

From cod to conch

How the fisheries have shifted focus over the past twenty-five years

By MIKE SECCOMBE



Jimmy Morgan fished from the Mary and Verna for almost forty years out of Menemsha. In July 2008, the retired fisherman was featured in the magazine, which has covered recreational and commercial fishing regularly through the years.

Way back when Janet Messineo used to wait tables in Vineyard restaurants, calamari was never on the menu. And sushi? Who'd ever heard of sushi?

And twenty-five years ago, when this magazine began, fishermen could still harpoon swordfish in Vineyard waters. The great collapse of cod stocks had not happened. Few of us had even heard of global warming, let alone anticipated its potential to devastate our lobster fishery. Who thought conch fishing would become a major industry? Who thought “trash” species like the horseshoe crab would need a management plan for protection?

Yes, a great deal has changed in the past quarter century: what we harvest from the sea, what we eat of it, what we do with the rest, what's still out there, and what is no longer out there.

Some things haven't changed of course. Fisherfolk still talk about the big ones that got away. And they still lament that things are getting even worse. Let Janet Messineo, president of the Martha's Vineyard Surfcasters Association, begin a run through the litany of loss.

"When I started, in the mid-seventies, the waters were still pretty rich with bait." She lists squid, mackerel, and the big herring called Atlantic menhaden or bunker. "Oh my God, you used to be able to go to Menemsha and stand on the jetty and get a bucketful in no time....Not any more. I don't think I've seen a big menhaden in the water since about 1986. And I've really noticed the squid population has gone down," she says. "We really need to protect the forage fish. The big fish aren't going to come back if there's nothing for them to eat."

Let Cooper Gilkes, owner of Coop's Bait and Tackle in Edgartown, continue the litany.



photo by David W. Skok

Cooper Gilkes of Coop's Bait and Tackle, seen here with a false albacore at the Lobsterville jetty, is concerned about numbers of fish.

"Things are getting worse, definitely, no doubt about it. Take herring for example. When I was a youngster, there was herring in all the runs. Plenty of them. You could catch all the herring you wanted," he says. "There was a gradual decline and then when they brought all the big boats in, expanded the offshore fishery, they scooped up all our herring."

Now, we're in year two of the second consecutive three-year moratorium on the catching of herring and, says Coop, "We've just about lost the herring. That's my belief. Something is drastically wrong with the herring, but it's not just them. It's just about everything."

Well that's a sweeping generalization, of course. What he means is species that are singled out for human consumption. As Jesse Ausubel, director of the Program for the Human Environment at Rockefeller

University, New York, and adjunct scientist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (and seasonal Oak Bluffs resident since 1955), points out, there are some four thousand forms of sea life in the whole Gulf of Maine/Georges Bank area, which includes Vineyard waters. And there is no evidence any of them, with the possible exception of one species of skate, have become extinct.

“But obviously, the abundance and distribution of species is changing a lot,” Jesse says. “Things like cod that were very common are no longer. And the very large fish, like the billfish, are much rarer....But the animals that grow very fast, that mature in a year or two, like squids, continue to do pretty well. And in the area as a whole, herring and mackerel, have made something of a comeback.” Yet he adds, “Still, the commercial industry continues to decline across the region.”

Decline is unfortunate, but it is better than the alternative – collapse. And that decline is guided by an increasingly complex regime of management plans enforcing quotas, size limits, and other regulations about what can be caught, and where and when it can be caught. Most fishermen accept the need for regulation, even if they bridle at its detail. Everett Poole is one of those. The former fisherman and retired fish-market operator decries the complexity of the rules, as they apply to more and more types of fish.



Jimmy Morgan often fished alone, dragging inshore for ground fish.

“One of the things that had kept the Vineyard a good fishing port, was it had a lot of small boats, that would fish for a variety of species, and that way they could make a decent living,” he says. “But now you’ve got to have different licenses for each kind of fish and if you haven’t caught some of those fish during one of the base periods that the government establishes, in its infinite wisdom, then you lose that license. So where people ’round here could fish for anything that came along, now they can only fish for certain things because either licenses were never issued to them or taken away because they didn’t land anything during a certain period of time.”

It’s a common complaint. But in fairness, just as fishermen have to adapt to changes in regulation, so the regulators have to when fishermen, finding their activities limited with traditional target species, redirect their efforts. And this has meant a big difference to the profile of the industry over the past twenty-five years – and also, down the line, to the types and origins of seafood Vineyarders eat.

Most lobsters now come to Martha’s Vineyard the way the tourists do: by ferry. Go shopping for fish, and along with some local catches, you are likely to find cod imported from Iceland or farmed salmon from Canada or talapia imported from who knows where. Meanwhile, the fishermen who once put local fish on

local tables are just as likely to be catching something that people here don't eat, to be sent interstate or overseas. Take conch as an example.

