A Rising Tide Photovoice Photobook

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A Rising Tide Photovoice Photobook

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Abstract:

This document provides the results of the photographic documentation and written narrative portion of the photovoice case study conducted from November, 2021 to March, 2022 by (n=4) research participants. The goal of the Photobook is to share the data collected by the research participants on their experiences as women owning and operating an oyster farm in Maine and New Hampshire.
Photobook Introduction

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire designed and implemented a photovoice case study with the following objectives:

1. Determine if women’s experiences as producers are influenced by gender dynamics in the aquaculture sector of Maine and New Hampshire
2. Identify institutional barriers and opportunities for women producers
3. Determine if the use of social networks benefits women’s ability for knowledge sharing, decision-making, and access to resources

The University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research approved this study (IRB #: 23; Study approval date: 8/12/2021; Modification approval date: 3/18/21). The case study was conducted throughout November 2021 to March 2022.

The sampling frame included women-owned or led oyster production businesses chosen based on the survey data and a demonstrated use of social network. For this case study, the purposive sampling criteria includes (1) woman owned/operated business in Maine or New Hampshire, (2) commercial oyster aquaculture production, (3) demonstrated use of a social network. The participants (n=4) were asked to document their experiences owning and operating an oyster farm with the prompt “what do you want to communicate about the work that you do on your oyster farm?”. The participants were also provided four general themes for resources and barriers to identify including people, organizations, networks, gear, funding, and training opportunities. Each participant took five photos and wrote a narrative description for each one.

The goal of this document is to provide open access of the data the participants collected and for anyone interested in the results of the case study portion of this research.
A Rising Tide? The role of social networks for women aquaculture producers in Maine and New Hampshire

Photovoice Case Study
Principal Investigator: Natalie Lord
Advisor: Catherine Ashcraft, PhD
Participant Researchers:
Alicia Gaiero
Amanda Moeser
Joanna Fogg
Laura Brown
University of New Hampshire
May 2022
“Boat Problems and Triumphs”

Boat problems...summer of 2021 I had some ongoing problems. I struggled to get a mechanic to look at my engine due to peak season and high demand. I wasn’t raised on the water or working on engines. When I finally shared to a boat yard that I was an oyster farmer I was given the time of day. I appreciated that they got me right in and took care of my boat. Every day on the water provoked anxiety. The thoughts of “Am I doing this right? Is my engine too loud in the morning? Am I going to fast in the mooring field? Did I make a mess on the dock – will locals be mad at me? Are they mad I have a mooring in a residential field despite not living on this island?” I was often concerned about how I looked. I don’t have a lifetime of experience on the water. In truth, summer of 2021 was the first time I was really out on the water operating my boat and farm alone. I didn’t know what was wrong or right and I feared a rookie mistake could damage my boat, harm someone else, harm the gear or damage relationships with waterfront homeowners. I am proud of my boat and the things I learned from the internet. I learned to change my prop. I also properly diagnosed my boat problems on YouTube and ended up impressing my mechanic who did not expect me to be right. My proudest moments were when I was forced out of my comfort zone and things felt high risk.
“The Public Dock”

