

by Tom Keer

EVENTS

STATE OF THE STRIPER UNION

Stripers Forever hosts a striper symposium to build support for game fish designation.

IN THE BATTLE TO ENSURE healthy striped bass stocks for future generations, Stripers Forever (SF) has emerged as the leading voice for reclassifying the species as a game fish, thereby abolishing commercial fishing from South Carolina to Maine. Toward that goal, the group recently hosted its first Striped Bass Game Fish Symposium in Foxborough, Massachusetts. Billed as the “most important event in the history of saltwater recreational advocacy in the Northeast,” the symposium was intended to serve as a springboard for increasing public awareness of striped-bass management issues, and for recruiting new members. The gathering was also the culminating event of SF’s three years of Web-based advocacy for game fish designation. That movement is currently in its second incarnation after a 1990s effort stalled in what has once again shaped up as a battleground state: Massachusetts.

Of the 13 states and one district from South Carolina to Maine, 50 percent of them currently classify striped bass as a game fish: Connecticut; Washington; D.C.; Maine; New Hampshire; New Jersey; Pennsylvania; and South Carolina. Stripers Forever believes that the remaining seven states need to follow suit to ensure a healthy biomass of this highly migratory fish throughout all year-classes, coastwide. Massachusetts was selected to host the event in part because it has the strongest saltwater recreational fishing sector of all coastal states within the striped-bass migratory routes, and



Striped bass are subject to commercial harvest in many states along the Atlantic Seaboard because they do not enjoy widespread game-fish status. **Above:** Rhode Island angler Bill Murphy shows off a fine bass from Joppa Flats in Massachusetts, which has shaped up as a target state in the effort to reclassify stripers as game fish.

because a victory there could set the precedent for wins in other states.

Despite the considerable traction that Stripers Forever has gained on the issue, convincing the Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries will be an uphill grind. Since the era of the Pilgrims, Massachusetts culture has been steeped in fishing for the table, which today has evolved on an enormous commercial scale. In the case of stripers, there is commercial fishing as well as “pinhooking,” or rod-and-reel anglers who sell stripers for profit. Pinhookers are not full-time commercial fishermen; they are instead simply anglers who offset their personal fishing expenses through the sale of fish.

But the small-scale pinhook harvests quickly add up, and overcoming the attitude of those who see striped bass as both a legitimate commercial industry and a

way for residents to supplement their incomes will be difficult in light of a state fisheries board that has consistently supported commercial interests. The most recent example is codfish, for which market fishing was prohibited until the stocks were declared restored a couple of years ago. The Massachusetts DMF promptly reopened commercial fishing. Stripers Forever argues that this binge-and-purge management philosophy is no healthier than the habits of a bulimic, and that in the long run it could be devastating for the hugely popular striped bass.

The Headliners

The nearly eight-hour event had 2½ hours of presentations covering five topics, as well as a silent auction and a dinner. The highlight of the symposium was an address by Rob Southwick, an economist who last year prepared the well-known

Southwick Report for Stripers Forever. That report suggests that a shift toward managing for recreational uses rather than the much smaller commercial sector will create a 105 percent increase in retail sales and a 21 percent increase in the number of jobs related to striped-bass fishing all along the coast. This includes revenues in areas such as fishing charters, tackle shops, marinas, restaurants, gas sales, and related expenditures. The Southwick Report also analyzes expenses that recreational and commercial anglers share—namely boats, motors, and tackle—and cites a clear revenue advantage to a recreation-oriented management policy.

Additional presenters included Russell Nelson, a scientist and director of Nelson Consulting, who discussed an analogous shift of management styles in Florida. As Stripers Forever has pointed out, at one time Florida's redfish and snook were managed for commercial interests. After the collapse of both of those stocks, the species were reclassified as game fishes. Management policy shifted toward the less consumptive recreational sector, and both species recovered.

The potential impact of aquaculture arose when Mike Freeze, owner of Keo Fish Farms in Keo, Arkansas, discussed fish farming as a means to replace wild striped bass for table fare. According to Freeze, aquaculture can supply the commercial demand for restaurant and retail seafood consumption, and if practiced in context with the Southwick findings, could contribute to a win-win scenario for both the fishery and the economy.

