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Clamming life comes to an end on Maryland coast



By KRISTEN WYATT The Associated Press - Published: June 8, 2008

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ASSAWOMAN BAY, Md. — The sun is just barely up and Gary Tull already has his dredger in the shallow bay between Ocean City and the mainland, a few plastic mesh bags full of the hard-shell clams he's caught all his life.

Tull clams like it's second nature. He drops the most valuable clams, little ones for steaming, through a slot into a bucket. He pops bigger clams into another bucket — without mixing them with less-valuable razor clams or the mud and crabs that come up from the bottom of

the Assawoman Bay.

But Tull's decades on the water may be coming to a close as Maryland closes forever

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its power dredge clam fishery in the Atlantic coastal bays. The state legislature mandated the closing amid complaints from sportfishermen that dredging hurts fragile underwater grasses, though state fisheries biologists did not recommend the closing.

The law means that Tull will take his 30-year-old wooden boat home to Crisfield and give up watering, maybe forever.

"I'm 56. What am I going to do? I don't know," Tull said.

These are uncertain times for the handful of people who make a living dredging hard-shell clams out of the back bays. Soft-shell clam dredging in the Chesapeake Bay will still be allowed, but that practice is so hit-or-miss no waterman makes a living doing it. Hand-tonging for clams will also be allowed, but the days of making a living catching clams and oysters by hand are past. Tull and his fellow clambers say the Maryland clam industry dies forever when this year's season ends June 1.

While the plight of Maryland crabbers has grabbed the public's attention, with the female blue crab harvest cut by a third this year and calls from politicians and crabbers to subsidize crabbers hurt from the decrease, no one's talking about the clambers.

A bill to compensate the clambers for their dredge equipment failed in the General Assembly, and Tull and his colleagues have not been able to see Gov. Martin O'Malley to beg for state assistance.

The clambers say it's almost like no one cares.

"We got nothing," said Ryan Williams, of Crisfield, helping another clammer unload bags full of clams into the back of the truck after a day on the Assawoman. "This is all I've ever done — clam. We've had a lot of discussion about getting some kind of compensation, but they say their hands are tied."

Maryland's clam closure comes after years of complaints from recreational anglers. Opponents say clam dredges tear up valuable underwater habitat and make it hard for sportfishermen to catch striped bass, flounder and other fish that draw anglers to the Assawoman. That appears obvious up and down the shallow bay, where working boats are few but yachts and pristine six-figure fishing boats line the coast outside high-rise condominiums.

"The recreational fishery is much more important to the Ocean City area than the four or five guys who are clam dredging," said Robert Glenn, executive director of the Maryland chapter of the Coastal Conservation Association, which pushed for the ban.

Clam dredging is more disruptive to the bay floor than oyster dredging. That's because oysters live on the bay floor, but clams burrow a few inches down, requiring more mud

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to be scraped to retrieve them. Already about half the Maryland back bays and all coastal bays in Delaware and Virginia are off-limits to power dredging.

But scientists didn't call for the Maryland fishery to close. The state Department of Natural Resources, which regulates commercial fishing in state waters, did not argue for the clamming closure, and the practice is legal in federal waters.

The agency says the number of hard-shell clammers in Maryland has already dwindled to a handful, from a high of 22 clammers earlier this decade, because of economic factors.

But Tull and the other remaining clammers say they've had a good season. Clams are sold in bags of 100, going for \$14 or \$15 apiece at a seafood wholesaler. Tull hauls in 40 to 50 bags a day and grosses about \$80,000 a year, earning about \$40,000 after expenses.

When the clam fishery closes, Tull isn't sure what he'll do. Maybe he'll join a tugboat crew, but that would keep him away from home for two weeks at a time.

He may try his hand at baking. Tull grew up on Smith Island, Maryland's only populated island accessible by boat, and though he lives on the mainland now, he and his wife sell Smith Island cakes. Those are multilayered confections made of up to a dozen thin layers, and they've garnered international interest after being named Maryland's official dessert earlier this year.

"We'll see how the bakery goes — maybe I can do this instead," said Tull.

Other clammers won't be baking for a living, but they don't know what the future holds.

"Here I am, 62 years old. We're all the same age. We're past the age where we can be retrained," William Ryan said with a shrug.

"I'll take the boat home and try to scrape up enough money soft-shelling. ... Otherwise, I'll probably sell the rig, sell the boat, give up," Ryan said.

The clammers have discussed hiring a lawyer to sue Maryland officials over the closure, seeking compensation. But after a recent day on the water, clammers said they weren't ready yet to contemplate life after clamming.

"What am I going to do? That's a good question. I hope the cakes work. We'll see," Tull said. "Not being out here? I can't imagine."

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