

Dead Fish In Bay Were Dumped

Officials Say Fish Appeared To Be Discarded

By ELISE R. HUGUS

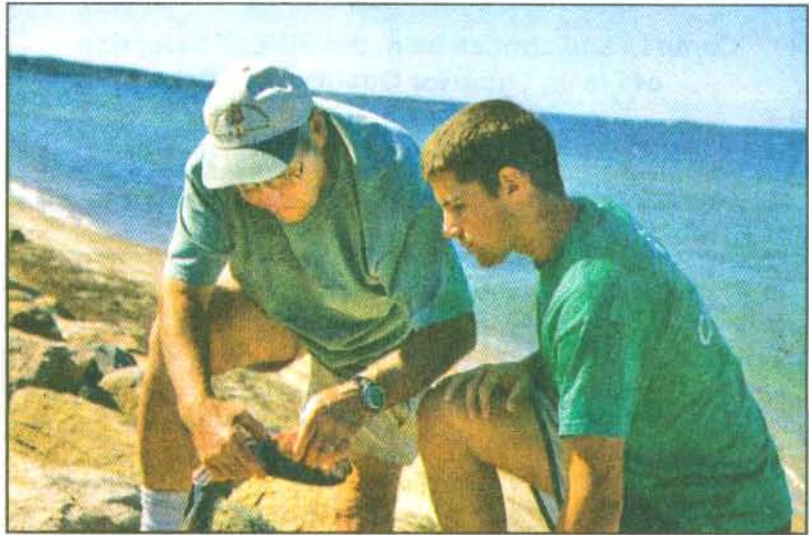
Hundreds of menhaden and bluefish that were found dead in Buzzards Bay last week were most likely dumped at sea, according to a Division of Marine Fisheries analysis.

After taking a look at four menhaden sent to DMF labs by the Woods Hole Group, scientist Neil Churchill determined that the fish had started to decompose before they hit the water, said DMF spokesman Kate Plourd.

"We don't want to speculate, but it does appear they were discarded in the water after they were dead," Ms. Plourd said.

The fish were discovered early Friday morning as George R. Hampson, Dennis B. Aubrey, and Jon Fincke, of the Woods Hole Group, were taking dissolved oxygen samples in Buzzards Bay. About two miles southwest of Cleveland Ledge, the group was stopped dead in its tracks by the smell of rotting fish.

"We saw one, then another, and then hit the mass. It was a horrible sight," said Mr. Aubrey, who estimated that up to 1,000 fish were floating on the surface



COURTESY DENNIS AUBREY

George Hampson (left) and Jon Fincke, who runs the Buzzards Bay sampling program for the Woods Hole Group, check out a tumor on a bluefish that washed up on Chapaquoit Beach in West Falmouth this week. The Woods Hole Group scientists discovered a massive fish kill in Buzzards Bay last week while taking dissolved oxygen samples in the middle of the Bay.

of the water. The group tracked the fish by the pool of fish oil that trailed behind them as other fish fed on the carcasses. About two-thirds of the fish were menhaden, he said, with many bluefish, and one Spanish mackerel observed, as well, Mr. Aubrey said.

Menhaden are not protected fish, but estimates have shown their populations in severe decline since the days when vessels

from Maine to Maryland lined up to catch the abundant species. Also known as "pogies" or "bunkers," the foot-long fish are harvested for their fatty tissue, which is used in a range of fish feed and omega-3 fatty acid supplements.

As the title of H. Bruce Franklin's 2007 book, "The Most Important Fish in the Sea," suggests,

Continued on Page 14

■ Continued from Page One

the bony, toothless fish play an important role in the marine ecosystem, filtering phytoplankton and algae from the water, and providing a favorite snack for predatory bluefish and striped bass.

The fact that other fish were mixed in with menhaden led Coalition for Buzzards Bay President Mark P. Rasmussen to dismiss the possibility that a fisherman had dumped a bycatch last week. Menhaden are typically caught with purse seines, while bluefish are usually netted with trawlers, gill nets, pound nets, or haul seines.

The discovery originally led the coalition and the Woods Hole Group to believe that a low-oxygen fish kill had occurred, but the dissolved oxygen data collected by both groups did not support that theory.

When he learned of the DMF's diagnosis, Mr. Aubrey said that a large fish kill—or dumping—is "very unusual" in Buzzards Bay.

"We've never seen anything like this before," he said, adding that the Woods Hole Group is investigating other bizarre findings in the bay, such as two bluefish that have washed up on Chapaquoit Beach with tumors in the past month, and scup "behaving in weird ways."

"The whole reason we're involved in this is because George Hampson is saying there's something going on out there that we don't understand. Nobody is paying attention," Mr. Aubrey said. At the time of the fish kill discovery, the group was finishing its last dissolved oxygen readings in the deeper holes found in Buzzards Bay.

"Buzzards Bay averages about 30 to 40 feet, but 60-foot holes are the first to go anoxic," said Mr. Aubrey. While the oxygen levels, even at those depths, are not low enough to trigger a fish kill, Mr. Aubrey said that the area near a former dumping ground, and another off of Woods Hole, are "areas of concern."