

Accompanied At Sea: Voices from the Northeast Fisheries Observer Program

Brian Hockstrasser Oral History

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Interviewer: SW – Sara Weeks

Transcriber: NCC

Sara Weeks: This is an oral history interview. This is Sara Weeks conducting an interview with Brian Hockstrasser of AIS Incorporated. It's December 12, 2023, and we are at Falmouth Technology Park, East Falmouth, Massachusetts. This interview is being conducted in support of the Northeast Observer Program Oral History Project. Brian, tell us about where you grew up.

Brian Hockstrasser: All right. So, I was born in Stony Brook, New York, which is on Long Island. From an early age, I've always been around the water. Really found a lot of enjoyment with it. My dad had a boat growing up. His father was always a recreational fisherman, so that was kind of our whole pastime growing up. When some other kids were out playing tag or stuff, me and my brother, my family, we'd go out on the boat, go seine netting, catch crabs, little mummy chugs, baby porgies, little flounders, and put them in our fish tank. So, it was one of our fun things to do growing up. Me and my brother would go out and just catch all local estuarian creatures and have our own saltwater fish tank, but all things we caught. So, that was pretty much what sparked my love for the marine world. Really early on, I really had my grandfather who originally got my father into the whole fishing scene. Then my father, who then carried that on to me and my brother. So, just always the passion from youth, just growing up on the water. From there, I guess I'll start as a kid, and then I'll kind of get to where I am today. So, just growing up on the water, fishing with my brother. My first actual job was working at West Marine. So, working at a boating store, didn't really like that too much. So, my second job that following summer, when I was fifteen years old, actually got a job at my town's local nature center. So, there would go catch local marine species, maintain the wet labs there, then give environmental marine science tours to classes and just local people that would stroll by our nature center on the water. From there, the town of Brookhaven ended up getting involved with shellfish restoration. So, along with working environmental education at the nature center, I would work in a shellfish restoration hatchery. So, there we would grow clams, oysters, and scallops. Grow them up till they are a larger size to avoid predation, and then reseed them in the harbors to spread stronger genetics because we would have disease resistant clams and oysters. Then also just to reseed the bays, trying to seed the bays to make them more viable for commercial fishermen as well as recreational fishermen as well. So, that was my job from when I was fifteen until all the way up to twenty-three when I graduated college. I would still do that in the summer. So, pretty much from an early age, a lot of kids grow up and say, "I want to be an astronaut or marine biologist," and I actually stuck with that. So, upon graduating high school, I went to Stony Brook University. I was based out of their Southampton campus, which really focused on environmental science, sustainability, and marine science. So, there, I worked at the school's wet lab as a marine intern, where just helped with experiments, monitor the wet lab, then mainly worked as a mate on the school's research vessels.

SW: Tell us more about that.

BH: Yes. So, on the research vessels, some of them would be going out with classes just doing plankton's toes or little mini otter trolls in the Shinnecock Bay. But along with that, I would go on the *Seawolf*, which is Stony Brook's research vessel. From there, one of the main things they would do is they were contracted out with New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection to do their otter troll survey through different quadrants off the Jersey shore. So, that was my first experience in a commercial fishing setting, essentially. Being on an 80-foot troll boat with the otter trawl gear, and actually being offshore for the first time as well. Because I had a lot of

inshore experience, but never actually offshore.

SW: Did you like it?

BH: I did. So, the first time I actually went offshore, it was on winter break, so I got thrown right into it as well. My first time, I almost got seasick. So, I came close, but I held it together. Yes. It was like over 10 foot waves offshore. So, my first experience of that was a little eye opening, but it just made me fall even more in love with the prospect of being offshore. Then just wanted to really understand more into how commercial fisheries operated. So, after doing a couple trips with that, I graduated college. Then I was applying for jobs, and the observer program came across a computer as a possible opportunity. At this point, I'd never even heard of the observer program before, but I applied and got the job. So, essentially, three weeks after I graduated college, I found myself up in Cape Cod, Massachusetts in Falmouth for the first time in my life at the NEFOP ASM Cross Training Observer Program Training.

