

Interviewee Name: Rodman Sykes

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

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch (The First Coast) and Corina Gribble (College of the Atlantic)

Interview Location: Rockland, ME

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Interview Description:

Rodman Sykes, a commercial fisherman from Point Judith, RI, begins his interview by talking about the changes in how young people get into the fishing industry. He focuses on how the advancement of young fishermen from low to high positions is diminishing, which is putting pressure on generations beginning to retire. Secondly, Sykes voices his worries and the foreseeable impacts of the small wind farm off Block Island and the planned 2020 offshore wind farm off Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Ela Keegan

Start of RODMAN_SYKES_VMFF2019

[0:24:16.1]

GK: Galen Koch
CG: Corina Gribble
RS: Rodman Sykes

[0:00:00.0]

GK: So this is on and you'll just, I'll just have you say your first and last name.

RS: First name is Rodman, R-O-D-M-A-N, and Sykes, S-Y-K-E-S.

GK: And Rodman, where are you from?

RS: I'm from Rhode Island. I fish out of Point Judith, Rhode Island.

GK: And.

RS: And.

GK: So you're a commercial fishermen?

RS: Yes, I've been a commercial fisherman. Well this is my 50th year. I graduated from high school in 1970 and went right into it. Uh 3rd generation on my mothers side, my grandfather and uh three uncles were fishermen. And I'm the last and nobody but, nobody behind me is going to get into the fishing business. I don't believe except. I got 1 nephew if he didn't stop paying attention in school he's gonna to have to be a fishermen. But hopefully he will smarten up. But uh yes, this is all I've ever done.

GK: So what sort of fishing are you doing? What's your boat like?

[0:00:57.4]

RS: I have a dragger, uh 68 foot, fiberglass uh trawler out of Point Judith and uh two men crew, well three of us all together. Two guys have worked with me since 1984, its my second port I've owned and these guys have been with me through the whole time, 34 years. Uh James and Jerry and the last few years we've uh been targeting skates for lobster bait mostly and ground fish.

GK: Oh wow.

RS: Plus down there we have other things like fluke and scalp and uh you know things like that also come in up and that when we're and scallops things like that and it all adds up to something. You know a little of this, a little of that, and put we mostly target the skates.

[0:01:55.8]

GK: And is that a newer um market for you or has that been pretty consistent, the skates, for lobster bait?

RS: It's been. I did it on and off for many years uh other times the year we would go wading fish or squid fishing and things like that. But as we got older it's kind of a, it's an easier way to fish for for a bunch of old guys. That we can do it uh um on a short day. A short day for us is 12 hours so, so. You know we leave the dock at three and we're usually all done at three.

GK: Wow.

RS: Three or four o'clock so uh it's at a good pace and the boat, my boat works very well with just two of us aboard, so every third day somebody takes a day off. So we can rotate the crew 10 months of the year and the winter time we try all three of us be there because, just because of the weather and the fact that we have to go farther away to catch fish.

[0:03:00.1]

GK: Are you taking um trips for multiple days sometimes?

RS: We haven't in a long time. We usually tied up somewhere [inaudible] sometimes we would go to Block Island, which is just off the coast. It's just a little quicker than going home if we want to fish the next day. But mostly we come home. That's the way we operate, most of the guys from Point Judith put in you know the extra days squid fishing and things like that, but that's the way we are now. So it works pretty good, it works for us. We we don't make as much money as we used to, but we're working in a nice easy pace you know for, like I say for a bunch of old guys.

GK: Yeah.

RS: Yeah.

GK: And do you, is it um, is the col . . . is the fishery down there predominantly older guys or do you see a lot of younger people getting into it to?

[0:03:56.8]

RS: We don't have many young people uh especially young people that are looking to learn and eventually be boat owners. When we were young you know 50, 40 or 50 years ago there was a group of us, 10 guys out of my high school class that went into fishing. And most of them are still there, the ones that are still able to be. And we had kind of a thirst for knowledge, we just you know the days we weren't in school we were down on the docks. Sometimes we would take a day out of school and we'd take a ride to Bedford or Stonington and then try to learn how other guys did things and it's uh you don't see that anymore. you don't see the interest in uh learning to to, the process used to be you would get a job on a boat, you would pay attention, save your money, learn maybe get on a bigger boat or a different boat or maybe a boat that makes a little bit more money.

