

We have much to learn from the humble oyster

By Lauren Williams, Haille Leija and Bill Rodney



Elizabeth Conley / Staff file photo

Prestige Oysters employees Jaime Martinez, left, and Joaquin Padilla talk about how they seed and harvest in Galveston Bay.

While some might say that the past year has drawn sharp to attention to the divisions between us, we see a real opportunity for common ground — if only we take some cues from the Gulf Coast oyster.

Oysters grow on reefs. They attach to each other and take strength from their collective partnership. With each passing year, oyster reefs grow bigger, more capable of withstanding challenges and more poised to support each other. They even provide benefits to others, such as serving as habitat for fish and other reef dwellers and protecting coastal communities from storms.

Just like those oyster reefs, we can achieve so much more when we work together in partnership and pull together toward common goals. A willingness to listen and a commitment to collaboration can break down old assumptions, like the belief that ensuring a healthy environment and a healthy economy are mutually exclusive.

This month, The Nature Conservancy, Galveston Bay Foundation and Texas Parks and Wildlife Department celebrate the successful completion of an oyster reef restoration project in the upper Galveston Bay and Trinity Bay area. With this project, over 20,000 tons of limestone rock have been placed in the water to create a 40-acre oyster reef complex. And while that in and of itself is exciting —

because oyster reefs are among the most threatened marine habitats on earth — the real win is an even bigger story.

Of that 40-acre project site, 25 acres will eventually be open for commercial harvesting while 15 acres are designated for oyster restoration. The protected area allows oysters to reproduce and sustain the commercial reef. That means jobs and fresh seafood. The Gulf Coast region serves as the cornerstone of our country's \$220 million oyster industry and produces nearly half of all oysters produced in the U.S. each year. The bulk of that production comes from Louisiana and Texas; the industry has a \$39 million average impact on our state's economy annually.

Forty acres might seem small in that context, but The Nature Conservancy has leaned into this multi-benefit theme with oyster restoration projects along the Texas Gulf Coast, from Copano to Matagorda Bay, and the results are more than promising. For example, in 2014, The Nature Conservancy and partners collaborated to restore Half Moon Reef in Matagorda Bay. This system was once one of the largest and most productive reefs in Texas. In just six short years, it is now teeming with marine wildlife again. Oysters can be found on 70 percent of the reef's surface, where they are improving water quality and bolstering seagrass growth. It also has become a hot spot for anglers and has helped to generate an additional \$1.27 million in annual economic activity through tourism, fishing guide excursions and recreational fishing.

The Galveston Bay project project was made possible in part by RESTORE Act Funding — dollars allocated for recovery following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill a decade ago. The spill polluted over 1,000 miles of shoreline across five states, dumping more than 205 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf — enough to fill 343 Olympic-size swimming pools. Scientists think as many as 8.3 billion subtidal oysters died as a result of the spill.

But that wasn't the beginning or the end of the challenges facing the Gulf of Mexico's oyster reefs. Hurricanes, the impacts of climate change, overharvesting, increased urbanization and harmful farming practices implemented far up the rivers that feed the Gulf have taken toll. While existing efforts through Galveston Bay Foundation's Oyster Shell Recycling Program, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Oyster Shell Recovery Fund and The Nature Conservancy's reef restoration projects provide much needed oyster habitat, only a fraction of the Gulf's original reefs remain. The Deepwater Horizon settlement agreement, totaling \$20.8 billion, designates \$16.6 billion to the Gulf, of which approximately 20 percent has been spent or spoken for to date.

We have an opportunity to get it right in the Gulf — to reverse a century of harm and to restore oysters in Galveston Bay and Gulf-wide. But the dollars alone won't get us there. Ensuring a healthy future for the Gulf of Mexico hinges on collaborating and coordinating across borders and outside of silos. Our successful efforts in Texas would not have been possible without partnerships built on time and trust. Innovative ideas that balance multiple interests, such as the hybrid reef management approach used first at Copano Bay and now in Galveston Bay, are critical. Increased collaboration supports replicating proven methods, so that instead of reef-by-reef restoration work, it will be possible to restore entire bays and estuaries.

When we purposefully develop solutions that balance the needs of everyone who relies on a resource, conservation can have a compounding effect over time, creating a continuous cycle of health and growth. If we can seize this moment — not to mention the \$13 billion in Gulf restoration funding left on the table — to work together as the subtidal oysters do, all of us will benefit in the form of improved

water quality, better protection from storms and a more resilient fishing and tourism economy. And with creativity, partnership, and a fair bit of courage, we'll preserve the chance to enjoy the incomparable taste of a fresh Texas oyster, today and far into the future.

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