



Since the “Restore Urbanna Creek” group started restoration of the creek in 2008, 11,000 bushels of shell and spat-on-shell — 3 million oysters — have been planted in the creek. Pictured above is a planting last year near the Beryl “Dick” Newman Memorial Bridge in Urbanna. (Photo by Larry Chowning)

# Group working to improve Urbanna Creek ecosystem

by Larry Chowning

**T**he resurgence of aquatic grasses and an abundance of oyster spat attaching to jetties, piers and boathouses on Urbanna Creek are a sign of an improving environment along the watershed.

Back in 2008, William Smiley, outdoor coordinator for Christchurch School, introduced a school project that had students planting shell and spat-on-shell in the waters off Christchurch School in the Rappahannock River.

As he studied and monitored the small reef they created, Smiley found that there was very little growth or progress. So, he directed his efforts to Urbanna Creek where after several years of planting seed and spat, found the creek to be a “wonderful ecosystem” for growing oysters. Urbanna Creek has been



Members of the “Restore Urbanna Creek” group include, from left, David Cola, director of place-based education, Christchurch School; Joe Heyman, chairman of the Urbanna Oyster Festival Foundation; Paula Jasinski, Green Fin Studio; Jen Sagan, Friends of the Rappahannock; Sara Chaves Beam, Chesapeake Bay Governor’s School of Middlesex County Public Schools; Christopher Little, river and outdoor coordinator Christchurch School; and William Smiley, ecologist/captain for sustainability with the Tides Inn. (Photo by Larry Chowning)

condemned for the harvesting of edible shellfish for years. In the late 1960s, the Town of Urbanna installed a sewage treatment plant that to this day

discharges into Urbanna Creek. There is also a sewage system discharging into the creek from the Middle Peninsula Regional Security Center and courthouse

complex in Saluda. The treatment plants are operated today by Hampton

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Roads Sanitation Department (HRSD). The plants are scheduled to be closed in the coming years when HRSD will direct the sewage to a treatment plant in Yorktown. Work has already begun on that project.

This will not, however, bring the creek up to an environmental standard where oysters can be harvested to eat, because of the extensive number of boats and marinas in the harbor, said David Cola, director of place-based education at Christchurch School.

“Restore Urbanna Creek (the named used by the group) is not just about science,” said Cola. “It is about providing environmental information so people who live on the Chesapeake Bay understand our watershed better. It is about people understanding that a healthy watershed ups the quality of life for all of us.”

The creek restoration program has brought together a local group of educators, environmentalists, ecologists and the Urbanna Oyster Festival Foundation — all

interested in the preservation of the bay.

The group has coordinated educational studies by using the creek as a hands-on classroom for Christchurch School and Chesapeake Bay Governor’s School students; provided water quality monitoring; planting reefs on the creek using seed oysters, shell and spat-on-shell; monitoring growth of the reefs; providing educational studies during the Thursday Urbanna Oyster Festival Foundation Education Day at the Urbanna Town Marina; and finding significant funds through grants to make it all happen.

Private partnerships have been formed as HRSD has provided some of the infrastructure for sampling and testing water quality of the creek; Bay Design Group in Urbanna has provided survey work required by Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) to establish the best reef locations; and The Cabell Foundation out of Richmond has provided grant funds along with others.

“What we have learned is that Urbanna Creek is a miniature Chesapeake Bay,” said Joe Heyman of

the Urbanna Oyster Festival Foundation. “What we are learning on the creek can be used to make the entire bay a better place and provide an understanding of what needs to be done to do that.”

What they have learned is that the more oysters living and thriving in a tributary makes for a much healthier watershed. Oysters are a filter feeder and each oyster filters about 50 gallons of water per day.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Urbanna Creek lost all of its aquatic grasses, mostly due to turbid, dirty water. “The grasses are coming back,” said Sara Chaves Beam, director of Chesapeake Bay Governor’s School. “The water is obviously clearer and cleaner, which is a gauge used to show we are making a difference.”

Cola pointed out too that the creek is full of oyster spat attaching to docks, bridge pilings, etc. “This is a real sign that life in and along the creek is getting better,” he said.

