

The Role of Aquatourism in Sustaining Maine's Working Waterfronts

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ABSTRACT

Adapted from agritourism, aquatourism is an experience that engages visitors with the landscape and stories of those who fish. According to the literature on the experience economy, the emotions generated by such experiences can translate into sales in real time as well as behavioral intentions to purchase in the future. What role can aquatourism play in sustaining working waterfronts? Using a mixed methods approach, this research uses interviews from producers and consumers to understand the value of aquatourism for the Maine fishing industry. This research shows that with a design that incorporates participation, people, product, and place, the fishing industry and its partners can engage visitors in memorable experiences that could transform them into loyal consumers of Maine fishery products.

INTRODUCTION

Picture this. While on vacation in midcoast Maine, you decide to take a tour of an oyster farm on the Damariscotta River. After squeezing into a kayak, you are launched into the river where the sunlight is dancing on the water. Your Maine Guide leads you to an oyster farm, where you learn that oysters filter the water, making the ecosystem cleaner for all species. After instruction, you use a knife to shuck the oyster in the palm of your hand then slurp it down in one gulp. Now, every time you go to a restaurant and see Maine oysters on the menu, you think about that day and want to order them. That's the magic of experience. Multiply these experiences by the millions who visit Maine every year.

According to a survey by Eventbrite,¹ 75 percent of millennials value experiences over things. Experiences not only engage the five senses but capture the heart, generating emotion, the strongest driver of memory (Kastenholz et al. 2018). Emotions drive sales of products in real time as well as behavioral intention to purchase following the event. This theory of consumer behavior forms the science behind the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Furthermore, emotional attachment to a product, such as those generated by memorable experiences, is the foundation of consumer loyalty (Theng So et al. 2013). Consumer loyalty not only

inspires repeat purchases, but also helps consumers ignore competitors (Song 2015).

Agritourism is “any income-generating activity conducted on a working farm or ranch for the enjoyment and education of visitors.” (Rilla et al. 2011: 57). This simple definition has been superseded by a conceptual framework that organizes activities into two tiers—core and peripheral—based on whether they occur on or off the farm and the degree to which they are directly related to agricultural production. Whether core or peripheral, activities may include direct sales, education, hospitality, outdoor recreation, and entertainment (Chase et al. 2018).

In terms of working fisheries, these types of experiences—called “mariculture,” “ocean tourism,” and “aquatourism”—can be hard to find. Here we stick with the last phrase, which is the term Maine Sea Grant has employed. About 50 of the state's 150 oyster farms welcome visitors, and 7 of the state's 5,000 working lobstermen operate boat tours.² Boat tours are part of the boat transportation sightseeing sector, which in Maine is comprised of 288 establishments generating \$43 million in sales.³ In addition to boat tours, many producers also offer activities similar to agritourism, including direct sales from docks and farmstands; hospitality through food carts, pop-ups, restaurants, and lodging; education, such as shucking lessons; and entertainment, such as festivals.

Although lobstering and oyster farming are quite different, tourists may see them as similar. Both are near-shore activities that can be demonstrated by an operator with a license that enables them to carry six or fewer passengers (Maine Sea Grant 2013a). Unlike a whale watch where sightings cannot be scripted or guaranteed, both oyster farm and lobster boat tours offer visitors a predictable opportunity to interact with the resource. Moreover, both types of tours actively engage the customer. On a lobster boat tour, visitors might wear rubber aprons and gloves while hauling traps,

measuring lobsters, banding claws, baiting pots, and returning them to the ocean floor. On an oyster farm tour, visitors may kayak to the farm, learn how to shuck the oyster, and eat them raw. Both types of tours typically offer narration from a captain, guide, or producer.

