

Shore Stewards News

GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES FOR LIVING NEAR WATER | ESTABLISHED 2003

Fall 2017

Shellfish Harvesting and Safety

By **Scott Chase, Shore Stewards Coordinator, WSU Extension Island County**

One of the greatest benefits of living around Puget Sound is the ability to enjoy the ready access to delicious shellfish, whether for your own enjoyment or when sharing with friends and relatives. This edition of Shore Stewards News covers licensing and harvesting regulations, shellfish safety, and steps you can take to prevent shellfish contamination on your beach.

Shellfish Harvesting: What You Should Know

Unlike many western states, most beaches around Puget Sound, Grays Harbor, and Willapa Bay are privately owned, and are not open to shellfish harvesting by the general public unless they have permission from the beach owner or lessee. Private tideland owners, as well as members of their immediate family, are allowed to exceed daily harvesting limits for clams, mussels, and oysters, as long as the shellfish are for personal use. If the amount gathered on private beaches exceeds daily personal limits and are presumed to be for commercial purposes, a shellfish certification is required from the Department of Health.

Some public beaches in the Puget Sound region allow shellfish harvesting, though some of those beaches may close on occasion if the location has been overharvested. You can find many of those public clam and oyster beaches by checking this Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife website: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/beaches/> Beaches can be searched by county, beach map area, marine area, or distance from your zip code. In searching the list for your county, you may find a large percentage are Department of Natural Resources (DNR) land, and only accessible by boat. Even with a boat, these may be difficult to locate. If you click on the name of any public access location on the list, you'll see a map and details of the beach. In many instances, there is no road access or parking at these locations, and every effort should be made to avoid trespassing across private land

or parking on private roads. It's always safest to harvest at State, County, or municipal beaches where shellfishing is allowed.

Shellfish Licensing

Before you head out to clam, crab, fish, or collect seaweed for personal consumption, you must have the correct license with the appropriate catch cards. These are available at your local authorized license sales location, or directly from Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife: fishhunt.dfw.wa.gov/ There are different annual licenses for freshwater and saltwater fishing, shellfish/seaweed (which includes crab), combination fishing and shellfish, and razor clams. Be sure to also obtain your free copy of the "Fishing in Washington Sport Fishing Rules" pamphlet where you buy your license, or find it online.

Anyone 15 years of age or over needs an annual license to harvest shellfish, such as clams and oysters, unless you are harvesting from your own private beach. You can be fined if you harvest shellfish over the allowable limit, or under the legal minimum size. You can purchase an inexpensive plastic gauge at most sporting goods stores to measure your clams, shrimp and crabs.



Using a plastic clam gauge / crab caliper. The clam is legal to keep if it is too large to be passed through the hole.

Photos by Scott Chase

Digging for Dinner

Once you have checked the regulations, purchased a license, bought your equipment (gauge, shovel for digging and 5-gallon bucket or other container for your shellfish), and made sure that there are no closures on your beach, you are ready go! Check the tide tables online, in newspapers, or in tide booklets, and plan to dig when the tide is low enough to access the beach. Only dig on your own beach or a beach open for public shellfish gathering. Dig carefully and try not to break or crush any shells with your shovel. Measure your catch to be sure it is legal. If any clams you dig are under the legal size, replace them in the harvest hole with the neck upwards, and cover them shallowly. When finished, fill in all your holes to protect shellfish and people. Wash your catch with clean salt water, cool your shellfish to keep them safe and fresh, and enjoy them using your favorite recipes!

SHELLFISH HARVESTING CHECKLIST:

- Check for closures just before you leave by calling the 24-hour Shellfish Safety Hotline at 1-800-562-5632 or www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Shellfish
- Harvest shellfish as soon as possible with the receding (outgoing) tide.
- Don't harvest shellfish that have been exposed to the sun for more than one hour (less in really hot weather).
- Keep shellfish cold after harvesting.



To see a ten-minute video showing Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife experts digging clams and sharing their expertise (and recipes!), go to <http://shorestewards.cw.wsu.edu/shore-stewards-tv/> and click on “Recreational Shellfish Harvesting” at the bottom of the page. (Photo above from that video.)

Identifying Bivalve Shellfish

Detailing the different species of shellfish you can harvest in Washington State, along with photos and harvesting rules, would take several pages. Our state provides some great website information on all you need to know about identifying and harvesting shellfish. For a printable pdf Bivalve Shellfish Identification Guide, go to <http://www.doh.wa.gov/Portals/1/Documents/Pubs/332-087.pdf>

There are great descriptions and photos of local shellfish you may harvest available on the WDFW and WDOH websites.



