

A REVIEW OF THE GAPER CLAM STOCKS IN OREGON BAYS ✓

The gaper clam stocks of Oregon have been studied by the Fish Commission since 1947. The principal populations are found in Tillamook, Netarts, Yaquina, and Coos Bays and in lesser populations in Alsea, Siuslaw, and Umpqua Bays.

The gaper clams are slow-growing, long-lived animals. They reach harvestable size in 5-7 years and clams estimated to be 13 years old have been encountered in the catches. A large portion of the stock lies in the sub-tidal areas out of reach of the diggers. So long as diggers utilize only the clams available in the inter-tidal areas, there is little likelihood that the total stock can be depleted. However it is important that sufficient numbers of clams remain in the inter-tidal areas for harvesting by sport and commercial diggers.

Studies during 1947 indicated that the abundance and average size of gaper clams had been declining and additional regulations were promulgated on July 22, 1948, to arrest the decline. Two restrictive measures were adopted. First, the personal-use bag limit was reduced from 36 to 18 clams per day. Second, digging (commercial and personal use) was prohibited during the period January 1-June 30 of each year. During this period the clams are in poor condition (low meat yield) due to spawning. Although in most of the bays gapers are more or less intermingled with other species of bay clams on which there is a daily personal-use bag limit but no seasonal restrictions, the conflict is most acute in Netarts and Tillamook Bays. 1/

During the past few years digging activity for bay clams has been increasing substantially in some areas, particularly in Netarts Bay, resulting in large numbers of gapers being dug during the season open to other clams but closed to gapers. This has resulted in considerable wastage by discarding

1/ 36 in aggregate no more than 18 of which may be gapers.

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broken as well as whole gapers during the closed period. On occasion inadvertent misidentification of species has resulted in the arrest of diggers.

The abundance of bay clams is roughly measured from year to year by determining the density of gaper clams in selected areas of each bay using a sampling method. In general the stocks are in fair to good condition.

With the increase in digging in recent years, and the indication that the trend will continue, it may be advisable to modify the existing regulations. If the wastage of gapers inadvertently dug but discarded during the closed season has increased substantially under existing regulations, then the seasonal restriction to save these clams for harvest when they are in better condition is not serving its purpose and should be changed to provide for better utilization of the resource. Limited data suggest that wastage is indeed increasing.

Although this wastage problem particularly applies to certain areas in Tillamook and Netarts Bays, it may be desirable at this time to keep the regulations uniform along the coast primarily for the convenience of personal-use diggers. These people are not intimately familiar with the resource and hence often are confused by complex regulations. Although the stocks may not be in comparable abundance in all bays, it is felt that this change will not put undue pressure on the separate clam populations. Based on the results of the surveys in the selected bays, no populations are showing any significant increase in abundance. It is felt, therefore, that if the seasonal restriction is removed with a resulting anticipated greater total harvest, in the best interest of the resource, the daily bag limit should be reduced to 12 gapers per day and 24 in possession. The over-all bag limit of 36 clams (all species combined) would remain unchanged.

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