

Interviewee Name: Micah Woodcock

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Galen Koch (the First Coast)

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Interview Description:

Micah Woodcock

Stonington, ME

Seaweed Harvester

Interviewed by Galen Koch

Micah Woodcock, a wild seaweed harvester from Stonington, ME, speaks about the reality of the practical, personal, and community sides of harvesting wild seaweed. He discusses his experiences in Maine and his opinions of the future of the seaweed industry and the people influenced by this business.

Collection Description:

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GK: Galen Koch (Interviewer)

MW: Micah Woodcock (Interviewee)

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GK: I will anyway alright say your first and last name for me.

MW: Umm Micah Woodcock

GK: and Micah where are you coming from today?

MW: Oh today, usually if I make it outside of the sort of twenty mile radius I am usually to be found, I stay away gone for at least a couple days. So last night I stayed in Belfast with some friends and then I made the treacherous trip all the way up to Rockport from there and now here we are and then in the winters I live in Sedgwick and the rest of the year I live on a very small island many miles off of Stonington.

GK: Great and tell me a little bit about err the work that you do.

MW: So I wild harvest edible seaweeds or sea vegetables for food uh and I've been doing that for eight years now after apprenticing with a harvester who's seventy three now who's in Washington County who's been harvesting in the same bay for about forty years now. And then I uh, seaweed harvesting, edible seaweed harvesting is regulated as a fishery by the Department of Marine Resources.

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MW: But uh as far as who harvests where that is more self regulated amongst the harvesters. It's a small enough industry that we know each other and we know who's harvesting where and we give each other room to work.

GK: how many people would you say are wild harvesting, do you know the number?

MW: Yeah sure, there's uh well there's five well established companies that are dedicated to wild harvesting and it's important to distinguish between the sea vegetables and the rockweed. The rockweed is a bigger industry and different end use of the products so that's more for animal feed and fertilizer and there the volumes, the amount of biomass, the rates of regeneration are different, it's sort of looked after differently. The structure of the industry is different. Uh with the sea vegetables uh we're taking much relatively small quantities and it's more, like, it's for human consumption and so there's a lot more quality, well quality control in a certain sense. Just uh kind of a little bit of a different situation, but with that, so with the sea veggies there's five companies, four of which are owner operated so you have individuals or families who are harvesting and drying and packaging and marketing and really running all aspects of the business. There's one larger company that buys from some independent harvesters, but that's the bulk of it at this point.

[0:02:13.8]

GK: So are you, is your company, how does your company work? How is it structured?

MW: Uh so I do just about everything, I wear all of the hats and then I have some part time help uh during the harvest season and then some part time help in the off season with uh processing of all the dry seaweeds cause I'm drying all of the seaweed and then it's totally shelf stable so I can deal with it afterwards and I sell and market seaweeds to retail stores and restaurants, online sales, mail order, value added producers, and I've done farmers markets and food fairs and all sorts of things over the years too.

GK: And can you talk a little bit about what it's like to be on a small island in, off of Stonington for the summer? I mean how, who's out there with you?

[0:03:01.3]

MW: So I'm off and on for usually about three seasons. January and February are kinda the only solid months I'm not out there really at all. Otherwise it's kind of a back and forth and mostly out there for the some of the warmer months. Umm it's remarkably different being on a small island where uhh you have a fair amount of control over who comes and goes, versus being on an island with say a hundred people or a few hundred people or a thousand people like a lot of the year round offshore islands in Maine. It's easier in some ways and harder in some ways. I'm the dog catcher and the fire chief and the plumbing inspector and so on and so forth and anything that comes up I kinda have to tend to, there's not too many people. There's some folks on a nearby adjacent island I can call if I get in a pinch but er.

GK: There's a lot of dog catching going on?

MW: Oh there's so much dog, well coyotes, but I mostly let them do their thing. Uh yeah, there used to be sheep on that island, but then the coyotes made their way out and there aren't sheep there anymore.

[0:04:00.8]

GK: Wow

MW: There would be a lot more dog catching involved if we wanted to have sheep back around. Uh but umm yeah there's not a whole lot you can do out there if you want to be there most of the time as far as making a living unless you work in a make, I don't know something that you could just make, unless you were like a writer or something have some kind of work you can transport with yourself anywhere. But as far as er what's out there, er fishing is just about all, and that it's a great spot for me as far as having access to a lot of the quality edible seaweeds.

GK: and so what does a typical I mean what does like a day look like out there, when you're harvesting?

