POINT REYES LIGHT

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The Pulitzer Prize-Winning Weekly Newspaper

ALSA

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Largest oyster restoration in California: Lunny's shells clean S.F. Bay

Sam Spiewak
2006-08-12

The Marin Conservation Corps helped scientists pack oyster shells into bags last Tuesday at Kevin Lunny's oyster farm on Point Reyes National Seashore. The shells will be used in an effort to restore native oysters to San Francisco Bay. (Photo by Jerry EcEowen)

On a gray and windy Tuesday evening, Kevin Lunny grilled oysters for a team of six marine biologists at his oyster farm, Drake's Bay Oyster Company, on the Point Reyes National Seashore. The scientists were there to begin work on what the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration calls the largest native oyster restoration in California – a project that might not have gone forward without a donation of several dump trucks full of oyster shells from Lunny's farm.

With the help of 20 volunteers from the Marin Conservation Corps, the scientists had spent the day packing Lunny's oyster shells into 2,400 yards of black net bags. By the end of this week, they planned to load the shells – 55 cubic yards in total – for transport to a pier owned by the Marin Rod and Gun Club near the Richmond Bridge. There, they will dump the bags into San Francisco Bay to create a reef.

The reef will help restore biodiversity to San Francisco Bay by providing what the scientists call "vertical habitat" on the bay's muddy bottom, explained Bud Abbott, the lead scientist on the project. Abbott hopes that the construction of a reef will ultimately lead to a self-sustaining native oyster population by acting as shelter for the small, slow-growing oysters that are native to the bay. By providing massive quantities of shell, Lunny has been an indispensable partner in the project.

Native Oysters

Scientists call oysters "filter feeders." Two or three can clean an aquarium of green water in about an hour. Their hair-like pumps, called cilia, consume algae, microorganisms and sediment, then wrap whatever is indigestible in mucus. Filter feeding helps prevent the formation of large green masses of algae that can block the light that would normally reach the bottom of the bay and allow aquatic vegetation like seaweed and eel grass to grow, said Abbott.

Ostreiculture in San Francisco Bay has a long

history. Native Americans cultivated the shellfish for centuries; before the 1849 Gold Rush, entrepreneurs introduced the mid-sized oyster from the Atlantic seaboard, cultivating thousands of acres of oyster beds on the tidal flats of the bay.

Human activities contributed to loss of the native oyster in San Francisco Bay: Over-harvesting, industrial pollution, an influx of non-native flora and fauna, along with dredging and filling of the bay bottom by the Army Corps of Engineers led to sedimentation.

By the late 1960s only tiny groups of native oysters could be found. The remarkable shellfish reefs that once graced the warm, protected areas of the bay had been almost entirely wiped out.

Starting in the 1960s, federal, state, regional and local governments invested heavily in cleaning up the waters. By the early 1980s, the California Department of Fish and Game proved that larval Eastern and Pacific oysters could be successfully grown to maturity. Scientists theorized that, given the right condition, oysters could once again spawn and flourish in San Francisco Bay.

Sustainable Oyster Farming

Kevin Lunny, oyster farmer, met Abbott, marine biologist, at a meeting of scientists from the National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration.

"I started going to the meetings because I wanted to learn as much about native oysters as I could," said Lunny. At one meeting he listened as scientists complained about how difficult it was to find suitable oyster shells to construct their reefs. Unable to find a local supplier, NOAA scientists had imported the shells of non-native oysters from Washington. Because there was a danger that invasive insects or microorganisms might hitchhike from Washington to California on these shells, the biologists spent weeks peering through microscopes, looking for anything that might be alive, and then carefully segregating inspected shells.

"I stood up and said 'I don't know if this could help, but we have shell,'" said Lunny.

His donation got the project up and running again. Though shell might appear to be simply waste product, it is valuable: Worth about $8 a bag, Lunny's shells save Abbott over $10,000, or about a fifth of his project budget.

The gift is in keeping with Lunny's passion for sustainable oyster farming.
"We produce 10 times the amount of protein per acre in water than we can on land," Lunny pointed out. "We don't use fertilizers, we don't till our land, and we don't have to feed the animals."

