

Date: Wednesday June 4, 2014.

Location: Orland River, Orland, Maine.

Interviewer: Julia Beaty

Interviewee: Jake Southerland

Associated sound files: JakeSoutherlandInterview.wav

Julia: So, I guess to start out with, can you tell me your name and where we are right now?

Jake: My name is Jake Southerland. We're on the Orland River in Orland, Maine.

Julia: So, is your official role in this that you're the alewife harvester for the town of Orland?

Jake: Yeah. That's what I do.

Julia: And how long have you been doing that for?

Jake: This is my ninth year.

Julia: And so, is it always at this location that you harvest alewives?

Jake: Yeah. I've been doing it every year.

Julia: So what makes this a good place to harvest alewives?

Jake: I guess because this is where they run to this watershed.

Julia: Do you trap them right at the dam there?

Jake: Yeah. At the weir, yeah.

Julia: Did you build that yourself?

Jake: Yeah. We build the whole thing every year and then take it all out.

Julia: Oh. The whole thing?

Jake: Yeah.

Julia: So, can you explain how your setup over there works?

[0:1:35 – 0:2:56 interrupted by phone call from one of his helpers.]

Jake: Sorry about that. There's two people that showed up wanting fish so he wanted to know how many more I want to catch.

Julia: Okay. Cool. That's good for you guys.

Jake: Yup. Two more.

Julia: So you were starting to explain how your setup works.

Jake: Well, basically the river is blocked off with a net. Then there's a V where the fish can go in. That's basically all it is. The only way they can go up the river is to go through that V which is in the trap. And then, like I explained earlier, the days I can't fish, the back side of the trap, we open it up so the fish can swim right through to get up river on the days I can't fish.

Julia: And there's a fish ladder that they get over?

Jake: Yeah.

Julia: So do you go in the trap with a net to pull them out when it's full?

Jake: No. When the tide goes out the metal conveyor puts them right in the back of the truck. We just have to go down and shovel them into the hole that the conveyor's in in the bottom.

[0:03:57 – 0:05:13 Interrupted by a phone call from a fishermen who wanted bait.]

Julia: So, you open the conveyor and is it individual fishermen that come and you sell them here?

Jake: Yup. Lobstermen come and get whatever they need, hopefully. We load them into the back of pickup trucks in lobster crates or fish crates.

Julia: You already talked about this a little bit before I had the camera rolling, but what time of year do the alewives usually start showing up?

Jake: Usually like the last week in April. And it runs usually until the first of June. But this year it was a little bit later so I can fish another week after this week.

Julia: So when did it start this year?

Jake: May 2nd or something was when we caught our first one, I think it was. Or 4th, something like that. Beginning of May.

Julia: Does it usually reach a peak somewhere in the middle?

Jake: Yeah. Well, it seems like they come in spurts. Like at the beginning of the year you get bigger fish. Then as the year goes on they get smaller, which are the bluebacks that go in this

river too. They're usually the latest ones. But usually, like you'll have a big run, you might have one tide you might have 300 bushel, then you might not have any fish for two tides. So you never know.

Julia: So they're coming in with the tide?

Jake: Yeah. Usually. Because at low water there's just what water is coming over the dam. It's like a brook. So they can't really go up that. They come with the tide, yeah.

Julia: So do you ever harvest twice in a day?

Jake: Yup. Yup, both tides. Yup.

Julia: I've heard that the alewives and the bluebacks, it's really difficult to tell the difference between them. Do you distinguish between them?

Jake: Yeah. You can tell when they're fresh. Fresh, you can tell them apart. But once they set for a half an hour they're hard to tell apart. But if you split them open and look at the inside of the belly an alewife is a lighter color where a blueback is darker, the meat. That's one way of telling it. But just to look at them it's hard to tell. After seeing a lot I can kind of tell when they're fresh, but once they get older they're hard to tell.

Julia: So when they're fresh it's the inside color that's different?

Jake: No, that stays the same. But the outside, like on their back has got a blue tint on the blueback. And their eye sits a little bit different and their nose is a little different, but they're hard to tell apart.

