



## Eelgrass and oysters

Eelgrass, *Zostera marina*, and American oysters (also known as Eastern or Virginia oysters) *Crassostrea virginica* live in this tank. They can often be found near each other in the Bay.

Oysters are bivalves. Bivalves have two shells and belong to the mollusk family of animals. Animals in this family have hard exterior shells that protect their soft inner bodies. Many people can recognize adult oysters. Dirty gray on the outside, oysters' shells can grow as large as ten inches long.

Eelgrass is a plant that grows underwater. It is a type of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV). It looks like long skinny blades of grass (grass that looks like an eel—thus the name!). Eelgrass, like other plants, produces oxygen for Bay animals while it photosynthesizes.

Both oysters and eelgrass perform two important functions in the Bay—they create habitat and keep the water clear.

The reefs, or beds, that oysters form create nooks and crannies where many other organisms live. Eelgrass, like other underwater grasses, provides important habitat for young crabs and fish as well as seahorses and many others that can hide (and eat) in the eelgrass beds.

Oysters, like other filter feeders, feed by pumping large quantities of water through their gills and removing algae and other particles. This process removes nutrients, sediments, and pollutants—in other words it helps keep the water clear. Eelgrass also helps keep the water clear because its rhizomes (a kind of root system) anchor soils and sediments at the bottom of the Bay. When eelgrass exists in large clusters, it helps lessen the effects of waves, preventing erosion and keeping animal larvae from being dashed about and destroyed.