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## S1E3: Why is Maine's reuse economy so vibrant?

Ron Lisnet

University of Maine, lisnet@maine.edu

Cindy Isenhour

University of Maine, cynthia.isenhour@maine.edu

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*The Maine Question* podcast transcript  
S1E3: Why is Maine's reuse economy so vibrant?

[Repetitive, pulsing background music]

**00:05 Ron Lisnet**

Hello and welcome to *The Maine Question*, UMaine's podcast series about the research and creative activity happening at UMaine. I'm your host Ron Lisnet. In this episode we take a look at all the stuff we buy and use in our daily life and an interesting economic and cultural phenomenon that can give the things we own multiple lives in effect. If you've ever bought something at a yard sale or a flea market, if you've ever left a piece of furniture or some other item out on the sidewalk for someone else to take and use, you've taken part in the reuse economy. And it's a bigger part of the overall Maine economy than you might imagine.

Cindy Isenhour, associate professor of Anthropology, who also works with the Climate Change Institute and the Senator George Mitchell Center, has studied this topic for several years now and she poses our main question for today's discussion.

**00:59 Cindy Isenhour**

The big question is what is reuse economy and why is Maine's reuse economy so particularly vibrant?

**01:07 Ron Lisnet**

Well, welcome. Appreciate you taking the time to come talk to us about this very, very interesting topic. Appreciate that. So, let let's start. Let's define some terms. What is the reuse economy?

**01:18 Cindy Isenhour**

Okay. It's a good question because people are oftentimes really confused by the term. They think it's recycling, which we're all very familiar with. But when we're talking, at least for this project and in a broader perspective, reuse has to do with the transfer of objects for the purpose for which they were originally produced—so, we're not talking about changing things, but extending their lifetimes through transfer of ownership. So, that can be all sorts of things and this is where it gets so broad.

It can be a sale, which is what we oftentimes think of, and this could be Craigslist or at a yard sale. It could be a gift. So, just passing children's clothes on to a friend. It could be a barter. It could be a swap. It could be an object found. So, someone leaves it on the curb or at the transfer station and someone else picks it up. So, lots of variety there, but the two things to remember are that it's an object being used still for its original purpose and that it's a transfer of ownership.

So, we wouldn't include things like using an old tire as a planter. That would be considered re-purposing, and for this project where we're really interested in the economic impact of those exchanges and so, when the exchange doesn't happen, as in re-purposing or I'm just using a cup that's disposable more than once, that would be—we would call that re-purposing for the purposes of this project...so...

**02:45 Ron Lisnet**

How big an impact does reuse economy have on Maine's economy?

**02:50 Cindy Isenhour**

Well, you know, um, that's a big question and it's one of the reasons we undertook this project—was to try to find out. Unfortunately, it's a really hard one to figure out, believe it or not, because there are portions of the reuse economy that are very much in the formal economic sector. So, we can look at industrial codes and all of the businesses that are categorized under used merchandise; and we can tally those in total those but the problem is is that we have an incredible amount of the reuse economy that's informal. It's underground. It's not easy to track, and so I can't give you, yet, a really clear number. But we are working on one. And I can give you a bit of, uh, some insight.

One is that we have recently just finished a survey. So, we sent a survey out to Maine households all over the state and we had about a little over 600 families respond and in that survey we asked them in a given year, in a 12-month cycle, to estimate about how much they think they spend on used goods. And when we tally that all up and we extrapolate it to a standard Maine population, we're talking about just on used goods, about \$570,000,000 each year. Pretty substantial number.

**04:11 Ron Lisnet**

Big number.

**04:12 Cindy Isenhour**

Yeah, and that does not include, for example, the costs of like refurbishing, repairing things for reuse. We're still working on that number, but we suspect that when we tally informal and formal, we're talking some numbers that rival some of the industries that we really invest a lot in here in Maine. And, yet, this is kind of a hidden value that we tend to underestimate but it's something that means a lot to Mainers and, um, is really impactful for a lot of people so...

