

Interview with Mike Blanton, commercial fisherman

Occupation: Commercial fisherman

Port Community: Elizabeth City, North Carolina

Interviewer: Sarah Schumann

Date and year: January 15, 2019

Location: Manteo, North Carolina

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]: Ok. To start, I'm going to state my name, Sarah Schumann. It's January fifteenth. We're in Manteo, North Carolina. And Mike, could you just state your name and occupation?

Mike Blanton [MB]: Mike Blanton, and I'm a commercial fisherman.

SS: Is that a fulltime or a part-time thing for you?

MB: I'm a fulltime commercial fisherman.

SS: Ok. And your homeport?

MB: My homeport is out of Elizabeth City, North Carolina.

SS: Alright. That's where you live, as well?

MB: That's where I live.

SS: Ok. What vessel or vessels do you operate?

MB: I use multiple vessels for different fisheries I participate in. It just all depends on time of year and where I'm at, really, is which vessel I need. One is a thirty-five [foot] Bruno and another is a little twenty-three [foot] Sea Hawk—just depends on where I'm at.

SS: Alright. Do they have names?

MB: No. The thirty-five [foot boat], the name of that boat is the Perry's Pride.

SS: Can you spell that?

MB: P-E-R-R-Y-apostrophe-S.

SS: Ok. Perry's Pride.

MB: Pride.

SS: Ok. The twenty-three-footer is nameless?

MB: Yeah. It's just a state-registered boat.

SS: What age are you?

MB: I'm thirty-three.

SS: Thirty-three. And just briefly, your educational background?

MB: I am more or less a high school graduate.

SS: Ok. Did you grow up in Elizabeth City? Is that where you're from?

MB: I did. I grew up in Elizabeth City. It's where I've been my whole life.

SS: Ok. Since we're not sitting in Elizabeth City when we're doing this interview, can you paint a picture of it for me? What it's like as a community?

MB: Elizabeth City is not your typical, what you would think of as a fishing community. The waterways in North Carolina are really unique. It's got a lot of coastline and it changes drastically from north to south. It's the second largest estuary, I think, on the East Coast or maybe in the United States. We're a big place. When you go to Elizabeth City, you don't think of fishing so much. But it definitely has a history of contributing to the overall fisheries in North Carolina, in that part. The access we have to the Albemarle Sound and all the tributaries—it's quite a large body of water up there.

SS: How big is the fishing fleet there?

MB: Years ago, there were hundreds of boats up there that would participate in various fisheries. As time has gone on, it has dwindled down into the tens and twenties. I would say that is what it would look like now if you were to take a count.

SS: What kind of fisheries are people mostly involved in there?

MB: In the Albemarle Sound area, nowadays, what you typically have is the blue crab fishery. You have various gillnet fisheries that have dwindled off into very few people participating nowadays, due to the two ITPs—incidental take permits—that the state has to abide by in their gillnet fisheries: one for sea turtles and one for Atlantic sturgeon. The Albemarle Sound area, along with every other estuary in the state of North Carolina, has been highly affected by the Endangered Species Act and the allowable takes that we're allowed to have in our estuaries. The inconsistencies that the ITPs create have pretty much driven everybody out from these fisheries.

SS: [Driven them out] from gillnetting?

MB: From gillnetting. But those who do gillnet target southern flounder, mostly. That's the large fishery up there for gillnets. There are some other sub-fisheries that take place, like striped mullet. Now we have another fishery that I would say has been blossoming.

SS: What's that?

MB: Which would be the blue catfish industry. They are an invasive species, though. Over the past five years, they've really taken hold down here. People have now really begun to target that in the wintertime, when there's no crabs obviously, because of the winter months and being too cold for that kind of stuff. The Albemarle Sound area really doesn't have as robust amount of fisheries to participate in as the rest of the state. We don't have oysters. We don't have shellfish. There's no trawling up there, so we can't shrimp. It's a very wind-driven tide. If the wind blows one way, the tide's in. If the wind blows another direction, the tide's out. But it's not a tidal tide. It's a wind-driven tide.

SS: Interesting.

MB: We don't have tidal flow all the time.

SS: How does that affect fishing?

MB: The way that affects fishing is you have to learn to catch fish differently. A lot of fisheries depend on the tide to catch the fish, but up there, you don't necessarily have tide. You sort of have to adapt with that, and learn how to fish a little bit differently than other places that are more tidal would fish.

SS: That's really interesting. Your own involvement in the fisheries, how did that begin?

[07:38]

MB: When I was a kid—and I say a kid, a young teenager—the fisheries were more robust. More people involved and more opportunity just to go fishing. I started working at a fish house, or what essentially was a crab house, just grading crabs all day long, every day. This was a summertime job that I had. I could kind of come and go as they needed me. It wasn't something I was pinned down to. It all kind of started from there. I started working on different boats with different people. I just grew this passion to be out there on the water and be involved in these fisheries. It was just such a freedom. It seemed like such a freedom to be able to do something like that. That's kind of where it all started.

SS: Are you the first in your family to be a fisherman?

MB: I am the first in my family to be a fisherman. My story might be a little more unique than a lot of these guys, because I didn't continue to fish when I became an adult. I actually broke off and went in the military for a little while, and then came back into the fisheries. I had this break-in time to where I didn't participate for a small amount of time. Then, while I was in the military, I purchased a boat and some gear. A good friend of mine, we sort of partnered up and went into business together. I funded a boat with some gear, and he ran

the boat, so I slowly became involved at a sort of part-time level while I had to continue to serve in my military commitment. It was always on my mind. It didn't come to fruition for me until later on.

SS: When did that happen? How long ago, or what age were you?

MB: After I got out of the military, I did just a little bit of time government contracting overseas. I realized, to be a fisherman, you need to have money. The initial investment is really the hardest part. The biggest challenge for anybody trying to get in is the financial investment. That allowed me to come back and invest in myself, to be a full time fisherman. That happened at the beginning of 2014. That's what, five years ago? Almost exactly now.

[11:19]

SS: What was the first step you took?

MB: Like I mentioned, I was partnered with a guy who participated in the blue crab fishery, the summer flounder fishery; that's what my first boat was involved with. He ran that boat for me for ... I want to say that began somewhere around '09 or '10, if I'm thinking correctly.

SS: Your role in that was mostly just putting up the capital to buy the boat?

MB: It was. But I was stationed in Maryland, and it's like a four-hour drive from here to Maryland. A lot of times, most weekends, I would take off on Friday afternoon and run down here, and either help him fish gear or help him fix something that might have gone wrong during the week, or just prep gear, or whatever it took to keep the ball rolling. I was hands-on, part-time. I did fund most of everything. But once it got going, it was self-sustaining. I wasn't dependent on it. He was. I just took the money and kept rolling it back into the business. I didn't really take a profit off it myself, so to speak. I just wanted to make sure that the boat was running. That was my top priority. I first started really fishing, or back being involved from my teenage years, probably '09 or around 2010.

[13:20]

SS: Ok. Then, when you came back in 2014—

MB: Then when I came back in 2014, I was full time, I fish full time on my own.

SS: Ok, and was that the same boat?

MB: Yup. I took the same boat. The other guy put together another boat. Since I was back in town and he had time to get his experience and get his feet on the ground, he was able to put his own boat together and get started. It was just a progression type thing that happened.

SS: Have you been doing those same two fisheries since then? The crab and the flounder?

