AWF Oyster Restoration Initiative

Cultch Material HITS THE WATER

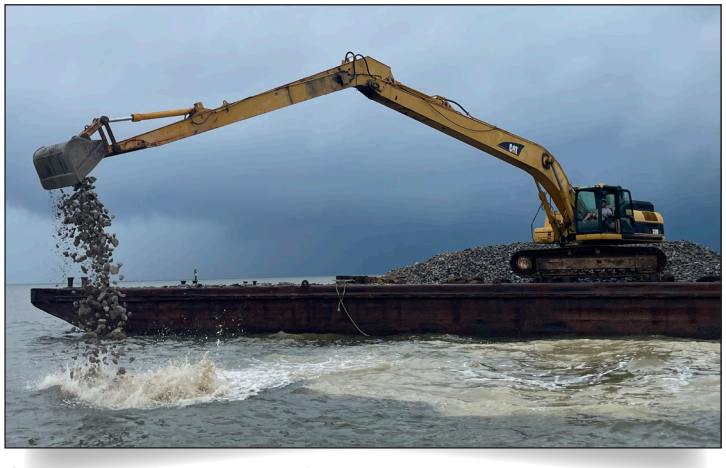
Tim L. Gothard, AWF Executive Director

On March 9, 2023 the first cultch material of AWF's Oyster Restoration Initiative hit the water. Much like the AWF Nearshore Artificial Reef Project that AWF completed eighteen months ago, the AWF Oyster Restoration Initiative is advancing rapidly. This is a direct result of energy and leadership of the AWF Oyster Restoration Committee, the AWF Board, and a host of AWF supporters.

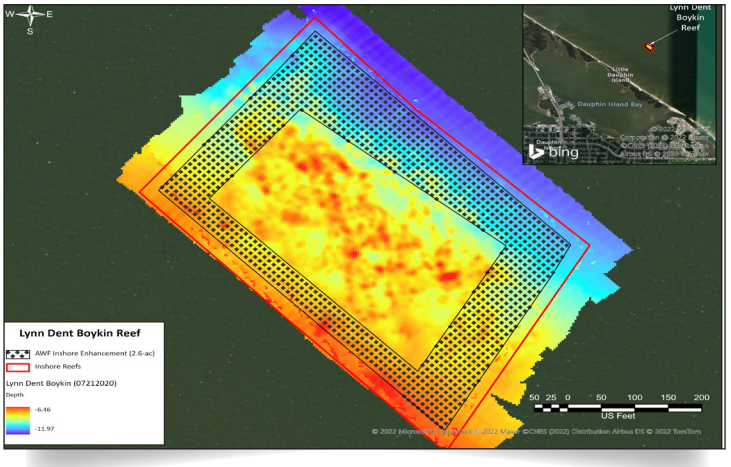
It was a little over a year ago when AWF made the commitment to establish the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund with a quarter of a million-dollar investment of AWF funds. Over the following six months, the AWF Oyster Restoration Committee worked with Alabama Marine Resources Division to identity relic oyster reef sites where AWF's assistance could help achieve goals of Alabama's Oyster Plan for Mobile Bay. In August of 2022, the AWF Oyster Restoration Committee recommended, and the AWF Board approved three projects of significance: enlargement of the Lynn Dent Boykin Reef, enlargement of the Bender Austal Reef, and a one-year monitoring project to assess oyster habitat conditions at the Point Clear Reef. The second week of March 2023, cultch material started hitting the water in Mobile Bay.

March 19th - Lynn Dent Boykin Reef Enlargement

On a stormy March 19th morning at about 9:30AM, AWF Oyster Restoration Committee Chair, Bo Cross, and AWF Oyster Restoration Committee member, Grey Cane, looked on by boat as the first cultch material (3 to 6-inch diameter limestone aggregate) of AWF's Oyster Restoration Initiative hit the water at the Lynn Dent Boykin Reef site. The Lynn Dent Boykin reef is located in a relic oyster reef area historically known as Sand Reef. Signs of oyster development have been observed in this area in the last few years and the 2,600 tons of new oyster cultch material deployed on the site will provide additional cultch material on which oyster can attach and develop. Successful oyster development will also yield increased oyster larvae and circulation among reefs along the lower, west side of Mobile Bay. At the same time, this enlargement will also provide



Crane on barge deploying rock at the Lynn Dent Boykin Reef.



Boykin Reef

enhanced inshore angling opportunities. The Lynn Dent Boykin Reef is easy to access from the Billy Goat Hole boat launch in Dauphin Island.

The AWF Oyster Restoration Fund was established by AWF to serve as a catalyst fund with the goal of funding projects with AWF dollars and private investments. The Lynn Dent Boykin Reef enlargement represents an investment of approximately $200,000. $100,000 was from AWF funds and $100,000 from private funds donated to the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund. Tremendous thanks to Regions Bank, the E.E. Delaney Foundation, the Lynn Dent Boykin Family, and Hancock Whitney Bank for investing in the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund and the enlargement of the Lynn Dent Boykin Reef specifically.

