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A Gift to a Bay, With Returns on the Half Shell

By MARIAN BURROS

SOUTHOLD, N.Y. — "Wanna see a scallop spawn?"

It's an invitation difficult to turn down. Kim Tetrault, who is director of the community shellfish gardening program of Cornell Cooperative Extension here on the North Fork of Long Island, tapped the edge of a shallow plastic dish filled with native bay scallops. Diaphanous bursts of protoplasm stirred the water — millions and millions of immature scallops. Some will find their way into the Peconic Bay and perhaps one day return it to its former glory as the home of some of the finest scallops in the world.

Years of overharvesting and pollution here were followed by eight years of brown tide, an algae that is death to scallops (and is none too kind to other marine life). By the late 1990's the scallop industry was almost completely wiped out. Clams and oysters were not doing too well either.

Cornell has been working to improve the bay's marine life for a decade, raising 10 million scallops, clams and oysters annually for the last five years at its facility at Cedar Beach Point on the Peconic Bay. But Mr. Tetrault knew that much more could be accomplished if he had more help. Given his budget, it was preferable that the help come without cost. Last year he found a way to step up the shellfish numbers: a corps of almost 200 people who not only work for nothing, but also pay for the privilege: \$150 to \$250 a person to become certified shellfish gardeners. In exchange for raising shellfish from seed, the Cornell volunteers are entitled to keep more oysters and clams than they can possibly consume without a lot of help from their friends.

Called the Southold Project for Aquaculture Training — or SPAT, a nice little play on the word for juvenile oysters — the program began in January 2001. Each week its volunteers, mostly retired people from Greenport and Southold on the North Fork, and Sag Harbor on the South, take classes in aquaculture and spend hours doing the scut work it requires: data collection, culturing, planting, monitoring, counting the minuscule spawn, cleaning cages, straining larvae, changing water.

Together they have just completed building a community hatchery that looks as if it was put together with chewing gum and baling wire. But it works, so far producing three million clam seeds and a couple of million oyster spat.

"It's the perfect program for us," said Irene Ludecker, who retired to Southold last summer with her husband, Howard. "We've always wanted to do something environmental. I've been summering out here all my life, and I've seen the changes. I can remember that until about 15 years ago, from September to April, just walking along the shore you'd get scallops and oysters. And then that was all gone. It's a cliché, but you want your grandchildren to have the same things you did."

Filled with seemingly boundless energy, the Southold aquaculture gardeners not only give their time, but also dream up ways to raise money for the program (this year, it lost much of its county funding). They have thus far put together a cookbook of 400 recipes for shellfish and held a few benefit parties.

There is a social aspect as well: some of the volunteers have become fishing buddies, plying the local waters for summer flounder and striped bass. And trips are planned to Mystic, Conn., and to Charleston, S.C., for the International Conference on Shellfish Restoration.

The Ludeckers are part of what is called the ambassador program at SPAT: for their \$250 annual contribution, they receive around 2,000 oyster spats, 2,000 scallop bugs and 10,000 clam seeds. They plant these at the dock behind their home. Those volunteers who do not have waterfront property pay \$150 to raise floats of shellfish in the saltwater creek beside Cornell's Cedar Beach hatchery. The SPAT gardeners use three-foot-long plastic cages for the juvenile oysters. Some use plastic bottles as floats. Others attach the cages to clothesline contraptions.

There are a number of community-based shellfish restoration programs in the United States. The largest and most successful, with 2,000 gardeners, is on the Chesapeake Bay. There are also programs on Raritan Bay in New Jersey; in San Francisco; in Olympia, Wash.; and off Mobile, Ala. But only the SPAT program allows gardeners to keep a portion of the shellfish they raise — half. (They are not, however, permitted to sell or barter their shellfish, which keeps them from competing with the area's remaining professional baymen.) The half they return is deposited in the bay in places where harvesting is forbidden.

The SPAT gardeners produce a premium product, Mr. Tetrault said. As I learned when I was treated to a plateful of their finished work, he is absolutely correct. Slurping oysters and clams off the half shell on a sunny June day, cooled by the breezes off the Peconic Bay, is the perfect lunch. First you taste the salty water in which they were raised, then the natural sweetness of the shellfish. The sparkling taste of the sea lingers. There is no need for lemon and even less for cocktail sauce.

Is the program a success? Peconic Bay is not yet thick with new shellfish. In 1975 more than 722,000 bushels of hard clams were harvested in New York, along with almost 300,000 bushels of oysters and about 49,000 pounds of bay scallops. Last year New York fishermen took in approximately 152,000 bushels of clams, 32,000 bushels of oysters and 4,000 pounds of scallops. As Chris Doley, the director of the shellfish restoration center at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said, it will be years before the impact can be measured. It took a long time for the bay to become damaged, and it will take a long time to repair it. "It's not a quick fix," he said. And SPAT is a work in progress. The experts and the volunteers are learning as they go.

But there is a very encouraging sign. Baymen report more frequent sightings of cultured clams and oysters, both of which have black genetic markings on the tops of their shells that distinguish them from the wild varieties.

"Over a short period, it's hard to see whether this is working," Mr. Tetrault said, "but now the volunteers will monitor the survival rate for us. The big-picture success we'll know in five years."