Potting a serious problem in state's artificial reefs
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BY AL RISTORI

Pressure is mounting to preserve the state's artificial reefs for the purpose they were intended for -- providing recreational fishing opportunities.

An ever-increasing multitude of fish and lobster pots on those reefs have made it difficult for anglers to drift in areas of the reefs created for just that purpose, as lines continually snag into the ropes connecting strings of pots, which are so numerous in many cases that it's even difficult to add materials to the reef without burying commercial gear.

Adding insult to injury is the fact that the reefs were built with very little public funding involved, but almost entirely with monies donated by recreational fishermen and divers.

Bill Figley, who built or expanded those reefs while running the program for the Division of Fish and Wildlife before retiring recently, has prepared a white paper being distributed to state officials that details the history of the reefs and the problems created by potting. As bad as gear conflicts are presently, they could get much worse as hundreds of trap permits are issued by the Division and uncounted thousands of traps can be deployed anywhere.

A survey in 2005 estimated 23,000 feet of trap lines on the Axel Carlsen Reef that's convenient to anglers fishing from Manasquan Inlet. In effect, that provides potters with a monopoly of the reef 24 hours a day without even having to be there.

Figley points out that during a period of 23 years, the state has established a network of 15 ocean reef sites, and constructed more than 4,000 reefs from 14 million tons of rock, concrete and steel. Those reefs were colonized by more than 150 species of fish and marine life to provide a new public resource that didn't exist 25 years ago.

Furthermore, those reefs were purposely placed on unproductive open bottom rather than areas where commercial fishermen had previously been potting.

New Jersey's Reef Management Plan stresses the importance of providing fishing grounds for hook-and-line fishermen and underwater attractions for divers. New Jersey's marine recreational fishing industry boasts 1.3 million resident and nonresident anglers who spend over $1.3 billion on fishing activities annually. In 2000, reefs accounted for 18 percent of all fish caught recreationally, though reef sites comprise only 0.7 percent of the sea floor within 30 miles of the coast.

The newly formed Reef Rescue organization is seeking special management zone status for the reefs. That can be done in state waters by Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Lisa Jackson, and she may well cooperate in the effort.
Many of the reefs are in federal waters outside of the state's three-mile limit. Jackson, as the reef sites permit holder, can also petition the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council for Special Management Zone (SMZ) status that will permit gear restrictions. Some southern states have already accomplished that by petitioning the South Atlantic Council. New York, which has protected sites in state waters, is currently asking the Mid-Atlantic Council for SMZ designations on three reef sites in federal waters.

The New Jersey Marine Fisheries Council briefly discussed this issue at Thursday's meeting and agreed to move forward with consideration. Pat Donnelly of Point Pleasant, chairman of the Reef Committee, assured me he'd do so quickly.

A legislative solution has also been proposed. Assemblyman Sean Kean (R-Dist. 11) introduced bill number 3986 that would ban fishing gear other than rod-and-reel, hand line, spear or gig on artificial reef sites and preserves them exclusively for recreational fishing.

Those in favor of applying SMZ protection to artificial reefs should write to Gov. Jon Corzine at State House, P.O. Box 001, Trenton, NJ 08625, requesting SMZ protection for N.J. reef sites in both state and federal waters.