MB: Yeah. My main two fisheries are the blue crab and the southern flounder fisheries, because that's the access that we have in the Albemarle Sound area. Those are the most

robust and profitable fisheries that you're able to work on consistently. The southern flounder fishery is obviously not as consistent, because the regulations are much stricter. You're always subject to ITP regulations. Those are first and foremost, so that's way more inconsistent today than it was ten years ago.

SS: Are you using both boats for both fisheries?

[15:05]

MB: The Bruno that I run, the Perry's Pride, I am not the boat owner. I am sort of just running that boat, due in part to [the fact that] it takes a lot to purchase a boat and keep up with the boat. There's not really facilities or whatever up in that area to house a boat that large, consistently, and there's not a lot of use for a boat that big, consistently, up there. With that vessel, I've tried to break away and participate in other fisheries, now that the ITPs have made things more stringent. The crab market has become really volatile in that area, and there's underlying issues with that, that I'm not going to really offer my opinion on, but there's issues there, with markets.

SS: With the crab market?

MB: Yeah. It can be frustrating to deal with that. I will say, one of the things that we're up against with the crab market, or the crab fishery, is bait. Bait prices are going up all the time, and it takes bait to catch crabs.

SS: What kind of bait do you use?

MB: We mostly, up there, use menhaden for bait. There're other bait sources that people use, but the vast amount of bait used in that fishery is menhaden, and menhaden has become a pretty hot commodity, especially since the herring fishery has been really reduced in the northern states and the lobster fishermen are needing bait sources. The blue crab fishermen are needing bait sources. You've had the expansion of the blue crab fishery to the southern states more. The southern states are more focused on blue crabs now. Anyway, bait gets spread kind of thin, and then the price goes up. That's a huge hurdle for crabbers. Another hurdle for crabbers is blue crabs have to stay alive. They're not worth anything dead, and it's hard to go crab all day long and then come back and move your product, keep it living, and have the complete process work. You have to sleep sometime. You have to have time to do other things. The process, start to finish, for crabbing, is very involved. It takes refrigeration, to acquire your bait, you have to have somewhere to store frozen bait—it's just a very taxing and demanding process to get that crab to the final user.

[18:54]

SS: Who do you deliver your crabs to?

MB: I sell my crabs to a wholesaler, who then handles the crabs from that point forward. With having so few wholesalers now, they sort of control your market for you. You don't have much say in that. There's not but so many people to sell the crab to.

SS: There's fewer than there used to be?

MB: There are. There are fewer than there used to be, so there's not as much competition for the crab. There's hurdles involved in trying to take a crab from the boat to the end user. [It] is a really big challenge. Then you have the transportation aspect of it. I mean, a lot of crabbers don't have time to get off the boat and just drive your crabs to two, three, four hours away and then do a turnaround trip, and then get up the next day at three or four o'clock in the morning and do it all over again. It's just impossible. I just feel like crabbers are having a hard time capitalizing on top dollar for their product, because there're just so many hurdles that have to be overcome. That's why I'm exploring different attitudes and different fisheries to participate in, to maybe alleviate some of that, when the market is not as strong and maybe it's not as worth your time to participate.

SS: What other fisheries are you getting into?

[20:54]

MB: Right now, this fall, we built some gillnets for sea mullets and participated in the sea mullet fishery out of Beaufort, North Carolina. That's been a learning experience. I've been in the ocean at times, but quite a bit of my time's been spent in the estuaries and the upper tributaries of Albemarle Sound. This is a completely different beast. It's night and day—the way the water acts, and how much water is there compared to the ocean, and tides and winds affect things differently. You're on a learning curve when you try to transition like that. It's been a learning experience for me.

SS: When you're doing your learning, is it just trial and error, or are you able to get advice from other people?

MB: Yeah, I can get advice from guys who've been doing it. I'm friendly with a lot of fishermen who participate in a lot of fisheries. I'm not shying away from asking for advice or sort of trying to pick their brains for their experiences and how to approach things. But then you have a mix of trial and error. Some things you just have to learn on your own. There's nothing anybody can tell you to make you grasp something, until you put your hands on it and do it yourself.

SS: Right. It's sort of a feel.

MB: Yeah, definitely. No one's an expert by just reading a book. There's no owner's manual, user's manual, or anything like that, that comes along with fishing. You sort of have to write that on your own, through your own experiences. That can be really challenging to do, to get to that point. There's a lot of prep and there's a lot of anticipation and there's a lot of things that come along with just going fishing. It's not just something that happens.

[23:32]

SS: You said earlier that you think the financial aspects of just getting set up to go fishing is probably the biggest hurdle that people have to overcome.

MB: Absolutely. Absolutely. I was lucky enough to be able to fund myself into fisheries. I one hundred percent funded my own way in the fisheries. I had to start small and progress from there. But it still took a considerable amount of capital to even think about being able to fish

full time, just fish, without having to rely on any other income sources. The amount of capital that it took still wasn't enough, honestly, when you think about it, because I could have done more or got more stuff or had a better boat. There's always that, in the back of your mind, of what you could have done differently. That's the trial and error of everything, too. Just because you buy a boat doesn't mean you're going to like it a hundred percent for what you're going to do with it. You have to sort of adapt and learn what your boat can tolerate—your gear selections, how you hang your nets, and what kind of nets you use. All of this stuff plays a part. The more gear you have access to, the more likely you are to be successful in what you pursue. Maybe you don't, all the time, have the right gear for the fishery that's kind of hot and heavy at the moment, so if you're not already prepped for that fishery and that fishery sort of takes off, and you're like, "Wow. They're catching plenty of this," and you're behind the ball. Well, every day you miss is another day closer to the end of that season. You're sort of trying to play catch-up sometimes. The fisheries are changing. Used to be, back in the day, people would only do one thing and one thing only. Now that markets are more volatile, regulations are more stringent, things are changing rapidly, reductions here, and just—it's hard to have all the gear types and all the access that you really need to be able to move around inside these fisheries, to capitalize. I think that's a huge deal right now: not being able to have enough access for when fisheries blossom or fade or this or that. It takes a lot of capital to be able to have all of that gear, to be able to be flexible. I think years ago, you didn't need that flexibility. You were able to stay more focused on the fishery that you knew the most about.

[27:10]

SS: It sounds like you might be saying there's sort of a downside to—almost like an overgeneralization, as opposed to being specialized in certain fisheries—and now the trend is to spreading people pretty thin across a lot of fisheries?

MB: Right. It seems to me that people are doing more rotating through fisheries. When a species seems more abundant and the market tolerates the pressure, and is actually demanding that product, people will try to migrate to that species and target it. I think you're seeing more and more of that nowadays. It's really becoming to the point where you really need a lot of flexibility, and being able to participate in multiple fisheries. Because sometimes, you go out there and almost feel like you're working for free, because the market is not as demanding on one product as it is for the other. You only have so much time in a year and so much time in a day and in a week and month, so you sort of have to make a decision, as to, "Am I wasting my time here? Or should I just stick with this one fishery and be satisfied with making what I'm making?"

SS: A lot of options. A lot of things to take into consideration

[29:16]

MB: I think the more options you have—the more options you have, the more likely it is you're going to be successful in the fishing industry nowadays.

SS: Yeah. Yeah. Ok.

MB: If that makes sense.

SS: That makes sense. I wasn't sure if you were saying it was a good thing or a bad thing. I guess it just is what it is.

MB: Yeah, I mean the more options you have and the more access you have to various fisheries, the more likely it is that you're going to be successful.

SS: Yeah.

MB: Ok?