Both types of tours are also subject to federal maritime law, which can hold the owner and master of a vessel liable for damage, injury, or death. By contrast, land-based farmers who welcome visitors on their property are not liable for injuries under MRSA Title 7, §252 as long as they provide adequate signage of inherent safety risks. Under maritime law, fishermen owe passengers a duty of reasonable care at a high level that applies to the safety of wharves, docks, ramps, and boats. Maritime insurance, such as an umbrella policy along with protection and indemnity, can help protect the vessel's owner against claims (Gunst 2013). In addition to insurance, vessel owners must carry proper licenses. To carry more than six passengers, the boat must hold a certificate of inspection from the US Coast Guard, which includes a review of the vessel's seaworthiness, construction materials, workmanship, and machinery along with the safety equipment that must be carried aboard (Maine Sea Grant 2013b).

In terms of legal requirements, there are important distinctions. Oyster farms must create a biosecurity plan to protect the resource from disease and pests that might be introduced by visitors. On the lobster side, operators can have a demonstration license, under which visitors may not handle traps or keep lobsters, or a Class II or III lobster license, which allows customers to handle traps and to purchase a lobster caught during the trip (Maine Sea Grant 2013c).

Despite the risks and tradeoffs, aquatourism generates both economic (direct sales) and noneconomic (consumer education) benefits for producers. Other benefits mentioned by more than 50 percent of producers were attracting new customers, creating authentic experiences for visitors, and promoting brand. To understand the consumer perspective in aquatourism, we analyzed reviews from visitors participating in both oyster farm and lobster boat tours, which are offered in response to each benefit described by producers.

METHODS

In 2021, we interviewed five lobstermen, four oyster farmers, and six industry professionals, including three representing Maine's seafood trade associations, to answer the question, What motivates producers to participate in aquatourism? To understand the consumer perspective, we

deployed two approaches: (1) an analysis of 375 reviews of Maine lobster boat tours posted on Tripadvisor during the 2019–2023 seasons and (2) an analysis of 400 responses to a survey we created for visitors of the Maine Oyster Trail during its 2021 inaugural season.

All three research methods involved a qualitative analysis of open-response questions, which we analyzed using the principles of grounded theory to identify patterns and themes (Ratnapalan 2019). First, responses were transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. Then, an inductive approach was used to open-code responses to each question, identifying themes within and across responses. Next, a conceptual framework was developed. Finally, responses were recoded according to the conceptual framework. In each method, only one instance of a theme expressed by a respondent was tallied. In previous work, we concluded that (1) lobstermen and oyster farmers participate in aquatourism for many of the same economic and noneconomic reasons as farmers (Paras et al. 2022); and (2) both aquatourism and agri-tourism experiences trigger the same memorable attributes for visitors (Paras and Michaud 2023).

FINDINGS

In 2022, 41 percent of Maine's 15 million visitors enjoyed the rocky coast and ocean views, and 45 percent ate lobster and other seafood (DSG 2023). When asked to define the Maine brand, the top phrases used by 500 US consumers included "lobster," "fishing," and "seafood" (Paras et al. 2023). Maine producers recognize their role not only in providing high-quality seafood but also in sustaining these iconic landscapes. The reputation of Maine lobster exerts a halo effect on all seafood, which is the tendency of a positive or negative impression of one product to influence beliefs about another product (Thorndike 1920). "When people think of Maine, they first think lobster boats and buoys. But....it's also the working waterfront," said one oyster farmer. In fact, the strong aura of lobster causes visitors to think that all seafood they eat in Maine is local. According to one industry professional, "There is a perception that when you eat in a restaurant on the water, the seafood you are eating is local. But this is largely untrue." Although just half of the producers we interviewed considered themselves to be practitioners of aquatourism, all participated in direct sales to consumers. Following is a further description of the benefits of and barriers to aquatourism.