“Twenty-five years ago, most people thought of the conch as a shellfish predator,” says Dan McKiernan, deputy director of the state Division of Marine Fisheries. “The commercial fishery was just starting up twenty-five years ago. Now it's worth over \$3 million a year.” (Two similar mollusks can be found in east coast waters – the common conch and the channeled whelk – and though the pot-fishery harvests mostly whelk, we tend to call both conch.)

This expansion into new areas of fishing has various knock-on effects. For one, it takes a while to determine how heavily a new species can be fished before it is over fished. This is something the regulators are just now coming to face with conch.

“The resource is now showing some signs of stress, in terms of the average size of conch being landed, and the effort fishermen have to put into getting them,” Dan says.



photo by Alison Shaw

As long as there are fish in the sea, fishermen will still be out there casting.

Or take the horseshoe crab. “Twenty-five years ago, no one even thought of managing the species,” he says. “It was considered a shellfish predator, like the conch, and for the most part people were glad to kill them.”

But horseshoe crabs became a target of large-scale harvesting for two reasons. First, they are the best-known bait for conch. Second, and more important, their blood contains a copper-based protein that yields a product that is the best-known detector of bacterial toxins. These days anything that's injected or implanted into a human body is tested with this extract of horseshoe-crab blood. So each year in America, hundreds of thousands of horseshoe crabs are harvested and bled so medical patients don't sicken or die. And this year, says Dan, new rules are being put in place to limit the harvest of the crabs because they've been in decline.

There are other examples too of how the fishing effort has shifted. Twenty-five years ago monkfish – particularly unattractive, bottom-dwelling angler fish with huge heads and enormous mouths – were frequently caught by scallopers and draggers and discarded because there was minimal market for them.

“I used to give a guy twenty cents a pound for a monkfish,” recalls Everett Poole, who used to run a fish market in Menemsha.

Actually, the flesh tastes a lot like lobster, and the liver is prized for use in sashimi. In Europe, angler fish have always been much appreciated. But not many people here ate them, recalls Dan McKiernan, “until Julia Child went on TV and talked about what a wonderful fish this could be. Some European markets were tapped. Next thing you know it’s the number two species in Massachusetts for value, behind sea scallops....Now it’s the subject of a very intense and overly complicated management plan by the federal government.”

There may be no better example of the way our tastes in seafood have shifted in the past quarter century than squid. As Janet Messineo says, it never used to be on menus. Like sushi, notes Jesse Ausubel, it’s a recent addition to the American diet. Unlike the bluefin tuna, which makes the best sushi, squid now is a pretty sustainable resource, thanks to management and the squid’s own rapid reproduction – a whole life cycle in a year. Though Dan McKiernan can see why local fishermen sometimes have their doubts about this.

“Squid, it’s like a scratch ticket, you know,” he says. “Weather conditions dictate whether they come in here in large quantities. A lot of strong southwest wind in late April and early May, they tend to be highly abundant around the Vineyard. A week of easterlies in that key two or three week period in early May and you can get practically nothing.”

And the same is true, to a greater or lesser extent, with a lot of fish. Menhaden is highly variable from year to year, depending on where the plankton are in the water, for example. Things are often not as bad as they seem, Dan says, and also sometimes not as “worse” as fishermen remember.

Take the iconic Vineyard fish, the striped bass. In the past couple of years, he says, fishermen have complained the fishing is not as good as it was in the 1990s. “But compared with 1985, it’s a whole lot better. In 1985, it was on the brink of collapse. The fishing was horrible.”

As for other species? Well, bluefish are now managed under commercial quota; they weren’t in the mid-eighties. They were probably more common then, because the niche they occupied as a mid-level predator was vacated at that time by striped bass.

Black sea bass began to come under fishing pressure twenty-five years ago, were over fished, and now are coming back. Likewise scup and sea bass. Stocks of summer flounder almost collapsed during the nineties due to over fishing, but stocks today are five to ten times what they were “due to some very Draconian quotas and large minimum sizes,” Dan says.

But not all is rosy. River herring, he says, remain a concern. While the fishing public tends to pin all the blame on big catches by offshore trawlers, Dan says research indicates a “triple whammy,” a combination of over fishing by factory boats, droughts in breeding streams over recent years, and increased predation by “a very popular fish called striped bass.” Fisheries managers continue to hope for their recovery.

There are, however, a couple of species for which there is little hope. One is winter flounder and the other, sadly, is lobster. “We are at the very southern extent of their range here, and as we’ve watched water temperatures rise over the past twenty-five years, we’ve seen a decline in their populations,” Dan says. “There’s no question it’s climate change causing this. You can’t deny it. Cold-water species just are not doing well. Those people hoping to see a recovery in the lobster or winter-flounder fishery in southern New England, I’ve just got to warn them, it’s probably not going to happen.”

So there's not much future in lobster fishing around here. But there is room for growth still in the fishing business, says Jesse Ausubel. "Increasingly the people who make a living on the water do it through the high value-added activities. Recreational fish is worth a lot more than commercial fish. Take somebody out sport fishing, and they effectively pay about a hundred dollars a pound."

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