

Scallop season opens with optimism

by [Charity Robey](#)



CHARITY ROBEY PHOTO | John and Nancy Kotula, 5:20 a.m. Monday, opening day of the scallop season, at Congdon Creek Dock.

On the first Monday in November, New York baymen take their boats out in the dark to carefully considered scalloping spots.

At sunrise, over the side go the first dredges, seemingly empty as they sink, but always full of hope. This year there is cause for optimism.

Fishermen, restaurants, fish markets and home cooks all over the Island and the North and South forks are preparing to do whatever it takes to get more of those comely mollusks with a band of blue eyes adorning the edges of their shells.

Last fall over 100,000 pounds of Atlantic bay scallops were harvested in Peconic Bay, three times as many as the previous year, and comparable to the bountiful harvests of the early 1980s when scallops were a major factor in the economic health of Long Island.

In the 30 years since, bay scallops have struggled to survive in waters polluted by nitrogen run-off and battered by algal blooms. In the 1970s East End baymen brought in 400,000 to 500,000 pounds of scallops every year. Then came brown tides in 1985 and 1987, followed by the coup de grace of pollution in 1995.

The following year, 53 pounds of scallops were harvested.

Commercial scalloping was gone and with it an important source of income during fall and winter for many Islanders when there was no work caring for the lawns, pools and children of wealthy summer residents. And no scallops to eat.

Although her life's work revolves around restoring a healthy environment for bay scallops to live, Alison Banco, a scientist at the Peconic Estuary Program, is just as eager to eat them. "There is nothing better than a sweet and buttery plate of Peconic bay scallops," Ms. Banco said.

There is close to a 100 percent consensus in the scientific community, according to Banco, that the numbers and the health of bay scallops relate directly to water quality.

Equally clear is the fact that the conventional septic and cesspool systems owned by 74 percent of Suffolk County homeowners are to blame. Farms and golf courses produce nitrogen run-off as well, but by far the main source of nitrogen pollution in Peconic Bay is home septic systems.

New York State, Suffolk County and local efforts to approve, build and upgrade to sewage systems that remove nitrogen from wastewater are major steps in the right direction and Shelter Island has provided leadership in these efforts. To demonstrate the technology, 19 homes in Suffolk County have been outfitted with one of the new bay-friendly septic systems.

On the Island, new systems at the American Legion Hall and at Sylvester Manor have received financial support and are underway. At Sylvester Manor Educational Farm, year round residents, seasonal farmers and visitors put a heavy load on the facilities. Strategic Director Sara Gordon said the Manor's new vegetative treatment system is designed to reduce the nitrogen entering the groundwater, and to study the feasibility of this type of system.

Cornell and Long Island universities scallop-reseeding effort, begun in 2006, has boosted scallop numbers dramatically in Peconic Bay. L.I.U. Professor Stephen Tettelbach, who has conducted research on bay scallops for 35 years and is co-leader of the restoration efforts, has documented improvement in the scallop harvests since reseeding began. The data reveals that reseeding has generated \$6 million to fishermen and at least \$60 million in related revenues to the region as of the 2014 harvest.

Nate Phillips runs Alice's Fish Market in Greenport. Just 28, he began scalloping during the bleakest days of the 1990s and sees a huge difference in scallop numbers today. "I feel that [reseeding] has done a huge thing," Phillips said. "Everything that Cornell does for marine life and habitat does help."

For people who care about ethical seafood, there is no guilt in eating these rare and exquisite bivalves that live only 24 months and can't be harvested until they are about to die of old age anyway.

A year ago, the main problem for Charlie Manwaring, owner of Southold Fish Market in Southold, was finding people who knew how to open bay scallops fast enough. In 2014 the bivalves were so abundant it was a struggle to keep up with demand. Unlike oyster shucking, separating a lump of scallop meat the size of a grape from its shell requires more finesse than strength; there hadn't been many to practice on since 1985.

Charlie's sister, Candice, who works with him at the fish market, recalled her own training as a child, when scallops were so plentiful that their father put her in a room with a pile of scallops and a knife and said, 'Don't come out until you've opened them all.'"

The result? A bucket of "petite" scallops. If the haul is as good as the Manwaring's hope, they will train openers in case there aren't enough old-timers available who remember how.



CHARITY ROBNEY PHOTO

Richie Surozenski leaving early Monday morning from the Congdon Creek Dock.

<http://bit.ly/1TCnVQg>