

Interviewee: John German

Interviewer: Jeremy Sharp, Cornell University undergraduate student, for New York Sea Grant

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John German Audio

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Jeremy Sharp (JS) Today is March 16, 2021. This is Jeremy Sharp of the Northeast American lobster initiative. I'm currently based in Ithaca, New York. I'm interviewing Mr. John German remotely from his home in Brookhaven, Long Island, New York. So to start off, can you tell me a bit about yourself in general?

John German (JG): Well, I was born here, and I've been fishing here. I like to say all my life, but that's not true yet.

JS: Yeah, no, I know. It's a bit of a broad question. I apologize. So how did you get involved with the fishing business?

JG: Where I live, when I was a kid, everybody fished there was hundreds and hundreds of fishermen and mostly clam diggers. At the time that was the only money around here, everybody had to dig clams. I live right here on the water. So on the south shore of Long Island. And that's where it started.

1:01

JS: What attracted you Oh, sorry, continue.

JG: Pardon me?

JS: I was just going to ask what drew you to the business?

JG: There was no other money around There was no way you make any money around here. So that's what everybody did. They went fishing. Everybody fished. They had a tradition of fishing here for hundreds of years. You know, that's what everybody did. And

now a lot of different money's been around but at the time, when I was a kid, there was no money around here except on the water.

JS: All right, was your family involved in fishing?

JG: Nah, my father was a farmer. He yelled and screamed at me when I went fishing, he thought was a stupidest thing in the world. But as he got older, he started asking me for a job, though.

JS: Really?

JG: Yeah.

JS: That must have been a very good day for you.

JG: Well, not really. He was not doing too good in the farming business. And he was quite a bit older than

JS: Oh, I'm sorry about that, sir.

02:06

JG: It's all right, it happens to everybody. Yeah. So I let him do something on a boat. I paid him something but he wasn't wasn't really a fan.

JS: Yeah. So you have you fished lobster before?

JG: Have I fished lobster? 45 years or so? 40 or 40? Or at least 40 years or the last 40 years straight.

JS: Oh, last 40 years. So I infer from your first answer. You started off with clams, right?

JG: Yep, yep.

JS: Alright, so Well, Well, how'd you make? Oh?

02:43

JG: Well, you know, it's just most of the guys here lobsters they started off, you know, working on the bay, when I say clamming, and that means you get one clam. And we went gil netting on the bay, we went, you know, catching oysters and catching mussels and hauling nets for shiners and all that kind of stuff. And it was just like a gradual thing changed over more and, you know, clamming is basically a zero-investment enterprise. And with lobsters you got quite a bit of money, you know, and when they just graduated from there, I guess, I don't know, it was a slow evolution, you know, and I just bought a

boat and I bought a boat because I got a good price on it. And I didn't use it for about three years. And eventually I decided I had to use it. So that's how I got going in lobstering, probably about 40. I've been doing this for 55 years. So probably about 42 years ago, I should have 40 Maybe a little bit more. I started lobstering.

03:44

JS: Interesting. So and then you'd say the lobster business. I mean, how's it been? Throughout that time?

JG: Well, it was pretty good till about 10 years ago, it was really good actually. And we had a we had a pretty good heyday there for about 30 years and the last 10 years, it's kind of gone to hell, but the conditions here on Long Island Sound weren't favorable. They had a big die off here, a combination of spray and they were spraying for mosquitoes and the water got a little warmer and it just went downhill. You know, pretty fast. It went down and one or two weeks it disappeared. We held on for about another 10 years after that. We was all right. And it really got terrible here. Most of us switched over to conchs in the last few years. But it's it was was a good ride. I fight like I told people before if I died tomorrow, and I went to wherever I was going, maybe Heaven or whatever. And he said to me, we screwed up. You weren't supposed to be here so we're sending you back And he said here's a hit you can do whatever you want. I'm gonna send you back I said just send me back and let me do it all over again. It's how I feel about it

05:10

JS: Well I love that attitude sir.

05:13

JG: I'll tell it I think I know it's been a good life for me. I've been doing it for like I said 55 years.

JS: That's good sir. May I ask what were some of your fondest memories while fishing?

05:27

JG: I don't know. I like to see the sun come up in the morning you know when you're out and you're going out and it's dark and you're heading off to the east and the sun is just about breaking out on the horizon here, I think in our there's probably 1000 guys up and down this whole coast from here to Canada someplace looking at that same sunrise steaming out here doing the same thing I kind of enjoy that a bit. And you know I'm not much of a people person. I like not having to deal with the people and I live here on Long Island you know, it's 3 million people live on this island and I work all day long and

I don't see another person. So there's not it's you know, there's not many people around can say that I don't have to see anybody, have to talk to anybody or chatter on the radio but now it's good I had all my kids you know, they've worked on a boat my brothers and everything they work with me and so it's been good. I can't complain at all. I like it that's what I'd like to do again if like I said if they sent me back

06:22

JS: Well, I mean that's good. So I take it your your immediate family for the most part are is working the fishing business with you?