[0:05:02.4]

And more opportunities to learn. And eventually you'd buy a boat and uh probably start with a small one and work your way up and there was somebody behind you doing the same thing. But that, that part of step isn't there anymore, there's very few of the young people, there are young people in our port but there mostly the guys there just for the job, not looking to not looking to learn that watching and buy a boat, uh.

GK: Why do you think that that is?

RS: Well there's a lot of reason for somebody, if you take a look around and watch what the regulations have done out uh out of the stocks, some of the stocks are kind of low. Even the market prices aren't what they think they should be and now they are threatening, not just threatening, they're going to fill the whole ocean full of windmills and all these things you know if they read the newspapers and see all these things coming at our industry uh.

[0:06:05.3]

It really gives it, it doesn't really give them a lot of reason to want to get into the business.

GK: Yeah.

RS: You know they go and do something else and uh anybody who's been in the business knows it's a lot of physical work, it's a lot of hours and uh days that start very early in the morning which a lot young kids have trouble getting out of bed. So, so you add all those things up and it's not that attractive as it used to be you know to young people. And when you get to the end of the line where I am and own a boat, there's nobody there to buy it from you, because that whole progression, moving up the ladder has stalled.

[0:06:57.7]

GK: Mmm.

RS: And we really don't see a lot of uh any indication that that's going to improve, so, I would like to sell my boat within the next year or two but I can't see it happening cause I don't see anybody. The only, was buying boats there corporations because uh some of the companies down at Point Judith have invested a lot of money in processing need the guaranteed [inaudible] of fish going through their plants and the only way to guarantee it is to just own the boats, you know, because if you deal with individual fishermen and uh something comes up, a disagreement or anything, they'll go somewhere else, because there are those options. So [inaudible] buying their own boats and the other problem is, although in the scallop industry there are no new fishing boats, they're all 30–40 years old.

[0:08:03.8]

I think the newest boat in Point Judith is probably 25 years old.

GK: Wow.

RS: So and the the Point Judith fleet has always been well maintained uh so the boats always look good, they're taken care of. But, then that uh there's still the engines roll part [inaudible]. That makes 'em more difficult to sell too. My boat is [inaudible].

[0:08:47.7]

GK: Your boat was built in 1977?

RS: 1977 yep. It's fiberglass, it's not like it might. My first boat was wood and it was built in 1978 and it's it's it eventually after I sold it it burned up up here in Maine.

[0:09:03.9]

But um I should [inaudible] but it did uh, this boat I got now is fiberglass so it's still good and solid, is plastic you know not much happens to it unless you beat it up somehow, but the engine still holds and all the rigging is old. So all those factors come in to the, somebody come along and buy in the thing so I can retire cause I'm 66.

GK: It's getting on time.

RS: It's getting on time and you don't know how much you got left and uh instead of struggle along in the fishing business I'd like to be able to relax, but I don't see that happening soon. So so I'll just keep pluggin'.

GK: And then some of those corporations that are happening in Port Judith is that is the owner, operator captain kind of phasing out I mean do people work for the companies as captains?

[0:10:02.7]

RS: Yeah, uh in many cases uh there's one, one of the fish houses owns seven or eight boats, another owns two, the other one owns four, but there still you know our port still a lot of owner operated boats.

GK: Yep

RS: Still and a lot there are other cases where the guys my age are a little older that own boats, they've kind of slowed down so you know they don't have to have go just going forward. Instead of the the mate taking over for the captain, he takes a day off, the owner takes you know goes and let's the mate take a break instead you know. The owner'll come back for a week or two, let the guy run the boat.

GK: Oh wow.

RS: You know have some time off. So it works that way, I haven't got to that point yet, but there's a lot of guys that do it that way.

[0:11:03.8]

GK: And.

RS: Cause they're still the same guys that were young guys coming up that were still there. Uh in many cases you know a lot of them grew up together and learned and and and invested

and uh have stuck with it so now as I say we're to the point where it is very difficult to get out.

GK: Yeah.

