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Contact Person: Bob Lewis, 301-904-2387

Local leadership class raises money and builds oyster reef

St. Mary's City—On November 16, an overcast morning with intermittent sprinkles of rain, over forty volunteers gathered to assist in building a three-dimensional oyster reef at Horseshoe Bend in the St. Mary's River. The event was co-sponsored by St. Mary's River Watershed Association and Leadership Southern Maryland Class of 2014, who raised the funding for the project.

Oysters are key to the health of the Chesapeake Bay. The oyster population has been decimated over the past decades, reduced to a fraction of what was once a thriving number of oysters that were able to filter all the water in the Chesapeake Bay in less than a week. Now, it takes more than a year. Increasing the number of oysters is part of the vital work performed by St. Mary's River Watershed Association.



On Saturday, while students on one side of the river were separating out the oyster shells that did not contain spat (young oysters), Craig Kelley, Captain of the Whiskers and a long-time waterman, steered the barge across the river to pick up recycled concrete to construct the three-dimensional reef. It took the LSM and student volunteers 15 minutes to move the 6 tons of recycled concrete by hand onto the barge. Many thanks go out to Bob Taylor Engineering, Inc. for donating the recycled concrete for the project.

Placing the recycled concrete took a bit longer. Along with another 6 tons of concrete installed last August, the 3-dimensional reef structure measured 4 feet tall and 16 feet in diameter. Once the concrete was in place, 50,000 baby oysters, or spat as they are known, were installed on the mound.

Craig Kelley, the barge operator who has been a waterman for 45 years, said “the oysters are coming back, but it’s taking a long time. If we get enough [oysters] living in the river, it's going to make a big difference in the quality of the water.”

Nick Ersoy, student volunteer who lives on the Patuxent River, commented that this was a great opportunity “to help clean up our waters.”

“Two years from now, we expect these one mound to filter more than 3 million gallons of water each day,” said Bob Lewis, LSM Class of 2014 student and volunteer for the day.

Alongside the mound installed on Saturday are another twenty-two mounds of varying materials—some concrete rubble and some are stacked concrete reef balls. Nearly half of these mounds are planted with oysters. St. Mary’s College students use the site for ongoing study and experiments.

The five-acre oyster reef restoration project is a partnership project of local Rotary clubs & Rotary District 7620, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, and the St. Mary’s River Watershed Association. Nearly every member of the LSM Class of 2014 and some alumni donated \$30 each providing all of the funding necessary for the project and a celebratory picnic afterward. Additional funding is needed to complete the five-acre restoration project—options for donating to the project can be found at www.ReReefTheBay.org.



Members of the Leadership Southern Maryland Class of 2014 join with college and community volunteers for a quick photo just after loading the barge.

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