



Tangier Island Just Scraping By

THE HARD-BITTEN WATERMEN OF TANGIER ISLAND
SOLDIER ON AGAINST A HOST OF CHALLENGES

A deep freeze is hard on Tangier Island watermen. When the ice gets too thick, icebreakers have to open the channels.

R

Rush hour on Virginia's Tangier Island begins about 3:30 a.m. On land, the only tip-offs that people are stirring are the switched-on kitchen lights and the faint aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafting on the predawn breeze. Down at the waterfront, the sound of cascading water pouring from the crab shanties is broken only by the blappity-blappity-blappity-blappity of diesels from the deadrise workboats slowly motoring out into Chesapeake Bay to work the crab grounds.

Indeed, life on Tangier Island ebbs and flows with the blue crab and oyster fisheries. Washed by fertile, emerald-green waters — a perfect intermingling of sweet water from the Chesapeake's tributaries and a briny influx from the Atlantic — Tangier's wild, marshy islands and their expansive surrounding grass flats support what is widely considered one of the most prolific blue crab fisheries in the United States. And its oysters are deemed some of the Bay's finest.

Shaped like a fishhook, Tangier Island is maybe 3 miles long and a mile wide — and getting smaller. The total area of the island is only about 1.2 square miles. It sits stoically, nearly in the middle of Chesapeake Bay, about 12 miles off the Eastern Shore of Virginia and just 3 to 4 feet above sea level. It's so remote that outsiders can only visit by boat, ferry or airplane. Folks don't own automobiles here; they travel the narrow, paved paths that crisscross the island in golf carts. There's one school on the island and one medical clinic. You can't buy alcohol on Tangier, and if you're smart you'll be discreet about drinking any you've brought with you. Religious faith is important to many of the island's residents.

About 450 people call Tangier Island home, among them many Pruitts, Crocketts, Thomases, Parks and Evanses. Hundreds of years of isolation means residents speak with a thick-tongued accent handed down by their Cornish ancestors, a sort of Old English that has been described as an Elizabethan or Restoration-era English accent. Though tourism is a major component of Tangier's economy, the rhythm of the place is dictated by crabbing in summer and oystering in winter. About 60 to 70 Tangier watermen remain to work the plentiful waters around the island. Ranging in age from 12 to 85, these watermen are a link to Tangier's storied past. They also represent the only hope for the island's uncertain future, one that is threatened by sea-level rise and a shrinking and aging population, among other challenges.

From the Boats to the Shanties

Capt. John Smith is credited with discovering the islands in this area, including Tangier, in 1608, although the Pocomoke Indians had intermittently occupied the area for centuries before he arrived. Local lore says a Cornishman named John Crockett and his eight sons were the first to settle Tangier, in 1686. By 1800 an Accomack County census showed that 79 people lived on the islands. Demand for seafood in the late 19th century brought prosperity and people to Tangier Island, but disease and overfishing caused its decline in the 1940s. As the richness of the waters surrounding Tangier declined, so did the population, which peaked around 1,500 in the early 20th century.



(Clockwise from top) Winter dredging for oysters is tough work; selling to a buyboat; Tangier is maybe 3 miles long and a mile wide — and getting smaller.





*"When I started oystering, we were getting three dollars a bushel up the Bay. Now they are getting forty to fifty dollars."
Mark Crockett, 72*



*"In the summer, I fish up soft crabs in my husband's shanty. Tending to the shanty is a full-time job in itself."
Amanda Charnock Parks, 36*

Today those arriving on the ferry will first notice the many crab shanties — patchwork clapboard shacks with docks, set up on stilts in the water. Most watermen use them as places to stow and work on their crabbing gear and boats; water cascades from other shanties, a tip-off to their water-filled tables, which are used to shed blue crabs for the soft-shell market.

A soft-shell crab is one that's between suits, so to speak. When a blue crab is ready to shed its hard exoskeleton (the only way it can grow larger) it goes into hiding to avoid predators, usually crawling up into the shelter of grassy shallows. Tangier has hundreds of acres of those shallows surrounding it.

On this day, in the predawn darkness, Leon McMann, age 85 and the oldest working waterman on Tangier, is part of a formation of scrapers working off the island. McMann's boat, *Charlotte B*, is like the rest of the scrape boats here — unique to the Chesapeake and purpose-built for running in as little as 2 to 3 feet of water, trailing a pair of toothless dredges that scoop up peeler crabs hiding in the eelgrass.

He pulls up a dredge with his weathered hands, empties its grass-and peeler-crab-laden contents into a gunwale sorting bin and sets the dredge back over. McMann says he can sell peeler crabs on the island for an average price of about 50 cents each. A productive day for a scraper here is about 400 peelers.

