

# Washington State is the World's Oyster— and Manila Clam, Mussel and Geoduck, Too

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Washington's venerable, yet fragile, shellfish industry is experiencing relatively good times, but pollution—an ever-present threat—still looms.

Justin Taylor, 88, stands waist-deep in the waters of the Skookum Inlet, scooping up shovel loads of rock and dirt.

It's a warm late-summer day, and Taylor keeps one eye on an osprey circling above him as he works.

He's been out here all summer, patiently digging a channel in the bottom of the inlet to help drain off water during low tide.

"If it's too wet, the clams don't like it," Taylor explains. "They like it to dry out."

After a lifetime of harvesting shellfish, Taylor knows plenty about what clams like. Oysters and mussels, too.

And he knows what they don't like.

Polluted storm water. Fertilizer. Farm manure. Leaking septic tanks. Slippery mud-like sludge.

On the surface, there is plenty to like right now about Washington's shellfish industry. Some of the old South Sound harvest beds that were wiped out by pollution during the middle part of the century are coming back.

Oysters are enjoying a renaissance among North American palettes, particularly live oysters on the half-shell.

Geoducks, the grotesque and fascinating king of the clams, are gaining an important

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Justin Taylor, patriarch of Taylor Shellfish Farms, takes a break from digging a new channel to improve clam habitat in the Skookum Inlet.

## AT A GLANCE

Oysters are enjoying newfound popularity in North America, particularly live oysters on the half-shell.

Geoducks, the grotesque and fascinating king of the clams, are gaining an important place in the market just a little more than a decade after farmers perfected their cultivation.

Over-harvesting and pollution nearly wiped out the Olympia oyster in the middle part of last century.

On an average day, an estimated 140,000 pounds of toxic chemicals enter Puget Sound.

A single oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water per day.



Bill Dewey of Taylor Shellfish points out the various parts of a Pacific Oyster.

place in the market just a decade or so after farmers began perfecting their cultivation.

And Manila clams, which became a staple of Washington's shellfish industry after World War II, are proving recession resistant.

Yet pollution in Puget Sound remains a major problem, threatening to cut off important harvest beds. And friction with some property owners who are not accustomed to the sight of a working waterfront threatens expansion.

Along Totten Inlet in Thurston County, a coalition of neighbors complain that Taylor Shellfish's operation is unsightly and damaging to other marine life. Some Pierce County residents have tried to block new geoduck farming operations, as well.

This summer, the Department of Natural Resources announced it will undertake an inventory of state-owned tidelands in an attempt to identify potential trespassing and unauthorized uses. The move followed a discovery of a potential trespass by Taylor Shellfish near Allyn.

Taylor Shellfish president Bill Taylor vowed to cooperate with the inventory, saying that water boundaries between private and state tidelands have been historically difficult to verify.

Justin Taylor is clearly frustrated by the slow pace of progress in addressing pollution. "I wish the state would get going and clean the water up," he says.

Tim McMillin, general manager of the 131-year-old Olympia Oyster Co., said the industry has survived many transitions over the years.

"I feel confident the industry as a whole will survive as long as we get the non-growers in the state of Washington to care about Puget Sound," McMillin said. "A clean Puget Sound helps everyone in the state, or nation for that matter."

#### OYSTERS AND WASHINGTON HISTORY

Washington state is known now for its apples, coffee and computer software.

But its history with oysters goes back much farther.

Some of the first laws the state put on its books are oyster-related, and the Willapa Bay oyster was Washington's first agricultural export.

By the 1890s, some 40 years after the first Puget Sound oysters were shipped to

San Francisco, the state's harvest had grown to more than 130,000 bushels, according to Daniel Cheney and Thomas Mumford, Jr., authors of the book *Shellfish & Seaweed Harvests Of Puget Sound*.

Frank Bishop, patriarch of the Little Skookum Shellfish Growers, published a book about his family's tidelands entitled *History of Little Skookum Shellfish Growers Tideland*. The subtitle captures the arc of history: "from Abraham Lincoln to George W. Bush II, December 9, 1864 to March 10, 2005."

The history for many shellfish growers includes rough patches. Competition from East Coast shellfish growers, changing consumer preferences, over-harvesting and polluted waters have all posed challenges for growers.

One of the biggest came from the Rainier Pulp mill, built in Shelton in 1926. The mill, later called Rayonier, operated for just a few decades until 1957, but managed to nearly wipe out shellfish harvests in Oakland Bay.

Oyster men fought the mill in court and elsewhere, making life difficult for people on both sides.

The industry survived in part because of the discovery that Pacific oysters imported from Japan could survive amid the pollution much better than the native Olympia oysters.

And little by little, harvest beds lost to pollution are returning. Since the mill's closure, the cleansing power of time and the tides—and oysters themselves—continue to uncover century-old dikes that have been buried in Oakland Bay for decades.

