

NOTES ON THE RESTORATION OF CONNECTICUT'S SHELLFISHERIES
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT SEA GRANT COLLEGE PROGRAM 1988

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Historical Fisheries

Connecticut's early shellfish history is a rich one. Connecticut's rivers, creeks and bays provided ideal habitats and low salinities that shellfish species such as the oyster prefer. Native Americans, and later European settlers, availed themselves to the vast populations of clams, oysters, mussels and scallops during wintertime when terrestrial food supplies were scarce. Shellfish were gathered with rakes, tongs and hand dredges from shellfish beds along Connecticut's 280 miles of coastline. As Connecticut's population increased, additional demand for shellfish (especially the oyster) promoted more organized and intensive cultivation techniques rather than relying on harvests from wild stocks. Today, this underwater farming of shellfish is called "aquaculture." The oldest and most successful aquaculture industry in Connecticut is the cultivation of the oyster, Crassostrea virginica. This industry dates back to 1855 when private culture rights were first granted as franchises by the state. So successful was this early form of aquaculture that by 1900, thousands of acres were devoted to raising the famous "Connecticut Blue Point Oyster." The oyster industry peaked in Connecticut at 2-million bushels in 1910, but fell to only 40,000 bushels in 1967. Improvement in water quality and relaying programs has helped the industry recently (from about 1970) and many beds now again produce oysters. Today, oyster culture remains the largest private aquaculture effort in the state.

Municipal Shellfish Commissions

As the shellfish aquaculture industry rapidly developed from 1860 to 1880, an offshore town/state jurisdiction line was proposed. After meeting acceptance, a state/town jurisdiction line for regulating shellfisheries was established for the entire coast in 1881. Inside this line, town "oyster ground committees" would regulate private culture rights; all other areas could be regulated by a state shellfish commission and later by the Department of Agriculture - Aquaculture Division.

Eventually, state statutes provided for the creation of town "shellfish commissions" to regulate public shellfisheries within "town waters." Today, most shoreline towns have established shellfish commissions that govern shell-fishing seasons, and issues permits for areas open for public shellfish harvesting. Most often it is required that town shellfish permits be purchased before shell fishing. When purchasing shellfish permits, it is important that you obtain information on what areas are certified (open) for shellfish harvesting.

Shellfish Restoration Programs

Town shellfish beds still produce significant quantities of mussels, soft-shell clams, hard-shell clams, oysters and bay scallops, although production today is just a fraction of past harvests. Many thousands of acres within municipal jurisdiction remain closed due to sewage outfalls or bacterial contamination. Renewed interest in improving water quality and reducing pollution may hopefully reopen these closed areas to public shell fishing. In the meantime, it is possible to restore neglected or abandoned shellfish beds in these closed areas. Several town shellfish commissions have taken an active role in rebuilding formerly productive shellfish beds in closed areas with recultivation or habitat enhancement programs. On the state natural beds, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture - Aquaculture Division has commenced a seed oyster restoration program for historical productive offshore areas. Shellfish management plans have initiated commercial relays of shellfish from town-closed areas to open certified waters to undergo a natural cleansing process. In this way, the resource is utilized for recreational and commercial shell fishing and is not wasted. Relay programs have increased substantially in the last few years and quite possibly in the not-too distant future, Connecticut's shoreline will once again be filled with a string of famous shellfish-producing towns.

For additional information:

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**Reprinted January 2006 for the Madison Shellfish Commission
- The Sound School, 60 South Water Street, New Haven, CT
06519.**