

Interviewee Name: Richard Nelson

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

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Galen Koch (the First Coast), and Rebecca Clark Uchena (Island Institute)

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

Date of Interview: March 3, 2018

Interview Description:

Richard Nelson

Friendship, ME

Retired Lobsterman and Fisheries Advocate

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Rebecca Clark Uchena

Richard Nelson is a retired lobsterman out of Friendship, ME. He moved to Maine to continue a musical instrument repair business, but the ocean view from the window of his shop called him out onto the water. He tells the story of how he started out helping and learning from a long-time lobsterman while slowly building up his own equipment and credibility in the community. He also explains how he uses his experience working in other places to advocate for Maine's fishing communities, regional ocean planning, and sustainable ocean use through writing, participating in committees and working groups, and petitioning representatives.

Collection Description:

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RN: Richard Nelson (Interviewee)

GK: Galen Koch (Interviewer)

RC: Rebecca Clark (interviewer)

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GK: I've got it on, just so you know. So I'm recording now.

RN: Okay.

GK: And I think what we would have you do first is just say your name and where you're coming from.

RN: I'm Richard Nelson, and I'm coming from Friendship, ME.

GK: You're from Friendship, ME.

RN: Coming from the Forum here. Outside the Forum. Fishermen's Forum, Rockport, ME.

GK: And are there any charts here, any of these charts that pertain to your home or are meaningful to you? You may even have—

RN: We may. We need to find Muscongus Bay.

GK: Wait, this might be it. Up on the north side of that one.

RC: Oh yeah.

RN: Let's see what we got here.

GK: And then have of, we'll here's Friendship.

RN: This is a little better.

[0:01:05.7]

RN: So went out of Penobscot Bay and around Monhegan Island and went back into the next bay, we'd be in Muscongus Bay.

GK: Will you show me on the, will you show me with this marker? You can write on that.

RN: Well, this is where Friendship is. My house is about, there. This is Friendship Harbor here. And you head out. And it's a harbor where people either fish to the western, would be out this way. Or there's a whole slew of them that solely fish to the east. And that could be anywhere as far as over toward the Allen Island, which goes down here.

GK: Can you make a line with the marker so we . . .

RN: Okay, that would . . .

GK: Is it working?

[0:02:07.4]

RN: Let's see. Well, they're out this direction through what they call "Lobster Gut" is out through here. This is Otter Island. This is uh, one time somebody joked it's the passage at Hauteur Island, as if it was a fancy restaurant or something, you know. So what else do we need to know?

GK: Well what's your history with fishing?

RN: My history is very odd. I didn't start fishing until approximately halfway through my life. I was working in, uh, I was born in Maine originally, but one of these people who went away and worked my way back. So, about 35 years ago, I came back to Maine.

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And the last place before then was working with two other partners running a violin shop in downtown Boston, MA. And that was a partnership that dissolved. And my wife and I ended up up the coast looking for a home up in the coast of Maine because that's, again, was my original home. And I'd been back many times during my life with family and vacations and all that. Always had a love of the ocean and all that. And we went, came up and looked for an affordable home near the water, if possible. And Friendship was one of these lost little places.

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If you were further south, you'd be in the Brunswick area or Damariscotta, which was a little more expensive, and on up to Rockport, Camden. I think Camden is back up. Just ended up seeing this house in Friendship and just kind of put an offer on it on the spot. To try to shorten up that story I, I started to work on instruments and things, which is what I did in partnership and stuff, in Friendship, believing that I could do that away from the market itself. But just, that presented a few problems plus the fact that I was sitting there looking out over the harbor and getting to a point in my life that I was very, getting very antsy sort of sitting there.

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Working on instruments is very, kind of a sit down and concentrated, lean over, and fine work. But it was somehow just figured it was time for me to get off my butt and go do something. Go do something else. Go outside and see what I could find. I was very lucky that there's some very good friendly people in Friendship. Even though it kind of has it's, it has the sort of the opposite reputation of its name of its . . . Which we even experienced. When you first go in there

and drive around, people, you know, stare at you, like what the hell do you want type of feel. Because it's not a tourist town.

[0:06:11.7]

They're not used to a lot of people there. There's absolutely no restaurants there. And there's no, or there hadn't been. So where was I here?

GK: So then how did you get into the fishing industry?

