

Interviewee Name: Adam Mistler

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:

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Interview Description:

Adam Mistler, a representative from the environmental NGO Ocean Conservancy in Washington, DC, talks about their efforts to include and listen to fishermen and other ocean stakeholders in their environmental campaigns and how important it is to fight misconceptions on both sides to advance successful and supported ocean conservation and planning projects.

Collection Description:

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GK: Galen Koch
GC: Giulia Cardoso
AM: Adam Mistler

[0:00:00.0]

GK: So, uhm, I'll start just . . . So you already did one of these, uh?

AM: Mmhm (laughs).

AM: Despite, I'm not a fisherman and I don't live on a working waterfront (laughs).

GK: That's hilarious. What's your first and last name?

AM: Adam Mistler

GK: And how do you spell Mistler?

AM: M-I-S-T-L-E-R.

GK: Great. And Adam, where are you from?

AM: Uh, I'm originally from Boston, which is one reason I love coming to the Maine Fishermen's Forum. But I uh, live in Washington, DC.

GK: Ok. So what, why are you here today?

AM: Uhm. I work for, I work for an ocean non-profit, an environmental non-profit. Uhm, and we can sometimes be seen as an enemy of a lot of the people who might be at events like this. Uhm, and my non-profit would like to dispel that notion, when it comes to us, that we want to work with people and we know that

[0:01:01.5]

AM: It, lobstermen, this is their livelihood and for many of them it's a livelihood they wanna pass down to their children. So that they, they want to be stewards and we, we want people to know that we know that.

GK: So can you disclose what your, the non-profit it is, that you work for?

AM: Uh, Ocean Conservancy.

GK: Okay. And so, what are some of the, the, when you come to this, what are some of the issues that you hear, maybe that there's like a misconception around? How you're going about it, or how lobstermen are going about it? Is there anything in particular, any issues in particular that . . .?

AM: Uhm, a major issue is uh, right whales. And uh, that is, again, an area where lobstermen are in many ways doing everything they can

[0:02:00.7]

AM: Everything they can, to maintain lobster, lobstering as a, a going concern, something they can continue to do to actually make money and earn a life. Uhm, and it ... many organizations, uh, engage to protect right whales, which is of course, a noble goal, uhm, but, they, they engage in ways that does not gonna fit the people on the ground sometimes.

GK: And so, you're being very uh (laughs) careful, which I appreciate. Uhm, but can you talk a little bit about ways of engaging, like how can you bridge that, that divide, I—from your perspective?

AM: Uhm, well, actually, there is a lot that can be done and, as I was saying that may lobstermen are good stewards, that this is their livelihood and they wanna keep the resource around, uhm.

[0:03:06.8]

And it is, there's a lot that they can do that we can help. Uhm, Ocean Conservancy recently, uhm, became a lead organization in the global ghost gear initiative, and we've worked with a few of the, with, or I know of at least one lobsterman here where we went out on a boat with them, uhm, we went out on their boat, and just started hauling in a bunch of derelict fishing gear, that had been left in the water. That's, that's not good for whales, it's not good for a number of charismac—charismatic megafauna. Uh, and it's also not good for a lobster fishery or many other fisheries.

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It, it damages lobster traps, it, it hurts their the ability to make money, so, we can all work together on accomplishable thing that are both good for the environment and, at the same time, being good for the environment are directly good for business.

GK: How do you know if it's uh, like abandoned or not being used?

AM: Uhm.

GK: That gear?

AM: Uh, a lot of it will, part of it is just what you see. It's, it's portions, uhm, or like, the lines that are, are disconnected from anything or, uh, it, it, it's damaged, it's, it's clearly been torn from a storm, from where it should be, uh.

GK: Wow, so you've been out.

AM: But also.

GK: Yeah.

AM: I did not go. I wish I did.

GK: But someone went out with, uh, a lobsterman.

AM: Yes. A co-worker of mine.

GK: Cool.

AM: At that, uh. Yeah, it seemed very cool. I wish I was there.

GK: What do you think is the perception, I mean, I was in the MLA meeting this morning.

