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Menhaden Fisheries Coalition

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Coast-wide sightings of Atlantic menhaden support 2014 stock assessment methods, findings

An examination by the Menhaden Fisheries Coalition of observations and reports from fishermen, journalists, and other local residents from Maine to Florida corroborates the most recent stock assessment of the species. The 2014 benchmark assessment found that Atlantic menhaden is healthy and neither overfished nor subject to overfishing.

April 1, 2015 – (Menhaden Fisheries Coalition) – In 2015, Atlantic menhaden, a fish that has been no stranger to media attention over the past few years, once again made headlines. After years of pessimistic evaluations, the stock found its outlook suddenly reversed with the publication of the most recent stock assessment, completed in 2014. The news is almost entirely positive: the species is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, and has not been close for over a decade. Since 2007, in several key metrics, it is performing at or near record bests.

But these fish don't just exist on paper, a theoretical byproduct of computer models and scientific estimates. They have been spotted coast-wide, in numbers and in places that are far beyond the Mid-Atlantic-based menhaden fishery. This is consistent with what fishermen have been saying for years about large numbers of menhaden in more northern areas of the Atlantic, and what recreational anglers, whale watchers, and even environmental organizations have reported throughout 2014 and 2015. Now, what observers have been seeing in the water has aligned with what's printed on the pages of the assessment.

Most prominently, in the last year, innumerable numbers of large menhaden schools [have been sighted in](#) the vicinity of New York harbor, although more often than not they have been forced from the headlines and replaced in the spotlight by the humpback whales that have followed in their wake. Both [local New York media outlets](#) and national outlets such as the [CBS Evening News](#) have noted that humpback whales had a very visible presence in 2014, the apex of a trend of increased sightings over the past few years. One of the main factors believed to be drawing them to the area has been the opportunity to feed on large schools of menhaden, which attests to the size and frequency of the menhaden schools in the region.

But the menhaden sightings go beyond the five boroughs. As far north as [Providence, anglers have reported to the Providence Journal](#) schools of menhaden large enough to fill the state's Mossassuck River. Writers for the *Connecticut Post* [have similarly seen "great shoals of bunker"](#) leading an "onslaught" of local waters. Recreational fishermen have noted a general [resurgence of menhaden in the Northeast](#), greatly improving sport fishing for the predator species that are never far from menhaden schools. Such sightings are truly coast-wide, with *The Florida Times-Union* reporting that large menhaden schools have been appearing even as [far south as Jacksonville](#),

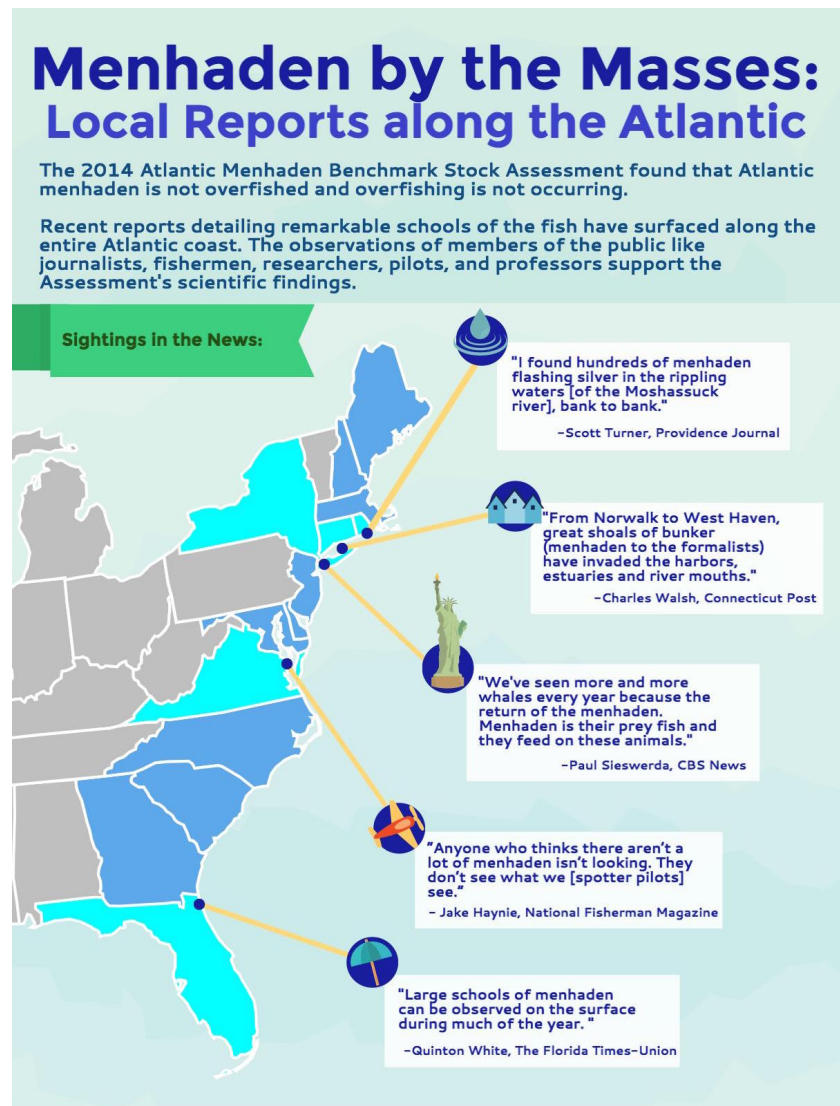
Florida. Reports such as these have been surfacing for many years. As far back as 2012, prior to any Atlantic menhaden harvest cuts, the [Asbury Park Press was reporting](#) that “large schools of Atlantic menhaden” were drawing whales, dolphins, and other predator species to the New Jersey coast, and the [Norwich Bulletin noted](#) “lots of menhaden” venturing into Connecticut’s waters on a daily basis.

