



Photo courtesy of Phillips Foods

Chesapeake lessons

Importers attempt to sustain blue-swimming crab fisheries

By Lisa Duchene

In the late 1980s, Steve Phillips pioneered fisheries development in the Philippines and Indonesia to export blue-swimming crabs to the United States. Now, his Baltimore-based company, Phillips Foods, along with at least 10 importers, relies on the crab supply from those countries as well as in China, Thailand and Vietnam to produce pasteurized crab and other value-added products sold nationally and to supply Phillips' 10 East Coast restaurants.

But the fishery may be overharvested. In the last decade, the crabs (*Portunus pelagicus*) were smaller than in the 1990s and the fishermen had to work harder to harvest a smaller catch. Both are telling signs of overfishing.

Rather than moving on to an undeveloped fishery — a response found throughout fisheries history — Phillips is leading an effort to create a fisheries management regime for Asian blue swimming crab.

"The worst thing you can do sometimes is disengage from a fishery," he adds. "That's not socially responsible. We can't go in and mismanage their resource and rape their resource and 20 years later they have nothing. That's criminal, in my opinion. I wasn't raised that way and we don't operate that way.

"The thing I need to do," says Phillips, "is stay engaged in the industry and help the industry make improvements to help sustain that resource."

Two decades ago, Phillips, a Maryland native and the grandson of Chesapeake Bay watermen, realized the Chesapeake's blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) production wouldn't be enough to satisfy growing U.S. demand for the sweet, tender meat, and Phillips' growing business.

He'd spotted a blue crab in a magazine picture, and soon visited the Philippines and Thailand, where the national

Steve Phillips and other crab importers are hoping to improve fisheries in Asia.

governments did not see export potential for the crabs. Phillips' company now operates 11 plants in Asia and is one of several companies that in 2009 imported a total of 41 million pounds of swimming crab worth nearly \$280 million.

As Phillips organizes U.S. importers and Asian processors to tackle the problems, he is exporting lessons learned from his native Chesapeake Bay.

"Sometimes the best lesson is learning what not to do. What we are trying to impress upon the Asian governments and the fishermen is, 'Let's not follow the path that's been followed with fisheries elsewhere in the world,'" says Phillips.

The importers' effort began in 2006 by organizing Indonesian processors to talk about sustainability. They soon formed the Association of Indonesian Blue Swimming Crab Processors, called APRI, which represents 85 percent of Indonesian crab exporters.

In 2007, the association turned to Seattle-based Sustainable Fisheries Partnership (SFP) to form a strategic plan to improve the fisheries. An early project was a poster urging fishermen to not catch egg-bearing females.

By 2009, they had the results of a Marine Stewardship Council pre-assessment, which identified the areas in which the fishery fell short of MSC certification: absence of a fisheries-independent data and stock assessment, lack of management structure and lack of the genetic work to determine whether the fishery involves one or

Continued on page 46

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Going Green

Continued from page 34

multiple stocks.

This year, Phillips and its fellow National Fisheries Institute-member importers formed the Crab Council. Importers agreed to pay one and one-half cents per pound of crabmeat sold to generate about \$1 million to \$1.5 million annually to fund the crab fisheries management, and signed a marketing pledge to accurately represent sustainability of the stocks.

The new associations are meeting with governments, tapping scientists at the University of Indonesia and forming regulations in Indonesia and other Asian

nations. In the Philippines, industry association PACPI represents 90 percent of crab exports and has worked with SFP to form an industry-government working group.

In each country, the effort involves creating a crab advisory commission with representatives from government, industry, universities and NGOs, according to SFP. The goal is to have rules and regulations in place by the end of this year, says Phillips, as well as a way to enforce them.

“A lot of those rules and regulations mirror what we’ve done in the state of Maryland,” says Phillips. The key, he says, is

conserving females.

Maryland and Virginia took painful steps to do just that in 2008 and the effort may be paying off. After 15 years of low catches, the Chesapeake Bay blue crab fishery is seeing strong stock and harvest numbers for the second year in a row. Earlier this year, surveys estimated about 315 million adult crabs more than a year old, a 41 percent increase from 2009, and a healthy 115 million crabs north of 200 million harvestable crabs, the Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee’s rebuilding goal.

“You want to be cautiously optimistic about it,” says Derek

Orner, research fishery biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Chesapeake Bay office. “Two years doesn’t make a trend. Everything right now points to [the fact] that the sound management measures made two years ago, particularly to conserve the adult females, worked.”

In 2008, Virginia and Maryland shortened the fall season and temporarily stopped Virginia’s winter dredge fishery, a 100-year tradition. The measures, aimed at protecting female crabs, meant about \$3.6 million in losses to the coastal community, according to Doug Lipton, resource economics

professor at the University of Maryland. Bill Gouldsboro, director of the fisheries program for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, notes Maryland and Virginia’s commitment to work together in 2008 was the key turning point. “We had the science for 10 to 12 years to tell us the stock was down and we needed to take action in the fishery. We only had the political will starting two years ago.”

In Asia, the science is not yet in place. But the will and the market appear to be behind sound management.

Contributing Editor Lisa Duchene lives in Bellefonte, Pa.