

**Interviewee Name:** Paul Molyneaux

**Project/Collection Title:** Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018

**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations:** Matt Frassica (The Briney Podcast)

**Interview Location:** Maine Fishermen's Forum, Rockland, Maine

**Date of Interview:** March 2, 2018

**Interview Description:**

**Paul Molyneaux**

Milbridge, ME

Author, Journalist, and Former Urchin Harvester and Fisherman

Interviewed by Matt Frassica

Paul Molyneaux, an author, journalist, and former urchin harvester and fisherman from Milbridge, ME, speaks about the capitalism and economics of the fishing industry. He also speaks about his experiences winking for periwinkle snails and diving for sea urchins as well as participating in the governance of the sea urchin fishery.

**Collection Description:**

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 is a project of Maine Sea Grant, The First Coast, College of the Atlantic, and the Island Institute, with support from the Maine Fishermen's Forum Board of Directors.

**Citation:**

Molyneaux, Paul, Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 Oral History Interview, March 2, 2018, by Matt Frassica, 9 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

**Transcription by:** Rebecca Clark-Uchena, Island Institute

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PM: Paul Molyneaux

MF: Matt Frassica (Interviewer)

Transcribed by Rebecca Clark Uchenna

[0:00:00.0]

PM: He was a draggerman. I used to be a draggerman out here in the '80s.

MF: Well so, tell me about how you got started fishing, because you wrote a whole book about it.

PM: Yeah, did you read it?

MF: Yeah I read it.

PM: Oh cool.

MF: And it's a long story, but maybe the capsule version?

PM: The capsule version was, I think, my son and I were hiking the application trail a few years back in 2010 and I said, you know we were about there for seven months and he's the youngest Mainer to through hike, and um I said to him I think I went fishing because it was the wilderness, you know, that I just wanted to like I think I was aware that the world as it was structured was pretty crazy but in fishing everything about it made sense, right? You're out in the wilderness, you get paid for what you do, you get a share so you're not just, you know you're sharing the risk with the boat owner and you're also sharing the reward. And that to me seemed to be extremely fair, um compared to everything else I was looking at, right? [laughs]

[0:01:33.0]

PM: and um, so you know I started down on the coast down in Jersey working at the docks, which is I grew up in Pennsylvania and that was the closest place, and um the thing was it was like 1977 when the 200-mile limit went into place. So in 1977 there was a new boat being launched in the northeast every 4 days. So all the top fishermen were moving on these new boats and left all these wooden eastern rigs um scrambling for crews so it was perfect time for a guy coming from the suburbs of Philadelphia to get into the fishing business because you know they were taking anyone and that's basically – and you know and I'd lied my way on board. "You been fishin?" "yeah" you know – with my grandfather in a pond [laughs]

[0:02:38.0]

MF: And then so it was the perfect time to get started but it rapidly became not the perfect time, it seems like. You were there, you were watching as the industry shifted away from small and medium boats to a much larger industrialized fishing. And so I'm interested in how that looked from your perspective on the decks of boats.

[0:03:10.0]

PM: Well, I think there was an event – I started on the smaller boats but then I got good and became a twine man which you know I could mend the nets on the decks you know and um I remember, so I got onto bigger and better boats and I was working on one called the *Atlantic Harvester* which was later had its name changed to the something *Sunrise* or something like that and got run over by a Russian freighter. Um, but I was working on that and Benny Bickford was the skipper and we were, he was you know, trying to keep his job so he had to get the boat you know the boat had to produce. So we got into hake that were just on the margin of being market size and we were bringing over huge bags of hake and throwing like half of it overboard.

[4:10] And at one point I'm standing there am I'm looking at this, and the hake they come up and their bellies expand and they float.

MF: And they die.

[0:04:20.0]

PM: Yeah, and they're just floating all around the boat all these, what they call cock hake you know, just because that's like what size they were [laughs], floating around the boat like it was carpeted with them. And I thought you know, this doesn't make any sense. We're out here on a 10-day trip, we're working 7 days just to pay the expenses of this monstrosity of a boat and then 3 days to make money and I think that wasn't the last time I went dragging but it was close to the last time.

