

No Longer "Shellshocked," New Yorkers Fight to Get Their Oysters Back



BY **RACHEL NUWER**
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Nineteenth-century New York City was an oyster lover's paradise. One-cent food carts shucked tasty morsels on the spot; baskets of bivalves crowded the harbors for export across the U.S. and to Europe; and oyster middens, huge heaps of discarded shells, seemed to rival the tall towers of downtown Manhattan. Some 9 billion oysters once sucked and filtered 350 square miles of muddy water within the Hudson River Estuary, and dubbed NYC "the oyster capital of the world." Unfortunately, this utopian pact between sea and city did not last.



Restoration efforts along the Hudson River, where bountiful oyster beds once made New York City the "oyster capital of the world." **Shellshocked**

Shellshocked: Saving Oysters to Save Ourselves, a documentary premiering **tomorrow night in New York City**, follows the rise and fall of the region's oysters. While the film zooms in on the gloom and doom of the bivalve's century-long plight, it doesn't dwell there. Instead, *Shellshocked* delves into the efforts to bring oysters back to the Hudson.

"New York is a microcosm for what's happening around the world," says writer and director **Emily Driscoll**. "What's really great about this film is that it can spark discussion and action for oyster restoration projects worldwide."

PHOTO GALLERY The Big Apple Brings Home Its Bivalves

Driscoll combed through archives around the city for details that capture old New York's booming oyster economy, when residents slurped down a million oysters every day and the local seafood industry capitalized on the healthy fisheries the bivalves helped bestow. Oysters kept the city's water clean -- a single animal filters around 50 gallons of water daily -- and laid foundations for a marine ecosystem as diverse as the Big Apple itself.

But the mollusk fell on hard times. In 1916, doctors traced an outbreak of typhoid fever back to polluted oyster beds off Staten Island. As harbors choked on the city's sewer runoff, epidemiologists linked diseases to tainted oyster beds again and again. A so-called "oyster panic" ensued when cholera and typhoid began popping up around the five boroughs. One by one, New York's oyster beds shut down.

"It came as this huge shock that dumping raw sewage on your food supply was unhealthy," says Mark Kurlansky, author of *The Big Oyster*, in the film. "But even then, they didn't stop." (Driscoll says Kurlansky's "ultimate oyster book" opened her eyes to these amazing organisms.)

SHOWTIMES

The South Street Seaport Museum will be screening "Shellshocked" on Saturday, October 20, every hour on the hour between 10:00 a.m. and

New York's last oyster bed, in Raritan Bay, closed in 1927. By the 1960s, oyster were withering under an onslaught of chemical pollutants that ate through their shells and poisoned them. As the weakened animals succumbed to disease, deep shipping lanes delivered another blow, carving into the Hudson River and usurping the oyster's tidal habitat.

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"Just about every assault we could inflict upon them, we did," Driscoll says. "The oysters didn't stand a chance."

Though the 1972 Clean Water Act helped New York waterways recover from many of the egregious sins against them, the oysters did not return. "We have no natural oyster beds in this region at all," Meredith Comi, director of the **NY/NJ Baykeeper's** oyster restoration program, says in the film. Worse yet, preexisting beds are integral for new generations of oysters since free-floating larvae seek safe, established refuges upon which to attach themselves. If any larvae are drifting around the Hudson these days, Comi says, they're just "falling into the muck and dying."

New York is not alone in this ecological predicament. Scientists **recently declared** the wild oyster reef as the most severely impacted marine habitat on earth, and an estimated 85 percent of natural beds worldwide have disappeared.

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Even so, the bivalve may return to the Big Apple yet. The **Hudson River Foundation** is creating five experimental beds throughout the harbor in order to study the oysters' survival, reproduction, and environmental benefits. The ambitious project aims to establish 5,000 acres of local reefs by 2050, which could bode well for the city's already recovering waterways.

"Restoring oyster reefs is not just about oysters," says Kyle Bennett, an aquatic invertebrate ecologist at Elmhurst College, in the film. "It's about the health of the ecosystems in the places where they're going to be restored." Nearly 300 aquatic species rely on oyster beds in some way.

A determined group of scientists, students, government officials, and citizens are taking part in the recovery. On Governor's Island, high school students at the Harbor School act as the oysters' future stewards, growing colonies, building and installing new reefs, and monitoring their newly planted subjects. Researchers at Baruch College are investigating the best places to put the reefs, based on where the bivalves would likely thrive and optimize their nitrogen pollution-filtering capabilities. And Mara Haseltine is bringing an artist's skill set to the project, submerging her sculptures in the river so young oysters can settle on them.

"Oysters are one of those founding blocks of the ocean world. We need to stop taking away those blocks before everything crumbles," conservationist Fabien Cousteau, grandson of ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau, explains in the documentary. "Nature, with a little help, can regain balance that we've taken away."

Since the film's release, fans from Florida to Cape Cod to England have contacted Driscoll, eager to learn how to start their own restoration projects and spread the word. The director's happy her work is encouraging local action and suggests hosting home screenings of the film (which is available [here](#)).

"People can use their own expertise to restore oysters or help the environment in general," she says. "Nature gave us oysters. Let's use them to clean up the mess we've created."


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