

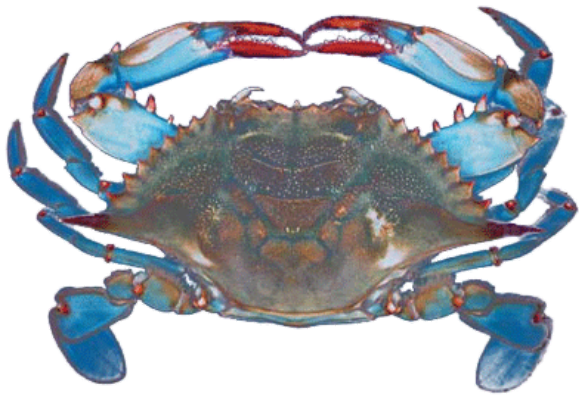
CHAPTER THREE

A World Without Blue Crabs

“... mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount.”

— Charles Darwin, The Origin of Species

First we had the state of the Bay, then we learned about the menhaden, and the oysters; all of these elements are intertwined in some way, but we have yet to talk about the remaining piece of the puzzle, the most prized, marveled, and iconic member of the Bay: the blue crab. The Atlantic blue crab, or better known to scientists as *Callinectes sapidus* Rathburn. *Callinectes* is a Greek word meaning beautiful swimmer, the appropriate nickname for these creatures, and *sapidus* translating to savory (Warner, 90). Together these words make up everything



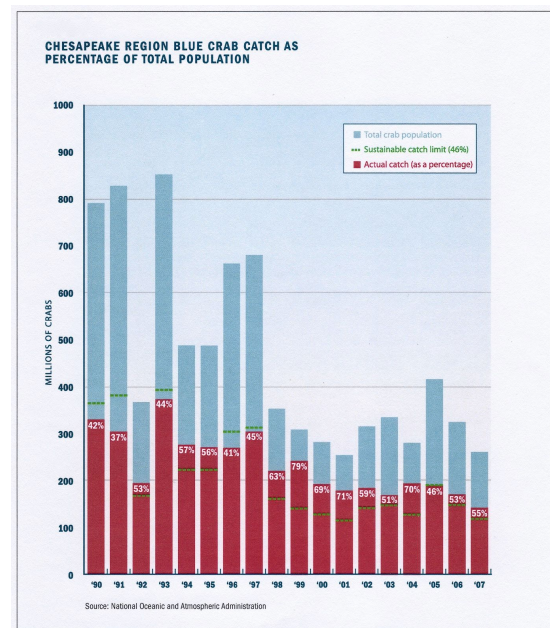
beloved about the blue crab. From its naturally beautiful shades of blue, to the way children squeal when it comes near their toes on summer vacations, these crabs are an important part of what makes up the Bay, and what makes it so

special. The Bay is known for its stock of Atlantic blue crabs - **no body of water has been so greatly fished for crabs than the Chesapeake Bay**. The blue crab industry on just the Eastern Shore has made the United States **the number one crab consuming nation in the entire world**, and crabs in particular are our nation's fourth most profitable industry (Warner, 9).

The Atlantic crab faces two main threats today that seriously endanger their existence in the Bay: **overharvesting and pollution**. Sound familiar?

These are not new problems, they are caused by humans, and therefore, can also be fixed by humans.

So, what's up with the crabs anyways? In the past years, the crab population has reached a dangerously low number. In the 1990s, the crab population was at a high of almost 900 million, and in 2008 the crab population lied just above 200 million. **How did we get here?** In just a matter of a little under 20 years, the population saw a huge hit. The two big factors seem to be almost a recurring theme: overfishing and pollution. First is overfishing, or overharvesting, in the case of the crabs, this is the technical term when the crab harvest exceeds the amount of crabs granted sustainable by the Bay. Currently, scientists have granted that to keep a sustainable crab population in the Bay, crabbers can only take up to 46% of the overall oyster population (Bad Water and the Decline of Blue Crabs in the Chesapeake Bay). The problem is, being a waterman is extremely difficult. To make a living they'll do whatever it takes. This is one of the main reasons that today, we are currently at an unfortunate point, where the harvest exceeds the sustainable amount of blue crabs in the Bay. This means, if this pattern



continues, **one day the Atlantic blue crab will cease to exist as we know it.**

The next primary threat to blue crabs is pollution. Sound familiar? It should begin becoming apparent to the reader that these issues are intertwined. The oyster reefs provide a habitat to the crabs, the crab larvae provide food for menhaden, and menhaden are filter feeders for the Bay. The cycle is never ending. Oysters, menhaden, blue crabs, and the Bay are all intertwined to create a giant puzzle we called the Chesapeake ecosystem. **With the failure of one, we have failure of all.**