[0:04:59.0]

PM: I mean I just kind of started... you know, I moved away from it and moved Downeast and started doing very small-scale artisanal fishing – urchin diving, seaweed collecting and wrinkle picking and hauling and fishing lobsters, just hauling by hand, and I was like trying to be the Wendell Berry of the sea. Like I had a total [explosion sound] you know um backlash, and I went Downeast. I was living like on about 5-grand a year, cutting my own firewood, growing a big garden, and fishing really small-scale – I was rowing. I rowed 8 miles a day.

[0:05:40.0]

PM: I wrote a story about this for the *Maine Boats, Homes and Harbors* called the crossing about rowing across to Grand Manan from Lubec for shits and giggles [laughs].

[0:05:56.0]

MF: Well and so um all of this is happening not in a vacuum but sort of being acted upon by regulations at the Federal level and also those big fishermen are helping to shape those regulations. So, in your book you don't seem to think that things went quite right in that process.

[0:06:23.0]

PM: No, well, see the way I said it is that the Stratton Report, okay, was kind of like Bretton Woods, it had the DNA of Bretton Woods as I put it and what the Stratton Report um, this was put together by the Stratton Commission in 1969 and it kind of -

INTERUPTION [0:06:48.0 – 0:07:29.0]

[0:07:29.0]

PM: So what the Stratton Commission did, I mean people said, "Oh they're putting us out of business, they don't care about us..." Right, that's exactly what the Stratton Report said. It said we will put these small-scale boats out of business and we will have a smaller fleet of highly advanced vessels that can catch the available resource with maximum efficiency. And you know, they had language in there, I can't remember verbatim, but it was like some of these people may not want to leave what, for them, feels like an adequate living and so this needs to be done slowly. And you know people talk about conspiracy theories and it's written there in plan language – this is what we're going to do to you. And um one of the things that they put in there was they thought the capacity of the ocean could yield 500 million tons of seafood every year. Well it's never gotten much over 100.

[0:08:37.0]

PM: but they said this, 500 million tons – if we use underutilized species. And there's this disconnect okay. They go "500 million tons" and everyone goes "500 million tons... let's rig up for haddock" you know because they're the most money. So they don't like go for the underutilized species, they go for the species for the most money.

[0:09:05.0]

PM: And this is what I wrote in my second book, *Swimming in Circles, Aquaculture and the end of wild oceans*, that they repeat the same sort of logical disconnect with aquaculture, they overestimate capacity and they go after the high value species that just are so destructive to the ecosystem and I mean that make no sense. Right? You've got 10 times the wild fish and soy beans, you know, or whatever they put in - genetically modified soy beans - going into the salmon for what you're getting out. And then they say, well, we're going to feed the world. Well, it's like how are you going to do that if you taking all the forage fish that poor people eat and feeding it to the salmon for rich people?

[0:09:51.0]

PM: You know? Or how are you going to have sustainable fisheries if you rig up for a fish that are already in trouble? The haddock were already in trouble when we instituted the 200-mile limit. I like to tell people; do you know when New England fishermen caught the most haddock they ever caught?

[0:10:05.0]

MF: um 1625?

PM: No 1929. And they killed as many as they caught they believe because they were using like 2-inch mesh.

[0:10:16.0]

MF: So um, there's so much I want to ask.

PM: Well, I'd just say too, that I mean one of the failures of logic is the economics that are driving this, right? So, it's this idea of um... it's this sort of capitalism on steroids kind of thing of where "consolidate to maximize efficiency" and "pursue an economy of scale". And I remember saying this to one of these economists, Ralph Townson, up at the University of Maine in Orono – are you familiar with him?

MF: I think you quoted him in your book.

