

We can make Long Island waters clean again

June 7, 2015 by MICHAEL DOBIE / michael.dobie@newsday.com



The call came just after daybreak. A local radio station was asking about dead fish in the bay.

John Torgan leaped out of bed, grabbed his cellphone and camera, and sped to the scene. There they were, menhaden as far as he could see, an estimated 1 million dead or dying from a lack of oxygen in the water.

"This was nothing like we'd ever seen before," said Torgan, a longtime environmentalist. "It was very disturbing."

But Torgan didn't see the huge kill of menhaden -- a critical species that filters water

and serves as food for other fish -- that began May 28 in the East End's Peconic Estuary. What he witnessed took place 12 years ago in Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay. What's happened since then has important lessons for Long Island.

The culprit in each case was nitrogen pollution, which fueled blooms of algae that reduced oxygen in the water. And the perpetrator was us. We the people are responsible for all that nitrogen.

In Rhode Island, the fish kill became a rallying cry in a way other warning bells had not. The public was outraged, the governor ordered an investigation, officials fingered nitrogen and legislators passed laws requiring sewage treatment plants in the bay's ecosystem to cut nitrogen discharges by 50 percent within four years.

It ended up taking a little longer, but the results have been impressive. Torgan, of the Rhode Island chapter of The Nature Conservancy, said treatment plants have reduced nitrogen discharges by nearly two-thirds, and total nitrogen in Narragansett Bay is down more than 50 percent.

There is still too much nitrogen in the bay and more needs to be done, Torgan says, but the water is cleaner and healthier. It looks and smells better. Menhaden are coming all the way into downtown Providence, where young oysters can be found on hurricane pilings. And striped bass, osprey, peregrine falcons and scallops have started to reappear.

So, what's Long Island going to do? If we're serious about our waters -- as much a part of who we are as for the folks in Rhode Island -- we have to do more than we're doing now.

Let's start by rejecting claims that these die-offs are normal. They're not. A couple hundred fish perhaps, that's happened, but not the tens of thousands that died at the end of May -- a conservative estimate at that. And not the thousands that continued to perish last week.

Some good things are underway. Riverhead's sewage treatment plant is being upgraded. New sewers are coming to Suffolk County, which also is testing high-tech septic systems to replace the bad ones in many neighborhoods. But that's not enough, and nothing will work if it's not coordinated and guided by data. We need nitrogen reduction goals and penalties for missing them. And everybody must do their part, because everyone helped create the problem -- including farmers and homeowners whose fertilizers end up in our waters.

Look around. The evidence of excess nitrogen is everywhere. It's there in Shinnecock, Quantuck and Moriches bays, the Forge and Carmans rivers, Lake Ronkonkoma, and the western bays in Nassau. It's the closed shellfish beds and last month's mass turtle die-off. It's 30 years of brown tides on the South Shore. It's the 90 percent of our sea grass beds now gone, and as much as 80 percent of our salt marshes. It's the 99 percent reduction in hard clams harvested in the Great South Bay.

We've had this problem for a while. Those huge piles of dead fish have to be our rallying cry, or what so many have written off as a bad dream will really become our nightmare.

Michael Dobie is a member of the Newsday editorial board.

[< back to article](#)