



Trouble in the Chesapeake Bay Oyster & Crab Business

Proper stewardship and management of a shared public resource, when done correctly, makes for a great story and benefits the public and all stakeholders. However, when things don't go as planned, the finger-pointing starts, and the political blame game begins. Wild oyster season started October 1 in the Maryland waters of the Chesapeake. On that date, oyster divers, hand tongs, and patent tongs began to ply the waters of their local oyster bars to try and catch their daily limit of 15 bushels of oysters per license.

For the last few years, oystermen catching their daily limit was the norm when the season began. Some of the best oystermen caught their limit every single day, all season long. This year is a different story. Legal size oysters were very scarce right from the beginning. Although there was no significant oyster “die-off” from disease last summer, it seems the wild oysters did not grow much at all in the last 12 months.

This year's Chesapeake blue crab season also ranks as one of the worst in many years. Dealers were begging for crabs all fall, at a time of year when, normally, there are so many, you can't give them away. Local fresh crabmeat prices broke records this summer, cresting the \$30 a pound mark for months. Crabs are as scarce as anyone can remember, and next spring and summer look to be worse.

In this article, we will explore the precautionary measures and strategies employed by the resource managers (Maryland Department of Natural Resources) in both the crab and oyster fisheries and see how Mother Nature has the final say on all matters.

First, the crabs

Last spring started off with a bang,

and crabs seemed to be everywhere. But as the summer wore on, it became clear that there were no



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“little crabs” which would grow to legal size for the fall run. Where did they go? The explanation can be found in the complex life cycle of the crab. Female crabs migrate to and bury in the mud at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay each winter. In the spring, they release their eggs — and these tiny larval blue crabs spend the first part of their lives drifting with the currents in the Atlantic Ocean. They are totally dependent on favorable currents, temperatures, and winds to bring them back into the Chesapeake Bay, where they grow into adult crabs.

So, the lack of crabs in late summer and fall this year can be attributed to the 38 percent decrease in juvenile crabs — crabs smaller than 2.4 inches — according to the 2017 Blue Crab Winter Dredge Survey results, when compared to the 2016 statistics. In other words, the winds and currents were not

favorable to bringing the drifting larval blue crabs back into the Chesapeake Bay last spring.

The good news: the survey found that the spawning female stock, the true barometer of the health of the population, increased 31 percent, to 254 million crabs. In the long run, that is the most important figure. So, in conclusion, we will probably have to endure another summer of high-priced local crabmeat, but take comfort in the fact that the Chesapeake Bay blue crab population is stable, healthy, and resilient.

And the oysters?

The wild oyster industry is faced with some major issues right now. The annual harvest in Maryland waters reached 400,000 bushels in 2014, after spending 20 years at fewer than 100,000. The increase was attributed to the new, enlarged sanctuary system put in place in 2010 by the Maryland DNR and the Army Corp of Engineers. However,

this year, the harvest is projected to drop almost 50 percent to under 200,000 bushels.

The problem seems to be that the oysters are not growing as fast as they should. Public oyster season opened October 1 and runs through the end of March. The remaining oyster bars that are not declared sanctuaries are dredged daily for their legal size oysters by the hardworking watermen of the Chesapeake Bay. They use many different harvest techniques to try and catch their daily limit of 15 bushels. This year, legal oysters — defined as three inches or larger — are scarce, so undersize oysters of less than three inches are being dredged up to the surface time and again, measured, and thrown back overboard. Working these bars over and over during the six-month oyster season causes increased mortality on what would be next year's oysters.

The state of Virginia has implemented a successful management plan that includes biomass studies to determine which bars should open — and when. If the majority of the oysters on a given bar aren't big enough, then the bar stays closed until they are. The Maryland DNR needs to design a similar system of rotational harvests — openings and closures of oyster bars — that will allow harvests to continue but also protect the long-term viability of the public oyster bars in the Chesapeake Bay.

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