**Interviewee Name**: Sam Belknap

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**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation**: Matt Frassica

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**Interview Description:**
Sam Belknap, a project leader at the Island Institute from Damariscotta, ME, talks about his interests in the anthropology of climate change, the benefits of nonprofits, and the problems with education in Maine.

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**Transcribed By:** Griffin Pollock

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[0:21:29.8]

MF: Matt Frassica
SB: Sam Belknap

[0:00:00.0]

SB: —That's the one thing any good anthropologist or social scientist knows, there's no wrong way.

MF: Okay, okay good to know. Alright, so for tape can you tell me your name and what you do?

SB: Yeah, my name's Sam Belknap, I am currently a community development officer at the Island Institute. I'm trained as an anthropologist and a climate scientist, but I grew up in a fishing family and I've done everything from sternmanning, to running my own boat, to being a dockboy, to managing my own lobster wharf.

MF: Wow, so you've done it all.

SB: (Laughs.) Almost all.

MF: And what—why did you end up in the nonprofit world?

SB: Because I've always been really interested in applied work. I spent a good chunk of my time in academia, and was dissatisfied with their ability to actually move from thought to action. So I chose to be an applied anthropologist and was drawn into the ability of nonprofits to do—to enact change much more quickly than nonprofits or even the policy world, so.

MF: And so what kinds of things are you working on?

SB: I am in charge of their sea level rise program and also working on issues of aquaculture. Some of my research background was in aquaculture and transitioning fishermen to aquaculture. And also renewable energy, so really adaptation strategies to help deal with and mitigate climate change. Kind of the heart and soul of what I do.

MF: All the exciting stuff!

[0:01:25.3]

SB: Yeah!

MF: And so—alright, so what about . . . we just have kinda like general, general kinda questions. We don't have to get through all of them, but they're just sort of to kinda get things started.

SB: Yeah.

MF: What do you value about your community or communities?

SB: It's . . . It's connection to the coast. Both the community in which I live, the community that I grew up in, and also the nonprofit professional community that I'm dealing with right now. The recognition that there's something special about this place, and there are communities that need some help. And being mindful, and being part of organizations that are mindful of the community specific needs. There is no broad brush solution, we need to get down and really get to know the people and their specific challenges. Um, because as a coast we're all in this together.

MF: And so where did you grow up and where do you work now?

[0:02:20.8]

SB: I grew up in Damariscotta, Maine. But that was where our house was. Really grew up in a lot of time, both in the Damariscotta River and also in Muscongus Bay out of Round Pond, my grandfather before my father owned a piece of working waterfront there in Round Pond which is on the Pemaquid Peninsula. So I grew up either on his lobster boat or on the boat with my father out on the islands of Muscongus Bay, so. The salt water runs thick in my blood, and island, island soil is the best kind of soil in my mind. But after being away for a while, both living in Arizona a bit after I graduated high school, and then coming back and being at the University of Maine, my wife and I and our two kids just moved back last Spring to the Midcoast, to Damariscotta, and built a house. And, and for—after a brief stint running the Herring Gut Learning Center down in Port Clyde, which is a nonprofit, experiential environmental education organization, I ended up at the Island Institute, which I had interned for back in 2012 when I started my doctoral work. And just fell in love with the organization and their approach to dealing with Maine's island and coastal communities, and here I am today!

MF: Are there things that you miss about being on a lobster boat?

[0:03:41.7]

SB: Oh absolutely, every day. I had the opportunity, between the institute job and my herring gut job, I got to spend two and half months sterning for my father. This later summer in through the end of November, and it just reminded me how much I enjoy that and how meaningful that experience is and how fulfilling it is in a completely different way. And it's—that ability to just experience the environment directly, and be at the mercy of natural forces. That helps you put the rest of your life in perspective sometimes. We can get lost in the hustle and bustle, and when you're riding up a 30 foot swell (laughs) and your boat, you recognize just how small your boat is, it helps to put everything else in perspective.