This link will take you to the WDFW website on clams. The links on the left side of this page lists each type of shellfish found in Washington, along with full details: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/clams/>

WDOH also has some great photos of local shellfish, along with short descriptions: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Shellfish/RecreationalShellfish/IlnessPrevention/Identification>

Statewide Harvesting Rules:

http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/statewide_rules.html

Shellfish Rule Change Hotline: 1-866-880-5431

Puget Sound Clam and Oyster FAQ:

http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/ps_clam_oyster_faqs.html

Oyster facts: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/oysters/facts.html>

Shucking oysters on beach (required):

http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/oysters/shuck_on_beach.html

How to shuck (open) oysters:

http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/oysters/how_to_shuck.html



Shellfish Safety

Before you head to the beach to dig for shellfish, ALWAYS check to see if a beach is approved and open for recreational harvest. Check for closures just before you leave by calling the 24-hour Shellfish Safety Hotline at 1-800-562-5632 or check the State of Washington Health Department's Shellfish Safety website at www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Shellfish

The Washington State Department of Health (WDOH) classifies recreational shellfish harvest beaches as to whether they are safe for gathering shellfish. They can be closed to harvest for a number of reasons, including pollution, harmful algal blooms, or biotoxins in the shellfish. The classifications are open, conditionally open, emergency closure, closed, and unclassified. Note that open classifications don't always mean you can harvest. The Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) sets limits and harvest seasons to prevent overharvesting. Check WDFW's website to make sure you can legally harvest at the location you plan to harvest. Because harvest limits, seasons, and even shellfish consumption safety depends on the type of shellfish you harvest, knowing how to identify

Protecting Your Beach from Contamination

Waste from humans, pets, livestock, and wildlife can make its way into the water and contaminate it with harmful bacteria and other pathogens. Shellfish such as clams, oysters, and mussels filter large amounts of water daily and help clean the water. A single oyster can filter up to 50 gallons of water per day. If the water is contaminated the shellfish will take it in and likely concentrate the contaminants. **By taking the following steps, you can protect your beach and your family from land based contamination:**

- Knowing where your septic system is located and following the maintenance and pumping recommendations as required in your county.
- Bagging your pet's waste and putting it into the garbage.
- Managing your manure if you have livestock or horses.
- Minimizing the amount of pesticides and fertilizers you use.
- Planting trees, shrubs, flowers, and groundcovers to provide some filtration for stormwater runoff before it reaches your beach.
- Hundreds of shoreline landowners around Puget Sound grow their own clams, oysters, and geoducks on their beaches, or mussels from their docks. Seed and equipment are sold by commercial shellfish growers and other organizations in our region a few times each year. Do not buy shellfish seed off the internet, and never buy shellfish at the grocery store to transplant on your beach. These practices are prohibited by both federal and state regulations. WDFW regulates the movement of shellfish to protect Washington waters from the spread of diseases and dangerous non-native pests like the Japanese Oyster Drill and the European Green Crab.
- When purchasing seed, make sure it comes from a pest and disease-free area and is unrestricted for planting in all areas of our state. WDFW guidelines for importing and transferring shellfish in Washington State, can be found on the WDFW website. Other resources for purchasing and planting seed include the Pacific Shellfish Institute, Washington Sea Grant, and Taylor Shellfish Farms.



Olympia oysters in Washington. Photo courtesy of NOAA.

Other Sources Regarding Shellfish Health

Washington State Department of Health (DOH) Biotoin Information:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/CommunityandEnvironment/Shellfish/RecreationalShellfish/Illnesses/Biotoxins>

Emergency Closures Due to Biotoxins and Vibrio:

<https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/eh/portal/odw/si/BiotoinBulletin.aspx>

Clickable Maps of recreational beaches closed due to pollution or biotoxins:

<https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/eh/maps/biotoin/biotoin.html>

24-hour PSP Hotline, 1-800-562-5632

Find your local health department to check for closures, listed by County:

<https://fortress.wa.gov/doh/eh/maps/biotoin/countybeachlist.html>



If you have comments or questions about a story, please [contact us](#).
Thank you for reading [Shore Stewards News](#).

Shore Stewards, Washington State University, Pullman, WA
[Accessibility](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Policies](#)

WSU Extension programs and employment are available to all without discrimination. Evidence of noncompliance may be reported through your local WSU Extension office.