Assessing resistance to recovery in oyster populations – inferences from inadequate monitoring programs

Cognitive dissonance

*Introduction* - Eastern oyster populations in the northern Gulf of Mexico are depressed from historic levels for reasons that are poorly understood. Since 2010, the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas have all declared state or federal level oyster fishery disasters citing reasons including prolonged drought, intense rain events, or freshwater releases from water management structures (refs) and Florida has engaged in litigation at the US Supreme Court level over oyster population collapse in Apalachicola Bay (ref). Several of these states have implemented fishery closures in response to depressed status of oyster stocks (i.e., Mobile Bay in Alabama, Apalachicola in Florida) but only one of these stocks (Mobile Bay) has reopened to harvest with Apalachicola scheduled to re-open in 2025. Oyster populations in the Gulf of Mexico were also damaged by the sinking of the *Deepwater Horizon* and subsequent oil spill (Deepwater Horizon Natural Resources Damage Assessment Trustees, 2016) which created substantial funding opportunities (more than $199M US) for oyster restoration in the Gulf of Mexico exceeding the annual value of oyster landings (Pine et al. 2022).

Many proposed, ongoing, recent, and historical oyster restoration efforts focus on the addition of various materials for oyster spat (larvae) to settle and grow. Adding this material to substrate is an effort to promote a positive oyster shell budget (harvest removes shell stock, Pine et al. 2015). This is done by providing material from outside of the system of management interest to replace degraded (but natively created), displaced (from culling during harvest) or removed (from harvest) cultch to mimic natural oyster cultch; a complex matrix of living and dead material where oyster larvae settle and grow. These restoration efforts are an attempt to shift oyster reefs from an observed low but resilient state to a more desired productive state (Pine et al. 2022) through restoration actions.

We used opportunistic sampling from ongoing and recently completed efforts to shift oyster populations from undesired to desired states through restoration and fishery closure projects in estuaries in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Many of the large restoration programs that are currently funding these efforts are long-term (10-year) projects, but information as learning is needed over shorter time scales to inform other proposed restoration and management projects in similar systems. This is an issue of both temporal and spatial scale (Pine et al. 2022). To facilitate learning under an adaptive management framework as programmatically adopted by these funders, these restoration efforts should be assessed in-progress, and if necessary, corrective changes made to improve the likelihood of the restoration objective of shifting the oyster population from an undesired low-level, to a more desired level. This desired state can vary by location, and type of oyster bar (intertidal vs. subtidal), and management goals. But in general, the desired expectation motivating these restoration efforts are to provide and promote both ecosystem services (ref) and create opportunities for oyster harvest through fishery recovery.

*Site description* – We assessed trends in oyster populations in three estuaries in the Florida panhandle that currently have ongoing or recently completed oyster restoration projects. Pensacola Bay (F1) in northwest Florida (Santa Rosa and Escambia counties) is the fourth largest estuary in Florida with a surface area of approximately 126,000 total acres. Reported oyster landings and trips for Pensacola Bay in recent decades have suggested XYZ (F2) since the current mandatory TRIP ticket program was implemented in 1986. The East Bay (F1) arm of St. Andrew Bay, near Panama City (Okaloosa and Walton Counties) is one region of St. Andrew Bay with a total surface area of approximately XYZ acres. Reported oyster landings and trips for Easy Bay are not available, but for the counties comprising St. Andrew Bay oyster trips and landings in recent decades have ??? (F2). Apalachicola Bay is a large estuary in Franklin County which historically supported the largest oyster fishery in Florida before collapsing in fall of 2012 (Pine et al. 2015) and was closed to commercial harvest in December 2020 through December 2025.