Just south of McMann are a skipper and mate on the *Cap'n Parker*, a traditional Chesapeake deadrise workboat. The pair methodically work a line of peeler pots — cube-like traps made of chicken wire and welded rebar designed to tempt peeler crabs looking for a place to hide and shed. Like McMann's scrape harvest, the *Cap'n Parker's* catch is destined for Tangier's shedding houses. "Nice day today," the skipper says. "Not many crabs, tho."

Back at the shanties, a number of these peeler crabs end up at Tangier Island Mayor James "Ooker" Eskridge's weathered crab shanty, where he buys and sheds peeler crabs for the soft-shell market. Eskridge's place is easy to spot: A large ichthys is painted prominently on its front, with the words "We Believe Jesus" inside it. Inside the weather-beaten, patchwork shanty are Eskridge's many junkyard cats, each named after conservative Supreme Court justices and political commentators. Samuel Alito and Ann Coulter rub up against my leg as I peruse Eskridge's shedding tables.

Shedding soft-shell crabs is an artisanal practice in patience that requires round-the-clock work. Peeler crabs are first sorted and placed by size into shallow tables that are constantly bathed in water from the creek below. Eskridge and his helper monitor the crabs around the clock because once a blue crab casts off its old shell, it begins to harden almost immediately. After it's been plucked from the water and packed, the hardening slows significantly. That's what makes for the delicacy known as soft-shell crabs the world around.

"Ain't always the easiest way to go," Eskridge says, "but it's mine, and I ain't got no boss to be pestering me, neither. Nothing else I'd rather do, really."

Hard Crabs and Potting

Morning fades to afternoon, and just downstream from Eskridge's place an aluminum deadrise workboat from Lindy's Seafood in Woolford, Maryland, is tied to a shanty. Workboat after workboat bellies up to her starboard side to sell the day's catch of hard crabs. She's a large boat, capable of hauling 700 to 800 bushels of hard crabs.



"I'm a crab house guy. I tend to crab shanties during the crabbing season."
Duane Crockett, 38



"There are not many jobs that I haven't had. I worked on the water, then we had a bad year for crabs and I went to work with Chesapeake Bay Foundation for 19 years. I ran the ferry service to the island. I was a better mate than a captain."
David Crockett, 62



"When I am not at school, I am working on the oysters. With the money I save, I am going to buy an outboard for my skiff."
Samuel Asbury Pruitt Parks, 12

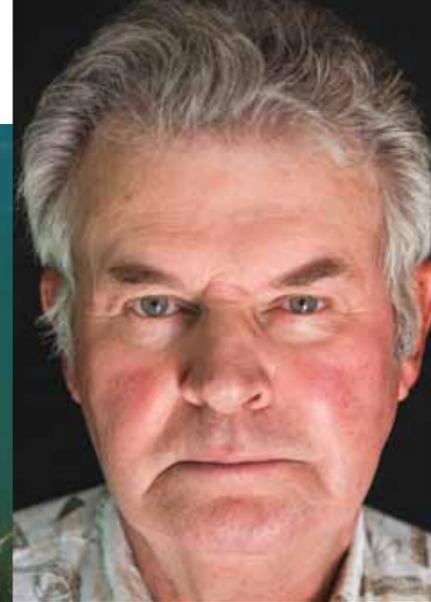


Rhythms of island life: scraping for crabs and dealing with pervasive erosion, which sometimes leaves headstones exposed in an area known as the "Uppards."





Compatriots: a rockfish and a blue crab in the shallows of Chesapeake Bay.



"I built workboats for watermen up and down the Chesapeake. Now, in my retirement, I run the Delvin K, buying oysters from dredgers and moving shell."
Jerry Pruitt, 71



"During the summer, I work on a crab boat. When I am back in school, I guide waterfowl hunting trips during my free time."
Cameron Evans, 16



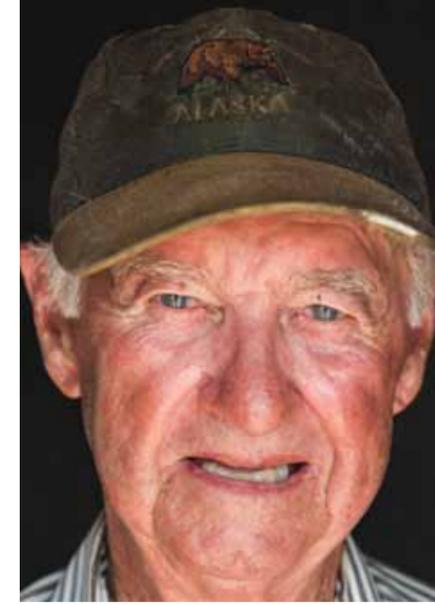
"As the mayor of Tangier, if I am not eel potting, peeler potting or shedding crabs, I'm tied up with the island's politics. There is always something to do."
James "Ooker" Eskridge



"My work now is for Lindy's Seafood. We come down from Maryland six days a week in the crab buyboat. I won't retire. I'll work 'til I die."
William Davis, 64



"I'm the last World War II veteran alive on the island. When I got back from the war in 1946, I started fishing for toads [northern puffers]. When we started catching, no one ate them. I turned them into the best eating fish in the Bay. Now, there ain't no toads."
Jack Thorne, 92



"I don't know why I still work, but I do. I started crab scraping when I was 14 — doing the same thing now. Crab scraping is a common job; it's a 24/7 commitment. You're always tending to the shanty. The crabs don't care if you're sleeping."
Leon McMann, 85

"How mahn-ee you got there today, Johnny?" the Lindy's skipper barks to a captain pulling up alongside.

