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Oyster cultivation off to a great start in Ches. Beach

Everyone who lives in Southern Maryland loves the Chesapeake Bay and praises its beauty, and its historically rich bounty of fish and shellfish. Equally, most residents deplore the declining quality of the bay's waters and resulting scarcity of marine life. Sadly, for many of us, deploring the bay's condition is as far as it goes. However, there is a group of people who are taking positive steps to help restore the health of the bay — and giving up a lot of their free time to do it.

Under the auspices of the town, the volunteer members of the Chesapeake Beach Oyster Cultivation Society (CBOCS) have quietly begun making a difference in the bay's water quality. Two weeks ago, CBOCS dumped into the bay the first bunch of oyster spat. Spats are immature oysters just big enough, after the first year, to fend for themselves in the bay. These yearling spat grew in oyster cages fastened to the bases of piers on Chesapeake Beach's new Rail Trail boardwalk.

John Bacon, the president of CBOCS, spoke about the society and the success of the first year's oyster growing cycle at the September session of Calvert Conversations, at the Twin Beaches Library. Bacon, several CBOCS volunteers and Orval Thrasher, a former waterman, were on the agenda for the Conversations program.

This was a double-header feature, because there were two speakers addressing the county's oyster interests from both the historical perspective — harvesting oysters — and the current cultivation effort to restore the bay's oyster populations. Orval Thrasher, a member of the North Beach Volunteer Fire Department, described his experiences as an oyster tonger in the now nearly defunct — in this area — oyster harvesting trade.

Thrasher described the changes in the land and seascapes at Chesapeake Beach. There was free docking for the fishing and oyster boats to unload their catch where the residential development Windward Keys now stands. The crab catch was unloaded in the same area, in a section called "Crab Alley." A photograph from that era, or a little earlier, taken from the shore, shows the entire horizon filled with big commercial boats, tongers and skipjacks.

Oysters were still plentiful as late as the early 1960s, and Thrasher could dive for oysters near "Old Rock," the reef in the waters just outside the town. "The bay water was so clear you could see the bottom at 7 or 8 feet. I dropped a pole once, and just dove down to get it," Thrasher remembered.

Some 40 years later, the first step in restoring oysters in the bay waters at Chesapeake Beach was accomplished when CBOCS volunteers released the first yearling spat at the Old Rock oyster reef. The oysters were gathered from the cages and taken in boats and dropped onto the reef out beyond Windward Keys, the place where the loaded fishing and oyster catch used to come into shore.

The importance of oyster restoration is not only to revitalize the local fishing industry. Besides their value as protein-rich food, and an important regional economic resource, oysters play a significant role in cleaning the bay water. Oysters filter the water as they feed. A single adult oyster can filter 50 gallons of water in one day, removing pollutants and micro-organisms, and also helping to increase the oxygen in the water. CBOCS president Bacon noted that in the mid-1800s, oysters could filter the entire bay in three days.

Bacon described how the society came to being, and how he became its first president. Chesapeake Beach Mayor Bruce Wahl had been thinking about oyster restoration for some time. Some private groups have had significant success with oyster restoration in Solomons and the lower Patuxent River. Based on these successes, Wahl wanted to begin a similar project under the auspices of the town. At the January 2011 town meeting, Wahl described the plan to place oyster spat cages under the piers of the new Rail Trail boardwalk that spans Fishing Creek.

Mayor Wahl asked everyone present to sign a list to volunteer for regular monitoring of the spat cages and water quality.

"I tried to get out of it," Bacon joked. "But Kathy Johnson [the Town Hall receptionist] made me sign. Since I was the first person to sign, I became the leader and president." Bacon is an engineer and scientist, so clearly the right man for the job.

The first job for Bacon and the newly formed society was to look at the waters on Fishing Creek and see if it could support

oyster growth.

"We had to find out, what do oysters like or not like in their habitat? Oysters need salinity and oxygen to grow, and they can't live if they're smothered by silt. The water temperature, the ph and the direction of the tides are all important factors for success," Bacon said.

The group checked the parameters of the waters at Fishing Creek and found they were fine for oyster seeding, and so, the decision was made to go ahead with the project. Some spirited people committed to buying rotating cages at \$500 per cage. Other individuals volunteered to monitor the water. These are cages set on pontoons, which rotate completely with the tide.

The spats used are Virginia Eastern oysters. In the wild, new spats attach to empty shells or other reef debris. The grids of the cages substitute for old shells for these small youngsters, no larger at first than small buttons to grow on. In a year, the spats develop hard enough shells to survive in oyster reefs. The first yearling spats were released in the bay Sept. 9, 2012, a day fondly called by CBOCS volunteers "Deployment Day."

The survival rate of the newly deployed spats is in the high 70s, which is very good, according to Bacon, and the society is very pleased with the results. Donations have been made to purchase more of the rotating cages, which are now in place at the bottom of piers along Fishing Creek boardwalk. CBOCS volunteers monitor the spats and the water conditions every week.

To date, CBOCS is a small group of volunteers, committed people who spend a big chunk of their free time performing the necessary tasks associated with keeping the project going. More hands make lighter work for everybody, and CBOCS is seeking to expand its volunteer base. The society can use many more volunteers to perform the weekly, seasonal and annual work associated with this project.

There are many other ways to work on this important project, such as administrative jobs for the society, fundraising, adopting an oyster cage, by purchase or donating funds for purchase of a cage. Anyone with a private pier is encouraged to consider installing a cage, either a rotating cage or one of the free Department of Natural Resources wire cages.

Although CBOCS is a project of the Town of Chesapeake Beach, participation isn't limited to town residents. Anyone who is interested in the health of the bay is welcome to come and help with this important effort. The county elementary schools already are involved, and are incorporating aspects of oyster cultivation into the fifth grade environmental curriculum. On a recent field trip, Bacon noted that the sharp-eyed fifth graders are really diligent at monitoring the water transparency.

More information about the work of CBOCS and the oyster cultivation project can be found at www.chesapeake-beach.md.us/cbocs.htm, by phone at 410-257-2230 or 301-855-8398 or by email at cbocs@chesapeake-beach.md.us.

The Twin Beaches Library hosts Calvert Conversation each month. This monthly, hourlong series is presented to give county residents, particularly new residents, the opportunity to learn more about Calvert County. The topics for discussion include current aspects of county life and occupations, as well as county history. For further information, go to <http://calvert.lib.md.us/twin.html>, or call 410-257-2411. The meetings often include knowledgeable speakers, and participant input is strongly encouraged. The library also springs for free coffee and tea to help keep the conversation and ideas flowing smoothly.