

# 'Oyster wranglers' scout rivers for signs of shellfish life

July 4 2017, by Wayne Parry

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In this June 2, 2017 photo, a volunteer "oyster wrangler" with the American Littoral Society prepares to load bags of shells onto a boat in Red Bank, N.J. The group is hanging the shell bags off the docks of participating homeowners along the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers to see if any oysters remain in the waterways in which they once were plentiful. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry)

A New Jersey environmental group that has had success re-establishing

oyster colonies in struggling waterways is trying a new tactic in two rivers at the Jersey shore: checking the water to see if oysters are already there.

The work by the American Littoral Society aims to see where new [oyster](#) colonies can be established, or existing ones expanded. The group is hanging bags of shells from docks of riverfront homeowners who agree to help, and checking to see whether any free-floating baby oysters, called spat, attach themselves to the shells and begin growing.

Tim Dillingham, the group's president, said he's confident they'll find oysters in the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers, where they once were plentiful. The first checks will be made in late July.

"In the past, (the Navesink) was part of the New York oyster kingdom, where there were lots of oysters that helped feed the world," Dillingham said. "Unfortunately, through overharvesting, pollution and not taking care of the river system, we've lost that resource.

"We're looking to put oysters back into the river to have a healthy river system," he said. "This is about putting a missing piece of the ecosystem back in place."

A single oyster can filter 50 gallons (189 liters) of water a day, making them ideal natural allies in the fight to clean up polluted waterways.



In this June 2, 2017 photo, Tim Dillingham, president of the American Littoral Society, addresses volunteer "oyster wranglers" with the American Littoral Society in Red Bank, N.J. The group is hanging the shell bags off the docks of participating homeowners along the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers to see if any oysters remain in the waterways in which they once were plentiful. Researchers hope free-floating young oysters will attach themselves to the shells and start growing, indicating how prevalent or scarce they are in the rivers. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry)

The project is called Operation Oyster, an offshoot of years of work it and other similar-minded conservation groups have done to try to use shellfish to combat pollution.

Most of those projects involved dumping tons of shells on river or bay bottoms and then sprinkling them with oyster seedlings to create ready-

made colonies.

This summer's work, however, is different. Volunteers calling themselves "oyster wranglers" seek to determine whether oysters are already floating in the two rivers, and if so, in what concentrations. The study will run through the end of September.

Though years of research have shown great promise that oysters can and do thrive after being reintroduced into polluted areas, efforts to expand oyster colonies statewide have been restricted for years by worries from New Jersey environmental officials and commercial shellfish harvesters that allowing colonies in too many spots could lead to someone poaching potentially contaminated shellfish, and that resulting illnesses could damage the state's \$800 million-a-year shellfish industry.



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Because of that, the environmental groups and the state have reached an uneasy detente. Six years after the state made the NY/NJ Baykeeper environmental group rip out a thriving oyster [colony](#) from the waters of Raritan Bay in Keyport, Republican Gov. Chris Christie signed a bill allowing small-scale experimental colonies in places where they are not visible or easily accessible to the public.

Baykeeper is allowed to grow oysters off the pier at the Earle Naval Weapons Station, which is guarded around the clock by gun-wielding patrol boats.

A few weeks ago, the state Department of Environmental Protection granted a permit to the Littoral Society enabling it to do oyster research in the river, provided that the shellfish are removed from the waterway before they reach market size, to prevent them from being tempting targets for poachers, said Bon Considine, a spokesman for the agency. The shellfish would then have to be relocated to state-approved areas.

While they would prefer to be able to establish new oyster colonies in waterways throughout the state, environmentalists are resigned, for now, to doing as much as possible within the restrictions.

Calling themselves "oyster wranglers," the volunteers have been contacting homeowners along the rivers, getting permission so far to tether 63 bags of [oyster shells](#) to the ends of their docks. The volunteers

will pull them up periodically to see if any free-floating oyster spat attach themselves to the shells and begin growing.



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