

SEA WORTHY

SUNSET ON TIANA BAY

What an ancient fishing technique teaches us about the state of our waters and the people who work them.

BY CARL SAFINA



Photographs: Brian Halweil

HAMPTON BAYS—In the chill dawn of an apple-blossomed morning in the single-digit days of May, Ken Mades stands outside his boathouse on the bay, blue eyes piercing the morning. He’s got a graying, Amish-style beard (trimmed close along his cheeks, no mustache, bushy chin). He’s wearing waterproofs and boots, and is well padded with sweatshirts.

Pushing 70, Mades has worked the bay since childhood. And “worked” is not a euphemism. It takes about a month to make a fish trap: cutting the trees, making the posts, sharpening the posts, taking off the bark, pounding them in. “For every hour the traps fish, there’s been an hour of unpaid prep work,” he says. “I try to go seven days a week regardless of the weather.” If he doesn’t go for a few days, the traps fill up and stop catching.

It’s three-and-a-half-miles to his first trap. The air is brisk, the bay flat. The talk is equal parts pleasure and wistfulness. He says, “I’d rather die than live inland. Freshwater is that stuff you *drink*—it’s not *water*. But the new attitude here, the development—the

changes are painful to me. We used to hear quail and other birds. Now we hear garbage trucks, leaf blowers, and hammers.”

Mades hasn’t left the inlet in years. For one thing, the contrast between the old days, of abundant swordfish and tuna, and now, strikes him as dismal. “Why would I want to look at a dead ocean?” he says. For another, love intervened. “Once I got married I didn’t want to be far from the house, or away overnight. I’m a dog-bark fisherman now,” Mades says with a twinkle, “Never so far from shore that I can’t hear a dog bark.”

Mades sets two traps of a type called *pound nets* in the bay’s shallow waters. They have a 500-foot-long wall of netting that leads into a 20-foot-square chamber or “pound,” sitting in water 10 feet deep. A funnel-configuration keeps most of them from escaping. A complex series of stakes and guy-lines keeps it in place, and allows the netting of the pound to be drawn up.

The first trap holds flocks of sea robins. Watching them swim, you mainly notice the orange edges of their fanning,



wing-like fins. “Like pumpkins,” Mades says. There are some bunkers and skates gliding around in the trap, and a diving bird, a double-crested cormorant, looking quite pleased with itself. Mades says sea robins are just coming into the bays.

During the 15 minutes it takes Mades to haul up the bottom of the net, the fish feel the whole sea drain away to a tight space. When confined and thrashing, there seem to be hundreds of striped sea robins. “More than a thousand,” Mades corrects. As sea robins go, they’re the biggest I’ve seen. These “super-chunk robins,” some of them, reach about three pounds.

Looking into the catch he observes, “It’s not like it used to be, but there’s some stuff here. All the good stuff is hiding below the robins.”

“This has never been more than a middle-class life—if you worked your ass off. Nowadays everyone cheats. The law forces it. The regulations are killing us—and also killing the fish. If I can get out every day I can sell the summer flounder I catch, but if I can’t get out for several days because of weather, and the net is full, I have to throw most of the fish away because of the per-day limit.”

From Mades’s simple trap, the fish can be released uninjured. He might even catch them again. In the ocean, large boats called *trawlers* drag bag-shaped nets, and most anything unwanted is dead by the time it goes back into the ocean.

“The draggers looking for scup discard large numbers of summer flounder because of the regulations; if they could keep them they’d be able to make a couple of hauls and go home. Instead, they have to grind along for 12 hours, killing and discarding fish the whole time. These guys feel terrible about the waste. But everyone lies in the logbooks, because they’re so afraid of more regulations.”

Over the years, Mades says, summer flounder or fluke are more abundant than since he was a kid. “Winter flounder are way down.” Weakfish are recovering. “Squid are definitely way down.” Striped bass have *really* recovered. Mades laments the loss of white perch; the habitats in the creeks have changed. For every eel nowadays, there were probably a hundred when Mades was young.

The deeper catch appears: weakfish, blackfish, horseshoe crabs. (Mades calls them *horse-foots*, a name now archaic except among archaic people.)

Now Mades hoists a long-handled net, reaches in, and begins dipping out the catch. Different species go into separate totes that hold a hundred pounds each. The flat, slapping flounders; the speckled, purple-flanked Weakfish. The squid squirt their ink, their



only defense. “We used to get so inked up back when there were a lot of them.” He shakes his head and chuckles at a memory.

Mades reaches down to dip out a weakfish. “Isn’t she beautiful.” At nine pounds, she sure is. “The weakfish really hit heavily last week; they’re really coming in now.”

There’s a big fluke, around six pounds, with a large, healed-over chunk missing from a bite. All the fish here are on their way to spawning.

Mades’s opinion: “There’s nothing wrong with catching fish on their spawning run—as long as you leave enough to make the next generation.”

Mades gives me a net and I dip in, and soon two totes fill up with sea robins. We stack more totes and they likewise fill with wiggling robins. Then we stack even more: eight totes. Nine. The boat fills with slimy water, which Mades calls “sea robin gravy.” The robins are capable of vocalizing. And these—these hundreds of them—are grunting and *groaning*.

Sea robins taste good. But virtually no one eats them. To Mades they’re worth 12 cents per pound. The most abundant fish in Mades’s catch—by far—will be sold for lobster bait. That’s the fate of all these. “I guess the world’s not hungry enough yet,” Mades says.

“It will be,” I say.

Mades will make \$200 from these today. “But that’s important money.”

It takes an hour to dip the first trap fully empty. We also take

about 50 pounds of fluke, three blackfish of three to four pounds each, and about five weakfish.

Overall, Mades is saying, the productivity of the bay has changed dramatically. “Shellfish, eels, scallops, the eelgrass beds—it’s nowhere near what it was. That might just be because of increased salinity, I don’t know.” Neither do the experts.

We total 11 totes full of sea robins. Mades brightens quite a bit and says, “OK, that was excellent.”

The first laughing gull either of us has seen this year comes by, calling. And the first small squadron of terns, which prompt Mades to say, “The bluefish will be right behind them.”

The second trap holds even more sea robins, a few fluke. No weakfish here.

Mades says, “I’ll be stumbling around in a small boat for the rest of my life. I feel very privileged. He waves a hand at the new trophy homes. “No young person has the money to start here now.”

Most of the fish are still alive by the time we winch them onto the dock, and it’s sad to see the life twitch out of them.

Mades says, “We burned two gallons of fuel this morning. And I’ll feed several hundred people with super-quality seafood, the best and freshest it can be. And I’m proud of that.”

I say, “You should be.” In a nearby tree, shining orange and black, perches the first oriole that either Mades or I have seen this spring. 🍷

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