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# Parasite found: Scientists ponder new problem

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New research shows that native Eastern oysters are susceptible to *Bonamia*, a parasite that kills Asian oysters.

Until researchers at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington discovered the parasite in oysters from Hewletts Creek in New Hanover County this spring, scientists thought the parasite did not infect Eastern oysters (*Crassostrea Virginica*).

"We can't say right now that it threatens *Virginica* oysters, but we can say we were surprised to find *Bonamia* in the *Virginica*," said research team member Troy Alphin, marine biologist at the UNCW Center for Marine Science.

When large numbers of Asian oysters growing in an experimental nursery in Bogue Sound died suddenly in 2003, researchers found the parasite in the Asian oysters at the Carteret County facility.

Before then, *Bonamia* had been found only in oysters from the cold

waters off Maine, France, and New Zealand.

After the parasite was identified in oysters at the experimental nursery, researchers at Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) determined that *Bonamia* could quickly wipe out Asian oysters.

Asian oysters grow faster than Eastern oysters and aren't susceptible to the parasite MSX or the disease Dermo that have ravaged the native species. Some officials in Maryland and Virginia had hoped the Asian species could help filter polluted waters and boost oyster harvests in the Chesapeake Bay, but enthusiasm for introducing the species in US bays and estuaries slowed with the discovery of *Bonamia*.

Scientists in North Carolina later found *Bonamia* in crested oysters, a native species much smaller than the Eastern type, from Beaufort Inlet and Hewletts Creek. They can't say whether the parasite occurs naturally or was introduced, perhaps from ballast water dumped by ships at nearby deepwater ports.

Still, tests didn't show *Bonamia* in large Eastern oysters.

"The question for us was whether *Bonamia* was in smaller *Virginica* oysters," explained Alphin, describing the scope of UNCW study that was funded by North Carolina Sea Grant.

The UNCW team examined smaller *Virginicas* from Hewletts Creek, New River, and White Oak River.

Only the Hewletts Creek oysters tested positive for the parasite.

"And as we tested larger oysters, the amount of active infection decreased," Alphin said.

Researchers aren't sure what that means.

"Can *Virginica* fight off *Bonamia* as they get larger, or does it kill the oysters before they grow larger? We don't know," Alphin said.

Alphin cautioned that although the UNCW study found what he described as "a significant number" of active infections in the Hewletts Creek oysters, the results of the small-scale study don't prove that the parasite threatens Eastern oysters.