

Cooperation with Mass. needed

Ocean State must fight 'biological pollution'

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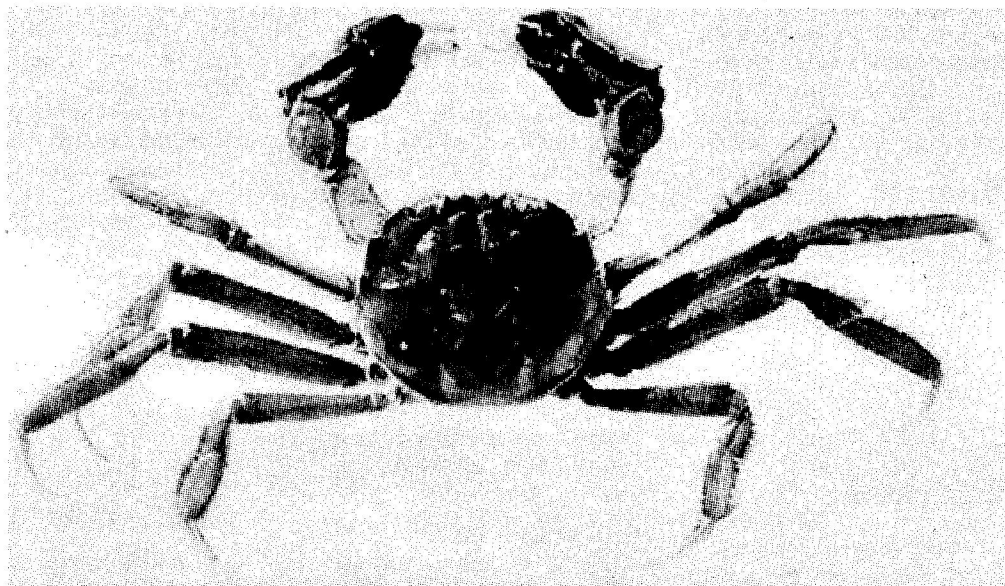
RHODE ISLANDERS have good reason to pressure Massachusetts communities about the wastewater they release into the Blackstone River and thence into "our" Narragansett Bay. The use of Rhode Island's coastal waters to cool the Brayton Point power plant, in Somerset, Mass., is another example of cross-border pollution that has drawn a share of political interest. Natural features rarely coincide with political boundaries, which is why regional cooperation is so important on processes affecting natural resources, especially in southern New England, where the states are small and demands on resources are numerous.

But before Rhode Islanders get too comfortable on the moral high ground, consider invasive species, which have been called "biological pollution." Invasive species are animals or plants introduced to places beyond their natural range by human activity. These species then breed and expand at the expense of native wildlife and habitats. These days, people are hearing more about such invasive species as zebra mussel, Asian longhorn beetle and Phragmites reed, and the sometimes catastrophic environmental and economic consequences of their introduction and spread.

The direct cost to control an outbreak can quickly mount into the millions of dollars and the indirect cost in lost habitat, recreational opportunities, and agricultural or fishing productivity can be much more. Preventing "biological pollution," like preventing water pollution, can be expensive in the short run, but it's nothing compared to the long-term costs of letting it happen.

Massachusetts is a national leader in invasive-species-invasion prevention and control. Particularly noteworthy are recent state regulations controlling the sale and propagation of invasive landscape plants. Concerned parties, including government, environmental, consumer, and business interests, worked for years to reach consensus on this common-sense protection. Massachusetts agencies and nonprofits have worked together to develop educational materials, monitoring networks, and rapid-response plans for several classes of invasive organisms.

Rhode Island, by contrast, has only a rudimentary invasive-species education program, a patchwork of prevention regulations, and neither a coordinated monitoring system nor a rapid-response plan. With this state of affairs there is a serious risk that biological pollution released in Rhode Island will contaminate



— Journal archives

Mitten crab

the environment of our neighbors. The potential consequences are not just theoretical.

Chinese mitten crab is a large crab native to Asia that breeds in estuaries but migrates up into freshwater rivers to grow. It has spread through hundreds of miles of river in California's Sacramento River system after an introduction into San Francisco Bay. Last summer, these crabs were discovered in Chesapeake Bay and scientists are surveying its tributary rivers to see if it is too late to stop its first East Coast establishment. If introduced undetected into Rhode Island's estuarine waters, this species could quickly spread through the Blackstone and Taunton river systems in Massachusetts, eating or otherwise competing with native crustaceans, mollusks and fish and digging foot-long burrows that break down fragile river banks. Mitten crabs can also act as an intermediate host for a fluke, a kind of worm and human lung parasite.

Reasonable measures taken by Rhode Island to control biological pollution in its environment could save us from calamity. They would also make it easier to hold Massachusetts to a high standard with regard to controlling water pollution. That's why the Rhode Island Natural History Survey, a nonprofit group founded to foster communication and coordination among naturalists, has been working to develop an Invasive Species Preparedness Strategy for Rhode Island. Using

a minimum of new resources, this plan would coordinate existing agencies, researchers and data networks to provide a prudent person's bare minimum capability for invasive-species prevention, monitoring, and response.

Elements of the plan include a public-education effort aimed at prevention and early detection, a reporting network and database, a review of regulatory tools, and advanced planning for a coordinated, interagency response once an invasion is detected. Although Governor Carcieri's own Bays, Rivers, and Watersheds Coordination Team has embraced this plan as a high environmental priority, it has yet to receive any funding and the prospects in this budget year seem dim. For more information on invasive species in Rhode Island and RINHS's Invasive Preparedness Strategy, visit www.rinhs.org/invasives.

What is the value of prevention? Even a very expensive invasive prevention and monitoring program would not be perfect. The next horribly destructive invasive species could be introduced anywhere, from any source. But when you start with virtually no preparedness, a little could go a long way. And for a patch of moral high ground on the subject of bi-state pollution, it's cheap real estate.

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