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Clamming in Maine

Brunswick High School

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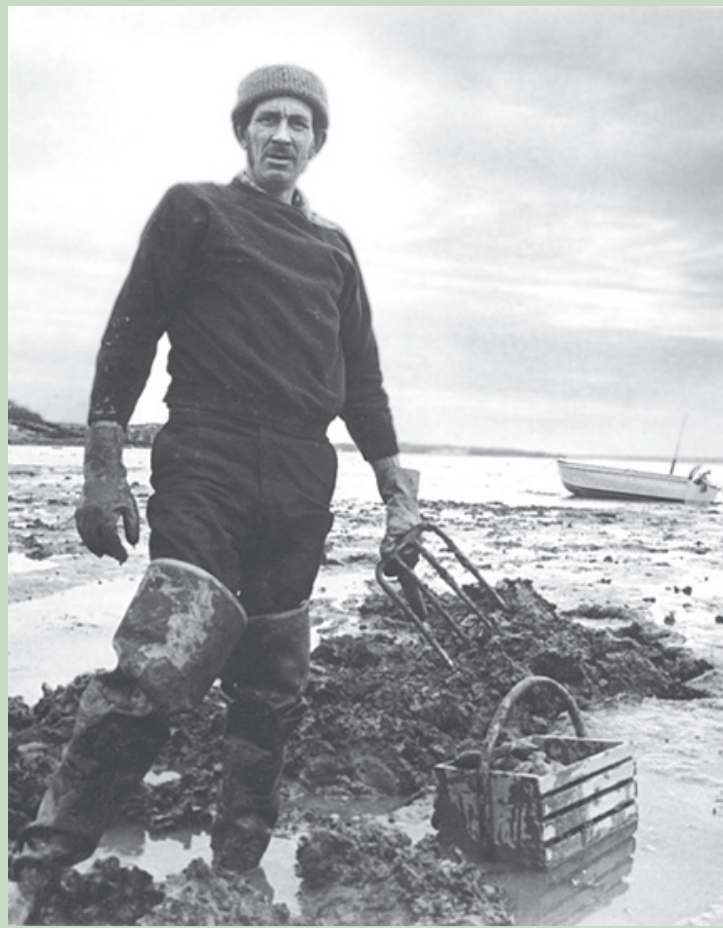
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Clamming in Maine

History

Digging soft shell clams (*Mya arenaria*) in Maine dates back hundreds of years. Ancestors of the native Wabanaki people harvested clams, as did the early colonists for whom shellfish was an important food source and a primary export. Since the 1800s, Maine towns have had the authority to issue licenses, open and close flats, set harvest limits, and restrict harvesting to local residents, and Maine is one of the only states that still has local shellfish management today. Clams are harvested by hand or using a rake to reach the clams, which can be 6-14 inches under the sand or mud. Harvests are still measured in bushels. One bushel weighs around 50 pounds.



Economic Benefits

Maine's shellfish industry, including soft shell clams, was valued at \$15 million in 2016, and has around 1,700 harvesters statewide. In addition to the wild harvest, soft shell clams are emerging as a candidate for aquaculture, through the process of "seeding" clam habitat with hatchery-raised clams and then protecting leased aquaculture sites from clam predators with nets or fencing.

Challenges for Wild Harvesters and Aquaculture Development

Recent increases in populations of predators such as green crabs and milky ribbon worms have reduced clam populations in many harvesting areas, and shoreline development has limited or prohibited harvesters from accessing some clam flats from the shore. Coastal development can also threaten water quality through increases in polluted stormwater runoff or waste discharges. Poor water quality and blooms of naturally occurring toxic plankton called dinoflagellates can also make clams in certain areas unsafe to eat, requiring the Maine Department of Marine Resources to temporarily close clam flats from harvest. Increased amounts of dissolved carbon dioxide in ocean waters (ocean acidification) is another source of concern, as clams form their shells out of calcium carbonate in sea water, which becomes less abundant as ocean water becomes more acidic.

Working Toward Solutions

Harvesters and resource managers use traps, nets, and fences to reduce populations of green crabs, exclude crabs and other predators from shellfish growing areas, and help improve soft shell clam survival rates. Harvesters, researchers, coastal managers, and community volunteers are working together to monitor water quality, ocean acidification, and the populations of soft shell clams and their predators to better understand how to protect this iconic and economically valuable species. Experimental studies to seed mud flats with hatchery-raised baby clams may also help to supplement

the wild population. Since 2016, the Town of Brunswick, Downeast Institute for Research and Education, Brunswick High School, and the Tidelands Coalition have been supporting a



series of experimental studies right here at Wharton Point.