JG: No, not anymore. I got that out of their system. My son worked with me for about 20 something years and we had it got a little we had a really bad year and he got on a fire department and my daughter's they all went on to college and went you know, one's a lawyer, one works for AT&T. I mean, they did it when they were little, but they don't do it anymore. It's pretty tough right now, it's pretty tough to support a family on what we make lobstering. Up to the north they're doing well. But here it's pretty, it'd be pretty tough. The only reason I can do it and a few other guys can do it is because we got our own equipment and and you know, we don't all we don't we're not trying to raise a family and not trying to pay off mortgages and all that other stuff. But it's enough, you know, with Social Security and you whatever money you got saved and whatever money you make, it's alright, but if you couldn't invest that much money anymore, and expect to pay off the boat and pay off the house and everything you have to do with kids, you know, raise them it's not enough money in it.

07:31

JS: Yeah, it's for a very independent lifestyle from what it sounds like.

07:36

JG: Yeah, yep, yep. Yeah, that gets to be more of a crutch than it hurts a lot of guys trying to be too independent because there isn't like I try to do what the what the there's just not enough money in it that's all. It costs too much operating too much overhead. Of course, I gotta tell you one thing when I would bringing up my kids you could get health insurance for the whole family for about maybe \$800 \$1,000 a year and now it's about 18 grand a year you know that kind of stuff you got to pay off and out of your own pocket and everything costs a fortune now, boat engines, gear, everything. So we had all that stuff you know we didn't have to buy it but if you had to buy it all you would never pay it off. We had a good it's good now and and you know I I'm done with all that stuff. So it's a good thing for me till I die I guess

08:38

JS: Geez, I don't know how to respond to that but but

JG: Well, no, we just go until we die and we call that retirement.

JS: do you have plans for retirement?

JG: Not really. Really? I'm 74 now and I don't plan on it but we'll see. I don't think so.

JS: Well I wish you the best of health sir. Yeah, so I that actually when you're discussing equipment that actually brings up another question of mine. Could you tell me about the type of boat they you've used the type of traps the type of equipment in general just can you give me a basic overview of what you use now and what you used before:

JG: Well? Well for the last you know, for quite a while now at least the last 30 years we used to use wooden boats or wooden traps but we don't use that anymore. Too much maintenance on it and now you know it's all fiberglass boats and big diesels and wire traps. And you know, it's you know, a trap we used to build a trap for about you know, 8-10 bucks out of wood. And now it costs you \$85 a trap for the wire ones it's unless you build them yourself and it's only if you don't save that much money building them so. It doesn't it's everything's changed the way we haul, the kind of motors, the hydraulic motors we use everything's different and more expensive but you know, constantly evolve you know, constantly evolving you know. Now guys, guys to the north of us not so much here fishing more offshore. Our boats are mostly 40 footers, 40, 42, 43 footers. Now they want to build 50 footers with bigger engines they can run offshore and more basically they're they're fishing offshore but they're day tripping and they got great big boats, great big motors and great big payments, you know, boat now might cost a million 2, a million 3. Whereas you used to be able to buy a boat, you know, like we use a 40-footer for sale, \$125,000-30 thousand you know 30 years ago so everything's changing, the industry changing you know, we got a lot more electronics than we ever had before. And I don't know when it ends but it ends when the lobsters end, I hope. Those guys up north are doing good they're like I'm talking north Maine, you know Nova Scotia in that area but they got to the same like sea conditions and environment that we had like 30 years ago. That environment is like moved to the north more and it's really producing lobsters good for them good for em. I don't know what else to tell you about the trap you've probably seen them their wire, you probably see him laying around

11:20

JS: I've seen a few of them Yeah, but I'm Maine- Nova Scotia but I'm actually this brings me into the kind of a two part question so the first part is, why do you think the

price of equipment has gone up like so much? Because that seems like such an extravagant rise

JG: Well, everything's going up my first truck I bought in 1970 I bought a \$2,000 off the lot I just bought one about six or eight months ago it's the same truck basically I mean it's got a couple more bells and whistles on it that's \$55,000. Our first house I bought it and now I bought it here for \$10,000 Now the house across the street from me just sold for \$900,000. So everything's going up you know it's in price of raw materials went up the price of bait went up as more demand for you know everything on a boat there was engines one way or everything just went up I don't know just the way things are people want more money to work and to build them and they get it and we pay it so having foods going out everything I don't know it's just the natural progression. This thing when you're trying to shut down these oil pipelines around here you know that oil they shut down everything goes up because everything's got to be trucked all over the place.

