PCBs in the Hudson Pose a New Threat To Shad Fishermen

Chemicals in River May Bring State Ban on the Fish Just As Water Became Cleaner

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GRASSY POINT, N.Y.—In the gray-shingled shack at water's edge, four fishermen sit playing cards around an old kitchen table, ignoring the ebb tide laden with the spring run of shad. The wall is hung with foul-weather gear; rubber boots are piled in the corner. On the refrigerator door somebody has taped up a newspaper clipping about the awful chemical in the fish of the Hudson River.

"I do my fishing from the window here," an old man says, looking off to the quiet hills on the east bank, three miles across the river from this small valley town.

"No nets for me this year," another man says. "No pay," says the third. And the fourth: "A lot of trouble, this."

April has always brought the silver-backed shad to spawn up river, an event once exhilarating for Hudsoners. "The first run sends a quiver of excitement through the communities of fishers," a Hudson chronicler wrote in 1902, "and the news is telegraphed from New York to Albany."

There were thousands of fishermen then, planting forests of stake nets off the shores of Manhattan and for miles north. The river teemed with carp, catfish, crappies and smelts, alewives, eels, whitefish and perch. The plentiful sturgeon were nicknamed "Albany beef," and the big cash catches were the striped bass and the shad of spring.

A Matter of Taste

The "taste of New York harbor" was already seeping into the fish in 1902, though. As the decades passed it got worse, and the market all but died. A few fishermen hung on, hauling their nets like Sleepy Hollow ghosts, only about 35 miles north of the big city.

Then, a couple of years ago, something remarkable happened: Environmental purification programs started to pay off. The diesel aftertaste was disappearing. The blue-claw crab was returning to the river bottom by the bushelful. Someone was envisioning a sturgeon and caviar industry. Until scientists found the chemical, it looked as if a body might make a real dollar again, hauling nets on the Hudson.

But last year New York state discovered that the polychlorinated biphenyls—or PCBs—dribbled into the river by two General Electric plants for the past 30 years have found their way into the tissues of nearly every species of fish in the river. The state and a lot of scientists say the industrial chemical can make people very sick, even years after it is ingested.

In February of this year, sale of the fish was outlawed. Only the shad was spared, temporarily. With the April season the state is testing the silverbacks, and a ruling on whether they too will be banned is expected soon. In the brief interim, a handful of fishermen are casting their nets anyway, for what may be their last run of shad.

The shack here in Grassy Point is at the end of a dirt turnout, amid a clutter of capsized dinghies and wire crab pots, and directly under the barge-loading conveyor of a big U.S Gypsum plant. A weathered, fish-shaped sign on the fence says "Fresh Fish" and points past the shack, where the four men are passing the time, to the dock. There another fisherman, Howard Jordan, is about to cast off his shad boat and haul his nets on the ebb tide.

Living Off the River

Howard is 54 years old and looks older. His hair is white, his face deeply lined, his hands scarred and cracked. He has been a truck driver, a machine operator and a coal miner in Kentucky. Twenty years ago he came north to be an electrician and to fish the river. But for 18 months there hasn't been any electrical work for Howard, and he has been living off the river, or at least he was until the ban.

Now, as the shad begin their run, he is going out again. "I'm still trying to work the damn river for what damn good it's doing me," he says. "The shad's about the only thing we got to depend on."

He suits up (rubber boots and fisherman's pants, quilted jacket and an army cap with a sweat stain around the brim), and he casts off. The outboard revs up, and the 20-foot open boat, its green paint peeling to the wood, skims out to mid-river off George's Island.

"That's mine," he says, motioning toward a line of thin hickory poles rising in the current.

Barely visible to the south are another thin line and another shad boat with a small black dot moving in it. The dot is Al DeGroat, one of "Turk" DeGroat's three sons—a rare family of Hudson River fishermen from a line going back at least to Al's great-grandfather. Howard's and Al's stakes are the only ones in sight in an area where it's

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legal to sink poles every 1,800 feet. Hardly anybody is fishing. "It's just a damn hassle-being thing," Howard says.

