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FINFISH

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Commercial finfish aquaculture began in Maine in 1970 near the midcoast town of Wiscasset. Richard Gower, Evelyn Sawyer, and Gary Towle formed Maine Salmon Farms, the first commercial salmonid pen culture operation on the east coast, and the second in the U.S. They raised rainbow trout and coho salmon in floating net pens and fed them a homemade concoction of shrimp and herring waste from a local fish-meal plant. High water temperatures during the summer and low water temperatures during the winter, particularly the superchill of 1976, were factors in the demise of their business.



Also in the 1970s, Robert Mant started Maine Sea Farms on Cape Rosier. He raised coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) and rainbow trout in pens that floated in the flooded pit of a former 300-foot-deep, open-pit, copper and zinc mine. In another part of Penobscot Bay in 1973-74, Spencer Fuller started a Vinalhaven-based company, Fox Island Fisheries, which was probably the first strictly marine pen salmonid operation in the Northeast. By 1975, Fuller's company was producing 40,000 pounds of fish in Hurricane Sound. The combination of the 1976 superchill, when the seawater temperature at the site dropped to 29.5° F., and the low price for fish caused the company to close by 1979. In 1981 Edward Myers, of Abandoned Farm, Inc. on the Damariscotta River, obtained the first lease from the Maine Department of Marine Resources allowing the culture of salmonids and shellfish at his site. Using 5,000 coho salmon, Myers set up pens about eight miles from the open sea. That winter, water temperatures plummeted to 28° F. and only 150 fish survived. Myers abandoned finfish cultivation to concentrate on mussels in suspension culture. By the early 1980s, after a team of researchers from St. Andrews (New Brunswick) Biological Station successfully raised salmon in Passamaquoddy Bay, pen-rearing

techniques were refined, and raising salmon and rainbow trout became a promising new business in Downeast Maine. In Eastport, where the decline of the local herring fisheries made salmon aquaculture a welcomed new industry, Ocean Products Inc. (OPI) was established in 1982.



(K. McHale photo)

By 1984, the company had 12 pens holding about 63,000 fish, most of which were destined for the Boston market. Some of the fish were also smoked and sold through L.L. Bean's mail-order catalog. A second generation of sea farmers in the Eastport area came mostly from former employees of OPI, from local families formerly involved in herring fishing, or were graduates of an aquaculture training course at Washington County Vocational School. These people formed small, mostly family-run businesses in 1986-87. Their examples were soon followed by subsidiaries of large firms, some of them multinationals including Maine Coast Nordic Enterprises, Sea Farm Lubec, Atlantic Salmon Maine, and Mariculture Products, Ltd. Currently, 12 companies along the Maine coast, from the Canadian border to Blue Hill Bay in the midcoast region, raise about 30 million pounds of salmon each year. Due to declining salmon prices and competition from overseas companies in the mid-1990s, Maine fish farmers and scientists are researching nutrition and feeding methods,

SHELLFISH and SEA VEGETABLES

In the 1970s, a few small oyster and mussel farms pioneered raising shellfish using labor-intensive suspension culture methods. Many of these early operations were undercapitalized, lacked sufficient seed stock, or were located on less than optimal sites. The industry grew slowly, but the 1980s brought promising changes. In mussel and oyster farming, bottom culture techniques were developed to allow growers to produce their crops more efficiently. According to 1989 data, for every 1,000 acres of ocean bottom planted with oysters, about \$35 million worth of shellfish can be harvested each year.



Nori grown from nets in Cobscook Bay.
(S. Crawford photo)

In the 1980s, the Beals Island Regional Shellfish Hatchery began to spawn soft-shell clams and educate clambers and the public about the life cycle of clams and ways to restock depleted clam flats.

Aquaculturists in the 1990s began to investigate the culture of nori, a species of algae native to the Pacific and most familiar as the seaweed wrapping for sushi. In Cobscook and Penobscot bays, large nets seeded with nori were placed in areas where strong currents could provide the necessary nutrients and oxygen-carbon dioxide exchange needed by the seaweed. The harvested seaweed is sent to Eastport for processing on a press (the only one of its kind in the western hemisphere) that turns out sheets of dried nori, acceptable to the burgeoning U.S. market.

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