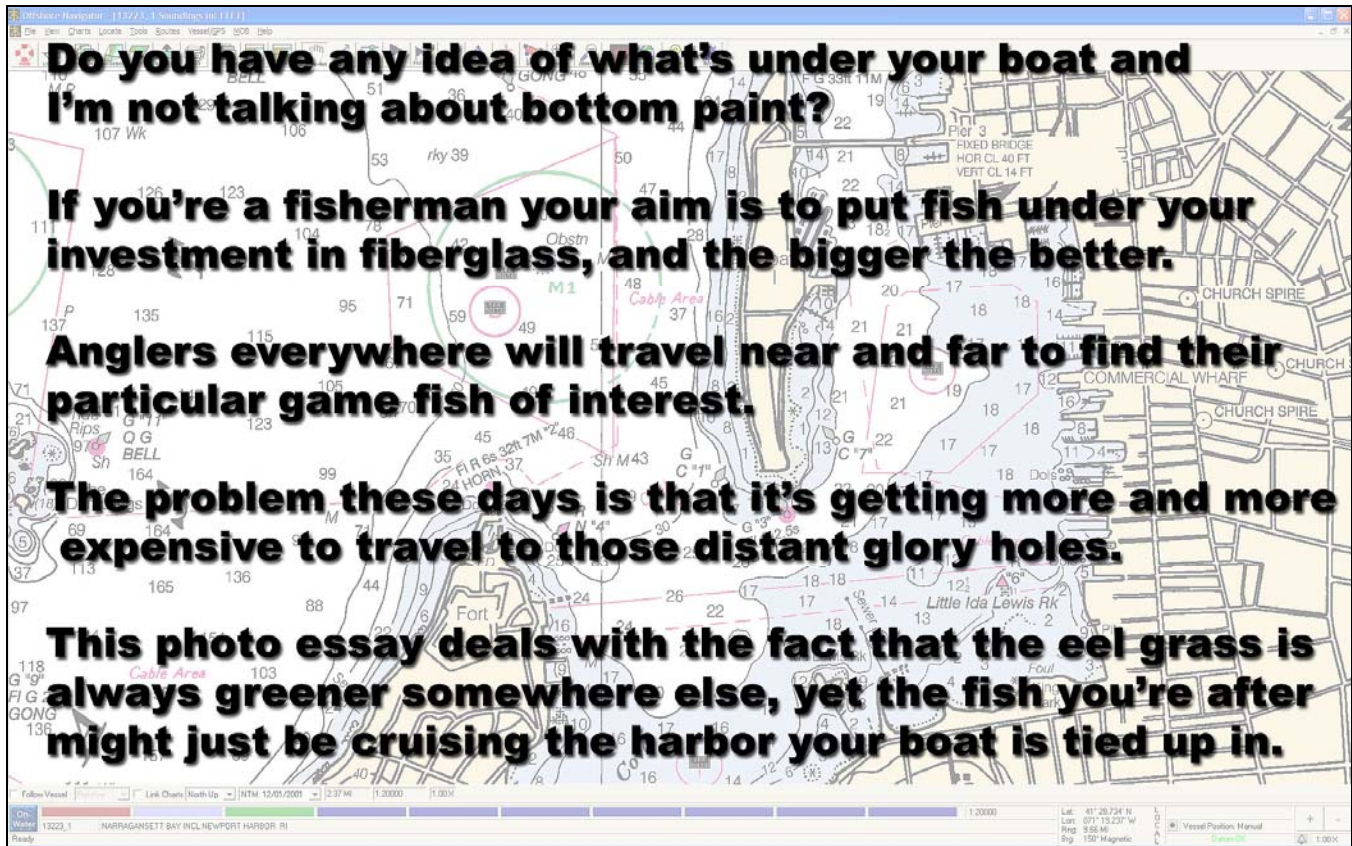


# What's Under Your Boat?



## [Let's take a look at some striped bass I found patrolling the docks in a small Cape Cod harbor.](#)

It was early evening on the last day of spring and the tide had just started to drop. The bass were making their routine rounds looking for a wide assortment of snacks in, around, and under the docks.



*These are the characteristic conditions in most New England harbors: green, turbid water, rich in the nutrients that attract the bait fish that stripers feed on. Notice how they are working the edge of the shadow line. When evening turns into night, they will often take station behind the shadow line waiting for unsuspecting prey to wander by.*

As I quietly worked my way along the edge of the pier, I took a deep breath and silently settled onto the muddy bottom. I moved ever so slowly along the bottom trying not to kick up the soft sediment that was several inches deep and as loosely packed as goose down in a pillow.



*At the end of most docks you'll find the bottom dropping off dramatically. At the cusp of the drop off some fish were looking at the bottom for clams, crabs, worms, mantis shrimp, lobsters, and other prey items, while other fish would gaze mid-water and above looking for squid, harbor pollack, menhaden, silversides, sand lances and the other bait fish that might occupy the upper reaches of the water column.*

I found myself emulating a striper by hiding next to the pilings and seeking cover under the shade of the dock above. Peering into the deep green water, with visibility of no more than 5 feet, I quietly waited for the stripers to appear. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds would tick by and then they would emerge from the velvety edges of visibility.



*This fish was so focused on looking for dinner in the mid to top-water areas it passed directly overhead. If I had been breathing from a scuba tank as opposed to freediving, my bubbles would have tickled its belly and surely driven it away.*

I wouldn't see stripers on every dive – that only happens in your dreams. Just like fishing, if you were to connect with your quarry on every cast or if I was to see bass on every dive it would quickly lose its mystique. It's so cool watching how they go about their business, I guess you'd have to classify me as a striper voyeur, or better yet a member of the game fish paparazzi.



