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A Closer Look

Maine leads in preserving working waterfront

By Daniel Dunkle
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(Sep 25): *This is the first of a three-part series on Our Changing Waterfront. Part two will look at the sardine industry in Midcoast Maine.*

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When looking at the state of the working waterfront in Midcoast Maine today, the bad news is that fishermen are struggling with lack of access to the water and rising costs of doing business.



Ryan Haskel, left, and Ryan Marves of North Haven load bait Sept. 22 at the Rockland Fish Pier. (Photo by Daniel Dunkle)

The good news is that Maine has become a leader among coastal states in preserving what remains of the working waterfront and creating new models for business success along the coast.

"The biggest change statewide, if not nationwide, has been in the ownership of the waterfront," said St. George harbormaster David Schmanska.

In many cases, he said it has been more profitable for fishermen to sell their waterfront properties to wealthy people, often from away, who use them for condominiums or waterfront homes. What was working waterfront has been

converted to other uses, and Schmanska said local people can no longer afford to live and fish in the town where they grew up.

Maine Lobstermen's Association President David Cousens of South Thomaston said the state has lost most of its working waterfront. Many privately owned docks and wharves in the South Thomaston area used to be owned by little fishing families, but now many of them are gone, sold off to people from out of state for use as real estate rather than working waterfront.

"They're pushing the commercial operations out," he said.

Fishermen, said Cousens, are faced with the decision of whether to sell their properties for a big check now, or work the property for 10 years to make the same amount of money.

As a result, he said more and more lobster fishermen will be working as part of co-ops or for larger companies instead of working independently on their own wharves.



Along the waterfront in Port Clyde. (Photo by Daniel Dunkle)

Cousens said none of the fisheries are doing well now, including lobster. The price of lobster is down, the cost of doing business is up, and banks are not loaning as much money. Some fishermen are having trouble making payments on their boats. In addition, there has been a recent shortage of bait.

Rising fuel costs, said Cousens, affect every aspect of the lobster fishing industry. Petroleum is used in the production of the ropes, buoys and other equipment, driving costs up astronomically. The fishermen also face the cost of modifying their equipment to protect right whales in the near future.

Schmanska said there has been a dramatic increase in pleasure boat traffic in St. George at the expense of working waterfront.

"People who move in often have no historic connection to the area," he said, adding they move into houses on the waterfront and then complain about fishing boats starting up at 5 a.m. People complain about the smell, the noise and the lights involved in commercial fishing operations.

"I was approached years ago with a petition to turn the volume down on the Whitehead fog horn," Schmanska said.

"I asked, 'Would you rather have the fog horn or a ship on the rocks in front of your place?'"

"There is very little public access for commercial fishermen," Schmanska said. "They are always at risk. It might be something as simple as a path from Route 131 to a clam flat. People think of a dock, but a new owner could say no to the clammers and post a 'No Trespassing' sign. That's their right."

Like Cousens, Schmanska believes the era of the independent fisherman going it alone has ended. In the future, fishermen are going to have to work together in groups or get government assistance.

When Island Institute President Philip Conkling talks about the working waterfront, he doesn't speak anecdotally. He has exact figures. In 2005, the Island Institute and its partners conducted a study of Maine's 142 coastal towns and cities. The study found that of Maine's 5,300 miles of coastline (including all of the peninsulas and island coasts), 20 miles of working waterfront access remain. The institute issued a report called "The Last 20 Miles."



Island Institute President Philip Conkling (Photo by Daniel Dunkle)

"We used to say that there were 3,000 miles of coastline," Conkling said. "In the '90s, we said there were 30 miles of working waterfront coastline."

"That's a decrease of a third," he said. "A third of it has been transformed over the last decade."

Conkling said that is only part of the story. "The big news, in my opinion, is that the state of Maine is really focused

on this as a problem," he said.

