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Conch, cash beckon on Mt. Hope Bay

Joe Strong, 81, has been fishing for most of his life, but lean times don't slow him down

By Abigail Crocker

If there is a conch city hiding under the waters of Mt. Hope Bay, Joe Strong is going to find it. Fishing since he was a teenager, Mr. Strong, who is now 81, decided 15 years ago to try his hand at conch fishing, going after large sea snails in baited pots. He has been at it ever since, one of the few to target the fishery in an area where quahogs and lobsters are the traditional kings.



Christine Hochkeppel

Joe Strong and Mickey Saccoccio fish for conch, the ocean's snail.

Conch, also known as whelk, is a shellfish often used in seafood salad.

Though those who love it really, really

love it, it is not especially popular among fishermen, especially since the bait is expensive. In order to entice the large-shelled snails into the pots, the traps need to be baited with horseshoe crab.

Mr. Strong, a Warren resident for many years, decided to try his hand at conch fishing after years of fishing for flounder and lobster in the bay. He said it's hard for local fishermen to make a living on their traditional catches because of catch restrictions placed on many species over the last several decades by both the state and federal governments.

They regulated us right out of the industry, said Mr. Strong.

He used to fish for flounder in the Mt. Hope Bay, however, now there are now too few to fish.

I used to haul in 150 pounds of nice blackbacked flounder. You can't do that anymore.

Since there are currently no restrictions on how much conch fishermen can catch, there is money to be made.

Early risers

The blue-eyed, white-bearded fisherman wakes up at 4 a.m. almost every morning to drive to New Bedford, Mass., where he buys frozen horseshoe crab, the preferred conch bait. He then drives to the Narrows section of Bristol opposite Touisset Point to meet up with his fishing partner, Mickey Saccoccio. Most days, he brings two cups of coffee and a breakfast bag of egg and vegetables. They load up Mr. Strong's 21-foot boat, a bare-bones but functional vessel, that allows one man at the helm, and another in the back to haul in pots and hack up bait. The two usually start their fishing by 7 a.m. and end at 11 a.m. after retrieving, emptying and rebaiting about 60 fishing pots.

Mr. Strong usually captains the boat, steering with a wheel, and Mr. Saccoccio pulls in the pots by grabbing the buoy with a boat hook and dragging the line into a hydraulic winch that pulls the pot up. Because Mr. Strong has been fishing for years, his eyesight is not what it used to be. Mr. Saccoccio helps him see the line of buoys, or strings, attached to pots.

If I don't have my glasses I'm in real trouble, said Mr. Strong. Mickey has good eyes.

Tools of the trade

Mr. Strong makes his own pots in his basement, using various materials and designs. Some are rectangular and made of red plastic with a snap door to hold in bait. Others are constructed with wooden strips nailed together. Others are shaped like triangles, the opening for the conchs at the top of the pot.

This one is a pyramid pot, said Mr. Saccoccio, referring to a triangle-shaped pot.

Conch fishing is not for the squeamish. A wooden block, splintered with age, and a small hatchet are used to chop up the odorous horseshoe crab in halves and thirds. When one of the men is hacking up bait, there is no escaping the splattering of slimy green roe and bright orange innards that have the consistency of egg. The hatchet cuts right through the thin outer shell of the horseshoe crab and makes the guts fly across the boat's small cockpit. Sometimes Mr. Saccoccio needs to wash his glasses off in the sea water after chopping because he can't see through the slime that gets on his lenses. Mr. Saccoccio said he wants to change his clothes more than taking a shower after a long morning of conch fishing.

They can get pretty ripe after awhile, said Mr. Saccoccio, referring to the strong smell the horseshoe crab gives off.

The two yell out strawberry! when they see one of their small flat-topped and round-bottomed buoys. When they get a good batch of conch, the banter is light on board. When there are no conch in the pots, things get quiet.

All summer, this is what we called debilitating, said Mr. Strong.

Breaking even

According to Mr. Strong, he needs to buy about 50 pounds of horseshoe crab every morning to bait his pots. He spends about \$40 on engine gas a day, a conservative amount driving his boat at a slow and steady pace of six knots. In order to break even, he needs to make about \$90 in conch sales to a dealer.

It is not very lucrative, but it supplements my Social Security a little bit," said Mr. Strong.

Horseshoe crab is expensive to buy. According to Mr. Strong, it used to cost him 50 cents a crab 10 years ago. Now it's \$1.50 for a smaller male crab and \$2 for a female. Because the crabs blue-green blood is used in medical labs to test for fatal bacteria in vaccines and medications, Rhode Island fishermen have to buy them frozen from out-of-state medical labs that have already drained their blood. Currently, most horseshoe crabs are taken off the coast of Delaware and Maryland; Rhode Island does not allow fishermen to harvest them.

Mr. Strong sells his catches to a dealer in New Bedford, who then wholesales it out. He would not say how much money he can make on two totes of conch, but Massachusetts conch sells for about 45 cents a pound. In Rhode Island, it is estimated a pound sells for a little more.

The man at the helm

Joe Strong grew up fishing farther north and in colder waters than Rhode Island. As a kid, he moved around from Kittery, Maine to Lincoln, N. H. catching trout and other kinds of fish. The changing of seasons won't keep Mr. Strong from fishing. He hopes to fish until early November " he is no stranger to the wintry winds and neither is his wife.

They met in Concord, N.H. while she was working in an ice cream store. She is currently a working cardiac nurse at Rhode Island Hospital. Mr. Strong brags that out of all the women his wife works with, she is the only one still married. They have been married for 55 years.

Everyday, when he is done conch fishing, he takes his wife to Horseneck Beach to take a dip in the sea. She likes to swim in the ocean, said Mr. Strong. And everyday, they bring a gallon of freshwater for her to wash the salt away after the swim. Everyday has been beautiful.