

A Call to Action on Fluke

"In a civilized and cultivated country, wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen. The excellent people who protest against all hunting and consider sportsmen as enemies of wildlife are ignorant of the fact that in reality the genuine sportsman is, by all odds, the most important factor in keeping the larger and more valuable wild creatures from total extermination."

-President Theodore Roosevelt

As anglers, we understand completely the sentiment in the above quote from Teddy Roosevelt. Unfortunately, there are many otherwise intelligent and well-meaning people who will never understand. These people simply cannot grasp the dichotomy that defines, at the most basic level, the sportsmen's perspective; we kill God's creatures, yet we respect them and strive to protect them. A large, and growing, segment of society fails to understand how these two notions are not inherently mutually exclusive, and this, in a nutshell, is the biggest problem anglers and hunters will always face.

The problem with summer flounder management that we've been writing about over the past few months is but one manifestation of this difference of opinion, but for anglers in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic, where fluke fishing represents the majority of marine angling effort, it is of paramount importance. For the first time ever, a well-organized, well-funded, politically and publicly-supported movement is aiming its proverbial arrow directly at the heart of recreational anglers; and a perfect shot will drop us on the spot. Make no mistake...this battle is not just about fluke. If we lose this fight, we lose

our angling future. Win it, and we stand a chance to have a future. It's as simple as that.

How can this be happening?

Explaining how we got into this mess is no small task. Over the past few months, we've tried to keep our readers abreast of related developments, but admittedly the issue is so convoluted that most folks are pretty darn confused at this point. Readers would be well advised to understand a few key points, rather than attempting to digest the entire history of summer flounder management.



Bill Donovan

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has been managing summer flounder since the early 1990's when the fishery was, by all accounts, in pretty poor shape. As a baseline, in 1993 the total fluke biomass was measured at 46.9 million pounds with a Spawning Stock Biomass (SSB) of 20.5 million pounds. NMFS proceeded to implement a series of recreational and commercial quotas designed to grow the fishery, and by 2000 the total biomass had increased to 61.4 million pounds and the SSB grew to 42.7 million pounds. Here is where the fun begins.

Whether or not the quotas between

1993 and 2000 were effective depends upon one's perspective. During this 7-year period, total biomass increased by more than 30 percent and the SSB more than doubled; steady progress for sure, but not enough to satisfy the environmental lobby. They demanded a faster rebuilding, and actually used funds from the Pew Charitable Trust to bring a successful lawsuit against NMFS. As a result, in 2000 a federal court forced NMFS to rebuild the fishery within 10 years, and established a total biomass goal of just over 200-million pounds. Exactly where the 10-year timeframe and the 200-million-plus-pound target came from is the subject of much debate, but it's reasonable to assume that these numbers were based on some combination of science and politics.

So, that all happened back in 2000. Back then, the year 2010 seemed pretty far away. In fact, some individuals on the fisheries side actually thought we had dodged a bullet. Oh, how wrong they were.

A New Enemy

The now-infamous "Enviro Lawsuit of 2000" was extremely significant, not just because of its effect on summer flounder management, but because it marked a major shift in the way sportsmen's groups and environmental groups interacted. Previously, *(continued on page 6)*

most anglers considered themselves environmentalists, and it was very common for angler rights groups and environmental groups to work together on issues like pollution, public access, etc. As we all know, that dynamic has changed substantially; so much so that the very word "environmentalist" now has negative connotations within our community, and the more-derogatory "enviro" is now akin to calling someone's mother fat.

Back in 2000, there were several environmental groups involved, and to a lesser extent that is still the case today. However, one organization seems to have taken a leadership role in pushing for tighter regulations, and that is the Marine Fish Conservation Network (MFCN). This organization consists of 190 member organizations, including environmental groups, aquariums, marine science groups and, believe it or not, recreational and commercial fishing associations. In recent years, MFCN has grown in stature and power, due in large part to its substantial funding by the Pew Charitable Trust. In fact, MFCN director Lee Crocket was recently promoted to director of the Pew Federal Fisheries Policy Reform Project. From an angler's perspective, MFCN and the Pew Charitable Trust should be thought of as one in the same.

Make no mistake, "environmental protection" has become big business. Riding a huge wave of public environmental awareness driven mostly by fears of global warming, environmental groups are experiencing sharp increases in prominence, membership and funding. Ray Bogan of the United Boatmen recently referred to them collectively as the "environmental industry", a most fitting

moniker for sure.

Armed with a "boatload" of cash and a mission to protect the oceans' species from overfishing, the environmental industry is pushing hard for tighter controls on many fisheries, often ignoring socio-economic considerations and avoiding common-sense alternatives. Certainly, protecting our oceans is an admirable cause, one with which none of us would argue. But how far should such an effort go? Putting an end to both recreational and commercial fishing would certainly go a long way towards protecting our marine species, but at what price? Unfortunately, the "price" is not a consideration for the environmental industry. These folks want you off the water - it's as simple as that. Two

"Two decades ago, environmental groups fought side-by-side with us. Today, they would just as soon stab us in the back."

decades ago, environmental groups fought side-by-side with us. Today, they would just as soon stab us in the back. They are the enemy, and they are a formidable one.

Now back to fluke...

The Magnuson Debacle

As the decade progressed, fluke stocks continued to recover. By 2006 the total biomass had reached 103.9-million pounds and the SSB had hit 93.3-million pounds, a five-fold increase over 1993 levels. Anglers were enjoying tremendous fishing, not only in terms of numbers, but in terms of size. Another management success story, reminiscent of the heralded striped bass recovery, was unfolding right in front of our eyes. But all was not well in management land.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act, the nation's primary federal fisheries law, was up for reauthorization. Recreational and commercial fishing lobbyists worked hard to ensure that some degree of protection was built into Magnuson, and the environmental lobbyists pushed hard for wordage that would give fisheries scientists more control. In the end, we got a three-year extension on our 10-year fluke rebuilding timeframe, but it came at a devastating price.

