

Cape Cod Times July 18, 2018

Herring collapse would have a domino effect

By David D. Dow

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Your June 18 article “Herring trawler ban under review” stirred me into action, both as a retired marine scientist from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Marine Fisheries Service in Woods Hole and as a grass-roots environmental activist on Cape Cod. During my career at the NOAA Fisheries I was the recreational fisheries coordinator in the Northeast and served on the New England Fishery Management Council’s Habitat Plan Development Team, which helped develop the omnibus habitat amendment approved in January 2018 by the NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office in Gloucester.

The article spurred my comment to the New England Fishery Management Council on the achievable biological catch control rule - known as ABC - which influences the quota to be harvested by commercial and recreational fishermen. The article pointed out that a stock assessment review - a process establishing the reference points for a stock being overfished or subject to overfishing - would be conducted in Woods Hole June 26-29.

Your article suggested the quota could be cut by 50 percent to 75 percent. I recommended to the Fishery Management Council Atlantic herring working group that it extend the comment period beyond June 25; this would allow for new scientific insights on the stock size and estimates of the natural and fishing mortality and upper/lower biomass harvests at maximum sustainable yield, which the council incorporates into the ABC.

I used to attend some of these meetings that reviewed recreational fishing species - bluefish, striped bass, summer and winter flounder - and kept track of highly migratory species - tuna, swordfish, sharks - that have catch quotas in New England waters. In 2016 the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council published a forage fish plan that provided a comprehensive assessment of the role of forage fish in the marine food chain and the associated predator/prey interactions in a shifting environmental ocean baseline, influencing the pelagic essential fish habitat of these species.

I participated in the energy modeling and analysis exercise project, which showed the importance of forage fish in linking the plankton at the base of the marine food web to the marine life managed by NOAA Fisheries - fish and shellfish, protected sea turtles and marine mammals and seabirds. The marine scientists’ comment letter on Amendment 8 urged consideration of an adaptive, ecosystems-based approach for accommodating recent scientific knowledge that could make the ABC control rule more relevant to what is happening in places like the Gulf of Maine.

My fear is that Atlantic herring will follow the same pattern as the Gulf of Maine cod fishery, which has collapsed. I am not happy about being a resident of “Cape No Cod.” Forage species include river herring, which have benefited from projects like the Coonamessett River restoration. They provide food for humpback whales, which support whale-watching; promote sea bird populations, which attract bird-watchers; encourage saltwater angling on predators at different levels in the food chain; and promote commercial harvest of species like squid, dogfish and mackerel.

On Cape Cod the natural environmental quality and socioeconomic system are closely linked, so we can't afford a collapse of Atlantic herring and other forage species present in our adjacent ocean.

David D. Dow lives in East Falmouth.