MW: So the bulk usually like the really concentrated work is around the new moon and the full moon, with the bigger tides. So I go out with the tide. So I usually be out harvesting for maybe three hours a

day uh umm an hour and a half or so, two hours on either side of low tide and you go over the tides, it doesn't matter what time of day it is umm two in the morning, three in the morning, four in the morning.

[0:05:05.5]

MW: Usually the earlier, the morning tides more so than the afternoon tides often times for a lot of the year they're bigger. Umm and you're out harvesting for like as I said a few hours and then come back and wait on the tide a little bit and unload everything and then you're hanging everything up to dry or spreading it out on nets, wooden racks and then the seaweed doesn't have a vascular system like terrestrial plants, there's no internal plumbing. It's just one or two cell walls thick that are very uniform and then it photosynthesizes, so it uses the sunlight to produce chlorophyll. Uhh but then it's also just directly absorbing a lot of it's nutritional needs from the ocean water, all the vitamins and minerals. Uhh seaweeds is one of the most mineral rich foods in the world because of all that direct absorption of minerals and concentration from the sea water. The only minerals you can only really easily extract from ocean water are the salts and that's been a human practice for longer than people probably been keeping track.

[0:06:00.9]

MW: Uhh but all the other trace minerals are a little harder to extract. You get tiny bit's of them in the in the salt, but the seaweed hyper accumulates them and makes them available to us in dietary form and then seaweed is also the best dietary source of iodine umm which may have been what you asked me.

GK: No.

MW: Umm You asked me what does a typical day look like.

GK: Yeah.

MW: and were still on that.

GK: Well I think yeah yep still on that.

MW: So, dry, you dry the seaweed and then uh oh sea I was differentiating between land plants and sea plants.

GK: Yes for drying

MW: Yeah, so seaweed is easier to dry seaweed in a certain sense than land plants. It can dry really quickly. So I start the seaweeds outside if the weather's good sometimes they'll dry just on their own in a day outside. Usually I move them into a building where I've got fans and heat and then it's dry in twenty four to thirty six hours and then you can start over. Um So you get to go, you're moving with the tides so around a big week umm you're working go out and be harvesting and hanging seaweed up and then you're taking down seaweed that you harvested the day before and then moving the stuff from that day earlier inside and so the work day is going to be twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours and then you sleep a little bit and then you get up again and head out in the dark and go look for more seaweed.

[0:07:18.1]

GK: and if you didn't do that process, if you didn't go from start to finish, would you, would it rot and be destroyed or what's the consequences?

MW: Um quality yeah would suffer, the extent to which it would suffer would vary depending on ur the species and how dry it was. Seaweed, you need to get it at least sixty seventy percent dry relatively quickly ur and then after that you have a little more leeway. Umm but yeah you'd just have a big slimy pile of seaweed. The primary interaction that most people on the coast have had with seaweed throughout their lives is er, or not most but a lot of people at least, is dead seaweed that's washed up on the beach. That's sort of seaweed at it's worst.

[0:07:58.4]

Um it's like if you lived somewhere where nobody ate lobster but were used to stepping on them dying and decomposing on the beach, that's what our relationship would be like. The rockweed, which is most people are accustomed to isn't used for food a whole lot traditionally. There are some certainly some food uses umm but mostly it's edible the bigger kelps and dulse and Irish moss and things that grow and in more exposed places. The Irish Moss has one of the longest histories of being used in modern Anglo colonial America of any of the seaweeds for food you boil it typically in milk uhh to extract the gel that's in it and make pudding. Umm and it it's a very amazing gelatinous substance that has especially in the modern age almost countless uses in food products and in industrial products. The little dried individual pieces of seaweed look kind of like dried florets of broccoli

[0:08:55.8]

MW: and then occasionally I have sold it to an architectural firm that uses it in their three dimensional models for, to represent trees umm to have it along their little streets and their fake people and their fake buildings and stuff uhh and uhh people have gotten it from me for artistic purposes to make paint or to marble paper and dye things and all kinds of stuff. It's really good for your skin, it's really good for your hair. So those are just some parts in the day of the life of the seaweed harvester.

GK: Yeah, why I mean why do you do it?

MW: Umm well there's a bit of a running joke among some of the wild harvesters, uhh is more of a running question whether seaweed harvesting makes you crazy or crazy people are attracted to seaweed harvesting. And one conclusion is that it's a little bit of both, it attracts people who are a little bit sideways from the get go and that it reinforces that and uhh yeah once you're in the industry you start to meet more and more people who are seaweed crazy and it's, and they love doing it and they have a whole way of life built up around it.

