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# At The River Project, the world is their oysters

By Deborah Lynn Blumberg



*Villager photos by Elisabeth Robert*

Above and bottom right, oysters that are being cultivated off Pier 26 in Tribeca.

In a warehouse on Pier 26, scientist Scott Wingerter plunges his hand into a large, circular tank filled with water from the Hudson River to retrieve a speckled oyster that contracts from his touch.

Wingerter and his fellow researchers at New York's The River Project, a marine science field station on the pier, at N. Moore St. in Tribeca, have been growing oysters along the water in Lower Manhattan for the past few years. Through The River Project's oyster restoration program, researchers hope to reintroduce oysters to the Hudson River, where the shellfish once flourished.

"Up until 1900, the dominant ecosystem of the harbor was the oyster reef," said Cathy Drew, The River Project's executive director. "There were oyster stands on every corner and in bars, like hot dogs today. Everyone ate them."

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Several years ago, when The River Project researchers started hearing reports of people finding oysters near the Statue of Liberty, they soon discovered oysters growing on their own pier and began to track the shellfish. In 2003, to study the creatures, they decided to harvest 1,000 of their own. The ultimate goal — to one day reestablish oyster reefs in the Hudson.

“In our lifetime, there’s no hope we could eat them, because the water contains heavy metal,” Drew said. “But we want them back to clean the water and to enrich the food web, which would attract other animals and birds to the area.”



Jeremy Frenzel, holding up the net that hangs off the side of Pier 26 in which the oysters are suspended.

Oysters act as natural water purifiers — scientists estimate that one oyster filters 25 to 50 gallons of water a day. Functioning oyster reefs, like coral reefs, also provide a habitat for fish and other marine organisms that live on the heaps of shells. When the Dutch arrived in what would soon become New York City in the early 1600s, they sailed over a river bottom paved with oysters. But over-harvesting in the early 1900s and pollution in the 1960s and 1970s all but eliminated the shellfish from its waters.

“We project that if oysters were here in the numbers they used to be, they would clear the water in the harbor in a few days,” Drew said.

Over the past few years, the Hudson’s water quality has improved and oysters have reappeared, but only in small numbers. This summer, researchers will grow 2,000 to 3,000 more shellfish, and student interns will measure and monitor them to determine whether or not oysters could once again thrive in the river.

Inside The River Project’s main building, the round, fiberglass tank of oysters is just one element of the center’s 3,000-gallon aquarium system that houses fish and shellfish such as grubby, shrimp, crabs and shad. Here, researchers observe the oysters to determine optimum growing conditions. Outside, another batch of oysters in a lantern-shaped tier net with five levels hangs into the Hudson from the pier’s wooden dock. Student interns like Davan Sooklal, 16, help staff to study the shellfish.

“We’re looking at where they will grow faster,” said Sooklal, a sophomore at Washington Irving High School near Gramercy Park. Along with 20 other student interns who design their own research projects, Sooklal works 12 hours a week at the pier through the Project’s marine biology internship, funded by the National Science Foundation. “I’m guessing they will grow faster in the river,” he said.

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Jeremy Frenzel, The River Project's assistant head of interns, said he never knew oysters lived in the Hudson River estuary until he joined the project a few months ago, after graduating from SUNY with a degree in fishery biology and aquatic science. Restoring oysters to the river is not a short-term project, he said, and will require years of research. "You can't just take the oysters and throw them in the middle of the river," he said. "If we can figure out how to get them reintroduced, it will take a significant amount of time to do it." Perhaps even five to 10 years, he said.

Drew hopes to create a small oyster reef at the pier in the next five years, and if the restoration project is ultimately successful, envisions a return of fish long gone from the river, such as the black drum and the sheepshead fish — the namesake of Brooklyn's Sheepshead Bay.

"If oysters were here again, they would support an ecosystem more diverse than what we have now," Drew said. "Wild oysters are returning to the harbor. How long, if ever, it would take them to form coherent reefs is a big question."

Located across the West Side Highway, halfway between Canal and Chambers Sts., The River Project was founded in 1986 and is open daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free tours of the facility and its marine life are available upon request or by appointment. Schools can schedule class field trips from April through October.

The center is currently repairing several of the tanks and gathering fish from traps in the river. Researchers estimate that the tanks should be full by the end of next month. "It's always up to the fish though, to a certain extent," said Wingerter, The River Project's head of interns. Employees are also planning several new self-educational stations on marine life and water conservation. Two such exhibits include one on horseshoe crabs and another on the cost of clean water.

On Sun., April 25, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., The River Project will host its first large-scale public event of the year, a shad bake. Center educators will discuss the history of shad in the bay as they cook the fish in the traditional method, on a wooden plank. Visitors can taste free samples and tour the aquarium.

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