



The Good Fight

The Politics of Fishing
Guest columnist: Doug Lovell

Striped Bass Policy in the Bay-Delta: Lessons Learned

IT WAS 1992, and Boyd Gibbons, then director of the California Department of Fish and Game, was being urged to stop stocking striped bass. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service (now known as NOAA Fisheries), and advocates for Delta water exports, among others, were making overtures about the detrimental effects of stocking striped bass in the Bay-Delta estuary. They made these claims under the Endangered Species Act because striped bass, an introduced fish, were believed to be "significant" predators of endangered salmon and Delta smelt. The limited science available in 1992 indicated that such striped bass predation was minor, but detectable.

At that time, approximately 2.4 million hatchery-raised yearling striped bass were ready for stocking in San Pablo Bay. The strippers had been bought and paid for by mitigation money from the Department of Water Resources and PG&E, plus revenues from the striped bass stamp. The stocking program was primarily intended to compensate for the devastating effects wrought by the South Delta pumping plants and power-generating stations. The population of striped bass in the Bay-Delta estuary had just reached an all-time low. The abundance of legal-size (18-inch-plus) striped bass was around half a million, down from a historic abundance of about seven million.

As it turned out, Director Gibbons did not plant striped bass in the estuary. Director Gibbons, the DFG, and Governor Pete Wilson took substantial heat for "caving in" to federal concerns about striped bass predation. Fishing tabloids and local papers published scathing articles. Organizations representing conventional-tackle anglers were outraged. In the minds of many, it was the beginning of the end for our once-great striped bass fishery. In reality, it was a harbinger of long-term, durable restorative measures that would benefit the Bay-Delta ecosystem in gener-

al and, not coincidentally, striped bass. However, it would be years before we realized this.

Flash forward to 2003. The population of legal-size striped bass is now around two million. This population estimate is relatively uncertain, but the growth trend over the past several years is convincing. Granted, the population of legal-size striped bass is currently composed of relatively young fish, without a stable base of large, trophy, fecund females (the average-sized striper is smaller than it was decades ago). However, there are very few striped bass anglers and DFG biologists who dismiss what appears to be a dramatic recovery in the striped bass population.

What happened? Probably a variety of things. There were wet years during the middle 1990s that facilitated spawning and recruitment. *Egeria densa* (an invasive "aquarium plant") had increased in the Delta, thereby enhancing forage-fish habitat and water clarity. Fewer dredge spoils were being dumped into San Francisco Bay. Several ecosystem restoration projects had been initiated through the CALFED program. Most significantly, the South Delta pumping plants had changed their operations during the critical May-June time period when many juvenile striped bass reside in the South Delta and are susceptible to entrainment. (The pumping was ostensibly restricted for the benefit of the Delta smelt, which also likes to reside in the South Delta during spring.)

In the meantime, while striped bass were recovering because of factors not related to stocking, DFG biologists and managers single-mindedly proceeded to secure a permit to stock striped bass to meet the demands of some angling organizations. After about a decade of effort, the DFG finally got the permit from the federal fish agencies and proceeded to spend valuable funds to raise and stock striped bass. However, the stocking was soon terminated because the population had already recovered, exceeding the abundance

specified in the permit. Biologists are in agreement that stocking could not have been a significant contributor to the recovery of striped bass.

THERE ARE TREMENDOUS LESSONS to be learned from the sequence of events regarding the recent recovery of striped bass. The ecosystem is much more important than stocking for the survival of strippers. In fact, the Bay-Delta estuary constitutes a much better hatchery and nursery than anything we can artificially devise. A multispecies approach to ecosystem restoration and enhancement will promote a thriving striped bass population. Stocking striped bass, with its potential to affect native species negatively, is no longer politically feasible. Despite these lessons, strong sentiment continues among some anglers that stocking remain as one of the tools to prevent striped bass populations from crashing below self-sustaining levels.

These lessons have become the credo of effective angler organizations representing concerned striped bass anglers. The

California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA) and the Bay-Delta Committee of the Northern California Council, Federation of Fly Fishers (NCCFFF) are two organizations that have taken this credo to heart. For many years, the CSPA has been involved in keeping water in its natural watercourses, and in the mid-1990s, anglers banded together to form the Bay-Delta Committee of the NCCFFF.

For more than two decades, California's striped bass anglers have been required to purchase a striped bass stamp. The Striped Bass Stamp Advisory Committee, composed of concerned anglers and representatives of angling organizations, has overseen expenditures of stamp monies. Among recreational angler organizations, the CSPA, the United Anglers of California, and the California Striped Bass Association had historically dealt with striped bass issues. In 1997, the Bay-Delta Committee of the NCCFFF plunged into the foray and proposed dramatic changes to the sportfishing regulations for striped bass. The NCCFFF's proposed changes



AFTER YEARS OF DECLINE, THE STRIPED BASS FISHERY OF SAN FRANCISCO BAY AND THE SACRAMENTO-SAN JOAQUIN DELTA ARE ON THE REBOUND. ALTHOUGH THE CAUSES OF THIS RECOVERY ARE VARIED, MOST IMPORTANT HAVE BEEN HABITAT IMPROVEMENTS IN THE DELTA, ALONG WITH CHANGES IN WHEN WATER IS PUMPED SOUTHWARD FROM THE BAY-DELTA SYSTEM.

were designed to provide for recovery of the striped bass population and to eliminate the need for stocking. The Striped Bass Stamp Advisory Committee, the CSPA, United Anglers, the California Striped Bass Association, and the DFG opposed the proposed changes, and the state Fish and Game Commission rejected the proposal. It was a rocky beginning for the NCCFFF's Bay-Delta Committee.

