

Interview with Dustin Westman, commercial fisherman

Occupation: Commercial fisherman

Port Community: Heathsville, Virginia

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

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

Transcriber: Sarah Schumann

[00:00]

[beginning of interview]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann. It's January 16, 2019. I'm in Heathsville, Virginia, with Dustin Westman. Dustin, could you please state your occupation?

Dustin Westman [DW]: Commercial fisherman.

SS: Is that fulltime or—

DW: [nods head]

SS: Fulltime. What is your homeport?

DW: Potomac River, basically.

SS: Ok. Do you trailer your boats?

DW: I have several boats.

SS: Ok. Do you keep them here in Heathsville?

DW: I work anywhere from the mouth of the bay to pretty much Washington, or wherever I need to go.

SS: Alright, we'll come back to that in a second. What vessel or vessels do you own?

DW: I have a forty-foot midrise, I have a thirty-foot Chesapeake classic, and three smaller skiffs.

SS: What age are you?

DW: Thirty-two. I will be thirty-three.

SS: Briefly, what is your educational background?

DW: I quit school in tenth grade. I do have a GED.

SS: You have a GED? Ok.

DW: But I did quit in tenth grade.

SS: If you want, we can just start with where you're from, your upbringing, your origins in the fishing industry. Where did it all start for you?

DW: I've been on boats since I was about four.

SS: Four, wow!

DW: Every summer I'd go with my dad, crabbing, and I just loved it. By the time I was twelve, my granddad gave me a small skiff and [I] started making some crab pots, started doing them on my own.

SS: How far back does fishing go in your family?

DW: On my mom's side, her grandfather and then her father and her uncles and all them. My dad was the first one on his side.

SS: Did he wind up in fishing because of marrying your mom?

DW: Well, pretty much.

SS: So he got integrated into the industry? Ok. So, you said you started fishing when you were four.

DW: Yeah. I started unloading.

SS: So you barely remember a time before being on the water.

DW: No.

SS: That's pretty cool.

DW: My grandparents were on the water, so I was always at the water, fishing or doing crabs off of islands. It's all I've known.

SS: So tell me about that. What was it like being a kid on the water?

DW: I couldn't imagine anything else [laughter]. I've never done anything else. But I loved it, from day one. When I was a kid, I used to get mad when my mom would make me go to sleepovers and stuff, because I couldn't go crabbing the next morning. I'd get mad at her when she made me do stuff like that.

SS: Were you making money that young, as a kid, or were you just helping out?

DW: Well, when I got to where I could start doing stuff, I'd start making money. I'd get enough to buy me a shotgun at the end of the season, and on and on, as I was able to do more and more. I was culling crabs by six.

SS: So at twelve, you had your first skiff of your own.

DW: Yeah.

SS: And where did it go from there?

DW: I had that, which was a little teeny fourteen-foot skiff, and by the time I was fifteen, I'd moved up to a nineteen-foot and had three hundred crab pots, doing crab in the mornings before I went to school and gillnet—I had started gillnetting by then, and doing more stuff, and learning more. By the time I was sixteen, I had kids from school working for me. And I pretty much went full-time after that.

[04:05]

SS: How did you make the decision? Did you make a decision to leave school and go fishing fulltime?

DW: Well, at that point, I was pretty much making more than my teachers were.

SS: So, economically, it made sense.

DW: Yeah, and it's done well for me.

SS: Yeah. You do crabbing, and did you say some gillnetting as well?

DW: I do crabs, fish, oysters, I shed soft crabs. I do it all.

SS: And you've got the five different vessels that you use for that?

DW: Yes.

SS: Does each one get used for a different fishery?

DW: Yeah, pretty much. Couple of the skiffs, I like to keep so I can be mobile, trailer real quick in case I need to get somewhere. [I] mainly fish out of one of the bigger boats and crab and oyster out of another one.

SS: What kind of fish?

DW: Rockfish, perch. That's my two main fish that I fish.

SS: Is that with gillnet?

DW: Yes.

SS: Cool. You said earlier that you basically cover the entire Chesapeake Bay.

DW: Mm-hmm. I think I went to James River my first time when I was seventeen, tonging oysters. Since then, I've been everywhere. I got to go where it's at.

SS: How does licensing work with that, since there's different states' waters?

DW: The only different license is we have Potomac River as well as Virginia. We have to carry a separate license for Potomac, because that's shared by Maryland and Virginia. Everything else from here to there is Virginia waters. Now, you have to carry a separate license for everything you do. Pretty much everything is a limited entry, which, when I got into it, crabbing was the only limited entry. Now, you have to purchase each license from somebody, and it's all private sales, so the price of the license is sky high.