The dock is where I had some interesting interactions. At the public boat launch I’ve had people clap when backing my trailer in to launch my boat and when loading it on the trailer. I’ve had people ask my male friend who I had back my car and trailer into the water “why he was making me do all the work?” This often made me laugh because I understood the novelty. Often there were older people in the community who go to the boat launch as a place to eat launch or sit by the water and they don’t usually see people who look like me, out there doing what I do. I would like to know one day that there are just as many female boat owners and commercial female fishermen as males but for now I’ll keep enjoying the authentic conversations at the dock. I take pride in being different than the norm. I enjoy when these onlookers say they’re proud because I think I often forget to be proud too. As silly as it sounds, I am helping to pave the way for other women one interaction at a time. I am also proud of how my confidence has grown at the docks. In the summer and fall of 2020 my anxiety peaked at the launch. I was new and it felt like I was driving without a license! How do they not require training for this? I feared how many times it might take me to back my boat in and park my car and trailer. I was worried I’d make a mistake – like the time I unhooked the boat from the trailer, and I was alone so I had to go for an unexpected swim while the boat floated away. I was embarrassed and scared of the harbormaster. Now I have a really excellent relationship with him.
Here is a deceiving look at my farm. I applied for leases in the first weeks of COVID. The world shut down and there were a number of new barriers. The DMR lost some staff due to funding, and harbormasters were difficult to tract down. I struggled to get my leases approved and I had already place a deposit on gear and seed. My mentor offered to let me use his lease. This was intended to be for his expansion but he allowed me to use to of his lines. Mine are the two to the right. The two in the middle are another farmer’s. He experienced a similar issue with the leasing process taking too long. The two on the left are the actual lease holders. I am grateful that he share his space. I had to use the same gear as he did which was no problem but ever since I’ve been working towards independence. I’ve since been able to get 8 leases for the farm and move one of my two lines. The second will be moved as soon as I can this spring. At this time I did not yet have my own tumbler either and was reliant on my mentor. Often he asked for a free labor in exchange. I look forward to no longer being on the hook for the favor that was done for me. I have since had my own tumbler built and it was designed so I could go along my lines to be as efficient as possible. I was asked to not tumble or play music at the site and having to move my product added significant time to the process as my boat was not large enough to really carry the oysters, the tumbler and new bags easily. I am excited to continue towards my independence.
This is a photo of my largest harvest and biggest sale. This was an exciting day and the image I shared on social media. It was 2,300 oysters heading to New York City. What isn’t photographed is that on this day I made a big mistake. I spent the morning changing the prop on my boat in an unconventional way. We – myself and my friend Emma who had also never changed a prop brought the boat to shore while I worked on it with the help of YouTube. The tide was coming in and the boat was getting moved up the beach. Once I had everything apart I learned I needed an additional part. I had to leave Emma with the boat for more than an hour while she made sure it didn’t get stuck on the beach – since it had no prop it could not be returned to the mooring. I was able to get the part and eventually returned and successfully put things back together. We went on a quick ride to the farm where I had hope to check on things and make sure the boat worked in preparation of this large harvest that I thought was for the following day. On a hunch, I texted the buyer and learned I needed to harvest the 2,300 oysters that day! I freaked out. I was unprepared. I didn’t have enough coolers or ice but fortunately the temperature was cold, and I had presorted the product. So, we harvested and I figured out the rest later. To the average person they see a big sale but they don’t see the problems that we overcame to come to this point. I was stressed, as harvesting is only a very small piece of bringing the product to market. I would have to wash, bag, and tag the oysters as well as keep them on ice until delivery. So, on this day I learned a few lessons and this photo means so much more to me than a big sale. It represents my ability to overcome unexpected barriers and persevere.
“Closer to Independence”

The purchase of this tumbler allowed me to continue to step towards independence. My mentor had offered to let me use their tumbler for my oysters in exchange for tumbling his oysters at a 1:2 ratio. I could tumble one of my lines of gear in exchange to tumbling two of his. This was beyond my abilities. It is difficult for me to gather the people necessary to tumble just my own oysters and found this idea incredibly stressful. I would have rather paid to use it. I felt like I had to make sure that I could work independently to be successful. So, this was a big day.
I have spent a great deal of my lifetime near the water. I’ve always been drawn to the ocean. Growing up we had a 14-foot aluminum dinghy that my father treated like a yacht. Despite the amount of time I spent in it I never learned how to steer. Perhaps it was because I preferred to sit in the bow and watch the waves getting pulled beneath us while sucking on the salty straps of my lifejacket. Perhaps it was because I was the baby in the family. Or maybe I wonder, as I picture my dad handing the tiller to my brother, it’s because I’m a girl. I didn’t start to learn how to drive boats until I was 19. At that point I was determined but I was also far behind my male counterparts and self-conscious. Because I was often the only female on the waterfront I felt the weight of representing all women. This is a barrier I want to break for my daughter. I want her to know that her hand is welcome on the tiller--that it is natural for a woman to be at the helm.
Sea farming is physically demanding work. The limits of my small frame can be very evident in the course of day on the water. Finding innovative ways to maneuver and learning to work collaboratively is a big part of our daily life. I have found working with women particularly rewarding because we have an aptitude for finding unconventional ways to get things done and we expect to help each other by towing the same line, pulling the same cage.
“Giulia Cardoso on Work Barge”

