



WHAT DOES SHELLFISHING MEAN TO YOU?

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

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December, 2007

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.

Morris Johnson – Natural Resources Department Director (Retired) - Yarmouth

Mo Johnson, a life-long Cape Codder has spent his life on and around the water, claiming his first boat was a metal wash tub with a sail. In his years on the water, he has witnessed many changes in the resources, use of the resources and the attitudes about those resources. He has lived his entire life in Yarmouth with winter sojourns to Florida and the Caribbean but he bears witness to the explosive growth and development in Yarmouth in the last 50 years.

When asked about his feelings about shellfish, his immediate answer was that there was not enough for supply and demand, one of the reasons the price had increased. Shellfish provided a healthy food source and that fact increased the need for shellfish to be abundant. Gathering shellfish used to be part of surviving on the Cape but now it is considered a luxury. He could attest to the survival aspect as he survived on what he could gather or catch – clams, quahaugs, scup, eels, tautog, both selling his catch and eating it. At one time, he used to go around the neighborhood peddling fish he had caught.

One of the changes that occurred because of natural forces was the aftermath of the hurricane of 1944. It did not get much press coverage, certainly not as much as the hurricane of 1938 but the later hurricane veered further east with a track over the Cape while the earlier one tracked up the Connecticut River valley. Part of the reason there was not much press is that the hurricane occurred over a low tide – Mo remembered standing on a beach watching – but after it was over, thousands of trees were down. This was wartime and German prisoners of war were being held at Otis Air Force Base and were pressed into service to cut the trees.

Mo was the first Natural Resources Officer for Yarmouth but before he went to work for the town, he worked at many other occupations, all of which were water-related. He received his Coast Guard License when he was 18 or 19 years old bringing landing

barges to Nantucket. In 1951, he toured Florida and West Indies, places he fell in love with.

When he started working for the town, he took over from Roy Phillips. The department he inherited consisted of three closed-area signs and a sledge hammer. He built up the department, working out of his own garage for years before the town built a facility near the town transfer station. It was just shellfish at first but Mo noticed that there was a certain amount of territoriality that he thought was not useful. He remembered a time when a crippled kid fell into the water and the kid nearly drowned because no one could decide whose job it was to rescue him and there was a feeling of “it’s not my job” rampant in town. Mo thought that by combining departments, there would be a cost savings in equipment alone let alone personnel. He became head of a large department encompassing shellfish, harbormaster, conservation and dog officer, the latter because no one else would take it.

He had interesting stories about people who worked for him over the years. One of them was one of the worst crooks who had landed in jail. When he got out, Mo had a conversation with him on the flats. Mo gave him a job and it worked out very well.

Mo’s approach to shellfish propagation was unconventional. He promoted the use of hydraulic harvesting for clams (known as pumping) which he felt turned around the population of clams, making them more abundant in Yarmouth waters. The town owned a larger type boat, called the Silver Moon, that was put into service for all types of shellfish work but he used it especially for pumping – turning over the bottom which encouraged shellfish to set in newly turned bottom. He “rearranged” natural sand bars, allowing greater flow of water toward oysters.

Shellfish used to be something that people took for granted that would always be there but taking seed hurt the resource in the long run. He talked to people who habitually took the smaller animals because they were the best for sauces but taking them was not good

for the resource. Mo believed in sidewalk justice for enforcement, relaying a story of how he would see someone digging in a closed area and wait until they were through, then go up to them when they had a full bucket and make them plant each one individually and properly or else they would go to court. They got planted. A group of rowdy kids without licenses were made to plant the stock and in addition, Mo took all their beer cans and emptied them into a storm drain in plain sight of the offenders. He watched another commercial guy through binoculars while he was fishing in a family-permit area. He had two full burlap bags full of stock that he carefully hid in the marsh for later retrieval. After the man left, Mo went and took the bags and then watched when the man returned to find his stash gone. The same guy went scalloping with his brother and fell overboard and his brother wouldn't go get him until he had finished the tow even though his brother couldn't swim. Forty years of working in the shellfish business yielded many stories.

Mo "trained" many selectmen about the importance of shellfish. Most of them didn't know that there were a hundred thousand dollars worth of clams in a given year and didn't see the importance because they were too busy with the Police, Fire and schools. But Mo persisted and was able, over the years, to increase his staff and its visibility and projects.

Attitudes changed over time too. Wealthy people on Great Island, for example, got several shellfish grants but when they re-filed, half of them were taken away because they were only using a portion of the area. The remainder was used to protect their private shoreline. Mo explained to the Selectmen that these highly moneyed people were taking away natural fishing areas that were used by people to feed their families and they were tying up the waterfront. If the Selectmen didn't agree, they might as well give away all of Lewis Bay.

Mo has seen that shellfish is becoming less important in general and that people are working other jobs than shellfish. Shellfishing is not as easy because the supply isn't there and it takes much longer to get shellfish.

Mo tried unconventional approaches to increase shellfish as well. At the Union Oyster House in Boston, he noticed that the oysters they were serving had seed attached to the shells. He tried to get them to save the shells, offering to pick them up at regular intervals to put back in the water so that the seed could grow. The Oyster House refused. Today, that approach would be impossible with the regulations governing transport of oysters and certification of disease-free oysters when transporting them from one locale to another. But he did buy strings of oysters from Fisher's Island in New York. The six-foot long strings had oysters with spat on the shell and garden hose spacers between the oysters. In the area Mo placed them, the ones on the top two feet grew very well but the ones on the bottom did not do very well. After noticing the growth pattern, he looped the strings so that all of them were closer to the surface and they all did well.

He did a lot of experimenting and said that's what it's all about. He was a great believer in dredging areas – to increase the flow of water, depth, or to remove the build-up of organic muck that developed on top of clean sand because he knew that the muck was inhospitable to oysters but the sand was good habitat.

He also believed in the value of photographs, especially aerial ones and made a policy to do a fly-over every two years. They provided a valuable historic record but unfortunately, many were thrown out. The photos documented encroaching on public rights by private forces. People who believe they own the water don't know that they own to the low tide line but that the public has a right for fishing, fowling and navigation. Towns have also not been adamant about preserving ancient public ways to the water or maintaining those they know about. Once it is gone, the town can never get it back.

Mo has always been active in stirring the pot and the latest issue is a call to the county to fight for shorefront funds from the Public Access Board in the form of taxes paid for gas and fuel for craft used on the water. Towns should be receiving those tax funds but getting the funds out of the state would be better accomplished by the county, he feels.

Like many of his counterparts, education is a big component of a shellfish officer's job. He used to give lessons in how to dig shellfish to young campers from NY who had never done it before. They not only had fun but learned the proper methods and by doing it properly, they were protecting the resources for the future. Experimentation, management including managing people, and education - those are the important aspects of the work of a shellfish officer to protect the resources for the present and preserve both the resources and tradition for the future.

