

## **Community Profile**

### **Sea Isle City, New Jersey**

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#### **Description of Geography and Transportation Access**

Sea Isle City is located in New Jersey's southernmost county, Cape May, on a barrier Island named Ludlam's Island. The borough of Sea Isle City is a barrier island community that borders the Atlantic Ocean on the east, the small community of Strathmere to the north, Townsend's Inlet to the south, and several different bays and channels water bodies to the west (in the North is Ludlam Bay that is connected to Townsend Channel at the southernmost tip of Sea Isle City via Ludlam's Thorofare). It is reached via the Garden State Parkway or Route 9. It is connected to the mainland by three bridges, a toll bridge that crosses the Townsend Channel between Sea Isle City and Avalon; a second bridge that crosses Ludlam's Thorofare that connects via a county road to the Garden State Parkway; and a toll bridge at the northernmost tip of Strathmere that crosses Corsons Inlet and connects to Ocean City, another barrier island "shore" community. Several NJ Transit buses stop in Sea Isle City and the Atlantic City International Airport is located in the next county.

From Sea Isle City, it is approximately 80 miles to Philadelphia, PA, and about 100 miles to Trenton, NJ. In addition, it is a 2.5 hour drive to New York City. This shore town is a preferred summer destination for many tourists and recreational fishermen. The population of Sea Isle during the winter months is 2,824 (U.S. Census 2000) and is estimated to increase to 45,000-50,000 during the summer and can increase to as high as 60,000 people (Interview with Borough employee, 2003).

The average home is valued at 280,100. The population is primarily Caucasian (98.26% of total population), with a median age of 52.5.

The industries which employed the most individuals were education (249 individuals, 19.4% of employed individuals), Art (196 individuals, 15.3% of employed individuals), and retail trades (171 individuals, 13.3% of employed individuals). Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries were not reported to employ any individuals within Sea Isle City.

The per capita income in 2000 was 28,754. In 2000, 89 individuals classified themselves as unemployed (3.1% of total population), compared to 99 (3.6% of the total population) in 1990.

In 2000, 214 individuals (7.58% of total population) were living below the poverty level, compared to 109 (4% of the population) in 1990.

## History

Sea Isle City is located on a barrier island called Ludlam's Island (extending from Corsons Inlet to Townsend's Inlet) that was named after Joseph Ludlam who purchased the island in 1692. Farmers brought their cattle to the island to graze and used to drive the cattle across the lowlands to the island. The first mention of a structure on the island was of a hunting shack in 1809. In 1880, Charles K. Landis of Vineland bought the island and founded Sea Isle City. Sea Isle City was established as a Borough in 1882. Mr. Landis was instrumental in bringing the railroad to Sea Isle (Interview with Sea Isle City Historical Society, 2003). Mr. Landis installed canals similar to Venice, Italy in Sea Isle. These canals were constructed in the late 1800s and have undergone improvements over the years and are still present and in use today ([www.lazybeach.com/interest.htm](http://www.lazybeach.com/interest.htm)). Some of the first families to settle in Sea Isle City still live in this port. The first mayor of Sea Isle City was Martin Wells who was a commercial fisherman. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, commercial fishing became an important industry in this Borough (Interview with Sea Isle City Historical Society, 2003).

### Current Port Description:

This section includes port demographic information and where applicable compares 1990 to 2000 U.S. Census Data.

#### *Population, Race/Ethnicity, and Education.*

Since the 1990 census, Sea Isle City's population has increased 4.9% to 2,824 people in 2000. The ethnic composition of the city in 2000 is almost entirely White: 98.3% in 2000, and 99% in 1990. Educational levels are comparable to those for Cape May County as a whole. 714 people (32.8%) were high school graduates and 403 (18.5%) were college graduates in 2000.

#### *Housing.*

Sea Isle City is predominantly a summer "shore" community. In 2000, there were 6,622 housing units in Sea Isle City, 79.3% of which were vacant. Of the vacant housing units, 73.5% were seasonal, recreational or occasional use. Sea Isle City had 1,370 households in 2000; 95 (6.9%) of these households were single or female head of households. In 2000, the median house value for specified owner occupied units was \$280,100.

#### *Employment and Income.*

The per capita income in Sea Isle City in 2000 was \$28,754. In 1999, there were 214 people below the poverty level, compared with 109 in 1990. In 2000, there were 1,372 people in the Civilian Labor Force, and 3.7% of the people unemployed. There was a 10.1% decline in unemployment since 1990. No one listed employment in agriculture, forestry and fisheries in 2000. Education, health and the social services category was the top employer, accounting for 19.4% (N=249) of the residents; the arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services category was second with 15.3% (N=196); and the retail trade was third with 13.3% (N=171).

