A Path Forward for Connecticut Shellfisheries and Shellfish Resources  

By Tessa Getchis

Three decades ago, a plan was developed that identified top priorities for shellfish aquaculture in Connecticut. That plan was successful in generating enthusiasm and support for industry-related needs. The Connecticut Aquaculture Commission, established to draft the plan, included a diverse group of shellfishing interest groups who were passionate about promoting the growth of the industry comprised of clam and oyster harvesters.

Two notable initiatives that arose included the rehabilitation of the natural oyster beds which served as a seed source for the industry (shellfishermen harvest small seed from natural beds and transplant that seed on private cultivated beds), and the establishment of vocational education centers focused on aquaculture science and technology. The industry benefited greatly from the restoration of the beds and harvest numbers skyrocketed following the state’s investment in that resource. The plan also called for training opportunities for future workforce. Connecticut was one of the first states in the country to build high schools dedicated to aquaculture education. Today there are three schools, located in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Groton, that focus instruction on marine science and aquaculture. Several traditional and vocational-agriculture high schools offer aquaculture coursework as part of their curriculum. Having a written plan provided the justification for these and other projects, and crucial to its success was buy-in from both industry and government officials.

Thirty years later, many of the same industry needs are back on the table – clean water, a more streamlined permitting process, affordable shoreline access. New threats are also looming - pathogenic bacteria, climate change. These days, Connecticut shellfish interests extend beyond the industry. Recreational shellfishing is a popular activity for both residents and visitors. Thousands of harvest permits are sold each year in coastal towns from Greenwich to Stonington. Many towns rely on commercial producers to supply shellfish for their put-and-take harvest areas. There are also extensive natural populations of bivalve molluscan shellfish (various species of clams, oysters, scallops, mussels) in Long Island Sound – though how extensive we really don’t know. Worldwide bivalve populations are being impacted by pollution, overharvesting and a number of other perils, which has prompted concern about the status and health of our local resource. Shellfish are now being considered as potential tools to address coastal problems such as eutrophication of coastal waters and shoreline erosion. Scientists are investigating the ability of shellfish to remove excess nutrients, especially nitrogen, from Long Island Sound. Engineers are studying the ability of shellfish reefs to attenuate wave energy and protect vulnerable shoreline habitats and communities.

Not to be overshadowed are numerous opportunities for growth. Recognizing this fact, Connecticut Sea Grant, UConn Extension and NOAA Fisheries have partnered to facilitate the Connecticut Shellfish Initiative (CSI). The CSI is a public and stakeholder-driven endeavor that will result in a visionary plan for the future of Connecticut natural, recreational and commercial shellfish resources.

The Connecticut Shellfish Initiative is innovative in that it is broad in its reach – it includes all shellfish sectors and a diverse group of stakeholders. The initiative is supported by a steering committee comprised of individuals that represent those various interest groups. Just a few months ago we held public meetings to solicit input on the plan. We followed up with a statewide conference on shellfisheries topics highlighting the importance of our natural, recreational and commercial shellfish resources. The next step is to develop specific goals and actions – the justification we need to pave the path for the future of our shellfisheries and shellfish resources.

Learn more and get involved at: http://smp.uconn.edu.

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