SS: Yeah.

MB: It's not just market. It's natural disasters. It's regulations. With federal incidental take permits, they can essentially shut you down overnight. Even if you're doing well in a fishery, they can take that away from you, essentially with a moment's notice—without a moment's notice, almost. It's almost like it doesn't even matter who participates, as long as that animal is taken care of at whatever agreement level the state has agreed to monitor it at, if that makes any sense. The gillnet fisheries are the most volatile, and unfortunately, the gillnet fisheries are the easiest fisheries to participate in, because the gear is highly mobile. It's easy to build. I'm not going to say it's inexpensive to build, but in a way, it is, because you can build it yourself. It doesn't take a good amount of effort to build gillnets. Once you've bought some of it, like the top and bottom lines and the floats, you've got an initial investment, and then you rehang webbing but that's just time-consuming stuff. The gillnet fisheries are the fisheries that are regulated by the incidental take permits. A guy with a sixteen-foot skiff and a couple thousand yards of gillnet, who's trying to make it as a fisherman, could catch an animal one too many, and that'd be it for the rest of the year. It could be six months left to fish on that ITP year.

SS: Does that happen every year? That at some point it gets shut down? Or is that something that *could* happen? How common is that?

MB: It's a very common thing. Absolutely. Right now, as we sit here and speak, most of the state of North Carolina is shut down to large-mesh gillnets, because of incidental take permit guidelines that we must adhere to. The fisheries managers have to make decisions, thinking ahead to other fisheries. Once these takes start becoming prevalent, then they shut down areas to reduce the number of takes, to try to help sustain the fishery being open in some place or another, or to allow enough takes or to keep enough takes around to open another fishery that might be upcoming. It's very complex.

SS: Yeah, it sounds tricky.

MB: And adaptive management-triggered, based on how you manage this fishery.

SS: Wow.

MB: It's so complex, and it's so volatile, that nobody is interested in, more or less, having to put up with that.

SS: Yeah. (laughs)

MB: Because it's something you have to put up with.

SS: And pay a lot of attention.

MB: Yeah.

SS: You don't want to be a day late and find out you're not supposed to be fishing.

MB: Yeah. It's constantly—you're wondering whether or not you'll have the opportunity to fish tomorrow, based on interactions with endangered species. In my opinion, I feel like these species could be managed differently than on the ESA. Because the ESA is such a deterrent to fishermen, and I don't feel like the ESA was built for marine species. I think it was more along the lines for terrestrial species, that you could see the difference you were making with your own two eyes. Fish swim under the water. Even if you read the stock assessments, it tells you that there's lots of uncertainty as to stock size. Even in fisheries that are open and being fished on, there's still a lot of uncertainty as to how big that stock is. Then you take a stock like Atlantic sturgeon, to where it's a very data-poor stock, we don't know a lot about it. We know a lot of biological information about the fish, and that it takes it a long time to become mature, and I think that's what creates the issue, is that it takes twenty or thirty years for this fish to become mature, and so you're trying to keep them living to maturity. The gillnet interactions could hinder some of that, and that's fine. I don't think we need to open fisheries up wide open anymore. But I don't think we need to make it so stringent that it affects fishermen so negatively and they just give up on fishing and don't participate anymore. I don't think that's the intended consequence here. [But] that's the consequence that's happened.

[35:58]

SS: Aside from that kind of uncertainty that's provoked by incidental takes from the Endangered Species Act, what other issues do you see out there, either helping to support or making it more complicated for people fishing in your area?

MB: Well, I spoke on the market. There's been this—in my opinion—this disconnect between the fishermen and the real market—the end user market, I would say. Fishermen in this area have always sort of essentially gone through a middleman, dealer, wholesaler, dealer. They take your product and the man next to you, and they all combine it into a pile and send it up the road. Their overhead has probably grown. It just doesn't seem like it's sufficient for fishermen to use a wholesaler dealer anymore, with the amount of product that we're essentially catching. We don't have a bulk fishery anymore. It's all sought-after species that have a decent market value, that you feel like you have a chance of making a profit that day. I mean, it's not like you have to worry about moving fifteen, twenty thousand pounds of product every day yourself. You're essentially moving hundreds of pounds of product. With crabs, like I say, crabs are completely different. Crabs have to stay living. They have different specifications that you have to deal with. You have to keep them cool. They can't stay on the boat for so long. They have different grades, so quality of crabs matters a whole lot to market value.

SS: Ok, so that's a much more specialized marketing skills that you need.

MB: Yeah, absolutely. Marketing matters a lot. Years ago, when the Chesapeake Bay essentially went under very heavy regulations—blue crab regulations—to deal with a heavy decline in their crab population, Maryland and Virginia did not have access to the amount of crabs they once did. You had dealers, or you had people seeking out the North Carolina crabs. The market was worth so much more for North Carolina. Now, it seems that the rebuilding process that sort of took place in the Chesapeake Bay is starting to catch up with what the intentions were, and they're seeing an abundance again. Now, the crab in North Carolina, essentially isn't worth as much to those people up there anymore. The trend has been a decline. The value has been in decline. Another thing about blue crab is that there used to be quite a few picking houses in North Carolina, where they would pick the meat out of the crab. They would process the crab. Lower quality crabs that weren't worth as much in a basket, they would pile them up in more bulky packages and send them to these processing facilities. Well, there's less of them now. The amount of crab that you can send out to be processed is less, because they can only handle but so much.

SS: For picking?

MB: For picking.

SS: What's the reason behind that there's less of those picking houses now?

[40:37]

MB: One, I would assume that labor is an issue. Every crab is handpicked. There's no machine to pick crab. It requires somebody who can efficiently pull the meat out of that crab. With the changing of society and all that comes with that, I don't think there's as many people willing to do that anymore. What happened was that processing industry turned to immigrant labor, like the H2B program, and trying to pull in legal immigrant labor to process these crabs. Every year, it never fails, there's articles written about it, the H2B programs are not meeting the labor standards for the crab processing. It's just one hurdle after another. I would say abundance of crabs, shortage of labor—there are many contributing factors that I would imagine have cut down on the number of processing facilities for blue crab. Then you have crab imports. Because blue crabs have similar cousins all over the world that kind of look the same and maybe taste similar, so they kind of can get away with substituting, and so you run into stuff like that. It might not be as in demand as it once was. We could sit here and talk about this one issue, but [trails off].

SS: You said something about changes in society, in general. What's that referring to?

[42:50]

MB: Changes in society. When I said that, I meant that the mentality of younger people nowadays are not the same as when I was coming up. Born in the eighties, we didn't have cell phones. Technology was at a minimum. I still remember black and white TVs and analog radios. You weren't as occupied by technology. You weren't as influenced by things like that. As technology has really evolved very quickly into society, you have people now seemingly

less interested in doing the more laborious jobs, and more just being interested in things like that in general.

SS: Yeah. Alright.

MB: I see it in my own children as well. I've tried to take them back a little bit and let them experience some things that I did as a kid, so they wouldn't be as lost as to what it was like before technology.

SS: How old are your kids?

MB: My son will be fourteen February 1st and my daughter is fifteen.

SS: How have they responded to that?

MB: My son really enjoys being with me on the boat. He's worked with me the last two summers when he's been out of school. It's been really great having him, being able to have that with him. My daughter, she really has no interest, and that's ok. I'm alright with that. But I can see how society and technology has influenced her to be that way, more than just her not being interested. I hope that sounds ok.

SS: Yeah. I know what you mean.