March 16th - Dog River Reef Enlargement

The Dog River Reef was not part of our initial plan, but it was a unique opportunity that developed along the way. With the announcement of funding for Mobile County to conduct a significant shoreline improvement project along the Dauphin Island Causeway, a variety of materials that were placed there for an earlier shoreline protection project needed to be removed. In particular, approximately 1,000 concrete reef balls, which provide wave attenuation and can also provide cultch material on which oyster can attach, needed to be removed. Alabama Marine Resources contacted AWF about assisting with repurposing those reef balls for inshore fishing reef and oyster habitat. We were glad to help. The overall project was a joint effort involving Mobile County, Alabama Marine Resources, The Nature Conservancy, and AWF. More specifically, AWF provided $25,000 from the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund to cover the cost of transporting and deploying the 1,000 reef balls to the Dog River Reef after they were removed from the Dauphin Island Causeway. On March 16th, AWF Oyster Restoration

Barge with crane dropping the reef balls at Dog River Reef.

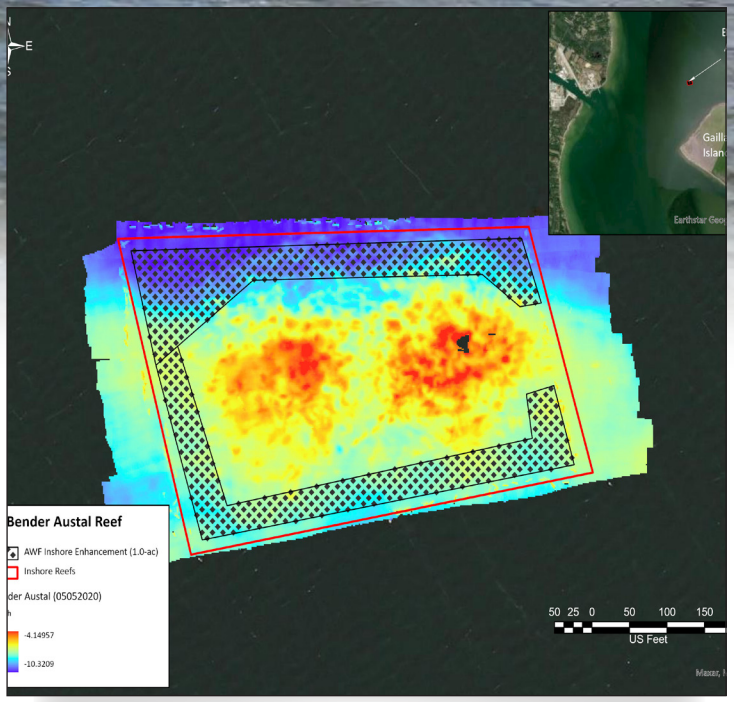
Limestone aggregate cultch material headed for the Bender Austal Reef.

Committee member, Grey Cane looked on by boat as the reef balls were deployed at Dog River Reef. This material will enhance inshore angling opportunities at the Dog River Reef and will provide oyster cultch material. Enhanced oyster populations at the Dog River Reef will also yield increased oyster larvae flow and exchange among oyster reefs along the middle portion of the western side of Mobile Bay.

March 24th - Bender Austal Reef Enlargement

On March 24th, the next load of cultch material arrived for deployment at the Bender Austal Reef. Located near and northwest of Gaillard Island, this relic oyster reef site has showed favorable water conditions and some signs of oyster development. 1,000 tons of cultch material (3 to 6-inch diameter limestone aggregate) were deployed on three sides to enlarge the existing reef. As with the Lynn Dent Boykin Reef and the Dog River Reef, successful oyster development on this new cultch material will provide the opportunity to increase oyster larvae flow and exchange among oyster reefs on the western side of Mobile Bay. At the same time, this enlargement will improve inshore fishing habitat and fishing opportunities at the site.

