

The 2001 SEAMAP Striped Bass Tagging Cruise

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Project Overview



Since 1986, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) has been actively involved in the United States Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Cooperative Coastal Striped Bass Tagging Program in the waters of the Maryland portion of the Chesapeake Bay. Over the years, an enormous amount of data has been collected in a continued effort to ensure the success of the striped bass fishery in Maryland. Since this project's initiation, approximately 70,000 striped bass have been tagged and released into the Maryland portion of the bay! Data gathered from tag returns are used by fisheries biologists to manage this important commercial and recreational species in Maryland.

In addition to the tagging efforts of MDNR biologists in the Chesapeake Bay, biologists along the Atlantic coast, representing various state and federal agencies, have joined forces with the USFWS to participate in the Annual SEAMAP Striped Bass Tagging Cruise. The objectives of this year's cruise are to collect data on various fish species (flounder, red drum, sturgeon, monkfish, spiny dogfish.etc) while focusing on tagging as many coastal migratory striped bass as possible. Since this cruise began in 1988, approximately 24,000 striped bass have been tagged, with a record setting number of 6,235 tagged fish last year! This year's participants, including representatives from the USFWS, MDNR, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), and the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (NCDMF), sure have a lot to live up to.

The following excerpts were written by Maryland Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Michael Luisi while on his week long experience aboard the NOAA ship, "Oregon II."

SATURDAY - January 13, 2001

Position: Moorehead City (Port)

Weather Conditions: Windy and cold

"My Arrival"

It was only a matter of minutes upon my arrival into the port of Moorehead City, North Carolina that I was introduced to life at sea! After settling into my stateroom, I followed the crew of the Oregon II (who, by the way, spent approximately 270 days at sea last year) to a local watering hole where we dined on fancy cheeseburgers and drank only the finest of amber refreshments. After a couple hours of hanging out with the

crew and familiarizing myself with some of the local customs, which included pool sticks and dart boards, I decided to get back to the boat and catch a few ZZZ's while the ship was still tied to the dock. I have never spent a night on a boat, therefore, I am a bit anxious about my first night on the HIGH SEA!!

SUNDAY - January 14, 2001

Position: N 35 05.45; W75 27.23

**Weather / Conditions: Windy and rough seas
(5-8 ft)**



"The Journey Begins"

As the sun quickly ascended over the horizon of the Atlantic, I was awakened by the sounds of heavy machinery and footsteps in the hallway of the Oregon II, as the crew began preparations for the arduous journey ahead. With departure from port just a few hours away, I was knee deep in preparations of my own. First and most importantly, I placed a small flesh colored motion sickness patch behind my ear. I've heard rumors that this medicine may cause blurred vision, but I guess I'll just have to wait and see (or not)! We may encounter some rough seas as we make our way out of Moorehead City towards Diamond Shoals near Cape Hatteras but I am willing to deal with a few side effects in order to keep my lunch with me a little longer. Secondly, I double-checked to make sure that all of the necessary gear I was responsible for was on board. We are good to go! Lets ride!!

We left port at approximately 1:00 p.m. and the captain of the ship announced that we had a few hours to kill (6 -8 hours) before we started fishing (sampling). So, as we rocked and rolled out to sea, the [scientific party](#) took some time to get acquainted with one another and develop a plan for the week ahead. Work shifts (watches) were yet to be assigned and we were all wondering when we would be expected to work. We are on 24 hour operations here on the Oregon II, meaning that there is constant activity on deck all day and night. The watches are divided into 4 hour long blocks, twice a day. One of the watches starts at midnight and ends at 4 am! Please I hope I don't get that one!!

Whew!! I was just assigned to the 4 to 8 watch (4 a.m. - 8a.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.). I can handle that! Also, it has been decided that we would start fishing around 9:00 p.m. I won't be the first to work but I can promise you I'll be out there when the first nets are hauled in!

All on deck were enthusiastic and excitedly anticipating what surprises might be awaiting them in the nets. The first few hauls produced only a handful of sea trout, kingfish and croaker but NO STRIPERS!! After an hour of this, I left the [workstation](#) and with a sigh of disappointment, retired to my stateroom. However, tomorrow is a big day! It is my first watch (beginning at 4 a.m.) and I have a gut feeling that we are going to get into some fish tomorrow (and NO! Its not me getting sick if that is what you are thinking!)

