

**Interview with Dustin Delano, commercial fisherman**

**Occupation:** commercial fisherman

**Port Community:** Friendship, Maine

**Interviewer:** Sarah Schumann

**Date and year:** March 1, 2019

**Location:** Rockport, Maine

**Project:** The Graying of the Fleet Part II: How and Why Young Fishermen Choose to Fish?

**Transcriber:** Sarah Schumann

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: To get started, I have a couple of biographical details to ask you. First of all, my name is Sarah Schumann. Today is March 1, 2019, and we're at the Samoset Resort in Rockport, Maine. Could you please state your name for the recorder?

Dustin Delano [DD]: Dustin Delano.

SS: Dustin Delano, and what is your occupation?

DD: Commercial fisherman.

SS: Ok. Is that fulltime or—?

DD: Yes.

SS Fulltime? Ok. What is your homeport?

DD: Friendship.

SS: Do you have your own vessel or do you—?

DD: Yes.

SS: What's the name of it?

DD: Knotty Lady.

SS: What is your age?

DD: Twenty-eight.

SS: And your educational background?

DD: Some college.

SS: Ok, some college. Alright, that's the end of my quick biographical details questions, so at this point I'll open it up to you, and just ask you to just tell me your story as a commercial fisherman. You can start wherever you would like to.

DD: I started when I was eleven, in my first boat, which was a skiff. I had a small skiff and outboard and twenty-five traps, hauled them by hand. Each year, I'd buy more traps. I had that small wooden skiff and an outboard for a couple of years, and then I bought a hauler and an outboard, and I used that through high school, my senior year. Then I purchased a thirty-four foot wooden boat. My father and I fixed it up over a winter, and that's what I used for the first couple years after high school and college. Back when I was in high school, in the fall, I would go to school during the day and then after school, I would go home and go out and usually get a hundred or a hundred and fifty traps after school, before dark. Even when I was in college, I came home on weekends and hauled them.

SS: Where did you go to college?

DD: I've been here, there, and everywhere. I went to the University of Maine at first. Then I came back and I spent a year fishing on my own, trying to save some money, and went back to college fulltime at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. I didn't stay there too long, either. I studied business marketing. Came back, fished for about a year and a half again, maybe a little longer than that. Saved up some money and then went back, to a different school in Pennsylvania, Grove City College, where I continued to study business and I also studied ministry, biblical studies. Then, there were just some things going on at home, so I came back to be closer to family. I ended up just going fulltime after that. I did a little schooling at home on the side, online. As I got busier and started getting involved in the management of the fisheries and whatnot, there just wasn't the time for school. I just didn't have the time to do it all. I lobstered fulltime. I purchased an offshore federal permit back in—well I had one in 2009 and I sold it, but then I bought another one in 2013. I fished out of Friendship, where you're allowed eight hundred traps. But there was an island community looking for fishermen off of Friendship—Monhegan Island.

SS: They were looking for fishermen?

[04:39]

DD: Yeah, because their fleet was shrinking, sort of.

SS: Why was that? Why was it shrinking?

DD: Because their fishery is set up different. It's a seasonal fishery. They only fish from October 1st until about the 7th of June. There's only half a dozen other guys. I thought it would be neat to go out and try it. The trap limit was half of what I was used to. I cut back to four hundred traps. I went out and tried it for a couple of years. It took a couple of years to

realize it wasn't really for me. I really needed to buy a house and stop jumping around. It was an interesting place, but I didn't want to build a life there.

SS: Were you doing summer months out of Friendship and then those winter months out of Monhegan Island?

DD: I wouldn't lobster from the beginning of June to the end of September. I wouldn't lobster. Traps were on the bank.

SS: You were just doing that island fishery?

DD: Yeah. I worked with family. Came back and forth. I started a kayak rental business on the island, stuff like that. But I really missed the summertime fishing. When I used to fish just seasonally in Friendship, when I'd haul my boat out in December, by the end of a month I'd be raring to go again. I really enjoy fishing year-round now.

SS: Is it with the offshore permit that you're going to do that now?

DD: Yeah.

SS: Tell me about the seasonality aspect of the lobsters. When you were fishing out of Friendship, it was the warmer months, and when you went to the island, it was kind of the opposite.

DD: The opposite.

SS: And now you want to find a way to do all of it, with the offshore permit?

DD: Yeah. I came back to Friendship, moved back to town and bought a house there. The way the state has it set up, you're allowed eight hundred traps, but my limit had been four hundred on Monhegan, so I had to build up. They only allow you to increase a hundred per year. So I only just now got back to eight hundred traps. I've been doing that the last three years, fishing offshore.