**04:40 Ron Lisnet**

Anybody who's driven up Route One and seen the flea markets or driven just around generally and seen yard sales signs, know that, you know, the reuse economy is certainly that's part of it. Maine has a robust history with this. Why do you think that is?

**04:54 Cindy Isenhour**

Oh, that's such a good question, and one that I think is really exciting and we've spent quite a bit of time scouring back through the historical lit., reading, first-hand accounts of folks who have been involved in this sector for a long time. The tendency is for people to assume first and foremost, that this is the product of a state that, relative to other states, is geographically marginal and has had periods of economic marginality. That's what I hear people say, first and foremost is, 'oh, this is because Maine is a relatively poor state.'

Interestingly enough, while that's the kind of common response, what we're finding very much challenges that idea. It has to do—and this is maybe not surprising either—but it has to do with this thrift mentality, right? A very long history of self-sufficiency. Living on...

**05:47 Ron Lisnet**

Yankee frugality, you hear that term.

**05:49 Cindy Isenhour**

Exactly. Yeah, and you know it's a lot of anecdotal evidence that overtime piles up. But then you know, I'm an anthropologist, so my primary research method is actually getting out and talking to people. And what we're hearing is that this is not just about, in fact, the numbers don't support the idea that most people who are involved are doing it for economic necessity. They're doing it for a sense of freedom, and, you know, living on their own terms, living a life that's good to them. And a big portion of this has to do with care.

The idea of expressing—not only care and stewardship for these objects and for reducing waste—care for the land, but also care for other people. So, um, a lot of folks who you know are flea market vendors or who shop these secondhand shops or volunteer in these donation centers, they're doing it out of a sense of care for people, for communities; to give, you know low...or affordable goods to families who need them...to make sure that we prevent waste. It's really a much more complex than just this kind of simple economic calculus of 'people don't have enough money to buy things new,' that just doesn't prove out.

**06:59 Ron Lisnet**

This sort of leads me to my next question. The current state of the environment—you see stories every day about plastic in the ocean and birds choking on plastic and that kind of thing—and the play that gets on social media; does that sort of rev this up or supercharge this a little bit?

**07:15 Cindy Isenhour**

Absolutely, and it's a big part of the reason that...I...that this project has come to fruition as...

There was a period of time when I was doing some consulting for the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, and one of the big movements in sustainability is to try to move toward a more circular economy. Right? To design waste out of the system because we know, sure, recycling is great, but it takes inputs, energy, resources to make those materials—those wasted materials—back into something new. If you can move up the commodity chain and design—cradle to cradle design—you can design those...that waste out, you get so many more—not only environmental efficiencies but also economic efficiencies.

And so, there's been a big movement in cities and states all over the world to move toward more circular economic systems and a part of that is increasingly becoming reuse. And so, if we think about this whole cradle to grave system, we can have interventions all along that. But increasingly, we're recognizing that the kind of end of the stream efforts are just not as effective as we need them to be, so we've got to move up and reuse this really become this big policy focus, so...

The problem is though that there have been so few studies on reuse. Why do people do it? We, we know what the economic or the environmental benefits are. We know very little about the economic and the social elements of this and questions like you know, how do we support reuse in ways that are socially equitable that not only protect the environment but also make sure that we're not formalizing a sector that a lot of people depend on for their livelihoods and excluding people. So, there are a lot of big questions there that we're hoping this project can really feed into those efforts to reduce pollution in the ocean, but also do it in in fair and equitable ways, so.

**09:13 Ron Lisnet**

So, for a lot of cities and towns, waste disposal is a cost [stammering] and I was surprised to learn it sits among the top costs for municipalities. So, how does this sort of help mitigate those costs? Does it?

**09:27 Cindy Isenhour**

It really does. So, we're talking about for a lot of cash strapped municipalities all around Maine. And it's not just Maine, it's a problem everywhere. The tax base that's generated, a huge portion of that needs to go toward disposal. And what's crazy about it is there have been studies that show that, you know, up to 30% of the things that we're throwing away are fully usable, right?

