Portland Waterfront Sign: A Dirty History of Casco Bay

Casco Bay Estuary Partnership
Montgomery Designs

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A Dirty History of Casco Bay

By the summer of 1866, Portland was the largest commercial shipping port in the nation. Industries sprouted up everywhere. Much of their waste was simply dumped into rivers, streams, and directly into the Bay. Few realized we were creating a toxic stew that would someday endanger the health of the Bay’s ecosystems and threaten to destroy fish, clams, and the livelihoods of those dependent upon the Bay and Estuary.

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“Scientists, East End Beach, 1920. In the 1860s a sewer system carried human waste away from homes, but straight into Casco Bay. At first, bacteria in the mud could absorb and clean up the sewage. But by the 1950s and 60s when the weather was warm, the Bay smelt awful. Even on hot days, you didn’t want to go into the water for fear you’d get sick from swimming.”

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“As GAS STATIONS grew common in the 1950s, GASOLINE full of toxics began leaking from corroded tanks into the groundwater, then into the Bay — an ongoing, sometimes hidden, problem.