Interviewee Name: Sarah Madronal

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

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Sarah Madronal, a fisheries biologist from Cutler, ME, talks about her work with the Downeast Salmon Federation around protecting waterfront access and improving fish passage for river-run fish. Madronal discusses the community she has found Downeast and her joy in working on education projects that engage local children in fisheries history.

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Transcribed By: Molly Graham

Start of SARAH_MADRONAL_VMFF2019_AUDIO

[0:28:45.0]

MF: Matt Frassica
SM: Sarah Madronal

[00:00:00.00]

MF: Let me start by asking you your name.

SM: My name is Sarah Madronal.

MF: What do you do?

SM: I am a fisheries biologist. I work for a combination of three non-profits. Downeast Salmon Federation is my home, it's the offices that I work at, and they deal with all my grants. Then, I also work for Alewife Harvesters of Maine and the Nature Conservancy.

MF: What is your day-to-day like? What are you actually doing? Are you out measuring fish? Are you doing spreadsheets? What do you do?

SM: All of the above. I have really three different big field seasons during the year, and then in in-between time I look at the data that I've collected and I also do a lot of education/outreach work as well. I work exclusively with sea-run species, not including salmon.

MF: What's the definition? How do you distinguish something like alewives from something like salmon?

[0:01:09.6]

SM: I think about them all in the same group. Slowly I've started to take on more sea-run fish. I focus on alewives, blueback herring, smelt and tomcod. They're in the same family and the distinguishing factor—I think about their biology and maybe their role in the culture and heritage of Maine rivers, especially sea-run species have been harvested for a really, really long time. There's really rich cultural history. They're all very related. The more sea-run species you have in a river, it's an indication of it being healthy.

MF: How long have you been doing this work?

SM: I started working with alewives when I was in college. I went to Colby College. I did my senior thesis on alewives and did it less on the biology and more on the social structures around the fishery and found it really fascinating. Since then, I took about a nine-month break and then I came back to Maine and started working on the coast.

MF: How long has that been?

[0:02:17.8]

SM: That’s going to be four years this spring.

MF: Nice.

SM: Yeah.

MF: What kinds of things do you like about your community?

SM: A lot of things. I think of Downeast as my community. I’ve lived a bunch of different places Downeast now. I was talking about this today with folks at my booth that it’s really possible for one person to make a big difference, whether that’s socially, economically, culturally. You can really make an impact and connect with a lot of people. I also really like the two degrees of separation between everybody. Anyone you meet knows somebody else that you know. In a way it makes it feel like a big family, but it’s definitely—especially living Downeast, it’s a family that you have to get into by knowing someone. But once you’re in, you’re really in there. There’s lots of different sub-communities in each town, each region. Seeing how they interact and cross over, especially with really diverse backgrounds is really interesting.

MF: It’s interesting that you mention that the backgrounds are diverse. You’d assume from the outside that the backgrounds would be pretty similar.

[0:03:34.7]

SM: Yeah. I live in Cutler, which is really close to Machias. Machias you would think, “Okay, it’s a college town, so there’s college students.” There’s obviously fishermen. There’s a lot of retirees, but there’s also people who work in agriculture. Tide Mill Farm is really close by. There’s that whole population of people. Then, there’s folks who work at non-profits. There’s a bunch of non-profits in the Machias area. Then, of course, there’s local people who—there are even local people who don’t work in fisheries. It’s all these smaller subgroups that intermingle. On the surface level it might seem like it’s one big group, but it’s actually not.

MF: Like different subspecies of fish?

SM: Yeah (laughs).

MF: What about concerns or issues in the community that are of concern to you?

[0:04:37.8]

SM: I think it’s interesting in Downeast Maine because we’re so connected to our resources. There’s a lot of social problems for sure. The one that always come to mind for us is the opioid crisis. That affects my personal life more than my professional life. But, by the same token, we’re so connected to the resource that when there’s something like—now there’s a bait

shortage, that affects everybody and everybody's personal lives, just like the opioid crisis pretty much affects every one's personal lives. I know very few people who don't have a family member or friend who's somehow affected. The same goes for the lobster industry. Those are the two biggest issues that come up in my life, for sure.

MF: The bait crisis affects you even though you're not a lobsterman.

[0:05:38.9]

SM: Yeah, exactly. Whether it's friends or family or a partner or whatever, pretty much everyone is connected in some way to the fishery, so it might not affect me specifically or my job, but it's something that everybody talks about. It's almost like some of these issues are a common bond. It's easy to talk to somebody about these issues. It's a good conversation starter in a way. It's the ties that bind.

MF: Can you describe what the people are like in your community?