Pollution and blue crabs: it's the same thing over and over. Agricultural pollution and excess nutrient runoff into the Bay is yet another killer to these blue crabs. This pollution has led to severe dead zones, killing crab food, which in turn prevents the growth of 75,000 metric tons of worms and clams - enough to have supported more than 60 million blue crabs. This cause and effect is one that we continue to let happen right before our eyes. Not only does this pollution lead to low food levels, but it leads to habitat loss, another threat to the success of the blue crabs. Sediment that makes its way into the Bay clouds the water, while also killing underwater grasses that juvenile crabs call home. Over half of the Bay's population of eel grasses have died since the early 1970s. Many believe that if pollution was taken care of, if those lands that border the Bay and see a direct runoff into the water have higher regulations, then the Bay would see

an increase in crabs, and therefore crabbers would be able to harvest a larger percentage of the Bay's population (Bad Water and the Decline of Blue Crabs in the Chesapeake Bay).

This industry is bigger and arguably more important than any other we have talked about. They are the leading seafood industry, both in recreation in commercial. They provide thousands with jobs, opportunity, and truly a way of life. Crabbers are considered the toughest of the tough. Strong, burly men who have seen years of good and bad harvest. Many of them scraping by, with crabbing being the only thing they know how to do. **They are the middleman between your steaming dinner on the dock and these beautiful swimmers on the sandy shores of the Chesapeake Bay, but there story is not as glamorous.**

Grant Corbin, an Eastern Shore native, is a crabber mentioned in the Pulitzer Prize winning book, Beautiful Swimmers. Grant's story is told by a mere



observer, someone who hops aboard his boat to see what's it's like to be a crabber on the Bay. It's tough work, simple as that. Work starts at 5:40 A.M., and doesn't see an end until 4 in the afternoon. It's not difficult to see that this is no desk job, it's more than just a job at that, **it's a way of life** (Warner, 9).

This job tends to be what their father did, and his father did. Grant himself

bought his first boat at seventeen years old, and has been living off the water ever since, doing the best he can to support his wife and children. This quote by Grant helps to sum up the true dedication required for this profession, **"You got to do it big if you're going to make out in this business... You got to work fast, go out everyday if you can. Mike, he does pretty good. He's not scairt of culling. Some people are plain feared of crabs. Lord knows they can't hurt you much." Mike replies, "Sometimes they get to you"** (Warner, 20). They surely will. It's a physically and mentally demanding living, but it's part of who they are. The stories of these brave men make up who we are as a country. Some of these crabbers come from a long line of watermen, and their families have in a way helped form this nation. Grant shares the struggles of the business when he says, "Good years you get about half what you put into this business. But in the bad years, way it's getting now, prices and all, handle the money is about all what you do" (Warner, 23).

The story of Grant Corbin correlates with that of many watermen all over the Bay, and therefore watermen all over the world. The biggest thing that watermen want to see changed all over the world is the amount of regulations they have. **If regulations were stricter on cleaning up the Bay versus fishing the Bay, then the water would produce more crabs, eliminating the need for a quota.** All fishermen want is to be free. Free from regulations that inhibit them from supporting their families. It's not that

they single handedly want to destroy the seas, but they want to be free in their lively hood. Their job is grueling, shouldn't they be allowed to make an honest living without the overbearing restrictions? Over harvesting crabs specifically is something that is leading to their rapidly depleting supply, but it's not just the blue crab that faces this problem. Menhaden, oysters, crabs, cod, and frankly any other seafood industry face the same dilemma. Many people believe that the problem with overharvesting is directly linked to the increase in effective technology, which is certainly a factor, but what are they to do? Take away that technology? If the government was to ban one type of equipment deemed dangerous, there would just be another created (Kurlansky, 112). If you were in that position, where you worked everyday on the unruly Bay, bringing home just enough to feed your family, **wouldn't you feel the government should**

look out for you? Approximately 4,500 crabbing related jobs have been lost over the last 10 years in Virginia and Maryland and only about 6,700 remain. The Chesapeake Bay foundation is looking to keep those people in business. They sum their sentiment up by saying, "Our goal is better water quality not only for the blue crab and those who harvest them, but for all creatures, human and otherwise who enjoy the Bay" (Bad Water and the



