Guardians of the Ocean: Rallying Resilient Oyster Tourism

Central Coast, Australia
Destination Central Coast (Central Coast Council)
Regional Areas (including counties, regions, provinces)
Visitor Experience & Destination Management

Summary of Good Practice Story

On Australia's Central Coast, the oyster industry supporting 230 farms across 30 estuaries has been repeatedly devastated since 2004 by QX disease, Pacific Oyster Mortality Syndrome, and severe flooding — with some farms losing up to 99% of stock, and Hawkesbury River operators like Adam Millward operating just five to six weeks some years with no insurance available. Rather than depending on oyster production alone, farmers diversified into agritourism: Broken Bay Pearl Farm (led by 2021 Australian Farmer of the Year James Brown) built a "Shellar Door" boat experience and achieved national ECO Certification in 2026, Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed and Sydney Oyster Farm Tours (NSW's first ECO Certified oyster farm) opened shucking workshops and in-water dining, all supported by Destination Central Coast's marketing and the region's 2026-2029 Destination Management Plan identifying oysters as an "Emerging Strength." This drove a 27% year-on-year rise in off-peak winter visitation at Broken Bay Pearl Farm and helped Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed draw 80% of customers from outside the region, including strong Chinese visitor interest. The lesson: diversification into visitor experiences isn't optional for climate-exposed food producers — it's essential resilience, built through destination-wide collaboration rather than any single breakthrough moment.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
We're about to take you to Australia, specifically one of its first certified ECO Destinations. Just 45 minutes north of Sydney lies the Central Coast, where your itinerary centres on bivalves, floods, passionate farmers and farmgate-to-plate food. Here, the Pacific Ocean meets lush hinterland through a network of waterways, leading to the Lower Hawkesbury River and a small precinct of tourism operators (two ECO Certified) driving sustainable aquaculture along the NSW Oyster Trail.

In Mooney Mooney, oyster farmers are part of a state-wide industry spanning 230 farms across 30 estuaries, supporting thousands of jobs across production, processing, retail and agritourism. Their work is at the heart of a nationally recognised culinary scene tied closely to the health of land and waterways. Oysters are central to the Coast's sustainable and tourism identity, with farmers producing Sydney Rock, Pacific, Angasi and Akoya varieties - flavours shaped by season and place, much like wine and terroir.

In 2026, the local oyster scene continues to evolve as farmers respond to environmental pressures. As lifelong farmer Adam Millward reflects, "When everything's in sync it's a really productive system". But what happens when it's not?

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
The Central Coast is responding to growing demand for immersive oyster tourism with 84% of global travellers seeking agritourism experiences and rising interest in authentic aquaculture encounters (Tourism Research Australia-Agritourism Report 2025; NVS & IVS, YE Dec2024). There's a clear opportunity to extend stays, increase visitor spend and support regional dispersal.

This story is not driven by growth alone; it's shaped by resilience. Oyster farming operates at the frontline of environmental change, where floods, water quality and shifting conditions directly impact livelihoods and ecosystems. As natural water filters (up to 180 litres a day!), oysters are vital to estuary health, placing them at the intersection of environment, economy and visitor experience.

Despite recognition in the Central Coast Destination Management Plan 2026-2029 (CCDMP), which identifies oyster tourism as a key opportunity alongside barriers such as low awareness, limited infrastructure and complex planning, mother nature has repeatedly disrupted progress. Since 2004, disease, parasites and natural disasters have caused significant stock loss, with some farms operating just a few weeks a year and others completely wiped overnight. A growing realisation is the risk is no longer sustainable. As one oyster farmer reflects, "There's no single breakthrough moment…it's about adapting, surviving and continuing to evolve…the goal became building something not solely dependent on oyster production."

The Vision: What you set out to do
Oysters offer a premium, place-based experience aligned with Australian food tourism, and Destination Central Coast has led a coordinated response to growing agritourism demand.

In 2022, NSW Government reforms enabled farm diversification, creating opportunities to elevate oysters locally. The NSW Visitor Economy Strategy 2035 identifies agritourism as a key growth sector, with a commitment to double aquaculture farmgate value to $300M by 2030. Destination NSW's First Program further support operators to promote experiences to domestic and international markets.

