

Netarts Bay Clam Summary

The clam beds of Netarts Bay were surveyed by Shellfish Investigations personnel on June 8, 9, and 13, and July 9 and 10, 1960. The results of these surveys appear in the following summary.

The problem, stated in its briefest form, is that large numbers of gaper clams are being destroyed in Netarts Bay during the closed gaper season of January 1-June 30 while diggers are legally gathering butter clams and littlenecks. This wastage is brought about by intermingling of species and the fact that part of the digging is conducted in knee-deep water with no chance to identify species prior to removal from the soil. Also, these clams occur in a bottom composed of rubble rock that does not allow the clams to leave their typical siphon holes or shows in the substrata. The gaper clam open-season in Netarts Bay is presently limited to July-1-December 31 each year to prevent the harvest of these clams while they are in a spawned-out condition and the flesh is watery. This was not a closure to conserve the stocks.

The problem areas are confined to the eastern or landward side of the bay. The western or seaward side presents no problems. In the latter area the bottom is composed of sand or sand and mud, and species may be determined prior to digging. Also, clam density in this area is much lower. The remainder of this summary will pertain only to the eastern side of the bay or problem area.

Gaper clam density, from standard survey methods, was found to be .69 and .60 clams per square foot, respectively, in 1955 and 1957. In 1960, the population density was found to be .30 clams per square foot. These densities are those found in the areas exposed by the lowest tides. Densities in the shallow-water areas that are never exposed completely by the tide are much higher. In a sample dig-out of 17 square feet and covered by 22 inches of water, 97 clams were taken.

This would be an average of 5.7 clams per square foot (2.94 gaper clams per square foot). Of the 97 clams, 48 were legal (butter clams and littlenecks) and 50 would have been illegal gapers. This is a ratio of 1:1 legal clams to illegal. In talking to diggers in the area it was learned that this ratio seemed to hold fairly true where digging was conducted in the water. In the dry areas the number of gapers dug was less, probably because of a lower population density.

Cape Lookout State Park is located on the southern end of Netarts Bay. This park is quite popular and in 1958, 176,000 people utilized its facilities. Sampling in the park in 1957 and 1960, indicated that about one-fourth of these people dig clams, at least during the summer months of peak use.

On July 9 and 10, 1960, diggers were counted at half-hour intervals. Peak counts on these days were 433 and 540. The total number of diggers that actually dug on these days is unknown, however, it would have been well over the figures listed. This is brought about by the earlier arrivals leaving before the peak figures were reached. During these counts 106 diggers were checked and it was found that the average bag contained 18 clams of all species. A minimum catch for these two tides would be at least 17,500 clams of all species.

At the present time much wastage of gaper clams is occurring in Netarts Bay during the closed season. This wastage occurs while people are digging butter clams and littlenecks which are legal to take while the gaper is illegal until July 1. Incidentally-taken gapers are left for the seagulls or fish to eat. Four alternatives exist by which this wastage can be reduced. They are: (1) close the eastern shore to all clam digging during the period January 1-June 30 each year; (2) leave the eastern shore open to clam digging for all species during the entire year (bag limit of 36 bay clams per day; of which no more than 18 could be gaper clams); (3) close the entire bay from January 1-June 30; and, (4) remove the seasonal restriction on gaper clams in Netarts Bay.

The first alternative, closing the eastern shore to all clam digging during the period January 1-June 30 each year, would prevent the harvest of all clam species, including gapers, until July 1 of each year in the problem area and would eliminate the wastage of incidentally-dug gaper clams. However, such a regulation would also further complicate the situation for the diggers. Clam species identification is already a problem among diggers and the problem of open and closed areas in the same bay would indeed add to the confusion.

The second alternative is to remove the seasonal restriction on gaper clams on the eastern shore only. This would eliminate the present waste of gaper clams dug and damaged inadvertently by diggers seeking other species during the period January 1-June 30. Unfortunately, this would also have the same disadvantage as alternate one. That is, the regulation would be further complicated. Furthermore, such a regulation would hamper the enforcement of the remaining closure to gaper harvest on the western shore. The enforcement officer would have to prove that gaper clams in possession of a digger had actually been taken on the western shore. With the present regulation, possession alone is normally sufficient.

The third alternative is to close the entire bay to clam digging during the period January 1-June 30. Such action seems unwarranted at this time since there is no evidence available that indicated that any species needs protection to maintain the resource. This would be tantamount to letting the tail wag the dog.

The fourth alternative is to remove the seasonal restriction on gaper clams in all of Netarts. If the inadvertent wastage of discarded gaper clams during the January 1-June 30 closed period has now reached appreciable proportion, then it is apparent that the seasonal restriction to "save" these clams for harvest when they are in better condition is not serving its purpose and should be removed.

Considering only the welfare of the resource, the removal of the restriction on the eastern shore seems most desirable. However, this procedure would be likely to further confuse the diggers and inhibit the enforcement of the regulations.

Therefore, it is the staff's recommendation that the seasonal closure be removed and the result closely watched.

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