Economics

Staying close to shore to accommodate visitors is an opportunity cost that demands a tradeoff—dollars from tourism vs dollars from harvesting. “I think it would take about \$2,000–\$3,000 to get my boat in shape,” explained one lobsterman. “About \$50 in fuel to go out. I would also have to think about whether to take a crew. I would charge about \$300, and put half in my pocket. Not bad for a day’s work, especially if you went lobstering that morning.” Since most producers hold a license that limits occupancy to six people at a time, such high prices are necessary to justify the tradeoff. Beyond the initial upfront capital investment, time is a considerable challenge. “My husband does a lot of double duty,” described the partner of one lobsterman, who operates a seafood restaurant. “He gets up at 2:00 AM, leaves at 3:30 AM, fishes, then he’s back by 2:00 PM and done at 4. Farmers and fishermen...work until the day is done.”

Personality

Aquatourism is not for everyone. “You have to have a personality to do it and you have to be ‘on’ all the time,” explained one industry professional. Even for those with the personality, however, aquatourism can infringe on boundaries. “I used to host an ‘underground’ pop-up in the yard. We had a huge following,” recalled one oyster farmer. “But it started to turn into a restaurant, and there was no separation between my work and my home.”

Safety

Another challenge is that producers work in industrial zones that preclude engagement. “Most of the time, the tourist is a speed bump who gets in the way of the working waterfront,” stated an industry professional. Even for those producers willing to welcome visitors on a boat, the logistics of touring and fishing are complicated. “You simply can’t fish and do tours at the same time,” stated another industry professional. “Forget off-shore fishing vessels. You can’t take tourists out at all. Even for near-shore fisheries, it is an enormous safety hazard to have visitors on your boat, as you need the clearance with nets and such, along with licensing and insurance.” For others, the harvesting season does not line up with the tourism season. For example, seaweed is harvested in early spring when the weather can be inhospitable.

Direct Sales

Every producer we interviewed stated that the primary benefit of aquatourism is selling direct to consumer. Because

seafood requires a consistent cold chain from harvest to retail, cutting out the middleman can bring producers a higher margin of return. “I don’t do any marketing for my own business,” explained one lobsterman. “People will call, and I tell them what time I will be on the dock. I sell all of my lobsters right on the dock.” Other lobstermen have gone beyond direct sales and into food service, generating an incalculable premium. “People buy from me because, number one, they know I can provide the freshest seafood they can find,” said one lobsterman. “Number two, they can enjoy a lobster roll while looking at the waterfront.”

For tourists, eating on the boat and on the dock is one of the appeals of the Maine Oyster Trail. “Visiting the oyster farm was fantastic,” recalled one visitor. “Then we had probably two dozen oysters afterwards. Took some home.” Indeed, when asked whether they purchased anything on the Maine Oyster Trail, 91 percent of visitors surveyed purchased something, including fresh oysters (65 percent) and merchandise (26 percent), e.g., shucking knife. Perhaps more lucrative than direct sales is the latent impact of aquatourism on consumer behavior. Over 80 percent of respondents to the Maine Oyster Trail survey agreed or strongly agreed that they would purchase Maine oysters in the future. As one oyster farmer stated,

Through this incredible exposure to aquaculture, our visitors become lifelong customers who eat Maine oysters first and then order our product when they see it on the menu. We thought the tours would be more of a moneymaker, but it isn’t really additional revenue for us. Still, it’s a net positive. We are creating customers one person at a time.

Thus, producers recognize that the benefits of aquatourism are not limited to direct sales at the dock: in the long run, they can lead to repeat sales that are the bellwether of consumer loyalty.

The capacity of lobster tours to influence direct sales depends on the operator’s license. Those with a Class II or III lobster license can offer lobster to go. Some operators work around this by offering lobster rolls or steamed lobster as a meal during the tour. Logistically, the to-go option, however, enables operators to use the limited time and space available on their boats to engage customers in the act of harvesting, creating ripple effects for partners that specialize in food service. “We learned a lot about lobsters, their preservation and harvesting,” reported one visitor. “Also, after you catch the lobsters you can buy them ... and carry it next door to the

restaurant and they will cook it. It was the best lobster dinner I have EVER had!!!”