Locally, the CCDMP (Actions 3.9.1–3.9.2) identifies oysters as an 'Emerging Strength', positioning food and produce as core tourism assets, with a focus on storytelling and 'meet the maker' experiences, and a collaborative approach to agri-product development and marketing. The shift has been gradual. Deb from Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed says, "People started staying longer…it just grew organically. The goal became clear: build something not only dependent on oyster production."
Supporting diversification through agritourism builds resilience, increases visibility and drives direct spend to family-run businesses. "It's about keeping the business going," says Deb, "but also sharing what happens out here with visitors."

The Journey: How change happened
Kidneys of the river. Guardians of the ocean. Carbon sequestering bivalves. However you see them, oysters are quiet sustainability advocates.

To understand the Central Coast's oyster industry, shaped by disaster, adaptation and collaboration, you must meet the 'river folk' of Mooney Mooney.
For Adam Millward, the river has always been home. Growing up across the bank in Brooklyn, he spent his childhood counting down the hours until he could join his father, a prawn fisherman, on the Hawkesbury. Today, that river defines his livelihood as an oyster farmer. "These days you have to diversify. You can't rely on oysters alone anymore," he says, reflecting on the loss of most of his stock to QX disease. "That's the reality of farming in this environment. You're always working with nature."

This need to adapt has driven change across the region. Operators like Broken Bay Pearl Farm have reimagined oyster farming. Led by marine biologist and Australian Farmer of the Year 2021, James Brown, the farm blends production with visitor experience. "We exist to inspire a greater connection between people and planet," he says. "We believe every oyster has a story. Sometimes, it ends with a pearl."

As part of an 80 year Australian pearling legacy, Broken Bay Pearl Farm achieved national ECO Certification in 2026, aligning with Destination Central Coast's ecotourism focus. Their 'Shellar

Door' experience invites visitors to explore the farm by boat, learn local cultural and colonial history, and enjoy oysters overlooking Spectacle Island. "Oyster farming is rare and fascinating," says Liz Grist, Oyster Sales and Distribution, "It's great to be part of something so unique and culturally significant." Since opening to visitors in 2018, the farm model diversified, recording a 27% YoY increase in off peak winter visitation in 2025 and introducing multilingual sessions for South East Asian markets.

Next door, Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed tells a similar resilient story. Run by Deb and Pete for over 20 years from first spat to final shuck, their 17.5ha farm produces around 1.5 million oysters across five leases, attracting domestic and international visitors seeking fresh, local produce.
Sydney Oyster Farm Tours, managed by second and third generation farmers, has expanded its offering, becoming NSW's first ECO Certified oyster farm and in water dining experience. "Sustainability is everything to us," says Sheridan. "Quite a few of us have now gained ECO Certification… we're really working towards becoming a green destination."

Recent growth of the oyster experience is supported by coordinated action, with Destination Central Coast elevating oyster tourism across destination marketing channels, itineraries and ECO Certification pathways, strengthening operator capability and collaboration to boost awareness.

Despite clear CCDMP guidance, nature has other ideas. From 2004, QX disease devastated Sydney Rock Oysters. From 2007, recovery through 'triploid' Pacific Oysters was short lived, with Pacific Oyster Mortality Syndrome striking in 2011. Devastating flooding from 2020 to 2022 caused losses of up to 99% in some waterways. In 2021, Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed operated for just 5-6 weeks, Westray Oysters reported a 60% loss, and Broken Bay Pearl Farm lost most of its 2-3 million Akoya oysters – with a few survivors to rebuild. Today, stock has recovered to a few million, mostly juvenile. Often there's no warning; healthy oysters can be wiped overnight.
In 2026 the industry is rebuilding, with hopes for mature oysters in 2027, despite a new virus. Farmers trial new approaches, breed from survivors i.e. just 70 oysters from a sample of 1,000 form future stock.

"There's no insurance," Adam says, "But you try new things. You keep going." Persistence underpins the Central Coast's transformation, where adversity drives innovation. Farmers, operators and destination managers now build a more resilient, sustainable and experience led industry.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
Local tourism organisation, Destination Central Coast play a vital role in building awareness of the oyster industry. Guided by the CCDMP 2026-2029, the focus is on collaboration between

destination managers and operators to grow sustainable aquaculture and immersive, nature-based experiences.

