

Interviewee Name: Dave Cousens and Edwin McKie

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Corina Gribble (College of the Atlantic)

Interview Location: Rockland, ME

Date of Interview: 03-02-2019

Interview Description:

In this interview, Dave Cousens—a lobsterman from Waterman's Beach, South Thomaston, ME—and Edwin McKie—a lobsterman from Bay of Fortune, Prince Edward Island, Canada—speak about the social and legal differences between Canadian and U.S. lobster fishing and the projects, such as meetings and the Eastern Maine Skippers Program, that they have worked on together. After meeting sometime between 1998 and 1999, Cousens and McKie have worked together to increase communication and education on the differences between the lobster industry in the U.S. and Canada.

Collection Description:

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019 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:

Cousens, Dave, and Edwin McKie, Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019 Oral History Interview, March 2, 2019, by Natalie Springuel and Corina Gribble, 13 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcribed By: Ela Keegan

Start of DAVE_COUSENS_EDWIN_MCKIE_VMFF2019

[0:30:54.5]

NS: Natalie Springuel

CG: Corina Gribble

GK: Galen Koch

DC: Dave Cousens

EM: Edwin McKie

[00:00:00.0]

NS: Okay we are now recording so I'm going to keep moving this thing around when you guys are talking.

EM: Back uh back a long time ago in another.

NS: Wait, hold on, let's get your name.

EM: Edwin McKie.

NS: Can you spell it for me?

EM: M-C-K-I-E.

NS: Great, and Edwin is?

EM: E-D-W-I-N.

NS: Great and where are you from?

EM: From uh Bay Fortune, PEI. It's a suburb of Surrey (laughs).

NS: And you?

DC: David Cousens from Waterman's Beach, South Thomaston, Maine.

NS: And can you spell Cousens for us?

NS: C-O-U-S-E-N-S.

NS: Great, thank you. Okay, back to what you were saying.

EM: A long time ago uh there was a a senator here in Maine brought in some legislation and that affected that was going to affect the lobster men in both Canada and the United States. In Canada we has we seen the people in the United States going in with all kind of traps and fishing year round and catching so many lobsters that we could never make money. And uh so anyway we uh, that's how I met Dave our our uh consulate in Boston invited—us invited us down to uh talk about about lobsters and so we flew down to Boston a few of us. We're sitting in the room in the consulate and I'm sitting down here with these Americans, fishing

all them traps, trying to starve us to death (laughs). Dave can take over from there 'cause he was thinking something a little different looking across the table.

DC: So we went in and we were saying, "God damn Canadians, I mean they are they're catching all the lobsters just to make our price go down." It's like cause our dealers were telling us you know the Canadians are just loading up on Lobsters and we got to lower the price, lower the price. So well like friggin' Canadians, they're making our life miserable, so we started talking and after about five minutes and I think a rum and coke or something we went, "These guys are just like us, they're not the problem."

[0:02:02.7]

DC: Anyway I think—well Edwin I think can say, you guys aren't the problem. So we decided that we would try to solve the problem. So we've made friendships and stayed in touch and we decided we'd put out a price report from all the places along Maine and Canada, whether they were fishing or not, cause that was key, because our dealers were telling us "Those guys in Prince Edward Island are nailing the lobsters." Well come to find out in real life they weren't even fishing. It was closed (laughs).

EM: Dave called me up and I said, "Well, not really Dave we're not catching any lobsters," where I was standing was about the 10th of May before we could get a boat out of the harbor (laughs).

DC: So we'd been told for the last 10 days the reason the price dropped May 1st was the PEI fishermen are just killing it. So I called Edwin and no. Where I stand we're not fishing so needless to say I called a few dealers and let them know what I thought and it wasn't the prettiest of conversations and we probably didn't get off as best of friends, but we started publishing it in our newsletter and you could call if you wanted a price. That was before electronics and social media and all that stuff. Now there are no secrets, but back then there were secrets. And I thought you know that was probably the best thing we did and I think that was 1989 or.

EM: 88 or 89.

DC: 88 or 89.

EM: But back in the days of fax machines, it was almost like smoke signals (laughs).

NS: So you guys have been—

DC: Friends since then.

NS: Friends since then.

