

Oysters Through History

Based on fossil records, it is likely that oysters have existed for over one hundred forty-five million years. Oysters are salt-water bivalve mollusks that live all over the world. Throughout the history of human life, these seemingly simple creatures have played an important role.

Though this may be surprising, there is archaeological proof that suggests that the Neanderthals, extinct archaic humans, ate oysters. Remains were found in cave overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Sadly, no other evidence was found at this site to show how the Neanderthals harvested, cracked open, or ate the oysters.

Thousands of years later, Native Americans also found many ways to benefit from oysters. They waded through shallow water, collecting oysters from small reefs. This left the larger populace out in the deeper waters untouched, allowing them to keep the population steady and the water clean. Once the oysters were on shore and eaten, they could be used for a multitude of things. Sometimes they were used to carve out the insides of burnt logs to create boats. In other instances, they could be used to scrape any excess off of animal skins so it could then be used for clothes and housing.

Later on, in the Victorian Era, oysters were considered to be food for the poor. They were sold in street stalls on nearly every corner in London and as snacks in bars. Since beef and mutton were expensive commodities, many people of the lower class used oysters as a substitute in soups and stews. During this time period, oysters were so cheap and plentiful that one of the most popular dishes among the lower class was oyster pie.

Quite on the contrary to Victorian times, oysters are now seen as a delicacy and expensive treat. Usually sold in the dozens, they can cost anywhere from thirty-five to seventy dollars per dozen. Of

course, some of the price extremes could be attributed to the numerous health benefits that come with eating oysters. Once the meat has been eaten and the shells have been cleaned, they are commonly used in household decorations and as craft materials.

As time passes, we can look back and see how the oyster has changed. Over time, the size of oysters has shrunk considerably. Prehistoric oysters could have been close to twice the size of the average modern oyster. Shells were particularly large during the Pleistocene era (ending 13,000 to 11,700 years ago) and sizes dropped after that. Sizes did increase a small amount before dropping again about four hundred years ago. Since then, the sizes of oysters have not changed much. The drastic decrease in size is most likely due to slow adult growth and constant harvesting which isn't giving oysters enough time to grow to their full potential.

For thousands of years, oysters have been of tremendous use to us as human beings in more ways than one. The majority of the time we have used them as a food source. Some people use oyster shells as a way to stop water that runs off roofs from washing away soil; others as driveways or road bases in place of gravel. However, they not only have significant uses to us, but are important to the environment as well. Oysters are natural filter feeders, meaning they clean out the water and remove harmful substances when they eat.

For over one hundred fifty thousand years, oysters have played a key role in human survival. They have provided food for us, protected our environment, and given us the means to create other tools that may help us survive. While many may always see them as only food, we know that there is a far more complex and amazing history behind these extraordinarily useful shellfish.