Geoduck farming takes off as demand for clams grows in Asia

By Phuong Le
The Associated Press

MUDFLATS OF MOLLUSKS. *Pumped sea water (left photo) is used to loosen the muck while harvesting geoducks for Taylor Shellfish Farms near Harstine Island, Washington. Demand in Asia for the giant clams is prompting shellfish farmers to grow more of the marine bivalve along Washington's private tidelands. Pictured above are slices of geoduck clam served as sashimi at the Maneki Japanese restaurant in Seattle, Washington. (AP Photos/Ted S. Warren)*

HARSTINE ISLAND, Wash. — John King plunges his arm up to his shoulder into the mudflats of Puget Sound, roots around and soon pulls from the muck the world's largest burrowing clam. The mollusk squirts water from its long obscene-looking neck. King dodges the spray, already using a water hose to loosen sand and harvest the next one.

Within hours, the geoduck (pronounced gooey duck) is packed live on ice at nearby Taylor Shellfish Farms — on its way to be served raw as sashimi or added to hot-pot dishes to satisfy a growing appetite for the unique Pacific Northwest delicacy.

"It's gained this luxury status. A big driver is the growing middle class in China," said Gina Shamshak, an assistant economics professor at Goucher College, who has researched the geoduck market. She added: "They want to consume the higher-valued seafood items, and geoduck is one of them."

Last year, the U.S. exported $74 million, or about 11 million pounds, worth of live wild and farmed geoduck, mostly to China and Hong Kong. That's double the volume and value exported in 2008. An average clam weighs about two pounds and can fetch up to $100 per pound overseas.

Demand in Asia is prompting shellfish farmers to grow more of the clams along Washington's private tidelands. Several new farms have been permitted in recent years, despite challenges from opponents concerned about plastic pollution, aesthetics, and potential environmental harm.

And now, backed by new research showing mostly short-lived, localized environmental effects, the state is preparing for the first time to lease 15 acres of public tidelands for geoduck aquaculture.

The native geoduck, which comes from a Native American word meaning "dig deep," has been dug recreationally in Pacific Northwest intertidal areas for decades, and it thrives in the inland waters of Washington, Alaska, and British Columbia.

But commercial harvests of wild clams didn't begin until 1970 in Washington, after divers discovered them aplenty in Puget Sound and lawmakers established a fishery. Commercial geoduck farming followed in the mid-1990s, really taking off in the last decade with modernized growing techniques.

Today, geoduck aquaculture represents one-tenth of the global geoduck market, and Washington claims 90 percent of that share, according to Shamshak.

"There are people interested in farming geoduck. There's a demand for them. It's lucrative," said Laura Hoberecht, an aquaculture coordinator with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). NOAA is working with local and state agencies to make the shellfish permitting process more efficient without reducing the protections, she said.

Raising these unusual-looking clams isn't for the impatient, however. Growing geoducks from seed to market takes five to seven years and plenty of gear.

For Taylor Shellfish, the country's largest farmed shellfish producer, it begins at its hatchery on the Hood Canal, where wild geoducks are coaxed into spawning eggs and sperm in a water tank. Once fertilized, microscopic larvae are fed algae, which the company grows itself on site, for several weeks.

Then it's off to a floating seed nursery in south Puget Sound. Thousands of tiny clams are placed in cages and lowered below the water's surface where they'll grow there for another year or so until it's time to be planted in the mudflats.

The half-dollar-sized clams are planted several inches deep and protected for the first one or two years by a six-inch diameter PVC tube or mesh pipe inserted into the mud with several inches exposed. The pipe is covered with plastic netting or canopies to keep away birds, fish, and other predators.

"It's relatively slow and steady. A big challenge has been getting these farms permitted," said Bill Dewey, a spokesman for Taylor.

One major roadblock has been opponents who have sued in court over concerns about potential environmental harm to salmon, eelgrass, and other marine life.

"There's no limit on aquaculture. They want it all. At what point is there enough?" said Laura Hendricks, with the Coalition to Protect Puget Sound Habitat. She worries the region's tidelands are turning into industrial farms and questions the long-term, cumulative impacts of intensive farming where thousands of clams are planted with plastic gear and nets.

