

MANATEE RIVER AND BEYOND

A Case for Supporting Oyster River Ecology



Restoring ecological function in Southwest Florida – and helping make large-scale restoration more practical wherever the lessons can travel.

MANATEE • SARASOTA • HILLSBOROUGH • PINELLAS

The scale of the problem is enormous. The scale of the response has to matter.



Oyster River Ecology was founded because too many important ecological problems were being discussed, studied and demonstrated at small scale while the ecosystems themselves kept declining. We did not want to wait for someone else to step up. We wanted to figure out what it would take to actually get restoration done on a massive scale, so that's what we did.

OUR MISSION

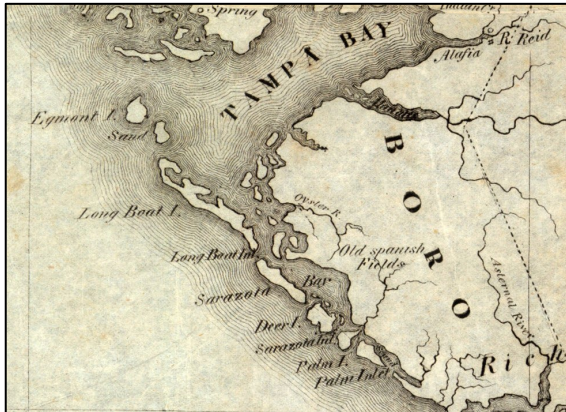
Serving Manatee, Sarasota, Hillsborough, & Pinellas Counties on Florida's Gulf Coast, Oyster River Ecology's mission is to restore ecosystems and preserve ecological functions while increasing the understanding of the natural systems on which we all rely. ORE is a results-focused 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization of ecologists, restoration practitioners, and environmental educators. We are dedicated to the habitat restoration, stewardship, beautification, and understanding of the environment to benefit quality of life for humans and wildlife alike, both now and for generations to come.

That mission is broader than oysters. ORE restores and stewards coastal and watershed habitats, works on invasive-species and native-habitat challenges, and puts people directly into the work through environmental education and volunteer stewardship. But the Manatee River has become our clearest proof that a small organization can take on a very large ecological problem and keep pushing until a practical path emerges.

We are not interested in restoration that only looks good in a report.

We are interested in restoration that changes what is happening on the ground and in the water.

Before it was the Manatee River, it was the Oyster River.

