

Interviewee: David Fox

Interviewer: Ian Bradley, University of Connecticut undergraduate student, for Connecticut Sea Grant

Date: February 19, 2021

Location: Virtual (phone)

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lobsters, traps, fishing, boat, bait, watershed,

00:00

IB: Okay, so I'm having an interview for the Connecticut Sea Grant and the American lobster Initiative Program. And speaking with David Fox, my name is Ian Bradley. And today is February 19, 2021.

00:15

David Fox (DF): I started writing and I wrote about fishing in Florida tarpon fishing in *Islamorada* and bonefishing and trevally fishing and Christmas Island in the Pacific. And then I was Riverkeeper on the beaverkill River for close to 20 years. So I had a lot of trout fishing experience. And, you know, I began to write about it. And I found it was sort of fun to revisit the old experiences, I learned from my grandfather, to observe the world. And to study the world and think about it a lot. And so I said, I'm not a writer, I'm a storyteller. And I am taken by storytellers. I like to hear people talk to people about, you know, what they saw what they felt what went on. So I wrote a series of stories about the several others about fishing at that time, some about fishing much later. And just found it in an enjoyable process. And my grandfather, I wrote a number of stories about him really studied like you he was a student of the watershed. So he studied the tides and the moon and, and the currents. And when we went out, it was not, hey, let's get the boat go out, you know, have some bait or have a fly line and see what happens. He had a plan. And I really enjoyed that it it, it added a big dimension to the fishing that I find in my lobstering and my fishing on Long Island Sound, it's really you know, you can go out throw the traps in the water, you can go out with boat, I had a little flats boat go out and, you know, start throwing lures around, we can really think about, you know, where would the fish or the lobsters naturally reside? Why would they reside there, you know, for safety for for food for security, what are all the reasons and if I can break that code. I wouldn't say I can think like a lobster or fish because I'm not sure lobsters and fish really think but there's an awful lot of books written about lobsters and fish that say their instincts and their habits can be studied, and they can be followed and you can change your experience, which is not to be a more successful lobstermen or a fisherman in terms of the numbers of lobsters or fish you catch. But to be more an integral part of the watershed, if that makes sense. One of the differences I've found between lobstermen and fishermen, whereas fishermen sometimes talk and they sometimes

embellish the truth or they feel unencumbered by integrity. lobstermen have a tendency not to talk at all.

They don't talk much until you really know em well. And they don't share as much the where to go and what to do is the Hey, what's going on, how's the watershed, you got a problem? They will share if somebody's poaching. You know, if traps are getting poached, I find that community opens up very quickly. But in terms of the rest of it, they they tend to be more independent. Neither good nor bad. It's just an observation. You know people learn how to do it and and you see them on the water. They're very friendly. You know, there's not a lobsterman I know out there wouldn't help you if you had a problem, but people are doing, people are doing their own thing. I don't run a lot of traps, but I can't remember what my fishing report was. But I probably had 80 to 100 keepers last year out of six or eight traps. And I give a lot of lobsters away because frankly I'm I'm enjoying the I enjoy the whole sort of gestalt of the thing I like going down in the boat, you know, I have my fishing gear with me so often. I'm watching the tide and if I have an outgoing tide, I'm gonna fish the outgoing tide. I finished the outgoing tide. And I'm gonna go pull my traps that pull my crabs Of course, I've got my boots and my, my heavy gear and my gloves and everything on board. And, and I go do that, but kind of the whole thing, but people will. People will ask me occasionally I'll get in the lobsters and they'll say, where do you get these? And I'll say Long Island Sound. They said, Well, could you be more specific? And I said, Well, sure. I got it out of my trap. Well, where's your trap? In Long Island Sound, and usually they'll smile and say, That's all you're gonna say. And I said, I don't know if you asked me another question asked me about the weather tell you a lot.

05:11

But yeah, but last year was funny two years ago, I had a little program I belong to a local Yacht Club. And people were fascinated with the lobstering. So I told a bunch of folks, I said, you know, if you would like to take the grandchild or a child out to see the lobstering, I'd be delighted to take them. So I took a number of, of grandparents, a few mothers, and children out, the children and it was really interesting, because I always ask them in advance, know how you can how you think your kids feel about this? Well, I don't know, you know, they're gonna be a little worried. The little girls might be a little scared, be a little messy. And, and then I would tell them on the way out what we were doing and where we were going. And then I would put on my my foul weather gear and put on my boots and get my gloves out, tell them all about it, then I'd show him the the, the bait well, where I had bunker, and then I give typically, two or three kids, I give each kid a job, you know, it's okay, now your job is to spot my buoys. And I'm going to get you in range. And here's the buoy, you know, because we got to put one buoy up on the boat so people can see it. I said, so here's our buoy, alright, and ours are nice. They're their bright orange with a big X, my last last letter in my name. And I said so. And their number. I said, so one of you guys, you're gonna have to spot the buoys. Okay, the other guy, you're gonna have to keep track of the numbers. So we don't always pick them up one through seven. Sometimes we pick up one and then five, and then four, and then three. So your job is keep track of the numbers. And if there's another kid, we'd bring him up another little job, to the bunker. And it's just fascinating to see how the kids get involved. Or you give the third one you say you keep track of how big the lobsters are. And you remember that you remind me when I get them out to

