

Interview with Scott Wivell, commercial fisherman

Occupation: commercial fisherman

Port Community: Port Charles, 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

[Start of interview]

[00:00]

Sarah Schumann [SS]: My name is Sarah Schumann, and I'm in Cape Charles, Virginia. I'm interviewing Scott Wivell [accent on second syllable]?

Scott Wivell [SW]: Wivell [accent on first syllable].

SS: Wivell. Scott Wivell. Scott, what is your what is your occupation?

SW: I'm a commercial fisherman.

SS: Full time or part time?

SW: Fulltime, year round.

SS: How old are you?

SW: I'm twenty-nine years old.

SS: Twenty-nine. What is the name of your vessel?

SW: It's the Lady Lynnae.

SS: You're the owner and operator of that vessel?

SW: Pretty much built it too.

SS: What's your homeport?

SW: Cape Charles, Virginia.

SS: And your educational background?

SW: High school.

SS: Alright, now that I have that biographical info out of the way, how did you first get into fishing? Tell me a little bit about your beginnings.

SW: My dad was a dairy farmer, of all things, really. He came down here before I was born. He was doing construction and things like that. He just kind of fell into commercial fishing. He just started working for people. Basically, I grew up in a commercial fishing family, even though I don't historically come from it. I've known it my whole life.

SS: Your dad was a first generation fisherman?

SW: Yeah.

SS: Ok. It seems like around here, a lot of the fishermen come from multi-generational fishing backgrounds.

SW: Right. I don't fit into that demographic. People who I know that work on the water—their dad, their granddad, their granddad's granddad. It goes back forever. I'm from Pennsylvania pretty much. But then again, I've lived here my whole life. I grew up on the water. Ever since I was about five years old.

SS: Five years old. Wow.

SW: Yeah. My first memories are working on the water. So, it goes back forever.

SS: Yeah. Did you ever consider doing anything other than commercial fishing?

SW: I didn't want to commercial fish.

SS: Oh. [laughter]

SW: [laughter] As a kid, you want to have fun. I didn't want to work all weekend. As a kid, I didn't really enjoy it for what it was, I guess. As I got older, I tried to go to college, and that didn't work out for various reasons. I came back here, and I was eighteen, and I had no direction. I went back and worked for my dad. Then I kind of just put my head to the grindstone. I got my own boat. I've been doing my own thing ever since.

SS: Were you your dad's crew as a kid?

SW: Yeah, all through high school. I did a work internship through high school. I'd work on the water in the morning with my dad. I didn't have to be at school until lunchtime.

SS: Oh, they let you out of class?

SW: Yeah. I had enough credits up to my senior year that I didn't really have to be there my senior year. It's kind of like one of them deals when I got to go to work in the morning. I was fishing in the mornings before I even went to high school, my senior year.

SS: Wow, that's an interesting program.

SW: Yeah. I worked for my dad forever.

SS: What kind of fishing was that?

SW: Everything, really. I mean, around the Chesapeake Bay, we like the term “waterman” because we don’t do one thing. Depending on the season, we’re all over the place. We do blue crabs, or just gillnetting—croaker, spot, bunker. Conch potting in the winter. Crab dredging in the winter. Just everything. You’re all over the place around here.

SS: Is that how you fish as well?

SW: Yeah.

SS: Pretty much the same as your dad?

SW: I oyster dredge all winter. He horndogs out in the ocean.

SS: You’ll have to tell me what that is.

SW: Spiny dogfish?

SS: Oh, ok.

SW: We call them horndogs. I can’t get into that fishery. It’s a closed fishery. You can’t even transfer the permits in Virginia. So I can’t do that.

SS: Is that federal waters or state waters?

SW: He works in federal waters. You can get a federal permit. But you can’t bring them into Virginia without a state permit, and you can’t get the state permit. So it basically locks young guys out of it. It’s basically one of them greying fisheries, where once all them people die, there will be no one else to do it, because they won’t let anyone else in.

SS: Those licenses aren’t transferable?

SW: They’re non-transferable. You *can* transfer them, but I think only two have been transferred in the last ten years or something, because it’s almost impossible to transfer them. Everything’s got to be like, I don’t know. They don’t like to transfer them. They said right on them, “nontransferable.” But they will transfer some of them.

SS: What kinds of licenses do you have?

SW: I have an oyster dredge, and everything else that comes with oystering. For oystering, I have to buy a commercial card to go to work. Then I have to buy an oyster license, a general oyster license for all the oysters. Then I have to buy a gear license, which would be hand scrape, dredge, and hand tongs, depending on how I’m catching them. Then I own a Class A gillnet license. So I fish gillnet in the spring and the fall. I have a crab pot license. I do that in the summertime. And in the spring, I hold a shucking license. I’ve been trying to get more into the retail side here lately. I’m probably going to back out of that here pretty soon because it’s been too much. All the paperwork, with like the Health Department, is kind of ridiculous. [laughter]

SS: Let’s come back to that in a minute.

SW: Let’s see what else. I hold a bunch of buyers’ licenses so I can buy oysters for the shucking house. I have a black drum buyer’s permit, because I’ve been trying to get more into retail lately. You saw that lady downstairs who was asking me what kind of fish I’ve been catching. People see me, they ask me what I’m catching. I’ve kind of branded myself as that. Ultimately, eventually, I’d like to have a retail store where I could do from the boat right there. It would be,

you know, fresh catch. Then, I have a fish trap right out here at the mouth of the harbor that I have with my dad. So I do a bit of everything. [laughter] The oyster licenses for my private ground. I have stacks. [laughter]

[05:56]

SS: That's a lot.

SW: Yeah.

SS: Are you working on a lot of those things simultaneously, or is there a seasonal cycle to it?

