

Testimony before lawmakers calls for protecting rays

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To the Editor:

Animal rights advocates, environmentalists and concerned citizens will testify before the Maryland Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee in favor of the 2017 Prohibition on Cownose Ray Fishing Contests (SB 268) Tuesday, Jan. 31 at 1 p.m. The bill is sponsored by Senator Ron Young (District 3) as well as Senators Benson, Guzzone and Pinsky.

The legislation will ensure that a person may not conduct or participate in a cownose ray fishing contest or tournament in state waters nor offer or accept any incentive to catch cownose rays in state waters for recreational purposes.

The legislation is in response to video footage that emerged in 2015 showing contest participants shooting cownose rays from their boats at close range with arrows, bludgeoning them with bats, piling them into a barrel to suffocate and then weighing the rays to see who killed the heaviest ones.

Identical legislation, HB 211, has also been submitted in the House of Delegates by Delegate Shane Robinson, District 39.

"These contests have been taking place for two decades, largely unnoticed until recent videos highlighted the brutality of the contests," said Delegate Robinson. "Not only are these contests cruel, they also are unnecessary and science shows that this species is vulnerable to overfishing."

Scientific evidence suggests that since rays don't mate until they are several years old and female rays give birth to just one pup a year, their population growth is slow and the species is vulnerable to overfishing. These contests often take place in June when female rays are pregnant.

After the contests, participants have been filmed dumping rays' bodies back into the water or tossing them into a dumpster.

"Killing an animal for fun and then throwing it overboard to rot goes against everything I have been taught about respect for the Bay and sporting ethics," said Captain Dennis Fleming, a guide with the Fishamajig Guide Service and a Potomac River Fisheries Commissioner.

And while rays have long been a scapegoat for oyster population collapses, scientists disagree. A 2016 report by Florida State University's Dean Grubbs explains that oyster populations have declined due to overharvesting, pollution, disease and habitat loss.

A final report from a cownose ray scientific workshop (convened on October 15, 2015, at the National Aquarium), which included experts on cownose ray biology, explains that while cownose rays are known to consume oysters, oysters are not a significant portion of their diet. The Grubbs study states that oysters and hard clams were found in less than three percent of cownose rays' stomachs examined in the Chesapeake Bay.

Furthermore, cownose rays actually may help disperse large, reproductively mature oysters throughout the Bay; their jaws aren't strong enough to crush and eat larger oysters, so they end up dropping them.

Similarly, cownose rays' foraging behavior in grass beds may be beneficial for blue crabs and other organisms by diversifying habitat and stirring up nutrients.

"There is no valid justification for the vicious massacre of these gentle creatures," said Mary Finelli, chairwoman of the Save the Rays Coalition. "Cownose rays have been a part of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem since before Captain John Smith arrived on its shores. These animals are not invasive, they are integral members of the Bay's ecology and have coexisted with oysters and scallops for thousands of years."

Advocates released a short video, "Save the Cownose Rays," to encourage Marylanders to support the legislation.

The House version of the bill is sponsored by Delegate Shane Robinson along with 17 other cosponsors. A Maryland House Environment and Transportation Committee hearing is scheduled for February 15 at 1 p.m.

Save the Cownose Rays Coalition is a grassroots coalition of non-profit organizations working to ban inhumane contests that target the cownose rays of the Chesapeake Bay.

View the fact sheet and FAQ for more information at Savetheraysmd.org

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