

Lessons Learned, Progress Made, More Work Needed

Updates on Three Bay Fisheries

By Bill Goldsborough



CBF STAFF

Oysters

Sanctuaries have long been viewed by both CBF and the scientific community as key tools in the effort to restore oysters to the Bay. With no harvest, sanctuaries allow reef structure to develop as oysters attach to each other and grow vertically. This in turn provides surface area and refuge for a variety of organisms that make up the reef community and serve as food for predatory fish and crabs using the reef.

However, the most important role of closed harvest areas may be in strengthening the oyster gene pool. By its nature, harvest typically removes the largest and fastest growing oysters. Over time this can lead to slower growing oysters and lower survival rates. Recently, University of Maryland researchers concluded that closed areas are the surest way to recovery and recommended a moratorium on oyster harvest in Maryland. While CBF doesn't believe a complete moratorium is necessary, this research confirmed that closed areas are important tools for restoration. Maryland's current plan set aside 25 percent of the most productive oyster bars as sanctuaries, in effect a partial moratorium.

In other recent oyster news, the Virginia rotational harvest system seems to be succeeding in supporting a stable harvest. In this approach, which was recommended

by the 2007 Virginia Blue Ribbon Oyster Panel, oyster bars are opened and closed to harvest in a multi-year rotation that allows for some recovery of the beds while providing watermen good bars on which to work.

CBF believes this is an effective approach for maintaining the public fishery and could be expanded to more areas. However, it is not a complete approach to restoration. Long-term sanctuaries are still important for full recovery of oyster populations. CBF addressed both sanctuaries and the rotational system in our 2010 Oyster Report accessible at cbf.org/oysterreport.



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Striped Bass

There was good news for striped bass reproduction in 2011 as juvenile surveys in both Maryland and Virginia found near-record numbers of fingerlings. A new stock assessment also found that the rockfish spawning stock is well above the target level. However, the assessment also confirmed that the spawning stock has been declining in size for five years. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) has been watching this closely but decided that harvest cutbacks are not needed at this time. The influx of young fish from the exceptional 2011 spawn should eventually boost those numbers.

The next question is how well those fish will survive the next four to six years while they are resident in the Chesapeake Bay. Water-quality stress and poor nutrition are two factors that can limit resident rockfish survival. Low dissolved-oxygen levels in the summer and limited key food may be playing a role in the epidemic of mycobacteriosis, a wasting disease that affects up to 70 percent of resident rockfish.



JOHN SARRICK/CBF STAFF

Menhaden

The Atlantic menhaden fishery is also managed by ASMFC. The latest menhaden assessment shows their numbers to be at an historic low. With high numbers of rockfish and low numbers of their favorite food (menhaden), it's a recipe for disaster. In response, ASMFC adopted new, tighter standards for managing the menhaden fishery at its November meeting and is in the process of developing harvesting rules for meeting the standards. Harvest cutbacks are needed to meet the new standards, but in the longer term, the population should rebuild and allow both stable catches and enough food for rockfish and other species that depend on menhaden. ⚡



CBF Fisheries Director Bill Goldsborough grew up on the Eastern Shore and got his inspiration from fishing the Bay for rockfish with his father.