The History of Oysters

fact sheet

Oysters have a history! Wild oysters have been a source of food for Australia's indigenous communities who collected them for thousands of years before Europeans arrived. Shell deposits in Sydney middens (remains of a feasting area) have been carbon dated to around 10,000 BC.

Cultivation of oysters is not a recent innovation. As early as 2,000 BC the Japanese were raising oysters, whilst the ancient Greeks and Romans discovered oysters to be a food delicacy worth cultivating from around 100 BC. More recently, an oyster industry has existed for a couple of hundred years in Europe, whilst Australia's history of cultivation started in the 1870's.

With European settlement of NSW and a rapidly increasing population, the demand for oysters grew quickly. The use of oyster shell as a source of lime in cement production resulted in natural oyster stocks being nearly depleted by the 1860's. Government controls were introduced and this resulted in the introduction of early cultivation practices in the 1870's, the first of which was a French method using canals. This method was unsuccessful because the canals soon silted up and in summer there was a high heat kill. In 1888, a a severe infestation of mudworm (that thrive if oysters are partially silted) seriously impacted oyster farming. This forced the development of intertidal farming techniques for catching and raising oysters. One technique was to use materials such as stones and shells, known as culch, placed on raised beds where water flow was sufficient to inhibit the deposition of sediment. Another option was to use stakes cut from casuarinas or mangrove trees and insert these vertically into the sediment. Stake cultivation has developed into the modern stick and tray method used today.

Oyster farming now employs many different techniques, all of which take place on selected sites – called oyster leases. About 2400 aquaculture leases exist in NSW, with a total current area of about 2900 hectares. These leases are administered by the NSW Government - Department of Primary Industries. Commercial production in NSW occurs in 32 estuaries between Eden in the south to the Tweed River in the north. Wallis Lake and the Port Stephens are the main producing areas. Pacific oysters (Crassostrea gigas) have also been commercially cultivated in Port Stephens since 1991, but are declared a noxious species in all other NSW waters. Some estuaries do however now hold permits that allow them to grow sterile Pacific oysters that they buy from commercial hatcheries at a very early age.

In NSW, Sydney rock oysters account for around 80 % of oyster production in the state and contribute to about 40 % of Australia's total oyster harvest. With an annual production of 106 million oysters worth $40 million, oyster farming is the oldest and most valuable aquaculture industry that has contributed to the NSW economy for over 140 years.

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