



**NOAA
FISHERIES**

Oysters in Alaska

**Grades K-2 Lessons on Pacific Oysters
(*Magallana gigas*) and Oyster Mariculture in
Southeast Alaska**



About

The Project

Mariculture (the farming of shellfish and seaweed in the ocean) is a rapidly growing industry in Alaska, with farmed Pacific oysters (*Magallana gigas*) currently significantly contributing to this industry's profit. However, there are no wild oysters in Alaska and the high-latitude estuarine environment of southeast Alaska differs greatly from many other areas in the country where oysters are currently farmed. Therefore, it is important to determine environmental factors that influence oyster health to optimize growing conditions at existing oyster farms and to aid in site selection for future farms as the industry grows. Another challenge associated with farmed oysters is harmful algal blooms (HABs), with paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) from *Alexandrium spp.* dinoflagellates being of particular concern for public health in the region. Determining which factors contribute most strongly to the health of farmed oysters, as well as to toxin levels in oyster tissue, is critical in allowing oyster mariculture to expand in a safe and profitable way in southeast Alaska.

To address these questions and challenges, scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) collaborate with a southeast Alaska oyster farm to monitor environmental conditions, phytoplankton community composition, indicators of oyster health, and PSP toxin levels in oyster tissue and the water column. More information about this project and our findings is available at https://afscmariculture.github.io/oyster_report/.

The Lessons

The following lessons are divided into three modules: Oyster Anatomy, Oysters in the Environment, and Alaska Mariculture. [Ocean Literacy Principles](#) (OLP) and [Next Generation Science Standards](#) (NGSS) addressed in each module are available at the end of the module. These lessons have been tailored to grades K-2, but additional grade levels are available.

Who We Are

These lessons were developed by Juliana Cornett, Alaska Sea Grant State Fellow at NOAA AFSC, Dr. Jordan Hollarsmith, Mariculture and Macroalgae Lead Research Biologist at NOAA AFSC, and Stori Oates, Communications and Education Coordinator at NOAA AFSC.

Table of Contents

About	2
The Project	2
The Lessons	2
Who We Are	2
Table of Contents	3
Module 1: Oyster Anatomy	5
Pre-Activity Questions	6
Oyster Dissection	7
External Anatomy Worksheet	8
Internal Anatomy Worksheet	9
Anatomy Coloring Page	10
Reflection Questions	11
Education Standards	11
Ocean Literacy Principles	11
Next Generation Science Standards	11
Module 2: Oysters in the Environment	12
Pre-Activity Questions	13
Phytoplankton & Filter Feeding	14
Phytoplankton Overview	14
Phytoplankton Drawing Activity	14
Filter Feeding Activity	16
Dealing with Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs)	17
Reflection Questions	17
Education Standards	18

Next Generation Science Standards	18
Module 3: Alaska Mariculture	19
Pre-Activity Questions	21
Oyster Mariculture Operations	21
From Hatchery to Farm	21
Oyster Life Cycle: Coloring Page	22
From Farm to Harvest	23
Site Suitability	23
Field Trip	24
Reflection Questions	24
Education Standards	25
Ocean Literacy Principles	25
Acknowledgments	26

Module 1: Oyster Anatomy

Summary: Students will make observations about the external and internal anatomy of oysters while observing a dissection.

Objectives:

- Draw the external and internal anatomy of an oyster
- Make observations during the dissection
- Participate in pre-activity questions and reflection questions

Materials Needed:

- Printed external and internal anatomy drawing and observation sheets
- Pencils & colored pencils
- Oysters
- Oyster shucking knife
- Paper plates
- Magnifying glass

Background Information:

Oysters are bivalve mollusks found in coastal waters around the world. Oysters have two, hard external shells made from calcium carbonate to protect their soft bodies inside the shell from predators. Oysters are selective filter feeders that feed on phytoplankton, and they have a digestive system to process these phytoplankton. Oysters also have a small heart and an open circulatory system; however, they lack a central nervous system.

A number of species of oyster are harvested or cultivated for either food or pearls. The Pacific oyster, *Magallana gigas*, is native to the Pacific coast of Asia, but has been introduced to other parts of the world. It is often grown in mariculture settings - including at oyster farms in Alaska!



Pacific oyster, *Magallana gigas*

Key Words:

- Mollusk = Animals with soft unsegmented bodies usually enclosed in a calcareous shell
- Oyster = Marine bivalve mollusk.
- Shell = External, protective structure of the oyster made from calcium carbonate.
- Shucking = Opening an oyster.

Pre-Activity Questions

Ask some or all of the following pre-activity questions before beginning the activities, while allowing students to observe an unopened oyster. It may be helpful to write down students' thoughts and answers to return to during the reflection questions.

