

Online, Saturday, August 9, 2008



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OP ED: A new look at buoy markers

By Carrie Byron/Providence

Few images depict New England better than a row of colorful buoys proudly strung from a seaside fence, shed wall or outside a clam shack. However, this pride in our place and heritage is often replaced by disdain when buoys are floating in the water tethered to their lobster pots, fish traps or aquaculture areas. Many boaters and seaside homeowners complain about the nuisance of buoys, describing them as navigational hazards or blemishes on their seascape vista.

As an integral part of New England culture, our reaction to buoys presents us with a paradox. Some New Englanders seem to value the aesthetics of buoys only when they are grounded and non-functional. Why do buoys have value as cultural artifacts but lose their value when they are serving their purpose in the water?

Perhaps it is because buoys can be confusing in what they signal. Let us examine a simple lobster pot buoy – easily recognized by any good New Englander. The logical assumption is that a lobster pot buoy marks a single lobster pot and, in most cases, this assumption is correct. However, lobster pot buoys are often used to mark other types of gear, structures, or special use areas, which may not be obvious from the sight of the lobster pot buoy alone. A prime example is lobster pot buoys that are currently used to mark the boundaries of aquaculture leases in Rhode Island. Confusion over this issue has led to some new thinking about buoys, as aquaculture gains a hold in the local economy.

Aquaculture leases cover 123 acres of Rhode Island coastal waters, producing more than \$1.5 million worth of shellfish, and contributing a gross revenue of \$4.3 million generated from aquaculture-related industries in 2007. Ninety-nine percent of farmed shellfish are oysters and the remaining 1 percent are quahogs. Aquaculture has been rapidly increasing during the last six years – a clear sign of economic enterprise and prosperity for Rhode Island.

The inability to distinguish the boundaries of an aquaculture lease from a lobster pot is arguably a potential hazard and a source of confusion to boaters. Aquaculture leases vary in shape, size and gear used. Some leases grow oysters on the bottom and use very little or no gear. Other leases have extensive systems of ropes, racks and bags in which oysters are grown, all of which may pose a navigational hazard. The need to clearly distinguish the boundaries of a lease from lobster pots and whether it poses a navigational hazard is important.

Currently, state regulation of aquaculture requires those buoys to be clearly identified as authorized by the Coastal Resources Management Council and must display their permit number as well. But there are two problems. The first involves their lack of a differentiation from traditional lobster pot buoys. And there is a logistical problem with using marked lobster pot buoys for aquaculture leases; they become easily fouled with algae, marine animals, and other growth rendering the markings illegible and indistinguishable as a lease boundary marker.

A working group for aquaculture, consisting of shellfish farmers, harvesters, environmental regulators and academicians, saw the need for an improved buoy system. A proposal is under review by the CRMC that aims to alleviate the current concerns. The newly proposed aquaculture buoys, actually sign posts on the water, will have uniform and legible markings making them easily distinguishable. Aquaculture leases will be

marked on each corner, 1 to 5 feet above the water, by a safety orange square or diamond symbol. The words "Aquaculture," "CRMC" and the CRMC permit number of the lease will be printed within the square or diamond. For example, a square symbol is used to simply convey information, whereas a diamond shape signifies an obstruction where boats should either not navigate or use extreme caution. The square and diamond are international symbols that should already be recognizable by most boaters and will offer a stark and easily recognizable contrast to the ubiquitous lobster buoys.

The working group that proposed these changes struggled with the balance of making the buoys visible and legible to boaters, while maintaining an aesthetic for shoreline on-lookers through discretionary variance in the size of the buoy. In regions of high traffic and wave-exposed areas, such as Narragansett Bay, a large sign is warranted. However, in small shallow water ponds lined with homes, a smaller sign may be used to be less evident from the shore.

The introduction of more informative markers projected for 2009 will, hopefully, go a long way toward eliminating the annoyance that many boaters and nearby residents now feel towards buoys. And for those who love buoys as artifacts defining a sense of place, perhaps they could rethink the role of buoys to include a feeling of pride in local economic prosperity as well as producing a visual connection with the seascape. Surely as coastal people, Rhode Islanders can and will learn to appreciate the view of a row of buoys in the water as being equal in value to those relegated to a fence post or shed wall.

The author is a resident of Providence and a fellow of the Coastal Institute at the University of Rhode Island.

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