

SUSTAINABLE COBSCOOK

Cobscook, Maine

Sustainable Cobscook was founded by citizens from communities around Cobscook Bay in northeastern Maine as an effort to plan and implement sustainable development in their region. Four task forces composed of members of the community have begun to establish and raise funding for local projects in four areas: environment, economic development, education, and community/cooperation. These efforts include a sustainable indicators project, a conference on using Cobscook Bay as a teaching tool, a soft shell clam habitat restoration and management project and a directory of regional cottage industries.

There are nine communities along the rim of Cobscook Bay, with a combined population of 6,801 people. The lack of significant economic development in the region threatens the qualities the people in Cobscook Bay wish to maintain: their livelihoods, the natural environment, their communities and their educational systems. Many people in the region are concerned that some types of economic development could be a threat to those aspects of the area as well. Residents are also concerned that if their towns are unable to provide quality education and job opportunities, they face losing their most precious resource as their children grow up and leave the area.

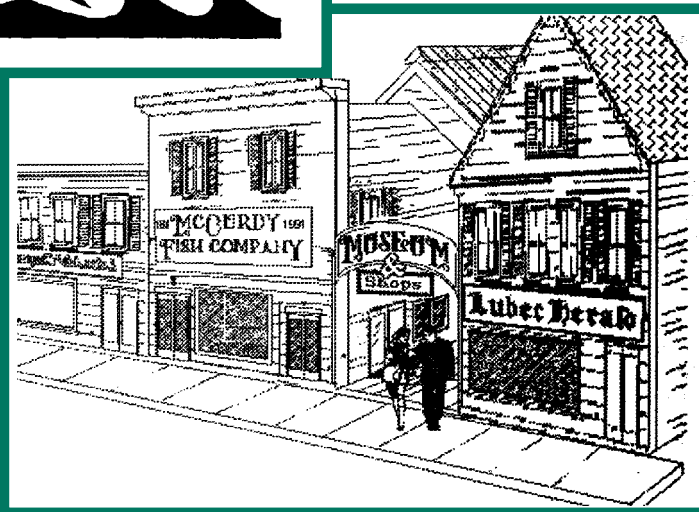
Flexible funding

Sustainable Cobscook is part of the Northern New England Sustainable Communities Project, a three-state initiative funded by the Ford Foundation. The underlying principle of the Project is that only the people living in a community can decide how to enhance or preserve what they value most. Sustainable Cobscook received \$10,000 from the Ford Foundation its first year, and \$40,000 each of next two years.

Each of the four task forces received \$6,500 per year to use however they decided. The task forces are also authorized to seek other sources of funding. The only restriction made by the Ford Foundation was that grant money could not be used to pay staff salaries. The Foundation wants the money to be used only to increase capacity in the community.

Indicators of sustainable development

The first action taken by the Economic



The historic McCurdy's Smokehouse, a community redevelopment project in Lubec, Maine, will preserve and share a unique part of Lubec's maritime heritage, support and create jobs, and provide opportunities to share community spirit.

Development Task Force was to hire a student intern from the College of the Atlantic to begin developing indicators to measure the status of the four commonly held values of the residents of the Cobscook Bay area.

Some of the specific indicators chosen by the task force are the dollar value of local fish landings to indicate economic health; the percentage of nesting eagles that successfully reproduce to indicate the health of the environment; the number of organizations with regional interests to determine the level of community and cooperation; and school test scores to indicate the quality of local educational institutions. These indicators will be used to track the history of changes in different

aspects of life in the region as well as to determine if and when successes have been achieved in different areas.

Teaching about local ecosystems

All of the task forces provided funds for an Environmental Teaching Conference to be held during the summer of 1996 to train teachers to use Cobscook Bay as a learning tool. They hope that this will instill in young children an appreciation of the importance of the Bay ecosystem to the region.

The Education Task Force has also contributed money to create a computer animation project for students in area schools that illustrates how the ecosystem of Cobscook Bay works. The program will create a visual record of how the Bay is changing with time. The second phase of the project will be a simulation program for the ecosystem of the Bay which will allow students to learn how different factors affect the Bay.

Reviving the clam industry

Because of poor water quality and over-harvesting, the soft shell clam industry, which was a large part of the regional economy less than 15 years ago is now virtually nonexistent. The Environmental Task Force received a grant of \$75,000 over two years from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Cox Charitable Trust to create a regional soft shell clam

habitat restoration and management project.