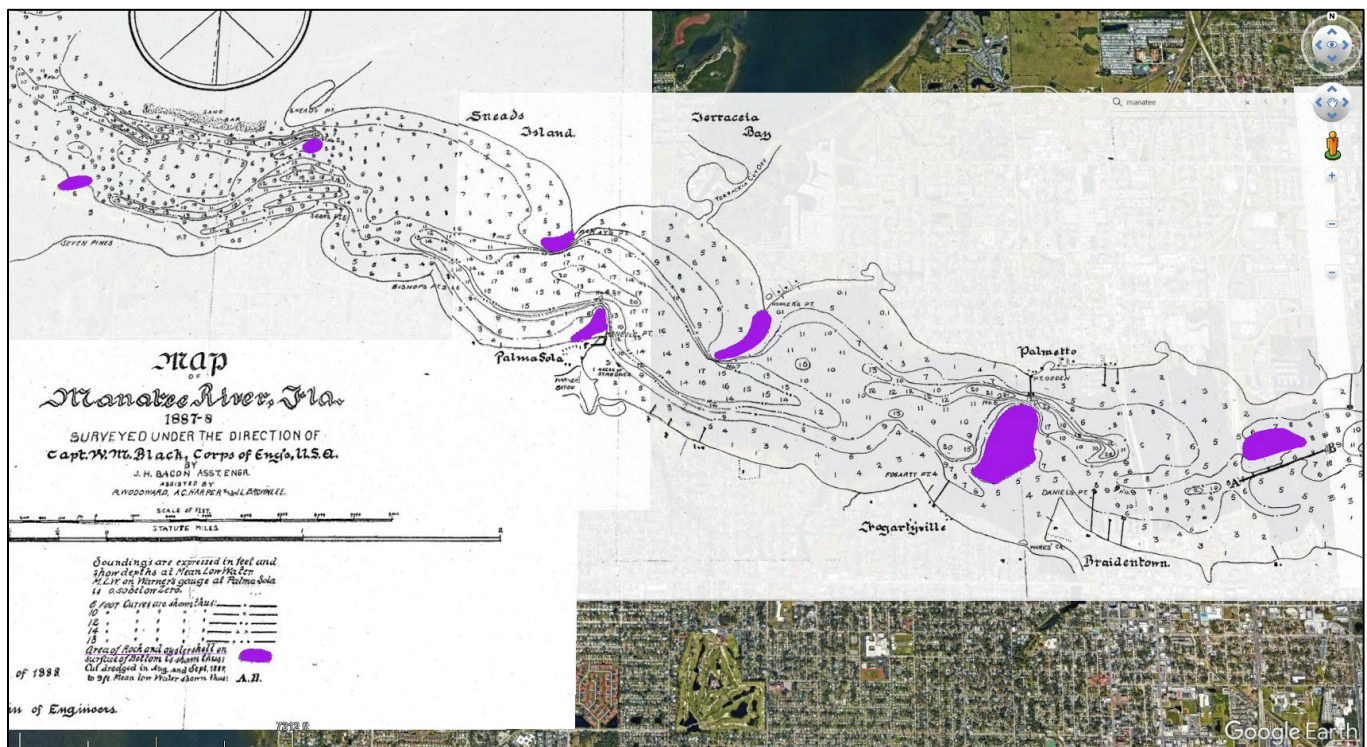


The name tells the story.

John Lee Williams' 1837 map labels today's Manatee River as "Oyster R." Decades later, survey records still showed extensive oyster grounds throughout the river totaling 132 acres.

Over the following generations, navigation dredging, shell removal, development and hydrologic changes altered the system. The river most people know today is already a diminished version of what came before.

ORE took its name from that history - not as nostalgia, but as a challenge.



Historic survey information supplied by ORE shows documented oyster areas in the Manatee River. Purple highlighting identifies historical oyster/rock features used in ORE's reconstruction of the river's oyster history.

Oyster River Ecology was founded in 2022, but the work behind it began more than a decade earlier: researching historical conditions, testing restoration sites, evaluating salinity, hydrology, sediments, food availability and predation, and asking a question that kept getting harder to ignore: if the river once supported 132 acres of oyster reefs, why were we content with tiny restoration projects and where in the river is scaling up going to work today?

Built by a restoration practitioner who got tired of waiting.

Damon Moore, Founder & Executive Director

Damon is a habitat-restoration practitioner with more than 20 years of experience in Southwest Florida, including a decade in private-sector environmental consulting and ten years with Manatee County Government's Natural Resources Department.

His work has helped create or enhance more than 2,000 acres of coastal wetland and upland habitat. Major projects include Perico Preserve and the 150-acre Robinson Preserve Expansion, where he helped incorporate sea-level-rise adaptation and sportfish nursery habitat into the design.

In 2024, NOAA Fisheries and the American Fisheries Society awarded Damon the Dr. Nancy Foster Habitat Conservation Award for exceptional achievement and dedication to coastal and marine habitat conservation.

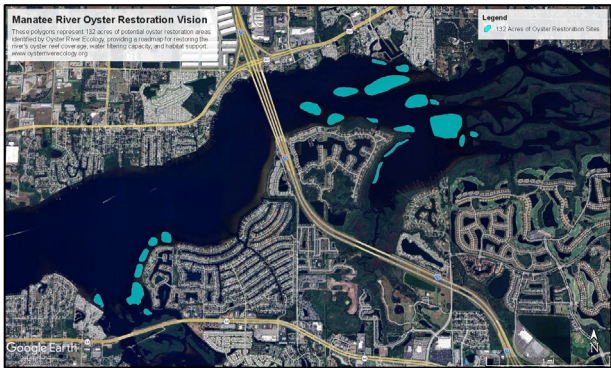
ORE grew out of the same habit that shaped those projects: understand the system, solve the real constraint, bring people into the work, and keep going until the habitat is built.



FROM A DRIVEWAY TO A RESTORATION ORGANIZATION

Some of ORE's earliest Oyster Rag Pots were made at the end of a driveway. Today the organization is operating from a small rented warehouse, managing permitted restoration sites, running boats and field crews, tracking performance, engaging thousands of community members and building the next generation of restoration capacity.

132 acres in the Manatee River – then keep going.



ORE currently restores roughly 60,000 square feet of oyster habitat per year with a small staff working from a tiny rented warehouse. That output already requires cement, production racks, storage totes, forklifts, trailers, boats, survey-grade GPS, field staging, permitting, weather windows, monitoring and a lot of physical work.

ORE’s Manatee River Oyster Restoration Vision identifies 132 acres of potential restoration areas based on years of historical research, field investigations, pilot work and site evaluation.

The Manatee River is ORE’s flagship demonstration: restore oyster habitat at the scale of an ecosystem, not the scale of a pilot project. The 132-acre concept is the roadmap. ORE’s long-term objective is to restore that footprint over the next 10-15 years while continuing to expand restoration into other suitable local waters.

The vision is not to turn ORE into the organization that must personally restore every oyster reef everywhere. The vision is to prove, refine and document practical approaches here, apply them throughout our four-county service area, and share them openly with restoration practitioners across Florida, the United States and the world.