MB: You sort of have to take your children back in time a little bit. Let them know, "Hey look, there's things that still happen. It might be outside of the public eye, but there's opportunities to fish and there's opportunities to do things a lot of people might not necessarily think about anymore or be interested as much in anymore."

SS: Because they're seeing the world through a screen.

MB: They're seeing the world through a screen! When you go work on a boat, when you go fishing, you put gloves on and a hat and some sunglasses and some oilskins, and you put all that down, and you essentially just go fishing. Video games and computers and smartphones and tablets and these artificial intelligence-type things like Siri and Alexa, have essentially take the element of just going out and working the water away from a lot of people, especially in fishing communities, or communities that have the opportunity to participate in fisheries. They just don't seem as interested in doing things anymore like that. When I was a kid, we didn't have all that. We were dying to go do something like that [fishing]. It just seemed like such a productive way to spend your time. You made money. You went fishing. You were out on the water. You were enjoying nature and what it had to offer. There was just a certain amount of freedom that you had out there. That was really appealing to us as kids. It just doesn't seem to have the same effect anymore.

SS: Doesn't have the same appeal.

MB: No. No.

SS: How does that make you feel?

[47:23]

MB: It's a terrible feeling, because I know that one day, if people don't try to find a solution and try to get people involved more in fisheries, I see it dwindling away to nothing. Because what you have is a more complex issue to where user group conflict comes into play. You see the trend, where these Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's and all these big chain stores, all these boat makers, and all these people that appeal to the recreational fisherman, have essentially started to have these conversations of reallocations and these conversations of who's worth more. You're constantly in a fight with them to keep access to a fishery. You're constantly in a fight with environmental groups because of endangered species and their wanting to intervene in the management processes that are trying to mitigate interactions already, and stop fishing, or try to essentially make fishing more sustainable. They're not more interested in that. They're just interested in the animal in particular. They don't care who it affects, if that makes any sense.

SS: Yeah.

MB: It's a terrible feeling, to know that all of these things are piled up against commercial fishing. Then you have politics that are involved. Where commissions could be essentially lopsided and show bias towards user groups. That's really discouraging for people—for parents who are generational in these fisheries. A guy right now might be a third-generation fisherman, and his son or daughter might be a fourth-generation fisherman. But this guy's seeing all this happening at the political level, at the regulatory level, and he's seeing himself cut off more and more. Why would he want to subject his son or daughter to that in the future, when he or she could push their son or daughter towards something more lucrative and less stressful, and not as controversial? I think that's the mentality you're seeing being taken here, is that people aren't as quick to push their son or daughter towards the fishing industry, because of those issues.

[50:39]

SS: How about you? If we were to fast-forward five years, and your son is nineteen. Would you be encouraging if he wanted to follow in your footsteps in fishing?

MB: I would be more reluctant to push him towards fishing. I would be more reluctant to push him towards fishing.

SS: Even though you chose it for yourself?

MB: Even though I chose it for myself. There's a passion that drives you towards being out on the water. It's not for everybody. Not everybody I run into, I feel like, could be a successful fisherman. It takes a certain someone. Same goes for any occupation or any career that you seek. We're not all cut out to be doctors or lawyers or this or that, and it's the same principle applies here.

SS: Say more about that. What kind of person is cut out for commercial fishing?

MB: Hmm. That's a good question. I would probably take a little thought to come up with that. But it all comes down to mentality and what your interests are. Fishing is an isolated

thing. It's an isolated job. You have to be able to accept isolation sometimes. You have to be able to navigate waterways efficiently and safely. It takes some responsibility to do things like that, because you have to take yourself out there and bring yourself back. If you have a crew, they have to trust you with their lives just as much. It takes a person who's multifaceted, with the ability to keep a stable mind during questionable situations. There's a long list of things. You have to be a mechanic. You have to be a medic. What if somebody gets hurt? There's multiple things that come with being a fisherman in my opinion. It's not just fishing. You got to know how to work on stuff. You got to know how to—it's just so many things that it comes down to it. It takes a very unique person, in my opinion, to be a fisherman.

[53:39]

SS: If you think about yourself, what traits do you have that you think have given you an advantage as a fisherman?

MB: I'm quick to learn. You have to be able to learn at a fairly fast rate. You have to be really adaptive. You have to be able to think about what's happening before it happens. There has to be a lot of anticipation. Fish are not easy to keep up with. They really aren't. Just because you go home at the end of the day doesn't mean the fish quit swimming. They might not be at the same spot they were in yesterday. It requires a lot of common sense. Things that you would use just to ensure that you can go and come freely and without incident. You have to be able to simply translate the regulations, and what you are and are not allowed to do, and stay within the law. Just tons of things that it takes to be a fisherman. Mentality has a lot to do with it. Can you handle getting up on your own, without having to punch a time clock? Take care of your gear efficiently? Be able to use that gear, without tearing it up in one fell swoop, and having to start all over again? Make money with it? It's a multifaceted person with unique talents and unique skill sets, that are essentially successful at fishing. It's not somebody you can recruit off the street to go and do something like that.

[55:55]

SS: In the future, as you move forward in your fishing career, where do you see things going from here?

MB: I see fishermen—young fishermen, any fishermen, young or old—having a hard time sustaining their life in fisheries. Within the state of North Carolina, the blue crab and the southern flounder, both stock assessments came back and the results were “overfished” and “overfishing occurring.” Now, the state and its requirements to rebuild or to end overfishing have to come along now. Nothing is guaranteed. No one management plan could turn out to be a solution. Essentially, we could enact a very stringent management plan that would anticipate huge reductions, but those reductions in effort don't make a difference in growing the biomass. You could arbitrarily shut that fishery down and not even mean to, based on recommendations from science on how much effort needs to be reduced. You can't continue to reduce effort and sustain a fishery. It just doesn't happen that way. Is the market going to be adaptive? Would the market compensate if you allow less catch? Is the market going to go up to compensate, and keep a median value? Who knows? Then there's a frustration or a mental thing that comes along with it, as a human being. When somebody comes out with a piece of paper, essentially, that reads, “Here's how this fishery will operate

now,” and this person has been used to operating under a certain way for years and years, and now they just don’t see how those regulations are going to fit into that fishery, they’re going to give up. They’re going to quit. They’re going to either find another fishery to participate in, or they are going to go find a job with a private company, or government organization, or whatever it is that they’re able to find to compensate for not being able to fish in the same manner they once did. It’s not what science says, and stock assessments, and how stock assessments are read. It’s not the end-all, be-all of what’s really going on down there. Does it sort of give you an idea of maybe some problems that you ought to overcome? Sure. But it also gives you an idea of the shortcomings in the science and in the data that aren’t necessarily available—like for example, a data source. You could lack a data source in a fishery that would be extremely detrimental to having a good stock assessment. You don’t necessarily see fisheries being funded at a level that goes and gets those answers, so you get trapped in this stock assessment that’s data-poor, that doesn’t show the entire picture. Then you manage based off that. There’s no way to tell whether you’re managing right or wrong, for years down the road. Instead of answering questions, we put regulations in place, and then we try to—[looks at phone]

SS: Do you need to deal with something?

MB: No, no. It’s fine. We put regulations in place, and we don’t know the outcome for another three, four, five, ten years. By then, it’s too late. Time’s already passed for lots of people. There just can be this downhill spiral. This snowball effect off of poor data and just overarching, overreaching regulations that don’t truly consider what it’s going to do to the fishery itself—and when I say that, the people who participate in that fishery.

