

Chesapeake Bay Foundation leads Virginia in oyster restoration project

Posted At : June 15, 2020 1:41 PM | Posted By : SHSJC

Related Categories: News

By Lauren Grayson

Outside of Smithfield Station, a popular local seafood restaurant, an employee threw a bucket of empty oyster shells into an already overflowing bin labeled "CAUTION: Oyster Restoration at Work."

"Every day, when the cooks take out the trash, they dispose of the oyster shells in a separate bin," store manager Evan Thomas said.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation collects the shells and uses them to construct and maintain the oyster reefs.

"The bin is in front of the restaurant so that when customers walk in, they can see the work that's being done," Thomas said. "It makes us feel like we're really making a difference because where we would otherwise just throw the shells away, we're finding a way to repurpose them."

Smithfield Station and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation are trying to increase the number of oysters and slow the rate of species endangerment by increasing the variety of life that exists within freshwater, tidal and marine ecosystems.

Jackie Shannon, manager for the Virginia Oyster Restoration Center, is responsible for gathering volunteers to produce and place man-made clumps of collected oyster shells into the ocean.

"My role is to be a lot more hands-on with the work that we do," Shannon said. "What me and my volunteers do is place clumps of oysters, called hatchery clumps, into the ocean. The goal is that eventually, they'll naturally recruit oyster larvae, producing more baby oysters that will grow to create reef structures. These structures will then eventually serve as a habitat for underwater wildlife."

According to Shannon, these oyster reef structures require years of monitoring. However, if successful, they become self-sustainable and create diverse aquatic ecosystems that have a huge biological impact.

This biological impact includes the preservation of the genetic information of these species, which potentially hold the cure to future diseases and contain overall solutions for survival. As soon as a species goes extinct, all of their genetic information is lost.

According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension, water animals and plants are our legacy to future generations. "Preventing habitat loss is the first important step to take in protecting our native species, and restoring important degraded habitat is the second step."

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation would be unable to restore degraded aquatic habitats at a steady rate without the community's participation.

"Building relationships with the community is essential to progress being made," said Christy Everett, Hampton Roads director for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "My job is to build important relationships not only with the government, but with community leaders and representatives as well. Partnering with them is crucial to our goal of improving aquatic biodiversity and improve the local water quality as well."

Yancey Powell, manager of education for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation's Jenny S. Workboat Education Program, actively educates students and their teachers on the environmental health of the Hampton Roads waterways.

"Maintaining the waterways is crucial to the survival of certain species here," Powell said. "Overfishing is definitely a problem, whether it be because of huge fisheries or individuals who frequently fish in the waterways illegally."

"Either way, they are altering and impacting the environment around them, which is why we then have to come in and make sure that they still have an underwater environment to come back to!"

Meanwhile, one shell at a time, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Virginia restaurants will continue to do their part to restore oyster reefs and create a more diverse aquatic ecosystem together.