

The Southampton Press

EASTERN EDITION

www.27east.com

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2021

\$1.50

EDITORIALS

The First To Go

It's becoming more and more clear that the devastation of the region's bay scallop population is a complex matter that won't be easily solved, if it can be solved at all. But it seems likely that one looming factor is most to blame: climate change.

This fall's harvest is still months away, but a recent survey of the scallop stocks undertaken by the marine biologists at Cornell Cooperative Extension Marine Program shows another grim summer in the Peconic Bay system. The shellfish is doing its best to survive as a species in most local waters, spawning at what might be a record rate this summer — but the adult scallops are dying off well before harvest, nine out of 10 of them in most places.

There's a great deal of speculation in answering why. But there is a unifying cause. It seems that water temperature in summer is simply too high for adult scallops to survive, post-spawning. There are other factors likely at play, too — in the past, pollution, harmful algae, parasites, disease and predators were all considered — and the cumulative effect is probably the issue. But water temperature alone will kill the adults, and it seems to be doing so, reliably, every summer now.

It's alarming and dismaying to think that the first real victims of climate change locally are the tiny creatures on which a shellfishing industry is built. Their ultimate demise, if it comes, means the demise of that industry as well.

But it also highlights the fact that climate change is not some esoteric concept happening in other parts of the world. It's happening here, having an impact here, and that's already started and is not likely to let up without a robust response, globally.

In that way, the scallops are like little canaries in the coal mines of our bays: They seem likely to be the first to go, the first to be significantly impacted by the warming temperatures that are being measured all over the world. The “monster numbers” of young scallops, as one researcher put it, are a sign of hope — and a reminder that all is not yet lost.