

Interviewee Name: Russell Kingman

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Matt Frassica (Independent Producer)

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Interview Description:

Russell Kingman, a weir fisherman and fisheries advocate from Chatham, MA, discusses how he got started in weir fishing and the changes in the species he has been seeing in his nets due to climate change. He also talks about his work with NAMA, a fisherman-led organization working to protect small-scale, owner operator fisheries against privatization and commoditization.

Collection Description:

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[00:33:04.5]

MF: Matt Frassica

RK: Russell Kingman

[00:00:00.0]

RK: At the time, I was playing in this band called, uh, Poi Dog Pondering. And the, my interviewer asked . . .

[00:00:07.3]

MF: So, for tape, can I get you to say your name and what you do?

RK: Ok, my name is Russell Kingman. Um, I'm a commercial fisherman from Chatham, Massachusetts. We have a weir fishing business there. Uh, 'm a clammer, I'm also a coast guard safety trainer, we train fishermen survival at sea with the Fishing Partnership. And I'm also in a band called the SeaFire Kids. We do all fisheries music, and, uh, nobody knows who we are.

MF: Like, uh, sea chanties, that kind of thing?

RK: Not—It's more folk. We call it fisher-folk rock. The sea chanties are a little corny. Yeah, so.

MF: I, um, my parents live in Gloucester and on New Year's there's this—there's always a performance of, uh, sea chanties, by this group who I can't remember the name right now . . . Three Sheets to the Wind, is the name of the group and anyway . . . Yeah, they do sea chanties.

[00:01:01]

RK: Yeah.

MF: Uh, so, tell me about how, um—it sounds like I'm not really sure where to start . . . What, how did your, um, association with fisheries and the ocean come about? Where did that start?

RK: Um, sort of by accident for me. When I met Shannon, her family had this weir fishing business. And it was, uh, they're generationally a fishing family. 'Course I grew up on the water, but not, not commercially fishing, so I asked if I could go one day. And when I went out, uh, this ancient fishery called weir fishing. I saw the traps out there, the poles that went down into the ocean floor and they came up through the ocean and reached up to the sky and was kind of like a mystical monolith out there—kinda fell in love with it. So I started going with Shan's dad and then Shannon came back to fish, she had fished before, but she had another job.

[00:02:06]

MF: Is this your wife?

RK: Yeah, yup, and so we fished together for about, oh I don't know, about eight years, I think we did that and she's still doing it. And I've had like six surgeries, so I gave it a rest.

MF: Did you grow up in Chatham?

RK: I grew up in Denis, which is a few towns over, yeah.

MF: And growing up, did you, you said grew up on the water. Were you boating, sailing?

RK: Lots of boating. Uh, been in two hurricanes on boats, you know, all over the place on boats. There's like pictures of me as a child, like, tied to a boat. You know, like a one year old . . .

MF: Like, Odysseus.

RK: Exactly like Odysseus, that's so funny (laughs). Yeah, no, not quite. But, um, but I just always loved the water, you know we grew up on it, so.

MF: Yeah. And then, um, what about, uh, so . . . we're asking sort of general questions about like what people are concerned about, what kinds of changes they're seeing on the waterfront. Are there issues that affect your community that you're particularly worried about?

[00:03:09]

RK: Oh boy, uh, biggest issue at the moment, I mean there's a couple of really huge issues going on. One, the most important is the corporatization of the fisheries, the commoditization. We do a lot of global work with, um, fisheries on this subject matter. You have a lot of organizations that are masquerading as environmental organizations that are really part of commoditizing the fisheries. And what that does, is it ends up consolidating the fisheries to the big players and pushing out the little—the smaller fisheries. The family owned smaller boats. And, uh, they're trying to do it in the shell fishing industry right now, and we're fighting against that. It's really what happened to the farming industry. Uh, so I work with organizations, uh, one called NAMA that we are together with a family farm coalition also. And, you know, trying to stem the tide of this corporate push; where, you know, these so-called environmental groups are funded by, uh, the Walton Foundation, and et cetera, et cetera. So it's really frustrating because we see this, uh, this system being put in place where, uh, you go to a catch share system and the first people in were just kind of handed this, uh, gift really and then the price has gone up and up and up and up, so it's, it's a commodity now. And now you have Wall Street buying it out. It's very frustrating, I don't know what else to say about that. That's the number one problem.