His oyster company holds more than half of the total area leased out for shellfish farming by the state Department of Fish and Game and accounts

for 85 percent of Marin County's aquaculture. A marine biologist from Fish and Game has said Drake's Bay has the best water quality of any of the leases in the state, and Lunny's beef ranch, which is also located on National Seashore land, was the first in the county to have its pastures certified organic.

Though every week thousands of visitors flock to Lunny's Schooner Bay cannery, he has resisted the idea of turning the farm into a picnic area with loud music and a party feel. He chooses instead to emphasize its identity as a model of sustainable aquaculture.

When Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall visited West Marin, Lunny was one of four local farmers chosen for a private lunch. The Prince was served an oyster from Lunny's Drake's Bay Oyster Company atop a piece of lettuce and blue cheese, while Lunny talked sustainable oyster farming with his highness.

Despite Lunny's status as a luminary of the Marin ecological agriculture movement, Drake's Bay Oyster Company will probably be shut down. Park Superintendent Don Neubacher has said that the park plans to end oyster farming in the estuary following congressional legislation that directs the park to remove commercial activities from potential wilderness tracts as soon as possible. Lunny's farm can't stay open without continued use of the small plot of shore it leases from the National Park Service.

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The New York Times

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February 24, 2008

In City Waters, Beds (and a Job) for Oysters

By JOSHUA BRUSTEIN

Hendrix Creek, flowing for just over a mile in Brooklyn through East New York, passes under the Belt Parkway and between two dormant landfills before it empties into Jamaica Bay. The creek, once fed by a natural stream, now starts at the output pipe of a wastewater treatment plant.

It is the perfect kind of place, said John K. McLaughlin, an ecologist for the New York City Department of Environmental Protection, for an experimental project that would establish oyster beds, not for harvest, but as living water filters.

Natural oyster beds once stretched for 350 square miles in New York's waterways. Over time, overharvesting and pollution took their toll. Sewage first forced the bay's shellfish beds to close in the mid-19th century, with all harvests outlawed in the 1920s.

There probably has not been an oyster in Jamaica Bay since the 1930s, Mr. McLaughlin said. "There may be a single individual or a few that seagulls dropped," he said. "But there's no population of any significance."

The new project, outlined in Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's PlaNYC 2030 sustainability policy, is meant to change that.

Scientists in the last several decades have developed a better understanding of the ability of oysters to filter water. As an adult oyster feeds, it can filter 5 to 50 gallons of water a day, depending on its size and the temperature of the water.

During this process, it absorbs nitrogen, algae and bacteria, depositing them in the sediment at the water's bottom. The oyster beds also serve as the foundation for an ecosystem that can support other marine species, like eelgrass, which in turn absorb other waste materials and provide habitats for fish.

Dozens of similar shellfish restoration projects have been started in other states, some financed by the Nature Conservancy and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"You can only improve water quality so much with hard engineering," said Mr. McLaughlin, who is in charge of the city's effort. He added that "using soft engineering approaches" can produce both benefits to water

quality as well as benefits to the overall wildlife habitat in the bay.

Hendrix Creek was chosen because it is protected from the stronger currents from the bay, and because it is small enough for a relatively modest number of shellfish — oysters and ribbed mussels — to have a measurable effect. Since the creek is directly fed by the 26th Ward wastewater treatment plant, the experiment will also provide a good indication of how well the shellfish can filter water coming directly from the city's own filtration system.

The city plans to plant oysters near the creek's mouth, where they will absorb nitrogen, a byproduct of human waste. Further up the creek, beds of ribbed mussels, which feed on smaller bacteria, will be added.

The Gaia Institute, a consulting group that is working with the Department of Environmental Protection on the shellfish project, has estimated that 20 cubic meters of mussels should be able to filter all the effluent from the wastewater treatment plant. But Mr. McLaughlin said it was unclear how effective the mussels would be in removing the kinds of bacteria that can end up in the bay.

The city plans to install water monitors to measure levels of oxygen and nitrogen this year. The shellfish will be introduced in the spring of 2009, and will stay in place for three years. At least one other creek feeding the bay may also be included in the project, which will cost $600,000.

