Date: Friday June 27, 2014
Location: Jonesport campground, Jonesport, Maine
Interviewee: William (Billy) Milliken
Interviewer: Julia Beaty

Julia: Do you want to say your name and where we are?

Billy: Billy Milliken. We're at the Jonesport campground right now, which is right in between Moosabec Reach and Sawyer's Cove. And the harbor, that's the primary harbor here.

Julia: So how long have you been harvesting elvers for?

Billy: I've been harvesting them since 1992, so that's 22 years. Quite a while.

Julia: And did you ever harvest the older stages of eels or was it just the –

Billy: Never. Always the glass eels, yeah. Really in Jonesport that's all you – where I live we have a chance to grab glass eels. You have to go up into substantial inland waters to get the big ones and we don't have a big source of it around here.

Julia: Okay. Because the big ones are in ponds?

Billy: The big ones are in ponds, and the whole thing with harvesting eels - many people that are in the business, we're sort of a resilient bunch. We come from very diverse backgrounds. But most of the harvesters are people who try to make money and take the opportunity to make money during seasons. The spring season, 20 years ago there was no money around. You'd make a little money in the fall, money in the summer. But all winter long you maybe just made a week's pay and by the time spring came around if there was anything that you could do to keep food on the table, you would. And the eel fishery is one of those fisheries that when we started you could get by. You could put food on the table. You wouldn't go behind. You weren't going to get ahead but if you worked hard you were going to get enough to feed the family. So those folks that are in it now that have been in it as long as I have pretty much have a good work ethic that way. That's what got them into the business.

Julia: So are most of those people who started doing it back in the '90s, before it got really big here in the past few years, were most of them lobstermen?

Billy: Pretty diverse. I'll tell you, there's a lot of, most of them were fishermen and they had fishing backgrounds, but a very diverse background. Like you had clam diggers and worm diggers. You had lobstermen. At the time I was gillnetting and I was also selling real estate. But mostly fisheries, guys from the coast that heard about or saw this harvesting being done and they asked about it and then they became part of it.

Julia: And so the early '90s, was that around the time that it first got started in this area?

Billy: No, no. They've harvested these since the '60s or even maybe before that up here. But prices went up in the '90s to the point where it gained a lot of attention. And some of the buyers, the out of state buyers came to the coastal communities and sort of recruited. I can remember getting recruited by a guy that said, he had a little tiny net and he said, 'With this net you can make $10,000 in one spot.' He said, 'Believe me! I've seen it!' And I was like, Okay. That got my attention.

Julia: Has it always been for export?

Billy: Always been for export. Yeah.

Julia: And you said you use a dip net?

Billy: I use a dip net. When I started I had fyke nets. I had five of them plus a dip net. There were regulations. The state of Maine, under pressure from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries, wanted to set a cap on licenses. The way they wanted to administer that is at one point in time, I think it was around 1999, they came up with a rule that if you hadn't had a license two out of the last three years you were out of the fishery. And there was one out of those three years that I didn't fish for personal reasons. I was tied up with helping out my grandfather, who was failing. So I lost out. I was out of the fishery for a few years. I re-entered by the lottery. And because the folks that were grandfathered under the old ways that were licensed three out of those three years, most of them got two pieces of gear. But having gone back into the lottery and gotten my license on the lottery I was permitted to have one. I had a choice so I chose a dip net and I'm glad I did.

Julia: What are the advantages of that?

Billy: You're mobile. During the tide you can move. If you have fixed gear you set that at low water or at the first part of the flood and it's going to be there. You may find out about a run of eels somewhere else, but it's too late. So you're versatile. I like working with a dip net. I just think that it's more rewarding to see what you're getting all through the night. Most of the guys that have fyke nets, a lot of them set their net, they'll sit on it all night and they'll wait for the tide to go. I always work two jobs anyway. I never gave up my day job so the least amount of time that I could spend on the river the better because I had to get some sleep.

Julia: So are they coming in with the tides?

Billy: They come in – it varies. Typically, I guess the average tide, a couple of hours before high water on the flood, they'll come in. And they'll run hard until just until the ebb tide and then they'll stop. But during heavy running periods, I've seen them run when it got dark and it was still ebb tide. It was an hour ebb at dark and they started running and they ran right through the low water slack. They ran the entire flood tide. It was ebb tide again. They ran until the sun came up. That's rare. But when they get ready to go, when they get up in these rivers, right

towards the top of the tidal areas in the rivers and they decide to run, they'll run hard. And sometimes they'll even run during the day.

Julia: Oh, cool. How do you know that? Do you go fishing for them during the day?

Billy: It's how do you not know that? So you're out looking when you can just in case. That only happens in special places. That doesn't happen on the ocean. Most of my fishing is done out here on the ocean. And it's pretty predictable out here. You've got two hours, the last two hours of the flood tide. Maybe a little bit into the ebb, but you pretty much know when they're done.

