

## Sports

### Running menhaden flowing like river rapids

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By **TIMOTHY JUNKIN** Special to the Sunday Star

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Running our Riverkeeper patrol boat around from the Choptank River to St. Michaels this past autumn, I encountered schools of menhaden moving like river rapids just inside the mouth of the Miles River.

As I'd coast our boat near a school, the fish would scatter and the effect was similar to watching calm water instantly turn into a boil. Menhaden play a critically important role in the marine food chain as they are a vital source of protein for larger predators such as striped bass, bluefish, gulls, and osprey. They are also a filter feeder and help clean the water in our rivers and Bay. A recent book by H. Bruce Franklin in its title describes menhaden as The Most Important Fish in the Sea. Menhaden were once so prolific that migrating schools would stretch from Maine to Cape Cod. Not so any more. The numbers of Atlantic menhaden are dwindling and under severe fishing pressure.

A recent New York Times opinion piece by Paul Greenberg published Dec. 15 laments their decline. Greenberg points out that, "For the last decade, one company, Omega Protein of Houston, has been catching 90 percent of the nation's menhaden. The perniciousness of menhaden removals has been widely enough recognized that 13 of the 15 Atlantic states have banned Omega Protein's boats from their waters. But the company's toehold in North Carolina and Virginia (where it has its largest processing plant), and its continued right to fish in federal waters, means a half-billion menhaden are still taken from the ecosystem every year. For fish guys like me," Greenberg writes, "this egregious privatization of what is essentially a public resource is shocking."

Menhaden need our protection. Our national and state leaders, in considering the worth and the plight of menhaden, and the need for regulation, might well remember the catastrophic cost of delay concerning so many other irreplaceable species we've diminished losses that could have been avoided if they had acted sooner and more decisively.

In the 1890s, 770,000 pounds of sturgeon were harvested annually from the Chesapeake. By the 1920s the annual catch had fallen 90 percent to an average of 22,000 pounds. Today, a sturgeon is rarely seen and the fishery is closed. Annual shad harvests averaged 17.5 million pounds at the beginning of the last century.

These dwindled to less than 2 million pounds by the 1970s and in 1980 the Maryland shad harvest fell to a record low of 25,000 pounds leading to a moratorium on shad fishing. Virginia, not to its credit, delayed banning shad fishing until after the 1993 spring harvest. The shad fishery remains closed. A century ago, the Chesapeake Bay was the greatest oyster-producing region in the world providing 20 million bushels of oysters annually. By the 1930's the average annual harvest was down to about 7 million bushels. Recent annual harvests have averaged under 200,000 bushels, less than 1 percent of the catch a hundred years earlier. Yet we still allow a commercial oyster harvest.

Omega Protein's largest processing plant is in Reedville, Virginia. Commercial fishing vessels from there using modern technology, air spotting, and massive purse nets, are threatening to choke off the vital schools of menhaden that we need for a healthy ecosystem. Maryland's U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin, in recently introduced federal legislation to protect the Chesapeake Bay, calls for a five year study of menhaden. While I applaud the intent of the legislation and Cardin's efforts to focus attention on the menhaden issue, I submit that more needs to be done. All of us concerned with our local rivers should let Senators Cardin and Barbara Mikulski and our local representatives know that we care about this issue. Collectively we can give our rivers and fish a voice. Simply put, one corporation should not have the right to destroy this vital species in our waters for the sake of making pet food, salad dressing, and lipstick, all of which can be manufactured from other sources. (Information on how to contact our political leaders can be found on our website at [www.crebconservancy.org](http://www.crebconservancy.org).)

As Paul Greenberg expressed, "President Obama and the Congressional leadership have repeatedly stressed their commitment to wresting the wealth of the nation from the hands of a few. A demonstration of this commitment would be to ban the fishing of menhaden in federal waters. The Virginia Legislature could enact a similar moratorium in the Chesapeake Bay (the largest menhaden nursery in the world.) The menhaden is a small fish that in its multitudes plays such a big role in our economy and environment that its fate shouldn't be effectively controlled by a single company and its bottles of fish oil supplements. If our government is serious about standing up for the little guy, it should start by giving a little, but crucial, fish a fair deal."

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