RS: You know I come here every year talk to John [inaudible] from [inaudible] as a state of the boat selling business and he says it's pretty slow with all the different factors so. So it's where we stand as far as that goes.

GK: And what brings you, when did you start and why did you start coming to the Maine Fishermen Forum.

RS: Uh I'm not sure what year it was, four or five years ago we were seeing a lot of changes and things down in Point Judith, uh down in our area, you know Long Island isn't everything.

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We're seeing a lot of fish that we never saw before. A lot of Southern species working up our way and uh some of the people from the island institute invited me up to first to Portland something in the summer time to be on a panel and get up and speak about what we're seeing there anticipating the you know, it coming this way eventually. And then they invited me up up to the forum that next winter and uh brought me here, put me up, put me in a nice room, fed me and everything like. And uh I had such a good time, I really enjoyed you know getting up, speaking and I had such a good time, met a lot of nice people, learned a lot. Hit the different seminars and I just decided this would be a nice break for me in February to come up here and see everybody that I've met and uh just relax for a few days.

[0:13:07.5]

GK: Yeah that's.

RS: And that's that's how I got started coming here. I always wanted to come here but I never had the opportunity or a real good reason and because I didn't really what it would be and when I did get the opportunity uh now I'll always come as long as I can afford to. You know afford the time to come uh because . . . I come up on Wednesdays. Very few people here, I go into town, walk around things like that. I just enjoy the few days away.

GK: Yeah.

RS: And I you know the dinner last night, the dinner tonight. Getting together with people I only see once a year.

GK: And then the com, the sense of community.

RS: Yeah I see. Right now in Point Judith we're having a lot of difficulties. The wind farms have caused so much . . .

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animosity in our port between guys who have been friends forever. I just button heads who how to handle wind farm situation. You guys don't seem to have that up here, people I mean you can see by the big crowds that show up at this uh and hopefully you never will, but right now we're going through an awful, an awful stretch at time.

GK: Can you tell me what the oh you know what the con . . . what's the debate about the wind farms or what sides people are on or?

RS: Well probably the biggest problem, the biggest thing that's cause the most problems is how to handle the situation. We have one fraction that none of us want these windmills because they're gonna totally clog, clutter up the ocean and there's so many unknowns to how they will affect the fishing. We know that, we don't know how they will affect the stocks and it's mostly squid that we depend on.

[0:15:01.5]

And uh it could totally destroy the whole industry, not just Point Judith but the Long Island boats, the Connecticut boats, the a lot of New Bedford boats that are doing the same thing. And there's still one group of guys who think we can stop it. Which isn't going to happen and then the other group that take what we can get, you know if they are for some kind of settlement we've got to take it. And that debates gone back and forth and uh it's it's been, some of the meetings have been very difficult, lot of [inaudible] lot of hate and the, and it's something I hope that they never go through up here, but it's probably going to come and hopefully the guys here, because we're the first our area is the first in this country.

[0:16:08.0]

Rhode Island has the first offshore wind wind farm. There's five of them off Block Island, just five little turbines off of Block island. And even some of the fishermen believe that that is affecting their fishing, just these five little ones. And now they're going to put a 1000 of them out there, all south of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard which is major squid fishing grounds in the summer. And like they we say there's unbalance, we don't know what is it going to do to that, who knows it could make it better, but it's going to make it. They're a mile apart, it's going to make it difficult for fleets of boats to work and then there's going to be more fighting now and they're trying to cope between them. And uh nothing good can come of this except some more electricity that's probably going to cost people more than they're paying now.

[0:17:02.0]

RS: But it's going to happen cause the government has leased these blocks of ocean to these big companies, none of them American companies, for millions and millions of dollars and it's hard to blame them. They're business men, they do what businessmen do. They do things that make money and uh we just hope that it doesn't totally destroy us. Because that has affected, it's affected so many things and will affect more. They got plans to go all down the length of Long Island, some of the just as important, squid ground as off squid grounds.

GK: Can you hear them when you go by, are they um is the sound part of . . .

RS: Uh.

GK: the concern?

RS: Uh the ones off of Block Island. It's hard to tell cause our engines are running all the time. I don't think they make a lot of noise, but they're they're small compared to what they gonna be putting up.

