Clam (quahog)

(Mercinaria campenchiensis - southern)

(Mercinaria mercinaria - northern)

Introduction

The quahog is an important food source. The so called "cherrystone clams" served in restaurants are actually immature clams of the same species. North Carolina is at the Atlantic dividing point between many northern and southern species. Our waters are cool in the winter yet warm in the summer. This allows us to have species adapted to both types of climate, thus we have both species of clam.

What do they look like?

The northern variety is marked inside with purple and has a smooth area in the center of the valves. They use their muscular foot to grip sand/mud and pull the shell along, digging up and down in the sand depending on the level of the tidal waters.

How big are they?

Clams can be 2 3/4 in.- 4 1/4 in. in size (7cm-11cm). To harvest them they must be an inch thick.

Where do they live?

They inhabit the sand and mud in bays and inlets from the mud flats to 50 feet (15m) of water.

Who eats them?

They are preyed upon by starfish, humans, snails, crabs, and gulls. In our estuaries whelks and moon snails often prey on clams.

What do they eat?

Clams have two siphons, one drawing in water with a fresh oxygen supply and planktonic food and the other expeling the waste products. The food that is caught on gills is swept to the mouth or stomach.

How do they mate?

Eggs are shed in water in mass quantities. Successfully fertilized eggs, should they survive, rapidly grow into planktonic veliger larvae that disperse by currents. The sexes are separate.

What are the young like?

Clams begin their life as males but about 50% often change to females withinn the first year. The young have sharply raised concentric ridges making young clams appear different.

How long do they live?

They can live as long as 25 years.

People Interactions

The genus name is latin for money. Algonquin Indians used the insides of the shell as wampum, or shell money. Those shells containing purple were twice as valuable as those with white. Clams are an important food species. It is important to cook them though as when they filter water for food they also accumulate bacteria and viruses in their bodies.

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Carolina Estuarine Reserve Foundation
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