

Interview with Michael Rioux.
Retired lobsterman, scallop and urchin diver.

Date: May 20, 2004

Time: 6:05 P.M.

Location: Ellsworth High School, Ellsworth Maine.
EHS Library

Interviewers: Julie Whitcomb, Student 10th Grade

Tiara Woods, Student 10th Grade

Erik Korver, Teacher, Biology



Michael Rioux, Surry, Maine. Retired lobsterman, urchin and scallop diver. Formerly worked off Stonington and Blue Hill Bay.

TW: All right, so, first off, how are you connected to the fishing industry?

MR: Well, I *was* connected through diving for scallops, that was how I originally got into the fishing industry and lobstering.

TW: You started...

MR: Um, well... I started by driving a dive boat for some divers... and after several years of that I decided to dive myself, and got into the scallop markets and then after that, of course, the urchins came and I got into that, A lot of the urchins were coming out of Stonington so I was based down there for a number of years doing that. And while I was down there, I had my lobster license and I part-timed for awhile. Then I decided to do it full time, and I did that for four years. So that's how I got into it.

JW: Where did you fish for the scallops and urchins?

MR: I fished all the way down to Milbridge and up and around into this area, and a little bit over around Vinalhaven, North Haven, Isle Au Haute and Swan's Island.

TW: Was there an area that was better for you?

MR: With scallops... they're spotty. You can hit a bad wake and miss them, its really hit or miss... you gotta have the right bottom, like anything, it's got to be the right bottom so you can hit them anywhere.

JW: So for the scallop diving was there any special equipment that you need?

MR: You needed a dry suit and dive tanks... a respirator.

EK: About how long would you be underwater for?

MR: Well, it depends on how many tanks and how deep... I usually did about four or five tanks and that put me in the range for around anywhere for three or four hours.. That's all winter.

EK: In the winter, and what type of...

MR: Yep, the coldest days. Because if it's really sub zero... you jump in the water and you warm up, in the wintertime most people don't realize that. If you jump into 30-35 degree water and its zero, it's actually pleasant.

EK: What's exposed in that?

MR: Just around your face. Your dry suit completely covers you. And you have mitts, water does get into your mitts occasionally if you have a leak and... You get a little wet but, the thing that's exposed is your lips and right around your cheeks... and your chin. It gets a little brutal, you have to come up to warm up.

TW: So is it all year long that you do this or only in the winter?

MR: The diving part was only in the winter.

TW: Right.

MR: The lobstering started in the springtime and that ran all through summer right into fall.

TW: And you went by yourself or did you take a crew along?

MR: Yeah, I have to have a crew. You have to have... especially when you're diving. You need somebody to tend... so I have another diver with me and I take a percentage of his catch.

TW: When you get down there how do you get enough scallops back up?

MR: You take a bag, and you tie a line to it, through a pulley, and you just drag it around and if you fill the bag up you just come up, they'll throw you another bag and down you go. So, it's pretty simple.

EK: How many bags could you get, say in a...

MR: Well, if you get a full bag a tank that's about a gallon per tank and that was fine

but,my best day was when I stuffed four or five bags every tank.

EK: So how many pounds was...

MR: 130. That was pretty fun... sometimes you get two buckets, a full bucket is what you really go for... a five gallon bucket is what I'm talking about... So, you get a gallon a tank its fine, it's a day's pay.

TW: Are there certain scallops that you can't bring up, like is there a size limit?

MR: Size limit, yeah. You can't take the smaller ones; it's not worth killing them... Yeah they've got to be two and a half inches that's what I think it was... I think it went to three... maybe three and a half now...

TW: Would that make it harder, do you think, if you were still doing it would it be harder to find ones that are larger?

MR: Well actually... well I don't dive anymore...

TW: Right but if you did, do you think it would be harder?

MR: Yeah, at the end of my diving career there were a lot of small ones around and bigger ones were harder to find. So yeah, but still it's not worth taking the small ones, you want them to grow.

TW: And, what would you do with the shell?

MR: You just throw them back in the ocean.

TW: They do?