[0:10:52.0]

PM: Yeah, and I said well what about the people that are put out of business? "Well they'll find another place in the economy." And I said well if this mechanization and consolidation is going on in all sectors of the economy, where really are they going to go. And he didn't have an answer for that of course, they don't. And I don't know, I followed this trail of the economics to Herman Daly and Ecological Economics and one of the problems that they say is that we don't depreciate ecosystem damage – what we do to the ecosystem and the stock structure. Sam Eaton – do you know Sam Eaton, marketplace?

[0:11:43.0]

MF: No

PM: So anyway, I was on a panel at Columbia and he said to me, so in your view is there no place for trawlers on the ocean. I said never mind my view, right? Take it to the bank, take the business plan to the bank and besides depreciating the vessel – the engine, the electronics, the

net – also depreciation the sea floor for dragging the net across it; the stock structure for taking out the, you know, this section of the stock structure and then include that, find a value for that, and include that in your business plan and see if the bank will loan you any money. Right? And they probably wouldn't. But then they say you can't find a value for that. Well I said then what you guys do is treat it as worthless, when if you can't find a value for it, it's actually priceless.

[0:12:43.0]

MF: And so all of this logic has led to a regulatory regime now where you have a catch share system that's determined in part by past performance. So how has that been set up in such a way to advantage some parties and disadvantage other parties.

PM: I mean, the allocation, well, first off 2008 should have lead us... I thought after the economic crisis of 2008, I thought great, these people will stop this stupidity of like this capitalize on steroids and privatize everything because it obviously doesn't work. The economy is based on these myths of infinite economic growth and the idea that we can replace natural capital with technology and that just seems so absurd. Let me see if I can put this in a nice concise form. There has to be growth in the economy, so there has to be investments, new investment, so we can't have growth in fisheries without increasing in the number of fish. So, we create an illusion of growth by taking fish from one group and giving it to another group. So this one group, whoever had the most invested in the fishery and caught the most fish, got the most fish. So the ones who had done the most damage to the fishery got rewarded the most, and so fish got taken away from the small players given to the large players and that spurs investment in these more advanced boats, and they say go, there's economic growth. But they don't count the economic shrinkage, they don't look at that. Again, the depreciation, the social depreciation, because we're using up social and natural capital, depreciating that, and putting it on the books as profit and calling it economic growth. And it's bazaar. If you want economic growth you would be starting at the head of the watershed and cleaning up the environment and creating an ecosystem where fish became more abundant and you could harvest more and that would be economic growth based on and rooted based on the carrying capacity of the ecosystem, not some sort of economic slight-of-hand or regulatory slight-of-hand where we take a huge chunk of wealth from one group of people, but isn't that the foundation of the American economy? We came over and took a bunch of land from the Wampanoag and Passamaquoddy and Penobscot and capitalized on it.

[0:16:15.0]

MF: And built an economy based on the slave-labor of another whole group of people. Um, we should make some room for the 5:30PM but what are you doing right now, can we keep talking at another location?

[0:16:30.0 – 0:17:52.0] *Moving to a new location, chatting, and signing release form.*

[0:17:52.0]

PM: My first job, I wasn't interested in being told what to do so I took off at age 17 and hitch-hiked down to Key West and got a job there on the docks snapping heads off shrimp for 5 cents a pound and come pay day, some women are collecting \$20, \$30, \$40 and mine comes up, \$7. And that was it and I thought this was where the money is. I guess, I don't know [laughs]

MF: Were you getting paid by the weight?

[0:18:24.0]

PM: Yeah by the pound, yeah and I was new at it. And I couldn't do it. I mean I could do alright now. I shuck scallops when I get the chance, for whatever, a buck a pounds and I make money on that, you know, \$20 an hour, you know. [laughs]

[0:18:44.0]

MF: What happened when you did that reaction against the industrialized fishing and you were just doing tiny scale work and you were living off \$5000. How did that work out for you or did that go differently than you expected?

[0:19:03.0]

PM: Well, I mean I was doing that and um around '93 a big crew came out from Lubec, I was picking wrinkles on these same rocks over and over again, I had this circuit that I would do, basically and I would just take the big ones and I could come back in a month or two and pick it again and do just as well.

FM: and what are they?

