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Creativity in the Face of Environmental Destruction

After living in Maine for the past four years, I've grown to adore this state and all the characteristics that define its environment. From the economic lifeline of the lobstering and clamping industry to the community members who hold this land close to their hearts, there is no shortage of artistic expression that reflects the identity of members in these coastal communities. However, in recent years, this delicate balance between community and environment has been threatened by the warming world of the 21st century. This paper will analyze creative responses from Maine voices and discuss what's changing, how coastal residents are impacted, and the tone surrounding the role humans play in this sensitive time. So please, take a step back, let go of societal biases, and begin to rethink what we value in this world.

The Gulf of Maine is witnessing a change in our environment firsthand. Its warming rate is 99% faster than that of any other ocean, which brings fluctuating weather, jeopardizing the livelihood of these coastal communities (Mills xi). Lobster and clams are historically important sources of food and livelihood for Maine residents, but their abundance is declining due to rising temperatures. An essay titled *Womb of Ice: The Maine Woods in Winter* discusses the alarming trend in air temperatures.

“...I feel an undercurrent of uneasiness. I know that winter in the Maine woods is attenuating, becoming less reliable. Scientific analysis shows trends towards warmer winters and earlier springs, consistent over the course of the 20th century. Average air temperature in Maine for the months of December through February increased by approximately 3° F...” (Weiger 23-24).

The research that supports this essay mirrors concerns expressed by the coastal communities, which validates their lived experiences. When air temperatures warm, the waters warm, causing aquatic animals to struggle to conserve energy and become more susceptible to disease, which directly impacts Mainers who are passionate about their home.

To create a more personal connection to communities directly impacted and reach a broader audience, the nonprofit organization *Down to Earth Storytelling* produces a range of media that document environmental justice stories with the goal of “changing hearts and inspiring action.” Their 2019 short film, [*Maine Roadtrip to the Future*](#), covers individuals and businesses from varying backgrounds and ages to observe how these communities are adapting in the face of change.

“Mainers are thinking about diversifying their businesses away from just lobstering because of climate change and ocean acidification... a risky business strategy to have all your eggs in one basket...thinking more about kelp aquaculture, shellfish aquaculture; however, they are also aware of ocean acidification. Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is absorbed and turned into carbonic acid in the ocean. This oceanic uptake of CO₂ can make it difficult for lobsters, oysters, and mussels to develop properly. Shell farming organisms represent 85% of the value of Maine's Fisheries” (Burt 7:15-8:22).

As coastal waters grow more acidic, the shells of our beloved “sea bugs” weaken, in turn threatening the economies of communities that rely on fisheries and the environment.

Shifting to a unique artistic medium, Jill Pelto is a climate change artist and scientist whose paintings depict the changes within the Gulf of Maine. Her piece, titled

Gulf of Maine Temperature Variability, “creatively communicates human-environment connections.” The watercolor captures the focal points of this paper, as it helps us feel Maine’s changing landscape and its “impact on various species, including ourselves”.



Notice the ebb and flow that blends the ocean and sky? That’s Pelto incorporating 15 years of ocean temperature data, which affects the abundance and resilience of the overfished cod, bottom-dwelling crustacean, up to the fishermen who have a choice to participate in sustainable practices. Pelto makes it her mission to incorporate education into her art as she recognizes the value of ecological balance (Pelto).

This industry is a way of life for many coastal Mainers and is a key aspect of their heritage and cultural identity. Many authors voice concern in these pieces for fear that their

children may not experience the same environment that they did growing up. So what can be done about it? In Sherry Barker Abaldo's personal essay, *Our Witching Hour*, she explores how human nature conflicts with the Earth. "The first step is taking accountability...Western lifestyle is not sustainable; if the entire population of the globe lived like Americans do, according to a recent study we would need four Earths." Take a moment, let that sink in. Abaldo highlights the notion that nature is often portrayed as "inherently pristine, eternal, even inviolable, when in reality our planet is as vulnerable as our own lives" (Barker 17-18). If individualism and accountability is a source of the problem, then can it also be a source for the solution? A poem titled *Nobody Looks Back: A Cautionary Tale* questions from a future perspective why we didn't act when we could and that we'll cry when it's too late, squandering whatever future we have (Stebbins 120). These written pieces help us confront uncomfortable realities and remind us of the consequences of our carelessness with a call to action.

That same call can be heard in music, which acts as a universal language to share its message for all to hear. Grammy Award-winning conductor and composer Lucas Richman wrote *The Warming Sea*, which is a symphonic exploration of rising temperatures in the Gulf of Maine. This multi-media composition, which premiered in 2022 at the Maine Science Festival, combines music and visual elements to inspire wonder and create conversation. This form of expression conveys the emotions of the human experience in the coastal communities. Throughout the 21-minute score, Richman's lyrics speak of seas that are warming and the need to tell our children "...the truth...things are changing. They must know things will not remain the same as they are..." These lyrics invoke a feeling of urgency that mirrors the impact of Maine's changing landscapes. Generational change can

be difficult to accept, but not at the cost of human livelihood. This original piece concludes with a choir singing the powerful words “hope begins with truth” (Richman).

It is important to remember that if we act now, we can maintain our ecosystems and remediate the damage that's been done. Individual choices to change one's values and perspectives can be the catalyst for inspiring not only their neighbors, but entire communities to care for the things we already have, our giving environment. If we can create possibilities where we can hold onto traditions while creating new entrepreneurial ventures with respect to reimagining a more sustainable symbiotic relationship, then we can heal the human relationship with the Earth we rely on. This critical turning point will take more than just fixing. When we shift our values, we can recognize the changes that must be made.

Collectively, the various forms of art explored in this paper create a space for communication and expression at the crossroads of science and the humanities. These creative responses offer a more digestible way to understand what is at stake for Maine's coastal communities and can reveal powerful insights to build connections for those who are passionate about environmental stewardship.

People often protect what they are connected to, and that's a lesson we can all benefit from. Due to the carelessness of human behavior, Maine has lost some of its natural beauty and resources, which drew so many people to fall in love with 'The Way Life Should Be' in the first place. In the words of Rachel Carson, "The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction" (Murray).

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