Julia: So do you start out by the ocean earlier in the year and then move in?

Billy: Yup. Typically. It depends on the weather that we've had in the spring. But if it's a normal year and it's been cold and there's still ice up in the rivers, that's really the only place you're going to get them because that water's too cold. They're not going to move up into the rivers and run very hard. So your only chance to get them is near the ocean, near open ocean. Those places are pretty reliable. I usually look for the ice. If there's ice on those outer shores and around the shores where it's tidal where the outfall is, we're not going to catch any. But as soon as that melts we're going to start getting a few. And that will build and build and build until such time as we can go inland onto some of the river systems and do a little bit better.

Julia: So what time of year is it, like when you're saying that the ice is gone and they start coming in here, is that usually around a certain time of year? I'm sure it changes depending on the winter.

Billy: These winters have been crazy. Three seasons ago, 2011, on March 22 it was 85 degrees.

Julia: Oh, right. I remember that.

Billy: It was just crazy. We went to our usual starting spots and it was just unbelievable. The eels ran even on the ocean. They ran all night. And we had, to that point, the beginning of that year that was the most money I had ever made in a night eeling, was the beginning of that year. And the eels had been there for weeks. For like a week and a half we had been seeing eels there but we weren't able to harvest because the season didn't start until March 22. So we were ready! We got to the spots early and waited for the sun to go down and the tide to go up and they were right there. And this year our season started two weeks late. It didn't matter because there were very few that were – it was a very cold winter, very prolonged, a lot of melting snow. So a lot of these outfalls, these river systems were full of water. Brooks were full of water. So there was a lot of current and the water was cold. So nothing really for the first four or five days into when the season started which was really two weeks late. So that really made them two and a half or three weeks late. And they didn't run hard. But we did okay eventually.

Julia: Do they start to taper off? Or do you think they're still coming in after you're done fishing for them? Do you know what time of year they start slowing down?

Billy: Yes. They'll taper off for a number of reasons. The tide will get wrong. There will be some nights we don't have any tide because there's no darkness at high tide. Particularly early in the season when there's so little darkness. The days are getting longer. Actually, later in the season the days are getting longer and you have sometimes twelve hour, six hour fifteen minute tides, you don't get any darkness. Other times they taper off – we think that we know – sometimes we get a few more fingerlings and pigmented eels and that's a sign that we're getting into the end of them. But Mother Nature seems like she's always got a surprise for you because just when you think you've got it figured out all of your logic is out the window because it's surprising. What we typically do is we go to our usual go-to spots and there are still some eels left there. We still could make a living but we know it's time to go inland to the main rivers where we can do much better. So we leave a few on the table.

Julia: Can you usually fish in the rivers right up until the end of the season?

Billy: Yes. We can fish the big rivers right up until the end of the season, typically.

Julia: Which is the end of May?

Billy: End of May.

Julia: Has it always been like that? Like, was it like that in the '90s?

Billy: Yeah. Oh yeah. We'd spend most of the month of May up on the Penobscot. The Penobscot River is – you have all of Penobscot Bay that bottle necks right into a very tight river so you've got the eels at the outer shores there that will bottle neck right into that. And I've seen them run there in April. And I've seen run there as late as after the season closed. So there's so many different factors that you just don't know. You have to be mindful and keep an eye on it. So if you can't be there yourself you pay somebody to go and check it for you. That's what we've done.

Julia: So do you mostly fish around Jonesport but sometimes go as far as the Penobscot?

Billy: Yeah. Every year I start out in Jonesport and then I migrate. My migration, eventually I end up on the Penobscot.

Julia: Okay. Every year?

Billy: Every year.

Julia: And that's just because, like you were saying, there's not a lot of rivers and ponds in here so you have to kind of go farther?

Billy: Well, it's really the big runs. The higher concentrations of eels are going to run on those big rivers. They're not running on the big rivers early in the season. They're running on the outer shores. So we're getting them here. And when it's time to move on to the river systems we do because we can do much better. This year my season did end on the Penobscot but it was one night on the Penobscot because we had a quota and I was done. I had caught all of my quota so I had to call it good.

Julia: Have you noticed, over the years that you've been doing it, if the abundance of them changes?

