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# Social oysters: Aquaculture inspiring communities

22 February 2016

By Christopher Kazarian

## New England shellfish growers plant seeds for better lives at home and abroad



The Island Creek Oyster Foundation (ICOF) has invested in aquaculture projects in Zanzibar as a way to provide nourishment and income to women like this. Photo courtesy of Island Creek Oysters.

For any business to be successful, it ultimately must be cognizant of the bottom line. But profitability needn't come at the expense of philanthropy. The two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Two aquaculture companies, less than 100 miles apart on the East Coast of the United States, have proven that success can be measured beyond money.

In 1992, Skip Bennett planted his first oysters in Duxbury Bay and thus, Island Creek Oysters was born. During the early years, Bennett sold his oysters to Massachusetts out of the back of his pick-up truck.

Today, Island Creek Oysters is at the forefront of American aquaculture as a farmer, wholesaler and distributor, operating 10 farms in Duxbury and employing a staff of 17 in its wholesale division. It has also launched high-end seafood restaurants in Boston and Portsmouth, N.H.

The genesis of the company's charitable Island Creek Oyster Foundation (ICOF) evolved from an oyster festival that began nine years ago. In that first year, funds raised from the event supported Duxbury charities.

The festival rapidly grew from a few hundred people gathering at a local pub to more than 4,000 descending on Duxbury Beach. Company President Chris Sherman said Bennett wanted to leverage that growth to do something more, and farther afield. "That second year we started using the money we raised for international development," Sherman said.

Specifically, Island Creek Oysters partnered with Dr. Hauke Kite-Powell, a research specialist at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), to launch a hatchery in Zanzibar. Rooted in the teach-a-man-to-fish philosophy, the goal of the project was to help women in the coastal community of Stone Town become self-sufficient by not only producing enough Andara, or clams, for daily nourishment, but also to support better lives for their families by providing more financial security.

“By building a hatchery, we wanted them to have a consistent source of seed so they could create enough product to bring to market,” Sherman said. “So actually, this would bring them an income so they’d gain further enfranchisement as well as be able to feed their families high-quality protein.”

Sherman said the hatchery suffered from poor water quality, forcing them to shut the operation down, but the foundation has since helped fund a new one currently being built in the more rural village of Bububu, a suburb of Stone Town.

## **Educational ambassador for aquaculture**

Ninety miles south of Duxbury in South Kingstown, Rhode Island, Perry Raso has become an ambassador, of sorts, for aquaculture and its potential community benefits.

It started in 2002, the year he founded Matunuck Oyster Farm in conjunction with a three-year federal grant he received to help fund the Ocean State Aquaculture Education Project. The purpose of the initiative, Raso said, was to foster acceptance of aquaculture through education.

***People need to understand that shellfish farms are not something to be afraid of. They are something that is helping increase biodiversity and the amount of local species in an area. So this type of education is important.***

He tailored the curriculum to individual groups – rotary clubs, middle schools, engineers, biologists – that he was speaking to, focusing on the need for aquaculture and the biological process of aquatic farming on scales both large and local. Following each presentation, Raso would then take students on a tour of his farm.

Like Island Creek, Matunuck’s beginnings were humble, starting with one acre, then three and eventually



Perry Raso is the founder of Matunuck Oyster Farm in South Kingstown, R.I., where he works to educate his community on the benefits of aquaculture. Photo courtesy of Matunuck Oyster Farm.

seven. Matunuck farms primarily oysters, but also clams and scallops that are sold to wholesalers and local restaurants.

Because he needed a commercial dock, Raso's operation expanded in 2009 to include a restaurant where he continues to conduct tours. The popular eatery has become a destination, particularly for summer visitors to the Ocean State, perhaps spurred on by positive reviews in the Boston Globe, *Yankee Magazine* and USA Today, the last of which listed Matunuck as one of the top "10 places in the U.S. to savor oysters on the half shell."

While Raso admits the federal grant was instrumental for him to start his farm – it funded 50 percent of his initial equipment costs – he understood the importance of the educational component tied to that funding. "Pretty much everyone I've had the opportunity to take to the farm has said the same thing: 'I can't believe that much goes into it,' he said. "They just thought you're growing some oysters in the water and you pick them with clam boots on."

The impact of his efforts may prove to be lasting. Some of the visiting children are seeing the waterfront for the first time. What's more, Raso has had at least one student of his pursue a career in the shellfish hatchery business.

Raso said that in aquaculture circles, he is one of the few to provide hands-on learning opportunities for the general public. He still does it for practical reasons; there is a demand for it. "After the grant I had this huge inventory of people asking me to come to their class or asking if they could come to my farm so I kept doing it," he said.

So he has built an agritourism business out of what was initially intended to simply be a way to earn a living. "I didn't start digging shellfish because I loved it," he said. "It was the best way I knew how to make money."

In the process, he has helped show that aquaculture is something to rally around, not only in Rhode Island, but in places like Africa and Southeast Asia where he has traveled to promote sustainable practices. "People need to understand that shellfish farms are not something to be afraid of," Raso said. "They are something that is helping increase biodiversity and the amount of local species in an area. So this type of education is important."

## Funding worthwhile investments

Despite the risks of funding development in faraway regions like Zanzibar, Sherman said such efforts are important for Island Creek because it "is putting our money where our mouth is. We have access to these funds through our events, which we do to raise money. It is our job as a foundation to be good stewards and determine which projects merit investment."

In Haiti, the foundation is partnering with aquaculture expert Dr. Valentine Abe, founder of the Caribbean Harvest Foundation. ICOF has funded two tilapia farms on the island – one in Lake Azuéi, outside Port au Prince, and another in the man-made Lake Péligre – as well as two fish hatcheries.

This is now the fourth year Island Creek Oysters has backed the venture, to the tune of \$100,000 annually. The results have been stunning. "We have about 450 fish cages deployed and about 450 families earning a living from farming fish in those two lakes," Sherman said.

The impacts have gone far beyond that. When he first visited the impoverished nation, Sherman

Skip Bennett, CEO of Island Creek Oysters, helps pick clams with a woman from Zanzibar. Photo courtesy of Island Creek Oysters

described the situation as dire; people lived in mud huts with no sewage system and no trash removal. Many children exhibited symptoms of malnutrition due to protein deficiency.

In less than five years, Sherman said, “the difference is marked. All the children are well fed, have clothes... and they’ve been able to build housing development on the side of a village. They live in these nicely colored houses with street lights. We’ve seen teen pregnancy decline, birth rates decline and everyone is doing a lot better from a qualitative standpoint. The energy of the village is much better and the place is abuzz.”

As someone who grew up in Duxbury, Sherman said being a part of an organization that is able to create positive change elsewhere in the world has been satisfying. “It’s been a tremendously rewarding experience,” he said. “It really feeds the mind and soul to take what we do and employ it to make a difference in other people’s lives.”

In the end, these types of philanthropic endeavors place a spotlight on the benefits that aquaculture can have on society. “The economic vitality of any area is good food and nutrition,” Sherman explained. “Without good nutrition and being able to earn an income through farming, you can’t talk about health care and education because without an income you have no means to feed yourself so it’s hard to realize potential in anything else.”

## Author

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