Julia: But you've been doing this for several years so you can tell the difference now?

Jake: Yeah. And then sometimes I say, 'That's a blueback.' And then you really look and well, maybe it's not. But usually you can tell.

Julia: Do you double check yourself by cutting them open sometimes?

Jake: Yeah. And then when I do scale samples I actually look and see exactly what they are. Other than that there's a lot of bluebacks. It's one of the bigger blueback runs, I think, in the state.

Julia: I thought that bluebacks weren't really that common here, but maybe –

Jake: In this river there's a lot of them. If you're still here when we harvest I can show you. There'll be a lot of them mixed in.

Julia: Yeah! Yeah, that would be cool if you could show me and maybe if you could put a blueback and an alewife next to each other and I could take a picture.

Jake: Yeah.

Julia: Cool. Do you notice any changes in the abundance or the number that come through on a year-to-year basis?

Jake: Since I've been doing it, which, I started in '06, every year has gotten better. There's been more. And this year is the best year of all. I've let more up because I haven't been able to sell them because the market's flooded. So there's even more going up than normal so it's looking like it must be flourishing to me.

Julia: Why do you think it is that there's more and more every year?

Jake: I think because of conservation. There was a couple of years that there was too much water to get the net in so fish started running before I even fished so a lot of them got up, more than normal. And there was a couple of years we had a lot of rain and it busted the net open and made holes so the fish could bypass the trap, so a lot got up that way. That's part of conservation, you know?

Julia: Yeah. Little accidents like that work out in favor of them.

Jake: Right.

Julia: Have the management rules changed much since you've been doing it?

Jake: Not since I've been doing it.

Julia: Have you noticed any other changes in anything else about the fish that come through over the years that you've been doing it?

Jake: No. Not that I can think of. It's the same. When they run they run. When they don't, they don't, I guess.

Julia: What do you think are the biggest threats to the alewives in this river, and the bluebacks?

Jake: The biggest threat would probably be the fish not being able to get up. A couple of years ago – there's actually two fish ladders, and one of them had some missing fins so they could only use one. We pushed to get it fixed so the fish could use both. Because if the ladders don't work then the fish can't get up. That would be the biggest thing, if fish can't get up. And then in the fall of the year there's got to be enough water for the little ones to get back too. If you have a real dry summer there might not be enough water for them to get back. I guess it hasn't been a problem.

Julia: So now there's only one fish ladder and there used to be two?

Jake: No. There's two. They fixed the other one so now there's two.

Julia: Was that up to the town to put in the effort and the money to fix it?

Jake: Yeah. The town did it. Actually, the paper mill in Bucksport used to own this dam. They turned it over to the town and before the town took it the mill fixed it as part of the deal with the town taking it over.

Julia: Does this generate electricity or anything?

Jake: No. It was a backup dam I guess for when they built the mill 60, 70 years ago, for when they need more water or something. It's never been used for that.

Julia: So now it's not really doing anything?

Jake: No. They're talking about taking it out, but it's not costing anything to leave it there and the townspeople above it, that would be like mudflats where their houses are so they're kind of against it.

Julia: Yeah. So it's probably not going to come out any time soon.

Jake: No. I think the only reason for them to take it out would be if they had to do a lot of maintenance and they didn't want to spend the money so they might take it out then.

Julia: Yeah. The next question I think you've kind of already answered, it's: what do you think is the best way to address the threats? I guess you said maintain the fish ladders. Is that a correct interpretation?

Jake: Yeah. That would be the big thing, I think.

Julia: Is there anything that you think, aside from maintaining the fish ladders, that you think could make the runs of alewives and bluebacks on this river even better than they are now?

Jake: The only thing I think that would make it better is if you closed it more days. But then again, the ponds above only support so many fish. I'm not sure how many that is. I've heard 12 fish per acre. If that's true, I think more than enough fish already get up. The amount of fish that we're catching is growing every year for the past nine years so I think there's plenty going through.

Julia: What's the name of the pond that this stream goes to?

