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PETER KAIZER

Our dwindling herring stock



By **Peter Kaizer**
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MAKING A living as a fisherman today requires adaptability, but it is impossible to adapt to loss of a crucial species. One adjustment I made 12 years ago was to spend a significant part of my year doing charters. I've been fishing out of Nantucket Island for 30 years. I still fish commercially on my 35-foot boat, mainly for bluefin tuna, but I spend most of the summer and early fall chartering for striped bass and other sport fish.

One thing that none of us - fishermen or charter clients - can adapt to is the overfishing and depletion of the herring stock. Atlantic herring has been the main forage fish for nearly all species, especially the tuna and striped bass I rely on. All is not well with herring populations, and the time to take precautionary action is long overdue. Independent regional fishery scientists, who are legally charged with advising the government, have spoken in one voice that we need to back off of the herring stock immediately.

Small boat fishermen like me have been sounding the alarm about the herring stock for years, especially on Nantucket Shoals, and trying to convince fisheries managers that the creation of an industrialized, midwater trawl herring fleet in our local waters was a big mistake. These giant ships are just like the foreign fleets that plundered these waters and nearly wiped out herring populations once before, in the late 1970s. Recovery took more than a decade, and for some reason we promptly invited other industrial ships in to fish in our waters again.

Industrial midwater trawlers drag a giant mesh net for herring, usually behind two boats in a practice called pair trawling. Most nations either ban the practice or push it far offshore. But we have experienced a "bait and switch" with this fishery. This fleet was supposedly created to work offshore on a large and robust body of herring on Georges Bank. But instead, it has gradually taken over sensitive inshore areas. Administrators even gerrymandered management boundaries a few years ago to redefine the offshore fishery to include waters just off Chatham, as well as a huge swath of Nantucket Shoals and the Great South Channel east of Nantucket that used to be considered inshore herring grounds.

So it's no surprise that in addition to that independent scientific review calling for an overall reduction in herring quotas of 40 percent, another government panel has found that the critical inshore component of the herring stock, the one that sustains my livelihood, has been chronically overfished and is also in need of precautionary cuts. The warning is loud and clear. Two groups of scientists, two approaches, one scientific conclusion: Cut the quotas or risk the depletion of the number one forage food for the fish and marine mammals of

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New England.

The New England Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service are charged with endorsing and implementing this science. The law is clear that the science must be followed, but these organizations are under a lot of political pressure to avoid precautionary reductions. A council committee already voted to include an option to completely ignore one of them. The council should step away from that slippery slope and mandate the reduced quotas recommended by the scientists to ensure a sustainable biomass of herring. The fisheries service must, in turn, implement that decision as the law requires.

Some say that these scientific warnings are based on "bad science." On the contrary, the science is solid and the most recent scientific analyses have confirmed three things: a continuing downward trend in herring biomass, too much pressure on the inshore component, and a consistent tendency to overestimate the population's health in the past. These things, especially the latter, have led government scientists to conclude that there is enough uncertainty about the size of the biomass that quota reductions are needed. To be clear: this uncertainty is not the same as bad science.

At its meeting tomorrow, the council must adopt the quota reductions as proposed by the scientists in order to ensure healthy and sustainable herring populations. The council must also prioritize completion of a comprehensive catch-monitoring program for the herring fishery, so we can get rid of this uncertainty.

Peter Kaizer is captain of F/V Althea K out of Nantucket, and a member of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. ■

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