MF: So how old is your dad?

[0:04:32.9]

SB: He is 67. He was here yesterday, wish I had—I would've sent him over here, he would've been a good guy to talk to. But he's an interesting case, he didn't take up lobstering until my grandfather got sick back in the mid to late '90s. And fell in love with it and despite having a full time job as an insurance salesman, would fish 200 to 400 traps depending on the year, just because it, it, it called to him and it speaks to him. And when he retired from the insurance trade last September, he's now fishing full time, so.

MF: Was it—was there any kind of . . . I mean I guess your grandfather had also worked in the industry, so there wasn't any trouble for him coming in as a—

[0:05:20.9]

SB: Well, I mean there is, 'cause the family—the whole story of the family's involvement in the fishery is really interesting. My grandfather had owned this wharf since probably the late 50s, and he was actually a physician, a general practice physician. So the kind of old-timey doctor that was going out to islands, deliver babies and do things like that. But when he—he had always been fishing on the side, but when he retired he also took up lobstering as how to fill his spare time. So we're not a traditional fishing family, but we're still a fishing family. So my grandfather was, I guess, respected and known enough in the community, both for the fact that he delivered half the fishermen's babies, but also he was out there fishing on the water. So when I was out there fishing, or my dad was out there fishing, there's always the perception that we're not the full-time, year round fishermen, but there was some acceptance so it wasn't as hard to get in the water. We never had to deal with having our traps cut or things like that, as long as we were respectful and didn't push things too far.

MF: As long as you knew your place.

[0:06:26.1]

SB: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

MF: And so what kinds of things—when you were studying anthropology, what kinds of research questions were you studying—

SB: So I'm really interested in how, I guess in the broadest sense, how human communities and cultural groups deal with climate change. Deal with change in general. So Maine is a unique case where we're seeing, again, the ocean's warming faster than 99% of the rest of the world's oceans, it is particularly vulnerable to things like ocean acidification. But we're also more and more becoming the vacation ground for people escaping Southern New England states seeking what their waterfront used to be. So we're facing climate and demographic change at the same time. And rather than separating those out, they're all part and parcel of the same picture. So it's really the cultural response to that and how communities are responding to that and dealing with that in different ways. And how they're managing to adapt while maintaining the core of their identity that's the reason why they're still here, and why people are looking to come here.

MF: And so it sounds like those research interests are very much in line with the kind of work that you do at the Island Institute. What kinds of responses or adaptations to change do you see in your work now?

[0:07:48.3]

SB: Well it's, it's . . . It's been encouraging to see the amount of interest and engagement that the fishery, the lobster fishery in particular, is putting into climate change response. And their acceptance, and I say they're a group of individuals, they're split just like the rest of the country is. But the level of engagement that a lot of fishermen have shown when it comes to dealing with these things and working with policy makers and their communities to move the conversation forward, to move policy forward, to help the state deal with these issues because they recognize first hand that as a naturally resource dependent industry, they're on the front line of the folks that are experiencing these changes, so.

MF: Sort of for better and worse. It sounds like it was kind of for the better for a while, and in the future it might not—

[0:08:46.5]

SB: Yeah, exactly! And it's really interesting because you see, or at least I see, I can't speak—some of my other colleagues see this kind of split in the industry, where you have the older folks that have, have recollection of the time when we were catching 30 million pounds of lobster. Where we have a generation of kids younger than me that only know the rising portion of the landings curve, and only know this good time where every year there will be lots of lobsters. And they have yet to really experience both the fluctuations within the industry itself, and also the policy discussions, the management discussions that have shaped this fishery in the past. And they're getting their first taste now with the herring quota allocation cuts that we're gonna see that's gonna impact the bait availability. And also the conversations around the whale rules and how that might impact the fishery. Whereas the older generation have experienced things like this. The formation of the zones, with including different technology within the trap, the vents and things like that. So when you couple those two things together, it's a really interesting time to be an observer of the fishery. I don't have my license anymore, that was gone for years, but to have one toe still in the industry and just being able to step back and observe things, it's really fascinating. And also scary, because the industry's going to change.

