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'Killing Contests' That Target Pregnant Females Threaten to Wipe Out This Graceful Ocean Animal

Scientists fear the hunts will decimate the cownose ray before they can learn of its role in the marine ecosystem.

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(Photo: Facebook)



DEC 16, 2014

YOUR REACH



Erica Gies' work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Scientific American*, *The Economist*, and other outlets.

Bio



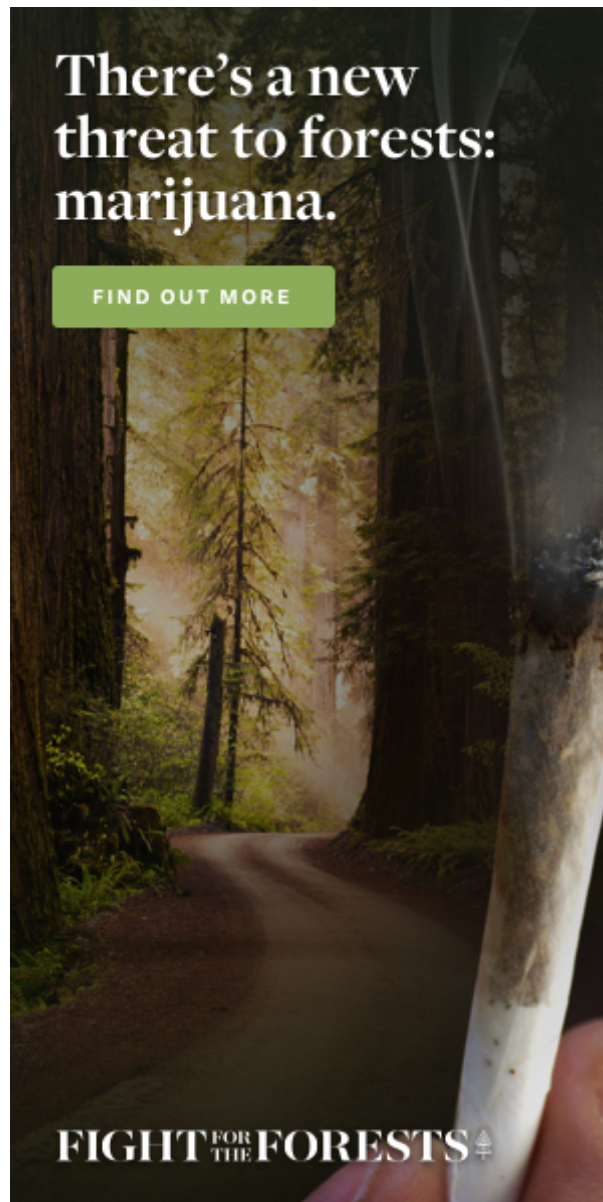
Each summer, bow fishers pack their beer and bravado and launch themselves onto Chesapeake Bay, competing to shoot the largest cownose rays, which they typically don't eat.

Usually a team of about three people shoot from a platform at the back of the boat when the rays are mating. "You can see these rays skittering across the water, and then they'll settle into a euphoric state with their wing tips out of the water," said Robbie Bowe, organizer of [Bowes & Arrows Skate Shoot](#) and owner of an archery shop in Woodbridge, Md. "The object is to run your boat up as fast as possible and shoot 'em while they're right on top."

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Last May, a man on a beach posed proudly with 26 dead rays, a crossbow in his hand, in a picture posted on the [Tilghman Island Cownose Ray Tournament's Facebook page](#). "Declare war on the rays" reads a comment.

Most [killing contests](#) are in June, when the rays have returned from the Gulf of Mexico to the Chesapeake to mate and give birth. The biggest rays are pregnant females, and they are the contestants' prime



targets.

“It’s the luck of the draw when a man shoots it and it’s a female: A lot of the times before they get to the scale, the pups are already coming out,” said Bowe. “They try to retain the pups inside to get more weight.”



