



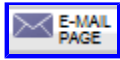
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Chesapeake Bay oyster restoration plan has a concrete base



Jake Taylor, in the red shirt, of the Virginia Marine Resource Commission and volunteer Carter Hanson count the concrete balls that were placed in shallow water off the Eastern Shore on Wednesday. ANDREW HENDERSON | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

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By SCOTT HARPER, The Virginian-Pilot  
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They came to the Eastern Shore from Charlottesville, bringing more than 200 concrete balls and the hope of restoring native oysters in Virginia.

Students, volunteers and a concrete executive descended on this aptly named seaside village Wednesday and Thursday to complete a yearlong effort at making these Swiss-cheesy spheres, then sinking them strategically in the salty, shallow waters off the lower Eastern Shore.

It is all part of an experiment using alternative materials to attract and grow native oysters. Over the past 50 years, native stocks have nearly disappeared from the Chesapeake Bay and other coastal waters, crushing a once-thriving seafood

industry and removing a key natural filter of pollutants.

Disease, lost habitat and overfishing are mostly to blame for the demise, which officials have been fighting to reverse for years - so far, with scant success.

The experiment launched this week combines the energy and money of diverse partners, including The Nature Conservancy, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Allied Concrete Co. and the Tandem Friends School.

Allied's president, Gus Lorder, approached the conservancy a year ago after reading that concrete might be a suitable habitat for struggling oysters.

"Having grown up in southern Louisiana and having spent so much of my time in the salt marsh, both at work and play, habitat restoration has always been a concern of mine," Lorder said.

So his Charlottesville-based company donated about \$50,000 worth of materials and concrete, which students at the Tandem Friends School, also in Charlottesville, spent months shaping into reef balls.

Each orb weighs about 40 pounds and is 18 inches wide - artificial biospheres where oyster babies, or spat, can attach themselves, feed, hide, grow, spawn and perhaps survive.

The balls are off limits to commercial harvesters, intended only for ecological purposes.

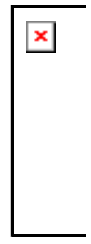
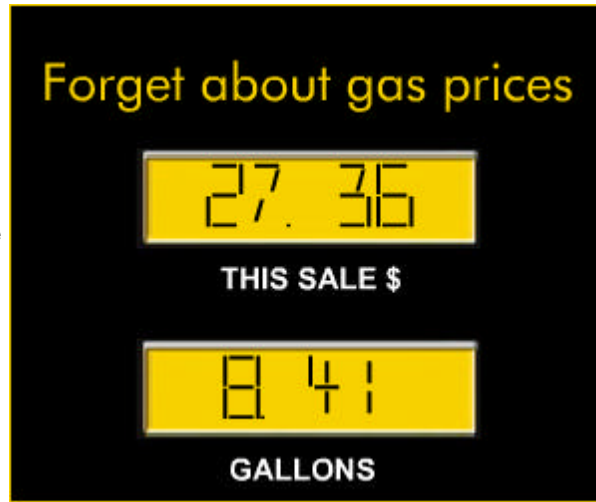
More than 200 balls were set at two locations this week, in Magothy Bay near Skidmore Island, and in shallows next to a lighthouse on Smith Island. Another 90 orbs will be deployed next month at a third site, also off Smith Island.

"Let's try it and see how it works," said Barry Truitt, a senior scientist with The Nature Conservancy on the Eastern Shore. The environmental group owns Smith Island and 13 other barrier islands on the Atlantic Ocean that collectively form the Virginia Coast Reserve.

The Virginia Marine Resources Commission, a state agency that regulates seafood and is engaged in restoring oysters, approved the experiment unanimously in May. The Army Corps of Engineers also approved a permit.

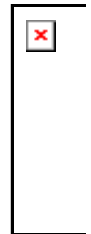
The commission and the conservancy have been working together for five years on seaside oysters. Aided by federal grants, they have constructed 20 acres of manmade oyster reefs from old shells. Truitt says the results have been promising.

The adult oysters monitored on most of the reefs are infected thoroughly with Dermo, a disease that does not harm humans.



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But, unlike oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, these seaside cousins are not dying from the infection, Truitt said.

"They seem to have acquired an immunity," he said. "We don't know why, but they're hanging in there."

The concrete experiment cost about \$214,000, with the state, the federal government, Allied Concrete and The Nature Conservancy chipping in.

If the concrete orbs are successful, Allied wants to expand the experiment next year, including projects elsewhere in Virginia, including waters linked to the Chesapeake Bay, Truitt said.

"It can't hurt to try," he said. "What do we have to lose?"

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