled trout, stripers, black drum, and undersized fish of all of these species snared as bycatch in gill nets, untold MILLIONS of juvenile fish are being wasted per year. From recent NCWF observer data, an average of 400 MILLION small spot, croaker, and gray trout are wasted in nets. If only 10% of those juvenile finfish were to survive naturally, then that is 40 MILLION of these fish available to repopulate our rivers and sounds EACH YEAR. It is nearly impossible to get a reliable estimate of how many sublegal sized flounder, puppy drum, trout, striped bass, black drum, and others are wasted as bycatch in inshore gill nets because no observer data is required AND many of these commercial fishermen neglect to report their catch because it is far above the legal allowable daily take, or it was taken from an area they were not supposed to fish. This is, without doubt, the main reason why the inshore fishing in our estuaries is suffering. How much better could our fishing be if those millions of fish were allowed to remain in the ecosystem, mature, and reproduce.

ENFORCEMENT:

Enforcement by DMF and NCWF is abysmal. That is NOT the fault of the officers who are spread ridiculously thin all across our estuarine coastal waters. However, the option of joint enforcement by these organizations, with help from others continues to be tabled or ignored by the NCGA at the behest of the commercial industry.

Having been on the water with increasing frequency, that is most likely because of the rampant disregard of the regulations by some commercial fishermen. They often take FAR MORE fish of a given species than allowed, and they often set nets in areas where they are not legally allowed to be. I could site many examples that I have seen over the past few years, but what was most telling to me were two separate occurrences in Beard Creek this past winter. On one occasion, a commercial fisherman came in to a small, private boat launch that I have access to with TWO 55 GALLON TRASH CANS FULL OF TROUT!! This FAR exceeded the 75 fish /day that he is allowed. Enforcement was called, and I attempted to delay his departure, but no officer arrived in time. Two days later, a netter launched his boat from another small ramp near the very back of the creek and proceeded to strike net the narrow

back of Beard Creek. Again, enforcement was notified, but to no avail. With only two or three officers to cover hundreds of miles of shoreline each, they don't stand a chance at effectively enforcing the current regulations. When too many fish are caught and kept, the fishermen either divide the catch and sell it to different fish houses, OR they box it up and take it to the "black market" that ships the fish and shellfish to other states such as Louisiana.

WATER QUALITY:

There is one issue that both commercial fishermen and recreational fishermen do agree on, and that is that there is a significant pollution problem in our estuaries. There are three main sources of the pollution plaguing our coastal waters, and they are: nutrient loading from sewage spills and run off from agricultural areas, siltation from overdevelopment AND the loss of riparian buffer zones upstream, and contamination from heavy metals and other chemicals from severe flooding caused by recent storms.

As mentioned earlier, two issues facing the MFC would go a long way in helping to improve the quality of our water. Oysters are remarkably good at filtering water. They can remove large quantities of excess nutrients and the algae that often blooms as a result. They can take heavy metals from the water and lock them away in bottom sediments. Because of severe overharvest and damage by the commercial industry, these organisms are no longer present in sufficient numbers to be able to clean the water.

In addition, the aquatic vegetation present in our creeks is under constant assault by gill nets. Not only can the algae and grasses normally present in our creeks effectively use many of the excess nutrients, but their daily photosynthetic activity adds dissolved oxygen to a system that is often short of this essential molecule. Some have argued that this is an issue that should be addressed by another governmental agency, however, many livelihoods depend on our coastal waters being absolutely pristine. As a commission, you have the responsibility to take all possible steps to assure that our estuarine waters remain clean. Though you may find it extreme, removing gill and trawl nets from our primary and secondary nursery areas will allow for our oyster rock and SAV to recover.