

Can Gulf oysters recover from Deepwater?



Gulf oysters have been declared safe by Louisiana and national authorities Andy Levin / Polaris



he Collins Oyster Company's sign Andy Levin / Polaris



Eric Buras and Raven Sylve Andy Levin / Polaris



Popular restaurants such as Casamento's, New Orleans, still do good trade Andy Levin / Polaris

Paul Greenberg

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First wrecked by Hurricane Katrina, then ruined during BP's disastrous oil spill, the Gulf oyster beds are in jeopardy

Just off the coast of Empire, Louisiana, about 40 miles north of where BP's Deepwater Horizon rig sank into the sea a year ago, Captain Eric Buras steers an open-decked barge in a tight circle. His two crew members, Raymond Sylve and his son Emmett, stand at a cleaning table, hammer-headed hatchets at the ready. After five circles, Buras throws a lever and the boat's dredge emerges from the deep and comes up over the railing. *Shrakkkk* roars the chain link holding bag and around 50 wild Louisiana oysters, each as big as a man's clenched fist, spill out on to the table.

As the Sylves work at the clumps with their hatchets, breaking them down into individual animals, Buras grabs one, wedges a knife into its hinge, prises it open and severs the meat's ligaments with a sweep of the knife. The liquor and the waters of the Gulf mix in the shell. "You wanna eat one?" he asks.

I think seriously for moment about last year's spill and the suffering the Louisiana fishing community has endured. The stories of fishermen who had lost their boats and their oyster beds in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, who were on the verge of gaining some of it back with an anticipated bumper crop in 2010 — only to lose as much as 80 per cent of their oysters in the spill. I think about the reams of government data saying the seafood is safe, the counter-narratives from a few in the bayous that say it is not, and the rumours whispered in oyster country that the dispersant Corexit is still being sprayed in nighttime sorties whenever a random slick bubbles up from the mud. Then in the way one addresses a muddy-shelled Louisiana oyster fresh from the muck, I press my lips to the very center of the meat and inhale the whole briny mass. Not a whiff of taint. It is delicious, if a bit warm.

William Thackeray wrote that eating an American oyster was "like eating a baby". Presumably the author was referring to the tremendous size of the *Crassostrea virginica* he encountered when Stateside, a totally different genus from *Ostrea edulis*, the smaller European oyster eaten from Colchester to Belon. But Thackeray might also have had his gag reflex triggered by the sheer abundance of American oysters that once paved the near-shore waters not only of Louisiana, but most of the American coast.

Back then, as Mark Kurlansky tells in his book *The Big Oyster*, New Yorkers consumed on average 600-700 locally caught oysters per year. Billions inhabited New York harbour.

Today they are gone, the beds of the famed Chesapeake are in trouble and many lesser grounds are fading fast. In a

phenomenon the National Academy of Sciences has described as “a moving wave of exploitation”, oyster collapse has moved down the American coasts with ever more distant estuaries providing the “seed” oysters to keep collapsing fisheries further north in business. Pollution accelerates the process. This trend is not exclusive to the United States. A 2011 paper by the Nature Conservancy reported an 85 per cent reduction in oyster reefs worldwide. The mouth of the Thames has suffered as much oyster loss as the mouth of the Hudson.

The last great Northern Hemisphere stronghold of the wild oyster is their most southerly redoubt, the Gulf of Mexico. It's one of the only places left in the world where most people can afford to sit down at a bar, order and consume a dozen oysters and then feel financially capable of saying “you bet” when the waiter comes by and asks, “How about another dozen?”

Drive down a Louisiana thoroughfare heading into the town of Golden Meadow, a sign catches my attention. “Collins Oyster Co” it reads, “Out of Business After 90 Yrs. Thanks to BP's Oil and Governor Jindal's Freshwater.” Inside, I meet Wilbert Collins and his son Nick, lifelong watermen born of watermen who explain with the charmingly elongated vowels of Cajuns speaking English, what had prompted their lawn sign. “On TV they always showed those birds full of oil. They make a big issue with it,” Wilbert Collins tells me, “But they killed millions and millions and millions of oysters and nobody said nothing.”

What killed the oysters was not crude oil but freshwater. As oil rushed toward the coast last spring the Governor's coastal coordinator made the call to throw open the Mississippi River's freshwater diversion devices that had been installed, ironically to help improve the water quality of the Delta. The emergency measure was taken in the hope that a counter-surge of river water would drive oil offshore.

While it's hard to judge the efficacy of this move, what it did do was drive millions of gallons of freshwater over the oyster beds.

Too much freshwater blows out an oyster's pump as it tries desperately to maintain a salinity balance. Two months of open diversions on an overfull river proved too much.

"Them things pushed a lot freshwater," Wilbert's son, Nick, tells me. "A ridiculous amount. And it didn't move the oil at all." Representatives from the State of Louisiana see their action as a very difficult but necessary choice between short-term injury and chronic damage. But the Collinses and the State agree on one point: that BP should have done more to fix the problems it caused. "BP is now refusing to provide emergency funding to help mitigate these ongoing impacts to our oyster community," Olivia Watkins, from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, says. "BP had actually committed to that funding late last year. However, they have since changed their mind and retracted that commitment."

