THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA'S OYSTER RECOVERY TEAM

is a volunteer effort founded in August 2012, in response to findings that Apalachicola Bay's oyster population had dropped dramatically and that the 2012-13 oyster harvest would likely be smaller than usual. The bay traditionally yields about 90 percent of Florida's total oyster harvest and 10 percent of the entire U.S. harvest.

The Team comprises about 20 faculty and staff members from multiple disciplines, who take part in research and outreach activities to address the crisis. The Team's primary goals are to learn why oyster populations declined in Apalachicola Bay, to find ways of boosting oyster populations, and to identify solutions for social and economic impacts associated with the crash.

The Team is led by Dr. Karl Havens, director of the Florida Sea Grant Program and a longtime professor in the fisheries and aquatic sciences program of UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, or UF/IFAS.

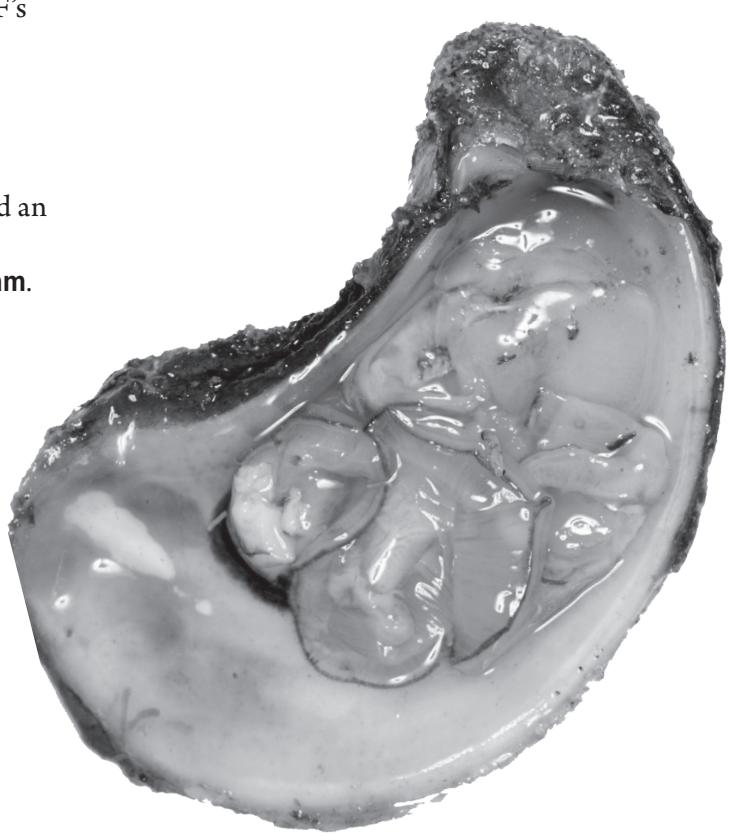
On April 24, 2013, the Team reported its initial conclusions and recommendations regarding the oyster population crash. The Team's full report and an executive summary are available online at **http://franklin.ifas.ufl.edu/uf-oyster-recovery-team**.

