

BASS & STEWARDSHIP

THE EFFECTS OF SOFT PLASTIC LURES

By Joseph W. Love, Ph.D. and Scott Sewell

Last year, Joe Ford from Lake Amistad, Florida, landed a 10-pound bass with 12 large, soft plastic lures in its belly: only lures, no hooks. Two years earlier, biologists from the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife reported that a brook trout that had eaten soft plastic lures had lost weight and displayed signs of anorexia.

Fears are that this could happen to largemouth bass as well. But what are soft plastic lures and are they really a problem in the Chesapeake Bay watershed?

Luring them in

Since soft plastic lures were introduced to the market, sales have skyrocketed and the range of products has exploded to include soft plastic worms and critter baits



A tournament catch

Joseph W. Love



Two bass caught with soft plastic lures

Mike Schenck



Black bass tournaments are routinely held at Smallwood State Park and bring together hundreds of anglers each year.

such as crayfish, lizards and frogs. The essential advantage of soft plastic lures is that they are somewhat buoyant, which increases their drop time in the water, or the amount of time it takes to descend to the bottom. The plastic lure descends in the strike time zone, which is the area where a bass will actually pursue its prey.

According to a review submitted to the U.S. Patent Office in 1986, about 95 percent of all bass strikes occur during this drop time. Consequently, for anglers and the lure manufacturers who depend on them, a long drop time is preferable. The other five percent are the fish that possibly got away.

Some lures are designed to float because they are filled with air pockets.

Other plastic worms have a curly-tail feature to create movement during descent. Scents have also been mixed in to entice bass; although in 2001, scientists from Lake Erie surmised that scenting might not make a difference.

It's no surprise that bass eat soft plastic lures. For the past few years, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) biologists have found soft plastics in the stomachs of several largemouth bass. Unfortunately, the amount of soft plastics that are discarded by anglers is not documented or known in Maryland.

On the Potomac River, Ken Penrod of *Lifetime Outdoors, Inc.* reports catching a bass that had "plastics sticking out of her vent." With more than 40 years of

experience on the Potomac, he notes, "discarded plastics and monofilament are big problems... and growing."

Recycling bait

The soft plastics problem was originally brought to nationwide attention by *BASS Times* author, Robert Montgomery, who advocated soft plastic bait recycling. Silicon rubber, the material used in many soft lures, can be recycled. BASS National Conservation Director Noreen Clough says the program to recycle has "gone viral." At the 2012 Bass Pro Shops Southern Open, Florida Bass Federation Nation Conservation Director Eamon Bolton recycled 17 pounds of soft plastics from this event.

Anglers will continue to use soft plastics as lures because they are very effective at catching fish. DNR encourages anglers to store their unwanted or damaged soft plastics in bags throughout the fishing day for recycling back at the dock. Anglers may visit mdrecycles.org or mde.maryland.gov to confirm that their neighborhood curb side recycling handles silicone.

Educating anglers

The Maryland Bass Federation Nation and Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) support the efforts of *ReBaits*®, a private company that is working to increase public awareness of this growing problem. The goals of the *ReBaits*® program are to educate anglers



Bolton shows seventeen pounds of recycled soft plastic lures that will not be getting into the waterways, landfills or bellies of bass.

Eamon Bolton



Charity displays his 45.5 inch catch.

Corey Charity

of the reasons to keep these baits out of our waters, provide a means for anglers to properly dispose of them, and engage youth and adult anglers in conservation. More information about this and other conservation programs supported by the Maryland Bass Federation Nation is available at mdbass.com. ■

Joseph W. Love, Ph.D. is the DNR Fisheries Service Manager.

Scott Sewell is Conservation Director of the Maryland Bass Federation Nation.