**09:49 Ron Lisnet**

Wow.

**09:50 Cindy Isenhour**

There—you know, there are products that could be extracted. And so, the more that we can encourage people to extend the lifetime of products, not only are we reducing waste at the end of the commodity chain, but we're also subverting some of the demand for new product production. So, we can think about the whole life cycle of the energy, the materials, the resources, the water, the land area that was—um—conserved by not driving demand for goods that we could just repurpose. So, it's a big—it's a big part of it for sure. And thinking about Maine municipalities, they're really interested.

We've been going to the Maine resource Recovery Association meetings for the past few years, and this is a big push of theirs too, is how can we help municipalities to reduce, um, through re-use? Many of them have transfer stations and this summer, our reached research team has visited many of those, and Ron, you wouldn't believe the amount of traffic that moves through those. The amount of goods that move through those transfer station shops,

I have—maybe of all the things that we've learned in this project, that's maybe one of the most surprising is just to look at the sheer volume. There's one transfer station in southern Maine that has been tracking how much they've diverted from the landfill, and it's absolutely amazing. I, I'm sorry I don't have it on top of my head, but it's...

**11:15 Ron Lisnet**

Substantial.

**11:16 Cindy Isenhour**

It's really substantial and shocking.

**11:19 Ron Lisnet**

So many of the products we have now are: use it, it breaks, you throw it away, kind of thing and they're not repairable. Your TV. Your phone—what—what have you. I mean, maybe your phone is not a good example, but a lot of electronics is that changing a little bit? You know you looked at repair clubs, repair shops in Sweden. There's even a taxpayer rebate if you have something repaired.

So, talk about that at that part of this.

**11:43 Cindy Isenhour**

Yeah, I do, I do think that the mentality is changing for sure. There are increasingly policy propositions to try to support reuse and repair. So, we have—all over this country—propositions for Right to Repair legislation which would require a manufacturer to give the consumer the right to repair an item, whether it be you know through module based design or, you know, in in some cases there have been lawsuits over people who've tried to repair things because the idea is that they're infringing on proprietary technology, and so that type of legislation is fighting back against that.

We also have some initiatives around the world to change the tax structure so that if an item has been taxed once at new sale, that perhaps it shouldn't be taxed again at the secondhand level.

And yes, you mentioned Sweden, so Sweden's interesting. They have now entire malls dedicated to just secondhand...

**12:45 Ron Lisnet**

Really?

**12:46 Cindy Isenhour**

...products and they're doing really well. Yes, old industrial spaces or old malls that have, you know, didn't do well and are abandoned being reinvented for that purpose and much more retail, very curated collections that are of interest to a lot of people. Um.

And then yeah, here in the states there are several organizations working on reuse that are developing handbooks for how to do a good Repair Cafe, where you can get folks from the community that have a specific skill, how to fix a toaster, or how to fix a bike, to come and volunteered their time to teach other people how to repair as well.

The state of Oregon, who is really a pioneer in this area, they have an entire statewide strategic plan for how to extend product lifetimes. They have a whole labor platform around how do we get more people trained again in repair function?

**13:38 Ron Lisnet**

Because these are law starts. I mean, people used to work on their cars or fix their bikes. I mean, not a lot of particularly young people probably are doing that much anymore these days.

**13:47 Cindy Isenhour**

Absolutely, at least I think that's the perception. We're trying to investigate that we've talked with several folks in the repair business around the Bangor area so far, and we hope to extend that out, but it does seem like there might be a bit of a resurgence among young people, at least for example, a few places we've talked to in Portland that are cobblers, are seeing a much more robust clientele in the younger sector, so that's encouraging. On the other hand, to talk to folks in northern Maine, yes, it's these are practices that really need to be revived. So, it does seem uneven and I don't have a firm answer on that one yet, but I think things are changing for sure and I think in multiple directions sometimes.

