

The future of razor clamming on Oregon’s North Coast

Shellfish biologist shares research data

By KATHERINE LACAZE
For Cannon Beach Gazette

While audience members gleaned a couple insider tips to aid the success of hunting for and cooking razor clams, the main takeaway from shellfish biologist Matt Hunter’s lecture at the Cannon Beach Library was how data from past research projects is used for management of the species in Clatsop County.

Hunter, who has worked more than 25 years for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, presented on “Oregon’s Razor Clam Resource: Past, Current, and Future” as part of the World of Haystack Rock lecture series, a joint effort between the library, Friends of Haystack Rock and Seaside Aquarium.

Hunter shared details about the razor clam species, their growth and movement,



Katherine Lacaze/For Cannon Beach Gazette
Matt Hunter, a shellfish biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in Astoria, gives a presentation “Oregon’s Razor Clam Resource: Past, Current and Future” at the Cannon Beach Library.

preferred habitat, and spawning habits. The population on Clatsop beaches has been “very consistent,” Hunter said.

The commercial fishery of razor clams dates back to the 1800s and used to account for a high percentage of the total catch. Once infrastructure changed around the Columbia River and development increased, people had more accessibility to the clams,

causing a significant shift in the primary purpose for harvesting.

Currently, commercial activity accounts for approximately 15 percent of the total razor clam harvest — the rest is recreational.

“It’s become very economically and culturally important along the entire Pacific Northwest, from Alaska all the way down to northern California,” Hunter

said. “People come to the beach a lot of times to go razor clamming.”

Research and adaptive management

Since 2001, Hunter has been involved in a number of multiyear, data-rich studies of razor clams to research maturation timeframes, body mass indices, biotoxin accumulation, discard assessment, and abundance assessment. He presented data collected during these studies and also how it has been used for proactive management purposes, of which the current season is a good example.

The razor clam season generally runs from Oct. 1 through July 15. When the department was doing stock assessment this year, however, they discovered the clams on Clatsop beaches were particularly small, or an average of 2.66 inches — well below the 3¼-inch minimum size allowed for commercial harvest. Only three of 240 clams they assessed were the legal size.

“We knew we had a problem, just looking at this

data,” Hunter said. “Rather than opening up (the season) and having a lot of issues with small clams not being retained, we went through some emergency rules and regulations to close it down.”

The department delayed the season for a month, which allowed time to get the public involved. At an October meeting in Seaside, they presented data from studies, as well as models that showed if harvesters kept the first 15 clams they caught — as they are supposed to — those clams would likely be only 2 to 3 inches. The goal, Hunter said, was “doing our due diligence and being transparent.”

During the meeting and through other means, such as phone calls and emails, they solicited public feedback regarding the season.

“After people saw the data, 86 percent of them thought the season should be delayed at least until March 1,” Hunter said.

The department also found most commenters supported adaptive management and allowing rules to be altered to reflect the factors presented in

a particular year or season.

With the season currently closed until March 1, the department is monitoring the clams’ average growth, which has been about .25 mm per week.

“The clams aren’t going to be very big unless something miraculous happens, so more to come, for sure,” Hunter said.

Looking ahead

Hunter has his eye on several future studies and projects. These include alleviating user group/social conflicts over harvesting; the sustainable use of the resource and wastage issues; and how microplastics, climate change and ocean acidification will impact the population.

The World of Haystack Rock series presents a slate of knowledgeable speakers who present at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month through May at the library. On Feb. 13, Joshua Saranpaa will discuss “Lifecycle and Rehabilitation of the Common Murre.”

Events are free and open to the public.

Fisherpoets: An artistic tradition derived from the heritage of coastal region

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Cannon Beach resident Jon Broderick, co-founder and organizer of the FisherPoets Gathering, and Jay Speakman, of Gearhart, kicked off “An Evening With Fisherpoets.” Their duo performance featured not only spoken delivery of their poetry, but also both men providing musical accompaniment, Broderick on guitar and Speakman on harmonica. The soulful presentation augmented the emotion buried in tales of missing loved ones while at sea and undergoing a harrowing experience while winter shrimping in Maine, among others.

Speakman and Broderick were followed by Rob Seitz,

who described his fisherpoetry as “so realistic it’s been known to cause a sea-sickness-like feeling among those who are listening.” True to his word, the Astoria-based commercial fisherman’s tongue-in-cheek delivery perfectly suited the experiences he captured, such as the challenge of relieving oneself into a 5-gallon bucket while on the water and dealing with younger deckhands by either yelling “or telling them how good you were when you were their age.”

Geno Leech, of Chinook, Washington, also imbued his poems with a sense of humor. Many of his lyrics spoke of unique individuals he has met and important relationships he has built through while work-

ing in the Pacific Northwest and the Great Lakes area.

To wrap up the evening, boisterous Dave Densmore, of Astoria, took the audience on a journey into the past through several “pretty true” historical poems about the settlement of Astoria and early exploration of the Lower Columbia River basin. Although told in first-person, Densmore stepped into the shoes of the crew members aboard the Tonquin to tap into the experiences of crossing the Columbia Bar, surviving on the “windswept western coast,” and the sensation of being unable to get warm and dry because of the perpetual coastal rain.

“An Evening With Fisherpoets” is an example of

how the library is working to expand the scope of the Northwest Author Series, which traditionally has centered on Saturday afternoon events where authors conduct readings and book-signings.

“We love providing a venue for authors to share their work,” Bernt said.

While continuing author presentations, the library is hoping to add more events, especially in the evenings when the whole library can be utilized. Bernt said critics were unsure how a poetry event would fare. As the evening came to a close, however, she noted, the reaction the poets received from the audience demonstrated “the love of poetry is alive and well.”



Katherine Lacaze
Fisherpoet Rob Seitz during the Northwest Author Series event.

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