Support Studying Menhaden Ecology, Fishery Impacts, & Economic Importance

Atlantic menhaden are herring-like fish that form large schools and are normally found in the Chesapeake Bay from spring to fall.

As forage fish, menhaden nourish Chesapeake Bay striped bass, bluefish, summer flounder, and other popular fish targeted by commercial and recreational fishing industries, as well as bird species like osprey. A healthy menhaden population benefits both ecological and economic interests throughout the Bay region.

Canadian-based Omega Protein operates an industrial "reduction" fishery location in Reedville that processes menhaden into oil and meal, making the small Northern Neck town one of the largest fish landing ports (by weight) in the United States.

Menhaden are also caught by numerous operations which supply the fish to commercial crabbers for whom menhaden is the bait of choice. These fisheries have a significant positive economic impact and support several hundred jobs in the Commonwealth.

Bait and tackle shops, fishing guides, retailers, and tourism-related businesses also depend on healthy fisheries that in many cases rely on a robust menhaden population.

Menhaden research is more important than ever for the Chesapeake Bay region as the population has been suffering from low menhaden recruitment for over 20 years. In addition, factors including water quality and climate change may be altering both the number of menhaden in the Bay and the times they are present in the region. CBF urges General Assembly members to support directing the Virginia Institute of Marie Science (VIMS) to study the ecology, fishery impacts, and economic importance of Atlantic menhaden.

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Menhaden are currently managed on a coastwide basis by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

Unfortunately, ASMFC doesn't have the resources to determine the population dynamics of menhaden in the Chesapeake Bay and is likely missing important regionally-specific population information.

Concerns about the removal of menhaden from the Virginia portion of the Chesapeake Bay are the primary reason ASMFC implemented a harvest cap on the Virginia reduction fishery in 2006. Unfortunately, this cap is based solely on historic landings and not scientific data on the population of menhaden in Chesapeake Bay.

Recent fish spills by the reduction fishery industry have highlighted the need to find ways to mitigate the impact of these spills to local economies.

Information on the by-catch for the reduction fishery is dated and needs to be updated to better understand the impact of this fishery on non-target species.

Now is the time to pass legislation to direct VIMS to conduct a three-year study of the ecology, fishery impacts, and economic importance of the Atlantic menhaden population in the waters of the Commonwealth.

It is critical that Virginia legislators ensure the health of the menhaden population and the Bay ecosystem by supporting this study.

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