

The Boston Globe

Morgan Hughes | September 19, 2018

Mass die-off of clams fouls Revere Beach



Tim Dibble of the Department of Conservation and Recreation used a tractor while burying Atlantic surf clams on Revere Beach in Revere

REVERE— Hundreds of thousands of Atlantic surf clams washed up on Revere Beach in recent days, creating a strange spectacle on the popular seashore Wednesday and a foul-smelling coda to the summer.

Authorities were trying to determine the cause of the mass die-off. Just before midday, as waves crashed nearby, bulldozers dispatched by the state Department of Conservation and Recreation dug large trenches in the sand to bury the juvenile shellfish in an “environmentally friendly manner.”

It was the third and largest event of its kind involving surf clams this summer, and similar events have occurred in the last 10 years at Nantasket Beach Reservation and Ipswich Bay, the DCR said.

The Division of Marine Fisheries is analyzing the clams and expects to have preliminary results in the coming days that might point to a cause.

“I’m puzzled by this,” said Bruce Berman, a spokesman for Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, an environmental advocacy group. “There have been shellfish kills, and they’re increasing in my opinion, as we deal with results of climate change.”

The changing water temperatures and fresh/saltwater mix of the ocean could have killed the “particularly sensitive” clams, said Berman, who was at Revere Beach on Wednesday morning. He also said a particular type of algae could have clogged the gills of the clams and caused them to suffocate.

“The extent and duration of this event are fairly unique in my experience, though that doesn’t mean they’re unique in the world,” Berman said. “But if they keep coming up on the beach every tide, it’s an uphill battle.”

The live ones closest to the water, Berman said, have at least some chance of being swept back into the ocean and surviving.

The die-off was the latest in the region to befall marine life this summer.

In July, tens of thousands of menhaden washed up in the Mystic River in Everett and Somerville, possibly after fish were driven into shallow, warmer waters by a predator. In Maine last month, a large number of fish — also menhaden — washed up on Old Orchard Beach.

At least four dead whales have turned up on New England shores or off the coast this month.

In Revere, the stench permeated the streets, homes, and businesses as far as a mile away from the beach. Roving gangs of sea gulls seized on the opportunity to dig through the mounds of shells in search of live clams to eat.

“Everyone is trying to figure out what is going on; from what it appears, it is an unprecedented event,” said state Representative RoseLee Vincent, who lives on Revere Beach. “I think it’s concerning, and we’re all trying to get a handle on it.”

Vincent said she had heard concerns about the mass die-off from people all over the city.

Gail Scibelli of Winthrop was running on her regular route about a mile from the beach when she noticed the “awful” smell.

“I just hope we’re OK from an environmental perspective,” Scibelli said. “Though people sometimes make fun of Revere Beach, a lot of us enjoy it. It’s still a very nice beach, and it’s a place where people like to congregate, and I think people want the health of it preserved.”

Cassandra Coppola, who has worked at Kell’s Kreme for 10 summers, said the smell hasn’t turned anyone away from the ice cream shop, though some have complained.

“It reminds me of that apocalypse feel — birds falling out of the sky and fish washing up on the beach,” she said.