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## **The Blue Crab Fisheries in the Chesapeake Bay Problems and Approaches**

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REPORT OF  
WORKSHOP ON CHESAPEAKE BAY FISHERIES STATISTICS  
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Virginia Institute of Marine Science  
The College of William and Mary

Virginia Marine Resources Commission

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CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<u>PREFACE</u> . . . . .	1
<u>SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS</u> . . . . .	5
OPENING REMARKS	
<u>James E. Douglas, Jr.</u> . . . . .	9
<u>W. P. Jensen</u> . . . . .	11
FISHERIES OF CHESAPEAKE BAY	
<u>L. Eugene Cronin</u> . . . . .	13
THE VALUES OF COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL FISHERIES RESOURCE STATISTICS	
<u>Paul J. Anninos and Howard King</u> . . . . .	19
THE CHESAPEAKE BAY FISHERIES A SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE	
<u>Herbert M. Austin</u> . . . . .	23
THE CHESAPEAKE BAY FISHERIES SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE	
<u>Mark M. Bundy</u> . . . . .	30
PERTINENT STATISTICAL DATA FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA FISHERIES	
<u>Philip W. Jones and Joseph Loesch</u> . . . . .	40
A STUDY OF THE PRESENT STATE OF OYSTER STATISTICS IN CHESAPEAKE BAY AND SUGGESTED REMEDIAL MEASURES	
<u>George E. Krantz and Dexter S. Haven</u> . . . . .	44
THE HARD CLAM FISHERY PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES	
<u>Andre C. Kvaternik and William D. DuPaul</u> . . . . .	53
THE SOFT CLAM FISHERY PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES	
<u>Roy Scott</u> . . . . .	60
FINFISHERIES PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES	
<u>John V. Merriner and Harley J. Speir</u> . . . . .	62
THE BLUE CRAB FISHERIES IN THE CHESAPEAKE BAY PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES	
<u>W. A. Van Engel, Chris Bonzek and Ray Dintaman</u> . . . . .	69

A SUMMARY OF PRESENT FISHERIES STATISTICS  
PROGRAMS IN MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA  
Paul J. Anninos and Michael Burch . . . . . 74

STATUS OF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT AND FISHERIES  
STATISTICS IN CHESAPEAKE BAY  
B. J. Rothschild and Philip W. Jones . . . . . 96

PARTICIPANTS . . . . . 109

THE BLUE CRAB FISHERIES IN THE CHESAPEAKE BAY  
PROBLEMS AND APPROACHES

by

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INTRODUCTION

Regulations of the blue crab (Calinectes sapidus) fishery in the Chesapeake Bay have been based on empirical reasoning involving biological, economic, political and sociological considerations. These regulations cover licensing, size and sex limits, quotas, seasons, and gear restrictions. They are designed to promote utilization of the resource for near maximum production, a reasonable economic return from adequate catch per unit of effort, and orderly fishing to minimize conflicts between units and types of gear.

Biological-Environmental Data Needs

The need for some of the present regulations has never been examined in a comprehensive study of the population dynamics of the blue crab in the Chesapeake Bay. How the population would react to changes in fishing effort, to alterations in the minimum size limit, to changes in gear types and mesh sizes, could be estimated with one type of yield assessment model. For that model it is necessary to have estimates of the biological characteristics of the stock, such as growth, mortality and recruitment rates, as well as records of fisheries yield over time. The effect of changing effort could be assessed with a model utilizing catch and effort data alone, requiring accurate records of landings and effort, by month, gear and geographic region.

Studies to provide estimates of growth, mortality and recruitment rates need to be carefully planned and executed by research scientists. Monitoring of the juvenile segment of the crab population provides an assessment of the strength of each year class at a time just prior to its recruitment to the fishery. The

availability of estimates of the number of crab recruits is an exception to the general rule that for most species the number of recruits is usually unknown. In those cases, yield must be expressed as the yield per recruit. This assumes that recruitment rate does not vary significantly from year to year. But wide fluctuations in abundance that have occurred in the 100-year-old blue crab fishery deny a constancy of recruitment. Evidence is accumulating that environmental variables are highly correlated with variations in landings, suggesting that the density-independent mortality coefficient is large. If this is true, changes in fishing intensity should not affect levels of recruitment.

The study of the influence of environmental variables on year-class strength, and subsequently on yield, requires a time series of data, consisting of landings and lagged environmental variables. Juvenile abundance estimates may be used instead of landings. The selection of environmental variable should be based on their known or expected effects on critical stages of the blue crab life history.

The primary objective for monitoring stock levels, by obtaining catch and effort data from the fisheries and making juvenile crab abundance surveys, should be to obtain data for yield assessment studies. These data will provide the background information needed for rational management of the blue crab fishery. Monitoring of the stock by juvenile sampling surveys should be continued in Maryland and Virginia.