AM: Mmhm.

[0:04:59.9]

GK: The Maine Lobstermen's Association, and the uhm, you know, what's your take on what's the perception of, is of, what they call the ENGOS, like that environmental NGO?

AM: Mmhm. Uhm, as a class?

GK: (Laughs.) Just in general, I guess, yeah, like a, as a group (laughs).

AM: It is . . . some probably immediately dislike us. But I think really it's just, they are wary. Uhm, yeah, I think, I think that's the right term. They (laughter in background) . . . they.

GK: Those, we just call those the sound, that's the ambience at the Fishermen's Forum (laughs).

AM: Uh, so, yeah, they're just wary. They know that e—even th—

[0:06:00.8]

AM: Every non-pro—every ENGO is going to do things that are uh, that fell over.

GK: Oh, man

AM: I—it's going to do things that sometimes are not taken well. Uhm, by a number of groups. Uhm, and lobstermen rightfully feel like they have been the target of a lot of things from ENGOS. Not that the ENGOS were actively trying to do bad, uh, and also it's a perfect storm for lobstermen, that there's just so much going on, uhm, s—, and the, all of it c—can, or not all of it, much of it can probably be in some way connected to environmental concerns or organizations.

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Uhm, it's . . . ocean planning, and where things can be done is incredibly important, because if it's not done well, then you're getting a wind farm, which people want, including environmental, most environmental organizations, for clean energy, but, you don't want that

to go where lobstermen are getting their lobsters. Uhm, or fishermen need to go to get their, any of the multiple species that they fish for, off of the coast here. Uhm, the, the Gulf of Maine has great winds, great resources, and we should be able to figure out how to use it, but they can rightfully feel like that, that wind farm, that siting, no one—it could go in ways that hurt them.

[0:08:00.9]

Uhm, and so that's just an example, but there's also fisheries management, for the lobsters, uhm, but also for the bait species, and it's a, there's a lot going on for, for lobstermen these days. And a lot of it is in some ways related to environmental concerns. So, they, they are wary and I don't think they automatically dislike us, uhm, I like to think I'm an incredibly likeable person. Uhm, but, they wanna know that we're not up to no good by them.

GK: Yeah, what are some of the, I mean, do you have conversations with lobstermen when you're here from, who are from the coast of Maine, like, what are those conversations like for you?

AM: Uhm, I won't name names, but I, I sometimes s—say.

[0:09:02.2]

Or, I will, I will say that I'm from the Ocean Conservancy, while also saying that that means I'm not from XYZ. Uh, so that, that helps, and usually gets a laugh. Uh, uhm, but I have, I have talked with people and it's, it's fine, especially if you're here. First of off, at the Maine Fishermen's Forum, everyone gets along. I feel like, especially like, the 2:45 session with NOAA Fisheries, everyone's gonna get along, everyone loves each other. A month from now, at the New England Fisheries Management Council, that is not going to be true. Uhm, so it's just, this is a great atmosphere and place to discuss things with people, because of that. Uhm, and yeah, so it's, it's, it's been fine, it (laughs).

[0:10:00.2]

GK: Is that because of who is here from those organizations, or is that because of the atmosphere of the Maine Fishermen's Forum that is just a place for people—

AM: I think—

GK: —to get along.

AM: I think it's both. And I think also, I, meant to say that one reason I get along people, with people even representing Ocean Conservancy is because of, a big part of it is just being here. If you're here, then hopefully the lobstermen know that you're not here to target them, you're here to listen and learn.

GK: Right, this is kinda their turf, in a lot of ways.

AM: Yeah (laughs).

GK: The whole state of Maine (laughs). No, yeah, for sure.

AM: I mean they get, uh, it's so, it's so, I, like I said, work for an ENGO and we have a, a government relations team and we'll bring people in to lobby on our behalf, because hearing from the people, hearing from their constituents is better than hearing it from our lobbyists. Uhm, and it's just hilarious when we bring in people from Maine, because everyone has a pre-existing relationship with their elected officials. They just, like, they'll, it's happened multiple times that someone we're flying from Maine will end up being on the plane next to Susan Collins. Uhm.