*These two “keepers” seem to have less than perfect tail fins...a past encounter with bluefish, seals, or fin rot? They would probably fall for a 7” white Slug-Go jerked along the surface in a walk-the-dog fashion. Maybe a wooden plug with a metal lip that would swim slowly in front of their faces would do the job – especially if it was in a bronze and white color, a perfect match for the pollack and cunner that were nervously swimming around the harbor.*

To my surprise (something striped bass are constantly able to do) I found larger stripers in water only five feet deep. The challenge was trying to hug the bottom and stay submerged without kicking my fins or moving my hands. The fish certainly knew I was there. They probably picked up on the electrical signal my body was putting out, or maybe it was even the subtlest of movement that sent pressure waves along their sensitive lateral lines. Then again, maybe it was the fact that we were eyeball to eyeball only three feet from one another.



*Close encounters of the personal kind that put you within arms reach of a striper are short lived events...sort of like, when some fool runs their boat through a school of working fish, it was fun while it lasted, but it's over in a flash. In my case it was over when my flash went off.*



*Another pair of long fish with broad shoulders worked their way along the sand/gravel bottom that eventually gave way to the muck/mud floor of the harbor. One of the easiest ways to catch stripers near a dock is to use fresh bait (emphasis on fresh—hours old not days old bait) right on the bottom. A fresh chunk of menhaden or a whole squid are deadly offerings. I recommend circle hooks when fishing bait, however don't set the hook by yanking the rod, just let the line go tight (but don't give the fish too much line or they might already be under the dock when the hook engages) and start to reel. I use braided line and a tight drag to turn the fish away from the timber and to gain control as soon as possible.*



*I enjoy filming all types of game fish, from marlin and tuna, to tautog and bluefish. However, striped bass are among my favorite species to shoot because each fish is quite unique; the colors can vary from olive green and bronze to shades of violet and cyan.*





*The two linesiders in the top photo have perfectly straight stripes while the photo below them shows a bass that looks like a puzzle where a few of the pieces were crammed into the wrong places.*

As time passed and the sun sank lower, I knew the larger bass would start to appear with more regularity. As is typically the case, they would be closest to the bottom and they would be far more wary than their younger counterparts. Big cows often travel alone or in smaller hunting parties as opposed to the big schools that smaller stripers tend to form.

I had been in the water for close to an hour and my bottom time was improving with each new dive. I swam to the end of the dock where I figured I would intercept the bigger fish that would be coming into the shallows from the adjacent channel. I stayed under the dock and slid down the back side of the corner piling. The mud was particular soft and when I touched down, a large plume of sediment formed a mushroom cloud around me. I'm not sure if it helped hide me or if it announced my presence to every striper in the area. As the cloud settled and the water cleared up a chunky striper glided into frame.



*The cunner at the bottom left corner of the picture was frozen like a statue as it watched in panic as the big cow cruised by.*

You can find out the intricacies of harbor habitat without even going on a scouting mission. Beyond studying a chart, a quick visit to Google Earth <http://earth.google.com> will allow you to scope out nearby areas without burning an ounce of fuel.

**Here are a few tips for fishing docks and harbors effectively:**

1. First make sure you have permission to fish off the dock, especially if you don't have a boat tied to slip there.
2. The best dock for fishing at night will almost always be the one with a bright light shining in the water; the light will attract baitfish and sooner or later stripers will cruise by.
3. The corners of the dock are often situated next to deeper water. Game fish will cruise the channel edge next to the dock as well as swim inside the shadow line waiting for unsuspecting bait.
4. Use stout tackle. You have to control the fish as quickly as possible or you'll lose every fish to the barnacle covered pilings.
5. Chum the area with a few small pieces of bait – don't over feed the fish and DON'T make a mess of the dock. Never, clean fish on the dock and discard the frames over the side, it was once a common practice, but not anymore.
6. If you're fishing at night and using chunk bait or squid, don't leave the bait in one spot for too very long, otherwise the crabs will strip you clean in no time. Consider a small cork to float the offering about 18" off the bottom.
7. Try catching a few shad at sunset and live line them around the corners of the dock.
8. Don't make ANY noise, it not only alerts the fish that you're there, it also disturbs people who are trying to enjoy their time on the water.
9. The most productive times will be just before sunrise and during the night.

Docks next to fish houses like the one in Galilee, RI tend to have stripers hanging around day and night; no doubt because fish sometimes fall overboard in the unloading process.

I use to launch my boat out of Allen Harbor in Rhode Island and every evening I would watch a husband and wife motor out in a little dingy and fish just outside the mouth of the entrance to the harbor...a place where every boat in the harbor eventually passes. One night I saw him fishing without his wife and I asked if everything was okay. He went on to explain that the night before, as they motored just outside the entrance they saw a couple of striper fins cruising up on the shallow bar next to the channel. His wife pitched out a whole bunker and the next thing they knew, they were up on the flat in only 3 feet of water fighting a monster striper. The fish was close to 58 pounds and it was the biggest striper either one of them had ever caught. He said that he was so jealous of his wife's accomplishment that he couldn't stand the thought of fishing with her again. I honestly couldn't tell if he was kidding.

Also keep in mind that Steve Franco's 75 pound, 6-ounce striper was caught on Memorial Day weekend 1992 in New Haven Harbor.

So next time you pull up to the your dock with less than the desired number of fish in the cooler or you didn't catch and release that monster striper of your dreams, don't throw that day's bait over the side unless you put a hook in it.