

Critical Crossroads: Coastline Challenges in Preserving Maine's Working Waterfronts

by Monique Coombs

Sustaining Maine's vibrant working waterfronts is among the most complex and contentious of all shared ocean challenges. Rapid technological and demographic changes have put pressure on Maine fishing businesses and reshaped our economic landscape. Preserving traditional industries while absorbing new trends and preserving natural landscapes has become a delicate and emotional balancing act in Maine's coastal communities. As waves of change continue, it is worth exploring the nuances of the relationships among shared spaces, local businesses, and coastal community traditions to identify strategies to safeguard our working waterfronts for future generations.

Shared spaces play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of community and adding to the quality of life for Mainers. However, many of Maine's traditionally shared spaces, like the waterfront, have recently been undergoing extensive change due to COVID migration, climate-induced migration, and the burgeoning trend of remote work. This convergence is leading to an unprecedented influx of new residents and visitors to Maine. And because of this, iconic working waterfronts that line Maine's extensive coastline and the breathtaking expanse of the Atlantic Ocean that sustains fishing communities are experiencing heightened demands and usage. These shifts are reshaping the dynamics of space sharing and placing added strain on Maine fishermen and their businesses.

A good example of both working waterfront and shared spaces can be found in Harpswell, the community I call home and where my family primarily earns their living through fishing.

MEASURING THE COAST

Harpswell, Maine, has approximately 216 miles of coastline, the longest in the state and half the length of the entire state of Rhode Island (Ferguson 2018). Harpswell has three distinct communities: Harpswell Neck, Cundy's Harbor, and Orr's and Bailey Islands. Harpswell plays a vital role in providing shared working waterfront infrastructure for neighboring communities, with many fishermen from Phippsburg, Brunswick, and Freeport landing their lobster catch in Cundy's Harbor. This is not unique to Harpswell and examples of other communities with distinct villages and shared infrastructure include places like St. George (Port Clyde and Tenants Harbor) and Moosabec (Beals and Jonesport).

A 2017 report from the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, *Beyond the Bow*, states that there were 79 wharves zoned for commercial use in Harpswell, along with nine public landings (Grindle 2017). These wharves and landings vary significantly in size and capacity, with some capable of accommodating large fishing vessels and others limited to small watercraft like kayaks. Many of the commercial wharves do not grant public access due to safety concerns and other reasons. The report also highlighted that

among the more than 80 interviews conducted, nearly 70 percent of participants identified access on and off the water as a top concern within the fishing community.

In a project undertaken in 2022, led by Manomet in collaboration with Harpswell's Marine Resources Committee, a total of 83 intertidal access points were identified in Harpswell. Among these access points, 57 were located on private property, 17 on municipal property, 6 on land trust properties, and 3 on state-owned land. Twelve of these access points have been lost due to modifications in agreements with private landowners (Marissa McMahan, pers. comm.).

Conducting a comprehensive assessment of working waterfront access and infrastructure within a coastal community is critical to understanding the evolution of gains and losses over time. Recognizing the importance of this task, the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, in collaboration with Tidal Bay Consulting, developed the Working Waterfront Inventory Template, an innovative structured framework for data collection that equips communities with a standardized process to facilitate their own waterfront inventories.

By offering towns the necessary information for conducting their own evaluations, the template ensures the inclusion of historical access points while safeguarding data that may be deemed proprietary by fishermen and clam harvesters. It also fosters communication and cultivates relationships between town administrators, committee members, and the fishing community. This holistic approach addresses another central finding of the *Beyond the Bow* report, which highlighted a disconnect between the town and the fishing community.

Maine's working waterfronts are variable, evolving, and diverse. A working waterfront in Maine can be discrete like a small fish house tucked away on a rocky ledge, surrounded by lobster traps and rope. Or it can be obvious like a larger wharf equipped with skiffs for each lobster boat, a conveyor belt for moving lobster crates, and numerous workers bustling about. It may encompass a boatyard packed with vessels or a marina lined with high-end sailboats, or it can be a short trail through the woods leading to the intertidal zone. Recognizing these distinctions and understanding the significance of each type of working waterfront is crucial for planning a diverse and resilient future for these essential spaces. These differences, however, make measuring the working waterfront challenging because so much depends on how the working waterfront is defined.