GK: That's so funny.

AM: That doesn't happen in other states! And it's lovely. And I, I know uhm, newly elected congressman Golden is in there and, uhm, former congressman Tom Allen I think is there.

GK: I heard Collins and King were, are, or were here today too.

[0:11:58.9]

AM: I know. I saw, I saw a form from Collins, so yes, I think she was here. I wish, I wish I'd seen them, just so I could say, "Hi, Adam from Ocean Conservancy," it's always good to have a s—have a, you know? Uhm, but, yeah.

GK: What are some of the, uh, things that Ocean Conservancy's working on beyond right whales, what are some of the big concerns for that organization right now?

AM: Uhm, my colleague that is here alongside me works on ocean planning. Uhm, and that's, uh, New England is really great for ocean planning uhm, and the data portal uhm, is really, really cool. I like, I just like exploring that. Uhm, but then, uh, a particular concern that we work on that is, a particular concern is Maine that we are very active on is ocean acidification. Uhm, we do work on sustainable fisheries, although we are more focused in the Gulf of Mexico, uh, for sustainable fisheries than we are in New England

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AM: Uhm, although of course, we are for sustainable fisheries in all, all areas of the world. Uh, and, uhm, I'm just, I'm trying to think of the things that are very relevant to Maine, and I think ocean acidification is the prime one.

GK: So what does that mean? When you say, uhm, yeah, what are some of the things that y—that the organization is doing to . . . Is it like awareness-raising, or is it actually uhm, coming up with solutions of how . . .

AM: Uhm, it's, it's both. Uhm, we do have a lot of awareness raising. Uhm, but we all, but that's not necessarily for the people here on the ground. A lot of that's on the Hill, the director of our ocean acidification team, Sarah Cooley just testified before Congress uhm, last, or this past Wednesday? Was it just Wednesday? This is, this is a long week.

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AM: Uhm, and, and we also uh, work with offices, uh, for a number of pieces of leg—of legislation that may, uh, hopefully achieve some good in addressing it. Uhm, and it doesn't necessarily have to be uh, a carbon solution. Uhm, there are a lot of things that can be done, uhm, to address water quality and other things that exacerbate uh, ocean acidification. Uhm, and you've, uh, spo—but we've, uh, we've, for our [inaudible] last year we brought down Bill Mook uhm, uhm, Mook Sea Farm and he talked a lot about uh, water quality and raising uh, for, for their seed uhm, how they really get good product from other things they can do to address uh, the results, and uh, if those can be done at scale, or in nature, uhm, all the better

[0:15:00.5]

AM: and that, there are things that can be done, uhm, in the natural world that make water more suitable for various things than acidification might have it be.

GK: Yeah, so supporting some of that work.

AM: Mmhm.

GK: And yeah. Yeah.

AM: And uh, a, also a very big thing that Ocean Conservancy focuses on is funding for ocean programs federally. And NOAA through their ocean acidification work does great stuff and, NOAA does great stuff on a number of things, uhm, and so we work to make sure those programs continue and get uhm, proper funding.

GK: That's great. Yeah. And, I mean, right now, is that, has it changed in the past couple of years with uh, in, in Washington? The climate in Washington, or . . . ?

AM: Uhm.

GK: For you and your colleagues?

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AM: Overall, certainly. Very much so. Uhm, there are some things that it has made much more difficult. Uh, simply as, as an environmentalist, uhm, there are very strong headwinds. There are always headwinds, when you're an environmentalist, but they're extremely strong right now. Uhm, and there are things that are happening at uh, in political leadership, or because of political leadership, that are not good if, if you're an environmentalist. Uhm, so that's very challenging. Uhm, but for some other things that we work on, it, there are ways that you can work around it.

