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Do You Consider the Oyster?

When you think of a pearl, you most likely think of jewelry. But do you think about how it is made or where it is from? Do you think about the pain it causes when it is being made?

Unlike most gems, it is not made underground but by an oyster.

Oysters are a type of mollusk or shellfish. They live on the seafloor near the shore in shallow water. An oyster's body has a mantle, gills, a mouth, an adductor muscle, a stomach, and a heart. Its shell is held together by a hinge. The shell has an inner layer and the Umbo, or beak, which is the oldest part of the shell. When a particle of sand, shell, or some other small substance gets into the oyster's mantle, it causes pain and could hurt the oyster's body. To protect itself, the oyster covers the particle with thin sheets of mother-of-pearl, or nacre. They build on the particle until it is covered in a shell-like substance: a pearl.

Now that you know what a pearl is, do you think oysters are only good for making pearls? If you do, you are one hundred percent wrong! Oysters are useful in many ways. People have been eating oysters for thousands of years, and they can be eaten in many different ways, like oyster stew. I, myself, am allergic to shellfish, but, I recommended looking for oyster recipes and making them.

Now oysters don't just benefit people by giving us food, jobs, and precious pearls, but also other plants and animals living in and around the water with them. Oysters give other animals shelter. When a baby oyster is choosing a place to settle down, it may settle on a rock or

another oyster. Over time, oysters can pile up, one on top of another, making a large oyster bed or reef with lots of nooks and crannies for fish, eels, crabs, and other animals to call home. Oysters clean the surrounding water. When they are feeding, they filter out pollutants and sediment from the water to find the phytoplankton or algae they eat. An adult oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water a day. That's a lot of water! They also help prevent erosion and hold silt on the waterbanks. So, oysters give other animals shelter, clean water to live in, and, for predators, a place to find a lot of prey.

Considering all that oysters do for us and our environment, what do we do for them? What do we do besides over-polluting the bay with nitrogen, phosphorus, pesticides, and other harmful substances? What do we do besides over-harvesting wild oysters, destroying oyster reefs, and leaving the bay and ocean floor covered with silt so that baby oysters have no place to settle down? In 1888, it was said that oysters could clean the whole Chesapeake Bay, which has eighteen trillion gallons of water in it, in days. But nowadays, it would take oysters about a year to clean the same amount. So, now we have a different question to answer. What CAN we do for the oysters, for the bay, and for the other animals living in and around the bay? Here are some ways you can help:

- **Recycle Used Oyster Shells:** You can recycle oyster shells at centers like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Brock Environmental Center where they clean the shells, let baby oysters settle on them, and put them in the Chesapeake Bay. There the oysters will grow and filter the water.
- **Plant Trees and Plants on the Banks:** By planting trees, bushes, flowers, and other plants, you can help prevent erosion on the banks of the bay. This helps the oysters have a solid place to settle and form reefs. Otherwise, they will sink in the loose silt and die.

- **Don't Use Chemicals:** Use less pesticides and other chemicals. If possible, try to use natural alternatives that will be healthier for the environment.
- **Don't Over-Harvest Oysters:** When you harvest wild oysters, don't harvest a whole area or day after day. Give oysters a chance to grow back.

Consider the ocean and the bay. Consider the fish, crabs, eels, and plants. Consider the oyster. Consider what you can do.