

Inmates Help Grow Oysters

09/30/2009

Star Democrat, The

Published: Sunday, September 27, 2009 6:56 AM CDT

CHURCH HILL A childhood spent in intensely urban Brooklyn, N.Y., and time in prison left Vincent Walker with scant awareness of marine ecology. Now, though, thanks to a cooperative effort between the Department of Natural Resources and Division of Corrections, he's not only aware of the issues, he's part of the effort to clean up the Corsica River.

The PVC-coated wire cages being built by Walker and his fellow inmates at the Eastern Shore Pre-Release Unit will serve as nurseries where oyster spat can develop until they are large enough to be transplanted to offshore bars.

For Walker, learning about the living water filters that will occupy the cages during their first year of development was a revelation. "It's very interesting as well as rewarding," he said. "They're going to relocate them to help clean the water, to do what oysters do," he said. "I'm from New York ... I didn't even know" such things existed.

"The majority of them haven't seen the inside of an oyster before," said Cpl. Laura Davenport at the pre-release unit. "They come from blacktop." Only about 20 percent of the unit's population of 180 is from the local area.

Current efforts by inmates at the unit "is a vital part" of conservation efforts in the immediate area, said DNR's Christopher Judy. "The Corsica River is their backyard."

The Corsica is one of 11 new tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay that will benefit from Gov. Martin O'Malley's Marylanders Growing Oysters Program, which was launched last year in the Tred Avon River. Local non-profits, such as Corsica River Conservancy, help recruit riverfront property owners willing to foster the oysters through their first year.

Shells covered with pinpoint-size spat from the University of Maryland's Horn Point Lab will be placed in the cages, which will dangle above the river bottom off privately owned piers.

The property owner/oyster steward will monitor the cages, rinsing them of silt so the spat can better survive.

After a year, the oysters can be transplanted to a sanctuary bar in the middle of the river, where their function will continue as purely ecological filters for the Corsica's water.

Along with being part of the effort to get 5,000 cages into Chesapeake's tributaries by September, Eastern Shore unit residents have planted grasses near Tilghman as well as thousands of trees in Worton as part of the joint DNR and Corrections Division program aimed at engaging inmates in projects with a positive impact on society.

It seems to be working.

Although he knows he probably won't find a job making oyster cages when he leaves the pre-release unit in October, Walker said he definitely plans to volunteer to help the environment.

"I'd like to help do my part," said Walker, who participated in the recent tree project. "I've planted trees and to know in 15 or 20 years" they will be grown, is rewarding.

"That's something you left behind," he added. "No matter what happens to me."