

WHY A CLEAN NEWTOWN CREEK MATTERS!

By Tina Posterli



Ever since he started patrolling Newtown Creek in 2002, Riverkeeper patrol boat captain John Lipscomb has seen people cast their rods into the creek and pull out fish and crabs with the intention of eating them. In a melting pot like New York City, where many immigrant newcomers are accustomed to subsistence fishing safely in their home waters, there is nothing out of the ordinary with this picture. In fact, it's completely natural and reasonable for people to want to use our waterways for the purposes for which they were intended. This is especially the case when most of the people fishing and crabbing in waterways like Newtown Creek are relying on what they catch to feed their families because they don't have enough money for groceries. However, these people are crabbing and fishing without having access to a crucial fact, that what they are catching is contaminated with toxins that have been pouring into the creek and other parts of the Hudson for decades. At Newtown creek, there is one sign placed at the main public access area at Manhattan Avenue Park stating that the waterway is unsafe for swimming and fishing. The problem is that this sign is only printed in



English, and there is a substantial Hispanic population living in the area who cannot read it.

This is a scenario that occurs along every waterway of New York City with people fishing and crabbing in the Gowanus Canal, the East River, the lower Hudson, the Harlem River and all points in between. Beryl Thurman, Executive Director/President of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy of Staten Island, Inc. (NSWC), is experiencing a similar situation in the Kill Van Kull and Arthur Kill. Both of these waterways are in violation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Water Act and residents are crabbing and fishing from these polluted waters and feeding their families and themselves with this poisonous seafood. In Staten Island, the problem is more wide spread. It's not only the immigrant population who are subsistence fishing and crabbing, it's also people whose families

have lived there for generations and all of their lives. NSWC has requested fish advisory signs, knowing that it won't stop residents from crabbing and fishing in these waters, but at least they will have information to be able to make an informed decision. New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the EPA will be putting up fish advisory signs on New York City properties that have waterfront access points to the north shore, but according to Thurman, "Everyone is moving too slowly, and I'm afraid they won't be in time to prevent all of these toxins from harming people. We need public service announcements on TV and the radio that make people aware that the Kill Van Kull and Arthur Kill are in violation of the Clean Water Act—that there are real issues in these concerns and that these waterways have the same contaminants as Newark Bay and Lower Hudson River."

While multilingual signage that properly informs people about the risks of eating contaminated seafood is essential, there is a larger issue at hand. It's not where a fish is caught, but rather what it's eaten all of its life that leads to toxic contamination. A fish in Newtown Creek will feed there, and then migrate back out into the East River and vice versa. "What really needs to happen is that we need to clean these toxic waters and their sediments and stop dumping pollution into them until fish are safe to eat," said Lipscomb. "Hunger is as powerful a driver as nicotine addiction. Just like the warning label on a cigarette pack, putting up signs might deter some people from fishing and crabbing in toxic waters, but it won't stop most of them. Until the water is clean, people will continue to pay the price for the violations of big industry who found an easy way out by dumping their toxic sludge into our waters for decades."

Riverkeeper believes that every citizen deserves not only a clean river, but also a way to experience and enjoy it. With your help, we are working toward the day when people can fish and recreate in our waterways without worry. ■