MR: That's what they want you to do because they could have seed on them. Of course, you bring them ashore and you get a lot of bacteria that's gonna happen when you leave a lot of guts and stuff on land.

TW: What do you mean like they could have seed on them?

MR: Seed, like little tiny baby scallops...

TW: Oh really?

MR: Yeah they cling to some of the shells and all kinds of bottom life down there but I've seen them before and they're really just minute little scallops.

TW: Wow, hm.

EK: What other strange things have you seen on the bottom while you're down there?

MR: No, the weirdest thing that I've ever seen, and I'm pretty sure of what it was, was a giant squid, it was a giant squid, yep. I had just jumped off the boat and I was heading down and I was in thirty feet of water so you can't see bottom so you kind of sit there and just sink, And I looked over and I could see kind of a green, fluorescent brownish green so I thought, "Well, maybe it's a ledge that we didn't see" so I swam to it and I remember I was in 30 feet of water thinking "Well this is a big ledge" so I swam to it and as I got closer I realized it was not a ledge and I got probably 10 feet away from it and it was all stretched out... it had a big black end and gray and green, it was really quite colorful. I was sitting there wondering what in the world this could be and then it just flexed up its tentacles and shot right off. It was probably eight feet long.

JW: Hm.

MR: The only thing that I could think of that it could be was a giant squid. I've had seals come up to me, you know, I've actually touched them... they get real curious and come up right in your face, some of the young ones... I've had dolphins cruise by... some halibut, of course, lobsters and crabs.

MR: Not the place I'd want to be.

MR: Nothing's going to hurt you down there, really. I dove for 15 years and I was fine.

TW: Did you do any urchin diving?

MR: Yes

TW: You did that.

MR: Yep, when that came into play I definitely jumped on because there was a lot of money to be made in urchins.

TW: Is that any different than scallop diving?

MR: Oh yeah, yeah the urchins are usually in a shoal area, they're not real deep... scallops are usually between ten feet and one hundred feet. The ledges usually dictate where you're going to go because that's where they cling, right around the ledges. I did that for, oh, I think six or seven years, and then it depleted-the entire industry. It seemed like every urchin around was picked up that was half decent... so it really depleted that stock... I think its time for them to shut it down completely and they may do it this year.

TW: And then you said you did lobster fishing ?

MR: Yep, yep in the summertime. Spring right through the fall, usually came around when I would go back diving... I had around four hundred traps, and that's a tough business to get into if you don't have a foothold because it can be clicky and you've got to be in with the boys or sometimes you don't get to stay in.

TW: I agree with that... did you have your own boat?

MR: I did. Yep, paid that off in urchins.

EK: Do you want to explain like what it means to be in or how they could push you around possibly?

MR: Well, you've got to know people for one thing, especially down in the Stonington area... I've been fishing, well, lobstering for a number of years. I just was part time... I did have a lot of traps... but when you go to a place where the Maine industry is lobstering and they really frown on you coming in... they're protective and that's basically what it is, they don't want people coming in.

TW: Did you have a hard time trying to get in with them?

MR: Well, yeah, I lost my fair share of traps. I'll say that. And then I decided that it wasn't worth the stress that I was going through.

EK: What do you think was the most difficult part of each one of the three jobs you've mentioned?

MR: Well, physically, scalloping. Sometimes you have to swim quite a ways and if you're carrying a half a bag of scallops it gets tiring, taxes you. As far as being accepted into the industry lobstering was by far the hardest. Of course it was a lot of work with the urchins because you'd be coming in with tons of urchins... literally, it was hard. But the swimming part with the scallops was I'd say the worst.

EK: What was the best part?

MR: When I got paid. The urchins was definitely the best... I could do three times... sometimes more than that in a day's pay than working all week for scallops.

TW: Was that because there were more urchins?

MR: Well yes, there were more urchins and they pay an outrageous amount of money per pound.

TW: What do people do with the urchins? Do they eat them?

MR: They do eat them, they crack them open and they eat what is called the roe, it's like five clusters of eggs inside the urchin. Sometimes they send the whole urchin, shell and all over to Japan, and they were the main ones eating that stuff... you've got to have a taste for it... I don't know, I just don't understand why they would pay that kind of money.

