

NATURAL HISTORY

Popular Shellfish in Provincetown Harbor

Quahog – *Mercenaria mercenaria*, otherwise known as “hard clams”, “cherry stones”, “chowders” or “little necks”.



Steamer – *Mya arenaria*, also known as “softshelled clam”. Steamers have all but disappeared from Provincetown Harbor, but are sometimes wholly abundant in Hatches Harbor just inside Race Point in the boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore.



Mussel – *Mytilus edulis*. A large bed of mussels is typically found growing on the rocks of the west end breakwater.



Sea Clams – *Spisula solioissima*. Also called “surf clams” or “butter clams”. Sea clams are found in beds in the town’s east end in about 12- feet of water at low tide and are best taken by snorkeling. A large bed exists from Wood End to Race Point on the shelf running along Herring Cove beach.



Razor Clams – so named because they resemble a straight razor of old. Periwinkle (snails) and oysters are also found in various locations and varying abundance.



PREDATORS

There are many enemies of the quahogs in our waters with the **green crabs** and **moon snails** being among the worst. The smaller the size of the planted clam the more vulnerable they are to predators, but we have surely, on more than a few occasions, found crabs and moon snails happily feeding on clams up to two inches in size. Starfish and gulls are another problem for the clam grower along with the aforementioned humans.



Provincetown tidelands are *closed* to the taking of shellfish *except* in areas designated by the Board of Selectmen and are open under a number of conditions. **Regulations controlling shellfishing are available at Provincetown Town Hall and at the Harbormaster’s or Marine Superintendent’s office.**

Provincetown Harbormaster: 508-487-7030

This brochure has been prepared by former Provincetown Shellfish Advisory Board Chairman Frank Foley and Grant Holder Polly Herrick in cooperation with the present Shellfish Advisory Board and the Provincetown Shellfish Officer Tony Jackett.

Funding for this project was provided in the form of a matching grant from SEMAC, The Southeastern Massachusetts Aquaculture Center.

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Shellfishing in Provincetown Harbor



First Landing Place
of the
Pilgrims

HISTORY

The first clam diggers in Provincetown, before it was Provincetown, were the mainland Indians. The Indians visited the area seasonally much as today's visitors do, to dig clams and make money. The Indians literally did make money digging clams, because early money was fashioned from the purple portion of the quahog shell. This money was known as **wampum**. It's been reported that this wampum has been found as far west as Colorado and was possibly minted right here in Provincetown. The Wampanoag Indians are actually responsible for the name quahog to describe the hardshell clam. The word is a derivative of the Wampanoag word "**poquahock**".

A good indicator of the abundance of quahogs in Provincetown in early times was the enormous piles of shells left behind by the Indians. These piles were called **middens** and later were burned by early settlers to create lime.

The tremendous availability of the quahogs in Provincetown Harbor is reported to have saved the lives of the pilgrims and other early settlers.

Provincetown's tremendous indigenous clam supply is said to have been harvested to near extinction during the Great Depression, when desperate town folk cleaned the flats both for the food and a few dollars to be made from selling clams.

Another clam that was at one time as plentiful in Provincetown waters is the **soft shell** or **steamer clam**. Also fished to near extinction during the Depression years the steamer clam began a significant regeneration during the 40's and 50's and right up to the late 70's. Provincetown enjoyed massive numbers of steamer clams. Then for reasons not entirely known, although many theories abound, the steamers abundance began to decline and now at the beginning of a new century has yet to regain its former abundance.

In the 1940's Provincetown closed all commercial shellfishing areas and restricted the harvesting to family permits, one bucket per week per license. In recent years digging has been allowed for two days a week.

PRESENT

Shellfishing is a wildly popular recreational activity in Provincetown. We regularly see tremendous turnouts during the public clamming season, when scores of diggers appear with rakes and baskets in hand no matter how hard the wind blows or how inclement the weather.

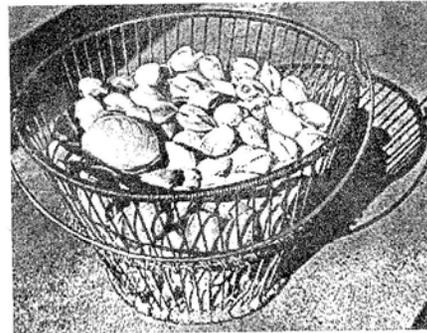


Photo: Polly Herrick

The Provincetown Shellfish Warden along with the Provincetown Shellfish Advisory Board is currently working on various innovative projects designed to increase the abundance of naturally occurring shellfish in Provincetown Harbor. One of these programs directed toward "**brood stock**" building is being accomplished with the cooperation of other town departments and the Town of Eastham where a system of "**upwellers**" grow quahog "**seed**" in a controlled environment until it is large enough to be planted in the wild. The seed clams are then transported to Provincetown where they are planted on the flats. The areas of the field plant are then closed to shellfishing for three years allowing the clams to mature and reproduce thus adding to natural clam "**sets**" in the harbor. This system is moving Provincetown from merely managing what previously existed to a program of constantly building and rebuilding the quahog stock in Provincetown waters.



FUTURE

Provincetown has a natural deepwater harbor with excellent water quality, plenty of plankton (food supply) and tidal flats for an excellent environment for shellfish.

Beginning in 1989 a system of shellfish "**grants**" has been permitted in the two areas of the west end flats. These two areas have been devoid of natural sets of clams for years. Millions of hardshell clams have been planted for private growers at this point with mixed success. This excellent environment for shellfish farming or aquaculture is also an excellent environment for predators and many steps are being taken toward predation control. One predator, the human kind, it is hoped will be controlled by this publication. Poaching has been a constant problem to the shellfish growers, but with education the problem is getting better.

Under the direction of the Shellfish Constable, the Provincetown Shellfish Advisory Board with private growers have been experimenting with the rearing of baby clams to a size large enough for safe planting both on protected grants and in the wild.

Everyone should benefit from many future developments and certainly new opportunities for improvement of the public and private clam beds will unfold. It is through these projects involving private enterprise and public support of supervised shellfishing programs that Provincetown hopes to build a reliable source of seed clams and the successful cultivation of economically valuable shellfish.



Many of the shellfish propagation projects in Provincetown Harbor have been granted funds from the *Southeastern Massachusetts Aquaculture Center 2000* aquaculture mini-grants. These grants were established to promote the sustainable development of the aquaculture industry.