

SAVE THE SHELLS, SAVE THE BAY

Town working with restaurants to return oyster shells to water

BY TED PHILLIPS

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Oyster Bay has started recycling shells discarded from restaurants, following a practice adopted by several other towns in recent years.

Under the program, restaurants can give oyster shells to the town instead of putting them in the garbage. The shells will be laid out at the Old Bethpage landfill to cure before they are put back in the water in Oyster Bay to help bolster shellfish spawning grounds. Oysters help clean the environment by filtering water.

"By instituting the Town of Oyster Bay shellfish recycling program we help our environment, we make our oysters far more sustainable," Town Supervisor Joseph Saladino said in an interview.

While the towns of Brookhaven, Islip and Hempstead have partnered with the Islip-based Seatuck Environmental Association's organization in their shellfish recycling program, Oyster Bay is going it alone, for now.

"We're in the infancy of the program, so we are looking to expand it, make it the best prototype in the whole nation so that everyone will want to follow Oyster Bay's template," Saladino said. He said the town had reached out to the Maryland-based Chesapeake Bay Foundation, which has a shell recycling program, in designing its own.

Saladino said the town is also open to working with local organizations.

Friends of the Bay, an Oyster Bay-based conservation group, had been in discussions with the town for years about creating a program, the group's executive director, Heather Johnson, said in a statement: "Friends of the Bay is very pleased to see the town's shell recycling program come to fruition."

Maureen Dunn, a water qual-



Oyster shells cure in the sun at the Town of Oyster Bay landfill in Old Bethpage as part of the town's recycling program. The shells dry out for about a year before they are put back into the water.

ity scientist who runs Seatuck's program, said they hope Oyster Bay and other towns will join in their program, Half Shells for Habitat, which she said has recovered more than 100,000 pounds of oyster shells since it began in 2018.

Oysters create their shells from calcium carbonate in the water, Dunn said. She said returning shells to the water serves two important functions: as the old shells dissolve, the calcium carbonate returns to the water, which provides a source for growing oyster larvae to create their shells; and it also helps reduce acidification of the water, which is a growing problem in the world's oceans and coastal areas.

"Calcium carbonate is a criti-

cal ingredient for the health of our bays," Dunn said.

Seatuck partners with 26 restaurants that collect oyster shells, which are then picked up by volunteers and delivered to its partner towns, where the shells cure for one year in the open air and under the sunlight. The shells are then taken to a hatchery, where larvae attach themselves to the shells, which are then put into the water to grow.

"This sort of gives them a boost rather than just putting the shells out in the water," Dunn said. "The aquaculture is then . . . in a sustainable way going back into the bays to support the next generation of oysters. Previously those oysters would have gone to the trash."

RECYCLING SHELLS

- Waste oyster shells are separated by restaurant staff and placed in a bucket.
- Volunteers pick up buckets and take them to municipal recycling facility.
- The shells age in the sun for a year to become sanitized.
- The shells are sent to hatcheries, where baby oysters called spat settle on the shells.
- Once the spat are big enough, the shells, with the spat, are returned to the water.

SOURCE: SEATUCK ENVIRONMENTAL ASSOCIATION