Column – Shad's decline is reminder to protect what we have

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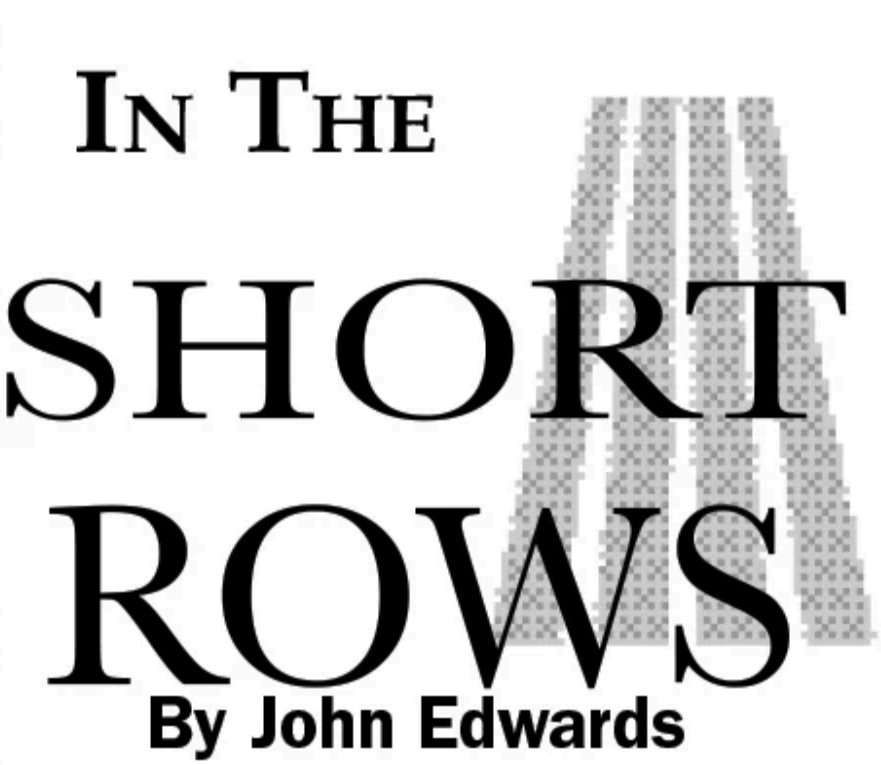

John Edwards

Civilization as we know and practice it — and, for that matter, love it — comes at a price on many levels, but nowhere more abundantly clear than in nature.

That price has been painfully evident here on the James River in recent decades as marine life has declined, and none of it more precipitously than the storied American shad.

Shad knew about the James River long before Capt. Christopher Newport navigated his way to Jamestown to deliver the first English colonists to Virginia. For untold millenia, these large anadromous fish had been swimming up the James and the Chesapeake's other western rivers each spring to spawn in fresh water above the fall line.

For Native Americans, the annual shad run offered vital sustenance after a long winter. Here were fresh fish to be eaten and many more to be smoked and thus preserved.

Colonists were astounded by the numbers of shad and herring, a cousin to the species that also swim upstream in spring. Of the herring, Virginian Robert Beverley wrote that they "come up in such abundance to spawn, that it is almost impossible to ride through without treading on them."

One of George Washington's important sources of income at Mount Vernon came from shad caught in the Potomac, salted, barreled and shipped to consumers in distant ports. And during the American Revolution, tradition holds that an early run of shad on the Schuylkill River provided food for starving American troops at Valley Forge.

Ah, the abundance of it all. What a commercial windfall the shad offered. And Americans were quick to seize upon it.

Following in Washington's footsteps, fishermen of the 1800s went after shad with enthusiasm — and with better boats and nets. By the mid-1800s the annual catch of American shad had grown to 40,000 tons. That's 80 million pounds — a lot of fish and a lot of shad roe that would never hatch.

Inevitably, that level of fishing led to a sharp decline in the fishery, and by 1900, the annual catch up and down the seaboard was 4,000 tons — a tenth of the glory days.

Meanwhile, rivers were seen as a valuable source of energy, and well into the 20th century, dams were being built across rivers up and down the East Coast, including the James. Nobody at that time thought much about the fish that couldn't successfully spawn unless they could get upstream of the fall line, where many of the dams were located.

Sediment from farmland and later development fouled rocky river bottoms that had received fertilized eggs for all those thousands of years. Chemicals were added to the mix, and the fishing continued. And the shad population continued a downward spiral.

Then, in the 1970s, the Virginia Game Commission, in one of its less enlightened ideas, thought that bringing blue catfish, native to Mississippi, and dumping them in Virginia's rivers would create a sport fishing bonanza where catfishermen in go-fast bass boats would flood Virginia for tournaments, thus generating millions of dollars in revenue for lots of people — including the state agency that introduced them and relies on fishing and hunting licenses to pay its bills.

The invasive species flourished, and why not? Being an extraordinarily effective predator, it found an abundance of infant striped bass, shad, blue crabs and numerous other marine animals that had been feed for all of those. Today, it stands unchallenged at the very top of Virginia rivers' food chain.

And the shad decline continued, as did striped bass and crabs.

Virginia closed the shad netting season in 1992 because of the plummeting population and today, if you are fortunate enough to find a shad roe to eat, it has come from some other state.

Dr. Patrick McGrath, a senior marine scientist and shad specialist at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), when asked this week whether there was any good news about American shad, was blunt.

"I don't have much optimistic to say about the shad population. It's at an extremely low level. It will take a long time to recover if it does at all."

The population in the James and York rivers, in particular, continues to decline, McGrath said. And the cause?

He believes it a combination of factors. One dam remains on the James and, while it has a manmade fish passage, shad don't particularly like that. Siltation continues to create water quality problems, and that's another factor.

And the catfish? McGrath says a study done for the state agency that introduced them didn't show a huge impact on shad.

The invasive catfish's impact "is still up in the air."

"We know they are definitely overpopulated, and that there are too many for the system."

Meanwhile, VIMS continues monitoring the spring migration, using drift nets near Jamestown to count fish.

And a team of scientists has been meeting to develop a James River recovery plan for shad.

"Eventually, that will be published and hopefully we can move forward," he said.

But he didn't sound terribly optimistic about anything related to what was once known as "America's Founding Fish."

And that's a very sad commentary on our stewardship.

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