



Black Steenbras, Poenskop or Cracker (*Cymatoceps nasutus*) is a fish of legends and at some point every angler who has wet his line in salt water has dreamt of catching a big one.

Despite the urge to catch one, many anglers don't know a whole lot about these fish and neither will they succeed in catching a good size one.

Where to find them:

Black Steenbras are a member of the Sparid family and are endemic to South Africa which means they occur nowhere else in the world. Their distribution ranges from the Mozambique Border to Cape Agulhas. In Natal they are mostly taken in 40 – 70m of water and very rarely if ever from the shore. In the Transkei they are taken in much shallower water, 8 – 30m is the norm, whilst west of PE they are mostly taken in 30m or less. From the Transkei westwards they are occasionally taken from shore although the majority of shore caught specimens are juveniles. Despite this, odd specimens have on occasion been taken in 70m + of water in the Border region. High profile reefs are favoured.

It has been theorised that Black Steenbras stick to the temperature range that suits them and thus they live deeper in Natal (*seeking cooler water*) and move shallower westwards thus keeping in their preferred temperature range which is often closer to shore. West of PE, the current runs much further offshore which results in deeper waters inside of the current often being ice cold on the bottom.

Certain places in SA are known to produce exceptional specimens with reasonable regularity, like the Transkei. It is believed that the Border Transkei region is the epicentre of the Black Steenbras's range (like Coppers).

Most endemic species have what is often termed their "epicentre of their distribution", which is basically an area where the habitat and prevailing conditions are most suited to them, often also a spawning area. Typically, these epicentres are best identified when fish stocks of a particular species are heavily fished, areas least suitable for the species are the first places for the fish to disappear and gradually the catches disappear until you're left with the last outpost so to speak.

Recently I read an explanation on the above using Kob as an example and which best describes it as follows:

"This can be explained by something called the 'basin effect'"

Imagine your bathroom basin which slopes towards the plughole. Places like the Gamtoos and Sundays can be seen as the plughole (the epicenter of local Kob stocks at certain times of the year), and as you move away from the plughole the Kob get scarcer (the water gets shallower in your basin). But we all want to catch Kob- so we fish where the most fish are- the Gamtoos and the Sundays (i.e. the plughole) and the catches seem to stay high. But as we remove fish from the “plughole”, they are replaced by fish from outlying areas (places further from your plughole) and the fishing at the plughole stays good, but the fishing at outlying areas decreases (there is still water at the plughole, but the basin is getting emptier). Suddenly, in outlying areas where you used to catch a Kob on any puff of sand, you start struggling to find the fish. Meanwhile the fishing at the plughole remains good, until suddenly it comes to an end when the last couple of Kob is removed and there are no Kob left to replace them (i.e. the water has completely drained from the basin). **The Kob stocks have quite literally gone down the drain.**

Don't judge the Kob catches on good kob fishing spots. Judge them on the places where you used to catch them perhaps as a “surprise” in the past but don't anymore.

Another good example of this is of adult Coppers which are now only being caught in the Border Transkei region whereas historically adults were plentiful from Cape Point to St Lucia. Thus we can deduce that the Border Transkei region is the epicentre of the fish's distribution. We're currently experiencing the reverse with 74, as they rebound they have made a come back in their epicentre first, the Illovo banks on the KZN south coast to Kei Mouth and they are progressively spreading west wards and increasing in average size. They were once so abundant that anglers reported them to be a nuisance on the 12 mile Banks off Cape Agulhas, so they have some way to go before we can say they have made a full recovery.

According to a 2008 ORI news letter, 2132 Black Steenbras have been tagged since their tagging programs inception (1984) and 148 have been recaptured (6.9% recapture rate). Of those recaptured, they travelled on average only 4km from their point of release. Thus it is logical to assume that they are a highly resident species and the potential exists to ring fence important breeding populations in protected areas.

Whilst they seem to have a limited home range, spear fisherman report that Blacks move from spot to spot on localised reef systems quite a lot. Typically when the Easterly blows and the temperature begins to drop, they either move deeper or closer to shore presumably to stay in their preferred temperature range.

So much for where they live, why are they so hard to catch?

Whilst Black Steenbras have a reputation for smashing tackle they are not hard to catch as they are usually one of the dominant species on the reef and their large size enables them to bully their way to the bait. Your chances are very good of getting one to bite if presented with the right bait and they are present on the reef. The main problem is that the number of sexually mature adults is decreasing.

