

# Oyster seeding: A 'tangible, physical' way to help the water

July 29 2019, by Wayne Parry

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In this July 25, 2019 photo, Christine Thompson, an assistant professor at Stockton University, looks through bags of young oysters growing on whelk shells as part of an oyster restoration program being done by the American Littoral Society in Ocean Gate, N.J. People involved in similar oyster projects around the world say that in addition to helping clean water and stabilize shorelines, the projects provide a way to let volunteers help the environment in a

tangible, easily understandable way. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry)

Restoring oyster beds and helping keep the water clean isn't just for scientists and environmental groups anymore.

Students, younger children and those with no particular scientific background like the idea that something they do this morning can be helping the earth by this afternoon.

Kenna Allocco, 12, of Beachwood, New Jersey, recently helped remove bags of whelk shells with baby oysters attached to them from a bubbling tank in preparation for their journey to a Barnegat Bay reef, in between asking a dozen or so incisive questions of program leaders.

"I'm interested in how all the animal species interact with each other, and in biodiversity," she said. "We're learning about this in school. I made a speech about the problem of plastic pollution in the ocean, and I scared my entire class. None of them uses plastic straws anymore."

The efforts are part of a worldwide effort by scientists and volunteer environmentalists to dump millions of baby oysters into waterways where they once thrived before overharvesting and pollution virtually wiped out the shellfish.

In addition to helping improve water quality and stabilize shorelines against strong storms, many people involved in the [oyster](#) seeding projects say one of their best benefits is providing an immediate, easy way for people to get involved and help the environment.

"It's a very real, tangible, physical thing you can do and see that it is helpful to the environment," said Zack Royle, a habitat restoration

coordinator with the American Littoral Society, a New Jersey coastal environmental group. "You place the seed oysters in the tank, you watch them grow and you put them into action when you dump them overboard."

The Littoral Society was one of two New Jersey [environmental groups](#) to carry out oyster seeding projects in the past two weeks.

The New York/New Jersey Baykeeper group is adding to an [artificial reef](#) it has built for oysters along the shoreline of the Earle Naval Weapons Station in Middletown, where the shoreline was ripped up by Superstorm Sandy in 2012. Both have been cultivating and growing oysters in New Jersey bays for years.

Meredith Comi, restoration director for Baykeeper, said the baby oysters attach themselves to the rows of concrete castles the group dumped a few hundred feet from shore. As the shells grow, they expand the mass and shape of the reef, providing "speed bumps against wave action during storms," she said.

A Baykeeper project in mid-July placed a million young oysters near the heavily guarded Navy pier. Over the past 10 years, they've set out 4 million of them in various spots.



In a July 25, 2019 photo, students load bags of baby oysters attached to whelk shells onto boats in preparation for putting them into the water in Ocean Gate, N.J. People involved in similar oyster projects around the world say that in addition to helping clean water and stabilize shorelines, the projects provide a way to let volunteers help the environment in a tangible, easily understandable way. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry)

Since it built the base of an oyster reef using empty whelk shells in Ocean Gate, New Jersey, in 2015, the Littoral Society has placed 6.3 million oysters on those shells, estimating that about 207,000 remain alive and growing.

At least 70 million more could be planted in the next few years, said Capt. Al Modjeski, an official with the Littoral Society.

Once they reach the water, the oysters have about a 10 percent survival rate, scientists say.

Oyster restoration projects are underway or have recently been completed in San Francisco Bay; Puget Sound near Seattle; in coastal salt ponds in Rhode Island and the state's Narragansett Bay; in the Carolinas; in Florida and the other Gulf Coast states; in New Hampshire; and particularly in Chesapeake Bay in Maryland and Virginia, where some of the nation's biggest oyster restoration programs have been underway for years.

Since launching in 2014, an effort to restore oysters in New York Harbor called the Billion Oyster Project has planted over 28 million oysters, with the goal of reaching a billion by 2035.

In Europe, oyster restoration projects are being done in England,

Scotland, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden.

The work usually involves scientific groups setting up tanks in which to cultivate baby oysters. Then they turn to volunteers to help put them into waterways.

"A really important part of this work is connecting people back to the environment," said Tim Dillingham, executive director of the Littoral Society. "This gives them an opportunity to become citizen-scientists and actually participate in oyster restoration.

"We call them 'oyster wranglers,' and there's a very real aspect to this: At the end of the day, the oysters you took out of a tank and removed from a bag and put into the water are on the bottom of the bay, doing what they do, filtering water and providing storm resilience, and you did that."

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