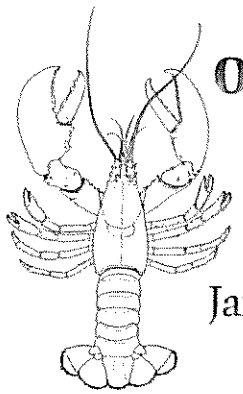
The Lobster Gangs of Maine



James M. Acheson

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time lobster fishermen on islands east of Penobscot Bay, where they own summer cottages. One said, "I couldn't have gone fishing in a big way the first year we bought the camp [summer cottage], but once I got to know the local fishermen, I had no difficulty."

Fishing rights in mainland harbors are usufructuary to a large extent. If a person moves away and stops fishing, his claim to fishing rights becomes progressively weaker. His children will have a more difficult time entering fishing than they would if he were an active member of the harbor gang. Under no circumstances can such a person's fishing rights be inherited by other family members. If he stays away from the town and from fishing for a few years, he himself might have difficulties rejoining his gang. On islands, the sense of ownership is far stronger and more permanent. There, inheritance of legal rights to a piece of land automatically carries with it rights to fish in the island's lobster-fishing area, in the view of those in the local culture if not in the eyes of the law. Even if the owner is not using his water, his fishing rights remain. Islanders worry that in selling land to "summer people," the islanders and their kinsmen will lose fishing rights, which they clearly regard as an insurance policy of sorts. Interestingly enough, if land is sold to an outsider, the new owner may not be allowed to go lobstering. Lobstering rights cannot be legally inherited or transferred in a deed.

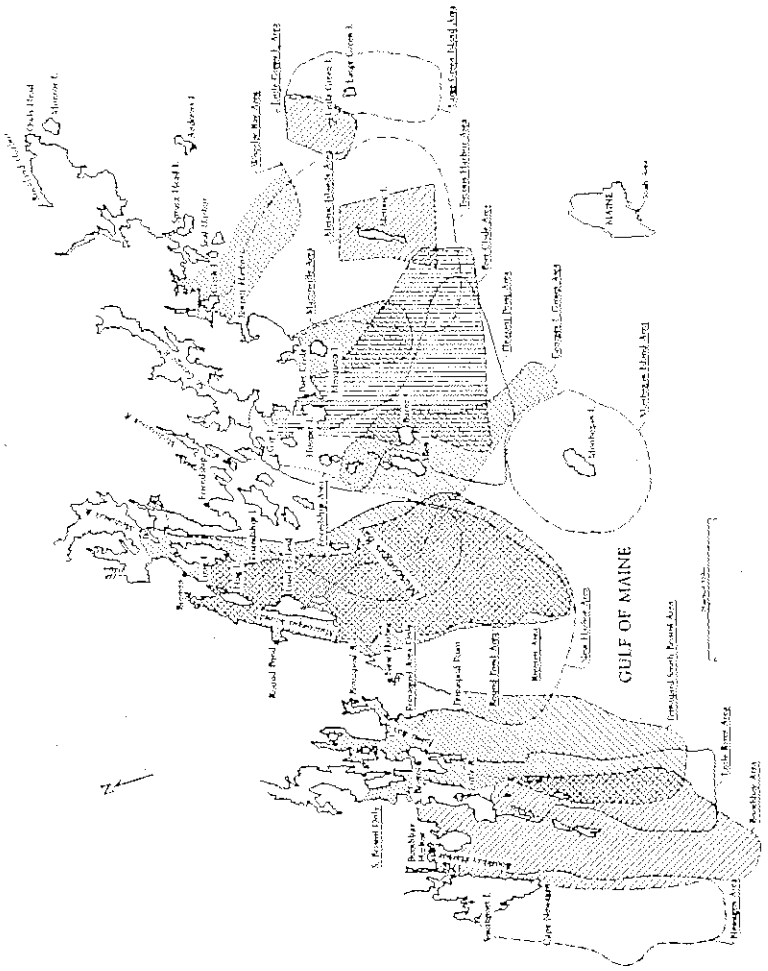
CHAPTER 4

Territories

In midcoastal Maine, the area fished by one harbor gang is rela small. In summer, when lobstermen are fishing "shedder bot they are rarely more than five miles from their harbors; in w when they fish deeper waters, they are seldom more than ten distant. A lobster fisherman thus spends his whole workin crossing and recrossing one small body of water. One herring f man says, "You show me a lobster fisherman fifty miles from l and I'll show you a poor lost son of a bitch."

