

Keynote Speech by Senator Dennis Damon

For Working Waterfront Access: A Forum on Challenges and Solutions, University of Maine Darling Marine Center, Walpole, Maine, December 17, 2003

Thank you all for coming today. You all deserve a great deal of praise. I am sorry that I cannot be with you today. I am attending to my duties as one of Maine's three representatives on the Atlantic States Marine Council. A meeting in NY with the 14 other Atlantic states. There is so much at stake. There's our fish, there's our fishermen, there's our families, our culture, our heritage, our way of life, and there's our fishing communities. They are all tied together, aren't they?

It is just this that that brought us here today. We are challenged with preserving our culture and our heritage. We are here to try to figure out how we go about saving a way of life. It is hard enough to try to save the fish stocks and it becomes doubly difficult when we have to factor in the human side of that too. The regulations make it difficult if not impossible for fishing to continue. Amendment 13, for instance, something that you have been hearing so much about, has potential to drive the fishermen ashore or to drive their boats to neighboring states. If that happens then the infrastructure necessary to support our ground fishery in Maine will likely evaporate. Fish piers will become something other than fish piers, ice plants that produce tons of ice, the ice that's necessary for the boats to preserve their catch - those plants will be dismantled. And the vessel stores stocked with parts and pieces critical to the fleet... they will all close. And then the fish stocks come back in ten years or less to levels never imagined in our lifetime, and they are predicted to do just that. When they do we will not be fishing and we will not be landing them in Maine because we let our gear go, we sold our wharfs.

Amendment 13 and other regulations that come from time to time are not only issues that threaten our fishing communities. Our fishing heritage is being eroded slowly, but as surely as any soft shoreline, by the ever present forces of the waves and the tide.

Our heritage is being eroded by a cultural divide. It is less like a storm with crashing waves and howling gale force winds than a slow steady creep of that flooding tide. A tide that brings with it conflicting uses, changing values, both in terms of money and a way of life, and it brings with it change. Just as rapidly as the coming tide covers the mud flats, and the seaweed and the rocks and turns the bay into a watery wonder, so does the tide of change transform fishing communities with boats in the yard, traps stacked everywhere and bait carries and wharves with nets drying and perhaps even cod split and air drying on cloths lines within the riggings... So does change transform these working communities into residential gems and recreational playgrounds.

I grew up in NE Harbor. I was Dot and Lou Damon's 6th and last child. My three brothers were fishermen and my father grew up on Deer Isle and he was a fisherman and so was his father, Franklin Augustus Damon, and so was his father's father, Benjamin Brentwood Damon, a fisherman on Deer Isle. And I have every right to believe that I too was going to make my living from the sea. I recall, it was in the fall of my senior year in high school, that dad and I were hauling traps one day he asked what are you gonna do

next year. I thought that is was a funny kinda question and it didn't take me long to answer. I'm goin fishing.

We continued to haul and about 15 minutes later as if those 15 hadn't past working in silence he said, "have you ever thought about going to school?" You mean college I said. "Yeah, I know you would be a good fisherman. I have seen you around the boat and you would be good. But your brothers are all fishermen and I think that you could do more." And then he said, if it doesn't work out you can always go fishing". He didn't say any more than that. He left me to stew over it and decide for myself. That is the way he was.

My father was a wise man; he knew I could do more. But what he didn't know, what he wasn't able to envision, what he could not concede back then. That there would come a day, a day that his son couldn't always go fishing. I thought that by breaking my family fishing chain I would create a different path for my son. He is 22 now and a student and Maine Maritime Academy. You know what, he wants to go fishing. Something about it must be hereditary.

When I was perhaps a sophomore or junior in high school in NE Harbor a fellow moved in to town. He was a writer, an author of children's books. He'd grown up on Cape Cod. And so he told me as we sat together on the bench in front of the Platypus on Maine Street in the center of town. He told me how lucky I was to be growing up in a small town and how sad it was that all of this was going to change. I said, "This place will never change." I am sure some of these older folks will die off but there are us younger folks. Its always going to be the same old NE Harbor I said confidently.