Further exacerbating the challenge to measure and understand the impact of how these shared spaces are changing is the enduring conundrum of both valuing and measuring culture. Culture is subjective and highly nuanced. Fishing families tend to keep a significant portion of their cultural practices and way of life private due to past experiences and a sense of distrust towards those who often lead efforts to measure and document these aspects.

MEASURING COASTAL CULTURE

Curated authenticity happens when a romanticized version of what fishing looks like on the coast is used to market a product, sell a space, or curate an experience. This version can lead to an unintended consequence when new residents and people visiting Maine are taken aback by the presence of noisy boats, messy piles of rope, and pungent bait.

Another aspect to consider when measuring culture is *working-class appropriation*, which refers to the adoption of working-class culture, lifestyle, or aesthetic by nonworking-class individuals or groups. This appropriation can involve using clothing, language, or other cultural markers associated with the working class in a way that might be perceived as inauthentic or disrespectful and is exemplified in a recent meme that stated, "People love to wear Carhartt until it's time to do Carhartt work." The concept of working-class appropriation can be contentious because it raises questions about the power dynamics between different social and economic groups. It's often discussed in the context of larger conversations about cultural appropriation and the ethical considerations around stealing or imitating elements from marginalized or less privileged communities.

Long before recent developments, the Wabanaki thrived as the earliest inhabitants on the coast of Maine, engaging in fishing for sustenance and trade for thousands of years prior to the arrival of European settlers. Upon the settlers' arrival in the 1600s, they swiftly recognized the bountiful marine resources, including lobster, clams, and fish like cod and pollock, which became integral to their livelihoods, facilitating the growth and advancement of coastal towns. It's crucial to recognize that the intensified exploitation of these resources by settlers imposed adverse effects on indigenous tribes' traditional practices, their ways of sustaining themselves, and their overall way of life.

Honoring historical context, finding common ground, resolving conflict, examining nuance, and creating opportunities for dialogue and interaction are formidable tasks, but they are necessary tasks that all Mainers must face to continue sharing space on the waterfront.

COASTAL GENTRIFICATION— RISING SEAS AND RISING COSTS

Gentrification is the common thread that runs through COVID migration, climate-induced relocation, and the surging trend of remote work.

The inherent conflicts linked to gentrification in Maine's coastal communities are complex and include issues ranging from airboat noise complaints in Freeport to land ownership disputes in Phippsburg, permitting challenges in Boothbay Harbor, historical land use matters in Harpswell, and disputes concerning intertidal access in many coastal towns. These conflicts, which often arise due to the influx of new, often affluent, residents can quickly escalate. Those possessing both time and financial means can readily engage in efforts to amend ordinances, contest permit procedures, and procure legal representation, which creates a hostile environment for traditional industries. These actions not only consume valuable time and financial resources of both the town and local businesses, but also exemplify a form of social inequity.

This social inequity is most evident during lengthy public hearings. Fishermen and clam harvesters suffer financial losses and missed opportunities when forced to invest time away from their occupations to advocate for their businesses. In contrast, wealthier and retired residents face no such losses during these proceedings. When these same residents are able to hire professionals to draft letters and gather information supporting their requests and viewpoints, fishermen may feel powerless to change their situation, leading to learned helplessness.

Climate gentrification is a term that was coined by Harvard researchers in 2018 (Keenan et al. 2018). It is the result of climate migration, and it refers to a

phenomenon where the impacts of climate change, such as rising sea levels, extreme weather events, or increased flood risks, indirectly lead to shifts in property values and demographics within a particular area. As certain neighborhoods in places like Texas or California become less desirable due to climate-related hazards, people seek refuge in perceived safer locales in places like Maine.

