Oyster History

The bays and estuaries of Prince Edward Island have provided ideal conditions for oyster production for thousands of years. Even hundreds of years ago, the Hillsborough River, seen here, provided an abundance of oysters to the natives of the province.

Since that time, the oyster has been an important part of the Island’s fishery.

For many generations, fishermen have been going out into the water ways of the province and collecting oysters.
At the turn of the century the Malpeque oyster received the title of “Best in the World” at the World Fair. This title sharply increased the interest and demand on the oyster stocks on PEI. So much so that the numbers of the valuable shellfish dwindled to dangerous levels.

There was also a great deal of tension between oyster fishermen and farmers during this time. It was felt by the fishermen that the practice of harvesting mussel mud (oyster shells) from the province’s oyster beds to fertilize fields was a large part of the problem of diminished stocks.

On top of the problem of overfishing, in 1913, a disease that was known as the Malpeque Oyster Disease killed nearly 90% of the oyster stocks in the area.
With this new challenge came the beginning of a new era for the oyster fishery. Dr. Needler, seen here, was hired by the Federal Department of Fisheries in the early 1930s to study the Malpeque Oyster and try and find solutions to the disease. It is then that he began his groundbreaking work at the Ellerslie Research Station on the Bideford River which was to lay the foundations for the modern oyster industry.

This building was the original lab for the research station that was set up on the Bideford River to study the problem. Under the very capable direction of Dr. Needler, many of the standards and techniques used today were developed.

The building that is now home to the PEI Shellfish Museum was for many years the centre of research and development in oyster fishing.
Dr. Needler created many enhancement practices that helped restore the oyster population. Spat collectors such as this egg crate covered in concrete made it possible for oyster farmers to collect spat to restock oyster beds.

Although the disease was never cured or even the source discovered, using the enhancement and oyster farming techniques that Dr. Needler developed, he was able to culture the 10% of the oyster population which was resistant to the disease for use in the restocking the population of Prince Edward Island and eventually the entire maritime region.

Thanks to these efforts, there are once again an abundance of Malpeque Oysters on Prince Edward Island. The Malpeque oyster, that was once declared “Best in the World” is actively reclaiming that title.
A complete history of the Malpeque oyster fishery can be seen at the PEI Shellfish Museum in Ellerslie, PEI.

The industry owes its vitality to the many dedicated individuals who have left their mark on the industry.

Today the Malpeque Oysters is in high demand across North America and around the world.