HISTORY

500 BC: Oyster populations flourished.

1800: Harvest grounds.

1850: First Olympia oysters were shipped from Washington to feed miners in California during the Gold Rush.

1881: The Puget Sound Oyster Association formed.

1902: Non-native Pacific oysters are introduced from Japan.

1910: Washington state created Olympia oyster shell beds.

1921: Commercial cultivation and harvest of non-native Pacific oysters began.

1927: The Shelton pulp mill opened and dumped toxic waste into Puget Sound, killing off many of the nearby remaining native oyster populations.

1927 and 1990: Growing concern at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife caused them to list the native oyster as a candidate for state threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and write a stock rebuilding plan.


2012: Swinomish Indian Tribal Community began its restoration work on Olympia oysters.

Tribal Facts:

The Coast Salish people love to say that “when the tide is out, the table is set.” Indeed, the Swinomish people have depended on shellfish as a food source for the last ten thousand years. One of the many shellfish species that were vital to us were oysters. Referred to as “klok klok” in our Coast Salish Lushootseed dialect, oysters played an important role in our traditional diet and culture. Because we only harvested shellfish when they were needed, Olympia oyster populations flourished under our subsistence practices prior to the arrival of European settlers.

What are shell middens?

Shell middens (also known as shellmounds or kitchen middens) are deposits associated with current or historic shorelines that contain useful remains of past inhabitants. These middens contain thousands of discarded shells as well as animal bones, artifacts, and sometimes plants. The high alkalinity of the shell’s chemistry results in the excellent preservation of many midden materials, enabling archaeologists to study subsistence practices from pre-European contact times. Shell middens can range in size and density; one especially large midden exists in Naams, British Columbia that is 29.2 feet deep and 10,000 years old. Most middens look similar to the shellmound in the photograph to the right, which is located within traditional Swinomish harvest grounds.