

## **Know your food, know your fisherman**

In recent years, the phrase “Know your food, know your farmer” has taken on special significance as more and more people become concerned with where their food comes from. As we’ve seen here in Maine—a state with rising acres of agricultural land and decreasing age of farmers—that ethic is returning incredible benefits. Go no further than your local farmers market to see how good it feels and tastes to buy your food directly from the person who harvested it.

The question is: how can we use this momentum to benefit our fishermen? A promising approach called community-based fishing shows hope that we can.

In many ways, the recent history of our fishermen shares a lot with that of farmers. For centuries, family farms fed our communities until recent decades forced small operations to close in favor of large industrial producers. The result has been the decline of the family farm, an increase in public health issues, and a general disconnect with the food we eat.

The plight of fishermen has many parallels. Fishing has always been the hub of our coastal communities, but recent decades have seen the number of boats on the water dwindle. Imports from other countries have flooded the seafood market and reduced wild fish stocks have brought on conditions that make it difficult for many fishermen to make a living.

What’s left of the fishing fleet is quickly being consolidated into fewer vessels, putting the small-scale fishermen—and the communities they support—in danger. And when we buy fish at the grocery store today, much of it comes from across the globe rather than the wharf just down the road.

The local-food movement has breathed new life into the diversified family farm—and it can do the same for the fourth-generation fisherman. Community-based fishing picks up on local-food ethics by creating networks to help fishermen sell directly to their customers and promote the value of sustainable fisheries.

A great example of how this works right here in Maine is the Port Clyde Fresh Catch co-op. Three years ago, commercial fishermen in Port Clyde faced dual challenges. Not only did regulations no longer allow them to catch as many fish as they once could, but having to sell to a distributor yielded them less return for the catch they did bring back to the dock.

They decided to turn these challenges into an opportunity. By forming a co-op to package and sell their fish, they were able to set a higher price for themselves while catching fewer fish. At once, they made local fisheries more sustainable and more profitable while bringing the highest quality seafood to consumers’ tables.

The co-op has continued to flourish since its start, selling products through farmers markets, community-supported fishery shares, and individual orders. Just as with

locally grown vegetables, the food is fresher and comes with the knowledge that its sale will support the community and help our neighbors who make their living on the water.

This movement isn't without its challenges, however. Community-based operations have faced hurdles in marketing, crumbling infrastructure, diminished waterfront access, and competition from countries that don't exercise the same sustainability standards.

With several partners from Maine, a new group has formed to confront some of these challenges—the Community Fisheries Network. Among its goals are helping community fisheries market their products, being an information exchange for businesses dealing with shared difficulties, providing a voice for sustainable and small-scale fishermen on a national level, and spreading awareness to the public about the value gained by knowing where our fish comes from.

Two bills I have introduced would build on this work. The Local Farms, Food and Jobs Act would allow people to use food stamps on local community-supported fisheries shares. And the Keeping America's Waterfronts Working Act would help communities preserve and expand their working waterfront infrastructure.

Maine communities have always prided themselves on their connection to our treasured marine resources. I hope the momentum of community-based fishing can continue not only to keep that maritime tradition alive, but to make it thrive once again. As with the local-farm movement, it will ultimately be consumers who make it happen with their desire to eat food that is not only healthy for themselves but also for their communities.