

**Interviewee Name:** Rustin Taylor

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**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations:** Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Rebecca Clark Uchena (Island Institute)

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**Interview Description:**

**Rustin Taylor**

Somesville, ME

Elver Fisherman

Interviewed by Natalie Springuel

Rustin Taylor, from Somesville, ME, is an elver fisherman who fishes around Mount Desert Island and Ellsworth. He talks about the changes in the fishery over time and the environmental balances to consider when fishing. He explains some of the factors that affect this fishery, such as water level fluctuations caused by the Union River Dam and the quota system established after the 2013 season.

**Collection Description:**

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**Transcription by:** Teagan White, College of the Atlantic intern

Start of RUSTIN\_TAYLOR\_VMFF2018\_AUDIO

RT: Rustin Taylor (Interviewee)

NS: Natalie Springuel (Interviewer)

RU: Rebecca Clark Uchenna (Interviewer)

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NS: Sure, we're on? Yeah! So, why don't we start by you stating your name and maybe you could spell it for us so we make sure we get it right.

RT: Alright, Rustin Taylor. R-U-S-T-I-N. T-A-Y-L-O-R.

NS: And tell us where you live.

RT: I live in Mount Desert, the village of Somesville.

NS: And you are a fisherman, tell us a little bit about your fishing.

RT: Yes, I'm a commercial elver fishermen, in the spring during the open season.

NS: In the open season. How long have you been elver fishing?

RT: Well, I've done it for probably close to two decades. There was a period of time where the fishery slowed down and not many people participated, and I would be in that category for that time, but yeah. Definitely over two decades. So it's been a good portion of my life because, like probably since I was about

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RT: 15 years old it's been something I've participated in so.

NS: So tell us a little bit about what it's like to be an elver fisherman.

RT: Well it's a lot different now than when it first came to Maine, so to speak, commercially because I was young at that time and it was a new fishery for everyone, and just, a lot of mystique about it with being at night, and something new and different, and it was a lot of mystery in like, you know, allure to it. But now with you know, the finances in everything, money changes things and it's matured into, and I've matured too, so it's different now. It's like... it was really exciting in that time and it still is, but it's just in a different way.

NS: Give us a day, or a, lemme say, a night in your life as an elver fisherman.

RT: You can definitely

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RT: expect not to get much sleep at all, and, which I used to try to fight that, and now I just kinda roll with it. It's like my body actually knows that I've been doing it for so many years, as it starts coming into spring I'm like, my rhythms, my circadian rhythm or whatever gets going at 3AM, like my mind is actually sharp. Like, I'm actually trying to use that to do billing and stuff like that right now because that just seems to be when my mind is anticipating this fishery that I've been involved in, but um, so you know, being up late hours and, it's like you almost have to take on the mannerisms of the species that you're, that you're pursuing and so like that would be like being quiet, and you know, at night unseen and just trying to go about it kinda like the eels, the elvers do themselves, so.

NS: So how do you decide where you wanna set your nets?

RT: Well it depends, like how the seasonal flow of the water in the spring is different every year

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RT: it's, and the weather, the way the temperature and the amount of snow pack and ice pack we have on the lakes all contributes to that decision, but it's like, so early on, it seems like the lakes are so cold that the elvers tend to stay more in the marine environment and the ocean, if you stay a little bit closer to the ocean, you tend to find them early on, but if you try to move up into the watershed, into the more fresh water areas early, there's nothing there. But sometimes the way the fishery is structured for fixed gear and other types of fishing, you might have to move to a spot early, way early on, knowing you're not going to catch anything in anticipation of the better fishing later on, so there's a lot of factors that go into deciding where. With an extreme like, limited amount of fixed gear; one piece of fixed gear, fyke net or two max for very few fishermen, it's hard to make that choice, which, and then the weather, it's not just the weather. If like, in a place like the

