

## Interview with Wes Bunker, Lobsterman

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**Student Interviewers:** Becca Silsby **Grade:** 10  
Mario Pinaro **Grade:** 10  
Hernan Rave **Grade:** 10  
Ashton Romer **Grade:** 10

**School:** Ellsworth High School  
**School Location:** Ellsworth, Maine

**Teacher or Parent Interviewers/Chaperones:** Eric Korver  
**Title:** Science Teacher

**Transcriber:** Becca Silsby

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MP: How long have you been a lobsterman?

WB: Ah, ten years

MP: What made you decide-

MP: Ok, what made you decide to become a lobsterman?

WB: Oh, I lost my job, and ha ha, I wanted to do something

completely different. I worked in a hardware store with my father. And I started urchin diving, and then I got into the fishing industry. And my next step was to become a lobster fisherman. I wanted to stay on the water year round, so guess that's basically the reason I did it, and you can make good money doing it also, so uh...

HR: Um, how does the normal lobstering day begin?

WB: Oh, I try to get there at daylight, and I get my bait up into five gallon buckets and have to



bring it out to the boat, and get the boat going and check the fluid levels in the motor and things like that, and just start out and go.

HR: What is um- what type of equipment is needed to lobster?

WB: Well you've got your traps, and your lobster boat that can be any where from, ya know, a real small boat up to 40 ft in length. Um, let's see, for personal gear you have to have rubber boots, you wear, well when its raining, I wear a raincoat, you have what they will call oilskins, it's like a bib-type rain-wear that you wear. Guess that's really the basics.

MP: Is there a lot of technology you use?

WB: Yeah, um, electronics. There's your radar and chart-plotter so you can go out no matter what the weather. You have the depth sounder that gives you the different types of bottom, Hard bottom would be like rocks or ledge and then you've got soft bottom which would be mud. And that, you know, differentiates between the two as to where you put your traps. You have the electronics VHS so you can be in contact with other boats and the Coast Guard if you have an emergency. And I always carry a cell phone with me too. The chart-plotter will have all the landmarks and, like buoys out there too so you can go around 'em in the fog and the radar would, you'd be able to see the land and other boats out there while you were navigating in the fog. The chart-plotter allows you to actually mark all your buoy locations too. You can punch in the numbers in your GPS and you could actually go to each buoy in line out there in the fog if you had to do it that way.

AR: Does the gender of a lobster affect whether or not it can be caught and kept?

WB: Yes. You can keep all males. Females, if they're egg-bearing you have to throw 'em back. You v-notch the second flipper on the right-hand side if it isn't v-notched already. If you catch a v-notched lobster you throw it back and you have size limitations there also, but.

AR: Have you ever caught a blue-lobster before?

WB: One that was maybe half-blue, but not completely blue.

MP: What's v-notched, you said?

WB: Ok, on, the lobster has five flippers on the bottom of it, and you take the second flipper

over on the right-hand side and they make a tool or you can use a knife, and you cut a v-notch, approximately a quarter inch in that second flipper over and that way nobody's supposed to take that lobster because it's egg bearing. You know, just to help the lobster industry 'n if you take all the females you're not going to have any lobsters left. So, just a protective measure helps everybody out.

AR: Does age affect it being caught or not?

WB: No, 'cause I've had em anywhere from like three inches up to, oh, seventeen or eighteen inches, so.

BS: So you can tell how old it is from, like, the size it is?

WB: Not really, um, the real little ones, I mean, you could guess I suppose, but, it takes several shedding process for em to get to be legal, a legal lobster.

AR: How large must a lobster be to be caught if, if there is a size regulation?

WB: It's the main part of the body you measure, and it has to be three and a quarter inches.

And anything under that you have to throw back, then there's a maximum too, which is, I'm not absolutely sure, ha ha, but I think its five inches. You have a measuring tool, a gage, that has a maximum and a minimum on it and you can measure the lobsters that way.

MP: So if it's five inches you can't take it?

WB: If it'll fit on the measure you can, but if it won't fit you have to throw it back.

MP: What do you enjoy most about your job?

WB: I guess the freedom. You don't have anybody there to bother you, you're your own boss. It is nice being out on the water in the summertime, nice days.

MP: What's the worse?

WB: Well, fishing when it's cold out, when it's real rough that can be miserable, it can be risky.

HR: What's the biggest size you can get, for a lobster? Is there a maximum size you can get before you have to put it back?

WB: Yup, five inches, on the body part, They call it the carapace. It has to be five inches.

AR: How big can the claws get?

