

Bagging Oyster Shells on Skidaway Island

By Philip Hanyok

March 13, 2012 -- I like oysters. I like them baked with butter and lemon, or in a stew poured into half a baked acorn squash, or fresh shucked on a half shell with any variety of sauce.

So when Gulfstream planned a day of volunteering to help create more oyster reefs through the University of Georgia Marine Extension Service (MAREX) facility on Skidaway Island, I was in.

I thought this would be a great way to help replenish oyster beds that might have been depleted due to my consumption of the tasty little mollusks. Happily, about 50 others had similar thoughts and joined the effort. This included Gulfstream employees, families with kids as young as 5, even teenagers and a few older folks.

Glenn Sams, who works with Gulfstream's auto-riveters, department 607, grew up working shrimp and oysters with his family. He said this is his second day of volunteering but he made time for it. He worked at Gulfstream until 4 a.m. Saturday morning, went home for a brief nap then came to the event. "I love it," he said. "I'm trying to volunteer every time. I love giving back."

We started the day at the Extension Service building where we learned about the GEORGIA program—that's Generating Enhanced Oyster Reefs in Georgia's Inshore Areas—a community-based oyster restoration program. Think oyster shell recycling.

The program's Biology Coordinator Zack Williams explained how we'd bag old oyster shells from restaurants, catering companies, shell recycling centers and others so that later the bagged oyster shells could be placed in the marsh where they will prevent erosion and, more importantly, provide a solid substrate for oyster larvae to attach themselves to and grow. There is no shortage of oyster larvae in Georgia coastal waters; what's lacking is the solid substrate needed for oyster populations to grow. The typical soft muddy marsh just isn't the right habitat.

This lack of habitat wasn't always the case. For more than 100 years oysters have been harvested from Georgia waters. Over time, removal of the shells without replacing them has reduced the oyster habitat. Other factors such as habitat destruction and pollution have also contributed to the problem.

Our half-day volunteer effort to help create new reefs would grow the oyster reefs and the oyster population, but that's not all. It would also help clean the water, because dense populations of oysters improve water clarity and quality by filtering algae and pollutants. One oyster can filter up to 2.5 gallons of water an hour, Williams said. Oyster reefs also protect shorelines from waves and boat wakes and provide habitat for other species that larger fish eat. For this reason, oysters are considered a "keystone" species—they play a critical role maintaining a healthy coastal ecosystem.

"I love anything that has to do with the quality of the water. That's my thing," said Adam Marshall, who was there with his father George Marshall, an infrastructure architect in the IT area. "When I saw this, I said that's what I want to do. I think this program will help tons of sea life, not just oysters. It will be good."

After Williams finished his presentation and answered a few questions, he led us by car a few miles to the oyster recycling facility where we put on our gloves and began shoveling oyster shells into tubes fitted with a nylon mesh sleeve tied on one end. When the tube was full, we hoisted the tube and tied the remaining mesh end to create our bag of oyster shells. Then came the muscle part—we carried oyster shell bags (thousands of them) to a pile where later they will be loaded onto trailers and hauled to the marsh.

It was physical work, but not difficult. Some of us could carry four bags of shells at a time, but didn't because it was more difficult to toss them to the top of the pile. Besides, the extra walking would help us reach 10,000 steps in a day, a goal some of us had because we are participating in Gulfstream's ShapeUp fitness program. More steps = more fitness. The walking also provided an opportunity for good discussion and a few new friendships to develop.

When we were nearly done, we had created a huge pile of oyster shell bags. Everyone got together for a group photo at the pile and a hooray. I couldn't help but think: Were some of these shells I enjoyed eating recently? Probably not, but it still felt good to do my part to replenish the resource.

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