Each harbor where boats are moored ordinarily has its own l gang and lobster-fishing territory. (See map 2.) Usually there many territories associated with a township as there are harb few of the largest harbors in the state have two gangs. In Frien for example, one gang has a territory to the west in Muscongu while another gang fishes the Georges Islands. Vinalhaven al more than one territory. The waters around unoccupied island shore are normally included in nearby mainland fishing territ but island waters farther out usually form special territories nated by the island name.

Fishermen talk about boundaries in terms of such key eleme river mouths, major peninsulas, and islands, but the actual di lines between lobstering territories are relatively small featu



Map 2. Lobster fishing territories along the central Maine coast, 1982

miliar only to people intimately acquainted with the area. Along shore, boundaries are often marked by coves, small points, beaches, ledges, large trees on shore, or sea buoys. Offshore, fishermen make reference to islands or to underwater landmarks such as channels, ridges, or named locations. Offshore lines are now marked out with radar or loran much of the time.

Before the advent of such electronic gear, island territories were marked by reference to points on the mainland. The western boundary of Metinic Island is recognized when Whitehead, some six miles distant, is in line with the smokestack of the Thomaston Mill, twelve miles away.

Close to shore, boundaries are precise, defined to the yard. Offshore, they are less definite. In midwinter, miles from shore, there is a good deal of "mixed fishing" by individuals from different harbor gangs. In summer, when fishermen concentrate their traps near shore, they take care to place them on their own side of the boundary. At this time of year, when the productive area is far smaller, the influx of part-timers results in intense competition and fishermen monitor their boundaries closely.

Fishermen know about only those boundaries that affect them directly. Lobster fishermen from Bremen, for example, know the lines between their own territory and those of Friendship, Round Pond, and New Harbor, but they have only a vague idea of the boundaries between Pemaquid and South Bristol, harbors on the same peninsula. New Harbor fishermen are not even aware of the existence of the Georges Island area twelves miles from their home harbor. Lobstermen are also generally reluctant to talk about territoriality; it does, after all, involve trap cutting, which is an illegal activity.

Defense of Boundaries

Violation of territorial boundaries meets with no fixed response. An older person from an established family with a long history of fishing might infringe on the territorial rights of others almost indefinitely. Those being infringed upon are especially reluctant to accuse a gang leader or the member of a large family, either of whom could

have a large number of allies. An unpopular person, a young fisherman, or a newcomer encounters trouble more quickly. Sooner or later, however, someone decides to take action against the interloper. Sometimes a small group of fishermen decide to act in concert, but boundary defense is often effected by one person acting alone.

The violator is usually warned, sometimes by verbal threats and abuse, but usually by surreptitious molestation of lobstering gear. Two half-hitches of rope may be tied around the spindle of the buoy, or legal-sized lobsters may be taken out and the doors of the traps left open. Fishermen have been known to leave threatening notes in bottles inside the offending traps, and one colorful islander carves a representation of female genitalia in the styrofoam buoys. Most interlopers move their gear when warned in these ways. If the violations persist, the traps are destroyed. Fishermen have destroyed traps by "carving them up a little" with a chain saw or by smashing them with sledge hammers. When such traps are pulled, the owner has little doubt as to what has happened. Usually, however, the offending traps are cut off: they are pulled, the buoy toggles and warp line are cut, and the trap is pushed into deep water, where there is little chance of finding it. There is no practical way to protect traps in the water. Removing the traps not only removes the symbol of another person's intrusion but also limits the intruder's capacity to reduce the defender's own catch. Destruction of traps does not usually lead to direct confrontation since the owner can only guess who destroyed them or even whether they were destroyed on purpose.

