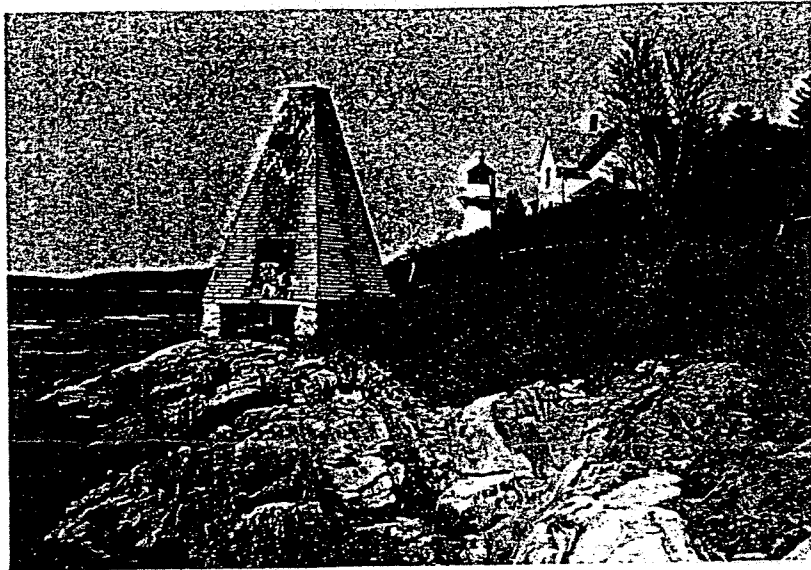


GUNKHOLING

with David R. Getchell, Sr.

The Island Trail

Islands, as those who know, have figured prominently in my life for the past two years. Working with the non-profit Island Institute, I have helped to survey several hundred state-owned islands in Maine to see if any have recreational potential (see Gunkholing *SBJ* #52-53). Our surveys have come up with a resounding "Yes." Scores of small islands, most accessible only by small boat, lie scattered along much of the coast. None of them is inhabited, and most show little or no signs of man. They have survived virtually unchanged from the days of the first explorers,



Way Station. Someday boaters may be able to use the tiny, state-owned islands along the Maine coast the same way bikers use mountain trails.

bits and pieces of wild land, some barren and rocky, some with grassy meadows rife with wildflowers and berry bushes, and some crowned by stands of tough, salt-tolerant spruce and fir.

That so many wild and beautiful places exist off a busy shore this late in the 20th century is amazing. More astounding is that until recently neither the state nor the public really knew they were there. Their "discovery" couldn't come at a better time.

As the U.S. population grows in size and affluence, two powerful forces are working in opposition. The first is the ever-increasing number of people with time on their hands and a strong desire to get away from it all. Their desire to "recreate" out-of-doors is subjecting all areas, especially public facilities such as state and national parks and national seashores, to greater strain.

At the same time, a second, counterforce is building. The amount of land we have access to is shrinking. Those with the money to do so have already bought the most attractive countryside and quite understandably, considering the investment, have little desire to share it with the general public. Now even less desirable and more remote land is being purchased by speculators, developers, or persons seeking privacy. In Maine, the vast northern woodlands, those owned by paper companies and other large landholders, have always been freely accessible to the public. Now even these regions are coming under tighter control with fees being charged for the use of roads and campsites. As for coastal property, 95 percent is privately owned, and of the remaining 5 percent, a sizable chunk is taken up by Acadia National Park.

The 1,300 or so state-owned islands are a very minor part of this 5 percent. They amount to only 800 acres altogether, or a little more than a half acre each. A hundred or so usable ones dot much of the coast between Portland and Jonesport, a fact that gives them a potential importance quite out of proportion to their size.

In studying this bounty, it occurred to me that here was a rare chance to develop an outstanding waterway for small boats that would use the state-owned islands for overnight stops, similar to the way hikers use pathways like the Appalachian Trail, Vermont's Long Trail, or the Pacific Crest Trail. The proposed Maine Island Trail would traverse the waters between Portland and Jonesport, an airline distance of about 140 miles, but would likely follow a route taking full advantage of spectacular scenery and exciting boating opportunities, a distance in excess of 300 miles. Trending along

protected saltwater rivers, among a myriad of islands, across imposing bays, and around intimidating capes, the trail would offer something for everyone. In its relatively short distance, there would be enough challenging boating for even the most jaded of small-boat cruisers.

Having recently covered the entire trail in my 18-foot outboard-powered boat, I can attest to the difficulties offered. Anyone attempting the entire Maine Island Trail in a sea kayak, rowboat, small sailboat, or motorboat is in for some tough traveling. There are inherent dangers — fog, wind, and

long open or exposed stretches — that require experience, good judgment, and a boatload of common sense. To my way of thinking, it is these stiff requirements that make the trail special.

I must reemphasize that a Maine Island Trail does not yet exist. There are many problems to be worked out with the state officials who manage the islands, decisions to be made on a final route and how the islands will be set up for public use, and plans drawn up on how the trail will be publicized.

Those in the Island Institute and others with whom I've talked feel that a proper job can be done only through a formal organization whose sole purpose is to develop and maintain a trail — a Maine Island Trail Association, so to speak, made up of members who believe an island waterway should exist and are willing to work toward that goal. Geography would have no bearing on membership; interest in the trail would be the only criterion.

For anyone involved with the association, this project offers a rare opportunity to establish guidelines for using the islands. Such guidelines would be aimed at reducing the human impact on the islands and thereby preserving their unique qualities for all time. Sound too restrictive? Not likely. Most experienced boaters who would find the trail of interest already have a strong respect for the natural environment. Their example of creating and adhering to a pact setting forth high standards of use would go far toward convincing others to do the same.

For those concerned that an island trail will bring the "Great American Public" swarming offshore, I feel safe in assuring them no such thing is apt to occur. Small offshore islands place strong demands on their users, both mentally and physically, and those persons looking for entertainment and conviviality will find little to suit them on a half acre of rocks, trees, and grass surrounded by an indifferent ocean.

But for those in small craft seeking superb boating and solitude, an island trail along some of the world's most beautiful coastline may be just what they are looking for. □

Author's note: I would like to hear from readers, pro and con, on this subject and to find out if they would care to join an association. Send letters to David R. Getchell, Sr., RR 1, Box 888, Union, ME 04862. I would prefer to have letters rather than phone calls so as to have a written record of interest.