132 ACRES Manatee River restoration vision	10-15 YEARS target horizon for the Manatee River build-out	10x planned increase in annual restoration output
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The method is simple. The ecology is not.

The Oyster Rag Pot



ORE developed Oyster Rag Pots (ORPs) because conventional restoration materials were too costly or too limited in supply to make restoration at tens or hundreds of acres practical.

The ORP provides stable, elevated hard surface above soft sediment, maximizing settlement area while using relatively little material. It can be produced quickly, installed at one-foot centers, and made with volunteer participation.

But the ORP is only a tool. Successful restoration still depends on putting it in the right place – where salinity, food availability, sediment conditions, hydrology, larval supply and predation allow oysters to thrive.

101

average live oysters per ORP after one year in ORE
subsample monitoring

50,000+

ORPs installed in the Manatee River as of August
2026

500/DAY

typical production by a two-person crew working
an 8-hour day

The 101-oyster figure is not an assumption or a theoretical carrying capacity. It comes from ORE’s subsample monitoring: after one year in the water, monitored ORPs averaged 101 live oysters per unit. That measured result is one reason ORE is confident the method can support reef development when it is used in the right ecological setting.

OPEN-SOURCE BY DESIGN

ORE publishes its fabrication process and actively shares installation lessons. The goal is not to own the only solution. The goal is to make effective restoration easier for other communities to do.

We can do about 60,000 square feet a year. We need to do ten times that.

60,000

SQ FT / YEAR TODAY

600,000

SQ FT / YEAR TARGET



4,500 ORPs being towed toward a restoration site. Thousands of individual units must be built, cured, packed, loaded, moved, staged and installed in the right place. Then the process starts again.

ORE currently restores roughly 60,000 square feet of oyster habitat per year with a small staff working from a tiny rented warehouse. That output already requires cement, production racks, storage totes, forklifts, trailers, boats, survey-grade GPS, field staging, permitting, weather windows, monitoring and a lot of physical work.

The next organizational goal is not incremental growth. It is to increase production and installation capacity by a factor of ten – to roughly 600,000 square feet per year – so the Manatee River vision can be completed in the next 10–15 years while ORE also advances projects in other local waters.

WHAT DONOR INVESTMENT REALLY BUYS

Donor investment gives ORE the capacity to move more habitat from idea to water: more production space, more efficient fabrication, enough trained staff to keep multiple work streams moving, dependable vehicles and boats, staging and storage, monitoring, permitting and the operational backbone required to do the same work ten times faster without lowering the standard.

The model is already moving into other waters.



ORE serves Manatee, Sarasota, Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties. The Manatee River is the proving ground, but it is not the boundary of the mission.

10 ACRES Eileen Reef – Manatee River	5 ACRES Safety Harbor – Pinellas County	1 ACRE South Creek – Sarasota County
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ORE has already received permit approvals for additional oyster restoration sites outside the Manatee River. Those approvals matter because they show that the next phase is not hypothetical. The work is already expanding across the service area.

At the same time, ORE is sharing fabrication and installation methods with practitioners elsewhere. Researchers at Roger Williams University are evaluating hatchery-produced spat on ORPs, and restoration groups around the country have shown interest in the approach. ORE’s fabrication guide is deliberately written for “Anyone Who Will Use It.”

Prove it here. Apply it locally. Share it everywhere.

ORE restores ecosystems, not just reefs.

Three program areas. One restoration ethic.



Oyster restoration is ORE's most visible program, but it sits inside a broader applied-restoration mission. ORE's Watershed Habitat Restoration work includes invasive-species management, native habitat enhancement, restoration of wetlands and uplands, and targeted conservation work where practical intervention can protect ecological function.

That work may look very different from an oyster installation. It can mean removing invasive vegetation one plant at a time, restoring native coastal vegetation, improving public conservation lands, or developing a site-specific solution for an imperiled species. The common thread is the same: understand why the system is not functioning, then do the work that gives it a better chance to recover.

Oyster Habitat Restoration rebuilds oyster reef. Watershed Habitat Restoration works across the upland-to-estuary continuum. Environmental Education brings students, volunteers, residents and partners into the same systems ORE is restoring.

ONE RESTORATION ETHIC

Restoration works best when ecology, operations and community stewardship move together.

Restoration transcends generations.



Meet the Oyster Heroes.

Since ORE's inception, the organization has participated in Braden River Elementary School programming around natural-resources education.

On one day, more than 400 elementary students learned about local estuaries, the oyster life cycle and why young oysters need hard surfaces. Then they made vertical oyster gardens and small ORPs. Two students, dressed in full superhero costumes, posed triumphantly with their finished gardens.

Those vertical oyster gardens were later installed in Wares Creek at Westminster Bradenton's observation piers, after residents of the assisted-living community had their own ORE program about oysters and the Manatee River.