Attraction of New Customers

Another economic benefit of aquatourism according to producers is the opportunity to expand their customer base. “When they come to Maine, it’s for vacation,” said one lobsterman. “They like it so much that they return back and retire here. A lot of people who come to this area are from New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.” Over 60 percent of tourists arrive from a New England or Mid-Atlantic state, with 78 percent making a repeat visit (DSG 2023). For some tourists, the repeat visit turns permanent. “My neighbor just moved here,” recalled one lobsterman who also farms oysters. “She came for one summer and then another and then she said, ‘I’m done. I’m moving everything here.’” Thus, today’s first-time visitor can turn into a future neighbor and lifelong customer.

Along the Maine Oyster Trail, 51 percent of survey respondents were from Maine and 49 percent from outside the state. One visitor designed a trip that revolved around the Maine Oyster Trail specifically for her milestone birthday. After the trip, she continued to have Maine oysters shipped to Michigan to remind herself of the experience. Another visitor from Colorado kicked it up a notch, visiting 13 out of 50 sites in one trip. “I definitely want to come back. I want to get to 20 so I can get that tote bag. And then ultimately, if I could get 50, I’d love to win the grand prize.”

Customers of lobster boat tours were just as excited. “On vacation from Atlanta with our family of 6,” reported one visitor. “In a vacation full of fun activities this was everyone’s favorite” Another parent echoed this sentiment:

We took our three boys ages 3, 6, and 8...and they were all super engaged and having a blast the entire 90 minutes. They were able to take the lobsters out of the traps, measure them, band them, throw smaller ones back in the water, bait the traps, push the traps overboard, and they all were able to drive the boat. It was an experience they’ll never forget.

Locals were more modest but equally enthusiastic in their goals. “My husband doesn’t like to shop. I can get him to shop for an extended period of time if I promise him that there will be oysters and beer somewhere in our journey,” said one visitor. Thus, while visitors may try to squeeze as many experiences as possible into their itineraries, residents find creative ways to integrate experience into their lifestyles. Similarly, lobster boat tours are not just for tourists. “Even

though my husband and his family are 5th generation Mainers, we’ve never done anything like this before. We’re so glad we did. We all learned a lot and had so much fun,” said one Maine resident.”

Consumer Education

The top noneconomic benefit of aquatourism according to producers is the opportunity to educate visitors about the benefits of seafood consumption. As a natural resource harvested from the ocean, one critical message is environmental. “If we could work together, we could compete against chicken, declared one oyster farmer. “Oysters are a sustainable protein at the right time.” Another critical message is political. Although Maine lobstermen pride themselves on operating a sustainable fishery, they have been under duress from fishing restrictions designed to protect the endangered North Atlantic right whale population (Briggs 2022). “With the right whale regulations, you have people making policies in cities even though no one up here has ever seen a right whale in Penobscot Bay,” stated one lobsterman who believes that interaction with consumers is one strategy to counter this negative publicity.

In the wake of negative publicity, visitors had only positive things to say about the industry as a result of participation in a lobster boat tour. One visitor wrote,

Throughout the excursion we all had the opportunity to bait the traps, toss baited traps overboard, clean incoming traps of unwanted crabs (tossed back into the water), learn how to measure lobsters to see if they were keepers, band the lobster’s claws, and learn about how egg bearing female lobsters were marked and returned to the water to maintain the industry.

Although the word sustainability did not appear in online reviews, visitors were able to recount the sustainable practices of the industry, with 70 percent citing appreciation of the knowledge and information they gained from the experience.

Thus, the messages absorbed by consumers are not overtly environmental or political in nature. When asked to name one thing they remembered about Maine oysters, just 12 percent of visitors to the Maine Oyster Trail articulated an environmental benefit, such as the sustainability of oyster farming. In fact, 88 percent of respondents recalled features that might be termed species-specific, including merroir (26 percent), the ocean version of terroir, which is the concept that different regions and landscapes result in different flavors and tastes; and farming practices (24 percent), such as

the sources of seedlings and the benefits of tumbling. “I love tasting the different areas in how the oysters take on totally different flavors even though they’re not too far away from each other,” recalled one visitor. Thus, consumer education about merroir not only drives repeat visitation, but bolsters the reputation of Maine oysters. “My experience using the Maine Oyster Trail has been excellent. It has forced me to visit many different oyster farms that I otherwise probably never would have visited,” recalled one visitor. “I look forward to continuing to follow the Maine Oyster Trail, not only because of the swag...but because I get to try excellent oysters and travel all around Maine.” The personal connection from producer to consumer is powerful enough to convey important, if subtle, messaging.