Now the trucker they got it cost them a lot more to trucker cost me a lot more to go with fuel now than it used to you know used to be diesel was used to be cheap now it's more expensive than gasoline. I don't know you know, supply and demand I guess some people want more money to work and you know people around here they make \$100,000 They think they are poverty stricken. It's ridiculous there was no such thing when I was younger. I mean the average person when I first started off you know fishing on the water I did, the average salary around here was about \$5,000. Oh, everything's going up all up and down on Long Island. I don't know why and I don't know where it's gonna stop but it keeps on going. You see even the price of gasoline went up the last couple of weeks. You know, so I don't know what drives it. All I know is I gotta pay it if I want to go.

13:27

JS: Oh, unlucky meme. All right, geez. Man. Outside rain for a car. That seems like the life sir. Geez. Oh, okay, fine.

JG: It's not only two grand for the first truck, grand two grand it was our 1970 That was the first truck I bought was 1970 brand new off the lot two grand \$2,000 Now it's the same ones \$55,000

JS: That's insane. Say that's that's absolutely insane.

JG: Well that's what it is, it can

14:03

JS: Oh, well. So kind of shift in focus from that. Do you think the die off that happened in Long Island will happen to Maine and Nova Scotia?

JG: I don't think they'll die off like that. I think eventually their catches will peak. But Long Island Sound was a little bit different situation because we have a contained body of water that water really never gets out of Long Island Sound because you've got to figure it's about 150 miles long. And the tide only goes for six hours. So if it's going at two knots. It can only go 12 miles one way and then it's coming back. You know, it sloshes around in there, you get to the eastern end as a little bit of mixing but you know, it's the same water going back and forth. So you get something in there or some problem with it, whether it's warm water or pesticides or whatever. It's contained in there kind of can't get out where's your take the rest of the coast it's open ocean is a better you get storms and there's a better influx of you know water to water to cool it or if there's any kind of thing we're on where it gets diluted it's it's more exposed to the open ocean. Long Island Sound where I fished, we didn't have that. I don't I don't think it'll happen, not the way it happened to us. But I mean not everything goes in cycles I can see the catch going you know get a little we've been have phenomenal catches for the last you know, seven or eight years and I can't see it staying that way but even if it went down to about a quarter that I'd be happy with it if it was me

15:49

JS: yeah so when the die off first happened Do you remember what the initial reactions were like?

JG: Oh yeah, guys guys were going crazy. They went out there and within about two-day period they're they picking up all their traps. Lobsters were laying in their traps just dead, and then the few that did survive, they'd be putting them in you know and tell them taking them to their buyers and when they went to sell them they'd be dead and a few that did survive after that they put them in have them in tanks and the next day they would be dead, so guys who are pretty well pretty well upset that's for sure. It was not a good time we weren't guys you know they got mortgages and houses to pay off and boats and everything else and often they have no income they were it was an extremely depressing time for a lot of guys. You know again our fishermen aren't really we don't really translate well in other businesses where you got to deal with a lot of people and everything else so a lot of guys did you know I'm getting out of the business and have done well and the initial shock was was was not too good

17:02

JS: no I bet I mean how did you survive that how did you push through that

JG: well we had, my fish I used to fish the eastern end of the Sound but our catches dwindled but then it dwindled so bad that we stopped. We went for about another 10 years where I am if the initial die off before it just started progressing and it was just not you know there was no you just couldn't do it on lobsters, we had to expand on anything we've catch a lot more fish and conch got to be a big deal, they were worth money and there was plenty of them around. Some guys switched into that and that carried us over and but and then fish, say like sea bass and black fish and scup and striped bass got to be a lot more important to us than they used to be. And that's basically what sustains us right now, not lobsters

17:57

JS: Okay, well it's nice to hear that you know you guys adapted well

JG: Well only a few guys adapted a lot of guys got out of their business or they just died one or the other.

JS: Oh Geez.

JG: I know there's a lot of them. A lot of them are older. So they haven't given out any licenses since 1994. 1994 was the last time they gave out any lobster licenses. 1994. So unless you had a license in 1994 you wouldn't have one now.

JS: No, really?

JG: No. So there's no young guys in the business really.

JS: So you're telling me if I wanted to fish lobster I couldn't apply for one now or

JG: No. No, you can't even apply for one.

JS: Oh geez. Okay

JG: In 1994 was the last time they gave one out, it was June of 1994.

18:44

JS: Wow that's crazy and why why was that the case to preserve the lobsters or what?

JG: Well, they made a limited entry fishery and stocks were down and they don't see they don't see on a depressed stock like that they don't want to give out any licenses. It's pretty much like that way on the whole coast you know. You can get some of the

other some of the other place they can sell licenses but here we can't. And but in Maine is a big waiting list guys can't get licenses, and Connecticut it's limited entry, Rhode Island I'm not sure exactly what they're doing in Rhode Island but in Massachusetts they have a program where you have to do an apprenticeship and and the same thing in Maine you have to get into an apprenticeship and get on a waiting list in New Hampshire kind of same way. Canada they sell licenses but they go for big money. But there's no place you can just walk in and slap your money on the table and just go get a license.

19:40

JS: There was a day it used to be like that.

