

Definitions

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knowledge crisis. We do not have the necessary critical information needed to manage the species – and a consensus last week determined that we don't even know enough to define harvest recovery, or understand sustainability. Yet, despite these huge gaping holes in our understanding, we allow this to continue. Why can't we learn from our former mistakes – as in urchin, cod and scallops – and move forward more sensibly?"

Rockweeds are brown macroalgae that depend on the tides. They produce inorganic nutrients by using the energy of the sun. They provide nutrients to the bay. They break off, wash up high, mix, bake and feed the bay. Because they lack vascular systems, the algae attach to intertidal rocks. And because they grow slowly, damaged or uprooted rockweeds can take decades to recover.

"There's no scientific evidence that it's sustainable," says Hadlock Seeley. "People have been asking these questions since 1998. There are still no answers, but they're still cutting it."

The diversified market for rockweed is strong and growing. Harvesting started in 2007, with nearly seven million pounds harvested in 2008. Ninety-five percent of all seaweed landings in Maine are rockweed.

Rockweed is exported to between 70 and 80 countries. It's an ingredient in dog food, cattle food, fertilizer and eye cream. A recent patent will now use it to make meat stay red longer in the grocery freezer case.

But in remote Washington County, these products and uses are far removed from the basic function of rockweed's role in the local economy. "We're poor. We need this work. The seaweed is like a blanket. You go there and move it – but now there's nothing there," says Keene.

Keene is quick to say that it's only commercial harvesting that jeopardizes habitat. "A lot of people go down and get a pick-up load for their garden," she says. "We're not against that. It's just the commercial operations."

"Millions of periwinkles went out with the rockweed," explains Hadlock Seeley. "A DMR-commissioned study could've looked at everything, but it was limited." ❊