

Talking With: John Sibunka

The Ffiles_

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After 39 years, and more than 3,500 sea days, the NEFSC's John Sibunka from the Howard Laboratory is hanging up his bongos. *The Ffiles* caught up with him earlier this month as he was embarking on his final survey cruise.

The Ffiles: What's the biggest change you've seen in your work over those 39 years?

Sibunka: Well, there are a lot. Maybe that when I first started it was who had the best microscope, now it's who has the best PC.

The Ffiles: What are some of the other things that are different?

Sibunka: We used to spend more time together, I suppose, and had some crazy traditions. For example, we used to play touch football at noontime, the whole lab except Dr. Walford. He was always the gentleman scientist, in a tie and everything. We started the Snowbowl. Captain Jack McAdam and I faced one another over the line of scrimmage one year and we hurt for a couple of weeks after that. We also had an annual softball game and the winning team got a cracked plate.

The Ffiles: I understand you were on watch for us before you even started working for the federal service.

Sibunka: Well that's one way of looking at it, that's when I was student at the Southern Maine Vocational Institute in South Portland in the marine tech program. We had a school ship, and four students lived on it at all times to keep the systems running and so forth. I was one of them. The *Delaware II* was being built at a yard right there in South Portland. It was about to be launched, I think. My roommate and I were on our way into town to do some laundry. When we came around to the ship yard, where the *Delaware* was, and I said, "Hey, that ship's on fire." And it was. I called the operator from a pay phone to get the fire department and she didn't believe it. The fire department did come, but by the time they got there, the acetylene tanks had exploded and it was just ablaze. All the trucks could do was hose down the surrounding area to keep it from spreading. The shed roof fell in and broke the hull in three places. And that was the end of the *Delaware II* in May 1965.

Then I graduated, and ended up working at Sandy Hook. That same boat yard got the insurance settlement, and then the contract to rebuild the boat that burned. So really, the one we have is the *Delaware II-and-a-half*, if you want to think of it like that.

The Ffiles: So what was your first job at Sandy Hook?

Sibunka: I was supposed to work with Dave Deuel (sport fish biologist) on bluefish. I got there on June 20, 1966. That was a Monday. I was at sea on the following Tuesday, and that's the way it's gone ever since. I averaged about 100 sea days per year until about 1999 and the end of GLOBEC. I've had a merchant's seaman's ticket since I was 19, I still have it. It's come in handy.

The Ffiles: For example?

Sibunka: Well, one time they got into some legal issue on the *Oleander*—that's a container ship that regularly sails from Port Elizabeth, New Jersey to Bermuda and we've outfitted her with various instruments to collect data. They had a new captain who wouldn't take a scientist that didn't have seaman certification. I had one, so I went and bailed out science.

The Ffiles: So did you ever work on bluefish?

Sibunka: No, not really. Instead of working on bluefish I ended up with the ichthyoplankton group working for Wally Smith (chief of the ichthyoplankton group 1963- 1996) and stayed there for most of my career.

The Ffiles: And spent a lot of time at sea, and saw some amazing things?

Sibunka: Beginning with the first time I went to sea on the *Albatross IV*. That was while I was still in school, in April 1964, on the spring survey. I will now end my at-sea career on *Albatross IV* on the spring survey of 2006.

On that first trip, I was standing the 12 to 6 watch on the bridge studying navigation—I was there for boat training. During the night we lost both radars. I was sharing a stateroom with Pat Twohig (long-time NEFSC electronics engineer – ed.) so I went to see Pat and woke him up. He came up with a lantern light and a white bedsheet. He had one of those radars in a bunch of little pieces and then back together and working within a few hours. I will never forget it.

The Ffiles: Were there any "firsts" that you remember?

Sibunka: Well, I was on the boat the first time they had a woman go as chief scientist for the NEFSC Survey Unit. That was on the *Albatross IV* in 1976, and that woman was Linda Despres, who was, and is, a great chief scientist.

I also sailed on the Soviet research boats when they were here, off and on for ten years during the MARMAP Program (which made observations of plankton and water properties at approximately 160 standard station locations 4-8 times per year – ed.) I am one of the few people who can claim to have been a chief scientist on a Soviet vessel.

The Ffiles: So how did you train for the work you ended up doing?

Sibunka: I graduated with an associate's in marine sciences from Southern Maine Vocational Institute, as it was at the time. Then I eventually went to Rutgers and got a B.A. in science under a student program—the agency paid, and I promised to work for the government for 10 years.

