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Tribe aquaculture projects progress October 14, 2004

By Ezra Blair



The Wampanoag Aquinnah Shellfish Hatchery uses five acres on Menemsha Pond for raising oysters. Photos by Ezra Blair



The tribe's shellfish hatchery began selling its Tomahawk Oysters this spring.

Next time you order oysters in Boston, New York, or Washington, D.C., don't be surprised if they taste familiar: they could be Tomahawk Oysters, born and raised in Menemsha Pond.

This spring, the Wampanoag Aquinnah Shellfish Hatchery began shipping out its Tomahawk Oysters, which were first spawned at the tribe's new solar shellfish hatchery two years ago, and were raised to maturity in Menemsha Pond.

At the same time, the tribe, with the help of a federal grant, is working to restore the pond's once thriving bay scallop fishery.

Rob Garrison, Wampanoag shellfish hatchery director, said that so far the tribe's commercial shellfishing venture is off to a strong start, and the scallop project is making headway. "The aquaculture projects we are working on are doing very well. We have been very busy," he said.

Mr. Garrison said the tribe is currently selling about 4,000 to 5,000 oysters a week. Next year he said he hopes to sell a total of 1 million oysters. "As we are going along our production is definitely expanding. We're still learning about the growth rates and the stocking densities, and everything else, but things are moving pretty smoothly," he said.

Aside from local sales, the tribe is selling its oysters in New York, and just began selling them in Boston and Washington, D.C. Even though all the oysters along the east coast and the gulf coast are the same species, each one has its own unique taste. So far, Tomahawk Oysters have received a warm welcome on and off the Island. "All the oysters we have sent out, all the samples, have all been very well-received everywhere we have sent them," Mr. Garrison said.

The unique taste of an oyster is caused by its environment. "They are really differentiated by the water quality in which they are grown. You can have two oysters grown 500 yards away from each other that will taste differently because of the water quality conditions between them," said Mr. Garrison.

For example, he said Tomahawk Oysters are saltier than those grown in Katama Bay because Menemsha Pond has a higher salinity. "It is very easy to tell the difference between Edgartown oysters and those here in Menemsha. Both are excellent, but they do taste different," said Mr. Garrison.

The area in Menemsha Pond where the oysters are grown is a five-acre strip of water off the western shore, just south of Red Beach. The tribe must receive a

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permit from the town and the state to use the site.

Mr. Garrison said he has no plans to expand the area any time soon. "It really would not be my decision, but right now we have got our hands full with what we have got. We will know for sure next year, but we should be able to handle 1 million oysters on our current site without a problem," he said.

Mr. Garrison said that while the acres of floating oyster bags can be an eyesore, he hopes people will see the benefits of the project as well. "In every aquaculture project I have been in, the visual impact of it is always an issue. There are certainly visual impacts that you can't deny. But on the other side of that there are benefits to the environment, one of which is actually removing nitrogen from the water and improving the water quality," he said.

Bret Stearns, tribal director of natural resources, agreed. He said there are many benefits from the oyster project. "There are a lot of reasons for projects like this. For one, it is creating local jobs with work that is inherent to this Island and its tradition of shellfishing. All those oysters are also taking in nitrogen as they grow, which helps improve the water quality in the pond," he said.

Water quality is a constant concern for Mr. Stearns, who is spearheading the project to restore Menemsha Pond's once thriving scallop population. This summer the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced the award of a \$247,500 grant to the tribe for a three-year project designed to restore the pond's bay scallop fishery.

Mr. Stearns said a portion of that money has already gone to a comprehensive study to map the bottom of the pond to locate viable scallop beds. He said other aspects of the project include cutting back scallop predators, like green crabs, and increasing the amount of eelgrass, where scallops thrive.

Mr. Stearns said the tribe's aquaculture projects are helping to restore the pond to the way it used to be when people used to make a living on its waters. "While on one side we do take up five acres, we are giving a lot back to the community. We are putting a lot of resources and technology into this. We have gone after federal grants, and are working to improve the quality of a pond that everyone shares," said Mr. Stearns.

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