

*The high modernist moment: Oysters, knowledge production, and conservation in the Progressive era, 1878–1917*

Hanes, Samuel (2008)

Abstract: Oysters had a long history on the U.S. east coast of local-level management and this dissertation explores the transition to from local to state oysters management between 1880 and 1920. To do so, it uses James C. Scott's description of "high modernism." Scott defines high modernism as visionary state planning with sweeping restructuring that simplify natural and social systems in an effort to make them more legible for greater control. According to Scott, simplification leads to unintended consequences and failure because it undermines social and environmental complexity. In marine fisheries, high modernism takes the form of privatization and aquaculture. Oysters were the largest U.S. fishery in the late 1800s and they were the first case where U.S. government officials and scientists tried to privatize a marine fishery. Government aquaculture experiments were meant to aid the privatization effort. This study explores what led to this form of high modernism in marine fisheries management. In addition, the dissertation examines how these radical reform efforts failed due to resistance from oystermen and environmental difficulties with aquaculture. The dissertation argue that instead of high modernist reform, the new state agencies rationalized older management practices, which formed the basis for state-level management. The older oyster management system grew out of conflicts over oysters and contained a complex mix of practices and property rights, many of which were poorly or ambivalently upheld. The new state management agencies rationalized these older practices, and this required making them more bureaucratic. Much of the early efforts of the state agencies were directed toward producing knowledge for this end.