Although the bay's condition is far from pristine, water quality has improved significantly in recent years, said Paul Mankiewicz, executive director of the Gaia Institute. Already, oysters have returned to several areas in the city without help, including City Island, Pelham Bay and Eastchester Park.

"The long-term modifications of the estuaries because of the Clean Water Act have made all the difference," Mr. Mankiewicz said.

Even so, four waste treatment plants empty into Jamaica Bay, discharging 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of nitrogen each day. That amount is far more than the bay can naturally absorb, and leads to algal blooms that starve other plants and animals of oxygen. Storms also regularly overflow the city's sewage system, sending untreated wastewater into the bay.

Mr. McLaughlin said that "any reduction" in nitrogen levels in Hendrix Creek would be considered an accomplishment. The city has not established hard objective measures of success, he said.

Even if the initial change in water quality is not significant, he said, the creation of a self-sustaining habitat in Jamaica Bay — where oysters and other species can survive and spread — would be an achievement. That process, Mr. McLaughlin said, would be the first step to restoring something close to the bay's original ecosystem.

But if the Hendrix Creek oysters thrive, the city may well face another challenge: keeping away adventuresome gourmands who might be tempted to help themselves to the delicacies.

"There's a worry that if you have oysters that sell for a dollar apiece, people will steal them and sell them," Mr. Mankiewicz said. "We want them for habitat, not edibility."

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San Rafael, CA 94903

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Rich Persoff

Signature

Richard Persoff

Printed Name

Been eating these for years they're part of the environment

COPY

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Dear Congresswoman Woolsey,

I'M AWARE OF ARGUEMENTS PRO & CON AND SEE NO VALID REASON FOR FORCING CLOSURE OF THIS VALUABLE PUBLIC RESOURCE.

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HAROLD E. FERGUSON

Printed Name

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Signature

Mark C. Woodward

I was born & raised in the Bay area but now live in Northern VA. The oyster farm is part of the historical & cultural heritage of the Bay area and should be preserved

COPY

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Signature

MARC BAINBRIDGE

Please dont close this oyster farm. I've been coming here for 30 years.. when it was Johnsons.

over →

This farm is part of what makes Pt. Reyes such a wonderful place.

[illegible]

COPY

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Signature

DAVID ROCHE
Printed Name

I authored a report for the Marin Community Trust on traditional occupations in West Marin. An organic business such as this one is a cultural treasure. Please don't allow this closure to occur

David

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Signature

Andrew Falk

I appreciate the thought & respect that the Farm has displayed in their work & towards the environment. Please allow them to continue to do so!

– A.F.

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Signature

Hilary DuBois

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Not only is Drakes Bay Oyster Farm an important environmental steward, it is also an invaluable cultural and economic resource. The farm, nestled among other small family farms in the pastoral zone of Point Reyes National Seashore (a zone set up specifically to protect agriculture), has been active for nearly 100 years. It is the last operating oyster cannery in California, represents 85% of Marin County's shellfish growing area, and has the county's only shellfish hatchery. As the Seashore's sole oyster farm, it is not only a key destination, but also a valuable educational and research farm for San Francisco Bay Area schools and universities.

I implore you to mandate the National Park Service to issue a renewable lease to Drakes Bay Oyster Farm to expire in 2029, which would be consistent with the farm's aquaculture lease with the Department of Fish and Game. This would allow Drakes Bay Oyster Farm sufficient time to establish renewable energy sources (e.g. solar power) and make required building repairs, thereby becoming even more sustainable and self-sufficient and enhancing the park visitors' experience at the farm. I simply do not believe that Congress could allow the closure of this important local, sustainable, shellfish source and cultural asset.

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Thank you for doing all that you can for your constituents on this issue,

Margaret Cleminshaw

Signature

Margaret Cleminshaw

I enjoy the visiting the oyster farm & bringing visitors when I kayak in the Estero. It's historic & interesting.