[0:10:06.0]

MW: For me it's when I'm, I've always, I for a long time I guess been interested in things that are overlooked and uhh grew up gardening and my mum grew up on a farm. She's from the get off the land generation so looked around and had enough and said let's get out of here. umm but you know I

grew up gardening and cooking and stuff and got interested in um weeds and things that are overlooked and culinary uses and then that one thing led to another then I in high school met some folk a guy who used to work for the harvester who I apprenticed with, um and heard about it when I was sixteen or so and it always sounded interesting. So a few years later I tracked the old-timer who I work for to learn the ropes down umm and then one thing lead to another, yeah.

[0:10:51.8]

GK: So how, I mean some of the questions we're asking are just like what are your, what are some of the values in the community that you live in that you see as important or something that you think is you know umm should be sustained, a value that should be sustained, or something that should change or ways that you think about the place that you live. And it's interesting for you cause you're living sometimes in a place with no one.

MW: So I'm not out there alone too much, I've got all my seaweed friends. No I uhh usually have people visiting or helping out and stuff umm but I'm the only regular presence there at this point, but I don't know how much I don't think a lot of people would necessarily use this phrase but one that has come to me more recent, well I've been thinking it more recently is self-determination and just as far as people's ability to have a voice in the decisions that affect them, because I think more and more all over the world where you look you see decisions being made that affect a lot of people uhh who don't have much say in it

[0:12:02.3]

MW: and I think that people in, a lot of Maine areas thankfully stubbornly independent and willing to fight for that umm and I think that it takes a lot of different forms. It's not just in the form of government, but as far as economic forces and access to fisheries and licenses and access to the basic things that umm individuals and communities need in order to survive and to do well and housing is especially a big one all along the coast of Maine er where there's yeah, often hear it said that Maine has the oldest housing stock in the country and yeah a lot it's a hard place to keep a house standing and not have a leaky roof and not have this that and the other. Yeah it's a lot of work to keep things alive here in that sense and yeah it feels like it's getting harder just for some of those basic resources that people need.

[0:13:00.1]

GK: What are you see, I mean I ask this because I know, but what do you see as one of the sort of trends around like younger people under thirty five or forty living in these small rural towns I mean there's a lot of people that we know who've come back and what are some of the ways that they're able to do that.

MW: Umm well first off I'd say one of the reasons that people are coming back is because ur well for one thing you need to leave Maine to appreciate it. I think that's been said a hundred times by a hundred different voices, don't need to beat that horse too much more, er but certainly for me, umm and then also a lot of people who leave go to urban areas and cities a lot of cities that have a good standards of living are getting increasingly expensive and so you have to work harder and harder for a lesser quality of life.

[0:14:01.2]

MW: in those environments so it just doesn't make as much sense umm. One thing I think is also is that uhh it's easier to stand out in Maine. If you just if you show up and you do something remarkable and you keep showing up, it's like people are going to support you uhhh because partly because there's less going on. Umm so and I don't mean that in the sense of like oh well it's like a good place for people who failed elsewhere, you can come back home. Umm cause a lot of people that's not why they came back and they're doing things that would be remarkable I think wherever they are doing them, but umm there's more like overt support from the get go in a lot of situations, which is er worth noting. As far as why or how are they succeeding. How are they making..

GK: Or um, what is like needed for that to happen?

MW: Oh

GK: I guess

MW: Umm

[0:14:56.4]

MW: So I have another pet project that isn't formalized yet to I want to start a non-profit for the removal and abolition of bridges in the state of Maine. Idea, maybe not all of them but a lot of them at least and our tag line is "Burning bridges builds community" and we're going to have T-shirts and bumper stickers and stuff, but I think that would be a great place to start to make that easier cause if uhh if it was a lot if it was harder to get around and people were more dependent on boat traffic umm I think it would lead to this remarkable disruption of society in a way that probably definitely shouldn't happen, but I had to say it at least, because there is a part of me that thinks it's a good idea. Umm what was your question?

GK: Well I think that's a good, an interesting segway so. What are people, what does a community need to like keep and attract? Some communities are successful at it, right? There's this question a lot of like attracting young people...

[0:16:00.1]

MW: Yeah

GK: and we happen to have a relationship with the community that has kept and attracted quite a few young people

MW: Yeah

GK: and like why?

MW: Mhm

GK: I don't know.