DC: Yep, yep. I've been up to his place fishing, he's been down to my place. We've been to a lot of meetings in Canada. Which . . .

EM: Some of them we shouldn't talk about.

DC: Yeah, right (laughs).

NS: So you said that you figured out that you guys weren't the problem. So what were some of the problems you were identifying?

DC: The problems were we were being used against each other by our dealers. They had the same thing in the reverse like they say in the fall, I mean the spring, when those guys would start fishing. Well we got to lower, we can't pay you much because the their nailing them in America.

[0:04:06.1]

DC: You know Maine is just killing the lobsters. We weren't catching anything I mean we don't have spring fishing generally speaking and so all it was we were being played against each other and we got smart enough to figure out no, it's not going to work that way. We're going to put out the truth, what's going on and so consequently the dealers weren't too pleased for five or six years, but they got over it.

EM: Yeah we there'd be a was probably every Wednesday or Thursday a fax in roughly how many pounds were coming in if you were fishing and roughly about what the price was. It wasn't really it wasn't cut to the fractions of the cent or right exactly to the pound but it was a close enough average that and we had people in Newfoundland that were part of it too and uh uh it just kept things..

DC: Honest.

EM: Honest and open and it kept it kept a lot of these stories that get started at a hockey rink or at a coffee shop from uh going out of control you know and we'd uh we just makes for better better relations in the through the concrete. If you've got a politician that gets in a room and with that doesn't know any better with a bunch of fishermen that don't know any better it's hard to say what [inaudible] (laughs).

DC: Never good.

EM: Never good.

DC: So we just bypassed the politicians cause we we said we could solve all these problems we got, half a gallon of rum, we could solve them, no politicians.

EM: And we done that one time in Orono, we put uh there was that was really the start of the lobster institute I believe.

DC: Yep.

EM: But we came to Orono and there was there was everyone was a little tense, there was a lot of people from Canada that, I don't know if we should be here. I think the same thing was going on in in Maine. We had a CBC reporter that was with us that was a real real character anyway. We ended up in the we had the whole meeting in a hotel room the night before the meeting (laughs).

[0:06:04.0]

EM: There was like there was quite a bit of fluid uh refreshments (laughs). The next morning everyone was friends (laughs). Have a coffee, telling jokes. It was it was done.

DC: It was done, it was done. The meeting was over with. We'd solved the problems and we were all having a good time and everyone was sitting around like "Holy shit that was easy."

EM: It's so important to have people going back and forth that's where our with what Dave started with the young fishermen coming to Canada. It's good to get them up and have them see something. I just wish we'd get more Canadians coming this way or stopping here on their way to Dominican Republic or wherever they're going, Mexico (laughs).

NS: So you've been, you're you're part of the group who's been bring, sending young fishermen—

DC: Yep.

NS: Up to the PEI? Tell us about that.

DC: I I was I was I've been president of the Lobster [inaudible]. I was from 1988-89 to last year 2018 and I've been friends with Edwin since we first met and so we got talking and Patrice our executive director was like you know we should educate these guys. 'Cause I've always been advocating that you can do more with less I mean you know the American way is bigger bigger bigger, more, more more and we got a problem with that right now and so we said let's show 'em how they fish. Show the kid, the younger people how they do it in Canada, cause it's a totally different fishery. It's a two month fishery for most of Canada. Um Nova Scotia has a six month fishery but their trap limits are anywheres from 250 to I think Nova Scotia's the highest one which is 375. Well we were at unlimited before 96 and then we went to 800 in 98 and so we were more than double the trap limit up there.

[0:08:02.7]