But the lessons provided by the recent recovery of striped bass are changing the basic approach to striped bass management. The striped bass stamp disappeared at the end of 2003. There is no longer the political will to continue this single-species stamp. Instead, a multispecies Bay-Delta sportfishing enhancement stamp has been established with an emphasis on habitat instead of hatcheries and on health instead of harvesting. Several angler organizations were instrumental in crafting legislation for the Bay-Delta stamp, including the CSPA, the NCCFFF, United Anglers, the California Striped Bass Association, and the Recreational Fishing Alliance.

THE FUTURE OF STRIPED BASS in the Bay-Delta estuary will depend on our effectiveness in restoring, enhancing, and maintaining a healthy ecosystem. Given the history of striped bass abundance since the late 1800s, when striped bass were initially introduced into the Bay-Delta estuary, this comes as no surprise. Striped bass coexisted in abundance with salmon, smelt, and many other native species for decades prior to the human replumbing of Northern California watercourses. The primary replumbing occurred in the middle and late 1900s as a result of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project. Both of these projects created water-storage reservoirs in Northern California, along with pumping plants in the South Delta and water conveyance canals, the California Aqueduct and the Delta-Mendota Canal. The overall objective of the water projects is to transfer Northern California's "abundance" of water to the "water-starved" San Joaquin Valley and Los Angeles Basin. These water projects and, in particular the pumping plants, remain public enemy number one for striped bass because they directly remove eggs, larvae, and juveniles, degrade water quality, and disrupt natural flow patterns. These weapons of bass destruction (pumping plants) are likewise public enemy number one for several resident Delta species, including the threatened Delta smelt, and remain significant obstacles to restoring Central Valley salmon runs.

Currently and for the foreseeable future, the enhancement of striped bass in California will be deeply embroiled in the politics of our state's water management policies. This is not an arena in which many concerned striped bass anglers find themselves to be comfortable. Water policy analysts, agricultural lobbyists, Ph.D. scientists employed by municipal and agricultural interests, and other empowered, well-paid, politically connected staff abound. Our volunteer fishery advocates and the few part-time staffers from the fishery organizations are outgunned and on unfamiliar turf. The CSPA and the Bay-Delta Committee of the NCCFFF have elected to join the broader environmental community to advance our objectives. We have committed our resources to the Environmental Water Caucus and the newly formed Sacramento Valley Environmental Water Caucus.

The Environmental Water Caucus, based in Oakland, is a coalition of environmental groups that includes the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Friends of the River, the Nature Conservancy, the Bay Institute, Save San Francisco Bay, Cal-Trout, the Sierra Club, the Natural Heritage Institute, and more than a dozen other environmental organizations. The Sacramento Valley Environmental Water Caucus has many of the same members, but is organized on a local scale. These coalitions deal with a variety of water-related environmental issues, including water conservation, wastewater reuse, desalinization, groundwater banking, water transfers, drinking water quality, and most importantly, the Bay-Delta ecosystem.

In late 2002, the CSPA and the Bay-Delta Committee of the NCCFFF sounded the alarm regarding state and federal plans to divert more water at the South Delta pumping plants. From our perspective, the threat to striped bass and many other Bay-Delta species that has been posed by the water projects was about to get a whole lot worse. The Environmental Water Caucus confronted this threat, proceeded to organize its resources, and establish a multifaceted campaign that includes media relations, grassroots advocacy, strategic alliances, legislative testimony, and participation in the CALFED process.

CALFED (now known as the California Bay Delta Authority, <http://calwater.ca.gov/>), more than a decade in the making and currently in its fourth year of operation, is a collaborative effort of state and federal water-resources agencies, fish agencies, and related public agencies dedicated to the restoration of the Bay-Delta

ecosystem, increasing the reliability of water supply, enhancing water quality, restoring stable levees, and other consensus goals. The CALFED program is similar in scope and complexity to megaprojects such as the Everglades and Chesapeake Bay restorations. The Environmental Water Caucus participates in many of the CALFED forums, including those focused on ecosystem restoration, surface water storage, expansion of the pumping plants, and the screening and salvage of fish at the pumping plants. Quite frankly, CALFED is too complex to comprehend, but remains as our best avenue for enhancing our striped bass population, despite the fact that striped bass are generally regarded within CALFED as a nuisance predator. By supporting CALFED efforts to restore and enhance the Bay-Delta ecosystem, we will benefit striped bass and do so in a manner that does not benefit striped bass to the detriment of other species.

Accordingly, we have learned another set of important lessons for restoring and enhancing our striped bass population — a coalition of organizations is essential to amass the momentum and effectiveness needed to promote an ecosystem-based multispecies approach. And we arrived at this point in the learning process without leveraging the significant economic effect

that West Coast striped bass have on local businesses and the regional economy.

So where does all this leave the individual concerned angler? Those anglers who have been ambivalent regarding striped bass restoration because of nonnative predation issues can take solace in the fact that striped bass populations are not being enhanced to the detriment of other species. Those anglers with a passion to restore Bay-Delta species, including striped bass, should support CSPA and the Bay-Delta Committee of the NCCFFF, along with the broad-based environmental groups of the Environmental Water Caucus. Your financial support and volunteer efforts for these organizations are sorely needed. It goes without saying that you can and should voice your support through the political process by voting your environmental conscience. You can also keep restoration on your personal radar screen by practicing, on a daily basis, measures that protect the Bay and Delta. Think of wild striped bass first, as a philosophy and a lifestyle.

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