get the measuring gauge, okay, because it got to be a certain size for us to keep them. And the kids get so involved. They absolutely you know, oh, there's the buoy. And then we get the we get the boat up on top the buoy and we you know, we top the trap and we pull the trap up. You know, we got the blanket over the side. And there's a lobster in it. They're in the lobster in it. How big is the you know, how's the bait look, let's exchange the bait. We throw it back in. And so and then I give the kids, typically the parents, a couple of lobsters to take home and oh man, it changes their experience. But somebody came up to me at the at the local place and said, David, you seem to be taking one of these families out on the water. I said, Yeah. And they said, Well, aren't you worried that they're gonna see where your traps are and where other people's traps are and start lobstering. And I said, Let me tell you something about a lot of kids today. If their parents are not bringing them into this thing, or they don't spend a lot of time. They're not going to do this, I said, but I haven't taken a parent out yet who had a nice big sailboat or a nice big powerboat, who spent two or three hours with me with their kids pulling up lobster traps, dealing with smelly bait, looking at snapping lobsters, putting the rubber bands on and said, Oh, I'd really like to do that. I said, I'm the best advertisement going for the local fishing store. These guys, these guys all want to go over to I said you can buy. You can buy these lobsters for \$12-\$15 apiece at the fishing. You don't need to have the boat you don't need to get dirty don't need to put on the foul weather gear. You don't need to have the snapping lobsters in front of you. And I said my view is That's unfortunate. But that's the way it is. I said but I'll tell you I've taken out 15 to 20 families and I haven't had a single one yet. Call me back and say hey, where would you go to buy lobster traps to get bait and do this? People miss a great opportunity to to participate in this phenomenal watershed we have. I get a lot out of it to you and I wouldn't want you to think that it was a charitable gesture. It's not. I get I get a lot in return. You take these kids out and you see their faces when you know you're going out on the boat. And the first thing is should be you know you get your gear out you're putting the gear on and you're telling them about it. Well the anticipation, they're thinking, you know, this is like Jules Verne or something. The reality is we're never out of sight of land that we run out. And in fact, we're in an area where most of them their parents either sail or have power boats, or they drive them down to the beach. They know where we are. And then you find the buoy that you know, then, you know, Mr. Fox has got all his gear on. Looks like the Ancient Mariner. And then then we're pulling up this lobster trap. Well, of course the rope is dirty and, and slimy and, and that's going on the boat and there's little crabs and stuff running around. Well, they're laughing about that. That's really funny. Then you see the trap. The trap comes into view. And I just work on em. I say now you guys, you know, tell me when you see the trap. I you know, my eyesight. It's not all that good. So when it's getting up near the boat. You tell me? Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, there it is. There it is. No. Okay. Now, are we looking at the top of the trap? Yeah, the top of the trap, you know, in about 10 minutes. They're experts and they're loving it. You know, they're helping me they're telling me what to do. They're not observing. They're, they're into the game. And it's, it's just so much fun. It's, it's just a laugh for me in any number of times. We've come in and there have been three kids and an adult. And we've gotten four lobsters that day. And I'll give the family all four.

11:24

I'm not going out lobstering to eat. I'm going out to have fun. And if those kids which they do take those lobsters home and then the family cooks them and they have them for dinner. I did give the kids a lot of not a lot but I talked to them about respecting the lobster. You know this is a living objects that you don't go running around with it. Treat it with respect. And it's time to cook it. Here's what you do. So anyway, that's a little that's sort of my contribution to trying to to get them involved. I take them fishing occasionally. But lobstering is really neat because they you get the whole thing in one trip. And if they want to come out for another trip, they're more than welcome. I also under my boat, and all the kids know this, I keep a what I call my hotel. It's actually you know lobster in terms, they call it a car. But I have a big trap that I keep lobsters in. And so if I get two or three today, and we're not going to have them for dinner, give them away. I'll keep them there for four or five days throw some bunker in. Well, sometimes the kids will come down to my boat and say Mr. Fox, can we see the lobsters and I'll pull up the big trap up? Of course it has it's not a trap and that there's no escape. And I call the hotel and they just love to look out and it introduces them to yeah guys. This is living here in our water right here.