These appearances are consistent with what many in the menhaden fishery have been seeing and saying for years. Fishermen working on commercial reduction and bait boats have had no trouble locating large schools of menhaden, and spotter pilots frequently are able to see large numbers of menhaden from the air. A recent aerial survey [conducted by scientists at the University of New England](#) also recorded large numbers of the fish in waters around New York and New England, areas that are considered to be within the species’ northern range. Managers are only just now considering this portion of the menhaden population in their assessment of the stock.

Previously, and perplexingly, these fish weren’t counted.

Most importantly, all of these observations are consistent with what the new assessment concludes: there are large numbers of adult menhaden outside the range of the waters around Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey, where the menhaden reduction and bait fisheries have concentrated their harvests. Up until now, these menhaden were not accounted for in stock assessments. Finally accounting for these fish is one of the most important outcomes of the 2014 assessment.

Following a technically flawed 2012 assessment, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the interstate body that manages menhaden, completely overhauled its assessment



Source: Menhaden Fisheries Coalition

process. Models were revised, new data was considered and incorporated into the assessment, and previous assumptions about the behavior of the stock were reviewed and corrected. The end result is a more accurate, more thorough, and more complete evaluation. It is, by a wide margin, the most accurate and comprehensive survey of Atlantic menhaden ever conducted.

Including previously uncounted fish is one of the primary reasons many of the metrics used to measure the menhaden stock are so positive. Fishing mortality, the number of menhaden that are caught by the fishery, is at its lowest point since record keeping started in the 1950s. At the same time, fecundity, the number of eggs being produced, is the highest it has been in 40 years. Other measures, such as the abundance of adult menhaden and the spawning stock biomass, are also in the healthy range.

There is still room for improvement in the stock, with overall abundance levels still remaining low. But the more promising figures are actually a better indicator that the stock is being managed sustainably, because taken together, they show that the commercial fishery is not significantly impacting the species' long-term ability to sustain itself. Given the high number of eggs being produced and the respectable number of highly fertile adult spawners in the population, the coast-wide stock has more than enough reproductive capacity. This means that the species is well-equipped to take advantage of the favorable environmental conditions that lead to successful spawning.

Anecdotal observations and scientific data can sometimes come into conflict with each other, creating ambiguities as to what the situation out on the water really is. But in other cases, the observations of fishermen, the reports of journalists, and the findings of scientists align in agreement, and in turn present a clear, definitive picture. For Atlantic menhaden, a durable and encouraging consensus has emerged: the species is healthy, wide-ranging, and sustainably managed.

About the Menhaden Fisheries Coalition

The [Menhaden Fisheries Coalition](#) is a collective of menhaden fisherman, related businesses, and supporting industries. Comprised of over 30 businesses along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, the Menhaden Fisheries Coalition conducts media and public outreach on behalf of the menhaden industry to ensure that members of the public, media, and government are informed of important issues, events, and facts about the fishery.

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