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Living by Fish -- Doing it Right in Downeast Maine

Robin Alden, Presented at TEDxDirigo May 16, 2012, Hannaford Hall, University of Southern Maine, Portland.

Imagine a place that can sustain itself fishing, forever. Imagine 150 miles of Maine coast and 50 fishing communities where fishermen and people in those communities take an active part in caring for the rivers and coves, and the mud and the seaweed and -- beyond that, the fish and habitat on the bottom of the ocean that they can't even see. Imagine a place where a resilient economy is based on healthy and diverse fisheries. And, over time, that both the economy and fishermen continually adapt to the ever-changing climate and marine system, changing what is caught and sold, working within its bounds. Imagine producing high quality marine food for the world, at a fair price, for the long term. Now, hear this again: I'm not talking about fiddling with the edges of the current, bad parenting model of fisheries, where it's all the government's job to take care of the fish and the fishermen's only responsibility is to catch as much as possible. No. I would like you to imagine a place where *fishermen themselves play a lead role in the stewardship* of the rivers and ocean that sustain them.

Right now, in eastern Maine, this vision could be reality in the next 10-20 years. Theoretically, of course, we could make it happen anywhere, anytime. But we don't have much of a track record when it comes to fish -- except for being great at catching them. As the saying goes, "We have declared war on fish -- and won!"

A convergence of factors is setting the stage for this change: new science, several big, marine and conservation initiatives, and an early, promising process that is supporting fishermen to speak for the future. None of these things alone will change the paradigm. But if we think completely differently about fisheries then these events provide us with an *amazing* opportunity to create something new in the developed world: a 21st Century fishing economy where we both care for the ocean *and* live and eat from it. We need to have the vision and the smarts and the courage to make it happen.

For me, the insight that led me here today, all started with a clam digger on Deer Isle. [Slide 1] I was 21, interviewing him for a story about clam laws. He was a clammer, in his 60s, and he was MAD because no one was listening to his ideas about protecting clams. As I listened to him, I heard the things that Herb knew about mud and where on a flat the clams grew fast, or slow. And where the young clams -- the spat -- settled and what conditions helped them survive -- or not. He knew things that I didn't even know there were to be known. He saw things I could not perceive as I looked out over the flats on that one, low tide. AND,... HE CARED.

His knowledge and passion! This 21-year-old thought it was a good start towards taking care of the most amazing manufacturing machine she'd ever run across: Every single year in the Gulf of Maine, the currents and sunlight and marine plankton produce resources for us to harvest -- seemingly something out of nothing.

But, unfortunately neither that knowledge and nor the passion has had an outlet. Fishermen and scientists and managers are trapped in a legacy of dysfunction. The result has been depletions and ocean degradation, years of frustration and alienation for fishermen and pervasive mistrust between fishermen and regulators.

What has been missing? That knowledge and passion of Herb's, turned into action.

[Slide] Eastern Maine is where the pieces are coming together. 150 miles of coastline, land, rivers and ocean, all interconnected, bounded on the west by the great Penobscot River and on the east by the St. Croix River, with the famed Downeast Salmon Rivers in between. Offshore, there is the coastal shelf -- the shallow area within 25 miles of the coast where **all** our marine resources reproduce and grow.

Eastern Maine has abundant lobster but -- and many people don't realize this -- the cod and haddock and flounders completely collapsed over 20 years ago and have not rebuilt. Both fishermen and scientists are nervous about the fragility of this lack of diversity. Lobsters, lobsters and more lobsters, but where are groundfish that are so essential to the ocean and the economy?

Eastern Maine is a place where fishing still matters, which is key to the opportunity I see. About 3000 fishermen, 50 fishing communities. Fishing still feeds the families of Hancock and Washington Counties and pays for schools and towns.