SW: How was the training?

BH: It was good.

SW: Tell us more about that experience.

BH: Yes. The training was very intense. I came into a thinking, I kind of knew everything, because I grew up on the water and I did a research vessel for two trips. In essence, I was very humbled. Learned there were many more seagulls than I knew existed, many more species of flounders as well, because I was only familiar with things off of the New York area. So, then that training was just so in depth, teaching us all the fish species encounter for me, and all the way down to North Carolina and all the marine mammals, sea turtles and birds. So, just an incredible learning experience. Also, just into the how the different commercial fisheries operated as well.

SW: How did it go with other students? How long was the training?

BH: So, my training, there was a unique one at the time where they did an at sea monitor and a NEFOP Observer training at the same time. So, my training was at least four weeks, possibly even longer. Because I think we did three NEFOP and then a 10-day ASM training after. So, we were at the Holiday Inn for over a month. Snowed in for a part of that because it was a year with some heavy storms. The camaraderie that you gained during that training was something that was unforgettable. I still even stay in contact with a few people from that training to this day. Just going through the classes and studying with everyone, it creates a really, really great bonding experience. Then being able to keep in touch with those people as you start this unique job by yourself in the field is really incredible. Because other people you went to college with their friends, really can't relate to what it's like to be offshore and deal with some of the difficulties there is being an observer.

SW: A lot of observers say the job is isolating. Can you expand on that more?

BH: I would say at a hundred, it definitely is isolating. So, you have to be strong mental or have high mental strength to be able to be successful in this field. Especially in today's day and age where you are cut off from land and technology is such a huge part of our lives. Being isolated out there on a boat with strangers, essentially, could be mentally taxing on someone. So, being able to come back to land and then having a good support structure, having friends and family. Then your fellow observers that go through and have the same experiences of you are huge, especially when I was starting out.

SW: So, after training, what happened then?

BH: So, after training, we go through the certification process. So, for my first trip, I got an experienced observer trip trainer to go with me, showed me all the ropes. I can say it was a huge shock compared to learning everything in paper. The first time you're actually put out into the field and working with the fishermen to try to sample the correct way was very difficult.

SW: How come?

BH: So, when I did the trawl survey in New Jersey with the Stony Brook's *Seawolf* and then the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, we had the captain, myself and another crew member, working crew for that boat. Then we had six members of the New Jersey DEP that would come out with us to all essentially do the job that one observer has to do by themselves on a fishing vessel. With fishermen who sometimes are trying to sort their catch quickly and might be trying to rush through certain things where getting a correct sample may not be the highest priority for them. Because they're just trying to do their job, sort their catch, get off deck. Whereas for our program, the data collection is extremely important, and we have certain ways and exact protocols that we need to follow. So, being able to follow those protocols in the field was a hard adjustment to make.

SW: How did you do it? How did you manage it?

BH: Well, at first I didn't do well. I actually had to take an extra certification trip. So, definitely stumbled a little at first, and just with more and more experience, I just got more and more comfortable. Just being able to identify the fish species quicker and being able to come up with a sampling plan. Because every haul is different, every catch size and composition vary. You have to think on the fly to change your sampling plan.

SW: What kind of trips were you taking? Tell us about the gear, the fishermen, the location.

BH: Yes. So, throughout my observer career, I was always based out of Hampton bays, New York. So, out of Long Island, the majority of the trips I would go on were always otter trawl. In the wintertime, a lot of those trips would be trawling trips offshore, going for mainly fluke, summer flounder. Then, along with skates, would be the main catch there in the summertime, the majority of the trips would also be targeting fluke. Then squid would be the main thing which I didn't realize. Growing up Long Island the whole time, I never realized that we had such a huge abundant squid fishery on the south shore. So, yes, a lot of squid trips, for sure.

SW: How did you find communicating with the fishermen?

