

Cape Cod River Herring Warden Oral History Project

TRANSCRIPT

Series: Cape Cod River Herring Warden Oral History Project

Interviewees: Mr. Dave Sargent, Retired Herring Warden and Shellfish Constable for the Town of Gloucester

Interviewer: Joseph Dello Russo, Volunteer Special Projects Assistant, Barnstable County Cape Cod Cooperative Extension Marine Program

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Location & Setting: Resources Virtual

Joe: If you just want to briefly introduce yourself, that'd be great.

Dave: Okay, I'm Dave Sargent

Joe: And you're a retired shellfish constable and herring warden

Dave: Yeah I'm a retired shellfish constable, herring warden, and I've been involved in the natural environment of Cape Ann forever, and still am.

Joe: Awesome, and then if you just want to, briefly, go into what your duties as a shellfish constable and a herring warden were? Just briefly to give people an idea of what your day-to-day operations were.

Dave: Well, as the shellfish constable, I had to get up very early every morning to update the shellfish answering machine to make sure that people could go shellfishing or else they couldn't earn their living that day. The machine had to be updated by 5, which meant I had to be getting up at 3 O'clock every day. Also checking to make sure that there weren't any rain closures or other closures (such as red tide), and then depending on what the tide was, I would have to start patrolling. I would check first the prohibited areas, making sure that people weren't shellfishing in prohibited areas, and then I would check the approved areas to make sure that people were abiding by the regulations that were in place to make sure that people weren't overharvesting and had permits. As a herring warden we have a volunteer fish count from April first to the end of May, and people go to the Little River and they count the alewives as they are going up at the counting weir. They put that information onto a paper that says how many fish came up within a 10-minute block of time. That information is then handed onto the division of

marine fisheries. They use that, along with other fish counts, for their database to see how well alewives are doing. Alewives, along with other anadromous and catadromous fish, aren't doing so well right now. This is all important information, even if people haven't seen any alewives that count counts; every count counts. I also have to make sure that there is no poaching that is done either with shellfishing, or baby eels, or alewives, so you know it's a lot of fun, or it was.

Joe: And from what I understand, the herring warden is a volunteer position.

Dave: Well, no they gave it to me as part of my title but didn't pay me for it.

Joe: Right, yeah. And so clearly somebody needs to love the natural environment and be an amateur naturalist to want to take on those responsibilities. So do you want to sort of go into your childhood, and what first got you interested in either anadromous fish or just the natural world?

Dave: Yeah, my grandparents, when we were young, they would babysit us. They would pack my sister and I up in my grandfather's kaiser, and put an afghan on us, and we would travel over to the Alewife Brook in Essex and watch the alewives run up. I would always look forward to that every year, and I became very fascinated by that. So every little stream and rivulet that I would come by, I would want to see if fish were going up. Sometimes I would mistakenly look at mosquito larvae, which were hopefully young fish, but that was never the case. Then I became more interested in that through my association with the herring warden before me, Stubby Knowles. I've been involved with him and really urged him and talked him into having a volunteer fish count. This will be the 22nd year of our volunteer fish count of the Little River.

Joe: Awesome. I find that's a common thread between fisheries people, that they're always looking in water, no matter what little stream or river they're walking over and when I go on hikes or walks with people they sort of get annoyed because I'll stop at every bridge and just look into the water for a second to see if there is anything hanging out there.

Dave: Right, even more than that I look at the vegetation, and I dig into the soil. I root around much like Pumba.

Joe: Haha, so you're really delaying whoever is walking with you then?

Dave: Yeah, y’know, just a glance doesn’t tell you a lot. The vegetation is there 24/7 so that tells you a lot more than just a quick glance. So, it is important to look at that. It is also important to look at the substrate to see what is happening upstream and what is happening there. It tells you a lot of what is happening in that little section of the waterway.

Joe: Sure, definitely. And so, you mentioned Stubby Knowles. So Stubby Knowles is a now passed herring warden. Do you want to describe when you first met him and how that relationship flourished?

