

Oysters Galore!



Did you know

The Firth of Forth was once famed for its oyster beds

They were used by stonemasons as a handy way of packing joints in stonework

Oysters were in such great supply that they were eaten as cheap snack foods

If you look closely at many historic buildings in the Old Town, you can still see oyster shells embedded in the walls

Today in Edinburgh, the headquarters of the Bank of Scotland famously sits upon a giant oyster spoil heap

Traditionally oysters are only eaten in months with the letter R in its name

Oyster middens have been found at Cramond dating from around 8,500 BC

In the 18th century there were even 'oyster cellars', a form of entertainment peculiar to Edinburgh

Roman soldiers who built the Antonine wall ate oysters. Shells have been found at the remains of the forts which once lined the wall

Edinburgh Oyster Cellar Memoires

In the 18th century there were 'oyster cellars', a form of entertainment peculiar to Edinburgh.

There is a wonderful passage in "The Traditions of Edinburgh" (Robert Chambers, 1868), revealing what it might have been like to eat in an oyster cellar in old Edinburgh:

"The custom which prevailed among ladies, as well as gentlemen, of resorting to what were called oyster-cellars, is in itself a striking indication of the state of manners during the last century.

In winter, when the evening had set in, a party of the most fashionable people in town, collected by appointment, would adjourn in carriages to one of those abysses of darkness and comfort, called in Edinburgh laigh shops, where they are proceeded to regale themselves with raw oysters and porter, arranged in huge dishes upon a coarse table, in a dingy room, lighted by tallow candles.

The rudeness of the feast, and the vulgarity of the circumstances under which it took place, seem to have given a zest to its enjoyment, with which more refined banquets could not have been accompanied."



Going ... going ... gone

Over the last few centuries native oyster stocks have plummeted in Britain, and all over Europe, due to factors such as over-harvesting, disease and pollution.

There were once oyster beds in the Firth of Forth which covered **50 square miles** and were the most productive in Scotland, landing up to a staggering **30 million oysters per year** at peak production.

By the 1950s they were virtually extinct.

Eventually oysters became an endangered species and had to be and still are protected by an Act of Parliament. Native oysters are on the Oslo/Paris Convention (OSPAR) List of Threatened and/or Declining Species and Habitats, so careful management is needed to preserve this precious resource.

Despite this depressing thought, there are 93 locations around the Scottish coast, where native oysters can be found, even if these populations are sparse. Most of the oyster beds are found on the west coast.

Good News!

Oyst

Native Oyster Gradual Recovery

By A LOCAL NATURE WATCHER

Today there are shellfish farmers working on producing and growing the population of native oysters. A Scottish fishery for native oysters in Loch Ryan is really making progress in husbanding their stocks. And further afield, there is a European wide movement to try to restore populations of native oysters. One day let's hope they will be back in the Firth of Forth!

There is a European movement to try to restore the population of native oysters

Firth of Forth Oyster Species

Native Oyster (Ostrea edulis)

The native or common oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) is a marine bivalve mollusc found in Scotland, previously in the Firth of Forth, and now mainly on our west and north coasts. Its rough, irregularly shaped shell grows up to about 10cm across.

Native oysters live on the seabed in relatively shallow coastal waters and estuaries (from the lower shore to 80m). They prefer habitats sheltered from strong wave action, which tend to be muddy. Oysters also require shells, stones or another hard surface for larval settlement.

The native oyster may live up to 15 years, but six years is more usual. This active filter feeder takes plankton and particulate matter from the water column. Native oysters have an unusual life history: as an alternating hermaphrodite species, an animal may change sex many times during its life.

People have harvested or cultivated the native oyster for centuries. It once supported abundant fisheries in several parts of Scotland, most notably the Firth of Forth.

'Oyster-tecture'



An unlikely hero – the oyster – is set to revitalise New York City's polluted waterways. To improve the city harbour's water quality, they are planning to tap into the molluscs natural ability to filter.

An adult oyster can process a massive 190 litres of water a day, pumping it through their bodies, extracting nutrients and pollution. By making underwater living reefs from a woven web of 'fuzzy rope', millions of oysters and mussels can settle in and conduct their business.

This is called 'Oyster-tecture'. Already over an acre of reef has been restored and, in two years the harbour's water quality will be evaluated and the city should greenlight her proposal for a 200-acre marine park in New York Harbour.