MF: And you think that the younger generation is just a little bit—doesn't have that flexibility yet?

[0:10:21.6]

SB: Well I don't know if they don't have the flexibility, they're also in a cultural circumstance where if I'm a 25 year old lobsterman and I go into a bank and I say, "I need 600,000 dollars for a brand new boat," it's the paper—"Here's the paperwork, sign on the dotted line, it's yours." Because there's the expectation that this is a very lucrative fishery. That puts an incredible amount of pressure on that individual to go out and fish hard. To make sure that they're able to

make these—put these boat payments. One of the fishermen I talked to said, older gentleman, said his son has to clear 300,000 dollars just to cover all of his payments for the year (laughs)! That's an incredible amount of pressure, and it doesn't allow you the time as a younger fisherman, who has a family to feed and these bills to pay, the time to sit back and necessarily think strategically about the future of your—of the fishery. Because it's "I need to make money now."

MF: Yeah. What about—are there other concerns either within climate change or other areas that you study that you're worried about changes happening, either like sea-level rise—

[0:11:44.9]

SB: Yeah, so I mean, sea level rise is is—I mean, A: it's part of my job description, but it's also an intimate concern because my family has a house on the Damariscotta River, and has a piece of working waterfront property that, the high-tide comes up to the bottom of the decking board. So four or five inches of sea level rise, which is what we're going to expect in the next decade or so, that's gonna have a dramatic impact on our property and we're not alone. You look at southern Maine, and while they have more beaches and are differently susceptible to sea level rise, as you go Downeast, even though the coast becomes different from a geological standpoint, their reliance on working waterfront infrastructure increases. So while they're vulnerable in different ways, they're no less vulnerable. And that's, that's worrying because there's less we can do from a policy perspective to kind of deal and prevent these problems, it's more reactionary. We have to provide communities the opportunity to build and change infrastructure which is a different conversation than regulating a fishery, but no less urgent. So it's—my wife always jokes that I pick the two most depressing topics to possibly be involved with, is fisheries and climate change, so (laughs).

MF: Yeah, nice work.

[0:13:08.0]

SB: But they're important issues that need to be tackled.

MF: And what about the access to the working waterfront? I mean it sounds like you're—you have a front row seat to that too.

SB: Yeah, I mean it's a huge issue across the state. Moreso with the development that we're seeing in the Midcoast and, more importantly, south of there. But it's, it's gonna continue to be an issue as more and more people are looking to utilize the waterfront for different purposes, whether it's residential or commercial. The estimate that came out of a paper the island institute did was that there's about 20 miles of working waterfront property out of the, depending on how you count the islands and things like that, 35 hundred to 5,000 miles of coastline Maine has, so. It's a sobering thought, and as Maine develops economically it's gonna be really important that developers and towns and municipalities and the state provide leadership on how to maintain kind of the quality of life that is represented by these working waterfront communities because there's a reason why people love coming here. And while they may not like the sound of boats

roaring their engines at 4 o'clock in the morning to go fishing, it was the concept of these fishing towns that brought them here in the first place, so. So there's a balance that can be found somewhere, I hope, given the right level of leadership.

[0:14:38.6]

MF: What about—how are you—what's your perspective on the way that communities are dealing with these sorts of conflicts, like in Portland there was recently a big fight over it, I think it is in Bar Harbor—

SB: There continues to be a big fight over it, so yeah. In Bar Harbor, I was just in a session talking about working waterfront in Boothbay Harbor, just one peninsula over from me, is dealing with the same issues right now. Developers looking to come in and snag up property and the ability of outside interests to tie people up in other litigation or outspend them to get access to what they want. Because they see an economic opportunity. And it's—they're often cast in a negative light, but a lot of these folks also have the economic interest of communities at heart. Whether or not their definition of community lines up with how we would define community and community interests, it's debatable I'll say. So yeah, thankfully there's less pressure, at least in my immediate area, but as time goes on the pressure will increase everywhere.

