

## OUR OPINIONS

# More symptoms of Bay's sickness

**E**arlier this year, legislators in Richmond devoted \$200 million to clean up the Chesapeake Bay, Virginia's first major estuary toward restoring the damaged estuary.

As hopeful as that commitment might be, a few recent developments underscore the magnitude of the task ahead, its urgency, and reveal a murkier and more dispiriting portrait of the watershed.

State officials worried that Tropical Storm Ernesto had washed enough bacteria and chemical pollution into

the waterway that they were forced to ban shellfish harvests for a few days.

The storm may well have created other problems, too. If the past is any indication, Ernesto probably washed enough nutrients into the watershed — fertilizer from fields and lawns, as well as sewer out- and overflow — to create an abundance of algae, especially if water temperatures remain warm. That could lead to the expansion of the Bay's dead zone, which had been smaller this year than usual.

The Bay's crab population has been smaller, too, which is a problem both environmental and commercial. No matter the measures taken so far, crab numbers stubbornly refuse to rebound in the Bay. Which means either that the crabs are hiding, or that we're not doing enough.

According to scientists, there were more than 800 million crabs crowding the Bay in 1990; today, the number is closer to 350 million, and not moving much. Worse, we're getting used to that.

"This is a typical problem in science," Rom Lipcius, a researcher at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, told the Associated Press. "As time

goes on you sort of get used to what you see out there as being normal and that's totally wrong."

The Virginia Marine Resource Commission is considering further expanding limits on crabbing; that may well be necessary. Without question, though, more must be done to bring back the grasses that shelter juvenile crabs, and to prevent the expansion of the dead zone that has preyed so heavily on crab populations.

**Male bass in the Potomac River are somehow producing eggs.**

At the moment, what's preying on bass populations in the

Potomac River remains a very creepy mystery. In the river and its tributaries, male fish have been showing up with eggs growing inside them.

More worrisome, perhaps, is the fact that nobody seems to know what's causing the fish's hormonal systems to go crazy, according to reporting in *The Washington Post*.

It gets worse: "I don't know, and I don't think anybody knows, the answer to that question right now: Is the effect in the fish transferable to humans?" said Thomas Jacobus, general manager of the Washington Aqueduct, which provides drinking water from the Potomac to homes in D.C. and Northern Virginia.

Such gender-bending has been noted in animal populations across the planet for years now, though its cause remains far from clear. Some scientists blame pollution for the hormonal chaos; others blame a combination of factors.

Regardless, scientists are scrambling to answer Jacobus' question: Can this affect humans? The health of the Bay, the health of the creatures swimming in it — not to mention the health of everyone living around it — may depend on it.