Jake: It feeds four or five ponds. It feeds Dead River. The bluebacks like moving water so they say they spawn in the river, the Orland River. And then there's Alamoosook Lake. North of that is Dead River.

[0:14:25 – 0:15:27 Interrupted by phone call from one of his helpers.]

Julia: Is that a seal out there?

Jake: Yup.

Julia: Cool. It was looking at me.

Jake: Yeah. I counted as many as 17 at one time. They're a big threat to the industry. They eat a lot of fish, but they've got to eat too. All right, I was on the different lakes. Alamoosook. And then off Alamoosook is Dead River. Then there's Hot Hole Pond, Long Pond, and then Alamoosook up another brook goes to Toddy Pond, which is first, second, and third Toddy. It's a big lake. It's all of those that the fish go to. So it's a pretty big estuary, or whatever.

Julia: Cool. Can you describe the importance of this fishery to you personally and to the local community here?

Jake: Yeah. For me it's a big part of my income for the year. And for the town, they get a percentage and it's a pretty substantial thing for them. I think they put it toward the school budget or whatever. And then, the fishermen, there's not a lot of bait around this time of year so it's great for them to get the lobster bait.

Julia: It's one of their favorite baits, right?

Jake: Yeah. The hardshells in the spring of the year, they say it's the best bait you can get. It helps their catch and everything.

Julia: And I think you were saying this before the camera was on, but lobstermen come from pretty far to get bait?

Jake: Yeah. From Matinicus, Spruce Head, Rockland down that way and anywhere in between. People come from as far as Jonesport and Beals. Most of them are from Stonington and Mount Desert Island. That's where most of them come from, but there's a few that come further.

Julia: So the economic impact is really spreading to other parts of the state.

Jake: Yup.

Julia: What do you think Downeast Maine would be like if there were no river fisheries like this?

Jake: Yeah, I don't know. It would be a big impact on the lobster industry, for sure. Plus it would be quite a bit of money from the town and me and people that work for me and help me. Then the money that I spend building the weir goes to the local hardware, where I buy stuff there. It would be a lot of things.

Julia: Do you have employees that help you?

Jake: Well, my son and a friend of mine help me do it. It's only for a month of the year.

Julia: What do you do for the rest of the year?

Jake: I haul herring that I buy off the herring boats for lobster bait for the rest of the year.

Julia: Oh. Okay. Those were all my questions. Is there anything else that you think is important for me to know about or to share with other people about this fishery?

Jake: I think you pretty well covered it, I think.

Julia: Is it okay if I hang around and watch you harvest?

Jake: Yeah, sure.

Julia: Cool.

Jake: We'll be doing it before very long. I just hope I can get rid of all the fish because he's let in a bunch.

Julia: Oh, is that what he was doing when he was sitting out there?

Jake: Yeah, he went out and opened the gate up because people showed up and said I want ten crates. I don't know if he's just – he's been known to give me a hard time, saying, oh, I've got 400 bushel when there's not.

Julia: Can he tell how many go through?

Jake: Well he's just guessing how many is in there. You can see in the pen, you can start to see the fin. There's still three feet of water and there's that many lying on their sides starting to go already. There's probably that truck-full in there, that dump truck.

Julia: So if you don't sell them all tonight are they going to die because the tide's low or can you leave them in there?

Jake: No. They're going to die. But I'll have to take them and salt them up to use as bait later this summer. And I can get rid of them. It's just the fishermen would rather have herring once

the shedders start, lobsters. But a few guys will use them so I'll get rid of them but I just hate to take up the space in my cooler if I can get rid of them fresh. When they don't like them as well, that's why I try not to catch more than I actually need.

Julia: Okay. That makes sense. So the lobsters like alewives when they're still hardshell and then they shed and then they like herring better?

Jake: Yup. A hardshell likes fresh better. Then once they shed they're softshells. They'd rather have salted herring or salted bait. But these don't seem to salt up and work as well as herring for some reason.

Julia: Cool. That's interesting. Okay. Well, do you want me to let you get back to work over there?

Jake: Yeah. I guess. All right? Very good. If you've got any more questions you can just ask.