MF: What about other, other concerns that you might have for like your children's generation? Things that like sort of are bothering you in the back of your mind that are maybe not exactly what you work on?

[0:16:10.6]

SB: Yeah. Having now a six-and-a-half and a three year old son, it's, it's—I mean it's troubling to see the last decade or so of the response to education, both at a national and state level. And the disconnect between investing in our children's education and the impact that that has on economic development. There's been proven studies showing that investment in early childhood education and education in general results in net benefits to the economy. And that continues to be a dialogue that needs to be had, and we see states cutting education budgets, federal education support drying up. And towns having to increase tax rolls to cover their education expenses. And that's alarming. And again, it's part of this broader conversation, because when we're talking about dealing with climate change, or dealing with changes in the economic landscape of the coast, they're all interconnected. I mean, towns that are going to have to deal with sea level rise are gonna have less money to spend on other programs. And that's where state and federal leadership are really going to be important.

MF: And why do you think that is, why do you think the education budgets are scaling back?

[0:17:48.2]

SB: (Long pause) I hesitate to posit a guess. I mean, I don't know. I don't know, I could speculate. I have some thoughts, but not anything I feel comfortable enough articulating in a way that's gonna be meaningful.

MF: What about positive things going on that make you hopeful?

[0:18:13.1]

SB: You look at the recognition that we're starting to see in the state, both from communities, but now in the state legislature and with our new governor, of the immediacy of the issues. And a willingness to go out on a limb and say, for example, "Maine is committed to an 80% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions." That wouldn't have been on the table four years ago, 8 years ago. And the momentum that we see from—I don't wanna say the environmental community, because that has a certain perception, but from folks that you could classify as the environmental community, is wonderful to see. Because there's a motivation for action right now, and there's an opportunity for action, and there's a willingness to listen to communities and to not just say "We're speaking for everyone," but a recognition to proceed that Maine is a diverse place, the coast is a diverse place. Solutions that work for York, and Portland, and Cumberland aren't going to necessarily work for Stonington, Deer Isle, Machiasport. And the willingness of both policy makers and nonprofit organizations and the research community to engage at the community level is really heartening, and I think that's where we're gonna see some really positive results coming down the pike.

MF: Any other things on your mind or like, stories that you'd want to pass along to future generations?

[0:19:51.7]

SB: (Laughs.) I guess the one piece of advice, and this is advice my grandmother gave me a while ago. Is don't be afraid of change. You're going to be afraid of change because it's the unknown, and people are always afraid of the unknown. But things have always changed. Like in my lifetime we went from—she grew up as the youngest daughter of seven children in a West Virginia dirt farm. Met my grandfather in DC when she was doing some secretarial work and he was in medical school. And then came to Maine (laughs) to live on the coast and be a doctor's wife and a fisherman's wife, which was interesting. She says, "I've seen things in my life that you could not imagine, you will see things in your life that you cannot imagine. Some of them will be good, some of them will be bad, but don't be afraid of it, embrace it, and engage with it most importantly, because you have the opportunity to help shape how things move forward." And that's kind of something I've kept in the back of my mind and probably one of the reasons why I wanted to be an applied anthropologist and why I like the ability of nonprofit to do things so quickly, is because if you take ownership and agency, you'll be able to do things. And you're holding yourself accountable too.

[0:21:19.6]

MF: Sounds like a fascinating woman.

SB: (Laughs.) She was. She was.

MF: Very cool, well thank you so much.

SB: Absolutely, my pleasure!

MF: Really good conversation.

[0:21:29.8]