SW: It's more of a seasonal cycle. I don't deal with oysters in the summertime, just because of the health risk. I don't. You can, but it's so much more with the time limits and icing and all that. I'm not trying to kill somebody. I won't touch an oyster in the summertime. Plus I got so much else going on. As spring comes in, I'll stop oystering and I'll put my net reel on and I'll try to bait fish. I'll catch menhaden up until crabs start potting. Then I'll take the net reel off and put the crab pots over. Then I crab pot through summer until about July, August, and crab potting pretty much dies down. The price is trash. You can't make no money. I switch back to gillnetting again. I go chase croakers for the rest of the summer. Then I target spot and a couple different fish up gillnetting. Let's see, oyster dredging starts in October, so come October I'll go back oyster dredging again. Then I just oyster-dredge all winter.

[07:00]

SS: In terms of how much each of those fisheries supports you, is there one that's kind of your bread and butter in terms of income? Or everything contributes a little bit?

SW: Well, they've got them all, they've pretty much got every fishery regulated into this six- to eight-hundred dollar a day gap that the boat can make. You can never get ahead. Oysters, they have it limited to sixteen bushels to the boat. It's eight bushels per person. Each person has to be licensed to catch. We're allowed to catch sixteen. That's eight hundred dollars a day at fifty dollars a bushel, which is current market price. If they were forty, which is the lower end where they normally are, that's that six hundred to eight hundred. With crab potting, it's the same deal. I'm allowed twenty-nine bushels of crabs. They stay between twenty and forty dollars a bushel. That keeps you right there in that six- to eight-hundred dollar gap for the boat. By the time you pay help and expenses, it doesn't really leave much.

SS: So that's by design, that they sort of have that figured out how much each volume of each species it takes to make that amount?

SW: Some people think.

SS: Ok, some people think.

SW: I think. It's awfully suspicious. You look at any fishery in Virginia. They send out these forms every year asking what the market value is. I feel like that directly goes into the regulations to basically keep you regulated to where you're making enough to go to work, but you're not making enough to actually ever get ahead. Like if you look at the fleet, boats are falling apart. Like, they're literally rotting out from underneath them. Just the other year, we had a guy up in the bay, a rotten board on the bottom of the boat fell out, and they sank. He died. This regulation has literally forced us to that point, to where you're making enough to get by, but you're not really making enough to where you can go buy a new boat. Up North, I see a lot of new lobster boats all the time. But down here in the Chesapeake Bay, you will see no new workboats at all.

The last one was probably fifteen years ago. They don't build them. Nobody buys them. In Virginia, the fleet's dying all around. That's with everything, too.

[08:59]

SS: When did you get your first license to operate your own boat?

SW: Nineteen or twenty, something like that.

SS: Did you get all of these licenses at once?

SW: I started off with just the crab pot licenses. See, some fisheries—I got lucky with the oyster dredging. I bought the crab pot and got into that.

SS: Did you buy it from another fisherman?

SW: Yeah, yeah. You have to buy out somebody else. Everything is a closed fishery.

SS: All of it's like that?

SW: You can't even go to the VMRC and get a commercial card. You have to buy out somebody. So I bought out somebody's crab pots and stuff and started there, with a real small sixteen-foot boat. And kind of built myself up to a bigger boat. I bought the gillnet license next, and just kept building up different stuff. Then I got into oyster dredging, and I slid into oyster dredging right before they overregulated the hell out of it. When I got into it, all you had to do was buy the license from the VMRC and go to work. Well, now my license that I just had to buy in, that three-hundred-and-fifty that I had to buy in, is worth nine thousand dollars. You can't buy one for less than nine or ten grand.

SS: Because they closed the licenses?

SW: Because they closed it down. You can't get one. That's the price that they're going for right now. They took a fishery that young guys were getting into. Who's got ten grand to buy an oyster license right now? Nobody does. Especially with that six- to eight hundred dollar a day gap, you're only making two or three hundred a day after you pay everything. You're going to work all winter to pay for that license for free. Nobody can do that.

SS: In the fisheries that you're operating in, you don't see it being possible to work your way up from crew to owner?

SW: No. They don't leave an opportunity any more. I managed to slide in there at the very end of it, I believe. My crab pot license, I forget what I paid for it, but they've doubled or tripled now. My license is worth ten to fifteen thousand dollars now, for my crab pot license. I couldn't have bought that if that was the price of it. My Class A gillnet's probably worth five grand, and then the dredging—that's thirty-five, forty thousand dollars just in licenses just to go to work all year. Just to work all year. That doesn't include a boat, slip rent, you know, just the simple stuff that piles on top of that. You'd have to go borrow a quarter of a million dollars just to go to work, just to make a day's work. They made it so you were better off just working on deck for somebody.

SS: Who works with you? Who's your crew?

SW: It switches up throughout the year. I have one boy who works with me throughout the summer. I have one who works with me in the winter. They're both younger guys—my age or younger. They've both been with me for a couple years.

[11:39]

SS: Are they people who want to stay in this industry?

SW: I don't know. You'd have to ask them.

SS: You can't speak for them, I guess.

SW: I would say the boy who dredges with me during the winter, I would say he does, because his dad owns a lot of fish traps. Yeah, he probably will take over that one day. The other boy, I ain't really sure what he's doing. [laughter] Lucky enough to have him show up.

[12:03]

SS: You built your own boat?

SW: Pretty much. Paid a hundred dollars for it. It was a beaten-up hull. It looked like something you should have burnt and taken to the dumpster. I gutted it, put six months of my life, built it to what it is. I don't know if you've seen the picture on my Facebook page.

SS: No.

SW: It looks a lot better than it used to. I can probably show you pictures of it.

SS: Ok, yeah. I'd love to see it.

SW: Yeah, it was one of them things. I was looking at an old wooden boat. My dad was like, "You don't want an old wooden boat. You're going to be upkeeping it all the time. You don't want one." Then I found a fiberglass hull and just kind of ran with that. That was probably six or seven years ago.

[12:55]

SW: There we go. There, you can just kind of scroll down through there. That's the whole process.

SS: Wow. [looking at photos] What's the length again?

SW: It's thirty foot.

