

You want **Oysters** with that Frye?

Neighbors create a happy home for mollusks

Ian Larson and his neighbors are helping to bring back the native Olympia oyster, a prized delicacy in Puget Sound, but one that has suffered from habitat loss, over-harvesting and pollution.

BY GESTIN SUTTLE

Larson lives on Frye Cove, a tiny bay on Eld Inlet, near Olympia. He and his neighbors are allowing the Conservancy and its partners access to critical tidelands for a project to create new habitat for the tiny shellfish that plays a big role in the health of Puget Sound. For the Frye Cove project, Taylor Shellfish spread nearly 300 yards of cleaned oyster shells across an acre of tidelands in Frye Cove during July 2007. The shells will provide a hard substrate in an otherwise muddy bay bottom,

where oyster larvae can attach and thrive and grow in the nooks and crannies of these older shells.

The Frye Cove project is on a piece of state-owned tidelands adjacent to the Frye Cove County Park, and tidelands to the south owned by Larson and four others. The Conservancy has pioneered ways to work with local and state landowners to do marine conservation work. For this project, the Conservancy made agreements with private landowners, obtained a marine conservation

license from the state Department of Natural Resources, and received access permission and project support from Thurston County. Marine conservation licenses and leases are new tools that allow access to submerged lands for restoration purposes.

It's one of several oyster projects that the Conservancy is pursuing with the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, and local, state, federal and tribal agencies. Restoring the Olympia oyster is part of a much larger effort to restore Puget Sound, work the Conservancy is undertaking with the Alliance for Puget Sound Shorelines.

Ian Larson, left, and Brian Allen, a biologist with the Puget Sound Restoration Fund, look over the tidelands at Frye Cove.



Why all this fuss over a tiny mollusk? Though small, the Olympia oyster plays an important role in the marine water quality. It purifies the water, with each oyster having the capacity to filter up to 12 gallons of water a day. “They’re doing good deeds,” said Betsy Peabody, executive director of the Puget Sound Restoration Fund. The oyster beds produce hiding places for microorganisms and other species that provide an important food source for a range of sea life, she added.

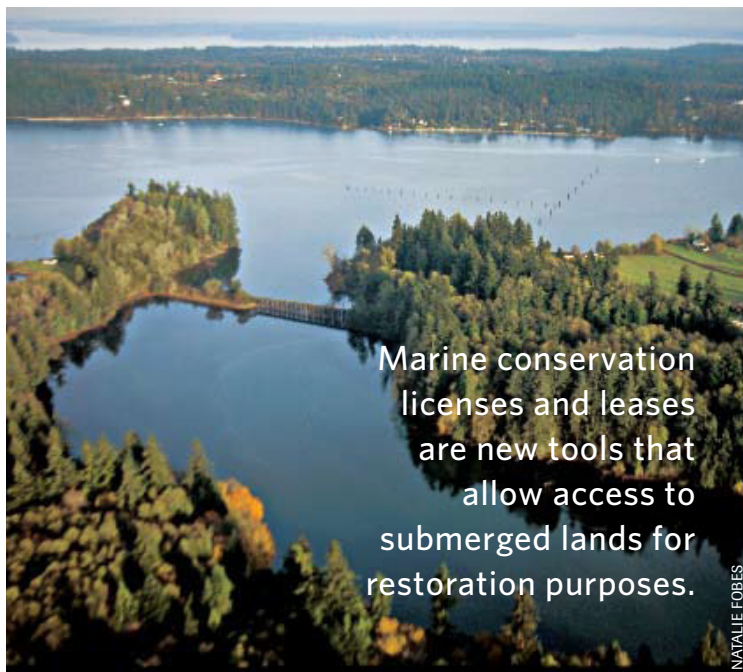
Larson first read about the project in the local newspaper and was eager to participate. “We wanted to help bring back the oyster for everybody,” he said. The agreement is that landowners will permit researchers to access their property for monitoring, and will not disturb the site where oyster shells have been spread for at least five years. “It’s not a burden, but a responsibility,” Larson said.

So far the work in Eld Inlet holds promise. The layer of shell in the southern area appears steady and undisturbed after several months, and is providing the quality and amount of structure necessary for oysters, said Brian Allen, project manager with the Restoration Fund. He has high hopes that Olympia oysters that spawn this summer will move in and thrive on their new oyster beds.

Funding for the nearly \$100,000 project came from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration’s community-based restoration program in partnership with the Conservancy’s Global Marine Initiative, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Russell Family Foundation and other private funds raised by the Conservancy.

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NATALIE FOBES

Conservation Down Under

Thanks to a powerful and relatively new conservation tool, The Nature Conservancy was able to access submerged lands to restore Olympia oyster habitat in Frye Cove.

That tool was a marine conservation license, which allows the Conservancy access to the tidelands and ensures that they won’t be disturbed for at least five years. Since 2000, the Conservancy has been researching and implementing conservation licenses and two other related methods—marine conservation leases and ownership—to obtain access to underwater lands in order to protect them. In 2005, the Conservancy’s Washington chapter obtained the state’s first conservation lease of submerged lands from the state Department of Natural Resources to restore Olympia oysters in Woodard Bay (pictured above).

Since then, the Conservancy has led national and international efforts to develop and expand this critical marine conservation approach. The Conservancy’s Global Marine Initiative works with partners worldwide to find solutions to benefit marine life and local communities. The Initiative developed www.leaseown.org, a new Web site that helps conservation organizations lease or purchase underwater lands in U.S. states and some countries that border the oceans.



KEITH LAZELLE