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RT: Union River in Ellsworth, you're totally beholden to the flow rate of the dam there. So the, that's a tough game to play because it moves the fishery from all the way, it moves it a mile up and down the river depending on the flow rate of the damn and that can change within hours at just with, the value of electricity at that time or the flow rate, or even, or them anticipating a water event, like you know, a large rainfall a week ahead of time they'll have to start dropping the water that they're holding back, so that makes it really challenging to fish a place like that. But it's almost worth it fishing a larger watershed like that because it's such a larger habitat that proportionally the amount of migrating elvers that come in there is proportional to the size of the habitat that is trying to feed, so it's like, it's kinda a gamble. So it's like, I tend to sometimes I'll tend to fish in the smaller brook knowing I'm not going to catch any huge amount

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RT: but you don't have to worry about the monster of the dam.

NS: So with the dam do you get any heads up when it's going to change?

RT: There isn't locally, like it's, the dam in the couple decades I've done it, its changed ownership hands, the contact information has changed several times. And one of the companies, I can't remember which now, was really good. It was literally calling an office and daily and getting a report from a secretary who, I wouldn't really want her job during the season because I think she gets quite a few calls from fishermen at that time, but um, but the original company was really good about responding and letting us know. That particular lady, she knew it was part of the program for that part of the year so she was really good about it, but um, since its changed hands at least once, maybe twice, lots of times it's a voicemail and there's almost no way to get information. It's become really difficult and when you're talking about thousands of dollars worth of gear, one net can be over a thousand dollars easily...

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RT: and if you're a family, say you had three or four nets and you know, in the Union River watershed and if you're working another job and they should open the dam you're going to lose the gear. It's happened to me a lot of times. Not only is it dangerous to be down in the river to be down in the river working, like down within the watershed because they have a horn supposedly, up by the dam but it's, you maybe, I might have heard it up there a couple times but you don't hear it down the river where there is still a lot of water above the Ellsworth boat launch so it's just like, that dam just really changed a lot of things there.

NS: I can imagine. And, so have you been following the relicensing of the dam of the Union?

RT: Yes, I have been, with quite a bit of interest in fact. I've asked people that know people, that know maybe, more than me, I've asked them, do you really think that we might see that dam disappear within our, within my lifetime? And you know, it's, it would be

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RT: so different if it was out of there and, I don't know. It would change everything for a long time. It seems like it takes a while for the watershed to recover, after a lot of things get stirred up and everything but I think that overall if that dam wasn't there it would be much more natural and it doesn't really seem to serve much of a purpose and, and the modern way of things are going...

NS: So you put your nets sometimes in the Union and sometimes you said in smaller brooks?

RT: Yup, um. It's really interesting perspective to start off fishing like, down around Mount Desert Island in crystal clean, you know, mountain streams with like, very little activity or, of people or, pollution in the water but then later on in the fishery you, you end up moving, like I said, away from the coast to more inland areas and that used to be Penobscot river, Bangor, Hamden and it was so crazy to come out of that

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RT: clean water and to water that was almost, you almost didn't even want to get near the water because the water quality is so much lower. Like you can visibly see some road runoff and some diesel fuel and foul odors coming out of who knows what type of, you know, industrialized facility so it's so much more industrialized in the Penobscot watershed, compared to fishing down around, you know, some of the coastal communities that are still not so industrialized and built up.

NS: How do you decide where, what river or stream you want to put your nets in?

RT: Well it was years and years of learning curve to figure out where and, even though I guess they don't, the elvers themselves don't go back to the same stream that they were born in, they tend to, like I said, it seems to be proportional, seems to be proportional to the size of the watershed, should be, if you can time it right, um, there should be a proportional, you know, migration of eels to go there so, it's a lot of looking at different spots and intuition and knowing like, early is going to be

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RT: this spot and later is going to be maybe that spot, and a lot of it's intuition and, and luck basically.

NS: And knowledge you've accumulated...