Fish Fight

While Stripers Forever has been able to grow its membership and at least keep the issue on the public radar, Web-based advocacy does have limitations. Of the group's 9,500 members, 4,500 live in New England from Connecticut through Maine. Despite a seminal event hosted in their own backyard, only 140 attendees showed up, a surprisingly lackluster turnout in light of the impassioned debate that striped-bass management can ignite.

"We have mixed feelings on attendance," says Brad Burns, president of

Stripers Forever. "On the one hand, we bridged a gap by shifting our focus from the Web to a public forum. On the other hand, we would have liked to have seen more participants."

Attendance also may have suffered due to concurrent grassroots events in the region, including local chapter Trout Unlimited presentations and other area programs. And the weekend's fine weather most likely found many anglers more interested in going fishing than being inside a convention hall.

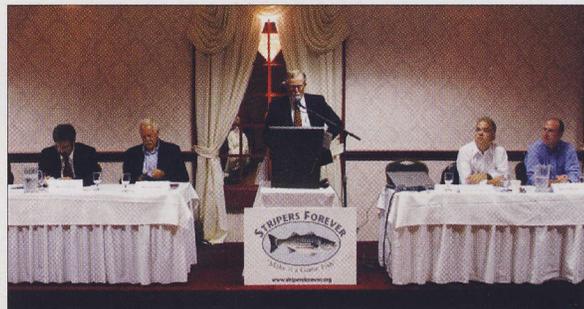
In the effort to continue disseminating its message, Stripers Forever recently began attending consumer fishing shows and has also partnered with the American Sportfishing Association, the Federation of Fly Fishers, and the International Game Fish Association. The group is reviewing the results of the May symposium to determine when and where to launch additional events.

Despite the low turnout and the obvious challenges ahead, Stripers Forever does have some notable leadership. The group's founder, Brad Burns, is best known for his efforts with Coastal Conservation Association to establish stripe-bass game-fish status a decade earlier. That attempt met with some success, but it stalled when the Massachusetts Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission (MMFAC) rejected a striped-bass game-fish initiative in the mid-1990's. In 2003, Burns almost single-handedly resurrected the movement when he founded Stripers Forever after noticing a decline in mature fish following a 40 percent commercial quota increase. "I was around when striped-bass populations were strong, and I was around during the collapse. Many would consider fish stocks plentiful, but fisheries managers don't respond to declines until a species has collapsed. I foresee a decline and want to be on the leading edge to prevent the past from reoccurring."

Former *Field & Stream* Editor Duncan Barnes has also lent his support to the group. Barnes feels that by "get-

ting the message out to recreational anglers and by continuing to communicate the game fish message, the commercial management practices will be reviewed and hopefully changed to become current with the times."

Noted striped-bass expert Kenney Abrams first wrote about a solution to



Former *Field & Stream* editor Duncan Barnes (standing) moderated the first Striped Bass Game Fish Symposium, which was hosted by Stripers Forever for the purpose of promoting game-fish status for the migratory fish.

halt commercial striped-bass fishing on his Web site in 2001. "Take the bounty off the striped bass's head, and all commercial fishing ends," says Abrams. Stripers Forever has adopted that philosophy as its driving mission.

In the long run, however, the real issue may not be one of leadership or even grassroots support, but rather the question of exactly how to bring 13 states together in a coordinated fashion, all legislating for the common good of a species that is disproportionately scattered along the coast at different times of the year—yet relies equally on each stop along the way during its migratory cycle. Just ask Jerry van de Sande, a Stripers Forever member from New Jersey who drove six hours to attend the event. "It's not a local problem. It's a regional issue," he says. "Stripers Forever needs the support from all states. The fish that are protected in New Jersey are migratory, and yet they are unprotected in Rhode Island and in Massachusetts. A consistent policy is the answer." ■

Tom Keer writes about fishing and fisheries issues from his home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. For more information on striped bass as a game fish, look up Stripers Forever at www.stripersforever.org