University of North Carolina
Sea Grant
Coast Watch
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WORKING ON THE WATER

By Sarah Friday Peters

The boat motor hums in a quiet monotone as oysterman Raymond Graham skims across Newport River in his handcrafted skiff.

The water ripples as he makes his way to a familiar oyster bed about a half-mile from his fishing shack on the shore.

It was a trip the Mill Creek fisherman had made almost every day of his life. The water is in his blood, you could say.

A Newport River oysterman pulls in the oysters while his wife culls them.

Photo by Nancy Davis

Five generations of Grahams have worked the Newport River waters. The first dollar Raymond ever made came from culling oysters for 5 cents a bushel.

At 58, Graham still makes his dollars from shellfish—fishing and distributing oysters and clams all over the country.

He is one of more than 8,000 commerical shellfishermen in North Carolina, and one of the reasons oysters end up on our plates.

This December day, Graham is dressed in a blue flannel shirt, jeans, black rubber boots and a navy blue baseball cap depicting a boat and bearing the words "Becky L. Smith." A chaw of tobacco rests in his cheek.

His hands and his eyes show oystering is hard work. To an outsider, it's both science and art.

Like farmers, oystermen work hand-in-hand with an unpredictable Mother Nature. It takes skill and luck to turn a profit.

In North Carolina, oystermen pick, tong or dredge for "coons" and "rocks." They call smaller oysters coons because the shell is shaped like a raccoon footprint. "Rocks" are bigger and thicker. Both can be found along the coast in bays, rivers, inlets and sounds.

"You take an oyster," says old-time oysterman David Oglesby of Mill Creek. "He doesn't want a real salt water or a real fresh water. He wants a brackish water."

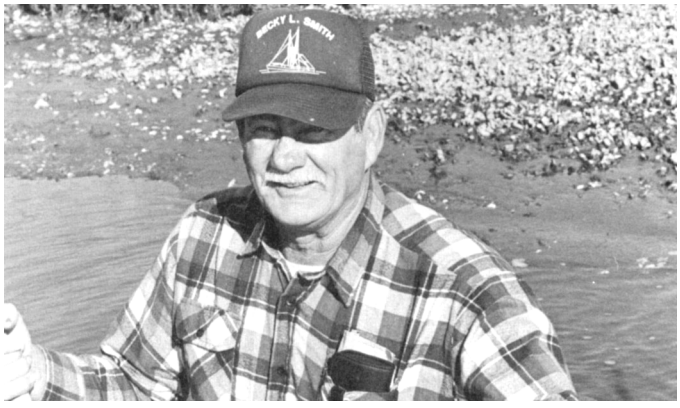
Oysters survive best in water with low to moderate salinity. They spawn during warm weather, sending millions of larvae floating through the water. The young oysters, or spat, cement themselves permanently to one place to grow. Oyster shells work best for a setting, Graham says, but other shells, tires and cans work just as well.

If larvae land on mud or shifting sand, they quickly die, says David Taylor, central district manager for the Division of Marine Fisheries. For this reason, the state plants shells to aid natural oyster production.

Weather, fungi, sponges, barnacles and disease impede setting, too, Taylor says. Usually a low percentage of young oysters make it to the marketable size of 3 inches.

It takes about 18 months to two years to get a 3-inch oyster out of the Newport River, Graham says. Oysters grow fastest in the winter.

The traditional, and legal, harvesting season runs from Oct. 15 to April 1 for shellfishermen working public bottomland. Those with privately leased bottomland can fish year-round.



Shellfisherman Raymond Graham

Photo by Nancy Davis

Graham has about 61 acres of leased land on the bottom of Newport River. Once a year, he pays $5 to the state for each acre. Some of the leases came from his grandfather. Others he got from friends.

Riding along in his l8-foot skiff, Graham points out his plots. Each one is marked with corner stakes and signs with his name and lease number. Some 40,0OO similar plots exist in North Carolina.

Out in Newport River, oystermen pick and tong for their spoils. Dredging, or harvesting with mechanical rakes from boats, isn't legal there.

"We've always caught them by hand," Graham says. "It's the only reason this river's survived....We've always had clams and oysters."

To pick oysters, fishermen wait until low tide then wade on shoreline or sandbar-type shellfish beds. With a bucket and a pair of gloves, they pick out oysters to take back.

Around Mill Creek, though, most people tong, Graham says.

The boat slows as Graham reaches his destination in the middle of the river. Nine other fishermen, some with a partner or two, are already at work.

Graham grabs his hand-made tongs. He works the six-foot shafts in his hands like a giant pair of scissors and rakes the basket across the river floor.

In a minute or two, he pulls a basket full of oyster shells from the icy water and throws the live ones on a large culling board stretched across his boat.

A woman in a nearby boat sits by her culling board as her husband draws the oysters from the water. With a flat iron bar, she knocks pieces of shell from dead oysters off the good oysters.

Restaurants and oyster bars require oysters to be clean and single for serving on the half shell.

Cleaned oysters go in a bucket. Discarded shells fall back in the water as substrate for future oyster crops.

"If you throw them away with dead shells on them, you wouldn't be able to work," says the woman.

In minutes, Graham putters to another spot near an exposed rock covered with shells.

David Oglesby has been working the section since about 7 a.m. It's nearing noon now, and he has almost two bushels of oysters.

"That's about right for this time of year," he says.

Business could be better. But like Graham, the 70-some-year-old Oglesby fishes most every day.

He likes being on his own, making a living from the water.

Besides, he says, "This is what I've done all my life."

As the water shimmers and the wind breezes by on the ride back to shore, anyone could see why.