

Background of Maryland's Black Bass Fisheries in Select Tidal Waters

Black Bass Advisory Subcommittee July 6, 2016

Background

The mission of the Department's Tidal Bass Program is to ensure population integrity and sustainability of tidal populations of black bass (i.e., largemouth and smallmouth bass) in Maryland. The most common black bass in Maryland's tidal waters is largemouth bass, but management actions have traditionally included smallmouth bass as well. Strategies and actions to succeed in the mission of the tidal bass program were outlined for largemouth bass in a Fishery Management Plan (FMP) reviewed by Sport Fisheries Advisory Commission and adopted by the Department's Secretary (Supplemental Material S1). This FMP is available at:

http://dnr2.maryland.gov/fisheries/Documents/Tidal_Bass_Fishery_Management_Plan.pdf

Problem

A problem with the Potomac River fishery was identified from over a decade of fishery independent and dependent data. It was determined that catch indices for age 1 or older fish were lower than average for Potomac River (Figure 1A). Annual fisheries surveys of the upper Chesapeake Bay (Susquehanna River, Northeast River, and Susquehanna River flats) have also indicated lower than average (i.e., poor) catch in 2014 and 2015, suggesting that problems could exist with this very popular tidewater bass fishery as well (Figure 1B).

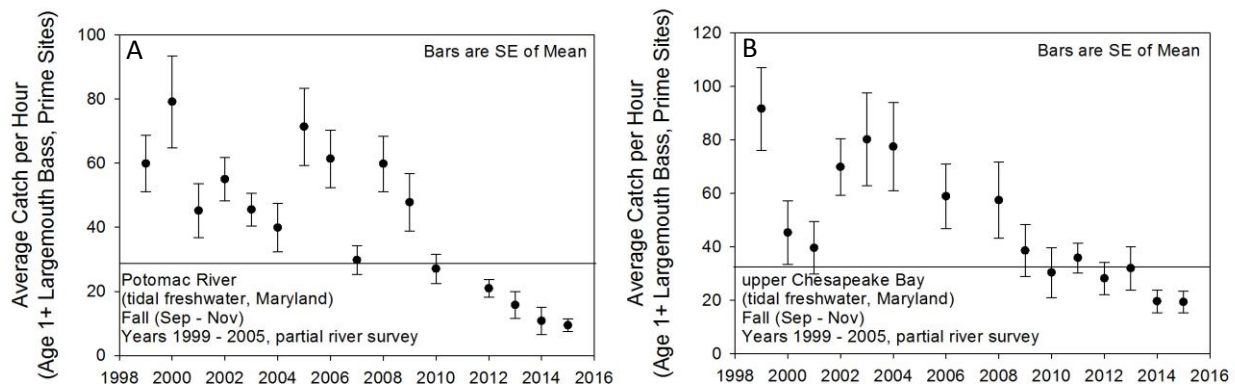


Figure 1. Annual catch of age 1 and older largemouth bass for Maryland's Potomac River (A) and upper Chesapeake Bay (B; Susquehanna River, Northeast River, Susquehanna River flats) as recorded from Maryland Department of Natural Resources' boat electrofishing surveys since 1999.

Strategies and Actions Taken to Address Problem

Strategies and Actions to manage the fishery are described in the FMP (Supplemental Material S2). The FMP Strategies identified by the Department for resolving the problem with the fisheries include:

- 1) identifying valuable habitat and habitat conditions...and promote their protection;
- 2) improving habitat conditions;
- 3) enhancing fish populations by releasing hatchery raised largemouth bass or stocking; and
- 4) promoting survival and abundance of older, larger fish.

The Department has implemented these FMP Actions to help achieve these Strategies:

- 1) provide comments during the environmental review process...to help minimize...impacts on...largemouth bass habitat;
- 2) write letters on official letterhead to stakeholders...to...promote the significance of the largemouth bass fishery
- 3) work with Artificial Reef Program staff...to develop reefs...for largemouth bass;
- 4) target tidewater areas that require stocking;
- 5) improve and promote angler awareness that increases survivorship...during catch-and-release fishing;
- 6) engage in meaningful studies that benefit the angling community...on methods to improve survivorship; and
- 7) discourage transportation of largemouth bass among river systems or to an uninterrupted area (i.e., an area uninterrupted by land) greater than 30 km from its area of capture.

Additional Actions

Despite these actions, the fisheries surveys have not yet shown improvement and additional actions outlined in the FMP are warranted. Promoting survival and abundance of older, larger fish may be additionally accomplished by adjusting creel limits or size limits (Action 4.3.1) when:

- 1) there are few adults in the population...; and
- 2) catch rates for adults are too low to provide a quality fishery.

Fishery independent surveys have indicated a decline in the number of adults in the past 4 years in the Potomac River population and past 2 years in the upper Bay population. The status of Potomac River fishery was ranked in the top half of all nationwide fisheries by B.A.S.S., but is no longer ranked. Several anglers, which include recreational anglers, tournament anglers, and guides, have additionally submitted comments to the Department regarding the decline of the fishery. The decline was also reported in the popular press¹. For those reasons, it is presumed that the catch rates for adults have been too low to provide a year-round, quality fishery in

¹ Drake, J. 2014. Bass are in trouble in the Potomac River. The Enterprise, B-4.
http://newbrunswick.archivalweb.com/scans/stmailib/ENTERPRISE/2014/2014-08-20_011.PDF.

Potomac River. Therefore the Department has identified several possible actions that affect creel or size limits (FMP Table 8.6.2): 1) change creel limits; 2) change or enforce size limit; 3) no possession (seasonal or spatial); and 4) fishing closure (seasonal or spatial).