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Seafood at gunpoint: Why one N.J. group raises oysters on a naval base



Field technician Mitch Mickley is handed a string of clamshells covered in young oysters to return them underwater as part of NY/NJ Baykeeper's oyster restoration project at Naval Weapons Station Earle. (Photo by S.P. Sullivan | NJ Advance Media)

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LEONARDO — Past the gates and security checkpoints, down the miles of reinforced pier where train cars load ordnance aboard warships, beneath the waves and the watchful eye of the United States Navy, sit the world's most heavily-guarded shellfish.

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For three years, the environmental group NY/NJ Baykeeper has been growing tankfuls of oysters at Naval Weapons Station Earle, a military base in the Leonardo section of Middletown Township. It's one of the few places in New Jersey they say they can raise the shellfish without running afoul of state regulations.

"Here, nobody can get into our oysters to poach them," said Meredith Comi, the oyster restoration program director for the group, sitting in a small skiff headed into protected waters to check on the project this week. "Because they are guarded by guns."

The Keyport-based nonprofit, along with Rutgers University, is studying how oysters can help improve New Jersey's polluted waterways, but state regulations limit where it can conduct such experiments. In 2010, the Department of Environmental Protection **banned research-related cultivation** of shellfish in the polluted waters of the New York/New Jersey harbor and Raritan Bay, arguing that tainted shellfish ran the risk of entering the food supply, presenting a direct threat to human health and the region's multi-million dollar seafood industry.

"If someone were to get sick from eating shellfish from contaminated waters, there's a risk people might stop buying or eating New Jersey grown shellfish," DEP Commissioner Bob Martin said at the time.

Baykeeper argues, however, that those polluted waterways are the places that most need oysters, prolific filter-feeders that have proven effective at removing contamination from the environment.

OYSTERS UNDER GUARD

When the 2010 ban was put in place, the group was forced to destroy their small oyster colony in Keyport, tossing some 50,000 research oysters into dumpsters and spraying them down with bleach, Comi said.

Eventually, **the state issued the group permits** to conduct their research at the heavily guarded NWS Earle, where seafood poachers dare not tread. There, Baykeeper set up incubators beneath **Ohmsett**, a 600-foot water tank where the U.S. Department of Interior tests oil spill response equipment on the base.

They raise them from brown sludge-covered larvae bundles in a row of tanks the size of small swimming pools, where the larvae affix themselves to strings of clamshells or so-called "reef balls" and "oyster castles" made of marine-grade concrete, which will be relocated to the waters near the pier to mature.



After Hurricane Sandy, New Jersey sticks with oyster ban, while New York hails 'em as "heroes"

How - and why - did 50,000 living oysters wind up in a dumpster? NJ Advance Media commentator Brian Donohue examines the State of New Jersey's continued ban on oyster restoration projects in the north Jersey waters amid a push by other east coast states to greatly expand their efforts to restore oyster populations to combat pollution and storm surges. (Video by Brian Donohue | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com)

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"They find all kinds of stuff to attach to," said Mitch Mickley, a field technician with the group, adding that oysters can be found on discarded tires and other detritus along the shore.

Oyster reefs were once a common sight along the Jersey shore and a vital industry in the region, until over-harvesting, disease and frequent dredging decimated their populations. After decades of decline, **the state's commercial oyster industry is returning**, though it faces its own regulatory hurdles and other challenges.

"You change the ecosystem dramatically when you add [oysters] back in,

Bill Schultz, the Raritan Riverkeeper, said the shore is littered with the evidence of how widespread they once were.

"If you go on a beach in South

Amboy at low tide, you'll find oyster shells that are this big," he said, holding his fingers about 10 inches apart. "They're huge. They're antique — God knows how old they are. But you can find remnants of these huge oysters that grew in this area."