WB: Oh. They can get to be pretty big. I've seen them about as big as a softball size, as far as the width of it.

BS: So would you say that most lobsterman are doing it for a lifestyle or just for recreation?

WB: Oh, for a lifestyle. The independence, a lot of em were born and brought up doing it.

EK: How did you get into it?

WB: Well, my father owned a store and we closed it up, and I started urchin diving first after that. It was the "gold rush" in the urchin industry. I started working on the water, and I went out with a friend on his boat and started being stern man, and I decided I'd give it a try. I liked being your own boss. You know, you can make good money, but you spend good money though, I mean it's a big investment.

EK: How would you go about starting out, because, from what I gather, it's a huge investment to do that.

WB: It is, now, the coast is divided up into each little management district. And there's some areas there's no waiting period, like down east you can just get a license and go in. In this area, three people have to, I think it's three people, have to get out before one person can get back in.. I shouldn't say get back in, but one person can get into the industry. And they have to do an apprenticeship program and go to and be a stern man on a boat for a couple years and complete so many hours and they have to take a written test of the state. Then they have to come up with some money.

BS: Where do you do your lobstering?

WB: Um, down in Hancock, Sorrento, Lamoine, down that area. Down towards Bar Harbor also.

MP: How many lobsters do you catch on average per day?

WB: Oh, a good day is 300-350 pounds. Small potatoes compared to a lot of people, uh, up where I fish in the bay fishing isn't as good as, you know, outside in the open ocean. Some guys go 20-30 miles off shore. My brother fishes with a guy outside of Stonington, on a good day

they're getting a couple thousand pounds.

AR: Is there a limit to catching lobsters?

WB: You mean, as far as how many you can catch? No, as many as you can catch.

MP: So what do you do with the lobsters after you've caught them?

WB: Um, you mean like on the boat or what I do at the end of the day like where I bring them?

MP: Um, both, I guess

WB: I've got a tank on the boat that circulates fresh salt water all the time. And you band them and put them in that. Then at the end of the day I've got some crates that will hold roughly 90-100 pounds and I put them in that. Then there's a dealer down in Trenton that I bring them to and I sell them to.

AR: Do you keep any lobsters for yourself?

WB: Oh yeah!

AR: Must be the best part, huh?

WB: It's free in a sense, but not really.

EK: What's the best way you feel to cook a lobster?

WB: Just boil it in water for 117 minutes-

EK: Do you like lobster rolls?

WB: I just like it with butter and freshly cooked.

AR: What do the antennas on a lobster do?

WB: I think it's a sensory type thing, they can feel their way along the bottom. They have eyes there too so they can see.

EK: Do you have, uh, you know, you see all those movies out there like "The Perfect Storm," and stuff like that, do you have a really death-defying type of story that you were out there and something bad happened?

WB: Yeah, actually. I was setting my first load of traps a couple years ago and I was out in the middle of the bay and my boat caught on fire. And the black smoke came up out of the engine quickly and I couldn't get to a fire extinguisher or anything, so I'm yelling on the radio

for someone to get there to help. They finally did but I was real scared for a couple, well, four or five minutes. There was no way I could swim to shore as far off as I was, so it was real scary there for a couple minutes.

AR: How about one of your best days? Like how many lobsters have you caught in one day?

WB: Oh, 500 pounds has been my best day.

MP: Is it just you on the boat?

WB: Generally. I used to take my stepson, but he didn't really care for the smell and, all of it. So, I like going by myself, it's a lot more work but...

AR: It's fun?

WB: Yeah

MP: Do you have a big boat or is it a...

WB: Uh, 32 foot boat, it's a pretty good size.

EK: How long is a typical day for you?

WB: Oh, twelve hours. It's, uh, well when it gets lightest earliest, I'm down there at 4-4:30 in the morning. And if I'm lucky I'm home by six or so.

AR: And you said you lost your job right?

WB: Yeah..

AR: Is there...

WB: Uh...go ahead, haha

AR: Is there any chance you'd be able to get your job back?

WB: No, it was a family business and, that was twelve years ago now, I wouldn't want to do it anyway. It was in retail, so

EK: I'm uh, you said you did urchin diving, I'm completely clueless as to how that works. What is, what goes on with that.

WB: Well that industry is in peril now, there's nowhere as many as there used to be. You know what an urchin is?

EK: Yeah, uh, the little spiny guy.

WB: Yeah, we just, you usually dive near shore, or real shallow areas in kelp. And you have a little garden rakes, a little three-pronged garden rake, and you've got some mesh bags and you go down and rake em up as fast as you could.