SS: Ok. It's a big job.

SW: Yeah. [laughter] Did it all myself.

SS: Six months sounds like a very short time for all of this. You must have been working round the clock.

SW: Yeah. It was pretty much whenever I wasn't working. I took every dollar I made working and worked all afternoon and night. My dad did all the woodworking, building everything, and I did all the fiberglass work.

SS: Yeah. It's a big job. Wow.

SW: Yeah.

SS: Looks great in the end, though!

SW: One day I'll get a bigger boat. But it's just one of them things where they keep us in that gap. I'm only allowed to keep sixteen bushels of oysters and I'm only allowed to keep twenty-nine bushels of crabs. You don't need but so big a boat to hold that. If you buy a bigger boat, you're burning more fuel, and you're making less money to keep the same amount. I don't know. Keeps me where I'm at, I guess.

[14:16]

SS: Is it good enough where you're at?

SW: I want a bigger boat. It's not enough room. It's dangerous sometimes, because I'll go out when the forty-eight, forty-five foot boats go, because I've got to make a day's work too.

SS: How far are you going? Where are you working?

SW: Right now, I'm working up near Tangier Island, oystering. It's about an hour boat ride from Saxis. It's about an hour car ride from here to Saxis and then about an hour boat ride. It's about two hours riding. It gets pretty nasty up there.

[14:45]

SS: And you're getting into retail?

SW: Trying to. It's a wall. I'm not even going to say a hurdle. [laughter] It's a wall.

SS: Because of health department stuff?

SW: Yeah. If I go catch an oyster, I legally can't sell it to you, unless I am a dealer. You have to go through a dealer—which, I understand that, it's the whole health stuff and whatever. But then, my thing is, where I'm a dealer, when I shuck oysters, I have to fill out the same paperwork as these big operations do that are processing millions of bushels a year, whereas I'm just shucking my own oysters. I still have to fill out the same paperwork and go by the same guidelines. When I'm filling out paperwork, I shuck once a week. I am the shucker. I am the packer. I am the cleanup. I am everything. I am the manager. So when I fill out paperwork, I have to do checks behind myself, initial it, and do a weekly check behind myself again. This is all in like six or eight different paperwork. It's so redundant and stupid, because I'm the only person there. I have no employees. It's just me, so I'm checking up behind—I'm basically initialing and saying, "Yeah, I just did that," and then initialing again, saying, "Yeah, I just looked at it again." It's so redundant.

[15:58]

SS: How could the system work better for you, if they were willing to change it?

SW: I don't have the answer to that one, but it needs to be streamlined. It needs to be simplified. I pay a lot of money to be able to catch oysters, but then I have to buy a completely other license to be able to shuck them oysters. It's five hundred and some bucks for me to buy a shucking license. I got to shuck a lot of oysters just to pay for that license. I don't. I lose money on that every year. I just basically do it out of entertainment I guess, because I enjoy doing it. I meet a lot of people and stuff.

SS: Are you shucking at events or packaging?

SW: I have. I have gone to a few events and shucked for them. But mainly it's just pints—shucked pints for people. My main thing is Thanksgiving and Christmas. Locals. I have a big local market. My phone rings off the hook around that time of year. Eventually it would be nice to have a retail location, I guess. At the same time, it's going to be a lot of headache. But, if you're going to stay in this industry, I feel like you have to. Just to go out and catch seafood and sell it wholesale, there's no money anymore. You have to be able to at least sell part retail. Like there'll be times in the summer when our crab buyers will cut us off. There's no market. You can't sell crabs. I'll put it on Facebook. Tell people to bring their own baskets because I don't want to lose my baskets. I'll go out and go to work and come in and sell every crab right at the dock. "There's no market," though. It's just one of them things. If you have control over that end of your market, you have job security pretty much. Because one, you won't have to catch as much to make the same amount of money. Two, you don't have them days when you can't go to work. That missed income really hurts when you're only allowed to work five days a week and then you cut one of them out because you're not allowed to and then weather hits you two more days—you've only worked two days. It's like this last week, we're only allowed to dredge Monday through Friday. Well, it blew Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. So I worked Monday and Tuesday and that was it this week. I won't work again until Monday. Hopefully it doesn't blow Monday. So, I don't know. Regulations are nice, but they also put us in danger. They force you to go a lot of days you shouldn't. Because we have these five days, so you got to go. Bills need paying. Then you get a Saturday like this when it's slick, calm, and pretty out, and you can't do nothing.

SS: Oh no. Frustrating.

[18:23]

SW: Yeah.

SS: So the retail is kind of a way to—

SW: I've been trying. I kind of feel like if I don't get into retail, I can't stay into this.

SS: It sounds like you like it, too. Or at least, maybe not the paperwork part, but the interacting with people.

SW: Yeah, that's what I told the guys. If I didn't have to do all this paperwork, I'd be fine. [laughter] I'll do the paperwork. I'm fine with doing the important stuff—you know, the times, all the stuff that really is important. But the initialing behind myself is fricking redundant. Last time when they came, I just had scribbly marks beside everything, and I was like, "Yeah, that's my signature. I ain't doing it no more." I got yelled at for it, but whatever. They'll get over it. I don't know.

[18:52]

SS: So are there any fisheries that you were part of that you got out of or gave up on?

SW: Not really. I'm pretty much doing the same stuff that I was ten years ago. Other than when I worked for my dad, I was allowed to horn dog. I don't do that anymore. That wasn't by choice. I've tried getting my license and I haven't been able to get in it.

SS: That's something you'd like to do if you could, if it was available to you?

