

Watermen seeking 'ghosts' of the bay

State program targets abandoned crab pots that pose a danger to a declining industry.

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March 16, 2009



James Green Jr. hauls aboard an abandoned crab pot after pulling it from the Chesapeake Bay near Gloucester Point. It is one of approximately 6,500 crab pots removed by Virginia watermen this winter. (Cory Nealon, Daily Press / March 10, 2009)

GLOUCESTER - Richard Green spent the winter on the Chesapeake Bay searching for what scientists say could be among the most prolific killers of blue crab.

It wasn't striped bass or eel, which feast on juvenile crabs. Instead, it was muck-covered steel baskets, better known as crab pots.

Scientists estimate that more than 100,000 crab pots are abandoned — most are accidentally cut lose by boat propellers — annually off the shores of Virginia.

The traps, also known as "ghost" or "derelict" crab pots, fall to the bottom of the bay, where they attract crab and fish for a year until the steel dissolves into salt water.

Previous studies indicate the ghost pots can trap up to 50 crabs, putting quite a dent into the \$200 million industry in Virginia. They also catch fish, such as Atlantic croaker, oyster toadfish and white perch.

Green, of [Gloucester](#), is one of 58 Virginian watermen to participate in a debris-cleanup program created last fall after state regulators — concerned about preserving the crab population — closed the winter crabbing season for the first time in 105 years.

The watermen were still out, earning \$300 a day plus fuel costs, removing the crab pots. This winter, the removal program recovered 6,436 crab pots and other debris as of March 6, the most current information available. The numbers are expected to go up, since the season lasted through Sunday.

Although in its embryonic stages, scientists hope the removal program will help boost the bay's crab population, which dropped to 120 million last year, prompting a federal disaster declaration.

"It's a practical application of science," said Kirk Havens, an oceanographer at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science in Gloucester Point.

The cleanup program was created by the [Virginia Marine Resources Commission](#), which utilized part of \$10 million that Congress last fall awarded to the state's struggling watermen.

The money was made available, in part, because scientists hope to eventually restore the crab population to 200 million. VMRC predicts the program will cost \$1.5 million this year, plus another \$1 million in each of the next two years.

At 63, Green has fished the bay his entire life. Like many watermen, Green believes shutting down the winter season was a misguided overreaction by the state.

"I think we jumped the gun a little," he said as he spent a recent morning aboard his boat with his stepgrandson, James Green Jr., 19, searching for abandoned crab pots.

The teenager, using sonar the state bought and temporarily installed on the boat, spotted what would become the day's first catch. He pointed to a fingernail-sized white rectangle — an abandoned crab pot — on an otherwise bronze laptop computer screen.

He walked out to the deck, where he lowered a modified crab dredging rig into the water.

The first two passes yielded nothing.

They snagged the crab pot on the third attempt and quickly hauled it onboard. It was a tangled mess of steel, algae and barnacles.

James Green used wire cutters to pull the pot apart and free its marine life, which included a few toadfish and an oyster.

The lack of crabs didn't surprise Richard Green. Most of the 350 or so pots he caught were without crab, which burrows itself into the bay floor during the winter.

"In the wintertime, there's few crabs," he said. "The only time they stay in the pot is when it's very new."

Richard Green doesn't dispute that the Chesapeake Bay is littered with the ghost pots, but he does question that watermen lose 100,000 of them each year.

"They cost \$30 a pot," he said. "We'd all be out of work."

While grateful for the pay from the pot removal program, he also thinks resources could be better directed toward more pollution prevention in the bay.

Scientists admit results from the removal program are not certain.

Take, for example, [Louisiana](#). State employees have removed 17,184 abandoned crab pots from the Gulf of Mexico since 2004.

Vincent Guillory, a biologist with the Louisiana Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, said he has yet to determine the effect, if any, the effort has had on the fishery.

"We can't measure it," he said. "There's too many other factors," including pollution and storms that move through the gulf.

The same situation could occur in the bay, said Holly Bamford, an oceanographer and director of marine debris program at the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#).

"Right now, we're driving blind," she said.

Regardless of what scientists discover, watermen like Richard Green say the work must be done.

"We need to clean up the bay," he said.