### Ethnographic Description of the Port:

As with many of the coastal communities in New Jersey, Sea Isle City is a place where much of the local activities and development efforts are centered on the ocean and back bays and tourist related businesses. This port caters to the tourists who come to take advantage of the beaches, the ocean and bay, restaurants, retail shops, bars, and rental homes and motels. By law, condominiums can be built no larger than a duplex (Interview with Borough Employee, 2003). However, driving through Sea Isle, it is evident that large multi-story two family structures are being built to replace the one or two story small summer cottages of the past and to fill remaining open spaces.

A major storm in 1962 destroyed many houses in Sea Isle City. The state and federal government bought many remaining properties from the landowners, and no construction is allowed east of a Beach Open Space line (Interview with Borough employee, 2003).

Sea Isle City is a small community with a total land area of 5.72 km<sup>2</sup> and total surface water area of about 0.88 km<sup>2</sup> ([www.pe.net/~rksnow/njcountyseaislecitey.html](http://www.pe.net/~rksnow/njcountyseaislecitey.html)). The main road into Sea Isle City is Landis Avenue that runs the length of the city, north and south, and is often referred to as Ocean Drive. The major thoroughfares starting from the ocean and moving west are: Pleasure, Landis, and Central Aves., and Park Rd. The streets are numbered from 1<sup>st</sup> to 93<sup>rd</sup> St. running north to south. The width going east and west ranges from about two to five blocks; after 29<sup>th</sup> Street going north the island narrows and there is only a block between the ocean and the bay. A paved walkway called the “Promenade” is located along the ocean and runs for about 1.5 miles ([www.seaislecitey.org](http://www.seaislecitey.org)) between 30<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Streets. It replaced the original boardwalk that was destroyed in the 1962 storm ([www.virtualnjshore.com/seaisle.html](http://www.virtualnjshore.com/seaisle.html)). Sea Isle City has a total of approximately five miles of oceanfront beaches ([www.seaislecitey.org](http://www.seaislecitey.org)). While driving north and also driving east into Sea Isle, one can see a tall water tower with “Smile: You’re in Sea Isle City” printed on it in large black letters.

Several of the city’s public buildings are located on JFK Blvd. which is situated in about the center of the city including the Ambulance Corp., the Post Office, the Public Safety Building, the Department of Public Works, the Town Hall, and the Cape May County Library. There are four churches, a bank, several physicians’ offices, and a dentist’s office as well as other small businesses. The Borough has a public elementary school and St. Joseph’s Regional School but does not have a high school. Students attend Ocean City High School.

Located within the city are two motels, an inn, and a guesthouse, as well as many private homes that are available for summer and winter rentals. The city has 12 Real Estate offices ([www.seaislecitey.org](http://www.seaislecitey.org)). The Tourism Commission lists 17 restaurants ranging from pizzerias to seafood restaurants ([www.seaislecitey.org](http://www.seaislecitey.org)).

Sea Isle City has two yacht clubs, the Yacht Club of Sea Isle City and the Yacht Club of Townsend Inlet ([www.seaislecitey.org](http://www.seaislecitey.org)). A total of three marinas are located here including a municipal marina; another marina is located across the bay from Sea Isle.

There are two boat ramps, one located at the Municipal Marina and the other at Larsen's Marina; there is also a fishing pier on the bay side.

The city has a VFW Post, a Community Lodge, an Italian-American Club, and a Townsend Inlet Civic Center as well as a Tourism Commission and Tourism Information Center open from May through September, a police department, and Chamber of Commerce ([www.seaislecity.org](http://www.seaislecity.org)). This small city even has a historical museum that includes information about the commercial fishing industry.

The main beach patrol office is located on 44<sup>th</sup> St. & Beach and a sub-station is located on 85<sup>th</sup> Street & Beach. There are a variety of designated beach areas including protected bathing beaches, kayaking beaches, rafting beaches, surfing beaches, volleyball beaches, sailboat launching beaches, and surf fishing beaches. Beach badges are required to use the beaches during the summer months and can be purchased at the Beach Badge Office on JFK Blvd. or from beach badge inspectors on the beach ([www.seaislecity.org](http://www.seaislecity.org)).

