

## *Ecological Benefits of Shellfish Aquaculture*

For several years resource managers have recognized the ecological benefits of eelgrass meadows and the excellent ecosystem services rendered by these environments. These benefits include nitrogen removal, benthic stabilization, increased sedimentation of particles and the valuable vertical structure, which provides habitat for juvenile fish and shellfish. For these reasons eelgrass meadows have been recognized as “essential fish habitat” and are widely protected by federal regulations.

In most coastal areas eelgrass is receding due to deteriorating water quality, siltation and erosion. Many municipalities have instituted reseeding and replanting programs and many have implemented or are considering implementing regulations to protect eelgrass.

There is a growing body of evidence that shellfish aquaculture provides many of the same environmental services as eelgrass. Shellfish remove nitrogen from the environment while shellfish aquaculture gear provides excellent habitat for juvenile fish and crustaceans. Shellfish feeding actually improves the water quality conditions in ways that help eelgrass populations to recover.

This pamphlet pulls together much of this evidence and makes the case that both shellfish aquaculture and eelgrass restoration have roles to play in maintaining and restoring the health of our nation’s estuaries.

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