RN: Well, that was it, I mean, I looked out and I was getting antsy and I wanted to be out, I was looking out over the water. And I wanted to get out there and do something on the water myself. So I did a couple things. I worked for the, there was a very elderly man who was still trying to fish in the house below me. And I went sort of as a sternman with him and his wife was very glad that I was giving him a hand and looking out for him a little bit.

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That was a very, he was at an age where it was very slow. But it was good for me because I certainly learned. And he had a lot of traditional, certainly a big difference between someone who was at that time, he was in his 80s years old. And some, just a teenager or some of the other young people who are starting out and stuff so. He carried his own sort of, his own knowledge and things which was interesting. And besides that, I just started fishing on my own as well as working with him. Just as a teenager would, getting a small skiff and an outboard and a few traps.

[0:08:01.2]

And people were nice. There was a fellow who ran a lobster wharf and was one of the town respected fisherman over there, (Stevie Larsh?). And he said, "Oh, I'm taking up traps." The first traps I set were, he said, "I'm taking up my traps and moving offshore. Why don't you just set on where mine are and then I'll take mine up and you can go from there. You know, learn from that." Type of thing. So people were very nice, you know.

GK: So he like gave you his spot kind of?

RN: Well it wasn't quite giving me his spot. But it was kind of, yeah, just a helpful thing of direction and how to head out there and stuff. You probably, might've heard, there are many stories about people running into many problems if they come and start to fish in a place like this.

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But I lived in town, right near the wharf. So I had already met most of these guys and stuff so. Everything went very well. The only troubles I did have were later on. Perhaps, almost 7, 8, 9 years into it when everybody kind of realized that I was pretty, very good at this and bought a bigger fiberglass boat and blah, blah, blah. And no matter what you do, there's always people that are, you know, jealous of anybody doing better than they do and all that sort of stuff because, mostly because they're not willing to put the work into it. They're just lazy about it.

[0:10:02.6]

Which brings up the reason I grew into it so quickly, one of the reasons was just that fact because I had been in a business that was very much like the art world. The musical instrument

world is very much like that in that you can be very good but not reach much from it unless you have acquired some name or, you know, it might be something that's not based on real skill or anything. Just like being a painter, you know, you could be the best painter in the world, and if you don't get, fall into some kind of recognition thing, you're not necessarily rewarded.

[0:11:04.6]

So I went from a business that is not necessarily rewarded on the work that you do to a business that is very much, if you put the work and the effort into it, you get the result. You get paid for it. Which is nice to me, you know. If you're intelligent about it and put the energy into it, you did very well at the time. And you still do now. Hopefully that will continue. We'll find out.

GK: Are you concerned at all about, do you have concerns about the future?

RN: Yes, I've got a lot of concerns about the future. It's changed now because I'll have to say that last year I retired from fishing. So we've gone quickly through the expanse of my fishing career.

GK: Well we can go back.

[0:12:04.1]

RN: Yeah, but, to say that then now I'm not only concerned about it, but that's my driving force in my current activities. A lot of it surrounding that thing, whether it's working on, I work on projects of ocean acidification and ocean planning things still. Politics, which is connected indirectly but very seriously connected I guess. I mean, right next week, I'm having to go to these BOEM meetings to oppose offshore oil and gas drilling proposals from this administration.

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And from there, I might end up going to Washington D.C. on a trip to discuss the NOAA cuts and NOAA budget and things like that which would also adversely affect fishing and things like that. Busy, you know, a lot of directions. But still, pretty much, all on . . . I did join the local land trust, but that's still because it's still connected because they wanted somebody, I became a board member on that because they want somebody connected back with the water and with projects to do with the water and stuff too.

GK: So when you go, have you been to D.C. before?

[0:13:55.8]

RN: Yes, I've been numerous times, I guess. Maybe, I don't know, 6-7 times.

GK: What's the reception like when you're there? How do you, how are you—

RN: Well, they, this is mainly to, for our congressional delegation I visit. Although I have visited offices that, NOAA offices, things like that as well. The reception is usually excellent because they really appreciate hearing from fishermen. And for someone who's a fisherman at the time

or involved in these things. Because, you know, it's a direct connection for them to what's, to the right on the ground as they say, to what some of the things they're working on and doing. Or what these budgetary things mean. So we've talked about budgets for NOAA and we've talked about funding for ocean planning.

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And the need for ocean planning and funding for ocean acidification. And the need to support that and things like that.

GK: What was the oil, that drilling mean for fishermen? I mean, what are you go, when you're going to talk about that?

