



# EarthWatch Rhode Island



## **Topic: Growing Rhode Island's Quahog Industry**

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Quahogs, the official State Shell, have a long history in Rhode Island and are an integral part of the state's economy. The Narragansett Indians and other Native Americans used quahog shells to make beads that they used as money (wampum). Today, Quahogs are a popular Rhode Island cuisine, used in everything from chowder to stuffies. Quahogs constitute the Bay's most important fishery, with a dockside value of nearly \$4 million in 2006. Rhode Island supplies a quarter of the nation's annual commercial quahog catch. However, the supply of quahogs available in Narragansett Bay has dwindled over the years due to pollution and over-fishing.

Quahogs are managed by the Department of Environmental Management with advice from the Rhode Island Marine Fisheries Council. In addition to possession limits and seasonal closures, the Department uses management areas and a rotating transplant/harvest system to ensure the viability of the industry by moving quahogs from polluted waters of the Bay to "spawner sanctuaries" where they rid themselves of pollutants and release their spawn to help restore the fishery.

This May, DEM and local shell fishermen, will conduct five quahog transplants to transfer an estimated 600,000 to 800,000 pounds of quahogs from high shellfish density areas in Narragansett Bay to shellfish management areas, and the Potowomut Spawner Sanctuary.

Today, quahogs will be harvested from Mill Cove, Wickford, and transplanted approximately 3 miles away in the Bissel Cove/Fox Island Management Area (just North of Rome Point and the Jamestown Bridge). Shell fishermen will dig the quahogs and take them to the transplant staging area. The harvested quahogs will be loaded onto boats for transport to the spawning/management areas. Transplanted shellfish will be unavailable for harvest until December 2007, allowing the shellfish to spawn and contributing toward replenishing adjacent areas.



**Local Rhode Island quahoggers take part in the quahog transplant program and release quahogs into their spawning areas.**

The price paid to fishermen who assist with dumping the clams into the respective management areas will be seven dollars for each 50-pound bag. The price paid to fishermen who do not assist with the dumping process will be five dollars for each 50-pound bag. Funding for the shellfish transplant program comes from commercial fishing license fees and Allen Harbor Lawsuit damage monies.

Since the transplant program began in the 1970's, adult quahogs from past shellfish transplants have spawned, and the resultant sets of juvenile clams have helped to replenish depleted areas of the bay and provide a bountiful winter fishery. Previous efforts have enhanced the stock of shellfish in Greenwich Bay and waters in the vicinity of Quonset Point, Pine Hill, Hope Island, and in the Potowomut and High Banks Shellfish Management Areas.



A local quahogger unloads a bag of quahogs into the spawning area.

DEM's Division of Law Enforcement's Marine Unit also plays an important role in these shellfish transplant activities by insuring that all of the product that is dug during the transplant goes into the designated area. Environmental Police Officers are on hand to make sure that none of the quahogs leave in the shellfishermen's boats, or none of the bags are dumped over the side to be recovered at a later time.

The division is responsible for enforcing the state's commercial shellfishing laws and regulations, in addition to recreational and commercial fishing and lobster laws. DEM Environmental police officers provide 24-hour patrols on the state's waters and fishing ports, protecting Rhode Islands multi-million dollar commercial shellfish and fish industries. There are currently more than 1,600 vessels, from quahog skiffs to draggers, that are engaged in commercial fishing in Rhode Island.

#### Interviews:

- Dennis Erkan, Principle Marine Biologist, RIDEM
- Owen Kelly - Local shell fishermen



NBC10 Report Lisa Purcell (right) talks with DEM Biologist Dennis Erkan (left) and Shellfisherman Owen Kelly (middle).