

Saltwater Fishing Licenses Help Protect Fish Stocks

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I am chagrined at recent letters to The Day regarding the new saltwater fishing license proposal passed by the General Assembly. Most distressing is the lack of understanding of what marine fisheries managers do to improve prospects for sustainable, productive and enjoyable marine fisheries. Many writers have suggested that a license is unnecessary because "the state doesn't stock marine waters." This observation does not account for the way in which marine fisheries are managed.

Rather than stocking, marine fishery managers conduct surveys, evaluate fish stock conditions and develop regulations to match allowable exploitation rates to the ability of fish stocks to sustain those rates over time. Biologists collect data such as lengths, weights and ages, and develop growth and mortality rates that are then used in preparation of "fish stock assessments" to project future stock sizes under varying harvest scenarios. Others have suggested that Mother Nature has provided the fish and their availability occurs without cost to Connecticut. While the first point is true as a basic premise, the second is not. Surveys and fish stock evaluations cost money, as does deploying the Department of Environmental Protection's environmental conservation police to enforce marine fishing regulations.

Enforcement of fishing rules is indispensable to effective fishery management. Integrating Connecticut's fishery management activities with those of the other Atlantic coastal states is also not without cost.

Because most marine fishery resources are highly migratory along the Atlantic coast, fishery management strategies must be interstate and cooperatively developed to have any hope of being effective. Under the auspices of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, an interstate compact enacted by the Congress and ratified by state legislatures in the early 1940s, coastwide fishery management plans are developed and then implemented by state rules. This process was strengthened in 1993 with passage of federal legislation that mandated that states comply with approved interstate plans or risk a federally imposed moratorium on fishing for the species in question until the state complied.

In this way, the condition of the fish stock becomes the basis to determine how much of a resource can be made available to satisfy the interests of the fishing public and the regulations are developed, to the extent possible, to provide equivalent opportunities for the residents of all states while ensuring that necessary conservation measures are in place. Sometimes conditions in the fisheries and the rules intended to maintain sustainable natural resources can be aggravating and the resulting frustration spills over into other arenas. At such times, criticizing recently passed legislation - particularly coming on the heels of the recent on-again, off-again implementation imbroglio - becomes understandable. However, it is wrong to suggest that Connecticut state government does nothing to enhance prospects for more productive marine fisheries. A great amount of effort is expended by Connecticut biologists and resource managers to ensure to the extent possible that fishing opportunities will be enjoyable far into the future.

Editor's note: *The writer, retired director of the state Department of Environmental Protection's Marine Fisheries Division, lives in Noank.*