As proof of the oyster apocalypse, Nick Collins takes me out on his boat and surveys his beds. As in my earlier trip, the dredge dragged along the bottom came up full and then spilled its contents on to the cleaning table. Every single oyster was a dead empty shell.

This is particularly painful after Hurricane Katrina. Katrina destroyed a lot of oysters, but hurricanes also spread larvae, or "spat", far and wide. It can take years for oyster numbers to rebuild after a hurricane but when they finally do the results can be spectacular. A plethora of post-Katrina oysters should have been coming to market right when the BP well blew.

But even if Nick Collins were pulling up bushels of oysters full with the plump meat of yesteryear, he might not be able to sell them at a decent price today. Typically, food scares are irrational: the recent dumping of radioactive water into the seas of Japan has cast a pall over the consumption of all sushi, Japanese or not. And perhaps food-cautious emotions are hitting hardest after the spill in the places that sell the most oysters — Louisiana restaurants.

Tommy Cvitanovich is the owner of a popular pair of restaurants in greater New Orleans called Drago's. After telling his chef to fire up a dozen of his famous (and delicious) charbroiled oysters for me, he tries to set me straight on what he feels is the public's glaring misconception of Louisiana seafood post-spill.

"The perception of our oysters not being safe is ludicrous," Cvitanovich says. "Right now, our seafood is the most tested food product in the United States. You've got Wildlife and Fisheries, the State Board of Health, the State Department of Environmental Quality all testing the waters. And that's just at a state level. On a national level you have NOAA, FDA, and the EPA and no one is coming up with positive tests."

In spite of all of these tests, a poll of national restaurants that was commissioned by Greater New Orleans Inc found that only 19 per cent of those restaurants' clients held a favourable view of Gulf seafood in 2010, compared with 75 per cent before the spill.

A lot of this is plain irrational fear from people outside the region who are not aware of the intensity of effort being directed at verifying seafood. But some of it stems from the sheer quantity of seafood Gulf residents eat. In the brackish sluiceways and milk-tea bayous of the rural part of the state the standard unit of measurement for local seafood is the sack. A sack is a burlap bag that can hold roughly 18 dozen oysters, 37 dozen crayfish, or 50 dozen bigano snails. Any of these creatures might end up in a sack at any given month of the fishing season, and it is not unheard-of for a family in the bayous to go through a sack in a single day several times a week.

This has prompted some, such as Wilma Subra, a Louisiana chemist who provides technical assistance to the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, to cast doubt on the way the safety of Louisiana seafood is being framed. "When the government established levels of concern for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon (PAHs), they used consumption rates that are not appropriate for the Gulf," Subra tells me.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries asserts that this is not the case. One of its recent press releases states that the average consumer could eat 1,575 jumbo shrimp, 130 oysters or 9lb of Louisiana fish every day for up to five years “without exceeding the health risks for contamination”.

I can personally attest to the overwhelming quantity of local seafood in the Gulf diet. By simply eating what is available in roadside shacks, people’s homes and restaurants my final tally for the week is 97 oysters, 36 shrimp, 26 crawdads and a half pound each of flounder, catfish and amberjack. Most of it was fried. All of it was delicious. To date, I am asymptomatic for PAH poisoning, though my doctor does mention something about elevated cholesterol. . .

Towards the end of my time in Louisiana I find myself thinking not only about Gulf seafood’s impact on my body, but also my body’s impact upon Gulf seafood. And so just before heading back to New York I decide to do a little penance, driving East along Highway 10, a road literally made out of oysters that were dragged from the bay and crushed up into roadbed. My destination is a site just outside Mobile, Alabama, a place where the non-governmental organisation The Nature Conservancy is trying to rebuild what had once been a billion-strong oyster colony.

One of the only touching things about the otherwise faceless life of an oyster is that what an oyster likes best is the nubby shell of another oyster. In Louisiana, where BP payments are falling short, oystermen are standing on the sidelines, lacking enough money to put “cultch” (oyster shells), back on to the beds so that if oysters spawn this spring and release larvae or “spat”, the young will have somewhere to “set” and mature three years later into an adult oyster.

With cultch either lacking or covered in slime from the freshwater inundations, a terrible downward spiral could be at

hand. No cultch means nowhere for young oysters to set, which in turn reduces the amount of mature oysters, which in turn leads to dirtier water, which leads to even fewer oysters. And pretty soon the water becomes brown and murky, fish are less abundant and sediment chokes the bottom.

The only thing to be done is to put oyster shells back in the water in hope that baby oysters will find them and make a home for themselves.

Wading into Mobile Bay, water quickly washed over the top of my boots but the enthusiasm of the several dozen volunteers was warming. A few hundred metres out from the landing I join the brigade, passing 5kg bags of oyster shells hand-to-hand.

Previous reefs built this way by the Nature Conservancy have shown to attract thousands of oysters per square metre. By my eye, the reef we are building is approaching 10 metres. In a morning's work, my personal contribution has possibly laid the groundwork to put back into the world all that I have taken.

But the oyster has suffered a terrible blow. The Gulf has lost tens of millions of them in a single year. The world has lost hundreds of billions in the past century. If we are going to fix things, we're going to need a lot more oysters.

*Paul Greenberg is the author of *Four Fish: A Journey from the Ocean to Your Plate**