Most boats and equipment have not been designed or built for us. It is hard to work at a table that requires you to have your hands above your shoulders all day. It’s hard to stand out by being the only one that doesn’t fit. These are things we are working to change.
“Upweller”

The summer I was 17 I got my first job as a sternman on a lobster boat. I would show up at the dock in the darkness before sunrise and be the only female getting out to work. Sometimes there were lewd comments and gestures. It could be an intimidating space for a young woman. Now I go out of my way to flood our docks and boats with women. I find jobs for even the smallest girls in my family so that the waterfront not only becomes a place where we feel safe and welcome, but also our own.
“Joanna and Iona”

I woke my daughter early one winter morning to go harvest at high water. I packed her a breakfast burrito and put her warm gear on top of her pajamas. After helping me for a while on the floats she got chilly and went to play in the truck. She took off her winter coat and hat and mittens and messed about for a bit before she came back to see if I was nearly done. After several trips of lugging the heavy harvest up the icy ramp I went to open the truck and realized we were locked out. I had been thinking a great deal about this Photovoice project and barriers that women face. The metaphor of being locked out of my own truck in the middle of nowhere, with a child, stung like the seawater on my hands. There was no spare key. She didn’t even have her hat. The closest house was over a mile away. After a few expletives and a kick at a snow bank I became very aware of what my four-year-old would learn in this moment. I decided I did not want this to be a lesson in blame, anger, or fear. I bent down and gave her a hug. We took this picture and then proceeded to figure it out.
“Shore”

The shellfish farming industry is rapidly growing. State agencies that control aspects of the shellfish program are unable to scale effectively and are often short staffed. We have one lab in the state to handle water and shellfish samples that determine harvest closures/openings leaving farmers unable to harvest and sell for extended periods of time. This image depicts the farm’s proximity to shore which allows recreational harvesters to walk out to the farm at low tide where oysters are spread on the ground and easy to rake. The department that monitors such activity is unable to continually monitor the farm sites during recreational harvesting times leaving farmers vulnerable to poaching.
Access to the farm site is a problem. There is one large private marina located in a turbulent channel and a few privately owned marinas filled to capacity. Public ‘fishing’ access, or non-motorized boat launching areas, are not conveniently located or require walking through a mud flat at or around low tide to get to the water. This makes hauling equipment and loading harvested oysters difficult. The stairs are not maintained by any agency.
“Clothing”

On the farm I wear insulated waders while submerged in cold water. Clothing for the fishing and hunting industry is created mainly for men or ‘one size fits all’. One size does not fit all. Women’s waders, when available, are two to three times more expensive and don’t have leg lengths that fit. Women often order men’s waders in kids shoe sizes to fit the feet, but the legs are too short, the bodice too tight and the seams split. Water jackets for men are more narrow and sleeve cuffs too loose allowing water in.
“Erosion”

Because of the limited access from shore to the water, mooring fields and aquaculture farms, the shoreline is being damaged. Small boats are dragged over shore grasses and mud banks and excessive water run off from increasing storm events through culverts creates channels in the mud and erosion of the banks. Climate change and human interaction are dramatically affecting the shoreline.
Access to my farm is in a very public place, at a parking lot. Though the lot provides parking for me to load/unload gear, it has also encouraged people to sleep in their vehicles and defecate in the woods. It is a common meet up spot for fishing, exercise, lunching and taking bathroom breaks. There is, however, no public bathroom or public trash receptacle. In a two hour span, I and two friends collected 743 pieces of trash from bottles tossed over the banks, fast food wrappers, broken fishing gear and debris washed ashore.
“Birds Eye View”