I started with the fisheries service as a marine tech in June 1966 aboard the *Dolphin* -- a 109-foot harbor tug that we got from the Army on surplus. As soon as I got my B.A., I was converted to a fisheries biologist. Mike Fahay (fishery biologist specializing in taxonomy of larval and juvenile fishes, at Sandy Hook since 1965 – ed.) and I are the last of the people that were part of that original ichthyoplankton group at Sandy Hook.

The Ffiles: What's the biggest improvement in methods or tools you've seen over your career?

Sibunka: Of course we have gone from the mechanical era to the electronic era. It's been a good change in a lot of ways. For example, for much of my time the logs were all paper and we used wooden measuring boards and scales, there was nothing that was electronic. FISCUS (a NOAA-developed electronic data collection system used on fishery survey vessels – ed.)? We'll never go back to paper logs. If anyone ever complains about FISCUS we should take them out to see it done the old way, and they'll get the idea.

Other things have changed a lot about going to sea. When I started there was no email, there was one radio call a day, if there was an emergency you had to call the high-seas operator which was very expensive. People played cribbage and read books and talked and socialized.

The Ffiles: So, some good some bad?

Sibunka: Well, the big change has been the way we accumulate and use data at sea. And now you are about to get a new ship (*Henry Bigelow* –ed.)and you will be very proud of her, as we were of the *Albatross IV* in her day. She was futuristic and forward-looking at the time. If not, the *Albatross IV* would have been a side trawler. I sailed on the *Bigelow* during the builder's trials. She is an amazing ship. A ship of science is always going to be tweaked, always going to be changed, but if you start out with a good basis, she'll serve you well, just like the *Albatross IV*. The *Bigelow* has already survived two hurricanes—she'll be a lucky ship for you.

The Ffiles: What is the thing you have missed least once we quit using it?

Sibunka: Doing plankton tows with a wire angle indicator—the real-time seabird CTD has been a life saver.

The Ffiles: What's the most exciting thing you remember happening on the ship?

Sibunka: One time we picked up a hedgehog (a WWII anti-submarine weapon developed by the Royal Navy – ed.) trawling at night down south on the *Dolphin*. I went to kick a shark that was on deck out of the way, missed, and kicked that hedgehog instead. It was about 2 in the morning, and that woke the watch up. Everybody was very alert after that.

The Ffiles: And your worst experience?

Sibunka: We used to do those infrared thermometer flights with the Coast Guard on those big Grumman Albatross sea planes. We had a hydraulic problem on the plane, and when they dropped the landing gear one of the lights indicating the wheels were locked didn't come on. We were diverted to an airport in Pennsylvania and they wanted to foam the runway—they had all the equipment out on the field, trucks and guys in asbestos suits and everything. The pilot decided to try it without the foam. We made it and everything was okay, but I think I lost a few years that night.

Those flights were to measure sea surface temperature on a monthly basis, before we could do it by satellite. The plane would fly at a maximum altitude of 500 ft with an infrared thermometer outside the plane. The readings were taken and eventually hand-plotted to show the curves. We also recorded any sealife we observed, and sometimes deployed surface and bottom drifters. The whole thing was a joint agreement between our agency and the Coast Guard. I did that for a few years until satellites took over.

The Ffiles: Is there a best trip that sticks out in your mind?

Sibunka: I don't know about that. I think some of the most enjoyable cruises were the summer trawl cruises that I made in August. They were scenic and the weather was good for a change. We always had good people on them.

The Ffiles: I'm told you have a reputation as a bit of a jinx aboard ship. Here's your chance to go on the record about whether that's fair.

Sibunka: Some people seem to think that every time I go to sea, I attract the bad weather. It even drifted over to WHOI. When I went there to sail on the R/V *Oceanus* for GLOBEC back in the 1990s—I heard somebody on the deck say, "Here comes Hurricane John." The reason is probably that I used to specialize in winter trips. Generally, I spent my career in the winter North Atlantic and when you do that, of course, you are going to get hammered. Also I remember that I was supposed to sail on a larval herring survey a few years back. It was in October and we were delayed several times. The relief Captain happened to be Jack McAdam. He kept delaying and I kept at him, saying "if it breezes up we'll just come back in." He said no. That weather system turned into the "Perfect Storm."