RT: And knowledge that we've accumulated and actually, I noticed one time, well when we were fishing, a lot of us were fishing Penobscot River, Hamden, Bangor, as a group of fishermen we were able to use, all of us collectively our knowledge of where they were. So you could like, read where other fishermen that were in the know were fishing, and we all kinda worked as a group, even if we weren't trying to help each other. But, then later years when the quotas became such a large reduction and not everyone was able, had to, you know, chase and fish for them all the way up in the Penobscot River watershed, you'd go up there and there was almost no, no one to be seen. There was no gear, there was no fishermen, and there was no litmus to know what happened to know where, to ask you know, have you seen them? Have they run through? Where's the, where's the nets? So it was like no one knew, and it was, there was at least

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RT: one or two seasons that, even I would think some of the best in the fishery were kinda scratching their heads because no one really, didn't have each other to bounce off of.

NS: And can you explain a little but of the change, why there were less fishermen?

RT: Yes, and I would attribute it to the really deep, over 50% um, quota reductions that, that individually were imposed on fishermen, harvesters. They took a three year average catch and then um, deducted percentages out of that which ended up being, I can't remember the exact amount, but over 50% reductions on an individual basis, so that led to a much shorter season and not having to, because before it was what they, I guessed they termed it derby fishery meaning we could fish, you know, until the end of the open season and catch as many as we could, but, um. With the quota that, being such a reduced number, um, myself, I haven't had to go to Bangor, which

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RT: at the Penobscot River and as far to fill my quota because I've been able to do it much closer to home, so...

NS: That's nice.

RT: It is nice that way, you know, especially with a family. And that, and an understanding wife of the hours, and locking my keys out of vehicle at 3 o'clock in the morning and having to call [chuckles]...

NS: So um, so over, so the change meant that less fishermen on the streams and on the rivers so you had less of a group to sort of check in with and operate with and talk to each other and learn from each other...

RT: And it's a double edged sword like everything to because it also, it did, it opened up opportunity in places where otherwise might be a coveted spot to fish and you might struggle to put together a decent catch in other places that aren't as productive and then, and without the quota fishery, that spot would never have had opened up and that would be monopolized the whole time but once it got, which I mean, the quota,

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RT: it's good and bad things, but with such a deep cut, it was a painful thing for everybody, but it did open up the opportunity for, you'll go by a coveted spot for uh, to fish, and the gear will be gone and you can actually participate in that, in fishing from that location so in that way, it was a positive.

NS: Is there, um, sort of, territoriality in a similar that there might be in the lobster fishery where

you know that that particular stretch of stream is always a particular person who, kinda claims it, or does it not play out the same way?

RT: That, it, no it doesn't.... It's kinda like local people from a local area see the same faces, fish the same area and should someone travel from a very long distance to come participate with the local uh, fishermen, that would be frowned upon a bit. But there's some jockeying but once everyone, you know,

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RT: locks in and figures out where they're fishing, there's only 417, a cap of 425 fishermen, and so, in our area there's only X amount so we all know each other and we all know each other pretty well and we've all had to mature with the fishery, with each other to work with each other. It's kinda like a first come first serve type thing and people pretty much try to respect that for the most part. I mean it's incredible with, with the way the value of them skyrocketed even at that point, there was a, there was a level of respect between harvesters that, I mean not to say that there wasn't disrespect, but there was a level of respect that I would have to say was uh, was impressive.

NS: So you figure out where you're going to put your net, you said you have two right? Just one?

RT: Just one, yeah.

NS: So you put your net in, and then, and then what do you do?

RT: Well that's why, that's why it's, it's, then it's not very exciting. Then with fixed gear you get to go look and see how much you're not going to catch at other places.

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RT: [chuckles] So it's, you feel like your hands are tied and lots of times you're a step behind and like, you like, so if you see them there last, the night before, you think it's a great place to put your net, and then they're not there, but they're not there the next night. So it's really, it's a lot of um, just intuition and really staying, really like, reading the weather conditions and the flow rates and even small, small rainfalls and stuff will totally change the flow rates especially in small watersheds, it will happen immediately. The flow rate will change. Or larger watershed like the Penobscot or the Union River, that will take days before you see the flow increase and that will either, eliminate fishing areas or open up other areas, it's, so it's a very liquid [chuckles] situation.