JG: Yeah, before 1994 it was, you could go down the department, conservation department and give em your money and they'd give you a license.

JS: I'm guessing it was pretty cheap back then too.

JG: I don't even know what it was might have been a \$100, \$25 dollars a license or something. And if you don't renew that license one year you lose it. You can't get it back. So you got to renew that license every year. If you don't renew it you're done you're out

JS: and you can't get it back.

JG: So no no way in hell you can get it back because guys forget and guys have different circumstances that happen and if they don't it's no I don't know one person who ever got it back.

JS: Oh wow, what are they up to nowadays?

JG: Or the people that didn't get them back?

JS: Yeah.

JG: Well, they could already get a job but I guess some of them went into landscaping or you know once they it seems once they drop out of the fishery you never see him again. I don't know what they do really.

JS: I'm sorry about that, man. Wow

JG: Well that's the way it is.

JS: I'm sorry I interrupted you. What were you gonna say sir?

JG: No, you're the leader.

JS: No, no, sir. You are the star of today's show. Don't worry. But um, what? What's the renewal process like for you right now?

21:15

JG: Well, it's not bad renewing. It's not bad as long as you keep getting them they send you the thing around, you know, December or November or December or the beginning of the year. You got to mail it in or renew it and you got the whole year to renew it. Like the license I have now I renew mine in December because I'm hugely efficient through January but you got until the end of the year to next December to renew your license for this year. But if you don't renew it, you're not getting one next year. Okay. And I have Connecticut licenses too. It's the same same thing in Connecticut if I don't renew it by March 31 of the year, I can't get it. I can't get it for the year and I'm out I can't get it again.

21:55

JS: Yeah. Okay, well, sounds like you keep on your toes pretty well.

JG: Wow. It's called survival I guess

JS: So I gotta ask and how am I gonna How do I phrase Oh yeah, so you mentioned January you just go fishing January so what seasons around the year or what time of year do you normally fish

22:19

JG: well we fish year round you know this time it you know a normal year like right now I'm doing some work for Cornell we we did a derelict trap removal, we usually do that in the wintertime. But you know when I'm done with that we'll start fishing for for striped bass. That opens May 15. And then we'll fish striped bass for a couple of weeks and we got an allocation of what we can catch on that, and we'll catch that. And then I'll be conching, the conch seasons starts, and then with that when we do that what I was fishing for sea bass and black fish and that'll pretty much keep us going right through till around September or so. September October and you know we'll fish right through there straight through November, December, and in January. And then then we start fishing offshore. I got a friend of mine I go with his boat, fish offshore fishing fluke. You know

that's a trip fish, and we go out for about you know, 30 hours at a time only because it takes so long to get to where we got to go right now we're fishing about 65 miles offshore. You know, that'll end up here pretty soon and like I said in between those trips, I'm going to Cornell and then it'll conch season will start again and we start the whole thing over again.

23:51

JS: Oh, wow. So that sounds like quite a schedule.

JG: Well, we're trying to, blends all in together sounds like a lot but we get a lot of time off this time of year.

JS: That's good. That's good, sir. So what work do you do for Cornell? I know you mentioned you know, you're retrieving fishing traps. What's going on with that?

JG: Well, this is program they got to go through DEP Department of Commerce and National Fisheries Service called derelict gear removal derelict, some derelict pots or something like that. When we go out, we dredge up these old pots and stuff that are left on the bottom out there. You know, just general. So far in about the last 10 years, we've taken out about 20,000 old pots we've dredged up. They got a system we drag behind a boat, matter of fact I was supposed to go tomorrow with them, but I had to cancel that. But that's what we're doing through Cornell, which Cornell just administers the program. The money actually comes from National Marine Fishery Service.

24:55

JS: Okay, well, that's cool. And then what did you do with the pots after you dredge them up?

JG: Well, this day sometimes this energy company called Dover I think is the name of it and they take them any burn them up or something or energy or something and or sometimes they just scrap them in order to just scrap the pots usually not in too good of shape

JS: okay and then so these pots are left behind because

JG: yeah they're left lost, and whatever but they're on a you know we go out we I pretty much know what guys fished and you know, we just go out and get them or try to get them you know, sometimes you get a bunch, sometimes you don't get too many. But that's it. That whole program is about you can call it Cornell University, Cornell or

Marine Program. If you want more information about that, I'm sure they'd be glad to tell you.

25:51

JS: sounds pretty cool. I haven't even heard of it. But that sounds really cool. Okay,

JG: Marine debris, marine debris removal. Matter of fact, you can go on the computer and put in Cornell and put it into marine debris removal and they got videos of it and stuff, they make videos and all that sort of stuff. You'll see my boat on it, it's the Suzanne Marie, you'll see that one on there, marine debris removal and Cornell Marine Program and you'll see they got plenty of stuff on it. And like I said, they they bring guys out there to film it and film it with drones and all that sort of stuff.