In a few instances, gangs defend their boundaries as a group. It is well known that anyone invading the traditional territories of such islands as Metinic, Monhegan, and Green Island can expect coordinated resistance from men fishing those islands. Once in a while, groups goaded beyond endurance launch a full scale "cut war" in which hundreds of traps are destroyed, boats sunk, and even docks and fish houses burnt. These so-called lobster wars lead to long-standing bitterness, violence, and court action.

It is a rare day in a harbor when someone does not suspect that his traps have been tampered with. Many incidents occur as a result of feuds and competition within a particular area. Much of this small-

scale molestation stems from the fact that maintaining territo lines means constantly utilizing one's own territory and perhap little more—a process known as "pushing the lines." Even in sl months, a few traps are left in certain peripheral areas to maint local territorial claims. However, fishermen touch another's g only with great reluctance, knowing that their own gear is vuln able to retaliation. The whole industry is aware that the individu whose traps have been cut off may well take vengeance, but f quently against the wrong person. The result, they know, can b comic and costly chain of events in which the innocent and t guilty retaliate blindly against one another. The norms are therefo widely obeyed, and although the entire coast is patrolled by only few wardens, there is little trouble. Fishermen are very careful punish intruders in ways that will not provoke a massive, violer response. According to one fisherman, "The trick to driving a ma [out of the area] is to cut off just one or two traps at a time." Th harassment makes it unprofitable to fish an area but does not cha lenge a man to open warfare, since he can only guess who cut h traps.

A conspiracy of silence surrounds all trap-cutting incidents an efforts to enforce boundaries. Those who resort to cutting trap rarely advertise their "skill with the knife," to reduce both the possi bility of retaliation and the chance of losing their lobster licenses fo destroying the traps of other men. Destruction of another's gear i always considered immoral, regardless of the circumstances, be cause it interferes with the victim's ability to feed his family. Vic tims may growl and threaten but they rarely report the incident tc any law enforcement agency. The culprit's identity may be un- known, and chances of successful prosecution are small. Fishermen feel strongly that the law should be kept at bay and that people should handle their own problems. Any fisherman who goes to the police to complain about trap cuttings not only looks ineffectual and ridiculous but is somewhat of a threat. When a man's traps are miss- ing, taking the law into his own hands is not only more effective but also maintains his standing among fellow fishermen.

Visitors to the Maine coast sometimes think that lobster fisher- men are a bunch of surly outlaws. This impression is reinforced by

tales of lobster wars in which hundreds of traps are cut off and property is destroyed. Widely repeated, these stories give the entire coast an unsavory reputation, which contains a kernel of truth. The territorial system does preempt a part of the public domain by groups that defend their claims by violence. But the stereotype concerning criminal behavior is essentially inaccurate. Fishermen obey the conservation laws. All register their boats and their trap buoy colors with the state of Maine; all have licenses. The prohibition against taking berried lobsters (with eggs) or "notch-tails" is universally obeyed.

The territorial system is a standard part of the social organization of the lobster-fishing industry. It is what Bailey (1969) calls an "encapsulated political system," operating with its own set of rules within a larger system. The boundaries are maintained by violence or threat, but the violence is patterned according to a codified set of rules.

Fishermen say that a man is allowed to fish within the entire territory owned by the harbor gang to which he belongs. This statement is not strictly accurate. A man is expected to keep his distance from other fishermen and not "dump" his traps on top of another's, where they can become entangled. Fishermen with traps in a saturated location have usufructuary rights; others cannot enter until someone leaves. The older, more skilled fishermen are likely to have their traps prepositioned in the best locations. When lobsters do appear, those who have "camped out" in good spots have monopolized all or most of the available space. Younger fishermen—particularly those who have joined the gang recently—are well advised to stay out of the way of men with status in the hierarchy of skill and prestige. Men of lower status can lose a great deal by coming into conflict with highliners.

