

Special species



Researcher Alicia Donaldson with Olympia oysters at the Gorge waterway. The molluscs are the only native B.C. oyster, but remain a rare find along the coast.

Roszan Holmen/News staff

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Alicia Donaldson wades into the Gorge calf deep while her fellow researchers clear the area of foam.

A thick layer coats the water's surface and strong winds whip the creamy froth into the air. As water gushes through the narrow channel below Tillicum Bridge, it stirs up the naturally occurring phosphorus foam.

It's a low-tide phenomenon, which is also the best time to view Olympia oysters. The native oysters are the reason for the researchers' visit.

All along the shoreline by the public dock, they cluster alongside barnacles and clams.

"They're attached to the rocks or just free living in the sand," says Donaldson, as she scoops one up. Olympia oysters, measuring a maximum six centimetres, are small compared to other species. They're the only oysters native to B.C.

"At this particular site we've not seen the Pacific oysters, which are the invasive ones," says Donaldson, project development officer for World Fisheries Trust, based in Vic West.

Pacific and Atlantic oysters were brought here by Europeans for commercial harvesting. Competition from these bigger shellfish contributed to a crash in the Olympia oysters' population in the 1930s. Over-harvesting also contributed.

Donaldson is leading the research project with funding from the federal government. Last year, the research team mapped the entire waterway and identified three spots where the native oysters thrive.

Donaldson is now taking baseline measurements to see how the numbers change over time.

The Gorge is right in our backyard, but few people are studying it, she says. "We're just getting a handle on the population."

Her findings will feed into a larger investigation of Olympia oysters along the B.C. Coast.

The Department of Fisheries and Oceans is also monitoring populations at several sites along the West Coast of Vancouver Island, in the Sooke Basin, the Sunshine Coast and others.

"DFO can't fund all the monitoring, so we're looking to partner with community groups and with First Nations," said Graham Gillespie, an invertebrate research biologist based in Nanaimo.

"We don't have quantitative estimates of how many oysters there were, other than production figures from the fishery. (Considering) they were abundant enough to support fisheries for a number of years, our impression now is that their populations are at lower levels than they were historically."

For this reason, the species is listed as one of "special concern."

But that designation could change soon.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada has the Olympia oyster on its agenda this year. It will use the early monitoring data to decide whether to change the oyster's status to threatened, endangered or not at risk.

Back at the Gorge, summer student Carla Yarrow helps to lay a quadrant of tubing, measuring 25 centimetres square. She counts the oysters inside and measures each one. She then moves the square to a new location along a transection of shore.

Donaldson also takes the temperature of the water and measures its saltiness by squirting a thimble full onto the screen of a refractometer. It's the type of work the researchers hope will appeal to amateur scientists and Gorge enthusiasts.

World Fisheries Trust opened the Gorge Waterway Education Centre in 2008. It's now launching a community monitoring program and is looking for volunteers.

"Its aim is to bring people together in the community and help to work with them in an effort to answer the outstanding questions that we have about the Gorge Waterway and its biology," Yarrow said.

Volunteers will monitor general conditions once a week at a given site, recording information such as the weather, water quality and any wildlife.

"It's about seeing if the health is changing and watching it over time," said Yarrow.

For more information, contact education@worldfish.org.

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