

Friends of Merrymeeting Bay

From its source in northern Maine's Moosehead Lake, home to endangered Canadian lynx, moose, bear and lots of tourists, the mighty Kennebec River flows south 200 miles to meet the equally long Androscoggin. The Androscoggin, rising in the lake region of western Maine and flowing through NH before returning to Maine, joins up with the Kennebec and four smaller rivers at Merrymeeting Bay, the largest freshwater estuary system north of the Chesapeake.

Merrymeeting Bay, draining nearly 100,000 square miles or nearly 40% of Maine, is the largest staging area in the northeast for migratory waterfowl, feeding and flocking as they head south. The Bay is equally well-known for its bald eagle, migratory fish and rare plant populations. Watching over this special tidal riverine inland delta [20 miles upriver from the Atlantic] is Friends of Merrymeeting Bay [FOMB], a volunteer based non-profit using research, advocacy, education and land conservation to preserve, protect and improve, as their mission states, the unique ecosystems of Merrymeeting Bay.

With only one staff-person and a cadre of over 125 active volunteers [putting in 3,500 hours/year] from a membership of 450, the Friends have helped protect over 1,300 acres of valuable wildlife habitat in the area, they have conducted first-of-a-kind research projects in Maine using caged freshwater mussels to monitor and detect river contaminants, aerial photography and GIS to look at land use and vegetation over time and homemade sophisticated drifters to study circulation patterns in the estuary system. Lately, FOMB advocacy work has focused on toxins, development pressures, upgrading water quality and gaining safe and effective migratory fish passage through and around hydro-electric dams. The group was recently successful in blending science and advocacy to prevent a proposed tidal generation scheme that would have severely restricted the only access to the Bay and river system for huge migratory fish populations., Data from their active volunteer water monitoring network supported prior river classification upgrade efforts and a 2005 endangered species act petition filed by FOMB and two other local parties just resulted in expansion of endangered species protection to Atlantic salmon on three of Maine's largest rivers, the Kennebec, Androscoggin and Penobscot. Local volunteers make a difference!

Today's biannual FOMB Bay Day is a highly choreographed but always fluid effort bringing together more than forty FOMB volunteers with sometimes over 200 "no child left inside" energetic 4th graders in just one day. Add the ingredients [plenty of mud], stir, and let the fun and learning begin!

Whether squishing through tidal fish nursery habitat on a plant walk, creating Gyotaku fish prints, gathering in a beach seine net, making a mud model of the Bay or un-earthing 300 year old artifacts; by the end of the day, names like mummichug, cream ware, diadromous, banded killifish, sturgeon, Abbagadasset and three-spined stickleback are rolling off kids' tongues waiting and wanting to enlighten their parents at home. In today's geographically-challenged society, Bay Day not only provides hands on learning, exercise and fun, but by learning the six rivers and critters living in and around them, also conveys a critical sense of place. And, an extraordinarily special place it is.

When all student hands go up as volunteers to drag a dead duck and lay a scent trail in a "dogs for conservation" session, when kids clamor to carry the 50 foot rolled up beach seine through the woods to a location with more water or when a young lady refuses to stop for lunch because she is wants to "stay and become an archaeologist", FOMB volunteers know they are having an impact, fulfilling a need and are in the right place doing the right thing.

Ed Friedman