

# Our Changing Sport Fisheries

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Most of us are painfully aware that the world we know is changing rapidly, and not always for the better. This applies to sport fishing as it does to all other human activities. For example, back after World War II when the kind of fishing we have today was just getting started, bamboo was the standard rod building material. A sport fishing boat was any old creak too far gone to sell for a used yacht, but not quite rotten enough to try to burn for the insurance. Many party boat anglers still used hand lines. And a man who didn't sell his extra fish was a fool.

Nowadays, fiberglass has replaced bamboo as the universal rod building material, and several companies are experimenting with space age stuff like graphite and boron for making rods. Man-made fibers have completely replaced natural fibers for fishing lines. Sport fishing boats are highly developed, specialized craft, loaded with sophisticated fishing gear, electronic aids to navigation, communication and fish finding equipment.

Sport fishermen themselves are also changing, especially in their outlook. Many now realize that a number of species of fish and some marine habitats have been exploited to the point of economic if not biological extinction. And a man who doesn't release his extra fish is a fool.

Let's take a good look at some of the important changes in modern sport fishing with an eye to understanding what is going on right now, and what we may expect from the future. A good place to start is with boats and equipment. You might say that a four-way revolution has taken place.

First, sport fishing boats, ranging from the small, specialized center-console open boats that are so popular, up to the super-giant half-million-dollar ocean-going party-fishing boats, are vessels specifically designed to perform well under less than optimum conditions. Just as the fast run-runners of the 1930's strongly influenced the development of yachts and naval small craft before and during World War II, so the development of fast, seaworthy, economical, sport fishing boats has exercised a powerful influence on the design and construction of quality yachts and work boats both here and abroad during the last 20 years.

Next, the development of high quality fishing tackle and accessories, rods, reels, lines, and other components that conform to new general criteria of performance, has given fishermen vastly improved tools for attracting and catching fish. Guesswork and mystery are rapidly going out of fishing and are being replaced by logic and greater understanding of why fish bite and why, sometimes, they don't.

Third, the advent of electronic and other aids to communication, navigation, and fish-finding has shown fishermen how to catch fish where they were never suspected to exist. Fishing areas have been expanded and seasons made longer. Science is replacing luck in fishing, and while some may disagree, we must admit that on salt water the day of the contemplative angler is just about over.

Fourth, sport fishermen and the rest of the world are discovering that fishing for fun rather than for commercial profit is big business. With close to 10 million salt water anglers spending at least \$1.5 billion a year, leaders in game fishing conservation, management, and legislation are starting to muster increasing economic and political clout.

Fishermen themselves are becoming politically and socially housebroken. They are rapidly losing the old habit of calling lawmakers and conservation department officials a bunch of nincompoops before going to these same men, looking for a favor. While some old warhorses may still paw and snort, the new, younger leaders are quickly learning the value of doing their fact-finding homework before launching an attack on entrenched interests, or seeking a favor.

But there are other changes that are affecting us far beyond the scope of our own technological and intellectual progress. One of these is the very recent growth of massive foreign commercial fishing efforts close to our shores. We are all now quite familiar with the pattern of government-subsidized foreign fishing. What many of us don't quite realize is that only by having true workable facts about our own sport fishery at our fingertips can we sit down and talk turkey with the fisheries managers and negotiators of foreign countries. It was pitiful, for example, to sit at the first great International Billfish Conference at Hawaii, in 1972, and listen to our own very capable Dr. Don deSylva's inability to counter Japanese commercial billfish statistics with corresponding U.S. billfish sport fishing values.

Since then, our game fish researchers have started to make some progress in filling in the sport fishing economic statistical gaps. For instance, Dr. Luis Rivas now of the NMFS center at Miami, Florida, recently described to me a way of comparing the value of a marlin to sport fishermen with that of the value of the same fish to commercial fishermen.

He took as an example a medium-sized blue marlin that might be worth \$150 on the dock at Tokyo after it had been carried home by a Japanese longliner working off South Pass in the Gulf of Mexico. If you could trace back the actual costs of charter fees, tackle, bait, fuel, and other expenses spent by sport fishing boats of the Gulf area to catch the same fish, the value of that fish to the U.S. sport fishing industry might be as much as \$3000, or 20 times its cash value as meat on the Tokyo dock.

We need massive quantities of carefully analyzed facts like these at hand when our fisheries experts and negotiators get together with those of foreign countries to settle thorny mutual problems. This is why the new fish-catch and fishing effort information gathering program of the NMFS is so vitally important. Without provable economic and biological facts about our game fishes, our men are like a half-baked bank robber waving a cap pistol and shouting garbled threats in the bank of international fishing. We cannot afford to submit them to the humiliation of being laughed out of a chance to have their say.

Another change that is affecting the way we fish is the growing massiveness of our national sport fishing effort. This growth has been gauged at the rate of more than 5% a year. If we log 10 million steady salt water fishermen in 1975, a few moments with a pocket calculator shows us that if this trend continues, we ,

should have more than 20 million ocean anglers by the year 2000.

