Why Healthy Oysters

GO UNHARVESTED

Apalachicola Bay, Florida

AS OF EARLY JULY, oysters, shrimp, and fish from Florida's Apalachicola Bay are healthy and fresh. There's no oil here, and fishing is wide open. Still, Tommy Ward, owner of 13 Mile oyster company, says that his production is down eighty percent.

"Everybody's gone BP-ing," he says. During a normal summer, Tommy, a third-generation oysterman and winner of the SFA's 2006 Ruth Fertel Keeper of the Flame Award, would be buying oysters from thirty to forty boats, each bringing in twelve to fifteen bags of oysters per day. This summer, he's working with six boats. " You don't have the workforce to harvest the product," he explains.

Shortly after the spill, BP set up a program called Vessels of Opportunity, which hires area fishermen to maintain booms, scout for contaminated wildlife, and skim surface oil where possible. The program is controversial in Apalachicola because, unlike in Alabama and Mississippi, fishing is open here.

Many ask, Who can blame the fishermen for taking work that pays essentially ten times what they would make in a day oystering? Through the BP program, the owner of each participating boat gets paid at least $1,200 per day (depending on the size of the boat) and $200 per hand on deck, plus expenses. They work eight hours a day, are not permitted to fish, and have to wear life vests. That last requirement gets a big laugh around here.

"It's human nature to go to bigger money, you know, to supply the needs of the family," says Johnny Richards, a professional shrimper, fisherman, and oyster harvester. Johnny, sixty-eight, has been in the seafood business since before his eighth birthday. That's when he started helping his dad out on the family boat here.

Johnny tells me that a harvester can make about $20 per sixty-pound bag of oysters. In a good day, a boat will bring in twelve to fifteen bags, which on the high end is about $300 a day. As for shrimping, Johnny explains, if you bust it, you can bring in $500 a week. "That's an excellent, really good week. But there, too, a lot of them work day and night. It makes an old man out of you in a hurry." Now these same men are being paid $1,200 not to fish for a mere eight hours a day. It seems like a pretty easy decision.

LEFT TOP: Tommy Ward of 13 Mile oyster company.
LEFT BOTTOM : Johnny Richards has worked the waters of Apalachicola since he was eight years old.

OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS, Tommy Ward has been losing the battle to maintain production levels and keep his business chugging along. His son decided to take two of the five family boats out to work for BP. The money helps, but Tommy doesn't like it. He just wants to do what he loves and keep the oystering way of life alive.

"What do you do? You've got customers what you've had for thirty years. You struggle and ease along with the little product that you're getting in to save some of your major accounts, you know, that have been with you for years."

Tommy realizes there are other places in the world to buy oysters. If his customers are forced to go elsewhere, he knows it could be an uphill battle to get the business back later, even if the oyster bars stay perfectly clean.

But what if they don't stay clean? As of early July, Apalachicola Bay is pristine, but oil lurks only twenty miles west of here.

I ask Johnny if he has thought about what he will do if he can't fish anymore. He pauses. "Not really. I'm just about the age now that no one would want to hire me." He pauses again. "I hadn't thought about what I'd do if I wasn't fishing."

In the last five years, the people on the Gulf have lived through so much. Hurricanes Katrina, Dennis, and Ivan. Drought and recession. Insurance companies that were slow or reluctant to settle claims. Competition from cheap seafood imports. High gas prices that made fishing runs cost-prohibitive. And now, the biggest oil spill in American history.

As of this printing, that damn well is still gushing oil. With no end in sight. These people are tired.

"It's their way of life. You're taking away a way of life from a bunch of people," Tommy says tearfully. He takes a few deep breaths and utters simply, "Families."

I ask Tommy if he has anything to say about what the future holds. He manages a smile and shakes his head. " We've never faced anything like this before. I don't have a clue what to do. I don't think anybody else does, either."

A CREATIVE MIND

Full of Ideas for the Future

New Orleans, Louisiana

RICHARD MCCARTHY is the executive director of Market Umbrella, a New Orleans–based, not-for-profit champion of ecologically friendly and economically sustainable public markets. In 2003, Market Umbrella founded the White Boot Brigade—named in honor of the ubiquitous white rubber boots worn by fishermen—to promote a new model of seafood sales. The Brigade helps independent fishermen follow the farmers market, sea-to-consumer business model.

Despite the fact that Richard's home state is the hardest hit by the oil spill, in a recent interview, I found him to be remarkably buoyant about the future. In a region where so many are understandably paralyzed by uncertainty, Richard churns out ideas with inspiring confidence.