(Photo: Gilbert Grant/Getty Images)

“When I started the tournaments, I didn’t have any limit and guys would come in with their boats overflowing with these things,” added Bowe. “And I said, this is not a good thing. Some of the ‘anti’s’ would see this carnage and say, ‘Oh no, they’re going to decimate the population.’ ”

That is exactly what scientists fear.

Since many slaughtered rays are dumped at sea, no one knows how many are killed. Neither Virginia nor Maryland, where most kill contests are held, impose limits on fishing rays. Bowe’s contest saw 150 participants last year, and another contest in Virginia, [Amazon Rain Chicken’s Chesapeake Bay Stingray Tournament](#), saw about 120 participants last year with team names like Death From Above and Bloody Decks.

The kill tournaments may seem like a throwback to the bad old days before people understood the role individual species play in the ecosystem.

But animals that people perceive to be a problem—such as wolves, coyotes, foxes, squirrels, and rattlesnakes—are still targeted in killing contests across the United States.

The “smiling” Atlantic cownose rays that “fly” gracefully through the water may seem an odd focus for such bloodletting. But shellfish farmers blame the rays for decimating their harvests. It’s an idea supported by the state of Virginia, which for several years has been trying to jump-start a seafood market for the cownose ray. Its campaign “Save the Bay, Eat a Ray” conveys the idea that the native rays are harming the ecosystem.

That supposition, however, is not supported by science, and it could be devastating for the rays—and possibly other creatures in the ecosystem.

When the Atlantic ray’s close cousin, the Brazilian cownose ray, became popular for export, it was quickly overfished and is now listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.



(Photo: Facebook)

It's that history that alarms scientists. Cownose rays are extremely slow to reproduce, taking about seven years to mature. Females usually give birth to a single live pup after an 11-month gestation period.

"Cownose rays have been a convenient scapegoat for the insults that we've brought on a lot of these shellfish populations in the past," said Dean Grubbs, a research biologist at Florida State University, referring to overfishing and pollution.

Yet people in the shellfish industry argue that cownose ray populations are booming in the Chesapeake, citing the reduction of their key predator, sharks, and changes in shrimp trawlers that allow non-target animals like rays to escape.

In fact, several local species of sharks have recovered since strict fishing limits were imposed in 1993, said Grubbs. And due to the rays' extremely slow breeding cycle, they're not capable of a baby boom. A paper he's not yet published found that, with no fishing, the cownose ray population would increase just one percent annually.

And while rays do sometimes eat young oysters and bay scallops, several studies conducted [across their range](#)—[Alabama](#), North Carolina, and in the [Chesapeake Bay](#)—have shown that those creatures make up a tiny minority of their diets.

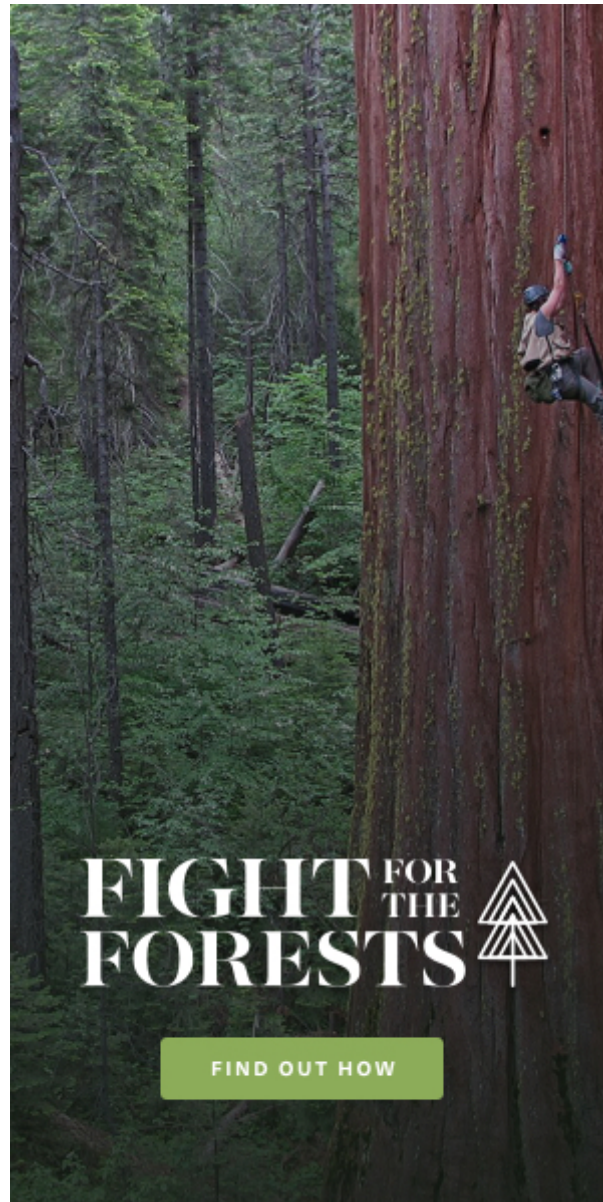
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Robert Fisher, a fisheries and seafood technology specialist at the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences, wrote a [report for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) in 2010 that found that oysters accounted for no more than 8 percent of the cownose rays' diet in Chesapeake Bay.

