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Rockweed harvesting raises concerns for local citizens

By Anne Berleant

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Bags of rockweed harvested from Smith Cove are lifted from shore for transport by Acadian Seaplants in 2021.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLUE HILL ROCKWEED FORUM

BLUE HILL PENINSULA — While farming and harvesting edible seaweeds like sugar kelp and dulse is on the rise in Maine, the commercial harvest of inedible rockweed has tripled over the last 20 years and accounts for about 95% of all seaweed harvested in the state.

In 2021, 15.1 million pounds of rockweed harvested brought in a value just shy of \$1 million. After processing for fertilizer and other uses, its value rises even more.

However, the increase in rockweed harvesting has led some residents to question its effect on the ecosystems it nurtures and protects along local coastlines. In Hancock County, the Blue Hill Peninsula Rockweed Forum, founded by Brooklin resident David Porter and summer resident Allison Snow, both retired botany and mycology/ecology professors, is working to bring more eyes on the potential effects of industrial rockweed harvests.

“I didn’t know about harvesting until 2021, which in July was when Acadian Seaplants came in and started harvesting at Smith Cove in Brooksville,” Snow told the Islander.



Brooklin resident David Porter, co-founder of the Blue Hill Peninsula Rockweed Forum, examines rockweed on Mill Island.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BLUE HILL ROCKWEED FORUM

Snow and her neighbors watched as tons of rockweed was harvested from Smith Cove. “We were counting the bags,” she said. “At first, I didn’t think anything about it. But the more I read in the scientific literature and talking to people, I realized that rockweed is a very important habitat, and it grows back very slowly, only a few inches a year.”

She counted at least 210 bags of rockweed taken during part of June and in July, she said, with each bag holding about a ton.

Once several feet of rockweed are harvested, it removes the habitat from the area, she continued. “That’s what [Porter and I] are concerned about,” she said. “If you have three to six feet of rockweed that is important for other species at high tide and low tide. So, that’s our focus, trying to focus on the habitat for other species of marine organisms.”

The Maine Department of Marine Resources (DMR) manages rockweed harvesting in Washington County’s Cobscook Bay and permits harvesting there and elsewhere. The DMR uses licenses, mandatory reporting requirements, a minimum cutting height of 16 inches and, in Cobscook Bay “a sector allocation system and a limitation on the harvest from that sector to no more than 17% annually” to manage the resource,” explained Deirdre Gilbert, director of the DMR’s Bureau of Policy and Management.

“Based on prior estimates of rockweed biomass in the Gulf of Maine, Maine’s current fishery typically takes less than 1% of the available biomass,” Gilbert said. “Further, by its nature, rockweed is subject to significant ‘natural mortality’ annually due to storms, ice scour, etc.”

She noted that a Maine Supreme Judicial Court ruling in 2019 determined that rockweed is the private property of the adjacent upland landowner, so that landowner permission is required for any harvesting on private lands, which has limited harvesting opportunities.

A recent University of Maine study on how rockweed beds recover from harvesting concluded that the harvest has a smaller impact than previously thought and suggests that when managed properly, rockweed can be harvested sustainably without compromising long-term ecosystem health.

But Snow and Porter question its findings, both said, and the rockweed industry’s own conclusions on the sustainability of its harvesting practices. And, scientists from UMaine, the Smithsonian Institute and Maine Rockweed Coalition pointed out “major flaws in the original analysis,” said Robin Hadlock Seeley, executive director of the coalition.

Acadian Seaplants has tried to work with citizens concerned about the harvesting, said Chris Philbrook, who handles communications in Maine. And scientists Acadian Seaplants' senior resource biologist Alison Feibel told the Islander the company uses an area-based management model in all areas it harvests from.

“This model has been in place for over 20 years in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, where it has been extensively reviewed, and has been in place in Maine since Acadian began operating here in 2006,” Feibel said.

She added, “After more than 20 years of continuous harvest in New Brunswick, there has been no significant impact of the harvest on the biomass, height or morphology of rockweed (Lauzon-Guay et al 2021 and 2023) ... In fact, Maine has a stricter cutting height regulation than New Brunswick, or any other jurisdiction globally, requiring that at least 16 inches above the holdfast be left after cutting.”

Snow and Porter, though, remain unconvinced that habitat is not being negatively affected by the harvesting. “Young fish forage in the rockweed,” Snow said. “It’s important for fisheries. It’s a hard thing to say, if all the rock weed was gone what would happen to the fisheries. But marine biologists studying this for a long time have found that many, many fish feed there — it’s a feeding ground and a shelter.”

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Reporter