

Statement of Michael Nussman American Sportfishing Association

Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, I appreciate the opportunity to speak before the Commission on behalf of the recreational fishing industry and America's 50 million anglers and 70 million recreational boaters.

I am the president of the American Sportfishing Association (ASA), a non-profit trade organization whose members include fishing tackle manufacturers, boat builders, state fish and wildlife agencies, angler organizations, sport fishing retailers, and the outdoor media. For over 50 years, ASA and its predecessor organizations have worked on behalf of our members to promote conservation of fishery resources and environmental measures that improve the aquatic environment. Our goal is to ensure the enjoyment of healthy fisheries by America's anglers.

The commission is faced with a difficult task of balancing the many interests competing for use of our oceans and coasts. Specifically, you must examine how best to provide wise stewardship of our ocean resources while still providing for the enhancement of marine-related commerce. These are issues that I have spent the better part of my professional career addressing, while working for the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and most recently as the President of the American Sportfishing Association.

In conducting your review, a question that I hope you ask yourself is, how do most Americans interact with our oceans? I can tell you that it's not from the deck of a container ship or from an oil platform or even as part of a research project. The oceans are America's vacation spots, a refuge from the daily hassles of life. One hundred and eighty-five million people visit the coasts annually. They go to have fun, relax, and recreate. They go to feel the sand between their toes, the salt spray in their face, to play in the waves and relax by the shore. And in so doing, they rent beach houses, they go out to eat and they shop and sight see, all activities that support local economies.

An amazing eighty-five percent of tourist-related revenues nationwide occur in coastal states. These coastal tourists account for about \$52 billion in economic activity according to Sea Grant. Much of this economic activity can be attributed to recreation. One of the most common forms of coastal recreation is fishing and boating. An estimated 70% of boaters use their boats to fish. More people fish in this country than play golf and tennis combined. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, over ten million people fish along our oceans and coasts each year.

One of the reasons that fishing and boating have remained so popular, in spite of increased demands on America's leisure time, is that together they are a quality outdoor activity that the entire family can enjoy. Given what's been going on in the world lately, I don't think you can overestimate the importance of being able to spend time with friends and family out on the water. Fishing and boating are some of the best ways I know to slow the pace of life and stay connected.

Not only are fishing and boating good for the family, they also foster an appreciation for the environment. Nearly nine in ten Americans say outdoor recreation benefits the environment because it gives people a reason to care about our natural resources. Further, many Americans see outdoor recreation as one of the main reasons to protect the environment. Simply put, those that know and use our coastal resources take better care of them, a case made clear by anglers time and again. An excellent example

of this ocean ethic is found in the recovery of the striped bass, one of the most popular sport fisheries along our Atlantic coast.

Historical data on the striped bass fishery indicated that landings exceeded 12 million pounds coast-wide in the early 1970s and crashed to about 3 million pounds per year by the early 1980s. This decline was attributed to overharvesting and degradation of the marine environment. When faced with this collapse of the fishery, recreational anglers led the charge to rebuild striped bass stocks and pushed for the passage of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act in 1984. Once passed, this legislation resulted in completely closing the harvest for striped bass in several coastal states for a number of years. As these regulations took effect and striped bass populations rebounded, fishing quotas were slowly reinstated. By 1996, the value of striped bass landings was at the highest level since 1975, before the conservation measures were in place.

The recovery of striped bass populations improved the quality of striped bass recreational fishing, which attracted more anglers to this fishery along the Atlantic Coast. Average participation in the striped bass fishery increased an average of 38% per year between 1987 and 1998. And as expected, as the fishery improved and more anglers began fishing for striped bass, angler expenditures increased from a low of \$40 million in 1987 to a high of \$560 million in 1996.