Baykeeper's project is one of just a few remaining research projects in New Jersey aimed at enlisting oysters to clean up the state's waters, help prevent erosion of beaches and protect the shore from storms. The American Littoral Society recently **released 21,000 young oysters** into Barnegat Bay — a waterbody **with its own troubles**, though not as polluted as the Hudson and Raritan — hoping to clean up the water to allow other species to thrive.

An adult oyster can filter 50 gallons of water a day, removing nitrogen and other pollutants in the process. Multiply that by the thousands that can populate a healthy reef, these groups say, and you have a vital service being provided to an ecosystem.

REVIVING ECOSYSTEMS

This week, Baykeeper dropped another half million oyster larvae into tanks on the naval base, where they'll grow in a controlled environment before being transferred to waters just off the 2.9-mile finger pier complex that juts into Sandy Hook Bay.

Before the transfer, Mickley plunged into the water wearing flippers and goggles to check up on the oysters that have already made the trip, some of which are now three years old. He resurfaced with a heavy reef ball, a concrete globe covered in a dozen different species of snails, sea sponges and crabs that eek out a living in the nascent oyster colony.

"You change the ecosystem dramatically when you add (oysters) back in," Comi said, examining the ball from aboard the skiff. "There's much more diversity."

innovation' initiative

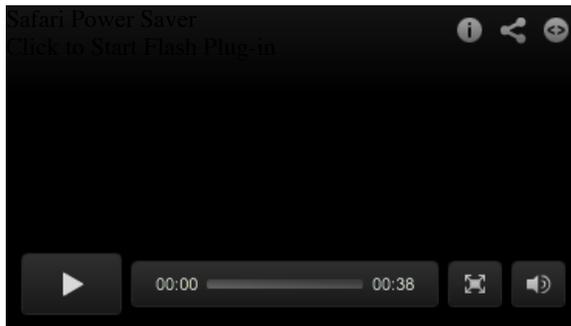
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Baykeeper on oysters

Meredith Comi, head of the oyster restoration project at NY/NJ Baykeeper, describes a small colony of oysters and other marine life found in their test site at NWS Earle.

A growing body of research also shows oyster reefs are a kind of critical infrastructure. After Hurricane Sandy, federal agencies like the Army Corps of Engineers **have recommended** beefing up reefs to protect shorelines from storm surge and erosion.

A bill before the state legislature (**S2617**), introduced by State Sen. Gerald Cardinale (R-Bergen), would overturn the research ban and allow Baykeeper and other groups to expand their work back into other polluted waterways, given certain protections are put in place. That bill, first introduced in 2010, was reintroduced this year, and is awaiting a vote.

Until then, Navy boats stand sentry at NWS Earle, protecting the bivalves like a national security secret.

"Rising sea levels have become a real issue for us, and the Navy has a huge interest in maintaining the health of our waterways," said Bill Addison, a public affairs officer for the base. "That's our business, and if they're contaminated, we have a problem."

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2 days ago

Whats with the inflammatory headline? "PROTECTED BY GUNS"

actually, they are protected by GUARDS. in the military.

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artclam

2 days ago

"An adult oyster can filter 50 gallons of water a day, removing nitrogen and other pollutants in the process."

Nitrogen is a pollutant? It's the major component of air which naturally dissolves in any water exposed to air. Perhaps nitrates and nitrites are the pollutants.

Like Reply



Anthony Agro

2 days ago

@artclam Excess nitrogen particularly from fertilizer runoff is devastating to the environment. Sure it's necessary hence its inclusion in fertilizer but to much of a good thing is very bad.

Anyone with a dog can attest to the nitrogen burns that can result when you dog urinates on your lawn.

Like Reply



nik1716

2 days ago

@artclam Nitrate and Nitrite are forms of Nitrogen. While some is needed to sustain aquatic growth, too much of it is where the problems are. Nitrogen (as well as phosphates) from fertilizer runoff is a huge problem for any body of water. Combine nitrogen, low water turnover rates, hot temps with lower rain fall you'd then get algae blooms which deplete the water of oxygen, resulting in the aquatic life dying off.

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