

AQUACULTURE CENTER NEWS

Published by

**THE SOUND SCHOOL REGIONAL
VOCATIONAL AQUACULTURE CENTER**

New Haven Public Schools Vocational Aquaculture Program

The Sound School

60 South Water Street

New Haven, CT 06519

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONNECTICUT “NATURAL GROWTH” OYSTER INDUSTRY

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Natural Growth Fisheries

The American oyster has been harvested in New England for hundreds of years by Native American and later by immigrant Europeans. The practice of oyster culturing is an ancient art which was utilized by the Romans and the Egyptian Empires.

New England's shellfish history is quiet varied. Each state has developed its own laws and ordinances to control harvesting. Shellfish resources were very important to early New England settlers. They were an excellent source of food and were gathered for winter sustenance. As population increased, so did the demand for oysters. Oystering was no longer a small boat or hand digging operation. Sailing vessels called "Skipjacks" appeared on the lower eastern shore in the late 1800's. These sailing vessels dredged oysters for consumption and seed. When oystering ceased to be primarily an immediate food production operation but evolved into transplantation of seed oysters to selected areas for future growth, the aquaculture came into being. Connecticut natural growth is an example of the early form of shellfish aquaculture. An examination of this industry will provide background of more efficient culturing techniques.

Natural growth seed oyster production, once a large Connecticut industry, is today making a comeback. The concept of spreading dry, clean oyster shells on river bottoms to supplement natural production is an old one. It is a practice that has been going on in Connecticut waters in varying degrees since 1881, making it New England's old aquaculture effort. Natural growth aquaculture is a three step process, 1. planting oyster shell, 2. harvesting newly set oysters as seed, 3. transplanting seed to grow out production beds. The early Connecticut oyster industry relied on local supplies from rivers and creeks. As demand increased, these local inshore beds were quickly depleted. Virginia oysters were first brought to Fairhaven, Connecticut in 1830. By 1850, 250 schooners were bringing to Fairhaven and City Point, New Haven, two million bushels of oysters yearly. In 1855, Connecticut passed the two acre law, which granted after five years of free use, two acres or less of sea bottom to individuals for planting and culturing oyster (riparian rights). This encouraged private cultivation with a state-town jurisdiction line drawn in 1856. In 1874, Henry C. Rowe of New Haven, Connecticut first tried cultivating oysters in the outer New Haven harbor in 25-40 feet of water. His efforts were so successful that by 1881, most of the available oyster grounds were leased to oyster companies. In 1895, Connecticut oystermen needed additional oyster beds and began leasing large tracts of Narragansett Bay under Rhode Island residents' names. New England oyster production peaked in 1898 at a little over 15 million bushels from one hundred thousand acres of leased state and granted town oyster beds. Connecticut was known at this time as the seed oyster state and supplied Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York oyster growers with seed. Oyster production declined upto 1910 when it collapsed as a result of eight years with no natural set. Production continued to plummet in the 1930's and 1940's because of poor sets and increased industrial and domestic pollution. After two major hurricanes and heavy bottom predation, the Connecticut industry was almost wiped out in 1959. Rhode Island, New York and Massachusetts oyster industries, cut off from the supply of seed, collapsed or were near collapse. During the next seven years, Connecticut still had not experienced a good natural set, therefore,

Connecticut qualified for resource disaster funds in 1967. By 1967, New England oyster production had fallen to two percent of the 1910 figure of the 26 million pound which is a little over half a million pounds. The resource disaster project cleaned fifteen natural oyster bed of predators and reseeded them with four hundred bushels of mature adult oysters at a total cost of two-hundred thousand dollars. The next year, the Connecticut received its first light set in two decades.

The areas that were cleaned received good local sets. The success of the cleaned natural beds prompted the state of Connecticut to reverse its earlier method of gathering seed oysters from tongs to hand dredges. Independent oystermen harvested seeds from outboard power skiffs and scows. The dredges were hauled by hand, and many oystermen brought an extra man out to help sort and bag the oysters in one bushel measures. After the changes over from tongs to hand dredges, production rose from 4,000 bushels to 120,000 bushels from the Housatonic river alone. The newly permitted dredging had been beneficial to river bottoms, freeing it of salt and debris, exposing clean oyster shell to oyster spats, and in general, making it worthwhile to work with the river at all” according to the shellfish commissioner, Edwin Forham. In 1973, Connecticut received a wide-spread and intense natural set. The Bridgeport natural bed, which encompassed 5000 acres in 1887, picked up a light set for the first time in 55 years. Since then, two additional rivers have been open to seed oyster production. The Hammonasset River was opened in 1978 and the East River in 1979. Connecticut now received a good natural set, and additional rivers may go into production shortly.