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Bill DuPaul

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Surf Clams Off the Virginia Coast

By

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March, 1982

Virginia Marine Resource
Report #82-5



CHARTERED 1693
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
VIRGINIA INSTITUTE OF MARINE SCIENCE
SCHOOL OF MARINE SCIENCE



Gloucester Point, Virginia 23062

March 23, 1982

Phone (804) 642-2111

The Honorable James E. Douglas, Jr.
Virginia Marine Resources Commission
P. O. Box 756
Newport News, Virginia 23607

Dear Commissioner Douglas:

This is in answer to your letter of March 16, 1982 asking about surf clams.

There have been many studies on surf clam abundance off Virginia's coast by the National Marine Fisheries Service. Most of these studies, however, began outside Virginia's three mile jurisdiction.

In 1974 VIMS studied surf clam distribution at intervals of 1, 2, and 3 nautical miles off Virginia's coast above Cape Charles (Loesch and Ropes, 1974). A total of 34 stations were occupied using a small tow hydraulic rig owned by the National Marine Fisheries Service. At almost all stations no clams were found.

At three stations 2.5 miles off Cape Henry no clams were discovered.

A recent report by Dillwyn in 1980 summarizes existing information on surf clam distribution. This indicated that surf clams are present in the inshore waters off the Virginia coast but in low numbers. He stated that the primary concentration off Virginia occurred at depths ranging from 18 to 37 meters. Depths three miles off Virginia's coastal waters above Cape Charles are generally less than 18 meters.

While most recent studies suggest a low density, there is some evidence which indicates that there have been very high densities in the past in these inshore waters. For example, Ropes reported that in 1964 huge numbers of surf clams were washed ashore after a storm at Wallops Island. Numbers average 20 per square foot near the low tide level along a two mile stretch of beach. These clams came from inside the three mile limit.

A recent conversation with Mr. Castagna indicated that surf clams do occur offshore within the three mile limit but they occur in streaks or patches. His information is based largely on conversation with watermen and his knowledge of the literature.

Letter to Commissioner James E. Douglas, Jr.
March 23, 1982
Page 2

Surf clams occurring in these shallow areas tend to be smaller than those found offshore and the expected size range would be from 4-6 inches long.

In the final analysis the last good study on density was made in 1974 and this showed few, if any, clams off Virginia's coast. There could be some there now and the only way to be sure would be to give a local clammer a permit to do exploratory work in the area or for someone to persuade NOAA to study the area.

If a local clammer is permitted to do exploratory work, we would be interested in sending someone along (if a student is available) or at least examining catch data, etc.

If you need further information, please let us know.

Sincerely,



Dexter S. Haven, Head,
Department of Applied Biology

DSH/gbr

cc Dr. Herbert Austin
Dr. William DuPaul