- What does an oyster look like on the outside?
- Have you seen any other animals that look similar?
- What do you think the oyster looks like on the inside?
- What body parts do you think it has inside?
- Why do you think oysters have shells?
- How might an oyster be eaten by predators?
- What part of the oyster do you think predators eat?

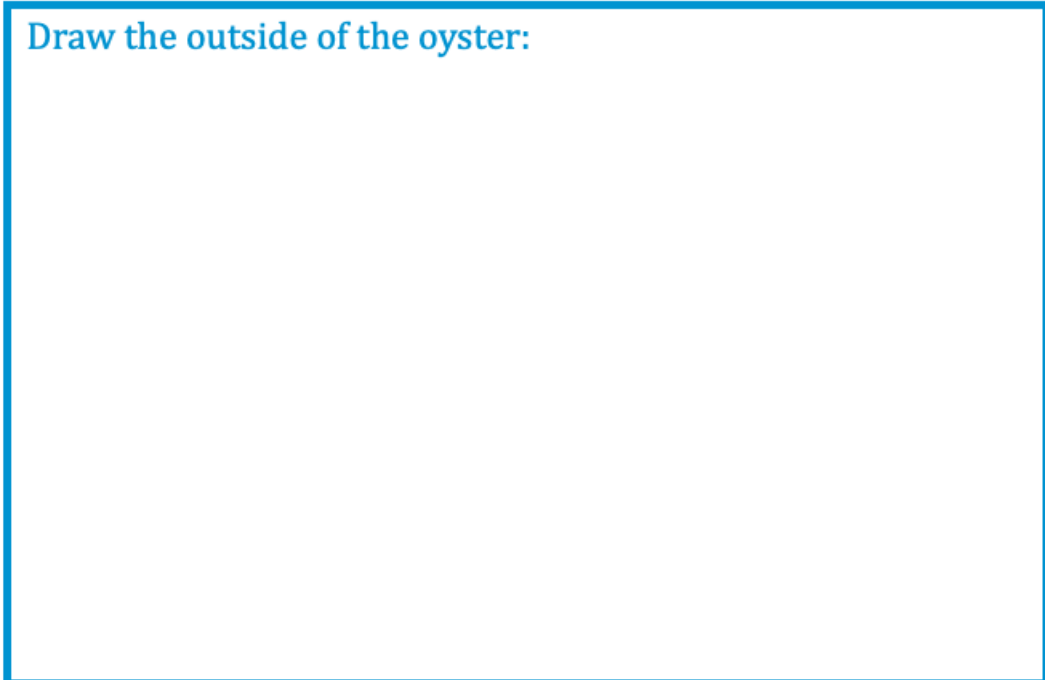
Oyster Dissection

1. Allow students to observe unopened oysters. Then, give them time to draw the external anatomy of an oyster and write down observations on the external anatomy sheet.
2. Let students observe you shucking an oyster.
3. Hand shucked oysters out to students on a paper plate with a magnifying glass.
4. Give students time to observe and draw the internal anatomy of an oyster, as well as writing down any observations, on the internal anatomy sheet.
5. An optional external and internal anatomy coloring page is also available.
6. Once complete, proceed to the reflection questions.

