



Peter Ralston (2)

From the Helm

Peter Ralston was a freelance photographer and I was a freelance writer when Betsy Wyeth introduced us on Allen Island in 1980, three years before starting the Island Institute and four years before launching the first *Island Journal*, now 25 years ago.

Peter and I had both come from places where local beauty and local culture had been badly marred by the kind of thoughtless development that had trampled over our connections to places that had been important in our childhoods. We sensed the same would likely happen to Maine's islands if no one did anything about it.

Whatever else we thought we were doing in starting the Island Institute, we chose to organize around the only two tools we had readily at hand: a camera and pen, which is why we decided to launch the Island Institute with a publication, *Island Journal*. We nominated each other as editor and art director because there was no one to object. We recruited George Putz, a gifted writer and lunatic genius from Vinalhaven, as senior editor; Doug Alvord, a graphic artist, to design the first *Island Journal*; and Ted Rodman, whom we borrowed from the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School, to serve as production director.

To say that we were green is to say that the Irish countryside in spring is green. When an article did not fit on a page, we reduced the point size of the text or width of the column to make it fit. We had no real grasp of typography, grid, deadlines, printing costs, distribution or editorial consistency. But we thought we knew good writing when we read it and a good image when we saw one. George Putz picked the cover of the first *Island Journal*, “Sheep in a Dory,” the instant he saw it, even though in Peter’s mind it was an indifferent photograph.

For that first issue, we also contacted 40 writers to tell us what made Maine’s islands meaningful to them and had an overwhelming response from islanders and writers to whom we could offer nothing other than space in the first issue. The section of the first *Island Journal* called “Radio Waves” contained columns from year-round islanders, which presaged *Inter-Island News* and *The Working Waterfront*, launched in 1987 and 1993 respectively. Many of those first voices are still with us: Donna Rogers still writes from Matinicus, Katy Boegel from Monhegan, and Steve Miller from Islesboro. Phil Crossman inherited his writerly voice from his mother, Pat Crossman, one of our original writers from Vinalhaven. Phil’s musings initially appeared in *The Working Waterfront*, and later became the basis for his wry essay collection, *Away Happens*.

We believed, as only the young and naive can unblushingly believe, that we knew what made life on Maine islands rare and interesting. We wrote on the first page of *Island Journal*,

“Although we can and do brag about our nesting eagles, the antics of whales and seals and the hundreds of ‘deserted’ island beaches, it is really the Maine islanders and the resource-based culture on which islanders depend that makes the archipelago wholly unique in the nation.”

That sentence remains the core editorial philosophy of *Island Journal*. The “look” of *Island Journal* has always been and remains the view through Peter Ralston’s incredible eye,

and he is widely and rightly regarded as the most talented and enduring photographer working on the coast and islands today.

As the 25th anniversary of the first *Island Journal* approached, we began thinking about how to celebrate the milestone. We had already published “the best of,” on *Island Journal*’s 20th anniversary. It occurred to us that because we publish *Island Journal* once a year, the articles and images that appear on its pages often represent the early-firing synopses of ideas, many of which ultimately mature into ongoing programs and activities we conduct with our year-round and summer island partners in Maine’s 15 island communities and along Maine’s 5,000-plus-mile saltwater coastline. As we look back over the past 25 years of *Island Journal*, we see stories from earlier issues as “way-points” in the journey.

Early articles on island schools grew into today’s large scholarship program to benefit island students and a technology education program (CREST) that provides students in remote communities with state-of-the-art tools and training in the context of place-based learning. The stories on working waterfronts grew into the passage of America’s first constitutional referendum providing property tax relief for fishing properties along the coast and islands, one of the first community-supported fisheries projects in the United States. Stories written



from the perspective of fishermen developed into a successful marketing and branding partnership with a group of conservation-minded Port Clyde fishermen. The focus on islanders struggling to maintain year-round communities grew into the Island Fellows program, in which over 70 recent college graduates with undergraduate or master’s degrees have spent up to two years working on local community priorities. The folios highlighting island artists helped spark the Archipelago store and gallery in our Main Street building. Our newest program focuses on how to capture abundant island and offshore wind resources that have remained unexploited since the eclipse of the age of merchant sail a hundred years ago.

There are other examples from past stories that you can read about within these pages.

Today we are still a place where words and images, visions and revisions come together in ideas from countless sources that we help put to work.

We are looking forward to the next 25 years and always appreciate hearing from you.

Philip Conkling