

Know Your Fisherman, Know Your Seafood

The Local Sustainable Seafood Movement in Rhode Island

Meredith Haas

The number of farmers' markets has more than tripled in the past 15 years and there are now more than 6,100 around the country, with Rhode Island leading the largest growth in the nation in small farms, according to the United States Department of Agriculture. It seems as though we're really getting to know our farmers and have a better understanding of where our food is coming from, except for seafood. Who are our fishermen and where is our seafood coming from?

The demand for local seafood in Rhode Island is slowly gaining traction but still a little wobbly on the first steps toward building a strong and sustainable local seafood economy. The majority of seafood products at farmers' markets in the state are limited to aquaculture shellfish products, wild lobsters and crabs, according to Farm Fresh, a nonprofit that distributes local food throughout Rhode Island. But when talking about local sustainable seafood is the term 'sustainable' synonymous with the term 'local'? Not always. There seems to be much confusion around what "sustainable seafood", and even what "local seafood", really means and a lot of that depends on where you're coming from on a broad spectrum that encompasses perspectives on the environment, the economy, as well as social and health issues.

The goal of the sustainable seafood movement is to reduce pressure on vulnerable species. The goal of the local seafood movement is to sustain local communities and reducing food miles, or reducing the carbon footprint, said Ann Cook, co-founder of the local seafood processor The Local Catch, in a presentation at the 2011 Ronald C. Baird Sea Grant Science Symposium. While seemingly different, she said, these goals do complement each other and that going local is a route to sustainability.

"There's nothing inherently more sustainable about eating local," said Cook. "When fishermen sell locally they are more accountable to the public. They have more incentive to be sustainable."

But there is still conflict on what sustainable and what local means.

"The term 'sustainable' is the conflict of discussion," said Dr. Cathy Roheim, professor at the University of Rhode Island and director of the URI Sustainable Seafood Initiative, at the symposium "Is it a point or a path? Do you reach a sustainability point or is it a process of moving toward something?"

In other words, is the notion of being sustainable the goal alone, or is it the framework of how we operate?



The Local Catch is a local seafood processor and wholesaler that markets local seafood to local consumers. The Local Catch strategy supports Rhode Island fishermen, is better for the environment, and provides a fresher, tastier seafood product to our community. Photo: Don Pryor.

Specifically regarding the sustainability of seafood, Cook summarized the general assumption that sustainability means that any particular species of fish, or shellfish, is abundant enough to satisfy current demand without compromising such resources to future generations. However, different stakeholders define sustainability in various ways in which there's no general consensus.

The criteria for deeming sustainability in fisheries, and even aquaculture, is much more involved, said Dr. Roheim. It includes assessing the health of the environment and the impacts fishing gear may have on habitat quality, as well as assessing management tools that most effectively promote a healthy environment while also sustaining those economies dependent on the resource, in addition to the abundance of a species. The criteria for sustainable aquaculture, she said, included assessing fishmeal products, pollution, and operation risks.

"When consumers ask Local Catch about sustainability it's hard to answer because it's not as black and white as some campaigns imply," said Cook. "Sustainability can be assessed in many more ways than just by species."

And so can "locally-caught."

In finding out what 'local' means to locals, former URI Sustainable Seafood Fellow Sam Grimley, now the Sustainable Seafood Project Coordinator at Gulf of Maine Research Institute, found in a survey of 200 Rhode Island consumers that buying local seafood meant one of three things:

- Seafood was either caught or grown within Rhode Island waters, which extends 3 miles off shore and includes Narragansett Bay.
- Seafood was landed in a Rhode Island port, or
- Seafood was brought in from a fishermen register in Rhode Island.

All of these points are valid. It demonstrates, however, the various ideas of what ‘local’ means to various people and how difficult seafood is to label as local.

Building relationships key to local sustainability

One thing that is for certain is that the relationship between fishermen, suppliers, chefs, and consumers is the key in building a better sustainable and local seafood industry in the state.

There are currently 38 operational aquaculture farms that cover 140 acres and 1300 fishermen in Rhode Island working to bring fresh, sustainable and local seafood to farmers’ markets, restaurants, and local processors like The Local Catch and Deep Sea Fish.

The direct interaction between fishermen and consumers, explained Cook, increases consumer knowledge on where fish are coming from and allows for the introduction of underutilized species such as Sea Robin and Scup.

“There’s a value decision when making a product,” said Chef Ken Watt, Executive Chef of Practicum Properties at Johnson & Wales University, explaining at the symposium that it’s not just the cost chefs and restaurant owners take into account when purchasing seafood. It’s the story about where the food came from and who caught it that adds value. “The more we know the better it’s going to be to move toward local and sustainable.”

The current challenges remain in market demand for “locally-caught” seafood and regulation restrictions on fishermen to directly distribute.

“There isn’t a market in Rhode Island to match local consumers,” said Dr. Roheim explaining that not everything in demand, such as salmon, is locally caught and that fishermen make more selling outside the state where demand is high.

One solution is to use these underutilized species so that consumers are more aware of the resources here in Rhode Island. Chef Derek Wanger, owner of Nick’s on Broadway in Providence, says he talks to fishermen and prints menus daily based on what is available.

“It’s still evolving and I’ve seen good response from guests,” he said. “The connection allows for complete traceability that I can now offer customers.”

The Matunuck Oyster Farm and Matunuck Oyster Bar is a unique operation to note because it brings locally grown oysters from a 7-acre oyster farm directly to restaurant patrons and farmers’ markets across the state. The American Mussel Harvesters in Quonset Point also grow locally, producing mussels and clams in addition to oysters. There are many restaurants and markets that also support local catches that include flounder, scup, lobster, scallops and clams.

Consumers are growing more interested and concerned about where food is coming from and how it impacts the environmental and local businesses. We as consumers, however, have very little knowledge of where our seafood is coming and who caught it.

The key is building relationships with our fishermen and better education so we can make better decisions. The consumer, said Grimley, has strength in the local sustainable seafood movement.

~Meredith Haas is the research communications specialist for the Rhode Island Sea Grant.



Perry Rasso, the owner of Matunuck Oyster Farm sorts oysters at his aquaculture site in Potter Pond. Photo: Meredith Haas.



Local fishermen sort catch in a trial of a net designed to reduce bycatch in the haddock fishery. Photo: University of Rhode Island.