SW: Well, yeah, because the resource is there. My dad catches his limit almost every day. I like oyster dredging. I've gotten pretty good at it. But at the same time, there's times of the year when I have to drive two, three hours. I'll go all the way to Reedville to dredge. That might be where I'm at in February. That's a three-hour car ride just to get to the boat. A lot of people stay over there, but I don't. I got stuff to do here. Them times of year, it'd be nice to have a backup plan, because right now, I have nothing in the wintertime. If I can't go oyster dredging, I have to go look for employment somewhere. Somebody's got to hire me, because I have nothing else to do. Other than plant shell and try to get that private ground up and running, because you got to have a backup plan. All it takes is one closure and you're out of business for months. You got to have something. I'd like to get into horn dogging if they'd let me. But I think they're going to cut that quota in half next year.

SS: Are there any other fisheries around here that you would do if you could, or that you'd like to build up to eventually?

[20:20]

SW: Well, we used to have a really good shark fishery here for sandbar sharks. Supposedly they're endangered. It's all you can catch around here. If you run a shark net out here in the summertime, it's literally stuck with enough sharks you'd sink your boat. And they're all sandbars. We're allowed to catch black tips and spinners and a couple other sharks around here, but we don't have them here. All we have is sandbars. It's sickening, really, the amount of sandbars we see. When we drum fish in the spring, we'll catch hundreds of six-foot-long sandbar sharks. They'd be hundred dollar bills if we could sell the meat. But we're not allowed to, because they're protected and endangered and whatever. There's absolutely no shortage of them. You ask anyone who's dropped a hook in the water or a net in the water or anything. That's all you catch. That was a thriving fishery until it was closed down in, I don't know, 2006, 2009, something like that. Because that's what me and my dad did all summer long.

SS: The sandbar sharks?

SW: Yeah. We'd only fish one or two nets, and you would load your boat. You drowned your boat right up. Then just like that, we were shut down. Not allowed to do it no more.

[21:35]

SS: Can you tell me a little bit about Cape Charles as a fishing community? Like, how many boats are there, what else are they doing, what's the community like here?

SW: Well, I can tell you it used to be a lot bigger. There's probably three or four boats that stay here year-round, and that's it. When I say year-round, I count myself, and my boat's not here. I keep a slip year-round even if I'm not here. There's not very many people at all. I think if you go over there now, there's maybe two or three boats that are working out of there, conching out in the ocean. We used to have a thriving crab dredge fishery here. I don't know if you've ever heard of our crab dredge fishery, but it was like a big boon in the wintertime. Cape Charles harbor would be packed. You could walk across from one side of the harbor to another on the boats. They closed that fishery down and forced all those people into oyster dredging, and now there's this big pressure on oysters. Oysters are declining. There's not doubt about that, because there's all this pressure. You have forty, forty-five boats that should be pulling crab dredges out there, pulling a little hand scrape that's two feet wide. They force people out of one fishery into another there. When crab dredging was in here, there would be hundreds of boats in Cape Charles. I mean, hundreds. Crab potting, in April or so, you'll usually see twenty or thirty boats in there. They'll come down from Tangier, mainly. Some guys from Maryland come down here. But other than that, that's basically the only amount of boats that come here now is for crabbing. March, April, May—a couple of months at the beginning.

SS: Ok. Seasonal.

SW: Because Maryland doesn't open up until April, I believe. Ours opens up in March. There's a lot of Maryland guys who hold licenses up there who'll come down here and work for a month or two and go back home. Back in the day, they used to have clam boats—surfclams and stuff—that used to come in here. There used to be a big clam house across there where the yacht center is, where they have all the boats. Used to be a big clam house there when I was a kid I used to play in. Now it's all gone. Place has changed a lot.

[23:50]

SS: Are there any other young fishermen around here?

SW: Yeah. I'm friends with probably ten or fifteen guys about my age. Generally speaking, we're all the same age too. There's a gap, probably from thirty to thirty-five to forty to forty-five where there are none. But that was in a few years when crab stocks crashed and there was just a lot of stuff that went bad for everybody.

SS: So you see sort of a small insurgence of young people getting back into it now?

SW: It's over with already. There's nobody under twenty-five. There's probably nobody under twenty-eight, really. There's not a lot of younger guys. I'm twenty-nine. They're all older than me, everybody I know. One boy out of Saxis, he's younger than me—two of them. Not very many people younger than me. Yeah, twenty-nine is about the youngest they get.

[24:52]

SS: What do you think things are going to look like in the future?

SW: Well, if I can outlive everybody it might be alright in twenty years. I don't know. It's hard to tell. Things like our crabs, the population goes up and down. We receive cuts on our limits, but it never goes back up. We all understand, when there are no crabs, cutting our limit to make it last longer for the year. We all get more money. It all works. But then when the crab population abundance is high, the limits have to go up to mimic that abundance, because if not, we can't compete with the states around us. North Carolina doesn't have a limit on their crabs. So they catch fifty to a hundred bushels to the boat. Then our strict limits. The most common license is mine. It was a three-hundred pot license. It's been cut down to two-hundred fifty-five pots through a reduction. I was allowed fifty-one bushel. It's been cut back to twenty-nine bushel. It's almost a fifty percent cut just in my income that I've received on that. That was in a matter of two years that they cut it back that far. That really hurt the summertime for me. Me and my dad, we've been trying to open a picking house, so we can pick some of our crabs in the summertime when they get real cheap. But even then, it's the problems that you always hear about—labor, who's going to pick them. We tried opening it up, and we had one person come pick. You can't get anybody to come pick. Then all the health department and everything to go along with that—you have to spend ten, twenty-thousand dollars on equipment just to operate it. That is just, I don't know, it's too much. We're trying, but I don't know how well it's going to work. I had faith, but I'm starting to lose it. I mean, I was head on into it the last couple of years, getting that retail, getting the shucking, getting the picking, getting all that going. But it took three and a half years to get the picking house certified after it was already there. Between the paperwork and everything that had to be done and had to be looked at. Three and a half years. All that money was just sitting there, just waiting.

[27:04]

SS: What's the status of that now?

