

SCALLOP SEASON

Continued from page 1

"I guess what I would have to say is it seems like we have a few more scallops than we had anticipated. The family people have done well in shallow water," said Fronzuto. "I think the colder temperatures will help."

Cold weather serves to sever dead eelgrass blades from these underwater plants, exposing scallops on the bottom that the thickly matted eelgrass would otherwise hide, deflecting the scallopers' dredges being pulled over the bottom from above. This clearing of the harbor bottoms could occur tomorrow, opening day, with the forecasted strong winds that help break off dead eelgrass blades.

Town Biologist Keith Conant, who, prior to the town's hiring of Shellfish Biologist Jeff Mercer this spring, typically spent a lot of time assessing scallop populations, offered his own predictions of the coming season which extends from Nov. 1 to March 31.

"I don't see this season being that much better than last year," said Conant. "We concentrated a lot of our effort in Second Bend this summer, so we didn't see a large part of the harbor like we'd normally do. I can't say that it's going to be a wonderful season. There seems to be good charge of seed from the shipyard almost up to Quaise, but that seems to be the only area that's well populated. There's probably other pockets in the harbor."

Madaket is a different story, though. While Fronzuto said scallops have been found along the main channel leading out of Hither Creek to the harbor proper, both he and Conant worry about the impacts of the new cut in Smith's Point created by the Patriot's Day nor'easter, saying it is still unclear at this point.

In the five months since the ocean re-separated Esther Island from Nantucket, sand from offshore poured into the west end harbor, filling eelgrass beds, but improving circulation.

"It's greatly improved water quality, but at the same time it's having the same effect as the old cut from '61 to '85 by filling in with a lot of sand. In the long run, it's not really good for the scallops," said Conant. "The eel grass beds probably will come back in those areas that have been covered because the water quality is still getting better."

That is at least some good news for a bay scallop fishery coming off two

seasons of abysmal harvests. Still, Nantucket's commercial scallop fleet is staring in the face of the potential demise of the last viable bay scallop fishery on the East Coast that only a handful of solutions are likely to reverse.

After learning last month that despite having the cleanest harbor among 89 embayments being reviewed by the Massachusetts Estuaries Project in the southeastern part of the state, the town still needs to scrape out certain amounts of nitrogen, fecal coliform bacteria and pollution from runoff. Fronzuto said that a watershed management plan will be needed. A shellfish management plan is due by October 2008.

Instead of waiting months for yet another plan to adjust its compass, The Marine Department is already taking steps to restore scallops in Nantucket waters.

Earlier this year, the town purchased one million scallop seed from Aquaculture Research Corporation of Dennis, Mass. (spawned from adult scallops from Nantucket waters).

Conant and Mercer are hopeful that these bay scallops, grown in upwellers and cages in the harbor, when released into the designated seed sanctuary, could reenergize bay scallop populations in Nantucket Harbor by augmenting the early summer and fall spawns next year. Mercer is already planning a DNA study to track these scallops over two years to learn what impact they have.

The intent is that within two or three years the industry will return to levels like the 15,000 bushels harvested during the 2004/2005 season.

To continue boosting scallop populations, Conant and the Marine Department will likely buy a million more seed spawned from Nantucket bay scallops next spring to keep the process going. And, as haunting a picture as he paints of the island's seemingly dwindling bay scallop populations, there remains one pumpkin on Conant's porch with a confident grin.

"One of the positive things that happens when the fishing drops off, the fishing pressure drops off," Conant said. "I think we've had a better recruitment (production of seed scallops), so not all the populations out there are getting fished. There is a better chance for recruitment with the additional scallops going into Second Bend." ■

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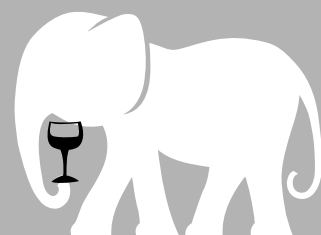
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