

## **A fragile Sound is examined weekly by dedicated team**

By TOM EVANS- Hour Staff Writer

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Hour Photo/Erik Trautmann

**Harbor Watch / River Watch associate director peter Fraboni, volunteer Besty Carlucci, director Dick Allen , intern Josh Cooper and Coastal Water Technician Eric Sroka bring in the trap to examine fish species in an effort to gauge water quality in the Norwalk River and Harbor Friday.**

Development along the Norwalk and Saugatuck rivers just before reaching Long Island Sound has altered the condition of those estuarial waters, and one local expert knows why.

Dick Harris, director of Harbor Watch/River Watch, a program out of Earthplace in Westport, said the desire for waterfront property has drastically changed those waters, and the creatures in them.

"What's happened is the marshes have been taken out on both sides of the rivers, all the way up," Harris said. "That loss of marshland creates a weak current coming out into the Sound. It's a mistake developing those areas, when you lose the buffer of the marsh."

With those concerns in mind, Harris takes two or three trips a week with his crew up and down those rivers and around Norwalk Harbor, measuring oxygen levels and recording the numbers of fish.

The crew -- also on board "Annie" on Friday were HW/RW assistant director Pete Fraboni, HW/RW coastal studies technician Eric Sroka, volunteer Betsy Carlucci and intern Josh Cooper - - uses a metal cage that holds a fine-mesh net and is skimmed just off the bottom to capture a glimpse of the sea life.

"We try to be as scientific as possible," Harris said. "We use GPS and a depth finder. Just dragging the cage along the bottom doesn't show us what we want to see."



Hour Photo/Erik Trautmann

**Dick Harris, Director of the Harbor Watch/River Watch program, navigates the Annie into the Norwalk River to count fish species in an effort to gauge water and Habitat quality.**

Harris and his crew visit pre-marked grid "boxes," 300 meters square, and drag the cage through that area. The netted life forms are then dumped into an examination box on the side of the boat, and catalogued.

"The (state Department of Environmental Protection) set up the boxes," Harris said. "We've been hitting them hard. When we troll, the cage stays in the water for three minutes. We're looking for what hatched this year."

Another team, Gerry and Karen Laroque, go out on weekdays to measure oxygen levels and record that data. Any readings below three parts per million of oxygen means fish won't be there, Harris said.

"If we find fish in say, box B, we know the oxygen levels are not below three (parts per million), or fish wouldn't be there," Harris said.

Three boxes were trolled Friday, with some unusual findings, according to Harris. Two winter flounder up to two years old were brought up, along with a winter flounder born this year, and a pipe fish.

The pure numbers don't necessarily concern Harris. Since June 23, when 23 fish were pulled up, the daily haul has reached double figures just twice in 15 trips. It's what's being brought up, or rather, what's not being caught, that worries Harris.

"With three more flounder we're up to 118 fish for the year, and that's been reasonably good," Harris said. "But there's not enough species. We haven't had a fish kill, and it's too late in the year for that now."

A fish kill is a situation where too many fish try to inhabit an area where oxygen levels are barely enough to handle a small number of fish.

"Last year, from Wall Street to the I-95 bridge, we lost about 10,000 fish," Harris said. "In the summer of 2005 we lost two million. The area above the Maritime Aquarium used to be a prime fishing area, with people catching up to 50 fish a day. That spot has never come back."

One of the biggest mysteries this year is the stark absence of bunkers, the bait fish that attract bluefish and striped bass into the harbor and beyond.

"No one has seen any bunkers," Harris said. "Now there's no incentive for blues and stripers to come in the harbor and feed. Those fishing coming in help the water quality."

Harris said his expeditions are the "only survey of this kind going on" in Connecticut, and he shares the data with state agencies.