In 2006, voters of the state passed a constitutional referendum providing a tax break for commercial fishermen. The measure is sometimes called the "current use" tax incentive, and it allows working waterfront properties to be taxed based on their current use in commercial fishing, use rather than on their "highest and best" use if fully developed. In the past, such properties were taxed according to the amount they would be worth if purchased for private homes, restaurants, marinas or whatever use had the highest value.



Vessels are moored in Port Clyde. (Photo by Daniel Dunkle)

Another sign of Maine's leadership was evident at a Sept. 13 celebration in Port Clyde of the restoration and expansion of the historic wharf at the Fishermen's Co-op.

The state provided \$340,000 of the cost of the project, according to Deirdre Gilbert of the Maine Department of Marine Resources. The project was part of the Working Waterfront Access Pilot Program, which offers grants to preserve working waterfront. As part of the grant agreement, the wharf must be preserved for commercial fishing operations in perpetuity.

The three-year-old program uses voter-approved bond funds to invest in economically significant waterfront properties, according to Hugh Cowperthwaite of Coastal Enterprises Inc. In 2005, state voters approved \$2 million for the program, and in 2007 voters set aside another \$3 million. The money is being used to fund projects statewide.

The wharf will support 28 lobster boats that annually land more than 600,000 pounds of lobster, and nine ground fishing boats that land 1.5 million pounds of shrimp and fish per year, according to a press release from the Island Institute. The dock is 89 feet long and 30 feet wide.

Conkling said what is happening to Maine's working waterfront has already happened elsewhere. "Working waterfronts have been completely eclipsed in vast sections of the rest of the Atlantic coast," he said. "They're gone." In their place are hotels and condominiums.

Maine has become a leader in the fight to preserve working waterfront. "We've gone all over the country making presentations about what Maine has done including its constitutional referendum," Conkling said.

Ground fisherman Glen Libby of Port Clyde said the votes show that people in Maine are supportive of their fishermen. Libby is chairman of the Midcoast Fishermen's Association and president of the Midcoast Fishermen's Co-op.

He said 30 years ago, there were a lot of fish close to the shore, but now fishermen have to travel farther and farther from their home ports to catch the fish. "We didn't make any money this summer because the fuel costs were so high," Libby said.

Instead of giving up, the Port Clyde ground fishing fleet has changed its business model, launching its brand, Port Clyde Fresh Catch. Libby said fishermen used to try to catch as much fish as they could to make their money. "Markets pushed people to overfish to survive," he said.

Now they are using more environmentally friendly fishing practices and charging higher prices for fresh-off-the-boat fish marketed directly to local restaurants and markets.

The goal is to help build the fishery back up to sustain it for future generations by taking in fewer fish and reducing the amount of bycatch, or fish that are either too young or of the wrong species. They do this by changing the fishing gear they use, including using nets with wider gaps in the mesh that allow juvenile fish and smaller fish to escape.

"It is possible to sustain it," Libby said of the fishery. "We're changing the whole mindset in fishing."

Consumers, he said, want to know that the products they buy were harvested in an environmentally friendly way, and that has given the Port Clyde fishermen a marketing niche.

"We need area management to prevent people from coming in and fishing the wrong way," Libby said. The fishermen are pushing for the New England Fisheries Management Council to make gear changes mandatory for ground fishermen to prevent bycatch and overfishing.

"There's plenty to be grim about," Libby said. "I'm sick of being grim. I'm going to do everything I can to avert disaster, to make this thing sustainable."

Port Clyde boasts the second largest dragger fleet in Maine. "They're pretty stubborn down there," Libby said. "They don't want to be the last fishermen. They don't want to see it become a part of history."



Port Clyde harbor. (Photo by Daniel Dunkle)

Conkling sees the declines in the fisheries as a temporary problem, not a permanent one. "Believe me, a fishery will be here," he said. "We will be harvesting some of the incredible marine biodiversity that is out there, and hopefully

doing so in the future in a more sustainable way than we've done it in the past 20 years."

The key, he said, is preserving access to the water for the future generations.

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