MONDAY - January 15, 2001

Position: N 35 14.16; W 75 27.23

Weather / Conditions: Partly cloudy, mild temps; A dense fog in the evening

"When It Rains It Pours"



I walked out on the deck this morning at approximately 3:45 a.m. fully dressed from head to toe in rubber, waterproof and fish slime-proof gear. Word from the other crew was that the stripers have not been found, but I think all is about to change. Well, I am man enough to admit when I am wrong! The entire day went by and NO

STRIPERS (Rockfish) were collected.

Although we did not catch what we were after, it was the only fish in the sea that we didn't catch or see. A whale was spotted today about 200 yards from the ship. She greeted us by clearing her blowhole and welcoming the Oregon II to spend a few days on her turf. A few [monkfish](#) were collected, "Gosh they are ugly!" and a loggerhead sea turtle was brought on deck, tagged, and successfully released. I would have taken a picture of the turtle, however, it was collected at 2:00 a.m. and I was probably being tossed around in bed by the rough seas at that hour.

Extremely large numbers of croaker, [seatrout](#), herring, [squid](#), and bay anchovy were hauled in all day long! Just so that you understand, when I say that a large number of fish were caught, I mean a LARGE NUMBER OF FISH WERE CAUGHT!! Now, I have been known to elaborate and even sometimes exaggerate when it comes to telling stories about fishing, however, I am not exaggerating here! I witnessed a haul of trout coming over the side of the ship that was so large (estimated at 4,000 lbs.) that it tore the haul completely in half ([this picture](#) was taken about 5 seconds before the net snapped!! From this moment on, things just got worse.

At one point in the evening both hauls were pulled over a section of rough coral bottom. We were not greeted as kindly by the coral as we were by the whale and, in the end, the coral had the last laugh. One net was completely ruined and the other was admitted to the "OR" for major surgery in order to perform efficiently. This halted operations for the remainder of the evening. The joke on board was that we are getting closer. "We got some [ROCKS](#), just not the kind that swim!"

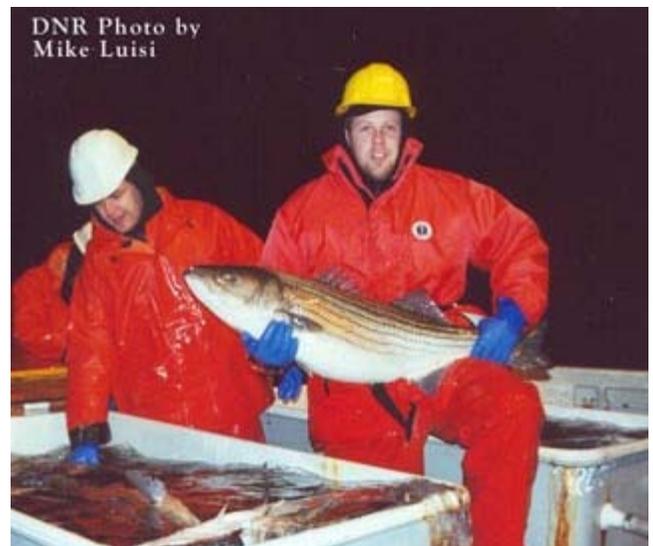
TUESDAY - January 16, 2001

Position: N 35 59.91; W 75 33.33

Weather / Conditions: Sunny but cold; Very little wind; Calm seas

"The Wait is Over"

I staggered down the hallway toward the stern of the Oregon II around 3:30 a.m., not yet acclimated to the rocking of the sea. My watch has had its ups and downs over the last day and a half. Equipment problems have plagued us and we are quickly losing valuable time and points in the highly competitive competition between the watches. Each watch keeps a tally of points, which are associated with different types of data that could be



collected. The more difficult or rare the data, the more points the team receives. To give you an example of how this works, tagging a striper is worth 1 point because there are a lot of stripers out there while tagging a sturgeon, which is less abundant, is worth 5 points.

After the first few hauls this morning it looked as if today was going to be similar to Sunday night and Monday. Then, in an instant, everything changed! I was standing on the stern looking over the side of the boat as the winches roared and the hauls started coming in. Like many times before, I assumed the net would be full of trout or croaker. Well, I was proved wrong!! As the net came out of the water I looked through the webbing and all I saw were stripes! "We have stripers!" I yelled to my crew as they came running over to see the first of the day's harvest.

