

Starting to clam up



Shellfishing signs at Compo Beach in Westport Sunday morning.
Hour Photo / Danielle Robinson

By **RINDY HIGGINS**
Hour Correspondent

With the approach of warm weather and the chance to get outside, more and more people are calling the Westport Shellfish Commission to inquire about how to shellfish recreationally in town's waters, says Alicia Mozian, Conservation Director.

"Getting a permit is easy", said Mozian. "There are some regulations that must be strictly observed."

Anyone over the age of 17 may purchase a permit, which, like a fishing license, must be displayed when using it. The brief application form can be found by calling the Westport Shellfish Commission or online at the town website www.westportct.gov ("How do I" tab/scroll down to Get a shellfish permit) and filed in one of three ways: mailed back with

a self-addressed envelope; filed in person at Room 205, Westport Town Hall, 110 Myrtle Ave. or at Westport Outfitters, 609 Riverside Ave. This is the second year that the Shellfish Commission is collaborating with Eric Johnson of Westport Outfitters, which has been supplying recreational anglers and boating enthusiasts with the equipment, supplies and support for 20 years. Their expanded hours, which include weekends (see www.westportoutfitters.com), make it convenient to obtain a permit when the town hall is closed.

Several fee structures apply. Connecticut residents between the ages of 17-64 pay \$20 and seniors pay half. Out of state residents between the ages of 17-64 pay \$50 and seniors pay half. Permits are valid from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31. New this year are daily permits which cost \$10 and can be postdated to the desired date; this allows those who may be in town for a limited time to test the waters at a lower cost. Since children under 17 years old do not need a permit, they can join in the treasure hunt for free, as long as they are accompanied by an adult with a permit. These fees allow for families to share the joys of an outside, inexpensive activity together, gathering the sea's produce for dinner.

Only certain areas may be harvested recreationally, so checking or downloading the map from the Town website is important. It shows the location of the recreational shellfish beds at Cockenoe Flats, which lies between the southern boundary of Saugatuck Shores and the northern shore of Cockenoe Island.

There is also visible signage posted in three locations that indicate where the town has recreational shellfish beds. These diamond-shaped demarcation signs are half red which indicates a closed area and half white pointing to the conditionally open areas. One sign is located at Bluff Point near Cedar Point Yacht Club. The red part of this sign points to the Saugatuck River because it is a closed area, and the white part points towards Cockenoe Flats which is conditionally open. The second sign is located at the small beach between Compo Cove and the northernmost stone jetty at Compo Beach. This sign's red part faces Sherwood Millpond and Sherwood Point areas since shellfishing is not permitted in Sherwood Millpond, Compo Cove and off Burying Hill beach. The white section points towards Compo Beach. At the cannons at Compo Beach, there is a third sign that points red towards the Saugatuck River because it is a closed area, and points white towards the area off Compo Beach. This area off Compo Beach is available to shellfishing in the off-season only (October 2 - April 30).

These recreational shellfish areas are located in 'conditionally approved' waters, because they may be closed under certain conditions. The waterways in which these beds lie are closely monitored by the Connecticut Department of Agriculture/ Bureau of Aquaculture in order to protect public health. They may be closed after a heavy rainfall or due to pollution. Another reason may be that the Shellfish Commission, in its mission to preserve the stock, has transplanted young shellfish from closed to conditionally open recreational areas. The beds will be closed while the transplanted shellfish 'purify' themselves and dig into the bottom to be found by people searching for them. The number to call before leaving home to confirm that the shellfish beds are open is 203-838-9807; the phone number is also written on the permit.

The town has also installed two status signs to signal if these recreational shellfish beds are open or closed on any particular day. These 36" round discs at Compo Beach near the cannons and at Canal Beach must be viewed from the waterside. When the sign is red, the beds are closed, and when the sign is white, the beds are open. Watch these signs for status changes.

The best access to the recreational shellfish beds is via boat; there is a state boat launch on Elaine Rd. off Compo Road South. For those arriving by car, a small public parking area at the end of Canal Road in Saugatuck Shores provides space for about six to eight vehicles. The parking lot is surrounded by private property and there is no street parking.

Before heading out to harvest, several other factors need to be considered, such as the time of day, the tide, the daily limit and knowing if the shellfish beds are currently open. Shellfishing is permitted only between sunrise and sunset. It is best to go at low tide when much of the shellfish beds are exposed and more easily accessible. A tide table for the mouth of the Saugatuck River can be seen and/or downloaded from the Town's website; a tide chart is also given out along with the permit. In order to preserve the shellfish population, there is a limit of half a bushel a day, or a 5-gallon bucket.

Rindy Higgins, a commissioner of a local shellfish commission and trustee of a conservation association in Massachusetts, was a marine educator for more than 20 years at The Maritime Aquarium. Her "Raking It In" series discusses the benefits and challenges, techniques, ecology, and cultural heritage of shellfishing in Westport waters.