



The Center for Conservation Biology

W i l l i a m & M a r y

20 August 2020

P.O. Box 8795
Williamsburg, VA
23187-8795

Phone
(757) 221-1645

Fax
(757) 221-1650

E-mail
info@cbbirds.org

Dr. Bryan D. Watts
Director
(757) 221-2247

Dr. Mitchell A. Byrd
Director Emeritus
(757) 221-2236

www.cbbirds.org

The Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor, State of Virginia
PO Box 1475
Richmond, VA 23218

Dear Governor Northam,

The menhaden is a keystone fish within the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem. Many of our most iconic species including the bald eagle, osprey, great blue heron and brown pelican depend on menhaden stocks to sustain their breeding populations within the Bay. Other species such as common loons and northern gannets that stage within the Chesapeake also depend on menhaden to fuel their migrations. Approximately 30% of the North Atlantic gannet population comes into the Bay during the spring to feed on menhaden before flying north to breeding grounds in Newfoundland.

Deep withdraws of menhaden stocks for the reduction fishery is having an impact on consumer species. We have conducted fieldwork with osprey throughout the lower Chesapeake Bay for 50 years and data demonstrate ongoing impacts. Through three generations of graduate students (1975-2006) we have observed shifts in diet and an associated reduction in productivity. Fish delivery rates were more than three times higher in 1975 compared to 2006. Menhaden, once the dominant fish in the diet now represents less than 30%. Shifts in diet away from menhaden have been coincident with a 90% reduction in menhaden stocks (Maryland, DNR haul surveys). No other fish species available to consumers provides the energy content of menhaden. Reductions in menhaden stocks have caused osprey productivity to decline to below DDT-era rates. These rates are insufficient to support the osprey population within the main stem of the Bay.

Menhaden provide critical ecosystem services within the Chesapeake Bay. We request that the needs of the broader ecosystem be considered when setting harvest policy and that menhaden stocks be maintained at levels that support a healthy Chesapeake Bay ecosystem.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bryan Watts".

Bryan D. Watts, Ph.D.
Mitchell A. Byrd Professor of Conservation Biology
Director, Center for Conservation Biology
College of William and Mary