SM: I feel like I'm in a bunch of different communities. In the non-profit world it's one community. Where I live is another community. But we're all tied together. People tend to a little reserved, but very friendly. If you're willing to—something that happens in Downeast Maine is a lot of people, especially young people, move there for a couple years and then move away. I found that if you have a little bit more roots and you're willing to spend a little bit more time, people are really open. Depending on what group or community then I'm thinking about and I—it's really interesting and the demographics are really interesting, especially way Downeast in Cutler.

[0:07:16.2]

There's very few young people who are not going to University of Maine at Machias and are college age. I know that's a concern of a lot of people. A lot of people move away. A lot of young people moving away. The population's been declining for a long time. That's something that shapes the community, but I don't know that it's something people talk about a lot.

MF: Did you find there was resistance that you encountered when you first moved there?

SM: For sure. Originally, when I moved up here, I moved to Stonington, which was a really cool place to live, but it's a very insular community. Being on an island it fosters that. I found that knowing someone who was really active in the community was a golden ticket pretty much. Then, when I moved further Downeast, my partner used to be a lobsterwoman in Jonesport-Beals. That was another community where they were like, "Oh, you know someone. We love you." Without that way in—it's understandable because so many people come and go and there's so many summer people coming and going that why invest a ton of time in someone who's just going to leave and not come back. It makes sense in a lot of ways, but once that door is open people are really generous.

MF: Have you found that your nonprofit work has been a way in?

[0:08:47.3]

SM: In some ways, yeah. In that community for sure. There's a lot of nonprofits around. People are incredibly supportive, especially of me being a young woman. People are really supportive of me living Downeast and working Downeast. They want to support me and support my career and my dreams, which really has been an incredible learning experience because everyone's a mentor. Yeah.

MF: Are there changes that you've observed, either in your work or just being part of the community that make you nervous, aside from what you already mentioned—the bait shortage and the opioid crisis? Are there things going on, maybe with the salmon or alewives or whatever else? Or waterfront access?

[0:09:42.8]

SM: Yeah, I was going to say waterfront access. That's something I deal with less in my work now, but I used to work for Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries, which is down in Stonington. That's why I lived in Stonington. Waterfront access even in Cutler—I live in Cutler—it's really noticeable in the winter. You can see all the driveways that are not plowed. That's an indication that that waterfront property is owned by people who summer there. Even the people who have access to coastal properties, the taxes are really high and so it's hard for them to keep those properties. Yeah, that's really concerning, especially for lobstermen and really anyone who wants to have some kind of aquaculture or seaweed—those are industries as well. That's really concerning. There's no easy fix for it. That's why it's so concerning. The taxes themselves, that's a problem, but what are you going to do about it?

MF: Right. It's not as if you could just buy up those properties because they're extremely expensive.

[0:10:58.0]

SM: Exactly, yeah.

MF: What is going on with salmon and alewives? Are there positive steps being made? Are there dams coming down? Are there things that you've seen in the years that you've been working on it?

SM: Yeah, for sure. I work less with salmon, although Downeast Salmon Federation has a hatchery. Each year we're adding more salmon to the river. Unfortunately they have to travel a really long way before they come back to our rivers. The chance of their survival is low, but being a nonprofit we can do things differently. We're seeing a little bit more success, but I'm not as versed in all their stats and everything they do. But for alewives, it's a really hopeful story. I've seen dams come down for sure. I've seen fishways improved. If fish can swim upstream to ponds and lakes, they come back in huge numbers. They're not as picky as some other species. They don't need really high quality water. It's a really hopeful story and it's a story that can be

told by lots of people, because we deal with volunteers and community members. I've dipped alewives over a culvert with three generations. It's a really hopeful story and a lot of things we hear about fisheries decline. Alewives aren't declining, at least not in Maine. We're making really huge strides all over the state. It's literally every stakeholder you could imagine is involved, which is really hopeful.

[0:12:33.8]

MF: That's great. Are there things that are on your mind, things that come up here that you've thought of since you've been here or things that you—?

SM: At the Forum?

MF: Yeah. Things that you want to talk about.

SM: Yeah. I think the thing that's been coming up the most with the bait shortage is alewives as a bait source. They are a lobster bait and a halibut bait traditionally, but they're really small scale fisheries. They're run by each individual town and then the harvester themselves can decide how much they want to harvest. Obviously, they're an upper limit, but if they don't want to harvest up to that upper limit, they don't have to. It would be great if the alewife fishery could step in, but the beauty of it is that it's small, it's co-managed, it's local. The thing that we're all having to think about is how do we scale up without hurting our resource, how do we scale up without hurting the type of management style we have. Ultimately, the decision to open more alewife runs is up to the state and the federal government, so the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. There is some local control over the runs that we have, but then opening new runs is a pretty arduous process at this point.

