



Shannon Batte unloads bins full of oyster shells at Red Bluff Road - a wasteland rented from the Port of Houston used as a curing site in Pasadena, Texas.

Oyster shells given new life as reefs off Texas coast

On the terrace of a seafood restaurant in Houston, Texas's largest city, a few ladies are enjoying a local oyster dish: the breaded mollusks are slathered in mayonnaise and served in a sandwich. Sitting in the shade of a palm tree on a warm winter's day, the diners have no idea that behind the restaurant a woman is busy giving the shells a second life. Thanks to Shannon Batte, they will soon form part of a reef in Galveston Bay, six miles (10 kilometers) away. Out of sight, the Galveston Bay Foundation employee loads seven trash cans each weighing 175 pounds (80 kilograms) onto her trailer.

The cans are full of not just oyster shells but also water, discarded oyster forks and squeezed lemons. All year round, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, she makes the rounds of the foundation's partner restaurants. "Most people like to enjoy their oysters in any month that has an 'r' in it," said Batte. "So currently, right now, it's December, so the oyster shell collection is a little more. But due to Covid there's not quite as much shell as we've normally had in the past."

"Our customers really want to know where do our oysters come from and what do you do with those shells," said Tom Tollett, owner of Tommy's Seafood Restaurant & Oyster Bar, quoted by the foundation. It was here that the first oyster shells were collected almost 10 years ago, in March 2011. The program has grown since then to include some 10 restaurants. Displayed on menus or tables, logos and diagrams show guests

the fate of the thousands of shells collected: they will simply return to the waters where they were formed. New oysters will settle and develop on these shells.

A 'coastline of life'

Galveston Bay is home to a seafood-rich ecosystem thanks to the brackish

To rebuild the ecosystem, the shells are now dumped each spring on rocks placed at the bottom of the water. Where the current is stronger, the shells are piled into nets and erected as dams. This becomes a new habitat and by breaking the waves, also helps fight soil erosion. "This is a method that we

bulkheads." To date, the foundation has used its method to protect more than 20 miles of coastline and restored 50 acres (20 hectares) of salt marshes. It collected 54 tons of shells in 2012, 125 in 2019 and 111 in 2020, despite the coronavirus pandemic. Once submerged, the shells are also perfect shelters for crabs, shrimp and small fish that will feed larger ones and contribute to the diversity of the environment.

'Curing site'

Developing the oyster population also offers another advantage: each mollusk naturally filters up to 50 gallons (190 liters) of water per day. But before taking a dip, Batte's shells stop at what the foundation calls a "curing site" between Houston and the coast. Batte, 33, empties her garbage cans in a field, removes the oyster forks and spreads the shells on the ground.

Three months later, they will be turned over using a small backhoe, and then spend at least another three months in the fresh air. This prolonged sun treatment in one of three dedicated sites sterilizes the shells by killing bacteria and parasites. The first flies arrive without delay and soon four wild boars are licking the shells and chomping on lemons. "They are less and less scared. Sometimes they don't wait until I am gone to feast. I am careful because they can attack. Luckily I have an air horn to scare them off," she said.— AFP



Shannon Batte poses next to the pick up truck used to transport the oysters shells, in front of Tommy's Seafood Restaurant & Oyster Bar.

mixture of fresh water from rivers and salt water from the Gulf of Mexico. In 1845, when Texas became a US state, the town of Galveston already had its own oyster bar. But in September 2008, Hurricane Ike, which killed 113 people in the United States, destroyed more than half of the oysters' habitat, smothering their reefs with sediment.

adapted from a sister organization in Florida, Tampa Bay Watch. It is used across the nation, particularly on the East and Gulf coasts," said Haille Leija, who is in charge of habitat restoration at the foundation.

"It allows for the establishment of a 'living shoreline' in contrast to hardened shoreline protection structures such as



Shannon Batte loads bins full of oysters shells, behind Tommy's Seafood Restaurant & Oyster Bar in Houston, Texas. — AFP photos



Oyster shells are seen at Red Bluff Road - a wasteland rented from the Port of Houston used as a curing site in Pasadena, Texas.

Square in talks to buy Jay-Z's Tidal

Digital payments company Square has held talks to acquire Jay-Z's Tidal music streaming service, Bloomberg News reported. Square chief executive Jack Dorsey, who also leads Twitter, aims to expand and diversify the company, according to the report, which was based on an unnamed source. Bloomberg said the talks may not result in a transaction. Jay-Z bought Tidal from Europe-based Aspiro in 2015 year in a deal valued at slightly more than \$56 million.

Owners include several other high-profile artists, including Madonna, Rihanna and Jay-Z's wife, Beyonce. But Tidal has struggled to compete against much larger streaming services such as Spotify and Apple. The privately-held company had three million paying subscriptions in 2016, when it last disclosed figures. Jay-Z surprised fans in December 2019 by moving his music catalogue back to Spotify after a two-year hiatus. Apple in 2016 also reportedly explored a purchase of Tidal to bolster its music streaming offerings.— AFP



STRANGE WORLD: THE WEEK'S OFFBEAT NEWS

Our weekly roundup of offbeat stories from around the world:

Y-front revolution

What is it with Russian spooks and underpants? In Soviet times foreign journalists would know they had had a visit from the KGB when they would find their underwear drawer rearranged. It was like a Kremlin calling card - "We are watching you." Now the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny claims to have tricked an alleged FSB agent into spilling the beans on the poisoning that nearly killed him by using that old trick beloved of radio hosts, the fake call. Pretending to be a Security Council official investigating why the agent had failed to kill him, Navalny got the man to divulge that they dusted the Novichok nerve agent along the seams of his underpants' coddie.

Knickers, Moscow insisted as it slapped sanctions on Germany, where Navalny was treated. But Navalny's supporters in Russia were soon waving underpants embroidered with the word Novichok in front of the world's media. Vladimir Putin is no doubt quaking in his pants at the prospect of boxer-brandishing protesters at the gates of the Kremlin. After the orange, rose and the jasmine revolutions, might there one day be a Y-front one?

It's raining iguanas

Only just recovered from the hurricane season, Floridians now face a new menace - showers of iguanas. The Sunshine State is suffering an unusual cold snap with temperatures set to fall to freezing at Christmas. Which means iguanas will start falling from trees. The cold-blooded lizards literally freeze up when the temperature drops below four degrees Centigrade and fall from on high, posing a real danger for anyone underneath. In recent years the authorities have urged Floridians to cull as many of the illegal immigrants as they can, with iguanas slipping over the Mexican border and in from the Caribbean in vast numbers. Frost can't kill them, however, and some misguided locals have been known to cover fallen lizards in towels to warm them up or even take them home - a big no-no for experts. For defrosted iguanas are particularly dangerous and can quickly turn vicious.

It's a Christmas miracle. Nuns in a French convent have gone viral with an all-dancing all-singing video in which they appeal for help to adapt their spartan cells so older sisters won't have to go to an old folks home. With rosary beads flying and woolly-stocking feet kicking, the Apostolic Sisters of Saint John shot "Together till the End" in their ancient priory in the Burgundy village of Semur-en-Brionnais. The clip ends with the oldest nun sung up into the heavens in a hot air balloon. And pennies have indeed been falling down with the nuns nearing their 100,000-euro (\$122,000) target to do the work.—AFP