

Fisheries Management and the "Safe Act"

Let me begin by thanking you all for letting me share some of the perspectives that I have garnered in over 35 years as a fisherman and 25 in service to the resource and my industry.

I fish on a much different ocean today than when I first started fishing with my grandfather as a boy in the mid-1960s. When I started out, catching haddock in the waters around Pt Judith was commonplace and a daily component of our catch.

Last year I caught only two. They are considered fully rebuilt and are now managed jointly with Canada by virtue of the climate that they have chosen to live in.

In the fall of 2013 I caught 1800 pounds of spot in a single set off my net. These are a fish that are indigenous to the Carolinas. Not Southern New England. I had never seen a single one until the late 90s. Although not greatly abundant, regularly caught now in Rhode Island are the species of Croaker, Grouper, Cobia, Drum and Tarpon. My grandfather never saw a single one of these in his entire life as a fisherman.

Dogfish were determined to have been overfished roughly 15 years ago and were assigned to a rebuilding plan. The plan was driven by incorrect biological assumptions of their reproductive capability and initial abundance. They have now overpopulated the waters of the Atlantic, from Hatteras to Nova Scotia to an extent that there is no longer an effective migration. In their current unexploited condition, they stand to significantly hamper the recovery of a species that either compete with or serve as a food source. These, the findings of Dr. James Sulowsky PHD, Professor at The University of New England, the foremost authority on dogfish in the U.S.

I hope that I have adequately portrayed an ocean that is in flux. In New England, we currently are an industry that is in search of a science based, regulatory co-existence with the laws that govern our fishery. We are a cold water region that has suffered greatly at the hands of a warming regime. Our inability to successfully rebuild several key stocks is well documented. We have evoked the ire of Magnusson, and been put to the lash at the hands of an act that reasons repeatedly that ideology serves as a fair substitute for sound relevant science.

The Magnusson act was assembled at a time when the science surrounding our fisheries was in its infancy. As we should anticipate, the scientific perspective of the management of our oceans should evolve. The act has not. To date, we have failed to articulate those discoveries into actionable policy within our fisheries. Any national policy that remains predicated on outdated scientific perspectives will do unnecessary economic harm to those it serves; it will limit the productivity of what I believe, are our national protein reserves and compromise to some extent our national food security. Our failure to tease out an edified response to these problems from the larger national debate surrounding climate shift, strands the enormous sum that we have invested in science and leaves my region without an effective solution to an ongoing and complex environmental problem. Our fields will lay fallow till we dare fashion a different response.

The framers of Magnusson were wise in their decision to construct a document that is largely conceptual by nature. Given that it is thematic and overarching it is there for lacking in the granular specificity that is needed to deal with environmental problems that are beyond the realm of what was once known. Magnusson Stevens is a profoundly valuable document that should remain our North Star of fisheries management policy, but In New England, in the face of wholesale systemic change, as a stand-alone, document, it has failed to produce the biological or economic results that have been promised and delivered elsewhere. It is in need of a reasonable compliment, one which is free to consider environmental conditions as a necessary component of its decision making process. One which does not attempt to separate the fish from the surrounding sea. I believe that the "Safe Act" could serve our national transition to ecosystem based management, as is called for in Magnusson's vision of our fishery.

The wild caught fisheries of the Northeast may ultimately prove to be the "coal miner's canary" for this Nation as we grapple with the issue of climate change. A reconsideration of strategy is called for given the enormous chasm between what we have endured and what we have gained.

I view the Safe Act as a sound, reasonable, and measured compliment to Magnusson. It represents a new set of eyes on the problem and another tool in the tool box. It respects both sides of the larger debate and a chance to evaluate the potential for new strategies in healing our Nation's most iconic fishery. I urge you to pass this Bill along for further consideration and discussion.