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**Committee: Environment and Transportation**

**Testimony on: HB500 “Dredging on Man-O-War Shoals - Prohibition”**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing Date: February 16, 2022**

The Maryland Chapter of the Sierra Club strongly supports passing this bill, which would prohibit dredging buried oyster shells from the Man-O-War Shoals, located off the southeast shore of Baltimore County.

Man-O-War Shoals is a prized fishing location for generations of local fishermen as well as commercial fishing and crabbing businesses. Local restaurants rely on this supply of local seafood that comes from the last remaining three dimensional oyster reef in the Chesapeake Bay. Dredging the buried shell would cause substantial damage to this relic reef and its thriving ecosystem and additionally cause harm to the people who rely on the supply of fresh fish and crabs caught at this location.

Dredging and using this buried shell for substrate to start new oyster beds is only a temporary solution to the problem of getting enough substrate in the bay for oysters to grow on. According to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, dredged shell has a half-life of 3-6 years. Considering that oysters are harvested after three years of growth, this means that the dredged shell might only support another two harvests before it degrades. Thus, the utility of the shell that would be removed from this location is not worth either the habitat destruction or the monetary cost of retrieval. The Man-O-War Shoals took over 1,000 years to form. If this is depleted and used, we still need another way to grow oysters in the bay very soon thereafter. It would be best to explore those options now and keep the Man-O-War Shoals intact.

There are alternatives to using dredged oyster shell that should be explored. It has been proven that stone can be used as a substrate for the oyster spat to attach and grow upon. Alternate substrates such as porcelain, concrete, limestone, non-calcium stone, and non-oyster shells have been studied and tested for biological, structural, chemical, and economic parameters. Many have found to be viable alternatives to dredged shell, and the choice to use any one of them is site dependent. A 2020 review article notes that the finite nature of dredged shell will limit its use and reports of dredged shell being a good economic choice are outdated.<sup>1</sup> According to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the cost of using gravel in Harris Creek was estimated to be about half of the projected cost of dredging oyster shell at Man-O-War Shoals.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bioone.org/journals/journal-of-shellfish-research/volume-39/issue-1/035.039.0101/Alternative-Substrates-Used-for-Oyster-Reef-Restoration-A-Review/10.2983/035.039.0101.full>

Another alternative is to increase the oyster shell recycling programs. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation has a recycling program in place to accept shells at drop off locations. Restaurants can participate in this program, as well as individuals.<sup>2</sup> Programs such as this one could be expanded, and more restaurants encouraged to participate. As oyster shells are valuable, we should be recovering and recycling them. Potentially this program could be expanded to include non-oyster shells as well, thus increasing the volume of shells collected. Recycling shells benefits the environment and contributes to Maryland's landfill diversion goals.

Another process to examine is to increase recovery of shells from shucking houses. When oysters are harvested, they are generally sent to Virginia for processing. Virginia reclaims and uses the shell. Options and incentives could be put in place that might either return some of the shells to Maryland or process the oysters in state and then keep and use the shells in Maryland.

Solutions to this issue are needed for the health of the bay and the oyster industry. Dredging Man-O-War Shoals is not the answer. We ask for a favorable report.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbf.org/how-we-save-the-bay/programs-initiatives/maryland/oyster-restoration/save-oyster-shells.html>