

Saving Our Oysters

Volunteers help preserve the Lowcountry's succulent bivalve. BY KATY DONALDSON



LEFT: Bags of oyster shells form an artificial reef. **BELOW:** Our writer joins the line that passes shells down the dock.

Recycle Your Shells

The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources invites you to recycle oyster shells in 16 collection sites along the coast. For drop-off locations, visit www.saltwaterfishing.sc.gov/oyster.html.



On a sweltering summer day, I'm building a beach house for oysters. Actually, it's an artificial reef designed to shelter oysters and other marine life. The construction site lies on the shores of Hunting Island State Park, where I'm standing in a line of 30 hot, sweaty people. Despite the heat, I'm grateful for the socks on my arms as bags of sharp oyster shells roll up my chest and down again to the next person in line.

These volunteers work for South Carolina Oyster Restoration and Enhancement (SCORE), managed by the state's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). The program builds reefs up and down the coast, including two already completed here at Fripp Inlet.

The artificial reefs provide shelter for the oysters and are critical to the health of our estuaries, explains project manager Nancy Hadley. "Oysters provide food for fish and birds," she says. "They also help clean the water. Each oyster filters up to 50 gallons of water a day."

Toiling for a Cause The Lowcountry sun beats down on us as the three-step reef construction begins. A line of volunteers stretches from a docked boat to a trailer filled with oyster shells bagged by a Boy Scout troop. Person to person, we pass shells down the line until the boat is filled. Dirty and surprisingly heavy, these bags are my workout for the day.

The boat, loaded with shells and volunteers, sets off to the drop site, where we gleefully fling 350 bags into the water between preset markers. Then we munch on cool watermelon and wait for the tide to go out again so we can assemble the bags into a reef.

When the water recedes, we trudge through the pluff mud to the bags. Our crew packs them tightly together, adding two neat rows to an existing reef where oysters already cluster on the mesh.

Nancy explains that oyster larvae prefer to reside in empty oyster shells, which secrete an enzyme that leads the infant oyster to its permanent home.

Like those at Fripp Inlet, SCORE reefs show great success. As many as 500 oysters can grow on just one bag, Nancy says, meaning our reef could ultimately harbor 175,000 future oysters. Each bag can also host 20-100 crabs and 50-100 mussels. "By rebuilding oyster reefs, we are helping the environment," says Bonnie Wright, president of Friends of Hunting Island State Park.

Lowcountry Love As I lift bags alongside the other volunteers, I'm struck by their passion for this project. "It's a chance to make sure the oyster population is enhanced and protected," says Terry Stone, our project's volunteer coordinator. It's also one way, he says, to make sure we have tasty oysters for years to come.

That's not always the case. Shore erosion and development cause some areas to lose their oyster populations. DNR created SCORE to keep oysters thriving here. Restaurants and residents help by putting empty shells into

recycling receptacles along the coast, which are then used to build reefs. "Our Lowcountry ecosystem is sensitive and productive in marine life," says Bonnie. "We need to protect it."

These volunteers pool their passion for the environment and work together. "This project is a team thing," says Nancy. "It's a great way to meet people interested in the same things you are."

A day at the beach is the perfect summer day, even if this one required heavy lifting in the heat. I met great people, who share a love for this place, its resources, and its heritage. At the end of the day, I know the reef we built will ensure the Lowcountry's clean water, marine life, and oyster roasts for the next generation. ●

To learn more visit <http://score.dnr.sc.gov>, or contact Nancy Hadley at hadley@dnr.sc.gov or (843) 953-9841.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CARY JOBE