

Oyster Fact Sheet

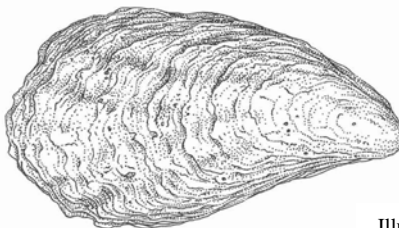


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Common name: Eastern oyster or American oyster

Latin name: *Crassostrea virginica*

Characteristics:

- Oysters are found in sounds, bays, tidal creeks and on exposed mudflats.
- Oysters feed by filtering particles from the surrounding water, simultaneously cleansing various pollutants from the water. A large, healthy oyster can filter as much as four gallons per hour.
- Spawning occurs from April to October, peaking during the summer months. Sperm and eggs are released directly into the water column where fertilization occurs. The larvae float on water currents for three to four weeks at which point the larvae settle to the bottom where they must find a clean, hard surface to which they can attach. Other oyster shells are the ideal settling habitat. If they do not find such a surface they will settle to the bottom and die.
- In inter-tidal (exposed to air during low tide) environments oysters grow in clusters and have thin, elongated, irregularly shaped shells. Inter-tidal oysters spawn intermittently through out the spawning season and may settle on one another, creating the cluster. In sub-tidal (always submerged, even at low tide) environments oysters grow individually and have thicker, heavier shells. Sub-tidal oysters generally spawn in one shorter time span during the season; therefore new oysters settle on much older and larger oysters, easily broken into singles, or other hard substrate.

Distribution:

- The Atlantic coast of the U.S. and the Gulf of Mexico.

Fisheries:

- Oysters in South Carolina are typically harvested at approximately three years of age.
- In South Carolina most oysters grow in inter-tidal environments in clusters. Oysters in Chesapeake Bay, Md. and Apalachicola Bay, Fl. grow in sub-tidal environments as singles.
- Oysters are typically hand picked with long-handled tongs; mechanical dredging is by permit only.

Management:

- The SC Department of Natural Resources (SC DNR) is responsible for oyster management. Fishermen must hold a commercial saltwater license, proper equipment licenses and an individual harvest permit.
- The harvest season is from September 16th to May 15th. Harvest is only permitted during daylight hours.
- The oyster population in South Carolina is stable, though smaller than 100 years ago. Declines in oyster populations throughout much of the United States may be attributed to over harvesting, coastal development, deteriorating water quality, increased sediment loads and disease.
- The SC DNR Oyster Recycling and Restoration Program is dedicated to oyster shell recycling and oyster bed restoration. Twelve oyster shell recycling centers are located along the South Carolina coast. Consumers and restaurateurs are encouraged to deposit clean shell at these centers. Shell will then be used to restore shellfish beds and enhance current resources.

Sources: www.dnr.state.sc.us/marine/mrri/acechar/specgal/oyster.htm, www.dnr.state.sc.us/marine/pub/seascience/oyster.html, <http://saltwaterfishing.sc.gov/oyster.html>