Billy: Yes. We've had years that have been good and bad throughout the course of my fishing career. I understand that the last three years, my efforts have gone way up. I've been focused on it. It used to be that if I had to work the next day and it was a late tide I might not even go. Because the price was maybe $100 a pound or $70 a pound and I'd hope to get a pound. I've seen them be somewhat volatile, but the last three years, I've never seen so many. So we had this perfect storm of good price and a great abundance of eels that have come to the shores so we've been really lucky. And even though my efforts went way up, I've never seen the amount of eels on the shores that I have over the last three years. Early in the '90s and through the mid-'90s we didn't get anywhere near what we can get now. So that's pretty exciting. From somebody that is of my perspective, something is going on. There are more eels coming to our shore. So what does that mean? There are more mature eels going out to spawn? I don't know. One would think that. But I'm sure there's a lot of mitigating factors.

Julia: Is it maybe because people aren't fishing for the yellow eels and the adults as much? Would that be why more are making it out?

Billy: Well, I think that it's – we've installed a lot of fishways. We've been mindful of the effort of the mature eel exiting the river safely so that it can go out and spawn. I think that what we're seeing now with the increase in glass eel is a direct result of that, in my opinion. Because more mature eels are making it out through the turbines. They're able to get out there. Whereas before many of them were closed off, they couldn't possibly do it, or they were getting torn up by a turbine.

Julia: Yeah. That makes sense. So that kind of leads into the next question, which is, what do you think is the biggest threat to the eels in this area? And I don't know if you want to answer for the glass eel specifically or for all types of eels, if you think that there's different threats.

Billy: You know, I think that the biggest threat is the loss of habitat. An eel's a very resilient creature. Despite the fact that the eels have lost so much habitat they continue to thrive. But if we were mindful of opening up habitat, working with hydro-electrical companies to shut their turbines down or make a pathway for an exiting eel to make it back to the ocean - if we don't do that, I think that's the biggest threat. Of course, you have greed. You have to be mindful of the fact that everybody wants into this industry right now. The state's doing a pretty good job

to keep that as managed as they possibly can. But I think that the correct way to manage the species, the abundance of the species is at the adult level, not at the glass eel level. Because the glass eel has a 99% mortality rate anyways. These mature eels hatch so many. The whole catch in Maine, if you took every spawned eel out of like five mature eels that would be greater than what we take out of Maine every year. And naturally all of them don't live to make it to Maine shores. But, you know, we're not talking about very many mature eels to make a whole lot of baby glass eels.

Julia: Okay. So you just need to make sure there's enough mature ones out there?

Billy: Yeah. Let's take care of the big guys and make sure they get out to spawn.

Julia: I guess you answered the next question, which was, what do you think are the best ways to address the threats to the population? So, I guess you could elaborate more on that or not but it sounds like you already answered it.

Billy: Well, let's try to get habitat back. Let's work with hydro-electrical dams to minimize the threat to these exiting eels. Let's continue to be mindful. Let's observe fisheries so that we can identify any type of decline or increase. Let's spend a little bit of money on research. Our methods of harvesting, I don't think that they can be improved that much. We don't have any bycatch for other species really to speak of. We have two closed seasons. We don't fish the middle third of the river. I think those are all pretty good practices that don't need to be addressed. I think that's about it.

Julia: Can you describe the importance of the elver fishery to your community in this area?

Billy: Very important. Jonesport is a town of about 1500 people. In the 1950s there were about 5,000 people here. We've lost our – we had three sardine canneries in town. The herring fishery sort of went away from this community. Our population has dwindled down to about 1500 and it's an aging population. We don't have a lot of working families here. When I graduated from high school in the '80s we had 130 kids in the school. We're down to 60 now. So we really need jobs. Jobs are very important here. The lobster fishing industry is good but it's a limited entry fishery. We can't create any more than really what we have in that. The eel fishery, there are about five or six licensed fishermen here on the peninsula. That money that has come in through their incomes has been spread amongst the community. It's very important to this community and others. We're mindful of that. All of the fishermen are mindful. The money that we spend, we try to keep it in town because we appreciate that guy that's got a job at the hardware store. We might pay a dollar more for a piece of plywood, but it's worth it to have the family in town, to have the job in town, and the convenience.

Julia: So there used to be a lot more fishing industry jobs in the area and now there's not a lot?

Billy: Oh yeah. Mostly with herring. A lot of weirs, a lot of seiners. And the factory jobs, they're all gone. Now we have lobstering, which is great. The community is doing well to maintain

where it is just by the lobstering. But we're never going to grow that much. And we've shrunk. We really need to grow a little bit. There are other fisheries. The scallop fishery is pretty decent. Quahoging, musseling. There's a mussel factory. We do have some seafood wholesalers that are trying to add value to their product here on the peninsula so they employ people doing that. Like, for example, we have a mussel plant here where they actually package the mussel and that's created a few jobs. Things like that we need to do. It's too bad that we couldn't add value to these elvers here. But it's very complicated. Really the only way to do that would be to farm them here and I don't think this environment is a very good place to grow them quickly, as quickly as you'd need to to make it profitable.

