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O Oysters

When your next [oyster](#) arrives on the half-shell, pause to consider it. It is a remnant of a vanished ecosystem and a reminder of a time when New York was oyster city. You can almost imagine the wholesale oyster barges docked along the East River and the sight of oystermen working the waters around Staten Island in the mid-19th century. Those were mostly bedded oysters — brought in from other locations and grown to size within easy reach of New York.

What is vastly harder to imagine is a more distant past when New York was surrounded by immense natural oyster reefs — the temperate-zone equivalent of tropical coral reefs. Oyster reefs were once a major ecological force in coastal waters all around the globe. But according to a recent survey published in *BioScience*, an international team of marine biologists has concluded that 85 percent of oyster reefs have been lost and that they are “functionally extinct” in much of North America, Europe and Australia.

What destroyed them was overharvesting, pollution, habitat destruction and the practice of bedding, which replaced wild, native oysters with non-native cultivated ones.

What has been lost isn’t just the oysters themselves. It’s all the beneficial effects that huge oyster reefs used to provide — filtering water, providing habitat for other species, and serving as a coastal buffer against the erosive action of waves. Even now we can witness the ecological importance of coral reefs, whose existence is threatened by ocean acidification. But none of us have ever seen the almost inconceivable extent of historic oyster reefs, and when we think of oysters now we think of them as a cultivated fishery, not an ecosystem.

Oysters are prolific, and that means there is a chance to conserve existing oyster reefs and restore depleted ones, something that is already beginning in the Chesapeake Bay, and in North Carolina, Ireland and Denmark. This will mean learning to value oysters for the benefits they bring to coastal ecosystems, not just for how they taste with lemon and some hot sauce.