

Cross-training Staff, Supportive Community and Business Resiliency Key to Award-winning Lennox Island Mi'kmaq First Nation Shellfish Hatchery

Business is booming at the Bideford Shellfish Hatchery says Mike Randall, executive director of Lennox Island Development Corporation. Launched in the spring of 2016, Bideford is the only Indigenous-owned and operated oyster seed facility in Atlantic Canada.

“There’s a huge demand for our oyster seed because of its quality and reliability,” Randall says.

He credits much of their success to a well-trained and dedicated staff, all of whom are from Lennox Island Mi'kmaq First Nation. This community of 450 members is located in Malpeque Bay off the northwest coast of Prince Edward Island.

“We’re creating life here. Things can go south really fast and we could lose an entire spawn. That’s why everyone is cross-trained and able to do anything at the hatchery from cutting the grass to doing chemistry in the lab to scrubbing out rearing tanks.”

“We want everyone to be ‘MacGyvers,’” he continued, referencing the hero from the TV series in the late 1980s who could create problem-solving devices out of common items.

Bideford is the home of the wild oyster industry and the world-famous Malpeque oyster, but disease has greatly reduced the wild oyster population. Oyster farming took over but there was only one Atlantic Canada source for oyster seed, which is the larval stage when an oyster bonds to shells or another hard surface.

Lennox Island First Nation saw an opportunity to develop an oyster hatchery in the Bideford River Marine Centre, a long-shuttered federal government research station which the community had previously acquired. With funding from federal and provincial governments, the building was retrofitted and refurbished.

Obtaining funding can involve a lot of hard work but it’s important for any new enterprise advises Randall. Finding funding sources requires networking and maintaining relationships while getting the funding



requires being knowledgeable, understanding money and having a solid business and design plan. “You also need a clear roadmap on how to execute your plan,” he says.

The community hired a hatchery expert to design the facility and then a well-connected shellfish aquaculture veteran to be the manager. “He trained the workers and was a great mentor,” said Randall.

Successfully growing oyster seed is an exacting business. It requires very specific water chemistry and temperature to grow the seed from spawning through its life stages to the shipment of a healthy, disease-resistant product. That’s why hiring the right kind of people is so important, says Randall. “They need to be willing to do whatever job needs doing, to be part of a team with a common purpose, and to be honest.”

“If a mistake is made, they have to be honest so we can learn and fix it. No one is going to get in trouble for a mistake.”

Being resilient is also crucial. When something goes wrong it's important to "wind back the clock" to learn what happened and fix it quickly.

Randall says the people at Bideford hatchery are motivated to make it successful to both benefit the community and show the world what they can do. In 2018, Bideford won the Ulnooweg Entrepreneur Award for Aboriginal Government Enterprise of the Year.

Support for the hatchery in the community has also been strong, he added. "This is a result of being upfront regarding any problems or delays."

The success of the hatchery enabled Lennox Island to start their own oyster farm in 2019 using their own seed. "We're learning and the oysters are growing beautifully. They are marketed as 'Lennox Island Choice Oysters.'"

The community has a lot of capacity to expand both the farm and the hatchery, with the latter now growing quahogs.

"There are a lot of great jobs in the aquaculture industry," says Randall. "We're re-creating our old ways using modern technology."



Best Practise:
*Capacity Building through
Training and Mentorships*