Destination marketing promotes oyster tourism as a top visitor experience, reaching 4.8M domestic and international travellers who visit annually. Destination-led content amplifies this across owned and earned channels. On LoveCentralCoast.com, editorial storytelling, oyster guides and certification all elevate local producers.

Love Central Coast social media activity (June 2025-June 2026) generated 369,388 views, 26,507 reach and 6,440 interactions, supported by influencer partnerships. A standout Instagram Reel achieved 259k views; 4k interactions. PR reinforced this reach, including a live TODAY Show weather cross at Mooney Mooney (AVE $340,067), alongside editorial promoting premium coastal experiences.

Exposure has translated into results. Hawkesbury River Oyster Shed report 80% of customers from outside the region, with strong international visitation and Chinese travellers finding them via ‘Little Red Book’. Operators have diversified through shucking workshops, boat tours and in-water dining.

Partnerships are driving new revenue and shared storytelling. Broken Bay Pearl Farm employs nearby farmers like Adam while showcasing local products like Adri’s Gingerbread, Moore’s Pearl Crush Gin and Take 3 for the Sea jewellery. Immersive experiences invite guests onto leases to learn about sustainable aquaculture pre-tasting fresh oysters. “This adds a real sensory layer to the experience and helps people connect more deeply with the place,” says Jodi Chant, Marketing Manager.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn

Many passionate people work in pearling, seafood and aquaculture with one learning clear: diversification isn’t optional, it’s essential. It must be supported by sustainable destination management and marketing, with operator collaboration key to long-term survival.

Working with nature means managing non-stop variables, (water quality, temperature, runoff, pollution, disease) but it’s how this is navigated as a community that matters. Hardship offers the seedlings for resilience and oyster farmers are a rare breed of tough!

Hope is on the horizon, with growing opportunities to share the river’s story, support recovery and prompt more research. Our region is shifting to higher-yield, quality visitation, increasing economic return while reducing reliance on volume-driven growth to support a more sustainable visitor economy.

Perhaps our greatest reflection is seeing two Central Coast oyster farms achieve ECO Certification from 2023 to 2026, echoing the value of farming practices that support healthy marine environments. i.e. Broken Bay Pearl Farm use natural weed control and native Indigenous garden beds to help biodiversity.

Encouraging sustainable visitor behaviour is key, with initiatives like free transfers from Hawkesbury River Train Station (linked to Sydney) helping reduce car travel to Mooney Mooney and manage peak visitor flow. Certification shows the cascading impact of destination-wide efforts, aligned with Tourism Australia's 'Green is our Gold' initiative.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

This World Oyster Day on 5 August 2026, consider the story beneath every freshly shucked oyster as part of the experience. What waterway did it grow in? How many litres of water did it filter? Was it hand-harvested by someone like Adam, continuing a generational legacy?

This is one story from the Central Coast's wider river community, reflecting a broader agritourism shift as operators diversify into tourism, hospitality and new income streams to support their farmgates. In Mooney Mooney, operators are exploring grant opportunities to support aquaculture and event development, while also seeking to engage local schools in educating future generations about oyster farming and river health.

Here at the confluence of opportunity and challenge, we see growing demand for luxury, immersive waterfront experiences on the Central Coast celebrating its thriving culinary and artisanal scene. At Mooney Mooney, farming equipment sits piled and idle awaiting stock recovery expected by November 2027 in time for peak season. Despite this, farmers continue to invest, trial new technologies and work the river.

