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## A Captain Who Sometimes Goes Overboard

By Angus Phillips  
Sunday, August 6, 2006; E02

It was a sad day on Chesapeake Bay last week when one of the estuary's most colorful and entertaining figures got busted for the fourth time on charges of illegal possession of Maryland's state fish, striped bass (rockfish).

Capt. Levin G. "Buddy" Harrison III, latest in a century-long line of Harrisons who have operated a commercial fishing and shellfish business, a hotel, a terrific seafood restaurant and a charter fishing and hunting guide business on Tilghman Island, was charged by Natural Resources Police with possession of 31 undersized rockfish after a charter trip.

Harrison has three "priors." In 1992, according to NRP records, he was fined \$2,020 and ordered to take 100 kids fishing after being caught with illegal rockfish; in 1998 he was found guilty of possessing undersized fish and fined \$120; he paid the same amount for possessing undersized rockfish in 2000. Now this.

I suppose it's sad that Harrison, 72, who drives around in a huge, camouflage Hummer and is famous for his gaudy gold jewelry, Rolex watches and snakeskin boots, would feel the need to continue taking illegal fish when he obviously has everything he needs for a full and happy life. But that's not the sad part.

The sad part is this: For the latest transgression, after admitting responsibility, Harrison was ordered to pay the state the grand sum of \$125 for the offense plus \$5 each for every illegal fish. That comes to \$280, which is about the tip his mate might have expected from the party of 34 anglers they carried fishing on the 62-foot Capt. Buddy that day. Indeed, if the party paid full fare for the journey, it's a tiny fraction of the posted \$4,500 charter fee.

Sound pitiful to you? Well, you're not alone. Even the head of Maryland Fisheries, Howard King, was put off. "That's a low fine," he said. "It's too low. If we have an opportunity to review those fines, we're going to do so."

"No, no, no," said Mike Slattery, deputy secretary of Natural Resources, who has overall responsibility for both *fisheries* and Natural Resources Police as the No. 2 man under DNR Secretary Ron Franks. "It's \$280 *per* fish," he said several days after the incident. On that account, Slattery was wrong. It's \$280 total, NRP spokesman Sgt. Ken Turner confirmed.

Harrison claimed mitigating circumstances. He was sick that day, he said, probably from conflicting medications he's been taking, and had to cut the charter short. "I told them they had an hour to catch what they could and I just went and lay down. The mate told me they were taking their own fish off the hooks and he couldn't control it."

Back onshore, the fish were loaded in a container and hauled off to Harrison's fish house for cleaning. That's when Natural Resources Police, acting on a phone tip, intercepted them. Harrison, who said by then he was on the way to the doctor, took the blame and accepted the citation the following day, he said.

All of which adds up to a muddy picture if you let the details get to you, which you shouldn't.

Here I should offer a disclaimer. I've known Harrison for 25 years and am in many ways an admirer. He is of the bay and from the bay, an authentic original who can spin yarns with the best of them. I've fished with him numerous times and always counted as the best hours those when I stood by his side in the wheelhouse listening to his reminiscences of the old days. I even thought about doing a book.

That's the appealing side of Buddy Harrison. He came along at a time, back in the 1940s and '50s, when the bay really did seem like an inexhaustible source of plenty, when rockfish, oysters, crabs and shad were so abundant, it didn't seem they would ever run out. Back then, watermen and recreational fishermen and hunters considered many of the state's rules and regulations silly and devised clever schemes to dodge them.

Well, they were wrong. As the human population soared, pollution increased and appetites for seafood grew, it became clear that the bay's abundance was not only exhaustible, it was in many cases exhausted. Most notably, shad grew so rare Maryland shut down fishing for them altogether and never reopened it; the state slammed the door on rockfishing for five years in the 1980s to let dwindling stocks rebound, and did the same with Canada goose hunting in the 1990s. Meantime,

oysters all but vanished and crabs grew scarce.

Harrison's views evidently have not changed with the times. He's a practical, independent sort, used to carving out his place in the world by his own rules. He once told me a story that might help illustrate his view.

He had an old, ramshackle building on his property that needed demolition. He had it bulldozed, he said, then figured to set it on fire on a calm day to clear up the mess. But he learned a county permit was needed for an open fire. He called about the permit and was told one couldn't be issued for a fire that big, that he needed to have the trash hauled away instead.

Harrison said he checked with some haulers, all of whom wanted several thousand dollars for the job. Then he called the county back and asked about the fine for unauthorized burning. It was substantially less. So he poured some gasoline on the wreckage and set it ablaze, he said, then called the county and told them to come on down and write him his ticket. That's Eastern Shore practicality at work.

Harrison is well connected -- he was great pals with state Comptroller William Donald Schaefer when Schaefer was governor; he takes Slattery, the deputy secretary of DNR, hunting, and U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski fishes with him.

It may be too late to change this old tiger's stripes, but it would be nice to think that at least an effort was being made. Fining a repeat offender, a state licensed charter boat skipper at that, \$280 for bringing in 31 undersized rockfish on a charter trip worth several thousand dollars isn't a slap on the wrist, it's more like a congratulatory handshake.

DNR ought to be ashamed.

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