**CHESAPEAKE BAY
FOUNDATION**

Saving a National Treasure

Decline of Blue Crabs in the Chesapeake Bay). **Let's hold them to that.**

Let's fight for the Chesapeake Bay crabber.

So, What Next?

You've done your research, you've heard the story of the Bay, but what are you going to do about it? Here's what we've learned so far: the Bay is sick, and if we don't do something now, it will never recover. The Chesapeake Bay is more than just a body of water - it's home. It's home to countless aquatic species, some of which we have covered head on.

Oysters, menhaden, and blue crabs are all extremely important to not only the



overall health of the Bay providing ecological benefits, but also to many extremely profitable industries that

are located up the shores of the Bay, bringing in millions of dollars of revenue, and providing jobs for thousands of Eastern Shore natives. But it's bigger than all of those things; it's bigger than

the money it brings, the ecological benefits it provides, and the families who stay on its shores for vacations - it's an important part of who this country is.

Menhaden from the Bay provided the Native Americans with means to produce better crops; oysters are credited with saving the colony of Jamestown from complete extinction... The Chesapeake Bay and its members have played a very important role in the success of our

country. Think about everything the Bay has seen - the first explorers, English warships during the War of 1812, freed black men dredging for oysters, generations of crabbers, and even your family vacation to Tangier Island. The Chesapeake Bay connects us with everything before us, everything that made the United States what it is today.

The Bay is a way of life, it represents opportunity, the American Dream, and

survival. After centuries of its existence are we truly just going to let it die, and with it, all of those things we value so highly? Can we with a moral conscience, as students of science, as educated citizens of the United States, simply let the Bay continue to be uncontrollably polluted, overfished, and susceptible to global warming? You may think you are just a student, but you are more than that. You are an educated and extremely

capable member of society. In our lifetime we will either watch the Bay die, or live again. We have to be proactive, it's our choice. I challenge you to be proactive. Do not simply complain about the issue, make a stand for what you believe to be right. We are educated voters and the future leaders of America, we are the future owners of the beautiful body of water we call the Chesapeake Bay.

The pristine Bay that the first explorers came across just a few centuries ago is nothing resembling what we have today: a body of water who has seen the negative effects of human interference. The menhaden industry, the blue crab population, the quality of water.. all of these elements are suffering in one way or another because of human interference. Do not forget the inspiring words of Captain Saunders,

an oystermen who made in debut in a previous chapter. His view on the future of the Bay is simple, he believes that nature can and will heal itself, it simply just has to be left alone. There is still time to make a change. The health of the Bay has seen an increase in the last few years, let's use this momentum to do something. Here's how we do it. Listed below is who you can contact directly to speak about your grievances, to tell the

people that speak for you what you want
to see done. Make a change and let it
start with you.

Virginia Representatives for the U.S. Senate:

Kaine, Tim - (D - VA) (202) 224-4024

Warner, Mark R. - (D - VA)] (202) 224-2023

Virginia Representatives for the U.S. House of Representatives:

District	Name	Party	Phone
1	Wittman, Robert J.	R	202-225-4261
2	Rigell, Scott	R	202-225-4215
3	Scott, Robert C.	D	202-225-8351
4	Forbes, J. Randy	R	202-225-6365
5	Hurt, Robert	R	202-225-4711
6	Goodlatte, Bob	R	202-225-5431
7	Brat, Dave	R	202-225-2815
8	Beyer, Don	D	202-225-4376
9	Griffith, Morgan	R	202-225-3861
10	Comstock, Barbara	R	202-225-5136
11	Connolly, Gerald E.	D	202-225-1492

"Gerry"
