

From Tide magazine by Doug Pike. (TIDE is the official magazine of the Coastal Conservation Ass. in the United States)

“In state after state, sportsman have taken a united stand on behalf of resources that were represented mostly by commercial fishermen.”

COASTAL FISHERIES are on the mend, thanks in great part to the phenomenal effort of this organization and its members. For every challenge we meet, however, it seems another rears its head. To stay the positive course, we must maintain focus on the simple objective that got us here: The resource comes first.

This group was founded more than 20 years ago not by people who wanted more fish for themselves, but by men and women who recognized a disturbing decline in what they considered a valuable coastal resource.

Their first order of business was to right the red drum population's sinking ship, the cause of which was determined to be increased, unchecked netting in shallow bays. If a revitalized population reaped secondary benefit in the form of even better fishing than before, so be it.

And so it has been, first here in Texas, then continuing throughout the other Gulf Coast states, and now up the entire East Coast. In state after state, sportsmen have taken a united stand on behalf of resources that, until CCA came along, were represented mostly by commercial fishermen whose livelihoods depended on how much of that resource they could catch in a year. In other words, most of the marine resources had no real representation until only recently. The henhouse that was New England's groundfish fishery eventually collapsed under the management of so many foxes. Other fisheries nearly were destroyed, as well, before CCA intervened and reversed their downward spirals.

The primary beneficiaries of this association's tireless work are not recreational or commercial fishermen, they are fish. What you and I feel down the end of a tight line or lift to our mouths from a pool of melted butter is the byproduct of conservation success, not success itself. That subtle point is critical to any understanding of conservation objectives. Catching a fish and maybe eating it does not represent a conservation job well done. Instead, conservation success is achieved when there are so many fish of a particular species that catching and keeping some of them has no negative impact on the population.

The notion that any fisherman is absolutely entitled to a portion of a resource, for any reason and regardless of that fishery's status, holds no water. What someone's father or grandfather did for a living has no bearing on present management. Neither, to be fair, does it matter how much any of us spends on boats or on rods and reels.

From a management standpoint, those factors have no bearing whatsoever on what is in the best interest of the resource. Before anyone gets a slice, there first has to be a healthy, renewable pie from which to carve those portions.

In recent travels along both the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts, I have heard an unusual and unsettling thought process at work. The idea hasn't yet reached every port, thankfully, and it certainly is not the majority opinion. If allowed to spread, however, it could threaten long-term conservation goals.

My concern, and I've heard it espoused in both recreational and commercial camps, is a "me first" attitude that is rooted in pride and prejudice. Hard-line commercial fishermen claim that they have rights to portions of the fisheries because they're working on behalf of those who eat fish but don't catch fish. That is not the actual reason they brave foul weather to run their nets or traps or lines.

The bottom line is that commercial fishermen fish for money. If they put the resource first, they would be more accepting of occasional harvest reductions as valuable long-term management tools. I can't recall many commercial fishermen lobbying on behalf of reduced effort, restricted gear or shorter seasons.

Some recreational anglers take a similarly unreasonable stance, insisting that the investment they make in licenses and tackle, gasoline and accommodations, somehow earns them a guaranteed portion of the fishery. Economic factors may be valid considerations when talk turns to allocation of available resources, but they do not assure access to stocks that, for whatever reasons, can't overcome the loss.

Whether we use nets or trotlines or hooks or sharpened sticks, none of us has any absolute, by-gawd right to take home fish. And the more time each of us wastes grousing over who should or should not get what amount of those fish, the greater the risk that we someday may find ourselves wrestling over the last of the species.

Coastal fisheries are renewable resources. On that, we all agree. But a resource's ability to renew itself is dependent upon a host of environmental and biological factors. If anything other than the resource -history, pride, prejudice, recreation, entitlement — becomes a first priority, then that resource is destined to fail.

"None of us can lose sight of the fact that every manner and form of fishing is reliant upon fish. So long as we shape management strategies around a "resource first" core, our coastal fisheries — and the excitement they provide — will outlive us"