JS: That's cool. Okay, yeah. And it sounds like I'm looking it up right now. Sounds like a really good program. It looks like it. Looks like they do it worldwide. But um, you mentioned your boat the Suzanne Marie, can you tell me about that boat? Right? Did you use it for lobster fishing at all or anything like that?

JG: Oh yeah, that's the whole use boat. That boat there is 26 years old. Yeah, you'll see it if you're looking at the things I use today, from the users. That's what I'm using right now.

JS: That's awesome. So she's been with you for 26 years and you've used your official lobster like you said?

26:55

JG: oh, yeah, yeah, so like, standard 44-foot lobster boat.

27:00

JS: That's awesome. So for Oh, okay. That's cool. 26 years I actually was around the lobster. Okay, so I'm just trying to get a timeline in my mind before proceeding to the next few questions. So what what kind of boats did you start off on like, well, what actually not let me ask you this. What was the best single best boat you think for lobster fishing type of boat? The kind of fishing right now? Yeah, like the

27:28

JG: the one I'm using now. I guess it's the best captain I worked up to I probably had eight or 10 boats in my time. You know, once upon a time, we were running two boats, my son had one in front of the other. This the one I settled on, that's what I got I think that's the best one. I've had plenty of them from small ones, you know, 20 footers up to

you know what I am now 40 foot, 40 foot seems to work out best on our fishery for what we do and the type of conditions we run into and the amount of gear we have to move around store you know, pull around everything else like that. 40-footer seems to work the best.

JS: 40-footer

JG: for us. And that's a pretty standard lobster boat up and down the coast. If you go any where's on the coast, 44 young brothers feel you'll find 90% of them are in that range.

JS: Okay, cool. So

JG: they're all fiberglass keels.

JS: Fiberglass, do you prefer wood or fiberglass boats?

JG: fiberglass. There's too much maintenance in wooden. Every wooden boat you see they might look pretty, but sooner or later somebody's gonna saw them up and throw them in a wood burning stove sooner or later. Fiberglass, fiberglass ain't that way.

JS: Yeah, no, I bet I mean, if you tried to burn it, it would stink up with smoke. But yeah, well, I guess

JG: I had one. I had that built in 64 a 64. I think 64 And I just saw it the other day this guy took it, took the hull and made a sport fishing boat out of it, ripped it apart. It's beautiful. Great like the day come out of the factory. And that's how fiberglass is you know, that hull, from 1964 to now and it looks like it was just built but wood wouldn't be that way. Wood you got maintenance on them all the time there. They're just another thing to maintain. It's like wooden pots, they beat them up.

JS: I'm sorry, you were saying about fiberglass, I realize

29:34

JG: Now fiberglass and wire pots, it cut's way down on your maintenance. It's hardly any maintenance on them

JS: That's awesome. Yeah. So talking about the fishing quantity that you guys have. What's the amount of lobsters that you typically get this year compared to the back then?

JG: Well I've been lucky to catch two hundred pounds of lobsters this year and years ago, we used to catch about 150 to 180,000 pounds.

JS: Geez.

JG: Yeah, right.

JS: I'm not good at math, but that definitely seems like less than 1% of what you guys used to catch.

JG: Probably is way less than 1%. I don't know. I never figured it out.

JS: I mean do you think lobster will ever make a return?

JG: It might but not in my lifetime, or at least my fishing lifetime I don't think it will I got no, each year we say it can't get worse, but it does.

30:41

JS: Oh geez. So it's just been on the decline ever since.

JG: Oh, yeah.

JS: Oh my gosh. I'm sorry sir. Sure. But imagine how much lobster

JG: What I make now what I make now fishing on controllable stuff and bass. I know what I make now in a year I used to make in a big week lobstering.

JS: Wow. Goodness.

JG: That's what it is.

JS: Oh, geez, sir. Wow. Yeah. I can't believe that much lobstering used to show up in that area.

JG: Well, used to be a lot of lobsters caught around here. But it ain't that way no more.

JS: I mean, imagine how much more you could have caught with the fiberglass boats and whatnot.

JG: I don't know. It is what it is. I imagined it don't make any difference. Yeah.

JS: Was there a visual difference between the lobsters by the way? Like, could you guys look at them and tell something's wrong? Or was it just numbers?

JG: It was it was basically just numbers. We had some shell rot around and but you know, it didn't seem to be a major problem, but we're just the numbers that don't take too long if you go out every day and you catch 500 dollars' worth of lobsters. And of course your \$750 to run the boat. It can't go on forever like that.

JS: Yeah, no, of course. Yeah. No, I am sorry about that. Do you think

JG: It don't make any difference? It's just what it is.

32:07

JS: Yeah, I mean, I hear that the fishing community in Long Island especially the lobster fishing community. It was a big culture you know, there's a big culture surrounding it. Would you agree that's the case?

