

## What Happens to the Animals?

### Oysters: Nature's Filters

Oysters serve as natural filters, helping keep the water clear. To trap its food, microscopic algae, an oyster pumps in water—up to two gallons per hour! Along with the algae, oysters suck in sediment that would otherwise cloud the water. Oysters pump the clear water back out. Then they digest the algae and drop harmless pellets of waste (which include sediment) to the bottom of the bay.

In Colonial times, the floor of the Chesapeake Bay was piled high with oyster beds. In fact, ships had to be careful to steer around them. But today, only 1 percent of the oysters are left. And they can no longer play a big part in keeping the water clear.



*Oysters: nature's filters*

This is also bad news for the snails, crabs, and small fish that live in the millions of nooks and crannies in a healthy oyster bed. Many of these creatures lost their homes.

What happened to all the Chesapeake's oysters? A virus infected some of them. Pollution killed others. And oyster drill snails ate still more. But the main reason so few oysters are left is that people have eaten most of them.

Lots of people find oysters so tasty that they will pay a high price for them. So it is no surprise that watermen are taking so many out of the bay. As a result, not enough oysters are left to replenish the population.

### Go Fish

Many different kinds of fish live in or visit the Chesapeake Bay for part of the year. Some have unusual names, like cownose ray or hogchoker. But you may have heard of others, such as shad, rockfish (striped bass), herring, perch, eel, and bluefish. Some eat plants and algae. Some are bottom feeders and hunt in oyster or grass beds for snails, small crabs, and worms. Some eat smaller fish.

Fish that visit the bay for only part of the year seem to be doing fine. But fish that live there year-round may be in trouble. In fact, the rockfish population has been so low that some states, such as Maryland, have laws to control fishing for rockfish.

Why are fishermen catching fewer fish? There are many reasons. People built dams across the rivers in the bay's watershed area. And these stop fish from swimming upstream to lay eggs. Cars and power plants that use fossil fuels have caused acid rain. It has damaged both eggs and young fish. Harmful chemicals from factories and mines can give fish cancer or even kill them. Plus, there is the sediment that can kill fish eggs and clog fish gills.

And remember, one of the bay's biggest problems is that we take too much out of it. For most kinds of fish, there are no limits on how many can be caught. So commercial fishermen (who catch fish for a living) and sports fishermen continue to overfish the bay.