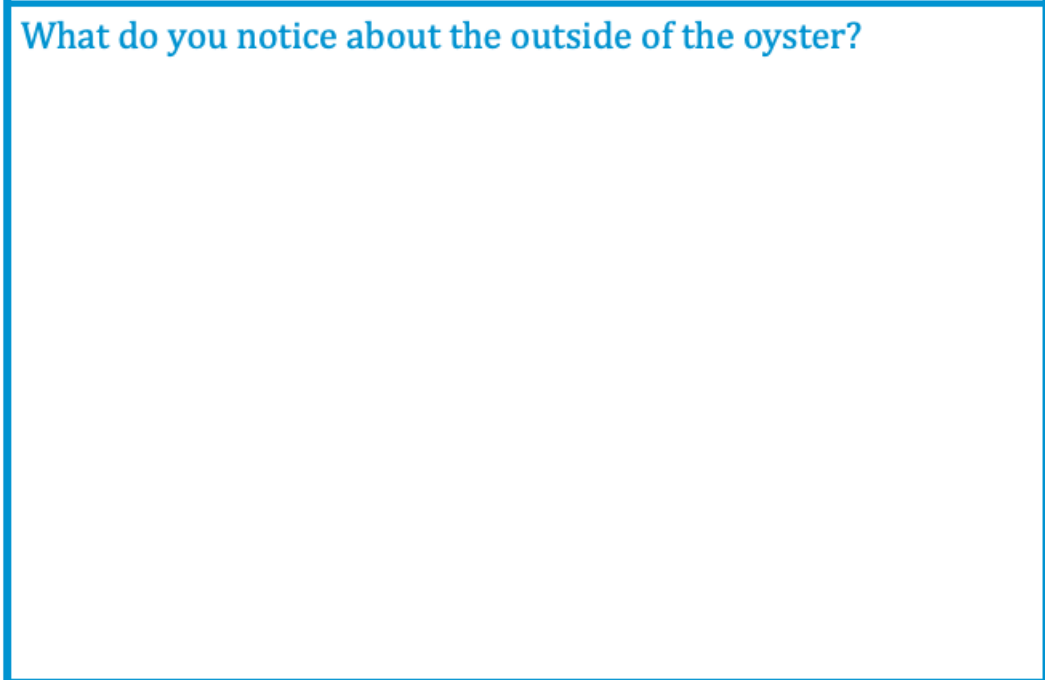
External Anatomy Worksheet

Name: _____

Draw the outside of the oyster:



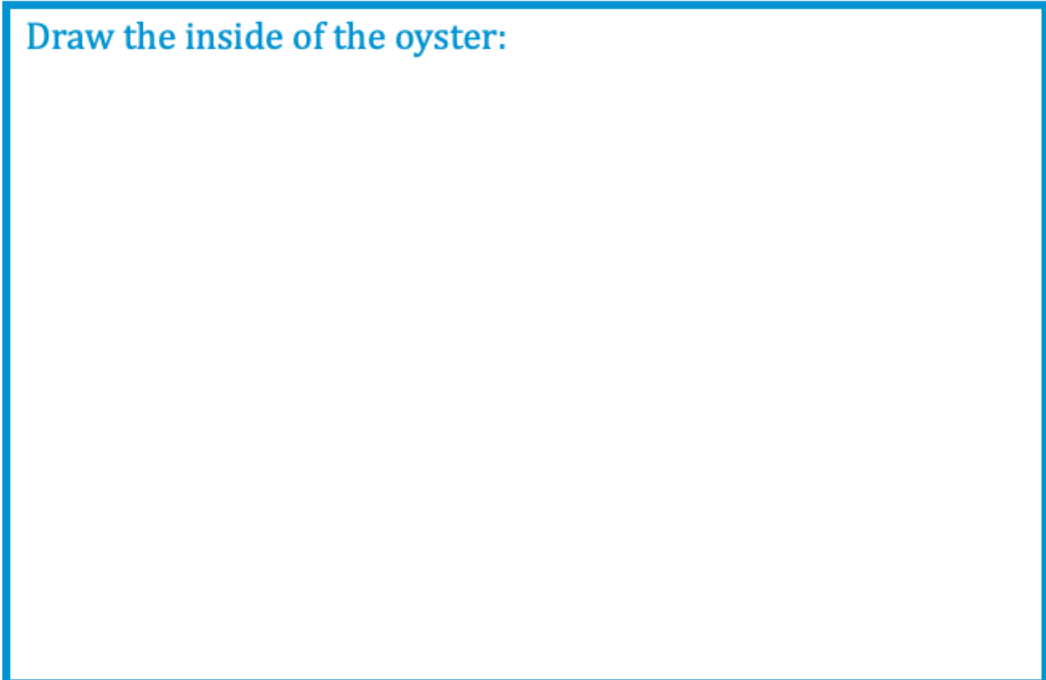
What do you notice about the outside of the oyster?