JG: I would say Yeah. It still is among the fishermen. I pretty much know all the fisherman on Long Island from Montauk you know, all the way up around to the west. I know pretty much all of them. I see quite a few of them quite often, in fact I talk to most of them every day. Either on the radio or telephone or radio or whatever they stop around. We still meet. Like I said all I guess that old fishermen they hang around the docks all day long, they'll only talk about the you know the big catches and fishing here and who was fishing there and who's got your warden and I don't know if all accountants go down there and sit on a bench and talk about their old ledgers or whatever, but fishermen do that. That's what they do.

33:03

JS: Do you think this kind of this culture? I mean, you've told me about a lot of fishermen exiting the industry. But how big of a hit Do you think this culture took after the die off?

JG: Well, just lobster wise, they went from I think well, just where I am. Probably they said we went from about how much of a hit on a price or money wise, it went from down to from about \$20 million dollars to about a couple \$1,000 dollars. You know this whole industry?

JS: Geez.

JG: I mean, there ain't enough lobsters laying you couldn't even get a bunch of people together and eat what they catch lobster wise. You know, on the island, but you know, it was one or two places guys fish way out east where they catch a few lobsters but it ain't no big grand slam or nothing.

JS: Yeah,

JG: No, I'm not going I'm not me. Well, I'm not moving anyplace to go catch lobsters, because I'm gonna stay where I am. That's it. And I ain't gonna go chase them all up and down the place. If I was younger, if I was a kid, you'd have to go someplace where you could actually do it. You could never make it here. You'd have to move to Maine or Canada. I don't know what you do. But you couldn't stay here and do it. We have had quite a few guys moved to Rhode Island and everything. Most of them are fin fishing now, they fin fish more than anything else.

JS: Yeah, I was gonna ask, what is fin fishing?

JG: You know, catching fin fish, like flounder, fluke and you know, fin fish. Oh, fish. You know, fluke, flounders, you know scup. Yeah, sea bass, dragger, they drag nets around.

JS: No. Okay. Anything with a fin. I didn't know that was the term, that's actually very interesting. So yeah they switched over and I assume you just, you said you have no intention of leaving the Long Island area now

JG: I'm not leaving, I was born here and I'm going to die here.

JS: Oh, congratulations. What about Long Island appeals to you so much personally?

35:18

JG: Well I mean this is the way I was born and I have no reason to leave. You know I live I like a lot of people around here I went to kindergarten with them I went to Little League with them and Cub Scouts and everything else and where I live it's a pretty decent area. I live on the water here and I know everybody, and they know me. I got no reason to move. I don't have to go chase around you know, like I said, I don't have to go support families and everything. All my kids are grown up and got their own families. I don't have to support any families or anything. I can live quite comfortably on what I have. You know, I don't have any bills. My couches are paid off, my truck, boat,

everything is paid. I don't have any. Any, you know, reason to go chasing around after anything. I got enough.

JS: That's good, sir. That's good. So currently, how how bad was the industry impacted as a whole by the COVID 19 pandemic?

JG: Well, actually, it was impacted quite a bit, not so much, in the demand side, and the prices went all the hell with everything, you know, I grew up catching sea bass this spring. And that normally would be well, first we started off with striped bass, striped bass, and when we catch them in May, just not many around us. They're usually about Oh \$6 item \$6.50. We got \$3 for them this year, and they got as low as \$1 and a half and the price wise and so and then fluke and the guys that catch official, you know, round the prices were what really killed us. There was enough demand around and a lot of guys started selling stuff on the side of the road or they were getting the right price but they couldn't sell the volume but what they were catching, they were they were getting good money for but this COVID thing, they shut down all our market stuff we catch you take lobsters and striped bass and that's a high price item all that stuff is sold in the city in Manhattan and all our stuff and all the restaurants and everything. Well they shut them all down, we have no market. That's why they couldn't move the things.

They told us, don't go, it's this COVID thing, and even when they come back, a lot of guys are pretty concerned even when it comes back here, when they open up them restaurants again a lot of them aren't gonna make it. Can't open back up again because it's out of business and can't afford to go back in, they lost that income, they can't afford to go back in business and a lot of the people are going to flock to the restaurants again, when they do open, and a few that are open, got a lot less market in order to sell our stuff and you know the higher price of sea bass, and they cut the price so much on that to sell what we can, but when it does come back, the market ain't gonna be there for, at least for a while, and it might never come back. Because these are outlets have taken such a hit, the guys who own restaurants and everything. I know one guy that we were supplying, and he was buying stuff on a dock and he called it "Dock to dish" and he'd buy it on both the boats and he had his own restaurant accounts there a bunch of them used to run them, every one of his restaurants went out of business. The markets were what killed us more than anything else.

38:40

JS: Geez. Oh my gosh, that sounds devastating. Sure. Do you think what do you think has had a bigger impact on the fishing industry so far? To date? The lobster die off or the pandemic?