Awards or Certifications

Destination Central Coast

- Certified ECO Destination – Ecotourism; since 2022; Ecotourism Australia
- Finalist - Marketing & Communications for Impact; 2025 National Banksia Sustainability Awards
- Finalist - Supporting Local Enterprise (Industry Programs); 2025 NSW Local Government Excellence Awards

Broken Bay Pearl Farm

- ECO Certified (2026); Strive 4 Sustainability Scorecard; Ecotourism Australia
- EarthCheck Sustainability Micro-credentials
- Gold - Outstanding Outdoor Experience; 2025 BusinessNSW Awards
- Finalist - Outstanding Outdoor Experience & Outstanding Food Experience; 2025 Central Coast Visitor Economy Awards

- Winner - Outstanding Visitor Experience; 2023 BusinessNSW Central Coast
- Australian Farmer of the Year (2020/2021): Managing Director James Brown; first time in Australian history a representative from the aquaculture and pearling industry achieved this.

Sydney Oyster Farm Tours
- ECO Certified (2023); Strive 4 Sustainability Scorecard; Ecotourism Australia
- Finalist - 2025 NSW Top Tour Guide Award
- Central Coast Business of the Year & Excellence in Sustainability; 2023 Central Coast Business Awards
- Gold Award - Ecotourism & Take 3 For the Sea Award for Visitor Litter Prevention; 2023 NSW Tourism Awards

Web Articles

Love Central Coast Destination Website:
- Oyster Guide: https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/local-oyster-guide

- Shellabrate with Oysters: https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/shellabrate-with-oysters-on-the-central-coast

- ECO Certification announcements: https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/oyster-farm-tours-national-eco-certification

https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/central-coast-pearl-farm-achieves-eco-certification

- Grant-funded 'Waterways' content: https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/news/the-central-coast-below-the-surface-fishing-prawning-and-oysters

- PR examples: https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/9174124/romantic-travel-central-coasts-hidden-appeal-to-couples/

https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1941761733214237

- State and National Tourism Industry: https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/newsroom/sustainability-worth-celebrating-on-the-central-coast

https://media.destinationnsw.com.au/best-oysters-along-nsw-coast

https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/newsroom/celebrate-world-oyster-day-in-nsw

Other Relevant Links

o VIDEO: Mooney Mooney:
https://youtu.be/8tZu6Sgly4Y?si=btO7_jHrJLGwtsDQ

o Central Coast Sustainability Pledge:
https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/sustainability-pledge

o Central Coast Destination Management Plan 2026-29:
https://www.lovecentralcoast.com/sites/default/files/2026-06/Central%20Coast%20Destination%20Management%20Plan%202026-2029%20Final_spreads.pdf

o State and National Tourism Industry:
https://www.tourism.australia.com/en/insights/consumer-research/future-of-demand.html

https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/insights/nsw-visitor-experiences-state-of-play

https://www.tra.gov.au/en/research-reports/agritourism-in-australia

Quotes or Testimonials

“Most people don’t know who we are, or how we do what we do. We’re the unknown artisans of the ocean.” – Pearls of Australia

“Pearls are the only intrinsically sustainable precious gem on the planet today. They are the only previous gem born within a living organism – the oyster.” – Pearls of Australia

“James Brown, our Managing Director who grew up at Cygnet Bay in the remote Kimberley’s of Western Australia, always talks highly of the farmers in the Central Coast region…he says it always feels like home when he is back on the river here.” – Jodi Chant, Broken Bay Pearl Farm

“We’ve seen a strong shift toward visitors wanting a more complete understanding of aquaculture and the waterways themselves… From a sustainability perspective, our approach has always been grounded in working with the environment we rely on. The health of the water directly impacts everything we do, so many of our practices are about minimising impact and supporting that ecosystem.” – Jodi Chant, Broken Bay Pearl Farm

“You can see how good the river can be. When conditions are right, the oysters grow incredibly quickly - from just a few millimetres to noticeable growth in days. That tells you how healthy the river can be. They’re feeding, growing, everything’s working. It’s a really productive system… But it’s also a river system that’s heavily influenced by weather, freshwater, and everything

coming down from upstream. And that's just the reality of farming in this environment. You're working with nature the whole time." – Adam Millward, Mooney Mooney Oyster Farmer

"The Lower Hawkesbury River on the Central Coast is a magical place. Come for the scenery, stay for the experience and taste oysters that truly reflect where they're from. It's not just a visit, it's a chance to slow down, connect with nature, and enjoy something rare: a place where the environment, the oysters, and the pearls are all part of the same story." – Liz Grist, Broken Bay Pearl Farm