

NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office Partners with Maryland Department of Natural Resources in Study of Derelict Fishing Gear



The NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office Derelict Fishing Gear Program is working with several state and academic partners, including the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, to quantify the number of derelict crab traps in the Chesapeake Bay and to determine whether these traps adversely affect blue crab and other resources.

The Chesapeake Bay blue crab fishery uses traps as the primary method of harvest. Conservative estimates suggest that more than 250,000 commercial crab traps are deployed in the Bay on a typical

day during the summer months. Information from the Chesapeake Bay and around the United States suggests that every year, each commercial fisherman may lose as many as 30% of their traps for a variety of reasons. Crab traps become “ghost traps” after their float line is severed by vessel propellers, chafed due to wave action, or affected by strong currents.

How Are Bay Partners Addressing This Issue?

In 2006, the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) and Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MD DNR) collaborated on the design of a survey to provide a precise estimate of the number of ghost pots in Maryland waters. This survey was implemented by NCBO in 2007 and provided an estimate of 42,000 derelict pots submerged in Maryland waters.

NCBO is also completing studies that assess potential impacts of these derelict traps on blue crabs and other species. In 2006 and 2007, baited experimental traps were deployed to simulate “ghost fishing” in several locations in the Maryland portion of the Chesapeake Bay. Non-fishing traps were also deployed at each location to monitor the rates of trap fouling and degradation. The results of these studies will be available in late 2008.

What Can You Do to Help?

NCBO examined the feasibility of recovering derelict pots using multiple methods during 2006 and 2007. In the spring of 2008, NCBO will conduct a limited pilot study on gear retrieval with interested stakeholder groups. In addition, NCBO and its partners are evaluating possibilities for a recycling program for recovered gear, and are exploring the practicality of incorporating biodegradable components into trap design and construction. These efforts will benefit immeasurably from the participation of Bay stakeholders—particularly watermen.



The Derelict Fishing Gear Program uses sonar equipment to map the locations of derelict crab pots (seen as yellow boxes, below).



Science enables protection and restoration of the Chesapeake Bay's living resources.

Gear Retrieval: What Are the Facts?

Removal efforts by the general public should be approached with caution for the following reasons:

1. The best approach for retrieval is yet to be determined. Results of the NCBO feasibility studies will be made public in late 2008.
2. It is not yet known if the impacts caused by derelict gear are greater than the potential ecological damage that could be caused by various removal methods, such as dragging.
3. How to dispose of recovered gear and who "owns" recovered gear remain unclear.
4. Current rules in Maryland may create legal barriers for removal of abandoned pots by private citizens or community associations.
5. There are several health risks associated with handling sharp metal objects that are encrusted with marine fouling organisms, such as derelict fishing gear.
6. Any retrieval program should be developed in a way to avoid conflict with the efforts of actively working watermen. For example, if retrieval is determined to be the best course of action for mitigating impacts of ghost pots, MD DNR will establish time periods outside of commercial crabbing season for gear retrieval.



If I Come Across a Derelict Pot, What Should I Do?

1. Record the date and location where you found the pot or pots.
2. To the best of your ability, note what kind of animals are in the pot, how many there are of each, and their condition (dead or alive and any obvious injuries).
3. If possible, take some photographs.
4. Send this information to Steve Giordano: 410-267-5647 or Steve.Giordano@noaa.gov.
5. For information on disposal of recovered pots, contact Steve Giordano.

If you would like more information about the ongoing derelict pot study or the pilot removal study, please contact Steve Giordano, NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office, 410-267-5647 or Steve.Giordano@noaa.gov.

If you would like more information on retrieving pots, please contact Brenda Davis, Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 410-643-4601, ext. 112, or bkdavis@dnr.state.md.us.



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