

Fishtales, Saturday, September 29, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr
Interviewee – Dave Cassoni
Engineer – Ace Elijah Burgess

AB So we have David Cassoni here. Alright

DC How's that sound?

AB It's great, it's great. So just give us your tale.

DC Well alright. Name's Dave Cassoni. I am a commercial lobsterman and currently fishing out of Sandwich, Cape Cod Bay. And I've been lobsterin' for about 40 years now. I could go back reflectively to beginning in a tiny little harbor in Cape Cod, Ellisville Harbor which is currently a state park now, but it was a harbor that dried up when it was low tide. So the first years were very difficult, all of the, all of our traps, all of our bait, all of our skiffs, everything had to be brought to the end of the beach in four wheel drive, piled up, carry a skiff down, go out to our boats on moorings, bring all the equipment back and forth all the time in and out, it never ended. Now we're very happy. Now I can walk down a ramp, go right to my boat. I have electricity and fresh water and an area to load my bait and an area to do it. So things have changed over all these years. The lobsterin' itself hasn't changed dramatically. We haven't developed a better mouse trap to catch the lobster. We're still in the business of trying to figure out a creature that has no brain and we don't do well trying to outsmart it so it's kind of bad for our ego. But we work very hard at doing it. Our traps haven't changed, we haven't developed a better mouse trap, we haven't developed anything that has worked to the advantage of catching more. However, over these years, the number of lobstermen, commercially has actually reduced. We've gone down and down. There isn't anything really dramatically unique about going out, pulling the trap. Everybody feels that this is exciting. It's pretty much boring when you get up and you go out and you do it every day and you're with expectations that there's something in the pot that you're hoping that when you pull it you're going to have something that's going to at least bring us back a little bit of revenue. It doesn't always work that way. I think with unusual things, I have on occasion pulled up traps and found a note in it, thanking me for lobsters and one occasion I pulled it up and there was a note thanking me for lobsters with a six pack of beer, so that kind of worked out. The oddest thing I ever found was a pair of, which I'm sure I hope drifted around, a pair of ladies underwear that was huge. It was [laughs] it was rather large. I don't think it got stretched out by the salt water but it was rather large in the trap. I think it blew around and it went into the current and got picked up and put in the traps and yeah, all I could envision was there's lady on a bluff or a house near the beach where it blew off of her laundry line and she says "Oh somebody stole my underwear! Oh!" You know and it's out there drifting around in the water. We don't find too many different things, I mean in a trap, everything goes in because of the bait. Hopefully it's lobsters that we can sell for a market. It may be crabs, it may be fish, everything else come and goes

in it. The number of commercial fishermen in the state has diminished; we are still working to try to improve the sustainability of our resource. We're working constantly to do everything we can to maintain this resource as a sustainable resource. We work around in Cape Cod Bay where I lobster, we work around all of the most endangered animals in the world, the northern right whale being the number one most endangered large mammal. We want to avoid any interactions. We have all gone whale safe with our gear so that this is one added feature of the lobster industry that an awful lot of the public is not aware of. And this was at the expense of the individual lobsterman, out of pocket on an average of 10-15 thousand dollars per fisherman to make our gear whale safe so we don't have interactions. These are important facts that I think that the public should be aware of. I have a feeling very strongly about this. The industry itself from southern waters our lobster *homarus americanus* is harvested from the northern reaches as far north as Labrador, but as the waters get colder there are fewer lobsters there, to off of New Jersey where the water gets warmer there are fewer lobsters harvested there. The largest landers of lobsters are the Maritimes in Canada, Atlantic Provinces followed by Maine and then Massachusetts. Everybody else is minimal amounts. Just over 250 million pounds of lobsters are harvested annually and only in the Northwest Atlantic, shipped all over the world. Our lobsters are very iconic, everybody recognizes the *homarus americanus*, our lobster, vs. other lobsters, the spiny lobster, the rock lobster and such around the world. The fishing community works very hard at it and it is definitely independence, it's very difficult to get three lobstermen together to agree on where to go for coffee, never mind on how the industry should be run. If you put three lobstermen together, instantaneously you're going to have four opinions on an issue. They are very independent thinking, they are very independent workers, they're very aggressive about their industry and we hope to keep this going in the future. Thank you very much.

MS Thank you.

DC It's not, people equate everything to the Deadliest Catch

AB Right, right.

DC And for them to get a one hour series, they're on four or five boats and they're there all year.

AB Yeah.

DC And now, they've changed all of the ground rules on their crabbing out there you know. So what happens is you look at some of the footage from the Deadliest Catch when they're goin' through some really shitty weather and they got waves the size of these gallows frames out here, you look, that photo was taken eight years ago, nine years ago.

AB Oh really?

DC They used to have what was called derby fishing. They had a season right here.

AB Right.

DC There was a quota in that season. Every boat went out. When that quota was filled or close to it, they closed it. So you only had so much time and every body was fighting for the same product. Now you have a quota, I have a quota.

AB I see.

DC When you catch your quota, you're done. When I catch mine, we go at the same time. You got, now you got more time frame.

AB I see.

DC You don't have to go out in that weather.

AB I see. So

DC So these people that are goin' out and doin' it are still doing it, number one for the cameras. 'Cause look at how far you think, I mean if you thought that Sig Hansen and the Northwestern was makin' a fortune on their crab, yeah they do, they're doin' it. But their making more money now on sellin' their stories. Oh yeah. And that's what it boils down to. And you know you go through all that you know that's the way it goes.

AB It's true yeah.

DC I mean we've had 'em all, you get em all out and everybody says the same thing, everybody wants to [know] is it like that?