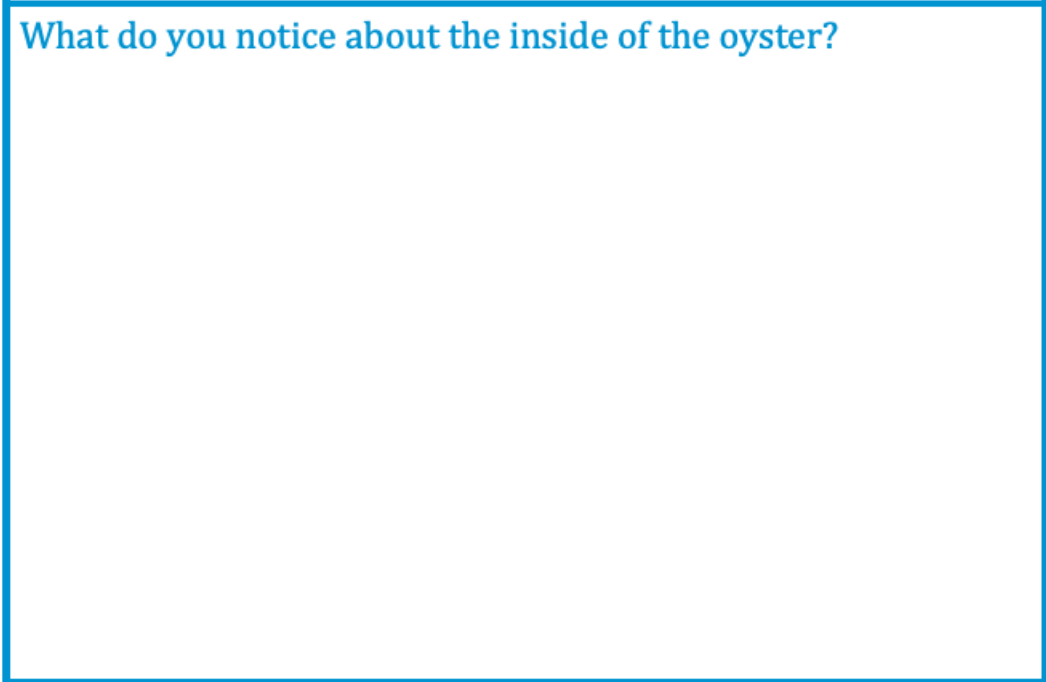
Internal Anatomy Worksheet

Name: _____

Draw the inside of the oyster:

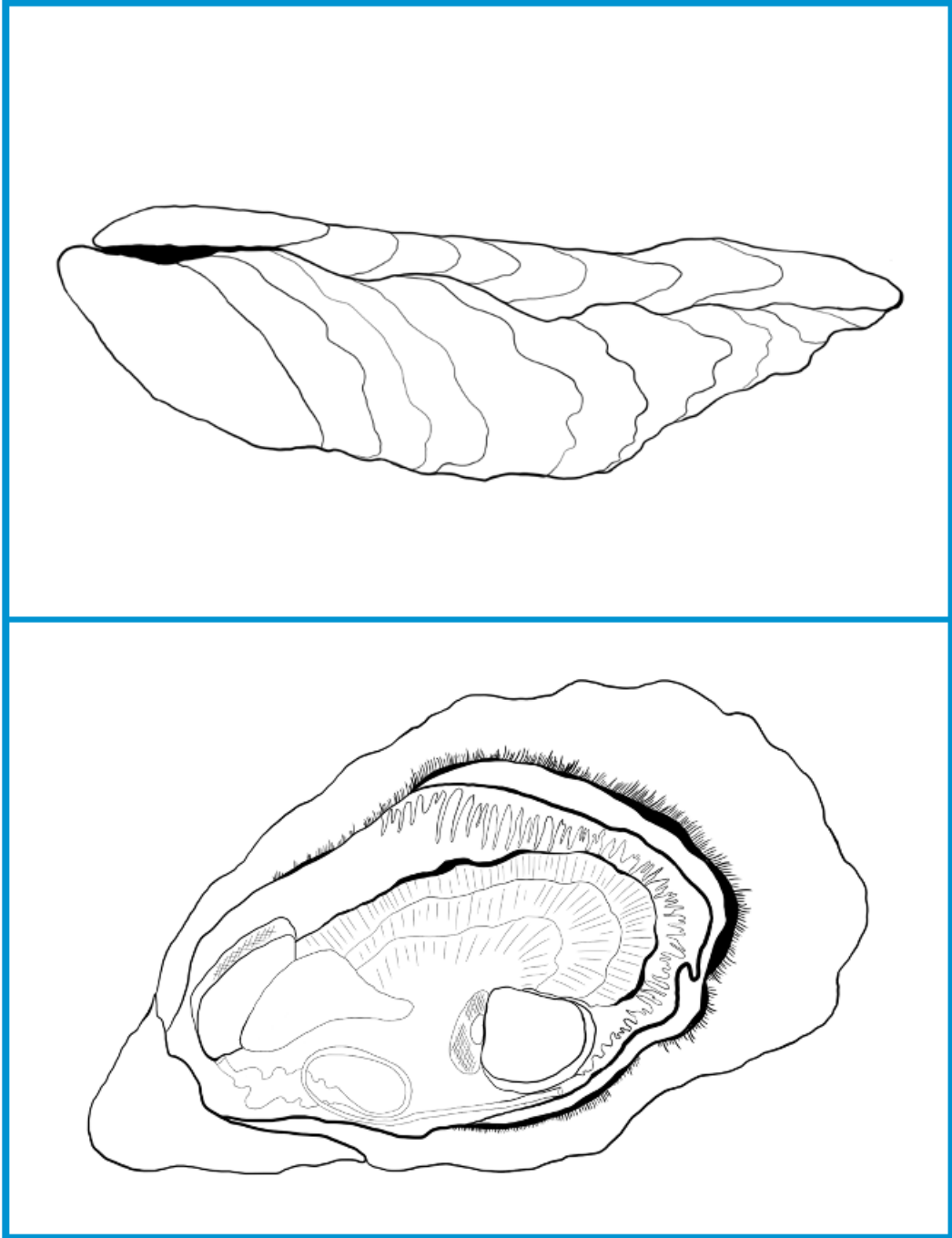


What do you notice about the inside of the oyster?



