



## *The More Things Change*

### *Why Recreational Culture Kills Island Life*

*George Putz*

Older New Englanders will recall what Cape Cod was like 40 years ago, Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket 30 years ago, and the southern Maine beaches 20 years ago. All of these places have become very different from what they were. Among other things, these places used to be different kinds of places, unique places, not only with different kinds of geography and natural history, but also different kinds of heritage, uses of the English language, and patterns of interaction. By simple observation we understand that a pandemic kind of phenomenon happens because of recreational development. All these places are becoming more and more alike.

Our problem is not lack of data but lack of vision. I call it "undersight" — an inability to look up and see what is before us. Over the past 20 years, on my own island of Vinalhaven, we have seen the collapse of the "fish house culture" in favor of a more mercantile, recreational social structure. With an ever-larger number of supercilious and superfluous itinerant bodies infusing the landscape, the institutional fabric changes over time. I live in a place that has a work ethic — where you are a valuable human being if you're hammering with your hammer and sawing with your saw, or repairing a net; where you are busy. And if you're on the street, you're on the street to get something, on errands. You are occupied. As there begin to be larger numbers of physical bodies just wandering around, something in you gets a little rattled. I'm not talking about the pestiferous aspects of this; I'm talking about the symbolic ones. You know: "What the hell are these people doing here?"

On Vinalhaven we used to get away fine with one part-time local constable. Now, with no increase

*Allen Island wharf*



PETER RALSTON (2)

in year-round population, the island requires three officers — these because of the encroachment of essentially displaced itinerant personalities and their effects on the cultural fabric. As these newcomers increase, social requirements escalate by orders of magnitude.

You begin to lose poor people. As there come more and more itinerant bodies, more people ask about properties for sale. And they start buying them, placing demand pressure on the land. Land prices go up, pressure on the tax base increases, and the first to be displaced are the poor.

Then you also begin to lose the land-owning lower middle class, because they can no longer stand these burdens (or temptations) either. As this patrimonial alienation occurs, and you begin losing your poor and lower middle class working groups, this gradually saws away at the health of the community. In light of established mercantile values, this sounds like an odd thing to say, but the presence of these people *is* critical to community health. When they are gone, you don't have a community any more because you don't have a critical mass....

For all Vinalhaven's 172 miles of twisted, ledgy shoreline, there is only about a half mile of it, total, appropriate to sustain the wharves, fish houses, assorted piles of rope, traps, nets, and other necessary paraphernalia of the commercial fishing community — the working waterfront. When you begin to nibble away at even tiny bits of this truly useful shoreside land, you are literally cutting the ground out from beneath a community's traditional lifeways.

Just as soon as you see an interest in converting to recreational uses, the game is basically already over, even for the highline fishermen, the quarter-million-dollar-cash-turnover guys who can afford their required work spaces. Beyond the costs of wharfage and fish houses, places to stack gear, and so on, when the waterfront market is tuned to recreation, you get more and more people who don't like the smell of bait, piles of encrusted rope, and guys who say things like "fuck" in loud voices, all day and night, sometimes little else. Ostensibly genteel people don't like to hear that.

And eventually the new genteel sensibilities will prevail by sheer economic clout. Take banking, for example. Banking practice is one of the first things to change when a community's economic focus shifts. If a loan officer in an island branch bank has a choice to make between an apparently iffy \$15,000 loan for electronic fishing equipment, using the boat as collateral, and the same amount of loan toward a terrestrial recreational establishment, you can forget the electronics. Risk capital is just like any other addictive predication — you go with the best, least risky

option available.

Expectations shift. The community becomes "dispirited" as it shifts from the Masonic order, the Red Men, or other sorts of secret societies and religious groups, where there's a direct connection to the mysticism of the family, of what it means to be a man or woman, wherein life itself is fused with mystery. All this gets pared away, until you have a much more simple-minded, pragmatic, symbolically impoverished institutional life.

And this dispiritedness, sadly, works its way into the next generation. For 200 years of island history, a 12-year-old boy, if he was going to amount to anything, was going to be a fisherman, a boatbuilder, or in some other way a principal in the maritime community.

There are no more roller skates on the street or sidewalk. There is no bike with a broken sprocket, and there isn't any laundry flapping in the breeze or gossip going back and forth between the houses. It's just a dead place, with the wind whistling through the eaves. And those kids that aren't there anymore aren't in school becoming distinct, proud islanders. We've not only changed history in this regard; we've in a large part eliminated it. Through oversight we have allowed yet another vibrant part of cultural diversity to slip away from our human family.

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