How New England fights climate change with help from local organizations (Episode 28)

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As the cause of climate change mitigation loses favor in the White House, reducing risks from global warming has fallen to local communities. In New England, organizations like the Gulf of Maine Research Institute (GMRI) are taking matters into their own hands. Host Monica de Bolle is joined by Glenn Prickett (GMRI), who describes how his organization helps lobster farmers, coastal communities, and the city of Portland develop tools to reduce the damage from overfishing, higher sea temperatures, and rising sea levels.

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MONICA DE BOLLE: How are local communities in the US fighting back against climate change? In New England, organizations are coming together to reduce the damage caused by overfishing, higher sea temperatures, and rising sea levels.

Spearheading this movement in Maine is the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, which works with coastal governments, businesses, and fishermen to better the community and the environment.

You're listening to an episode of Policy for the Planet, a podcast exploring the global response to the climate crisis. I'm your host Monica de Bolle, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

To help us dive in deeper, I'm joined by:

GLENN PRICKETT: Glenn Prickett, President and CEO at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Glenn has focused on climate change throughout his career, leading projects related to greenhouse gas mitigation in various sectors and building corporate partnerships for climate resilience and adaptation.

Hi Glenn, thank you so much for joining us on Policy for the Planet. It's a pleasure to have you. And I'm very much looking forward to this conversation because we have been trying in this season of this podcast to have sort of a storytelling take on issues affecting various regions, different parts of the world. But the climate aspect of things, we are trying to sort of tell it in a story rather than just throw a bunch of theory and facts at people. So I'm very happy to have you. And I'm just gonna start us off by asking you to give us an overview of the climate related ocean issues that you see being where you are and how they are affecting New England economies.

GLENN PRICKETT: Well, thank you, Monica, and hello to you. And it's really a pleasure to be here on the Policy for the Planet podcast. So it's a great time to be talking about climate impacts here in New England. We've just come through a nationwide extreme weather system. So we're all kind of digging out from very heavy snowfall all across the country. And that is related to climate change.

What we're experiencing here in New England is really affected by the warming of the Gulf of Maine. And the Gulf of Maine is the body of ocean between Cape Cod and Nova Scotia that includes the Bay of Fundy. So it's a very productive ocean ecosystem. Really the reason why Europeans came here in the first place was to chase codfish that lived in the North Atlantic and were particularly prevalent here in the Gulf of Maine.

The Gulf of Maine, however, is warming very fast, three to four times the rate of the rest of the ocean. So we're a canary in the coal mine for climate impacts. And when the ocean warms, it does a number of things. First of all, it changes the ocean ecosystem. So species that were prevalent here may not be prevalent anymore. Species that were more successful somewhere else move in. So in terms of economic impact, we see a lot of change in the fisheries.

And so that same industry that built New England is what's very dynamic all the time, but it's especially dynamic now. So the codfish that once drove the industry, those have been in decline for several decades. Lobster has taken their place. Lobster have been very prevalent here in the Gulf of Maine, but they're moving. So we're not seeing so many lobster in Southern New England anymore. We're still seeing them here in Maine, but they're moving offshore to deeper and colder water. So that's affecting fishermen

who fish near shore. They don't catch as many lobsters they used to. So that's one big economic impact is changing fisheries. Another tremendous one is the impact of coastal storms. So we just experienced these snow storms across the country. What we face here in New England are occasional very destructive coastal storms. Traditionally, we've known Northeasters or nor'easters as they're called, where the wind comes from the Northeast.

In the last several years, we've seen more damaging storms coming from the Southeast and the way our shorelines and our harbors are oriented, those can be much more destructive. So two years ago, exactly two years ago in January, 2024, we had back to back southeastern storms coming from the Southeast that happened to hit at a very high high tide, each year there are certain months of the year where the high tide is higher than normal.

So, it was a high, tide. had these storms coming from a particular direction. And we've also had about nine inches of sea level rise. And you put all that together and these storms are very destructive. Over half of the warps, the working waterfront throughout the state of Maine were damaged or destroyed in those storms. So that has a tremendous economic impact on those towns, on the industries that depend on the waterfront. And then if you zoom back from that, of course, there are human health and safety impacts, but electricity is a big one. So when we have big storms that knock out power, that has a big economic impact as well.