[61:33]

SS: You were saying, before we started the audio, that you’re involved in a couple of commissions.

MB: Yeah.

SS: Can you describe that a little bit, and how you got involved? What that’s like for you?

MB: Sure. I am a sitting commissioner on the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission, a commercial seat, and then I’m a proxy for the legislative appointee to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. That all came about in 2018. I was most recently appointed by Governor Cooper to the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission back in August, I want to say. All of that came about mostly because of my willingness to be involved, I would say, and the amount of time I spent trying to advocate for all user groups and just for fisheries to stay intact, and my participation at the committee levels, and with advocacy groups for fishermen, and just trying to understand the processes that are involved, to better regulate these fisheries. It’s not easy to understand. Fisheries are so robust. There are so many processes that go on. Fish are assessed in different ways. Crustaceans are assessed in different ways. It’s a lot to keep up with for the common fisherman. A lot of them just aren’t even interested in doing so. They just want to be left alone. They want to go fishing and do their job, do their daily work, and come home at the end of the day or the end of the trip, if they’re out on a trip—a multiday trip. That creates a challenge for guys to be involved. Guys who go out on multiday trips, sometimes that can last weeks. They’re intently focused on

making that boat a profit, and making themselves a profit, and making their crew a profit so that their crew returns and they feel like going again and it wasn't a waste of their time and they can fulfill their bills and their commitments at their home place. A lot of guys just don't have time. I felt like my voice was needed for these people. I went through and starting gaining more of an understanding of what was needed and what the fishermen was up against. That wasn't just for one fishery or two fisheries. That was me trying to understand the complexities and how everything intertwines: how many fisheries we actually have, the status of each one, what's more important, what fisheries do we need to prioritize—just various understandings that I went and tried to achieve. Which I did, and it was recognized by certain officials that put people in place. I assume that they had confidence in me to sit at the table and bring the voices out. That's why I started pursuing this. I didn't, essentially, pursue these seats. I was asked to sit in them.

SS: By the commissions themselves or by, like, an industry association?

[65:48]

MB: Industry advocated for [it], obviously. There's a process to get in one of these seats. Somebody has to be an advocate for you. It's a public seat. You're a public servant. You're appointed. Somebody has to stand behind you. They have to have a voice for you. Multiple people. It's not just you jumping up and down, screaming and shouting that you're the man. There was a process and I had to make friends, for me, with me and my mindset and my knowledge base. All of that created an advocacy for me to be put into these seats. It's not something that comes along just for anybody.

SS: Right. What's that experience been like?

MB: Well, it's been short-lived so far. I've only sat in a couple of commission meetings. I'm just now trying to put my feet on the ground and gain understanding of where we were in the process of certain items, just getting spun up on things, to try to be productive in the conversations and to try to make solid recommendations, to be able to have productive conversation, more or less, and to bring ideas to the table and be able to influence in certain ways, based on my knowledge base and what I know. I've seen it on the inter-jurisdictional level at Atlantic States, where you have multiple states sitting at the table, and you're trying to come up with a common-ground solution that fits coast-wide, based on how many states participate in these fisheries. Then that trickles down to the state level, where the states must interpret that guidance from the inter-jurisdictional commission, and now place it into their own fishery and form their own fishery based on the guidelines that are acceptable to that inter-jurisdictional. It really helps that I'm both. Because I can really see—

SS: How one drives the other.

MB: Yeah. I can see what's driving. I can hear more conversations. I can meet more people and be more productive in the conversation. I think it really helps that I'm involved in both organizations right now. It's just, like I said, this first year, I'm in my first year of doing this, and, yeah, it's been a learning curve, for sure.

SS: What things in your life experience so far do you think have prepared you to take on this role?

MB: Well, obviously I'm thirty-three. I got two kids who are teenagers. I've had to be responsible from an early age. I spent some time in the military. I saw government processes before, so I'm familiar with government processes. I had the discipline from having to be a parent and having to be in the military to just kind of think logically and not be so emotional about issues.

SS: Hmm. Interesting.

MB: Because if you spend any amount of time around the fishing industry, it's a very emotional conversation whenever you bring up the regulators versus the fishermen, and how the fishermen feel about the regulators or the people implementing the regulations. You have to have a very stable mind, I would say, to deal with this stuff, and to have conversations even with people who are completely opposite thinking than you, and not get frustrated with them, and just try to talk to them and find what the solutions possibly could be for them, and get that out of them, and come to some kind of happy medium place, so that, for a lack of a better term, one person isn't drug through the mud, or everybody is essentially thought of at the table. It requires somebody who can do stuff like that, I feel like.

[70:55]

SS: Yeah. That makes sense.

MB: Yeah, it's a challenge. A big challenge is participating as a public servant on these commissions, spending the time doing that, and then making a living yourself on the water.

SS: Yeah. That's a lot to balance.

MB: That's a huge, huge, huge hurdle for somebody to do. It's very time consuming. My mind essentially never leaves fisheries. I'm constantly talking about fisheries to somebody. It's never the same conversation. It's always something different. Then I have to go do it myself and make a living off of it. It makes it really challenging. It's not something that's prestigious. It's something that you have to want to do. Yeah, it's a huge responsibility. It's not something you can take lightly. There's a lot of pressure on you to do the right thing by people. You have to consider everybody involved. A lot of times, the right choice, not everybody's going to agree with that. It's tough going.

[72:23]

SS: Do you feel that, that your new role on these commissions has changed, or might change, your relationships with other fishermen, the way that you're perceived?

MB: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Some fishermen are encouraged by it. Others are shied away by it. They don't believe in the process to start with. A lot of people may think that if you haven't been on the water for thirty, forty years, you don't know anything. Some fishermen are stuck back in that time where they had open access to everything. They want it back that way, to where they were unbothered by regulation. But I just don't think you'll ever achieve that. It requires young minds to be at the table, to sort of be there in a way to offer productive solutions, maybe, to the problems that have been identified. But not in a

way to where you're essentially trying to create arguments at the table to just unregulate everything. I think some people are encouraged by that and some people are discouraged by somebody younger being on a commission. You run into all kinds. Some people are going to agree with you and some people aren't. The thing is, you have to be ready to accept that. You can't sit around and worry about how somebody's going to receive you all the time. Of course you *do*. You're concerned that the decision you make, that folks will take it and embrace it and understand the reasoning behind that decision, because it's not easy sitting at that table, and the pressures that come with that, to debate with other commissioners of completely opposite mindsets, and to bring the conversation out, to bring the facts out—because some commissioners don't care about facts. They just care about their feelings about something. There's no requirement that says that you have to manage solely on a fact. That's not a requirement. People who are biased towards commercial fisheries easily try to sway public opinion and paint you in a bad light, and that's just not the case. I think fisheries have shrunk so much that the impacts from commercial fishermen just aren't as large as they were in years past. The access is nowhere near the same as it was in years past, and we're having a hard time proving that, I feel like. The fishermen are having a hard time proving that, because the rhetoric on the other side of the ball—and I'm talking about the people who are against commercial fishing, or who don't absolutely favor commercial fishing—the rhetoric stays the same: "They're the ones that are the problem." Trying to combat that with such a small group of people, a lot of times, against such a large group of people, it's like a David versus Goliath-type situation. The story is almost the same. You got to appreciate that about the commercial community, because they will band together and try to combat some of the fake things that are put out. It's a challenge, being in the seat. It's not an easy role to play.