There are two major festivals in Sea Isle City: the Skimmer weekend occurs annually during Father's Day weekend and the Fall Family Festival is held the third week of September. Both festivals have fireworks, a food court on Kennedy Blvd., flea market type vendors (clothes, crafts), fish booths, an antique car show, and the City Marina sells and shows boats. The Skimmer event is much larger than the Fall Festival because most tourists have left by September (Interview with Borough Employee, 2003).

### **Presence of Fisheries Related Businesses**

This is a check list of fisheries related businesses located in Sea Isle City developed by the researchers touring the area and asking local businesses.

1. Air fill stations (diving)
2. Bars/ clubs (dockside or in town)
3. Cold storage for bait, catch
4. Diesel fuel
5. Docking facilities (commercial)
6. Fishing associations
7. Fishing monuments
8. Fishing pier
9. Ice houses
10. Lawyers (admiralty and others working with fisheries)
11. Marine boating suppliers (type)
12. Museums—fishing/marine-related
13. Public boat launches
14. Recreational docks/marinas
15. Recreational bait/fishing supplies
16. Seafood restaurants
17. Seafood retail markets
18. Whale watching/pleasure tours

## Gentrification/Development.

Researchers used a list of indicators of gentrification to determine whether certain kinds of changes were occurring in the community. Gentrification of the waterfront is taking place in Sea Isle. Many condos and other homes have been built next to the commercial fishing docks, displacing fishing docks and resulting in complaints from local residents about the noise and smell from the fishing docks. One commercial fisherman no longer docks his boat in Sea Isle City because of this problem (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). Some of the local commercial fishermen still live in the Borough (despite the census report of no one of this profession), and the ones that do not live here also use the local supermarkets, convenience stores, restaurants and bars. There are problems with the local police about trucks parking in the street when they come to pick up fish at the docks in Sea Isle (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003).

As in the previous section, a list of indicators was developed by the researchers driving through the community. The following is a list of those indicators found in Sea Isle City. The only indicator listed below that was not present was number 11 Hotels/Inns dockside.

1. Visitors bureau
2. Marinas
3. Upscale housing (condominiums, townhouses or residential development close to waterfront)
4. Recreational bait/tackle shops
5. Fish/Seafood retailers
6. Fishing excursion vessels
7. Trendy retail shops (Gourmet and/or organic food shops, coffee houses, boutiques, brew pubs, cigar bars, art studios and galleries)
8. Recreational boat tours (including whale watching)
9. Seaside restaurants
10. Recreational boat dealers
11. Hotels/Inns dockside
12. Maritime museums
13. Franchise restaurants, grocery stores, bookstores
14. Resorts (spas, hotels, etc.)
15. Public beautification – flowers, street lighting, parks etc., trash receptacles

The Sea Isle City Chamber of Commerce web-page represents the town this way: “Over the last century, Sea Isle has grown from a small fishing village into one of the Jersey Shore’s most spectacular vacation resorts. Our clean, white sandy beaches and peaceful meadows have been attracting family vacationers for many years. Sea Isle offers a diverse array of restaurants and shops, biking, boating, swimming, free summer concerts and strolls along our famous promenade” ([www.seaislecitychamber.com](http://www.seaislecitychamber.com)). The Sea Isle Chamber of Commerce and Tourism Commission are very active in promoting tourism,

recreational fishing, and business in the community. There is no mention of the commercial fishing industry on their web pages ([www.seailsecity.org](http://www.seailsecity.org), [www.seailsecitychamber.com](http://www.seailsecitychamber.com)), except for a brief notation of its past importance.

## **Dependency and Engagement in the Fisheries**

### History and Current Description of Fishing

Sea Isle City has a long history of commercial and recreational fishing. There has been both growth and decline in the commercial and recreational fishing industries in this community in terms of numbers of participants over the years and changes in methods and species targeted by the commercial and recreational fishing industries. This port has multigenerational families participating in both the commercial and recreational fishing industries.

### Commercial Fishing

The fishing industry started in 1890 with the use of pound nets. The first mayor, Martin Wells, was the first pound net fisherman (Sea Isle City Historical Society, 1990). As Sea Isle City's reputation grew as a fishing port, immigrants with fishing experience from Italy began to arrive and fish out of this City (The Story of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet). Sea Isle City was considered a leader in the commercial fishing industry by 1921. Many of the area's fishermen had emigrated from Italy to the cities of New York and Philadelphia and then to this area. Italians working at the Stetson hat factory in Philadelphia moved to Sea Isle City to fish in 1906. These commercial fishermen, whose families were from fishing traditions in Italy, became known as the "hat men". The "hat men" formed their own fish company called the Shallow Water Fish Company in 1917 (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet). Others formed and purchased fishing companies and started boat building businesses and seafood markets. The "Gordon Fishery" was a big fish broker operating from the late 1930s to 1970s in Sea Isle City. Mr. Jack Gordon who owned the company was an immigrant from Russia (Interview with Sea Isle City Historical Society, 2003).

