

Conservatives and Conservation in Maine

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Reluctantly, I peeled the Biden 2020 sticker off my car and stepped back to stare at the sticky residue on the windshield. I had only been working at Holbrook's Wharf and Lobster Grille for a day when my coworker, Morgan, said, "Caroline, do you want to have your tires slashed?" I thought she was joking, but her concerned frown meant she was serious. Located in Cundy's Harbor, Maine, Holbrook's has been a working wharf since 1832. The community is tight. Many of the families go back hundreds of years and have passed their trade down through generations. You can see the family trees remembered on the hulls of fishing boats bobbing in the harbor, the names of family members dipping under the waves. I grew up coming to Holbrook's because my great-grandfather built a house here over 150 years ago. I fell into the summer job working at the general store after COVID-19 halted my existing plans, and my great-aunt graciously offered to put me in touch with the owners. Morgan and I immediately became friends, and she saved me from several encounters with the fishermen, including accidentally parking where I blocked their trucks, calling lobstering a summer job, and now, having a Joe Biden sticker on my car.

When I started this job, I did not understand how people whose careers relied on a healthy ecosystem, such as lobster or fishermen, could support a Republican candidate like Donald Trump. My experience inspired this essay, which looks at the intersections between Conservative politics and politicians and Maine's natural environment. Working at Holbrooks led me to look at other Maine industries, such as logging and the manufacturing of paper products. I want to understand the history of these industries and the evolving politics of the employees. I focus on Republican leaders and policies because the party is divided on to what extent economic growth is worth damaging Maine's natural environment. I found that the most contentious relationships between economic

expansion and the environment are based in politically conservative rural and coastal regions. These regions have transitioned from rightward-leaning communities to some of the most conservative in the state as politics became more partisan and the Republicans better represented the concerns surrounding job loss. The Maine Republican Party is not against conservation or protecting the environment. But, they have inherited a group of voters whose jobs depend on a healthy environment where people are allowed to use their natural resources. So far, the Republican party has prioritized the use and taking of natural resources over their conservation. Both industry and conservation can exist in Maine, however, it must be a bipartisan effort.

Maine's fishing and lobster industries have suffered in the past years. Overfishing, ocean acidification, and rising water temperatures have diminished populations and forced species to move further north to colder waters. These changes have especially harmed the lobster industry. A 2006 study by Fisheries Research reports that lobster is the "Single most commercially lucrative marine species in the United States" and that "Maine accounts for 34% of all U.S. lobster landings" (Driscoll et al. 386). The diminishing lobster population will disproportionately hurt Maine's economy because it makes up a large part of the state's exports. The diminishing lobster population is directly linked to climate change. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports that ocean temperatures have risen at an average rate of 0.12°C (32.2° F) (Greenhalgh). That rate increases in the Gulf of Maine, and it is predicted that sea surface temperature will "rise more than 4°F by the end of the century under a high-emissions scenario and 2° F under a low-emissions scenario" (Greenhalgh). Lobsters can survive in temperatures up to 20°C (68°F) before they hit a "stress threshold" and start to die off (Greenhalgh). An NOAA report on average water temperatures in Maine from the summer of 2020 June, July, and August all averaged between 60° and 63° meaning that Maine has maybe twenty years left (Water Temperature Table of the Northern Atlantic Coast).

The future for Maine's lobster industry is dire. The Maine Lobstermen Association (MLA)

has been at the forefront of the fight to protect the Gulf of Maine. With over 1,200 members MLA has partnered with scientists to gather vital data used to create laws to set quotas and recommend policies to protect the environment (Maine Lobstermen's Association). But, the effects of climate change are too big for one organization, or even one state legislature, to battle alone. The Trump administration's repeals of legislation to decrease emissions and exit from the Paris Climate Agreement have hurt Maine's lobster industry, and yet, still many fisher and lobstermen voted for Trump in the 2020 election (The MLA did not endorse a presidential candidate in 2020).

Terry Alexander is an offshore fisherman and voted for Trump in the 2020 election. Alexander sits on the New England Fisheries Management Council and is the President of Sustainable Harvest's Northeast groundfish fishermen sector. Alexander grew up fishing, and today he owns two vessels. A native to Cundy's Harbor, I had the opportunity to interview him over the phone for this article. "I was actually at the table with the President that day," Terry says after I ask him about Trump's efforts to help Maine lobster and fishermen (Alexander). "He opened up the areas that the Obama administration closed." I start to ask what he means but Alexander continues, "The reason that's important is that there was a lot of lobstering going on out there and those boats got displaced and started coming inshore... It's fishing displacement" (Alexander).

