Volunteers find signs of ecological recovery at Gloucester's Mill Pond

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Fri Oct 02, 2009, 12:35 PM EDT

- Gloucester -

The flat-bottomed canoe slid on top of the mudflat like a slug slithering across a leaf. Balancing his body weight in the unwieldy aluminum boat, a young volunteer shoveled a pile of marsh sludge into a bucket at his feet.

“You can't walk in this mud. You're up to your knees instantly,” said Eric Hutchins, a local biologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), as he surveyed the scene. “If there's quicksand in Cape Ann, it's here in Mill Pond.”

With the half a dozen buckets successfully filled with 300 pounds of the glutinous muck, Hutchins and a few volunteers made their way to the edge of the pond and pulled the boat and its sweating captain to shore with a rope.

Twenty yards away, another team of volunteers waited with hoses to sift through the loot, keeping an eye out for soft-shell and duck clams, snails, worms, and whatever other surprises the pond might deliver for the second annual survey of living organisms in Gloucester’s Mill Pond in Riverdale.

Conducted Sept. 23 and 24, the survey is a part of Salem Sound Coastwatch and the City of Gloucester’s efforts to restore the tidal flow of the Mill River. By counting the number of organisms alive in the benthic (mud) layer of the pond, conservationists say they can measure whether or not the pond is recovering from decades of habitat destruction and mismanagement.
“We found 25 clams yesterday,” said Hutchins of the benthic samples taken by volunteers and biologists this year. “That means there could be tens of thousands. Next year, there could be a hundred thousand. Eventually, there could be a million.” The living creatures in the mud will be food for birds and fish repopulating the pond and also represent an important seed source for the mud flats downstream, according to Hutchins, where many people conduct their own clam surveys for culinary ends.

It has only been five years since the tidal gate was permanently opened to Mill Pond, allowing the consistent influx of ocean water into the area which helped flush out hundreds of years of built up contaminants and brought in living organisms from the sea. The pond was first dammed in 1702.

In spite of the new tidal flows, a full recovery may not be possible without additional hydrologic modifications, according to Executive Director of Salem Sound Coastwatch Barbara Warren. Nonetheless, the initial results of the surveys, said Warren, are encouraging. Some specimens of soft shelled clams found by the volunteers during this year’s survey were four or five years old, evidence that the opening of the tide gate had a significant impact early on.

The survey is supported by a variety of institutions including the Massachusetts Wetlands Restoration Program, the NOAA Restoration Center/ Restore America’s Estuaries partnership, and the Massachusetts Corporate Wetlands Restoration Partnership (CWR).

Access to the pond was provided by Lois and William Bairstow of 375 Washington St., who allowed volunteers to walk through their back yard, through the six foot high reeds and across the marsh grass to the mud flats.

Over the course of two days, this year’s survey team extracted 72 buckets of mud from the pond, approximately 3,650 pounds in all. Each bucket was then dumped on top of a metal screen with a quarter of an inch mesh, where volunteers used hoses used to push the mud through, leaving behind the clams, snails, and assortment of other specimens. Another team collected the specimens and carefully photographed and recorded their size. “We really get the range,” said Susan Yochelson, outreach coordinator for Salem
Sound Coastwatch, of the people who come out to help with the effort. “Some are scientists, some are just supporters.”

“Well, some of us do this because we’re dying to get out of the office,” piped in a volunteer, Carole McCauley.

McCauley works for the National Estuary Program, a job that she said largely confines her fundraising and community organizing from behind a desk. Donning a pair of fishing bib overalls and squishing mud between her hands all day in fortuitously sunny weather is a welcome change, said McCauley.

“This is the other side of fisheries,” said Hutchins of the two-day survey. “All you ever hear about is regulation but here we are, doing rehabilitation.”