

Squid trawlers leave a wake of death south of Martha's Vineyard

Trawlers from across the Eastern Seaboard leave behind miles of dead and dying by-catch in one of New England's richest squid-breeding grounds.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - September 7, 2016

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Payback leaves Edgartown Harbor at sunrise. - Sam Moore

Commercial fisherman Donny Benefit piloted his 36-foot boat Payback out of Edgartown Harbor as the sun came up on one of the last days of August. Once clear of the harbor, he opened the throttle on the diesel engine, turned up the country music, and fired up a Marlboro Light — the picture of contentment.

From April until the end of November, Mr. Benefit sets out on the Payback to haul in his conch pots. He's a third-generation Islander; his grandfather came to the Island via Fall River, after stepping off a whaling boat from the Azores. Mr. Benefit has fished for a living since he graduated from Martha's Vineyard Regional High School in 1976, and he's one of the few Islanders who still make a living at it today.

In August he takes a self-imposed sabbatical from conch fishing, "so they can have their babies," he said.

During that time, he likes to fish, and he likes to take people fishing. He often takes his 13-year-old daughter Mikela, who won her class in the annual Bass and Bluefish Derby a few years ago with a false albacore.

This day he was taking Ann Frederick and her daughter Charlotte Bloom, from New Paltz, N.Y., who came to the Vineyard with a singular goal — to fish as much as possible.

"We started talking to Donny at Coop's one day," Ms. Frederick said. "He was this funny, outgoing guy, and when he saw how much we like to fish, he just offered to take us out on his boat."

"It's a good day to make some memories," Mr. Benefit said to his guests as he set up the tackle.

Today would be their second trip with Mr. Benefit. Their first trip, a few days earlier, was marred by the memory of hundreds of dead and dying sea bass, left in the wake of a squid trawler. The fish were too big to escape the 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ -inch diamond-mesh squid nets, and since the nets were outfitted with a "strengthened" net, hundreds, perhaps thousands of pounds of the savory fish were caught, Mr. Benefit estimated.

Commercial fishermen operate within a complex maze of regulations that include open and closed fishing days, set quotas, and specialized permits. By-catch — in which fish not the intended targets are caught — is also strictly limited. The bass were most likely thrown back due to regulations set by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council that, paradoxically, are intended to protect fish stocks, according to Dan McKiernan, deputy director of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

The boat might have already caught its sea bass allocation for the day. The boat might not have been permitted to catch sea bass.

“When I think of all those dead sea bass, I get shaking I get so mad,” Mr. Benefit said. “They should at least be allowed to sell them. It’s just a total waste of life.”

“We also saw them shoveling fluke off the deck,” Ms. Frederick said. “We couldn’t believe how many.”

“You don’t know how much fluke they throw back, because fluke don’t have an air bladder, they sink right away,” Mr. Benefit said. “When you haul up sea bass from 60 feet, their swim bladders rupture, and then they can’t go underwater. A lot of them get crushed when they haul in the net.”

Mr. Benefit has fished commercially for 40 years. He remembers swordfishing with a harpoon with Skip Mayhew. He remembers when cod were plentiful. He’s fished for pretty much everything that can be fished for out of Martha’s Vineyard, and he’s seen every one of those species decline.

He said he had a revelatory day last summer. “August 12, I’ll never forget it,” he said. “At first it looked like a white carpet on the water. It turned out to be a carpet of dead striped bass; it went for a mile and a half. And they say they don’t catch them.”

Mr. Benefit said a big part of the problem is that squid boats are allowed to use the squid net as a liner to a four- or five-inch mesh net, also called a strengthener, which squeezes the squid-net mesh tighter, and also allows the net to haul up much more. “It’s like putting a nylon sock in a net,” he said. “Nothing gets out.”

Equally concerning is the pressure these trawlers are putting on the squid population. According to Lisa Hendrickson, research fisheries biologist at the NOAA Northeast Fisheries Science Center, Nantucket Sound, Vineyard Sound, Buzzards Bay, and the areas south of Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket (in waters as deep as 50 meters) serve as one of the most important longfin squid-spawning habitats in New England.

As the morning went on, Mr. Benefit made good on his promise to get mother and daughter into some fish. An hour of trolling yielded several beefy bluefish. Ms. Frederick also hooked into a mighty 10-pound-plus bonito, “a Derby winner,” in Mr. Benefit’s estimation. It escaped just before he could gaff it, a moment he would replay several times over the course of the morning.

While Mr. Benefit had succeeded in getting his guests into fish, so far, his own quarry — a squid trawler — had eluded him. This morning he was on a mission to get photographic evidence of the carnage they leave behind, so he could show the public, and officials from the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the regulatory body for waters beyond the three-mile state limit, the severity of the by-catch problem.

A little after 10 am, Mr. Benefit saw a tiny speck on the horizon that he somehow could tell was a squid trawler. He put the Payback into high gear. “Look for the puff of black smoke,” he said. “That means they’re hauling in their nets.”

Well before Payback was close enough for us to see that the lettering on 70-foot trawler read Shelby Ann, out of Point Judith, R.I., the water was strewn with dead and dying fish, mostly scup, between two and six



inches long. Some were already dead, others were close to it, their burst swim bladders leaving them swimming in circles at the surface, like they were trying to get a breath of air, when they were actually trying to do the opposite.

Hake, butterfish, and whiting, some as big as a foot, were also in the macabre flotilla.

Squid, some over a foot long, crushed from the weight of the catch, bobbed in the water like empty bottles.

Mr. Benefit checked his coordinates so he could measure the distance the carnage would cover.

"There's so much of it, even the seagulls are picky," he said, watching a pair of seagulls make a casual flyby.

"These guys got to make a living, I get that," he said. "But these [out-of-state] boats have to go out farther; three miles is not enough."

The state of Massachusetts controls the waters three miles from its shoreline. Only boats with coastal access permits can fish inshore waters. After three miles, large squid trawlers like the Shelby Ann are subject to federal regulations under which they can drop their nets, which can be as big as a football field, and drag for longfin squid, and in the process, haul in enormous amounts of fish that feed on the squid. It's hard to find a fish that doesn't like to eat squid. Even squid eat squid.

"They need to be further offshore, I'd say 12 miles. They can still get squid, but they won't be wiping out so many fish," he said. "This is next year's scup. Gone. This is just one boat, one drag; can you imagine what 15 or 16 of them can do?"

The number of squid boats working south of the Vineyard used to be in the low single digits. But with fishermen increasingly squeezed to make a profit, and with squid priced at an all-time high, a lot more boats are pounding the water south of South Beach. Mr. Benefit said he's counted as many as 28 boats trawling for squid.

After marking mile one, Mr. Benefit grabbed a net, and asked his fishing team to begin scooping up by-catch. Squid would be dinner or bait. Hake and whiting would end up in a cream sauce on mashed potatoes.

The haul quickly mounted. "You could make a living doing this," he said, picking a foot-long squid out of the net. "Look at him change colors, he's still alive."

By mile two, the dead and dying were too numerous to count, and showed no signs of abating. "It makes me sick to my stomach," Mr. Benefit said. "Ninety-five percent of these fish are babies."

Just before mile three, the Shelby Ann hauled in her net, and soon after, the by-catch got even thicker.

"They keep the biggest squid, which are the breeding females," he said. "Squid only live for a year. They're going to fish this place out."

At mile four, the dead and dying were still thick in the water. Mr. Benefit was satisfied he had enough documentation.

"I can't take much more of this," he said.

He pointed the Payback north, and headed for home.