Alexander is referring to when, in 2016, former President Obama established the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument, a 5,000 square mile area off the New England coast, and the first National Monument in the Atlantic Ocean. Established using the Antiquities Act, commercial fishing is banned within the National Monument. In a statement from the White House, the goal of the protected area is to "improve ocean resilience in the face of climate change" (White). While the Obama administration's efforts are important, the consequences were paid by Alexander and other fisher and lobstermen. In some ways, the Trump administration both saved and cemented the doomed fate of New England fisheries.

Global warming will ruin the Maine fishery. As oceans warm, fish move north, and species are not adapting at a rate where we can continue our rates of harvesting. When I ask Alexander about Trump's handling of global warming he says, "there's no doubt in my mind that it [global warming] exists... as somebody who pays very close attention to water temperature our water is definitely warming up and fish... lobsters, especially, they're moving north" (Alexander). Alexander, however, is an optimist. He tells me how new species are coming to Maine. I can't help but wonder how this migration of species is sustainable. Alexander adds that many Maine fishermen "don't have Mid-Atlantic species on their permits" meaning that since the permits are limited access, which Alexander explains to mean that "you would have to buy a permit from an existing person," even with new species in the harbor, Maine fishermen wouldn't be able to catch them (Alexander). Despite Alexander's hope for the future and years of activism to preserve the fishing and lobster industries, the rate of change in our climate is too fast to hold on to the fishing economy he grew up with. The medium Alexander strived for has failed. National politics and bipartisanship have irreversibly damaged economies that rely on a healthy ecosystem.

The impact of industry on conservation is not linear. Elections, weather, tourism, and trade all affect both Maine businesses and the natural environment. An unexpected problem, however, is the inaccessibility of data and research surrounding the health of New England's oceans from key organizations. A study about the Gulf of Maine Council (GOMC), found "enablers and barriers affecting production, distribution, and use of its publications" (Cossarini et al. 1). The study describes the data as "grey literature," meaning that it is vague and difficult to understand (Cossarini et al. 1). GOMC is incredibly important because they play an advisory role in setting policies concerning the fishing and lobster industry. Politicians and policy advisors use this information to create laws and quotas for the fishing and lobster industry. Because the information published by the GOMC is so vague, the policies can become more political as people have less researched-based evidence to use.

The GOMC's finding should be easily accessible since the current practices create a disconnect between the people on the boats and the people making environmental policies.

Mandi Hawkes is familiar with the confusing and constantly changing fishing regulations. At only 23, she is the Hawke's wharf manager, responsible for buying fuel and bait for the lobstermen, selling their lobsters, and negotiating with the hundreds of international buyers that rely on the Hawkes for their lobsters. In an interview with Mandi, she expands upon the impact of the Trump Administration on Maine's lobster and fishermen. "No President has really cared about us until Trump," she says. I shift uncomfortably knowing that just hours earlier the Associated Press called the election for Joe Biden. "Our taxes and the price of fuel have gone down and the price for lobster went up. We've been doing really well until COVID" (Hawkes). The Hawkes family is a founding member of the harbor. They own the commercial wharf next to Holbrook's, their homes line the harbor road, and their boats fly Trump flags in the harbor.

I first met Mandi when she first came into Holbrooke's general store for Cool Blue Gatorade and Snickers. I'd often look out the window of the store and see her driving a forklift full of traps down the wharf. She values hard work and has been working every summer since she was 12. Her experience in the workforce has created a strong belief that the individual is responsible for providing for themselves. Mandi has appreciated the Trump Administration's efforts to lower oil prices and taxes since she has seen the benefit on her family's business.

In the short term, Trump's commitment to the oil industry has helped lobstermen, although the long-term effects will and have harmed the industry. When I ask Mandi about the long-term problems for the lobster industry she immediately answers, "global warming.... It's hard to hear him say some of the things he says, especially about global warming not being real. But, he has supported all of these small businesses the best way he knows how by trying to bring us more profits" (Hawkes). Unlike Alexander, Mandi is not convinced that there is another species for the fishermen to turn to.

She says, “We had shrimpling, dragging, and alboring. Now, all of those fish are gone” (Hawkes).

Despite her own belief in global warming, Mandi still thinks that Trump is the better candidate for the lobster industry. She says, “Tomorrow morning, I will still need to pay my car bill and buy groceries, I can’t choose between eating and the environment.” Mandi sees her decision as based on clear necessity. Her demographic is one lost by the Democratic Party. Democrats have alienated many Republicans who support efforts to combat global warming but do not see it as an option because of their income. She answers my question about the transition to the Biden administration, “My biggest fear with Biden is that taxes are going to skyrocket, which is going to make our fuel \$5 a gallon. Right now, it's \$2. My dad fishes down east and he uses 400 gallons of fuel -- with Biden, his trip won't even be profitable” (Hawkes).