The public's confusion about their biology endures in part because the science has lagged, primarily because people historically have not eaten rays.

As a result, ray fishing is completely unregulated, said Matt Ajemian, a research biologist at Texas A&M's Harte Research Institute in Corpus Christi.

Ajemian last year gathered together scientists who are ray experts to review existing science and figure out what additional research is needed. The experts signed a resolution



calling on Virginia state officials to set catch limits, convene experts to estimate the ray population, and initiate a science-based conservation plan.

“The main goal is to prevent a disaster,” said Sonja Fordham, president of Shark Advocates International. “Starting with Virginia made sense because that’s where an interest in developing the market has been centered.”

The Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars over the last several years to try to develop a market for cownose rays.

“The texture and bite of it is not like fish; it’s like veal, flank steak, or pork,” said Mike Hutt, director of the Virginia Marine Products Board, who has promoted cownose ray chow at trade shows in Europe and Asia. “And it’s high in protein.”

That worries biologists.

Although the market has been slow to gain traction, if that turned around suddenly, “you could be in big trouble before you know it,” said Fordham. “We have no idea of what would be a sustainable catch.”

However, coming up with a sustainable catch number is a policy catch-22.

“There is not a fishery,” said Rob O’Reilly, chief of fisheries management with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, “and that’s why there are no guidelines.”

In other words, until the ray is being fished in significant numbers, the state won’t set limits.

That backward policy could land the ray in trouble. In his 2010 report, VIMS researcher Fisher wrote that scientists need to

figure out a sustainable harvest before a market for rays really takes off.

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But local oyster farmer Lake Cowart said his 47 years of experience on the bay are enough for him to know that cownose rays are preying on his oysters.

“I’ve seen them on the beds and damage done,” said Cowart, owner of Lottsburg, Va.-based Cowart Seafood Corp., citing tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of seafood lost overnight.

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Due to human overfishing, most oysters are now farmed.

Cowart's business started using aquaculture cages to protect the oysters from rays in 2005. They are effective, he said, but capital and labor intensive. "We've invested well over \$1 million," said Cowart.

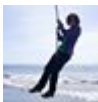
As for the bow hunting tournaments, they are scheduled to return again in June, during prime mating and pupping time

"They want to kill them while they're still pregnant," said Grubbs, the Florida State research biologist. "They're getting a two for one in their mind," he said, echoing a sentiment expressed on tournament chat boards.

"I'm a hunter and a fisher," he added, "and I can tell you, it takes zero skill to kill a cownose ray."

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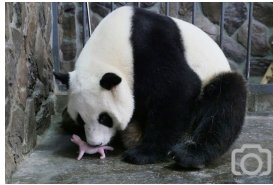
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