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.

David Slack – Grower/ Commercial – Orleans/Eastham

David Slack moved to the Cape in the late 1970s to go shellfishing after leaving a desk job as an auditor for Prudential and commuting to Boston from the suburbs. While he was doing that job, he felt disconnected from the community and wanted to do something different and be more a part of a community. He knew a couple of guys from surfing days in the area and while he never caught up financially from leaving his Boston job, he felt that when hunting from the sea, he was a part of the sea around him and the ground he walked on. He felt almost immediately that he could make some money with a feeling of accomplishment.

He began his fishing career harvesting shellfish – luckily it was at a time when scallops were available. He dug clams with eight to ten other people who sold them to an Up-Cape dealer. He worked at that for several years and then mussels took off in popularity and he went into harvesting mussels. It was year round and steady work. When that dwindled, he worked for Frank Fettig in the construction industry laying tile. For a while, he was self-employed laying tile and while it paid pretty well, he found it to be a tough business and went back to fishing.

Dave acknowledged that a desk job was not for everybody and mentioned a number of people who were college-educated who had turned to fishing in this area and at the time, it was considered sort of a "hippie kind of thing." It gave him a sense of belonging both to people and to place and he liked being on and around the water.

He has seen what he considers to be a frightening degradation in the wild shellfisheries and laments losing wild areas. He was not here for the big decline in the quahaug fishery in Pleasant Bay but heard about it and saw first-hand declines in other species. He acknowledges that town propagation programs keep shellfishing viable but it is an uphill battle. He tried fish dragging for a while but it was not for him as he especially did not

care for the round-the-clock watches. He felt that shellfishing and later shellfish aquaculture were more conducive to provide a way to structure his life and that it was a lot easier to plan things than to be at someone else's beck and call. He desired independence over profit and even though he says that benefits of a desk job look good now but didn't then.

The declining wild fisheries and opportunities presented in Orleans and his work doing tiling, allowed him to ease into aquaculture buying gear, reading and talking to people. The J-Tech program offered a course and while he didn't take the course, he got a copy of the manual. He quickly found out that aquaculture is very site-specific and that what works in one area may not work in another. There are certain generalities but individuals find they have to develop their own methods and cites as examples that the three largest growers in Pleasant Bay do things differently.

The number of grants has been relatively stable lately after what he called a gold rush earlier when people rushed to get grants to grow quahaugs. Many of them started with funding that Karl Rask obtained through the Lower Cape Development Corporation. With both bottom and money available, fishermen turned to farming and got into it but people also dropped out early when things didn't happen as fast or as easily as they had thought they would.

Most growers switched to oysters but even with the number of oysters being grown, there doesn't seem to be a set being thrown off or surviving in the bay. No one has tried to catch spat from oysters they are growing – they all buy seed. He has been at it about 10 years trying things a little bit differently all the time. At any one time, he estimates there is are probably about a million adult oysters.

He has found a "night and day" difference in growth between last year and this year. They are growing much faster and look healthier this year which could be a result of the new inlet in Pleasant Bay that appeared in April after a 4-day hammering northeast storm.

Dave praised Bill Walton (Barnstable County Extension Agent) for helping growers and while he said some people were concerned that he was both an extension agent and a grower himself, the fact that he was growing oysters himself was a benefit. Traditionally, he has resented government intrusion but lately he found that he welcomes it to find better ways to do things. He credits the county with finding better ways to do things through their shellfish programs.

Dave mentioned the Research Farm Network as part of this effort. In its third year, it provides materials and seed to be grown under experimental conditions in each aquaculture area on the Cape. It is run by Extension agents Bill Walton and Diane Murphy who check the viability and size. The county provides the seed and gear for the grower to grow the shellfish and the county does the monitoring and compiles the results. The grower is paid a small stipend and gets to keep the stock. It's not much – he received 13,500 animals – but the program allows a comparative analysis of growing conditions because everyone uses the same gear and does things essentially the same allowing Bill and Diane to check what works in different areas.

An increasing problem Dave has seen in Pleasant Bay is the presence of tunicates and the growers are trying to find methods to deal with them. It's part of aquaculture that one problem after another crops up and needs to be resolved – they have not resolved the tunicate issue yet.

He has seen an increase in eelgrass in Crooked Channel – far more than before and while there have been dramatic changes this year, he can't attribute all of them to the new inlet. But he said it is a reprieve, not a permanent condition, a sentiment echoed by many others.

He is troubled by the slide he has seen in many species and says that we are fighting hard and need to continue to fight hard to keep this place where we live so that it doesn't

become Chesapeake Bay with all the problems that bay has with water quality and shellfish abundance.

All things being equal, wild harvest is easier but the resource doesn't match the desire to harvest. If the resource were better, he'd get back into the wild harvest but doesn't see it happening any time soon. There is still the supply/demand issue and with more resources, there will be more people getting them. He sees that most of the shellfish harvested is coming from aquaculture and sees that trend continuing. Whether the growers perfect a cost-effective method in Orleans is another story. Meanwhile, those who are there are still hanging on but he acknowledges that "they love to die".