SS: I can imagine. It's got to be tough.

MB: It takes a lot of reading and understanding. A lot of times, for fishermen, they only get passionate about the issue that affects them, and when you become a commissioner, every issue affects you. It's not just one issue that affects you. Now all issues are your responsibility. Fisheries you may not know much about, you sort of may have to scramble to find somebody who is an expert, and to really fill you in on what it's all about. It takes quite a bit of effort to do that. There are days when I do nothing but spend massive amounts of time on the telephone, or in the company of somebody I need their honest opinion and their knowledge on something. I think I'm good at taking all that in and bringing it to the table, but it's still difficult. There're times that I try to go out and fish in different fisheries, just so I can see the fishery for myself. Yeah, it takes some effort for me to be in this position. It's not something that comes easily.

[78:33]

SS: I really applaud you for taking that on. It's such an important role to play, and it can't be easy to balance that with fulltime commercial fishing and a family.

MB: Yeah, it's not.

SS: You must be very dedicated.

MB: Yeah, it takes dedication. I'm ok with that.

SS: Is there anything we haven't talked about yet that you feel is important?

MB: I think environmental factors are very important.

SS: What do you mean by that?

MB: I think that we're doing a very poor job of assessing environmental factors against fish stocks. A lot has changed environmentally in the past twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years. You know, development and density. Densities in coastal areas has increased, population densities. Water quality has deteriorated quite a bit from what I remember it being in my childhood days. Various things, environmentally. Natural disasters and the effects that it has, both short- and long-term. I think the finger is easily pointed at the fishermen a lot of times. But then there's this silent issue in the background that nobody ever wants to bring forward and try to factor in to its fullest. Somehow we get back to the conversation about, "Well, reductions in fishing effort are going to fix this problem." I just don't know that that's absolutely the case all the time. I think of it like this. Humans and terrestrial species of animals, of any kind, if your living environment isn't suitable for you, you fix it. That could be anything from air quality to the quality of your habitat. All the details that you can apply to that, you can apply the same details to a fish or a crab or a oyster or anything that lives underneath the surface of the water. I feel like we avoid that issue in our thinking about what this habitat is and where these fish live. We only assume, it seems like, that the fish just need water to live. But we don't assume what kind of runoff, or what kind of habitat we've taken away, or sedimentation running off the bank where there's farm fields being plowed all the way to the bank of the river systems and the sounds and the estuaries, where they're spraying pesticides and herbicides and applying massive amounts of fertilizers, and all kinds of just other issues. How has that affected these waterways, long-term? And those effects to those waterways, what did that do to the fish populations? I think that one of the huge contributing factors to fisheries issues today is not the fishermen. It's what's affected these fish long-term. Did something that happened twenty, thirty years ago and has continued to happen environmentally steadily drive these fish stocks in different directions? Whether it trended down or up—because it goes both ways. I say that because you can have poor water quality, and some fish can thrive in that, like catfish. A catfish can thrive in super-poor water quality. But other species that are anadromous, that come from the ocean and spawn in your freshwater systems, they're just coming in here to spawn and that's it. Well, those conditions may be different than what they need. But it wasn't like that fifty years ago when they were more productive, because of coastal development and all these things that I mentioned previous. I just don't think there's conversations being had about all and every contributing factor to fisheries issues. I feel like we get so intently focused on what the fisherman is doing, that we just forget about all the other things that contribute. It's really hard to get everybody to see something like that, when other people may not necessarily be of the same opinion, and don't place value on that as much as you do, or at all.

SS: Yeah.

[84:57]

MB: Because I think people get lost in the fact that, "Oh, the water's still there. There's still water there, so there should be—"

SS: Yeah, it still looks beautiful, right?

MB: Yeah, it still looks the same. But what does it look like underneath? That's where I think people have trouble with fish. It's not something you can readily just go see. I mean, of course there are species that you can find using sight, but you're seeing just like a speck of the population. If you see one or two or ten of the species together, gathered in shallow water that's clear enough to see. It's just this misconception, I feel like, that, "The water's just fine. It's still there. It still looks the same to me. There's no reason why fish populations should be any different than they were when they were virgin species, untouched populations." I think they just get really focused on what kind of fishing effort has been on these things. I'm not saying fishing effort doesn't make a difference in populations of fish, but we've been through mounds of regulations and we're still not seeing productivity to the levels that you want. You have to start questioning whether the fishermen are the ultimate contributing—you know, the issues within whatever fishery you're talking about.

[86:55]

SS: I'm curious to hear if you have any other ideas about what needs to be done to fix that problem—the oversight of, we'll call them habitat issues—other than a change of mentality. What else?

MB: I think the Chesapeake Bay has really become a shining example of how to start looking at environmental issues. The Maryland-Virginia managers—you know, coastal scientists and habitat scientists and the environmental scientists and the fisheries scientists—I think they did a great job of identifying a lot of issues. You've seen some trends in the bay, in the Chesapeake Bay, that have been positive, in a positive direction. I think they did a really good job of identifying what needed to be fixed, what some problems were, and they approached the problems and tried to find solutions. I don't think that necessarily spills over state lines in to other mentalities, across states. For instance, the state of North Carolina, I'm sure they have plenty of people in positions to assess things, but when you start to talk about doing something like that, you talk about funding, and maintaining the ability to continue to assess, and then making logical decisions to fix the problems. I just don't think the effort's been put forth in the state of North Carolina to fix stuff like that. You have so much influence to your coastal regions by inland places. It's just this huge trickle-down effect. So many people influencing these water bodies that they don't even realize their everyday life influences that. I don't know that you're having success in just trying to change the mentality of the citizens of your state, to say, "Look. What you do in Raleigh could absolutely affect the Pamlico Sound or any other water body in the state of North Carolina." When you have these huge rainfall events, hurricanes and wet seasons that continue to just pile water on top of water, and all that stuff has to come back to the coast. You have all these wastewater treatment plants that might not be able to keep up with the population densities. All these swamplands that have been filled in for coastal development or farmland, that once were these huge filters that are no longer there no more. What effect did that have, long-term? I don't think the answers are there. I don't think the assessments have been made and the answers are there.

[90:47]

SS: Because we're not even thinking about that.

MB: I don't think that we're thinking in that direction.

SS: Right. We just need to have a whole overhaul in the way we're thinking about the relationships between these things—

MB: I think so.

SS: Before we can even start understanding them.

MB: Absolutely. You know what the bad thing about that is? Fishermen are the low-hanging fruit. They're the easiest to pick on. They're the easiest to target, because they have the most direct impact. Doesn't mean they have the biggest impact. They just have the most direct.

SS: Most visible.

