

Neuse native striped bass in danger

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

The Neuse River, once the second most prolific striped bass fishery behind the Roanoke River, will lose all of its native bass unless the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission takes immediate action, Benjamin R. Ricks, a N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission biologist, told a room full of anglers at a recent fishing school in New Bern.

"If the Wildlife Resources Commission didn't stock, there would be no striped bass in the Neuse or Tar," Ricks said. "The situation couldn't get much worse."

Although the U.S. Fish & Wildlife pays \$250,000 a year to stock the Neuse for recreational angling, commercial fishermen using gill nets take home 70-80 percent of the catch, said Dr. Chris Elkins, president of CCA NC and a retired UNC microbiologist, who was part of a panel discussing the impending loss of all wild stock.

"Scientists believe that the gill net fishery must be immediately halted or the wild striped bass, the only fish presently capable of reproducing because they have the homing instinct, will be lost permanently," he said. "Time is of the essence based on the declining curve of this stock. If nothing is done, genes that have evolved to the unique characteristics of these waters will be lost," Elkins said.



Photo by Rip Woodin

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WaterDog Guide Service Capt. Tom Roller, left, and client Ted Vaden admire a small Roanoke River striper.

State coastal division director named to lead marine fisheries

By David Sneed
CCA NC Executive Director

State environmental department Secretary Donald R. van der Vaart named Braxton Davis, director of the N.C. Division of Coastal Management, to also lead the state's Division of Marine Fisheries effective April 19.

Davis fills the vacancy left when Dr. Louis Daniel abruptly resigned Feb. 29 as director of

DMF. At the time, a press release by the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality that oversees the division gave no reason for Daniel's departure.

As head of DCM, Davis enforces state and federal laws that regulate all development and dredging permits in the state's 20 coastal counties as well as the policies of the Coastal Resources Commission. Although both divisions are headquartered in Morehead City, they are

located in separate buildings.

A press release said for the immediate future, the divisions will remain separate entities housed under the state's environmental agency, and Davis will lead both divisions as director. The DEQ intends to examine ways in which the two divisions can achieve efficiencies in operations, which fuels speculation of a future merger.



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DAVIS

NEUSE

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The native population will be gone before the next fisheries management plan is implemented after 2020, Elkins said, calling for the closure of commercial fishing and development of an emergency supplemental plan.

The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries has listed striped bass in the Central Southern Management Area from Roanoke Marshes in Dare County to the South Carolina line as a “stock of concern.” In a report written by Ricks and another WRC biologist, Kyle T. Rachels, the concern results from a “lack of adequate data” and the need for conservative management is supported by “truncated size and age distributions, low overall abundance, and an absence of older fish in spawning ground surveys.”

Ricks said the WRC shocks the Neuse River annually to survey the striped bass. He’s found that the stocked fish grow quickly but there is little evidence for reproduction, which puzzles him.

The WRC sees signs of spawning activity but there are no small fish as a result, he continued. “Is it an egg or larvae problem? Is it flow? Why aren’t they reproducing?” he asked.

Combine the absence of reproduction with a high mortality rate and the population can’t recover, Ricks explained. In his report, Ricks wrote, “Striped bass mortality in the Neuse River is similar to the total annual mortality that led to the collapse of the Chesapeake Bay striped bass stock in the 1970s. The collapse of the Chesapeake Bay stock is well docu-



RICKS

mented as having experienced recruitment overfishing that reduced the spawning stock biomass to levels that could not produce dominant year-classes.”

The mortality numbers between recreational and commercial catches are not adding up. The next DMF fisheries management plan won’t be started until 2018, although Ricks wishes it were sooner.

“We’re at a crossroads,” he concluded. “We could go with stringent regulations if we thought it would rebuild the stock. If we can’t get to natural reproduction, we might open the harvest to keep more fish. We’re in a holding pattern,” he added, acknowledging that new planning is needed.

MFC member Chuck Laughridge, who was on the panel, said outside of the Neuse and Tar Pamlico Rivers striped bass is a by-catch for commercial shad fishing, although it yields \$50,000 a year versus \$32,000 for shad. “The recreational fishermen are paying to stock striped

bass so the commercial fishermen can catch them and sell them back to us at a profit,” he said. Either striped bass should be stocked and commercial catch limited to restore the fishery, or “just have a put-and-take fishery,” Laughridge said.

He also noted that the shad fishery is “at an all-time low. It all needs to be addressed on an estuary basis.” Writing a fisheries management plan that only has a 50 percent chance of success is not way to manage the state’s resource, he added. “We’ve had terrible fisheries management and you shouldn’t be letting it happen,” he said. “People should get mad and transfer that anger to the folks in charge.”

Dr. Tim Nifong, a panel member and general counsel for CCA NC, said, “Rather than sending a nasty gram to your legislator, it helps a lot to show up in Raleigh and at MFC meetings. That’s very important. Legislators pay attention to that.”

DIRECTOR

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CCA NC Executive Director David Sneed was optimistic that the appointment of Davis will lead to improved resource management. Fish landings from croaker and spot to Southern flounder and gray trout have been declining over the last decade, Sneed said.

“It’s no secret that Dr. Daniel had his own agenda and was not interested in considering outside opinion from conservation groups,” Sneed continued. “It is our sincere hope that closing the door on the tenure of Dr. Daniel will be seen as the opening of a new path for fisheries management in North Carolina.”

Dr. Tim Nifong, a panel member at a recent CCA NC fishing school in New Bern, told around 60 anglers that “North Carolina has had terrible fisheries management, just unconscionable and you shouldn’t be letting it happen. It’s been a culture of exploitation,” Nifong added. “We’ve got to change it to one of conservation. Folks, they’re your public trust resources and they are supposed to be managed that way.”

Capt. Tom Roller, president of the N.C. Guides Association and panel

“North Carolina has had terrible fisheries management, just unconscionable and you shouldn’t be letting it happen.”

Dr. Tim Nifong
CCA NC general counsel

member, told the crowd, “North Carolina is the only state in the country that allows wide scale use of gill nets. Our recreational fishery is managed for the commercial industry. We’ve got to question what we want our fishery to look like in the future.”

