

Fisheries Meet In Montauk For Lunch, Discuss Industry

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New York Times Best-selling Author Paul Greenberg hosted a forum on sustainable fisheries on Saturday, with a number of panelists like Nat Miller, John "Barley" Dunne, Michael Doall and Mike Martinson, and a seafood lunch. KYRIL BROMLEY

The Coast restaurant in Montauk was packed on Saturday at lunchtime for a forum on sustainable fisheries hosted by Concerned Citizens of Montauk and New York Times Bestselling Author Paul Greenberg.

Local shell fishermen, oyster farmers, chefs, and experts discussed the desire to help the local fishing industry and support area restaurants with local fish products. Mr. Greenberg spoke about what he learned while conducting research for his books "American Catch: The Fight for Our Local Seafood" and "Four Fish: the Future of the Last Wild Food." He said that the U.S. imports much of its seafood and shellfish are a scarcity compared to many years ago.

"More than 85 percent of fish we eat is imported," Mr. Greenberg said. "Six of the top 10 most consumed species of fish are primarily from abroad." He added that there was a very clear shift from 1880 to 1940. By looking at menus from that time, there is a steady decline of oysters and increase of shrimp. He said it was once typical for the average New Yorker to eat 600 oysters per year and that was possible because there were several trillion oysters in New York waters many years ago. "It's turned from a food system into a waste disposal system," he said of New York Harbor.

Nat Miller, a 13th generation East Hampton shellfish fisherman, joined a panel of speakers that included

John "Barley" Dunne from East Hampton Town's Shellfish Hatchery, and Michael Doall and Mike Martinson from Montauk Shellfish Company.

Mr. Miller, representing the dwindling number of baymen, said scallop season generates the most shellfish money for his business but it isn't as lucrative as it once was. He said that when he was 10 years old every restaurant would pay 26 cents a net for clams, and now it's about 20 cents a net, adding that shell-fishing has become a "not in my backyard" thing, where people don't want to see clambers out in the water, but they want to eat the clams at the restaurants. There are also poachers, who come in looking for easy money and don't abide by set limits.

"It's simply human greed," Mr. Miller said. "Earning a day's pay at a time, you're chasing rainbows and you're never going to find the end."

Environmentally, shellfish are an extremely important part of the ecosystem, according to Mr. Doall, who worked as a marine scientist at Stony Brook University for 20 years before growing oysters in Montauk.

"Shellfish restoration is one of the number one things that need to be addressed in order to promote the health and vitality of estuaries on Long Island," he said. "One hundred years ago, New York Harbor had 700 million oysters a year and now you can't find one."

Mr. Martinson said this great loss was because of the actions of people and said it is our responsibility to treat the water better.

"With all my experience with collapse and population density, I attribute it 100 percent to the population density of humans on the planet," he said. "This is not our planet. It belongs to all life and we need to keep the earth in the forefront of everything we do."

Part of the solution comes from having enough shellfish, according to Mr. Doall. He said they help suppress algae blooms and alleviate hypoxia, or oxygen deprivation. Nitrogen-polluted algae blooms die and sink to the bottom and bacteria break down there, but shellfish help crop the algae before it hits the bottom, he said. They also remove nitrogen from the water system by absorbing it.

To that end, the New York Harbor School has established an oyster hatchery on Governor's Island and their goal is to grow as many as one billion oysters in the harbor by 2025, Mr. Greenberg said. "We really need trillions, but the effort is there," he said. "It's not as much an environmental thing as it is a sentimental thing. Like if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere."

Fish aren't exempt from population decline either.

According to the panel, which included Chef Peter Hoffman, Dock to Dish founder Sean Barrett and Chef Jason Weiner, different species of fish are chosen annually as unofficial "fish of the year" and are over-fished and eventually depleted.

Both chefs, Mr. Weiner and Mr. Hoffman, are at the forefront of a new way to provide fish in restaurants. Instead of creating a menu and then getting the fish they need, they take what is given to them or what is readily available and good to eat to create a menu.

That's where Mr. Barrett comes in. His Dock to Dish service is a Community Supported Fishery, meaning he works with fishermen to catch healthy, quality fish that are abundant in the ocean or bay and gets them into the chefs' kitchens and those who buy in, within 24 hours so they can prepare very fresh dishes.

"I ask 'What am I getting?' and Sean's standard reply is 'Something really fresh,'" Mr. Weiner said. "It's not about the chef it's about the ingredients and the chef is sort of secondary. We're coming into a period

where people see names of farms on the menu, opposed to the chef's name on the bottom of the menu."

For those who want to make sure they eat fresh, local seafood at restaurants, Mr. Barrett suggested talking to a waiter to find out who caught the fish, or at the very least where they caught the fish.

Dr. Carl Safina, a Stony Brook University professor, Bonnie Brady of the Long Island Commercial Fishing Association and the Center for Sustainable Fisheries, and Dr. Michael Frisk, a professor and researcher from Stony Brook, discussed fishing regulations and finding a balance in ecosystem-based management, similar to the way the state Department of Environmental Conservation sets fishing limits, and a viable fisheries economy, where fishermen can still make a living.

According to Jeremy Samuelson of CCOM, you can't have one without the other.

"Everyone acknowledged that the really hard choices made in the 1980s and '90s about needing to set limits have resulted in the rebound of fish stocks," he said. "The takeaway is that management has a critically important role to play here."

Mr. Samuelson said the forum was made possible by reaching out to Mr. Greenberg, who received a grant to do a dozen forums around the country.

"I want all of us to know where our fish come from and what fish we're eating, whether it's caught sustainably, whether a fishing family landed it for us and whether they got paid a fair wage," Mr. Samuelson said. "If that change can happen in the fisheries food distribution system, then we will have all lived a full life."