

About Recreational Shellfish Harvesting in Southwest Florida



In many northern coastal states it is common for individuals to harvest shellfish such as clams and oysters for their own personal consumption. Although not as prevalent, recreational shellfish harvesting is legal in Southwest Florida, but there are specific guidelines about where and when harvesting is allowed and how many can be taken. Shellfish regulations are established and enforced to protect human health and also to preserve the living marine resources and ecosystem within which they exist.

Shellfish harvesting areas (SHAs) are established, monitored, and managed by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Division of Aquaculture. Because shellfish such as oysters and clams are filter feeders and can harbor potential contaminants that pose health risks to humans, several water quality standards must be met before FDACS can designate an area for harvesting. Within a SHA, there are several water classifications. The public is only allowed to harvest shellfish from approved or conditionally approved waters.

Before visiting a SHA, it is always recommended to check with FDACS before harvesting to ensure the area is indeed open. Heavy rains, red tides, and other events that can potentially introduce elevated levels of contaminants can result in temporary closures. To find the status of a SHA visit www.floridaaquaculture.com, click on "Shellfish Harvesting," and then "Daily Status." The open/closed status of SHAs in Southwest Florida is also available from the FDACS shellfish field office in Punta Gorda by calling (941) 833-2552.

Recreational Shellfish Regulations

In order to legally harvest shellfish, a valid saltwater fishing license is required. In addition to knowing where legal harvesting of shellfish is allowed, recreational harvesters must also be aware of size and bag limits and seasonal closures associated with shellfish.

Oysters

- Minimum size limit: 3 inches
- Bag limit: 2 bags per person or vessel, whichever is less, per day (1 bag = 60 lbs., or two 5-gallon buckets, whole in shell).
- All oyster harvesting is prohibited during July, August and September with the exception of Dixie, Levy, and Wakulla Counties where harvest is prohibited during June, July and August. All harvest is also prohibited when SHAs are temporarily closed.



Clams

- Minimum size limit: 1-inch thick across the hinge.
- Bag limit: one 5-gallon bucket per person or two per vessel, whichever is less, per day. There is no set closed season, but all harvest is prohibited when SHAs are temporarily closed.



NOTE: *The harvesting of bay scallops south of the Pasco/Hernando County line is Illegal!*

For more information on recreational shellfish regulations visit:

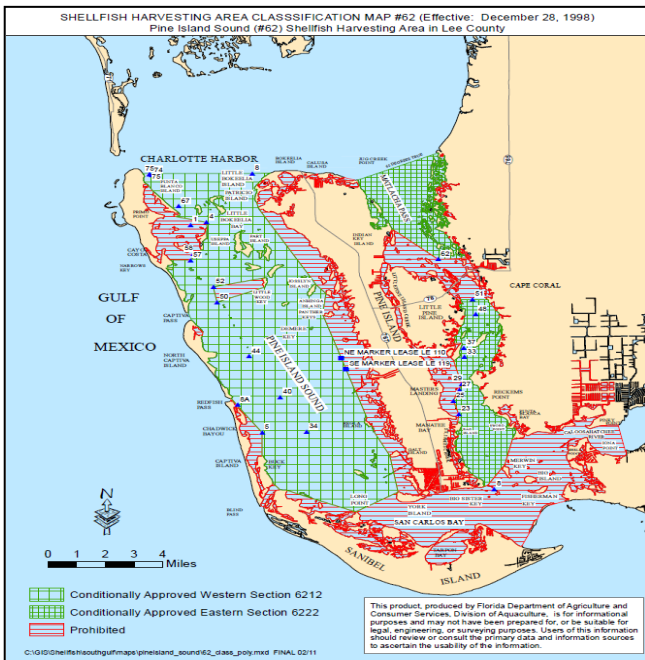
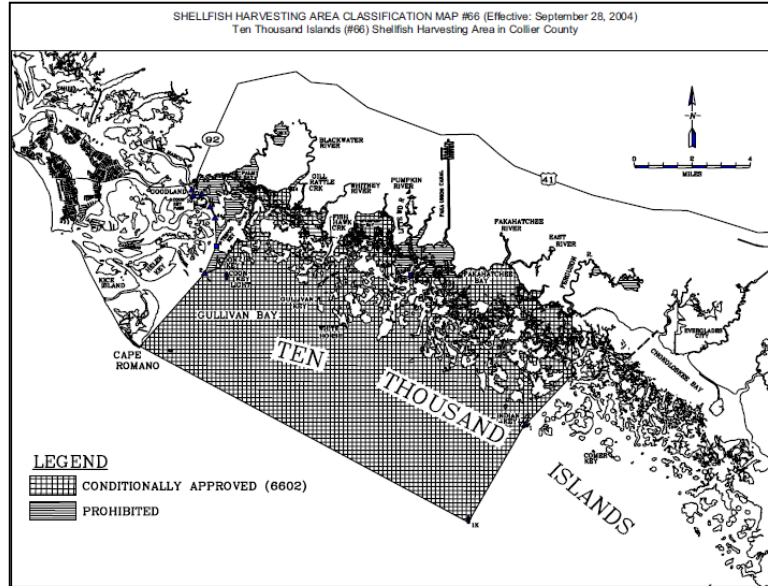
<http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations/>