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Uhm, for example, with funding it's important to remember that the appropriations battles usually start when the President releases his proposed budget, but, it's Congress that figures that stuff out, I almost swore there. Uhm, yeah, it, it, it's Congress that has the power of the purse, so we work bipartisanly with members of like, a great uh, a great Senator on many ocean issues uhm, is uh, Senator Shelby of Alabama, uhm, who is a good, a staunch Republican. Uhm, and so work with Congress people to make sure that funding is good and

doesn't reflect massive cuts that have been proposed, uhm, by the current administration. Uhm, although when he does propose massive cuts, it does also rile up people and having people riled up is not always a bad thing.

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GK: Yeah, a little support, a little wind under your sail.

AM: Yeah (laughs).

AM: Exactly.

GK: And I, uhm, I don't wanna keep you for too long, but I'm wondering if you, I know here at the Forum and sort of, from, I interview a lot of fishermen, and hear a lot about uhm, kinda the, the power of the ENGOS. It's like, always kinda pointed to as this big block of environmentalists or, the fishermen view environment—mental group as like, very powerful.

AM: Mmhm.

GK: Like, very wealthy and I wonder if that's a, if that, for you, rings true to any degree.

AM: Uhm, I would just say that another reason it's great to be here is because when people get to know you and your organization, it, then you are separated from the all-powerful block of ENGOS, you are now your own thing.

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Uhm, and that's really important to be. Uhm, I of, I of course don't think that E—ENGOS are an all-powerful block, uh, and the amount of money that a non-profit has, just, varies so wildly. Uhm, but di—ENGOS together can, of course, achieve a lot of good. Uhm, but also they can achieve things that have consequences. The, the, the cost-benefit analysis has to be, the, your view of the cost-benefit analysis is going to be different depending on who you are. Uhm.

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But that's not to excuse either the lobstermen or the ENGOS, because ENGOS, each ENGO should look at the cost-benefit analysis and as a cost keep in mind the people on the ground. And the people that are not in DC, which is a wonderful city, and it's not a swamp and there, and it, uh, it has a life that is not Congress.

GK: Does it? I'm just kidding (laughs). Oh, I'm learning new things every day (laughs). No, I think it, well in, it's, I'm sure it's refreshing for people in here to talk to you and see that people from that, that, that there's an interest from someone from DC to come to the Maine Fishermen's Forum of all things.

[0:21:00.4]

GK: It's obviously [inaudible] done—

AM: Yeah, the—

GK: Reaching out—

AM: Oh, yeah, we want them to know that we, we are, we want to listen to their concerns and for ocean planning, we want their concerns to be listened to by the government, so that things aren't thrown at them unless they really have to be, I'm not gonna say that there, sometimes things have to happen. Uhm, so we, we, we want them to know that we care and we want them to know that we want the government to care and other people to care. Uhm, and I also, we also, my organization, wants to know their concerns, we, we care and we wanna know their concerns because that helps us on Capitol Hill, that helps us know what we should be focusing on, uhm, that helps us figure out some of the cost-benefit analysis when we want to engage on issues, it helps us know that "Nope, that, that's going to, that's going to piss off a lot of people that we like, so let's not do that." Uhm, and yeah, so.

[0:22:01.7]

GK: Cool. Well, uh.

AM: Also, drinks with fishermen's always fun.

GK: Agreed (laughs). Was there anything uhm, when you came in that you were feeling you wanted to talk about today, that I didn't ask about, or something that . . . you're here.

AM: Uh.

GK: Advocating for, or.

AM: Uh, I, I, I work for a part of the Ocean Conservancy called Our Ocean Network, so I get the word out about a lot of things, and we focus on storytelling, uhm, so that we can have uh, like, when we have people come in for the fly-ins, come to town, uh, the important thing is that they can tell a story about why NOAA is important to them, or their life. Why the ocean is important to them and their life. And that helps us support things.

[0:23:03.1]

And it's positive. And I would just like to say that positive storytelling can events, is that a word? Uh, positive change.

GK: That's great.

AM: And so that's why I do these things, even though I am mortified, and I'm not a fisherman and I have nothing to say (laughs).

GK: You had a lot to say! Thank you (laughs)! Thank you so much!

AM: Thank you.

[0:23:30.5]