

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES NEED TO CONSIDER ALL USERS

Fish populations are ecologically and economically important to the Coastal Bays. Harvests of fish and shellfish must be balanced between recreational and commercial users, while maintaining populations that support ecosystem needs (food source for other fish and bird species, filtering the bay, shoreline protection, habitat). Fishery management plans have been developed for blue crabs and hard clams that balance the needs of multiple users. The northern bays have significantly higher densities of finfish than the southern bays. Temporal changes in abundance of many species are mostly the result of stock-wide recruitment processes in Atlantic coastal populations. Therefore, the harvest of many finfish species is managed on a coastwide basis.

Despite a ban on mechanical harvesting for shellfish in the Coastal Bays beginning in 2008, current hard clam densities in all of the bays remain lower than historical levels. Density trends in the northern bays have been improving, with the Isle of Wight Bay clam population approaching the 60-year

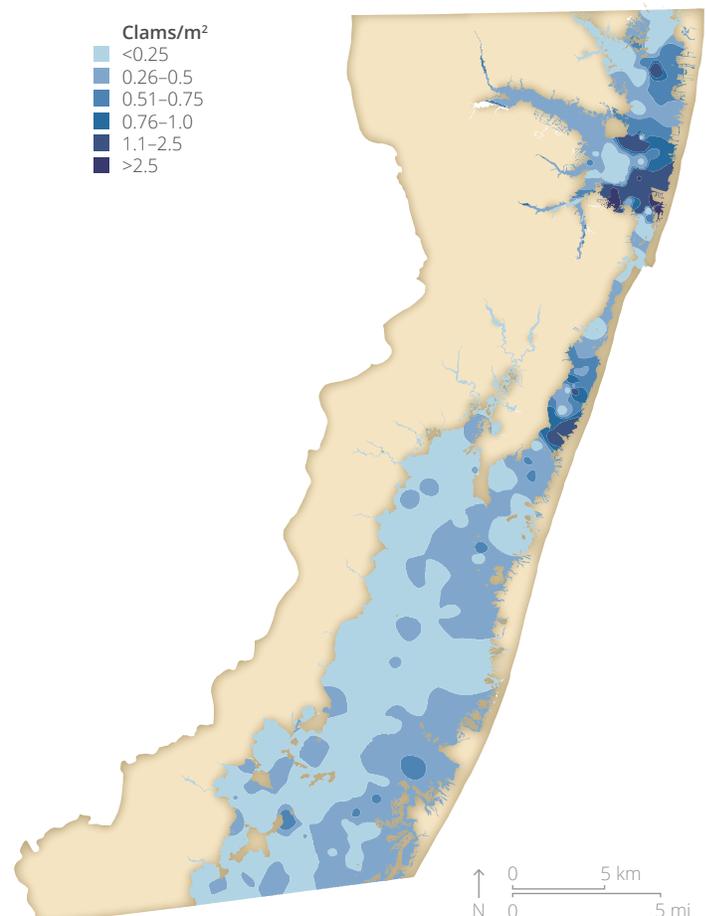
benchmark. Observed mortalities have been negligible throughout the bays. The Coastal Bays populations are dominated by older, larger clams, with recruitment generally low and sporadic in the lower bays. Parts of Sinepuxent, Isle of Wight, and Assawoman Bays experienced a strong recruitment period during the late 2000s which accounted for the boost in clam densities, but has tailed off since then. Poor recruitment may be a factor of the small and patchy clam population. Shellfish aquaculture is beginning to expand in the State and may help boost wild populations in some areas. Recreational clamming has long been popular in the Coastal Bays.

Extremely low densities of bay scallops over the past four years, diminishing habitat, and declining water quality suggest that the long-term viability of the bay scallop population is in question.



Shellfish sampling in the Coastal Bays. Photo by Robert Bussell/MD DNR.

2013 HARD CLAM DENSITY



This map shows the density of hard clams in the Coastal Bays in 2013.