



WHAT DOES SHELLFISHING MEAN TO YOU?

**A COMPILATION OF INTERVIEWS WITH CAPE COD PEOPLE INVOLVED
IN SHELLFISHING**

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INTRODUCTION

The Barnstable County Cooperative Extension contracted with Coastal Resource Specialists to interview people on the Cape involved with shellfish in some capacity. The objective was to get a sense from the people being interviewed – shellfish officers, growers, and commercial fishermen - of what shellfish means to them. All were asked the same question at the start of the interview: “What does shellfishing, the act of shellfishing or the ability to harvest shellfish mean to you?” From that starting point, questions centered on how the individual got into shellfishing and then what they thought the future of shellfishing might be.

While not written in quotes, the material came directly from the interviewees.

The interviews represent geographic, age, gender, and experience diversity as well as shellfish species diversity. One group not contacted directly but an important component of the Cape community was the Wampanoag Native American tribe. We would like to add one or two interviews from to this group to complete the user groups.

Some major themes emerged from this work but one theme that came through loudly is that shellfishing remains an important component of the Cape economy and culture and those who are involved are concerned about its continued presence on the Cape.

Bob Bryson – Grower – Barnstable

When asked what shellfish means to him, Bill Bryson responded that for the last 15 years, he has been going shellfishing any day he could. He started out as a commercial fisherman and worked his way into aquaculture because Mother Nature was not able to supply the needs and there were diseases, and greed. He likened it to keeping 100 cows in a 25 cow barn. He was able to get some cheap seed and put them in Barnstable Harbor. It didn't work out well – the seed came from New Jersey. He now grows both quahaugs and oysters. He grows mostly quahaugs and said soft shell clams sometimes set on the grant and sometimes they are a bonus and sometimes they are a pest.

Barnstable Harbor got hit pretty hard with QPX but unlike Wellfleet where they were able to get under control, in Barnstable Harbor, that was not the case. It is possible that part of the reason is that shellfish is moved between north and south side frequently since some grant holders have grants in both bodies of water. Something else happened in '05 – he noticed that a culvert had been opened and shortly after that, the stock was weakened and died. After that, many of the growers gave up. There are about 10 active now but during the height, there was double that number. For a few years it was good but all of a sudden, things changed – they were getting \$.23 now and the price hasn't changed since 9/11. There is still a demand and a real need to produce more but they can't at the price. He sells to ARC along with one other guy. He said they have always been fair to him but 9/11 was a turning point and things have not been the same since.

In 1989, he left the Cape to go to Vermont to milk cows. He was also a farrier for 20 years and he raised chickens. When he came back to the Cape, he started up with horses again but it was getting to be too much physically. Aquaculture opened up and he decided to give it a try. He enjoys it. He doesn't mind the cold and has been outside most of his life.

He had a good crop last year but not as good this year. There were a lot of steamers on the grant and he harvested them but had to do it in the summer because that is when the price is highest. Quahaugs take about 2 years to reach harvest size in Barnstable Harbor although this year it took a bit longer. Now there aren't many natural quahaugs left. There is plenty of flushing but what is coming out from the land is not much good. Green grass going to the edge of the water is not good and he has seen more of that. Things have changed and nobody seems to know about Barnstable Harbor – or maybe they just don't care. There's no power to determine how many houses go in where or what goes on lawns. He said we'll be hearing about Barnstable Harbor soon – more and more people are looking into it.

When he fished commercially, he fished for clams and quahaugs. There have always been clams and you can get them year round. When he switched to aquaculture, he did mostly quahaugs. When asked why he didn't switch to oysters he said they were OK but he was satisfied with quahaugs. Some people said he couldn't grow them in the harbor but he's been doing fine with them and it is mostly what is going on there now. Most of the others who were growing them walked away after the QPX but he has stuck with it. Most of the guys in Duxbury are growing oysters but there isn't much of a market. Bill said he might think more about oysters if a market develops. Right now, the grower gets screwed. The grower does all the work and gets the short end of the stick every time.

He feels that the QPX got bad in Barnstable Harbor because of greed – putting too much stock in the area and the Harbor couldn't handle it. In '06, he had a good crop but was overwhelmed with crabs – blue crabs – not normally seen on the north side but he thinks they came in with the stock that was transferred from the south side to the north side. He has seen conchs on the north side too. There has been a lot of politics involved in everything that has been going on in Barnstable Harbor and there have been some pretty powerful people involved. But some people seem to be cutting their own throats. Shellfish has not been something to get rich on but it is a living. It was a lot better before 9/11 but buyers realized they didn't have to pay as much. This year, they went up \$.01-

.02 – now it is \$.18. – that’s the same as it was 30-40 years ago. He doesn’t think the people in Barnstable Harbor will ever organize or find a market for their stock. Right now, it’s hard to find 3-4 guys to say the same thing never mind go into business together.

Bill made a plea for the county to be more equitable for the shellfish projects – if there are hand-outs for experiments – seed, cages, etc., everyone should know about it and have an equal shot at being able to participate.

His has been a family business. His daughter worked with him for two years when she was going to college and it helped put her through. It is more than a living – it is a lifestyle. It allows him to be by himself and it suits him. All his life, he has been working alone – commercial shellfishing, aquaculture, farrier, farming. He said he doesn’t work well with others. He has had a few jobs working for others but they didn’t last long. He spent time on fishing boats in Wellfleet and Sandwich (draggers) off and on for 5 years. There’s not much there now and you have to go too far to get the same amount of fish. It wasn’t worth it for him. Unfortunately, he thinks the regulations came too late. He sees the trucks with fertilizer and thinks the two are related – lack of fish and fertilizer on the land. When they opened the culvert, there was nothing left – not even shells. First they suffocated with the silt coming out the pipe and then there was a cold winter on top of it. He wasn’t the only one affected by the culvert opening but he got the worst of it.

