

## Opinion

### Notes on the River: Vibrant striped bass fishery returns

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Fishing inside Poplar Island recently, near Knapps Narrows and its portal to the Choptank, we saw acres of breaking blues and small rock.

Underneath these dinks, the bigger stripers lurked. We couldn't get a live spot even close to the bottom before we'd hook a good size rock, and bringing it alongside the boat, we'd see several more large fish flashing around it like white ghosts in the green water. Many of our friends have enjoyed similar days this year and a strong fishing season as well.

It wasn't that long ago that we thought we'd lost the rockfish to our rivers and Bay. Between 1973 and 1985, the fishery virtually collapsed and, for those who remember, there were seasons when few rockfish were caught or even seen in our rivers.

In 1985, Maryland initiated its moratorium on catching striped bass despite cries of outrage and opposition. In just five short years the fishery began to recover. Today we have a vibrant striped bass fishery. Our rivers, and the abundance of life they support, have amazing recuperative powers.

Earlier this year I had a chance to speak at the annual meeting of the Talbot Creekwatchers, a group of dedicated volunteers who have been engaged in water quality monitoring on the rivers in Talbot County for ten years.

They test on the Tred Avon, the Miles, the Wye, the Choptank, and many of our creeks. Annually they publish a report that can be found on our Web site [www.crebconservancy.org](http://www.crebconservancy.org). Their report for 2008 was similar to the one for 2007, which was not so different from the year's before.

Their recent results demonstrate, once again, that all of our local rivers are in distress. All have phosphorous and nitrogen levels way above those considered acceptable for healthy tributaries. Water clarity was uniformly poor, and findings indicative of inadequate oxygen levels and excess algal growth were common. Sampling data from other sources show similar results.

One of our board members, Dr. Thomas Fisher, a professor at the University of Maryland's Horn Point Laboratory, and a noted expert on the Choptank and its tributaries, has graphed the dissolved oxygen findings taken near the Route 50 bridge to Cambridge over the past 20 years. The graph goes in the wrong direction. Oxygen levels are dropping. Extrapolating out, if things don't improve, we could in the next decade experience oxygen levels in the Choptank that cannot support marine life. This could result in massive fish kills and a dead estuary.

This data is extremely important and we owe a debt of gratitude to those who have amassed it. But it is of no import if we do not heed it. Let us use it as a call to action to make the changes necessary to reverse these trends, and to give our irreplaceable rivers like we did for the striped bass the opportunity to recover, the opportunity to replenish and revitalize themselves.

All of us need to help by changing our habits. On our Web site we offer ideas for such change. Promote, for example, increased stream and ditch buffers with natural plantings, whether on lawns or farms. Buffers serve as filters, taking up unused nutrients.

Support the wetland restoration efforts of CREB and others. Wetlands also serve as powerful filters. Reduce the use of lawn fertilizers. Encourage local officials to improve wastewater treatment facilities. A community united can turn the tide.

Tim Junkin is a lawyer and writer, and currently the executive director of the Choptank River Eastern Bay Conservancy, non-profit organization headquartered in St. Michaels.

