

Talking With: John Boreman  
The Ffiles  
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Dr. John Boreman started at the NEFSC in 1980, after spending his early career dealing with power plant impacts on fish and wildlife. He was instrumental in establishing the Center's Cooperative Marine Education and Research Program, and was its first coordinator at the University of Massachusetts. He served as deputy center director under Dr. Michael Sissenwine, starting in 1997, and one of his first assignments was to institute the reorganization of NEFSC.

Boreman stepped in as acting NEFSC director in late 2002, just days before a problem was discovered in the way the research survey trawl had been deployed between 2000 and 2002. This discovery quickly became a highly publicized part of an ongoing, controversial process to revise the region's groundfish management plan. Boreman resolved important questions raised during this time about the quality of science underlying the fishery management plan, and instituted a formal way to use fishing professionals in the research survey's future design and execution. He was selected for the director's job in February 2003.

In his first years as director, Boreman has presided over a fast-changing landscape of research and policy priorities during a time when NOAA is also significantly reworking its own management and budget processes. The Ffiles talked with Boreman about what it's like to sit at the top of the organization, what he sees ahead, and how 88 keys figure in his off-site life.

**The Ffiles:** What is the best thing, so far, about being Center director, in comparison to research and teaching, where you came from?

**Boreman:** For me, it's being able to work across a wide range of science, and a wide range of issues-- from integrated ocean observing systems, to marine mammals, to social sciences. And the issues change every day. For me, that's a plus!

**The Ffiles:** And what is the worst?

**Boreman:** Dealing with our current budget allocation, which is significantly less than last year's. We have been working almost continuously on figuring out how to meet our obligations and maintain our programs. It will be difficult, but I'm optimistic that we'll squeeze through.

**The Ffiles:** You've been a researcher and a program manager, and the deputy director. What's the biggest change in your thinking owing to sitting in the director's chair for a while?

**Boreman:** Moving up through the ranks, I was used to a chain-of-command type of structure where you had to make your boss happy, and had to make staff happy, and that was it. As Center director, my attention is much more focused toward interactions with outside groups and people. How well I respond to outside groups and how well I represent the Center and our science to others are key to success in this job.

**The Ffiles:** You came into your job on the eve of a crisis, the discovery that several years of bottom trawl surveys had been affected by uneven warps on the research trawl. You jumped into resolving that issue, and seemed to have landed on both feet. Was there something about that trial by fire that helped set the course of your tenure as director?

**Boreman:** The big lesson I learned from that crisis was that we need to listen to the people whose livelihoods are heavily influenced by us getting our science right. That's important. We need to make sure that everything we do is well documented and is transparent; and if we are wrong, just say so and get busy fixing the problem. I think that's what the industry appreciated at the time. We were willing to admit there were things we needed to improve at the Center and we reached out and asked industry to help us do that.

**The Ffiles:** What is the most exciting thing you see ahead in science and research for the NEFSC?

**Boreman:** If the momentum for science in support of ecosystem-based management continues, it will be a real boon for all of NOAA Fisheries science programs, including ours. Our Center's vision statement focuses on an ecosystems-based science program, because that's where we think the next big advances will come, and it appears that management of our marine resources is headed in the same direction. I believe this combination preserves and improves our basic mission to monitor the marine environment and the animals that live in it, and will also demand some pretty advanced applied science. Right now, we are going through an education process, both within and outside the agency, to get a common understanding of what ecosystems-based management means.

**The Ffiles:** It seems there's a lot of competition going on among various groups and agencies to gain a foothold in ecosystems-based science, whatever it turns out to mean. Is that good or bad?

**Boreman:** It's typical whenever a big shift in how we approach natural resource management is occurring. Some people are trying to do some things too fast, and we are probably not moving fast enough in other areas. But a very important part of this process is dialog and education. I don't think we have finished the dialog yet about where we in NOAA, as well as others, need to be going. The fact that a lot of different programs are looking at science for ecosystem-based management means a lot of good minds are working on the issue. On balance, I think that is a good thing.

**The Ffiles:** Any other area where you see exciting things happening?

**Boreman:** Cooperative research. The industry-based surveys and study fleet, for example, show real promise. We have to remain diligent about maintaining our core research, but overall, cooperative research has expanded our reach and our ability to respond to questions about current issues posed by managers and industry.

**The Ffiles:** If there's an up, there must be a down—are there current science programs that will get smaller or disappear?