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I personally think the number two problem is probably pollution and nobody seems to want to look at that, because you can't hold, for instance, a company like Exxon Mobile or the incident in Fukushima or you know, people aren't really held responsible on that level. I feel like they end

up picking on fishermen alone. I'm not saying there's not over fishing, there is. But we are not the sole source of the problem of the ecosystem of the ocean. So that's a bother, uh, I lay awake nights thinking about that one. Um, and uh, third problem, we're gonna deal with climate change. That's gonna change everything. We've already noticed crazy changes on the weirs. Uh, species that aren't due 'til the summer on the first day we're able to fish. Uh, you know, we start in March to build the traps, but we don't really, usually fish for, until April and, uh, 'til we get everything built. And then, you know, we've seen species right away that we normally don't see 'til the summer, so everything's changing. Uh, weather patterns, temperatures, so that would be—I don't know which one is more important . . . they're all important.

[00:06:01]

MF: They're all scary.

RK: Yup.

MF: Um, so tell me about the weirs and what, what species you're fishing, you're fishing and what are those changes in the, in the time distribution?

RK: Right, um, well, uh, the species wise, the weir is a stationary item, so we build them and they don't move. So whatever comes through Nantucket Sound is what we'll end up catching. And we hope to get squid, and we get mackerel, we get sea bass—uh, black sea bass—we get pogies, um, butterfish, uh, anything that swims through. Um, it's a passive fishery, so, everything is alive and well. It's like a big aquarium, everything swimming around, so whatever we can't take, goes back in the ocean. So it's a fishery we're very proud of. We have seen migratory shifts where we no longer see certain species at all. Um, that's due to a lot of, uh, temperature changes in the inshore area. Maybe becoming too warm too quickly for the fish to come into shore. 'Cause we're an inshore fishery. Um, what was the other part of the question, I forgot.

[00:07:13]

MF: Oh, um, which species you catch and how are you seeing—which are the ones that are showing up early or?

RK: Well, uh, for instance, like, I think we saw a bonito, which is really usually a southern fish, but we do get them in the summer sometimes. We saw, I think one, uh, late April or early May. Which was really a conundrum and you wonder, you know, is the fishing season already over, you know. Um, things like that, uh seeing the order change in the fisheries, uh, and the migration of the fish. And that's really a conundrum, because we used to be able to, historically, count on seasonal migration. So, you know, first would come this, and then following that would be the next . . . and now we're—it's kind of a mishmash. And we're not seeing that pattern, so we can't rely on, uh, things that we relied on in the past. It's a guessing game now. So, that, you know, partly due to fish stocks I suppose, but partly due to migration patterns.

[00:08:22]

MF: And is that, um . . . are you affected by the sector system? Do you have to be part of that or are you outside of that?

RK: Luckily, we're outside of all that. And ironically are very vocal about all that, even though we're not directly affected as of yet. We're a boutique fishery at this point. I mean, back in the day, um, I guess late 1800s and to the early to mid-1900s, weir fishing was everywhere. But now it's just, uh, we put in two or three weirs and there's one other person that puts in two weirs. And so we're really kind of off the grid, we're not having a major impact on anybody or anything. So, at the moment, we're kind of outside of all that.

[00:09:10]

MF: Last year, I met a weir fisherman from Cape Elizabeth and they caught, um, mackerel I think.

RK: Mmhmm, yeah, we get mackerel.

MF: Um, so, uh, tell me about your—tell me about the community you live in and the kinds of things that, um, you like about living there.