In the press release, Secretary van der Vaart said, “Braxton’s knowledge of state and national coastal issues, and his experience as director of our coastal management division, made him the perfect choice to lead both groups. His extensive background in coastal science and management will allow him to bring these two groups together in an effective and exciting way, and enhance protection of our state’s coastal and marine

resources.”

Davis began his tenure as director of the state’s coastal agency in September 2011, after serving as policy director for the South Carolina coastal program. He holds a doctorate in marine affairs from the University of Rhode Island, a master’s degree in biological sciences from Florida International University, and a bachelor’s degree in environmental sciences from the University of Virginia.

“I am honored by the trust placed in me to lead these two very important coastal divisions,” Davis said in the press release. “Both divisions have a long history of working collaboratively in many areas, including regulatory, research, planning, conservation and outreach activities, and I believe this move will only strengthen the partnerships we’ve developed over the years. I look forward to continuing our collaboration, and bringing both teams together to find more ways that we can improve our work and services.

“I plan to listen to, and work closely with staff, commission members, and other interested groups – both internal and external – to identify opportunities for efficiencies and improvements,” Davis continued. “I hope to develop draft recommendations for the future of both agencies later this year.”

Davis named Mike Lopazanski, chief

of the coastal division’s policy and planning section, as acting assistant director of the Division of Coastal Management. Col. Jim Kelley will continue to serve as acting assistant director of Marine Fisheries, a role he has held since February.

Lopazanski has worked for the coastal management division for 25 years, and has been head of its policy section since 2012.

Kelley has been with the N.C. Marine Patrol for nearly 27 years and has served as its leader since February 2014.

The state’s coastal agency regulates development in the 20 coastal counties, balancing coastal development needs with the protection of North Carolina’s coastal and marine resources, navigation, recreation and property rights.

The agency also helps local governments establish access ways for the public to reach coastal waters, assists with local land use planning, and administers the Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve Program, which sets aside coastal lands for research, education and stewardship.

The state’s marine fisheries division is responsible for the stewardship of the state’s marine and estuarine resources, and is dedicated to ensuring sustainable marine and estuarine fisheries and habitats for the benefit and health of the people of North Carolina.

Area captains share how and where to fish

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

Four coastal captains whetted the piscatorial appetites of about 60 anglers who attended CCA NC's first "how-to" fishing school in New Bern the first weekend of March.

Capt. Dave Stewart of Minnesott Reds near Oriental loves to hunt for redfish with a popping cork. "It's easier than bait fishing and a lot more entertaining," he said. Stewart attaches a cork to his braided line, then adds two feet of 50-pound mono as a leader. He tips his hook with a DOA artificial bait.

"The color of the DOA bait doesn't matter much," he added. "It's much more the cork noise and the bait fluttering." These big reds move into the sound from the ocean starting in May and June then spawn on a full moon. They can be fished all summer in four to six feet of water before they head back to the ocean in October," Stewart said.

Another redfish expert takes a different approach. Capt. Robbie Hall of Hall'em In Charters in Swansboro, chases redfish in the marsh where the water is only knee deep, especially in the winter.

"In the winter, it needs to be calm and sunny," Hall advised. By mid April, the



Capt. Allen Jernigan of Breadman Ventures explains how to use Cajun Thunder popping cork.

Photo by Rip Woodin

schools of reds begin to bust up so there is a lot more blind casting, he continued. He throws a quarter-ounce jig with white Gulp as bait.

Flounder are very structure oriented, Hall told the crowd, and like deeper wa-

ter and faster current. The key to fishing the ICW on any tide is finding a spot with finger mullet present, he said.

From late July through September, the water gets hot so the fish move to the mouth of the rivers, Hall said.

Speckled trout move north to south in late September and early October while the drum move back to the beaches. He likes a Rapala Skitterwalk for trout.

When fishing a wreck offshore, Hall uses a two-ounce Spro jig. "Check the menhaden schools too. A cobia could be underneath," he added.

"Don't be a creature of habit," Capt. Allen Jernigan of Breadman Ventures in Sneads Ferry told the angling audience. He uses a spinner bait for trout in the summer. "Move it some, sit it some," he said. "See how the fish are reacting. Fish will follow a bait a long way in the summer when you should look for a point with a little current."

He also likes a popping cork called "Cajun Thunder" but he attaches a foot of fluorocarbon to his Penn 12-pound braid with an Albright knot rather than tying it directly to the cork. His leader is about 18 inches of 20-pound fluorocarbon.

A top water lure is a good searching bait. If that doesn't draw any reaction, he sometimes switches to a copper spoon.

"2015 was the worst year for trout and drum," Jernigan proclaimed. "It was nothing like what we've seen in previous

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Spawning zones will rebuild snapper, grouper stocks

The South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (SAFMC) convened in March and adopted spawning Special Management Zones (SMZs) to protect larger reef fish from excessive fishing pressure.

North Carolina residents and tourists pay a premium for fresh snapper and grouper for dinner.

We recreational fishermen go miles offshore to "the stream" to catch our limit, rooted in the joy of procuring the self-caught meal. These bottom fish, however, are vulnerable to overfishing. Many live up to 40 years, grow and reproduce slowly.

Removing the large fish reduces the chance of increasing or maintaining a population's size. These fish aggregate tightly over limited bottom structure, particularly before and during spawning. Several can be caught and removed quickly from a small area.

The SMZs came about through Amendment 36 of

the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. Establishing conservation policy is challenging, and compromises must be made that impact fishing opportunities. The SMZs were selected after the SAFMC formed a working group of diverse stakeholders and held public hearings to incorporate recreational and commercial fishermen's knowledge, along with fishery scientists' evidence of reproducing deep water reef fish in the selected areas over a period of four years.

The N.C. management zone is one of three natural bottom SMZs located from North Carolina to Florida. In addition, there are two artificial reef SMZs off of the South Carolina coast. The NC SMZ is



BOB
LORENZ
SAFMC
Advisory panel

a 5.1 square mile area, 64 miles off South Inlet in 246-453 feet of water.