SW: We're certified and ready to go, but we have no crabs here in the winter. We have no crab fishery in the wintertime because they closed down the crab dredging, so we only have crabs available from March 17th to the end of November. There's three months in the wintertime when there's no crabs coming in from Virginia, even though we have crabs in Virginia. That kind of hurts our market, because we don't have that year-round supply of crabmeat and we can't really compete with markets, so you see a lot more of the foreign crabmeat coming in. There's a guy across the bay who just got sentenced to three years in prison, because he was mixing foreign crabmeat with our crabmeat and just relabeling it. He probably deserves more than three years in prison. They've created that problem, because they've made it so we don't have that year-round supply. I mean, if it was crab dredging right now, I probably would be picking a little but just to satisfy the locals. But I'm not going to get crabs from Louisiana to pick. It's just not financially feasible for me to do in my situation, especially in my whole business model, just retailing *my* stuff. When you get into trying to buy stuff, you're not going to make as much money. I'm trying to just cut all everybody out. [laughter]

[28:18]

SS: So you think, at least for crabs, the resource could sustain more fishing activity than it is?

SW: There's no doubt in my mind whatsoever.

SS: Does that go for other resources too?

SW: Well, debatable.

SS: Sandbar sharks?

SW: Sandbars, yeah. There's a big debate about the crab dredging, because not only was it the crabs that are affected, but when they stopped crab dredging, we stopped having a spring croaker fish run. They stopped coming. We use to croaker fish in February and March in the Chesapeake Bay. But they don't come in any more. We can't find them.

SS: What's your theory on that?

SW: We used to catch them crab dredging. They'd feed on the crabs. The cut crabs. The few crabs that were cut from dredging were immediately feeding wintertime fisheries. Them croakers were literally chasing the crab dredges around the bottom and eating the cut-up meat and stuff. Once they cut out the crab dredging, the fish stopped coming. Croakers have been on a steep decline in Chesapeake bay, literally since they stopped crab dredging. A lot of watermen see that correlation. You talk to a lot of people and they'll tell you about it. Not only that. There's a thing called hydroids. It's like a grass that grows down here. It feeds on larva. Well, crab dredging cleared a lot of that off the bottom. Now, they don't do that, and it grows there. There's a couple people who think that's responsible for the lower crab abundance numbers, because it literally feeds on crab larva. I don't know. Everything's got a snowball effect. The crab dredge fishery was a big one. It was literally shut down overnight. Even though I think it was only sixty boats doing it when it was shut down, it's still a big effect. A lot of misinformation I think. People thought they were tearing up the bottom. You don't dredge in shallow water. You dredge in deep, muddy waters so you're not tearing up anything. It's one of them things. Going to the general assembly, you don't have no say in it. Somebody had a reason.

[30:18]

SS: Do you ever get involved in policy?

SW: I go to a lot of meetings. I go to a lot of VMRC meetings, which never amounts to anything. They have their minds made up before they even start.

SS: What does that stand for?

SW: Virginia Marine Resource Commission, is what it is.

SS: Ok. You go and you speak there?

SW: Yeah, I go to probably three. They have a monthly meeting. I probably go to maybe three of them a year. Usually the ones right before oystering, because we have to fight for that. It's been mismanaged terribly the last few years. Just make sure nothing else is sliding by here and there. But it's hard. They do the meetings on a Tuesday. Usually fisheries comes up a little after lunch time. So you have to take a day's work off just to go to the meeting. There's nobody there. You walk in there and there's one or two commercial fishermen there. That's not fisheries management at all. It's frustrating.

[31:27]

SS: How do you deal with that frustration?

SW: Just work harder.

SS: I heard you say earlier that you're married?

SW: Yeah.

SS: Do you have kids?

SW: Nope. Got two cats and three dogs.

SS: Ok. [laughter]

SW: Yeah, I've been married for three years and I've been with my wife for thirteen years.

SS: Do you have any siblings that are active in the commercial fishing industry?

SW: Yeah, I have two brothers. My oldest brother works with my dad still. My middle brother was the smart one. He got a job doing marine construction and stuff. He was the smart one. [laughter] He got a land job.

SS: As for you, are you committed to staying in this industry and doing what you're doing? Or do you ever think about doing something else?

SW: In too deep. How do you get out? I've literally spent every dollar I've made for the last ten years getting where I am in this fishery. There's no backing out. [laughter] Nobody's going to buy my gear for what I need to get out of it. You know? I mean, we do so many different fisheries. The amount of gillnets we have for the different fisheries we target. I have truck beds all full of different nets, you know. I couldn't sell that. It'd be like a quarter of a million dollar loss if I tried to get out of it now. There is no backing out. I got to make it work. I don't know how. I'll figure it out, I guess. Slowly. Make a few mistakes along the way, you'll figure it out.

[33:16]

SS: Do you have any regrets about choosing this career?

SW: No. I enjoy it.

SS: Ok.

SW: Yeah. I enjoy working on the water. It pulled me in and it's not letting me go. It's one of them love-hate relationships. I get to do stuff most people only dream of.

SS: What are the parts you like about it?

SW: Freedom. I mean, most days I work with one guy. I don't even have to boss him around. It's more like, "Hey, do you want to do this? Do you want to do this?" I don't boss people around. It's more like I go out with a friend. We go make money. We go home. I like to enjoy my day's work. That's the best part of being a commercial fisherman. If I want to slow down, if it's a pretty day, you slow down and take it easy and enjoy the day. You know? You don't have to bust ass and do whatever. You ain't got time—well, besides the time limits on some fisheries. Just that freedom of being able to do what you want, make decisions. Yeah. Not having to conform, I guess.
[laughter]

[34:23]

SS: Why do you think that you're not seeing people under twenty-five getting into it?

SW: If you had the money to get into it, why would you get into it? I mean, realistically. Once you count boat and licenses, you have to have a quarter of a million dollars to start fishing on the Chesapeake Bay to go make two-hundred dollars a day, if you're lucky. Why would you? Who's going to? Nobody smart enough is going to do that. The only people who are going to do it are the people who are forced to do it, because they either had licenses passed down to them and they have no other option—they can't afford higher education and stuff—or they made mistakes in their life and were forced into this. There's no apprenticeship program. There's no way for a young guy to work his way up to a license. You know, a young guy can work on boats from the time he's fifteen to the time he's thirty. He still can't go get a license.

SS: Has there been any talk about creating some kind of program like that? Or have you thought about it?

SW: Well, I think it's been brought up. But I think it's always shot down, because they're always in the position that, "Well, these fisheries can't handle it. We can't let more people into the fishery." Understandable, but a lot of it's created by them. Like the oyster dredge fishery, the amount of people in that right now is directly correlated to their actions. Between the shutting down of crab dredging and then, I mean, I don't know. Three or four years ago, when—like I said, I bought into oyster dredging when you could just get into it—the deckhands only had to have an oyster license. They didn't have to have an oyster dredge license. The VMRC moved and made it so that everybody on board had to have an oyster dredge license. That effectively, overnight, tripled the amount of oyster dredgers on paper. You have three hundred boats working, so that's three hundred harvesters. You had three head on a boat. When it first started, it was three head, eight bushels per head, twenty-four bushel. You have three head on a boat and you made them all buy an oyster dredge license. You just, on paperwork, made three dredge boats, even though they're not there. The number of dredgers went from three hundred to like a thousand, overnight. They had this big problem they had to solve, so they shut the fishery down to anybody

new getting into it, because that was the one fishery where young guys could get into it. Say they worked on deck crabbing all summer with somebody else—you could make good money doing that—and had nothing to do in the wintertime. Well, if they were working on deck for somebody and they had to buy an oyster dredge license, a lot of them had little boats, and they were like, “Well, I might as well take my own boat out there and go dredging and make a little bit more money.” So in effect, not only did they create more dredgers on paper. It led to a lot more people who were deckhands rigging up little boats and going to work. So in effect, they did create more boats. Then they dropped the amount of people on a boat from three per boat to two per boat. Well, that extra guy didn’t quit fishing. He went and rigged up a boat too. Then you have fifty percent more boats working, because they moved it from twenty-four to sixteen. Well, it didn’t really cut nothing. We were still harvesting the same amount of oysters, just with more boats. So they created this problem, to where when they open an area, there’s a hundred boats swarming in one spot, running into each other. It’s fricking hectic, really. It’s a safety hazard. It’s all created by policy that has just spiraled downhill from one thing to another. It’s led to that point to where oyster dredging can’t really sustain the way it’s being managed right now. I don’t know what I’m going to do in the winter in a few years, because I don’t think it’s going to hold up. I hope it does, because I mean, what else are you going to do from October to March? There’s not much to do. Look for employment somewhere, I guess.

[38:13]

SS: It sounds like a lot of these policy changes have had unintended consequences?

SW: Oh yeah. Then they never come back on any of them. Like crabbing, I forget the exact number, but it’s been like almost a hundred different regulations have been put on crabbing alone in the last fifteen years. None of them were ever taken off. The ones that don’t work are never removed. They just pile more regulations that don’t work on top of regulations that don’t work, so you’ve got this mess. Some of them work! Don’t get me wrong. As a twenty-nine-year-old commercial fisherman, we need regulations. I need a future. We can’t go catch everything and not leave a future. Most people think we’re out there just taking everything. It’s not possible. Because, like I said, I can’t get out. I don’t want to catch everything because I have no future if I do. I’m sitting on a quarter of a million dollars worth of gear that’s worthless if I catch everything, so I depend on proper management. That’s why I go to these meetings. I go to a lot of advisory committee meetings and stuff, too. But a lot of times, you’ll go to advisory meetings, and you’ll all agree on something, and then it’s taken in front of the VMRC board, and they basically take it for nothing. They don’t really listen to it. Very seldom. They’ll go with their staff recommendations instead. Well, they’re not listening to the industry. The industry is trying to tell them where the problems lie and where to fix it, but they very seldom listen to the industry. They go with their scientists instead, which most times—I’ve been going to these meetings now—the most senior person over there has been for three years. How do they even know what happened? None of them even remember when crab dredging was shut down. They were all still in middle school, probably. That’s the problem we’re running into now. You go down there and talk to people, and they don’t even know what you’re talking about, because they weren’t there. All of the more experienced people have retired in the last couple years. I don’t know why. Hopefully things will change over there.

[40:05]

SS: Do you think it’s just a lack of understanding, or are there agendas at play?

SW: Well, it’s all political. The VMRC is all politically appointed positions. They’re all appointed. The head of the VRMC is appointed by the governor.

SS: Are there any fishermen on the commission?

SW: No.

SS: None?

SW: The only people on the commission are people who are directly tied to large-scale oyster operations.

SS: Have there ever been any small-scale commercial fishermen like you on it?

SW: There have been, I think, throughout the years, but I don't think they last long. A lot of times, these advisory panels, they'll put commercial fishermen on them and whatever, but if you don't agree with them, they'll kick you off, pretty much. I know quite a few people who were removed from the crab panel because they were pushing for crab dredging to be opened back up, because of everything I said—because it would really help us. I mean, even if it was opened up on such a limited scale—you know, ten, fifteen, twenty boats were able to do it—it would take so much pressure off of the oyster industry, while at the same time holding up the crab industry. But there's no push there. They won't budge on that issue. You bring up crab dredging, you're basically shoved out of the room. They don't want nothing to do with it. Which I guess a lot of that comes from environmental groups. That's just basically because they think you're dredging up eelgrass. You don't dredge in the shallows. Most of the time, you're dredging in thirty, forty-foot of water. The blade doesn't even touch the bottom. There are no grasses down there. Misinformation. We don't do a very good job of educating people, either. There's no push in Virginia to educate. The public basically takes whatever they read in the newspaper and runs with it, which is basically that we're poachers, that we're out there breaking the law. That's all you ever see in the newspaper. You never see a positive story about a commercial fisherman. We're made out to be criminals at every turn. I've been working on the water on my own for close to ten years, and I've never had a ticket. Yet, when I pull in to the dock, I'm still scrutinized like I'm a criminal. "What you got in the cabin? What's under there? What's here?" [laughter] It only goes but so far.

SS: What do you think could be done about that?

SW: I mean, don't get me wrong. Some people do break the law, and that's the major problem, because then the spotlight's shined on them people. If you have one person who breaks the law, you can put him in the newspaper and make a story out of him. A guy going out and having a good day's work doesn't make the newspaper.

SS: It's not news.

SW: Nobody cares.

SS: Yeah. So the news media just gravitates towards controversy and disaster?

SW: Yeah, negative. That's news. Positive news doesn't make the news.

SS: Yeah. It's true.

[42:58]

SW]: Yeah. Need to band together, I guess. But that's not possible. I mean, you have a bunch of independent people. They're not going to come together. That's what makes commercial fishermen who we are. That fierce independence of, "I'm going to go out there and I'm going to carve my way through this world." Doesn't really leave room for getting together and making

changes. That's why we get forced into a lot of the corners we're in. I don't know. I got faith, but not much. I try to, at least.

SS: The faith that you have, where does it come from? What are the things that give you hope?

SW: [laughter] I couldn't tell you.

SS: Hard to name them?

SW: Yeah. I don't know. Just me.

SS: Just a sense of dedication and conviction?

SW: Yeah. That's just how I've always been. If I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it well. I'm going to give it my all. I ain't going to stop halfway. I think that kind of spirals down to being a young guy in this fishery. You got to make choices that people twenty years ago didn't have to. You know?

SS: What do you mean by that?

SW: Going with a smaller boat. Buying old gear instead of new gear. Patching your stuff a lot more. Trying to make stuff make it that extra mile. Because you can't make enough money if you're buying all the new stuff. You're basically just rotating through gear and you're never getting ahead. You have to kind of make decisions to cut corners. You have to figure out what's more important: painting the side of the boat, or, you know, buying a new pot hauler or something. That's the hard part: figuring out where you're going to make it in there. I don't know how I could support a family on my income. I mean, that's not why I don't have kids, but if I had kids, I don't know where I would make that extra income. I mean, I make enough to support my lifestyle as it is, but barely. It definitely couldn't support kids, unless something changed. The only way is with that direct-from-the-boat-to-retail. If we don't have that "fresh and local," we won't have nothing. It will all be imported seafood in twenty years.

SS: So you see that as a real key to resilience?

SW: Yeah. That's really all I see that's left. I encourage everybody towards retail. I talk to a lot of guys, because I'd almost like to do like a co-op. Try to get a bunch of us together, because if you get three or four different guys, who do different things throughout the year—like, I grow oysters, but I don't really grow oysters. I don't grow them in cages like a lot of guys do. I just plant them on bottom and let them naturally grow. A lot of guys who do the aquaculture, those oysters are available all summer long. If you got into a co-op between a couple of guys who do wild fisheries and then something like that, you might be able to build on something to the point where you'd have, you know, the security of knowing you're not going to be out of work next year. But at the same time, you run into that roadblock of FDA and local health department and all the regulations you got to jump through to even make that possible.

SS: The guys you talk to, are they interested in that?

SW: Not really. [laughter]

SS: Not really?

[46:07]

SW: Not really. I mean, it's hard. These guys have literally put out everything they've got to stay where they're at right now. Then, where are you going to come up with the kind of money to build a processing facility? If you had the money, why would you do it? It's another one of them situations. There's better ways to spend your money, because say you build a processing facility and you go process spiny dogfish here, and then that fishery's shut down again. It was, ten or fifteen years ago. It was shut down to where we were only allowed six hundred pounds a day. You can't make a living on that. If somebody put millions of dollars into this processing plant, and then two years down the road, they have nothing to process—someone's not going to build that processing plant without that guarantee that they can. All it takes is one bad trawl survey and the numbers come back wrong. I mean, we believe in science, but science is flawed just like everything else. It's done by man. All it takes is one flawed survey and you'd not be putting the fishermen out of work; you're putting a multi-million dollar operation out of work that was trying to help the fishermen. The people who have the money to enter into that sort of things aren't going to enter into it with that kind of uncertainty. You know?

SS: Yeah. Too risky.

SW: They're going to go build whatever sells. Whatever people want.

[47:24]

SS: What does the older generation say? How do they see you? What do they think of what you're doing? Do they offer encouragement or discouragement?

SW: None ever discourage. I'd say they try to help you more than anything. A lot of guys will help point you in the right direction. Because there are no young guys around, you know? I know ten or fifteen people around the bay who die every year, just of old age, that were commercial fishermen. I see it every year. You know, their boat's being passed around. Turned into sport vessels and stuff, because they're all dying out. I guess they do support the next generation coming in, because there's nothing after them. You know? You'll find support in some of the most random places. People you wouldn't think would help you out will help you out. I haven't run into any problems with anybody. I'll work all around the Chesapeake Bay. Oystering, we go everywhere. Up in Saxis is basically to the Maryland line. Then I'll work in the Rappahanock, the York, and the James River. I work the whole western shore as well. I'm around everybody. I try to keep in touch with people from all around the Chesapeake Bay, mostly just so we can talk to each other. Then you'll find a lot of guys who will even call me, even people who live in areas that are far away. "Hey, I caught this fish." They let you know when they're catching stuff. Because there's nobody else. You ain't got to worry about people coming in and catching all your fish, because there's nobody to come. It ain't like it was years ago when we'd go croaker fishing, when there'd be twenty, thirty boats trying to run nets on marks. You got like five now. There's no real competition. There's no real need to get mad at each other, because you're only allowed to catch but so much and there's only but so many people, that there's plenty of room now.

SS: There's more sharing of information and mutual support?

SW: I'd say, especially with the younger guys. You'll find that a lot of the older guys—you'll post a picture of your limit on Facebook and they're like, "What the hell are you doing that for?" It's like, "I caught that yesterday. It wasn't today." They have that mentality still, like they don't want to let out too much information. "You can't tell everybody what you're doing."

SS: But that's changing?

SW: Yeah. I mean, we're only allowed but so much. Oystering, we're only allowed sixteen bushel. That's nothing. You don't have to catch very many oysters to catch your sixteen bushel. If I'm on a good spot and I see one of my friends is still working and only has half his limit when I leave,

I'll go out there and tell him, "Hey, go by that buoy and dredge right there. Just bring the buoy in when you leave." You know, we try to help each other, because, I mean, without us, there's nothing left.

[50:11]

SS: It actually becomes more advantageous to collaborate than compete?

SW: Yeah. It's more of like a brotherhood, I guess. I mean, what's the point of competing? We're not the ones who cut our limit down to that. We didn't put ourselves in that situation. It's not our fault. There's no fighting. You don't see people sinking other people's boats around here, stuff like that, or nothing. I mean, there's nothing left. There's nobody left. Like I said, they got like five boats in Cape Charles. What's the competition for? [laughter]

SS: If you had a crystal ball, what do you think that this would look like in ten, fifteen, twenty, or more years?

SW: Ideally, management that took fisheries suggestions for the weight of scientific suggestions. Scientists serve a job. They go out there and they do the random surveys. Like, we have a crab dredge survey on the Chesapeake Bay. They have these randomized spots around the Chesapeake Bay that they go and do their dredge survey every year to determine the amount of crabs that are in the bay. Well, if you look at where they dredge, most of the places don't even line up with where people traditionally crab dredged in the bay. They're working areas where there are no crabs, where you never will catch crabs. You look at it, and you're like, "Why are you even testing it if there's nothing there?" If you took fisheries opinion into it, and we're like, "Test here, here, and here. This is where you'll catch crabs." You know. But they don't want to catch crabs. They just want to test their random spots, count what's there, and call that a stock assessment. Which I understand. We need stock assessments. Because if the population drops in half, we know we got to catch less because they got to reproduce for next year. I understand all that, because we need a future, but it needs to be a proper assessment. I feel like a lot of stocks run into that improper assessment. Like sandbar sharks. You hear the guys up north talking about the cod. Just all kinds of stuff up and down the coast, where there's an assessment done, it just doesn't line up with what we're seeing day to day in fisheries. Like, you'll see a stock that's abundant and then they tell you it's not. It's hard to have faith in their word about the stuff you actually agree with them on, because they were wrong about the other stuff, so how are they right about this? There's little faith there. If you had more of a communication between the scientists and the fishermen, I feel like you would have more sustainability. Because, at the end of the day, we just want to make a good day's work. That's really what it boils down to. We want to enjoy our day and catch fish and make a day's work. We can't do that, one, without proper fisheries management, but, two, without having a voice. If they don't listen to us, we have nothing. I feel like fishermen's voices are basically muffled. You can hoop and holler all you want. They're still going to do what they want. Very seldom does it ever change anything. It feels futile, I guess. I probably haven't been to a meeting in a year, honestly. It got to the point where it's like, why? You bring up information. You question their stuff. They can't even give you good answers. It's like, why? I mean, you got kids in college who are doing our surveys. They [unintelligible] catching anything. [laughter] There's a lot of guys who try to work on the water who can't make it anyway. To think anybody can go out there and do a stock assessment is kind of foolish. I mean, fish swim. [laughter]

[54:00]

SS: Are there any examples of fishermen and scientists doing collaborative research, or sharing information a little better?

SW: I'm sure there is. I haven't. [laughter] I haven't been involved with any of it. I mean, I don't know. I feel like if they just took more weight to our words, it would help a lot, just in the trust

between commercial fishermen and scientists. There is no trust. I mean, you saw what you got on your Facebook page. Mention NOAA. [laughter] You basically get a middle finger from everybody, because we've been fucked by them for so long. Nobody even cares, that it's like, why?

SS: Yeah. That trust is obviously not there.

SW: There's none. Without trust, what do you have in this fishery? We basically work for the feds. It's basically like going to work for somebody you don't trust. You know? We're only allowed to catch what they'll let us catch. So, it's hard to trust their stock assessments, I guess.

[55:12]

SS: Are there any topics we haven't covered yet that you think are important or relevant to this project?

SW: I really don't know. I feel like I've just been blabbing on at the mouth here.

SS: No. There's a couple clear messages that are coming through. It's frustrating to think about how if people can't communicate, can't find ways to trust each other, it has real repercussions for people's lives.

SW: It is. The not knowing in this industry is what kills people. It's the stress of not knowing what you're going to do tomorrow. I mean, we already have to deal with weather and everything. Then you just pile on everything else. You could be shut down tomorrow. It's hard to operate like that. It's nerve-racking.

SS: The regulatory uncertainty just adds a whole layer to the natural uncertainty that you're dealing with because you're operating in nature?

SW: I mean, basically, it has a direct correlation to people's health. I mean, these regulations are hurting people's health. People are stressing so much about stuff that their health's declined. They get to that point where they're stressing so much about going to work that it's killing them. I don't know. Overregulated. I mean, we're the most regulated besides nuclear, right? I mean, come on now! It's a fish. [laughter] I feel like you could simplify a lot of the regulations. To go to work, you almost literally have to have a degree to sit there and read through all the regulations just to know what you're allowed to keep, where you're allowed to keep it, what size net you're allowed to use, what size you're not allowed to use. There's so much you have to know before you can even go to work. If you slip up on one of them things, you end up with a half a million dollar fine. If one of your breakaways isn't done just right, you know, you end up being hit by a big fine from the feds over nothing.

SS: Well I think we've covered most of it. Is there anything else you'd like to add before I shut the tape recorder off?

SW: Yeah, I really don't know. I feel like I said a lot, about summed it all up.

SS: Yeah, I think so. Alright, well, thank you.

[57:56]

[end of interview]