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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. Subsequent archaeological and historical records paint a picture of a complex society with a deep cultural and ecological connection to Casco Bay. Though the first people likely walked into Maine 12,000 years ago—here, rising sea levels washed away any record of those early inhabitants. The first known human presence in Casco Bay is dated to 22,000 years ago, when glaciers carved coastlines. Over time, climatic shifts and changing sea levels affected the ecosystems of Casco Bay, leading to the formation of shell middens on Casco Bay islands. These middens, a testament to the ancient way of life, are found on islands that once were connected to the mainland. They serve as a window into the past, revealing the rich cultural and ecological history of the area.

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. The first known human presence on Casco Bay, dated to 22,000 years ago, also marks the beginning of indigenous peoples’ intimate knowledge of the bay’s natural resources. They hunted, fished, and gathered using sophisticated tools made of wood, stone, bone, and clay. This knowledge helped them survive this dynamic coastal environment.

The self-haul clam middens once found on Casco Bay’s islands are still being lost to rising sea levels. A 3000-year-old pot found in a Casco Bay island shell midden dates back 2000 years, other artifacts reach back over 4000 years. The first known human presence on Casco Bay, dated to 22,000 years ago, also marks the beginning of indigenous peoples’ intimate knowledge of the bay’s natural resources. They hunted, fished, and gathered using sophisticated tools made of wood, stone, bone, and clay. This knowledge helped them survive this dynamic coastal environment.

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Many Wabanaki consider the waterways and estuaries of Casco Bay to be their ancestral homelands. Today’s WABANAKI include: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Abenaki, Maliseet, and Micmac. They maintain an active maritime culture—fishing, hunting, and gathering. The Susquehanna-era abenaki word kasqu’ became “Casco.” Many Wabanaki consider the waterways and estuaries of Casco Bay to be their ancestral homelands. Today’s WABANAKI include: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Abenaki, Maliseet, and Micmac. They maintain an active maritime culture—fishing, hunting, and gathering.

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

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.

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