[0:19:43.0]

PM: Periwinkles, little sea snails. And um, this crew came from Lubec and they went behind me after I had picked it and picked everything I had left behind. And they never quite came back after that. And at the same time the sea urchins were coming on, so I started hand picking sea urchins. And back at that time in the winter time I had a team of sled dogs and I would run that team of sled dogs down to the shore and I'd load that sled up with sea urchins, and get them out busting ice out of tide pools. I'd be down there in February, you know, busting ice out of the tide pools, and just bailing those urchins out of there. You know, you'd have, on the real low drain tides, you'd have half an hour to get as much as you could, I could get like 300 pounds and they were getting close to being like \$100 a pound back then. And so my wide was like wow you gotta get into this business. So in '94 I got my... I already had my dive license and so I got rigged

up and I started diving seriously and paid off my mortgage that first season and spent the summer kicking back in Ireland.

[0:21:08.0]

PM: But so while I was in Ireland, I met these guys and they were like oh yeah we used to have a sea urchin fishery here too. Well, what happened? Well, they started paying us at 30 cents a pound – and they were talking Irish pound in kilos, but if you do the conversion it was the same as us. And then it got up to about a buck a pound and they wiped them out. And now they say you work all day to get two totes. And I'm like, yeah, I can see that coming. And so when I came back, I started going to the management meetings and saying we're already passed the curve. Our landings are already starting to go down, so that means we're already in the brood stock and we've got to scale it back 2/3 just to play it safe if we want to protect this resource. Of course nobody wanted to hear that. But even [Chung?] the big buyer down in Portland – he's still down there – he stood up in that meeting and said, "Yes, I was in Ireland, he's right." [laughs] But you know, you just can't stop... it doesn't seem like the destruction. And so they pushed along and um we just all kept fishing. I became part of the sea urchin zone council; I was like the voice of trying to conserve the resource. George LaPointe appointed me and I was only supposed to do 2 years but he kept me on for 5 years just trying to slow down the wiping out the resource. And there was one vote where we shrunk the window of size, you know we raised the minimum and reduced the maximum and I was the only harvester who voted in favor of that conservation measure. And afterwards I had people confronting me on the street you know, like how dare you. [laughs]

[0:23:12.0]

MF: So it would have been regulated more like lobsters, where there's a minimum and a maximum.

PM: Yeah, it was. But it was too little too late. I think what I had proposed when I came back from Ireland in 1995 was that we go to a tote limit. And I at the time said 4 totes because I said look, that's 400 bucks, you can do it in two tanks maximum, maybe even in one tank if you land in the right spot, and then you're done for the day, you go do something else. But no these guys were looking at making a hundred grand a year and you know in the short term and go do something else you know. And I was in this other mind set of you make \$400 a day, what's wrong with that. You do that, or 120 days a year, what's wrong with that – and do it forever was I thought. The same way I had approached the wrinkle picking, was just like take out the big ones and come back and take out the big ones again and just keep coming back and doing that steady. But I'm a rare one or something and I couldn't get anywhere. Well, now they're at a tote limit at 6 totes I believe and you know guys come up to me 20 years after the fact and go "you were right". And I'm like you know yeah well thank you.

[0:24:39.0]

MF: So it sounds like, I mean you were saying before that there's the bank logic of "take as much as you possibly can while valuing the resource very low". But it sounds like that logic also drives some of the fishermen themselves in the way they think about it.

[0:25:03.0]

PM: Oh yeah, definitely. You know I remember Leo Murry come in to the – he was one of the first people to drag for sea urchins in Cobscook Bay and he came to one of the meetings when we were talking about reducing the size and he said, "urchins don't grow that big in Cobscook Bay" and I said, "God damn it Leo you dragged all the ones that big in Cobscook Bay you dragged them out of there. You saw them, they were that big. And now you're telling me they don't grow that big, I mean come on." I mean he just, they so... I don't want to focus on Leo, I probably shouldn't have used his name. Um, you know the guys they just get focused on making that money and then they buy a new boat, they got make a payment, blah, blah, blah.

[0:26:10.0] END