These aren't mysterious things where you got to go to the Caribbean or the far Pacific or somewhere to see them. They're right here, they are living in our water. And we got to take care of our water. We want to have these animals living here. No, I was in Annapolis and then I was in the Navy. And I moved here about 40 years ago so and I had fish I was fishing regularly I fish all over the place they go to the keys and fish for Bonefish I've been to Ambrose and the Bahamas. I've gone to Christmas Island in the Pacific. I was working up in the mountains in the Catskills as a river keeper on the Beaverkill River and enjoyed that. Out here I really started striped bass and blue fishing first. I always had I had a series of different boats all in the in the the low 20 somewhere from 21 feet to maybe 24 feet and easy you know nice V bottom fishing boats. So I have like a 19 foot boat with a 90 Yamaha on it that draws about six -eight inches of water. I can go most anywhere and I have a Minn Kota electric engine on the front of it. And I use that for lobstering and shallow water fishing and it's great. The flat bottom boat so you know it's not something you want to have in rough weather. I was going out. I was going out lobstering in the early 90s with guys and Jesus, it was easy. Lobstering was probably like blue fishing at that point. There were a lot of them. And then as you know so well well late 90s We they got wiped out. I wasn't running my own traps then. I was just going out because there were at the club I belong to there were probably I bet you there were six or eight guys lobstering. Today there's two of us because everybody got rid of their traps and then about I'd say I'm trying to guess. But I think somewhere around 2005 or six, one of the guys I was fishing with was pulling traps. And he was starting, you know, it was coming back and, and so I worked with him. And it wasn't until about three years ago that I finally said, you know, he and I were together and I decided I just run my own traps instead of working with him. It's been easy and good little, a little mix. But the only problem you know, is it at 76, how many traps can you pull to be perfectly honest, and I, I had, I had a few too many for a while. And I've had to cut back I was running eight or nine.

15:45

Honestly, keeping the boat on top of the traps in a rolling in a running rolling sea and pulling the trap up and dealing with it all, that's a little too much at my age. So I'm down to about five traps.

That works well. And I have a good yield. Yeah, I always have wired, I've always had wired traps, I can't imagine how it would be to haul up wood traps in my will in the water where I typically set traps, I'm setting traps, I look, I really work to find structure. And because my little boat is so good, I can go into some places where big, big boats don't want to go. And you wouldn't want to lay a line of traps in there anyway. So I can put my traps in a lot of structure that might be 15,18 feet at low tide. So that's not a bad lift. And the currents not that bad in there. And as a result, I've taken most of my traps that had four bricks, and I went to three bricks. And now I'm down to two bricks. And I'm not having any trouble where I'm putting traps with them getting swept away. And this is just an endeavor where you can really have fun and you can learn about the world. You live in the round here. People think lobsters come from Maine. And I have a friend that has a restaurant. And I took his grandchildren out. And he said, Well, I think the lobsters from Maine tastes a little better. It's really, really think so he said, Yeah. And he said we buy them at Stop and Shop. We say okay, I said they may taste different. And I said do you have any idea when you go to Stop and Shop or shop? Right? How long those lobsters have been in that tank? I mean, they don't they don't do they? They just put the lobsters in the tank. I said when you get one of my lobsters, he's come out along that's a fresh lobster. They said have you ever thought about that lobster sitting in that tank at Stop and Shop? He's been eaten. He's been living off his own body fat for a long time. I don't know exactly. You know, if you think it's better, you get more protein and less fat. But that's that's a different animal. And I don't know what that water is in that tank and how they're filtering it but I can tell you my lobsters are coming out of Long Island Sound and our water is good. And it's real saltwater. It's not some kind of filtered water. I think the last 5 to 10 years, fishing activity has been picking up down in this area of the world. It's more active. I do see more people out in the shallow water. I cover with my little boat active actively on a three or four days a week about 10,10 miles maybe a little bit more of shoreline. I don't see that many people out and I see an awful lot of people in the same places. That to me is not the game you know if it's working there it's great but I like to try different places and just experiment around. You got to move although I, I right now for the last year or so. I've been in a real sweet spot and I haven't moved more than I haven't moved my set more than half a mile Yeah. But but um you know I'm in a lot of structure I'm where a lot of people don't want to be in the commercial. I don't know what exactly what the commercial activity is around. But they don't want that. You know, that's not that's not an area that works for them.

End