EK: You have a tank, or a hose...

WB: No, you have a tank, a scuba tank, and you use a dry-suit to do it.

EK: And people eat the urchins?

WB: Yeah, the Japanese love em.

EK: Yeah, interesting.

AR: There's a rumor saying that they're trying to get lobsterman to go to school now, but they wouldn't be able to catch as many lobsters, or anything. I've heard a rumor on that.

WB: Guess I haven't heard that one.

MP: Do you catch a lot of other stuff besides lobsters in your traps?

WB: Mhmm. Um, some urchins, starfish will climb in there a lot. Every once in a while a sculpin or a mackerel will get in there. Guess that's mostly about it.

MP: Well what do you do with them? Do you just chuck em back in?

WB: Yeah, I chuck em back out. And crabs I should say too, an awful lot of crabs. Some people keep them but I don't bother.

MP: So do you do this year round or?

WB: No, just in the summer time.

MP: Is that it?

WB: Yeah...

MP: And you make enough money to, uh, support...

WB: Well I actually have another full-time job as well, so I'm a part-timer. You could well, if you had to, you could make a living of it and fish from now until November, I fish from June to November but you have to chase the lobsters our into the open ocean, and there's unspoken boundaries there that you're not supposed to cross, haha.

HR: What do you mean "unspoken boundries"?

WB: Well, fishermen have certain areas that they fish in and you're not allowed in this guy's territory. You can do it, but there will be consequences to be paid. They usually cut off your traps if you do it.

EK: What's the most difficult part you think, of getting into the business, or even just say a typical day?

WB: Physically it's real tough on your shoulder yanking the traps up, ya know, over the side of the boat all day. You have a hydraulic port-hauler which brings 'em up and you have to bring the traps up over the side of the boat. That can really bother your shoulder after a while, especially I will do like 300 traps, so it hurts. But I'd say financially too it's a very big investment. A lot of guys have, ya know, two to three hundred thousand dollars tied up in it, ya know.

AR: How many lobster traps do you have?

WB: At least 350. The limit's 800. Somebody doing it full time, will fish probably 6-800 traps.

EK: Would someone be capable to do it year round, do you think, to make enough money to do it?

WB: Yeah, if I was fishing full-time where I am, I'd fish five to six hundred traps and I'd make enough to get by. It gets to be real boring though in the winter when you have something else to do. Some guys do fish year-round but they're way off shore, like 20-25 miles off shore.

HR: Is it harder to fish offshore or something, do you need an extra license?

WB: You need a Federal permit which they don't give out anymore, you have to buy that. Ya know, those run \$10-15,000. Well, you need a lot bigger boat because you have a lot more severe weather out there especially in the wintertime.

BS: Do you own your own boat?

WB: Yes

MP: Has there been a really big, uh, population change in the lobsters since you've started, are there more now?



WB: There seems to be, the catch is going up year by year. Last year was a little down total for the industry, I was happy with what I did, but, still seems to be real good. Down in Southern New England, they've got some shell-disease now that's really wiping out the lobster population.

AR: What kind of things do lobsters eat?

WB: I guess mostly fish, we bait the bag with herring, and we're actually feeding them all the time because after four or five days the herring usually goes bad in the bag so you just dump it out and the lobsters get a free meal.

EK: You said you had a higher rate of lobsters, the population's going up around here.

WB: Mhmm

EK: What do you think is the cause of that?

WB: Well, the experts say, ya know, the trap limitations they've put on before, I guess four or five years ago, they put a trap restriction on 800 traps was the maximum. But before, at one time people could fish as many as they want and it went down to like 1200 traps. And now it's 800. I think that has a lot to do with it and the limited entry now, in most of the state, has something to do with it as well. You can't just go and do it anymore, you have to do the apprentice program and things like that and wait for people to leave before you can get back into the industry.

AR: Has a lobster ever snapped your finger before?

WB: Oh, yes!

AR: Does it bleed?

WB: At times it has, it hurts.

AR: I remember when I was little I was stupid and I put my finger right between and it just, went snap!

WB: Mhmm.

HR: Does it just lock in, or?

WB: Yeah, I mean you have to thrash it or if you just, if you can grab the other claw that isn't biting you, then after a couple seconds then it will release.

MP: Do you have to uh, check, like, all of your traps everyday, or do you like, check half?

WB: Oh, when I do it I check them all every other day in the summer time when the shedders or the soft shells are coming in. Because usually there's enough lobsters to make it worthwhile. Later on in the fall the weather gets a little worse, so it might be three or four days between times. Sometimes it can be even up to a week or so the worse the weather gets, especially in the fall.