This project will encourage regional shellfish management practices around Cobscook Bay, coordinate information among towns, and encourage local water quality testing using local school students and volunteers. The project will be working with the Maine Department of Marine Resources to open closed clam flats that are safe to reopen. The Environment Task Force is also investing funds in a clam seeding project to seed newly opened beds.

Helping a new agricultural industry

The cranberry industry has recently returned to the Cobscook Bay region after a 50 year absence. The cranberry growers

association educates new farmers about how to properly use pesticides. The industry is currently small, so the growers association is underfunded. There have also been problems with cranberry farmers using pesticides in larger than needed applications. The Economic Development Task Force is trying to correct this problem by contributing two thousand dollars for research to identify available funding for the growers association to hire staff. The association plans to be able to support itself within five years because the industry's barrel self-tax will bring in more money as cranberry growing becomes more popular in the region.

Building awareness of cottage industries

Many people in the Cobscook Bay area are self-employed, making products or performing services out of their homes. Most of these businesses advertise solely by word of mouth which means that people that don't know about them will often leave the region for products or services they need. To make people more aware of these local products, the Economic Development Task Force is creating a directory of all the businesses and services available from cottage industries in the nine town area.

Bringing communities closer together

Lubec and Eastport, the largest two towns on Cobscook Bay, are separated by only two miles across the water but are forty miles apart by land. The Community/Cooperation Task Force has contributed funds for Lubec to acquire a water taxi that will be used to transport people between the two towns.

Building community involvement

A local ad-hoc steering committee met regularly during the first several months of the project in order to plan public participation and educate themselves on the concept of sustainable development. A series of public meetings, with attendance ranging from 10 to 40 people, were subsequently held to determine commonly held values in the community.

According to Dianne Tilton, Executive Director of the Sunrise County Economic Council, people who participated in the public participation phase of Sustainable

How To Get in Touch with Sustainable Cobscook

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Scope: Nine towns on Cobscook Bay

Inception Date: 1993

Participants: Individuals and organizations in the Cobscook Bay region

Project type: Community economic development, sustainable indicators, comprehensive community development

Methods used: Small grants to local sustainable development projects, public participation

Lessons learned: Most people are not used to having the power to make important decisions affecting their communities and local economies. Grassroots economic development is getting everybody in the community involved in every level of major decision making.

Cobscook began to take ownership over the project: "We had teachers, town officials, people from the land trust, retirees, people from the historical society, students from the technical college. I think they feel ownership of the project because they made all of the decisions. The foundation didn't say we want you to come up with economic development. They had to come up with every step on their own. It was brutal but they can look at the results and can see that it comes from the community up rather than from the top down."

Tilton feels that community participation has been both the key element in the success of Sustainable Cobscook and the greatest barrier encountered along the way. The project became complicated in the short run as more people got involved. It is more successful in the long run,

however, because the community supports the effort and because the project reflects the values of the community.

—Jobs & Environment Campaign



UPDATE

December 1997

Nine regional projects continue to advance the original goals of the Sustainable Cobscook Bay Alliance, which has disbanded as a formal entity although projects continue under various committees. The Clam Restoration Project has succeeded beyond all expectations in terms of community support and profitability. In the first three months of 1997, \$30,000 worth of softshell clams was harvested. The Sunrise Farmers Market has increased its profitability and size by including more local producers. Thirty-five businesses cooperated with the Quoddy Regional Land Trust to publish a guidebook to trails on public land or land owned by Maine Coast Heritage Trust, the Nature Conservancy, or the Quoddy Regional Land Trust. Cranberry farming on both owner-operated and commercial farms is expanding in the region, creating jobs and economic vitality.

Lubec Landmarks is restoring McCurdy's Smokehouse as a museum and educational/cultural center, creating eight jobs. Lubec's waterfront has been restored, and there is a new marina. Low-interest, long term grants or loans have provided renovated housing. Eastport's waterfront is also revitalized, and the ferry to connect the two towns is in the design stage.

As an economic development professional, Dianne Tilton believes that the key to leadership is knowing when to follow. She feels the community has learned to honor values, work together, and find creative ways to overcome differences. She emphasizes that traditionally the local culture operates through networks of people rather than institutions. Despite the distances, the small population, and the tendency of local officials to think short-term, the work of the Alliance has helped scores of people to look at problems and projects in new ways.

—CONCERN, Inc.