



Mark J. Belton, Secretary
Maryland Department of Natural Resources
580 Taylor Ave, Annapolis MD 21401

June 1, 2016

Dear Secretary Belton,

The cownose ray bowfishing contests held on the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay last June have generated a great deal of public outrage, as exemplified by the more than 136,000 people who have signed a petition opposing these killing contests.¹ Native to the Chesapeake Bay, cownose rays are beloved animals who are integral and beneficial constituents of the Bay ecosystem. Despite the substantial public opposition to the rays being slaughtered, and despite well-publicized scientific findings vindicating the rays and warning of their vulnerability to human predation,² at least two such contests have been announced to take place in Maryland this month.³ We are calling on the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to take urgent action to preclude any and all such contests.

Allegations that the rays are responsible for the decreases in oyster populations have been refuted by the report issued from the scientific workshop on cownose rays which was held at the National Aquarium last October.⁴ The shellfish fisheries were declining for decades due to pollution, disease, loss of habitat, and overcollection for human consumption.⁵ Recent dietary studies show oysters and hard clams are not a significant part of the rays' diet.^{6,7} "Cownose rays have been a convenient scapegoat for the insults that we've brought on a lot of these shellfish populations in the past," explains Dean Grubbs, Research Faculty and the Associate Director of Research at the Florida State University Coastal and Marine Laboratory and President of the American Elasmobranch Society.⁸ Oyster populations have, in fact, been increasing, with hundreds of thousands of bushels of them collected in the past few years in comparison to tens of thousands of bushels in the preceding years.⁹

The allegations have been further refuted, along with the claim that cownose rays are overpopulating, by another recent scientific report.¹⁰ These reports also warn of the high vulnerability of the ray population to human predation due to their late maturity, lengthy gestation, and low reproductive potential. (Bowfishers seek the heaviest rays, most of whom will be pregnant females.) Marine scientists have, in fact, for years been urging Atlantic states -- Maryland and Virginia in particular-- to take immediate action to protect the threatened

cownose ray population.¹¹ A diminished cownose ray population would in all probability have difficulty recovering, as is tragically the case with the Brazilian cownose ray population.¹² This also detrimentally affects the entire ecosystems of these migratory fish.

According to the latter report: "Recent reported annual landings of cownose rays in Chesapeake Bay have been as high as 186 metric tons. By comparison, the current U.S. federal quota for 'Aggregated Large Coastal Sharks' in the Atlantic is 168.9 metric tons." This astounding figure does not include rays who are incidentally caught and discarded from other fisheries, those killed recreationally, or rays who are caught elsewhere along their migratory path.¹³

Gliding along the water's surface, the gentle, graceful rays are easy targets for bowfishers who ride right up on them, shoot them with arrows, impale them, haul them from the water, mercilessly beat them, pile them up to suffocate, and worse. The flesh of rays is said to be hard to cook and has a strong urine flavor.¹⁴ The bodies of caught rays are instead dumped back into the water or tossed into dumpsters. Video documentation of these atrocities is at: <https://youtu.be/k2H-aY-5s6I> and <https://youtu.be/KyLZaOS9zDs>

There is no valid justification for this wanton, egregiously inhumane and ecologically reckless animal abuse. The Izaak Walton League of America has published an article condemning the contests,¹⁵ as has Smithsonian Institution,¹⁶ National Geographic,¹⁷ and others. The Chesapeake Bay Office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Chesapeake Bay Office (NCBO) states: "NCBO does not currently support developing a fishery or using other methods to reduce the number of cownose rays in the Bay."¹⁸

We call on the Maryland DNR to preclude these contests by deeming cownose rays to be a species in need of conservation, or in whatever other way(s) necessary, to prevent these massacres from being carried out. We look forward to your response informing us of the action you plan to take. We will gladly assist in any way possible. Thank you for your concern and consideration.

Sincerely,



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1. <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/451/235/724/stop-the-mutilation-of-stingrays/>
2. See "Media Coverage": <http://fishfeel.org/stop-savage-killing-contests/>
3. <http://fishfeel.org/wp-content/uploads/raytournament061116.png> and:
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16. Cutlip, Kimbra, Cownose Rays Acquitted: Not Guilty of Decimating Chesapeake Oysters, *Smithsonian Insider*, April 11, 2016: <http://insider.si.edu/2016/04/cownose-rays-aquitted-not-guilty-decimating-chesapeake-oysters/>

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