The Ffiles: Now it's time for the "state of knowledge" question. What's the progress been under your watch?

Sibunka: When I started in fisheries, the stocks were pretty high and life was good for the fishermen. Then I saw it progressively get bad. Now I think that the stocks are starting to rebound. I feel good about that, I feel like I am leaving at a good time. And that's a good feeling to know that I was a part of that. I remember those small tows in the 1990s, and I was there when we got the first monster tows of haddock when that big 2003 year class came in—I saw it before anything was published or documented or anything. I got to see the effects of what I was doing over my career, right at the checker really.

There have been a lot of good people at fisheries over that time who just did their job and did it well. They aren't in the limelight. But I think the Northeast Fisheries Science Center, with all the opposition we have had to face, has tried to do a good job.

The Ffiles: Are there any of those people who really stand out as memorable to you?

Sibunka: Capt. Robert Landsvick, one of the captains of the *Dolphin* and later captain of the *Delaware II* when she went to Sandy Hook. He influenced me a lot. He was from the old school and originally from Norway. He had very high standards and values and was a good person to learn from, and a lot of us around here did. He was a World War II veteran, decorated by the king of Norway for valor. He was among the officers that

ran one of the subchasers that the U.S. gave to Norway for use in the operation now called "The Shetland Bus," helping resistance fighters in German-occupied Norway from bases in the Shetland Islands.

During the 1960s on the *Dolphin*, I sailed with another memorable guy, John Pennington. He started his fishing career in the early 1900s on the fishing schooners. He fished in those dorys and told great stories.

The Ffiles: Any other changes you'd like to mention?

Sibunka: The water is cleaner. All those regulations about dumping and stopping pollution have really made a difference. I can remember when you couldn't walk the beaches at Sandy Hook without getting tar on the bottom of your feet, and you don't get that any more. The dumpsite closures, the processing of waste, the improved sewerage in cities like New York have all made a real difference.

The Ffiles: What will be the next big thing in your area of expertise, ichthyoplankton studies?

Sibunka: These studies will continue to be an indicator of the strength and health of upcoming year classes and future fish stocks, and I think we will be able to be more predictive, for management purposes. We have to, there is such demand for it. In general, I think there should be, and probably will be, more effort as far as looking at environmental changes and effects, and habitat loss. I know those are a buzz phrases, but I can see us getting more involved with that kind of study. I think they are a factor for many species right now.

The Ffiles: I am sure that you remember the fire that claimed a good part of the Sandy Hook lab back in 1985. Do you remember hearing the news?

Sibunka: The fire was extremely traumatic, and I really don't like to remember it. I was at sea when it happened and they actually sent word not to tell me about it. Somebody did slip, though. I hit the dock in Woods Hole and called Wally Smith at home right away. He just said, "Yeah, the lab burned down." You can't imagine. That's not just a place to work, it's your life. It was traumatic-- let nobody have to experience it again.

We were like a family, and Sandy Hook has stayed a tight group. A lot of people who started there will end their careers there. That's unprecedented, or at least unusual in the fisheries service. There are so many people who have made their mark on the fisheries service who started there, I am honored to have worked with people like that.

The Ffiles: So what's next for you and your family?

Sibunka: My son is in medical profession, and going to the Mayo Clinic for a degree program this summer. My daughter works for Savannah School of Art and Design in the in-house graphics department. I was at sea when my granddaughter was born, and will be at sea this year when she has her first birthday on April 19.

The Ffiles: Are you staying in New Jersey?

Sibunka: Dave Deuel and I stayed friends. You know, he caught the world's record red

drum, on the Outer Banks back in 1984, 94 pounds 2 ounces. The record still stands. He and I were to be partners when we retired, and he was to build a house out in North Carolina. Unfortunately he died, but my wife and I bought land down there more than 20 years ago and now we are building a house on it. I miss Dave as a friend and a fishing partner, so I guess I will fish that beach alone, but will have him in my memories. Along with those of my father, who also liked to surf fish from the beach.

The Ffiles: Any advice for the rest of us?

Sibunka: I worry some about the problems we've had in recent years with getting new people on board. People like me and Mike Fahay are walking away with a lot of knowledge that it would have been great to pass on to some new, young staff in our group. I can see that the wheel may have to be invented again because of that. I know that the survey group has been able to bring on some new people. There's a lot of young talent out there and it's great to be on the ship with all that youth and enthusiasm.

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