EK: How much would that be, say, for a typical urchin size and what kind of price for it?

MR: A typical urchin size... well, over the years they have dwindled, the big ones were picked up, and they've started going down smaller and smaller until finally, if you could find anything two and a half inches then you were doing pretty good. It depended on the type of urchins, they wanted a certain type, and some of them don't have much roe, and they don't want those... they want the full shells. Of course that dictates how much weight there is... if it's half empty then they're not going to pay that much. Of course the color of the roe was important too, so that's how they paid... they have like A, B, and C grades.

EK: So what might be an average urchin price?

MR: Well it varied...

EK: Depending on what the market was?

MR: The market, and at certain times of year they were paying really well because they wanted the urchins badly. When I started out I was getting paid thirty two cents a pound and I was still doing a lot better than I was with scallops... then the best price that I ever had was about three dollars per pound... that's in the shell. So if you come in with two thousand pounds then... do the math.

EK: Split between... what was it about two people?

MR: Well, there's a tender, I had a tender and a culler, which they culler the urchins. I made a split with two other people... but I had another diver, so I got a percentage of his. We all made out pretty good.

TW: What does the tender do?

MR: The tender gives me bags, pulls bags up...

TW: Do they weigh it on the boat?

MR: No, they have a skiff. They would ride out and instead of having a big boat that would run around and possibly hit a ledge, we'd just anchor the boat and have a skiff running back and forth to the ledges... and the culler, he'd just stay on the boat and cull the urchins.

TW: What is that?

MR: What is what?

TW: Culling urchins?

MR: Culling would be taking trash and small ones out, because they only wanted two inches and above.

TW: Has that size limit gone up since?

MR: I think so, yeah. I think they put a stop on three inch urchins, they can't take them over-size and they can't take them under so it's still two inches... two inches up to three inches. Anything over three inches they can't take.

JW: Hm.

MR: Well that's what I've been told. I've been out of it for... well seven years.

EK: Did you ever have some type of an equipment failure or something like that, or a near-death experience?

MR: I've had a few, yeah... I had bought a brand new Viking dry suit and it was supposed to be the top of the line. It zips across the shoulder and you can have undergarments to keep you warm. And what had happened was the guy that was tending me, like my tender... had zipped my undergarment in the zipper. So I jumped in and I was purging, going down, and my zipper started to part... I could feel the water coming in, but I didn't realize at the time what was going on. The deeper I went, the more it started opening it up and when I got to the bottom, it parted like six inches and I was having a rush of 29 degree water at that time. And I filled up with water... and I made it to the top and luckily... and if he'd gone any sooner I don't know if I'd be around but he was just starting to take off and I hollered to him and of course he turned right around. I was just soaking, ringing wet, full of water... I must have weighed 500 pounds.

TW: Wow.

MR: I did fix the problem. I got right back into the water and did another tank, and I called it a day. Well also, I've turned my own air off in 30 feet of water before. Your lines that are going to the top are always getting tangled in your tank, the valves right on the top of your tank. And it made a half pitch right around the valve handle, and I was trying to pull it out, and what I was doing was turning my air off, and I completely turned it off and exhaled, and no air. It was kind of a scary feeling but I did make it to the top. That was not fun.

EK: You're usually around thirty feet? Do you go deeper?

MR: Thirty feet... oh yeah, I've been scalloping to seventy five feet... it's a very good depth for some reason, I don't know why but at thirty to forty feet you can stay longer, as in you can get like an hour out of a tank, at least an hour, and that's where we like to stay because then there's less decompression, and you have more time to find your scallops.

TW: When you said that seventy five feet is a good depth what did you mean?

MR: Well, the scallops will bunch up for some reason in twenty feet, forty feet, and

seventy five. For some reason, I don't know why it is, but that's how we usually found them. I never figured it out but... of course, they like the type of gravel, silty bottom too. So conditions have got to be right if you get little current pelts too because the little brinks feed into the fish.

TW: Okay, so you said that you thought the urchin population was kind of diminishing when you were around, what do you think about the scallop population from what you saw?

