

Citizens saving stripers

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When I look back on the 2008 Legislative session, one particular piece of legislation comes to mind as a great example of the power of citizens to make a difference and how democracy ought to work.

Citizens from around the state have been concerned about the striped bass population; it has been declining over the last 35 years in the Santee Cooper System, which includes the Wateree River. Biologists say that there is no one piece to the problem, however excessive fishing of young stripers appears to be one of the main factors contributing to the depressed stock.

The health of the striper population has a clear economic impact. It is particularly important to the tourism industry and all of the businesses associated with fishing, such as guides; docks; bait and tackle shops; boat, trailer, and engine sales; restaurants; and lodging facilities. The declining striper population was negatively affecting our region and had even resulted in a decrease in fishing license sales.

Rep. Billy Witherspoon, the Chairman of the House Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Environmental Affairs Committee, always said, "You can never win with fur, fins, and feathers," referring to the contentiousness of trying to get people to agree when it comes to hunting and fishing regulations. The striper problem was causing similar conflict.

Because of the importance of the issue, the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) decided to try a new method to resolve the problem. DNR convened a stakeholder group of citizen members appointed by the Legislature and DNR. The members represented various geographical areas and areas of expertise and interest. Of the thirty-eight members of the group, Kershaw County was fortunate to have three active representatives: Benji Jackson, Paul Willits, and Michael Williams. The group was thorough in its investigation of the problem, based it on scientific data, and exercised diligence to arrive at a consensus on solutions that will conserve the striped bass population for generations to come.

During this six-month process, it became clear to the committee that the best way to restore the population is to allow the fish to re-establish themselves. This would require delaying harvest until the fish could spawn at least once. Stripers in the Santee Cooper system achieve full sexual maturation at 26 inches. Additional facts considered by the committee confirmed that stripers are most vulnerable during the summer months when water temperatures are at 77 degrees Fahrenheit and above.

The stakeholders unanimously voted on recommendations to present to the General Assembly. Based on these recommendations, a House bill (H 4548) was filed in January of this year and signed into law last month. This was an amazing result for an issue that

had been stuck in legislative committee for years.

Key elements of the new law are that in the Lower Santee River and Cooper River system from June 1 to Sept. 30, it is unlawful to take or possess any striped bass. Also, from Oct. 1 through May 31, it is unlawful to take or possess more than three striped bass per day. The striped bass must be at least twenty-six inches in total length and must be landed with head and tail fin intact. The law includes a point system for violations of taking or possessing more than the legal limit of striped bass and of taking or possessing an undersized striped bass.

I am proud of the way the process succeeded in this case to reach a workable consensus and a law that will make a significant difference in the restoration of the striped bass population. The dedication of the members of the stakeholder group is to be commended. Members of the group focused on what was best for the striper population, even if it meant personally sacrificing in the short-term. This was a model for how democracy works best when the citizens are actively engaged and work towards achieving the greater good.