[0:18:00.1]

RS: The things are huge, uh I don't know what they say, 7 or 800 feet tall, great giant blades you know. 100, 200 foot or so blades, I don't know. The uh electricity and the first ones going in is going to New York and then it's going to Massachusetts and then Rhode Island. So it's going to make a lot of electricity, but a lot of the things we don't understand, the reason they're putting them on the ocean is cause that's where the most wind is. They've proved, they've done studies, they've proven that. But we can see them being very difficult to maintain and we don't see them surviving hurricanes and things like that. In 20 years they're supposed to take them out. It's a 20 year project.

GK: Just an experiment? Or . . .

[0:18:57.4]

RS: The Block Island ones are what they call a demonstration project in 20, 20 or its maybe 25 years they come out and by that time there's going to be technology. Just in the cusp of of the 4 years that the Block Island ones have been in. Since they've started putting em and they've only been in for 2 this is the 3rd. Other technology and and wind turbines is improved so it's it's hard to keep up with that. They put uh 20 or structures up there and in 20 years it's you know they might have a thing as big as this little trailer that will do the same thing.

GK: Yeah.

RS: You know, I did a lot of work for AT&T uh what they call cable patrol. I worked with my boat between the industry and uh the fishing industry and the cable ship or the cable company and well anywhere from Rhode Island all the way to Florida I worked.

[0:19:58.6]

And when I started the telephone cables they put in had uh they had like 40, 40 calls I think at a time could go through these, to the ear. By the time I got done it was 250,000 through the same fiber cable, just by advancing technology. So that's these wind wind things are going to do the same thing. They'll come up with more and more ways to generate electricity. And in the meantime these things will get in our way and who knows how they're affecting our our stocks, just we don't know. I did a trawl survey, I've done a lot [inaudible] of research in my carrier and they asked me to do the trawl survey for this wind farm project for the last, this is the 7th year. We go there once a month and tour around, see what changed and hopefully I don't know if that's really going to tell us anything because it's a totally different situation.

[0:21:04.1]

There's, there's only a two-mile stretch of them where there's 1000s of square miles of area that they're really going to effect.

GK: For the future project?

RS: Yeah.

GK: Yeah. Well we will have to check back in with you in another year and see . . .

RS: See how we're doing.

GK: Yeah, when do they go up?

RS: Well they're not totally done with all the permits and things it's it's a bunch of different companies but they've planned to start doing something in 2020.

GK: Okay.

RS: And one of the things that uh cause I work with one of the companies as a representative to the fishermen. One things we don't understand with the Block Island wind farm, we started the trawl survey two years before they did anything to get a base. And then two years, during construction, it took them two years to build them and then two years that were going to three years after to compare.

[0:22:04.1]

And and they want to start in 2020 and they haven't done anything. And NOAA hasn't, I guess NOAA hasn't required it the state or island required it because they were in Rhode Island waters, but our government hasn't uh seemed to make them do anything as far as studies go. So how are we going to really know except by what data they have, uh what what happens? And if we get up in a meeting and say hey this happened and that happened, they're going to say where's your proof?

GK: Right, if the scientists who are working from within the company.

RS: Yeah, if we if they if they'd had started if they knew they were going to do this and started surveying these specific areas right from the start it doesn't cost them that much.

[0:22:59.7]

RS: You know they pay us pretty good, but it's not I guess by the time it goes through the whole process of we start the process by catching by dragging a net around and we take uh scientists with us to do the studies and then it goes from there into the computers and stomach samples are checked. So it adds up, but in the whole the whole project it's nothing. They, unless they're afraid of what they might say. They also did a lobster survey, you know they put the ventless traps out to see what 1 and and uh hopefully that will continue, but I I uh oh I've done, I've been there for every every month, for the whole time. I hesitate to say anything till the scientists are done of of what I feel is going on. You know wait till they put it all together, so I don't get myself in trouble.

[0:24:01.2]

GK: I understand.

RS: Which I've done many times.

GK: I understand.

RS: Uh, so.

GK: Well Rodman thank you for talking with us today.

RS: Well glad to.

GK: Yeah.

RS: Sure that wasn't too painful.

GK: Not too bad, huh?

RS: You've got people knocking on the door coming in.

[0:24:16.1]