SS: How much would a license go for?

DW: It all depends. A crab pot license, when I started, was around three thousand dollars. Now it's around twelve [thousand]. So that's gone up. An oyster license came with your stuff. Now they're eight, nine, ten thousand dollars for an oyster license. Gillnet licenses are three thousand, four thousand [dollars]. They used to come with your crab pot license when you bought it. So all that is a huge expense that was not there when I got into it.

SS: But you said the crab license was limited when you got into it?

DW: Yeah.

SS: So how did you get yours?

DW: Grandfather. Grandfather passed mine down to me.

SS: Ok. So your grandfather really set you up in the business when you were twelve?

DW: Sure did.

[07:15]

SS: Why do you think he did that?

DW: He was getting older and he was fading out.

SS: So he gave you his business?

DW: Pretty much.

SS: So what do you think now? It's been twenty years since you've had your own license. How have you seen it change? Do you feel any differently?

DW: No, I still do well. But as far as somebody trying to get into it now, if somebody eighteen years old wanted to get in, you wouldn't have the money, unless you come from a wealthy family that wants to back you, and when you put in that kind of money, you have to make money. It takes a long time to learn.

SS: So you learned from your family, I take it, from a young age.

DW: A lot. I mean, I've always done a lot of free work, helping people, to learn and stuff, sometimes for no pay, sometimes for very little pay, just to learn stuff.

[08:35]

SS: For a young person who's trying to get in now, is that still a pathway they can take, just helping out to learn how to do it?

DW: Yeah. Yeah. Most people are helpful, very helpful. If you ask them, they ain't going to tell you. If you show that you want to learn, most of them will. But the licensing is the biggest thing. That, and you got to get your gear and your boat and everything on top of that.

SS: Do you have crew when you're fishing or is it just you?

DW: I have two who work for me fulltime.

SS: How old are they?

DW: One is thirty-six and the other is twenty-five or twenty-six. Actually, the younger one, he's trying to buy some licenses and the older one, he already carries some licenses. So they're trying to work their way into the business, but it's hard to come up with enough to really get into it on your own. It's very tough.

[09:56]

SS: How long would you estimate it would take fishing to make back the initial investment?

DW: If I was to make the investment right now, I could get it back.

SS: Because you know what you're doing.

DW: Yeah, and I'm into multiple things. But your average person will only be able to get into one thing, if he's lucky enough. And a lot of times, one year you do really well on crabs, another year oysters do really well. Some years, it takes all of them to make a good year. It's really, really tough, just trying to make it on one thing.

[10:41]

SS: Tell me a little bit about your community here. Is it a fishing community or do people do other stuff for the most part?

DW: Well, right in Reedville, we have the fish factory, which is a huge fishing industry for the menhaden. There's a lot of crabbers, a lot of pound netters, a lot of gillnetters. It's a good amount. Most of the community looks up to the waterman—a lot better than a lot of places.

SS: People are generally supportive?

DW: Most of the people who live on the water are very good to us, unlike I've heard from some other areas and see in some other areas that I've been. Everybody here pretty much knows everybody.

SS: You said you've never considered doing anything other than fishing?

DW: No. I washed dishes one time at a restaurant. I was like fifteen. I done that for about two months in the winter one year. I hated that. [laughter] But no, I never considered anything else. I love going to work. I mean, there's things *about* the job I don't like.

SS: Like what?

DW: Sometimes dealing with people, or you got a bunch of dirty crab pots that you got to wash. But it all makes it worth it when you're out there and everything's going right.

[12:27]

SS: Are there other members of your family in your generation who are fishing too—siblings, cousins?

DW: I only have a sister. She worked for me several summers—wash pots, paint buoys, pull crabs, stuff like that—but she got a job once she got out of high school. Other than that, nobody's left in my family working. [I'm] the only one left.

SS: Do you have family of your own?

DW: I'm married, but I have no kids. I have two nieces. That's all I got.

SS: Ok. What do you think the future of being a waterman around here looks like?

DW: As far as a youngster getting into it, I don't see how it's possible. Unless, like I said, unless he has very good backing. As far as the average person getting in and expecting to do it on their own, it's pretty much impossible.

SS: When would you say that changed?

DW: Probably fifteen years ago. When I got in it, everything was slow. The crab population was down. Oysters had died. It was just starting to come back up. Now, they're both at a high, so everybody wants to be in it that can be in it. So like I said, everything is running sky high.

SS: Tell me a bit about why everything was slow when you got into it, and why it came back.