JG: Oh, that's a good question. The lobster die off put us out of business. There's no hope after that. At least during the pandemic, there's some hope for the future. Maybe things would get back to normal but when the die off or die off, it's a pretty permanent thing. The pandemic is you know, it's a good possibility it will get better. Maybe not right away but eventually but I think they, the die off was the real killer not not so much the pandemic

JS: Good point. So do, where do you see the lobster industry in another like 20,25 years?

JG: Probably won't see it, I imagine it'll be dead by then, but I don't really know, it could come back. Like I said it could it could easily, you know, in the 70s it was terrible, but it came back pretty quick. But I guess I don't know. I don't know. I like to think it would be coming back but I have my doubts. It's hard to tell I you know, it's almost impossible to tell what it'll be like. I hope it comes back good. And I hope some other guys get to enjoy it for their life lifetime, but I had it and I wish some other people would get it too, but I can't predict what will happen. I have no idea.

JS: Yeah, I mean, try to continue sir.

JG: It is a day-by-day thing you know, you come in and you see what you got. And so, you can't predict the future.

40:29

JS: No, of course. Yeah. Now is there any actions you think that that the that fishermen or the government or anyone could take that could potentially help the lobster population return?

JG: Not really. No, no.

JS: No, I mean, what did you perceive as the main cause of the lobster die off at least in your opinion?

JG: Well, like I said, they had a spray a lot for this West Nile virus, they sprayed the hell out of things, and we had a big storm, and the waters were real warm. And we basically had waters warm and since then on, lobsters are basically a cold-water species, they're not a warm water species. And I don't know water got warmer and so I think it was a combination but it don't seem to be changing, it seems to be getting less and less and less and less. Maybe the waters getting too warm for them I have no idea and they can talk all they want about climate change and warming waters but I don't know whatever they're gonna do about that. That's way beyond me. I don't think we can change like I

said that's nothing you're gonna change in a day or right away, but I don't know if you noticed. I don't know what anybody could do really, just take it as it comes.

JS: Unfortunately so.

JG: You know there was no risk and if there's no no risk or anything in this whole business, everybody be doing it. There's no guarantees in the fishing business, never has been.

JS: Really? Even back then?

42:09

Now no guarantees I mean, they could guys would come in and they couldn't make it it's you know, you know just the work I've seen guys come down here getting everything you need to go out there, and work four or five days and say oh, to hell with it, they aint' doing it. That's too much. Because you know, you go, with us, we'd fish. Our heaviest season went from the middle of June to the middle of September. You'd go east every day, I don't care what it did every day 12-14 hours a day for you know 100, 110 days straight. If you don't do that then you're not gonna make it. It's not what a lot of guys do, There's no such thing as taking a day off. This happens on the Fourth of July or you're going to be working or you ain't going make it, that's the way it was

JS: rolling the dice

JG: what's that?

JS: let's just say it's like rolling the dice

JG: Yeah, I know that when I got into it, the winter is cold and the summers are hot and and that's what it is. I knew that all along so a lot of people, a lot of people they sit on a dock and just see what they come in with, they don't understand what goes into producing that.

43:18

JS: Oh, I bet that during all of this though during like the die offs and the fallout afterwards, did you feel supported by the government, or local reps or anything like that?

JG: No, we're just basically went out, after the die off, we had a lawsuit now, we the class action suit. A lot of guys got a lot of money from them.

JS: Who did you guys sue? Who's you guys know who do you guys sue if you don't mind me asking?

JG: It was Cordova. They manufactured this pesticide that they sprayed. well, they just passed the buck, they just pass it, actually which I love what it like to sue the state but it can't sue the state. There's not you can get any money out of them. So they follow the chain. We had some lawyers who did that. That's like, remember the PCB thing on the Hudson River where GE got sued and all that money?

JS: Yeah, I've heard of it.

JG: They basically, the only reason GE got sued was because they had money. There was about 30 companies up and down the Hudson River, dumping them chemicals in there but GE was the only one that had money. That's why they got sued. They weren't any more culpable than any of the other companies. And it's the same thing happened with this. They followed a path back and what basically happened with Cordova suit was they just mislabeled the package. They wouldn't admit they were guilty or nothing and and that's where the lawsuit finally resolved itself.

JS: Okay

JG: But the fishermen got some money for that. I mean, they didn't get a fortune but they all got money.

JS: I should hope so. Is this the same company that you now retrieve pots and give them to?

JG: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, this company actually was Denmark, Sweden or someplace. No this is different.

JS: Now just similar sounding names.

JG: Yeah.

JS: Okay. Geez.

JG: It is actually different. It's actually a different name, but I can't think of it. That's a while back.

JS: Yeah, no. Okay. So, what has been? I don't know, I'm just I'm trying to think, you've given me a great discussion, you give me a lot of themes of, you know, industry at risk. It's an industry on the decline. It's, it's, I don't know, I mean, what what advice would you give to any incoming fisherman not I know, you know, no lobstering...

JG: There ain't no income. There ain't no fisherman cause they ain't giving out new food fish licenses either.

