



What will happen to Wellfleet shellfish when Herring River is restored?

Wellfleet is a shellfishing community. Wild harvest of shellfish and aquaculture are major industries. Annually, more than 1000 shellfishing permits and over 70 aquaculture propagation permits are issued, and over 2 million “live pounds” of shellfish are grown or harvested from Wellfleet Harbor. An abundant supply of oysters can be found in the Herring River Estuary, but this productive source of the famous Wellfleet oyster is no longer available to shellfish harvesters due to degraded water quality resulting from the dike and subsequent obstruction of tidal flow.

The Massachusetts Department of Marine Fisheries (MADMF) is responsible for coliform testing as it relates to regulation of the shellfish industry. High fecal coliform concentrations in Herring River are thought to originate from wildlife, and are enhanced by poor water conditions which favor the growth of undesirable microbes: low salinity, low pH and low dissolved oxygen. Until recently, the Herring River Estuary was closed to shellfishing only after heavy rains. Now, much of the Estuary is restricted to shellfishing on a permanent basis due to poor water quality.

As a result of Herring River shellfishing restrictions, shellfish harvesting is currently concentrated in fewer areas of Wellfleet Harbor. Restoration of tidal flow in the Herring River Estuary will decrease the bacterial loads and make it possible for the MADMF to open areas to shellfishing that have been closed for decades.

In addition, the restoration of tidal flow will allow shellfish to spread to areas in the Estuary where they are not currently found, thus allowing the newly formed oyster beds to serve important functions such as water filtration and enhancing local fisheries by providing habitat for larval stages of fish and invertebrates. The formation of new oyster beds may eventually increase the area of the Harbor where shellfish can be harvested.

Thus, restoration of tidal flow to the Herring River Estuary will improve water quality and provide an economic benefit to Wellfleet’s shellfishing industry. In addition, the potential growth of a healthy oyster reef will increase filtration capacity and further contribute to the improvement of water quality.