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Oysters get second life Shells used for reef that will provide habitat

By Shelby Sebens
Staff Writer

ST. JAMES | As the sun began to break away from the clouds late Saturday morning, residents of this town continued raking, shoveling and bagging a massive pile of oyster shells.

It did not matter that they had been doing it for two hours already, their faces sweaty and clothes dirty. They were helping the environment.

More than 75 residents turned out at Waterway Park to help fill about 1,700 bags with oyster shells that will create a reef in the Intracoastal Waterway. The oyster shells will attract larvae, creating a reef that will provide habitat for small fish, reduce erosion and filter the water, said Martin Posey, chairman of biology and marine biology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Posey stood next to two tanks that displayed an example of what the oyster reef will do. One, murky and cloudy, was just filled with water from the waterway. The other, completely clear, was the same water but with oysters.



STAFF PHOTO | MATT BORN

Miles Tagtmeyer throws one of the 1,700 bags of oyster shells onto a pile at St. James Waterway Park Saturday. The shells are going to be used to build a series of reefs along the Intracoastal Waterway.

The project that brought St. James together with UNCW and the N.C. Coastal Federation was the idea of one resident, Taylor Ryan.

Ryan, who also serves on the town's storm water committee, recently attended a forum in Fort Fisher on the benefit of recycling oysters.

"It just looked like a project that we ought to get involved in," he said, adding St. James residents are always willing to help.

"St. James is known for terrific volunteer spirit, and this is just a good example of it. There's just never a shortage of people to help," Ryan said.

St. James Waterway Park has been designated as a research sanctuary by the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries.

"This is very much a community-based project," said Ted Wilgis of the N.C. Coastal Federation and a marine science master's student at UNCW. "It's wonderful to have it come from the grass roots."

St. James Mayor Shelley Leshner was not surprised so many people showed up Saturday even though there was a major golf tournament at the same time.

"This is typical. This is how our community reacts to things like this," she said, as she took a short break from shoveling and loading oyster shells into 3-foot-long bags.

The residents, college students, state officials and even a couple of grandchildren heaved loads of oyster shells into the bags via shovels and a Bobcat. Posey said the bags eventually will disappear and become part of the reef.

Despite the heat that was beating down on them about 11 a.m., the volunteers kept heartily at the large heap that had started to dwindle.