DW: We had a bad crab die-off, and just about all the oysters died. Both have recovered. As the population of each has [gone up, there are] more and more people getting into it. And a lot of the people that work on the water now have other jobs or are into something else, that had a lot of money to start off with, when they jumped into it.

SS: When you say people having other jobs, this isn't watermen who are taking part-time land jobs in order to be able to keep fishing? This is people who had land jobs first?

DW: A lot of them still have land jobs. A lot of them run other businesses.

SS: What's their motivation to become watermen in addition to that?

DW: I guess because they like to do it, and they're able to. But I mean, that's a huge problem. They're running a fulltime business, got people working for them, and they're out there holding a license. And then there are several people who hold a license and never use them. They just pay their fee every year because it's a good investment, and the price of the license keeps going up.

SS: Oh, I see, just as an investment?

DW: Mm-hmm. There's a lot of that.

[15:38]

SS: These people who are part-time watermen who have other jobs, could you describe those people a bit more? What kind of job do they have? Where are they?

DW: Several of them own tree companies or grass-cutting business. A lot of people who work at the naval base hold crab pot license or stuff—people that really don't need to be out there, in my opinion. That's really the main reason that licenses have run up so high.

SS: If I'm reading between the lines correctly, you're saying that these people have almost an unfair advantage because they have this source of money from other businesses, that they can out-compete a young waterman who's trying to make it?

DW: Yeah. Somebody who's trying to start. I mean, if you're sitting there and you have a fulltime income, it's not as bad on you to pay twelve hundred [dollars] for a license and thirty thousand dollars for a boat. You don't have to go out there and make a payment just off the water every month. I mean, you have other means of doing that, so that's a huge disadvantage.

SS: Can you think of examples of individuals you know who have been trying to become full-time watermen—you know, young people—but haven't been able to, because of that licensing fee barrier?

DW: We see it every year. Several people will try to get into it, and they're looking at a big bank payment. It's like I say, you don't just go out there. There's more to it than just putting stuff in the water and catching stuff. You have to learn and even if people help you, it still takes a long time to learn where you need to be, when you need to be there, stuff like that.

SS: So those are people who manage to get the license, but then—

DW: Then end up folding up because they can't afford to keep operating.

SS: Because the license fee overextended them relative to what they can—?

DW: Mainly that, and the gear. I mean, just to go crabbing, you're looking at seventy thousand [dollars] right now. And that's on a small scale, not even a big scale.

SS: Wow. That's a lot to bite off.

DW: Yeah.

SS: With that kind of uncertainty—

DW: And most eighteen-year-olds aren't going to walk in the bank and get a loan for that.

SS: Is there anyone who will provide loans around here to young commercial fishermen?

DW: Around here, it's got so tough that a person that's well established can hardly get a loan to do anything. It's tough. Even if you have equity, some of the banks still don't want to. And that's not just with water stuff, that's with [trails off]—

SS: In general with getting a bank loan?

DW: Everything got so—after that recession and all, things have got really tight around here. We don't have a local bank anymore. Everything has been bought out by big banks. Used to be, when I was younger, I could call, tell them what I wanted to do, and they'd have the paperwork ready for me when I got down there. I only had to sign, never even had to go in and talk about it. Now you go to go through months worth of stuff just to get something.

SS: That's in general? That's not just for commercial fishing?

DW: No, that's everybody.

[19:45]

SS: I guess if you could go back in time, would you say that things have unfolded for you the way you thought they would, or have there been any surprises along the way?

DW: Pretty much, things have gone—I mean, things have gotten better.

SS: In what way?

DW: As far as when I got in it, there was very few crabs, very few oysters. Both populations came up. Markets got better. One time, we were catching a load of crabs and oysters, and getting great money for them. That's kind of dwindling back down a bit now, because there's so many people that have gotten into it. But at one time, we really did well, and better than I'd foreseen it happening.

SS: That's a nice surprise.

DW: Definitely. I never thought that I would have two people working for me, and numerous boats, and hold all the licenses that I hold. It really turned out a lot better than what I had seen through my family experiences before. When I got into it, I got into it at the right time. I really did.

[28:28]

SS: What are your markets for what you're catching? Where does it go?

DW: Most of our stuff goes to Baltimore, Washington, crab-wise, fish-wise. Oysters, we sell local to Cowart and Bevans, and they ship all over the place. Baltimore, Washington is the main hub for seafood.

SS: So do you deliver to a wholesaler and they send it up there?

