

Stockton University, Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve Recycle Crab Pots

NOAA-Funded Project Collects Over 1,500 Pots, Returns Over \$50,000 to South Jersey Commercial Crabbing Community in Three Years

For Immediate Release; Photos on [Flickr](#)

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Galloway, NJ - A towering pile of crab pots with bay mud still clinging to the corroding metal slowly shrank as volunteers weighed each pot, recorded valuable scientific data and broke them down for recycling on April 23 at Stockton University's Marine Field Station.

Crab pots severed from their buoys become ghost pots that litter the bay floor and, early on, may inadvertently trap blue crabs and other marine species, making the resource less available to all stakeholders. The pots also pose hazards to boaters in shallow water.

In 2012, Stockton and the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve received New Jersey's first round of funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) for the [WeCrab Marine Debris Project](#) to locate and remove abandoned crab pots. Now in its third year of funding, the project has recovered a total of more than 1,500 crab pots and provided over \$50,000 in benefits to the commercial fishing community.

The project has directly and indirectly helped South Jersey crabbers through direct pay for recovery efforts, returned gear in serviceable shape and reduced pot loss during the summer months through self-recoveries using low-cost sonars.

Mark Sullivan, associate professor of Marine Science, Steve Evert, manager of the Stockton University Marine Field Station, and Peter Straub, dean of the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, have mapped the bay floor using sonar to locate abandoned crab pots. Straub first began finding ghost pots while teaching students to use sonar out in the field. During the off-season, commercial crabbers recover the marine debris with grappling hooks. **-more-**

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“The project’s focus has been one of partnership with the commercial sector, bridging the gap between science and industry for the benefit of all stakeholders,” said Steve Evert. A total of \$241,597 is supporting the removal and prevention program into next year with about half of the total granted by NOAA and the other half being an in-kind match by Stockton.

The current project goal (2015-17) is to recover 1,000 pots from coastal bays, bringing the total effort since 2012 to over 2,000 recoveries. “The project benefits the blue crab fishery and commercial fishermen by training crabbers to use low-cost sonars to recover lost pots during the season, breaking the cycle of derelict gear and increasing the available resource for all stakeholders,” said Evert.

The pots processed at the field station on April 23 came from the Mullica River and Great Egg Harbor Bay system with many in poor condition. Evert explained that the project has been “successful at breaking the cycle of loss,” because crabbers are recovering their own pots now.

The field station trains crabbers to use sonar as a tool to recover their lost traps. “Once they get 20 pots back, the tool is paid for,” explained Evert.

“Our fishermen have been getting anywhere from 40-50 pots back a year since they’ve been involved in this project. Since NOAA funded this area in particular, 250-300 less pots were lost in the last few years because our fishermen recover the majority of their own pots using the sonar,” he continued.

Even pots in the poorest condition have value in the parts such as the rebar, cull ring and bycatch reduction devices.

Steve Zeck, a Stockton alum and Jacques Cousteau volunteer, enjoys recreational crabbing and came out to give back to the environment during Earth Day Weekend. This year was his third year volunteering for this project.

Helen Zaengle, a Stockton graduate and retired nurse from Little Egg Harbor, came with her husband, Richard, “because we both enjoy doing this together.”

Peter Straub thanked the volunteers and said, “This project is really making a difference in the bay, and the baymen really appreciate your support. They depend on this ecosystem.”

Among the volunteers was a group of students from the Marine Academy of Technology and Environmental Science (MATES) in Ocean County and their teacher John Wnek, who is also an adjunct instructor at Stockton.

After the crab pots were all broken down, volunteers had a picnic with fresh seafood and a barbeque on Nacote Creek.

Samantha Tomkowich, a freshman Marine Science major from Beachwood, N.J., and Ryan Brewster, a sophomore Health Science major from Newton, N.J., volunteered as part of their Fisheries Management course to get hands-on experience.

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Brewster, who has had an interest in marine wildlife since his childhood days of watching Steve Irwin, crabs off of a pier in Belmar. Tomkovich became interested in marine science during a class in high school and decided to major in it when she came to Stockton.

In addition to the valuable data that volunteers are helping to collect, crushing crab pots is a great way to spend time outdoors blowing off steam before finals week, Mark Sullivan said to his students.

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