



A fleet of skipjacks, used in the Chesapeake Bay for oyster dredging from November until April. The skipjack with its high, graceful bow is the last fleet of working sail in America, and is a symbol of the romance of the Bay.
Photo by Ralph Rinzler for the Smithsonian.

Region and Community: The Chesapeake Bay

Charles Camp

The Chesapeake Bay has long been appreciated as one of the Middle Atlantic's prizes of nature—an area both beautiful to the tourist's eye and bountiful to the waterman's nets. The Bay has served to define the geographical and historical identity of the region—a place from which the lines of culture have traditionally been drawn.

The Bay occupies a special place in the minds of Marylanders, who have come to define themselves, their foodways, and their ambivalence toward modern times in terms of the Bay and its people. The fluctuating price of crabmeat is not a simple indicator of nationwide economic trends; it is the expression of a complex

biological and economic system that is made all the more compelling by its many human participants. The waterman is the central figure in this order—the human link that both generates the system's complexity and makes it comprehensible. The watermen catch the wily crab, itself the subject of considerable folk wisdom, and all of modern science and economics cannot draw the crab unwillingly into the pot.

In the states that border the Bay, the waterman has achieved the status of a folk hero, an individual believed to possess an understanding of his world which surpasses that of his fellow-men, and powers of will and strength that enable him to perform heroic feats. Unlike most folk heroes, however, the waterman works alone in a world where silence prevails, and

the heroics—real and fictive—exist chiefly in the stories told outside work. These stories, of bad weather, good captains, and great catches, serve to define the way of life the watermen share, and maintain the line between insiders and outsiders which describes the folk group.

In part because the folklore of the watermen tends to focus upon the relationship between individuals and the natural world in which they work, outsiders are not accustomed to thinking of the people of the Chesapeake Bay region as members of tightly-knit communities. There are exceptions—the more isolated islands of the lower Eastern Shore, including Tilghman, Smith, and Deal, have long been considered places where older values, including a strong sense of community, continue to prevail. But

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with these exceptions, the Bay region and the lower Eastern Shore in particular are seldom viewed as a network of towns and hamlets which by their interdependence constitute a very special sort of economic and social community. Most of the towns that encircle the Bay at first appear to be simply places where people live and work. The towns seem more the products of expediency than planning or the thoughtful decision of families to settle together in one place.

Like many other aspects of the Bay, these initial impressions are misleading. The dependence that Bay area community members place upon each other is subtle, yet it dramatically shapes the way life is lived and the rewards of living it. Like the waterman, who requires the services of a shipwright, marine blacksmith, net gearer, mechanic, and fuel supplier to make his living, Bay towns are formed as much by mutual reliance as self-sufficiency. The economic chain that extends from the Chesapeake waters to the Middle Atlantic markets is dependent not only upon individual watermen, but also upon the Bay communities for the delivery of oysters, crabs, and clams to waiting consumers. Recent changes in this chain, and the increase of large-scale commercial fishing in the Bay have not altered the principles of independence and mutual support which, despite their superficial incompatibility, form the foundation of community life.

The Bay is changing, as all people and their communities change, but the identity of the region in the minds of those who live within its bounds remains strong. Like the crab that challenges the waterman to seek him in his home and on his terms, the Bay is a vital, yet ever elusive force, shaping those who live upon its fortunes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dozens of books and articles have been written about the Chesapeake Bay, its marine life, history, watercraft, and folklore. Among the works currently in print, the following provide the best introduction to the Bay and its culture.

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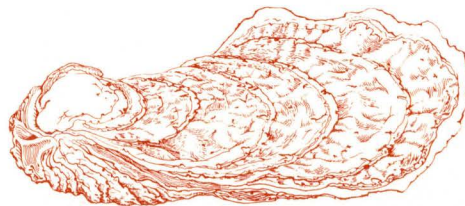


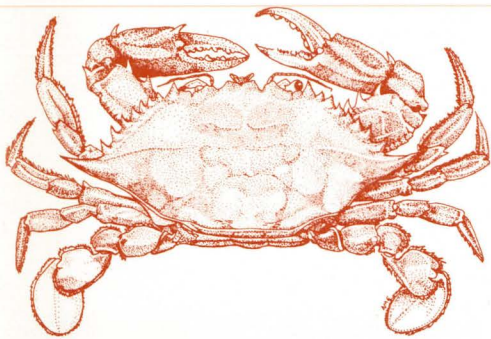
The life cycle of the Atlantic blue crab is punctuated by a series of moults, or shell shedding. Like fingernails, their shells consist of a substance called chitin which has no growth cells. The popular soft shell crab is not a separate species as is sometimes thought, but an Atlantic blue crab in a specific stage of moult. After shedding, if left in the water, a crab's new shell becomes a "paper shell" or slightly stiff in 12 hours, and crinkly hard in 24 hours. Seventy-two hours after shedding, the crab's new shell is as hard as his old one was.

Checking the crab floats is an every-day job for the waterman. He must get the soft crabs out before their shells turn hard. Floats are placed in creeks carefully chosen for their strong tidal flow and anchored crosswise to insure maximum circulation. The waterman must constantly watch and overhaul his floats, cull unhealthy specimens and check the progress of the crabs daily as they approach the moment of moult.

Henry Brown, sailmaker, carries on his family's three-generation tradition of making sails for skipjacks. He takes pride in doing the handwork that most newer sailmakers do by machine.

Photo by Janet Stratton for the Smithsonian.





An increasingly used modification of the crab float is a stationary extension of the crab shanty. Besides making it far more convenient for the watermen to work the floats, this arrangement insures constant water circulation by means of pumping tidal waters through the holding tanks.



Watermen in a crab shanty talk about the day's catch with Ben Evans (right), a Festival field worker, and Alex Kellam (left). Alex Kellam is a storyteller and retired waterman from Smith Island, whose conversations are well laced with the stories, poems and songs of the Tangier Sound.



Soft crabs from Smith Island are cleaned, packed and prepared for market, first going to Crisfield, the commercial center for Tangier Sound watermen, and crab capital of the world. Shipping point of the world's largest annual catch of crabs, it exports 125-175 million pounds of crabs, worth approximately \$40 million.

Photos by Janet Stratton for the Smithsonian.

