

Digging for Dinner

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3 June 1998

This article originally appeared in the Wall Street Journal
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Brinnon, Wash. -- As we schlepped buckets, babies and backpacks through the shin-deep mud, we laughed until our bellies ached and began to think we were crazy. Wouldn't it have been easier to buy dinner from a reputable fishmonger? Certainly. But it wouldn't have been nearly as adventurous, informative or rewarding.

My husband, two children and I were on our first family camping trip, and our main mission was to dig for and gather our dinner. The rangers at Washington's Dosewallips State Park were hosting their annual Shellfish Shindig. Started in 1994 by ranger Harry Louch, the objective was to get campers and residents out on the park's tidelands and educate them on how to properly dig for, store and handle the treasures at hand. Fortunately, the rangers have a well-equipped campus on which to teach. The park boasts more than 50 harvestable acres of tidelands teeming with Manila clams and enormous beds of Pacific oysters.

Located about 2 1/2 hours southwest of Seattle, the park sits on the Hood Canal. A 60-mile inlet of the Puget Sound, the canal is a remarkably clean body of water and one of the most productive natural oyster spawning grounds in the country. The park's tidelands sit at the base of the Dosewallips River and are an incredibly vast and fertile estuary with everything from bald eagles to millions of baby oysters. Before we actually hit the tidelands, the park's Shellfish Enforcement Officer and our mentor for the day, Erik Plunkett, described our destination as follows: "It's mud, muck, worms, life and everything else."

Intrigued, we put on our boots and hiked the 20 minutes from our tent to the tidelands. Standing at the end of the trail, we watched other campers navigate the mudflats. There was no easy way out. We teetered on. Mr. Plunkett grinned and said, "It's all part of the experience."

When we hit the tidelands, the vivacious ranger stopped to teach other clam diggers and oyster shuckers. He reached into his fannypack and handed over a 1 1/2-inch piece of PVC piping. The ring guided diggers. Any clam that slipped through the opening was too small and had to be put back.

Mr. Plunkett also pointed out the tideland's fine points and explained what we would find in the different zones. The Manila clams, which thrive in gravel and coarse sand, could be found just shortly after we entered the tidelands. Sharing his stalking secrets, Mr. Plunkett said: "On the surface, I look for signs of life. I never look for clams. I look for airholes. I look for box crabs. I look for worm holes. Those things indicate a zone where there is life." Although we were tempted to start digging right away, we bypassed the clams for the time being. The tide was at its lowest, and Mr. Plunkett wanted us to go straight for the water line. The beach's best oysters were there.

"The oysters here spend more time under water, and they expend more energy on producing muscle and meat rather than sturdy shells," the ranger said. The oysters' shells were fragile and sharp. The tips broke off easily, and the vast beds crunched even as our little three-year-old daughter walked across them. The oysters farther inland, closer to where the Manilas lived, had tougher shells. The beds were also smaller and sparsely populated.

Carefully walking over the fragile oysters, Mr. Plunkett hunted around for a unique specimen and picked up a cluster as big as a football. Turning it, he showed us the baby oysters attached to the larger shells and explained why we had to shuck our oysters on the beach and leave the shells behind. If we carted that cluster back to our campsite and shucked the oysters there, the baby oysters, called spat, would die. Mr. Plunkett also pointed out that his unruly cluster would pose a challenge to even an experienced shucker. With that, he set it down, selected a single oyster of modest size, and shucked it with ease. He then carefully put the shells back on the bed and went to help other shuckers.

Left to our own devices, we worked quickly. The tide was rolling in, and we still hadn't picked up dinner. My husband and I each gathered our 18-oyster limit but he had the unenviable task of shucking all 36 on the spot.

Next on our agenda were the Manilas. The ridged clams measure only about 1 1/2 to 2 inches in width and live about three inches below the surface. Their small size makes them suitable for simple preparations such as steaming. To get started, we chose our first spot haphazardly. We paid for it. After 30 minutes of digging shallowly with our three-pronged garden rakes, we had a total of only 25 clams. We were each entitled to a limit of 40. At another spot, chosen more attentively, we each hit our limit within five minutes.

Back at camp we put the oysters on ice and stoked up our camping stove. Working under a canopy of maples, we cranked out steamed Manilas, New Orleans-style oyster poor boys, and a steaming pot of New England clam chowder.

As we tucked into our creations, I recalled a recent visit from my sixty-something plumber, Gordon Tibbetts. A lifelong recreational shellfish harvester and fisherman, Mr. Tibbetts relayed this old Northwest saying: "When the tide is out, the table is set." Indeed, ours was.