Dave: Well, I first met him when I was a commercial shellfisherman and he was the shellfish constable. We started chatting and came to a pretty good friendship and he talked me into volunteering for the city for the shellfish advisory and I did that. Then I got involved with Mass Bay’s program Eight Towns in the Bay, which is now Eight Towns in the Great Marsh, and became the local representative. Through that process, in my representation, I was able to talk to him about the volunteer fish count. I also got involved in trying to do wetland restoration as well as shellfish restoration in that role. Stubby helped with that as well. When he finally passed, his relatives (as well as people of division of marine fisheries), asked me to take over because they didn’t want all of the wonderful work that he’d done to fall by the wayside. Because I was working with him so closely, I agreed to do that. I did that until I reached the same age that he was when he passed and then I decided to retire haha.

Joe: Right, and so you mentioned that you helped convince him to start a volunteer fish count. Before that, there were no fish counts happening or was it just you two?

Dave: Basically, Stubby was doing that by himself. He was writing things down on 3X5 index cards; what would happen year to year. You know he would show me those and share that with me as well. I prophetically said, y’know Stubby you are not going to live forever maybe we ought to open this up so more people can really enjoy this because afterall Gloucester is America’s oldest seaport, so we are better to have some information on anadromous fish. They [anadromous fish] travel through so many different environments that if they don’t mesh well together that there is something really wrong with these environments. We need to watch out for that because not only is this our heritage and environment and stuff like that, but everything in the ocean really depends on food fish. He agreed to that, reluctantly haha.

Joe: There was a little convincing that had to happen.

Dave: More than a little, but y'know it took a while.

Joe: Right, so once you did get the program started, what was the first year that you guys had that volunteer fish count?

Dave: It was 2000. It was in conjunction with Mass Audubon at that time, and Eight Town in the Bay.

Joe: Did you guys get a good turnout the first year?

Dave: Oh yeah. The first turnout, it was really good yeah. We have roughly 50-80 people on any given year doing fish counts and it's great. It is nice to see people, and they not only look for the fish, but as you and I have spoken a little earlier, they look to see if the plants are growing, if other animals that may be around, y'know birds or snakes or something and they report that on their little sheet as well. It is stewardship at its best.

Joe: Right, you mentioned this is going to be your 22nd year of doing that. I know you are retired now but do you still help out and count fish. Are you still involved in some capacity?

Dave: I am there every day haha.

Joe: Every day, yeah. So you still have a good pulse on things. Do you guys feel like you guys have gotten more public involvement over the years or is it more random with people schedules and whoever can show up on a given year?

Dave: There are some people who are tried and true, who show up every year. And then there is a normal turnover of people who maybe do it for a couple of years and then they leave, and then other people who are enthusiastic they take over for a couple of years. It is like a baseball team. You have some rookies and some old timers.

Joe: You've got to have that experience to help everything else move along. With the actual herring runs, have you noticed any patterns since you've started paying attention to them since you were a kid? More, less, or earlier [arrival time]

Dave: Well, when I was a child there was a lot more herring around. When Stubby and I were doing that, as well as the first few years of the volunteer fish count, things were pretty predictable. Lately, with global climate change, it is anyone's guess. There was one year where I actually had to break through ice so that people could see the flowing river, and then there was another year where it just flooded out not only the fish ladder but part of the road beside the fish ladder. Last couple of years, we have had droughts where there is hardly any water running, so the last few years everything has been not predictable and that is the only predictable thing that there is. Before that y'know, we were really counting on the heavy rains that you get in the spring and seasonally high groundwater and snowmelt too and we were able to deal with that on a regular basis.

Joe: Some of the challenges that you faced monitoring these runs was environmental conditions, and because the count, I believe you said starts on April 1st every year?

Dave: That's right.

Joe: So, you are not amending that schedule to the fish. You have to just deal with it as it comes.