Anatomy Coloring Page

Name: _____



Reflection Questions

Ask some or all of the following reflection questions after completing the activities. It may be helpful to return to students' thoughts and answers from the pre-activity questions.

- Did the oyster look the way that you expected it to on the inside?
 - Why or why not?
- Do you have any of the same body parts as an oyster?
 - What is similar and what is different?
- What types of animals do you think would be able to eat an oyster?
 - What tools or body parts would those animals need to be able to eat the oyster?

Education Standards

Ocean Literacy Principles

- **Grades K-2: OLP 5A.4.** Ocean organisms have a variety of different structures and behaviors that help them to survive in the ocean.

Next Generation Science Standards

- **K-LS1-1; 1-ESS1-1.** Use observations (firsthand or from media) to describe patterns in the natural world in order to answer scientific questions (Science and Engineering Practice).
- **1-ESS1-2; 2-LS4-1.** Make observations (firsthand or from media) to collect data that can be used to make comparisons (Science and Engineering Practice).
- **1-LS1.A.** All organisms have external parts. Different animals use their body parts in different ways to see, hear, grasp objects, protect themselves, move from place to place, and seek, find, and take in food, water, and air. Plants also have different parts (roots, stems, leaves, flowers, fruits) that help them survive and grow (Disciplinary Core Idea).
- **1-LS1-1; 2-LS2-2.** The shape and stability of structures of natural and designed objects are related to their function(s) (Crosscutting Concept).

Module 2: Oysters in the Environment

Summary: Students will learn about phytoplankton, how oysters feed and interact with their environment, and how oysters compare to some native shellfish in Alaska.

Objectives:

- Learn about phytoplankton
- Complete filter feeding activity
- Compare and contrast oysters to other shellfish

Materials Needed:

For Filter Feeding Activity

- Clear plastic cups
- Food coloring
- Filtering material (coffee filters/cheesecloth)
- Multiple different types of small objects (pasta, beads, etc...)
- Sticky material (tape/putty)

For Drawing Activity

- Printed phytoplankton drawing worksheet
- Pencils & colored pencils
- Photos of phytoplankton or phytoplankton guides (if available)

Background Information:

Oysters are sessile organisms, meaning that they stay attached in one place (such as a rock on the seafloor), and do not move around their habitat. Since they are unable to move around, they cannot chase after prey. Instead, oysters filter feed - meaning they filter out particles suspended in the water column that drift by them. In particular, the particles they like to eat are phytoplankton, microscopic marine algae that make up the base of the marine food web. However, oysters take up more than just algae when they feed, so they have mechanisms for dealing with things that they don't want to eat.

Key Words:

- Filter Feeder = An aquatic organism that feeds by filtering out particles suspended in the water column.
- Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) = An algal bloom that negatively impacts other organisms, often via the production of harmful toxins.
- Macroalgae = Macroscopic, multicellular, marine algae - also called “seaweed.”
- Microalgae = Microscopic, marine algae (may be unicellular or multicellular) - also called “phytoplankton.”
- Phytoplankton = Autotrophic plankton that form the base of the marine food web.
- Pseudofeces = A specialized method of expulsion used by filter-feeding mollusks to get rid of non-food particles.
- Toxin = A naturally occurring organic poison produced by metabolic activities of living cells or organisms.

Pre-Activity Questions

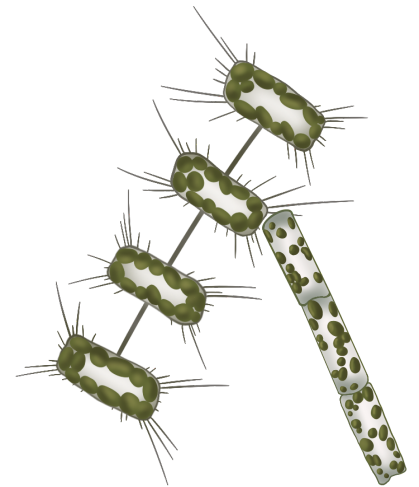
- Have you ever found seaweed at the beach?
 - If so, what did you notice about it?
- Have you ever heard of phytoplankton?
 - If so, what are they?
- What do you think oysters eat?
- How do you think oysters eat?