Large fish such as speckled hind and warsaw grouper are the targeted species for conservation. The SMZs will be closed to anchoring and all bottom fishing, but open to surface trolling for pelagic favorites such as dolphin, wahoo and king mackerel.

The SAFMC also established a Citizen Science initiative to promote collaborative research and data collection between commercial, recreational fisherman and scientists. We fisherman will be provided an opportunity to participate in studies and collect real field data during our fishing experiences.

Research is important to document the impact the SMZs will have on fish populations, and to evaluate

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CCA NC is a non-profit community of recreational anglers working to protect our marine resources for future generations to experience and enjoy.

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Coastal Conservation
Association
of North Carolina

Suite 123
4809 Hargrove Road
Raleigh, N.C., 27616
919-781-3474
www.ccanc.org

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N.C. on verge of 'New Day' in conserving fisheries

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

North Carolina, its recreational and commercial fishermen and its citizens who love to eat fresh seafood are experiencing an exciting opportunity to bring a "New Day" to our long suffering public trust marine resources and their management. Our New Day started when CCA NC announced its "Save NC Sounds" campaign to educate the general public about gill nets and otter trawls in our inshore waters.

A second boost came with the passage of the Southern Flounder Supplement. A third major event, the recent resignation of Dr. Louis Daniel as Department of Marine Fisheries director, has provided more opportunity. The appointment of Braxton Davis, director of the Coastal Management Division, as Daniel's successor adds to the momentum.

During Dr. Daniel's eight-year tenure, we witnessed more species of fish fall into the "Concerned" or "Depleted" designation, than became "Viable" or "Recovered." When Daniel resigned, only four of our 16 state managed fisheries were Viable or better. He managed our fisheries for maximum yield for the commercial fishermen, not for the betterment of the resource.

With Davis' science background, we expect him to really study the impact of certain gears and harvest traditions that negatively impact our marine habitats. We cannot restore our fisheries without improving our coastal habitats, so we believe the right man has been appointed to bring a New Day to N.C. fishery management.

Rep. John Bell (R-Wayne) has started a special committee to study state wildlife resources, and our precious coastal fisher-

ies are a leading part of that study. Now, we are seeing more movements toward a change from other groups and organizations that do not want to waste these "New Day" opportunities and restore our coastal public trust resources.

In late 2014, CCA NC announced its "Save NC Sounds" campaign to educate the public on the damage being done to state marine resources by gill nets and otter trawls. We are the last state in the nation to permit almost unlimited use inshore of these two gears. Most states have banned the use of gill nets, except a few states continue that allow gill nets for short seasons on special fisheries.

Most states have banned the inshore use of otter trawls while a couple of states allow only a limited number of small boats pulling otter trawls with 50 feet or less head rope to operate. Most states now require skimmer trawls, channel nets or shrimp pots on inshore waters, while the otter trawls are permitted only in the ocean. CCA NC does not want to put the commercial fishermen out of business, but we do want a "New Day" where North Carolina is like other states requiring the most efficient gears for commercial harvest.

Most everyone knows by now about some of the changes coming to Southern flounder harvest in 2016. While the Southern Flounder Supplement was not perfect, it will effect needed changes that will lead to the first large improvements in a fishery that has been depleted and overfished for over a decade. Every citizen needs to send his thanks to the nine members of the N.C. Marine Fishery



**BUD
ABBOTT**
Chairman

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SPAWNING

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the effectiveness of the fishery management policy. The Citizen Science initiative has been designed with the help of a diverse team of commercial and recreational fisherman, scientists and conservationists. A few CCA members from North Carolina through Florida participated. Funding for the program is the next step. There will need to be introduction and approval of a congressional appropriations bill or line item during this spring's 2017 federal budget process to begin implementation later this year.

In other items of interest, the 2015 recreational catch for cobia exceeded our allowed quota by over 140 percent. Recreational

Establishing conservation policy is challenging, and compromises must be made that impact fishing opportunities.

anglers from Georgia to New York landed more than 1.5 million pounds of cobia. Our annual catch limit was 630,000 pounds. The SAFMC decided that for 2016 the cobia season will close on June 20, and the daily bag limit will remain at two in federal waters that are three miles or more from shore.

Hogfish, a species in the snapper-grouper complex, will likely see changes to

regulations through Amendment 37 of the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. There are two separate hogfish populations in the South Atlantic. The Florida stock is in poor shape while a separate stock from Georgia through North Carolina is fairly healthy.

Here, we are most likely to see a 17-inch fork length minimum size limit, two fish per day limit in the near future. As of March 2016, the SAFMC has not proposed a yearly closed season for hogfish. There has been some discussion of a potential closure during the spawning season in June-July off our coast.

A member of CCA NC's executive board, Bob Lorenz is one of two N.C. recreational fishermen on the federal South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel.

MFC adopts controversial flounder supplement

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

Despite direct threats from 13 coastal legislators, the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission adopted a supplement to the state's Southern Flounder Management Plan last November that will cut landings by 38 percent, close the season from Oct. 16-Dec. 31 and raise the minimum harvest size to 15 inches.

Before the supplement took effect Jan. 1, there was immediate talk of a lawsuit by the commercial fishermen's association and legislative promises to rescind the commission's vote. The commercial interests believe the 2014 stock assessment that prompted the action is faulty. Before an assessment can be relevant, it should measure the Southern flounder fishery in multiple states, not just North Carolina, they claim.

Conservationists, recreational anglers and wildlife advocates all argue that the state's Southern flounder has been overfished for nearly 20 years. David Sneed, executive director of CCA NC, said, "Various fisheries staff reports labeled Southern flounder as 'overfished' from 2002-2005, and 'depleted' from 2006-2013." Ten years after the adoption of a management plan to rebuild stocks there are no statistics indicating the purposes of the FMP



Photo courtesy of Andrew Boyd

have been met, Sneed said.

