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## Grant funds research on oyster reefs in Wellfleet

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Oyster reefs like this one growing near Wellfleet's Herring River dike are now rare, to the detriment of water quality and oyster populations.

Cape Cod Times /Steve Heaslip

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By **Doug Fraser**  
STAFF WRITER  
December 03, 2007

WELLFLEET — Within a stone's throw of the Herring River dike is something rarely seen in New England waters over the past 200 years. That low mound of dirty-looking shells that emerges only with the tide is a colony of oysters, the living adhering to the shells of the dead below, and known as an oyster reef or bank.

Before colonists arrived, oyster reefs were a prominent feature along the eastern coast of North America, including the cold waters of New England. Shipped out by the barge load for food, to clear channels for ships, and to make cement, the reefs had largely disappeared by the dawn of the 19th century.

The "reef" on the Herring River survives only because harvesting is prohibited because of bacterial contamination. But a partnership of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and The Nature Conservancy hopes to rebuild these reefs, including one off Lieutenant Island on tidal flats owned by the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary.

The benefits, say proponents, include cleaner water, better habitat for fish and other marine life, and a boost to wild oyster populations.

"It was part of the biodiversity of the harbor, and now it's missing," said Wellfleet sanctuary director Robert Prescott.

Wellfleet shellfishermen harvest thousands of bushels of oysters a year from the wild. Free-floating oyster larvae need to attach to something hard to anchor themselves, feed and grow. While a reef can grow on cement, pier pilings, and other shells, the perfect medium is oyster shells. Wellfleet keeps its wild shellfishery going by returning empty, shucked oyster shells to the water.

Last week Wellfleet selectmen unanimously approved a research and development permit for the project. Prescott said his project will experiment with various reef structures, including mounded empty shells, cement board, empty shells tied to a plastic mat, and specially coated cement structures known as reef balls.

Similar projects have been tried in the Chesapeake Bay, Washington state, and on Long Island, Prescott said. He's hoping to start work on the reef structures early next year.

"We're ramping up on shellfish because of the ecological and fishery services they provide," said Boze Hancock of The Nature Conservancy. The conservancy and NOAA recently awarded a \$50,000 grant to the Wellfleet Audubon project. It was one of 14 coastal restoration projects they funded this year, eight of them involving shellfish.

A mature oyster can filter 50 gallons of water per day, and a good reef has 1,000 live oysters per square meter, Hancock said. There is hope oyster reefs would help communities like Cape Cod that are trying to clean coastal waters of nutrients and harmful algae.

Reefs would be of much greater benefit to the marine food chain than sand and mud flats, Hancock said.

"They have been a serious feature of the ecology of the Atlantic coast," he said. "The benefits would be very much appreciated today."

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