AB yeah

DC This week was the worst weather. It was pretty shitty. It ended out I worked in it, but you know you're in a 36 foot boat versus a hundred and fifty foot boat, that's a big difference.

AB Right, yeah.

DC And we're in and out in eight hours. People just don't realize you know? I'm glad like right here for the Working Waterfront that they do this. This, New Bedford, right here, New Bedford is the number one port in the United States, dollar value marine product landing. Number one. And it's all scallops. These boats right here. That boat behind you, that big, big boat right there

AB Yeah

DC The permit that's on that boat, is about a million and half dollars. If not two and a half million

AB Wow

DC A crew man on that boat comin' in after fifteen days'll make 30 thousand dollars.

AB 15 days?

DC 30 thousand dollars. They will make

AB [inaudible]

DC All these boats are owned by maybe a dozen guys and the permits

AB And you're saying that these lobsters go all around the world?

DC Our lobsters go all around the world. But I mean now this, the difference is like in Massachusetts, Massachusetts waters, lobster is the number one marine resource. This is the number one cash, but its' all federal waters. They're workin' on George's Bank. They go out 200 miles.

AB Wow

DC These boats go out 200 miles. We're workin' within the coast, three miles. So lobster is a different story. But regardless, industry is altogether different. Every part of it is different. It's how it's regulated, how it's managed.

AB Right

DC You know and like I said with these boats here, mostly tied up because their areas that they can go in are closed.

AB Right.

DC And when they open, they go out and they make their money. But the rest of the year they're closed. So they may fish for one month

AB Right

DC Two months a year, so a guy makes 30 or 60 thousand, but that's it.

AB So it's cool in the sense that he's not having to work the whole rest of the year, but

DC Well but they go on other boats or they try to do it. And of course a lot of them don't know how to manage, deck crew, don't know how to manage their money

AB Right

DC They could make it all and next week they come down and one of them, like he said they don't have cab money to get back to the boat you know?

AB Right, right, right.

DC They blow it right back here. This waterfront used to be nasty, off limits to people really. You wouldn't want to come down here. It was rough. It was that image that people have of, a misconception of the fishing industry you know. And they used to worry about a lot of the boats that worked off shore bringing the drugs in, illegal drugs

AB Right

DC They had to test 'em 'cause more drugs go out on the boat. A lot of these boats are clean though. They drug test the crew and stuff. But I mean

AB It's like a lot of things have changed though. When was that that it was kind of rough?

DC Oh within about, within 20 years, you know, fifteen. There's still shades of nastiness, but I mean the Working Waterfront's been going on about eight or ten years now and every year it gets better because they open it up and the public now comes down and sees the waterfront, sees the industry, sees all this stuff, sees what's going on. It's very complicated, you know. And it is. But there's still an aspect that hasn't changed. It's, I like this idea of the Working Waterfront. It was a good idea.

AB Yeah. It's a really cool idea.

DC There's a lot of shows. We do the Wellfleet Oyster Festival in two weeks in Wellfleet.

AB Where is that?

DC [coughs] on Cape Cod.

AB Cape Cod

DC Right out before Provincetown, Wellfleet Oyster Festival. Most of the oysters come from Wellfleet.

AB Oh cool

DC It's probably the, they close off downtown Wellfleet, and it's only the length of this pier, like this is it. 20, 25 thousand people. If you had heart attack and died you couldn't

fall. There's so many people. You wouldn't believe it. We go down. What we bring here for our giveaways over at the Mass Lobsterman's booth we give away fliers and we'll get rid of a tote or two, there every hour we get rid of a tote. They take it. There's so much handouts. So many people, it's unbelievable. It's the end of the season for the Cape, you know. So...

AB So it's a big success

DC Oh it is. Oh yeah. Yup, yup. That's a good deal there. I keep lookin' for somebody to bag to come over here for you. And there isn't an awful lot of people here

DC There's nothin' out there checkin' them anyways.

AB Yeah. Is there a lot of stealing that goes on?

DC There can be pilfering yeah, yeah.

AB What's the, how do you check

DC We have law enforcement, we have environmental police, but their limited as budgets in the state reduce so does the enforcement level

AB Right.

DC And they're tryin' to check everything. The environmental police are responsible for inland waterway pollution and they're responsible for hunting and fish, fresh water fishing and along with salt water and there's only 76 officers for the whole state. Nothin' you don't see anything, so it's a shame. It's a shame. No there is. And we, you know a lot of times they'll come by and they'll see, they'll say well this guy's got hundreds of pots and they go to buy a trap and they find out that to buy one trap, the rope, the buoy, get everything goin' is a hundred dollars or more and he's got hundreds, maybe he won't miss a couple.

AB Yeah, right, right.

DC That happens

AB Yeah. Have you caught anyone?

DC Over the years, yes. Gone to court, got damages, everything else. Yup, yup.

AB [inaudible]

DC Know I've seen it, years ago we used to watch 'cause we suspected and saw where they were headed and called the local police can do it too until, they can hold somebody.

We can go down and identify it, say that is my trap, look my name's in it. He has no right, he didn't have authority to take that trap.

AB Right.

DC I wanna do it the right way, I don't wanna put a bullet in the guy's head, 'cause I'll be in jail for life, so you know what the hell. Nab him, now they can go after him. And they can do what they want. So it can happen like that, but it's, you know it's he said, she said otherwise. You have to not pull in your trap and take in the lobsters, that happens all the time. What you wanna do is you wanna make sure that you get

AB Get them in the act of doin' it because once they've pulled your lobster there's no way to tell

DC There's no way to determine if they have a license they said oh they were my own traps.

[Another interviewee arrives]