"Near 20 booshel," the skipper says. "Turtles done smashed dahn a few of 'em pots, tho," he adds, referring to the damage sea turtles can do to crab pots when they try to get in and eat the crabs. These hard-shell blue crabs are generally caught farther off Tangier with large, chicken-wire-wrapped pots framed by welded rebar. The pots are baited with menhaden and dropped overboard in long strings that crisscross the Bay.

Boats stack up, creating a traffic jam in the harbor surpassed only by the line of deadrise workboats waiting to fill up at the fuel dock. This is the afternoon rush on Tangier Island.

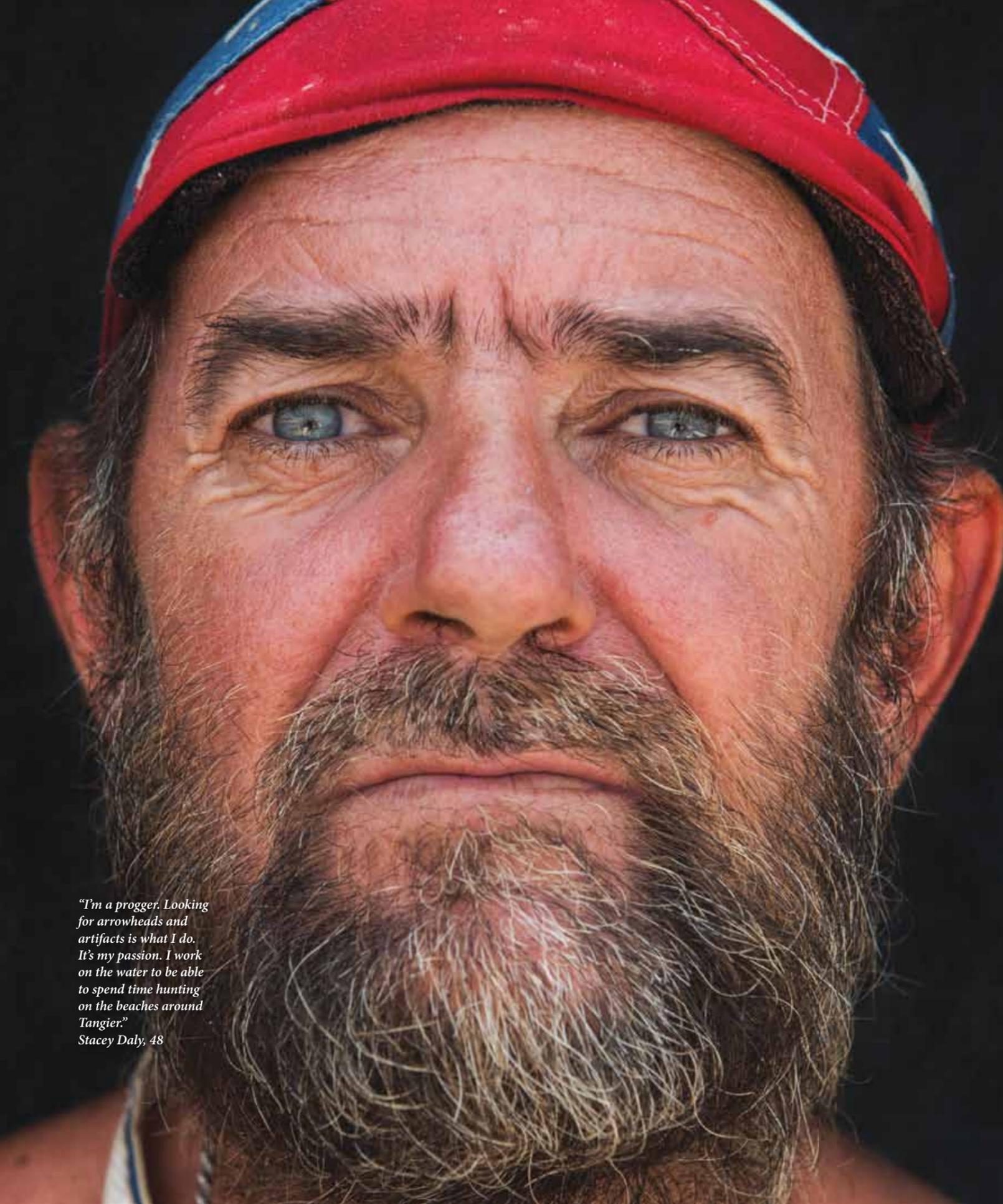
The price Lindy's pays varies daily, based heavily on supply and demand. Large jimmies (male crabs) fetch the highest prices; skippers can get as much as \$100 for a bushel of these "number ones." "Number two," or "cull," males fetch \$50 to \$70, and mature females, known as "sooks," generally go for \$30 to \$40 a bushel. Still, these prices can vary so widely as to be entirely unpredictable, and that makes life financially difficult for watermen in some years.