MW: Umm, I mean it's easy to say that it's because it's so unique, that it's a really spectacular beautiful place and umm that's also when you look at it every day, that's not something that you think about in a way. It gets obnoxious listening to people who just are passing through talking about how amazing it is, and how remarkably beautiful it is and you're so lucky, it's like you don't really know what you're talking about but thank you, I agree in a certain sense, but they are not seeing it with the same eyes, but as far as why. Umm I think part of it is the stubbornness of people who care about it enough to put up with some of the difficulties and everything is a trade off. If you move to a city, it's a trade-off, there's things, a lot of things you go without if you leave Maine.

[0:16:58.7]

MW: Umm uhh for me I was born in a totally different part of Maine and it's different being here, up there, I mean I don't, any other, probably every other person I could stop to and talk to would know somebody I'm related to. Whereas where I live now that's not the case, which is a really profound difference, even if you're from fifty miles down the road umm it makes a big difference being sort of nested in this place where you are have I mean you don't even know who you're related to. You're probably interacting with people on a regular basis you're related to you don't even know, umm 'cos you haven't figured it out, but.

GK: and you moved away from that?

MW: Oh yeah yeah, I, my parents dragging me all over the world as a kid so I've lived lots of places and then did a bunch of traveling on my own to really see what was what all around America and then came back to Maine really by accident. I wasn't "Oh I'm going to move back to Maine," I came back to visit and liked what I saw as an adult and stuck around.

[0:18:00.0]

MW: Umm

GK: Do you have any concerns about like the future of your fishery?

MW: Yeah definitely. Umm I think it could change as far as seaweed goes, uh seaweed is one of the most ur, arguably one of the most resilient organisms on the planet. Seaweed people come and they refer to it as a plant. Seaweed technically is not a plant at all, the scientific term would be marine macroalgae, which is a fancy way to say big algae that grows in salt water in the ocean, but uhh, there's some fun facts about seaweed are that seaweed was the first organism on this planet to figure out or invent sex. If you want to put it that way, seaweed pioneered sexual reproduction uhh prior to that it was all cell division from what I understand according to the fossil records, that was one point three billion years ago and seaweed predates the existence of terrestrial plants by about eight hundred million years.

[0:18:56.6]

MW: Uh so, seaweed is definitely not a plant from a scientific perspective. It has been around here a lot longer than we have and I think it will be here long after we're gone. Umm as far as and then especially with intertidal seaweeds, the intertidal is kind of one of the most rugged, exposed, difficult

places to survive as an organism on the planet. Umm and I jokingly refer to it as navy seal boot camp for marine organisms and if you can survive there you can survive anywhere. Umm so the seaweeds especially in the intertidal are a lot more rugged than the subtidal seaweeds as far as temperature fluctuations, and salinity and water and drying out and they don't even know when they're dead. You can harvest a bunch of rockweed and have throw it in the truck and drive a hundred miles down the road and the seaweed would still think it was just another day at low tide. Whereas the subtidal seaweeds you take, you cut those, they start to freak out and release all kinds of slimes and umm so on and so forth, they know that the gig is up.

[0:19:57.5]

MW: As far as the future of the seaweed industry, there's kind of three, what I refer to as three somewhat independent seaweed industries. There's what I do, the wild harvesting, the edible seaweeds. There's the rockweed harvest um which is a bigger industry and now there's more people aquaculturing or farming seaweeds and uhh if you based on the amount of media attention it's got, you would think that seaweed farming was like uhh I don't even know what to compare it to, er, just you'd get the impression that seaweed farming is a really large industry in Maine and in the North East. I tell people I harvest seaweed and they all conclude that I am a millionaire and have a second home in Hollywood and this that and the other, none of which is true, yet. Umm but uhh is still even the aquaculture is still a pretty nascent industry umm still earning it's figuring itself out and with what I'm doing it's not really a growing industry at this point which I'm happy for.

[0:21:01.2]

MW: Even the scalability of the wild harvested edible seaweed in Maine is pretty small. There's room for a little more sustainable harvest, but honestly not that much. Um it's always I think going to be a relatively small fishery and I think that's one of it's strengths and in a certain sense that gives me confidence, more confidence for the future because with the smaller number of people realistically it can be easier to work things out amongst each other. Uhh with the really established wild harvesters er we know each other and we know who's harvesting where and we have invested interest in keeping the peace. If I come step on your toes and harvest in your area you can come do the same to me. So umm, it's been people have gotten along remarkably well in that regard over the past, er and certainly in the time that I've been in the industry and then over the past forty years from the stories I've heard from other harvesters and the people that I learned from, so that gives me hope. Umm. Yeah.

[0:21:58.0]

GK: But those, those three industries that you mentioned, those three sort of branches have different concerns and, and different

MW: Yeah yeah definitely.

