

The Eastern Oyster

Article & photos by Jack Austin, South Texas Border Chapter

Have you ever heard the phrase, “The world is my oyster?” Well in a way, that applied to me in my childhood, as I grew up in a small town in Virginia that was heavily involved in the harvesting and processing of oysters. The shells of the processed oysters were often so plentiful that they were used to form roadbeds on private roads. This, of course, was back in the 1940s and 50s, when the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries were blessed with an abundance of the tasty bivalves. As a boy, I had a small wooden skiff and a short set of oyster tongs called “nippers,” and I could easily go out into the tidal creek we lived on and harvest a bushel of oysters in an hour or so. I would then either sell them to the “shucking house” operator or get my dad to help me shuck them so Mom could fry them up for a tasty meal accompanied by coleslaw and hush puppies.



Eastern oyster -photo by Anita Westervelt

Unfortunately, the days of abundance of Eastern oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*) were relatively short-lived. Many oyster beds were over-harvested and not replenished with shells for young oysters to attach to. Also, the oysters were attacked by parasitic diseases such as Dermo and MSX. The oyster industry along the central Atlantic Coast suffered greatly from these diseases and almost collapsed completely.

Many efforts were made during the decades of the 70s, 80s and 90s to restore the oysters. Tons and tons of shells were placed on played out oyster beds and seed oysters were imported from waters that had not been invaded by oyster diseases. In addition, a new way of growing and harvesting oysters was developed called oyster farming. Oyster farmers placed tiny seed oysters in wire cages and deposited these in clean water with adequate tidal flow to keep nutrients available to the young oysters so that they could remain healthy. In this way, the seed oysters could grow to market size rapidly, usually within 12 to 15 months. Oyster farming is not only prevalent along the Atlantic Coast but is also practiced along many areas of the Gulf Coast.

Additionally, conservation organizations have been actively building new oyster reefs in tidal waters and planting healthy strains of seed oysters on these new beds which will help restore native oysters to waters that had been devastated by the combination of disease and over-harvesting. Hopefully, we will continue to improve the management of our coastal waters and the wonderful marine species that inhabit them.