BH: That was also a big adjustment. I always learned that as long as you were always very respectful. You're on their boat is like going into their home. As long as you're respectful and hardworking, they might not always agree with what the observer program stands for, or some of the work we're doing. But as long as you treat them respectfully, they'll treat you like a person. In my experiences, a lot of them are just really great, hardworking people. I've established a lot of relationships with them throughout over the years. Especially in an area like New York where the fleet is not super huge, and you end up going with the same vessels time and time again. You might not work with coworkers on these vessels as like your fellow marine biologists, but you end up going out with the same fishermen over time. They end up becoming your coworkers essentially. While they might not want to take observers, they want to take an experienced observer that's respectful and efficient, it's going to stay out of the way. So, the more you stay with the program, and the more you do go on different vessels, it becomes more like a normal job. You're comfortable in the vessels, the fishermen, and you get to figure out each other's work schedules. We can work to a common goal. I can work, stay out of their way. They can help me so we can all get off deck and get our both jobs done respectfully.

SW: Tell us more about some of the challenges that you've experienced as an observer.

BH: Some of the challenges, I would say, the scheduling is very difficult. It's probably the least scheduled job you'll find the United States. Just because there's so many variables at play to when trips will go such as the weather being the main one. But then fish prices, finding crew to go, mechanical issues, all those things impact. Prices and marking quota openings as well limit the kind of trips that you can deploy on and when the vessels go. A lot of times, the weather changes, especially in the winter months. So, trip might delay for five days. Then all of a sudden it's going on six hours' notice, because there's a weather window. So, it realistically is an on call position, and you just have to be ready to go when the trips go at a moment's notice.

SW: What were some of your best experiences on the fishing vessels?

BH: What I tell people is it's really a unique experience that most people will only imagine or can watch on the Discovery Channel. Because that is really the truth of it. You're out there in the middle of the ocean seeing species and marine mammals, fish, and commercial fishing operations firsthand that literally people can only imagine reading a book or watch on television. Because it is such a unique and amazing experience. Being out in the middle of the ocean like that is really incredible.

SW: Have you had any close calls? How about the safety at sea?

BH: I've had a couple close calls on vessels. I was on one boat that they say we were hit by a rogue wave. Not sure exactly what it was, but we were hit by a very big wave, to say the least. I actually bent the net drum in and bent the metal on the side of the boat, made the refrigerator come off the wall, fly across the whole deck, even damaged the vessel a lot. The trip was terminated at that point. We were actually just steaming out to the grounds. That was pretty scary. Then overall, I would say, I'm lucky, compared to most people. I haven't had a really

huge amount of anything catastrophic go wrong. I've never had to abandon ship or anything along those lines.

SW: Did you feel safe on board with the captain and crew? If so, why? How?

BH: With the rogue wave incident or just in general?

SW: Generally.

BH: It varies. The majority of these guys are very experienced and have a really great control over everything. Then it would kind of vary vessel to vessel. I've been on some boats with a brand new captain, and things would be chaotic. Haul backs would be extremely chaotic and stressful. Those definitely seemed a lot more dangerous. So, it would be a lot more wary on those trips. So, I would say it varies. But most of these guys, they've been doing it for so long, they have such a good grasp over everything. So, I would say in most cases, I did feel safe.

SW: What about some of your advice to newer observers? I know over time, you've worked with a lot of new observers.

BH: Yes. My advice to new observers would just be to always be respectful on the vessels, always be hard working. Go out of your way to help them whenever you have a chance, even though that just means doing the dishes after a meal or something along those lines. Always over packing for trips. I had one trip that was supposed to be five days, ended up being fourteen. I only had like one change of clothes that had to be all thrown out by the end of it. Always being over prepared and respectful on vessels are my two main words of advice.

SW: When they struggle, what are they usually struggling with?

