

Bay Scallops Sustaining the Tribe



Wampanoag Environmental Laboratory Manager Andrew Jacobs on restoring traditionally important shellfish

SNEP: How would you describe your current role?

Andrew Jacobs: I'm with the Natural Resource Department of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah). I am the Laboratory Manager for the Wampanoag Environmental Laboratory, and I'm also an environmental technician, so I do work in the lab and in the field.

SNEP: What brought you to doing this work?

AJ: I had majored in biology and had research experience with the Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group years prior to taking this position, so it became a great fit. When I came to the tribe, they were in the midst of a big Tribal Wildlife Grant for scallop restoration, so I joined as the restoration coordinator and oversaw those efforts. I didn't have any prior connection to the tribe, but we were still able to make great strides, in part because my predecessor had laid the groundwork. It was a wonderful project and it was fantastic that we saw the success that we did.



Andrew Jacobs, Laboratory Manager, Wampanoag Environmental Laboratory

SNEP: Can you speak to the Wampanoag's shellfish restoration efforts? What has worked, what hasn't?

AJ: The entire program is focused on bay scallops in Menemsha Pond now. It is a salt-water pond, tidal, with a channel open to Vineyard Sound. Even though we say pond, it's absolutely salt. It's on the western end of Martha's Vineyard and abuts tribal land. Menemsha is the hub of all of our management and restoration work. It's essential for sustenance. There are local fish species, many deer in the area. We actually manage a herring run from Menemsha into Squibnocket Pond, connected just to the south. It's a vibrant, very productive area.



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With bay scallops, we're looking at a species that is not only economically important but is culturally significant to the Wampanoag people. The history goes back thousands and thousands of years in archeological evidence. The shell middens show that these shellfish have always been a sustenance food, an important part of their way of life. Shells are sometimes incorporated into Wampanoag regalia. Scallops were a bounty of the land and they were able to harvest it to feed their families. Today it's highly lucrative. That is part of why it is so important to bring back this species.

What's important to know about our program is that our management activities are mostly for the purpose of continuing sustenance and commercial activity for the tribal citizens and those who have shellfish permits with the town of Aquinnah. The tribe itself does not make income off of this but does it to provide for others. The bay scallop has been in drastic decline. When the program started, the shellfish population had bottomed out for the commercial fishery. For a little over ten years, there was no commercial season. It was the dark ages, as it were. The population started to recover a little bit, but then dropped off again. Then, in 2004, we were able to get that Tribal Wildlife Grant to find best management practices, look at water quality, do genetic studies and predation control. With all of that we were able to bring back the population from the brink within a few years. Once the grant had run its course, we continued the efforts and have ever since, following the same practices.



Releasing bay scallops into Menemsha Pond

SNEP: What do those practices look like in the field?

AJ: Our efforts are two-pronged. We purchase seed to grow and we collect spat from within the pond, so if one was to fail the other is still present. We use scallop lines and place seed into bags of different size mesh, which act as a suitable habitat, kind of a pseudo-eelgrass, which scallops would usually attach to. They are able to grow in these bags on floating lines, suspended off the bottom, away from predation and in a higher flow of water. They get

more and better nutrients and it reduces mortality because they are able to grow stronger and more plentiful before their release.



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Beyond that stage, the scallops are released into a one-acre sanctuary. Those areas are not permitted for shellfishing. The dredgers and draggers aren't allowed to fish in that area and every year we change the location so that it can't be fished. We are deputy shellfish constables for the Town of Aquinnah, which allows us to move seed and interact with shellfish, so we map out different areas that would be best to release—where is the eelgrass the healthiest, where is the optimal habitat for scallops? We present that to the shellfish constable and work out an agreement to create the sanctuary under the jurisdiction of the constable.

There's a rather small window when bay scallops are harvestable, usually from late November or early December through late winter or early spring. We still see a cycle of amazing gains that drop significantly. There are conditions we're still trying to perfect. Is it the time of year we release? The size we're able to grow them to? Are we putting enough effort into predator control? We put a lot of effort into making sure the scallops stay sustainable and we would love to expand.

SNEP: You mentioned cooperation between the tribe and the town. How do tribal shellfish law and state or municipal laws compare?

AJ: We all want the same thing—we want healthy and prolific shellfish. This is a significant part of people's livelihoods. We are a seasonal economy. Come winter, people need to find ways to ensure that they continue to make a living. Members of the Wampanoag Tribe do not require a shellfishing license. Their indigenous fishing and hunting rights provide them the opportunity to harvest sustenance foods. The scallop shellfishery is a huge part of that, especially at that end of the island. We work very closely with the towns. Obviously, we're deputized in order to move the seeds. Our communication is quite reasonable. We have a direct line. I think I speak with the constable at least once a week.



Scallop seed prior to setting on grow lines



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SNEP: What benefits have you seen from restoring bay scallops?

AJ: There is a lot of interest in what we're doing out on the pond. People are excited to hear what we are doing. The better the boon, the more economic impact -- and people love eating them, too. People used to go and get their scallops and bring them to what was essentially a shuck shack. They would bring their bounties, and this was a time when families were brought together. You got to spend quality time, and that was a very important aspect of shellfishing. It's one that tends to get pushed to the wayside because people are preoccupied with how they're going to make sure they have a roof over their heads, but this was a family activity, and it still is to this day.

SNEP: What qualities do you think make the region special?

AJ: The island is a microcosm. Like I mentioned, it is seasonal and the only way on or off is essentially the ferry. People find a way to make a living and they create close personal groups. That is one reason why the idea of sustenance is so important. People fish and share it with their neighbor. It's a very communal location, especially for those who are here year-round. Even those who visit seasonally, they're treated as family. People take care of one another like you hope everywhere else would. It's a way of life on the island.