MR: Well, the last that I had seen, there were a lot of small ones, very small ones, quarter and half dollar size... and it takes awhile for them to grow, so seven years... they must be coming back, I would think by now... seven years that would actually be a good time to go back diving.

EK: Do they farm those at all?

MR: I don't know if they do that. When I was getting out of it they were coming out with these bags called spat bags... of course that's what smaller urchins are, they're called spat. And what happens was little scallops get into the bag, it's a little fine mesh, and they get trapped in there, and then they take those scallops in seed areas. Whether they stay there or not, who knows? When I was diving, if I was in an area where there were a lot of small ones. I'd pick them up and then I'd go dump them into a shoal area, I'd come back to them two or three years later... kind of like the bank.

TW: Did they stay in one spot?

MR: Sometimes they'll swim out, but if they like the spot, if you found a spot where scallops were thick before then they'll usually stay right there.

EK: What made you leave the industry?

MR: Well, diving is for a young man, you've got to have a lot of energy. I was finding that after 15 years my shoulders and my elbows were bothering me. I just didn't want to pursue it any longer. I hadn't been seeing much for quantity, and it was time to get out, basically.

EK: And what was the driving thing to get into the industry?

MR: I love working out in the ocean. I was in the Navy right out of high school... and then of course I met these guys that were diving and I jumped on that, because I just loved being out in the ocean, everything about it.

EK: Would you keep any of your catch?

MR: Oh yeah, definitely.

EK: One of the benefits?

MR: That definitely is a benefit, yeah. Occasionally I'd bring scallops home. I never brought any urchins because I'd never really been fond of them. Lobstering, one thing that I miss the most was catching the crabs and bringing crabs home to eat. Those were definitely a treat.

TW: So you never got into the crabbing industry at all?

MR: No, no, nope.

EK: What do you work on now?

MR: I'm a painter, drywall... painter.

EK: Which do you like better? Or do they both have their benefits?

MR: Yeah they both have their benefits, working on land the weather isn't dictating when you go to work, usually. I mean if you have a bad storm, of course, ... but when you're a fisherman, you're at the mercy of the weather. If you've got a wind, you're done. If it's a lot of snow or rain, you can't really work well. Can't do good work. But you got your money when you could fishing.

EK: What was a typical workday like? When did you start and about how long did it take to prep?

MR: Yeah, we'd get going early, we'd get to the boat at probably about five, maybe six. You gotta listen to the weather and try to get out and do it as quickly as you can, and get in. So it varied, I mean you could get out and it would be beautiful, and within hours the weather would come in and it would drive you home. That's one thing I don't miss about fishing.

TW: Do you think you would ever go back?

MR: Well, I can't really, because I've given up my licenses and they would have to give me another license.

TW: Is that a new thing in the industry?

MR: No it's been going on for quite awhile, in fact, before I even got out of fishing that was a rule.

TW: So you have to keep one every year to keep it going?

MR: You don't have to fish, but then they did put in a stipulation that you have to bring in a catch. You have to show pounds from what you were doing, like lobstering or scalloping... if you have no weights to prove that you were fishing then they'll take your license.

EK: Where would you take your catch?

MR: Lobsters right to the pier, down in Stonington. I fished in a few other places where I'd just take it home and bring it over to the Maine Shell. The urchins,, you'd just bring them over to the pier. Occasionally, if the buyers aren't giving you a good price than you can truck them, and send them to another place. Scalloping you would always take inland someplace.

EK: To a restaurant or could...

MR: Well, sometimes, yeah, I had a few restaurants that I sold to, Maine Shellfish, Sheryl Hopper down in Southwest Harbor... and there were a number of places down on the island, Deer Isle.

TW: Which one sold better?

MR: Sold better?

TW: Yeah, had the most profit, do you think?

MR: Um... urchins, I would say. Just from the mass weight that you'd bring in, you could make a thousand, two thousand dollars a day sometimes. Averaged a thousand, but there were a lot better days. But again, you know it's not a sure thing, you don't go right out and load up. Sometimes you have to bounce around and especially at the end of my urchin days you really had to hunt to find urchins, because they would clean places that just had carpets and carpets, so there was nothing. Not even in the cracks and crevices.

