

RESTORING THE OYSTER

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WHY IT MATTERS

The native oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) is one of the Chesapeake Bay's keystone species and of great ecological, economic, and historical importance for communities and Tribal nations across the Commonwealth. Oysters filter sediment and remove excess nutrients from the water. **Oyster reefs** create benthic habitat for many marine species from mud worms to predator fish species like striped bass. For centuries, oysters have been harvested from the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries and remain one of the most economically important fisheries. Whole communities and regions are synonymous with the oyster and their cultures were formed around its harvest and processing. Today people travel to Virginia's coastal areas to experience the many benefits oysters provide.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

The Chesapeake (meaning "great shellfish bay" in Algonquin) Bay once boasted oyster reefs so expansive they posed navigation hazards to explorers and watermen. Today, oyster populations in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries remain a fraction of their historical numbers. Overfishing, disease, and pollution have all taken their toll on this keystone species. There was a time when the oyster population in the Bay was so vast, the entire 19 trillion gallons of water could be filtered in less than a week. Today, our current population takes a whole year to filter the Bay.

Today oysters are experiencing a renaissance. Populations are rebounding thanks to oyster aquaculture, wise resource management by the **Virginia Marine Resource Commission (VMRC)**, and investments in oyster reef restoration. As oyster restoration efforts have increased to meet Bay cleanup goals, the available supply of shells has dwindled while the cost per bushel has increased. This has created logistical problems in finding enough shells to complete reef restoration projects.

OPPORTUNITIES

Restoring Virginia's oyster population will continue to require broad partnerships, wise management of the existing oyster resources, and adequate resources. To meet the growing demand for oyster shells, oyster shell recycling programs need to be supported by funding that will incentivize people to donate oyster shells to an organization that is engaged in oyster replenishment projects and exempt from taxation under §501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. \$250,000 per year in the Oyster Replenishment Fund

would allow the Commonwealth to maximize the reuse of the state's oyster shell resources to incentivize shell recycling programs.

In addition, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and the **Virginia Institute of Marine Science** should comprehensively map and sample all oyster-growing areas in the waters of the Commonwealth to complete an oyster stock assessment for the Commonwealth of Virginia.

TOP TAKEAWAYS

As oyster restoration efforts have increased to meet Bay cleanup goals, the available supply of shells has dwindled while the cost per bushel has increased.

Virginia's oyster shell recycling programs incentivize people to donate oyster shells to an organization that is engaged in oyster replenishment projects through tax incentives.

These recycling programs rely on consistent and adequate funding from the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Baby oysters on Recycled Oyster Shell
Photo by Liz Heras