While the 2014 stock assessment did not technically prove that overfishing continues, Sneed said it verifies that Southern flounder numbers are still low. And to make matters worse, much of the commercial harvest is among "recruitment" stocks, smaller juvenile fish that haven't yet spawned. This was the reason the commission raised the minimum size from 14 to 15 inches for

Net Effect documentary

As the debate over fisheries management has gotten meaner, WRAL-TV in Raleigh produced a powerful documentary called Net Effect that looks at the overall status of important North Carolina marine fisheries stocks and how poorly they've been managed.

The documentary fairly examines the state's commercial and recreational fishing heritages relative to the two key issues that have depleted fish stocks in recent decades: The proliferation of large mesh monofilament gill nets, and the continued large scale shrimp trawling in North Carolina estuaries.

CCA NC is making DVDs available to various state leaders. The documentary can be seen at the following link: <http://www.wral.com/net-effect-the-fight-over-flounder-/15019970/>

the commercial catch; the recreational minimum was already at 15 inches but 84 percent of the total flounder harvest is by commercial fishermen.

The vitriol surrounding the fight has taken a toll. Dr. Louis Daniel, executive director of the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, told the audience at the November meeting where the fisheries commission made the decision, "There has been an extraordinary amount of erroneous information out there about this Southern flounder issue. There have been some hurtful and hateful things said about me, particularly, and about other folks, about staff, about Je-

sus himself, maybe."

Shortly after that 6-3 vote, Commissioner Keith Rhodes who had just been appointed to the board by Gov. Pat McCrory, abruptly resigned. Two racist remarks posted on a closed group Facebook page were directed at Rhodes, who is an award-winning African-American chef from Wilmington. He had voted with the majority on the supplement and drew the ire of the commercial fishing industry because he also serves on the N.C. Catch board that promotes eating local fish. The State Bureau of Investigation is looking into the threatening posts.

Halt commercial striped bass harvest immediately

Dear MFC Commissioners,
I am writing this letter to ask you to take immediate action to stop the commercial harvest of striped bass in the Central Southern Management Area (CSMA).

The three river systems in the CSMA (Tar/Pamlico, Neuse, and Cape Fear) are stocked each year with striped bass by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). Harvest of striped bass in the Cape Fear River is already closed to establish a breeding population that will be self-sustaining.

Farther north in the CSMA, the Edenton National Fish Hatchery supplies the WRC with approximately 100,000 phase II fish (150-250 mm) each year for both the Tar/Pamlico and Neuse river systems (1,2). Like the Cape Fear striped bass program, these stock-

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

ings have a goal of re-establishing a natural breeding population that is self-sustaining. Unfortunately, this project is failing due to overfishing by commercial fishermen.

Not only does the WRC stock these fish, but they have also conducted cutting edge scientific experiments aimed at understanding the populations. What they have found is disturbing. Genetic marking studies by the WRC have shown that at least 93-97 percent of fish in the Neuse and Tar/Pamlico rivers are derived from hatchery stocks and that very little, if any, natural breeding is occurring.

This finding is very troubling, but these particular populations of striped bass offer a unique opportunity that is quite rare in the complicated world of marine fisheries management. While most marine species are difficult to assess, a known number of phase II fish is added to the respective rivers each year. Natural mortality of these older fish has been well-studied so an accurate range of mortality rates can be used when evaluating the population.

In addition, these fish don't emigrate. They stay within the river system in which they were stocked and swim upstream each year during a set season, passing through relatively small sections of water where they can be routinely sampled. Finally, a very limited recre-

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Commission for standing up for our resource, after so many past commissions refused to do what was necessary.

We now have limited seasons for gill nets, a Total Allowable Landing (TAL) on pound nets and season closure when most flounder are leaving our inshore waters to breed in the ocean. Yes, we know a few recreational fishermen will be upset that the season is closing Oct. 15 each year, but we must start rebuilding the Southern flounder fishery or lose it forever. North Carolina is the largest inshore nursery area on the east

coast and we affect the fisheries of other states with our lack of proper fishery management.

On the habitat front, CCA NC was able to secure a \$100,000 grant from our national Building Conservation Trust. CCA awarded this grant to Dr. Joel Fodie of the UNC Marine Studies in Morehead City.

His study will involve construction of new oyster beds and monitor the fish that frequent these beds.

This study has direct relevance and will help scientists better understand the importance, makeup and structure of oyster beds as habitat improvement. A New Day starts with improved habitat, and CCA NC is prepared to lead the way.

CCA NC leadership spends consider-

able time working with the state Legislature to improve our marine resources. We call attention to matters that positively and negatively affect our fisheries and their management.

The new Wildlife Resource Committee's first meeting was the third week of April in Raleigh. While nothing earth shaking came out of the meeting, we do expect some good results in future months.

Citizen advocates are welcome to attend these meetings and provide comment. Your CCA leaders are doing just that and welcome you to join us in these efforts. Your legislators need to know you are concerned about protecting and preserving N.C.'s public trust resources at the coast and want a New Day in fish-

ery management. Call them!

We are starting to see other fishing groups and conservation organizations attend Marine Fisheries Commission meetings, sessions with legislators, holding public awareness meetings and other activities to protect our coastal marine resources.

We urge you to get involved with a fishing club, a conservation group or CCA NC and do what you can to help us preserve our public trust resources for future generations. We all enjoy our great coastal areas, our oceans and eating good seafood.

If we want a New Day in North Carolina fisheries management, we must step up and speak from our hearts. Protect today and conserve for tomorrow.

HARVEST

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ational harvest is monitored via surveys while commercial harvest, which is limited to a yearly TAC of 25,000 pounds, is reported on trip tickets.

In essence, the only unknowns in this system are the number of fish killed and discarded by commercial gillnetters, the commercial gillnet harvest that is not sold, and illegal harvest. Using all of this information, the WRC was able to complete a virtual population analysis. This analysis indicated that "cryptic mortality" was greater than the reported recreational and commercial harvest. Using even the highest known natural mortality rate in this analysis could not lessen this cryptic mortality to a level that would allow it to be explained.

