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BRINGING THEM BACK | STATE HOPES TO HALT OYSTER DECLINE

If you like seafood caught in North Carolina's sounds, tidal creeks and close ocean waters, then you better like oysters - and not just as an appetizer or aphrodisiac.

It sounds simplistic, but that's how important the oyster is to the state's estuarine environment and - consequently - commercial and sport fishing industries, experts say.

Sloshing through the shallow mud flats near Hewletts Creek, Cape Fear Coastkeeper Ted Wilgis said the humble oyster can tell us a lot about the health of our marine environment.

"They really are a bellwether species," he said as he checked out some test oyster reefs established in the shallow waters by the N.C. Coastal Federation.

Like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, oysters are a harbinger of what's going right - and wrong - in our coastal waters.

Find lots of living oysters, then you generally have healthy, clean water and a healthy, fully functioning marine ecosystem.

That's because a market-size, 3-inch oyster can cleanse roughly 50 gallons of water a day, pumping water at the rate of 1,500 times its body volume per hour.

But the booming development along the coastline, along with agricultural runoff from inland areas, has created more polluted runoff than Mother Nature's natural filters can handle.

That's led to scores of waterways - like most of New Hanover County's tidal creeks - that have dead or dying oyster reefs and are closed to swimming and shellfishing.

Stuck in a vicious cycle, poor water quality means fewer oysters, which in turn means even more polluted water - even as development pressures on



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

Lab technician Tressa Hartsell (left to right), research assistant Russ Barbour and graduate student Heather Harwell gather information Tuesday on oyster beds created by the UNCW Center for Marine Science near Hewlett's Creek. UNCW has been studying the oyster beds for the past few years.

Humble but vital

Declining oyster population signals trouble for marine habitats

coastal waters increase.

But it's not just coastal development that's decimated the shellfish to about 5 percent of their historic range.

Craig Hardy, with the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, said disease and overharvesting have helped further erode oyster numbers.

"It's been a bad confluence of factors," he said.

Next week, the Coastal Federation

will join 30 other public and private groups in hosting a conference that will look at the state of North Carolina's oyster population and what can be done to bring it back.

Mr. Wilgis said all a person has to do to know the shellfish is in trouble is to note that the state's oyster harvests in the 19th century were counted in the millions of bushels.

Harvests in recent years have been hard pressed to break 50,000 bushels.

"Our oyster population has stabilized in recent years," Mr. Hardy said. "Unfortunately, though, it's stabilized at a very low level."

But as he overlooked another set of test oyster reefs near the mouth of Hewletts Creek, University of North Carolina at Wilmington marine biologist Troy Alphin said a healthy oyster population means a lot more than cleaner water and a local source for a good meal.

The researcher said oyster reefs create important nursing and a juvenile habitat for a slew of critters that otherwise would struggle to find a home on the bare tidal mudflats.

"If it's not there, then that habitat's not there, and those animals likely aren't going to be there," Mr. Alphin said.

But officials admit reversing the oyster's downward trend isn't going

to be easy and will require as much work on land as in the water.

"If you don't stop what's coming into the water in the first place, then it doesn't really matter what you do in the water," Mr. Wilgis said.

One proposed method to save - and rehabilitate - the state's oyster population is to take a watershed approach to the problem.

In that respect, Hewletts Creek could offer a model for the rest of the state with Wilmington and New Hanover officials working onshore to limit runoff washing into the headwaters of the tidal creek, and the Coastal Federation and UNCW working in the water to rebuild oyster reefs.

"We think these kind of multi-pronged approaches offer the best chance for a recovery," Mr. Wilgis said.

Mr. Hardy said whatever initiatives are proposed, it's going to take cooperation among a number of groups - including developers - to bring the unglamorous, but environmentally important, mollusk back.

"We didn't get here in just five or 10 years," he said. "It's been over a hundred years of impacts to get us where we are."

"Hopefully it won't take us 100 years to get us back, but it's not going to be a quick fix either."



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

Lab technician Melissa Anderson holds a cluster of oysters with a crab living in it as graduate student Heather Harwell (left) gathers more information Tuesday.