BH: At first, I would say the sampling or the seasickness just being on a vessel. Well, I was lucky enough to have a lot of experience at sea before getting into this job. A lot of people we hire, while extremely book smart, don't have a lot of that at sea experience. So, what you know in a classroom then all of a sudden, being 200 miles offshore is a real, real culture shock. Some people, unfortunately, just can't adapt to it. Once people are around for a while and get over that initial concept as being on the boat working with the fishermen, I would say the scheduling is the biggest issue for people. It's that if you are some of that really demands structure in your life, it honestly might not be the job for you.

SW: Do you try to talk to observers about that before? Is that part of the recruiting process?

BH: Yes. I actually think I just took that last line out of my interview when I screen people.

SW: Really?

BH: Yes.

SW: Okay. So, you interview for new observers.

BH: Yes.

SW: You want to tell us a little bit about that.

BH: Yes. So, I observed as a full time observer for around four years before moving into the management structure within the observer program. So, I started out as an assistant coordinator based out of New York for about a year and a half. Then for the last five years or so, I've been a full time New York coordinator. Most recently, I've actually been in charge of the coordinator of operations for the Mid-Atlantic. So, essentially overseeing the whole Connecticut through North Carolina region. So, now, with my higher management roles, I play a large part in the recruitment process. Pretty much during our interview process, we try to outline every possible negative aspect of the job possible. While that might scare some people away, it's for the best. Because we really want to try to sort through and find the most highly qualified candidates that actually will be able to handle the difficulties of the job. Because most people I interview with is going to be the hardest job and hardest thing they've ever done in their lives to this point. The scheduling, going offshore in the elements, the mental aspects of it, working with fishermen, the physical aspects of it. Out of the interviews, I pretty much say, if you really want to get down to the nitty gritty, a basket of fish weighs around 70 pounds. You're lifting and weighing and sorting 70 pound baskets of fish all day in rough conditions with fishermen that don't really want you to be there. If you're okay with you've enough mental strength to be able to know that what you're doing is important, and work past being possibly unwanted on certain vessels, because knowing what you're doing is important, and just having an overall passion for the marine world and marine conservation, then this is the right job for you. Also, like I said before, we'll go into all the possible negatives, such as the scheduling, not having the greatest accommodations. But the rewards are also just outstanding in the fact that you are gaining these experiences that other people are only reading in a book. If fishery management really is something that you want to get into, how can you possibly manage a fishery without actually being on fishing vessels and seeing how fishermen and fisheries operate firsthand. Where in college, you might hear, "Oh, it's all the fishermen's fault that are overfishing." Actually, getting to go on the vessels and seeing how things operate firsthand, you actually then realize how management provides such a huge role in the overfishing and how our stocks are doing. Because the fishermen might not always be the bad guys. Sometimes the rules and quotas might not make sense. That's why the observer data is so important because it can gather information and changes can be made to regulations then and sometimes can even benefit the fishermen.

SW: What do you think are some of your greatest contributions to fisheries management?

BH: My greatest contributions, I would say, just gathering the data in fisheries for these last ten years. Then now, hopefully that I am at the next level, hopefully passing my experiences on to the new observers that come into it. One of the things that I find the most satisfaction with this job now is actually being a trip trainer and going out with observers on their first trip to try to show them the ropes. For someone who struggled themselves on their first couple trips and had to actually take additional certification trips. I understand not getting the job at first. So, like, when I tell new people when they stumble and fall or have problems with things, I'm like, "Run it past me and ask me for advice. Because everything you've done wrong over the last ten years,

I'm sure I've done it at one point." Because the job is so difficult and it is such a slow learning curve. I would say it took me around six months to feel actually comfortable doing the job, and then a year before I was actually 100 percent comfortable. I could say I'm actually really good at this now. So, whereas other jobs might only take a month, two months, to get really saturated into it, the learning curve is slower here than in other professions by far.

SW: Where do you see yourself in five years?

BH: Five years

SW: Or ten years?