DC: And they used a lot less bait. They caught the same amount of lobsters in a lot shorter period of time and it just was much more economically efficient how they did stuff. And so when we had plenty of bait and we had you know fishing was going on the upswing all the time, no one was interested in being more fishing. But now with Wales and bait shortage all of a sudden it's looking a lot more attractive that we have to do another plan. So starting I think five years ago and we've been two trips. We took a group of 20 or 25 young fishermen that showed that that were fishing but showed an interest. We schooled them in biology for a day (coughs). Basic lobster biology, we had the scientists come in talk to them. Then we schooled them in management then we schooled them in promotion of the product. And so then we took them to Canada and we went fishing, Edwin lined up, Edwin did the work up there and he lined up fishermen that we could stay with. Each kid stayed with a fisherman and went fishing with them and it was different I mean everyone had a little different operation but the premise were the same. They were hauling 270 traps or so every day, you know not letting a five or six night set not like we do, but on them every day. And I can cause I'd been up there fishing I can remember the first reaction when the kid when we all got back together at the end of the day, we meet at a restaurant and the—their eyes are like this wide and they would you know they were all having a drink, well some I guess we're too young to drink but the older guys were having a drink [inaudible] (laughs). And uh they were like oh

my God, I couldn't believe the lobsters they were catching. They hauled 270 traps, and they said they hauled them yesterday. And they didn't put hardly any bait on I mean they were 1 fish per trap or a little amount of fish and they were like "Oh my God," they couldn't believe it. And so it we said this is a worthwhile thing. So then I think I think from Edwin's point of view the guys had fun with our with our fishermen too.

[0:10:01.5]

EM: There was it was some of them like some of them like Robbie talks to uh to young Trip all the time and uh other other ones.

NS: Robbie is a fisherman in PEI?

EM: One of the guys in our harbor. And um I talked to uh um Genevieve?

DC: Yep, Genevieve.

EM: Yep and she uh talks to the guy she was out with on occasion to keep up and stuff and that's that was the whole goal like from my end was to have uh—the if we can't get them get the guys from PEI to come south at least we can get them talking to the people here.

NS: Uh tell me a little bit more about bait. How is it that you're catching plenty of lobsters with less bait?

EM: Well you have with with the trap limits we haul our traps every day. So we're probably, if you look at the five day five day set, we probably put the same amount of bait in our traps over the five days, but we only have the in our case 273. There's other in other zones that have 300, but hauling them every day, you're traps aren't coming up empty and—

NS: And are you—uh is the bait shortage that we're experiencing here going to impact you as well?

EM: Oh probably when there's problems in the fisheries it always effects, it's going to drive the price of bait up here so we'll being good entrepreneurs on the North of the border they'll like find a way to shove our price up a little bit too (laughs).

DC: But see we're baiting our tra—we have 800 so we have to bait them for a four—three or four night set. So we're using a lot of bait per trap. Where I I went out with you and I've been out with a couple other guys up there using like 1 fish per trap. And they may not change it everyday. That fish may bait, may fish for three days, then they change the fish. So we're taking anywhere from 500 to some guys are taking 2000 pounds of bait a day, these guys are taking-

[0:12:00.3]

EM: If you took 200 pounds of bait you'd lose a lot. You're taking a lot of bait.

DC: But just by hauling them every day you don't need the bait.

EM: Back in April we started getting around first before you guys went and raised you caliper size and had the catches go through the roof—

(NS laughs.)

EM: We were catching almost the same amount of lobsters on Prince Edward Island. Uh 1200 fishermen with uh trap limits and seasons as the state of Maine was in the whole in their whole summer. So its it's changed the last, we're we're catching. We used to be catching around 20,000,000 pounds and we're some of our we're getting a little bit smarter and we're raising or caliper size a bit. It's showin' with 38 million pounds last year through 40 million something like that [inaudible] 100 and 20 or 30.

DC: See they still have a smaller lobster than we do. Their calipers length is what inch and 3/4?

EM: Yeah, inch and three quarters.

DC: Yeah and ours is two and a quarter. So each individual lobster weighs more here. So we we always say it, if they go to our calipers length they will bury us in lobsters (laughs).

EM: We bring in the same amount of animals we'd see uh a big difference in the amount of pounds we bringing in. And hopefully the younger generation'll catch onto that. That could change the old guys.

NS: So uh when you guys go out on each other's boat what else is different?

DC: Size, I mean size. we don't dare, I don't dare pick lobsters because I'm used to see lobsters that are my size. So I know there's been a lot of kids that has jumped on the first trap they said oh I want to help, they start throwing lobsters, they guys are like wooah wait those are keepers, don't throw those overboard. Cause you know their size is smaller so you know it that's different but um other than that. They have the same boat, same engines, same electronics, they're just more efficient than we are (laughs).

