

Restoring lost oyster beds will take time

Shellfisheries extinct since '20s

Published in the Asbury Park Press 02/10/05

By KIRK MOORE
STAFF WRITER

WEST LONG BRANCH -- Bringing oysters back to Raritan Bay and New York Harbor waters will be a generational task, and supporters should think of it as ecological restoration to liven up a harbor bottom deadened by siltation and dredging, shellfish experts said at Monmouth University Wednesday.

"We're not talking at this point about restoring a fishery that disappeared in the 1920s," said Frank Steimle, a scientist at the National Marine Fisheries James J. Howard Laboratory at Sandy Hook.

Rather, Steimle said, the goal of building new oyster reefs in the harbor should be to recover "a lost fish habitat . . . They provide a lot of nooks and crannies, hard surfaces for sponges and other organisms. It makes a nice hiding place for juvenile fish."

The NY/NJ Baykeeper conservation group sponsored its oyster restoration conference at the university to build a new alliance for the cause among government agencies and community activists, said Debbie Dalton, the Baykeeper oyster program manager.

"The long-term goal is to create a regional plan for oyster restoration," Dalton said. "Baykeeper has been doing this on a small scale since 1997, so we're really at a crossroads."

Some natural historians have suggested the Hudson-Raritan rivers estuary may have had up to 350 square miles of oyster beds before European settlement — an area four times that of Manhattan, Steimle said. Large scale commercial oyster culture started in the 1800s and peaked around the advent of the 20th century when millions of pounds were harvested annually.

Conservation groups like the idea of bringing back oysters because the bivalves are filter feeders — removing some of the algae in bay waters — and the shellfish beds shelter other marine life. Volunteers have built oysters reefs at Red Bank, Keyport and Liberty Island in the upper harbor, and raise seedling oysters in floats at private docks.

The conference, which continues today, is looking at what it would take to expand the effort and at lessons learned from shellfish restoration projects in Chesapeake Bay and on the Long Island shore.

"What do we want to restore? Is it fisheries rehabilitation, or is it ecological restoration?" Mark Lukenbach, a professor at the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences and oyster restoration expert said. In Chesapeake Bay, he said, "the answer is, we want it all."

Lukenbach indicated he thinks the Chesapeake effort is pressing for short-term gains in the beleaguered commercial oyster business at the expense of long-term restoration.

"Stop compromising long-term restoration strategies to prop up a dying industry," he advised. Lukenbach said a restoration effort should focus on a small number of suitable areas, and "go big" with massive plantings, monitoring and bans on removing the shellfish.

But commercial fishermen are also allies of restoration programs, and organizers should seek them out. Andrew Willner, who directs the Baykeeper program, said the harbor's baymen have been watching his group's efforts with interest.

"We have watermen who harvest mostly clams, and they tend to look on this as a cute experiment," he said. "But when you talk to them about it, you can see the dollar signs in their eyes."