

**SOUTH BAY****Mysterious oysters living in bay  
Hundreds of alien bivalves removed in  
emergency project**

- [Carl T. Hall, Chronicle Science Writer](#)

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Monster exotic oysters have been found growing in the South Bay, biologists said Thursday, a nasty surprise that could threaten efforts to restore native oysters in the bay.

Scientists are unsure what species the invaders represent -- let alone how they might affect the bay if allowed to expand in large numbers.

It's not apt to be good for the petite native oysters, usually no more than 2 1/2 inches long, which these days can be found clinging to just a few scattered pockets around the shoreline.

The exotics have been found up to 9 inches long, growing in a variety of shapes.

Andy Chang, a UC Davis graduate student, first discovered the big empty shell of a nonnative oyster in June 2004, near the eastern end of the Dumbarton Bridge. Nothing more was found until just three weeks ago, when biologist Rena Obernolte, working on a native oyster habitat survey for the California State Coastal Conservancy, turned up five large live oysters in the same area.

Panicky ecosystem managers organized a quick removal project, securing emergency permits and help from a number of agencies to take advantage of the only favorable tides they could expect until November.

A crew of government staffers and volunteers removed 256 of the exotic oysters last week after searching the East Bay mudflats from the Dumbarton Bridge to nearly as far north as the San Leandro Marina. One more oyster was picked out in Richmond, and two were found near the western end of the San Mateo Bridge.

Genetic testing is in the works. But experts said the oysters clearly are a different species than the bay's native Olympia oyster, *Ostrea conchaphila*.

"They're not native oysters on steroids," said Andrew Cohen, a senior scientist and director of an invasive-species program at the San Francisco Estuary Institute.

The exotics may be a hybrid Pacific variety of oyster, which is widely cultivated on the West Coast, although the bay visitors are growing in a different form than what experts are used to seeing.

Pacific oysters can get to be quite large, up to 16 inches, if conditions are favorable. The ones that were found in the bay already were hefty enough to take scientists aback.

The big question now is what the exotic oysters might do to the bay ecosystem if they can't be

Yes  No

Yes  No

Yes  No

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eliminated.

One possibility, considered remote, is that they might create more surfaces in the bay upon which the native oyster larvae can grow. More likely: The exotics will grab all the best habitat, and form reefs unsuitable for local fish and invertebrates.

"We're really concerned about these nonnative oysters out-competing the native oysters," said Abe Doherty at the coastal conservancy.

Nobody knows how the exotic oysters got here.

The ones that were found could be part of an invading horde fully adapted to bay life. Or they could be aged survivors of a single travel party, perhaps grown from larvae dumped in the ballast discharge of an oceangoing ship.

It might even be possible to prevent their taking hold in the bay, although efforts to deal with other invasive species have rarely succeeded.

"We have a chance," Cohen said. "We don't know if they're actively reproducing in the bay yet."

For more information about exotic species in the bay, see [www.exoticguide.org](http://www.exoticguide.org).

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