NS: Uhuh. So what do you want to bring from Canada to Maine.

EM: Be more fishing. Fish smarter not harder. I made that up by the way a few years ago and we had t-shirts done (laughs).

NS: I saw then today, yep. I saw someone wearing one, yep.

EM: Yep.

DC: No I mean I just, we're, in Maine I think in 2009 or 2012 we used over a 150 thousand ton of metric bait to catch I don't back then it was 95, 100,000,000 pounds. These guys in Canada, all of Canada, not PEI, used 1 th—I think 1/4 the bait and 1/4 of the time and caught more lobsters than we did with one third the traps. So I mean who's and they did in like record time. I'm not advo—I'm not adv—I've never been advocating for seasons, because I think seasons you rush all your lobsters in one small time frame and economically that can hurt you. Whereas, if you do it over the course of a year the market stays steadier. And we actually got a pretty great relationship with Canada. We don't capture lobsters in the Spring,

March. They supply the market and then they don't fish in the summer and the fall much. They've got one or two place open but minor minor amounts landed, and so we complement each other. You know we're done catching lobsters the middle of November mostly for the big [inaudible] lobsters. these guys come on in Nova Scotia, supply the holiday market. So, it's a great relationship between Canada and the US, it's just I've always said why do we use so much resource. You know bait used to be cheap so it wasn't really that big a deal. I mean we had the herring, it was four cents a pound of the boat. Now it's I don't even know what it is this year off the boat.

[0:16:00.8]

But a tray of bait used to be five dollars. Last year I paid 65 dollars for it. This year they're telling us gonna at least double or more than that. So you're talking 100 dollars, more than 100 dollars a tray of bait. You don't want to be using 10 trays of bait a day, that's 1000 dollars. You know that's a lot of money. So we need to be more efficient you know, whether it's trap limits or you know smaller like these bait saver bait bags that you're lookin' at. But we don't need 800 traps, I mean I've always said that, I think we need uh come down and now with bait and whales we're going to be coming down. And a lot of people aren't good with that (laughs).

NS: Yeah. I want to talk about whales in a minute but first I want to ask you the same question.

EM: Well I'm hoping we can bring uh—get the skipper program started in the schools and I, one of the things we're lacking in the fishing industry is is real in the school systems is um is economic courses. People, it's no good to make 1000 dollars if it cost ya 1500 dollars to make it and for kids getting into it or younger people they'd have taught a little more economics in in there with the skipper program I see and the um other school program that started here um people get the chance to see other opportunities that are there with a little education. Like I was—I was I was one of the ones that was looking out the window as soon as the sun was shining. After grade 9 twice, I'm out of here [inaudible] (laughs).

EM: We don't I it really I I probably be a millionaire if I'd stayed in school, learned a little economics and a few things that uh that could be brought from what's going on here.

NS: Yeah, that's a great program, it really is fabulous. I know you had a couple skipper students come up.

EM: Yes.

NS: And visit you.

EM: Yep

NS: Tell us a little bit about that.

[0:17:59.7]

EM: It was it was uh really good, the kids got a chance to see see how things worked and and they're kids with student license. So they got a chance to see us with you know putting on one

fish and and uh it there some of the things we have make life a lot easier, like the trap landers so it's uh.

NS: Did the uh US skippers get to meet any young lobstermen?

EM: No they did not. Not not the school kids not this time, because everything is rushed. It was I talked to Valerie here last year um in a meeting and we talked a couple of times on the phone and they—the teachers from the kids arrived and we made it happen it just uh just the way it worked.

NS: Yeah, so can we talk about whales for a little bit, um and turn—

DC: No (laughs).

GK: A net full of whales.

NS: Well let's go there anyways (laughs). If we can. Mostly—

EM: It may cost you a couple of drinks (laughs).

NS: Fair enough. Um I'm mostly just curious what can be learned across the borders related to whales and what's been happening in the last couple years with the whales sort of evidently moving north. What can we learn from each other on that?

