



OYSTER UPDATE

OYSTER POACHING



We have a problem and need your help. Some of the larger oysters on our sanctuary reefs are disappearing.

During the past 15 years, several partners, including the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the US Army Corps of Engineers, the City of Virginia Beach and LRNow, have partnered to build 62 acres

of sanctuary oyster reef in the Lynnhaven River. These reefs are established as sanctuary and are part of restoring our native oyster population to the river. But some of our larger oysters are being poached from these sanctuary reefs.

There are no public oyster grounds in the Lynnhaven. What that means is that unless you hold a lease for a section of

the river bottom, there are no areas where you are allowed to take oysters from the river for your own consumption. Our commercial oyster companies hold leases from the Commonwealth of Virginia to farm oysters on their leased areas of the river. As a bonus, they are adding to our overall oyster population because they seed their reefs with baby oysters regularly.

The other issue with harvesting oysters illegally is that not all areas of the river are safe for oyster consumption. If you eat oysters from areas of the river that are closed, you risk illness.

Thank you for helping everyone understand that taking oysters from the river is not legal, healthy or helping us restore our oyster population.

WHICH AREAS OF THE LYNNHAVEN ARE OPEN TO OYSTER HARVESTING?

The Virginia Department of Health, Shellfish Sanitation Division (VDH SSD) closely regulates where it is safe to harvest oysters in Virginia. As a matter of fact, until the recent problem on the Eastern Shore, there had not been an illness traced to eating oysters for more than 50 years in Virginia.

The water quality standard for shellfish harvesting is quite rigorous. Water quality measurements are taken at 35 different locations in the Lynnhaven Inlet, Eastern and Western Branches and in Broad and Linkhorn Bays at least monthly. The 30 month average of these water quality tests is what determines which areas are open and evaluations are updated annually.

In 2002, when LRNow (then Lynnhaven River 2007) was formed, only 1% of the Lynnhaven met the rigorous standard for shellfish harvest. There was no commercial oyster activity in the river and there hadn't been for a long time. Some of the closed areas had been closed since the 1930's.

Today, 42% of the river is open to shellfish harvest and we have six active commercial oyster companies working in the Lynnhaven. Thirty percent of the river is open unconditionally. That area is in Broad Bay and Linkhorn Bay. Twelve percent is open with restrictions. The restrictions apply after a significant rain event. Whenever we receive more than one inch of rain in a 24 hour period, that 12% of the river will be closed for 10 days. It will reopen automatically after the 10 day period. The restricted area is in the Inlet and Eastern and Western branches of the river.

This conditional opening is a new process for the VDH SSD, and has been undertaken in the Inlet and Eastern and Western Branches of the Lynnhaven alone. When we have more than an inch of rain in one day, there is significant stormwater runoff from the developed lands that surround the Eastern and Western branches of the Lynnhaven. This stormwater runoff carries all types of pollutants with it, including significant levels of bacteria. Over many years of collecting data in the Lynnhaven, the Department of Health can accurately predict how long it takes the river to recover after that influx of stormwater. Their data indicates it takes about five days for the river to flush out the pollutants from the stormwater. Then they give the oysters another five days to recover. After 10 days, the river and the oysters are safe and healthy again.

This new process is a step forward for everyone. It reflects actual water conditions more accurately than the 30 month averages do. Because of denser development in their watershed, the Inlet and the Eastern and Western Branches of the river are more severely affected by stormwater runoff than Linkhorn and Broad Bays.

Our oyster industry continues to grow as demand for our delicious Lynnhaven oysters grow. So you can eat them with confidence they are safe, healthy and fresh!

OYSTER CASTLES

Last summer we reported on our first oyster castle project on the northwest shoreline of Broad Bay Island. In part because of the success of that project, we have pursued several other oyster castle projects this spring – the second phase of the Broad Bay Island Project, now named the Laila Reef, constructed by LRNow staff and volunteers; and four projects done by private homeowners under LRNow direction. Oyster castles work well in the many areas of the Lynnhaven River. The interlocking blocks are specially designed for oyster restoration and contain approximately 30% oyster shell and no toxic substances that can leach into the water. Their interlocking nature means that the reef can be designed to fit the contours of a particular shoreline and provide the little nooks and crannies that oysters like. And best of all, they can be constructed in areas where a traditional oyster reef is not practical, providing valuable habitat for our growing oyster population.

If you are interested in considering an oyster castle reef as part of your shoreline management, please contact Meredith@LRNow.org. Not all shorelines are appropriate, but we can come out and look at your property and let you know what may work for you.



The Laila Reef is named in honor of Laila Serpe, whose bright spirit was taken from us too soon. Laila's dad, Richard Serpe, is the Chair of the LRNow Oyster Restoration Committee.



Constructing phase two of the Laila Reef.



One of our homeowner reef projects.



This is the Laila Reef after one year!

LYNNHAVEN River NOW

Restoring a legend.