DW: Mm-hmm. The buyer that I work with on my crabs, I've been with ever since I started. So we have a really good business relation, and that helps out a lot too, versus some people that got into it afterwards that have to deal with this one or that. He can call me and tell me exactly what kind of crab he needs to be able to move, whether he needs a jumbo crab or a cheaper crab to be able to sell, and I try to catch that for him so that we can sell them and keep going. That helps it a lot.

SS: You say not everybody has that kind of long-term relationship with their buyer?

DW: No. A lot of people may be selling to this guy today, and then he tells them that he can't use them, and so they're over here or panhandling the stuff. I'm glad I don't have to deal with that. That's a huge plus as well.

[23:11]

SS: Do you go to meetings or get involved in research or advocacy?

DW: I'm on the crab advisory board for the Potomac River and the oyster planning panel.

SS: What's that like?

DW: Most of the time, nobody wants to listen to what you have to say. [laughter] You know, scientists, they think—well, I ain't going to say they think—they know that they know so much, but in my opinion, there's no bigger scientist than somebody that's doing it everyday, and sees it everyday, versus sitting in the office reading this and reading that. But, nobody wants to listen.

SS: What's an example of where there's been a discrepancy between what the science says and what you're seeing as a waterman?

DW: Well, just last year, they said we had one of the worst crab hatches in ten years, and I was telling them, "Well, we've seen more," and all of a sudden, last fall, bam! There's all

these crabs. No market to sell them, because it was so many. We had a super cold winter, and where they do their surveys, the crabs were not there. They had moved to deeper water because of the super cold winter, and they didn't want to listen to that.

SS: But then in the end, the harvest proved them wrong?

DW: Mm-hmm.

SS: Did they recognize that?

DW: No. They're never going to recognize it. [There have been] several instances of things like that. Probably shouldn't get too far in depth with stuff like that, might get myself in trouble. [laughter]

[25:10]

SS: What motivates you to take on those roles of being on those boards?

DW: I mean, I like to help. Some things, they have listened to, but most of the time, they don't listen to a whole lot. But the boards that I'm on are all watermen, that try to give knowledge to them. But you know, everything has to go through the uppers, and most of the time they, "Oh, that's a good idea, but we're going to go this route." That's how it normally turns out.

[25:55]

SS: I see. You're moving around a lot, it sounds like, to different parts of the bay, and you're interacting with watermen from other ports and other towns around the bay. Are there differences within that region in terms of what the watermen are like?

DW: Everywhere you go, you got a different crew. Some areas, they might try to rob you blind. Other areas, some of the nicest people you ever met, and some will invite you over to the house to have dinner and a beer. They're different everywhere you go. But most of your watermen that are fulltime all travel around a lot, so pretty much know everybody, to an extent. There's certain ones when you go to this place that might never move that you might meet for the first time, because they don't ever move. But I talk to everybody from Hampton to Washington on a regular basis that I've met and that we work together some and have developed good relationships over the years.

SS: In terms of young participation, do you see that varying around the bay, in different areas, different ports? Are there certain areas with higher concentrations of young people?

DW: No. There's very few young ones at all.

SS: At all?

DW: I think maybe two my age are in it, as far as fulltime.

SS: Two?

DW: Two.

SS: That's a very low number!

DW: Yeah. I'm talking about in this area.

SS: Oh, ok, in this area.

DW: But it would be the same every area you go, maybe one, two. And then, most of them are older.

SS: So how many are there total in this area?

DW: I don't have a number for you.

SS: Ok. But two is a small portion of it, I take it.

DW: Oh yeah. Yes. I mean, you have crewmen, a lot of crewmen that are younger. But as far as actual [license/boat owners], like two. That's not going to be good in fifteen years.

SS: What do you think things will look like in fifteen years?

DW: Well, at some point, something's going to have to give. Because the older ones are going to start fading out, and the young ones are going to have to, somehow. Either licenses are going to have to start going down, or something, or there won't be no seafood. So something's going to have to give.

SS: What do you think will happen?

DW: I mean, I guess if it stays like it is right now, maybe enough forty-year-olds will come in that are established in another business to maybe keep it going. But if you don't start getting young ones in it, it's going to fall apart.

SS: Could it survive as a bunch of part-time watermen? Would that be the same, or would it not work?

DW: I don't think it would work.

SS: Why not?

DW: I don't think you would have the volume, the knowledge. Somewhere, you got to have some teachers. If you don't have anybody to show you how to do it, it's going to be a lost art.

SS: How does that make you feel?

DW: Pretty bad. Pretty bad. I wish everybody had an opportunity like I did, to get into it. I've enjoyed my life so far.

SS: If you were to tell a total stranger from another part, what's so special about it?