Mandi’s concerns are shared by many Mainers. In the recent senate race, incumbent Sarah Gideon (D) lost to Susan Collins (R) partially due to people’s fear that they would not be able to afford oil to heat their homes. In Maine, renewable energy is too expensive for most people. At \$55,425, Maine’s median household income is one of the lowest in the country and is even lower in rural areas (“QuickFacts: Maine”). Even though industry increased and benefited the state economy, economic expansion did not happen everywhere. In particular, Washington, Penobscot, Piscataquis, Somerset, and Aroostook counties have been harmed economically by the decline in logging and paper mills (“Maine Election Results 2018”). These are some of the most conservative counties in Maine. In the 2020 presidential election district 2, which contains the previously mentioned counties, gave one of Maine’s four electoral votes to President Trump (Andringa et al.).

The decline of Maine’s paper product industry is primarily due to modernization and the decrease in demand for paper catalogs and magazines. Though land conservation and environmental policy did hurt paper mills, it is not a primary factor in their closing. In fact, many rural conservatives support land conservation because of their ties to the land through hunting, fishing, and other outdoor

recreational activities. In a 2020 article titled "Maine Voices: Maine Conservatives Should Support Land Conservation," Garret and Jeff Murch make a similar argument, writing, "As Republicans, we believe that conservation is conservatism at its best."

Garret Murch is the founder of GCM Strategies and the former political and communication director for the Maine Republican Party. Additionally, he served as a legislative aide working on environmental policy for former Senator Olympia Snowe, and in 2017, he served as a senior advisor to Governor Lepage. After reading his article, I reached out and was surprised when he agreed to speak to me for this paper. As a Republican, Murch's perspective is a minority among Republicans, although, after our conversation, I am curious why more Republicans aren't taking the same stance on the environment. In the article, Murch writes "Preserving our environment is essential to preserving our Maine Heritage." I ask him about the use of the word "heritage," to which he responds " it's preserving what is best from our past... it's not what your foreign policy is... it's about conserving our land and water and appreciating them" (Murch).

From the title of his article, it is clear that Murch is writing directly to Republicans. While Murch says he voted for both Senator Collins and President Trump, he does not think that conservation has to be an issue that divides Republicans and Democrats. He says, "I think you'd have a lot more support from Republicans if you focused on preserving fish and animals... and not just hiking trails" (Murch). It is true that when many conservation groups acquire land, hunting, fishing, and ATVs are often prohibited. The exclusion of these activities also excludes thousands of Mainers who would otherwise have been included in the conservation effort.

Interestingly, hunters and fishermen have been some of the most prominent activists in making Maine's paper industry clean. The runoff from the paper mills and chemicals used to clear cut a forestry area can be extremely harmful to local animal species. Jeffery Opperman, the lead freshwater scientist at the World Wildlife Foundation and former director of the Great Rivers

Partnership at the Nature Conservancy, uses the Lower Penobscot River Comprehensive Settlement Accord as an example of bipartisan efforts to protect Salmon traveling up the river (Opperman 311). The accord was accomplished because a variety of stakeholders including the Penobscot Nation, conservation organizations run by both Democrats and Republicans, state and federal governments, and a hydropower company came together to put the environment first.

The Natural Resources Council of Maine (NRCM), is another organization that exemplifies protecting the environment in a way that all Mainers will benefit from. Influential in passing the Lower Penobscot River Comprehensive Settlement Accord, NRCM is one of the largest environmental advocacy organizations in Maine. Every year, NRCM, in collaboration with the Environmental Priorities Coalition (EPC), creates an agenda of priority bills to protect Maine's environment. This year, a few of the priorities were investing in land conservation and state parks, protecting public lands, protecting Maine's waterways (Didisheim). These goals are also some of the priorities outlined by Murch in his effort to realign conservatives with conservation.

Neither Conservatives nor Democrats are responsible for global warming. The predicament our country and the state of Maine faces is the result of collective negligence and irresponsible management of resources. Since it was a bipartisan effort to get us to this tipping point, it only makes sense that it be a bipartisan effort to get us out. Thomas Saviellio's political career exemplifies the steps we must take to protect both the environment and the economy. First becoming interested in politics after meeting Senator Angus King, Saviello has a Ph.D. in Forestry Sources and was the environmental manager at a paper mill for 20 years. Saviello says that he always votes for "who he thinks is the best candidate." In the 2020 election, he voted for Senator Collins (R) and Joe Biden (D). Saviello is not tied to the politics of a particular party. When he first ran for political office in the Maine House of Representatives, he won as a Democrat but won his reelection as an independent. However, when he later ran for state senate Saviello ran and won as a Republican.