RK: Oh, it's beautiful. I mean, you know, we're on the water. Of course, uh, we don't live in the fancy part of town, but it's available to us and we have a very close-knit community, um, a lot of history there. Now I get a little emotional. Um, I really love the people in our community, we have nice people who are, uh, we're just very lucky. So, we're all living, uh, all my friends and people, family that I know, living in accordance with the change in seasons and the fisheries and which fishery you're in. You know, and I've been in others, I've been on offshore lobster boats when I'm not weir fishing. Uh, so it's just a beautiful way to live. Close to nature, um, in a beautiful part of the world, you couldn't be luckier, you know, really. Although, everywhere in the world I think people feel that way. It's beautiful everywhere. You know, so.

[00:10:20]

MF: Um, but, uh, that said, people come to your corner of the world every summer in great numbers.

RK: Yes, they do. Uh, we feel very—I mean it's hard for us to stay there. It's very expensive to live there and we're priced out of the real-estate. Um, we can't afford to buy. Um, however, that's the price that we pay, uh, to stay in an area that we love. You know, so, we have a lot of history on the cape, both families, and, uh, Shannon's family's been in Chatham since the origin of the town pretty much. So, we're not willing to give, uh, give that way of life up, but it is difficult, you know, everything's changing. Anywhere that's waterfront is, you know, become astronomically expensive.

[00:11:11]

MF: And are you seeing, uh, reductions in your access to the waterfront?

RK: Um, yes. Uh, for instance, was the Eldredge family dock, which has been owned for generations. We had to sell it, couldn't afford to keep it anymore, taxes go up. Um, everything's more expensive, maintenance, uh, anything you can think of. And, so, we're hoping, uh . . . the family sold the dock to the town with the stipulation that it will remain a fishing landing pier for the fishermen. Whether or not they have to do that, I don't know. But little by little, you see, um—you see the amount of fish landing sites reduced. And, you know, we were contacted when the dock was for sale, you know, by marinas, by condo developers. Um, in fact, the Eldredge family should get a standing ovation. They sold that dock for probably 30% less than they had to, to keep it town owned, you know, with the town. So, very, um, true family, really great people. So, you know, they took a big loss to hopefully keep it in the fishing, uh, fishing world. But, also, even with the global warming, we have all these storms, there's been a lot of breakthroughs, channels are closed off by the moving sands, so we'll see what that does, uh, as time progresses it's getting harder and harder to leave ports. So, there's, there's that. As far as access, um . . . yeah, things like, you know, things like the town saying the moorings that used to be available to fishing boats that were passing through, that were fishing in the area, they now no longer allow the fishing boats to use them. They only allow recreational boats. Little by little, it's the water—I think the word is being gentrified. It's really just for, more for marinas and recreational boating and, uh, it becomes more of a tourist attraction. When it's really a vital fishing port.

[00:13:41]

MF: Um, and so, what kind of a change have you seen in, um, I guess, you know, since you've been aware of the, of the fishing industry, um, on that part of the coast? What kind of change have you seen in the, the balance of how much, um, fishing is happening versus how much, you know, tourism or, uh, you know, real-estate development is happening?

RK: Yeah, I would say since, some of the major changes were really I think 80s into the 90s, where you saw a real reduction in the fishing fleet. We've kind of leveled off at a very light fishing fleet. But those people are, you know, in it for eternity. They're not selling out, they're not giving up. Uh, so I think the, the major reduction in the fleet happened during those days, when, you now, the, the cod industry kind of tanked and certain fisheries weren't doing well, and, and people got out. Um, we're certainly not catching anywhere near the fish that was historically caught. And that's another problem, is just the viability, but then you see, you know, these quotas, these catch shares that are worth now in the hundreds of thousands sometimes millions for certain species that no one new can get into it. If you wanted to become a fisherman and you were 25 years old, it's, it's prohibitive to enter the fishery. You know, your dad has to kind of pass down a permit or something. And yet, the older people are telling all their kids, you got to get out of this, you know, you gotta let it go, it's not gonna happen and that's sad too because you lose that tradition in an area. And you, um, you know, you're fighting—we feel like sometimes we're fighting a losing battle, you know, to keep it going. But we love it, so we'll keep fighting, you know.