Considering this, the most likely explanation for the cryptic mortality of CMSA striped bass is that it derives from illegal and underreported commercial harvest, dead discards from gillnets, and ghost fishing gear. Taken together, the results of many years of studies on this fish population along with their recent genetic analysis have led the WRC to conclude that long term recruitment overfishing is occurring and that the stock would improve if this exploitation decreased. Since recreational harvest is minimal, this can only be achieved by stopping the commercial harvest of CMSA striped bass. Without stopping the commercial harvest of these fish, the joint effort of the WRC and the National Marine Fisheries Service to re-establish a self-sustaining population of striped bass in the Tar/Pamlico and Neuse River systems will continue to fail.

Now some will say that stopping this

harvest will cause great hardship. However, that is not the case. At most, stopping the commercial striped bass harvest in all CMSA waters will eliminate the legal sale of 25,000 pounds of striped bass each year. From 2005 to 2014, the average annual commercial harvest of striped bass from the CMSA was 23,623 pounds — only 168 commercial fishermen reported a striped bass sale in 2013, which is the latest available data.

The CMSA striped bass harvest is on average, only 15 percent of the yearly harvest taken from internal waters in North Carolina, with the other 85 percent coming from the Albemarle Sound Management Area (ASMA) and Roanoke River Management Area (RRMA). In 2014, the reported commercial harvest from the CMSA was 25,085 pounds and this had a value of \$68,607.

This works out to an average of about \$400 per commercial fishermen if about

168 fishermen reported sales in 2014, as was the case in 2013. The cost of stocking these fish is estimated to be approximately \$600,000.

These amazing numbers lead prudent people to ask a simple question — why does one state agency allow the harvest and sale of fish that cost other agencies nearly 10 fold more to stock?

And this stocking occurs trying to re-establish a breeding population of this species! This just makes no sense, and that is why I am asking you to do the right thing and put an immediate stop to commercial harvest of striped bass in the CSMA.

Eb Pesci
Greenville, N.C.

Editor's note: The following letter was sent to members of the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission

CAPTAINS

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years. The class size and by-catch regulations (allowing commercial fishermen to keep more drum) hurt, especially in my area. I would see dead drum floating every day," he said, putting the blame on the discards by commercial gill netters. "The hook-and-line mortality is nowhere

near the problem that the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries says it is."

Capt. Tom Roller of WaterDog Guide Service in Morehead City told the crowd that Atlantic Bonito is a great fishery to start the season. While they look sort of like false albacore, these small speedsters have vertical lines separated by horizontal white spaces.

"They come when the water temperature is 62 degrees. They'll be two miles off the beach on structure like a wreck

or Diver's Rock," he said. To catch them, leave the dock while it's still dark, Roller advised.

"Use a Sting Silver of one to 1.5 ounces. Let it sink for five to 15 seconds before starting the retrieve."

He uses 30-pound fluorocarbon leader or 40 pounds if Spanish or king mackerel are around.

Roller also offered a few tips on chasing cobia. "You can bait fish using circle hooks and a menhaden," he said. Focus

on tidelines or a ball of menhaden in 20-25 feet of water. "Put the sun at your back and stalk the bait ball if there has been no pressure on it."

The cobia are often below the school. Any kind of big splash or nervous action by the school is a tip off.

He uses a 2-3 ounce Spro jig with bucktail. "A cobia likes something big, so put a trailer on it too like a split tail Z-man." Roller will also throw a Tikki jig that can run up to four ounces.

Free circle hook plan to reduce fish mortality

By Bill Mandulak
CCA NC Contributor

Because circle hooks have great fish conservation value, CCA NC is including a free circle hook in 10,000 flyers that will be given to tackle shops for distribution to the general fishing public.

"The full color flyer will have a brief discussion of the benefits and rigging of circle hooks," said David Sneed, executive director of CCA NC. "We believe this program will have a very positive impact on our fisheries."

The design of a circle hook has the point of the hook bent toward the shaft of the hook instead of parallel to the shaft in a traditional J-hook, Sneed explained.

Circle hooks originated in the commercial long-line fishery to increase the security of the hookup and facilitate release of unwanted catch.

"These same benefits apply for recreational fishermen as well. As a result, the popularity of circle hooks has grown quickly," he continued.

They are now required by regulation in several fisheries including certain bottom fishing in federal waters and the "old drum" fishery in Pamlico Sound.

Circle hooks are now being used successfully in fisheries as diverse as off-shore marlin fishing with very large circle hooks to very small circle hooks used for sea mullet fishing in the surf.

In the April Saltwater Sportsman magazine, George Poveromo discussed



Lupton rig for drum

the advantages, proper usage and rigging of circle hooks.

He described the many fisheries that can benefit from the use of circle hooks and how different types of circle hooks might apply.

Poveromo pointed out the challenge most recreational anglers face in the use of circle hooks is learning how to properly set circle hooks. Once this is mastered, circle hooks can be a great advantage for the recreational fisherman.

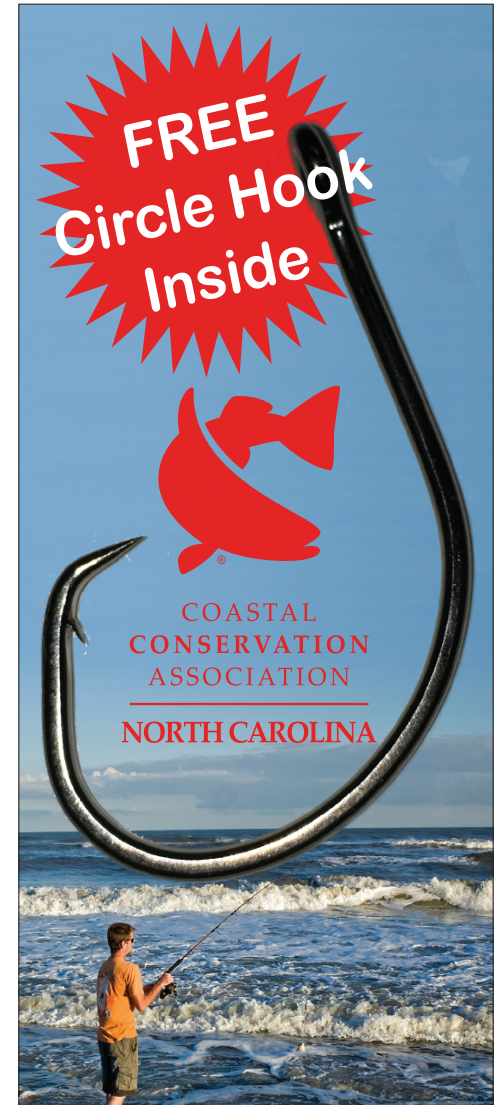
Beyond the advantages to the angler, Sneed said studies have shown that non-offset circle hooks minimize gut-hooking fish.