Built into Magnuson is now a clause that requires NMFS to end all overfishing within 3 years. On the surface, this appears to be a reasonable requirement and, again, a respectable sentiment. But, consider the fact that, despite the tremendous resurgence we've seen in the fluke fishery, and despite the general agreement within the angling community that the fluke fishing is as good as it's been in decades, NMFS still considers fluke to be overfished. Exactly

how they've reached this conclusion is beyond me, but it puts the fishery in dire straits.

Now, not only do we have to reach an arbitrary 200-million-pound biomass level by 2013 (twice the 2007 level), but we have only 30 months to grow the fishery to a level where NMFS no longer considers it to be overfished. To make matters worse, all but two coastal states exceeded their quotas in 2007 - and some substantially so - despite some pretty tough regulations and short seasons. This puts fishery managers in a difficult position. The fishery is so strong that we are virtually guaranteed to overfish our quota. Yet, managers must ensure that we hit an overly aggressive, if not impossible, rebuilding timeframe. Look up the word "irony" in the dictionary and it has a picture of a fluke next to it.

What's the bottom line?

What this all translates to in terms of regulations for 2008 and beyond is still in question, but it will not be favorable to anglers. At this point, NMFS is recommending a 15.77-million-pound quota for 2008, an 8-percent reduction over the 2007 quota, but the enviros are lobbying for a much tighter 11 to 12-million-pound quota. Also, just prior to resigning his post at NMFS, administrator Bill Hogarth penned a letter to Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Chairman, Peter Jensen, recommending a very conservative approach in 2008, and threatening a closure in 2009 if our quota is exceeded. See Dusty Rhodes' *Management in Perspective* column on page 10 for more information on that.

So, something has to give. Either we need to prove that the fishery is indeed in better shape than NMFS considers it to be, or we need to amend Magnuson to allow for more common sense and flexibility in managing our fisheries. If we cannot accomplish either one of these, the fluke fishery will most certainly close, and the entire recreational fishing industry will go right down with it. After that, you can kiss sea bass, blackfish and scup goodbye, because they are next on the enviro's hit list. It won't take long before we're off the water completely, which is just what the enviros wanted in the first place. This is not just about fluke; it's about having a pastime to pass on to our children. We must come together in a decisive manner, and we need to do it NOW!

A Call to Action!

Enter the *Save the Summer Flounder Fishery Fund (SSFFF)*. This is a new non-profit organization, the sole purpose of which is to fight to save our fluke fishery. The manage-

Save the Summer Flounder Fishery Fund (SSFFF)

Website:

www.ssfff.net

Mailing address

(for donations)

PO Box 86
Brielle, NJ 08730

Industry Meeting:

Thurs. Dec. 13th, 7:30pm
United Methodist Church
100 S. Pitney Rd.
Absecon, NJ

ment board consists of party and charter boat owners, tackle and bait store owners, tackle distributors, bait wholesalers, and others whose livelihoods are dependent on a healthy and vibrant recreational fishing industry. The board consists of Greg Hueth, President of the Shark River Surf Anglers, Bill Forman, owner of Spring Lake Freezer, Capt. Adam Nowalsky of the charter boat Karen Ann II, party boat captains Chris Hueth, Willy Egerter and Ronnie Santec, Nick Cicero from Folsom Tackle, and Dave Arbeitman from the Reel Seat. Ray Bogan of United Boatmen will work closely with the organization, as will representatives from the RFA. The organization is beginning work in NJ, and will evolve outward from there.

The first goal of the organization is to support Bill HR 4087, which is an emergency legislative intervention introduced by Congressman Walter Jones of North Carolina. If passed, it will enable stock managers a reasonable level of regulatory flexibility. The second goal is to raise money to conduct an independent stock review that will reinforce what we all know to be true – that the fluke fishery is no longer overfished. This will entail hiring independent marine scientists to generate the data needed to prove that the fishery is healthy, and that

current rebuilding deadlines are unnecessary. Additionally, the SSFFF will work closely with other sportfishing advocacy groups such as the RFA to enhance their lobbying efforts on our behalf in Washington.

At a meeting last month in Belmar, fishing-related businesses throughout northern New Jersey were asked to donate \$500 each as seed money. A similar meeting will be held for industry folks in South Jersey on December 13th at 7:30pm at the United Methodist Church, 100 S. Pitney Rd. in Absecon. If you own a tackle shop, party or charter boat, marina, or any other business that relies on revenue from anglers, you are asked to attend this meeting. A series of public meetings are being planned for January.

I have had extensive discussions with the SSFFF board members and I've attended several meetings. The organization is well-run, well-represented, and has a solid plan. The *New Jersey Angler* has offered its full support of SSFFF and will be working closely with the organization on this most important issue. But what is MOST important is that each and every angler who values his or her time on the water becomes involved. The effort will require tremendous resources – in terms of both people and money – in order to be successful. I urge every reader to visit their website at www.ssfff.net and see what they're about. Please consider making a donation; you can do that online or via the mailing address in the sidebar. As the organization moves forward, they will announce various fundraising events and public meetings. Check their website often, and we'll keep you informed, as well.

This is for real, folks. We need to come together, rally around the SSFFF, and do whatever we can to save our most important fishery. From a fishing perspective, nothing has ever been more important.