

An overview and brief history of rockweed harvesting in Maine

The history of rockweed harvesting in Maine – condensed to one sentence is: Three or four processors have been collecting rockweed from the same areas year after year since the 1970's with no indication that the ecosystem has been affected in any way.

During an average year, the total of all the commercial harvesting along the coast of Maine has climbed to about 2% of the standing resource (University of Maine). Ice and wave action "harvest" about 20 times more rockweed than all the commercial harvesting operations combined. This is what floats around in mats.

The Maine processors and harvesters (often the same people) are, I could argue, cultivating the wild plants. The word "mariculture" applies to the approaches that have evolved, and have been common to the commercially successful rockweed processors. The practical truth is that the larger plants are easiest to harvest, and trimming them back both prevents them from breaking off on windy rough days, and opens up the bed to more sunlight promoting faster growth for the smaller plants. These plants often reach potential harvest size a year or two later.

There is no possibility that a commercial processor would risk damaging a bed that is within an economical transportation range of his or her factory.

It should be mentioned that these commercial processors, along with folks from the University, formed the "Maine Seaweed Council" (www.seaweedcouncil.org) in 1993's to develop agreed upon "self-regulations" with respect to harvesting practices- long before the Department of Marine Resources printed its first seaweed harvesting license.

In the last 10 years, based on concerns of some folks around Cobscook Bay (when the Canadians began buying rockweed harvested in the region), the DMR and our elected officials have taken steps to create more complete and science based regulations to manage this fishery. These draft regulations are consistent with the position of the Maine Seaweed Council's self-regulation, and probably the most conservative in the world for rockweed harvesting. (over)

They appropriately and preemptively, are taking the steps to establish rules to ensure that as the industry continues its growth in Maine, its future practices will be as responsible as its past practices. As importantly, there will be rules and limits in place to protect our coast in the event "big off shore money" ever considers bringing harvesting or processing ships to the coast of Maine.

One of the steps toward that responsible management plan is establishing the criteria upon which to select areas that may need to be closed - no harvest or limited harvest- either for ecological or research reasons. In support of developing those closure criteria in a responsible way, several members of the Maine Seaweed Council- those who have been harvesting along the coast for close to 40 years- have offered to make available their records of where harvesting has and hasn't taken place. The decades of empirical data potentially derived from such comparisons would be representative of actual commercial harvesting practices, and provide data available in no other way.

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