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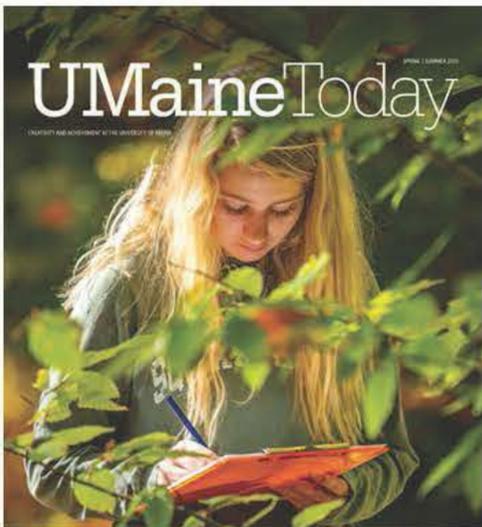
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Locally caught Maine scallops.

Photo courtesy of Togue Brown

New international study shows alternative seafood networks provided resilient diversity during pandemic

March 31, 2021

Local alternative seafood networks (ASNs) in the United States and Canada, often considered niche segments, experienced unprecedented growth in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic while the broader seafood system faltered, highlighting the need for greater functional diversity in supply chains, according to a new international study led by the University of Maine.

The spike in demand reflected a temporary relocalization phenomenon that can occur during periods of systemic shock — an inverse yet complementary relationship between global and local seafood systems that contributes to the resilience of regional food systems, according to the research team, which published its findings in *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*.

The globalization of seafood has made food systems more vulnerable to systemic shocks, which can impact those dependent on seafood for sustenance and employment, according to the research team, led by Joshua Stoll, assistant professor of marine policy at the University of Maine.

Policy changes and greater investments in data collection and infrastructure are needed to support ASN development, increase functional diversity in supply chains, and bolster the resilience and sustainability of regional food systems and the global seafood trade, according to the researchers.

“This research shows that alternative seafood networks help to make seafood supply chains more diverse. In doing so, it brings attention to the critical role that local seafood systems play in supporting resilient fisheries in times of crisis,” says Stoll, who collaborated with researchers from the University of Guelph, Haverford College, University of Vermont, North American Marine Alliance and 11 community-supported fisheries from the U.S. and Canada.

Seafood is a highly perishable commodity that demands efficient distribution. Alternative seafood networks distribute seafood through local and direct marketing, conducted by the very people who caught it, as opposed to the long and complex supply chains of their global counterparts.

According to the study, this physical and social “connectedness” may help to insulate local and regional seafood systems from the deadlock caused by systemic global shocks that disrupts the broader seafood trade.

“ASNs emphasize shorter supply chains and direct-to-consumer models,” says Philip Loring, associate professor and Arrell Chair in Food, Policy and Society at the University of Guelph. “They’re not locked into a single system. They have access to diverse fisheries, they know how to get straight to the consumer. All these things came together and made a unique ability to pivot quickly.”

The researchers analyzed four lines of quantitative and qualitative evidence: national Google search term data, website analytics data from ASN, SafeGraph foot traffic data for more than 3,000 fish and seafood markets, and in-depth interviews with practitioners from 16 ASNs in the U.S. and Canada.

Funding for the study came from the Oak Foundation, the School of Marine Sciences at the University of Maine, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the COVID-19 Rapid Research Fund from the Gund Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont.

A news release with graphic representations of the study data is [online](#).

Contact: Margaret Nagle, nagle@maine.edu

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Division of Marketing and Communications
5703 Alumni Hall
Orono, ME 04469-5703

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Fax: 207.581.3776

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