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 Wampanoags. 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.

Dan Warncke – Natural Resources Officer - Bourne

Dan opened the conversation about shellfishing by saying that full time year round commercial fishing was no longer viable in Bourne and that eelgrass had declined to the point where there wasn't much left. He said that commercial quahaug harvesters could no longer compete with aquaculture, they had few soft shell clams and no oysters. Most of the former commercial fishermen had switched to construction, the building trades, contract mail carriers or driving trucks. He said that he was a proponent of aquaculture but that the wild fishery just can't compete any longer. Quahaugs used to be the bread and butter of the industry in Bourne but it is no longer what it used to be. The abundance had declined considerably from 10,000 bu./yr twenty five years ago when there was still a danger of overharvesting to 2,000 bu./yr and it is hard to sustain even that amount. He said it takes a lot of propagation to sustain the effort. Notatas are beginning to show up in the natural environment, a sign that the propagation is working.

Dan began working for Bourne Natural Resources in 2002. Before that, he was a commercial fisherman and also worked for Great Eastern Mussel Farms,Taylor Seafood, and Waquoit Shellfish. He had a lease site in '80-'83 using long line suspension to raise mussels and oysters. It was the only one in Bourne since 1950 but prior to that, there were oyster farms in the town. His site was in the old Cape Cod Canal and was 22' deep, allowing enough depth for surface suspension. He started with mussels and eventually raised oysters and scallops too. It was a good area to raise shellfish but between the ice in the winter and having to relocate gear and fouling in the rest of the year it was extremely labor intensive.

In 1980, Great Eastern Mussel Farms hired Dan to run a processing plant in Dennis off Old Chatham Road. It was an inland site using fresh water to wash down the mussels that were harvested from Cape Waters including Chatham and Orleans.

Earlier, Dan was fishing commercially for both finfish and shellfish including having a rod and reel license. Now he fishes recreationally only. In 1971, the Natural Resources Department began and Burke Limeburner was the first director. He had just retired from the Air Force and he hired four deputies that had also retired from the Air Force. At the time, Dan was a 21 year old kid and it was the year they had a bumper crop of scallops. He began fishing on those and never looked back at any other occupation.

Dan's family is an old Cape family – the Phinneys, and he is the last in the line to make a living on the water. He started fishing with his grandfather when he was two years old, going out with him when he fished. At 10, he was shucking scallops after school for his uncle, earning $.10/qt. At 21, he partnered up with a friend – he bought the outboard and drags and the friend had the boat but in mid-season, he had made enough money to buy his own boat. He borrowed $1,000 to buy a car and paid it back in 30 days.

When scallops were done, he went into quahaugs and stayed with that year round for a long time. There were times when he couldn't go because of oil spills or red tide and he went into the building trades to fill in but always went back into the fisheries and has been doing it for 31 years. Now, he fishes recreationally and also has lobster pots in the Cape Cod Canal.

In 1972, there was a bumper crop of scallops and Dan needed help with the shucking. He met a young lady, Tracy, who was in junior high school. She would come in after school and help out. She was not driving yet so he would sometimes give her a ride home. Eventually, they got married – he was 24 and she was 18. His wife ended up fishing too, bringing their 2-year-old son Tony with her. In the early 1980's, they had a good lifestyle, watching their son grow up and fishing. But pollution closed some of the prime area where they had been hydraulic clamming to make a living. Tracy got involved in water testing and started a water quality program at Bourne Department of Health with George Heufelder, who worked with the Barnstable County Extension Service. They did point source surveys of the shoreline and it later turned into a part time job for Tracy

working for the Board of Health. She went from there to the Coalition for Buzzards Bay and later to the Buzzards Bay Project as the Administrative Assistant working with Joe Costa.

As a commercial fisherman, Dan thought of eelgrass as a nuisance because it came between you and what you wanted to harvest. Things got better day by day when scalloping as the grass gave up. They routinely had 10 drags – 5 on a side – for getting bay scallops. Each boat was equipped with an electric hauler that was also used as a pot hauler. The five drags are all in a line with about 8 feet separation and they are hauled with the shortest drag first (the one with the shortest line), eventually getting to the longest line at the fifth drag. According to Dan, they all catch scallops. The first drag generally catches a lot of grass and the least scallops and they get progressively better with the last one usually being the best. The system works well and if you work hard you can get in three tows an hour.

Even in good scallop years, he always got by with quahaugs in the off season. You could make more money than banging nails but would never become rich. Generally, you needed some form of supplement or a gravy crop to get by and get over the hump. When there was a good scallop year, you would see new trucks, boats, motors – there was a ripple effect throughout the community because everyone had money to spend to catch up on past bills. The ripples spread out to the shuckers as well and to the dealers. With a small town, when 100 boats are involved that means there might be 200 people fishing and many more shucking scallops. The impact on the whole community was very positive with a lot of people having income to spend. The last good year was 1983 and they had a 3-bag limit. A bag equaled 1.5 bushels. In 1971, there had been a five-bag limit or 10 with a partner. They could sometimes hit windrows of scallops and in two tows, get 15 bushels of scallops. The bags were marked with Town of Bourne stamped on them. There were always tricks to max out your limit. You had to leave the bags wet so they didn't shrink and really shake the scallops down in the bag and crown off the top. You could get good sized scallops to cut 10-12 pounds a bag if you put the effort into it.

Later the town switched to one bushel plastic crates. You can only get about a 7 pound yield from a bushel crate but there were stories of guys that would fill the crates with rocks and put them by the wood stove to bulge them out. Anything to get an edge.

With the decline in scallops, in 1980 they formed a local shellfish group with a three-pronged approach: establish 1-acre grants, allow a deep-water quahaug fishery and use hydraulic gear for clams. Many people applied for grants but only one was successful. Part of the reason for denials was most the people were trying to get grants in existing resource areas. Dan tried a different approach and chose a deep water site in the old Cape Cod Canal. He stared with mussels and later expanded to oysters and scallops. The work was very labor intensive between having to relocate gear in the winter to avoid ice and dealing with heavy fouling the rest of the year.

The deep water quahog fishery was not too successful, but the hydraulic clam fishery was extremely successful until the early 90's – 1994 was the last good year. In 1993-1994, it was typical to find 100 clams/ft^2. They were working it all summer long over and over and there was an abundance of seed but by the next spring, they were all dead and that was the end of the clam fishery. Dale Leavitt did some work looking at the clams to try to find out what was happening and found a clam lymphoma.

Dan continued to work in the fishing industry until 2002, but he was working 4-5 jobs – a mooring business, quahaugging, mowing, and helping in a firewood business and said "you do what you gotta do as a Cape Codder."

Oil and transport of oil is a common theme in Bourne. The Bouchard spill in 1972 meant a loss of shellfish for several years. Ninety percent of the area's oil supply goes through the Canal and Bourne. In addition something like the Red Tide can shut down everything and the state is cautious in how they handle that.

Finally, in 2002, he felt it was time for a change and got the job with the Bourne Natural Resources Dept. His body was tired and he says that fishing is a young man's game – he had developed ailments such as carpal tunnel and back problems and couldn't bull rake any more. In the heyday of fishing, he would have taken a pay cut to work for the town because he was making more than the town workers. He still took a pay cut but he is much better off primarily because of the town benefits.

As a commercial fisherman, he said that part of the thrill is the search and spent 30% of his time looking and 70% harvesting. He has seen constant changes in the resources and says that an area that was good one year may not be the next. The ocean is never the same two days in a row and that is one of the things that kept his interest over the years.


STEARNS