Brand Promotion

A brand is a name, term, or symbol that distinguishes a product from its competitors.⁴ Brand promotion drives consumers to purchasing decisions in favor of a specific brand. While Maine lobster is a recognized brand, Maine seafood is still emerging. A new report, detailing the \$3.2 billion impact of Maine’s seafood sector, is one step that the industry has taken to create a unified brand (Wallace and Colgan 2023). The storytelling that is part of local food promotion, for example, is worth a premium of \$1.696–\$2.076 per pound in the marketplace (Printezis et al. 2019). In fact, a recent survey of 500 US consumers found that they are willing to pay a 22 percent premium for Maine products, including food (Paras et al. 2023). Although most of the storytelling happens on websites and social media, aquatourism is another vehicle for delivering Maine’s seafood brand. Oyster farmers recognize that storytelling is bolstered by acts of participation. “We have a really unique opportunity in that we can sell oysters straight off the farm to people who are on the water in kayaks or boats.”

It all starts with quality. One visitor declared, “I’ve been eating raw oysters from the Pacific Rim of the United States to the southeastern United States, the Carolina coast, Rhode Island, and Prince Edward Island. Maine is the best.” While aquatourism can deliver the brand of a specific producer, the benefits clearly accrue to the industry itself. As one visitor along the Maine Oyster Trail recounted, “We love oysters and I think most of the world knows, the best oysters in the world come from the Gulf of Maine, especially from the Damariscotta River. And it’s great for the environment, great for the state of Maine.” This positive view of the Maine brand was not limited to a single visitor. When asked to share their

values about aquaculture, 87 percent of visitors who responded to the Maine Oyster Trail survey agreed or strongly agreed that oysters are a healthy and sustainable protein, that aquaculture has a positive effect on the environment, and that aquaculture is good for Maine’s economy.

Thus, storytelling about Maine oysters translates into positive consumer perceptions about aquaculture, which has had to battle negative publicity, including the perceived incompatibility of oyster farming with lobstering (Whittle 2022), the obstruction of scenic views (Puniewska 2023), and mass die-offs of species particularly associated with salmon farming (Rogers 2021). As one oyster farmer put it,

We are good stewards of the environment. But there has always been a bit of NIMBYism with sea farms. To be approved for a lease, we have to prove there will be no adverse impact in terms of navigation, light pollution, noise pollution, hours of operation, etc. Some people do not want us “blocking” their view. But no one owns the view.

Sharing their story with the public, particularly about the role of oysters in filtering water, is an important message best learned in the field. Dozens of visitors remembered that oysters “improve the quality of the sea water” by filtering “up to 50 gallons of water a day,” which helps to “clean the ocean” and sustain the “ecosystem.” Moreover, oysters “do not retain these impurities, so they are clean and safe to eat.”

