

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Wampanoag tribe suspends its hatchery operations



The tribe's shellfish hatchery uses six acres on Menemsha Pond for growing out mature oysters. Photo by Ezra Blair

By Nelson Sigelman - January 25, 2007

The Wampanoag Shellfish Hatchery at the head of Menemsha Pond off State Road in Aquinnah lies dormant. Hatchery director Rob Garrison left in September, and there are no immediate plans to raise juvenile shellfish this year.

Spencer Booker, president of the Wampanoag Shellfish Hatchery Corporation, said this week that the departure of Mr. Garrison and the suspension of hatchery operations are part of a needed restructuring. That includes a shift in focus from research to the business side of the operation.

Mr. Booker said that Mr. Garrison did a wonderful job getting the operation going and providing a product to sell, but that the time for costly research and development is over. "The tribe decided that after six years, going on seven, it was time for it to become a self-sustaining entity and stand on its feet financially," he said.

The operation typically shuts down during the winter months, and there are currently no plans to restart the hatchery once spring arrives this year. That does not preclude future collaboration to use the hatchery, Mr. Booker said. When Mr. Garrison left, the board named David Vanderhoop to be acting director.

Mr. Booker said he views the recent changes positively. "I find it to be quite an exciting time," he said. Mr. Booker who also works for the tribe's department of natural resources.

Meanwhile, an ongoing bay scallop enhancement program fits into the overall goal of growing and selling a variety of shellfish, he said. The lack of hatchery activity will also not immediately affect the sale of oysters.

Mr. Booker said there is an ample supply of oysters currently in the growing bags, enough to sustain operations for the next few years, he said.

The tribe began raising oysters in its new solar shellfish hatchery in 2002, under the direction of Mr. Garrison. In spring 2004, the hatchery began shipping out shellfish marketed as "Tomahawk Oysters" that had been raised to maturity in Menemsha Pond.

The tribe currently leases a site of about six acres in Menemsha Pond from the town of Aquinnah for its aquaculture operation. Oysters are spawned in the tribe's shellfish hatchery and then raised to maturity in plastic mesh bags that are suspended from floats and connected in large rafts floating in the pond.

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