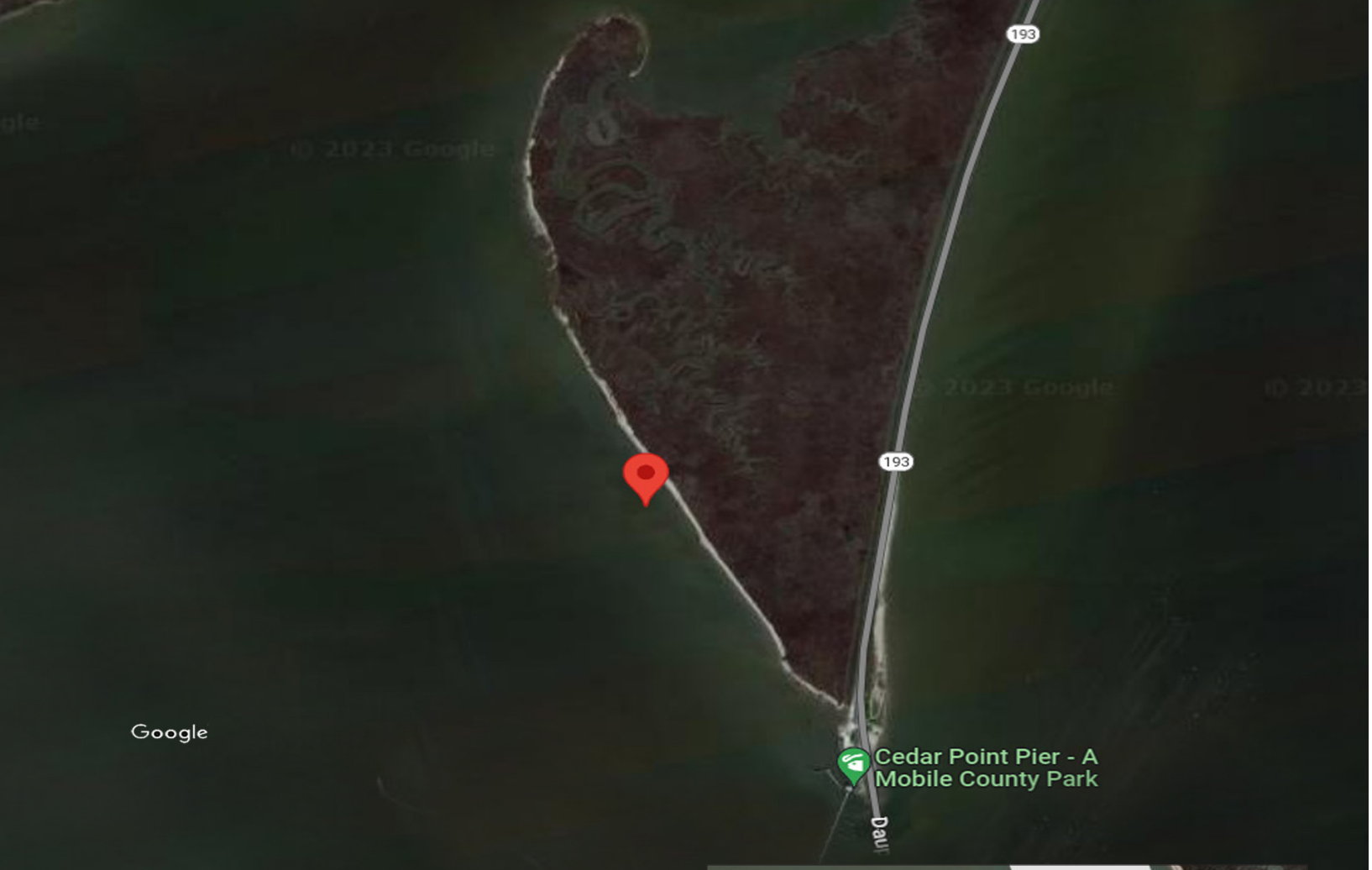
The Bender Austal Reef Enlargement represent an investment of approximately $72,000 from the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund. $36,000 of those funds were provided from AWF dollars and $36,000 from private dollars contributed to the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund. We owe great thanks to Alabama Power Company and a group of a dozen AWF friends for investing in the AWF Oyster Restoration Fund and making the Bender Austal Reef Enlargement a reality.



Bender Austal Reef

Point Clear Reef Monitoring

Water monitoring equipment (SONDE unit) for monitoring the Point Clear Reef is ordered and in the works. This one-year monitoring project will take a look at water temperature, salinity, pH, and several other factors over a 12-month monitoring period. There have been some signs of oyster development at this site in the last few years, but it is imperative that we gain insight on water conditions, over time, to insure that suitable conditions persist long enough to signal a good chance for oyster development. After the monitoring project is complete, it will better inform a decision of if, and how, a viable oyster restoration project might be developed and deployed at the Point Clear Reef. Our target for SONDE unit deployment and initiation of the monitoring project is late summer/ early fall 2023.



The Big One

Heron Bay/ Cedar Point Beach Reef

The AWF Oyster Restoration Committee met on February 19, 2023 to consider taking on "The Big One." Following that meeting, on February 20th, the AWF Oyster Restoration Committee recommended, and the AWF Board approved, taking on the 77-acre Heron Bay/Cedar Point Beach Oyster Restoration Project. This project is located just west of the Dauphin Island Parkway in Heron Bay. The site is a historic oyster reef area, is within the current commercial oyster reef grid, and next to some of the most productive oyster reefs in Mississippi Sound. The project will involve deploying 6,500 tons of cultch material over the 77-acre footprint. During our Committee discussions, it was noted that his project fits perfectly with exactly what AWF stands for: balancing use, management, and protection of our natural resources. The Heron Bay/Cedar Point Beach project represents an opportunity to restore an oyster reef in a potentially highly productive area. If successful, it would provide opportunities for sustainable harvest of oysters for human consumption, continued management of the oysters and oyster reef to insure longer term productivity, and contribute to water quality improvement and protection from the additional filtering capacity of a larger and robust oyster population in the area. As we speak, we are engaged in early talks with AWF partners and supporters who have high interest in helping this big project become a reality. Stay tuned. We look forward to sharing more with you in the days ahead.