Sometimes groups of men use a particular spot or set of spots for such a long time that they begin to feel proprietary rights over these locations. Within harbor gangs in the study area, however, such men have only usufructuary rights, not permanent ownership. Should the men who regularly fish in a location move their traps elsewhere, others from the harbor gang can move their traps into it. Under unusual circumstances men attempt to maintain small private do-

mains within a gang's territory. A boat builder on one of the offsl islands maintained a private area off his own property where alone placed traps. If anyone else placed traps in his preserve would cut off their traps, pull up all his own fishing gear, and g work building boats until trouble died down. To the best of knowledge, no individual areas of this kind existed in any har gang in the midcoastal region in the 1980s.

It is much more common for part-time fishermen and those on the prestige scale to be restricted to certain areas. Two part-t fishermen have said that they place traps only in the coves wl they own cottages. They have had no difficulty, in part becaus the idea that ownership of land gives fishing rights in adjac waters. They can also keep an eye on some of their gear. Both, h ever, have received definite hints that they would experience trou if they tried to fish elsewhere in the gang's territory.

Boundary Movement

During the past sixty years, all boundaries have moved somewl but at varying rates of speed. Some have been surprisingly stal The boundary line between Tenants Harbor and Martinsville moved less than a mile since 1920. In other areas, especially in western part of this zone, boundary movement has been much fas

Boundary movement often occurs as a result of incremental, n violent encroachment by individuals on the area of another ga During the spring of 1971, for example, one ledge in the New Har territory was being fished by two men from that town. In early Ju three fishermen from Friendship, where the number of fisherm was increasing, also began to fish there. After several weeks, New Harbor fishermen moved their traps from the area, angrily claring that the spot was so "polluted with traps" that it was worthwhile to fish there any longer. Other Friendship fisherm moved in. By the end of that year, mixed fishing was allowed.

In a few instances, boundary movement is the result of coor nated, violent action by a group of men. One such incident occur in the mid 1950s, when a group of Tenants Harbor fishermen

cided to fish an area off the privately owned Penobscot Bay islands. Their traps were promptly cut off; they retaliated in kind, and for a few weeks a minor "war" broke loose. Over the course of a summer, Tenants Harbor fishermen succeeded in making life so miserable for the islanders that they were able to push the line back a few hundred yards. Violence, however, does not always lead to boundary movement. Over several decades, various groups have transgressed the Green Island boundary, which nevertheless has continued in place.

Rapid boundary movement can take place without violence, as when islanders move to the mainland or sell the island to a tourist who either does not know the value of the traditional lobster-fishing area or cannot defend it. The area is then quickly incorporated into the fishing territories of adjacent harbors. In the past few years, Teal Island in Muscongus Bay was sold to outsiders, and its fishing area was taken over by Pleasant Point and Port Clyde; the Loud's Island area was incorporated by Bremen and Round Pond.

Not all islands abandoned by their fishermen are peacefully incorporated into the territory of another harbor gang. Isle au Haut affords a case in point. In the 1950s fishermen lived on the island and maintained their own area, but in the following decade, these men moved to nearby towns on the mainland. They continued to fish around the island and defended their area successfully until the mid 1980s. Trouble has erupted as Stonington fishermen encroach on the area. One boat reportedly has been sunk, and a number of traps have been cut off. In time this subzone will probably be incorporated into the Stonington area.

Boundary movements are rarely the result of individual actions. If only two individuals are involved in a dispute, a stalemate is likely to result. Fishermen have said that "two men who get to fighting only put each other out of business." Such statements, however, are not completely accurate. If a person is determined to remain in an area, he can make it very expensive for anyone who wants to dislodge him. In one night, a single person can destroy more traps than several people can set. Reportedly large-scale trap cutting has been accomplished by attaching a scythe to the side of a boat and running the boat close to the offending warp lines. In local legend, hundreds of traps have been thus destroyed by one person in the course of a night.

The decision to defend or to intrude on the area of another depends on a hard-headed assessment of benefits and costs. A l bay up one of the tidewater rivers is the exclusive fishing grour one man and his family, who defend the area against all con Their defense of the area is strengthened by the famiiy's reputa for violence and by the fact that some members have spent an usual amount of time in jail. (One of my research assistants, boat that supposedly invaded this family area, witnessed a ham being thrown through the boat's windshield.) Members of this ily say that the lobster population in the area can support only a fishermen, and since their small boats cannot operate outside river, other fishermen should leave their paltry supply alone. Bu maintenance and observance of boundaries are always based or tionality. Where honor and feelings of self-worth are at stake, have not always acted in their best economic interests. Most fo however, especially those involving the kind of long-term act necessary to change territorial boundaries, are made with a clear to economic benefit.