[0:13:56.8]

MF: In other words, alewives aren't going to fix the problem in 2019?

SM: No, exactly. Currently, to open an alewife run, you need ten years of scientific data, which is a lot of data and a long time. A lot of the places that are going through the process of reopening, it's one person who's doing a lot of that work. If that one person has health concerns or wants to do something else, that's ten years and it's not exactly a lucrative fishery either. It's a lot of work and a lot of love. If you don't love what you're doing and you really don't believe in it, then it's not worth it.

MF: What's your plan? What do you hope to be doing in ten or twenty years?

[0:14:50.5]

SM: I think the thing that I've learned in the four years that I've been Downeast is the education and learning, whether that's formal or not, is so paramount. I've talked to a lot of people who didn't even know there were alewives in their backyard or didn't know anything about salmon or any of the other species that I work with. I think education also helps with common

understanding because there's a lot of misunderstanding within different groups. Fishermen and scientists, it's a classic clash. My job, being able to work with harvesters in fisheries, but also being able to do science work, has forced me to be in the middle. I have to say actually sitting down and talking to people, especially one on one, there are very few people that haven't been able to come to a common ground or a common understanding at least. Having that education and being willing to take time with people—you might have to talk to somebody a couple times about something before you can reach that place of understanding, but it's really, really important and it's really easy to be divided and to not like certain groups, but I think, especially in fisheries, we have a lot more in common than I think we realize or are able to communicate.

[0:16:11.1]

MF: You want to do more of that kind of education work?

SM: Yeah, definitely. It's my favorite part of my job now to do education/outreach work, especially with kids, getting kids outside. That's really important. Then, the younger you can get kids outside, the more that I found that they fall in love with things in their backyard, resources. Those kids can become stewards of the resource. It's really powerful, especially you see long dynasties of fishing families and even if the fisheries change, those families keep on fishing. A lot of those people are stewards of their resources too and they don't even know it. Educating kids when they're young about the world around them is really important. For a lot kids, especially kids who don't really fit in in classic classroom settings, teaching and learning outside is a way that they can thrive, really.

[0:17:19.1]

MF: Are there organizations who are doing that work really well, you think, right now?

SM: Yeah. There are a lot of organizations who are doing pieces of it, for sure. The Eastern Maine Skippers program I used to work with. They're doing amazing things for high school kids. They're taking kids who normally would have dropped out because they could make more money fishing and they're teaching them things that they need to learn to be really successful adults and successful fishermen and teaching them that school can be cool and fun and you can learn things that are relevant to your life. They're definitely a group that's doing a really good job of that for sure. They're the ones that always come to mind.

MF: Let's see. We have some other possible question ideas. This is a pretty wide open one. What role does the ocean play in your life?

[0:18:19.0]

SM: The ocean is everything (laughs). The ocean is everything. I live really close to the ocean, so it's literally part of my daily life. I live right on the water. I think in coastal Maine it is the tie that binds for sure. Whether it's a summer person who's coming to look at the ocean or a fishermen who's been fishing for forty years, or a scientist, anybody in between, it's really the thing that we have in common. I think the ocean, especially for me and the work that I do—I

work in rivers so much that sometimes I forget that so much life happens in the ocean and even some of the species I study. It can almost be something we take for granted, that it's always going to be there and the resources are always going to be, even though clearly history tells us otherwise. But it's easy to see just all that blue and think everything below it is stagnant when it's not. It's always moving. It's very dynamic.

MF: Right. We have a sense of the ocean as eternal.

[0:19:27.3]

SM: Yeah. It's there. It's like hills, it's like mountains. Not even those things are stagnant, but especially the ocean it's easy to just have a very romantic view of the blue because you can't see below it. Somebody told me a long time ago studying fisheries is like forestry, except you can't see any of the trees and they're constantly moving, which is just a great analogy (laughs). I always think of that. I always catch myself when I'm like, "Oh, the ocean is pretty. There's nothing happening out there." That's the reminder that a lot is happening.

MF: What was your course of study at Colby? Did you have an important teacher there?