*Management actions* – Cultch material was deposited in each bay in phases by individual state management agencies (Florida Department of Environmental Protection, DEP; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, FWC; Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, FDACS) as part of three different projects funded to the State of Florida with funds made available following the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. In Pensacola Bay approximately 20,103 cubic yards of limerock aggregate were distributed at 17 different sites at an approximate density of 228 cubic yards per acre (FDACS 2016a) during September and October 2016. In St. Andrews Bay approximately 17,000 cubic yards of crushed granite was distributed on nine different oyster reefs at a density of about 200 cubic yards per acre (FDACS 2016b) in June 2016. In Apalachicola Bay two different restoration projects with similar objectives and methodologies occurred during this time. In the first (FDEP), approximately 95,500 cubic yards of limerock aggregate was deployed as part of an FDEP project on fourteen different oyster reef sites. Average density of cultch material was 300 cubic yards per acre. The second (FWC) deployed 9600 cubic yards of shell material in sites 2-acres in size at densities of 100, 200, 300, or 400 cubic yards per acre. Across all studies the actual area and density of cultch material deployed varied due to construction challenges and storm events that occurred during the study period.

*Methods*

Landings – We summarized commercial fisheries landings data for each of the three bays from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission public database. For each bay we summed the landings and trips by county surrounding the bay, and the calculated catch-per-unit effort (CPUE) as annual landings/annual trips.

Reef construction – Reef construction methods across studies were similar and were designed to minimize costs and maximize amount of material deployed. Sites were selected for cultch placement based on local knowledge of historic or extant reef locations. Cultch material was deployed on site from barges by washing material from barge deck using high pressure hoses at a prescribed density.

Field collections – Similar methods were followed for all projects to estimate live oyster counts and mass of cultch material based on methods used in Florida since the 1980’s (FWC 2021 <https://myfwc.com/media/27745/oimmp-v2-ch11.pdf>) where divers haphazardly place ¼-m2 quadrats at selected sites and remove all oysters and cultch material to a “wrist deep” depth and place material in bags. Once bags are returned to the vessel, they are either processed on site or returned to the lab where counts of live and dead oysters, measurements of shell height, weight of cultch material, and other metrics depending on study were recorded.

Data Analyses – We followed methods for analyzing oyster count data described in Moore et al. (2020) modified based on how data were collected in the field. Briefly, we summed counts of live oysters at each restoration site and period into three size classes, spat (<26-mm shell height), sublegal (26-75-mm shell height), and legal (>76-mm shell height). For some studies, counts were totaled in this way in the field and for other studies total counts (all sizes) were converted to counts per size class by calculating the proportion of oysters within each size class from concurrent oyster shell height samples to the sample of total oysters. We then assessed the distribution the count data follow by examining the ratio between the count mean and variance at each site (variance always exceeded mean). We used generalized linear models (GLMs; Bolker et al. 2009) with a negative binomial distribution to assess how oyster counts (dependent variable) vary over period (a time variable of equal length used to combine sampling months into winter [November-April] or summer [May-October]) and we used site as a random effect (to account for correlation among samples at each site). We assumed that the total oyster counts per site would be related to the number of quadrats collected at each site, so we included the number of quadrats as an offset of effort (log link function; Zuur et al. 2009, 2013). By using effort as an offset in this way we change the model from modeling counts, to modeling a rate measured as the count/quadrat as the response variable. Because the quadrats were the same size across study, the area sampled only changed as a function of the number of quadrats. Using counts and accounting for effort, as opposed to converting the counts to CPUE based on density sampled has two main advantages in our experience (1) maintains the response as an integer allowing the use of a negative binomial distribution (which we have observed oyster count data follow; Moore et al. 2020) and (2) fitted values and confidence intervals do not contain negative values (Zuur et al. 2009). We fit models to the data that included time (period), location (as a random effect), and then used the best fitting model (informed by AIC value and visual assessments of model fit to data) to predict oyster counts by period and location using the glmm.TMB (Brooks et al. 2017) and ggeffects packages (Lüdecke 2018) in R (R Core Team 2021). For Apalachicola Bay only, we assessed whether the number of days Apalachicola River discharge (the primary source of freshwater input to Apalachicola Bay) was below 12,000 CFS (by convention) measured at the Jim Woodruff gage (USGS 02358000) influenced counts of oyster spat. The 12,000 CFS convention has different gage locations in Apalachicola River is important because at discharge levels about 12,000 CFS the adjacent floodplain becomes inundated (Fisch and Pine 2016) although the exact point of inundation may have changed over time due to river bed degradation (S. Leitman, personal communication). Regardless, we use the number of days per Period river discharge was below 12,000 as an indicator of low freshwater inputs where higher number of days in a given Period would suggest a period of time characterized by river discharge that did non inundate the floodplain and lower number of days below 12,000 would indicate a higher number of days the floodplain may have been inundated. Because Apalachicola Bay had multiple projects with different starting points and cultch materials, we summed the weight of cultch collected by divers by restoration project, site in the bay, and period. We then used a similar generalized linear model framework as the live oyster count data to assess patterns in cultch material persistence across projects in the bay. Data and all code used for analyses is available from the following Git repository ABCDEF.