COPY

Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey
California, Sixth Congressional District
1050 Northgate Drive
San Rafael, CA 94903

Dear Congresswoman Woolsey,

I am writing to express my support for renewing the lease for Drakes Bay Oyster Farm in Marin County, California. I am told that it was the wish of the Congress of the United States in 1976 to eventually cease the production of all cultured shellfish in the Point Reyes National Seashore. The Seashore administration has chosen the year 2012 to take this prime farmland permanently out of production—farmland that cannot be replaced. I am shocked to learn that California Department of Fish and Game's largest shellfish lease and California's finest shellfish water quality should be a casualty of our own national policy.

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Thank you for doing all that you can for your constituents on this issue,

Signature

DAVID L SAMSON
Printed Name

WE HAVE BEEN COMING HERE 30+ YEARS SINCE IT WAS JOHNSON'S. PLEASE DON'T CLOSE IT!

COPY

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California, Sixth Congressional District
1050 Northgate Drive
San Rafael, CA 94903

Dear Congresswoman Woolsey,

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PLEASE SAVE LOCAL BUSINESSES!

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Thank you for doing all that you can for your constituents on this issue,

Heather Furmidge

Signature

HEATHER FURMIDGE

Printed Name

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

SAVE THE BEST OYSTER FARM IN THE U.S.!

Re: Drakes Bay Oyster Farm & the PRNS General Management Plan update

The oyster farm, cannery and retail sales have been specifically included in the Seashore's General Management Plan as an important resource to remain since the park was created. For many decades BEFORE the PRNS was established and during the entire period that the PRNS has existed, this historic resource has been important to our health, education, economy, environment and the overall enjoyment of the area. The Point Reyes National Seashore is my park and **I want shellfish farming, processing and retail to remain in Drakes Estero and I want this clearly identified in the new PRNS General Management Plan.**

Signature MARGERY MORSE

This is an important resource for people & also draws people to learn about Nature.

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature Arabella Bolds

DO NOT CLOSE

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature DIANE HERBNER

Keep

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

COPY

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Signature
Matthew R. Coven

As an environmentalist I feel strongly that Drakes Bay Oyster Farm should be allowed to stay, considering its excellent practices!!

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature
Elizabeth Siedhoff

We need oysters! home grown - we've enjoyed Drakes Bay oysters for soups!

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature
Ronald Arrunts

20 yr Sierra Club member

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Sandra Halland

Signature

Sandra Holland

I love wilderness, of which we are all a part, but I think food production done in an environmentally helpful way should be at the top of the list. Ideology has no place.

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

DON - IF ALL DISTRIBUTION CEASES - OYSTERS AND BEEF WILL GIVE US ALL A SOURCE OF PROTEIN!
xxx Donna

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Donna Sheenan

Signature

DONNA SHEENAN

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Nancy C Metzger

Signature

Nancy C. Metzger Director of Sustainability, San Domenico School

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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John Mills
Signature
John Mills

Good job working with a lot of people. Nice people, work with these people

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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DAVID W BODNER
Signature
David W Bodner

IT IS TIME TO DO the Reasonable Thing!

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature
PETER MOLNAR
Printed Name

A regional treasure!

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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S Bradman
Signature S. Bradman

- note I grew up in Marin
- this should stay.

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature Andrew Falk

Thank you for helping this valuable resource to continue.

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

COPY

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Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature DAVID ROCHE

WHY would YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS? WHY???

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

COPY

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Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Aine Lynn S. Cadavona

Signature Aine Lynn S. Cadavona

it will be a shame to loose this-

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Jake Richtman

Signature Jake Richtman

don't shot them down

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher, Superintendent
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Paul Elliott

Signature Paul Elliott

do NOT disapoint me
keep this Place

cc: Jon Jarvis—NPS Regional Director

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Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature M. Kate St. Clair

Please!

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

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1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Beverly Childs McIntosh
Signature
BEVERLY CHILDS MCINTOSH

Mr. Neubacher, I was impressed with the abundance of healthy ~~on~~ eel grass @ the oyster facility - BCM

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director

Don Neubacher
Point Reyes National Seashore
1 Bear Valley Road
Point Reyes Station, CA 94956

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Signature JOSH KNOX

sustainable appropriately scaled

cc: Jon Jarvis -- NPS Regional Director