

P.J. Waters

The oyster is his world

INTERVIEW BY PAUL ZIEKE

Many environmental groups beg the public to take better care of our planet—save the rain forests, eliminate plastic, drive a hybrid. Alabamian conservationist and educator P.J. Waters says, “Grow oysters!” Why? Because they’re natural water filters. As coordinator of the Mobile Bay Oyster Gardening Program, Waters teaches volunteers how to grow these mollusks in cages suspended from private wharves throughout the Mobile Bay Area. For several months, participants tend to juvenile oysters, which come from the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory on Dauphin Island. Once the oysters are mature, Waters and his team plant them on restoration reef sites around the bay.

How do oysters help the environment?

They are an integral part of the ecosystem that most people don’t get to see. Oysters improve water quality by feeding on excess algae floating in the water; this activity balances other elements in the aquatic environment. An adult oyster can filter up to 4 gallons of water every hour.

Who volunteers in this program? Does a participant need to have a particular background or prior experience?

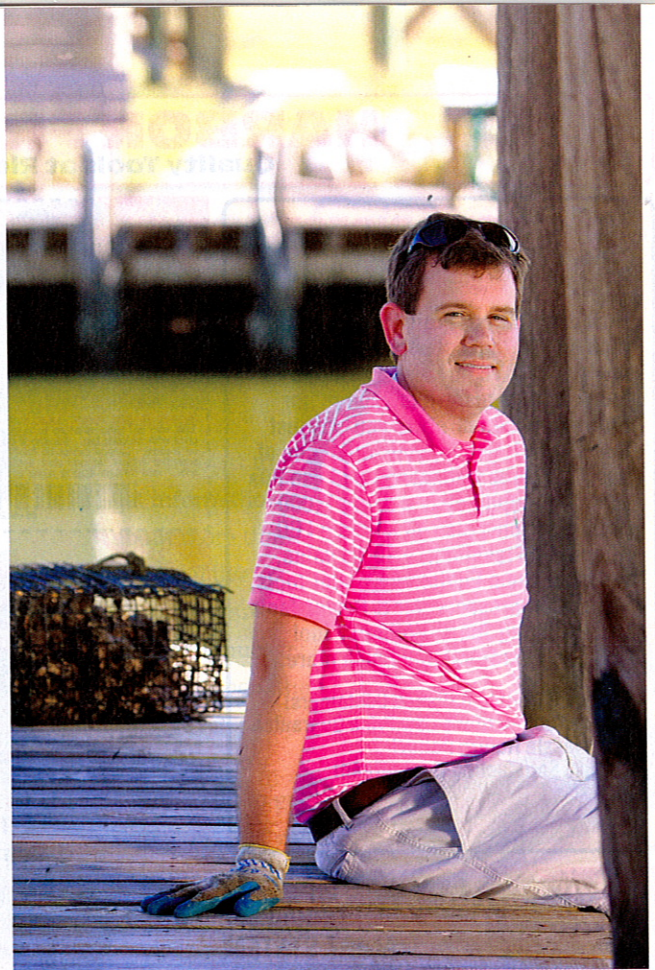
Our gardeners range from elementary school science students to retirees. We’re looking for people living on the lower-half of Mobile Bay who have piers available to suspend the oysters. We had 49 locations last season.

What about folks who don’t live on the bay?

There’s still a way to participate. People can adopt a garden. We have adopters from all over, from New England to Chicago. For \$25, you can sponsor a garden for a season. In return, you get monthly updates on garden growth, and you can come visit and take a guided tour of the Auburn University Shellfish Laboratory.

Is it difficult to raise an oyster garden?

Not at all. We hold training workshops in April or May. In June or July, we set up each gardener with oyster spats—each is about half the size of a thumbnail. The cage gardens are suspended between pilings about a foot off the bottom of the bay.



Gardeners have to haul up and clean the gardens each week. Around Thanksgiving time, we gather the oysters and plant them at designated reef sites in the bay.

What’s the biggest threat to oyster beds?

Oyster drill snails have significantly damaged oyster reefs. We recently went through a drought, which meant less fresh water was mixing into the bay—and brackish water attracts these predatory sea snails. Our gardening program helps protect small oysters during their most vulnerable growth stage, when these types of predators snatch them up.

How many oysters have been raised through the program?

Each garden generates about

250 oysters. Since we started the program 11 years ago, we’ve planted more than 400,000 oysters.

You have the perfect name for an oysterman. Have you always wanted a career on the water?

Yes, my name somewhat foreshadowed my career. I grew up in Birmingham, spending summers on Mobile Bay. That is where I caught the “water bug,” I suppose. I just really love this bay and jumped at the opportunity to work with it and the great people of this area. **AJ**

If you’re interested in becoming a volunteer oyster gardener or sponsoring a garden, call (251) 438-5690 or visit oystergardening.org.