

SHAD

Seventy per cent of all fish caught by shore anglers in KwaZulu-Natal are shad. What do you really know or understand about these fish?

Although shad occur in the warm waters throughout the world, the South African stock is separate from these, and South Africans have the sole responsibility of looking after the fish along the eastern coast of our country.

Tagging of shad has shown that they migrate from the cool waters of the Western and Eastern Cape to KwaZulu-Natal each winter. The shad migration follows that of their main prey - the sardines - in the annual 'sardine run'. In the warmer waters of KwaZulu-Natal they breed in spring to mid-summer. Their eggs hatch after a few days and the young fish are carried back to the south-eastern Cape where they spend their first year living in large marine bays.

Young shad feed on small marine creatures drifting in the open ocean, and adult shad are vicious predators, preying on small fish such as pinkies and karanteen. It is no co-incidence that sardines and shad migrate at the same time of year, sardines are one of the most important fish in the diet of shad. Most fishermen have witnessed the excitement of shad 'on the bite' when large shoals gather to feed. Shad also provide food for other predators including large gamefish, sharks and dolphins.

Shad can grow to be 120 cm long and a weight of 14 kg. Fish of this size would be 10 to 15 years old - but with the intensity of fishing along our coastline few fish survive to attain this age. One year old shad are 25 to 30 cm long and at two years they are over 35 cm and are sexually mature.

Shad facts:

Spawning - September to February with a November to December peak.

Most shad are sexually mature at 30 cm.

Larger fish produce many more eggs than younger fish which have just reached maturity.

Shad have been a popular eating fish since the early 1900s and there are numerous historical accounts describing the abundance of shad in earlier days. Huge shoals of shad were netted in the Durban Harbour and, prior to 1960, 20 000 dried shad a week were sold in the Durban fish market. Dried shad were also exported to Mauritius. At present no shad may be caught commercially or sold in KwaZulu-Natal. This restriction does not apply in the Western and Eastern Cape where shad are still commercially caught and sold.

Due mainly to over fishing, shad catches declined in the 1960s and 70s and fewer large fish were caught. To prevent over exploitation, a bag limit was set in 1973 and in 1977, a closed season was introduced. A minimum size was first set in 1916 and this size limit has been adjusted periodically as scientists learn more about shad biology.

Minimum size limits protect young fish, allowing them to grow to beyond the first breeding age.

Bag limits restrict anglers daily catches of shad and distributes the catch evenly among anglers.

Closed seasons protect the shad at a time when they aggregate to breed. Just as we do not catch rock lobster in berry (carrying eggs), it is important to leave shad to release their eggs into the water during their breeding season.

Since 2006

Bag limit: 4

Minimum size: 30 cm

Closed season: 1 October to 30 November