Gut hooked fish have a much lower survival rate than jaw-hooked fish.

The design of the circle hook causes it to rotate in the fish's mouth allowing the hook to be set in the fish's jaw.

"Part of CCA NC's mission is to educate the public on conservation measures that will guarantee our fisheries will be available to future generations," Sneed said in explaining why CCA NC undertook the project.

The support from Eagle Claw Hooks, Select Bank and Trust and Adams Towing and Recovery made this program possible, he added.



Official sunglasses
of the CCA NC



Hurt: 4 years of spreading conservation gospel

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

Former CCA NC Chairman Greg Hurt said he feels his greatest accomplishment while leading the organization is spreading the “gospel message” of resource conservation to various stakeholders from association members to legislators.

After serving two years as president then two more as chairman, Hurt said through better education and communication, the organization has become much more proactive in the fight to conserve coastal fisheries for future generations. “Many now understand that unfortunately our great state is not and has not been the ‘gold standard’ for effective, pro-resource fisheries management. As a result of efforts by CCA and other like-minded groups, we are certainly seeing many more of our state’s legislators coming on board, committing to create and support legislation that will protect the resource,” he said.

To effect a fisheries management change from a culture of exploitation to conservation, Hurt said the public must get involved and influence their representatives in the General Assembly. “So we are very pleased to see significant numbers of citizens joining the cause. As most know, our saltwater fish species are public trust resources, owned equally by the senior citizen in Boone or teenager in Beaufort,” Hurt continued. “Many of these individuals have grown tired of ‘their’ fish not being taken care of and have chosen to get involved and do their part.”

As usual, Hurt gave credit for his success to others. “My second highlight is I had the pleasure of working with dozens of people who are tremendously passionate about the cause. These folks dedicate significant amounts of time, effort and money to protecting the resource and are really making a difference,” he added.

Hurt said he also tried to change the perception by some people that CCA NC is an enemy of commercial fishing and wants to keep all the fish for its members. “That’s just absurd,” he explained. “Because we oppose a very limited number of current commercial fishing gear



Photo by Rip Woodin

Former CCA NC Chairman Greg Hurt enjoyed a good tug from this Hickory shad on the Roanoke River.

types, we are seen by some as opposing the entire industry. Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Hurt said he is, at best, an average recreational fisherman and many times doesn’t bring back enough fish for dinner. “As a result, I depend on the state’s commercial industry to provide the seafood requirements of my family. That said, highly destructive and non-selective

gear types such as inshore gill nets and inshore trawls are not sustainable ways to commercial fish and have no place in North Carolina.”

Does he have any regrets over items left undone in his four-year management tenure?

“Only that we haven’t accomplished as much as quickly as I had hoped,” he answered. “I have come to understand

that fundamentally changing the way our state manages its coastal resources is a tough process. It’s a process that takes longer than expected but a process that must be executed. I honestly feel like things are moving in the right direction, slow but steady. The more individuals who get involved the better, numbers matter.”

Hurt said anyone can help simply by joining CCA NC or an organization that is working for conservation and fair use of the resource.

“Let your voice be heard. CCA NC Executive Director, David Sneed, often uses a quote from Art Neumann, a founder of Trout Unlimited. ‘Take care of the fish and the fishing will take care of itself.’ Very simple yet powerful advice,” he concluded.

Marine Fisheries Commissioner Chuck Laughridge said Hurt has been “the most level headed and fair person CCA has ever had in a leadership position. Great on Jones Street (the Legislature) and the same on the boat, and I’ve seen him many times in both places. If you could clone a leader for CCA, or a pro-resource leader, I doubt you could find a better pattern than Greg Hurt. I consider it a privilege to call him a friend.”

Current Chairman Bud Abbott said Hurt was one of the most effective presidents and chairmen CCA NC has had when it came to moving important fishery issues forward.

“Greg helped formulate the first CCA NC Strategic Plan that made multiple efforts to protect and improve our public trust resources at the coast. Greg is very humble and will not call attention to himself nor his positive results.”

One of Hurt’s most effective traits was his quiet approach to major issues, Abbott continued.

“He was always the calming voice in the room when things got heated and consistently looked for the best solution available. Greg understands the plight of the commercial fishermen, but understands changes in gear and traditions are necessary for the betterment of all NC citizens and its marine resources. CCA NC, its members and the citizens of NC owe Greg a big slice of gratitude and thanks to go with his humble pie.”

Anglers should unite to fight destructive nets

By Kent King
Guest Columnist

This has been an unusual fall fishing season so far. The fish have been biting extremely well, but they are running small this year.

Speckled trout are the main species we target as the weather cools off, and the water temperatures reaches that magical mark of 55 degrees.

We are finding trout in just about every place we fish. We have been rewarded with trips recently where we have caught 82, 54, 29 and 63.

Normally with that many fish striking our lures, a limit of four trout apiece could be extremely easy.

That has not been the case at all so far this season.

There are two main reasons why we are catching so many small trout and very few large enough to go in the cooler.

One natural cause is the cold stun events these larger fish have endured for the past several winters.

Those cold kills must have been much more severe and widespread than originally estimated.

The second reason throws the blame directly to the commercial fisherman and the variety of nets they use to catch fish.

There are stop nets in the ocean, pound nets all across Drum Inlet, and now that Dec. 1 has arrived, there will be all kinds of gill nets in our internal coastal waters. These inland waters are where the speckled trout choose to spend the winter months.