SS: Offshore is still Area 1? Part of the same regulatory area?

DD: Yeah. It's all Area 1. We started having menhaden up here, the last couple years, so last year, I decided I would go buy a seine and a power block and go try it. I'd never done it. I found a guy who used to be a seiner years ago, and he came and helped me. We did that last summer.

SS: How'd it go?

DD: It went pretty well for the first year. I wasn't expecting to make a lot of money or anything. I just wanted to help my family and myself to get reasonable priced bait.

SS: Did the herring situation play a role in driving that?

DD: Well, just the fact that there were pogies in my backyard.

SS: They haven't been here before?

DD: No. They were here seventeen years ago, and then they were gone for a long time. I guess, traditionally, that's what they've done.

SS: Were there other people who went seining for pogies?

DD: There were three of us in Friendship that did it last year. My father's rigging up this year. He went with me a little bit last year. We're going to go with both of our boats this year so we can help each other.

SS: In terms of getting the net and gear and stuff, were there people in the area that you could get that from, or did you have to look out of state?

DD: Yeah, I kind of had to look out of state. I went through Brooks Trap Mill to help me purchase a seine that was made in India. The one I used last year was very small. It was only fifty fathoms by five fathoms. I purchased that locally from a guy who built seines in Brunswick. It was very small. It was tough to catch fish when they got spooked or when they were in deeper water. So I purchased this larger seine, which was about twenty-five thousand dollars, and then we purchased another one. After the quota is caught, we're allowed seventeen barrels a day, so we had to purchase a different size seine to be legal for that fishery, because the one I purchased for the federal quota was too big.

SS: You would have caught too much?

DD: It's one of those rules that's there to basically make you spend more money. We're hoping the fish show up this year, because we have over sixty thousand tied up. We're banking on the fish showing up. If they don't show up, I don't know what's going to happen.

SS: How many years did they show up consistently when they were here before?

DD: I think they were here about ten years.

SS: And this time, how long have they been here?

DD: This time? They've only been up in this part of the coast for the last two or three years. They're usually only around for five or ten, so we're hoping to get another year or couple years out of it, maybe. We can travel to southern Maine, if need be. It's just a lot of weight to haul back and forth. We'll do what we have to.

SS: I get the sense that you come from a fishing family?

DD: Yes.

SS: Can you tell me about your family a little bit?

DD: My father's fished since he was a teenager. His father didn't but his uncle did—his father's brothers. His grandfather fished. So, I don't know, I'm probably at least fourth generation.

SS: Do you have siblings who fish?

DD: I don't. No.

SS: No siblings at all?

DD: No.

SS: An only child?

DD: Actually, I don't think there's any Delanos left.

SS: In your generation?

DD: Right. There are Delanos, but they're not fishing. The younger ones have either not gotten into it or have gotten out.

SS: For those who have gotten into it and gotten out, what would you say are the reasons for that, in general, that people leave?

DD: It's not for everybody.

SS: What do you mean? Can you elaborate?

DD: It takes a good work ethic. It takes knowing when and how to reinvest. You can't just go out and haul your traps and spend the money on something else. You have to be careful not to spend money that you need to build up. I think especially in the first few years, you have to be constantly putting your money back into the business and purchasing better traps. It's a constant battle replacing rope. We can only fish sink rope groundlines, so a lot of our ground lines are only lasting a couple of years. We're spending thousands and thousands a year to replace groundlines because they don't hold up. There's a lot of expense involved. I think a lot of people see value in choosing a career where it's clear money and you don't have a lot of overhead. That's what fishing's turned into now. Our overhead is very high. I'm repowering my engine now in my boat, and just to repower my engine is costing more than my father had in building a whole new boat and engine in 2003.

SS: The prices of everything have just gone up?

DD: Yeah. I don't necessarily look at them as having failed for getting out, but maybe just as not wanting that pressure.

SS: How do *you* handle that pressure?

