

Jon Semlear
April 11, 2016
Interviewed by Nancy Solomon

00:59 – First generation fisherman, bayman. Family in Sag Harbor 70 years. Father was local doctor.

1:00 – Always interested in boating, clamming, scalloping. Started out recreational. College: Marine affairs, coastal zone management, environmental studies, marine science.

1:40 – High school and college worked part time on water. Afterwards did shell fishing, clamming. Got into trap fishing became main thing.

2:08 – On bay full time before brown tide hit - 1985. Born 1960. Brown tide wiped out the scallop industry. Affected most shellfish to a degree.

2:42 – Before brown tide was catching scallops – were prevalent, clamming, musselling. Did all shellfishing.

3:00 – Tools – uses 18 foot Howard Pickerel garvey he built for Jon. Used rakes, scratch rakes, dredges, scallop dredges – got tools from old timer – blacksmith from Greenport. Paul. Built thousands of scallop dredges.

3:40 – Bought Clam rakes from Ray at Armor Instrument and Island Fishnet in Sayville. McDonald's – cool place. Not sure it is still there.

3:48 – Customers: Sold to Seafood Shop, John Morris has Mattituck Seafood, Kor- Jay in Hamptons Bay, scallops sold at home out of shop.

4:25 – Got into pound trapping 23 years ago. 1993 / 1994. Kenny Clark – friend, they bought out trap fisherman in Greenport. Bought gear.

6:05 - Accidents – hitting traps with a boat. Change regulations. Permits. Coast guard permit. Lights on traps. Now a requirement.

7:05 - After brown tide did some shell fishing. Carpentry. Doing both. Scallops good in recent years. Trap fishing steady. Sells a lot of bunker fish.

8:36 – Uses nothing for bait. Don't use bait for traps. Like pound trap.

9:10 – Black sea bass pots. First year using them. Describes them. Uses no bait.

10:00 – Only fisherman parent in Sag Harbor. More fishermen parents in other areas.

10:58 – Mentors. Ken Clark best friend and his mentor.

12:13 – Challenges of doing pound trap fishing is the setup.

13:20 – This job (of being a fisherman) is something out of the past. A lot of labor. You have to love it. Expenses are very high.

13:43 – Spend hours and weeks sewing nets. Spend equal time prepping on land as you do working on water.

14:44 – Questions how much longer can he work like this. Scary if he gets hurt, there is nobody else to take his place.

15:00 – Changes how he fishes with environmental changes. Combination of a lot of things. Not just waterfront living. Ground water flow from farmland, from anywhere. Not sure where to point finger.

15:43 – Had mahogany red tides recently. Some years, really bad red tides, fish die in traps. If they can escape, fish are fine. But if red tide sits on them for a day, a lot will die. Had a lot of fish die like that - especially bunkers. Happened three - four years ago.

16:20 – Changes in kinds of fishing caught. No butter fish. No blue herring. Not as many smooth dog fish. Still see a lot in the ocean. Ocean gil netters catch them.

16:38 – Tons of blue fish. Last year most bunkers ever he ever saw.

17:07 – A lot of striped bass, porgies and fluke in bay. Used to catch hundreds of horseshoe crab. Now gets very few horseshoe crabs. Affected in his area.

18:03 – Fishery fairly steady.

18:30 – When cannot catch in traps, go with gil netter in ocean – if does not fill in traps.

19:05 – Regulations from state had an effect. Quota systems are very restrictive. Fluke quota restrictive. More relaxed on porgy quota. Definitely had an effect.

20:35 – DEC did some good – change in striped bass quota. Very helpful. But DEC should have shorter time between science data and what is actually going on.

21:35 – In a tough state. NY does not enough data collected over years. NY Does not have the history. Hurts the industry.

22:17 – Fishing helped him as a trustee. Since 1686 – trustees were watermen. Having background working on water – very helpful. Stewarts of town waters.

24:30 – Some places more productive for shell fishing - like Quogue. Did not work up there. Now completely collapsed. Areas where there is nothing. Some rebounded.

25:00 – Why? Did all kinds of studies done. Worst brown tide boons every summer.

25:30 – Development changed ecology of the bays. Long Island all a sandbar – there is a lot of stuff – not just shore front homes. Because ground water flows.

26:39 – Eventually will get to point where everything is suffocated. Pressure from real estate and wealth. Does not see how things will not collapse. Environment cannot sustain.

28:40 – Close calls. Shell fishing. Late winter. Big ice flow coming down on them. Fell in water. Ice almost flipped the boat over. Brutal cold.

29:50 – Second story of close call.

31:20 – No off shore fishing. Did monk fishing once. Did not know much about it. Accustomed to working the bay.

32:50 – Self-taught to mend holes in net from a library book. Ken knew a little. Now builds nets for other people.

35:15 – Could not do it if did not live on this property. Look out the window – know exactly what the weather will be like.

36:00 – Before technology – knew storm was coming - watch the sky.

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