

AWW, SHUCKS!

TED WILGIS AND HIS PLAN FOR
OYSTER RESTORATION.

by Tiffanie DiDonato
photos contributed

On any given day, you'll find Ted Wilgis, the Coastal Education Coordinator at the North Carolina Coastal Federation, happily exploring estuaries along our coast. Often on his days off, he'll find a thick and lush marsh, and walk through it to simply satisfy his thirst for curiosity. Wilgis said to me, "I like to just see what's out there." Our coast is where he feels most at ease. On Stump Sound, behind Topsail Island, and at Carolina Beach State Park, he's also involved with helping rebuild oyster reefs. And therein rests his passion—becoming an active spokesperson for North Carolina's oyster restoration.

As Wilgis began to explain the process, it became quite clear he wasn't talking about a simple task. No, no. Oyster restoration is, in every sense of the way, a multi-pronged and seemingly endless duty; one that involves fisheries, the management of the oysters through farming, and ensuring good water quality at our coast. Then there's even the harder chore of bringing awareness to, well, people like me (I won't lie) who never considered oysters as much more than a flirty

appetizer while on a romantic date. Oh, how wrong that is. Turns out, they can spike our local economy, purify dirty water, and help their community thrive.

Here's how: baby oysters all begin as free-floating organisms, but then they drop to the bottom, and attach themselves to a hard surface. Turns out, their favorite place to mature is on other oyster shells. An embankment of oyster shells placed in brackish water with a nice tidal flow can swiftly become populated with a horde of different marine organisms, like worms, algae, minnows, fish, crabs, more oysters—you name it. Before long it's literally an aquatic city attracting even bigger fish and accomplishing something else—purifying our water ways by feeding on plankton and waterborne detritus. A single oyster can filter 50 gallons of water in one day! Recent research also supports the fact that oysters can even help fight climate change. But their struggle to survive dates back to the 1880s.

According to Wilgis, oysters were, "dredged beyond capacity. As much as 50% was lost in historical overfishing." Tack on clean water



We are now in the peak of oyster reproduction season, and though efforts by the federation and others have improved our fisheries (The Coastal Review reported in 2013, 110,892 bushels were recovered worth an exciting \$3.4 million to our local economy), according to Wilgis, the reality is the oysters harvested and purchased by consumers at local restaurants are more than likely shipped from the Chesapeake Bay or the Gulf Coast. This is the final spine in Wilgis' oyster restoration plan—developing more North Carolina oyster farms. To date, there are only 10. Compare that to Virginia's 100 local oyster farms.

"In the southern part of our state, oyster reefs are the only real structure out there in the water—it serves as a refuge for lots of different fish and crabs. There are areas in our state that are always closed, because they are always polluted. But the Bradley and Hewlett's Creek Watershed restoration plan partnered with UNCW and the town of Wrightsville Beach, and Wilmington is working hard to open up these areas that have been closed for oyster farming due to stormwater."

As author Rowan Jacobsen said within his single-subject book, *A Geography of Oysters*, North Carolina has the potential to be the Napa Valley of oysters if we try. We just have to bring back and further protect what we have. Until then, as a community, there are things we can do to help. When we dine out, inquire where the oysters are coming from, and pledge to support only local oyster farms. And volunteer. To see the opportunities visit: www.nccoast.org. ■

decline due to mush sediment and erosion, plus other waterborne diseases like Dermo, a disease that kills shellfish before their legal harvesting limit, stormwater runoff, and we're lucky to even still have them around for harvesting.

In the nineties, the remaining 50 % of our state's commercial harvest almost vanished entirely. In 1994, the Division of Marine Fisheries recorded a mere 34,727 bushels of oysters worth a scanty \$632,000. Habitat loss and pollution was just too overwhelming. Panicked, worried, and fearful for the future, fishery managers actually considered implanting oysters not native to our waters.

"Oysters are an economic driver for North Carolina," Wilgis said. "When you think about an oyster, remember that they are intricately connected to the health of our coastal ecosystem. They are not just great to eat or important to fishermen, they are a critical component of our economy. Good oysters mean clean water. Clean water means more people can swim, visit the area, dine out, and that provides an important source of income for so many."