EM: Coming here every year the whales were a problem and an Patrice and Andy were saying, whales bothering you? and I said not really but are you interested in them. Of course we're interested. It's not really, they're not really showing up. Well shouldn't really say that, because that the next that same summer they did show up in big numbers and people they had to start getting on board, but it was something we hadn't really heard from right where we are. Now they had been it was on the radar in the Bay of Fundy for some years, but there's a lot that can be learned from working together back and forth. We can we can uh—

[0:20:03.5]

DC: Save 'em.

EM: Save 'em.

NS: Yeah, yeah.

EM: I think the fishermen will do whatever it takes to make it work.

NS: Yeah, I know you guys in Canada I think or in Campobello. Have an incredible group of guys—

EM: Yes.

NS: Who are working on disentanglement.

EM: Yeah, but we had in Canada in that bad year, we had uh a big increase in the snow crab quota and there was a lot of temporary permits put it that hadn't really fished crab and there was a lot of I think substandard gear used. There may have been [inaudible] rope and they needed. Cause it hasn't, because the whales had been there before and they hadn't been tangled.

NS: Do you have fishermen that lobster part of the year and crab part of the year, or do they tend to be pretty separate?

EM: They—they'll go snow crab fishing and catch the snow crab and then go lobster fishing.

NS: They do, so they're in both.

EM: And then there's some some that have different season. They're snow crab in the spring and then fish the fall season.

NS: Um want to say anything about whales or not—

DC: Well—

NS: Okay.

DC: We need we need to work with environmental groups and save the whales. I mean it's not a winner for us to be killing right whales. That's why down here we've been working for 20 years to save whales I mean to do what we can. We put breakaways on, sinking ground lines, you know we've done a lot but you know there's only 400 of them now, so one death is not good. So we we are going to be driven by the ESA and uh marine mammal act to deal with it and we have dealt with it but it's going to be driving the next year it's going to drive in the law.

[0:22:01.3]

There's two lawsuits and we've been, we're now faced with jeopardy which means that if National Fishery Service that when they do they biological assessment they have to determine whether we jeopardize the right whale population and before we have skated by by not being found in jeopardy, but I doubt that will happen after 2017. And even though snow crab got the majority of them that year, it's fixed gear and we do have you know rope on whales. Maine traps and rope have been taken off, not on too many deaths, but on entanglements, when they've been disentangled. So we know we have some problem, so we are going to have to deal with it head on because two lawsuits and the jeopardy finding. If we're found in jeopardy it means national fishery service can pretty much do what—they can shut the fishery down if they want. So we have to try to avoid that by coming up with something that will definitely help the whales and still try to keep us in business. And so that's the tightrope we're walking right now. And it's gonna be hard because we're looking' at a whole host of things on the table and it's going to be I think decided in the next four to five months and it's who knows. I don't know what it's going to be, but it's going to be something. You know probably a combination of trap limits and weaker rope I, if I was to guess ahead of time right now that's what I would guess.

NS: Um I was gonna ask you both of you sort of a follow up question which is related to what you were just saying, which is what is your concern for the future?

DC: I got three sons doing this, fish—lobster fishing. I've got a lot of concerns, climate change is by biggest worry because Gulf of Maine is warming faster than any other body of water except one in Japan. So we're in the 99th percentile. A lot of things that's good, but in warming water that's not good, so we have that to worry about, we have bait shortages, we have the whale problem.

[0:24:02.7]

So we have a lot of things [inaudible]. We can probably solve the bait issue with less traps. We can probably solve the whale issue with gear modification and less traps. We can't stop climate change and so that's my biggest fear is that in 20 or 30 years it—the Gulf of Maine may not be a hospitable place for a lot of lobsters. I mean I don't think they're going to go extinct but it may not be a via—commercially viable fishery. And that worries me. I've seen massive changes in the last 40 years you know and you're not supposed to see geological changes like that in decades, you're supposed to see 'em in centuries or millenium, not in 10s of years. So we'll see.

EM: Well unlike Dave I have three girls, they are business trees. They're city, they like to live in the big cities, so I'd like to be able to sell my fish out there, but I really like lobsters and I hope to live a long life and I want to eat lobsters (laughs). But one of the, one of the biggest concerns I have is the ocean pollution, like the plastic in the water. It's really it's it's sad to go to the beach and see gloves and lobster bands and broken up traps on the beach and uh that that's really a it's a problem, bait bags. It uh just I don't know how we get that cycle broken, but uh it's definitely a problem. And in Canada we have some, we have communities in the Saint Lawrence river that are still, still have to have they're they're uh sewage systems upgraded. It's uh it's um problematic to look at these things.