MONICA DE BOLLE: So could you please explain, because you and I talked about this before when we were sort of getting the ideas for this episode, could you explain to us what is sea scale and how it's helping the fisheries and the fishermen that are affected by all of these issues, including not just the oceanic environmental issues that you mentioned, but also the coastal issues that you mentioned.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah. So SeaScale is a startup business that we've helped to support and I'm super excited about them and what the business is about. John and Charlie are the owners of SeaScale. And just to back up a minute, I talked about the impact that climate change is having on the fisheries and the economy. Fishermen in this region are incredibly practical and resilient. So fishermen have changed what they fish for, for hundreds of years. They'll fish for different species, whatever happens to be prevalent at the time.

What's happening now is a significant change where we have fishermen who have depended on wild harvest fisheries who may not be able to earn as much as they used to fishing for ground fish like cod or even lobster if they're fishing close to shore and the lobster are moving farther out. So what we're seeing in response is a real rise in aquaculture that is farmed fish and shellfish and even seaweed, which is a really important product now in our economy. But it's of like that old song from the musical Oklahoma, know, can the farmer and the cow men be friends?

So the wild harvest fishermen are different. It's a different business from the people who grow seafood in cages on the shoreline. What Sea Scale is doing, what John and Charlie doing is super cool. So they are fishermen themselves. And they have invented a, they call it the main scallop pot. And it's like a traditional lobster trap or lobster pot. But I think of it like an easy bake oven. So you open the front of the lobster trap, which is a big, you know, it's not a cube, it's whatever, know, like a cube if you stretch it out. I don't know the geometry shape of it, but you open, and it's a wire cage. You open the front of it and they have three shells that they put in.

And those shelves are where you put the spat of the shellfish that you're growing. And then you drop the trap down to the bottom of the ocean, just like you would a lobster trap if you were fishing for lobster. And then that lobster pot lives there for a period of years as the shellfish, the scallop, or the oysters mature. So normally in an aquaculture operation, this would happen in a pen that was stationary in a particular area near the shore and you would take a little skiff or a small vessel out to tend your cage. In this case, you could drop the pot and you could actually move it around.

If you need to open up that area for one of your neighbor fishermen to come in and fish in a particular season, you can move the scallop pot around. And the beauty for the fishermen is they can harvest shellfish after a few years as an addition to their revenue stream, but they can use the same boat.

They can use the same gear on the boat to haul the pots up and drop them down. Buying the lobster pot is similar to buying a trap that they would buy normally. They can integrate it into their normal routine on the water without having to become a farmer. So they're still a fisherman, but they're fishing for farmed shellfish. So it's just one of many innovative businesses that are sprouting up here in the Gulf of Maine as fishermen and other people who make a living on the water are figuring out how to adapt to the changing ocean.

And we're really proud at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute that we can support these innovative blue economy ventures.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Yeah, this is so interesting because it's basically repurposing something that already exists to basically take advantage of something else, given the adaptation needs and the things that are happening. So it's a fascinating story. If I may ask you, yeah, sorry. Now.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah, and really speaks to Maine's heritage because Mainers are very practical, New Englanders are very practical. They're always coming up with ways to innovate and make something a little bit better, and this is just the latest technical example of that.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Yeah, it's really interesting and fascinating, as I said. How is it financed, Glenn? How is SeaScale financed?

GLENN PRICKETT: I'm not the owner, so I don't want to speak for them. We provided some grant support to them when they were in their startup phase. We have an incubator program here called Blue Tech Boost. So we did give them some early grant funding to get the business going. And it's a local business here in Midcoast, Maine. And we're continuing to support them. But I can't speak to the financing of the business.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Can you talk to us a little bit about the initiatives to deal with the coastal aspect and the coastal problems that you mentioned before?

GLENN PRICKETT: Right, right. So the warming ocean does a couple of things. As water warms, it expands. that's what's that. And the melt of the ice sheets in Antarctica and the North Pole area, you have more water coming into the ocean. It's getting higher volume as it expands. And so that's creating sea level rise along the shore. And then as water warms, also can give rise to more intense storms, more destructive storms.

So between sea level rise and more intense storms, we're having these terrible flooding episodes and destructive storms along the coast, which is having tremendous impacts on people, on health, on security, and on the economy. So one of our priorities here at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute is to help develop climate-ready communities. So we have a coastal dynamics lab that studies sea level rise and storm activity. And there's a lot we don't know yet about how the warming of the Gulf of Maine translates into destructive storms and sea level rise.