[14:09]

DD: It doesn't really bother me too much. I feel like I work hard, but there's always room for more. I'm not uptight if I miss a day. I don't have myself in that type of financial situation. I don't have a brand new boat. I was thinking about building one this year. I've been talking with Mussel Ridge. I was thinking about building a forty-six Mussel Ridge, but it didn't seem like the time, with so many things coming up—a possible bait shortage, the offshore fishery

in jeopardy with right whales, and there's a lot of ocean energy development in the works and a lot of stuff going on with wind development that seems to be very shady and behind-the-scenes. I've heard a lot of rumors about some stuff going on that's going to take place in the Gulf of Maine, but it almost seems like it's being hidden from us. It's just scary to see videos of some of the negotiations at some of the meetings. The value of that bottom is in the millions. We in the Gulf of Maine have, for generations, worked to keep it sustainable, through all of our conservation measures—through V-nothing and through the size of lobsters that we keep, throwing back the large ones. Those are measures we did ourselves—vent size and all that. So it's really frustrating. I feel like we've been excellent stewards. The Maine lobster industry is booming. It's really frustrating that there are people out there that it means nothing to, and they are willing to take it away. They think that wind turbines will save the world. The way I look at it, there's a possibility of my livelihood behind replaced by several hundred foot turbines. If that happened, I think we're going to have a couple of hard years coming, with bait supply and all that other stuff. I think if lobstering came to an end, I would have to pack up and leave, because there wouldn't be anything else I could do there. There wouldn't be any other opportunities.

SS: Any other fisheries?

DD: Right. Most of the other fisheries are sewn up. A lot of entrances are frozen. There isn't a way in. That's one solid thing that the Maine lobster fishery has going for it. I think that stands out from any other state. Any student can do the apprentice program and can buy a student license and have access to this fishery.

SS: That's how you got in?

DD: That's how I got in. Until you're twenty-three, you can log your hours and you can still receive a regular lobster license. That's open to anybody, any young person. This past year, there's been some threats, because we have a waiting list for licenses once you're over twenty-three. If you're over twenty-three, you get placed on a waiting list, and so many licenses have to come out before a new one is issued. They've been screaming about it not being fair that young people can jump in while they're put on a list. Sure, there's some inequity there. But we're trying to prevent a graying industry. We're trying to prevent our industry from dying. You can still get in with just a license that you don't have to purchase. It's not like Australia and Canada where it's several hundred thousand dollars to get in.

SS: Here, there's just a basic license fee?

DD: Just a yearly license fee. It's open to any student. You don't have to be from a fishing family. Any student has access to the fishery. I think there's so much value in that. We had some legislators this year who wanted to take it away. It's been tough fighting. It's come up a couple of times in the last five years, and I think it will probably continue to come up. But at the same time, I think preserving what we have for younger generations is something not to lose.

SS: And you don't think that would happen if they changed the system?

DD: Our fleet is already—the average age is still pretty high. I think it would be even worse if we didn't have it set up the way we do. I think it's great to be able to talk to little kids about the possibilities that they have here. I think it's helped them.

SS: Do you talk to a lot of people younger than yourself, providing advice or answering questions about what it's like to be a lobsterman?

DD: I let them know what we have here, because I feel like sometimes that gets left out in today's society. Even when I was in high school, there was this cliché that if you didn't go to college, basically, you're not going to amount to anything. I don't agree with that philosophy. I don't think everybody's made to go to college. I don't think they need to. I think that the trades are not going away. You're always going to need plumbers and electricians. You're always going to need trade-oriented things. Not everybody's going to need a master's degree in engineering. I feel like we've gotten ahead of ourselves too much. I feel like we're kind of looked down on as less educated people, and it's frustrating. That's not always the case, of course, but I think it's important to be showing young people that it's acceptable.

SS: Do you feel that that is true even in your community of Friendship? Even in your coastal community?

DD: Maybe not so much in Friendship. Friendship is a peninsula where half the families there are fishermen. Most of the kids are involved in fishing. It's when you go to high school and you merge in with other surrounding towns, other inland towns. There's definitely a lot of uncertainty in the future of it. It's scary. It makes me wonder what things will look like in ten years.

SS: What do you think they will look like in ten years, if you were to venture a guess?

DD: I think in ten years, we'll still have a healthy biomass of lobsters. I think the lobsters aren't getting caught up, aren't being overfished. Our conservation measures are successful and prevailing. I don't think that will be an issue. I think the biggest issue we face are those who don't care about us—the NGOs, the conservationists.

SS: Are there people who want to shut down lobstering?

DD: Lobstering? Yup. Over the right whales, that kind of thing. And just the whole—I'm pretty nervous about the movement towards offshore wind development, because that's such a huge spatial issue. You're talking thousands of square miles. If I couldn't fish out there, if that was taken over, it would just destroy a livelihood and might put an end to generational heritage. That's one of my biggest concerns, the ocean energy development. I just feel like we're constantly being attacked by so many different things, and everything is coming to a head. Every year, it seems like we're trying to defend ourselves against something. Now, there seems to be more things, and everything seems to be more serious.

SS: It sounds like the common denominator in all of that is just people not understanding and valuing what you do?

