

CONSIDER THE ELEMENTS

THE SUN

Little more than a decade ago, on Jan. 1, 1985, Maryland closed its fishing seasons for rockfish in the hope that the species would rebuild its dwindling population, which for the decade previous had been severely threatened by overfishing and pollution in the tidal rivers of the Chesapeake Bay. On Jan. 1 of this year, the rockfish was declared a recovered species, and tomorrow Maryland recreational and charter boat fishermen begin the longest rockfish seasons since before the 1985-1990 moratorium that closed all fishing. The reason, of course, is that Chesapeake Bay and coastal management plans have protected the rockfish, recreational and commercial fishermen have cooperated, and the species is flourishing.
Peter Baker
The Baltimore Sun
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With the illegal netting of 12.6 tons of striped bass in February, citizens in our own State and up and down the East Coast were outraged by the criminal threat to a population that so many sacrificed to save a quarter century ago. These blatant thefts of the public trust forced us to close the February striped bass gill net fishery until we were able to ensure we would

not exceed our State's quota for this important shared resource, stealing further from the honest, hardworking watermen who make a living from our Bay's bounty.

The only bright spot throughout this unconscionable situation, has been the unprecedented support of our staff, stakeholders and elected officials.

Maryland Natural Resources Police braved frigid temperatures, working around the clock to identify those responsible for these crimes. Fishery managers, ice breaking crews and geological surveyors joined them, helping load and distribute the illegal harvests, man check stations and search for further illegal activities.

At this writing we continue to offer a reward of more than \$30,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the criminals responsible -- a reward made possible through generous contributions from the Maryland Coastal Conservation Association, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Chesapeake Bay Savers, Maryland Charter Boat Association, Maryland Saltwater Sportfishermen's Association and Maryland Watermen's Association and private citizens.

Lawmakers and stakeholders are working with us to develop and propose further regulations and increased penalties to better address under-reporting of harvest at check stations and illegal markets for untagged and unchecked striped bass, in addition to the use of illegal gill nets. Similar efforts are underway to enhance penalties for the illegal harvest of oysters, a fragile fishery being further endangered by those who disregard the law.

In an interesting juxtaposition, just as we were in the thick of addressing these blatant thefts of the public trust, Agriculture Secretary Buddy Hance and I had the honor of co-hosting a celebration of Maryland seafood at the Boatyard Bar and Grill in Annapolis. Yellow perch, blue fish, oysters, and yes, striped bass, received a well-deserved spotlight at this sold-out event, which was attended by members of the seafood industry, recreational anglers, conservationists and fishery biologists alike, and which will be replicated across our State in the months ahead.

With all the recent attention on striped bass and oysters, it is important to remember that our ultimate goal is to manage every Maryland fishery for sustainability over the long term. Under the leadership of Governor O'Malley, Maryland has been consistently conservative in its approach to managing the State's fishery resources... including blue crabs, oysters, yellow perch, snapping turtles, terrapins, menhaden, horseshoe crabs and river herring, while keeping in mind the priorities of our seafood and recreational industries. This record on fisheries management should reassure citizens and stakeholders that we will continue to protect all fisheries threatened by poachers, to the fullest extent of the law.

We hope to never return to the day when a fishery -- any fishery -- is forced to close in Maryland. And we offer our deepest gratitude to all of those who share our vision and stand along side us to make it a reality.



Jay Baker

John R. Griffin
Secretary