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Oysters Matter Too!

By Riley Tripp

Oysters have been living in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed for as long as anyone can remember. And I bet that there are a lot of interesting facts about oysters that you don't even know! In this essay, I will tell you the story of the oysters at the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, starting with what oysters are.

Oysters are from the kingdom Animalia, the phylum Mollusca, and the class Bivalvia. Did you know that the oysters in the Chesapeake Bay are really called "*Crassostrea Virginica*"? Oysters also help filter the water in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed and adult oysters can filter up to fifty gallons of water a day!

These helpful creatures like to live and form their beds at the bottom of the bay around eight to twenty-five feet in water depths. They go this deep because they can't tolerate the freezing temperatures found in Maryland and Virginia. The shells of oysters are usually covered in Bryozoans and sea squirts, along with the occasional clamworm on the surface of the bed.



Oysters may be endangered though, due to over-harvesting and diseases like Dermo and MSX. Dermo (also known as *Perkinsus marinus*) is a disease that was found in the Chesapeake Bay in 1949 and it is still there today. Dermo mainly affects the *Crassostrea Virginica* in their second year of life. It is advised to wait one to two years before planting seed stocks in an area with diseased oysters.

MSX (also known as *Haplosporidium nelsoni*) is a disease similar to Dermo except it not only affects the oysters that live in the Chesapeake Bay, but it also affects pacific oysters. MSX is a spore-forming protozoan. It is not harmful to humans but lethal to the *Crassostrea Virginica*.

In the seventeenth century when huge numbers of oysters lived in the bay, colonists used hand tongs to harvest the oysters. In the 1800's, they started to harvest the oysters with dredges. More than 1.5 million bushels of oysters were harvested each year by 1850. About three decades later, 20 million bushels of oysters were harvested from the bay! This is called "over-harvesting".

Over-harvesting has been going on for centuries and has led to the demise of the bay's healthy reefs. Oysters may seem delicious to eat, but if you harvest too many oysters, you could destroy parts of the Chesapeake Bay. Oysters matter, too.

Thankfully, oyster sanctuaries and many other programs have helped with over-harvesting. Oyster sanctuaries are underwater reefs where shellfish harvesting is prohibited.

Oysters have different names. For the eastern oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, *Crassostrea Virginica* is one of the names. You might also hear people call oysters "arsters". This is because Oysters are meatier in the months that have an "r" in the name. Also, did you know that oysters can change their genders? I couldn't imagine waking up one morning and thinking, "Hey, you know what? I'm going to switch genders today!"

The other day I read a quote from a man named William James. The quote was, "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does,". It really made me think about what we do to the bay whenever we absentmindedly toss a can into the bay, or watch a plastic bag float away. These things that people do every single day have a difference—so why don't we do something to protect the bay instead? Here are some things we can do:

1: Grow Oysters! This is an easier idea if you have a dock.

2: Clean up your local beach every now and then. A little bit of work goes a long way!

3: Make sure you clean your boat regularly if you have one.

4: When you go fishing, make sure that you only keep the fish that you'll use and release the rest.

5: Plant trees along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay.

So take care of your Chesapeake Bay and the animals that live in it. Especially the oysters. Because they matter, too!