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The Oyster's Forgotten Role in Our History

Oysters have played an important role in North America for thousands of years. Native Americans depended on them in winter and spring, when other foods were unavailable. They would harvest oysters in the same place over and over again, dumping old shells back into the water to make large shell deposits called middens. This practice helped keep the bottom of the bay firmer, giving baby oysters, or spat, a place to set and start their adult lives. This also helped keep the population stable.

When the colonists started exploring North America, they had to be very careful when they were in and near the bay. Why did they have to be so careful? The oyster reefs were so big that they were above the water! This made navigation difficult for the ships sailing between North America and Europe.

After settling in the tidewater region, colonists were unprepared for the hardship of finding food in the new land. The Native Americans living in the area started trading with the early settlers and teaching them how to find food. Oysters, being easy to get and bountiful, helped save the English from starvation.

Oysters themselves were not new to them, but their size was! The oysters from England were only one fourth the size of some of those in the Chesapeake Bay. One man named William Strachey recorded one that was 13 inches long! Francis Louis Michel also noted that they were so big he often had to cut them in two so they could fit in his mouth!

There were not many colonists around yet, so the oyster population was still plentiful. When more settlers from Europe arrived, they almost at once started harvesting and eating oysters in great quantities. Since they were so close to shore, people harvested them by hand or, to get those a little further away, they used a short rake. The old shells were still being returned to the bay, helping the oyster spat to grow.

But it didn't stay like this forever. After the civil war ended, many ex-soldiers and formerly enslaved people, as well as newly arrived immigrants, having no jobs, turned to the ever growing oyster companies near the Chesapeake Bay. This was only the beginning of a time called "The Oyster Wars." Why was that time called "Oyster Wars?" Did people fight over them? Well, yes, they did! When the New England watermen exhausted their supply of oysters in their part of the Chesapeake Bay, they sailed to Maryland's and Virginia's areas of the bay. Maryland and Virginia fishermen then, being angry at them for harvesting in their parts of the bay, opened fire at them. People were killed. Then Maryland and Virginia turned against each other for their oyster supply.

As transportation was becoming faster and more efficient, oysters could be sent alive to places further inland. Whole towns like Crisfield, Maryland were literally built on the oyster shells and economy. These towns had everything needed to prepare the oysters for exporting. Over time, modern machinery like cheap gasoline engines made harvesting easier for workers, but this wasn't good for the oysters.

The oysters weren't reproducing fast enough to keep up with the demand. They weren't given enough time to grow, so they became a fraction of their ancestors' size. To make matters worse, the used shells weren't being returned to the water, and the middens were being dug up

for products like chicken feed, mortar/plaster, road building, and fertilizer. This gave the baby oysters no place to set, so they just died in the loose silt at the bottom of the bay.

In the 1900s, the oyster population declined so much it affected the fishermen. Specialists also realized how critical it was to put the old shells back in the bay. But this wasn't the end of the oysters' troubles. Pesticides and chemicals were being dumped in the bay, making bacteria grow and reproduce faster than the oysters could handle. The bacteria removed oxygen from the water, making it unsuitable for life.

If you haven't realized, *we* are the cause of most of the oysters' troubles. Everything we do has consequences, whether good or bad, so it is our job to learn from the past and do something to help. We can help by returning shells to the bay for the spat, not using chemicals near waterways, and giving the oysters a chance to grow. And please, let's not start another oyster war.