It’s a beautiful day in late May. A solitary figure is wading off Calf Pasture Beach in Norwalk with a clam rake hoping to get the limit of cherrystones. A big horseshoe crab scuttles by on a mission. Approximately 1000 people every year are able to enjoy this pastime simply by buying a recreational clam permit from the town of Norwalk, allowing them access to this fresh seafood bounty. But these clams did not get within reach by accident—and there is no Clam Fairy as far as we know, at least not one with wings. The closest thing we have is Norm Bloom and his oyster boat captains. Three times a year each and every year, Norm Bloom and Son of Norwalk, Connecticut will transplant all-told 2000 bushels of clams from waters in Norwalk to the recreational beds where they can be reached from shore by recreational clammers. Norm provides the same service for the towns of Stamford and Westport as well. He has been doing this without fanfare since the mid-’90s. In all he provides more than 100 captain-hours every year to those three towns in efforts to keep their recreational shellfishing programs going.

Pete Johnson, chairman of the Norwalk Shellfish Commission, says he has a great relationship with all the area commercial operators but Norm is the only one who voluntarily offers this service.

“We don’t make a big deal about it; it’s just one of the things we can do to help out the guys who manage our resource.” Bloom explains. “Besides, if we announced when we do the transplanting, there would be cars lined up all along the shore roads for the easy pickings.” A great deal of planning has to go into these transplant operations, comments Bloom. “We have to coordinate when both the recreational and certified commercial beds are open and make sure that we put “clean” product in during those times.”

The Norwalk Shellfish Commission manages about 200 acres of natural shellfish beds, which include a number of recreational harvest areas. Among the recreational areas is Calf Pasture Beach, which is the only one accessible from shore. Most of the other non-recreational areas do not allow direct-to-market harvest by commercial shellfishers. In these areas the Norwalk Commission allows commercial operators to harvest for transplant in exchange for 10 percent of their take. The shellfish will be naturally depurated (cleansed for two weeks) after which they can be put on the recreational beds for harvest. These operators also pay lease fees to the Norwalk Commission, which allows the Commission to fund other activities. In all it is a perfect circle; providing the public access to high quality shellfish and allowing commercial operators to harvest and sell this bounty as well. Both activities boost economic activity and provide a huge amount of product to area seafood outlets and restaurants. Norwalk offers a general recreational shellfishing permit as both clams and oysters are available on their beds.

Even commissions that don’t receive commercial donations in product have to rely on commercial harvesters in one way or another. At the other end of the state, Don Murphy, a veteran of 29 years and chairman of the Stonington Shellfish Commission, buys his clams for stocking from Hillard Bloom and Company in Norwalk. The Stonington Commission manages three conditional recreational shellfishing areas and issues close to 1000 permits every year, generating $15,000. As with most shellfish commissions, their activities are self-funded, and do not rely on taxpayer dollars to sustain their programs. They also work with commercial operators to harvest clams in town.
waters, transplanting some for recreational shellfishers, and allow a percentage to be sold by the commercial operator.

Murphy also works closely with members of the Noank Aquaculture Cooperative.

“We cooperate with commercial interests to improve recreational opportunities in Stonington. We have a terrific relationship with them,” Murphy says. The Commission relies on members’ boats, loading facilities and labor to accomplish their twice-yearly stocking. For the most part, such in-kind payment or remuneration offsets the cost of commercial license fees in town waters. Co-op members provide their landing/loading facilities as well as their boats to help the Stonington Commission stock its recreational areas. The Stonington Commission is also looking at starting an oyster seeding program over the next couple of years.

The town of Groton is already taking it a step farther. Not only do they use commercial operators such as G&B Shellfish of Stratford to supply clams for their recreational beds in exchange for a percentage of the catch, they are currently the only state shellfish commission with an ongoing oyster stocking program. As part of the rental agreement with the Noank Aquaculture Cooperative, co-op members supply a dollar amount of oysters every year to the Groton Commission to cover their lease obligation. Co-op members supply about $7000 per year in various size adult and juvenile oysters to the Groton Commission for stocking in their recreational areas. In all it comes to about 20,000 oysters per year. The Groton Shellfish Commission is the only commission in the state with a dedicated oyster program and separate permit sales for oysters.

“We sell about 1500 permits per year of which about 400 are specifically for the taking of oysters,” says Chairman Ed Martin. Groton also offers visitors the option of 1-day and 1-week permits as opposed to seasonal only. Chairman Martin, a spry 84-year-old who has been a member of the Commission for the past 23 years, relates a great story of how the Groton Commission program got started. Back in 1994-95, when the Commission had no money to buy clams, Norm Bloom’s uncle and family patriarch, Hillard Bloom, donated clams for a period of four to five years to help the Groton program get on its feet. Chairman Martin said, “I visited him (Hillard Bloom) when he was very sick and close to passing many years later. I said, ‘you probably don’t remember me,’ at which point Mr. Bloom replied that in fact he did—of course he remembered me.” It was a touching moment that Chairman Martin relates with obvious emotion.

As with all these local shellfish programs, permit sales only scratch the surface of the larger economic impact of people coming to town for a limit of clams. Recreational shellfishers also spend money in shops and restaurants after a long day on the water. They buy equipment such as waders and clam rakes at local shops and marina facilities—and let’s not forget that statewide, town shellfish commission members volunteer their time at no public expense. They stock beds, patrol for poaching, perform water sampling, and other invaluable tasks, all on their own time and largely under everyone’s radar. Their work makes it possible for the thousands or permit purchasers across Connecticut’s shoreline to come away with a greater appreciation for the estuarine environment of Long Island Sound and maybe a limit of clams. It is doubtful that the average clammer will ever know the degree of effort required by the various parties to make sure that there are enough shellfish out there to catch. For them, there might just as well be a Clam Fairy—waving a magic wand over the state’s recreational shellfish beds.

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