

11-2009

What is the Downeast Fisheries Heritage Trail?

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Recommended Citation

Maine Sea Grant, "What is the Downeast Fisheries Heritage Trail?" (2009). *Downeast Fisheries Trail*. 1.
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The Downeast Fisheries Trail

What is the Downeast Fisheries Trail?

The Downeast Fisheries Trail is an educational trail that showcases active and historic fisheries heritage sites, such as fish hatcheries, aquaculture facilities, fishing harbors, clam flats, processing plants and other related public places in an effort to educate residents and visitors about the importance of the region's maritime heritage and the role of marine resources to the area's economy. The Trail builds on these local resources to strengthen community life and the experience of visitors.



A Rich Fisheries Heritage

The importance of fisheries heritage in Maine cannot be underestimated. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the proportion of Maine workers employed in commercial fishing industries is more than 12 times the national percentage. In the Downeast region, the diversity of species harvested includes scallops, clams, lobsters, crabs, mussels, elvers (juvenile eels), alewives, herring, shrimp, urchins, marine worms, seaweed, and others depending on season, year, and conditions. Hancock and Washington counties usually rank second and third in the state for amount of clams and lobster harvested each year and the waters of both counties are among the state's most important for both finfish and shellfish aquaculture (ME Department of Marine Resources). There are several fish hatcheries in the region that raise endangered native Atlantic salmon for stocking in Maine rivers. Historically, the two counties were home to a number of sardine packing plants (one of which remains in operation) and traditional fishing gear like the herring weir was once common in many bays Downeast.



The scale of changes facing fisheries in communities today is even greater than the decline of the sardine industry. The ground-fishery, for example, was enormous up to the 1980's, and generated income for hundreds if not thousands of local families, but that fishery is now virtually non-existent. Lobster populations continue to be strong, but the recent international economic crisis has caused boat prices to plummet, leaving many lobstermen and their families struggling to make ends meet.



Washington and Hancock county communities from Stonington to Corea and from Steuben to Eastport face fisheries decline, closures, or near extinction in most sectors. These once-remote coastal communities are increasingly popular for second home development while local families may be forced to move away from the coast and abandon or commute to their work on the water due to rising property values. Shorelines popular for picnics or clamming are posted "No Trespassing," thereby further eroding access to the maritime resource. Research conducted by the Island Institute shows that nearly 70% of Maine's working waterfront is privately owned and threatened by conversion to other uses. The rich fisheries heritage that defines this region and the quality of place that locals and visitors cherish is threatened on many fronts.

The Future: A Two-county Fisheries Trail

The Downeast Fisheries Trail was created in 2000 with the help of the Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center, Maine Coastal Program (State Planning Office), Quebec-Labrador Foundation and the Maine Community Foundation. While the original Trail focused exclusively on Washington County fisheries heritage at sites from Milbridge to Eastport, a new effort is forming to revive and extend the Downeast Fisheries Trail into a bi-county educational product that preserves the region's rich natural and human heritage while tapping into the growing market for tourism that truly connects visitors to place.

With the support of a recent grant from both the Hancock and Washington county funds of the Maine Community Foundation, project partners will be reaching out to fisheries and tourism interests in the fall of 2009 and winter 2010 to seek feedback on potential Trail sites and ideas for educational content of outreach materials. In Hancock County, meetings will be held where members of the public can help inventory and assess new sites for the Trail and develop companion educational materials. In Washington County, existing sites will be inventoried for needed improvements and updated materials.

This project will ultimately lead to: website development, market research and partnerships, site protection planning, incentives for local expenditures, targeted package tours, and collaboration with students in two counties to, for example, conduct fisheries-related oral histories, podcasts, travel itineraries, videos, working waterfront festivals and other products that celebrate and educate about fisheries heritage.

For More Information and To Get Involved

For more information about the project, to get on the mailing list, or to become involved in Hancock County, contact:

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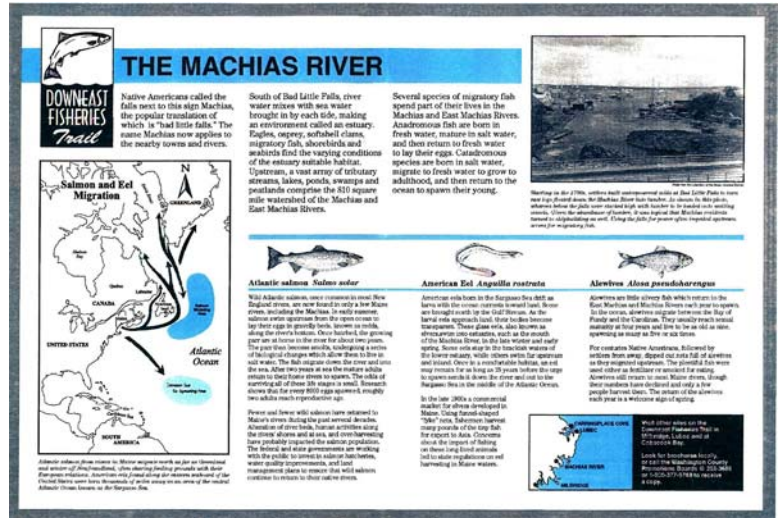


Figure 1: Signage about historical and ecological resources is an important part of the Downeast Fisheries Trail.