[00:15:44]

MF: And it's, so it's not just a battle against, um, ecological conditions, uh, and like declining stocks or whatever, but it's also a battle against regulations—it sounds like capital interests and other, you know, human, uh, actors who you need to, uh, work against.

RK: Yeah, I think really we don't have enough young people choosing to become fishermen because it's, uh, it's prohibitive for them to get involved. It's not as lucrative. I mean it's a tremendously hard lifestyle, but it's a labor of love. But if you can't make a living, you know really, you know, and can't afford to live in the area, don't have a mooring for the boat. You know, like in our harbor, I don't know, like a 15-year wait list for a mooring, you know. So, um, all these factors, uh, just stack up one at a time to where people opt to do something else. And it's sad to see and I think it's not good for the future of food production because we rely more and more on imports, and I think we should have really made space for, uh, local fisheries in this country to supply our own people with food. It only makes sense to me, but, you know, the highest bidder wins, you know.

[00:17:13]

MF: Do you see any developments that make you hopeful? Either through your work with NAMA or other, other people doing that kind of work?

RK: Yes, uh, I do see hope. I think we're ever hopeful. I think, um, that's the only way to go, you know. You can't . . . (takes a deep breath) . . . can't give up. I've been all over the world doing work on this, on these issues and made wonderful friends, there's beautiful people everywhere. And I think that—I think we can make, uh, changes and in roads but unfortunately, by the time people figure it out where this was going, um, so much was already in place, uh, that we're—we're battling an uphill battle. NAMA has done a lot of great work, um, reversing some of these trends and being, uh, bringing a lot of awareness to the public. Um, and, uh, being a fisherman led organization, so. And there's others, there's other people doing the same kind of work. So I think, uh, the local . . . buy local, eat local movement is a real beacon of hope. Um, I think programs that try to diversify the menu, uh, where people realize there are other delicious species in the water, doesn't just have to be tuna or cod or salmon, but there are other species and so we're working on that. So there's, there's always lots of hope. And people are generally good, there's just—we've been through a crazy pocket of history here, and now, what to do, you know? So we're working our way out of that time. But I, I will say, I will remain optimistic.

[00:19:07]

MF: What, what's your perspective on what's happening now in the lobster industry as, as someone who, who has had some experience lobstering? Um, when you come here, you're surrounded by, uh, mostly Maine lobster people, uh, what would, what's your advice to them?

RK: Uh, well, they've had a good run here in Maine for a long period and I think, because I'm not from Maine, uh, you know, it's maybe not my territory. Maine has an incredible fishing tradition, and the state itself I feel supports their fishing tradition pretty well. Um, you know, but, you know, these trends, you know, they've had a great run with the lobsters, they've had plenty of them, the price has been good, and I think some of the young people, um, don't remember a time

when it wasn't good. And so my advice would be to, uh, don't get into a great deal of debt, and put some money away for the, for the down times. Because there will, there will be, you know. But aside from that I think Maine is thriving and they have a great, great high school program to kind of ease the young people into the industry who are interested. I just couldn't say enough good things about, uh, Maine and what and how they have preserved their tradition. And they're, it's a respected tradition here, you know.

MF: And do you think that's in contrast to Massachusetts?

