The Smith Mountain Striper Club (SMSC) is a local non-profit club that strives to educate, promote and protect the Striped Bass (Morone saxatilis) that inhabit the waters of Smith Mountain Lake. The SMSC holds regular meetings with guest speakers, offers on-water fishing activities and engages the local community in out-reach efforts. The SMSC website is www.smithmountainstriperclub.com and has great information for the novice and expert alike.

SML is home to a most distinguished resident that is acknowledged in journals as far back as 500 years ago as explorers reached the shores of the northeast coast. This renowned anadromous (migrate from sea to freshwater to spawn) fish known as the Striped Bass (striper, rockfish, linesider) was an integral part in helping build our great nation. Journal entries dating back to 1614 talk about the abundance of Striped Bass off the Northeast Coast. Captain John Smith also noted *"a most sweet and wholesome fish as ever I did eat….altogether as good as our fresh Salmon. Our Fishers take many hundreds together…yea, their nets ordinarily take more fish than they are able to hall to Land."*

Found in The New England Prospect in 1634, William Wood wrote *"one of the best fishes in the Country, a delicate, fine, fat, tasting fish. The English at the top of an high water do crosse the creek with long seanes…and the water ebbing from them, they are left on the dry grounds, sometimes two or three thousand at a set, which are salted up against winter to eat or use them for their grounds."*

Several years later in 1639, overfishing had become an issue and Massachusetts ruled that Striped Bass could no longer be used as fertilizer. The settlers realized the importance of the Striped Bass as a food source and worked to ensure that the fish would continue to feed them in the future. The passage of this legislation is believed to be our first conservation and fishery management laws.

As the country grew west, the Striped Bass went along for the ride as well. In 1879 and again in 1881 The United States Fish Commission (the group that preceded the U.S. Fish and Wildlife) started transporting Striped Bass from New Jersey to the San Francisco Bay. The fish were gathered in the Navesink and Shrewsbury Rivers near Red Bank, NJ, loaded into barrels on trains, kept alive by manual aeration and stocked into the San Francisco Bay. Dr. Livingston Stone of the U.S. Fish Commission is credited with successfully stocking the Striped Bass using this program.

The story of the Striped Bass took an interesting turn in 1941. Known only as a fish that would spawn in fresh water and return to the sea, the Striped Bass showed their adaptability much to the surprise of biologists. The Santee Cooper Hydroelectric and Navigation Project was underway in 1941 and during an 8 week period when the lakes were impounded, Striped Bass making their springtime spawning run were trapped behind the dams. Biologists were aware of Striped Bass on their spawning run and assumed they would die in the newly formed lakes. The Striped Bass that had become permanent residents of Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie did not die, instead they survived and thrived! The biologists were shocked that the fish were able to adapt and upon further research found that the Striped Bass were reproducing in the two Santee Cooper lakes. In the 1950s, several states began raising Striped Bass in hatcheries and stocking them in lakes and reservoirs. Today, 36 states and 5 countries have landlocked Striped Bass due to the confluence of nature and science.

The Striped Bass story at SML began when the lake was impounded in 1963. The VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (now VA DWR) started stocking the lake with fingerling size (approximately 1.5" in length) fish as the lake continued on its journey to reach full pond. Smith Mountain Lake does not have suitable spawning habitat, landlocked Striped Bass can only reproduce in rivers that maintain enough flow to keep the eggs suspended in current for 48-72 hours. To maintain this world class fishery at SML, VA DWR stocks on average 350,000 fingerlings a year. VA DWR Biologist Dan Wilson is the key figure that determines the actual yearly stocking rate. He compiles data from gill netting surveys, angler journals and the collection of fish heads. The gill netting surveys show how well the stocking (recruitment) is progressing and how well the fish are growing in their 1st 3 years in the lake. This data gives DWR an idea of what fish will be entering the system as catchable fish. The angler journals give a complete picture of the entire population of Striped Bass in SML. It is a snapshot of what size and how many fish that anglers are catching. The fish head collection is the most interesting part of his study. There is a small bone in the Striped Bass inner ear called the otolith. DWR extracts this bone and can determine the age of the Striped Bass by counting the calcified rings (much like trees). The age determination is critical in identifying the overall health of the Striped Bass fishery. For example, a 6 year old Striped Bass should measure 26-28 inches in length. If DWR, through the fish head collection data, notices 6 year old fish that are only 22 inches long they will start to investigate why the fish aren't tracking along the published growth rate chart. In that case the forage base may not be adequate to support the fish population and the likely recommendation is that stocking would be reduced until growth rates show improvement.

The Striped Bass that roam the waters of SML provide entertainment and a food source for residents and visitors alike. Many businesses, hotels and restaurants see increased revenue from visitors that trek to SML to fish for these elusive giants. None of this could be possible without a delicate, coordinated effort from the VA DWR and the members of the SMSC who provide valuable data and feedback to ensure the future of the Striped Bass fishery at Smith Mountain Lake.