JS: Oh, really?

JG: No not since '94. The only way they can get the only way you can get a food fish license now is they have a lottery. And when guys get out of the business, they they are into 10-20 licenses, they reissue 10 of them. They just had that lottery last week. And so it keeps reducing the number of guys reducing the number guys and the guys that are in our lottery have to qualify. So that that's what I'm telling you about new licenses. That was for lobster, crabs, food fish, and conks, those licenses. The only license you can just go down to the counter and slap your money on there and get it is a shellfish license. If you want to go dig clams or catch oysters or mussels, that kind of thing.

46:27

JS: Oh, wow. Geez. Do you think that's a good move on their part? Or? No? Or are you ambivalent?

JG: Well, I don't know. You see, the backside of that is you've got nowhere to sell you gear too when you're done. If you want to retire you got nobody's gonna buy your boat and all your gear, cause they can't get a license.

JS: That's a really good point, actually. Oh, so what happens to that gear?

JG: It just rots away most of the time. Or they sell it out of state for about nothing, but other than that, if the guy can get a license he can sell it right here on the dock.

JS: Wow. Okay. What's the plan for your equipment? Wondering if you have an idea for all that.

JG: I don't know. I don't know. I left you know, I don't really know. I figured I just die on it. And they could do with the boat whatever they want.

JS: All right. Okay. Okay, so moving away from that. How has Long Island changed as a whole? You know, since you were growing up as a kid till now?

JG: What's the change? It used to be all farms around by me. Are you familiar with Long Island?

JS: Unfortunately, no, but I a few of my friends are from there.

47:41

JG: Well, anyway, people used to live along the North Shore and they lived along the south shore, and the whole middle of the island was nothing but woods. Now the whole middle of the island has filled in and all the farms around me are all houses now. It's changed a lot. And fishermen used to be the majority. Where I live now we're a tiny, tiny, tiny minority.

JS: Wow. Sounds like sounds like quite the difference sir.

JG: Yes, it is.

JS: Has it changed the landscape at all? Has the harbor or anything like that been reshaped from that?

JG: Yeah, around the harbors and everything, used to be just woods and hills and stuff. Now it's all solid houses, because everybody wants to build a house and look at the water. You know, we were kids, we used to go hunting all over the place and on all the places through the woods I could walk miles and miles and miles, we'd hunt with buddies of mine, and now it's all houses.

JS: Wow, yeah. And then I mean, do you? Do you mourn the loss of this, or?

JG: Well, I'm not happy about it, that's for sure. I wish I went back the other way. But, like I said, is like kinda like that die off. There's nothing I can do about it. They sell the land and people build houses. And that's it. It's got especially bad. Lately on my street, there's probably only 11 houses and it was really only three people, three houses that people lived in full time. And now with this pandemic thing they all moved out, they were the summer houses like these other people from the city, they all moved out in there. And they're now now, people living in every house.

JS: Oh, geez.

JG: So like I said, there used to be only three houses that were actually occupied, the rest were, I called them city. It's, they come out here and they, they're living here full

time. The whole problem is they bring their politics out here too. But that's another subject.

JS: Oh, of course sir. Of course.

JG: And they're not going back.

JS: Yeah, no, unfortunately, sometimes, you know. Okay, so, um, I think we're about approaching the end of the interview. You've been wonderful, sir. You've answered a lot. I mean, you've answered all my questions perfectly. Well, I was just wondering, is there anything that you personally want to talk about in this interview that you want to put on?

50:05

JG: No, not really. Like I said, if you want to go see that thing about the derelict pot remover, just go on your computer with Cornell Marine Program and a derelict pot. They'll have all the videos you want there. And if you want some background on when we had die off and all that stuff, you just put your name and my name in a computer for lobstermen, there's a ton of interviews I did with people and that newspapers and everything else and a lot of junk for backup material if you want to, if you want to see it.

JS: Of course

JG: There's nothing really. I'm just waiting. Just go fishing. And that's it.

JS: I mean, sounds like quite a life, sir. Honestly, I was so jealous.

JG: Me too. I'm kind of jealous of myself. But it's been a good life. I can't complain at all about it. I mean, there's hard times and good times and bad times, but basically, it's been good times. It's been good to me.

JS: It's good, sir. I'm glad. It sounds like I mean, other than the die off of course, but I mean, it sounds like a lot

JG: I wish it hadn't happened, but it did. So, that's it.

JS: Anyway. Sir, I hope you'll have a good day and thank you so much.

JG: Okay, yes. No problem.

JS: Yes. And I'll and I'll be sending you the audio for this interview sir.

JG: Okay

JS: And then so you can listen and tell me if you're fine with it being you know, released and whatnot. Of course. Anyway, thank you for meeting with me sir.

JG: All right, keep turning the channel and I'll talk to you soon.

JS: Absolutely. Talk to you later, Mr. John.

JG: Okay. Yep.

End.