Phytoplankton & Filter Feeding

Phytoplankton Overview

Algae comes in all sizes, from tiny microalgae (also known as phytoplankton) that can't be seen with the naked eye up to big macroalgae (also known as seaweeds) that can grow over 50 meters long! Seaweeds are multicellular, while phytoplankton may be multicellular or unicellular. Both seaweeds and phytoplankton use nutrients and sunlight to photosynthesize.

While phytoplankton are extremely important, serving as the base of the marine food web (and producing around half of the world's oxygen!), some species of phytoplankton can be harmful to the animals that eat them and to other animals up the food chain (including humans). When a large number of these harmful species are present in the water, it is known as a Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB), which can make marine animals and people very sick. As such, all shellfish farmers in Alaska are required to send their shellfish to the state testing labs to test for toxin levels before they are able to sell their shellfish for people to eat.



Thalassiosira sp. & Leptocylindrus sp. diatoms


Phytoplankton Drawing Activity

After discussing key characteristics of phytoplankton, as well as the difference between phytoplankton and seaweed, students will draw a type of phytoplankton and a type of seaweed in the spaces on the sheet on the following page. It helps to have phytoplankton and seaweed photos or guides available to students, if possible (or fresh samples if you are near the ocean!). Some phytoplankton photos are also available at

https://afscmariculture.github.io/oyster_report/content/phyto_photos.html.

Name: _____

Draw a phytoplankton:



Draw a seaweed:

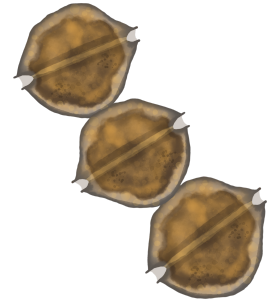


Filter Feeding Activity

1. Mix food coloring and small objects into water in one plastic cup (designate some objects as food or algae that oysters prefer to eat and other objects as non-food and/or algae that oysters prefer **not** to eat)
2. Set filter material in other plastic cup and pour water through
3. Note that the water is less colorful after going through filter (oysters can remove some excess nutrients and other pollutants from water, leading to cleaner water)
4. Note that all of the objects are stuck in the filter (both the “good” algae and the non-food or “bad” algae)
5. Explain that oysters can preferentially feed to an extent by covering things they don’t like in mucus and expelling as “pseudo-feces”
6. Have students use tape or putty to pick up non-food items or “bad” algae out of filter and discard
7. Explain that items remaining in filter are what the oyster will digest

Dealing with Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs)

Sometimes oysters end up consuming algae that are bad for them (or bad for other animals or people that then eat the oysters). Out of the Harmful Algal Bloom (HAB) species here in Alaska, we are most concerned about dinoflagellates in the genus *Alexandrium*, which produce saxitoxins that can cause Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP).



Alexandrium sp. dinoflagellate

However, the amount of HAB phytoplankton in the water is not necessarily directly related to the amount of toxins in shellfish tissue because oysters and other shellfish have some different ways for dealing with HAB species.

For example, oysters are able to preferentially feed to an extent - by either closing their shells to prevent filter feeding or “spitting out” algae that they don’t want to eat as mucus-coated pseudo-feces. Some shellfish are even able to use toxins to their advantage! Butter clams, one of the clam species found in Alaska, are able to sequester saxitoxin from consumed algae in their siphons as a chemical defense against fish that attempt to eat their siphons.

Reflection Questions

Ask some or all of the following reflection questions after completing the activities above.

- How did the water change after going through the filter?
 - How do you think oysters might change the water in the ocean?

- Do you think oysters impact the other animals that live in the ocean?
 - If so, how? (For example, a positive impact could be habitat provisioning - other animals, such as mussels, living on top of oysters. Other oyster species, like the Eastern oyster, also form oyster reefs. A negative impact could be competition for space or food with other species.)

- Have you ever found shellfish at the beach?
 - If so, did they look similar to or different from oysters?

- Pacific oysters are not native to Alaska. What are some similarities and differences between Pacific oysters and some of the native shellfish found in Alaska? (Show photos of, or shells from, native shellfish, if possible, as well as the Alaska Mariculture poster at the beginning of Module 3, which shows a number of native shellfish)

Education Standards

Next Generation Science Standards

- **K-LS1.C.** All animals need food in order to live and grow. They obtain their food from plants or from other animals. Plants need water and light to live and grow (Disciplinary Core Idea).
- **K-ESS2.E.** Plants and animals can change their environment (Disciplinary Core Idea).