NS: Yeah and uh what do you hope for your grandkids if and when you have any?

[0:26:00.1]

EM: Oh I have grandkids.

NS: Yep.

EM: They like to go swimming from the boat, but I don't think they'll ever want to go fishing there.

NS: Nobody's in the fishery?

EM: Not yet no.

NS: Yeah.

EM: They uh, I just always told the kids they should get a business degree. Didn't care what they done after they got a business degree, but even if you're a bum in the street you're going to be a better bum in the street if you know how to handle your money (laughs).

NS: Yeah. Do any of you guys have questions?

CG: Um I guess how would you approach this idea exchange across nation boundaries between Canadian fishermen and U.S. fishermen, particularly Maine fishermen when there's still a sense of false rivalry between those two fishing communities?

DC: I think you do it the way we did it. You take younger people who aren't as biased as us old farts and send them up there and let them see for themselves. Because there really is, there is no rivalry really we complement each other. So our board of directors on the Maine Lobster Association now I think has about four or five young kids that that went on the first program. They were so interested they wanted to get involved so I see it being great dividends. So I don't think it's a problem of rivalry, I think it's a problem of education and outreach. Let's educate ourselves. I think together we can do a lot of good things on the whale issue on pollution issues. Um hopefully Canada can drag us along on climate change, cause we seem to be a little slow in that last regard the last couple years down here for some unknown reason (laughs).

EM: And that's exactly my thought too. If we took the, we used the community at Grand Manan and one of the communities here in Maine and if the school kids were going back and forth. If we get that skippers program started up there in a small island high school it uh could change the attitudes.

[0:28:07.1]

EM: and you'd have I don't know Frida says they don't use Facebook anymore, but you'd have kids uh that—

DC: It would be twittering (laughs).

EM: Electronic pen pals you know, so they'd know what was taking place and be there'd be more comradery.

NS: So I know you've been coming to the forum for a long time. What what makes you keep coming back? What do you love about the forum?

EM: Well I like I like to come down to the forum and know about the whales and know about sitting on seminars and when I go home and these topics come up you can say "No no that's not that way it is." You can really annoy the enemy with—

DC: With knowledge (laughs).

EM: With knowledge.

NS: That's great, that's great. Do you have any questions?

GK: No that was great, that was great. I have lots of questions but uh I think that's great. Thank you guys.

NS: Thank you guys. Any any parting thoughts?

GK: I still want to hear about um how bad it was, your bad stories.

DC: They weren't bad, they were fun stories.

EM: They're sort of funny

GK: Bad behavior.

EM: It uh you have to really trust our rubber arms a lot.

GK: I know we'll get it some some year when you're like—

NS: We're going to fire this up in the bar tonight.

GK: In 20 years, when the stakes for you are really low.

EM: See people say the truth with set you free. That's bullshit the truth the truth'll get you in trouble. Divorce will set you free (laughs).

NS: Man. Well thanks so much guys.

GK: Thank you, That's great

DC: I remember one meeting we had in Halifax there was a whole bunch of us and Edwin I don't know there was probably five or six Americans [inaudible]. And Klaus Sonnenberg flew us out.

[0:29:59.9]

From, picked us up in Wiscasset? Flew us up in his airplane to Halifax and so we're having this meeting and Edwin decides I look something like the ambassador to Canada from the United States so he jumps up on the bar and he says "Hey guys I'd like to introduce the ambassador of the United States, we have him here tonight so it's a real honor." And I mean he does it so well I'm going like "Holy shit." Yeah! Dave Cousens right here and so there was so many drinks coming our way that night I mean I I understood why he did it after he did it. I was like this is awesome, you go to a bar and everyone just buys you drinks, so—that was just a little tidbit (laughs).

GK: Just a taste. Thank you. Just a taste. In the future we'll—

DC: Ah we'll forget them by then (laughs).

EM: Old age—

GK: Thank you guys.

EM: Old age just sneaking up on us you know.

GK: We're going to take a quick photo.

[0:30:54.5]