So we're kind of adding to our basic knowledge of those phenomena. And then we're taking what we learn and we're turning it into decision support tools that towns and businesses can use to get information and forecasts specific to their locality so they can plan ahead for what the likely sea level rise and storm damage could be to their town and their business. We then also facilitate towns and businesses to figure out what are we going to do about it. Sea level rise and storm damage are going to affect a lot of things from where you locate the wastewater treatment plant to whether you have to raise a dock on the town pier.

These are all very expensive changes. So we help towns figure out what are the most important assets to protect. And then we also help them figure out how are we going to pay for this with state grants or federal grants, or is there an innovative bond measure that we could pass where we could raise some private money to finance this. One of the things we do that I'm really excited about is working with, let's call them learners of all ages. So students in school, but also people of all ages to go out in their communities and collect data on flood levels.

We have a citizen community science program here. Because just because you know what the tide level is going to be at your location doesn't mean you know what the extent of the flooding might be at that tide level. So we are collecting, we are helping communities collect data that our coastal dynamics lab then uses to be able to help those towns predict, okay, if the sea level is at this level and the tide is at this level. Here is the extent of flooding you could anticipate in your town. And we're coordinating those types of data gathering projects all across the Maine coast. That's actually part of a bigger educational program we have to work with students throughout Northern New England, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, upstate New York, to collect data in their communities on the impacts of climate change.

But in this case, we're looking in particular at sea level rise and coastal flooding.

MONICA DE BOLLE: So Glenn, what's an example of how the Gulf of Maine Research Institute is working with these towns and these communities to handle or to address these storm related issues?

GLENN PRICKETT: Well, we're starting close to home, Monica. In fact, we're starting in our home. So our lab is in Portland, Maine. We have a beautiful property on the waterfront. And it's called Commercial Street, the main street that runs along the

Portland Harbor. It's all reclaimed land. If you go back and look at historical maps, it used to be Portland Harbor.

And then over time it was filled in, similar to what's happened in Boston with Back Bay, for example. So nature is starting to take it back. As the seas rise and we have more storms, we're having more flooding along Commercial Street, including on our property. So we have a partnership with the city of Portland. Mayor Mark Dion and I announced this just last fall, where we're providing our science that our coastal scientists generate to the city so they can figure out how to take action at the city level in neighborhoods like Commercial Street to manage the impact of climate change.

And then we also, have actually two properties that we own here on Commercial Street. One is where our lab sits, that's called Wrights Wharf. We have another property called Union Wharf that we acquired a few years ago to preserve it as a working waterfront. It's one of the oldest wharves in the city. It's been a mainstay for the fishing industry transport industry for centuries. The family that owned it was putting it up for sale and we were concerned that it might get converted to some other use condos or a commercial office space and those are great things but we don't have a lot of work and waterfront left so we acquired it.

But it is very vulnerable to flooding. We had terrible storms here two years ago, the entire wharf flooded. So we're using that as a living laboratory of how do you manage a working waterfront in the context of climate change? How do we elevate the utilities and how do we anticipate where the localized flooding on the wharf will be so that we can kind of get everything squared away before it floods?

So we're going from the hyperlocal, like how do we manage a property in the face of climate change, to the municipal. How do we provide science to the city so they can have a citywide plan for the future of how they're going to adapt to the rising tides and storms.

MONICA DE BOLLE: And that's quite a bottoms up approach.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah, and we're using both of those experiences, our own property and the city's plan to share with towns and businesses throughout the Gulf of Maine. And we're supporting other towns in the region as well, not just.

MONICA DE BOLLE: This is very interesting because one of the things that we often hear when we're talking about climate change these days is that people in general kind

of feel disconnected from climate change, especially when you talk about it in these very, very broad terms, which is how many of us were approaching these issues. But from what you're saying, given the practical, pragmatic aspects of what you're doing on the ground, do you get a sense that this engages people with the issue and they actually get a firmer understanding of what climate change actually means?

GLENN PRICKETT: Absolutely. So we're seeing the impact of climate change real time in our communities now. And that's certainly true here in New England. As I mentioned, the fact that the Gulf of Maine is warming faster than the rest of the world's oceans puts us on the front lines of the impact. so people see it, they understand that climate change is happening and that it's causing real impacts in their community. So our job is to help people arm them with the knowledge and the resources and the relationships they need to take action.