Module 3: Alaska Mariculture



ALASKA MARICULTURE SPECIES

- 1. Bull kelp, *Nereocystis luetkeana*; 2. Ribbon kelp, *Alaria marginata*;
- 3. Sugar kelp, *Laminaria saccharina*; 4. Red sea cucumber, *Apostichopus californicus*;
- 5. Pacific geoduck, *Panopea generosa*; 6. Pacific oyster, *Magallana gigas*;
- 7. Blue mussel, *Mytilus edulis*; 8. Littleneck clam, *Leukoma staminea*;
- 9. Red king crab, *Paralithodes camtschaticus*; 10. Pinto abalone, *Haliotis kamtschatkana*

Summary: Students will learn about how an oyster farm works and take a field trip to a local oyster farm.

Objectives:

- Learn about how an oyster farm works
- Consider what makes something a good habitat for oysters

Materials Needed:

For Activity

- Beads of three different sizes
- Colander/strainer with large holes/mesh bag with large holes
- Strainer with small holes/coffee filter/mesh bag with small holes
- Paper plates
- Ruler

For Field Trip

- Thermometer
- Refractometer
- Plankton net tow
- Microscope
- Microscope slides and cover slips
- Disposable transfer pipet

Background Information:

Aquaculture is the culturing of aquatic species, while mariculture is the culturing of marine species in particular. In Alaska, mariculture only includes the culturing of seaweed and shellfish, as the culturing of marine finfish is not permitted. However, mariculture does include finfish in some other parts of the country and world. Although some forms of aquaculture and mariculture have been practiced for thousands of years, large-scale commercial mariculture is a fairly new industry - with exciting potential for growth in Alaska!

Key Words:

- Aquaculture = Culturing aquatic species.
- Hatchery = A place where the hatching of eggs (such as oyster eggs) is artificially controlled for commercial purposes.
- Larvae = Oysters that have hatched from eggs, but have not yet settled and reached the “spat” life stage.
- Mariculture = Culturing marine species. In Alaska, mariculture only includes the culturing of seaweed and shellfish, as the culturing of marine finfish is not permitted.

Pre-Activity Questions

Before beginning the activities, assess what students already know about mariculture in Alaska by asking some or all of the following pre-activity questions. It may be helpful to write down students’ thoughts and answers prior to the activities, and return to them during the reflection questions.

- Have you ever heard of aquaculture or mariculture?
 - If so, what are they?
- Do you know of any mariculture species that are farmed in Alaska?
- Do you like to eat seafood?
 - If so, what types of seafood have you eaten?