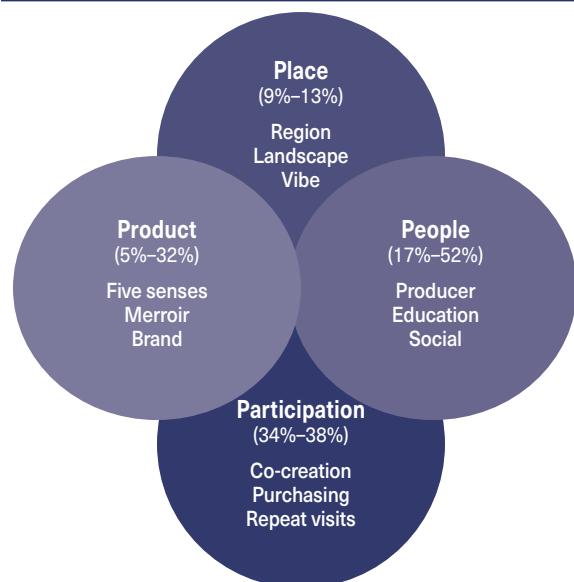
Creation of Authentic Experiences

Through aquatourism, producers are engaging visitors in authentic experiences, from exploring picturesque harbors, touring by boat, learning to fish, hauling traps, digging for clams, learning to shuck, and eating fresh seafood. As one oyster farmer described,

The farm is six miles by boat. We usually see seals and bald eagles and ospreys along the way. We work to change their perception about aquaculture. We drop the hook, lift the cages, and show them our market-sized product. We anchor for 30 minutes, then it’s all you can eat oysters.

Experiences like these are offered by producers and tour operators throughout the Maine coast on a fixed schedule and charter basis. On a lobster boat tour, dressing the part adds a layer of authenticity while serving a functional purpose: allowing customers to keep their regular clothes dry while they engage in the activity of lobstering. Without this outer layer, customers might be less willing to engage with the resource, as they risk getting wet and slimy along

FIGURE 1: Elements of a Memorable Aquatourism Experience



with cutting their hands. A more casual experience, like walking down the dock to buy lobsters, is also considered aquatourism. Similar to stopping by the farm for local produce, a visit to the harbor is a sensory experience that may involve incidental conversation with a working fisherman.

DISCUSSION

When prompted to describe their experience, visitors to the Maine Oyster Trail offered memories that ranged from a few seconds to five minutes. We developed a four-part conceptual framework to organize the themes described by respondents (Figure 1). Overall, participation, which was mentioned by 38 percent of respondents, was the most common theme, including the sense of discovery involved in designing an itinerary, active engagement in a physical activity, and the purchase of merchandise by which to extend or remember the experience. The second most common theme, mentioned by 32 percent of participants, was product. In the case of oysters, product included their sensory attributes, the concept of merroir, and a belief in the quality of the Maine brand. The third theme, which was mentioned by 17 percent of participants, was people, including the personal connection they made with the producer, information they learned about oyster farming, and the social experience shared with family and friends.

The fourth theme, mentioned by 13 percent of participants, was place, including a description of place-based attributes, such as geographic place names, the natural landscape, and the physical elements of the setting. Collectively, these inter-related qualities constitute the magic of experience (Paras and Michaud 2023).

Our analysis of lobster boat reviews validated this construct. About 52 percent of participants specifically cited people in their review, including friendly and knowledgeable captains and crew members who worked hard to engage each and every customer. About 34 percent cited acts of participation as the most memorable part of their experience, including engagement in the activities of lobstering. About 9 percent cited place, and 5 percent, product. Of 377 reviews analyzed, customers awarded lobster boat tours an average rating of 4.97 out of 5 stars, with 99 percent positive or effusive in their comments. In the words of one visitor

If you want an amazing Maine experience on the water, this is it. No matter your age this lobster tour will not only meet but surpass your expectations. Every person that wants to can experience every aspect. Worth every penny! The kids want to know when they can go again.

Many reviewers not only said that the lobster boat tour was the “best experience” of their vacation, but some stated that it was a “highlight of their life.” By providing the quintessential Maine experience, lobster boat tours serve as an ambassador for the Maine seafood brand that goes far beyond representing the product of one particular fisherman.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a full sensory experience, aquatourism can serve as a powerful experiential marketing strategy for Maine fishery products. By engaging participants beyond the act of sitting in a boat, they become the currency for the experience economy, driving sales in real time as well as behavioral intentions to purchase in the future. We recommend a variety of strategies to extend the reach of aquatourism throughout Maine.

