

Documentary Explores Decline In Commercial Scallop Industry

by Tim Wood

CHATHAM – Back in the 1980s, the local bay scallop

fishery was booming. For several months of the year, it was a viable commercial enterprise, with many locals jumping in to take advantage of the bounty found in Pleasant Bay and other near-shore locations.

But sometime in the late '80s or early '90s, bay scallops became scarce. For nearly two decades now, there's been barely a commercial harvest in Chatham; last year, Shellfish Constable Renee Gagne's year-end report stated that for the second year in a row, "there were no discernible commercial landings for bay scallops." Nobody can say exactly what accounts for the decline, but it's generally assumed to be related to water quality and the loss of eelgrass resources. Those issues have also impacted the commercial bay scallop industry on Nantucket, and threaten to end what is essentially the last remaining commercial bay scallop fishery in the region.

"The Last Bay Scallop?" a short film by Nantucketer John Stanton, looks at the challenges facing the fishery and the way of life that's endangered by the continuing decline in landings: In 1980, 120,000 bushels of bay scallops were landed on Nantucket; last year, landings dropped to 14,500 bushels. "This isn't anything theoretical," Stanton said in a phone interview from his Nantucket home. "It deals with how people make a living, and its connection to water quality." The half-hour film will be shown at the Chatham Orpheum Theater on Saturday, Sept. 9, sponsored by Pleasant Bay Community Boating. Following the screening will be a question and answer session featuring Stanton, Gagne and Owen Nichols, director of marine fisheries research at the Center for Coastal Studies.

Stanton, who has been making films since 1989 and has been a Nantucket resident for about 30 years, said he initially started out to record the cottage industry that bay scallops represented on the island for generations. "Lots of guys made extra money doing it," he said. "There was always a big group of people who went.

"I wanted to capture those stories," he said. "As we started doing it, it became obvious that the

"the gauge" for bay scallops in the region. While Chatham hasn't had harvests like it had in the 1980s when scallopers fished well into the winter months there have been a few "mini" scallop years, the most recent in 2011, when 1,500 bushels were landed. That year officials opened the scallop fishery early so local fishermen could get a jump on the Nantucket harvest.

Chatham's upwelling system grows scallop seed each year, but it's impossible to track once it is released in the wild, Gagne said.

"A lot of what we do is really keeping our fingers crossed," she said.

Stanton said he created a 10-minute version of the film for use by non-profit organizations to highlight the issue, and he's brought the full film to a number of area theaters and communities for screenings and question and answer sessions. The documentary has also been selected for a number of film festivals, including the Annapolis Film Festival, the Boston Film Festival, and festivals on Nantucket, Woods Hole and Martha's Vineyard.

For Stanton, telling a good story is just as important as educating the public about the problem. "If you ask people to sit in a dark room, you'd better tell them a good story," he said. Documentaries should be about interesting people first; connecting issues to those people's lives is "powerful," he said. It's also important to provide followup through question and answer sessions, many of which end up being longer than the film.

"That's what you want. There's an old saying that a documentary doesn't begin until the house lights come up," he said.

Stanton concedes his work is "very, very local." His current project, "Foodie Island," is all about how Nantucket's eateries went from "curly fries to French cuisine." Nantucket, he added, has always been "it's own entity," but reflects the mainland in microcosm.

"It's not a faraway place anymore," he said. Balancing modern life and protecting nature as key issues. "Those battles go on the same as they go on in Chatham and everywhere else. It's just more amplified."

Still, making documentaries in your own backyard has its ups and downs. Costs are low and

started doing it, it became obvious that the environmental part was important to the story." Despite its gentrification, there's still a small, tight-knit community of locals on Nantucket. That can make shooting films there interesting. "When you make a film on Nantucket you're making a film about your neighbors, more so than anywhere else," said Stanton, who wrote, directed and edited the film. Before shooting, he spent a lot of time talking to scallop fishermen and others to learn about the culture. "I love oral history and just wanted to do something like that. I wanted to save these stories." Once he started shooting at the start of the scallop season in November 2015, it was obvious that the water quality issue was "huge," he said. Narrated by Rob Benchley, the film tells the story of the fishermen who haul in the scallops, the challenges they're facing and what's being done to try to save the fishery. Stanton noted that on other fisheries issues, scientists and fishermen often butt heads; here, however, there's cooperation, with everyone recognizing that water quality is the issue.

Last year, Nantucket voted for an expensive sewer system, "a big step in the right direction," Stanton said. Chatham is also in the middle of implementing a pricey and wide-ranging, multi-year sewer plan aimed at improving coastal water quality, and other towns on the Cape are in various stages of addressing the issue.

Improving water quality will certainly help move toward restoring a scallop fishery locally, said Gagne, who noted that Nantucket has remained

backyard has its ups and downs. Costs are low and he's been around long enough that folks know he has the best interest of the island at heart, he said. But, "I always have to keep in mind that we're mucking around in other people's lives with a camera crew." Tickets for "The Last Scallop?" are \$10 and can be purchased at www.chathamorpheum.org. To see the trailer, go to vimeo.com/160544706.



Nantucket scallopers Carl Sjolund and Bruce Cowan appear in "The Last Bay Scallop?" COURTESY PHOTOS



Kaitlin Shaw, Nantucket's water quality expert, culls scallop seed.