The value of a yearly crab abundance prediction to the commercial fishermen, processors and shippers and to management agencies is unknown. Ideally, industry would modify its activities if predictions and the success of fishing were highly correlated. Over the long term, since 1956, landings were within 5% of the predictions. Recently, within the last four years, landings have differed from predictions by significant amounts.

It is important to recognize that the predictions are not the primary objective of juvenile abundance surveys, and that they are based on the observed relationships between current and historical juvenile abundance and commercial landings data. Explanations must be sought for the apparent successes and failures of predictions, explanations for the causes of fluctuations in abundance. Predictions could be de-emphasized if they are shown to be of little value to the blue crab industry for planning. They are of scientific interest because deviations require interpretation, and they have publicity value.

### Harvest-Effort Estimates

The Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) has instituted a new and innovative approach in making estimates of catch and effort of blue crabs in Maryland portions of the Chesapeake Bay and the Maryland oceanside bays. The system is based upon a monthly random sample survey of individual licensed crabbers. For each month, estimates of catch are produced by gear type, river system, and market category (#1 male, #2 male, female, mixed, soft and peeler). The system has eliminated past suspected underestimation of harvest. Monthly estimates of fisherman effort in terms of man-days, man-hours, amount of gear fished, and number of times gear was fished are also produced from the survey. The present survey includes catch estimates by the recreational licensed crabbers as well as by commercial crabbers, though catch by non-licensed recreational crabbers is still not estimated. This unreported catch is potentially quite large. A catch by 100,000 people of 3 bushels per year, would mean an unreported catch of 13,000,000 pounds per year; an amount equal to approximately one-third the total annual catch reported in Virginia. In order to accurately estimate this component of the harvest, it would be necessary either to license all persons fishing for crabs in the Bay, or to include blue crabs in the annual National Marine Fisheries Service sportfishing survey.

MDNR is well pleased with the mechanics and results of this type of harvest estimate system. It is thus proposed that the survey be expanded to include the entire Chesapeake Bay and the Virginia oceanside bays. However, implementation of this system in Virginia would require basic changes in several present practices. First, individual reporting of catch to a regulatory agency has never been required in Virginia for any species. Because of resistance by watermen and the public alike to breaking this long tradition, it is possible that mandatory reporting of individual catch would have to be legislated, with revocation of license as the consequence of non-reporting. Second, this type of system requires fairly advanced automated data processing (ADP) capabilities that at present don't exist for the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC). A system such as this could possibly be conducted with the ADP power provided by a relatively inexpensive micro-computer, but because licensing files tend to be large, would best be conducted by access to a mainframe computer. Such a Bay-wide system could be conducted using the ADP power already available to MDNR, possibly under the auspices of a bi-state statistics working group which would have access to the license files of both

states. Required sample sizes could be reduced if it were possible to differentiate between truly commercial and semi-recreational crabbers among those individuals holding commercial licenses. This could be done by simply including a question on the license application asking how many days per week the person crabbled during the preceeding year (or plans to crab during the current year if he did not previously hold a license).

Because of the need to manage species based on biological rather than political boundaries, such interstate agreements are certainly desirable, and will become absolutely necessary with the recent striking of residency requirements. Failure to institute similar harvest estimate systems for both states will result in vastly different types of estimates, which would not reflect the true contribution of each state to the Bay's blue crab fishery.

The cost of the Maryland random sample survey is approximately \$300 to \$400 per month, the bulk of which is the cost of mailing questionnaires and postage pre-paid return envelopes. It is reasonable to think that these costs would be approximately double under a similar Bay-wide survey.

#### Economics Data Needs

The economics are, of course, what actually drives the commercial portion of any fishery. Managers must therefore have knowledge of present, past, and possible future market conditions. Two basic types of data are necessary in monitoring the economics of the blue crab fishery in the Bay. These are 1) a monthly average price by market category paid by all crab houses; and 2) a once yearly measure of gross operations by these houses including information such as; the number of employees, overhead and fixed costs, variable costs, and if possible revenue figures. These measures, combined with harvest-effort estimates, provide the necessary data points for input to models which will yield estimates for economic optimization of harvest. These data will also yield measures of value of the fishery, effects of the fishery on the communitites involved, and the relation of the fishery to industry in the rest of the region and the state.

#### Sociological Data Needs

The major function of sociological data in making fishery management decisions involves the need to balance the desires of different user groups.



Data needs include the relative numbers of individuals involved, their relative amounts of catch and how these catches are distributed in time and space. These Bay-wide estimates of relative use by different groups would be a direct consequence of implementation of the proposals made for Harvest-Effort estimates.