

The Olympia Oyster by Rebecca Lexa

Willapa Bay is well known for its oyster industry. But did you know that the oysters being harvested each year are introduced Pacific oysters originally from Asia? They replaced the native Olympia oyster after its populations collapsed from over-harvesting, and because Pacific oysters are bigger and easier to cultivate.

The Olympia oyster, the only oyster native to the Pacific Northwest, isn't gone though. Once widespread from California all the way north to Alaska, it still hangs on in smaller populations along the coast, including in Willapa Bay. It generally doesn't get much bigger than three inches long, and often grows in eelgrass beds. While it usually sticks to salt water, it can tolerate the variable salinity of estuary habitats near streams and rivers. It spawns from May to August, and one oyster can produce up to 300,000 eggs in one brood!

There are efforts to preserve and return the Olympia oyster to its historic range. Both conservation groups and specialty commercial oyster companies have reintroduced these shellfish to suitable intertidal areas. Threats to these populations include pollution from industries and boat motors, a buildup of silt from erosion, a lack of shells for young oysters to grow on, and invasive species like the Japanese oyster drill, a mollusk that bores through the oyster's shell to eat it.

Hopefully with time and continued effort, the native Olympia oyster will once again be a common sight on the tidelands along the Pacific Coast!