

Merging Science and Community to Achieve Shellfish Restoration and Management

Birch, Anne ¹ & Geselbracht, Laura ²

¹ Marine Program Manager, The Nature Conservancy, Florida.

² Senior Marine Scientist, The Nature Conservancy, Florida

Abstract

Scientists and restoration practitioners recognize that development, implementation, and adaptation of oyster restoration and management plans must be informed by the best available science as well as stakeholder input. Stakeholder participation from the outset and through all stages of the process ensures development of a community vetted and readily implementable plan. Community involvement in restoration and management decisions can be challenging, time consuming and viewed as an obstacle to getting on with the “important” work. In practice, it is rewarding and necessary. Actively engaged community stakeholders offer real-life experiences, local knowledge, unique ideas and solutions. Inclusion of a diversity of community stakeholders often results in them becoming the best champions of and influencers for our work.

An example is the Oyster Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) Plan project that is under development in the Pensacola Bay System of Florida, USA. A key science element for a successful EBFM Plan is a Habitat Suitability Model (HSM), which is comprised of seven biological, physical and chemical factors individually rated for suitability, and spatially characterized. The HSM sets the foundation for the plan. A draft HSM was developed by project scientists and presented to the project’s community stakeholders working group for review. The working group, comprised of oyster fishers and aquaculture farmers, planners, developers, community and economic organizations, scientists and resource managers, recommended several valuable improvements to the HSM. Acceptance of the HSM and, by extension the Oyster EBFM Plan, would be difficult without working group input and participation in the process.