NS: So you go out to your net and you see that you've got some elvers in there...

RT: Well, so it's, like yeah. You've set the nets then, uh, some people dip for them with just like

a hand dip net but other

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RT: people use a fyke net, a fixed piece of gear that you have to put on the shore at low tide when the water's left and the shoreline is open and rocky. So you walk out and you anchor the net down, and then the tide comes and floods the net, like usually deeper than like what you could stand, like you know, over your head or whatever... it floods the net for a three hour period and then the tide drains away, and then that's when you can get back to the holding portion, like the lobster trap type portion that basically, it's just like a funnel, like a cone that funnels the um, them into like a holding area and then there's a smaller opening that they hopefully don't find their way out. And at that point, you just, you hope to see something in there. It's really difficult because lots of times you can see far more elvers in the water than in what you might actually have in the net, and some people think that when they see a, maybe a really large net in place, a very large piece of fixed gear with very fine mesh, that you're catching a very large amount and it's just, literally, even with

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RT: over two decades experience, when you untie the holding portion to look, you just don't know. You don't know, I mean you could have seen thousands and thousands of them, but you don't know if they actually went into the nets, so that's the trick. A lot of people have shied away from the fyke nets because it takes a lot of, a lot of years to figure out how to get them to go in there.

NS: Um, how do you, well, so when you, so then you open the end up to see what you have in there...

RT: Right, so then you untie the end, it's called the cod end, there's no cod involved, it's just an old term for nets I guess, something, and um, so it's just like a, you really don't need much. That's one thing that I like about it, you really don't need a lot of overhead or like, you know, there's no hydraulic equipment involved, there's no bait needed or anything like that, it's just like really basic, like hand harvesting. So really you just need a bucket and maybe a separator type net to separate the debris out and you just

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RT: basically shake whatever might be in that fine mesh screen. You know, it's like window screen like material but much more durable and you just kinda shake whatever, usually you're talking ounces, very, [NS cough] very small, generally tends to be very small amounts with the value of like, you know, because apparently it's like 2,200 glass eels per pound, so you know, it takes quite a few to [NS coughs again] to catch a pound. So like, you know, years ago when the price was a fraction of what it is now, you could still make okay, an okay side pay doing it and then, when the price increased it made it... I don't know... more lucrative, it's, it's really hard to



understand that you're only going to catch a couple ounces of something, you know, in the night and actually have that be worth your effort. Because it's something that you could hold within one or two hands

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RT: and have it match the night's effort, so.

NS: [coughs] Excuse me. Do you have any questions Rebecca? [coughs].

RU: Do you see a lot of young people getting into the fishery? Or does it stay the same?

RT: Well its been, its been a closed fishery with the only mechanism for new entrance has been the lottery, which, that the state has held for uh, vacant licenses which is, I understand reasons why it's done but it just seems like, it seems like with other fisheries there's an apprenticeship program where people are, you know, introduced to the fishery and I know with a lot of new people that were entered into the fishery previous, that didn't have years of experience when the price was fractions of what it has been

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RT: recently. There just doesn't seem to be the respect of the watershed and for the locations that would they would fish because, like I said, when there's only 400 fishermen, which then there was a bunch more added, but, we would be quiet and respectful to these small little mill streams and stuff like that and little side places on the side of the river that really, you don't want to aggravate the land owner. They may not own the land right there but if you're going to be there at midnight you don't want to be slamming your door and aggravating their dog or something like that. And then when the fishery kinda exploded and there was a bunch of new people let in, there was not really any respect. I heard people saying "I didn't have this yesterday and I might not have it tomorrow so I don't really care about today," whereas being one of the, I will call myself one of the original people in the fishery, it kinda hurt my feelings to see, cause I didn't want to lose access to these places that we've had a good rapport with the landowner or adjacent landowner for decades and not had a problem

[0:20:00.2] and then to see a lot of "No Trespassing" signs go up at places because of the increased interest and stuff so, that, that was difficult. So, I kinda went in a different direction than your question but...