Cod fishing was also popular in this port and lobster fishing began in 1930 (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet). Several boats still lobster fish today. Another fishery that occurred in the spring and no longer exists was seining for shad fish (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet). By 1960 decline in cod and other species began to affect the port. "Commercial fishermen started to hang up their boots. There was no cod fish, the pounders were closing down, and sport fishermen had to go farther offshore for a decent day" (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend Inlet [page number?]).

There are about 11 commercial fishing families in the area who fish from this port.

Today, the majority of the commercial fishermen from this port tend to live in Cape May County within 20 miles of the port. However, some fishermen do live in Port Norris in Cumberland County.

In 2001, according to NMFS VTR reports, a total of six vessels fished from Sea Isle City, taking from 11 to 38 trips each. For every year except 2000, tunas (TUN) were the top species landed by weight. In 2000, more Atlantic croaker, scup, black sea bass, weakfish, striped bass and spot (FF) were landed. Other top species include lobster (LOB), swordfish (SWD), other species (OTH), and monkfish (MNK).

According to NMFS VTR data, tunas (TUN) consistently comprised the highest value of total landings in Sea Isle ranging from a high of about 52% in 1997 to a low of 30% in 2001. Other top value species were lobster (LOB), swordfish (SWD), Atlantic croaker, scup, black sea bass, weakfish, striped bass and spot (FF), shellfish (SHF) and monkfish (MNK). Tunas were also the top species landed by weight, from both VTR and weighout data.

NMFS VTR data show 6 vessels. However, during interviews with commercial fishermen and other informants we identified two lobster and black sea bass potters, three longline vessels, a dragger, and 3 conch potters, one of the conch vessels also potting fish. There are also several gill-netters operating from this port. One of the vessels that used Sea Isle as a homeport sold one of his vessels in Sea Isle and bought a new vessel docked in Cape May, but still maintains his slip in Sea Isle.

In 2001, the commercial vessels in the NMFS data averaged 46 feet in length, 26 gross tons, 284 horsepower engines, and average year built was 1978 for those vessels that designate Sea Isle City as their principal port. The average crew size was 2 and these vessels averaged 30 trips in 2001. NMFS weighout data show that the primary gear types in the port are pelagic longlining, handlines, otter trawl bottom fish, gill nets (fixed, anchored, sink and drift), fish pots/traps and lobster pots .

There is only one packing dock left, Capt. Bob's dock. Two packinghouses were sold and replaced by condos (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). No fish processors are located in Sea Isle City. Most of the fish harvested are trucked to the New York market, but they may also be sold to other markets in the region. The conch fishery sells to buyers from New York and Virginia (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003).

Sea Isle City has little port infrastructure. It does not have welding, electronic or computer repair; most fishermen do not use the ice company located in Sea Isle City because it is too expensive; and many fishermen have their own fuel tank at the dock. Some fishermen obtain out of state insurance and many fishermen from Sea Isle City use the grocery stores in Cape May Court House or Seaville for their provisions.

## Seasonal Round

The seasonal movements depend on a host of factors including gear types, fish behavior, weather, and infrastructure. For example, a commercial fisherman at this port pots black sea bass from April through January 15, collects horseshoe crabs by hand from mid-June to Mid-July, and used to lobster pot. However, he states that he hasn't been able to catch enough lobsters to make it as profitable now as it was years ago (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). The longliner fishery that operates from this port primarily targets large pelagics such as tunas and swordfish when these species are available to the fishery.

In terms of the seasonal pattern of employment, commercial fishermen can find year-round employment, but it is difficult to find crew. Crewmembers are not willing to work for \$10/hr as on a potting vessel. In addition, crewmembers do not stay long. For the crew that quit, some go to work for other vessels and others leave the fishery. For example, one older crewmember went to work for the glass factory where he had benefits and made more money. Years ago, commercial fishermen made good money fishing, but today it is difficult to make good of money (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003).

