

# Can You Dig This?

## SHELLFISHING IN NEW JERSEY

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**New Jersey's coastal bays and rivers** offer many recreational opportunities, such as fishing, boating and kayaking. However, one activity that is often overlooked is recreational shellfishing for hard clams or "clamming." Many locals and visitors to the New Jersey coastal region enjoy eating these succulent treats, but may not realize that great clamming opportunities exist from the Navesink River south to the small bays and sounds of Cape May County. As with fishing, there is always a great sense of accomplishment that comes with "catching your own," especially while enjoying a day on the water with family.

**New Jersey has a storied history** for harvesting shellfish that dates back centuries, with Native Americans harvesting shellfish for sustenance, later evolving into a commercial industry around colonial times. Recreationally, catching clams and oysters was a popular pastime that has, over the decades, seen a decline in the number of participants.

Contributing to this decline in participation are various factors such as loss of shellfish harvest areas closed due to poor water quality, overharvest and shellfish habitat loss from coastal development. Over the last several decades, improvements in water quality have expanded areas available to harvest, while tougher coastal development regulations have preserved existing shellfish habitat. Although shellfish populations have not yet returned to the numbers seen during the "glory days" of the past, there are still many good places to harvest shellfish.

**By far, the majority of shellfish harvesters** in New Jersey target hard clams (*Mercenaria mercenaria*). Clamming can be a relatively inexpensive activity; all that's needed to get started is a recreational shellfish license and a pair of old shoes or booties. Since clams are predominantly found in sand/mud bottoms and are buried just below the surface, the easiest way to start clamming is with the technique commonly known as treading. The harvester wades on a shallow water flat and probes the bottom with their feet or hands. Once a clam is found, you simply pull it out of the bottom.

Be sure to check your tides though; low tide is the ideal time to harvest. This is critical to the success of your trip as treading in head-high water will only make you a better swimmer!

Another popular method is using a scratch rake; a gardener's hand rake will also work fine. Simply pull the rake along the bottom until you hear and feel a clink, indicating a clam has been located. Use the rake to pull the clam out of the bottom.

Most shellfish harvesters utilize boats or kayaks to find areas to shellfish. However, there are many public

access areas along the coast, such as Island Beach State Park, for those without access to a boat. A great way to find clamming areas is to visit a local bait and tackle shop.

**Hard clams** can be found in a wide range of substrates and depths. For those who wish to expand their opportunities, a long handled shinnecock rake or tongs can be used off a boat in deeper waters inaccessible to treading. As you gain more experience, you will start to fine-tune your harvesting technique and become more efficient.

**Other species of shellfish** such as oysters (*Crassostrea virginica*), soft clams (*Mya arenaria*), blue mussels (*Mytilus edulis*), bay scallops (*Aequipectin irradians*), surf clams (*Spisula solidissima*) and other bivalve mollusks can also be harvested under the recreational shellfish license. Periodic oyster tonging seasons are set dependent upon current oyster bed conditions. New Jersey's tonging areas are the Maurice River Cove in Delaware Bay and in Great Bay near the mouth of the Mullica River in Atlantic County.

A recreational shellfish license costs \$10 for residents, \$20 for non-residents and \$2 for a juvenile under 14 years of age. Seniors over 62 years old that are New Jersey residents may obtain a free lifetime recreational shellfish license (initial \$2 application fee). Licenses may be purchased at a shellfish license agent (see page 21) or online at New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife's Web site at [WildlifeLicense.com/NJ](http://WildlifeLicense.com/NJ).

The recreational license allows for the harvest of 150 shellfish (in aggregate for all shellfish species) per day. Hard clams have a minimum size limit of 1½ inches in length. Shellfish harvest is permissible between sunrise and sunset. Shellfishing is not permitted on Sunday (except for in the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers). For more detailed information, see shellfish regulations on page 18 in this *Digest* or visit our Web site.

**All shellfish must be harvested** in waters classified as "Approved" for shellfish harvest or within the open harvest period of "Seasonally Approved" waters (usually between Nov. 1 to April 30 of each year). Shellfish Growing Water Classification Charts may be obtained at shellfish license agents or viewed online at the NJDEP's Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring Web site at [nj.gov/dep/bmw/waterclass.htm](http://nj.gov/dep/bmw/waterclass.htm). Shellfish harvesters must avoid shellfish aquaculture lease



Clammers Jennifer Samuels (L) and Kim Schneider show their catch.

grounds. These grounds are used privately for the cultivation of shellfish and are typically delineated with cedar or PVC poles.

**In an effort to provide more shellfish harvest opportunities in New Jersey**, both recreationally and commercially, Fish and Wildlife has made significant efforts to enhance and restore New Jersey's natural shellfish beds. Popular programs such as the hard clam seeding behind Island Beach State Park and on the flats in Great Bay near Seven Islands have been successful, as they have provided excellent recreational harvest opportunities. Partnering with Rutgers University, various federal agencies, local municipalities and organizations such as ReClam the Bay, Fish and Wildlife's Bureau of Shellfisheries has initiated numerous programs designed either to enhance existing shellfish beds or to restore extant or remnant beds.

These programs have included the purchase and planting of clam and oyster "seed" (young shellfish raised beyond the larval stage) from hatcheries plus the purchase and planting of clean clam and oyster shell to provide excellent cultch material (growing substrate) for the setting of oyster larvae. These programs have been successful, providing excellent harvest opportunities in addition to the ecological benefits.

The enjoyment of exploring New Jersey's coastal waters while finding your own "clamming hotspot" and feasting on your bounty at the end of the day are the best rewards of all. With tens of thousands of acres in New Jersey's back bays and tidal rivers available to harvest shellfish, why not give it a try?

*To stay up to date on important news and events related to shellfish, sign up for our shellfish and marine fisheries e-mail Listserv. Visit Fish and Wildlife's Web site at [NJFishandWildlife.com/lstsub.htm](http://NJFishandWildlife.com/lstsub.htm).*