In addition to a career in politics, Saviello worked a full-time job as an environmental manager at the Androscoggin paper mill. Joining the mill in 1991, Saviello says he “inherited a mess” continuing to say that in terms of environmental problems, “you name it, we had it” (Saviello). Regulations surrounding the Clean Water (1972) and Clean Air Act (1970) were a particular problem at the Mill. He describes experiencing resistance to change because people thought, “This is what money looks like; this is what money smells like” (Saviello). The look being pollution, and the smell being sulfur emissions that smell like rotten eggs. Saviello, however, started to change people's minds when he fixed the problems that allowed the sulfur emissions to escape. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) began using the Androscoggin mill as a model of meeting environmental standards. Saviello’s time at the Androscoggin Mill demonstrates that the paper industry does not have to suffer as a result of environmental legislation.

Since Saviello left the Androscoggin mill, the paper product industry has faced new challenges. A changing market reduces the demand for paper, foreign competition makes it cheaper to buy from other sources, technology allows computers to replace employees, and yes, the increased environmental policy creates higher costs for mills. “It used to be that the people bore the brunt of a paper company... it was easy to dump into the local river, like the Androscoggin,” Saviello says, “but the people knew that that meant jobs” (Saviello). Now, increased environmental legislation shifts so that “the people aren’t going to bear the brunt of that cost, the industry is” (Saviello). Saviello does not think that we need less environmental regulation, but he does believe that there is a responsibility to bring a new industry to rural Maine.

The perspective around environmental legislation must change before it will be attractive to both parties. Currently, environmental policies are associated with taking and limiting opportunities. Republicans have distorted the public expectation of environmental policy to mean job loss and higher taxes. History shows a different story. Over the past 50 years, Nixon’s Clean Air Act (1970)

has done countless good for the environment, for citizens, and the economy. Regulation led to innovation as companies were challenged to develop cleaner solutions. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports a net improvement in economic welfare between 1990 and 2020 of two trillion dollars as a result of the Clean Air Act (“Benefits and Costs”). In that same period, the Clean Air Act only cost businesses 65 billion dollars (“Benefits and Costs”). The trillions of dollars put into the economy benefit people in different ways. The most important impact and source of savings, however, has been in protecting people’s health. In another study by the EPA, it is reported that in 2020 the Clean Air Act will prevent over 260,000 early deaths and 2,400,000 cases of asthma exacerbation (“Benefits and Costs”). Here it is often said that by protecting the environment we are protecting future generations, which is true, but that statement oversimplifies the solution to global warming. While we need more legislation like the Clean Air Act we must accompany it with job training and increased infrastructure in rural areas to combat the effects of a transition to a renewable economy. By presenting and passing legislation that will protect the natural resources and promote a new kind of workforce, environmental legislation can transition from being perceived as a limiting factor to one of necessary and beneficial change.

Like how FDR is said to have electrified the country, the state of Maine must connect rural areas. Expanding broadband internet and cell coverage is an important first step to rebuild the industry to replace the dying paper mills. Investing in these economies should be a priority because Maine relies on young and middle-aged taxpayers to cover the costs of its large elderly population. Unions used to provide the safety of job protection, however, after the loss of unionized jobs in the mills in the 1970s, worker compensation and benefits declined (“1970-Present: Rediscovery and Rebirth”). Saviello recalls how “any place that was unionized was Democrat, no question.” Today, these same areas voted for President Trump.

The Republican Party is responsible for some of the most important environmental legislation

in the United States. Richard Nixon founded the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. In addition, Nixon signed The Clean Air Act (1970), the Clean Water Act (1972), and the Endangered Species Act (1973). Each of these pieces of legislation was passed without a dissenting vote in the senate. So what has distanced Conservatives from conservation? Political science professor Neil Woods, concludes that there are three major factors. First Republicans have gone “from viewing environmental issues as urgent to viewing them as alarmist and exaggerated”; second, a transition “from relying on scientific research and expertise to viewing these entities with suspicion,” and third, a shift “from embracing a central role of government in addressing environmental problems to viewing regulations as a threat to economic growth, individual freedom, and free enterprise” (Woods 647). These changes are evident in our national politics, and Maine is suffering because of it.

Working at Holbrook's general store this summer -- the same general store that my grandfather would row to in the summers to buy milk and pick up his mail-- I learned a lot about politics. I listened from behind the counter as men in overalls and yellow rubber boots talked about Sleepy Joe Biden and how much Donald Trump was doing for the lobster industry. I tried to keep an open mind since I do not work in their industry: I do not wake up at 4 am to haul traps; I do not have to rely on the oceans for an income. I wrongly assumed that environmental protection and economic expansion were mutually exclusive. I learned that throughout Maine's history they have propelled each other. The mills got better and the surrounding communities were healthier because of it. The lobster industry has adapted to meet environmental regulations. The problems Mainers' face are largely out of control of the people in these industries. Global warming will not be solved by individuals. Modernization and technology will not stop just to protect Maine workers. Instead, Maine must adapt. New businesses must replace the mills. Leaders who will fight against global warming must be elected. Both a healthy natural environment and a thriving economy are possible for Maine, but it will take both Democrats and Republicans to make it possible.

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