## Recreational Fishing

Sea Isle City is an important recreational fishing area. It is strategically located along both the back bays and the oceanfront. It has charter boats, party boats (head boats), and rental boats as well as surf anglers. Head boats began operation from Vansant's pier on 86<sup>th</sup> Street in Townsend's Inlet. The Allard, a sailboat with engines, began head boat fishing in the early 1900s from this pier (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend's Inlet). The cost to rent a boat to fish in the ocean or to rent a rowboat was then only \$1.00/day (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend's Inlet). Several other head boats begin to dock at this pier. However, in 1953, the pier was sold and the new family only operated the pier 8 hours a day. The store was closed when the boats came ashore. All the boat captains then decided to move to Sea Isle City. Some boats that sailed from 42nd Place and others from the mainland that is the current location of the Captain Robbins (The Story of a History of Sea Isle City & Townsend's Inlet). Data for 2001 only lists one recreational party/charter vessel operating from Sea Isle... This vessel is 50 feet long and made 56 fishing trips. However, there are many more charter/party boats located in Sea Isle City.

The species of fish targeted by charter/party boats, private boats, and shore anglers varies by season and is often linked to the migratory patterns of many of these fishes. Some key species for the port are striped bass, summer flounder, weakfish, bluefish, kingfish, and mackerel. For the past several years, during warm winters the for-hire vessels have been taking winter trips for striped bass. Head boats take full day, 3/4 day or 1/2 fishing trips. Charter vessels usually book full or 1/2 day trips. Several of the head boats in Sea Isle also provide eco-tourism cruises. All of these categories of fishermen can fish in the ocean or back bays. See description of the port of Point Pleasant for crew information.

One charter boat captains indicated that his clientele come from Philadelphia area, New York, Delaware and Maryland. While the number of commercial fishermen has declined in Sea Isle, the number of recreational fishermen and sport fishing boats has increased, but the number of party boats has declined (Interview with recreational fisherman, 2003).

Sea Isle used to issue 50 permits for “fish buggies” (also known as beach buggies); now that number has risen to 500 permits and may be purchased for about \$35 each. The buggies are permitted on the beach from September 15 through May 15. There are many fishing tournaments, especially in the spring with many surf fishing competitions (Interview with Borough Employee, 2003).

Sea Isle City has several marinas including a municipal marina, a fishing pier and beach and bay areas for fishing. Local tackle and bait shops are present as well as lodging, restaurants, and a grocery store that fishermen can use.

### **Vulnerability in the Fisheries**

#### Recreational and Commercial Freshmen’s Response to Management

Many fishermen indicate that regulations are a serious challenge to the future of commercial fishing in this port as well as in other ports. Regulations have forced many commercial fishermen to fish further offshore than in the past for lobsters and other species. In addition, some of these fishermen have diversified to species such as conch and horseshoe crabs to supplement their incomes.

One recreational angler noted that fisheries regulations are working; there are now more fish to catch than there were several years ago. However, many party boats have left Sea Isle because it is so difficult to fish under current management scenarios (i.e. bag and size limits). A local tackle/bait shop indicated that shortening the summer flounder season had a severe impact upon his business. The recreational industry “is dying” because of too many regulations especially for tuna. (Interview with tackle shop owner and charter boat captain, 2003)

#### Local Community Impacts

Both construction and commercial fishing industries are key employers in Sea Isle City (Interview with Borough employee, 2003). However, commercial fishing and party boats have dwindled in the port, because it is difficult for them to make a living (Interview with Borough employee and commercial fisherman, 2003). Many commercial fishermen have moved to Maryland and Virginia to fish (Interview with Borough employee, 2003). It is difficult for commercial fishermen to find alternative fisheries Because of the high cost of licenses in many fisheries, which have become limited entry (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). In addition, local restaurants and seafood stores are no longer as dependent as they once were on locally caught fish. Years ago fish that were caught in the area were sold in local markets (~99%) (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003).

## Fishing/Community Relations

There have been some conflicts between Sea Isle City residents and recreational anglers who use beach buggies as well as the commercial fishing industry. Residents complain about too many people using beach buggies (4WD vehicles) on the beaches, even though a borough employee argued that 99% of them are responsible fishers while only 1% causes problems (Interview with Borough employee, 2003). Many commercial boats do not fish on weekends in the summer because of the recreational boats and the “slow wake” zones in Sea Isle that cause the trips to be longer (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). Local residents complain about the noise and smell from the commercial fishing docks. Commercial trucks have trouble finding parking when they come to pick up the catch. .

Commercial fishermen are concerned about the influx of sport boats and decline in available space, parking and storage for commercial fishermen (Interview with commercial fisherman, 2003). Both commercial and recreational fishing industry members are concerned about the increasing property values and development of residential structures that are forcing local businesses to close.

## **References**

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