

Have You Thanked an Oyster Today?

South Carolina boasts some of the best inshore saltwater fishing along the entire Atlantic seaboard. While prudent resource management is a major contributing factor, the health of our marine fisheries is also dependent on plenty of essential habitat and exceptional water quality. Thanks, in part, to the eastern oyster, we are fortunate to have both.

When most people hear the word, “oyster” they usually think of seafood. After all, harvesting oysters for consumption is a popular and traditional activity in South Carolina. However, many anglers often fail to consider the extent to which oysters affect angling opportunities. Simply put, more oysters mean better fishing.

Ask anybody who fishes the inshore coastal waters of South Carolina what they look for when trying to determine the best places to catch fish, and chances are oysters will be part of the answer. Small invertebrates utilizing the oysters for protection become prey for small fish, which in turn attract larger predators. Whether it be the mouth of a creek, or a broad mud flat, if an area has, or is adjacent to oysters, it is likely to hold gamefish.

For the most part, oysters in South Carolina grow in the intertidal zone, or the area that is exposed between high and low tide. As many anglers will attest, fishing is often more productive around the low tide when the oyster beds are visible. However, not all oyster beds are equal when it comes to producing quality game fish. Other variables, such as current flow and the proximity of deep water, also influence the productivity of a particular area.

South Carolina’s inshore angling “playground” consists of approximately 385,000 acres of salt marsh, more than any other Atlantic coast state. Oysters play a critical role by helping to stabilize shorelines and prevent the loss of marsh grass by acting as a buffer against wave action. Without the marsh grass there would never be the opportunity to pursue red drum during “tailing tides”.

Many successful anglers recognize the importance of water clarity. Muddy or “dirty” water typically means difficult fishing conditions. Because oysters are filter feeders, their feeding not only removes suspended sediment from the water, but also can dilute pollutants into less harmful forms. A healthy large oyster may filter two and a half gallons per hour.

Not just inshore anglers benefit from oysters. Popular species caught by recreational anglers that are not typically associated with oyster reefs may still utilize this type of habitat during early stages of their life history. For example, oyster reefs are the primary habitat for juvenile gag grouper and other snapper-grouper species.

The SCDNR is committed to pro-actively managing, restoring, and enhancing the State’s oyster habitat. In addition, SCDNR administers an oyster shell-recycling project, which last year accounted for a record 23,802 bushels being recycled. With the help of volunteers, approximately 34,400 bushels were planted on public and state shellfish grounds. The shell, also known as culch, provides the most favorable

surface for which oyster larvae can attach. It takes about three years for an oyster to reach harvestable size, but remember, the benefits to marine life, and fishing occurs long before that.