RU: Yeah, no, that was good.

NS: What made you first get into it?

RT: Um, well it just came out of nowhere, like a shot in the dark like, no one had really ever heard of it and I was like, like I said, I think I was only 15 and my father was like, I don't think

there was much for licensing required at that time and just a couple people were just experimenting. They heard it was a new thing that might have value and somebody might be able to take them to a buyer and it was just a fun thing that I heard about at first and I'm sure at that time there was probably people doing it lucratively but, for me it was just an adventure to do something new and at night, but I was still in high school. My parents were like "you are not..." you know it was questionable. It was a new thing and I think I was a junior that year, something,

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RT: and they were like "no", you know, and then the fishery came back consecutive years and I was a little bit older and they were like "well," you know, "whatever" and I started participating and if you had a good night you could make as much as you did at a day job, um. Which helped in the time of year in the spring, you know, it's always after a long Maine winter of heating bills and everything else and there's no tourisms that's started and it might be too early to do grounds work and this, that and the other, so the timing of it is really key for a lot of coastal, coastal people I think.

NS: So it's a, a portion of your income during a set time of the year and then the rest of the year you do other stuff?

RT: Yeah it's, well, it's kinda weird because like so, when the price exploded, what at 2012 or whatever it was, I actually kinda sat back and said "am I really at the right place at the right time that this is gonna, you know, not be

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RT: something I can hang my hat on, but this is gonna turn from something that was, you know," cause I had literally fished them for \$70/lb in the past, and when you talk about the price going over \$2,600/lb, that's a huge difference. I actually wouldn't even sell them at \$70/lb. I refused to. I waited until the price was at least \$100/lb. But that's just, you know, and then it jumps to \$2,600/lb, um, I lost my train of thought but that was, that was just crazy for that, that

NS: Yeah that must have been an opportunity to think about...

RT: Right! So okay, so that's where I was going with that. So I was like "so I'm in a snapshot of time where something's actually really gonna work out," and then I almost wasn't even surprised with the quota restrictions coming down so heavy at 50, 52.9% or something along those lines. It was kinda like, "oh man," and it just turned it back into a kinda thing that you do on the side of everything else, which, you know, was disappointing but not surprising.

[0:23:00.1]

NS: Yeah. Yeah. Do you love it?

RT: I do love it. I love it dearly. It's one of the things even, even with all the hardships and stories that would make the hair stand up on the back of your neck, I do. I get a lot anxiety thinking about a season approaching, but it is one of the, because being at the, like where the tide meets the, salt water meets the fresh water, you know at that time of year in the spring when nature is waking up, it's really one of the coolest places to be and the things that you see, like, you know, I've seen baby flounder in the water. I've seen so many different things. I've seen big runs of [NS coughs] smelt, smelt fish and different things. Um, alewives and just tons of different things that I never really knew was happening right under your nose, you know, in your backyard because most people are smart enough to be sleeping at that time but, [chuckles], so.

NS: [coughs]. That's great. Is there anything

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NS: else that you want to say? [coughs] Clearly I have a frog in my throat.

RT: Well, um, just that, um, I mean, Maine is like, it just seems like if you read back historically this region has always been, you know, fisheries have always been really important for the New England, you know, coastal areas and, uh, you know with declines in a lot of fisheries I understand and advocate for protections, but at the same time, there's an argument about how, you know, how much protection does certain things, species need and it's just like, I'm glad to participate in this because I just want to be part of, you know, it feels like being part of Maine's heritage to be able to work within a fishery that's valued and it seems like historically it always has been that way and the diversity of fisheries in the state

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RT: has been, you know, become smaller and smaller and I'm just glad to have this one still and to have not lost it. I've tried to participate in a lot of ways to uh, advocate for us so we don't lose it.

NS: That's great. Thank you.

RT: Cool.

NS: Yeah.

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End.