

Oysters Favorite for PenderWatch Speaker

Some of Troy Alphin's favorite creatures are oysters.

"We are speaking for oysters because they don't speak for themselves," said the senior research associate for the Benthic Ecology Program at UNCW's Center for Marine Science at the March meeting of PenderWatch & Conservancy.

Alphin loves oysters because a huge number of organisms depend on oysters to help create their habitat. An oyster can filter 30 gallons of water in a day and reduce erosion by providing structure.

Historically, a number of parasites and diseases have affected our oysters causing massive die-outs, he said. Then there was over fishing.

North Carolina now only produces three percent of its record high harvests at 1.8 million bushels in 1902.

The amount of filtration that used to take days would now take decades.

Oysters also separate particles from the water, eating them or sending them to the bottom creating sediment. Now, said Alphin, oysters can't keep up the pace. They get buried further up in the tidal creeks because there is too much material to cycle.

To improve our ecosystem, he said, first we need data to show the changes in our waters.

"Otherwise," asked Alphin, "what are we going to restore it to?"

His lab at UNCW has asked coastal communities to help monitor and gather information such as water temperature, salinity [saltiness], and spat volume [juvenile oyster generation and growth], studying how much growth they can get from small placements of shell.

Over 100 have volunteered since the program started in July.

In cooperation with UNCW and local schools, PenderWatch has joined to set a program in motion in Pender County to measure these changes.

“They took it and ran with it,” said Charlie Baker, teacher at South Topsail Elementary who participated with students and other teachers for the first outing.

*For further information on PenderWatch & Conservancy or to become a member, call **270-4133**, or sign up for PenderWatch e-notification by emailing vufinder@mac.com*