

Interviewee: Donald J. King, Branford CT (original)

Interviewer: Nehaben Padhiyar, University of Connecticut student, for Connecticut Sea Grant

Date: January 21, 2021

Location: Virtual (phone)

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

lobsters, fishing, traps, lobster traps, conch

00:00

Nehaben Padhiyar (NP) start the interview. Okay. Good afternoon this is Neha from Connecticut Sea Grant oral history project. We have today with us Donald J. Kane. Today is 21st, January 2021. So before starting this conversation, I would like to ask the permission to Donald that this video is going to be recorded for academic and research purposes. Donald do you give the permission for the same?

Donald King (DK) Yes.

NP: Also Connecticut Sea Grant might have sent you the release form. So it's, uh, you you might have got it, right.

DK: Yes.

NP: All right.

DK: I'll try to send it back.

NP: Perfect. So Donald, could you please tell us that where did you grow up?

DK: I grew up in Branford, Branford Branford, Connecticut. Right on Long Island Sound right down in the Indian neck sections of Branford as I've lived there pretty much right on the water all my life.

01:15

NP: Well, wonderful. And I think that's where you live right now.

DK: Yes, I live about a quarter mile from where I grew up, less less if you go by as the crow flies straight line.

NP: Okay, what was your family business?

DK: My family was my father was involved in trucking, truck transportation. And I was in a failing business for a while, part time, while I did my fishing, full time fishing and part time in this business for a while.

02:03

NP: Right. So how were you introduced to lobster fishing.

DK: In 1969, my father bought 10 traps for me. I was only 10 years old. And he bought the 10 traps and we went through wooden traps back then. I think they cost maybe at the time. \$200 for ten traps.

NP: Okay, so would you like to tell us some early memories of the waterfront?

02:44

DK: Yeah, well, lobsters, we all we had was a small boat, we used to go out there and pull the traps and ropes up by hand, we had no har any kind of device for just, it'll be shallow, mostly shallow water. And only to the depth, the deepest was you know, 20-30 feet. And we'd be riding around the rocks. And we would catch plenty of lobsters. And it started to grow on me even at that early age, that this is something that I wanted to do. And at the time, as a 10-year-old, you know, we used to sell a few lobsters and it was, you know, even for a 10-year-old, it was pretty lucrative to make a few \$100.

03:37

NP: Right. So you started really young, and that's when you decided to be in this industry. Right?

DK: Right. Well, I always tell a story, the first one of my first memories and what kind of pushed me into it was I had to save up a bunch of lobsters. This was probably a couple of years after maybe I was 12 and I saved up a bunch of lobsters for this Italian wedding party, and maybe 20-30 lobsters or something like that. And I went and delivered them and this big Italian guy with big burly hands, said here's the money for the lobsters. And he put it he put my hand out and he put three \$100 bills in there and that was like my first memory of really that how the lobster business could be lucrative, and I saw that money and as you know young 12-year-old, \$300 is like a billion dollars to a young person.

04:46

NP: Well that's amazing. So are you actually fishing for lobster at this time too?

DK: Yes, we still fish for lobsters. There's now along with a lot of other things Our lobstering used to be 90% of our business. And now it's probably less than 10%. 80% of our income was derived from lobstering for many, many years. Now, it's less than 10%.

05:20

NP: Right? So So do you also partner with other lobster men and lobster women in your community?

DK: Do I do what?

NP: Why do what the partnership like you know, with other lobster men and other lobster women in your community?

DK: Do I know other people?

NP: Yeah, yeah. Probably partnership or your, you know, acquaintance with those people. The other lobster men and other lobster women?

DK: There's nobody left. There's no now there's only there's only like three, three of us left in our area where there used to be 20 in the Branford you know, Branford, New Haven, Guilford area, there's only three, three of us left, and there used to be 20. And even when I was younger, there was more than that. If you count part timers,

NP: Right. Right. So you are the only one from the area that that has been there since so long. So far.

06:26

DK: I've been I've been here the longest in this area.

NP: Right? So

DK: Maybe one of the longest in the Long Island Sound. One of the longest.

NP: Well, that's, that's wonderful. So do you remember any particular day where weather was not easy? And you had to you know, you had to bait and you had trouble fishing?

DK: Yeah, a lot of days.