**Boreman:** The short answer is that it just depends on where the dollars are. We have been very adept at reallocating our people and capabilities to do the work that has been asked of us while maintaining our core monitoring programs. There are no “weak links” in our programs since we are pretty much stripped down to the essentials now. I think it's more a question of how much we'll do, rather than what we will do.

**The Ffiles:** The agency has changed a lot since the 1970s when our mission was broadened to include fishery and marine mammal regulatory responsibilities. Are we now an agency that's more about regulations than about science?

**Boreman:** I'd like to take an even longer view: we've changed a lot since the 1870s! It's certainly a fact that the agency is regulation driven. Perhaps that's a natural evolution away from the basic science we conducted for much of our history, or maybe it's just the press of litigation and other influences that stem from the management side of the house.

What worries me most is the potential for losing our long-term science vision because we are so consumed by current events and issues. We are able to respond to those short-term needs because we have long-term monitoring and assessment programs. If we sacrifice the basics, we won't do a very good job on the applied tasks. For example, when recent reports said that primary production was seriously compromised in the North Atlantic over the past 30 or so years, we were able to show that for the same period on the Northeast continental shelf, zooplankton been relatively stable and even had a banner years. We were able to do that because of a long-term commitment to monitoring plankton and ocean conditions on the shelf. The food habits database, results from our long-term sampling program. It now includes more than 700,000 records. We're using it to look at all kinds of current issues in fishery

management: "trade-offs" in multispecies fisheries, the role dual role of some fish both as seafood and as forage for other marine life, and the occurrence of localized depletion.

**The Ffiles:** The budget news has been grim this year, and many believe that will be the case for the foreseeable future. What do you think those changes actually mean: a changing mission, the same mission with fewer resources--what can people expect on the ground?

**Boreman:** To me, the budget outlook means we will continue to lose flexibility on how we spend our funds. Every year, a greater proportion is directed toward specific activities, and we have to scramble more to maintain our core, long-term programs that play such an important role in our work and that of others.

To overcome this, we need to be significant players in the NOAA budget planning process, which we which we are doing by getting NEFSC people on the goal teams that help formulate the budget. I want to ensure that we have our oar in the water at the right time. This might not mean much in the short-term, but the out-year budgets appear to be leaning in our favor. The FY07 budget just submitted by the President to Congress shows major funding increases for protected species research and stock assessments, improving data collection for fishery stock assessments, upgrading the automated at-sea data collection systems on our vessels, economics and social sciences research, and computer hardware and software.

**The Ffiles:** Is there any chance we'll turn our attention more to basic science and exploration, and do less analysis in support of regulatory actions?

**Boreman:** I sincerely doubt it. We are the only part of NOAA that has regulatory activities as part of its mission. Perhaps other parts of NOAA will be able to build their capabilities and go in that direction. NOAA Fisheries Service needs to develop stronger partnerships with those line offices and with academia so we can take advantage of what they have to offer.

**The Ffiles:** If you were to go back to research, do you have a pet project?

**Boreman:** I have a few. I spent my research career studying coastal migratory species like striped bass, salmon, winter flounder, weakfish, bluefish, and shad. However, the species group that fascinates me the most is the sturgeons. Worldwide, sturgeon species are in trouble because of pollution, dams, and overfishing. Some species are believed to be down to fewer than 100 individuals, and one at last report has fewer than 10! That one was last seen in Uzbekistan in a feeder river to the Aral Sea. Another species that has fascinated me since my graduate days at Cornell is the sea lamprey. Not a warm, cuddly species, I know, but one with a curious life history about which we still know very little. Finally I'd also like to know where juvenile American shad go once they leave the estuaries for the open ocean.

**The Ffiles:** Finally, a pop question about your life outside of work: have you ever played a Bosendorfer?

**Boreman:** No, but I would like to. I have played a Steinway, a grand, in the showroom. My great-grandfather built pianos for Steinway & Sons. He built a piano for the family, and I played that. My grandfather was a concert pianist who toured for Steinway & Sons.

**The Ffiles:** So, are you gifted in this regard?

**Boreman:** Regrettably, no. I was constantly playing at the piano in my grandmother's house, and took it up as a student at 38 when my kids were taking lessons--I decided that I had held out long enough. I just enjoy the mathematics of it. Taking another run at it seriously is part of my retirement plan.

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