MB: Most visible, most direct impact. That's where people get so focused on it, that visible impact. It's just becoming overwhelming to the fishing communities. Before too long, when there's no fishermen left, there's not going to be anyone to point a finger at. What do you do then? If nobody's fishing, you have no economy from your fisheries, recreational fishermen are ceasing to put money into going fishing, commercial fisheries don't exist anymore, what do you do then? If you're going to continue to assess these populations, and they're still going to be on a decline, who you going to point the finger to then? That's what worries me most, is if we don't change the behavior of the common public, and say, "Look, what you do everyday—the plastic bottle you throw out the window of your car, the bag of trash that has what plastic items in it that could have been reused and recycled and taken away from the landfills and all the chemicals that leak from a car—like, everybody contributes. If you drive a car and it leaks oil onto the pavement, well guess what? It's going to rain. That water is going to wash that little drip of oil into a storm drain. That storm drain is then going to go to some ditch, which will eventually lead to some creek, and that creek is going to empty into some river, and that river's going to go into a sound, which essentially will go into an ocean, and that drop of oil will continue to go wherever its destiny has." You know what I'm saying? Think of that, millions and millions of times. Millions of drips of oil. Say you spill something and don't clean it up, and that gets washed away, and doesn't get filtered, and the environment can't handle it, and it essentially ends up in a waterway somewhere. Every septic system that's below ground for every household, it filters out into the ground system. You just never know how big of an impact society's having on your coastal resources. I think the picture goes way deeper than a fisherman. Going back to it, the fishermen are the low-hanging fruit, so they're the ones that are going to be impacted the most, because we're worried that a fish is not sustaining itself. It can be thought of in so much more of a robust way than how a fisherman impacts a fishery. I just don't think we have that mentality right now, as fisheries managers. Our fisheries managers, our state elected officials—they just don't have that same concept of understanding, it seems like. I'm not saying that some don't. I'm sure there's some out there that have a mentality like that. But I think it's a really small minority of them that have that genuine concern on that level. It would be really useful to change the mentality of how we look at what affects fisheries. I'm going to use this example. If you think of Alaska, their population density—they're not there.

It's raw land. It's still really raw, untouched land, even the amount of land that's been mined, or maybe some deforestation. I mean, I've never been there, but I can only imagine, through pictures and conversations with people who have, a lot of it's still very raw and untouched, and not affected by the same population densities that are like East Coast. All of these river systems in Alaska still have the same natural filters that they've always had. If you look at the productivity of Alaska, it just outshines every other fishery in America. In my mind, when I think about East Coast fisheries versus West Coast and more of Alaska fisheries, it's night and day, so far as environment. I'm talking purely environmental here, and the influence of the human being on those environmental systems, those river systems and those water systems. It's easily arguable that Alaska and its productivity can be attributed to almost purely natural causes, to allow these fish to do what they need to do. It's got a huge amount of fishing pressure! It seemingly sustains it fairly well, even with the amount of pressure that's there. Like I said, I don't have a huge amount of understanding of West Coast fisheries or Alaska fisheries or Northwest Pacific fisheries, but I do read, and I do see things, and I do compare. I just don't think there's any comparison now, because of how we have developed the East Coast versus how we have developed Alaska. You don't have the opportunity for development in Alaska. It's very raw up there. The seasons are heavy. The winter season is extremely heavy. It's very unappealing to most people. There's a very short-lived window for actually being able to get out and be productive. I feel like, if the East Coast was nowhere near as developed, and the land environments were still just as raw and untouched as maybe Alaska right now, that you would see way more productivity in your fisheries. I just think that fisheries have been influenced beyond the fishermen, on the East Coast. If you think about it, it makes perfect sense. The East Coast was the landing point, the starting point, for America. It all blossomed on the East Coast. That's where the development is the heaviest, because it's the oldest part of America. It's where everybody started at. I just think history has a lot to do with it, and how we approached things. There was huge industry on the East Coast at one point, which probably had a lot of influence on things. I think we should—it's really important to take a historical perspective here and take a look back at what has happened to East Coast fisheries—or, at East Coast America, and what influences were on the fisheries aspect of the East Coast. I think that's extremely important to do, but there's no one doing that. There's no one taking a look back and saying, "Well, considering all of these things, this is why we're probably at where we're at today." Not, "Oh, well, if we cut out this much fishing, we can get the population to come back." I just don't think it's that simple of an answer any more. I think the answer has become way more complex. But it's such a struggle to have those conversations, because all anybody ever wants to focus on is the next step in regulating a fisherman. You're in a constant battle to have a counterargument to that. It's this mindboggling issue that there's not enough people to tackle. Not enough time. Not enough effort. Not enough interest. Not enough foresight. It requires people to be interested in fixing something to fix something. And then, how do you even fix it? Are we beyond the point of no return? Right? I mean, are we beyond fixing this, for some of these species that have dwindled down to a status to where we're putting them on the endangered species list? Which are directly affecting other fisheries, because this species exists alongside these other targeted species? There are so many questions that you can formulate out of these things.

SS: It's very complex.

MB: It is extremely complex. I just don't think that we're putting the effort towards the complexities, if that makes sense.

SS: It does. Hopefully, you can use your platform on some of these commissions as an advocate to raise some of these questions. I know it would take a lot more than one person to—

MB: Absolutely.

SS: To start really getting some traction.

MB: Yeah, I mean, it's just not ideal for one person to tackle this huge, complex—that's going to require people way smarter than me, who have knowledge way beyond me.

SS: Yeah. Real specialized knowledge.

MB: Yeah, specialists. People who've studied biology and chemistry and stuff like that. A combined effort. To have those people around, you have to have money, essentially, and if your political mindset is that that is not important, it's never going to get funding. Your tax dollars—the people's tax dollars—are not going to go towards taking care of this public resource. It's unfortunate that other things are priority, when you have a natural resource that is essentially struggling on paper, based on a science project—because that's all a sample is, is a science project. All of these science projects, that are in theory, in theory, if in theory, if we go out and set a net in the same spot at the same time, we should be able to gauge all of that. But to me, it's not that cut and dry. As a fisherman, it's not that cut and dry. I don't fish in the same spot on the same day of the same year. Weather patterns affect that. The way the wind's blowing affects that.

SS: It's not a simple linear equation.

MB: No, it's not as simple in my equation. But it's simple in their equation. To me, it's arguable. Then their rebuttal to stuff like that is, "We're factoring that in. We're factoring it into our equation." Well, guess what? I'm not a mathematician. All I can do is take your word that this is being considered, and that it's an accurate consideration. I think scientists really miss that. They miss the ball on that. They don't think in those terms. All they think is, "We're going to try to stay as consistent as possible, to maintain this science project, the scientific theory, the scientific process." I'm not saying science is not needed, but I think we're coming into a day and time, to where science needs the fishermen. There needs to be an overhaul and a collaborative effort to bring the knowledge of the fishermen into the realm of science, and to allow the fishermen to scrutinize their tactics, their theories, even if the scientists don't like it. It's ok to disagree, but the science has to be willing to change their ways. Again, their argument's going to be, "We need consistency. Because we need this time series. We need twenty years of data so we can look at a trend. We need all these things." I'm ok with that. You can still consistently do what you think you need to do, but there are things we can do to assess alongside your assessment, and to sort of have a checks and balances, because there is no checks and balances. The only check and balance is that stuff they call peer reviews, where they send someone that hasn't been involved, send the information to somebody who hasn't been involved in the process, and just get them to look over it, and make sure it's complete, and that their theory works. That's it. You can get into

this conversation and talk about stuff in the fisheries for hours upon hours. But I think, overall, the effects to fisheries on the East Coast, because that's what we're talking about, are far more far-reaching than fishing effort, now. Years ago, the federal government took action to alleviate fishing pressure, and they have. The fleets are nowhere near as big. Now they're asking the question of, "Why are people not becoming fishermen?" Now they're scratching their heads and saying, "Well, what we did has created this monster. We're not even going to have fisheries anymore if the trend continues. We're not seeing promise in some of the stocks we thought would recover from taking away fishing pressure." Now they're looking at other issues and they're finding that climate is becoming an issue for stocks. Trends are changing in stocks. Fish are not found as commonly in some places as they were and are now more common in other places than they used to be. I think all of this is trying to come to light, but I think the majority is still skeptical of that. It's just trying to change the mentality, and trying to think differently, and look at things more objectively and subjectively. I think that's really important, moving forward.

