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Outdoors

By John Geiser —

Maryland Biologist Talks About Bass

Striped bass fishing fell off last year along the New Jersey coast and it could get worse, according to a Maryland striped bass expert.

Joe Boone, biologist of the Maryland Fish and Wildlife Department, told us yesterday that the possiblity of lean days ahead for bass fishermen is not remote.

However, he sees no reason to panic.

"We're still getting average reproduction of bass every year," he said. "But people aren't satisfied with that, anymore."

HE POINTED OUT that since 1956 there have been five dominant year classes (years in which reproduction was tremendous) but there hasn't been one since 1970.

"We were getting a dominant year class about every three or four years or so," he said. "And we have to have them to match the abundance of fish we're used to."

The Chesapeake Bay spawning season occurs in April and May with most of the production occurring in four major areas: 1. upper bay complex (Elk River and the Chesapeake and Delaware); 2. Potomac River; 3. Choptank River, and 4. Manticoke River.

THERE IS a lesser contribution from seven other areas in the Chesapeake but success or failure of fisheries from North Caroline to Maine rests on those four grounds.

Boone said his department samples the production in late July, August and September when the stripers are about two to five inches long and readily captured by shore seining.

"We're hoping for another dominant year class," he said. "If we don't get it — well, there will be lot of fish over eight pounds but things will be getting worse."

Boone said there has been an indication that years of heavy rainfall have been years of better than average bass reproduction but there aren't enough facts to prove this.

CALIFORNIA has a small bass population and they have a lot of money and they've done a lot of work but they haven't proved anything," he said. "We have no real theories of reproduction and no one else does."

Boone feels that pollution of the Chesapeake Bay breeding grounds have been blown out of proportion.

"If anything, it's getting better," he said. "The Potomac, for instance, is improving."

He pointed out that pollution has never been the problem with striped bass that it has been with shad and river herring.

He stressed the fact the stripers spawn so far down the rivers, where pollution is diluted in the relatively clean waters from the bay, that they are not severely affected.

WHILE THE biologists have not noticed obvious pollution problems where bass are concerned, Boone said they still will be looking for contaminants this year.

He said checks for PCBs, for instance, rank high on the list for his unit.

Was he surprised to hear that striped bass checked by Sandy Hook marine lab proved to have very low levels of PCBs with one exception?

"No, they're Chesapeake Bay fish," he said. "That's where most of your bass come from."

BOONE SAID both the Chesapeake Bay sport and commercial fisheries showed declines this winter.

"Just look at the price on the wholesale market," he said. "That shows you how the number of fish is falling."

Friday's "Green Sheet" showed striped bass were bringing 70 to 75 cents for two- to four-pound fish and 55- to 60 cents for panfish in Baltimore. Bass had soared to over $1 a pound in Fulton Market during the earlier part of the winter.

Striper prices were not listed in the Green Sheet for Fulton Market, Friday, but 13,000 pounds were received. Maryland shipped 3,300 pounds; Virginia sent two boxes and North Carolina, 9,500 pounds.

MARYLAND sport fishermen, in particular, are concerned about the lack of stripers.

Outdoor writer Tom Cofield of the Maryland News American, wrote Feb. 15, that discontent is rampant and all kinds of ideas are being put forth to conserve the fish.

One angler wanted a salt water license and a limit of one fish over 15 pounds a year. The money from the license would be used to back up the one-bass law.

Another fisherman wants a crackdown on farmers living along some of the tidewater rivers — such as the Bush and the Gunpowder. He feels pesticide runoff is ruining bass reproduction.

STILL ANOTHER fisherman advocates banning all sport and commercial fishing for bass in certain important spawning areas until the fish return to their abundance of a few years ago.

Maryland's legislators have been listening to the gripes of striper fishermen but each time a hearing is held or a bill comes up in Annapolis, the only ones there to talk are commercial fishermen.

One legislator asked Cofield where the sportsmen are: "We can only judge each situation by what we see and all I ever see sitting out there is commercial fishermen."

New Jersey's striped bass season opens Monday.

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