NP: A lot of days, yeah

DK: They did. Now, it's the what, what happens is the boat, the boat, the guy in the lead, and the helpers And for the most part can, we can take it. But the problem is that when

it gets really, really rough, it slows you down. It's like diminishing returns, you can't you can't pull the traps make any time and it's just it's not worth it when it gets really rough. Plus, you know, you get all beat up and you get really tired really quickly. So it's not it's not worth it when it gets really rough. But have we been stuck out there in rough weather? We certainly have and for the most part, you try to work through it until you get too tired and or it gets too rough. And you just have to go in.

07:51

NP: Right? So do you do this things alone or you need help for this? Because pulling the traps and stuff as you said it's pretty tiring?

DK: Yeah, I do. I do some stuff alone. Still, now I do some stuff alone. But when we go out there to work a full day, I usually try to get at least one, one helper. And the operation works very smoothly with three with two helpers one, one person behind usually me and then two people working the traps.

NP: Right. So how many pots do you take on a daily basis?

DK: It all depends on exactly what we're doing during the day. Back in, you know when we back in the 80s we used to consistently pull between four and 500 every day, and they were all lobster pots. So things have changed. Now, we pull more round 200 traps a day 200 to 250. But there are different kinds of traps. We have lobster traps, we have sea bass pots, we have conch pots. So then we usually go out and pull some gill nets before the day starts to get bait to bait everything up. So it's changed. Back, back earlier it was more more pots. All lobster pots now it's less pots and different pots.

NP: Right? So you said that you use different kinds of traps. So could you explain more that that you know what kind of traps were for what kind of catch and the purposes for for those traps? So could you explain

09:50

DK: believe it or not, the lobster traps which they still call lobster traps catch everything except, except a lot of lobsters, so we can catch, in a lobster trap we can catch black fish, sea bass, conch, lobsters, a couple of different kinds of fish.

NP: Right.

DK: So and then in the winkle or conch pots, they pretty much catch winkles. That's about it because they're kind of open. Occasionally they catch some fish in the conch

pots. And the sea bass pots catch all kinds of fish, they catch porgies, sea bass, blackfish, any kind of fish. A lobster pot also catches porgies too, scup or porgies.

10:47

NP: right. So so what kind of boats do you use?

DK: I have one Maine boat which a 42-foot Dixon with a 405 horsepower Cummins diesel motor. And then we have a couple of smaller boats that we set nets with. And we sometimes also, we also controls just put the smaller boats, we can pull the conch pots, or the shallower conch pots. But for the most part we try to do most most everything is done in a 42-foot boat.

NP: Right. So as you were telling us earlier that the wind affects the catch and stuff, so so would you like to tell us more about the weather that affects the catch. So like the season, in which season do you get the most lobster, and in which season you don't?

11:47

DK: Well, historically, July has been the best month for lobsters. And the end of June through July has been usually the best month. And it's kind of the highest demand for the lobsters too because of all the this year there was in all the restaurants. And they had as probably the one of the higher demand times. And now lobstering is closed for, for taking lobsters through September through December. So you can't take that time of the year used to be in October, we used to have a good run, we used to catch a lot out in October. And then January, February and March are normally the slowest months because temperature by that time of the year has dropped below the 42 degrees and 40 to 42 degrees it's a magic number for lobsters. Because they hibernate once it gets below 40 degrees. They hibernate like bears, so they eat their shell in the fall, they go into hibernation for three months. And then they'll come back out and feed again once the water gets warmer in April. Then they go to shed in May. And so you don't really catch that many and then you catch them again in July. And then August comes around and things slow down again.

13:28

NP: Right. So as you just said that during hibernation, it's hard to catch lobsters, right?

DK: Now it's hard to catch lobsters in this area. They are catching some further to the east, and further to the west and catching some not, still not like we used to. But I think there's more, the waters better to the east. And there's some deeper holes down to the west. So they gravitate toward that. But there's very few guys doing it where there used

to be probably 300 guys, there's full timers, there's only maybe 20. In the whole Long Island Sound and Connecticut.

14:15

NP: Right. So So are lobsters predictable? Like can you predict when and how?

DK: No, they're not predictable at all. I mean, you think when you think you know that you figured out what lobsters are gonna do, and they change and do something else. And they did a study off of New London where they put a homing device a little beeper on a big, like four-pound lobster. And a diver went down and found the lobster around the wreck that's off of New London and moved it like a mile away from the wreck. And they went right back to the wreck, they went back down again and got it out of its hole, moves it another mile in another direction. And they went right back to the wreck. And then the third time he moved it a mile in a different direction, and then they couldn't find it, they lost the homing signal on it. And a week, and a week later, it was found 200 miles in the Hudson Canyon 200 miles away in the Hudson Canyon. So this just proves that you really don't know what these things are going to do.

