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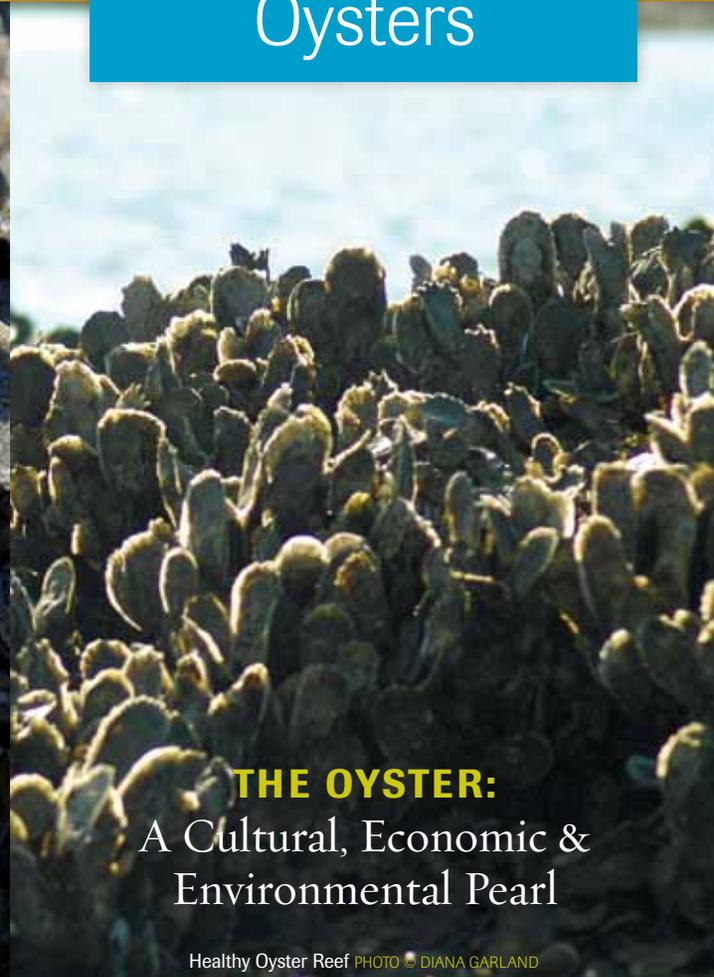
The Nature Conservancy: (252) 441-2525

Restoring North Carolina's Oysters

Oyster Reef Constructed by TNC PHOTO © AARON MCCALL/TNC



PHOTO © N.C. DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES



THE OYSTER:
A Cultural, Economic & Environmental Pearl

Healthy Oyster Reef PHOTO © DIANA GARLAND

“Oysters, great and small, are found almost in every Creek and Gut of Salt-Water, and are very good and well-relish’d. The large Oysters are excellent, pickled.”

– Explorer John Lawson *A New Voyage to Carolina*, 1709



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Oysters were once plentiful in North Carolina waters. Native Americans relied on them for food. Archeologists found mounds of shells, called middens, which were left behind by these early residents.



In 1586, at the request of Sir Walter Raleigh, scientist Thomas Harriot traveled to Roanoke Island where he described the sheer number of oysters: “There is one shallowe sounde along the coast....where for the space of many miles together in length and two to three miles breadth, the ground is nothing else.”

More than a century later, in his “A New Voyage to Carolina,” explorer John Lawson observed: “Oysters, great and small, are found almost in every Creek and Gut of Salt-Water, and are very good and well-relish’d. The large Oysters are excellent, pickled.”

Oysters played a significant role in the colonial economy. Coastal North Carolinians traded bushels of oysters for other supplies.

After the Civil War, oysters’ role as a commodity grew. Oysters that had once been bartered for supplies were sold for cash in a market that craved plump east coast oysters. Oyster houses were built along the coast and large

canneries followed to supply northeastern markets with North Carolina oysters.

A struggle sprang up between the folks who harvested in shallow waters with tongs, who were largely North Carolinians, and the folks who harvested in deeper waters with motorized dredges, who often came from out-of-state. Thus began the “Oyster War of 1891,” where armed North Carolinians, supported by their legislature and governor, threatened to shoot out-of-state dredgers.

The war ON oysters began in the next century – unsustainable harvesting depleted oyster beds and onshore development, timbering and agricultural uses degraded habitat. In 1987, a new problem hit oysters; Dermo, a disease caused by a parasite that doesn’t affect humans, wiped out large numbers. North Carolina’s oyster population has shrunk to less than 10 percent of its historic range.

Today, The Nature Conservancy is working to restore oyster reefs along our shoreline for a number of reasons. Many of us love a plump North Carolina oyster whether it is raw, steamed or fried. But, there are other reasons for restoring oyster reefs that affect even the vegetarians among us.

Oyster reefs provide habitat for marine life. Oysters filter water, improving its quality. And, in a world where sea level is rising, they provide valuable protection for shoreline – building new oyster reefs will lessen wave action and reduce shoreline erosion.

The Nature Conservancy began its oyster reef restoration work in 2002, partnering with the NC Division of Marine Fisheries to establish some of the first oyster sanctuaries in the state and creating an oyster shell recycling program



with local business. Today, that work continues with volunteers helping the Conservancy bag oyster shells, which are placed in water to attract young oysters, called spats. The Conservancy is also using a kind of rock called marl as the basis for new oyster reefs which has similar properties to oyster shell.

Our goal? Well, we would love a return to the condition that John Lawson described in 1709, where healthy oysters reefs are found all along North Carolina’s shoreline – restoring a cultural, economic and environmental pearl.

from left: Building Reef PHOTO © MIKE HORAK/TNC; Oyster Reef PHOTO © AARON MCCALL/TNC; Volunteer Juan Santos Bagging Oyster Shells PHOTO © DEBBIE CRANE/TNC