Here's what's happening to set the stage for this opportunity

- First, the eastern Maine coastal shelf from Penobscot Bay to Canada has just been identified as being distinct, ecologically. This may sound insignificant but it's actually liberating news. No more one-size-fits-all approach from Eastern Maine to Cape Cod!
- Better yet, we can act on this because federal managers are starting to shift toward managing by **area** instead of just by species -- a HUGE change. This is a learning moment -- no one knows how to do this new, ecosystem management. What better place to try it than in eastern Maine? It's a pretty small and uncomplicated place compared to the rest of New England. And we have the motivation -- fishing still matters here.
- **This will provide fishermen with new standing.** Remember the incredible complexity Herb observed just on one clam flat? There is no way to manage that complexity from Augusta or Washington. Fishermen's knowledge and observation and, yes, their responsibility will have new value and relevance.
- It gets better! Eastern Maine is about to experience a cataclysmic, **positive** ecological event. This year, dams will start to be taken down on the Penobscot River. For the first time in 160 years, almost 1000 miles of streams and lakes will be open to sea-run fish. Those are fish such as alewives and salmon that spawn in fresh water and live in the ocean. The river will come alive!

- Other rivers and streams are being opened in the area as well, as communities improve sea-run fish passage throughout the watersheds of the Downeast Salmon Rivers.
- This river news is vitally important because of the linkage between ocean and river health. The rebounding of the river fish should be a driver for *marine* restoration, rebuilding the ocean groundfish that have been missing.

But, back to Herb the clam digger. Unless fishermen's knowledge and passion is enlisted, all these exciting events will not catapult us to a **new** fisheries economy. In 2009, Dr. Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel Prize in Economics for documenting that effective natural resource management requires that **users** participate and hold **actual** authority.

But, **how**? Mistrust and fishermen's pervasive futility -- well-founded and for good reason -- are the biggest obstacles. We have looked at this deeply and have developed a process to support fishermen in building the hope and the skills it takes to speak effectively for the long term. We call it Community Fisheries Action Roundtable, C-FAR for short. [Slide]

"How do you start?" someone asked me. We start by listening and writing everything down. The next meeting, we share what was on the butcher paper and start there. After years of dysfunction, there is a **lot** of angst to be vented.

We focus on **improving** the resources and finding solutions. If everything is a zero sum game, it's hard to hope. We talk about access. If a fisherman -- or his grandson -- doesn't have the right to fish, why care about that resource?

We are conscious about creating a safe place. It takes real courage for fishermen to participate. Sharing your observations about fish behavior amounts to sharing your competitive edge. Speaking up can make other fishermen angry -- very dangerous when you have \$50,000-100,000 in lobster gear sitting unattended offshore. It's hard work, too. One fisherman said, "We are saying things we wouldn't say anywhere else. It's good. But I'm still more comfortable standing at the back of the room, yelling."

We eat together. We avoid the typical meeting set-up -- for many fishermen that conjures the feelings of failure left over from school. We meet again and again and again. We ask what's important -- about fishing, about a fishery, about their community. And we write it down. Those values then provide a set of principles, formal or informal, that together we can check back to as we face tough discussion on rules. These are emotional issues that touch the very essence of being a fishermen.

Fishermen meet with regulators, and scientists with us as guides. The dreaded "GOVERNMENT" gradually takes form: state and federal, legislature and agency. Science morphs from being the club used to beat fishermen with, to a process of testing questions, -- familiar precisely because fishermen do that every day, as they fish.

In between, we take phone calls and provide perspective and support. The land world is so much more complicated than the world of fishing where the tasks are straightforward, the hunt is engaging, the hierarchy of captain and crew is clear cut, and the rewards are immediate and tangible. "The worst day on the water is always better than the best day on land."

And we're there for the long haul, a daunting responsibility. Hope -- which is what fishermen tell us we are giving them -- is extraordinarily fragile, especially for people who are used to command and control, not being part of the ups and downs of a long, collective process.

And so, *I* have hope that, in the next 10-20 years, it *is* possible to build a new and lasting fishing economy in eastern Maine. This is a big job that will require collective action by many people and groups, and state and federal government. But imagine: Restored rivers and a restored and diverse marine system. Boats that fish and tend the productivity of a local area, based on dynamic science informed by an active, two-way exchange with fishermen. An adaptable, fair market that turns diverse species into food.

The external conditions are set. And we have a glimmer of hope and emerging trust to mobilize that critical element: fishermen's knowledge and passion. I don't think there is anywhere else in the developed world where it is more possible to create the 21st century fishing economy this planet needs.