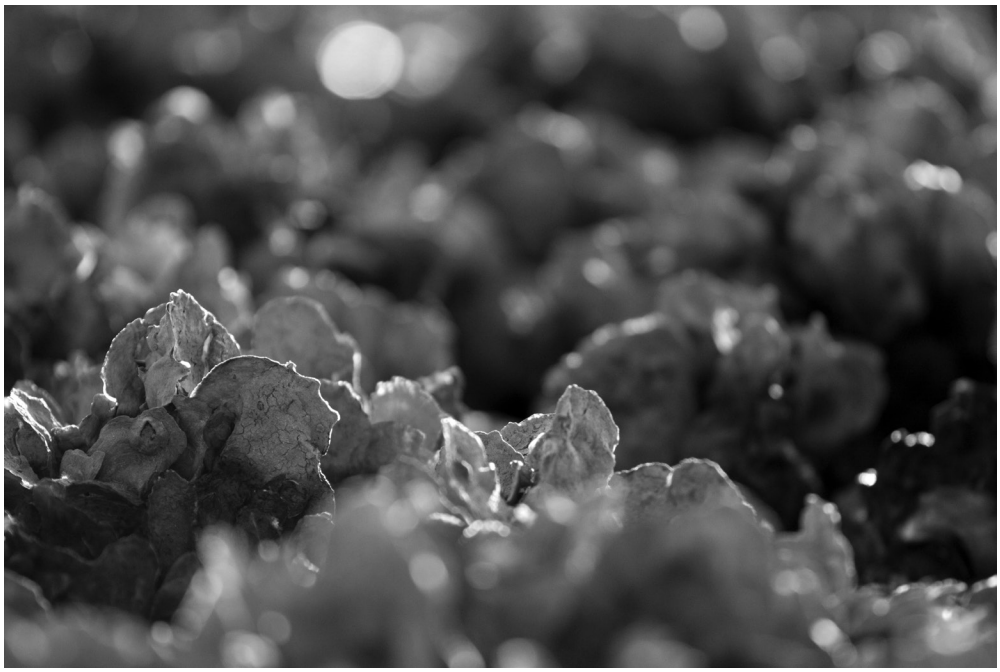
Conclusions

- The oyster population crash was likely the result of diminished numbers of juvenile oysters reaching maturity, due to insufficient reproduction by adult oysters, unusually high mortality of juvenile oysters, or a combination of both factors.
- Water sampling and tissue analysis revealed no evidence to suggest that oil or dispersants associated with the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill played any role in the oyster population crash. Similarly, there was no evidence to suggest that overharvesting played any role.

Recommendations

- Reshelling efforts are needed in the bay, to provide suitable habitat for free-swimming larval oysters to anchor and develop. However, research is needed to determine the best approach to reshelling, with regard to the locations and quantities of oyster shells involved.
- Oyster population indicators should be closely monitored, including oyster landings by the industry, and ongoing assessments of oyster populations in of all parts of the bay.
- The oyster industry should follow established guidelines regarding size limits, areas closed to harvest, seasonal closures and harvest reporting requirements.





Recent Accomplishments

The Team's efforts to analyze the causes and extent of the oyster population crash helped convince the U.S. Secretary of Commerce to declare a federal fisheries disaster for the area in August 2013, opening the possibility of federal assistance.

In partnership with state agencies, county officials and the Gulf Coast Workforce Board, the Team secured $4.19 million in funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to conduct experimental oyster reef restoration on a small scale. The funding, announced in November 2013, will enable researchers to determine the benefits of reshelling degraded oyster reefs under various conditions. The Team is presently working to secure about $37 million in BP oil spill settlement monies, to fund a project that would restore about 1,000 acres of degraded oyster reef, using information gained from the small-scale study.

In December 2013, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced plans to fund oyster habitat enhancements in Apalachicola Bay and other Florida Gulf Coast waters, with $5.37 million in monies from the BP oil settlement.

In February 2014, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that it would provide $6.3 million in relief, a consequence of the fisheries disaster declaration in August 2013. The funds will support projects that include job retraining for seafood workers and oyster reef restoration.

At the listening session on Oct. 1, 2014, Dr. Havens, along with UF colleagues Dr. Andrew Kane and Dr. Angela Lindsey, will have a facilitated dialogue with community members in order to hear and document their specific questions, concerns and ideas on issues ranging from possible closure of the bay to restoration efforts to community involvement in bay management initiatives. That information will be compiled and made broadly available, and will be used by UF, state agencies and others who can provide answers and solutions to meet community needs.

Future Efforts

The Team will continue to research critical issues that impact oyster populations in Apalachicola Bay, will communicate its findings to the seafood industry and the scientific community, and will assist decision-makers with the best available science-based data relevant to oyster fishery management and long-term recovery of the industry.

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