[109:14]

SS: Yeah. We started out the interview talking about age and generational differences and perspectives on the fishing side. I'm curious if you've had any observations about how younger generations of scientists might be evolving in their thinking compared to older generations of scientists? Because generations change in every trade, career, profession.

MB: What I think you have with the scientific community is once it's stained in a textbook, is everybody's going to learn the same way.

SS: You don't see it evolving?

MB: Now, I don't know that I can answer that question, because I don't spend a lot of time around young scientists and old scientists, to where I can see some sort of difference in logic or thinking or whatever. I've been around some scientists who are completely convinced that fishing is the ultimate problem. I've been around some scientists who think that fishing has nothing to do with it, and that there's a huge problem somewhere else, some factor that has contributed to a population of fish not being able to sustain itself, other than fishing pressure. I don't think it matters about age. I just think it matters about influence, and how they learned, and who they learned from, and what school they went to, and what mentality that school has in their approach to conservation, and stuff like that. It might have a lot to do with these people's upbringing and how they were brought up in life. Were they part of a really conservative family that believes in using the fishing resource as lightly, and having a small impact on this? Or did they come from a family that ate seafood regularly and targeted fish regularly and enjoyed a fresh product and are more open-minded to think that seafood is an important resource, and that fishing pressure can be tolerated? I think it all stems from the school and the mentality of the person before they even got to that point. Like I said, schools use the same texts and the same literature for everybody, and they're graduating people every single year. They're pumping out these same mentalities over and over and over again, and I don't think that it fosters an independent way of thinking for science. But I think some scientists have been adaptive in taking interest in how robust these fisheries are, and does the amount of fishing pressure actually, is it actually detrimental, or is the fishing pressure so small that it convinces them that fishing pressure actually isn't the issue? I think it just all depends on individual experiences for each scientist. Because one thing that does

happen when each scientist leaves the university is that they don't all go and do the same job. Some go here, some go there, some might work in freshwater, some might work in more of a marine environment, and so their experiences vary after they leave academia. I think that's where you get the various mentalities of these scientists. But they are cut from the same cloth, in my mind, because they are studying the same things, just going through these schools. Whereas fishermen, I don't fish the same ways as this other guy fishes.

SS: Yeah. It's a very individualized experience.

MB: Absolutely. We're all mostly self-taught. We might work on the back of a boat for a little while to gain experience, but once you get out on your own, it's all about what you learn from day to day about how to do things.

SS: It's not a cookie-cutter kind of thing.

MB: Fishing is not a cookie-cutter kind of thing. It's not like you all go buy the same boat, the same gear, the same stuff. It's never like that. Every boat is unique. Every boat you step on, the captain has a little different mentality. Sure, there's fleets that stick together and pal up, do that thing. But at the end of the day, nobody does things that absolute same way. I'm going to tell you, right now, some fishermen are more successful than others. It shows, based on their knowledge base, and based on their effort, and many different factors. I think, with science, when you implement a science project, it has to be done exactly the same way each time, for consistency. It doesn't mean that they're going to capture the absolute right data. Right? I'm trying to make a comparison to fishermen being different. Like, I could be fishing in the same spot, almost, as another fisherman, and he might catch twice the stuff that I catch, based on a gear modification that he has, just based on something super simple. My net might not be the same as his. When you have that level of consistency in science, you might not know that you're doing something wrong. That's all that I was saying. I'm not discrediting science. I think that they have an assessment and they have an idea, based on long-term trends. It's evident sometimes, to where you can see the trend and it goes down, or you can see the trend, and it goes up. You can see successes or failures. But I don't attribute it wholeheartedly to being the word that is necessary to fixing something.

SS: Right. It sounds like you think science sometimes suffers from tunnel vision.

MB: Absolutely.

[117:14]

SS: Well, to wrap up, why don't we circle back to you and your personal experience. Where do you see yourself in ten or twenty years from now?

MB: That's a good question and I probably can't answer the ten- or twenty-year thing. I love fishing. It's just what I enjoy doing. That's why I pursued it. It was really hard to pursue. I mean, it wasn't an easy thing, to where, "Oh, I'm just going to go buy boats and gear and, you know." It took a considerable amount of finance, knowledge. It took a lot of effort. It's just not something you can wake up and do overnight. I'm not done fishing. But the thing is, if these trends continue, if we don't come to some sort of solution as to how to maintain our

commercial fisheries and add value to our products, and expand some markets and other things, I just don't see where this can be productive for people like me anymore. Because, endangered species are taking more of an important role to monitor than me making a livelihood around them. Sea turtles, the same way. It's just really hard to know that at any point in time, some very specific issue can affect so much. One very small incident can affect so many things, so many lives, so many families. I'm taking on my role. I've agreed to take on these public servant roles to try to make a difference. But if the mindset and the mentalities are going to stay the same, and we're not going to explore different avenues to try to get better at this, then you're going to end up beating your head against the wall until you're pretty exhausted. I'm sure the same mentality's shared throughout. I talk to these guys, most of them. The opportunities just aren't the same anymore as what it was thirty years ago. Even twenty years ago.

SS: Even within your own career?

MB: Yeah, within my own career. It's just, regulations have changed. Access has changed. Access has been closed in many federal fisheries. Like I can't just go get a federal permit anymore. I have to either purchase it from somebody or it has to be passed down from a family member, and like some of these permits are hundreds of thousands of dollars. That's a significant investment to a young person. It requires either some huge financial assistance or the ability to have enough capital or enough stuff to create a loan. That's risky. Who wants to really subject themselves to that stuff? That risk? Who wants to subject yourself to that risk? They're constantly closing access so that people can't get into it. Well, when you can't go apply for a permit through the Northeast or the Southeast or whatever regional office you need to apply through, because they're all limited access or closed fisheries, what does that tell you right there? I can't even expand. I can't even participate in a federal ocean fishery if I wanted to.

SS: Do you feel like you, and other people with your size business, your age, your same approach, are sort of locked into state water fisheries, and you would like to be getting into federal waters fisheries but you don't have that option?

MB: Absolutely. Absolutely.

[122:24]

SS: What are some of the federal waters fisheries that you would participate in if you could?

MB: I'd love to have a shark permit. North Carolina is one of the biggest transitional area for sharks. Sometimes that stuff will fill the gap. I'd love to have a king mackerel permit. I'd love to have a tuna longline permit. We're close to the Gulf Stream. The fleet is shrinking. They're taking permits away.

SS: Are there any young owner-operators in those fisheries? Federal waters fisheries around here?

MB: I think there're some who have had the—who have been lucky enough to have permits handed down to them from family members. But for people who have just taken money and bought permits off of people, I don't know that there's been that very many. I just don't.

Acquiring a federal permit is extremely difficult. It's not easy to do. But if I had even a king mackerel permit, just one permit, to participate in one fishery, would be a start.

SS: Could you do that with the boat you have now?

MB: Yeah. I could go king mackerel fishing in the larger boat. It'd have to be a suitable day. I couldn't just go anytime. But I would get a good amount of days in.

SS: Alright, well I think we might want to wrap this up, so you can get on to your kid's wrestling match.

MB: Yeah, no problem.

SS: Any final thoughts that you would like to share before I turn it off?

MB: No. I feel like I talked way too much.

SS: [laughter] Alright, well thank you very, very much for your time.

[144:32]

[end of audio]