Dave: That is true. There was one year, when it was really really warm in March, that the fish started to run at the end of March. It was only Eric Hutchins from NOAA, and I, that were able to see the fish for two or three days before the beginning of April. There have been other years where it has been really cold, and the fish haven't run until later. Usually, the water in the fish ladder has to be about 12°C for them to start moving up from the estuary.

Joe: And you need those spring flows to where the river is actually high enough for them to get into the river.

Dave: Right, and up until recently that hadn't been a problem. Now we have had droughts in the spring which I don't recall ever happening before since 2010.

Joe: Right, I was doing some work up in Maine and we were seeing that too where we were monitoring Atlantic Salmon and we weren't getting spring runoff and the snowpack wasn't there and this fish weren't able to get into the river. Similarly with herring, they would get to dam and there wasn't enough water to get up the fish ladder and then they would be easy pickings for ospreys and stuff like that.

Dave: Once I retired my wife and I took a cruise up to Alaska and we saw salmon that were not able to get up to their headwaters either in Ketchikan. They were stranded so, it is not just the Little River in Gloucester, as you said it is other places as well. That impacts the whole fisheries in the ocean when something like that happens.

Joe: Yeah, and have you noticed predator presence or other environmental, like biotic factors, that have affected the run. Maybe more eagles nowadays, more ospreys?

Dave: Yeah we have more striped bass, and we have more ospreys. One of the more meaningful things that someone wrote on a letter to me was that they went with their grandchild to do the fish count and didn't see any fish at all, but then they went up to the Lily Pond which is the natal headwaters for the alewife y'know in the Little River. They said an osprey swooped down and grabbed an alewife and take off. That grandchild will remember that forever and who knows maybe they'll be the alewife warden in 2050.

Joe: Right, and it is that kind of exposure, which is great that you were able to pioneer a volunteer fish count because that gets people outside and paying attention to what is going on; just like you have been your entire life.

Dave: It is like I said to Stubby that prophetically he won't live forever, well prophetically I won't live forever either and so occasionally you have to hand the baton off to a future generation.

Joe: Right, and was that some of your favorite things to do as a herring warden, was that public interaction? Or did you have other things that you really enjoyed?

Dave: I really enjoyed the public interaction more than anything else, and watching people get excited about that. That makes me very happy to realize that all of the hard work that Stubby put into maintaining and promoting the fish run, that it is being passed on.

Joe: You mentioned that there is a fish ladder. Do you guys count the fish at the top of the ladder as they pass through?

Dave: Well, I call it the fish ladder but there actually was a step fish ladder by the water filtration plant, and we had to monkey with it every year to make sure that the flows were right. Within the last few years, with many grants, we removed the

concrete fish ladder and the sludge lagoon that was by the water filtration plant, and a natural stream habitat was installed in its place, which is a weir and pool type of environment. This is really nice because the vegetation along the side has really bloomed as a result of that and it's really taken over and it's a nice place to look at. It can deal with extreme events like too much water for example. It still can't deal with the fact if we don't have enough water. Then the stream meanders through some areas that aren't developed and just before the Lily Pond we have a steep pass fish ladder that was just put in by division of marine fisheries. Before that we had a wooden Denil fish ladder that the carpentry shop had placed in with discretionary money from EPA. We had to repair that quite a bit in the last few years before we got the aluminum steep pass ladder.

Joe: Do you ever remember any times where there maybe wasn't enough water and you guys had to manually move fish up passed those impasses or was that never really an issues?

Dave: That never really happened. One of the things that happens is we've had it where we haven't had water and then there will be one or two rain events and all of a sudden, the fish that were out in estuary then start to head up. In the meantime, they're all sort of balled up down below in the estuary and the striped bass are having a smorgasbord.

Joe: Are you much of an angler?

Dave: Haha not as much as I used to be. I used to fish quite a bit when I was much younger.

Joe: I'd wonder if the angling community looks at those times and post up right where the river spills in the estuary there and know that there is probably going to be a few striped bass hitting their alewife patterns.

Dave: There is no doubt about it, y'know, any week now we are going to start seeing three or four anglers and pretty soon it will be a dozen down at that location starting to fish for striped bass.

Joe: So then, you first got involved in herring management because you met this charismatic guy and you talk about having to convince him to do things but did he ever have to convince you to take on some additional responsibilities and start

watching the herring runs with him or was it more of an I want to do this because of my childhood upbringing?

Dave: It was more like I want to do this. To him this was a very private thing for him, and it actually took some trust on his part to even let me be involved, and I was grateful for that.

Joe: That's interesting, so he probably enjoyed the serenity of going and monitoring these things himself, but now having a community of people to look after these fish you find that projects, such as; the replacement of your Denil fishway go faster now that you have more stakeholders in the mix.

Dave: Absolutely, you know, now that there is more stewardship, there are more voices calling for more help and stuff like that. In the past, he didn't have any budget to try and repair any of the fish ladders, so he and I would scrounge little pieces of wood and plywood that we would find at construction sites that people wouldn't need to help cobble together and scab together the denil fish ladder and the step ladder and stuff like that. You know, everytime we would ask for money people would say why, now it is a lot easier because more people will be involved. Otherwise, we would have never gotten the natural stream in place. It is only through stewardship and opening it up that we were able to do all that.

Joe: It is, you know, inspiring to hear that. You were able to recognize that and start this thing in Gloucester and build that community behind the herring run. It seems like that could be a lesson to other people who are facing similar situations, that maybe they don't have a budget, or they don't have public engagement and they are kind of on their own. By bringing those people in can, like you said, really build that stewardship.

Dave: At this point, I think we need the political will in order to make changes and you are not going to be able to do that if you do not have stewardship.

Joe: Right, so how does that inform your view on maybe the future of herring management and where that is going? Do you see that public engagement pushing more projects forward?

Dave: As far as being a prophet, I am a great loss.

Joe: Right, so its anyone's guess but hopefully current trends continue, you know on the public engagement side. We could use a little more rain but...

Dave: I am not sure, I think there are some moments where we were passed the tipping point with global climate change and there are other times where I see people getting very enthused and want to do things where I get very inspired again. I vacillate between the two, in other words; the tide goes in- the tide goes out not only in the estuaries but with my emotions as well.

Joe: Right, that is definitely a good point. I guess it is important to note for everyone who is listening to this, did you guys just have alewives, or did you have blueback herring as well?

Dave: We didn't have blueback nope. At one point we did have rainbow smelt, but we haven't seen those for a number of years. At the end of the Little River where it enters the estuary, there is a pier built called Frenchman's pier that was just for smelt fishing, but now we haven't seen smelt there for years now. What we are hoping is that sometime in the future they will also return.

Joe: Yeah, I don't know if you ever did any smelt fishing growing up?

Dave: I did quite a bit, yeah.

Joe: You did quite a bit, yeah. I would go with my dad down in beachmont in Revere, and he talks about stories of people filling five gallon buckets up with smelt. You know, a good year for us would be maybe like 100 fish back when I was you know 10 or 11, and now we go now we are lucky to get even a couple in the same spots we go. The loss of smelt is something that really not a lot of people are talking about and I think that is good because you are bringing these people in to count herring but you can also say "Oh we used to have this and that and we don't anymore."

Dave: It's really part of a so far tragedy. You can explain how things used to be, and where things are now, and you can normally summarize where they will be in the future if you don't do anything. There are sometimes where I think we are beyond the tipping point and there are other times where I am encouraged.

Joe: Do you guys ever see eels?

Dave: You know, there are a lot of eels. Little River is mentioned in Bigelow and Schroders "Fish of the Gulf of Maine" as having quite a bit of eels returning. Apparently, some people in Maine have read Bigelow and Schroders "Fish of the

Gulf of Maine” because many years we have people from Maine coming down trying to poach our glass eels and we have had a number of apprehensions and sent people back. There have been a couple of times where people have even put fyke nets at the end of the fish run and we’ve had to remove them and fortunately the Environmental Police and the federal government have also been helpful in trying to monitor that.

Joe: So, you would get law enforcement involved and never have to do any of that yourself because it is big money for sure and can be dangerous work too.

Dave: Well, I’ve had to do a lot of enforcement on that and whenever possible I try to call for the calvary.

Joe: Right, yeah there would be stories where Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries would come and be collecting the glass eels to bring them into labs to study them. They would collect them in these little traps and they would have to have security staged overnight because they would have people who would come and steal their traps. Some of them could be worth tens of thousands of dollars depending on what the catch was.

Dave: Absolutely right, you know during the season where glass eels are running, I would do night patrols as well.

Joe: And so you had herring, you used to have smelt, the eel numbers are still up, did you guys ever have see anything else or did you have anything unusual coming up the river in the spring.

Dave: Haha there was one fish counter who didn’t understand daylight savings time, so he picked an earlier time slot where it really didn’t get daylight. So he was there in the dark with a flashlight trying to see if any alewives had come up and he swore it was a sea monster that jumped in front of him but it was really just a river otter. It was a river otter that jumped up right in front of his flashlight and he fell backwards into the water, haha, he never made the mistake and he picked a later time the next year.

Joe: So he still came back, that didn’t stop him, that didn’t scare him away?

Dave: No, he hung in there.

Joe: That's funny. You know river otters, that's another animal that, you know in down Gloucester you are seeing ospreys and it is amazing how much the wildlife congregates around the run of these fish. Just so everyone knows alewives will swim up the river because they breed in ponds, so what is at the headwaters of the Little River?

Dave: It is the Lily Pond which is a fairly large but shallow body of water. In the Lily Pond, you were talking about things that rely on them, there are mussels called alewife floaters that totally depend on alewives for their existence. They spend part of their life actually in the fish themselves, in their gills, and then they're laid basically when the fish come up to lay their eggs the alewife floaters are also deposited on the same river bank so they also help try to filter sediment and turbidity and you know that is within the Lily Pond itself so it is a symbiotic relationship. There are other fish that are in the Lily Pond too like bass that sometimes try to eat the smaller juveniles and stuff like that. So, it is definitely a whole environment, ecosystem.

Joe: That is interesting, I didn't know about those mussels. So they are completely reliant on alewives?

Dave: Correct.

Joe: So, did you guys do any work in the pond? You mentioned some habitat stuff. I don't know how much you paid attention to that side of it.

Dave: Well I paid a lot of attention to that. Well, you know, occasionally, we'd see the empty alewife floater shells at the headwaters where the fish ladder is. I've seen some live ones along the side too. You know racoons, and other animals, they love to eat those mussels. It is a good food source for them.

Joe: So far, the herring that are able to get into the pond, other than predation, have had no real impasses to breeding. They've been able to successfully carry out their life cycle?

Dave: Right, and normally they come back and the juveniles return in July and in August from the Little River here. We make sure that they are also able to travel back down so it is not just a "everything sort of shuts off at the end of May" we have to make sure that the juveniles are able to return.

Joe: Right, and do you bring the public involved in that as well?

Dave: No, they are not part of that.

Joe: Right, because you guys don't count them or anything, you are just making sure that they have the access that they need to get to the ocean.

Dave: Correct.

Joe: Right, that's really interesting. I remember there was one time when I was up in Maine again we had come across a pond that a beaver had built a dam and rerouted a stream into a marsh. We go over there and there are just thousands of baby alewives in this marsh and are unable to get downstream because of this beaver dam. Normally fish can get through a beaver dam, but it was so packed tight with mud that they just got confused with the flow of water and you know there were thousands of these little alewife in two inches of water. We were with the state government so we were able to do what we had to do by clearing out a channel for these fish and guiding them back downstream. I'm sure a whole litany of things can happen, and you talk about an ecosystem in cycles, if you don't have good escapement numbers for one of those years then that is less fish returning in the future. When they are already going out into the ocean environment where pretty much everything wants to eat them.

Dave: Correct, we too... beavers, you know, show up and what we have to do is like every morning show up before if beaver activity... usually that is in the spring of the year where their young go out and look for new places to build dams and make lodges and stuff. If they start to do that by putting a few sticks, we remove the few sticks before there is a dam to discourage them and after a while they move on to some other place where they don't have the crazy person always removing all of their nice work.

Joe: Right, do you guys ever have to physically remove the beavers from the environment, or do you just work around them?

Dave: I found that because it is the juveniles, they get frustrated after about a week or ten days and then they move on. So, it is just a matter of trying to work with the environment rather than to work, you know, against it. It just comes with the territory.

Joe: So then, interesting to note, your stewardship is beyond just the spring runs. Is there any other times where you are paying attention specifically for herring other than the spring and when the juveniles are running back?

Dave: No, that is pretty much it with regard to herring. The natural environment is a natural pulse and that is one of the nice things about New England is the changing of the seasons and how the natural environment has to change with it and adapt.

Joe: Yeah, yeah definitely. You know, we are sort of at that time where the herring are going to start running again? I assume you are looking forward to this year, is there anything specific that you are looking forward to, or hoping to learn something new?

Dave: I am always hoping to learn something new; it is what keeps me going. We just received an email notification from the assistant shellfish constable who is in charge of the volunteer fish count this year. She is anxious to get going and there will be counters there starting April 1st and hopefully things will go well. You never know, there have been times where I have been really pessimistic about the fish run and then been surprised you know at how well it has gone for the next year. There is nothing that says spring like the annual Little River fish count so.

Joe: So, if anyone is listening that is, you know, a prospective herring counter; do you have any advice for someone who might be showing up for their first shift of counting fish?

Dave: Well, I would refer them to the shellfish constable, or the assistant shellfish constable at their office in harbor loop in Gloucester and they can give them directions as well as instructions on how to do things properly.

Joe: Yup...so, and then if anyone is interested in listening to this who then wants to go ahead and volunteer do you have a name or some direction on how people can get in contact with the right person to get a shift going this year.

Dave: Rebecca Visnick is the person who is in charge of the fish count this year, and she can be reached through the shellfish departments phone number or website or they can contact Pete Seminara who is the shellfish constable and he can also assist them.

Joe: Awesome, it is great to hear that the shellfish constable, herring warden position is still going strong and these are people who are really paying attention to...you know... I mean you know better than anyone that you have the commercial clammers who pay attention to the clams and you pay attention to the herring but for the most part, it is going unnoticed by a large majority of the citizens in that area.

Dave: Yeah, a lot of people who hop in their honda civic at 5:30 in the morning and then come back at 5:30 at night don't realize what a wonderful place that we live in as far as the natural environment is concerned. There is the woods and the water, it is amazing, and it changes, it's not static at all and hopefully it is resilient.

Joe: Yeah hopefully that is a great motivating statement to anyone who is listening to this who maybe isn't as involved as they would like to be or isn't involved in their natural community that these things can be found anywhere. There are natural cycles occurring, that if you can just look closely enough or find the people who are looking at them, then you know, I am sure you guys would love to have more volunteers every year.

Dave: You know this is true, you can never have enough people who are interested in the environment. Even if you know sometimes it becomes a little difficult working with them, it is better to have people involved than not involved.

Joe: Certainly, well thank you Dave, this is a great conversation and I think illuminates a lot about where we should be going and how we should be interacting with our natural world. Just picking your brain about trends and challenges that you've seen over the years. Just that institutional knowledge that can help the next generation of amateur naturalists to sort of catch them up to speed and not allow history to repeat itself. Now we can move forward together and hopefully continue to count herring in the Little River in Gloucester for years and years and years.

Dave: Yes, haha.

Joe: Alright, thanks a lot Dave.

Dave: Thank you Joe

Joe: I appreciate it.

Dave: Yep, signing off.

Joe: Have a good one.