Julia: Definitely sounds important. So this question is kind of broad about all fisheries that happen in and near rivers. It's supposed to be about the eels and alewives and bluebacks and anything else, but what do you think Downeast Maine in general would be like if there were no river fisheries in this area?

Billy: Oh, it would be different. It would have an adverse impact on the economy. And it would just put pressures on other fisheries. Because these guys that are fishing in the rivers right now are going to have to be fighting after the same lobster or the same clam. None of the fisheries are doing unbelievably great. There's only so many dollars to be passed around and we really need those dollars coming from the rivers.

Julia: Yeah. Definitely. So clamming and musseling, is that a bigger industry here than in other places because you have the plant, the processing plant? I just feel like I've heard about it a lot over here –

Billy: Maybe musseling is probably above average. They have mussel fisheries along the coast. But here we add more value. This community has taken advantage of a facility that's here. They're taking these mussels and they're packaging them ready for retail sales. There's probably 20 or 25 people there. They work two or three days a week. They run the plant when the fishery is open. I understand it might be closed right now because of red tide. There's nothing we can do about that other than clean up the outfalls, which is tough.

Julia: I think you answered most of my questions. There are no questions on here about management or anything like that, but there's so much happening with that right now that I feel like it's probably going to come out in the interviews anyway. So you're part of the Maine Elver Fishermen's Association?

Billy: I am on the board of directors of the Maine Elver Fishermen's Association. We're facing challenges on every level. We're facing challenges on the Atlantic States Marine level. It's frustrating to us because they say that the population as a species as a whole could be threatened when we're seeing on the ground just never anywhere near as many elvers as what we're seeing. So it's frustrating. We're seeing challenges on the state level because of what the Atlantic States Marine is doing is actually creating a situation where we have to take less and less every year. This year we did an individual quota system. We've had challenges with some

of the Indian Tribes, well one of the Indian Tribes. Most of the Indian Tribes that are in the fishery have been very cooperative. The Passamaquoddy Tribe for good reasons hasn't conformed to what has been proposed in the past few years. But they've been able to work it out. Their ideology is a little bit different than mine but I do respect it. Instead of having a few licenses that will bring in good returns they have as many licenses as possible that have little tiny – and it's frustrating from a harvester's standpoint in Washington County because most of the Passamaquoddys live in Washington County. So I'll go to my spot – and they're all very respectful of my space. I can't complain about the people at all because they've all been A1. But it's frustrating to see ten, sometimes twenty, sometimes thirty people all in a spot and I know full well who's going to get a night's pay and who isn't. There might be two guys out of all of them who are going to get a night's pay. The rest of them aren't going to get anything.

Julia: Because there's just too many people for that small area?

Billy: Well, there's too many people in the small area and there's only two or three good spots at any given outfall. And I know full well that guy over there isn't getting any. He might get one or two all night. But that's their call. They have their own ideology and they have good reason to have it. But it's frustrating from my perspective because it's tough. I've got to get to my spots a lot earlier because there's a lot of competition. The guy in Portland hasn't seen the adverse effect that I have simply because we live in the same neighborhood as most of them. They're out trying to get what they can and I don't blame them for that but it's too many people in a small demographic to be licensed. There just isn't enough room. You have to worry about bank erosion and everything else, that's how bad it is. So that's been a challenge. Getting everybody to agree, we're an association right now and there's a lot of different views. Being a director and trying to get some consensus is a challenge because a lot of people have a lot of different ideas. We try to do that. We try to poll our members. We try to get ideas out there. We try to get them out to speak. But you saw at the last meeting, we only had like fifteen people there. That's a little frustrating.

Julia: So is the goal of the organization, like you said, to have this unified voice for the harvesters to be able to go to the ASMFC and lobby?

Billy: It is. The goal of the organization is to keep the fishery thriving. The base of the organization are people like myself that have been in it for twenty years and we have kept the fishery open by continuing to harvest even at $100 or maybe $50 a night. Kept the markets open. We were very fortunate to end up in a market that was very favorable to us. Now we're getting the benefits of that. We're getting all kinds of pressures from outside forces for all kinds of reasons. But our primary objective is to keep the fishery open and that's at the Atlantic States Marine level. I guess the second would be trying to lobby and have input with state lawmakers, Department of Marine Resources. They've always been good in terms of giving us time. I think they've listened until this point. We're going to find out this coming year when they propose rules. We had some assurances last year and we're hopeful that it's going to work out this coming year.

Julia: Cool. It's good that the organization exists. It seems like a really important thing to have.

Billy: Yes. I'm sure it's important to have some sort of solidarity amongst the harvesters.

Julia: Well those were all my questions. Is there anything else that you think is important?

Billy: We talked about conservation, we talked about its importance in the community, we talked about some of the challenges that we're facing. I think you've covered everything.