Here I am with another oyster farmer, doing some reconnaissance for her upcoming standard lease hearing. From the air, we look so small, which is odd because that’s not how I feel when I’m out there. Of all the people I work with in the area, her and my friend Emily are the easiest to get along with and the most inspiring and relatable. They are both supportive, tenacious, and independent.
I laugh and am mildly disgusted when I see people invest $30,000 in a shiny new boat for oyster farming. Part of it is jealousy—I think it would be nice to feel safe, have a navigational system, a hauler, a motor that starts without fail, all the bells and whistles—things that were out of my reach when I got up and going. But the bigger part of me is immensely proud and grateful. I started my farm with a 1995 Buick Century and an 11’ skiff. I built a beautiful farm in a prime location with very little aside from my own brains and brawn. I have zero farm debt which makes me better able to withstand market and environmental fluctuations. What’s best is that this model is replicable and accessible to all, not just dudes with cash to blow.
“Bottom Seeding”

This is my favorite way to grow shellfish—bottom seeding and hand picking. All I need for gear is a 5-gallon bucket, harvest bags, and a sled to drag across the mud. Oysters grown this way are hearty, flavorful, and top-notch quality. It frustrates me that as a woman and beginning farmer, I qualify for no-cost catastrophic crop insurance through the USDA; however, the species I want to grow (quahogs) and the methods I prefer to use (bottom-seeding) are not eligible for coverage. In my opinion, this is a prime example of long-standing, unaddressed institutional bias at the federal level, but it also happens within state policy, university research initiatives, financing, and industry advocacy organizations. Of all the barriers that I’ve encountered, institutional bias is the most concerning and difficult to address.
“Lanes Island Oysters—‘Grown by Amanda in Yarmouth’”

Terry and Sally were my first ever customers and have been buying from me ever since. I appreciate their shop because I overwintered oysters in the cooler, it’s close to home, and they always treat me fairly. Every time I drop off oysters, I’m there for at least an hour because we like to catch up and talk about our farms. Sally has her own farm and a clam license, too, and does all the day-to-day stuff with customers at the shop. It takes the two of them, working full-time and more, to keep the business going. It annoys me when the “people in charge” encourage direct-to-consumer consumer marketing as a way to sustain small-scale fishing and farming ventures. It’s another full-time job that I don’t need on top of my already full-time job, various part-time jobs, community service, and family responsibilities. I like my middle(wo)man and our businesses work in tandem.
One of my favorite journal articles on the role of gender in fisheries is titled, “Before we ask permission, now we give notice.” That’s partly how I feel about the wharf where I work and keep my boat. Now I am free to come and go as I please. It’s a critical access point for my farm because it doesn’t always freeze up in the winter and I have parking in the summer thanks to one of the fishermen. I look forward to going to the dock because I love the people and the stories that I hear while I’m down there. I strongly believe that gender norms have a foothold in our society and function in insidious ways, but I also know these guys accept me and genuinely want to see me succeed. For me personally (and gender relations more broadly), it’s important to continue working with men, as well as women.
Most oyster farmers pack things up for the winter—but my schedule, where I work, and gear are more similar to wild clammers—so they comprise a bulk of my social network. It took me a long time to get up the courage to take the boat out alone after dark in the winter. It’s pitch black and hovering around freezing. I don’t have the luxury of a heated cabin, lighted decks, navigational systems, depth finders, and GPS, which are all common on lobster boats and other fishing boats. For the first couple years, one of the guys would drop me off at Lanes Island (the uninhabited island where I farm) before the tide and pick me up on their way in. Last year, one of them took the time to help me practice navigating in the dark. Now I am confident enough to go alone, but we still check on each other and make sure everyone gets in safe at the end of the night. It’s not an understatement to say that I trust them with my life and these relationships are a matter of life and death.
This is just a pretty picture of my farm before sunset. It isn’t until the tide drains out that I can see the fruits of my labor. I like that it’s hidden away under the surface.