HR: How many lobsters have you caught in one trap, can you catch more than one?

WB: Oh yeah, um, I think the most I've had is twelve in one trap.

HR: So if you put a lot of food in there will more come, or?

WB: No, it's really more the area and if they happen to be moving along the bottom at that...sometimes depending on the tides and stuff, they'll just be more crawling around the bottom than they do other times. It goes in cycles, you'll have a good spurt then it'll slow down, then it will pick up again.

AR: The shell on a lobster, you know how its hard and rough? Does it, what does it protect it from?

WB: Um, I guess the smaller, the small predators, but I guess codfish and seals wiill eat em. Things like that, they can climb into some small holes on the bottom so , little rock piles and stuff like that, and use that as protection.

AR: Are blue lobsters rare to find?

WB: Yeah, quite rare.

AR: How much would that be going for?

WB: If you get one that's real blue they usually, some aquarium or someone like that will take the lobster just to show it off.

AR: Will they pay you for that or?

WB: No, there has been a couple of instances where friends of mine have given em to, down on the island, to a couple different labs and they won't buy one.

HR: Are they edible, like, are they good to eat, or?

WB: I would assume so, I've never tried it, but I'm assuming its just a different color shell.

AR: Do you think there's any other different color shelled lobsters out there?

WB: You get some that are a little more yellowish than, than a regular lobster, ya know, kinda a darker-

MP: What's the average life-span of a lobster?

PAUSE

WB: I honestly don't know. I guess, oh four or five years probably, maybe a little longer than that. But it takes seven or eight molting processes for a lobster to get large enough to be legal. But I honestly don't know the real good answer for that.

HR: Does it matter the older they are the better the meat, or is it the younger they are?

WB: No, usually the softshell ones are a lot sweeter in the summer time. Usually a bigger lobster, will be tougher, ya know a five or six pound lobster will be tougher meat than a smaller one would be.

AR: Ya know the legs on a lobster, how they have these little claws on the legs of them?

WB: Mhmm

AR: What do they use those for?

WB: Um, really the only thing I know is just to crawl with. The legs on the bottom of them are just to crawl across the bottom as far as I know.

PAUSE

AR: How strong are lobsters?

WB: Well, the crushing capability in the claws are real strong, I mean they can snap off a pencil. And they can swim real good, they swim backwards.

HR: So they swim backwards and walk forwards?

WB: Mhmm

HR: Oh!

PAUSE

EK: You guys outta questions?

All: I guess so.

EK: Can't think of anything else? Um, I guess usually what they ask also is what questions weren't asked that you think might be good for another group to do an interview?

PAUSE

WB: Geeze, I don't know, haha, I think we covered most of it. Um, maybe, the differences in the bottom where the lobsters are. If you have a lot of hard bottom, ledge and rock, and hard sand and gravel, it's usually better fishing than in the mud. Up where I fish is the mud. There's a lot more places for them to hide in the rock bottom, hard bottom. My brother lobsters over in Stonington, Maine, there's a lot better-

EK: Why do you fish if you know that its better in that one section, not to the other, there isn't room, or?

WB: , Over there especially, if you're not born and brought up there, you're just not allowed. If you do, then they'll just-

EK: Just too difficult to get in?

WB: Yes, unwritten laws.

HR: Geeze! So they'll just cut your trap off, if you?

WB: Mhmm, depending on who-

HR: How do you recover it? Do you have to dive for it, or?

WB: If you can find it yes, sometimes in the fall if there are people scallop dragging or shrimping they might get some of your traps. But usually its just a lost cause.

MP: Are lobster traps expensive?

WB: Yeah, um, by the time, a four foot trap, by the time you put rope and buoy would be about \$70 apiece.

AR: Have you ever gotten one of your traps cut off before by somebody?

WB: Um, a couple, not too bad. Up where I fish it's more of a hodge podge, a bunch of little towns, ya know, Sorrento and Hancock and Lamoine. Everybody basically gets a long pretty well. You lose a lot to boat traffic too. In the summer the sail boats and just the power boats out

there just running around and towards Bar Harbor the cruise ships will, can wipe out a quite a few of them all, so.

HR: What about, lobster stealing, do you guys get any cases of people doing that?

WB: No, I've heard of it , ya know, people doing that, I mean they go into the pound sometimes and try to steal, ya know, crates of lobsters.

EK: Alrighty, I think, are we done then?

BS: Yup, I think so. Thank you.

MP: I guess so, thank you.

HR/AR: Thank you