From some of the youngest people in the community to some of the oldest, everyone had a role. We all play our part.

Put people in the ecosystem.

The same philosophy drives ORE's field programs. Students do not only hear about restoration – they build ORPs, paddle to restoration sites, examine living reefs, install habitat and get in the water.

The point is not to create spectators. It is to create people who understand that stewardship is something they can actually do.



Small staff. Serious work.

Build it. Measure it. Make it better.

ORE's small staff moves constantly between science, production, field installation, permitting, education, volunteer coordination, equipment, fundraising and the basic operational work required to keep restoration moving.

Monitoring is part of the job, not an afterthought. ORE retrieves and examines ORPs, counts and measures oysters, records data and uses what it learns to improve the next installation.

As the organization scales, staffing has to scale with it – not to become bureaucratic, but to keep a tenfold increase in field output scientifically sound and operationally reliable.



Governance

ORE is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors that provides nonprofit oversight, financial stewardship and long-term guidance. Current directors listed by ORE are Rusty Chinnis, Keegan Murphy, Ryan Horstman, Elliot Prout, Joy Leggett-Murphy, Rob Brown and Alison Albee. Their backgrounds span clean-water advocacy, accounting, ecology, finance, law and land conservation, estuarine science and sustainability.

ACCOUNTABILITY MATTERS

ORE's culture is field-driven and entrepreneurial, but growth has to remain accountable to the mission. Strong governance, monitoring, transparent reporting and disciplined project selection are how ORE intends to scale without losing the rigor that made the early work successful.



We know how to do the work. Now we need the capacity to do enough of it.



ORE is not asking donors to fund an idea that might someday become restoration. We are already building, permitting, installing, monitoring and expanding. The constraint now is throughput.

With a small staff in a tiny rented warehouse, ORE can currently restore about 60,000 square feet of oyster habitat per year. That is meaningful. It is also not enough. The Manatee River alone calls for a restoration effort measured in millions of square feet, and ORE now has approved projects waiting in Pinellas and Sarasota Counties as well.

The next chapter is a tenfold increase in capacity: roughly 600,000 square feet of oyster habitat per year while continuing watershed restoration, education, monitoring and project development across the service area. That is how we get the Manatee River work done in the next 10–15 years while sharing hard-earned lessons so other practitioners can move faster than we did.

**No one else was stepping up to make this happen at a scale that mattered.
So we did.**

Every donor who invests in ORE helps turn that determination into capacity: a larger production system, more trained people, more efficient operations, more acres restored locally and more practical knowledge shared beyond our shores. The goal is not growth for its own sake. It is ecological work at the scale the problem demands.



MANATEE RIVER AND BEYOND. LET'S GET TO WORK.

HELP US BUILD 10X THE RESTORATION CAPACITY.

Your investment helps ORE move from about 60,000 square feet of oyster restoration per year toward the capacity to restore roughly 600,000 square feet per year - while expanding into other local waters and sharing what works beyond Florida.

QUESTIONS ABOUT GIVING OR PARTNERSHIPS

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oysterriverecology.org

Sources

1. NOAA Fisheries. “Outstanding Habitat Champion Recognized Through 2024 Dr. Nancy Foster Habitat Conservation Award,” Oct. 10, 2024. NOAA reports that Damon Moore has more than 20 years of restoration experience, helped create or enhance more than 2,000 acres of coastal wetland and upland habitat, and played a leading role in the Robinson Preserve Expansion.
2. Oyster River Ecology. “Our People,” accessed Aug. 2026. Staff and Board of Directors information; Damon Moore professional biography.
3. Oyster River Ecology. Candid profile, printed Aug. 15, 2026. Program descriptions, geographic service area, permit status, staffing, governance practices and oyster monitoring result of an average 101 oysters per ORP after one year.
4. Oyster River Ecology. Oyster Rag Pot Fabrication Guide, rev. Aug. 2, 2026. ORP design rationale, production rates, open-sharing approach, site-selection considerations, volunteer engagement and more than 50,000 ORPs installed as of publication.
5. Oyster River Ecology project materials and maps supplied for this Case for Support, including the 1837 John Lee Williams map excerpt, historical oyster/dredging overlays, the 132-acre Manatee River Oyster Restoration Vision, field photography and current operational targets.
6. Sarasota Magazine. “Oyster River Ecology Wants to Bring the Manatee River Back to Life,” July 2026. Independent reporting on ORE’s origin, operations, restoration model, community programs and growth.

Production targets of approximately 60,000 square feet per year today, a planned tenfold increase, and the 10–15 year Manatee River completion horizon are current ORE management goals supplied for this document. Permit approvals described here are five acres in Safety Harbor (Pinellas County), one acre at South Creek (Sarasota County), and the existing ten-acre Eileen Reef project in the Manatee River.