Adopt a Catch-of-the-Day Model

Although most of the groundfish landed in the state is auctioned at the Portland Fish Exchange, those species that make it onto restaurant menus are not always labeled as being from the Gulf of Maine. This represents a lost opportunity to market Maine seafood. According to a number of

industry professionals, Maine needs to embrace a catch-of-the-day model, which would feature species that are not yet overfished, such as monkfish, hake, and flounder. Proper labeling would extend the halo effect of the Maine lobster brand to other species.

Create Value-Added Products

According to our research, acts of participation are the most memorable part of an aquatourism experience. Participation includes purchasing products to take home, which can trigger powerful memories of their experience. Indeed, not having anything to purchase can lead to disappointment. As one visitor to an event in Cundy's Harbor recalled,

There wasn't any swag, there wasn't anything for sale, it was basically a tasting. I think my husband and my son asked one of the farmers if they could purchase a t-shirt and luckily they had something in their car, but I would have happily probably spent more if there was more available.

Beyond swag, most Maine seafood offered for sale is not shelf stable, limiting opportunities to capture additional dollars. As one oyster farmer explained,

Some of the larger oyster farms have product that is too large for the raw market, so they might offer jars of shucked or smoked oysters for \$15-\$20. Large farms have those varying grades. But for farms on a smaller scale, the raw bar is the highest and best use. Maybe someday there will be a market for jumbos and uglies, but right now it doesn't make economic sense to do value-add because we can't even keep up with the demand for raw product.

For small farms that don't derive much ticket revenue from aquatourism, shelf-stable products and branded merchandise could make a big difference in their bottom line. That supercharged moment on the dock in which visitors are the most emotionally invested in a small business can either be reinforced by a purchase or it can dissipate.

Enhance Existing Technology Platforms

Where to purchase Maine seafood

The opportunity to purchase Maine seafood in hours, days, or weeks following an experience is another dimension of participation. The Maine Department of Marine Resources has developed a website,⁵ which features an interactive map on where to buy Maine seafood. The map,

however, is limited to retail within Maine and does not include outlets where visitors live (predominantly in the Northeast). Search engine optimization should bump this website up to the top of Google's search results for "buy Maine seafood." With added functionality, the platform could direct consumers to selected retail outlets beyond state borders that carry the Maine seafood brand. Such an initiative, however, would require an extraordinary level of cooperation from seafood brokers and wholesalers.

Information on aquatourism opportunities

For example, a website maintained by the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Fisheries, is the portal for finding local Maine food throughout the state, including farmers markets, farm stands, and agritourism experiences. Aquatourism experiences, however, have not been integrated into this portal. A selection of lobster boat tours along with an overview of the Maine Oyster Trail, can, however, be found on the portal hosted by the Maine Office of Tourism. A complementary redundancy or redirect between the two portals would increase the audience for aquatourism.⁶

Establish a Set Time for Visitor Activities

Many aquatourism activities are advertised "by appointment only." With an established time, however, visitors will schedule their itinerary around available opportunities. Lack of information can lead to disappointment. "We tried to visit a place or two," reported one visitor along the Maine Oyster Trail. "The addresses weren't up to date. There was no one to contact. There was no information on their hours."

Extend Culinary Trails to Other Fisheries

A trail is an efficient means of organizing similar offerings around a theme that can be enjoyed at multiple venues throughout the state. Besides the oyster trail, culinary trails have been developed to market fiber, cheese, wine, and beer. While some visitors may be inspired to tour sites as a linear route, a trail might simply function as a portal to organize information from a variety of producers. Typically, the producer must agree to meet a standard level of service quality to be included. Most aquatourism opportunities, such as lobstering demonstrations, are marketed individually rather than as a unified theme, missing opportunities to capture interested visitors with varying itineraries who want to immerse themselves in the fishery.