They're very vulnerable to line fishing due to their resident nature and the fact that they inhabit easily fishable depths. Unlike the Copper grounds Black Steenbras don't get the benefit from roaring

currents and the wild conditions out on the shelf which offer Copper's some level of protection, not to mention that on top of ski boat pressure they are very accessible to paddle ski and jet ski fisherman thus they are on the receiving end of intense and ever increasing (and popular) fishing pressure.

Adding to their vulnerability is their incredibly slow growth rate. Age is determined by counting the rings on the Otoliths (ear bones) similar to the rings of a tree. They take 10 years to reach 53cm (4.16kg); *legal size is 50cm* and another 8 years just to reach 70cm (9.67kg). The oldest fish aged was 45 years old. Maximum size is some where around 36 -40kg.

Due to their resident nature and the fact that it takes over 18+ years to reach 10kg's, in heavily fished areas there are very few specimens over 10kg present. They simply can't swim around a heavily fished reef for more than 8+ years (legal size 50cm – 70cm) without being caught.

This was graphically illustrated by a recent Ski boat competition (30.07.2011) in the Border region which weighed in 63 Blacks over the 2 day competition. Of the 63 Blacks taken, only 6 were over 10 kg and of those 6 the biggest was 12.9kg. The remaining 60 Blacks had an average weight of 7.6kg.

We have to ask ourselves if the **legal** (*which it was*) exploitation of the species is actually in the best interests of the species itself or if competitive angling in South Africa needs a self imposed review of the way it does business.

Since the fish were taken adjacent to MPA's and aren't generally this abundant, it isn't unreasonable to assume that the fish may have temporarily moved from the adjacent MPA due to unfavourable conditions inshore on the same reef system.

Anglers and visitors witnessing these excellent catches may be led to believe that the stocks are in excellent condition, whereas it could just be an isolated case of an extra ordinary migration and not necessarily a spill over cloud from the protected areas.

Although recent reports from an area between two MPA's seem to suggest that small Copper's and Black's are becoming more prevalent on the shallower reefs, we as anglers must exercise caution, increasing pressure could easily reverse this if it is indeed the case.

Adding further to their plight is that they change sex. From 70cm most change to males and from 95cm all are males. The bigger the fish, the more sperm and eggs are produced exponentially and thus the predominance of small fish means reproduction and stock replacement levels aren't working at ideal off take levels.

Scientific opinion is that the stock is at 5% or less of its pristine level. This estimate is based on mathematical formulae and other methods (as it is impossible to count the fish like wild game on land). We can split hairs and argue the percentages but the moral of the story is that the current stock status is unlikely to yield more of the bigger fish we so desire without a drastic change in our fishing behaviour.

Probably the only good news is that their resident behaviour makes MPA's an ideal management tool and the Border region has a good number of well managed reserves. Unfortunately the picture outside of Border isn't as rosy. MPA's exist but many are poached and thus offer limited protection.

So if you want to catch a big one, two things are apparent; fish a remote area that isn't heavily fished and start releasing a lot more fish over and above the current legal size limit.

Looking at old fishing publications and old pictures it is apparent that these fish were once abundant through out their range and fish of 20 +kgs were the norm.

Spawning:

Published research on spawning is rare however some work has been done. Whilst the sample size (no of specimens examined nationally) was too small to be conclusive, preliminary findings showed that reproductively active fish were only recorded in the Transkei from May to October.

Whilst tagging shows high levels of residence the absence of reproductively active fish west of PE has led to speculation that sexually mature fish move eastwards to spawn from May to October but this has yet to be verified.

Juveniles (50cm and less) are common in the Transkei Border area in water 10 m or less. Both adults and juveniles are found westwards of Border but no sexually active fish were recorded westwards.

Also of interest is that Blacks of less than 10kg are very rare east of Port Shepstone. In fact most of Blacks taken in Natal are 15kg upwards although these big fish seem just as rare as elsewhere.

With no legal commercial activity in the Transkei region and very limited trawling opportunity due to the species' preference for high profile reefs and shallow water, it appears Transkei & Border recreational anglers are shouldered with the responsibility of being the guardians and custodians of the breeding stock of this great angling fish.

Food for thought.



34kg Durban



36 kg in 1978



Note: I have no formal education on matters fishy – information is based on what I have read and observation.

Source information:

- ORI Tagging news Letter
- Buxton & Clarke 1989
- Common Sea Fishes of Southern Africa –Van Der Elst
- Personal observation