TW: And have they since put any regulations on doing that?

MR: They have zones, I guess, for the urchins. And I think they close some zones down, and what I've heard they may close down the entire coast this year.

TW: Because of the population?

MR: Depletion, yeah.

EK: And do you agree with that?

MR: Oh yeah, yeah. It will take awhile to come back because it's urchins... you see some that are literally that big, you know, miniature urchins and how long does it take them to get to be two inches? You know they don't just grow over night. I think that closing that industry down for ten years would be good, but I know nobody likes to hear that.

EK: Do you agree with... often, through a couple of these interviews that I've talked through, some biologist will come in that has no real idea as to the industry or what goes

on, doesn't really listen to the fishermen. What is your take on... did you ever notice something like that or did you ever get that type of feeling that someone is telling you what to do who has no idea on what's going on?

MR: Oh yeah, that was irritating, yeah. I never really got to talk with any biologists, but I know that the state was coming up with these weird things, as I recall. How do they find stuff out unless they were actually diving? I don't know, I don't know how they came up with some of the stuff. So it was irritating to be told that we can't do something... especially downeast that's where all the urchins ended up being from here to Portland, they just cleaned everything out. They were just trying to regulate everything downeast which had nothing to do with this area, and it was kind of irritating.

EK: Are there any stigmas put on, like, say one particular... like oh all urchin divers are like this or all scallop divers are like that. What might those be?

MR: Alcohol, in the fishing industry was quite hard... and drugs, a lot of drugs. I think some of the divers got a bad rep with that. If you heard of a diver drowning or dying, it was usually because of drugs and alcohol.

EK: Like, while they dove?

MR: Yeah, I was fishing outside Marshal Island, and a diver was inebriated from the night before, and he was diving. He drowned, and of course by that community enemy... But usually, like ninety percent of the time when there is a drowning or a death of a diver in the water, it's because of alcohol. Because you black out, alcohol strings your blood too much.

TW: Were there any negative ones that weren't really true that you heard?

MR: About divers? Or...

TW: About anybody in the fishing industry.

MR: Um... no they were pretty much all true. (Laughter) No I can't really come up with... like give me for instance. You know with fisherman, really one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch. It only takes one bad apple, as anything. Then you start getting a reputation, and it gets sent around the entire fishing industry.

EK: Do you think you're pretty much all set with...

TW: I had a question that I was just wondering about. From what you saw, what do you think about the populations of the lobsters, scallops... what do you think they will be in the future?

MR: Well, my theory on the lobsters is when the bottom fish were depleted, the lobsters started coming in really thick, and that's because they weren't eating the baby lobsters for that period of time. And I think eventually, we'll see a decline in lobsters because the

ground fish, the bottom fish are coming back, and it's just a matter of time. I can't tell you... I'm vague on the amounts of catches for the last several years, I knew last year I think the catch was down a little, of course the price was way up so that helped out.

TW: Do you think that the regulations that the state keeps coming up with are going to help the population in a way? Do you think it's a good idea?

MR: I really don't know about that now; I don't even know what the new regulations are to tell you the truth.

TW: Right, like just the sizes.

MR: The sizes... I think that will always benefit the fishermen. I mean, if you can't take a certain size then the next year they will be pretty close to the size that they've got, so it only helps the fishermen, I think.

TW: Do you have any advice to offer anyone that would want to try to get into this industry?

MR: I would just go to college and have a real life. Something that doesn't dictate your moves, like the weather and what not. It is a good living, I'll have to say, for the people that love the ocean. I think that times are coming where they're not going to be good, the scalloping, lobsters... the scallops and urchins, so it's hard to say.

TW: I think that's good.

EK: Usually what they ask at the end of some of these are, what questions that weren't asked might have been good ones to ask. Something that might have been left out.

MR: Oh... I think we pretty much covered it. Right off the top I couldn't come up with any...

EK: That's fine, are we all set then?

JW: We're all set, well thank you for coming in, and...

MR: You're welcome.