

Deep commitment

By Lauren Klein, Staff Writer

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Brendan Boepple, 17, left, and Steve Krivoshik, 17, haul a drag net last Wednesday over the side of a converted oyster boat used by HarborWatch/RiverWatch, a monitoring effort of local estuaries and watersheds in lower Fairfield County.
(Chris Prevolos/Staff photo)

NORWALK -- Amid high school crew practices and oyster boats returning from work, a team of novice and experienced environmental scientists on an oyster-boat-turned-science-lab roamed the waters about a mile off Norwalk Harbor last Wednesday afternoon.

They hauled up a shrimp, two types of flounder fish, several crabs and a lot of what they called black mayonnaise -- smelly saltwater mud.

"It certainly isn't wonderful, but we got a lot of variety," Dick Harris said of what he and his crew of three Wilton High School students found. "In the good old days, we would bring the kids out here and they would go crazy. There were lobsters, and sea horses, crabs -- all sorts of things."

The increase in the saltwater mud is a result of silt deposit and dredging, and is one of many signs of water health that Harris tracks as director of HarborWatch/RiverWatch, a monitoring effort of local estuaries and watersheds in lower Fairfield County. It is based at Earthplace in Westport.

The "good old days" were in 1991, when Harris started bringing groups of high school students from Fairfield County schools on weekly trawling trips for fish and other sea creatures in Norwalk River and harbor.

The students have helped him collect data every year since, except for a hiatus from 1994 to 2002, when they needed to raise money for boat renovations and worked on another data collection project outside the mouth of Norwalk Harbor.

Harris and his volunteers have been a valuable source of information for the state Department of Environmental Protection, but their data collection also affects local industries reliant on the waterways, and recreational fisherman and residents who enjoy the water.

Tracking speed, depth and GPS coordinates, the three Wilton High seniors last Wednesday - Steve Krivoshik, Matt Ross and Brendan Boepple -- systematically noted the animals they caught at designated points along Norwalk Harbor.

The more fish and diverse animals they find the better the water is doing, Harris said.

"We are looking for noncommercial fish that don't do anything for man but show him he has got a balanced environment," he said.

The totals from each day are sent to Penny Howell in the fisheries division at the DEP who, after years of data collection, can analyze the changes.

Harris, 67, has "hung in there with a lot of different volunteers and generated some useful numbers," said Howell, senior fisheries biologist. "It is hard to do what he has done over a long period of time. And it is the long period of time that makes it most useful."

The fish count naturally dips and spikes between the years, but despite the creatures found on the recent trawling trip, 2006 is showing signs of a drastically low dip from previous years, Harris said.

Last year, Harris' team collected 14 species and 442 fish. So far this fall, they have collected only seven species and 60 fish, Harris said.

"We're not seeing all our friends," he said.

The numbers of fish in Norwalk waters were low to start, Howell said.

"This stock can't afford any more bad numbers," she said. "It's had too many bad numbers, so something is seriously wrong."

Howell's next step is to search for the cause of the sustained dips, which would take years of data collection. Her department is looking at links from the rising number of predators such as cormorants, diving birds that eat small fish, to man-made causes such as pesticide use.

Another indicator of unbalanced ecology in Norwalk Harbor was the thousands of mud snails Harris and his crew picked up last week. The tiny snails feed off organic material such as decomposed leaves that residents rake from their yard and throw in the water, Harris said.

But the trend is not all downhill. Some years have been worse, such as 2002, when volunteers picked up one fish the entire year. The modernization of the Norwalk sewage plant in the mid- and late-1990s also helped improve the harbor's water, Harris said.

Harris, as the only volunteer boat trawling the waters of Connecticut, has found support from the state but also from local industries, such as Norm Bloom & Son, Oysters and Clams, which understand that their businesses depend on the water's good health.

Using a team of volunteers from eight high schools, Harris' trawling expeditions also help build a contingent of environmentally minded citizens who can protect the water for years.

Jim Hunter, a freshman biology and advanced placement environmental science teacher at Wilton High School, began trawling with Harris 19 years ago as a student at Staples High School in Westport. He went on to study environmental science in college and, as a teacher, has found students for the trawling tours each year.

Hunter has 13 students rotating on the trips this year from his A.P. Environmental Science class, but said his students are getting a different experience than he did. He remembers picking up 12 or 15 fish in a net. His students are more likely to see one fish per net, and maybe a couple of crabs.

"I can only teach these kids in the classroom," Hunter said. "If they go home and talk to their friends and family about what they see on the water, they can take that knowledge to the next level."

One of Hunter's students, 17-year-old Brendan, a senior who was on his second trawl trip last Wednesday, said the maintenance work is a hometown issue that residents like him can tackle.

Harris, a retired district manager for Shell Oil turned self-taught marine biologist, felt the same way when he reached out to Howell in 1991 to see how he could help the DEP.

"I felt that the ecology was being stressed down here," Harris said. "The water doesn't have the same sparkle, and I wanted to do what I could do."

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