

Growing Sustainable Aquaculture in the Ocean State

By David Alves, David Bengtson, Barry Costa-Pierce, and Timothy Scott

People are surprised to learn that aquaculture has such a long history in Rhode Island.

From the first oyster culture lease in 1798, the culture of shellfish has been an integral part of the Ocean State. Aquaculture in Rhode Island went from a high point in the early 20th century to practically nonexistent from the 1920s through the 1970s. Starting in the 1970s, a pioneer group of farmers and researchers worked diligently to bring aquaculture back to prominence in Rhode Island. In the early part of the resurgence, the growth of the industry was slow and fitful at best; however, it was during this period that the foundation was laid for a dynamic revival of the aquaculture industry in Rhode Island.

Aquaculture in Rhode Island is now growing into a healthy, environmentally sustainable industry. Much of the credit for this growth is due to farsighted farmers, researchers, state and federal legislators, and the occasional regulator. The aquaculture industry in Rhode Island is very fortunate to count U.S. Sen. Jack Reed as a proponent of environmentally sustainable aquaculture.

We are very pleased to be able to celebrate the activities of the Rhode Island Aquaculture Initiative (RIAI) in this special section of *41°N*. The RIAI was formed in early 2002 following Sen. Reed's instrumental garnering of a \$1.5 million grant for the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) to grow the aquaculture industry in Rhode Island. To ensure that this grant was spent in the most strategic manner, the CRMC collaborated with the University of Rhode Island (URI), Roger Williams University (RWU), and Rhode Island Sea Grant to form the RIAI.

The RIAI is governed by an executive committee that truly encompasses the wide range of aquaculture in Rhode Island. Being the smallest state in the union sometimes has its drawbacks, but in this case being small allowed the RIAI to reach out to the majority of interested parties, statewide, to participate. The executive committee is composed of aquaculture industry representatives, fishing industry representatives, state regulators, and research and extension personnel from URI, RWU, and Rhode Island Sea Grant.

Has the initiative been a success? Absolutely! The industry has grown at double-digit rates, and spin-off businesses have been generated. Quality research has been conducted to directly support the industry. Overall, there has been an investment in the future of the industry for the benefit of all the citizens of Rhode Island. But there's more to be done.

Rhode Island is fortunate to have a number of experts fostering the growth of aquaculture in the state. This special section of *41°N* highlights their achievements, which have made Rhode Island aquaculture a model regionally, nationally, and even internationally. We look forward to continuing the work begun by the pioneers of the aquaculture industry. We will ensure that the aquaculture industry in Rhode Island continues to be an ecologically sustainable industry that maintains its dynamic growth while respecting the unique character of the Ocean State.

SIDEBAR

Aquaculture has a long history in Rhode Island, and the CRMC is proud to have been a contributor to its growth and success since the late 1970s.

Historically, the aquaculture industry had slowed into the 1970s, but toward the end of the decade, with the assistance of the CRMC, growers established farms and the industry grew. The CRMC permitted Luther Blount's Prudence Island Farm in 1976; in 1978, Blue Gold Mussel Farms cultivated 60 acres in Middletown; and in the latter part of the decade, 13 small farm leases were established in Rhode Island's coastal ponds. In 1981, the aquaculture statutes were revised, making the CRMC the lead agency on aquaculture leases, and in 1983, the CRMC adopted leasing procedures in Section 300.11 in its program, called the Red Book.

In 2007, the industry produced more than \$4.3 million in gross revenue. There are currently 30 farms, at a product value of \$12,862 per acre.

The CRMC prides itself in the working relationship it has cultivated with the industry through cooperation with the public, state, and other officials and Rhode Island's institutions of higher learning. Research and other advancements in the industry have largely come through the RIAI.

The CRMC sees aquaculture as having a role in Rhode Island's economy and as improving water quality and the Bay itself. The CRMC continues to work with the industry, municipalities, and the general public to create a balance between economic growth and a diverse use of Rhode Island coastal waters. The CRMC and its partners are also currently working on a statewide aquaculture plan, which will address potential areas for future expansion, where appropriate. The future of aquaculture in Rhode Island looks bright, through the comprehensive management of the CRMC and partnerships between the state and its universities and federal partners.

—Michael M. Tikoian is Chairman of the CRMC.