They chase the minnows up deeper creeks and rivers. With nets set all along the shoreline, many of the larger fish never make it to their wintering grounds. They are caught in those nets, while most of the smaller trout can find a way to free themselves from the larger size mesh.

Last year fishing near Rose Bay was starting to get good around Thanksgiving.

We were catching a lot of respectable speckled trout.

As soon as Dec. 1 arrived, there were dozens of nets set parallel to the shoreline.

These nets were placed in the areas where we had caught nice trout only a week earlier. We could not even fish close to the bank.

The trout did not have a chance with all those nets.

Ever how many trout entered Rose Bay last fall, very few survived the winter to reproduce their species in the spring. These same scenes were repeated at Vandemere, Bay River, Hobucken, Juniper Bay and Bogue Sound. There are so many nets doing damage to the species they cannot possibly grow in numbers and size.

Speckled trout are not the only species affected by being overfished by the commercial fisherman's nets.

Flounder are also in short supply, and we went almost the whole summer without catching a single



Photo by Rip Woodin

Kent King of Nashville prepares to launch his boat for a day of speckled trout fishing on Rose Bay.

GUEST COLUMNIST

keeper puppy drum.

We cannot do anything about God's plan of natural selection as a result of the cold kill events.

We surely can do something to ban those destructive nets from our state's waters.

The nets must be banned from internal coastal waters when fall arrives.

The creeks and rivers narrow as the fish swim upstream. Like a funnel, the fish have nowhere to go but straight in a net. My best friend called last week with a good plan.

He wants to round up as many recreational fishermen as possible and head straight to downtown Raleigh. He wants to see hundreds of trucks, pulling boats both large and small, circling the governor's mansion.

It would be a peaceful protest in hopes of gaining attention toward banning nets from North Carolina's waters. At the very least we should gain plenty of at-

CCA NC event schedule

May 18-20 N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission meeting at Crystal Coast Civic Center, Morehead City, N.C.

May 21 Cobia and Spanish Mackerel Challenge, Morehead City, N.C. Entry fee \$150-\$350. For more details, see <http://ccanc.org/events-calendar/2016-cca-nc-cobia-challenge/>

tention from all the traffic we bring to a dead standstill.

It would be nice to plan that event for a cold, rainy, Mustang day when we cannot otherwise go fishing.

CCA honors top volunteer, legislator

Lee Sykes recognized

At its recent annual meeting, the State Board of Directors for the Coastal Conservation Association North Carolina (CCA NC) named local on-water towing captain and TowBoatUS Beaufort owner Lee Sykes "Volunteer of the Year."

An advocate for coastal fisheries and owner of a local 24-hour on-water recreational boat towing and assistance company, Sykes is the CCA NC president of the Crystal Coast Chapter and is credited with, "Revitalizing this chapter and bringing it back as a significant contributor to our efforts in North Carolina," said chapter member and CCA NC Board Member Bert Owens. The chapter is one of 13 in North Carolina. "He was determined that the Crystal Coast Chapter would remain a vibrant voice for coastal fisheries conservation in North Carolina."

"I'm honored to have been selected," said Sykes. "I'm out on our waters nearly every day and believe that everyone needs to do his part. I've always wanted to ensure that my own child will continue to have a vibrant fishery for her generation, and our coastal waters con-



CCA Executive David Sneed, right, congratulates Lee Sykes, owner of Towboat U.S., as the organization's most active volunteer.

tinue to provide a quality fishing experience that doesn't diminish."

Part of a nationwide network of 300 locations and more than 600 towboats, Sykes' TowBoatUS business is North Carolina's largest, providing 24-hour on water towing assistance and soft un-grounding services to recreational boaters, much like a reliable auto club. It also offers salvage services. In addition to Beaufort, Sykes' additional TowBoatUS locations include Swansboro, Jordon Lake, Falls Lake, Sharon Harris Lake, Gaston Lake, Kerr Lake, Smith Mountain Lake, Va., and most recently High

Rock Lake. For more visit BoatUS.com/beaufort.

CCA and its state-chapter network are engaged in hundreds of local, state and national programs and projects related to marine conservation, including initiating scientific studies, funding marine science scholarships, building artificial reefs, creating finfish hatcheries, initiating hydrologic and contaminant studies, monitoring the quality and quantity of freshwater inflows, supporting local marine law enforcement and more. For more visit www.ccanc.org.

Bell's legislative role appreciated

Rep. John Bell, (R-10), was named Legislator of the Year for 2015 by the Coastal Conservation Association of North Carolina.

The annual award honoring the legislator who does the most to promote conservation in the state was given to Rep. Bell April 28 at a banquet hosted by the Triangle Chapter of CCA NC at the N.C. State Fairgrounds.

Rep. Bell, whose district includes portions of Wayne, Lenoir, Greene and Craven counties, was a sponsor and main driver behind the passage of the N.C. Outdoor Heritage Act during the 2015 long session. A key part of the law establishes the N.C. Outdoor Heritage Trust Fund for Youth. It provides opportunities for youth age 16 and under to participate in outdoor activities, including hunting and fishing, that will pass on North Carolina's outdoor heritage to future generations.

The citation honoring Bell reads, "With deep appreciation from the sportsmen, anglers and conservationists of North Carolina; for the commitment and leadership of N.C. Representative John Bell 2015 Coastal Conservation Association North Carolina Legislator of the Year."

"We honor Rep. Bell for his commitment to the conservation of our coastal marine resources and to the preservation of North Carolina's outdoor sporting heritage," said David Sneed, executive director of CCA NC.

In his second House term, Bell is majority whip and lives in Goldsboro.



REP. BELL



GRADY-WHITE



Onslow chapter gives vets a day on the water

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

It cost a lot of time, effort and money but the Project Healing Waters event staged in late October by the CCA NC Onslow Bay Chapter provided an incredible experience for participants and volunteers alike, said David Sneed, executive director of CCA NC.

