

Back to the Bay

It's time. Deep down in the Chesapeake Bay, there is an oyster reef. The temperature of the water is just right...algae is abundant...salinity perfect. Suddenly a milky-white cloud rises from the reef. The oysters have just spawned. Soon the babies are drifting in the current. Once they grow big enough, they are ready to settle down. A large rock, a wooden pier will do, but an oyster shell is always preferred. They must find a smooth, hard, and stable place to which they can permanently attach and to continue growing into adults, or else they will die. When they are fully grown, they can be harvested and sent to restaurants. This is why it's important to return the oyster shells we use to the bay.

Oysters are shellfish that have been in the Chesapeake Bay since before the first colonists came to Virginia. For food, they filter water through their gills for edible particles, and in the process also keep the water clean and clear for the neighboring sea grasses, fish, and the many other creatures that live in the community, for oyster reefs are home to many. There can be thousands of oysters in a single reef. An estimated 35 million oysters are harvested and taken to processing plants and restaurants for people to enjoy every year. But what happens to all their shells? Some are ground and used as fertilizer since they are rich in calcium and others for crafts or landscaping. But most are simply trashed.

Back in the bay, there are few problems. When oysters are harvested, the reefs become smaller. The remaining oysters are then not enough to be able to keep up with the pollution levels, affecting all those creatures who live in and around the reef. With all the missing oysters, there are limited places for the spat to settle since there are very

few available shells. If there is no safe, smooth place for spat to attach to, they will sink to the bay floor and die.

This is why organizations like the Virginia Oyster Shell Recycling Program, Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and The Nature Conservancy are teaming up with restaurants and retailers like Tuckahoe Seafood, Fuller's Raw Bar, and Acacia Midtown to collect used oyster shells and return them to the bay. Every oyster has two shells, meaning that 100 oysters equals 200 shells. With as many as forty restaurants donating to one program, these numbers add up very quickly. One seafood restaurant reported using between 2,200-2,400 shells in just one night. There are numerous coordinated drop-off sites in key locations where shells are gathered. Countless volunteers then load up trucks with the very heavy, full bins of shells and transport them to sites where they are cured and cleaned; this is to make sure they have no parasites or diseases that could harm the oyster reefs they would be taken to. Just this part can take up to a year.

Once this stage is finally complete, there are two possible next steps: go to the bay now or go to a hatchery. At the hatcheries, shells are placed in tanks full of oyster spat so that as many as fifteen of these can attach to each shell. This is to ensure the babies are able to get a solid grip on the shells and to help the reefs grow faster. The tons and tons of shells are placed in suitable locations around existing reefs, helping those reefs to grow and ultimately replenish oyster populations. This is a long, time-consuming process that would not be possible without much collaboration and effort, but the results are so worth it. Many oyster reefs have been successfully rebuilt and are flourishing. The hope is that these will continue to grow and spread throughout the area.

Oysters are a part of Virginia. They are important to the Chesapeake Bay and to many plants and animals. By returning shells to the bay, we help ensure that the baby oysters can have a good chance at life, which will help keep their population at a healthy level. By helping the oysters, you are also helping give animals homes, and keeping the waters of the Chesapeake Bay clean. This is why it's important to return oyster shells to the bay. To do this, we must work together. So, let's do our part.