RK: A little bit. A little bit. I think Massachusetts is, maybe, just a little closer to the cities. And we get people who, you know, they come to the cape because they think it's so beautiful and so, I don't know, rustic. And then when they build their 10-bedroom mansion, they decide they don't like the fishing boats because they're noisy. Or whatever. And they begin, you know, uh, for instance, we had a big resort that, uh, the fishermen have been storing their, their dinghies and their, you know, the boats they would take out to their fishing boat for, I don't know, probably hundreds of years. Suddenly, you know, put up a giant fence with all the signs, like you know, they don't want to see these boats for their guests. And it shocks me that people could take century-old traditions and act like they're now a nuisance. When they're really at the heart and soul of our town. We're a town that was built on blue collar workers and the fishing industry. And it slowly becomes forgotten.

[00:21:55.4]

As the mansions are being built and replacing it with, uh, this kind of Disney World for the elite. And that's a little tough to take, you know. We want to keep the traditions alive. And they're also beautiful. The boats are beautiful.

MF: Yeah. I mean, we do hear stories like that. Um, from people in Maine, too. Uh, that there's super rich coming in and complaining about lobster boats going out early in the morning. I mean I think it's an issue here too. But maybe, maybe there's more support for, um, for fishermen in Maine. Uh, more organizations and education.

RK: And more fishermen, you know. Just more fishermen. So it's not, you know, we have, oh I don't know, maybe a dozen commercial boats in the harbor we go out of. And maybe 700 recreational. So you know, we don't have this, the same proportion. So I think we have less of a voice. So.

MF: Yeah. Um, we have, uh, some other sort of discussion questions. Um, let's see. Um, we talked about this a little bit, but can you, can you describe for me the people, uh, the people in Chatham. Either like fishermen you work with or, um, people in the wider community. What are the people like?

RK: Yeah well the people, I mean, the people are generally wonderful. From all slices of life. I mean, we've had this history of, uh, really co-existing very well. Whether you're a blue collar worker or you're a summer resident. And I'm seeing a shift in that now. I'm seeing like, you know, a little bit of an attitudinal shift. Um, but the people are, are generally wonderful. Uh, the

fishing people that I know of course, um, I'm getting older. And they're aging out completely. And some of them are passing away. So we're seeing a lot of that rich history. When Chatham was a, a really, a rustic town. And solely based on fishing, almost.

[00:24:15.2]

Um, and those characters are just amazing people who were, you know, in some ways pioneers. Really hardy souls who, they made all the infrastructure, you know. They built the railroads to ship the fish, I mean, these people are amazing human beings with tremendous wills and super talented, uh, creative, learning all kinds of skills to keep, you know, to keep going. And so I'm sad to see those people really passing on. Because they, they're kind of like the gems, you know. And I can't even include myself at all in that category. Uh, of like Ernie or Fran (chokes up). Sorry. They're just great people. Uh, who've come to love. And don't want to see them go. But that's the way life is. And they take a, a treasure of a time period that we'll never get back, you know. Uh, not just because of climate change, times change. We just, we can never go back. You always have to keep going forward, but yeah, Fran was just incredible, a weir fisherman that just passed away recently so. I miss him.

MF: Um, tell me about your, um, sorry.

RK: It's okay. Catch my breath. Okay, go ahead.

MF: I was going to ask you to tell me about your travels. You mentioned India, where have you been?

[00:26:07.0]

RK: Uh, I've been with Johnny Cash. I've been everywhere, man. No, um, just recently, uh, Shannon and I got back from India from the World Forum of Fisher, uh, Fisherpeoples. And, uh, we, we did represent NAMA there. But we also represent the United States. We were the only people from the United States there. And there were, I think, somewhere around 55 countries who were represented. And that was a global forum on, uh, the future of fisheries and what all countries are facing with this globalization and the corporatization of everything. Uh, Shannon and I have been, uh, to [?] quite a bit. We ended up working on, um, a document that was put together by the FAO which is a branch of the United Nations. And we were on, on this document which was a, a recommended framework for countries. Uh, how to protect, uh, indigenous people. Um, it, uh, put language about, uh, anti-racism. Uh, women's rights. And, uh, rights of, uh, people who fish in areas for small-scale fisheries. So it was all, the whole document was on small-scale fisheries. And I think something like 60 countries have signed onto it now. It's a great document. And when we were in India with the World Forum of Fisherpeoples, uh, that was really, uh, one of the foundations of this meeting is, uh, discussing how to take it to the next level, um, amongst many other things. But so, uh, that was last November. We, a year from last November we were in India. And, uh, we've been to Italy several times. And, uh, we've been asked to travel a lot. But, um, we can't always do it. You know. So, we give presentations at universities sometimes. And, uh, I don't know, I guess it's just a love of the fisheries. So things keep coming up, we'll say yes if we can do it.

