

My name is Greg Renzulli and I am a full-time shell fisherman on Narragansett Bay. Unfortunately, I feel writing this will have little impact and fall on deaf ears as it has for the last 8 to 10 yrs. The Shell fishermen of Narragansett Bay have been sounding this alarm for quite some time and no one wanted to take us seriously. These are the same men that live this trade year in and year out and actively sample the bottom daily with our bull rakes. What knowledge could we possibly bring to the table? I have been making a living on the bay for the last twenty years and for the first time in my life I see the business I worked very hard to build being destroyed. When I started quahogging the bay was full of life. There were sets of clams hard shell and soft shell from Davisville to Pine Hill Mud all the way up to the entire Upper Bay and down the East passage equally. Greenwich Bay had one of the largest sets it had ever seen. Apponaug Cove and East Greenwich coves had quahog sets a foot thick on the bottom. But then slowly something changed. Today those same coves are full of dead quahogs of old sets and what is there is a lot of chalky clams with rotting porous shells. As the years went on the sets stopped and gradually the lower bay was no longer producing and now that plague has crept into Greenwich Bay and up through area B and making its way further north. It has gotten so bad that we are forced to work the same areas over and over in Area A and B where they too now are having a hard time continually recovering from being culled so much.

Now correlation does not necessarily mean causation but with a long enough sample time one can certainly start to gain confidence in what they believe they are seeing. Since that tunnel came on line it was intended to clean the water and rid pollutants, which to a degree it has done well. Except right alongside this we started to see less and less recruitment and quahog spots literally go barren. Sometimes unintended results come from these grand experiments and I believe the food web, in which our larval clam rely upon to survive before settling on the bottom, has been greatly affected by the chemicals being used in vast amounts to treat the wastewater. There have been heavy rainfalls where after I can literally smell these agents coming off of the water. I no longer see the zooplankton and phytoplankton clouding up the water each season in spring thru summer and early fall. Another reason I have this suspicion is the clams themselves are growing slower, rounder and with much less growth rings per season than 15 to 20 years ago. I often take home Tops or Cherrystones to make stuffies or casinos and notice the meats of these hard shell clams in relation to their size is inadequate. Thus, another sign to me they are not getting the nutrients they need to thrive, not just survive. Other things I am noticing is that the few juvenile clams I am finding are mostly all in a hard bottom or one that is a transition from hard sandy bottom to mud. What I am not seeing whatsoever is any signs of new life in the soft mud bottoms especially in depths greater than 20 ft. When I began quahogging, soft mud bottoms were thriving from the lower Bay to the upper bay. In the last decade I have seen almost no new sets in these bottoms and bay wide.

The bay seems to be its healthiest when you have Greenwich Bay and its respective coves within with a high biomass in conjunction with the upper bay having similar. In which it does with the Providence River stock currently. I think focusing on restocking these key growing areas is very important. Begs the question why are we treating our bay like a swimming pool? At what point does this gain in such high quality water have a benefit if the result is wiping out an industry, losing jobs and local tradition that is going on nearly a century. I have watched the number of boats dwindle down to nothing and most of my peers forced to quit and find jobs elsewhere. This industry that once dominated RI seafood is hanging on by a thread. As I want to believe this commission has good intentions it's hard to convince me that it is little more than saving face.

Greg Renzulli 1-23-2024