15:36

NP: So there are many variations, you can't just predict it, right?

DK: Yeah, you just can't predict whether you're gonna go with five people compared it to, you know, you have a family of four kids. And one of the kids stays home, one of them moves a little further away, and maybe one of them go to the west coast. So that's what happens with lobsters. They move they move around.

16:01

NP: Right, that's correct. Okay, so So you are also a seaweed farmer, right. So would you like to tell us a bit about harvesting areas?

DK: Well, seaweed in the crop that we grow is sugar kelp. And it's, it's a superfood. It's super high in nutrition, and super high in different nutritional values. So we harvest that we put it we have lines out there now, and we put it out in in January. I think it's beginning of December, we put it out this year. And then we there's not much to do except just check it and make sure the lines are all tight. And nothing's. There's no problems with the lines, and then the anchors are tight. And then we wait until May, or April May time and it starts to grow. And when it's small, it's very good as you can fry it up. It's excellent. It's almost like spinach, you think that brown kelp is brown, but when you cook it off, it turns green. And tastes almost like spinach. So it's pretty good. And it's good for you.

17:36

NP: Right. So as you said that it is high in nutrition. So the demand for the same would be high too, I think.

DK: Yes, it's it's a superfood. And it's just starting. It's I've been doing it for quite a number of years now. But it's just it's also used in some cosmetic applications. And the guys it's that I do it as a small farm, but some of the bigger farms also use it for for cattle feed. Feed can be used.

18:12

NP: Right. Oh, well. So where are you fishing around the time of 1999 when the lobster die off happened in Long Island Sound?

DK: Oh, yeah. I was fishing. I've been fishing every day since 1969. So yeah, we we went out we I actually was one of the I used to leave my pots in a little bit longer than the other guys. And it happens. This is when there was no closed seasons, and we could harvest them in September. And the pots were coming up with dead lobsters in them. And the worst part about it was the ones that were alive. We normally put them in our circulating tanks and bring them in. So not by the time we got the live ones in, half of them will be dead again. And then we will deliver them to the restaurants and we get a call. And after a day. Another half of them would be dead. So they were just they were dying and dying quickly.

19:26

NP: Right. So even after you got them they were dying. So yeah, it was a difficult situation.

DK: We had a big hurricane that year, Hurricane Floyd. And it wasn't a really no one really remembers it because it really wasn't a bad like winds storm because the wind was blowing offshore, but it was a really it was a real bad rain event. And at the time, it was a big scare for the West Nile virus. So they all these briquettes of mouth ion and the water was actually I say that what had happened there was we had the chemical poisoning from the west from the mouth ion and the other chemicals that they sprayed. And the water was abnormally warm, which is another problem with the lobsters. Lobsters have trouble with warmer water. And so, he links these things together, and it was September, which is their worst month they die. We have a certain amount that dies anyway, it's September. It's like a calling effect. So you put all those things together, and it was just lobsters, just died off and died off in huge numbers.

20:51

NP: Right, it impacted everyone involved in the business. Right.

DK: You know, at first, we would, we thought it was just, you know, you know, an isolated event, you know, we didn't realize that it was going to be the demise of the whole industry. I mean, we actually didn't, we had some decent years after that. Where we were able to catch lobsters, but after a while, it just got worse and worse where you couldn't. And everybody anybody that was strictly a lobsterman were which like I said, we we had other things that we've been doing. So we were able to diversify and shift our shift from lobstering, we had hard years. It was bad. So we had hard years.

21:52

NP: So so since so many years, you're in the industry, so have you seen any regulatory changes in the industry? Would you like to talk about them a bit?

DK: The regulations, there's been more than a page worth of regulations that they've put on the fisherman and they've gone up on the gauge, raised the gauge size, they've closed the season, they put escape vents, big escape vents in the traps, so that the lobsters get to get out all except they know bigger, bigger lobsters. There's a bunch of changes and they've all been targeted at the fishermen. And in reality, it's, you know, one of the big problems is water quality. As far as you know, the chemicals that they put into the water and they have never addressed those problems. Plus we have other problems too with fish predators to the lobsters or this fish that they haven't just been out abundant amount of fish that have come around. So lobstermen are really, have their backs against the wall, they you know, they, they're tough, but you just can't and also, you know, the actual you know, the climate change and the warming of the waters in general even though it's only a very slight fraction. It does, it does matter.

23:32

NP: Right. So you said that water quality changes, so it affects the lobster catching too, right? How does it affect lobster catching?