*Results*

*Trends in oyster counts across Apalachicola, Pensacola, and St. Andrews Bays across reefs restored with rock cultch*

*#DEP\_all\_bays\_all\_years analyses*

The dispersion parameter using a binom2 family was 0.56 suggesting extreme overdispersion and supporting the use of a negative binomial distribution in the GLM. Based on AIC, GLM models that include Bay (Apalachicola, Pensacola, St. Andrews) and Period (Bay + Period) or an interaction term between Bay\*Period with site within the Bay as a random effect and the number of quadrats as an offset were not different (delta AIC = 0.3). Because our interest is in how counts of oyster spat change over time (as a restoration effort to shift the system from an undesired to desired state) we were most interested in the Bay + Period model. For this model, Period was not significant (beta = 0.003, SE beta = 0.05, p=0.95) suggesting across all three Bays oyster spat counts did not change significantly over time. However, the beta value is positive, and a back transformed value (*exp*0.003) suggests a change of about 1 live oyster spat per period across all Bays. Examining each Bay individually across Period suggests a significant change in Apalachicola live spat over time (beta = 1.83, SE beta = 0.47, p <0.001) and in St. Andrews Bay (beta = 3.85 SE beta = 0.90, p < 0.001) but not for Pensacola Bay (beta = 2.38, SE beta = 0.82, p = 0.11). Predicted mean live oyster spat counts (95% CI) for the last period of the time series (period 14) from a single ¼-m2 are Apalachicola = 18.5 (9.5 - 35.8), Pensacola = 25.5 (12.9 - 50.4), and St. Andrews = 134.4 (63.63 - 283.72) which are declines from the predicted values for each Bay at the beginning of the time series (Figure X, predicted with data).

Fitting the same Bay + Period model to counts of sub-legal oyster counts model results were similar with a nonsignificant change over Period in counts of live sub-legal oysters across Period (beta = -0.04, SE = 0.06, P=0.48) across all Bays. For Apalachicola Bay, counts of sub-legal oysters were also not significant (beta = 0.38, SE = 0.59, p = 0.52) but the beta coefficients were significant for Pensacola (beta = 2.41, SE = 1.05, p < 0.001) and St. Andrews bays (beta = 3.11, SE = 1.15, p < 0.001). Predicted mean live oyster sublegal counts (95% CI) for the last period of the time series (period 14) from a single ¼-m2 quadrat are Apalachicola = 2.67 (1.2 – 6.0), Pensacola = 12.8 (5.8 - 26.4), and St. Andrews = 23.2 (8.9 - 60.6) which are declines from the predicted values for all bays at the beginning of the time series (Figure X, predicted with data).

The Bay + Period model fit to counts of legal oysters were similar with a nonsignificant change over Period in counts of live sub-legal oysters across Period (beta = -0.07, SE = 0.07, P=0.31) across all Bays. For Apalachicola Bay, counts of sub-legal oysters were significant (beta = -1.37, SE = 0.61, p = 0.02) and beta coefficients for Pensacola (beta = -2.3, SE = 1.06, p = 0.06) and St. Andrews bays (beta = -0.09, SE = 1.14, p < 0.001). Predicted mean live oyster sublegal counts (95% CI) for the last period of the time series (period 14) from a single ¼-m2 are less than one legal adult oyster per quadrat for all three bays.