The crab fishery used to run year-round on Tangier, but that ended when Virginia put a halt to the winter crab dredge fishery five or six years ago. It was a controversial fishery that employed dredges to dig out wintering, fertilized female crabs from the Chesapeake's muddy bottom. A decline in crab populations shut down the fishery, with scientists pointing to the large number of fertilized females the dredges were taking. On the shoulders of the crab season, many Tangier watermen oyster or net rockfish in the winter instead.

The Lone Ranger

The finicky crab fishery and winter oystering are the biggest cogs in the wheel of Tangier's way of life, but other folks attached to the Bay also rely on the island to make a living. One such person is Capt. Kevin Josenhans, essentially the only skipper consistently guiding clients around Tangier Island. He hunts for the speckled trout, striped bass and red drum that feed in and around the island's cuts, shallows and marshy points.

On this hot summer evening, he runs his Jones Brothers Cape Fisher-



*"I'm a progger. Looking for arrowheads and artifacts is what I do. It's my passion. I work on the water to be able to spend time hunting on the beaches around Tangier."
Stacey Daly, 48*



Tangier Mayor and waterman James "Ooker" Eskridge "fish-ing up" soft crabs from one of his tanks.

man 20 north of Tangier to a marshy sliver of land called Goose Island, setting up a drift past a spit off Rum Point. A perfect rip has set up in the shallows off the point, so I fire a Clouser-tipped back cast into the seam, giving it a few moments to soak its way into the tidal current. We set up several drifts this way, repeating the process many times but can't buy a hit. Josenhans points at the fishfinder. "Eighty-nine degrees," he says. "Damn, that's hot. Let's go look at some deeper spots."

South of the island is a long sand spit with structure scattered around it. We begin casting jigs into deeper water. Before we know it, we hear braid spooling off Josenhans' daughter's reel. A few minutes later she brings a beautiful 28-inch striper alongside. We take some photos and send the fish on its way before packing up for port, the sun setting behind us.

Josenhans, like the folks going for shellfish, says his catch has changed with the times. "The quality of the fishery here, especially when it comes to speckled trout, is highly dependent on the type of winters we have," he says. "There have been some big winter kills over the last few years, so it's been a little more challenging to find them consistently. Plus, that water is damn hot. But come fall, things will light up around here like you wouldn't believe. It's a stunning place to fish — my favorite on the Bay."

Future, Unclear

Later that night, down the main road, a typical group of tourists and locals has gathered at Four Brothers Crab House & Ice Cream Deck. Owner Tommy Eskridge echoes what his neighbors have said all day. "Crabbin's gettin' harder and harder every year," he says. "The state busts

us down with regulations, and the prices change so damn much. But the cost of the gear, fuel, boats ... they keep goin' up. It ain't no wonder that so many kids leave the island these days."

Despite the odds that Eskridge mentions, boys such as 12-year-old Sam Pruitt Parks have no intention of leaving. He and waterman Alan Parks worked an oyster aquaculture lease earlier that day, one of only a few such leases on Tangier. "I'm the youngest waterman on the island," Sam says. "This is what I want to do, and I'm not going nowhere." He'd saved up enough money to buy an outboard for his first workboat, a small fishing skiff.

Still, Tangier's population is declining and growing older. More and more young people leave for the mainland each year, tempted by better-paying jobs and an easier way of life. And the people are not the only thing disappearing. The island has been eroding for centuries, but now pieces of Tangier are washing away with ever-increasing speed. Some recent studies predict that Tangier will be underwater as early as 2050. There's talk of a new jetty, but that remains an open question. The island is losing about 10 feet of shoreline a year. The subject is touchier than presidential politics or fishery regulations. As one local woman puts it, sea-level rise is more dire than the news from the marshes. "Even if the crabs are still around in 50 years, I don't know if the island will be."

Tangier and its people remain in flux, proudly defiant, come hell or high water, or both. "Only God knows what's to happen to Tangier Island," says the cashier at the general store. "People been sayin' we're gonna be wiped away for years, but we're still here." 🦀