A Tyopology of Territories

There are two different types of lobster-fishing territories in r coastal Maine. Although fishermen are aware of the differ between them, they have no terminology to describe what I call cleated" and "perimeter-defended areas."[1] Nucleated areas are fined in terms of the major harbor where fishing vessels are moo perimeter-defended areas in terms of the peripheral boundaries. cleated areas exist in the mainland harbors in the western pa the study area, from the Sheepscot River to Port Clyde. Perim defended areas exist only in the fishing waters surrounding G Island, Matinicus, Metinic, Monhegan and some of the smalle lands in the Muscle Ridge channel.

In nucleated areas the fishermen's sense of territoriality is pro tional to the distance from the harbor. Intruding traps placed the harbor mouth are quickly destroyed. On the periphery, the s of territoriality is weak and a good deal of mixed fishing takes pl In Muscongus Bay, for example, the fishermen from New Har

Round Pond, Bremen, and Friendship have exclusive fishing zones near their own home harbors, but in the cold months of the year, when they fish in the middle of the bay, men from these harbors fish together. Yet the areas on the boundaries of nucleated areas cannot be exploited by fishermen from just any harbor. Mixed fishing does not imply completely open access. Were fishermen from Monhegan, Tenants Harbor, or Boothbay to place traps in the middle of Muscongus Bay, they would almost certainly have trouble.

With perimeter-defended areas, the sense of ownership remains strong out to the boundaries of the territory. Boundaries are sharply defined and defended to the yard. There is little mixed fishing. Fishermen feel that if they are going to keep people from other harbor gangs on one side of the boundary, they should stay on their own side. Even in the winter months fishermen rarely fish outside the area they claim for their exclusive use.

As noted earlier, it is easier to gain acceptance in mainland harbor gangs, where nucleated fishing areas are found, than on the islands, with their perimeter-defended territories. The barriers to entering harbor gangs that fish perimeter-defended areas are to be expected, given the nature of their defensive boundary arrangements. The object of maintaining impermeable boundaries is to reduce the number of people fishing in an area. There is no sense in incurring the cost of defending strict boundaries if anyone can join the harbor gang. Thus, fishermen who strongly defend their boundaries against other harbor gangs also limit entry into their own gangs to a much greater extent than do those fishing nucleated areas. As a consequence there are fewer fishermen per square mile of fishing area in perimeter defended areas, which produces both biological and economic benefits. Most important, lobsters taken from perimeter-defended areas are consistently larger, and catches and catches per unit of effort are greater. In addition, fishermen from these areas earn significantly higher incomes (see Appendix).

In the early decades of the century, according to older informants, all lobstering areas in the midcoastal region were essentially perimeter-defended. The nucleated areas, now predominant, are a relatively recent phenomenon, which have come about as the boundaries between small areas have been pushed back or have broken

down completely, with the resultant amalgamation of several smal areas into larger, nucleated fishing territories. Before 1920, lobster ing was done only in summer in very small territories held by group of men who defended them vigorously. This fishing pattern was con nected in part to the technology of the day. Fishing was done from small sloop or rowing dory, which could not be used safely in stormy weather. The area that a man could fish was very restricted, as wa the effective travel radius, and the amount of "lobster bottom" tha a fisherman could learn with a lead line was very limited. Since th income of these harbor gangs depended on a very small area, ter ritory was jealously guarded. Many of these small fishing areas wer also adjacent to legally owned land holdings, and at that time th idea that landowners had a right to the "shedder bottom" or "short warp fishing" off their property was unquestioned.[2]

These perimeter-defended areas have lasted to the present aroun the islands in Penobscot Bay. In the western part of the centra Maine coast, the small perimeter-defended areas have been com bined into larger nucleated areas, mostly fished by people from a least two harbors.