#ok the above is done. Just a reminder, this is based only on the DEP data so this would be all rock sites.

*A detailed analysis Apalachicola Bay oyster population response to restoration measured by counts from rock and shell cultch from multiple studies*

Analyzing available data and understanding Apalachicola oyster response to restoration actions is complicated because of variability in the design and monitoring programs used as part of ongoing restoration efforts. In Apalachicola Bay multiple restoration materials (limestone or fossil shell) have been used since 2015 and these materials have been placed in the bay at a variety of densities. Because of construction challenges, some sites may have received both limestone and fossil shell. Monitoring efforts to track oyster population response have been similar across studies, but the timing of monitoring post-construction has varied from monitoring beginning within weeks of cultch material being deposited, to monitoring not beginning for 1-2 years following cutch placement because of Covid-19 related delays in completing field efforts. Observed counts of oyster spat by research study highlight these challenges where the number of spat have ranged from 0 to more than 80000 per 1/4-m2 depending on study and period of time (Figure X) suggesting that these data are highly overdispersed, but over time oyster counts across study trend closer to zero.

We combined oyster count data from various surveys and standardized site names. We then fit GLM models to these data to describe the number of oysters of each size class over time (Period) with site as a random effect and the log of the number of quadrats as an offset. Results from this model found Period was significant (beta = -0.18, SE = 0.04, p < 0.001) suggesting that over time for each period and across study and cultch material used, and density of cultch material deployed, counts of oyster spat did not respond positively to restoration action. Predicted number of oyster spat per ¼-m2 transect (95%) in Period 14 was 18.4 (12.6-26.8) much lower than in Period 1 (Figure X). We fit the same model as above but included an additional parameter describing the number of days river discharge was below 12,000 CFS in the model. Both period and the low days term are significant in the model with the terms for low days ((beta = -0.009, SE = 0.003, p = 0.007) suggesting that for each day increase in the number of days discharge is below 12,000 CFS the number of oyster spat declines slightly (exp-0.09) by about 1 oyster spat per ¼-m2 quadrat. The same model, but a 1 period lag on the number days discharge was below 12,000 CFS, suggested that the number of low days in the prior period did not influence the number of live spat in the current period (p = 0.31).

An examination of the different projects, which were deployed in different periods and monitoring begin in different periods, does not provide clear patterns into how counts of oyster spat change over time. We fit a GLM model that included period and Project (four different projects, three using rock and 1 using shell) to the observed counts of oyster spat per quadrat. Comparisons of the performance of project in producing oyster spat are difficult because of variations in the diming of when the monitoring began on each project. As an example, for one project monitoring did not begin until nearly two years following construction, and if the response of cultch to restoration is different two years following restoration than immediately after restoration, then this would not be clear. To create a comparative framework across studies we predicted the number of oyster spat per ¼-m2 in period 14, the last year of monitoring. In this comparison three studies would have completed their construction efforts 3-5 years prior (NFWF-1, NRDA 4044, NRDA 5007) and FWC-2021 would be < 2 years since construction. If time since construction were a major influence, then the predicted values for each study in the common period should differ. For the single project that used shell cultch (NFWF-1), we predict in Period 14 about 71.2 (95% CI 24.8-204.7) live oyster spat per ¼-m2 quadrat. For the rock projects the predicted number of live oyster spat per ¼-m2 quadrat vary. For project NRDA 4044 mean predicted number of live spat =10.9 (6.0, 19.8), project NRDA 5007 mean predicted = 41.7 (23.0 – 75.9), and project FWC-2021 mean predicted = 19.06 (12.2 -29.8). An interesting result is that the most recent (existing fewest number of years) constructed reef project FWC-2021 had predicted counts between the two older constructed reef projects, all with rock substrate. Project NFWF-1, the only project which used shell as cultch, had significantly higher initial (soon after restoration) observed live oyster spat counts by a factor of more than 100 than any of the other projects. The extreme dispersion observed for this project (Figure X, observed counts) resulted in poor model fit compared to the other projects, thus the predicted live oyster spat counts in period 14 may be positively biased.

