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## Portland Waterfront Sign: Casco Bay's Four Thousand Years of Sustainable, Stable Productivity

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**Native Americans harvested this rich estuary, camping on Casco Bay islands to hunt, fish, and dig clams.**

Prehistoric spear and harpoon points, fish bones, and shell heaps found on Casco Bay islands help trace ancient peoples' late winter, spring, and summer camps. While evidence of ancestral Wabanaki (*People of the Dawn Lands*) dates back 2000 years, other artifacts reach back over 4000 years. Though the first people likely walked into Maine 12000 years ago – here, rising sea levels washed away any record of those first 9000 years of human presence.

**Imagine the centuries of Native American cookouts** that it took to create this midden (mound) of discarded shells in mid-coast Maine.

[Photo: 1886] Oyster midden site was active from 2200-1100 BP

**The softshell clam middens once found on Casco Bay's islands** are still being lost to rising sea levels.

4000-5000 year old point

2000 year old pot found in a Casco Bay island shell midden  
[Bruce Bourque, Maine State Museum]

# Casco Bay's four thousand years of sustainable, stable productivity

**Indigenous peoples' intimate knowledge of the Bay's ecosystems** helped them survive this dynamic coastal system. They hunted, fished, and gathered using sophisticated tools made of wood, stone, bone, and clay.

Using weirs, nets, and spears, Indians harvested fishruns  
[Left: Plummets, a sinker weight for a fishing net]

Susquehanna-era point may be 3000 years old  
[Nathan Hamilton, USVI]

**Native peoples depended on Casco Bay Estuary, an extremely productive natural habitat.**

The Estuary's ten foot tides swept salt water upstream into freshwater streams, coves, and marshes to nurture **abundant marine life**: seabirds, shellfish, lobsters, fish, and sea mammals.

**By the 1730s, Europeans had begun drastically affecting the Bay and its native residents.**

Dams blocked fish runs. Disease, war, and politics displaced Wabanaki tribes. The industrial revolution would bring unchecked pollution. **This once-stable rich, ecosystem shows signs of strain.**

Some fish begin their lives in freshwater streams but spend much of their lives at sea. **Alewives, sturgeon, salmon, and stripers** returned upstream to spawn until hydro dams blocked their passage

Archeologists find **many DEER bones** in Casco Bay's prehistoric shell middens

Early Mainers hunted **SEA MINK and Seals**. During the 1800s' booming fur trade, sea mink were hunted to extinction

Once plentiful, **COD** grew big enough to eat mature lobsters

**LOBSTER** anyone? For at least 4000 years, harvesting shellfish has been a part of Casco Bay life

Many Wabanaki consider the earliest occupants of Casco Bay to be their ancestors. Today's **WABANAKI** include: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, and Abenaki. They maintain an active maritime culture – hunting, fishing, and gathering

[At right] 1000 year-old carved walrus tooth found in Casco Bay midden

Native peoples hunted the **STURGEON** which grew to over 14 feet

As climate changed over time, marine life changed too. **CLAMS** replaced Quahogs and Oysters

**CASCO. What's in a name?** In 1614, explorer Captain John Smith described "the Country of Aucocisco, in the bottome of a large deepe bay, full of many great lles." **Aucocisco** (*uh-kos-is-co*), captures the sound of this Mi'kmaq word in English. It means "head of bay, mud." **Is Casco a clipped form of Aucocisco's last syllable?**

Or, some Wabanaki scholars suggest the **Abenaki word kasqu'** (*Great Blue Heron*) became "Casco." Since migrating peoples usually named places for unique wayfinding landmarks, it would have been unusual to name a bay for such a common bird. **How might kasqu' have become Casco?**

■ **GLACIERS** carve coast 22000 years ago

■ **CLIMATE WARMS**, glaciers retreat First Mainers arrive 12000 years ago

■ **RISING SEA LEVELS** wash away signs of possible human use

■ **CLIMATE STABILIZES** about 4000 BP Sustainable rich habitat

■ **EUROPEANS DISRUPT ECOSYSTEM** 1730s settlements: Dams block fish runs

■ **NATIVE AMERICANS** leave behind remains of cod, clams

*Casco Bay over time*

Casco Bay Estuary  
PARTNERSHIP