The breakdown of the small, perimeter-defended territories wa made possible by technological change. As motors came into com mon use in the 1930s, small skiffs and dories give way to larger faster boats. The introduction of depth-sounding equipment in 195 made it easier to learn the bottom. Both innovations greatly in creased the area a fisherman could exploit effectively.

Reasons for the differential breakdown of boundaries around the perimeter-defended areas must also be sought in ecological and po litical factors. In the western part of the study area, where the coas is convoluted into deep bays and long peninsulas, harbor gangs from communities on the ends of peninsulas have been under consider able pressure from those further up the rivers and bays. In the days o sail, fishermen from communities up the estuaries restricted thei fishing to summer and exploited the waters directly adjacent to thei home harbors. As late as the early 1960s, most of the men from such towns were content to be part-time fishermen with small boats Since the 1970s, these men have had to fish full-time in order to sur vive economically. To gain access to deep water and winter lobste

concentrations, they have been buying bigger boats to reach areas formerly exclusive to the peninsular towns. Such individuals sacrifice a great deal to gain access to open-ocean fishing areas. Their alternative is to be restricted to shallow waters around their home harbors and to fish only during the summer.

For people in harbors on the open sea, it has not been worthwhile to repel the invaders. While incursions from upriver communities mean more competition and a subsequent reduction in both catches and revenues, attempts to stop the invasions would cause a great deal of trouble, perhaps even a full-fledged lobster war, with huge financial losses, problems with the law, and worse. Thus, harbor gangs from places such as New Harbor, Boothbay Harbor, and South Bristol now operate in nucleated areas, with small zones near the mouth of their harbors for their exclusive use, and share a great deal of the deep waters in the bays with fishermen from inland towns. The amount of mixed fishing is especially large in fall, winter, and spring, when individuals from river and bay towns must come "outside" to fish at all.

Perimeter-defended areas around Penobscot Bay islands have survived because their defenders have so far been able to cope with incursions. Two factors have bolstered the islanders' defense. First, the men from mainland harbors have not been particularly aggressive in pushing into the areas controlled by island harbor gangs. Harbor gangs from towns such as Tenants Harbor, Port Clyde, and Spruce Head have access both to shoals and to deep water; their fishermen can operate year-round without going far from home or encroaching on neighboring island gangs. Second, men fishing the island areas have been willing to mount a spirited defense of their areas, despite the smaller number of gang members. It is common knowledge that anyone who attempts to fish in the area around Monhegan, Green Island, or Criehaven will meet with coordinated resistance from the island men. Especially in islands owned by families, long-term ownership lends strong moral overtones to their claims. Gangs fishing permanently occupied islands have mustered effective defenses in part because the mutual interdependence of island living fosters a sense of identity and exclusiveness, bringing individual behavior under more control. Moreover, a loss of fishing grounds is a direct

threat to the livelihood of most island families. The ability of l
ers such as the king to coordinate defensive activities is also
hanced by these factors.

Distance does not play a key role in maintaining these perime
defended areas. The men who fish off some of these islands (
Green Island, Little Green island, and Metinic) actually live on
mainland and make the trip daily to these islands to fish. In a
tion, lobster fishermen from mainland harbors commonly go m
than twenty miles in search of lobsters and sometimes go as fa
Cashes Ledge, fifty miles away, for a few hauls in the spring.

The size of the harbor gang is not a factor in the defense of an a
Virtually all the mainland harbors have more fishermen than th
land harbor gangs. The islanders, however, can mobilize more r
"on the line," so to speak, than the larger mainland harbor ga
This ability is what counts.

The present disposition of lobster-fishing territories is a funct
of the costs and benefits of territorial defense. On the mainland, r
in harbors on the ends of peninsulas have not found it worthwhil
defend their territorial boundaries against more desperate men fi
upriver. As a result boundaries have broken down and the area wl
mixed fishing is allowed has increased. These processes have
duced nucleated areas on the mainland. On the island areas in
nobscot Bay, fishermen have maintained boundaries, and perime
defended territory continues to be the rule.

How do the lobstermen view the different types of territories –