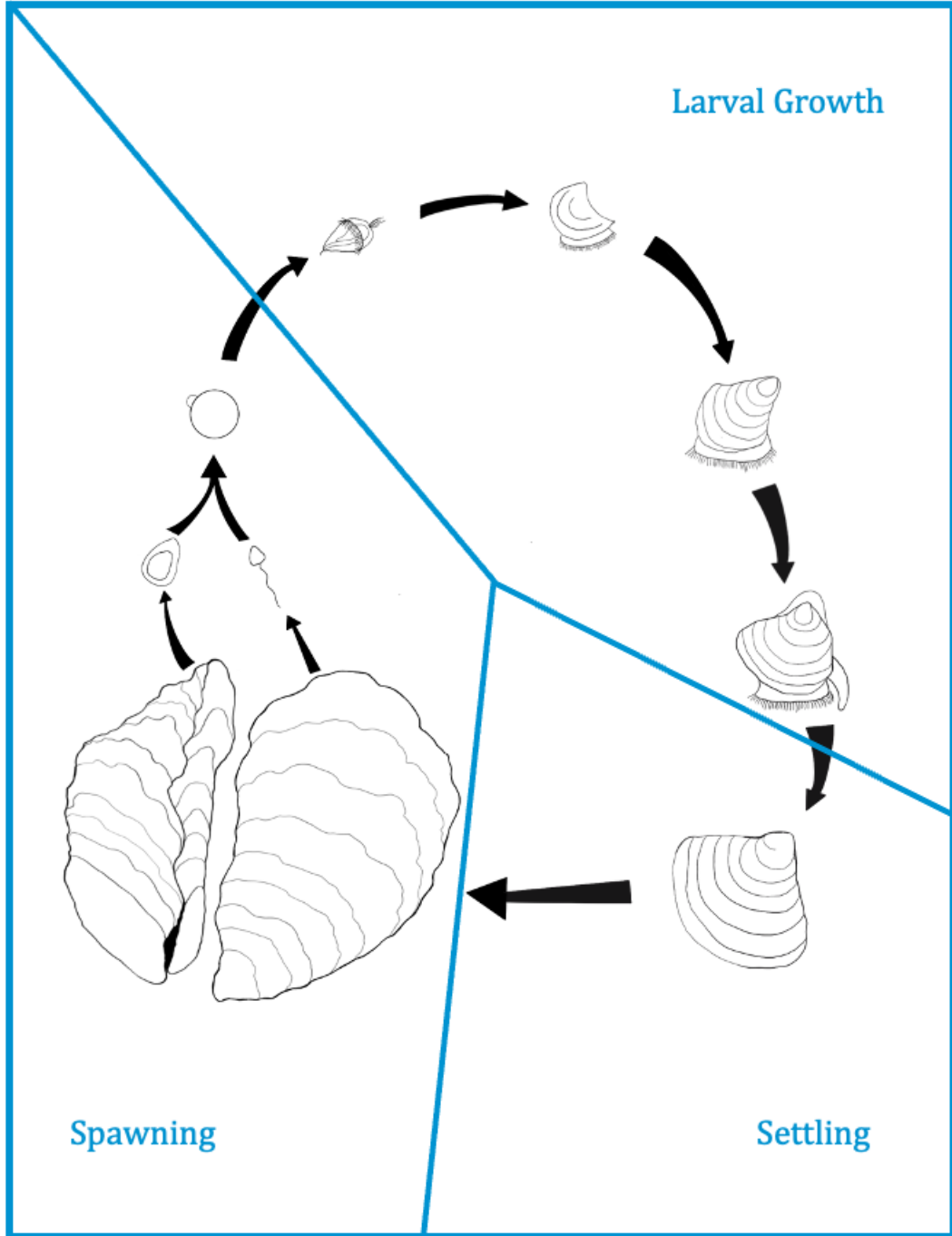
Oyster Mariculture Operations

From Hatchery to Farm

Farmed oysters do not naturally reproduce here in Alaska because the water temperature is too cold, and there are no wild oysters in Alaska either. Instead, oyster farmers in Alaska receive their oysters as “seed” (oyster spat that has reached a certain size) from hatcheries, which then grow to mature oysters on the farm. Have students color in the oyster life cycle coloring page on the following page.

Oyster Life Cycle: Coloring Page

Name: _____



From Farm to Harvest

1. Mix together beads of all different sizes in a bowl
2. Have students sort out the smallest beads into the container with the smallest mesh (fine mesh bag, coffee filter), and explain that these are the juvenile oysters that still need to grow
3. Medium and large size beads should remain in the bowl. Transfer these medium and large beads to container with larger mesh (strainer/bag with larger mesh)
4. Now, have students “harvest” out of this container
5. Set harvest size as a measurement larger than medium bead and smaller than the large bead
6. Have students measure beads with the ruler and put large beads onto the plate (“harvest”) and medium beads back into the container (“grow-out bag”)

Site Suitability

Determining where to put oyster farms, as well as other mariculture operations, involves careful consideration to maximize profit for the farm and minimize any negative impacts to the environment, other marine species, or other people who may use the area. This makes it important to determine what characteristics contribute to a good farm site, and to determine how farms may impact the area around them.

Field Trip

For schools local to the Juneau area, students will take a field trip to Bridget Cove, where they are able to observe a commercial oyster farm from shore.

1. Give students time to observe the farm from shore
2. Explain the layout of the farm: space for tumbling and washing oysters and sorting harvest on the dock, stacks of oysters on the far side of the dock, bags clipped to the buoy lines...
3. Allow time for discussion of what the students observe and any questions they may have
4. Now, take a plankton net tow and save the water sample in the bottle attached to the net
5. Using the thermometer and refractometer, measure the air temperature, and water temperature and salinity of the water sample
6. Finally, place a few drops of the water sample on a microscope slide, attach the cover slip, and have students find and observe phytoplankton in the water sample

Reflection Questions

Ask some or all of the following reflection questions after completing the activities above.

- What do you think makes a habitat a good place for oysters to live?
- How does the weather here change throughout the year?
- Do you change what you wear throughout the year?

- Do you change what you eat throughout the year?
- Do you think the conditions we measured (temperature and salinity) change a lot throughout the year?
 - If so, how do you think this might impact the oysters?
- Do you think the food that oysters can eat changes throughout the year?

Education Standards

Ocean Literacy Principles

- **Grades K-2: OLP 6A.2.** The ocean provides much of the food we eat.
- **Grades K-2: OLP 6A.4.** The ocean is a place where people work.

Acknowledgments

Portions of this curriculum were adapted from the NOAA [“Oysters in the Chesapeake Bay”](#) curriculum, the Billion Oyster Project [“Ecosystem Engineers: How Oysters Help Sustain Our Environment”](#) curriculum, and the Maryland Sea Grant [“Eastern Oyster Education”](#) curriculum.