So yeah, it's both specific to their locality so they understand it and then we help them take action so we all feel some agency that there's something we can do about this challenge.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Yeah, which I feel is sort of a critical thing, right? mean, unless you get people engaged at that level where they actually feel they have agency in dealing with the problem, it is much harder to sort of get across the urgency of what all of this represents. So this is fascinating.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah, it excites me about what we're doing here and my work here. So I used to live in Washington DC and lived there 35 years and work with some great organizations. And we made an impact on policy at the national and international level. But climate change has always felt very abstract, I think, to a lot of people. What we're doing here really brings it down to earth and helps people not only see the impact it's having, but see what the solutions are, how they can take action in their day-to-day lives, in their communities, with their state and local governments to actually make a difference and have a better future in the face of impacts.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Absolutely. So one thing, one kind of final, I'm not sure final thing, but with the US government pulling out of all of these organizations in the front lines of climate change issues, how do you see sort of the continuing prospects for local initiatives such as the ones that you've mentioned, and those undertaken and sort of pushed by GMRI?

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah, it's look, it's a challenging, troubling time. The withdrawal of the United States from international agreements, international institutions is problematic and it's personal for me because I worked on a lot of these international agreements and institutions. I moved here to Maine two years ago because I really believe that the leadership we need now is going to come from the ground up. It's going to come from communities, municipalities, states taking action.

I came to Maine because the Gulf of Maine Research Institute is an amazing place and also because the state of Maine has been a real leader on climate action. Things like installing heat pumps. You never think about it in a very cold state. I think we lead the country in heat pump installation and they work. My home is heated entirely with heat pumps. So I do think in general that we need to see leadership from the bottom.

And I think what we're able to do is bring a community together beyond politics. And we work very hard here at the Gulf of Maine to create a big tent where Republicans and Democrats, rural and urban, people from different walks of life, different economic interests can come together to address a problem that faces all of them and work on some collaborative solutions. We're all about collaborative solutions.

And I really think that's how we're going to make progress on climate change is people coming together in their home place, solving a problem and then sharing solutions through networks. And that's what we're committed to do here at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute is kind of get beyond the politics, identify the shared challenge, bring people together, use our science and their know-how and ingenuity to figure out a practical solution and then scale it up by sharing it around to other parts of the country and other parts of the world.

MONICA DE BOLLE: It's so interesting to hear you say that because we had a guest on the podcast. He's an expert from the German embassy here in DC on environmental issues. And he was talking about some of the initiatives that his country, Germany, is taking. And a lot of the initiatives that he discussed were local initiatives, such as the one that you over at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute are doing. It's a very similar approach.

And his take is very similar to yours. I mean, the goal is get people involved, get them to understand what the issues are, leave the politics aside. Let's just get an understanding of how to make people's lives better in view of this challenge that all of us are facing.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah. I mean, an example that I'm really proud of, we, together with the environmental defense fund, another great nonprofit, we're administering a project called a fish score. And that's an acronym. because, I'm an old DC hand and if I got to have an acronym at some point in this podcast, but this one stands for fisheries strategies for changing, wait, fisheries strategies for changing oceans and resilient ecosystems fish score.

And I say we administer it because it's a network. Right. The challenge is how do you make your fishery resilient to climate change? I talked about how we're trying to do that here in the Gulf of Maine by providing science and supporting businesses like C-Scale. So we've put together a network of, I think it's up to like 500 organizations now in something like a hundred countries that we in the EDF administer to share solutions. How do you measure fishery for climate resilience? What are the key steps you need to take to make your fishery climate resilient? What are some successful interventions you've made and how can we share them with each other? So this is an international network that operates in a very science-based, non-political way to solve the challenge of climate change when it comes to the fishery, the fishing economy. And you can imagine that happening in any number of domains with organizations like us that are expert on a particular topic. I think that's the future of how we're going to work together as a planet to solve these problems.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Well, this is great and it's great to hear because it gives us a sense of hope that, you know, in spite of the fact that politics is getting in the way of so many of these questions, people are doing things on the ground, such as, you know, the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and others. So thank you so much, Glenn.

GLENN PRICKETT: Yeah, no, thank you. Look, I'm super optimistic that we can rise to these challenges. And I guess the last point I would make, it's not just about avoiding the harm of climate change. It's about building a future that's better for everyone. And what's exciting about some of the work we're doing is that we can address the challenges of climate change in ways that make our economies stronger and our communities better.

So there's a real positive opportunity here if we rise to it in a collaborative way.

MONICA DE BOLLE: Thank you very much. This was a great conversation.

GLENN PRICKETT: Thank you, Monica.

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Until next time, here's to creating meaningful impact through interesting conversations.