

To Appreciate Oysters

Oysters rock! Well... not really. They're alive! Even though they may look like rocks, they are not. Oysters do so much for us, and we need to appreciate them.

There are many different kinds of oysters. The *Crassostrea virginica* oysters, also known as Eastern oysters, live here in the Chesapeake Bay. Not only are there different types of oysters, but they also are a keystone species. That means that if they were taken away, the ecosystem would be drastically changed and greatly harmed. What makes the Eastern oyster different? According to Northern Neck waterman Curtis Jenkins, "the oyster can adapt to its current water qualities, even if it is not native to that area." Oysters are amazing animals and do so much for us.

The oyster plays many roles in keeping the Chesapeake Bay alive. "The biggest role the oyster plays is cleaning the water. One oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water per day," said Mr. Jenkins. If it were not for the oysters, we would be swimming in some pretty nasty water. Oysters also form reefs so other creatures and organisms can live there and stay for protection, which helps the other creatures survive. Oysters also filter out the algae that blocks the warm sunlight from heating the water. In the fall and winter, the water needs to be warm so the animals in the water do not freeze to death. Recently the number of oysters in the Chesapeake Bay has been low and we need to keep that from happening.

Oysters in the Chesapeake Bay are being harmed by humans and diseases. Mr. Jenkins explained that “oysters first got diseases when humans tried to introduce a different oyster to the original ones. Yet, the population of oysters has gotten better over the years.” They have been over-harvested, and the water where they live has been harshly polluted. A lot of people sell oysters and harvest more oysters than they need, so they have to throw away the oysters that died. The pollution that gets into the water is from farms, farm animals, boats, human development, and so many other ways. The way it gets to the Chesapeake Bay is by runoff from rain and wind. Oysters can get diseases called *Haplosporidium nelsoni* and MSX. They also can get other diseases but only when they become two years old. They can get Dermo or *Perkinsus marinus*. This means they will grow slower than they should and, therefore, die because they are unhealthy. We could help save the oysters, by reducing pollution and only harvesting a small amount of them.

We could do many other things such as stop polluting, for example, not littering the Chesapeake Bay. It’s hard for the larvae “spats” to attach to the bottom because of the pollution and trash on the Bay floor. They can’t attach or “strike” to anything and grow because of the pollution in the water so they die. How could we help save the oysters? “Anything to support the water quality, and not over-harvesting will help save the oysters, ” quoted Mr. Jenkins.

So the next time you see an oyster, don’t throw it or break it because remember, oysters are not rocks!