DD: I feel like people don't have an appreciation of what we do. They don't think it's valued. Not everybody, but definitely a lot of these conservationists and the developers for projects like that.

SS: What would you say if you were given an opportunity to convince them why fishing matters?

DD: I mean, I have. We dealt with a wind project off of Monhegan Island that the university was in charge of. It was a test project. We weren't treated fairly from the beginning. We were lied to. We were told that the project was going to be a certain size and a certain time, and the project took off on its own. It was all of a sudden going to be far greater than what it was before, what it was supposed to be. We would provide feedback, and the next time we would meet with them, it would be with people we'd never met before. Then, the same thing would happen. We'd come back to the table and be talking to new faces who had never heard what we said before. I think that these people are saving the environment, and that it doesn't matter at what cost. To them, a job is a job, I think. But to us, it's generations of lifestyles that we've built and molded. Like I said, I feel like we've made our fishery one of the most sustainable in the world, and that's taken a long time, like I said, generations of people. I feel like that doesn't mean anything to them. They oftentimes portray us as barbarians that are just out to kill and take everything they can. Putting wind turbines is going to help reduce the carbon footprint and maybe get rid of us at the same time.

SS: You're on the board of directors of the Maine Lobstermen's Association?

DD: Yeah.

SS: Vice president?

DD: Vice president.

SS: How long have you been in that role?

DD: This is my second term on the board. There's two vice presidents. We were elected a year ago.

SS: How did that come about?

DD: Just getting involved in the fisheries. The Maine Lobstermen's Association, over the last few years, has had a leadership program to try to grab young fishermen along the coast and introduce them to other fisheries in other places in the world, try to compare them and show them how other people do things, and also to teach them the science behind our own decisions that have been made over the years, how to manage their own businesses, how to be practical. I think that probably one of the greatest things I ever gained out of it is that our board is made up of people all along the coast, from Zone A to Zone G, and all different ages. I'm not the youngest on the board anymore. There's guys on the board from twenty-four years old all the way up to, I would assume, in their seventies. You come in and you sit down, and there's twenty-one guys from all over that all have different insights and are all feeling different economic impacts on their area, because some places are better. They catch a lot more than others. What's been nice, for me, is it's kind of like a reality check when I get



back. There's guys that have been in my position. Probably if I hadn't been on the board and heard from these guys, I probably would have built a brand-new boat, and been significantly in debt. They've kind of been my voice of reason. Whenever I start thinking that way, all I have to do is go to a meeting and I come back to reality a little bit. We're learning a lot from them. They're learning from us, because they're starting to forget what it was like when they were in their twenties. We've talked about different things like trap limits—reducing the amount of traps we have. I think as you get older, it's easier to say, "Sure, let's reduce our trap limit." But for the younger guys, I'm not sure that's the right answer or not. There's a lot of checks and balances. That's been the benefit of being on the board. Once you know what's going on, there's involvement, different things going on in the legislature, what's going on with the federal stuff.

[30:30]

SS: Is that a formal program that you said the MLA has for young fisherman?

DD: Yeah. It's a leadership program.

SS: With seminars and workshops and stuff like that?

DD: Yeah. It usually starts in mid-winter. It's kind of an every other year thing, every couple years. I think there's usually ten to twenty from up and down the coast that will participate. The last couple times we've done it, we've taken a trip up to Prince Edward Island and spent some time there, looking at their fishery. They have a short fishery with three hundred traps. We've kind of examined the differences. It's very different. They kind of try to teach you how you can survive in the industry.

SS: What's the name of the program? Is it just called the leadership program, or does it have a name?

DD: It might be called the leadership institute. It's through the Maine Lobstermen's Association.

SS: Sounds like an interesting model. Are you married? Do you have kids?

DD: No. I have a girlfriend who has a couple kids. Three kids.

SS: Do you think that, for future generations coming after you, what do you think things are going to be like for them? What words of advice would you provide for someone who's like eleven right now and starting to fish out of a skiff with twenty-five pots, like you did?

[32:13]

DD: I think that a lot of that weight is on our shoulders. I think that we need to step up the game and get more involved, and protect what we've build over decades. No matter what, if somebody's eleven years old, I think it teaches them a great work ethic, even if something happens to the fishery. Anybody, I would still encourage them to seek out something to fall back on. But I wouldn't tell somebody not to come into the fishery. I think that if we want there to be a fishery for the young people, then that's on us.

