



EarthWatch Rhode Island



Topic: Protecting Rhode Island's Shellfishing Industry

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With seasonal parties now in full swing, many Rhode Islanders will enjoy an abundance of shellfish harvested locally from Narragansett Bay. The Bay is home to a number of species, including quahogs, bay scallops, soft-shelled clams, oysters, and others. Shellfishing in Rhode Island is an integral part of the state's economy. In 2004, shellfish landings were valued at 10 million dollars. Keeping shellfish safe and in good supply is a challenging job.

The Departments of Environmental Management (DEM) and Health (DOH) establish and enforce laws and regulations to ensure that the shellfish on our dinner plates have been grown, harvested and processed in a sanitary manner and to ensure the viability of the industry for future generations. Many of these measures are based on the National Shellfish Sanitation Program (NSSP) and must be enforced in order for Rhode Island shellfish harvesters and dealers to sell shellfish products across state lines

DEM's Division of Fish and Wildlife conducts scientific surveys and resource assessments that examine the health and abundance of shellfish in the Bay. These studies,



A local shellfisherman unloads his catch for the day.

aimed at sustaining the long-term viability of the shellfishing industry, are used to determine the number of commercial shellfishing licenses that can be issued annually by DEM as well as the catch limits and minimum harvest sizes for each species. Shellfish harvesting regulations are promulgated annually by DEM in consultation with industry and the Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council.

DEM's Office of Water Resources monitors water quality in the Bay and from suspected pollution sources and determines where shellfish can and cannot be harvested. The waters considered unsafe for harvesting shellfish for human consumption are declared prohibited areas. Parts of Narragansett Bay and Mount Hope

Bay are closed to shellfishing because of sewage contamination, and in some cases due to residual contaminated sediment. In addition, a portion of the upper bay is closed after rainfalls because antiquated combined sewer systems allow diluted or inadequately treated sewage to enter the bay during rainstorms. The Department publishes maps showing shellfish closure areas and maintains a 24-hour shellfishing hotline with recorded updated information on shellfish closure areas. (That number is 222-2900).

DEM's Division of Law Enforcement patrols the state's waters 24 hours per day to make sure shellfish are harvested only from clean waters. Environmental Police Officers also board commercial fishing vessels to make sure that fisherman are licensed, complying with size and catch limits and that the seafood is handled in a manner that maintains the quality of the product. EPO's also check tags that shellfish harvesters are required to affix to their catch. The tags include the harvesters' license number, the date, location, species and approximate quantity of the catch. In the event of a disease outbreak or sickness related to shellfish, DOH and DEM could use the information to trace the source of the shellfish and help determine the cause.

People who take shellfish at night or from polluted waters or fail can be charged with a felony and could serve jail time. Those who do not comply with size and catch limits can be charged with a misdemeanor and be fined.

Once the catch is transferred from the shellfish harvesters boat to a shellfish house or dealer, the Department of Health oversees processing and distribution operations. DOH's Office of Food Protection certifies shellfish dealers and checks their facilities and transport vehicles to ensure cleanliness, safe handling practices and proper temperature storage and control.

As the State does its part to protect consumers and to ensure the viability of the State's shellfishing industry, it also encourages Rhode Islanders to take precautions when eating shellfish:

- Buy from reputable dealers who practices safe handling and cleanliness techniques and who properly refrigerate or ice seafood
- Wash hands thoroughly with hot soapy water before and after handling any raw food
- Shellfish is highly perishable. Ask the dealer about proper storage, preparation and cooking techniques for the type of shellfish you purchase.
- Purchase shellfish harvested locally if possible. Some Rhode Island quahogs are marketed in purple-color mesh bags with a Rhode Island Quahogs logo.
- Support efforts to keep the Bay clean.



Rhode Island promotes locally harvested Quahogs with this purple mesh bag designed by local cartoonist Don Bousquet.

Interviews:

- Mark Gibson, Deputy Chief for Marine Fisheries, DEM Division of Fish & Wildlife
- Doreen Beck, Sr. Environmental Health Food Specialist, RI Department of Health
- Michael McGiveney, Shellfish Harvester and President of Rhode Island Shellfishermen's Association



Michael McGiveney, Shellfish Harvester and President of Rhode Island Shellfishermen's Association, explains the process of shellfish harvesting.