The rest of the day was hit or miss. A few fish here and a few fish there. As we moved slowly north, we did, however, see a few different species of fish. A few red drum and [sturgeon](#) were tagged and we encountered numerous [spiny dogfish](#), [Boston mackerel](#), and squid. Today was quite an exciting day and every watch had the opportunity to tag some fish. The fishing was slow at times but never for long.

The weather has been beautiful and each day my watch has been on deck during the sunrise and sunset. Not too shabby huh? We are only a few miles offshore and the Outer Banks of North Carolina are well within site. The seas have been mild, however, I don't think it is going to last. Word around the ship is that a storm is moving in from the south and it may reach us by Friday. I'll fill you in as we hear more.



WEDNESDAY - January 17, 2001

Position: Off of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina
Weather / Conditions: Overcast and cold

"Attention: ALL HANDS ON DECK!!"

Two unexpected thumps on the door of my stateroom at 2:00 a.m. could only mean one thing. We were told at the orientation on Sunday that if we got into the stripers heavily (300-500 per net), all hands would be needed on deck in order to process the fish and get them back in the water as quickly as possible. Knowing that I was needed for this purpose, I quickly geared up and prepared myself

for the elements ahead. I walked out on deck expecting to see hundreds of fish and when I looked around I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I rubbed them to make sure I was seeing what I thought I was seeing and I was right, there was nothing!! As quickly as they appeared in the previous net, they were gone!

The rest of the day followed this pattern. The stripers were here one minute and gone the next. Some of the more exciting hauls contained red drum, monkfish and sturgeon. Also, we collected a few stripers that were tagged on previous expeditions and one that was [tagged](#) by a private organization (American Littoral Society). All in all it was a productive day. We successfully tagged approximately 1,500 striped bass, a handful of red drum, and two sturgeon. Moral is high and everyone is optimistic about the rest of the trip. However, rumor has it that we might be leaving a day or two early because of the approaching storm. The severity of the storm could produce conditions that would most likely halt work and may send us home.

THURSDAY - January 18, 2001

Position: N 35 32.92; W 75 22.71

Weather / Conditions: Overcast and cold; It is pretty miserable actually!!



"Decision time!! Have you ever read *THE PERFECT STORM?*"

Basically put, today was just plain uneventful! We started moving back south just in case that storm decides to wrestle with the Oregon II. We are still about 12 hours from port and the Captain plans on fishing all of the way back, unless of course, the storm is too bad. By the end of the day it appeared that we have moved out of the stripers but we really had no choice. Mother Nature shows no mercy out here and I don't think anyone on this ship (including myself) wants to test her powers. The storm is getting closer and we are keeping a tight watch on it. I never thought talking about the weather could be so exciting but when you are not catching fish and are miles from nowhere it is about the only other thing to do!

It was decided that we would move a considerable distance south during the late afternoon and evening and would begin fishing again around midnight! This meant that we had a lot of time to kill before we were needed again on deck. The Oregon II has a great movie collection and most of us retired to the lounge to watch movies and get some rest.



FRIDAY - January 19, 2001

**Position: Somewhere in the path of the storm
Weather / Conditions: Exactly like you would imagine it to be**

***"The sea was angry that day my friends!" -
George Costanza***

It was decided by the chief of operations and the captain of the Oregon II that at noon all operations would cease and we would start making preparations for the trip home. We were informed that the trip would take about 8 hours and that we should pack up all of our gear and secure it in

our room because it might get a little rough around Diamond Shoals. Well, if what we went through was a little rough, I'd hate to know what a lot of rough was!!!

There were some huge swells and we were sliding and falling all over the ship. It was almost impossible to get from point "A" to point "B" without losing your balance and crashing into something. A few of us were watching a movie when the rough seas hit us and we were all sliding around like we were in bumper cars. I had to get some fresh air at one point and I didn't think I would make it without getting sick. However, the medicine I was on must have kicked in because it did the job.

Eventually the waves settled down and we arrived back in port. Although I had a great time out there, it was nice to be back. The trip turned out to be a success. We [tagged](#) a total of approximately 2,500 striped bass and we came back with as many people as we left with on Sunday! Overall, I enjoyed my first experience at sea and throughout the course of the week, developed a newfound respect for life at sea and the power of Mother Nature.