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Partnership Kicks Off Re-Reef the Bay Project

Dropping the ball on a project is never a good thing, unless those happen to be reef balls dropping into the oyster sanctuary of the St. Mary's River, where they will help to form vertical oyster reefs where the pollution-filtering bi-valves can thrive.

On Saturday, November 10, partners of the St. Mary's River Oyster Reef project joined together on the back lawn of the Muldoon River Center at St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) for the groundbreaking and launch of the first-ever three-dimensional oyster reef

project in the St. Mary's River. The College, St. Mary's River Watershed Association (SMRWA) and the Leonardtown Rotary Club have created a formal partnership, with each bringing their unique resources and abilities to the table in seeing the project to fruition.

Joseph Urgo, SMCM president, stated, "The establishment of this reef is an inspiring example of the kind of community-college partnership that we enthusiastically participate in. It's a project that also provides demonstrable educational and academic value to our faculty and students."

Faculty members and aquatic biologists Bob Paul and Chris Tanner, have been hard at work applying more than a decade of research to a new model that will bring oysters off the river's floor and have them growing vertically throughout the water column, like they once did on over 70,000 acres throughout the Chesapeake Bay.

"Bringing back the three-dimensional reefs, in my mind, is something pretty fantastic," Professor Tanner stated. "I really think this is the way to go."

This man-made restoration of a once-natural growth pattern will allow the oysters to thrive in a more nutrient-rich environment and potentially become more resistant to diseases. An



Representatives from the three project partners deploy the first reef ball onto the site of the St. Mary's River Reef Project. The three-dimensional structures installed in the river mimic historic oyster reefs, which can host four times the number of oysters than can be found on thriving flat oyster bars. Photo by Carrie Munn.



adult oyster filters about 50 gallons of water each day removing algae and sediments that cloud the water and block sunlight from reaching the bottom where aquatic vegetation once grew.

“Oyster, once able to filter all the water in the Chesapeake Bay in three days, serve as the kidneys of our Chesapeake Bay,” said SMRWA project director Bob Lewis.

Ongoing monitoring and research will further establish best practices for recovering the oyster population and thereby improve water quality and positively impacting the ecology of the watershed.

Professor Bob Paul shared the concept of rebuilding oyster reefs as a guest speaker at the Leonardtown Rotary Club nearly 15 years ago, said Rotarian Steve King, who is the Club’s project leader.

King explained his club has been joined by eight others in committing to this project and he hopes to add more. Through fundraising and district grants, as well as promotion and volunteering, he explained how these contributions match up with the goals of the district environmental committee formed two years ago.

“Rotarians, like many who live near and enjoy all the Chesapeake Bay and local rivers have to offer, we’re concerned and we want to see something done about it,” King said. “Historically, people were unaware that mining these reefs to near depletion would have such long-term effects on the oyster population and water quality, but now we know how to go about restoration.”

SMRWA president Joe Anderson explained there are ways for the community to get involved as well. Donations of \$10 will plant 1,000 oysters, \$100 will support installation of a reef ball with the contributor’s name inscribed, and a \$3,000 donation will create and install an entire reef mound with your name inscribed on signage at the College’s waterfront.

Paul and Tanner have created a comprehensive plan for the construction and monitoring of a 2.8 acre reef, rising from the bottom of the river to within a foot of its surface during low tide.

The success of this project could become a model for more three-dimensional reefs throughout the Bay.

For additional information or to find out how to get involved, visit www.ReReefTheBay.org



St. Mary’s River Watershed Association Reef Project Director Bob Lewis, left, Rotary District 7620 Governor Bob Parkinson, Leonardtown Rotary Club President Kelly Schroeder, St. Mary’s River Watershed Association President Joe Anderson, St. Mary’s College of Maryland President Joe Urgo and Leonardtown Rotary Club Reef Project Director Steve King stand together on Nov. 10 at the kick-off for the reef project. Photo by Carrie Munn.