Where will they all fish?

What will they fish for?

Will there be any fish left for them to fish for, or will sport fishing eventually be outlawed because commercial fishermen and uninformed landlubbers think sport fishing is "wasteful" of edible protein?

These are new problems we are starting to face now and will have to tackle in the near future if we are to preserve our fair share of fish and fishing for the future. But who is going to pay for the kind of research and management we need now and in the future to keep our sport fishing industry viable? Will it be a matter of trusting to luck and "general funds," or should we seriously investigate the idea of a universal salt water license, the proceeds of which would be applied 100% to salt water game fish work?

Still another change in our way of life is the way we relate to commercial fishermen. Take for instance the business of the proposed 200-mile exclusive economic zone that finally received official U.S. sanction during the recent United Nations Law of the Sea Conference at Caracas, Venezuela. Both the tuna and the shrimp industries are dead-set against this concept, yet the majority of other commercial fishermen and practically all sport fishermen are for it.

In our admittedly new relationship of guarded sweetness and light with commercial fishermen, how tough should we get, and where do we compromise to gain desperately needed mutual decisions? In the "good old days" we could afford the luxury of damning commercial fishermen because they were commercial. Now we want them as allies to save the fish that both of us need for the very existence of our respective industries.

Finally, there are two underlying changes that will affect sport fishing in unpredictable ways in the near and more distant future. The first of these is really no stranger. This is the threat of economic dislocation brought about by the present worrisome inflation and fear of recession or even depression. People have lived through depression and inflation before and when things get tough they have a habit of doing for food and for profit what they once did for recreation—provided of course that there are fish to fish for.

But the second of these great changes—the new and ominous energy crunch—looks like a true storm cloud on the horizon. Modern sport fishing is admittedly an energy-consuming activity. Non-fishermen ashore have been quick to try to curtail the use of pleasure boats to save stocks of fuel for "more important" uses ashore. Yet nothing is said publicly about that fact that sport fishermen in the United States right now are producing somewhere between 1 billion and 2 billion pounds of edible fish annually, a very significant addition to the nation's diet.

We need to know exactly how many of what species we are harvesting by sport fishing methods so we can dispel the myth of energy use without beneficial production of food as well as recreation, and also so we shall know what effect our fishing has on the fish stocks that we harvest. And we need to plan for the future so that good fishing may be available to many people when fuel for pleasure fishing may not be as plentiful as it is now.

Speculation over why people fish certainly is not new. The great Izaak Walton confessed in his classic, "The Compleat Angler," that the highest point of fishing, to him, was when he sat down to dine on the catch in the company of fellow anglers, especially those who had not been as fortunate as he.

Modern anglers fish for a great many reasons, but according to a recent report of the Sport Fishing Institute, the most compelling reason can be boiled down to pure escapism, the need occasionally to get away from it all. A survey of fishing motivation conducted among salmon anglers of the British Columbian coast by Richard C. Bryan of the Fisheries and Marine Service of the Canadian Department of Environment disclosed that fully 61% of the anglers interviewed admitted to going fishing to "relieve tension," "to be outdoors," and for a "change from working pressures."

The value of fishing as recreation is now widely understood. Its value in this country as a source of high quality food for its participants is deeply underrated. This combination of facts, plus the growing awareness of the need to conserve fish and environment, puts some present day anglers in a contradictory position. How do you equate the old and honorable habit of fishing for the table and the freezer with the very modern admonition to release your fish and let them live?

We need to be able to advise serious-minded anglers when they ask questions like this. Perhaps the most fundamental change of all in the recent history of sport fishing has been the rise of leadership groups like the IOF, the IGFA, the Sport Fishing Institute, the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, the American League of Anglers, the Florida League of Anglers, and many other similar organizations.

I once heard a well-known New York State politician say that when it comes to doing the slave work of political party organization, he counts on perhaps 1% of the available party members to put their shoulders to the wheel. Two per cent more like to stand around and criticize. The other 97% don't seem to know or care what is going on.

I doubt that our average is any better, but with men like Dr. Walton Smith of the IOF, Bill Carpenter, Elwood Harry, and Dinny Phipps of the IGFA, Dr. Frank Carlton and Chris Weld of the NCMC, Curt Gowdy and Art Lee of the ALA, Dick Stroud of the Sport Fishing Institute, Lyman Rogers of the FLA, Frank Mather of Woods Hole, John Gottschalk, Hal Lyman and Frank Woolner of "Salt Water Sportsman," and so many others, we don't lack the kind of articulate, no-nonsense leadership we need.

What we need from this point on is to give these men and their organizations the kind of backing that will put a real weapon in their hands, not a silly cap pistol. Then, when people ask us, "Why try to hold onto the good things of the past? Don't you realize the whole world is changing?" we can answer with the old truth that the more things change, the more they remain the same.

Sport fishing isn't changing as much as it is growing up, learning its own strengths and weaknesses, understanding what it must do to survive in the changing present and the uncertain future. That is why we have met here in Miami. That is the message we should carry to our friends and to the whole world.