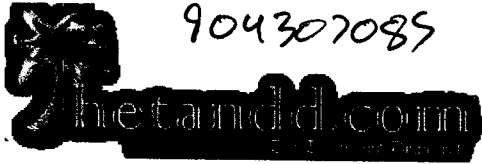


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Managing striped bass

DNR focuses on increasing harvestable population in Santee Cooper System

By S.W. SHOPTAW, T&D Correspondent
Monday, January 29, 2007

SANTEE – The continuing decrease in harvestable striped bass in Lakes Marion and Moultrie and their headwater rivers is the focus of a series of meetings being conducted by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

Striped bass, DNR officials point out, are aggressive fishing fish and due to the size they normally get, are a prize catch for the novice as well as the professional fisherman.

The purpose of the DNR meetings, one of which was conducted at Lake Marion High School in Santee on Jan. 23, is to discuss striped bass management with local fishermen and concerned residents.

DNR officials say the decrease in harvestable striped bass in the Santee Cooper System is not a recent trend.

Scott Lamprecht of DNR said striped bass can grow as long as four feet and weigh nearly 60 pounds. But, annual mortality of striped bass in the system is about 70 percent a year, he said.

"Anglers harvest or kill at least 40 percent of the population each year, and up to 30 percent die of natural causes. Very few fish live beyond five years, so the fish caught by anglers are relatively small and most female striped bass do not live long enough to spawn even once," Lamprecht said.

He said striped bass grow rather rapidly in the South Carolina lakes compared to other places around the state and country. In Santee Cooper, stripers reach 21 inches, the current legally harvestable length, at about three years of age, Lamprecht said. Sexual maturity for males starts around two years of age, and they mature by age three. Females do not start maturing until four years, he said, and they are all mature by age five. About half the females mature at age four and half at age five, Lamprecht said. About half of females will mature and spawn at age four, or 24 inches, and by age five, or 26 inches, he said.

"The current lake limits protect the fish to about three quarters of the second year of life. There was a peak in the amount of fish in approximately 2001 as a result of a large recruitment in 1998. But since that 1998 recruitment, we have had mediocre recruitment," Lamprecht said. "And, over the last six years we have had very little recruitment, and that has brought us to where we are today ... the lowest point we have been in the history of the reservoir."

Management of striped bass started back in the early 1980s, he said.

"This was to address the problems we were encountering in the 1970s that was occurring with the natural recruitment. This started with an 18-inch size limit imposed in 1984 and supplement stocking at five fish per acre. Previous to that time, we had never stocked striped bass in Santee Cooper," Lamprecht said. "Five years later there was no change. At that time, the limit was dropped from 10 to five per day and we started supplemental stocking at 15 fish per acre."

According to Lamprecht, the large striped bass are not supposed to tolerate temperatures above 80.6 degrees F. for extended periods.

"However, in Lake Marion and Moultrie, summer water temperatures often reach 82.4 to 86 degrees F. This generates a great deal of stress on the larger fish. Because of their weakened condition during the summer months," he said, "about 75 percent of stripers that are caught and released during the summer will die. Death

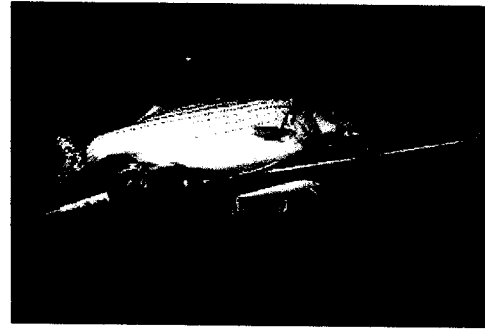


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usually occurs later, after the fish appears to swim off healthy. At cooler temperatures, stripers can be released safely."

As a result of the continued decline of the striped bass, Lamprecht said DNR is recommending several options to reduce the decline and bring back the population.

The primary way to increase the number and size is to reduce fishing mortality, which includes both harvest and hook-and-release deaths related to high summer water temperatures, DNR points out.

For Lakes Marion and Moultrie and the Congaree, Broad, Wateree, Santee and Cooper Rivers, DNR has listed the following four options:

-- Option 1: Oct 1-May 31 – Two stripers per day, minimum length 26 inch, with careful release allowed; June 1-Sept 30 – Closed season. No targeted catch-and-release fishing allowed.

-- Option 2: Sept 16-June 14 – Two stripers per day, minimum length 26 inches, with catch and careful release allowed; June 15-Sept 15 – Closed season. No targeted catch-and-release fishing allowed.

-- Option 3: Sept 16-June 14 – Two stripers per day, minimum length 24 inches, with catch and careful release allowed; June 15-Sept 15 – One striper per day, no minimum size. No catch-and-release fishing.

-- Option 4: Oct 1-May 31 – Two stripers per day, minimum length 26 inches, with catch and careful release allowed; June 1-Sept 30 – The first two stripers caught, no minimum size, and striper angling must cease for the day (no catch-and-release fishing allowed.)

For the Lower Saluda River, DNR recommends the following options for management for quality fish and brood stock protection:

-- Option 1: One striper per day, minimum length 28 inches, with catch and careful release allowed.

-- Option 2: One striper per day, minimum length 26 inches, with catch and careful release allowed.

-- Option 3: Two stripers per day, minimum length 26 inches, with catch and careful release allowed.

-- Option 4: No harvest. Catch and careful release allowed.

According to DNR, the expected benefits are:

-- The fishing mortality on the Santee-Cooper striped bass population will be reduced, increasing the average size and the catch rate of striped bass.

-- The number of mature females in the population will increase, and the potential for sustained natural production will increase. And, a quality fishery in Lower Saluda River will be protected and developed.

The Department of Natural Resources recommends Option 1 in both Lake Marion, Moultrie and Lower Saluda River.

Mary Shiner, executive director of Santee Cooper Countries Promotion Commission, says the desired options would be Number 3 in both areas. According to a letter from Shiner to Lamprecht, she said, "We believe this approach is a reasonable compromise between doing nothing and closing the fishery completely. Additionally, it allows some fishing activity in the summer months, which helps our tourism and those individuals like fish camp owners and guides who depend on this resource for their livelihoods."

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