Develop Cooperative Infrastructure

For most producers, aquatourism demands a drastic change in business model. “We have said ‘no’ to tours,” explains one oyster farmer. “But we have looked into it. We are so small. Our farm is about 15 minutes away by boat. Logistically, it doesn’t make economic sense.” One alternative is to collaborate with boat and kayak operators that can make scheduled stops for conversation with a farmer and a sampling of fresh oysters. Through this model, the producer can get the benefit of a flat fee for their time plus the opportunity to sell “without the stress, especially when it comes to the weather and cancellations,” said one oyster farmer.

Extend the Pick-Your-Own Concept to Fisheries

The opportunity to pick your own strawberries, apples, pumpkins, and Christmas trees is a strong driver of agri-tourism, particularly for families. Last year, the Kennebec Estuary Land Trust invited the public to Reid State Park to learn to dig clams with the local shellfish warden.⁷ Although towns offer recreational licenses, tourists would appreciate both the instruction and the information that comes with an organized activity. One ambitious visitor to the Maine Oyster Trail arranged a work day with an oyster farmer, creating a one-of-a-kind premium experience.

Incorporate Tours as Part of Special Events

While seafood festivals are popular events on the Maine calendar, few, with the exception of Portland’s annual Walk the Working Waterfront, offer specific opportunities to tour working waterfronts, learn about the lives of fishing families, participate in a demonstration of how the resource is harvested, or understand the economic impact of fishing in Maine. One industrious lobsterman tackled this dissonance head-on:

During the Lobster Festival, I brought the girls out who were competing in the pageant. They were so interested in learning about my work and so appreciative. It was hard with coronavirus. So much of it got canceled. But if they wanted to, I would do it every year.

Create Shore Excursions for Cruise Ship Passengers

In 2023, 379 cruise ships were scheduled to bring 454,000 tourists to eight Maine ports (Yechivi 2023). Imagine if these tourists could also experience and taste Maine seafood. As a diversified lobsterman who also farms oysters explained,

The cruise ships can be a burden on us. I’ve seen 1,000 people get off the ships in Rockland. It’s good for Main Street but not for us. Tourists can only go so far. It would be great to take them on a tour of our oyster farms.

Instead, many shore excursions focus on shopping or touring, two activities conducive to motorcoach travel far away from the port. Another lobsterman went even further with criticism. “Not one person coming off a cruise ship has ever bought food from my cart. I don’t know a fisherman who has supplied lobster to a cruise ship.” Rather than benefiting from direct sales, Maine producers discussed bearing the brunt of pollution from cruise ships and property damage from collisions, representing another missed opportunity for consumer education and for promoting the Maine seafood brand.

CONCLUSION

Aquatourism is an opportunity for lobstermen and oyster farmers to share their stories and their products with Maine residents and visitors alike. Although aquatourism is not for every producer, these memorable experiences generate a variety of economic benefits for everyone—attracting new customers, promoting the industry’s brand, and driving sales in real time as well as back home via restaurants, grocery stores, and E-commerce platforms. In terms of process, aquatourism can be more effectively packaged through information portals, fixed hours, itineraries, and culinary trails. In terms of products, Maine fisheries can cooperate with tour operators and other ambassadors to engage visitors in authentic experiences as part of special events and shore excursions without trading the opportunity cost of fishing for tourism. The consumer education intrinsic in these experiences has the power to shape the values, behaviors, and loyalties that transform casual visitors into lifelong consumers of Maine seafood, a net positive for the working waterfront and for coastal tourism.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.eventbrite.com/blog/academy/millennials-fueling-experience-economy>
- 2 This number increases to 80 once boat tours that visit oyster farms or demonstrate lobstering are factored in. Prices range from \$20 to \$150 for regularly scheduled tours, depending on their length and the inclusion of food, while charters range from \$300-\$500.
- 3 Sightseeing Transportation in the US: Industry Report. Retrieved from IBISWorld database.

- 4 <https://www.ama.org/topics/branding/>
- 5 <https://seafoodfrommaine.com>
- 6 <https://www.realmaine.com/>; <https://visitmaine.com/>
- 7 <https://www.pressherald.com/2022/06/27/learn-to-dig-for-clams-at-reid-state-park>

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