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REGINALD VAN TRUMP TRUITT

Dr. Reginald Van Trump Truitt, pioneering oyster biologist and founder of the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, died on April 11, 1991 at the age of 100. He was born on August 12, 1890 in Snow Hill, Maryland into a family of oyster planters. He received his BS (1914) and MS (1924) degrees from the University of Maryland, and his Ph.D. (1929) from American University. In 1920, he joined the faculty of the University of Maryland as an Assistant Professor, moving through the ranks to become Professor of Zoology and Aquiculture [sic] in 1925. In 1942, he became Director of the Maryland Department of Research and Education, a position he held until his retirement in 1954. He lived in retirement on Kent Island and devoted time to Maryland history, writing a number of accounts about Kent Island, Maryland's coastal hurricanes, Assateague Island, the ospreys of Great Neck, etc. He also worked to have Assateague Island recognized as a national seashore.

Dr. Truitt began his academic career as a student of insects, but turned his attention to oysters because of his concern about the decline in oyster harvests in Chesapeake Bay. Beginning in 1918, he spent summers on Solomons Island where he began investigations into oyster spawning and setting. He recognized the importance of environmental factors, so measured temperature, specific gravity, and pH of the water while sampling oyster larvae over major producing areas in Maryland. This work entailed travel over 500 km of water on a regular basis. He determined by 1927 that water quality was satisfactory for oyster production, but that only a few of the oyster beds studied in 19 regions of Maryland harbored enough larvae to justify the effort and cost of shell planting. He also noted high inter-annual and inter-regional variability of oyster larval abundances.

From 1927-1929, he and his colleagues concentrated on 10 oyster bars, making field trips nearly every week over 200 km of distance to collect larvae and measure water quality variables. Effort centered on the relationship of broodstock abundance and larval abundance, setting and spat survival, comparisons of settlement on different kinds of cultch, the appropriate time to plant shells, and the physical nature of formerly productive oyster beds. He demonstrated that oyster shell was more attractive to settling oyster larvae than glass, wood, bricks, cinders, and pebbles. He found correlations between broodstock abundance on an oyster bed and larval abundance in the overlying water column, noting however that high numbers of broodstock alone did not assure high incidences of spat settlement in all regions of the Bay. His recommendations that the minimum harvestable size of oysters be increased from 2½" to 3" and that shell and brood oysters be used to rehabilitate depleted oyster grounds were enacted into Maryland law in 1927. Thus, in that year, a shell planting program partly financed by a gas tax on work boats and a requirement that 10% of shucked shell be made available by oyster packing houses to the State as cultch were implemented.

Ever the practical biologist, Dr. Truitt established an experimental "oyster farm" in 1931 on a 1000-acre reserve in the Honga River, an estuarine tributary in central Chesapeake Bay. He had found the region to have numerous larvae in the water although the oyster

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grounds had been badly overfished, with limited shell available. Over a three-year period he had 212,000 bushels of shell planted on one 50-acre section. About 4,000 bushels of seed oysters were harvested in autumn 1934 from a four-acre patch within the planted area. He estimated that about 50,000 bushels had set where oysters had not been produced for years, demonstrating nearly 60 years ago the aquacultural potential of properly managed shell planting in Maryland.

Much of Dr. Truitt's research was not supported by outside funds until the 1930's, and depended on his own resources, and on donated sampling gear, chemicals, work space, and laboratory assistance (Maryland's Conservation Department did provide manned boats and supported the field program in later years). Nevertheless, he produced many technical reports in the Annual Reports of Maryland's Conservation Department, as well as an illustrated guide to oyster biology and Maryland's oyster industry. Initially, Dr. Truitt's summer work was performed in the Episcopalian parish hall on Solomons Island. In 1925, he established the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, with construction of its first building begun in 1931 with the assistance of the Conservation Department. Cooperating institutions at its inception were the Carnegie Institution, the University of Maryland and the Johns Hopkins University, and Goucher, St. John's, Washington, and Western Maryland Colleges. Thus began what is now the oldest state-supported marine laboratory in continuous operation on the eastern seaboard. In 1929, five students (three men, two women) were admitted to the laboratory to study and perform research, four from the U.S. and one from Columbia, South America. This tradition of summer interns working at CBL (and later at its sister laboratory Horn Point Environmental Laboratory) has continued to this day.

Dr. Truitt was active in many scientific societies, including AAAS, AFS, ASLO, and ASZ. He was Vice-President of the Ecological Society of America in 1950–51, and was made a Fellow of the Maryland Academy of Sciences. Of significance to members of the National Shellfisheries Association are his serving as President of NSA in 1935 and 1936, and his recognition as an Honorary Life Member in 1959. As noted earlier, Dr. Truitt had a strong interest in historical matters. From 1952 to 1962 he founded four county historical societies in Maryland (Worcester, Calvert, Queen Anne's and Charles counties). Always an athletic man, he represented the University of Maryland in lacrosse as an undergraduate (playing against Jim Thorpe in 1913) and coached the University's team to its first National Championship in 1925. He entered the Lacrosse Hall of Fame in 1960 and the University of Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame in 1984.

Although the oyster harvests in Chesapeake Bay have continued their decline (mainly due to politically influenced management, overfishing, pollution and, most recently, disease), many shellfish biologists have long believed that, had Dr. Truitt's recommendations of 60 years ago been applied rigorously by the State, harvests would now be higher, and oyster farming rather than oyster hunting might be a present reality in Maryland. In 1981, Dr. Truitt received the Rachel Carson Award for his work to preserve the Chesapeake Bay and its environment. His life work and accomplishments point to a significant lesson. Dedicated individuals must struggle to get their scientific and conservation messages across to politicians, managers, and the lay public, and must often be disappointed by the inertia of the system. Yet they persist, to the benefit of future researchers and society. If we can make a fraction of the contribution to science and society that Dr. Truitt made in his time, we will have done well.

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