**14:35 Ron Lisnet**

Right. How does social media play into this? Of course, we—a lot of people in Maine are familiar with Uncle Henrys, but now you have Facebook Swap and Sell. Of course, Craig's List—you know any number of ways online to swap, sell, trade — is that fueling this as well?

**14:50 Cindy Isenhour**

Absolutely, yeah. And you know it makes sense. There are so many what economists would say transaction costs associated with secondhand consumption. Sometimes it's really difficult to find what you're looking for. You know if you're out browsing the secondhand shops, and it's almost like shopping via convenience rather than a targeted item, but when you have the ability to go online and do a targeted search for what you're looking for in a specific geographical radius, it really does reduce the amount of time and effort people have to put in to finding things so.

At the same time, we see that many of the brick and mortar stores either are moving toward a more hybrid model where they sell some things online or list them online, but also have them available for people to see in person so, um, yeah.

We're seeing big shifts there and we're seeing that, while many people lament the idea that younger people aren't as engaged in this, the secondhand economy, we're seeing evidence that they are engaging, it's just in a new form, right? They're doing much more online. But we also are asking questions about what happens when a lot of these reused products are captured by national sellers reselling markets. So, for example, like Thredup is now, which is a reused clothing service.

**16:15 Cindy Isenhour**

Where you can sell your clothes to Thredup and then resell them for you on a national platform. They're searchable, right? People all over the country could buy them, so it's a great service and that you're getting goods. The places where people want them and need them. But it does raise questions for a place like Maine where a lot of people are involved in this type of economic activity and do we end up with kind of consolidation of the product in certain places? So those are questions were investigating, too.

**16:42 Ron Lisnet**

Now, I know you looked at this aspect of it: when people face political or social or natural disasters, you know, that that drives this and ramps it up a little bit more and not only economically, but socially. Does that enter into this?

**16:56 Cindy Isenhour**

So, I'm an anthropologist and we have—we are typically interested in much pretty broad timeframes, right? How do human societies adapt overtime? How do we change? How do we understand our world and respond to it? And one piece of—one particular part of anthropology has looked at how humans respond when markets crash when natural disasters hit, and so to think about social resilience, societal resilience, and what are some of the factors that come into play there. And so part of this research, in addition to the climate benefits of reuse, the waste benefits of reuse, the economic, it has to do with,

how might these alternative means of procuring goods and these kind of informal social structures of exchange. How might they impact resiliency?

And so, yeah, we've been able to do some really interesting work on this in large part thanks to my partner, Andrew Crawley, who's in the Economics Department—has done some looking at how—and this is on a national level—at how reuse markets respond in economic recessions, economic booms and busts? What do they do? And while one might guess that reuse markets would expand when the economy, the overall economy is contracting—that is true in a lot of places.

What we find is that here in Maine, yes, there is a response, but that our economy, our reuse economy, remains consistently stronger than most other states, regardless of what the overall economy is doing. But because it does respond, it does suggest to us that from an economic standpoint, people might be using reuse as a means to kind of buffer the effects of other markets that might boom and bust. So, that's pretty cool.

**19:00 Cindy Isenhour**

But then, in terms of the social aspect of this, I can't overemphasize enough how many people, when they talk to us about what they're doing and why they're participating that

it has to do with their community. And again, this idea of expressing care for others and the idea of creating these networks of exchange where people know each other they trust each other and they are able to find what they need through people. So, there's a great quote from an antiques dealer that actually found on the. I think it was on the Antiques Association webpage that people aren't necessarily—I'm not going to get this right—but people are not necessarily looking for things in the antiques market as much as they're looking for the relationships...

**19:43 Ron Lisnet**

Really?

**19:44 Cindy Isenhour**

...and the people, right? And I think a lot of antiques dealers know that they're looking for the story, the magic, the people associated, more so than the object themselves. And that's a really interesting part of this project, is that we're understanding increasingly that it is about, you, know, these tools for existing in the community, a caring community, in a place where you feel like you have networks for exchange for sociality for procurement, and maybe that has a positive impact when I think about what types of shocks might come our way.