[0:20:18.1]

SM: I had a lot of important teachers. I actually have a degree in policy. I thought I might want to be an attorney or go work on Capitol Hill or something like that. I found that that work didn't fulfill me like science and education did. So, at Colby I had a professor, she still teaches there, Loren McClenachan. She teaches a lot of the marine and environmental science classes. She introduced me to the fact that Maine is a place where one person can make a huge difference. Even in my senior thesis, I felt like I was doing something that mattered, which in college, it's a lot of tests and you're doing things for yourself, but I felt like what I was doing had more significance. She always emphasized that for sure. My advisor at Colby, too, Philip Nyhus, he really pushed me beyond myself. He was really supportive of me when I was in college. He was one of those teachers who didn't really take excuses. Everybody has stuff going on when they're in college. He really pushed me to literally be better, which was really helpful and I think that was really important in my life for sure.

[0:21:49.1]

MF: Do you feel like you are replicating some of that when you are doing your education work now?

SM: Yeah. I think when I look back on my time in college I think of the individual professors who made a huge impact on me. I don't think they know that they made that much of an impact on me. I think about that with the education work that I do. If I can connect with one kid, I can make such a huge difference in their lives that I'll never understand. But having that happen with myself, it makes me more excited to do my work, but also knowing that if even it makes one kid's day better, that's really important. I was not a good traditional student, so having that, experiencing that too and thinking, "Oh, I'm not good at school. Whatever," now that I work

with kids, I'm more willing to work with the individual kid, teenager, whoever, than to have one way to teach something.

[0:23:02.7]

MF: Just like your professors didn't necessarily know the impact they were making on you, you don't necessarily know what kind of lessons you're imparting.

SM: Yeah, exactly. I actually like that. I like that maybe I'll touch a kid, maybe I won't, maybe they'll just have fun outside. But either way, I hope that the thing that kids take away from outdoor education is that they can keep learning, no matter what, on their own. Just going down to a stream and looking at bugs, you can learn something from that. Always remaining teachable and learnable and working with adults too, that's really cool. When you get someone's grandparents—they brought their kid to an event or something—and they're learning something too and getting excited about things that were in their backyard.

[0:24:08.1]

MF: What about seasonal challenges? Do you find winter is a particularly difficult time? Tell me about how the time of year affects your life?

SM: I'm really lucky that I have field seasons for my job all year round. I'm really big into being outside all the time. One of my studies is on tomcod and I study them in December and January. I'm outside in rivers every day that I can possibly be in December and January. It's one of the most fun surveys that I do. I work with volunteers too, who also go out in the field. It's really fun and I really look forward to it. I love my job so much that each season that I have a field season, it's something that I really look forward to and I want to get outside. I want to be outside every day. It's really exciting in that way. I think the seasons don't affect me as much because of that. It's kind of like, "Oh, I'm looking forward to this one thing." I never get cabin fever or anything like that. Yeah, just really lucky that my job allows me to do that (laughs)

[0:25:29.1]

MF: Yeah, that's good. And that you have something to look forward to in the wintertime, so it's not just like—

SM: Snow (laughs).

MF: What about changes that you've seen in the past four years? Have you seen things that have—? Let me just keep an eye out because we do have a 5:30.

SM: Yeah, sure.

MF: Okay. Can I just peak outside and make sure nobody's waiting?

SM: Oh, yeah. For sure.

MF: Where's the light switch in this place?

SM: I don't know.

MF: My leg is completely asleep.

SM: This looks like a light.

MF: Hi. Are you waiting for an interview slot?

SM: Just waiting for [inaudible].

MF: (Laughs.)

SM: The lights are—

MF: You found it?

SM: Yeah. It's these buttons.

MF: Oh, right. They're just individual—yeah.

SM: Yeah, exactly. I had to take a close look (laughs).

MF: Leave it to the scientist. Now I can't get this one to work. Oh, well. Cool. Well, let's just keep going, one more question since there's nobody out there. But my foot is so asleep. I'm sorry.

SM: No worries.

MF: Any changes that you've observed in your four years?

[0:27:13.4]

SM: Changes I've observed. I think I'll start off in my work. I've noticed a lot more collaboration and working together. I used to also work—when I was at Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries, I also worked for Downeast Fisheries Partnership, which is a whole group of nonprofits and College of the Atlantic that worked together to tackle bigger fisheries issues than any one nonprofit or one person could tackle on their own. I've seen a lot more movement towards working together and part of it is out of necessity. We have limited funding Downeast. Part of it just the synergy and how much more everybody can get done working together, which is really cool, at least in the nonprofit, science, fisheries, monitoring world, definitely. I think the other changes I've noticed—I think I've been so focused on learning, learning about people and communities and the different places that I've lived that I feel like now I'm just starting to really

understand what's going on, so I feel like I haven't observed as many changes because I'm getting caught up to speed.

MF: Yeah, all right. Well, thank you very much.

SM: Yeah, thanks.

MF: This is great.

SM: Yeah.

[0:28:45.0]