DK: Water quality I think is one of the big big reasons along with water temperature. I don't think temperature alone is the is the issue but I think you add all these things up and like I said. It's just it's no longer a real conducive spot for the lobsters to live we're hoping they keep moving in they hope they can move back in but so far the last few years have been very have been poor. We've did a little better last year but and then about five years ago we did a little better also but it hasn't been good.

24:25



NP: Also, this pandemic might have affected the industry. So what do you think about the impact on on lobster industry due to this pandemic?

DK: The pandemic? Yeah, it definitely did. When it first started. I would sell I would sell it to restaurants. Like for instance, I sold maybe 100, 100 crates a crate is like about 100 pounds, I sold maybe 100 crates in 2019 and, 2020 I sold one. So that just goes to show you how much it's gone down 100 to one, basically because when the restaurants closed, they weren't no one was buying lobsters, obviously. And then a lot of the restaurants like, had to change things around because a lot of them to start with is you remember, it was all plasticware and you can't eat lobster with plastic forks and plastic knives, you just can't do it. So there was you know, that lasted for the summer. And then you know people's habits changed the thing that they buy now instead of buying a whole lobster, they buy lobster rolls, that's that that has become king, you probably have some places that you've been to that sell lobster rolls and so everybody wants to know, it's an easy thing you can can take them out now nobody really wants to take out a lobster. But on the flip side of that I've had probably higher numbers of individuals that come and purchase lobsters whole lobsters from me then than I have in the past they because they you know they don't people still want to eat a lobster crack the tail.

26:31

NP: Right so if you're not from restaurant, they buy it from you, the individuals.

DK: Yeah, more I have more individuals, I used to have the restaurants which was a lot easier. Now you sell it you can sell you know, 1500 at a time, instead of like two or three at a time.

NP: That's great. So what do you think that it is the biggest challenge of lobster fishing.

DK: Just the lobster fishing?

NP: Yeah, lobster fishing or anything that you think is a challenge in the industry that you are in. General fishing, you can you can describe about the general fishing.

27:16

DK: I think that the challenge is for the lobsters to come back. And that is you know, some some of that is some of that. Yep. You know, there's really no control over that. It's nature, you know that some of this stuff might be cycles. So because we've talked to old timers that lobstered before I did and you know, the 40s and 50s. And there's records of them not doing that well back then not doing and not wasn't a lot of traps out and there was no rules or regulations, they wouldn't do that. Well, it was not until the

not, you know till the 80s that they really lobsters were super abundant. So I think it cycles, its water temperature, its water quality. Its predators, I think those are the things that have to be changed if they want the lobsters to come back.

28:16

NP: Right water quality, predators and stuff mattered the most is the as we discussed earlier. Yeah. Right. So So do you believe that there is a significant decline in the lobster industry? Do you do you feel that?

DK: Oh, yeah, I mean, without a doubt it's gone from I don't even want to I mean, you can do the State's got the numbers, but it's gone from, I think 2 million pounds down to like 50,000 pounds or 40,000 pounds. And that's the whole sound and for us, it's even worse than that it's, you know, 98% worse, or whatever that is.

29:03

NP: Right. So, what do you think would be the probable factor that has promoted the decline? You know, the weather?

29:13

The biggest factor that started the spiral decline was the was the spraying of that West Nile virus. And I think that was what started it and they also also the predators and the predators. What the water temperature.

NP: Right. Well about, would you like to tell us a memorable experience or incident with us. You know, that has happened to

DK: about about about lobsters?

NP: Yeah, about your profession about lobsters anything that you want to say

30:11

DK: no, I mean, I pretty much covered everything and it's been, for me it's been, it was it was always, you know, like I said, you can't really figure the lobsters out. And it's been like almost a you know, a hunting thing where you're you've tried, you know, you try different things all the time. And you used to be very strategic and I have records of where, what date at what spots and it used to be fun. And now it's become more of a job. Although, when you work for yourself, you get to do certain, you know, you get to do certain things that you take your days off when you want. And you got to do you know, you don't miss any I had three kids and I never missed any of the sporting events because of lobster fishing. So there are some really real positive but the negatives are

it's tough. They're tough to catch, and it's really a wear and tear on your body. You know, getting it's physical, and getting beat up by wind and waves and rain and there's some days you wish you were working in some office building nice and high and dry. But when you get a nice beautiful day out there when I call it white calm with a water almost looks white, and you cruise around out there and the sun's coming up.

End