

CCA NH Tide Bits Oct. 15, 2009

The Orvis Company of Manchester, Vt. recently announced a grant award of \$10,000 to CCA NH to initiate an oyster shell recycling program and bed restoration in Great Bay. This large estuarine system is fed by six significant rivers and a watershed of 44 communities in NH and 10 towns in Maine. The bay drains to the Atlantic through the very short Piscataqua River. The oyster bed acreage has declined precipitously. Around 1000 acres of healthy oyster beds present in 1993 have dwindled to less than 100 acres. Filter feeding oysters could filter the entire estuary in a few days, but now the filtering capacity is negligible. Siltation, over harvest, nutrient loading, storm water runoff, disease, and excessive nitrogen are the reasons for their demise. Simultaneously, eelgrass has completely disappeared from portions of the ecosystem. These causes are slowly being addressed, but it is essential to maintain a stock of native oysters in the estuary.

Oysters grow best on oyster shell. But, when beds are covered in silt, the young oysters called spat, have nowhere to adhere. There are areas where siltation is not a problem and new beds can be established. Oyster shell is not readily available and some current efforts resort to using clam shell as an alternative substrate. The Orvis Oyster Project will reuse shell currently landfilled by the many regional seafood restaurants serving oysters purchased out of state. Larger volumes of shell may be available at regional oyster festivals in New England. Shell must be stored out of doors for three warm months at an existing site already established at the University of New Hampshire's Kingman Farm. Collected shell will be used directly in the bay as substrate and in cultivation projects.

The recycling part of the program will involve selling the idea to all the area restaurateurs up and down the coast and scheduling weekly pickups. Robert's Maine Grill of Kittery, Maine has jumped on board already, and we expect other restaurants to follow. Nick Lapointe of the Home Depot in Portsmouth, NH has provided the five gallon containers and Scott Eldredge of Eldredge Lumber in Kittery, Maine has helped out with the easy open lids. Volunteers will drive established routes, exchange empty containers for full ones, and drop the shell off at UNH.

The proposed project will build on the work and research of Dr. Ray Grizzle of the UNH Jackson Estuarine Lab and the cultivation project led by Ray Konisky of The Nature Conservancy. Residents raise oysters in cages suspended from piers until they can be transferred to new beds in the bay. Both individuals will be key to the success of the Orvis Oyster Project.

CCA NH is thrilled with this grant from Orvis. This is an opportunity to directly engage local businesses and indirectly engage the public. Great Bay has not been so great, of late. Media coverage will be essential. A good portion of the public is not aware that Great Bay is under considerable stress and, as most scientists agree, may reach a tipping point. An effort to restore oysters and raise public consciousness is essential. An informed public will ultimately influence policy makers and hopefully alter our personal activities and behaviors.