Conditionally Approved Shellfish Harvesting Areas in Southwest Florida

Collier County

Ten Thousand Islands SHA (#66)

Shellfish harvesting can only occur in conditionally approved waters within the Ten Thousand Islands SHA. All waters east of a line from Goodland south along the Coon Key Channel to Cape Romano, west of a line from the Ferguson River to Indian Key Pass channel marker 7, and north of a line from Cape Romano to Marker 1K to Indian Key Pass channel marker 1. Click [HERE](#) for a full description the area including management considerations for closures.



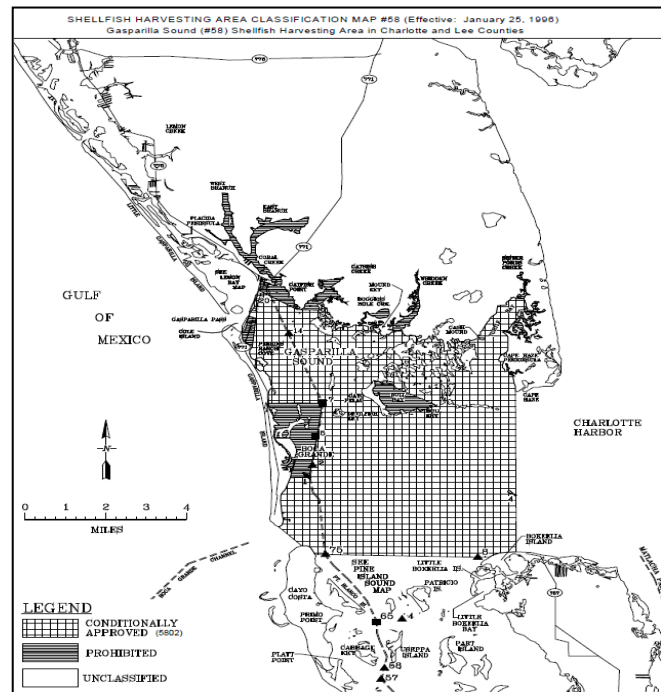
Gasparilla Sound SHA (#58)

All waters of Gasparilla Sound, Bull Bay, Turtle Bay, and Charlotte Harbor south of the State Road 771 Bridge and mainland shoreline east to Cape Haze, west of a line from Cape Haze Point south to Bokeelia Island, and north of Cayo Costa and Bokeelia Islands. Click [HERE](#) for a full description the area including management considerations for closures.

Lee/Charlotte Counties

Pine Island Sound SHA (#62)

All waters of Pine Island Sound, Matlacha Pass, and San Carlos Bay. The area includes Tarpon Bay and the Caloosahatchee River west of a line from Piney Point to Jona Point. Click [HERE](#) for a full description the area including management considerations for closures.



Commercial Clam Leases

Within the Ten Thousand, Pine Island Sound, and Gasparilla Sound SHAs, aquaculture lease areas are established for the production of hard clams. Leased from the State of Florida, the corners and perimeters of these areas are marked with PVC pipes and signage. Cultured shellfish are protected by law; harvesting is prohibited except by the leaseholder. Anchoring within these areas is also restricted.



