



The Eastern Oyster

The Eastern Oyster is one of the most famous organisms in the Chesapeake Bay. Early explorers were amazed by the amount of oysters found in Bay waters, and they quickly became well known around the world for their flavor. Today, the Bay's oyster population is in decline due to over-harvesting, disease, and habitat loss.

Oysters spawn near the end of June, when rising water temperatures trigger females to release millions of eggs into the water, where they are met by sperm released from males. Fertilized eggs develop into swimming larvae which, after a few days, settle to the bottom and attach themselves to a hard surface. Usually this surface is another oyster shell. Juvenile attached oysters are called spat. As spat grow, their shells increase in size. Once an oyster is three inches long, it can legally be caught and eaten. One interesting trait common to all oyster species is their ability to change gender. At the end of their first year, most oysters spawn as males. As they grow older, however, many spawn as females, especially after their second year.



Oysters eat by sucking water into their shells and filtering out small plants called phytoplankton. This process removes algae, sediments, and nutrients from the water while greatly improving the water quality of the Bay. One large adult oyster can filter up to sixty gallons of water in a single day!

Several factors have led to the decline of the oyster population. These factors include over-harvesting, diseases such as MSX and "Dermo", and runoff caused by land development that covers prime oyster habitat with silt. Many efforts are being made to restore the native oyster population. Private citizens help by raising young oysters in specially designed "oyster cages" which hang from their docks. Man-made oyster bars are being built in areas less prone to MSX and Dermo. Despite these efforts, the recovery process has been slow. The fate of the native oyster will depend on our efforts to restore habitat and improve water quality. Perhaps one day we may live to see the incredible amount of oysters that amazed the first inhabitants of our "Great Shellfish Bay".



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

DIRECTIONS: Read the text on the previous page, then answer the following questions in complete sentences. Write your answers on the lines provided.

1. When do oysters spawn?

2. What is a spat?

3. How do oysters eat?

4. What are three reasons that the oyster population has declined?

5. What has been done to try to restore the native oyster population?