**20:20 Ron Lisnet**

It interests me why this ultimately interests you as an anthropologist. Is it this economic phenomenon and how it how it intersects with the culture and people? Is that what ultimately interests you as an anthropologist?

**20:33 Cindy Isenhour**

Absolutely. What I would say about this project is that it's—more than any other project I've ever done—is it feels like it's at the perfect intersection of my interests. It feels very much like my baby. And

it has to do with this idea that we've got. I mean, I'm, I am an economic and environmental anthropologist, so it's got the environmental component of what? What are the emissions that are foregone when we reuse projects rather than producing new ones? What are what is the waste foregone? What is the total

lifecycle benefit of all of this? Then, it's got this social side that has to do with who's participating and why and how can we understand that in order to drive more socially and culturally relevant and appropriate environmental policy? And then it's got this resiliency side that comes out of a long tradition of anthropology—um and I think for most, anthropologists we're very interested in looking at what are the dominant logics. So, what are the dominant economic logics? What are the dominant cultural logics? And how can we start to understand those as cultural constructions, right? That things that were built up overtime by humans and are also able to be changed. Right? To be shifted by new types of ideologies.

And I think that, you know, it's really interesting to be able to talk to people and to learn from them why they're participating and that's a great piece of this. Sometimes people will tell you it's not about the environment for them at all, even though it is? Right? You know...

**22:11 Ron Lisnet**

Side benefit.

**22:12 Cindy Isenhour**

Yeah! Some people will tell you that it's purely for the economics. It's a really wide-ranging phenomenon, but I think what's so neat about reuse as we think about the future, is

that clearly resources are going to be becoming more and more precious overtime. More and more expensive. I think the writing is on the wall that we will eventually have to as an entire society reuse and recognize the value that still exists in already existing items.

And so business models are going to have to change. Policies are going to have to change. People's behaviors are going to have to change. And so, for me, what's really interesting about this is thinking about Maine's contemporary reuse economy, not only in its long historical trajectory and how it challenges some of our dominant ideas about disposability, about productivity and what where value comes from and where it exists, but that it also allows us to think about the future and how might we as a society adapt knowing what we do know about natural resource depletion and climate change and increasingly, scarce land fill space. And could there potentially be lessons here in Maine about how we move forward?

**23:29 Ron Lisnet**

That leads me to my final question, is where do you think this will go in five to 10 years as the population grows? As people are more mindful of what they buy and consume, where were we going to head?

**23:40 Cindy Isenhour**

Well, I think that the policy trajectory is clearly already there. We see that all over the country again states that are doing entire platforms. On this we see cities that have developed whole reuse policies. We're heading in that trajectory.

I also see that it's become very cool and hip in many urban markets to reuse, you know, the vintage lifestyle is on the rise for sure. What it means for Maine is not entirely clear yet, but I do think that there's an awful lot of potential for us to kind of get ahead of this and to think about, um, the value and the advantage of Maine's current reuse economy and how we can protect the people that inhabit it and make sure that we develop it in a way that's not only environmentally conscious and economically efficient, but also socially just to make sure that—what I'm really concerned about is that as reuse becomes more and more formalized on multiple scales, that some of the folks who have long inhabited the space and long let value through their labor through their care could potentially get excluded, and so how can we kind of protect those markets and make sure that they're accessible to everyone?

**24:57 Ron Lisnet**

Well, we'll be keen to see where all this work goes [*Pulsing background music fades in*] and thank you so much for coming in and sharing your story with us.

**25:03 Cindy Isenhour**

Thanks for having me, it was fun.

**25:05 Ron Lisnet**

Thank you so much for joining us. You can find this and all of our podcasts and most of the places that podcasts are available. We welcome your feedback on this show and our series. Drop us a line at Maine Question at Maine dot edu. This is Ron Lisnet. We'll catch you next time on, The Maine Question.