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Oysters Aid Bronx River Cleanup

Mollusks Help Filter Out Pollutants From River

By WILL HUNTSBERRY

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The Bronx River has the distinction of being the only freshwater river in New York City. It is also one of the dirtiest, according to environmental groups.

In a continuing push to return the river to health, these groups have enlisted oysters as an ally. They act as a natural filtration system in a body of water that sometimes exceeds safe swimming and fishing levels thousands of times over.

To gauge their progress with this and other cleanup strategies, scientists and activists took a snapshot of the river's health on Monday. They monitored and documented wildlife populations and tested water quality along the 24-mile river.

"We used to count cars in the Bronx River and now we're counting wildlife," said Maggie Scott Greenfield, program director for the Bronx River Alliance, a nonprofit group that coordinates educational and research work on the river.

A \$16 million cleanup of the river began in 2001.

The last of those funds is now being distributed to maintain the largest oyster bed in New York and New Jersey's waterways, said Jim Lodge, who heads the project for Hudson River Foundation.

The group deposited 250,000 spat, or baby oysters, onto the river bed this year. The oysters remove particles from the water, which improves light penetration, allowing more plants to grow and improving water quality.

Mr. Lodge said oysters were plentiful in New York's harbor until the 1900s, and were sold at street stands much as hot dogs are today. But by the 1930s and 1940s oysters were "functionally extinct," he said.

Today, the restoration is more about improving New York's waterways than bringing back an edible population of oysters. Mr. Lodge said that oyster reefs create habitat for other wildlife.

At the same time, Mr. Lodge said, "oysters alone will not clean up the harbor."

River advocates say the key to improvement is increased capacity at combined sewer overflows, which carry wastewater and storm water runoff to treatment plants.

Rocking the Boat, a nonprofit group, tests for pathogens along the river, including near a combined sewer overflow.

During dry times, team members often find very low levels, but after a rain they can swell to many times the recommended maximum for swimming in open water, said Sam Marquand, who heads environmental education for Rocking the Boat.

"I wouldn't swim in it," said Mackenzie Rolon, a high school senior who works at Rocking the Boat. The Bronx River is considered safe for boating, but not for fishing or swimming.

"Sometimes certain areas smell really bad and we see lots of trash floating," said Ms. Rolon, who has developed a love for working on the river.

Still, she has seen improvement: "Lately when we test near the dock, it hasn't been that bad."

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Alexis Kleinbeck and Sarah Tobing return oysters to a reef in the Bronx River.
Steve Remich for *The Wall Street Journal*



Examples of the mollusks from a reef built in 2012. Steve Remich for *The Wall Street Journal*