Total cultch weights were made integers by rounding to nearest whole kg. Data were then subset for each project and calculations of mean and variance by project suggested the data were overdispersed (variance > mean). We then fit similar GLM models as described for oyster count data to the cultch biomass.

and monitoring efforts. at a variety of densities. Additionall

Apalachicola has received multiple restoration projects using different materials (rock or shell) and materials at different densities

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We first tested to see if there was a response from any restoration over time by project. If so then what is unique about that project and does this benefit persist?

This section may draw in material from the short report produced earlier too.

##now go into other R code for detailed Apalachicola analyses

# Predicted counts of Sum\_spat

# Bay = Apalachicola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

-----------------------------------

3 | 26.04 | [14.97, 45.31]

5 | 24.47 | [15.93, 37.58]

6 | 23.71 | [16.16, 34.81]

7 | 22.99 | [16.10, 32.81]

10 | 20.93 | [13.99, 31.32]

14 | 18.48 | [ 9.54, 35.80]

# Bay = Pensacola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

-----------------------------------

3 | 35.95 | [19.83, 65.18]

5 | 33.78 | [20.96, 54.44]

6 | 32.74 | [21.20, 50.57]

7 | 31.74 | [21.10, 47.73]

10 | 28.90 | [18.55, 45.02]

14 | 25.51 | [12.91, 50.42]

# Bay = St. Andrews

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

------------------------------------

3 | 189.35 | [91.00, 394.03]

5 | 177.90 | [94.92, 333.44]

6 | 172.44 | [95.61, 311.02]

7 | 167.15 | [95.16, 293.59]

10 | 152.22 | [86.21, 268.76]

14 | 134.37 | [63.63, 283.72]

# Predicted counts of Sum\_sublegal

# Bay = Apalachicola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

----------------------------------

3 | 8.76 | [4.48, 17.13]

5 | 7.06 | [4.17, 11.95]

6 | 6.34 | [3.94, 10.19]

7 | 5.69 | [3.64, 8.88]

10 | 4.11 | [2.48, 6.81]

14 | 2.67 | [1.19, 5.99]

# Bay = Pensacola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

-----------------------------------

3 | 41.94 | [19.67, 89.42]

5 | 33.79 | [18.31, 62.35]

6 | 30.33 | [17.36, 52.98]

7 | 27.22 | [16.18, 45.78]

10 | 19.68 | [11.51, 33.65]

14 | 12.77 | [ 5.75, 28.36]

# Bay = St. Andrews

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

------------------------------------

3 | 76.24 | [32.13, 180.94]

5 | 61.42 | [28.89, 130.57]

6 | 55.13 | [26.91, 112.96]

7 | 49.48 | [24.69, 99.20]

10 | 35.78 | [17.27, 74.13]

14 | 23.22 | [ 8.91, 60.57]

# Bay = Apalachicola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

---------------------------------

3 | 0.55 | [0.24, 1.29]

5 | 0.48 | [0.25, 0.93]

6 | 0.44 | [0.24, 0.81]

7 | 0.41 | [0.23, 0.73]

10 | 0.33 | [0.17, 0.64]

14 | 0.25 | [0.08, 0.72]

# Bay = Pensacola

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

---------------------------------

3 | 0.23 | [0.08, 0.64]

5 | 0.20 | [0.08, 0.46]

6 | 0.18 | [0.08, 0.40]

7 | 0.17 | [0.08, 0.35]

10 | 0.14 | [0.07, 0.28]

14 | 0.10 | [0.04, 0.29]

# Bay = St. Andrews

Period | Predicted | 95% CI

---------------------------------

3 | 2.00 | [0.67, 5.99]

5 | 1.73 | [0.67, 4.49]

6 | 1.61 | [0.65, 3.98]

7 | 1.49 | [0.62, 3.61]

10 | 1.20 | [0.47, 3.05]

14 | 0.89 | [0.26, 3.10]

#ok walk through the 3 bays R code, which I think is just the DEP projects

#then go through the quadrat summary code which is just Apalach in detail with all of the projects.

This is r2 from quadrat synthesis

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated