



## CASTING COMMENTS

# The Last Fish

By Pat Murray

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WHEN THE FOUNDERS OF CCA FIRST GOT TOGETHER in 1976 to start the "Save the Redfish" campaign, they knew it was going to take a lot of sacrifice to get something done for the health and longevity of coastal bays. It was likely going to impinge on their personal time, their work, their money, and even though commercial fishermen were the overwhelming problem in the fishery, it would almost certainly involve imposing bag and size limits on themselves.

and 10 redfish?" The defiance of this greedy recreational faction seems so shortsighted when compared to the modern voice of marine conservation, but if you listen, you can still hear those same calls when the management decisions get personal.

### RESOURCE FIRST VS. FISHERMAN FIRST

The "resource first" ethic that drove the early saltwater conservation

to preclude all fishing activities, including recreational fishing, and were heralded as the solution to all fishery management problems. Recreational anglers united to stop this draconian and largely misguided approach for managing the nation's fishery resources. Oddly, recreational anglers even found themselves arguing against some environmentalists who would normally be our allies on most issues.

It was a divisive period that drove a unfortunate wedge between many in the environmental community and most in the recreational angling community.

Clearly, vast no-fishing zones along our nation's coast would have been a horrible outcome of that fight. As the dust has settled over this issue, the guidelines for a transparent and scientifically supportable system for such closures, as well as for their implementation and management, continue to be hammered out. But strangely, it has also revived a division among recreational anglers that seems to be growing. It appears that in this fight for a fair, inclusive, science-based management system, a selfish seed was planted, and as it has grown, it is beginning to choke the discussions in several prominent recreational fisheries.

The freedom to fish fight was never about putting recreational anglers first. It was about stopping a misguided fisheries management scheme that threatened to destroy the traditional fisheries management system and manage by rote exclusion. Clearly, the value of the recreational fishery is immense, and much has been written and spoken about the dangers of managing recreational anglers out of the fishery. Even beyond the economic ramifications, the inherent danger that exists in excluding recreational anglers is a loss of their unique conservation ethic as a part of the management landscape. But, without this strong conservation ethic, recreational anglers are merely another part of the problem and not of the solution.

As outrageous as it is to arbitrarily exclude recreational anglers from

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As the movement began to take shape, the concept of recreational bag and size limits for trout and redfish was embraced by many in the recreational fishing arena. There was also a smaller but very vocal group of anglers who thought their sport would not survive with bag and size limitations of any kind. It was their "right" to catch and keep as many fish as the ocean provided. Remember, in the late 1970s recreational bag limits for saltwater species were largely considered laughable. The ocean's resources were still thought by some to be inexhaustible.

Even with extremely liberal limit proposals (as much as two and three times current bag limits), there were those who cried that the trout and redfish recreational fishing industry along the coast would dry up. "Who is going to travel to the bay just to catch 20 trout

movement is slowly being corrupted by a doctrine of "fisherman first." It is hard to imagine that we have come so far in marine conservation and this thinking is still such a seductive part of the fishing ethic of some recreational anglers. It has often been said that commercial fishermen want to catch the last fish. But are we recreational anglers trying to stop them simply because we want to catch the last fish? The corruption of this ethic ironically may have emerged from a rather noble fight. At the start of the 21st century, there was an almost overwhelming push from a number of influential environmental interests and federal politicians to create vast no-fishing zones throughout the nation's oceans. Despite the fact that overfishing was largely related to commercial fishing practices, no-fishing zones were going

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fisheries, it is no less offensive to exclude them from proper management to the detriment of the resource.

#### THE LAST FISH

Some of the very people who helped push the "resource first" ethic are now arguing for greater poundage and more liberal limits, even in the face of troubling stock assessments. They cry that it will limit anglers' interest and may damage the industry, but won't killing the last fish not decisively kill the industry?

Fisheries management is not an easy activity. Among many of the seemingly theoretical scientific, political and managerial complexities, there are many parts of modern day fisheries management that involve making decisions on the economic livelihood of real people. Real jobs and real paychecks can hang in the balance. But if the resource is not put first, the outcome will always be wrong. No matter how politically and emotionally appealing it is to assume the "fisherman first" ethic in a tough fisheries decision, the problem invariably comes back, and when it does, it usually has bigger horns and sharper teeth.

Almost any good conservation movement (and clearly any successful one) is grounded in principle and ethic. For a conservation movement to be effective, it has to be founded in an unshakable tenet of putting the resource first. Then if the movement is successful, there will be a greater abundance of the resource for the angling public.

I do not think we have an ethical crisis in recreational fishing. There are many more examples of good conservation ethic over a destructive consumption ethic, but we have to remember that the unselfish spirit that started this conservation movement is one of the keys to its success. If the founders of CCA had stood up against rampant commercial fishing but had been unyielding on sacrifices for their own fishing interests, it is hard to imagine that they would have accomplished a fraction of what has been done for the resource.

Marine conservation today is even more complicated than 30 years ago, but many of the core questions are as relevant as ever. We have to realize we are faced with the same defining moment today as in 1976. Do we want the last fish for ourselves or do we want to conserve it to make a future for generations to come? ↗