

# Island oyster farmers plant the seeds for a cleaner bay

By Erin Tiernan

Every spring Jamestown comes to life as cherry trees flower and gardens begin to bloom, contributing to the island's natural appeal. This year, 11 Jamestowners are putting down their spades and concentrating gardening efforts to a more radical locale with larger implications: the Narragansett Bay.

As volunteer 'gardeners,' local residents partnered with the Rhode Island Oyster Gardening for Restoration and Enhancement program based out of Roger Williams University in an effort to reseed the bay with a natural and enduring oyster population.

But, don't start drooling yet, these tasty little shellfish have a lot of growing to do before they hit the raw bar.

RI-OGRE Coordinator Steve Patterson said one day oyster populations might return to levels suitable for commercial fishing and consumption, but as of now efforts are strictly for conservation purposes.

"If our program becomes as successful as we want it to, oysters will then again be permitted for consumption in Rhode Island," said Patterson. "We're permitted through the CRMC under an aquaculture initiative to try to bring oysters back through restoration efforts, so if we were raising oysters for someone to eat them, they'd never have a chance to make more babies."

After being devastated by the protozoan parasite Dermo, natural oyster populations "are realistically nonexistent in Rhode Island," said Patterson.

Necessary to the bay's status as an estuary environment, oyster beds provide nursery habitat for a variety of crustaceans and marine life as well as function as natural water filters to improve overall water quality in the bay.

Since 2006, Patterson has teamed with volunteers across the state and with local ambassador,

Philip Larson, in a grass-roots effort to restore the critical oyster habitat to Rhode Island waters.

Oyster gardeners nurture oyster larvae, called spat, that is natural to R.I. waters and resistant to the Dermo parasite. There isn't too much to do though, all the gardeners need is a dock or mooring ball so the oyster pod can be attached and submerged just below the surface of the water. Gardeners then must flush and flip over the bags of spat every ten days.

Patterson hopes this resistant species will plant the roots for a sustainable oyster population that has been missing from the bay for decades.

Due to Jamestown's strategic location at the mouth of the bay, Patterson sees a lot potential for growth. He is considering a satellite hatchery at Ft. Wetherill to keep up with the growing demand for spat.

Larson has been a contributor to RI-OGRE's program since its beginnings three years ago. Growing his crop at Sheffield Cove, Larson also advocates on the oyster's behalf by spreading awareness with his group, the Jamestown Aquaculture Movement.

"He (Larson) as been instrumental as an advocate and ambassador of the program," said Patterson. "He has been able to solicit close to a dozen oyster gardening sites on Jamestown alone."

This year's goal is to raise one million oysters at 100 volunteer sites. Patterson said each volunteer garden can potentially grow 10,000 oysters. Jamestown should produce about 110,000 toward the goal.

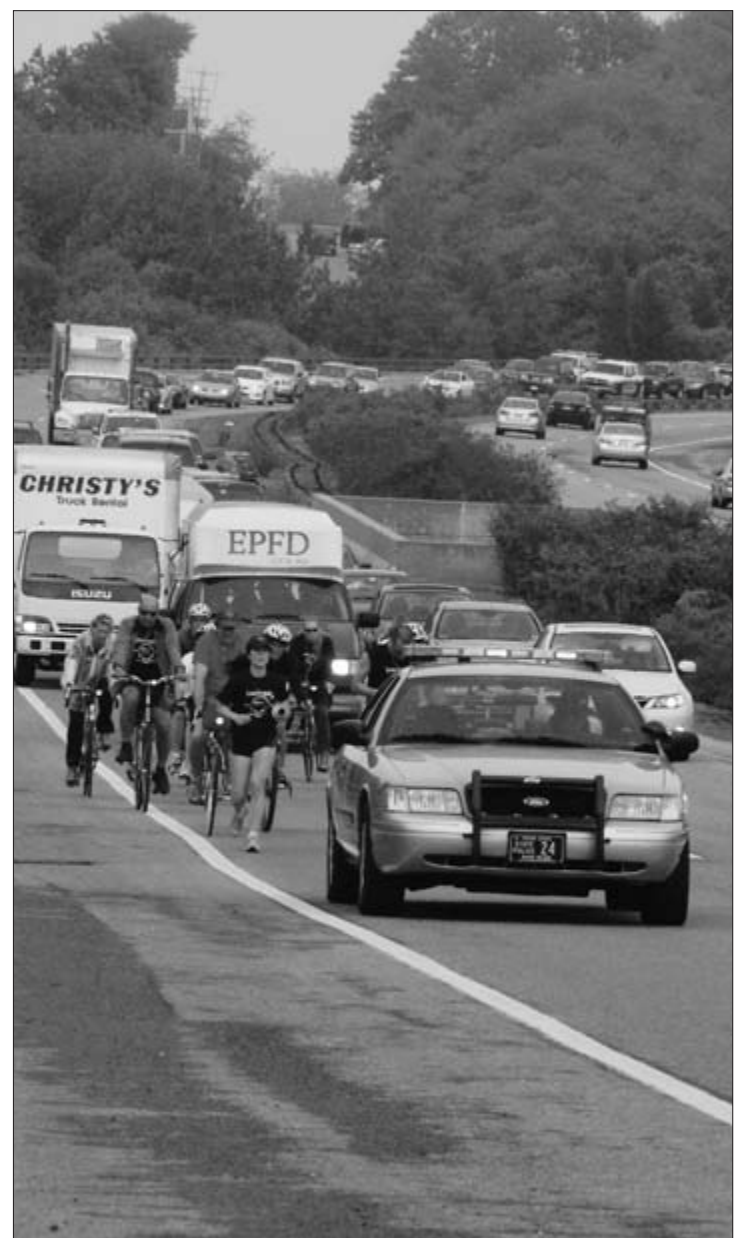
In mid to late-November, the oyster crops are "harvested" and Patterson and his interns then size, sort and count the oysters before dispersing the crop to one of nine shellfish management and restoration sites around Narragansett Bay. They are then left to grow naturally, with routine check-ups.

Patterson's aqua-farming initiative is not limited to the survival of oysters. Adult oysters filter impurities out of over 50,000 gallons of water per day. As the oyster populations thrive, so will all other marine life, creating a positive impact for commercial fishing and fostering habitat growth and complimenting conservation efforts.

"Oyster gardening benefits the overall ecology of the bay, along with conservation and commercial interests."

The level of volunteerism has perpetuated the OGRE initiative, making it possible to go from a mere 50,000 oysters produced in 2006 to 750,000 oyster babies last year.

Patterson said the level of local involvement is necessary and appreciated to keep the oysters growing. Patterson will cut off volunteer garden sites at 100 for this season. He currently has 89 sites confirmed. For more information or to volunteer a site, e-mail Steve Patterson at oysters@rwu.edu or call 254-3707.



## Torch bearer

Jamestown Police Officer Tiffany Kopacz ran the Special Olympics torch from the Pell Newport Bridge to the Jamestown Bridge last week. The Special Olympic games were held at the University of Rhode Island.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten



## This Saturday is Hazardous Waste Disposal Day for the Town of Jamestown!



### DROP IT OFF:

June 6, at Melrose School Parking Lot  
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8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

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