

The North Carolina Oyster Fishery

Oysters are bivalve mollusks. Most North Carolina oysters are harvested at about three years of age when they are three inches or more in length. This type of shellfish is commercially available from October to March and is harvested with tongs, rakes or by hand in intertidal areas and in shallow waters along the coast. Oysters are also harvested by dredges in parts of the Pamlico Sound. A number of aquaculture operations along the coast cultivate oysters for local and regional markets.

Oysters enhance water quality by consuming nitrogen-containing compounds, such as nitrates and ammonia that support the growth of marine algae. By limiting the presence of algae, oysters protect marine life by reducing competition for dissolved oxygen.

Because they are filter feeders, oysters concentrate nutrients and contaminants in their digestive tract. This is important because it is a tradition to consume oysters on the half shell (raw) or steamed (partially cooked).

[North Carolina Shellfish Sanitation](#) is the regulatory agency responsible for ensuring that oysters are harvested from unpolluted waters; however, certain bacteria normally present in marine waters can concentrate in the digestive tracts of oysters too. *Vibrio vulnificus* is found naturally in warm coastal waters, especially during the summer months and can cause serious illness in people who suffer from chronic health issues, such as liver disease, diabetes or cancer. Though raw oysters are a delicacy, physicians recommend that those who have weakened immune systems consume only cooked oysters.

Oyster stocks are currently stressed due to disease, poor water quality and habitat loss. The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), however, operates a shellfish rehabilitation program to produce more oysters for both commercial and recreational fishermen.

To learn more about this program, go to <http://www.ncfisheries.net/habitat/shellrehb2.htm>

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