This influx of new residents often results in increased property demand, higher real estate prices, and changes in the socioeconomic composition of the community. As a consequence, long-term residents, in coastal communities particularly fishing families, face challenges in affording the rising cost of living, and they are potentially being pushed out of their community.

Like many coastal communities, Harpswell has been experiencing growth over the past few years. This growth is reflected in the median home price, which in September 2021 was just over \$400,000 and two years later is nearly \$700,000. According to the Maine State Housing Authority, Harpswell is an unaffordable place to live because the median household income, which is just over \$80,000, is insufficient to buy a median-priced home.¹ This lack of affordability further challenges the ability of the younger generation, particularly young fishermen, to own a home in a coastal community like Harpswell.

The cost of doing business increases when fishermen have to move further away from the waterfront, especially if much of their gear is stored and maintained at their residence. Additional challenges include parking, maintaining a skiff, and traveling back and forth to prepare for a fishing trip such as getting bait, loading traps, and fueling the boat.

Economics are not the only thing affected by the various types of gentrifications occurring on Maine's coasts. *Solastalgia* describes a form of emotional stress or unease stemming from the noticeable alteration of the environment due to factors from climate change (Albrecht et al. 2007), or, as is the case on the coast of Maine, development. It reflects the emotional toll experienced when the surroundings that shape a person's identity and sense of place are negatively transformed, even while remaining physically present; it's like being homesick when you're already home.

Adding to the complexity of this issue, rules and ordinances geared towards climate change mitigation and adaptation are sometimes formulated without involving the insights or experiences of established residents and local fishing businesses. Unfortunately, this oversight can inadvertently compound challenges, escalate expenses, and restrict accessibility. It also perpetuates community resentment and conflict and constitutes environmental colonialism, a matter of particular concern, especially in the context of offshore wind development within the Gulf of Maine.

MAKING CONNECTIONS IN COASTAL COMMUNITIES

The Maine Coast Fishermen's Association has embarked on a multifaceted approach to addressing some of the challenges on the waterfront that we were able to pilot in Harpswell.

In partnership with the Harpswell Heritage Land Trust, *Harpswell Anchor*, Cundy's Harbor Library, and Holbrook Community Foundation, the association hosted "Living and Working in a Waterfront Community: A Conversation

Series." The panels were hosted in the different villages within the community, and topics included Fishing through the Seasons, Conversations from the Fishing Community, Access for the Fishing Community, and Etiquette on the Water. Each panel was also accompanied by an article in the *Harpswell Anchor*, the local newspaper. This same partnership produced a local guide, *Scuttlebutt: A Guide to Living and Working in a Waterfront Community*.²

Scuttlebutt includes information about the different types of fisheries in Harpswell, ways that homeowners can minimize their impacts on the town's coastal environment, tips for cooking local seafood, and information about preserving access for future generations to work on the waterfront along with many other resources. The title of the guide speaks to its intention to provide insider information, or the *scuttlebutt* to those living and working on Harpswell's waterfront to foster a sense of community and shared values.

There is no one way to save the working waterfront because it is not just one thing that is causing change in our coastal communities. Preserving Maine's coastal communities, protecting access to the waterfront, and honoring historical context while managing evolving trends because of COVID migration, climate-induced shifts, and the rise of remote work is an equilibrium that we have yet to conquer. Amid all these changes, the working waterfront is especially crucial because it is at the intersection of resiliency, local business, shared spaces, and tradition. As Maine's iconic working waterfronts face heightened demands and usage, the strain on local fishermen and their businesses is undeniable.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.mainehousing.org/charts/homebuyer-limits>
- 2 <https://harpswellanchor.org/2022/07/conversation-series-addresses-etiquette-on-the-water/>; <https://harpswellanchor.org/2022/06/waterfront-conversation-series-tackles-access-in-all-its-forms/>; <https://harpswellanchor.org/2022/04/waterfront-conversation-series-to-return-with-panels-on-access-etiquette/>; and <https://www.mainecoastfishermen.org/post/scuttlebutt-a-guide-to-living-working-in-a-waterfront-community>

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