

# The Catch

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Volume 6

Article 13

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2018

## Catching Up with Robin Alden

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### Recommended Citation

Ellis, Kathleen (2018) "Catching Up with Robin Alden," *The Catch*: Vol. 6 , Article 13.

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Catching Up with Robin Alden | *Kathleen Ellis*

*What's next for Robin Alden, fisheries advocate and activist, writer, editor, and publisher, Maine's illustrious winner of a 2017 "Hero of the Seas" award, former Maine Department of Marine Resources Commissioner, founder and editor of Commercial Fisheries News, and executive director of Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries?*

I first met Robin Alden in 1981, when I was communications coordinator for the University of Maine's Sea Grant College Program. From 1975-1976, Alden was a UMaine student research assistant who had co-founded the Maine Fishermen's Forum with economist Jim Wilson. From 1976-1978, she worked as part of Sea Grant's Marine Advisory Service. Over the years, our communications staff worked closely with Alden on the forum as well as on many other fisheries-related projects. Alden has a long relationship with Sea Grant, (publisher of *The Catch*), and she currently serves as a member of Maine Sea Grant's Policy Advisory Committee.

Now that Alden has retired as executive director of the Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries in Stonington, she could easily rest on her laurels. These include the 1997 Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment Visionary Award and the 2007 Maine Initiatives Social Landscape Artist Award, received along with her husband, Ted Ames.

In 2017, Robin Alden was a "Hero of the Seas" winner of one of the Peter Benchley Ocean Awards. These prestigious awards are given to "a marine grassroots activist who has made a major and long-term commitment to improving the quality of our seas and the communities that depend on them."

Not only has Alden contributed significantly to building sustainable coastal fisheries and fishing communities in northern New England, but she also spent twenty years publishing and editing *Commercial Fisheries News*, a regional fishing trade newspaper that she founded in 1973.

On her move from Massachusetts to the Deer Isle area of the Maine coast, Alden reflects, "I can't imagine what my mother thought when I called her to tell her I was going to extend my year off from Yale and start a fishermen's newspaper!" How did a 21-year-old medieval history major make the transition from college student to newspaper editor "with a passion to bridge the gulfs that separated fishermen, scientists, and policy makers"?

According to Alden, "*Commercial Fisheries News* was started on a literal shoestring. "My partnership with Nat Barrows, the publisher and editor of the local paper in Stonington, *Island Advantages*, provided *CFN* with an essential publishing incubator." In the beginning, Alden did all the writing, "though we added stringers along the Maine coast." The first issue was published in September 1973.

As with many of Alden's other projects, she attributes sheer determination to part of *CFN*'s success. In 1978, she began to run *CFN* on her own, realizing it would not be sustainable as

*Maine Commercial Fisheries*, its original name. She recalls, “The paper rode the wave of large scallop vessel construction in the early 1980s and took us as far as the steel boatyards in Florida selling ads.”

For Alden, “Keeping *CFN* alive simply took perseverance and learning—and learning. It was a labor of love, and if I could figure out the business end, then, I, and my wonderful team, could write what we felt needed to be written.”

Beyond her work as editor of *CFN*, many in the fishing industry and marine science community were acquainted with Alden’s activist/advocate role through her collaboration with UMaine economist Jim Wilson in founding the Maine Fishermen’s Forum in 1975. As Wilson’s student research assistant, Alden coordinated many of the panels and workshops for the three-day event. Now in its 43rd year, the Forum continues as an event by and for fishermen and the largest gathering of its kind in New England.

Alden met Wilson when she interviewed him for an article about lobster legislation. She says, “*CFN* was, for years, the paper of record for New England fisheries policy, and Jim’s rigorous examination—and re-examination—of the theory that underlies policy recommendation influenced my perceptions, my editorial writing, and fueled my interest in how and why fishermen’s practical knowledge can improve both science and policy.”

Another strong influence in Alden’s life and career is her husband and MacArthur Fellow Ted Ames. For Alden, her partnership with Ames has given her “the love of my life and the chance to be a fisherman’s wife. It provided me a home in the industry and influenced my perceptions when I had a chance to make policy as DMR commissioner.” Furthermore, she adds, “our relationship was instrumental in making the hard, and sensible, decision to sell *CFN* in the early 1990s.”

“Over the years, Ted and I have had the privilege of a life where ideas and perceptions of our common goal—how to further sustainable fishing and fishing communities—are completely interwoven with our friends and family life.”

Referring to the many honors and awards Alden has received over her career, she is candid. “Awards seem to come at the end of episodes in one’s career,” she says, “and most of mine have come in the last few years, so they didn’t have a direct effect on most of my work.”

However, Alden does believe her awards have helped the credibility of the Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries. “Until about six years ago, I had the naïve idea that I would solve the problem of sustainable small-scale fisheries and then step aside.” After facing “the reality of my own age, my major purpose became building a sustainable organization and a staff of people who would keep the work going long into the future.”

So what does the future hold for Robin Alden? Currently, she is “taking a ‘year off’ to decompress from so many years of carrying the final responsibility for an organization.”

“As the year goes on,” this Hero of the Sea reflects, “my interest in writing is re-emerging. I don’t yet know the form this will take. During this reflection time, I am acknowledging and connecting with the perspective I have gained over the years on the quest to set the conditions for community-scale fishermen to continue to fish forever. Writing always clarifies my thinking, and I look forward to using writing to both distill what I have learned and to share it.”