I remember him shaking his head and telling me about his small home town Cape Cod, and how he used to think the same way that I did. But it all changed and now he didn't even like to go back because it wasn't the same. In the 40 years or so since I watched the tide creep, slowly at first and then more rapidly, from the west all the way to down east. My NE Harbor, once home to fishermen and their boats, is now one of the premier yachting destinations in Maine. Does this marina bring revenue to the town? You bet it does. On any given summer day there are hundreds of millions of dollars of vessels in that harbor and they all pay to be there. But at what expense does this come? There are few fishing boats left in NE. I have 3 nephews who continue to fish there and there are a few more besides them. But none of them are welcome to tie up at the float in the summer. The community that once supported a considerable number of fishing boats and fishing families as shrunk in year-round population. There used to be three grocery stores, now there's one. There used to be a drug store. Now there's an art gallery open only in the summers. Don't get me wrong. NE Harbor booms in the summer. The town fills up with shops and boutiques and they do a brisk business. The people come but then they go and what's left of the community then.

I hear that in this debate over working waterfront some claim that because they have business that people come to in the summer that they and their businesses are now the new working waterfront. To me this concept is unsettling. Probably because of my heritage and my idea of a working waterfront. Perhaps in our discussion we need to

consider revenue producing ventures, marinas and restaurants and hotels, motels and B&Bs, and how we can work and live together. But I do not want them in my definition of working waterfront. Maybe we should call my definition, "struggling to survive waterfront."

I submit to you that the key to maintaining our working waterfront access. Access is impacted in many ways and perhaps you will be discussing that topic today. I hope so. I do wish I could be with you today. I wish you well and I thank you for taking the time to gather together and work on this vital part of Maine's future.

If you will allow, I will leave you with some comments I prepared for a Working Waterfront Press Conference held at the hall of flags last May.

One of my gifts in this life was becoming friends with Ruth Moore. She was a Maine native, born on Gotts Island in 1903. She was also the best author that ever depicted Maine place. Her novels speak of islands and coastal towns and she wrote about them with an authenticity lived by her rather than by trying to figure out what we who live on the coast and we who die at sea are all about. We live with the rhythm of the tides in our daily lives. We are tuned into the weather by looking at the sky always and by reading our barometers. We have to be. The Ocean and the elements are our office for it is there that we go to work everyday. It is there that we make our living, and it is there from which many of us have never returned. From the Ocean we feed our families, from the ocean we get our living. Our fathers did it, their fathers did it before them, and in many cases there were others before them too.

The tide is in us.

In 1946 Ruth Moore wrote *Spoon Handle*. This her 2nd novel was set on fictitious Big Spoon Island off the coast of Maine. Later 20th Century Fox made it into a movie. The movie, *Deep Waters*, was filmed on Vinalhaven and in Rockland. She hated the movie. She was so true to herself and to her place. She said to me one time, about the movie, "now you tell me, have you ever seen lobster fishermen with creases in their khakis?" The novel dealt with the fact that a true real estate agent on the island, a native, realized that by buying shore lots from various fishing families at bargain prices, he could resell those same lots to people from away. People from away would pay much more for them than they were worth. The purchasers were thought of having more dollars than sense. And there were many other sub-plots.

But the underlying message of the novel was that if we don't realize what we have and if we are not willing to protect it and preserve it then we will lose it. This critical real estate, at the margin between the land and the sea, is the vital link that is necessary for us to continue our way of life, for us to continue our heritage.

In the cherished conversations that I had over coffee with Ruth in her living room 40 years after she had written *Spoon Handle*, I accused her of talking about topics before their time. She didn't disagree. She wrote because she envisioned the future. She wrote to

warn us and she wrote to challenge us. Ruth left us in 1989 and she is challenging us still. And now is the time for us to act.

The initiative before us today is to protect and preserve our working waterfront. The development of our coastline and the competition for it has grown exponentially since Spoon Handle. Our way of life, indeed our maritime and fishing culture is at stake if we do not act now to ensure that future generations, who have it in their blood to go down to the sea in ships, will be able to do just that. For, if we do not protect our culture and our heritage, surely we will lose it. And if we do all of Maine will be poorer as a result. That, my friends, is not joke. Save our working waterfronts. You have my very best wishes. Good luck and thank you.