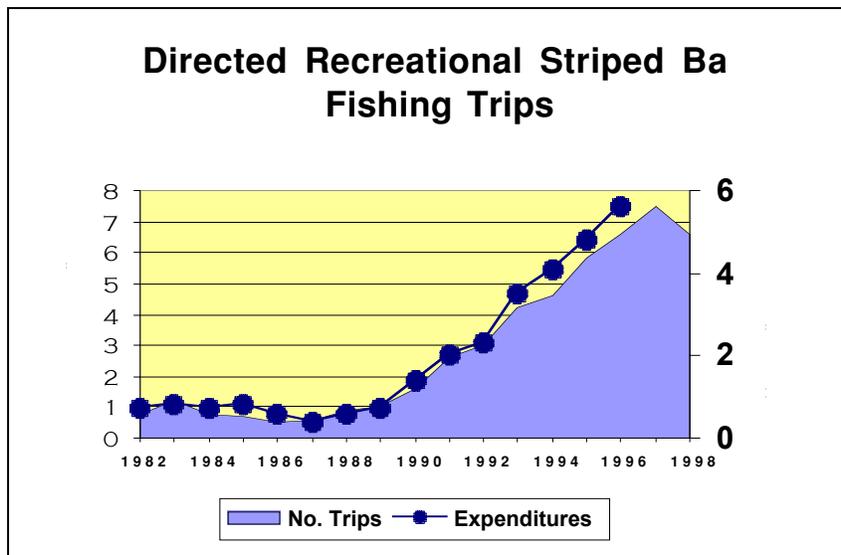


Figure 1. Angler trips and related expenditures on striped bass.

These are astounding figures, yet they paint a picture for just one segment of the recreational fishery. There are over ten million saltwater recreational anglers nationwide. They spend over \$20 billion pursuing their sport. What these figures tell us is that marine anglers are an economically powerful voice and that fishing regulations have a substantial impact on these 10 million consumers and the industries that support them.

Just as the oceans have an affect on weather and climate all across the nation, recreational fishing's economic effects extend far beyond the coasts. Nearly 300,000 people have jobs that are directly related to saltwater sport fishing. Whether it's a rod maker in Sprit Lake, Iowa, a charter boat operator in Connecticut or a family from San Diego looking for some quality time together, the thing that they all have in common is the need for healthy and abundant marine fish populations. Simply put, without fish, there is no sport fishing and no fishing industry. And therein lies the most critical

challenge facing our sport. We must manage our fisheries to protect and rebuild the overfished populations. Further, we need to do so in a reasonable amount of time and most importantly, in such a way as to preserve these recreational opportunities – because recreation is among the main reasons that people visit our coasts.

This is an extremely difficult challenge. Successful fishery management will involve some hard decisions to be made. The recreational fishing industry will do our part to improve fisheries just as we did to rebuild striped bass in the late 1980s. What we must avoid are the politically expedient solutions, tempting as they may be. Examples of these include some of the ocean wilderness proposals that severely restrict or eliminate public access to these national resources. Simply eliminating public access does nothing to solve many of the larger issues.

Open access for recreational anglers is a concept embraced on virtually all federal lands and waters including wildlife refuges, national parks, and wilderness areas. The record of recreational fishery management clearly demonstrates that recreational access can be maintained for under appropriate science-based regulatory schemes that include closed seasons, minimum sizes, and catch limits, among other measures. Such management practices have proven to be highly effective in maintaining healthy fisheries across this country..

The National Marine Fisheries Service has just completed its first comprehensive economic survey of the marine recreational fishing. This much waited for document tells us that of all U.S. finfish landings, recreational anglers account for only 3% of that total (measured in pounds of fish landed). However, in landing 3% of our total finfish, recreational anglers spent over \$20 billion annually. Meanwhile, that other 97% of finfish landings by commercial fishing operations are valued at the dock at just \$1.6 billion.

Anglers advocated a complete ban on striped bass fishing in the early 1980s because they knew that one day they would be able to reap the benefits of their sacrifice. Most of these ocean wilderness area proposals offer little hope of achieving such important gains. We are committed to using the full array of fishery management tools to rebuild our fisheries. There are many more striped bass-type success stories waiting to be told.

I urge the Commission to carefully consider the contribution of America's 10 million saltwater anglers, recreational boaters and the extensive industry that supports them. I applaud your efforts to elevate the discussion on ocean policy. Further, I look forward to working with the Commission to help develop an appropriate role for the sport fishing community.