DW: It's hard to explain. Being out there, watching the sun come up every morning, making money while you're doing it. It's hard to explain to somebody until you're actually there and seeing it. I like to say that it's like going to church every day of the week. You get to see all of God's creations every day.

[30:49]

SS: And from your personal perspective, just thinking of your own life moving forward, where do you see yourself in fifteen years?

DW: I hope doing the same thing I'm doing right now.

SS: Do you have confidence that it will continue to provide, just as well as it has?

DW: I think so. I think so, for me, for me. As long as my health holds out.

SS: Are there any other themes that you'd like to touch on?

DW: Like? [laughter]

SS: Well, I guess, here's a last question for you, unless there's anything else. What do you think it takes to succeed as a young fisherman?

DW: You have to be willing to work long hours, early mornings. You have to be willing to learn. You can't have a big ego. You have to be willing to ask questions and you got to be willing to go do things and not make money sometimes, just to learn. But that's the biggest thing, you got to be willing to work at it.

SS: Do you see those traits in young people around here?

DW: No.

SS: No?

DW: Most of the young ones you hire now, they don't want to do nothing but play video games and whine all day when they get to work, because, "Oh, I'm so tired." No, it's a different generation now than when I was younger.

SS: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add?

DW: I'm sure there is, but I can't think of it. Is there anything else?

SS: I can't think of anything else.

[33:15]

DW: Was it helpful?

SS: Yeah.

DW: Well, that's the main thing, I guess.

SS: Yeah, and I'm learning a lot about the different areas and the way that people fish. The fact that you have five boats and move around the bay is really interesting to me.

DW: Well, you know, we might be crabbing out here one day for females, and the female market might go terrible, and you might have to load the skiff up the next day and be up to the Pamunkey Indian Reservation to try to catch jumbo males and sell them. The skiffs really make it nice. You can move fast and you can move a lot of gear on them, up and down the road fast, versus having to trailer pots and everything. So that makes things nice.

SS: So it gives you the ability to respond to changes in the market, for example, or the resource?

DW: I mean, I might be sitting here at nine o'clock with my feet propped up, and get a hot tip from somebody that they caught a lot of fish over here, and next morning, I can be there. That makes it nice.

SS: Tell me about the shedder crab thing. Can you explain that?

DW: You've never eaten soft crabs?

SS: I've eaten them, but what is the process? Do you catch them and then shed them?

DW: Yeah, we catch them as a peeler crab, and then we put them in a tank and shed them out.

SS: Do you have the tank, or is it the dealer who has the tank?

DW: No, I have the tank. My shedding operation's in Lottsburg.

SS: Describe your shedding operation.

DW: It's just tanks. They're four by eight fiberglass tanks.

SS: With seawater in them?

DW: I use freshwater and put aquarium salt in. Several people pump, if they're on the water, they pump from overboard, pump the actual seawater through. What I run is called a closed system. So you build a bacteria filter, which is oyster shells, and then several different filters that break the stuff down, and it makes it basically like an aquarium at your house pretty much.

SS: How long does it take for them to shed?

DW: It all depends on the water temperature, how ripe they are.

SS: Do you do something to induce the shedding or is it just a matter of waiting?

DW: Sometimes in the early spring, you can have a load of them and everything will be full, sitting there and waiting and nothing happening, and then the moon will be right, you'll get a nice, warm evening, and they're just popping left and right, and you can't even keep up with them. It's interesting.

SS: So then you have to go through them and take out the ones that have shed, and sell them, and take out the discarded shells, and get rid of them?

DW: Yeah. They want them at a certain hardness. So you pretty much got to babysit them, especially when they're popping real fast. They want them so that they can hold their claws up. So you got to go through and check.

SS: Because they're so limp when they first shed, they can't even do that?

DW: When they first come out, they're like [demonstrates limp crab].

SS: Jelly balls.

DW: You all lobster [in Rhode Island, where the interview is from]?

SS: Yeah, but there's nothing like that. They're talking about that with green crabs now—trying to catch them and then induce a molt in the tank.

DW: I think the lobsters shed.

SS: They do shed, but nobody puts them in a tank to shed. When you catch them and they're really soft, the market's actually not very good for soft-shell lobsters. There's nobody who desires a soft-shell lobster. A hard-shell is much more profitable. Soft-shells can be picked for meat.

[dog approaches affectionately]

DW: She doesn't get a lot of visitors.

SS: Well, would you mind showing me some of your boats? I'd be curious to see how they're all rigged out for the different fisheries, if you've got a few minutes. I'm just going to shut this off.

[37:50]

[end of interview]