

Fish species declining at Norwalk Harbor

NORWALK

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The number of bottom-dwelling fish species and amount of newly hatched flounder in the harbor has declined drastically over a period of two years, but experts can't pinpoint why.

"There are many areas in the harbor where we catch nothing," said Dick Harris, director of Harbor Watch/River Watch, a program out of Earthplace in Westport.

Harris collects data in Norwalk Harbor throughout the year. Volunteers from Wilton High School's Marine Biology Club join Harris to survey the harbor from mid-May to October. The team records the number of bottom-dwelling fish species living in the harbor, and it also surveys the amount of newly hatched flounder in the harbor.

The crew uses a metal cage that holds a fine-mesh net and is skimmed just off the bottom to capture sea life. Using a GPS and depth finder, they drag the cage through 300-square meter grid boxes. The netted life forms are then dumped into an examination box on the side of the boat and catalogued.

The Marine Biology Club and Harris counted 13 different species of fish living in Norwalk Harbor in 2008. Harris said the number sunk to three species in 2009 -- pipefish, winter flounder and sea robin fish. So far this year, those three commonly caught bottom fish have held steady.

Sue Steadham, a Wilton High School science teacher who advises for the school's Marine Biology Club, said her team caught nine different species of fish in Norwalk Harbor last year.

However, in order for Harris to include a species of fish in his final count, the team must catch the fish more than once.

The team caught a starfish on one occasion last year, but they never caught another one, Harris said. The fish was not counted in Harris' list of species that actively inhabit the harbor.

In recent years, Harris and the Marine Biology Club also noticed a decline in the amount of flounder they caught. Steadham said the team caught 256 flounder in 2005, and that number dipped to 15 in 2008. Though the number of flounder caught by the crew rose to 46 in 2009, it is still a far cry from the amount of flounder they caught during the 1990s, Steadham said.

"In the early '90s, it was common to get 300 flounder in one season," she said. "It's an amazing difference."

Despite the decline in the number of newly hatched flounder, Harris said the flounder caught by the crew have been healthy. He noted that a massive fishkill did not take place last summer, as it had in previous summers.

Joe Schneirlein, manager of professional development for the Maritime Center, said crews from the Maritime Center have caught a diverse array of fish in recent years, but he noted that a declining amount of fish are choosing Norwalk Harbor as a place to spawn eggs.

Harris, Steadham and Schneirlein agreed that many different factors affect the amount of flounder that hatch in the spring.

"Unless you have evidence, you can't put your finger on any one factor and say 'This is the cause,'" Schneirlein said.

Schneirlein said flounder search for a bottom that has "a lot of nooks and crannies" when scouting out a place to spawn their eggs. He said that shellfishers used to scatter old shells in the harbor to provide the fish with a place to spawn their eggs. In the past 10 or 15 years, that practice has waned, Schneirlein said.

Harris agreed that poor bottom conditions are contributing to the problem. He said metals and old sludge that were deposited in the river decades ago still affect the fish population.

The waste contaminants were placed in a hole at the bottom of the harbor during dredging of the harbor that took place in 2009, Harris said.

"Nevertheless, it's a step forward because at least they took the accumulating bottom stuff and scraped it," he said.

Michael Griffin, harbor master for Norwalk, said the dredging took place in areas that were already devoid of marine life, and it did not have an impact on any species.

Harris, who has also been studying the water quality in the Norwalk River for the past 12 years, believes that declining oxygen levels in the harbor also add to the problem. According to Harris, these levels decline when contaminants from pesticides and storm drains leak into the water.

Staff writer Tom Evans contributed to this story.