RN: The drilling I think, I look at it as too, I just got done writing my written comments for the, to send in. And I pretty much said that through my background with working on ocean planning and things that I, and my background coming from that town of Friendship. That town of Friendship has 1,100 people live there. But of those 1,100 people, over 250 of them hold commercial fishing licenses. Now that's an amazing percentage of people that make their living off of one sector, one economic sector in such a small town.

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Besides from places like the coast of Maine, you'll find that repeatedly on these islands on your chart here. And the places where the people live and some of the other small towns that that's repeated up and down the coast of Maine and that type of thing. So if there are any problems on our water, those towns are going to completely lose their economic base. And so that's the important thing. And what I've told the, repeatedly told the ocean planning people is that fishermen basically need two different things. They need a healthy resource to fish on and they need to be able to access that resource.

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And this oil drilling threatens both. Any kind of an oil spill, problems with the industrial base of that is going to threaten that through oil spills and things like that. And it's going to threaten our access to the water. They're certainly, they've got a lot of clout and a lot of money involved in this thing. And they're gonna displace us out on the water to some degree.

[0:17:56.1]

Not only on the water. They're gonna displace us, well, let's say, out here on the water, they're gonna displace a certain amount of fishing effort in the routes to and from their land bases. Which is gonna be a problem. And wherever they're based on land is gonna displace a certain amount of our working waterfront as well. Which is something we're already kind of desperately fighting to maintain a sense of that. Because of the economic values of the waterfront and things like that it's hard to maintain that for, as a sort of a blue collar working base or something.

GK: Can you talk about in Friendship, what, where you have access? I mean, is that, what do you use, what do folks use? Is there a public pier or?

RN: There's one, in Friendship there's one town wharf. Which is right down below my house. And there's a few, quite a few private wharves.

[0:19:14.3]

There's a lot of, there's maybe 7 buyers in the main harbor. And then there was a secondary little bit of a harbor in Hatchet Cove, which is behind the main point of Friendship there. And some wharves on both sides of the main harbor. There's kind of like three different places. So there's a lot of activity there. It's a very busy little place for such a small, it's part of the, if there's negative about fishing in Friendship, it's that it's crowded, you know.

[0:20:04.6]

For the area. For the fishing area there, it's gotten, you know, certainly when you get out to these like, out to Monhegan Island and Matinicus, some of these places, there's a very small number of fishermen per square acre of, it's very dense. It's a lot of competition there. But it's still a nice place. And it does have that sense of, what I said before, that it's got a multi, a little bit of spread out so. I particularly fishes anywhere from, I was one of these western fishermen, so I would follow this chain of islands down to the western, and you'd end up, let's see here, anyhow, maybe the furthest part I'd be would be to the west of Monhegan and these buoys out here.

[0:21:14.3]

GK: How far out is that?

RN: That's probably 15-16 miles, nautical miles, out there. So it's a, kind of a long linear stretch you know. And we've kind of discussed that—

GK: Hold on just a second. That's out next person I just want to make sure he stays there. They keep leaving. Do you want to step out Rebecca and just?

RC: Yeah.

RN: (inaudible)

GK: I know. It happens quick.

RN: It goes by quick.

GK: It's not enough time. Did you, Richard, I want to, did you have a story or anything particular you wanted to say when you were coming in here?

[0:22:00.6]

RN: I think we're pretty much covering a lot of my story. Or the story that I think is important. I don't know, do you have any other directions or something?

GK: No, that's great. I love it, that's great. No, that's wonderful. I just, I think we could talk for hours with everybody.

RN: With me, you know, I'm not the multi-generational fisherman and stuff like that, but I've told people like Rebecca and the Island Institute and all these places where I've come out and done kind of advocacy work and different work like that that I probably might not be here if I was the sort of townie type of person. Because they tend to be slightly squeamish about speaking up and going outside of their shell, out of their town, out of Maine. So it's kind of, I think it was part of what I had to offer, was that knowledge and willingness to talk outside of that immediate realm of fishing in Friendship and stuff.

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Bring part of that outside. And through working with these NGOs and through the government things and through the ocean planning and we did a, I was in a couple of the ocean planning films and things like that. And I've done, also a lot of writing, a lot of op-eds and climate things and blah, blah, blah on and on. That's the kind of things I've retired to. That's basically the story.

GK: That's great. That's great.

[0:24:13.8]

End