



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 Wallace – Grower – Wellfleet

The first word that comes to mind when asked what shellfishing means to him is independence. It allows him to work in the environment and is always different even though it is the same environment.

Bob was a deputy shellfish constable under Bill Chapman and then became the constable for three years. He learned a lot about aquaculture while working for the town of Wellfleet and then jumped to the other side of the fence in 1982. He was bored and wanted to see if he could do it. Wellfleet was an oyster town but he tried to get people interested in growing quahaugs. The first couple of years were a real struggle. He bought clams from the draggers, buying by the pound and selling by the piece, making \$22.75/bag. He opened up chowders – they had to be removed anyway – he minced the meats and stuffed some and sold the juice separately to maximize the net. The price hasn't come up for the big ones since World War II. There are places that are still loaded because they haven't been worked. He spent some time diving for oysters in the wild in non-dragging areas where it is too deep at low tide. It took a couple of years to get the first crop through aquaculture.

He got his seed from ARC – they were the only game in town at the time and he was paying \$10.00/1000 for r-4s (6-8 mm) starting at 100,000 getting them in April. He increased to 350,000. He thought he had a lot but now he rotates a million a year. He sticks mostly with clams but grows oysters too but says he loses a lot of them. He sometimes has a wild set on his grant but there are disease problems with oysters. Last year, the previous year class developed Dermo that wiped out most of them. They grew until August and then showed signs of stress in late August and early September. He feels he can't rely on oysters for an income but he does handle about 200,000 clams a year. He indicated a price of \$.22-\$.26 for clams depending on the destination. Oysters take half the time of quahaugs as well – only 18 months but the labor is multiplied for

oysters. He dumped shell on the grant and every one caught 10-15 seed but he wondered where the parent stock came from since there were no wild oysters near him.

When he was the constable, people were growing oysters but not clams. The year after he got off the town job, Joel Fox started growing clams and then Willis Belanger started with maybe 50,000. They were relying on natural stock – no one was buying from hatcheries. People could transfer 25 bushels per acre from the natural beds – a practice that was stopped about 5 years ago. There are some areas that are thick with seed and they often die in the winter. Getting them from deep water is not allowed – they remain as spawning stock. People are now putting out Chinese hats to catch spat and they are using hatcheries.

He credits his success to learning a lot while working for the town and for receiving some good advice to stay in. He remembered a presentation by Ty Ranta (Barnstable shellfish constable) on growing clams. He watched the evolution of gear and experimented himself with gear changes. He used 4X4 wire boxes with scrim that allows water to pass through but holds the sand within and then they pumped the sand out. Now he uses landscape cloth and ADPI bags for oysters. Everyone finds what works for them and their particular situation.

Wellfleet was hit with QPX but not his stock. Three guys were exposed. They quickly removed all the infected stock which saved the harbor.

Bob spoke about municipal projects and said that they enhance the recreational harvest which is good too. Commercial guys volunteer time and effort. There can be as many as 125 out of town license holders on Wednesday or Sunday and people can get a limit in ½ hour – the place is usually packed.

Bob has 7.5 acres under lease in South Wellfleet. He is inside the breakwater on the northern end of Indian Neck, accessible by boat.

Some Wellfleet growers banded together for marketing purposes, forming the Wellfleet Shellfish Company, which includes 12 people. They pool the catch allowing them to get bigger customers off-Cape. They started with clams but sell oysters now too. They also buy from people who were not part of the original 12 members of the group. They're selling from 120,000 to 280,000 a week with the major portion of the business beginning around Memorial Day and gaining momentum to July 4 with another spike in December the builds until Christmas and lasts until the first of the year. A lot of the stock is sold in NY State – they drive it to Bourne. They have 6 employees year round for a business that is about \$8 million/year. They have a facility in Eastham that is HAACP approved for handling the shellfish for shipment. They handle both oysters and quahaugs but about 80% of the quahaugs are coming from 2-3 dredge boats that are fishing a huge set off Monomoy in Chatham. They also have several fishermen fishing in Orleans and Chatham using hand scratching methods. The draggers are using hydraulic means and they fish the smaller stuff if possible. They are fast-growing animals. At first, the buyers all wanted uniform stock and that meant farm raised and they were all from Wellfleet. But with the facility in Eastham that has a recirculating system, the dredged stock can be purged which takes out the grit and allows them to have a longer shelf life. The stock is currently sold in 110 stores with a company called Price Chopper.

The Chatham stock is keeping the price steady but low and they are looking to leapfrog to the next level. They were able to get this far because of a \$500,000 grant to look for ways to raise live cod. Alyce Boyd was the catalyst for the grant and the building and tanks fit the grant profile even though it was for shellfish rather than cod. The group spent \$16,000 for tanks and then bought a walk-in. Alyce's assistant, Patrick Bowe is still with the project as a salesman. It is difficult to keep the markets as the buyers are always looking for a lower price. They've gone from a low of \$.16 for growers and have gone up to \$.19 and that isn't much more than it was years ago. But the buyers want the stock year round and the shellfish can't always be harvested in winter conditions so it

makes it difficult but with the land-based system, they can be more competitive to be able to supply the market demand.

He said by the figures he was using that shellfishing is an important industry on the Cape bringing in a lot of money and providing jobs.

