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

Casco Bay Estuary Partnership

Montgomery Designs

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

Casco Bay’s four thousand years of sustainable, stable productivity.

Casco Bay is a large embayment of the Atlantic Ocean off southern Maine. Casco Bay is about 15 miles wide and 50 miles long from the head of the bay to the mouth, and it is approximately 100 feet deep. Casco Bay is the longest bay in the US, and the third largest estuary in the US. Casco Bay is unique in that it is connected to the ocean by a narrow entrance. This entrance is the mouth of the Fore River, a natural strait that connects Casco Bay to the ocean. Casco Bay is also the largest estuary in the US, with an area of approximately 300 square miles.

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: sealbirds, 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.

Imagine the centuries of Native American cookouts that it took to create the midden (mound) of discarded shells that it took to create this midden. People lived in villages near the shores of Casco Bay and traveled to the islands to hunt, fish, and dig clams. The softshell clam middens once found on Casco Bay’s islands are still being lost to rising sea levels.

CASCOS. What’s in a name? In 1614, explorer Captain John Smith described “the Country of Aucocisco, in the botome of a large deepe bay, full of many great Iles.” Aucocisco is a Mi'kmaq name for this area of Casco Bay, and it means “Wild of 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 islands for things that were important to them, it would have been common to name a bay for such a common bird. How might kasqu’ have become Casco?

Native peoples in Casco Bay’s 'People of the Dawn Lands' caught fish such as striped bass, sea trout, striped bass, sea mink, and seals for thousands of years. Today’s WABANAKI include: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, and Abenaki. They maintain an active marine culture – hunting, fishing, and gathering.

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Many Wabanaki consider the earliest occupants of Casco Bay to be their ancestors. In 1614, explorer Captain John Smith described “the Country of Aucocisco, in the botome of a large deepe bay, full of many great Iles.” Aucocisco is a Mi'kmaq name for this area of Casco Bay, and it means “Wild of Mud.” Is Casco a clipped form of Aucocisco’s last syllable?

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