Commonly Harvested Shellfish

While several species of molluscan shellfish are potentially edible, four of the most common types of shellfish recreationally harvested in Southwest Florida include the Eastern oyster, Northern and Southern quahog, and Sunray Venus clam.

Eastern Oyster *Crassostrea virginica*



The shell of the eastern oyster is thick, flattened, and highly variable in shape. It grows from round (irregular) to oval and usually bears concentric ridges. The exterior color of the shell is dirty white to gray while the interior is bright white with a deep purple or red-brown muscle scar. Large beds provide habitat for numerous fish and invertebrate species, reduce water turbidity through filter-feeding, and physically serve as a filter by removing debris from the water as it passes over the reef. For more information on the Eastern oyster, click [here](#).

Northern Quahog *Mercenaria mercenaria*



The Northern quahog or hard clam is one of the most commercially and recreationally important shellfish species in the region. It has a large, heavy shell that ranges from being a pale brownish color to shades of gray and white. The exterior of the shell, except near the base (umbo) is covered with a series of growth rings. The interior of the shell is colored a deep purple around the posterior edge and hinge. The Northern hard clam burrows shallowly in mud and/or sand sediments. For more information on the Northern hard clam, click [here](#).

Did you know that "cherry stones," and "littlenecks," are also common names given to hard clams and actually refer to commercial size classes?

Southern Quahog *Mercenaria campechiensis*



The Southern quahog or hard clam can easily be confused with its more commercially important relative, the Northern hard clam. The Southern hard clam, however, is heavier and more inflated, and lacks the smooth central area around the umbo that is characteristic of the northern quahog. Its inner shell also lacks the purple coloration characteristic of the Northern hard clam. Southern hard clams often burrow themselves in sandy/muddy substrates. For more information on the Southern hard clam, click [here](#).



Sunray Venus Clam *Macrocallista nimbosa*

Sunray Venus clams are often a prized find for shell collectors in Southwest Florida. They are characterized by a beautiful highly polished salmon

colored shell with radial markings. Sunray Venus clams typically are found along quartz sand beaches.

Finding Shellfish

While oysters typically form reefs that are fairly easy to spot during low tides, clams are burrowers, which can make them more difficult to locate. Most clamming is done during low tide when waters are shallower and sandbars and mudflats are exposed. Many harvesters search for clams in these intertidal areas by either blindly digging for them or looking for evidence of clams. As clams burrow into the sediment they can leave a small opening in the sand or mud where their siphons are. Some harvesters dig them up by hand or with a small shovel, while others may use a rake, which is popular harvesting method in many northern states. Depending on water depth and visibility, some harvesters may snorkel for their clams. Precaution should be taken when handling these shellfish as many have sharp edges that can cause serious injury.



A Word about *Vibrio vulnificus*



Although recreationally harvesting clams and oysters for personal consumption can be an enjoyable past time, caution should be taken when handling and consuming them. Most shellfish, especially oysters have sharp edges that can cause serious injury if not handled properly. Gloves should be worn when harvesting them to reduce being cut. Of particular concern is *Vibrio vulnificus*, a bacterium naturally found in warm coastal waters, and in many shellfish species. *Vibrio* can cause severe illness or death to at-risk people who eat raw shellfish or those who are cut by shellfish harboring the bacteria. *Vibrio vulnificus* is NOT a result of pollution, and can

be found in waters approved for shellfish harvesting. The bacteria do NOT change the appearance, taste, or odor of shellfish either. If you are immune-compromised, it is recommended that you thoroughly cook any oysters or clams you plan to eat and never swim or wade in seawater with sores or open wounds. To learn more about *Vibrio vulnificus*, and how to minimize risks associated with it visit: http://www.issc.org/client_resources/Education/English_Vv_Risk.pdf

References:

- Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Division of Aquaculture: <http://www.floridaaquaculture.com/>
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Saltwater Fishing Regulations: <http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/regulations/>
- Shell Images: www.jaxshells.com
- Smithsonian Marine Station at Fort Pierce Indian River Lagoon Field Guide-Invertebrates: <http://www.sms.si.edu/IRLFieldGuide/InvertMain.htm>

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