The fishermen who are still at it stick close, if only to commiserate and to curse; on weekends they sit together on the dock, mending their nets. Now a boat is approaching from the eastern shore for a visit, carrying a craggy-faced older man named Charlie and a big, round man named Jim. The boats nuzzle and the men talk—about the shad, about the wind, about the poison in the water. And they take a good-natured swipe at people who fish for fun.

"There's about 10 hook-and-liners there on the bank trying like hell," Jim laughs.

"I don't care if there were enough shad to walk across the river on," Howard says. "The only way to catch these SOBs is to snare 'em."

Hauling in the Nets

The men speed away and Howard turns to his work. He eases the boat to the first pole, puts on a pair of heavy rubber gloves and leans over the bow to grapple with the first net. The nets hang like curtains in the river; they bag in the direction of the tide and snag fish by their gills. Howard hauls the net around a wooden post in the bow, and he keeps hauling until a fish comes up. Still bent over, he struggles to free each one with a rusty pick.

"You got to work 'em out or they bust your net up," he says, prying at one especially entangled fish. He curses it. "Spend all day on one damn fish—gets you aggravated."

The fish pile up on the floor of the boat. About half are striped bass (which Howard isn't allowed to sell) and the rest are shad, their scales luminescent silver and purple, the roe bulging beneath their bellies. The morning passes, the tide ebbs, and Howard hauls from stake to stake and from net to net. He never straightens his back.

On the Hudson, a fisherman lives by the tides. Howard is out here twice a day, three hours at a stretch—once during the day and once in the black of night. "You just forget about sleeping," he says. "You forget you got a bed. You eat when you can." Howard and his wife live in a house on Grassy Point's only street. (Their children have grown and moved away.) Howard hardly sees her, except for supper, and he has to tell her when to serve it.

The shad season is just three months long, but whenever the Hudson isn't under a solid sheet of ice Howard is out here after one fish or another all year round. "Been out with six or eight inches of ice in this boat," he says. "You put rock salt on the fish to stop 'em from freezing, and they still freeze." How does he stay warm? "Work—that's all."

River Often Rough

The Hudson isn't a gentle river, though it is calm today. Occasionally Howard works with five-foot swells breaking over the bow, washing over him as he grapples with his nets. "Sometimes the bow of that boat is in the water more than it's out," he says.

Only wind and fog interfere: "A hard wind coming out of the south would have my boat twisted up around that net, and the net would be going up around the pole. You couldn't work it. If the fog is too dingedly heavy, you don't chance it. It's fun," he says wryly, "when you get out here at night in a fog and meet one of those big ships you didn't know was there. After your belly gets through changing sides, you do the best you can."

The tide is slowing and about to change direction as Howard pries the last fish out of the last net and heads back to the dock with about 80 shad—not too bad for this time of year. At the height of the season, four weeks in May and June, he can haul over 1,000 pounds a day and sell at 80 cents a pound. (Howard tends to be selectively hard of hearing. When asked how much money he makes, he doesn't seem to hear the question.)

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Sent Off to the City

He normally puts most of his shad into cardboard fried-chicken boxes, packs them with shaved ice, and has them trucked to the Fulton Fish Market in New York City, where there are three or four men who still know the art of boning a silverback.

(The Indian name for shad means "porcupine turned inside out." The fish has about 1,000 bones, including eight sets buried deep in its pink flesh. John Ciofa, who works at Smitty's Fillet House in the Fulton market, has been boning shad for 45 years, with 10 well-placed cuts of a fillet knife. "How do I do it? How?" John said on a recent morning. "You have to slice the bone away from the meat at all times. You have to slice under and over the bone to get it out. You can describe it, but you won't be able to do it.")

On some mornings a dozen people wait on the dock at Grassy Point for the fishermen to return. Today, as Howard ties up his boat, there is one aging black man.

"You got 'em. Yeah, you got 'em," he says, admiring the shad.

"Got a couple," says Howard. He packs four shad in a box for the man.

"How the fish are coming back—amazing," the old man says. "That's a shame about those PCBs. But I don't give a damn if they take 20 years to catch up with me. I ain't got 20 years."

The man leaves with his fish, and Howard Jordan cuts up a tiny perch that got caught in his net, and feeds it to the cat.

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