SS: I was wondering a little bit about financial aspects of being a lobsterman. You mentioned earlier a little about the cost. I think it was with nets and bait and the cost of engines. You mentioned things getting more expensive. Can you elaborate a little bit more on that? How are people coping with those increases in costs? Or how have you coped?

DD: Our landings have been up, since 2012 when there was a peak. It's not that we're catching more, but that the ocean is producing more. It's giving us more because of our conservation measures. I think that is what has allowed us to keep up. If the catch were to fall, even by twenty-five percent, I think it be pretty difficult for a lot of people, just because guys have built their businesses based on the current living. It may be difficult if the catch were to come down, if the price didn't make up for the catch decline, if there even was a catch decline. I think the next couple years will be a good test on that. There's definitely times of the year when it's not profitable to spend what you spend on bait. It's not profitable to catch what you catch, with what you spend on bait. I think that's going to become even more of a reality this year. I spent about seventy thousand on bait last year. My fuel was around thirty-five thousand dollars. So talking a hundred and five thousand dollars in bait and fuel. That's not counting the guys working in the stern, and buying traps, and everything else. A hundred and five thousand in expenses is a lot.

SS: It is a lot. Who do you have working in the stern?

[35:35]

DD: I have two younger guys, both in their early twenties.

SS: Do you think they'll wind up sticking with it or owning boats someday?

DD: One of them has expressed interest in the apprentice program. I've told him that he could do it. All he has to do is go get the paperwork, and he has yet to do it. That's kind of on him. I'm not going to do it all for him. If that's something he's really interested in, he has that opportunity. They both do. I think that both of them are content where they are, because they can spend their day on the water. It's a great job. I don't know that there's much that can beat it. For them, it's pretty stress-free. They go to work every day and they know they're going to have a paycheck at the end of the week, and it's clear money. It's not a huge, huge income, but it's not terrible, either.

SS: If you were to describe the type of person who becomes a commercial fisherman, and who excels at being a commercial fisherman, what are some words that you would use to describe that? It's not for everybody.

DD: Right. I think I've always been pretty cautious. I've tried to think things through, for the most part. But at the same time, I've definitely taken a few risks, like jumping into the menhaden fishery and purchasing seines when you don't know if the fish are going to be there or not. When you look at previous generations, your father and your grandfather can tell you, "There were menhaden here in the early nineties, and they were here for X amount of time. Before that, there was a lull, and way back then, there were some more." You feel like maybe you can depend on some of that information that's being passed down to you. I just think you need to be aware of your surroundings. You need to pay attention to what's

going on. I think you need to be involved. In Maine, we have the Landings [monthly newsletter] that the Lobstermen's Association puts out, and every fisherman and every lobsterman in Maine is sent one monthly. It's free. It's pretty simple to just pick that up and read what's going on. There are still plenty of people that don't. But I think that's important to do. I think you need to pay attention. We can all go out and set traps, but I have certain ways that I fish that are different from how other people fish. Lobsters are in certain places at certain times, and I'm always trying to be a step ahead if I can. You need to have a pretty good work ethic to succeed.

SS: Do you think, in your case, that a lot of that comes from coming from a fishing family?

[39:32]

DD: I think so.

SS: Or is it just who you are? Or both?

DD: Well, I mean, I think fishing's what makes us who we are. What we have, lobstering, growing up here, working on boats, working those fifteen-hour days, going in the nasty weather, seeing what it was like ten years ago when things weren't quite as profitable—that's all made us who we are now. It's through those experiences that we can build on and use them as we try to navigate through to the future.

SS: You mentioned that one of the things you were studying was biblical studies, so you're a person of faith?

DD: I'm a Christian.

SS: How does that come into play in your lobstering career, at all?

DD: I think sometimes it can be tough, because the lobster industry can be a cutthroat industry. I guess it's good to be able to just put your faith in something else. To put your faith in something else, instead of just things of this world, I guess. I think that's what relieves some of the stress for me. It's not all about fishing and what's going on right now, but there's hope to come. That's definitely not just with fishing, but with life.

SS: Are there any other topics that we haven't discussed yet, that you think are important for understanding your experience or what it's like being a young fisherman in your area?

[41:57]

DD: I don't think so.

SS: Are there any parting thoughts you'd like to leave with me, before we wrap up?

DD: No.

SS: Ok. I'll just ask one last question, very simply. Why do you love what you do?

DD: I like to be able to call the shots, I guess, control my operation. I like the freedom, for sure. I like that the harder you work and the smarter you fish, that there's a reward for that. I guess that's about it.

SS: That's it? Alright, if that's it, I'll turn off the recording. Thank you very much for your time.

[end of interview]

[43:50]