[00:28:13.5]

MF: And what, what kinds of, what kinds of similarities do you see in these other places that you go and other people that you talk to from other traditions? Um, what kind of similarities do you see to home?

RK: Well, um, there's always like, uh, there's always the, the big industrial fisheries. Uh, that are a problem for, uh, inshore, smaller fisheries. But sometimes, in other countries, such as like Africa and Senegal, and it's even, it's even worse because regulations, if they have them, they're not enforced. Um, and you have different countries from around the world like poaching basically other people's fish. And then, you know, there's lawlessness where we spoke to some Amazonian, uh, fisherpeople whose family was gunned down because they were protesting a dam that was being built. And there's, there was no, uh, course of action for them to take except to be fearing for their lives. Uh, so I think it's worse in other places in the world certainly than here. I mean, much worse. Um, but I think everywhere we're facing the same issue, is are we, have we allowed our entire food system to be co-opted by, um, by really by greed. You know. Instead, instead of sustainability. Um, and it's frustrating because oftentimes, conservation, uh, conversations are the very forerunner to pushing small fisheries out. It's ironic. But we see this with many of the well-known supposedly non-profit organizations. That they are actually not doing good in the world. And it's very frustrating, uh, to see that. I don't want to name them all, but anyone who's listening to this or ever does listen to this will know who I'm talking about.

[00:30:22.1]

MF: Uh, do you see someone outside?

CG: Um, we're good to keep going.

MF: Oh okay, I just saw you looking.

CG: It's Natalie.

MF: Alright. Uh, yeah. Um, that, that, um, uh, what would you call it? Um, uh, motto, uh, aphorism, uh, too many fishermen chasing too few fish. That's sort of like uh, uh, a true-ism that's maybe not so true. That's something that, that environmental groups have said.

RK: Yes, and they keep coming up, this is, uh, I'm stealing this from Seth Macinko who's a professor at URI. Um, and we've worked with him quite a bit and he always is talking about the false narrative of privatize or perish. And they create this urgency, "We're all going to, there's not one fish left in the ocean until we do this," you know, and then, um, like just recently in the shellfishing area, we find these organizations going around and giving talks to the council on aging and all these non-fishing people to try to garner like a public opinion about it before they make their next move. Which is to then throw something up for a vote. And people will be like, "Oh, we already heard about this, it's privatize or, you know, we're all gonna die if we don't do this tomorrow." And it's a lie, you know. It's really just to, uh, to, you know, you commoditize a

fishery and now it's like, a, uh, a what are they called, like a derby. You know, who's gonna get the prize? And it's gonna be the people with the most money. And there are not, I mean, I don't believe that the Walmart is the best steward of the environment. Or there's lots of wonderfully named, uh, organizations like, you know, "Your Grandmother's Knitting Conservation Fund." And it's a total lie. And if you look where they're, who they're funded by, if you follow the footprints, you'll see that this is disingenuous. Uh, so, it's very hard to educate people that don't want to see it, you know. We try to.

MF: Um, so I think we have a 3:00. But I want to thank you very much for talking with us. Um, this was really good.

RK: Okay, well it was enjoyable. I didn't think I'd, you know, be emotional about it, but I guess I am.

MF: Well I mean it's an emotional topic.

[00:33:04.5]