**FOODIES, RAW OYSTERS AND GOOEY-WHAT?**

Not too long ago, buying oysters meant going to the store and picking up a can.

These days, it's likely to mean ordering raw bi-valves on the half-shell at a restaurant, or stopping at a farmer's market and picking up a dozen live oysters for the evening's get-together.

"We are entering an oyster renaissance in North America," food writer Rowan Jacobsen writes in his book, *A Geography of Oysters*.

Jacobsen cites Taylor Shellfish Farms as proof, noting that just 20 years ago the company sold virtually no oysters in the shell. The entire market was shucked meats. Today, approximately 75 percent of the oysters that Taylor grows are sold live.

"People no longer want generic oysters in a tub," he writes. "They want oysters with somewhereness."

The resurgence has been a boon for the state's industry: More often than not, that somewhereness means somewhere in Washington.

The state is the largest producer of farmed shellfish in the United States, generating an estimated \$96 million in sales in 2005, according to the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association.

Food lovers aren't stopping at oysters, either. Geoducks, once a cheap stock for chowder, now command top dollar in Asia, and they're beginning to show up on the menus of some of America's finer restaurants, too.

The strangely huge clam can elicit snickers and gasps, but it's big business. For Taylor Shellfish, geoduck clams are its most profitable crop.



Nyle Taylor, 16, helps out the family business by taking sample counts and ridding the tide flats of harmful pests.

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—Rowan Jacobsen, from his book, *A Geography of Oysters*

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

In 1980, the first Washington state Legislature, passed a law that allowed for the sale of tidelands supporting oyster beds to private citizens. In 1895, lawmakers followed up with the Bush Act, which allowed citizens to file on oyster land whether or not oysters had been previously cultivated.

The Olympia oyster, which was nearly wiped out by over-harvesting and pollution, is Puget Sound's only native oyster. Pacific oysters were brought to the U.S. from Japan in commercial quantities beginning in 1919.

In 2005, Washington shellfish growers harvested 88.5 million pounds of oysters, clams, mussels and geoducks.

**Oysters grown in Puget Sound:**

- Olympia oyster (*Ostrea Lurida*)
- Eastern oyster (*Ostrea Virginica*)
- European flat oyster (*Ostrea Edulis*)
- Pacific oyster (*Ostrea gigas*); varieties include Myagi, Kumamoto and Hiroshima

Watch video of a chef preparing geoduck:

<http://bit.ly/4eOKvy>

Olympia Oyster Company:

[www.olympiaoyster.com](http://www.olympiaoyster.com)

Taylor Shellfish:

[www.taylorshellfishfarm.com](http://www.taylorshellfishfarm.com)



Hector Loza prepares a tray of oysters for shipment at Taylor Shellfish Farms.

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#### NATURE'S OWN FILTER

Pollution remains a major threat to the industry, however, despite some isolated success stories and the closure of the Shelton mill.

On an average day, an estimated 140,000 pounds of toxic chemicals enter Puget Sound, according to the state Department of Ecology.

David Dicks, executive director of the Puget Sound Partnership, leads the state agency charged with cleaning up Puget Sound. The shellfish industry is an important part of the effort, Dicks said.

"You go back in history, really the first people to get upset and concerned about fixing water quality, it was the shellfish people," Dicks said. "I consider them close allies in what we're trying to do."

Dicks said the controversy over geoduck farming is one that needs to be resolved. It's really a use conflict, and one that's fueled by hyperbole rather than facts, he said. He said the Puget Sound Partnership can play a role by helping gather solid data.

"These guys are completely good actors," Dicks said of shellfish growers. "For obvious reasons, they care a lot about the health of Puget Sound."

Oysters are doing their part to help with the effort. A single oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water per day.

The nonprofit Puget Sound Restoration Fund hopes to combine the restorative power of the oyster with the power of awareness. The group has launched two community shellfish farms and is planning a third farm as part of an effort to connect people with Puget Sound.

The farms are a kind of an underwater community garden. Volunteers invest their time putting out seed tending to their shellfish and harvesting their bounty, sometimes in the middle of the night.

They end up feeling connected to their food, and community, said Betsy Peabody, executive director of the group.

"They want to know where their food comes from," Peabody said.

The way Peabody sees it, Puget Sound would be cleaner—and there would be fewer complaints from property owners about shellfish growers—if the average person had a better understanding of the shellfish industry.

Not everyone can be like Justin Taylor, wading out into the water day after day to tend to their shellfish.

But it wouldn't be a bad thing to experience it every now and then.

In the end, as Jacobsen writes in *A Geography of Oysters*, everyone wins when the oyster thrives.

"It takes great habitat to make great oysters, so when you taste a really superb one, you can take pleasure in knowing that you are tasting the untamed health and beauty of nature," he says. "An oyster tastes good because at one spot in the natural world, something went right. A great oyster is an estuary flashing a thumbs-up sign." ■

