



Finding Possibilities in Oral Histories of Local Environmental Change

High School
English Language Arts
Maine

I had not expected climate change to come up. But it did.

Last October, my Environmental Literature class met three community old-timers at the end of an earthen pier jutting from one of the many peninsulas along Maine’s Midcoast. This was our second stop on a field trip focused on the history of the lands and waters in our school district. The goal was to gather grist for poems exploring local intersections of human and natural history, poems inspired by our state poet laureate’s hardscrabble collection *Midden*, about nearby Malaga Island. On the pier, my 11th and 12th grade students huddled against the cold as a member of the historical society spoke to us about how different groups of Indigenous people used the surrounding land over eras spanning millennia. What he said next surprised me.

He pointed to the head of the cove six miles north and described how, when he grew up there sixty years ago, the waters by the shore teemed with shellfish, and lobster buoys filled the cove. He described 150-year-old photographs showing people driving horse-drawn sleighs across the frozen salt waters. Now, though? He told us that now, there are only periwinkles and a scattering of wild mussels and oysters near these shores. Anyone who can afford it drops their lobster pots far down the cove in cooler, deeper water. And the last time these waters froze solid was well before our lifetimes.

This man never used phrases like “climate change” or “global warming”, but his testimony may have been the semester’s most powerful climate lesson. It was for me, at least. It left me to reconsider how, in a rural area like ours, I might teach the climate crisis and climate justice: not through statistical histories but through oral histories. In fact, that is how so many of our area’s farmers and duck hunters, lobstermen and Wabanaki basketmakers pass on their wealth of intergenerational knowledge. Their stories hold decades of climate observations, and because they are stories, where better to share and use them than in the English Language Arts classroom, among the community’s next generations?

Now, as I look ahead to next school year, I aspire for my students to begin our environmental action unit not by reading climate fiction, researching youth activists, or studying local climate data but instead by listening to the stories of community old-timers. I hope that these stories make the climate crisis more personal and reveal the disproportionate impacts that climate change has within our own community, allowing us to envision climate justice locally before situating it within a global movement. As exciting as this sounds, it also sounds daunting to me as one teacher only a few steps into my journey as a climate educator. This is why we need institutions like the Center for Climate Literacy, organizations like the Maine Environmental Education Association, and homespun networks of climate educators: they inspire and sustain us, help expand our individual capacities, and make meaningful climate justice education seem possible.