"There were smiles all around on the faces of the many fishermen from Project Healing Waters and the volunteers from the Onslow Bay Chapter," Sneed said. Friday night was the captains' meeting party at (state board member) Rocky Carter's house overlooking Queen Creek, Sneed continued. "Volunteers grilled steak and pork barbecue for slider sandwiches, and provided plenty of beer and drinks for all of the participants."

Hodge Jordan, who chaired the Swansboro event, said about 40 veterans were introduced to the 28 boat captains who would take them fishing the next day. Despite heavy scouting that included a chapter member flying his helicopter over the Swansboro shoreline, fishing was rough on Saturday because of an east wind that chopped up the bay, Jordan said. "We did catch some Spanish mackerel, trout, red drum, blues and a 40-pound king mackerel," he added.

When the boats returned, volunteers had prepared a Low Country boil dinner with 10 bushels of oysters and plenty of homemade desserts, Jordan said. "It was an incredible day," he added, explaining that no matter how much the volunteers work, they receive more than they give. "You never know how much it means to the veterans, especially the Viet Nam guys who never had a homecoming celebration."



Photo courtesy of Callie Freeman

Volunteer captains like Bobby Rice, right, took veterans out for a day of fishing and then treated them to a seafood dinner.

The chapter spent more than \$5,000 on the event including two nights' lodging for the veterans. Without that help, a lot of the participants would not have been able to come, said Dan Estrem, who is the Raleigh-Durham, N.C. coordinator for Project Healing Waters.

Estrem has about 125 veterans on his roster at any given time that the organization helps through fly fishing. He gets referrals from the VA Hospital in Durham, the Raleigh Veterans Center and some nursing homes.

During the winter they build fly rods

and tie flies, he said, which helps with motor skills. But getting out of the house every Thursday to socialize and fish in local ponds gives them a peaceful outlet to minimize their depression or brooding, Estrem explained.

He told the story of one vet who came to a number of meetings but sat off to the side and wouldn't talk to anyone. Now he's a regular and can't wait for Thursday. Another vet built a fly rod but never took it home and stopped coming to meetings. Estrem found out the man was in hospice with terminal cancer and

took him the rod. "He was pleased and died with it in his hand." That's how much the organization means to veterans.

Estrem brought about 30 vets from his region, another half dozen came from Wounded Warriors and a few Purple Heart recipients from Camp Lejeune also participated. "The amount of work CCA put into the event was phenomenal," he said. "It's hard to describe what it meant to the guys."

Bobby Rice of High Point, N.C., was one of the volunteer captains. "I took a young man, 24, from Missouri who had never fished salt water," Rice said. "He got a waiver and joined the Marines at 17, served two tours in Afghanistan then was blinded in one eye. He was an inspiration to me," Rice said.

Why? "Because here's a young man in his prime, a combat veteran who is now facing a medical discharge and doesn't know what he's going to do in the future. He had such a great attitude; it was truly incredible," Rice said. "It makes me feel good about the young men who will lead our country."

Bud Onstad, a 24-year Army veteran, spoke what everyone universally felt. It wasn't so much about the fishing, but the camaraderie. "Let me say the generosity of those who put on this event, shared their knowledge and provided a welcoming environment was simply overwhelming. The food and especially the fellowship was tremendous."

After catching several speckled trout and a flounder, Onstad concluded, "The fishing alone was great but getting to know Troy (his captain) and others was the best part. All the organizers gave us a special gift and we can't thank you enough. They all are very generous."

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Cobia harvest, season significantly reduced for South Atlantic coast

By Rip Woodin
CCA NC Editor

At its February meeting, the N.C. Marine Fisheries Commission significantly cut the recreational harvest and season dates for cobia, positions endorsed by CCA NC after the East Coast annual catch limit was more than doubled in 2015 to 1.5 million pounds.

The MFC rule reduced the daily bag limit from two to one fish greater than 33 inches per person and planned for a late June end to a season that previously never closed. Tom Roller, chairman of the CCA NC fisheries committee, said one of the big reasons for exceeding the 630,000 pound annual catch limit was the huge class year of cobia combined with cold water temperatures that kept the highly migratory fish in the region longer. "That class year was historical in size and an overage may never happen again," he said, explaining that North Carolina anglers alone caught more poundage than the total catch limit for the Georgia to Virginia region.

While cobia are not overfished presently, the changes "will be very unpopular but necessary to keep the fishery healthy and abundant," Roller continued. "As tough as it is, it will be hard to recognize that closure is good long term. The season has never been closed before because we've never come close to reaching the ACL."

Roller said North Carolina and Virginia catch most of the cobia on the East Coast while the states farther south are never close to their limits. Cobia has always been a popular fishery but it's been exploding in the past few years because there is a lot less to fish for in state waters. "If it's the only game in town, then more people will fish for cobia," Roller said.

The state took a proactive step to hopefully avoid what could be a more drastic reaction from the South Atlantic



Capt. Tom Roller of WaterDog Guide Service boats a nice cobia off the Atlantic Beach coast.

Fishery Management Council next year before it undertakes a new stock assessment.

The SAFMC, which manages fisheries from North Carolina to Florida, must act on the catch limit overage, adjusting it according to rules in the federal Magnuson Stevens Act that would average out the catch over several years.

The feds can't move fast enough to enact new regulations for 2016, Roller said, so the state's halved harvest limit may allow the season this year to re-

main open a bit longer than the current June 15 closure date. This won't impact southeastern North Carolina anglers as much as those on the Outer Banks and in Virginia, he added.

The cobia show up in North Carolina from early May to early June, said Roller who is also president of the N.C. Guides Association.

It won't hurt recreational anglers here as much as it will in Virginia, which likely won't even see any fish until after the closure.

"I'm a fulltime guide so I feel for the guys in the recreational industry," Roller continued. "It's a big deal because there's so much less to fish for in shore. There's little striped bass, gray trout or Southern flounder any more."

North Carolina needs to do a better job of managing its fisheries for the valuable recreational fishing industry. That's why this is a big deal. Fishermen migrate to where the fish are. If there's nothing to fish for, then those dollars will go elsewhere," Roller concluded.