Several studies by University of Washington researchers found mostly localized, transient effects from geoduck farming.

"We didn't see a lot of impacts of geoduck aquaculture in the studies we performed," said P. Sean McDonald, a lecturer and research scientist at the University of Washington who co-authored several studies.

He said they found short-lived effects to some groups of animals in a few areas, mostly because nets and PVC tubes change the habitat dramatically, but the effects of harvest are mostly negligible and beaches appear to recover quickly afterward.

He noted that some unanswered questions remain, including what happens to areas farmed year after year.

Dewey said Taylor and others have adjusted practices to respond to complaints, including trying out mesh nets instead of PVC pipes and switching to quieter pumps.

Back at Taylor's farm, workers race against the narrow window of extreme low tide one recent morning, scanning for little depressions in the sand, tell-tale signs of clams burrowed below. The harvesters are sunk up to their waists, working their hose to liquefy sand around the clams below and plopping them into orange crates.

Within hours the geoducks will be air-shipped, headed to restaurants in California and banquet tables in China.

Talking Story: Simply solid, Portland

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dignify our families, is hard. So hard. It's all so unjust. It's all so paralyzing.

And then, something really right happens. A moment bringing it all together. An instance so solidly, so simply Portland. What remains of my essay is about one of those, and what we might learn from it.

At 2:45 on a Friday afternoon in mayor Charlie Hales' office, the president of the Oregon Bhutanese Community Organization (OBCO), Deo Bhandari solemnly handed Mr. Mayor a small mountain of 5-, 10-, and 20-dollar bills. Plus two ziplock baggies packed with silver. All of it donated by Bhutanese Portlanders since Nepal's April 25 monster earthquake.

Three weeks before the gathering, a series of Himalaya quakes took approximately 8,700 precious lives, injured more than 16,000, and made roughly 500,000 (almost as many as Portland's population) homeless.

At City Hall, it was a breathtaking instance of poor Portlanders giving what they have to even poorer people. For River City, it was an instance of the oceans and the histories, of the neighborhoods and the politics, that make us who and how we are.

At Portland City Hall last month, members of the community witnessed the president of the Oregon Bhutanese Community Organization (OBCO), Deo Bhandari (second from left), handing to Portland mayor Charlie Hales (right) a small mountain of 5-, 10-, and 20-dollar bills as well as two ziplock bags of coins — an instance of poor Portlanders giving what they have to even poorer people. Also pictured are OBCO past president Chhabi Koirala (left) and Pax Bennett of Mercy Corps (second from right).

Mayor Hales handed Mr. Bhandari's expression of compassion to Pax Bennett and Jared Rowell, community giving officer and South Asia programs officer of the Portland-based humanitarian relief agency Mercy Corps.

In a voice that brought it all home, OBCO past-president Chhabi Koirala quietly added: "This is our small gesture of gratitude to Nepal for sheltering us, for more than two decades, after the Kingdom of Bhutan expelled us, and neighboring India refused us." A silence followed, during which Portlanders both settled and new, rich and poor, shared a world of sorrow and common cause. Bhutanese Oregonians had delivered a New Portland narrative.

Of course, there are a thousand daily instances of this River City ethos, in our crowded schools, in our crazy streets and robust workplaces. This example's not unique. But what is rare is this reporting. Our telling and retelling. Our relaxing into a narrative as generous as the braiding of 141 cascading tributaries into rivers Willamette and Columbia, a narrative as blessed as the auspicious confluence of our two grand matriarchs, right here. Right now.

Museum's stolen bonsai tree recovered, but severely pruned

FEDERAL WAY, Wash. (AP) — A valuable bonsai tree stolen from a Federal Way museum has been recovered, but museum officials say it doesn't look the same after it was severely pruned.

The executive director of the Pacific Bonsai Museum says the thieves' pruning job undid decades of careful work to shape the 60-year-old San Jose juniper. Kathy McCabe says the tree will survive, but it will take years to restore it to the work of art it once was.

The bonsai tree, measuring about 16 inches tall, was recovered two miles from the museum. Museum officials received a tip and alerted police.

McCabe doesn't know who took it or why. She's just grateful to have it back.

The tree was snatched from a public display on May 18. It is estimated to be worth thousands of dollars.