

My Day with an Oyster

When considering the oyster, I first thought of a story about a fish. There was once a zoology professor who told his new student to look at a fish called a haemulon. The student observed the fish for a few hours, then a few days, and then for eight months. He later said he had learned more about the haemulon through intense observation than any book could ever teach him. Since I am interested in zoology, I began learning about oysters by using the same approach. I placed an oyster on my desk and carefully studied it. After spending a day drawing it, opening it, looking at the oyster through a magnifying glass, and simply staring at it, I felt that I had learned more about the oyster than any other creature I have encountered.

At first sight, the oyster does not have a very attractive shell, however if you look closely they are very colorful. The shell is mostly colored tan, salmon, blue, and cream. When dry, the shells are dull but if dampened the colors become more vibrant. Half of the shell is rough and half is smooth. Because it is covered with ridges and holes, the shell looks like the moon when placed under a magnifying glass. Shining in the light, the inside of the shell is a metallic silver and white. This bowl-shaped shell contains the oyster. It is yellow and gray with a brown ring around a glob of slime. It does not seem like a creature yet it has a heart, stomach, gills, and more. Gooney, wet, slimy, and soft are just some adjectives to describe the texture of the inside. The oyster, like an old and wise person, is not considered an attractive animal but when looked at in the right way, they are remarkably fascinating creatures with much to offer us.

After observing as much as I could about my oyster, I wanted to learn more about their lives. Oysters benefit their surroundings and the ecosystem in many ways. Oyster reefs provide

protection and homes for fish, crabs, and worms. By eating algae and excess nutrients like nitrogen, oysters help us by filtering water. Each oyster can clean fifty gallons of grimy water every day. Since the oysters filter the water, more light can reach the bottom of the bays and rivers which allows sea grasses and other plants to grow. Oyster reefs prevent erosion and help stabilize shorelines. Surprisingly, oysters are not used only for food. They are used for mortar and plaster, roads, and grit in chicken feed. Over the years harvesting oysters has given thousands of people jobs. Oysters help make the world a better place.

Although oysters are used for many things, over harvesting causes lots of problems including oyster wars. In the colonial days, oysters were able to filter the entire Chesapeake Bay, which is 19 trillion gallons of water, once a week. Today it would take them over a year. Their decline is mostly due to overharvesting. Between 1860 and 1920, three quarters of the bay's oysters were removed. Later in 1950, pollution caused two diseases which killed even more oysters. As overharvesting went on, the reefs disappeared. In the 1870s everyone wanted to harvest the remaining reefs so competition grew into the Oyster Wars. Gunfights were frequent. Some captains, who were low on workers, would capture innocent people. They forced them to work for little or no pay. This angered more people so they fought against the captains. If they had cared more about the oysters and considered their importance, none of these problems would have occurred. Fortunately, there is still time to rebuild the oyster reefs.

Education is the first step to restoring the oyster population. Virginia cared so much about oysters that the state committed to restoring oyster reefs in five rivers by 2025. Now that I know more about oysters I want to help protect them too.

Bibliography

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