GK: and you as a wild harvester there's not you're not as worried about that particular branch, like do you have concerns about the other ones?

MW: Oh sure yeah and I uhh I live mostly involved in the, I'm really pretty limited to the wild harvesting of the sea vegetables and I say that over and over again and it's complete ___ to hammer it

home that the different umm but I'm definitely am interested in the health of the others and also I may want to participate in those other sectors too at some point in the future and even if I don't, my friends and neighbors might. Um. Some of the things that there's with the aquaculture specifically I think, one of the really important nitty gritty details to pay attention to is that there is a level of legal ownership that is specific to aquaculture

[0:23:01.9]

MW: as far as leases that can be set up and then they can be owned either by an individual or also by an entity, a corporation or business or so on and so forth and then they can be bought and sold. In Maine you can't buy and sell a lobster license. You don't have any kind of legal access or restricted right to lobster bottom, where you can set your traps. Um. That's determined by tradition and more on a community level and I think bureaucracies and organizations like DMR can provide a framework within which er community based management can occur er but you need a certain level of involvement and engagement umm on the, along the waterfront and on the communities as far as people knowing who they, who each other are. Umm in order for those kind of structures to work umm and I think there's a lot of value in that. I

[0:23:57.8]

MW: don't want to see micromanaging from uhh bureaucracies to try and sell off every little problem. I don't think that's an effective or even affordable or even realistic way to try and get people to work out their differences. Um so as far as ownership goes, yeah I harvest seaweed and legally there is nothing to stop other people from coming and harvesting seaweed on top of me, but there are other structures, social and economic, that make that not particularly attractive proposition and for now that's enough. I'm certainly open to more regulatory conversations uh and we may need those going forward, but we will see. With the aquaculture it has way more potential scalability. I could start a seaweed aquaculture company and start getting leases and then sell them all, bundle them and sell them to a hedge fund in New York or to a Chinese blackwater aquaculture company or some such thing and there's nothing to stop me from doing that.

[0:25:01.6]

MW: Umm there are some limits on how many acres of aquaculture one particular company could own but there's nothing to stop them from just starting another shell company uhh that could hold title to those sorts of things. So as far as the enclosure of the commons er and the effect that that could have on traditional fisheries uhh I'm really concerned about the future of aquaculture, but it's not growing in leaps and bounds enough that I'm necessarily losing sleep over it. I've heard it's, I think it was Mark Twain who said that "Those who are inclined to worry have the widest selection in history." Uh so there's plenty of things you could worry about, I try to be strategic about what I actually worry about, uhh pick the biggest most pressing problems umm to think about and then but also especially I'm a big, er, I'm strongly in favor of learning how to do a good job managing common pool resources rather than assuming that privatizing everything is the most efficient or sustainable way.

[0:26:02.2]

MW: Which is why there's this whole there's the idea of the tragedy of the commons umm about

which term that was coined by an academic related to grazing rights and unlimited access to pasture and inevitably it would be overgrazed and it was used as an argument to justify privatization. I think it's a false dichotomy, you can have over harvesting, bad management with common resources and with er heavily uhh totally enclosed privatized resources, so I'm wary of those, of that false dichotomy um and then also a lot of people of European descent in this country or maybe not a lot of people at this point but certainly some people are here as a direct result of enclosures of common resources that happened in England in the so called old world and that's why we're here today and we came here to get away from that and if we're replicating those same structures and systems that we were running away from four hundred years later because we forgot about it and we don't have to think about it any more I think uh yeah.

[0:27:02.5]

MW: were uhh just sowing the seeds of our own cultural destruction and that's part of, I think that's part of the reason I'm really pushing for uhh exploration of uhh interplanetary foods and uh clearly this we the gig is going to be up here sooner or later uhh.

GK: Interplanetary?

MW: Well specifically, there's the whole, I, there's, see a few years ago there's all this hubub about how seaweed is the next big thing and um you can have a distinction between sea vegetables and terrestrial vegetables, land vegetables, which are just boring and old at this point umm and that got me thinking well what about extraterrestrial vegetables. You've got all these people who want to go to Mars and blast off and Tesla their way to a new colony in outer space and there must be vegetables there and if not, maybe we can plant some. So I think extraterrestrial vegetables are the next big thing, that's uh what my mind is on.

[0:28:01.2]

GK: That might be the seminar next year at the um Maine Fishermen's Forum or MOFGA .

MW: Honestly, I think it's going to take more than a year for that to catch on, but ur.

GK: On that note.

MW: but uhh keep an eye out.

GK: On that note, I'm going to take a photo of you.

[0:28:18.0]

End