BH: Ten years, yes. Either staying with my current position, keeping on going up in the observer world in fisheries management, or just getting back into scientific research of some kind. Pretty much I can only see myself ever working in the marine fisheries realm. Because technically, I've never done anything else, even since I was in high school. So, staying in fisheries, in research as well is something that I really see for my future. In my spare time, I'm an avid recreational fisherman. I've actually gotten involved with a lot of research efforts voluntarily and commercially as well. So, I worked with Cornell Cooperative Extension in New York, and they were doing a striped bass contamination study. So, I'd actually take them out, and we would go catch striped bass for them to later run tests on through a lab to then test for PCB mercury levels. They would also do take genetic samples to see, possibly, what river they came from. Then do otolith to do aging on them as well, along with reproductive studies as well. So, the whole fish was actually used for a whole variety of scientific studies going forward. So, I was involved with them for two years. That was one of my favorite things I've done, honestly, was just going out rod and reel fishing. Then knowing that these fish were going to be used for some really great scientific studies moving forward. Then on my spare time as well, I got involved with great fish tag. They have a tagging program where they just give just not satellite tracking device, but the actual tags with numbers on them. So, this last summer, I tagged over 100 over slot striped bass, because in the recreational fishery. Now you can only keep striped bass between 28 and 31 inches. So, quite a lot of two big ones. So, tagged over 100 of them. Then a fish species I've always had a lot of interest in, because I used to be a diver and go spear fishing a lot, was tautog or Blackfish, as we call them in New York. So, there's kind of some controversy with them involving whether they migrate or not, or they just go into the deeps during the winter. So, we started tagging tautog this year as well, which, to my knowledge, is a very understudied fish that hasn't really been tagged much. So, we ended up tagging around 35 of them. So, in all of the keeper size. I have not heard of any have been recaptured to this time. But I'm really hopeful and just happy to get involved with that, and that's something I'm going to do on my spare moving forward for sure.

SW: Did the observer job steer you in the direction of getting your captain's license too?

BH: Absolutely. It really showed me that just being on these big vessels was something that I wanted to do, and wanted to one day maybe get. Off the deck and become a captain of a larger ship.



SW: For the tagging, were you running the vessel with your boat?

BH: Yes. So, that was my boat. So, I ended up going to Captain school. I have my 50 ton master's captain's license along with my Six Pack charter license. So, I will also do run charters on the side as well for fishing or sunsets. So, that's also just my weekend gig, which find a ton of happiness in. Well, I don't know if I would ever be able to make that my full time job. It's really something I'm passionate about. I can really thank the observer program for that as well. Because just being around commercial fishermen, kind of absorbing some of their knowledge as well, has really just made me so much more knowledgeable about the marine world and all different practices of fishing. Then for the independent tagging, one of the only reasons I was actually accepted into these programs was because of my observer experience, and because we have tagged certain marine mammals. Then just with Cornell, that's something they really look for as well. The professional experience of how to measure fish, how to treat the fish properly, because we couldn't contaminate the striped bass. So, just understanding scientific protocols. So, the observer programs actually opened a lot of doors for me in that sense, as well with different research and different organizations.

SW: Last question, what advice would you give the fishermen in working with observers to make this successful fisheries management process?

BH: I would say just good communication with the staff and with the observers, and also just not to blame the observers. A lot of them are new, fresh out of college, just trying to do a job might not be as experienced as we want them to be. But then, just being open with them. I had a lot of fishermen that taught me so much as a person. Then just in the field and history of fishing and commercial fishing, and histories of different areas and different species, and just being open with the observers and being helpful. If you see an observer not being safe, let them know, or you talk to the coordinating staff. If you have a question about coverage rates, or something along those lines, let us know, and just keep that line of communication open. Because I feel, especially once I became in the upper management and the coordinating role with the observer program, having a clear line of communications with the captains have gone a long way. Instead of just saying you have to take someone. Kind of explaining why the coverage is what it is, why they have to take someone, how often they have to take someone. Then it's assuring that things are fair and that we're not covering one boat more than the other, spreading the coverage to make all things fair, and just keeping that communication open, I think, is huge.

SW: I agree. Thank you so much, Brian. We appreciate your time.

BH: No problem. Thanks, Sara.

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