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FUNDY FISH



Zoe, from Moncton, catches a fish in the trap with her bare hands. **HEATHER DESVEAUX**

Weir a natural science lab

Fish trap an outdoor classroom for studying fishery, oceans

HEATHER DESVEAUX

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A fishing weir in the Minas Basin is reeling in visitors, scientists, studies, jobs and nearly \$1 million in local economic spinoffs this year.

And the debut of a scientific youth-mentoring program last week helps the muddy basin floor further evolve into a natural office and classroom for all.

At the end of the dirt road in Bramber, in Hants County, a civic street sign, Porter Weir, points toward it about a kilometre offshore. It's a simple, ancient fishing

technique, yet laborious, to each spring set up a trap with 700 poles 10 feet high, with nets connecting them.

It's also where the youngest female commercial fisher in the province works. Erica Porter, 21, puts in more than 400 shifts a season that include meeting each tide, setting up the weir and tearing it down.

So it was appropriate last week when 12 girls aged 10-14 from across the province enjoyed an excursion there to participate in the first Females in the Natural Sciences — F.I.N.S.

"We love to get the kids out there," said Porter in an interview at the site.



Erica Porter with a tagged striped bass. **HEATHER DESVEAUX**

"They may be scared at first, but as soon as they touch the fish they're hooked. I love it."

The girls got some hands-on experience in a natural environ-

ment, including catching fish with their bare hands, then tagging and measuring them.

During high tide, the weir is covered with about 40 feet of water. As the tide lowers, it's the last 10 feet that traps skate, gaspereaux, striped bass, squid, flounder and usually several sturgeon.

Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Catherine McKenna, was in the neighbourhood at the same time, visiting the Chéverie home of MP Scott Brison, eating a smoked — and less endangered — type of the salmon species.

But Porter didn't have any female role models in the sciences or government. She started in the industry as her dad's "tag-along" from a young age and started

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A LOCAL FOCUS

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making nets at nine years old.

Her father, Darren, promised his eldest he would buy her a commercial licence and gear if she graduated high school with honours. She finished school six months early at age 16, just so she could fish and look after the weir, which she now co-owns.

By the age of 18, Porter was awarded one of the province's six African-Nova Scotian Rising Stars awards.

"Fishing is a male-dominated industry; science, too. Some people definitely don't take me seriously but that's also because I'm young," said Porter.

"There is a stigma we're trying to break, but we're breaking it."

While studying business through NSCC online, Porter manages most aspects of the weir, including monitoring activities and hosting others who want to see the work being done there.

This spring the weir was named the Marine Institute of Natural and Academic Science (MINAS), with less emphasis on market catches — although lobster bait is still processed — and more focus on science.

"Weirs have a vital role to play to monitor the ocean's health, abundance of species and any changes that occur," said Darren Porter.

The study has already registered species never documented in the Bay of Fundy, or anywhere in the province in the last century, like the spotted hake.

"Erica has seen them before, but science hasn't until now," he said.

This spring eight scientists —



FINS girls help biologist Laura Logan-Chesney measure some sturgeon that were in a weir on the Bay of Fundy.

HEATHER DESVEAUX

bachelor of science and masters students and two professors from Acadia — began paid work with the weir study currently underway, funded by tidal energy company Big Moon Power.

Four locals are also employed on rotation to help Porter at the weir and more studies are planned, with additional jobs anticipated.

Most of the girls participating in FINS also got the opportunity to help Laura Logan-Chesney, one of the biologists on site, with some research. Their two-day program also included workshops at Acadia, a tour of the salmon hatchery in Coldbrook, and how to fillet flounder they caught at the weir.

Canadian biologist and Acadia grad Julia Whidden brought FINS to Nova Scotia from the University of Miami, where she was a visiting researcher and co-founded the group there in 2016. It was first used in shark research

before bringing it to the Bay of Fundy to promote ocean conservation.

The program aims to introduce girls to STEM careers — in science, technology, engineering and math — and is funded by a Fulbright Canada Eco-Leadership grant from the scholarship foundation established by former U.S. president Harry S. Truman in 1946.

Whidden also spent four years doing research in marine conservation at the weir, so she also knows it well.

"It's amazing the things that happen there," said Whidden. "The environment is so dynamic so the species have to be so specially adapted to it."

"The girls had a good time there and it was great to be able to introduce them to Erica and say, 'Here is a young woman doing this work, and she's really passionate about what she does.'"