

Interviewee Name: Richie Maderia (RM) Stonington, Connecticut

Interview Name and Affiliation: Ian Bradley (IB), University of Connecticut undergraduate student, for Connecticut Sea Grant

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Interview Location: Virtual (phone)

Interview Description: Born into a fishing family in Stonington, Ct., Richie Maderia had his first experiences on a boat at the age of 9 before becoming a professional lobster fisherman after high school. Maderia's experiences running a lobster fishing boat allowed him to see the industry boom in the 1980s through to the late 1990s when he began to see the lobsters — and the industry — die out. Maderia is passionate about the politics and policies surrounding both the lobster and fishing industries and has witnessed the effect that regulations have had on the fishermen who work on Long Island Sound, as well as on the ecosystem itself. Now working as a seafood wholesaler in Stonington, Maderia's son carries on the tradition of the family lobster fishing business.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

lobster, Connecticut, fish, traps, catch, business, pots, boat, regulations, predator, gauge

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IB: Today is February 22. Monday. And then speaking with your name is Richie Maderia. Is that answering?

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RM: That'd be great.

IB: Yep. All right.

And as far as I was told by Nancy Balcom from the Connecticut Sea Grant who's the lead on our, our project here and she was one who set up the newsletter and had reached out to everybody. She gave me some information that you had been involved with. With lobster lobster and lobster fishing and Long Island Sound for a while and had grown up involved with with fishing, I would expect from what you said and you also had involvement with like a seafood dealership. Is that is that all pretty much

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RM: I'm a seafood wholesaler, and yes. Well, my father was a commercial fisherman out of Stonington, Connecticut for many years of his life before he went to General Dynamics, then my uncle Joe got an idea to get into commercial lobstering. So I was eight years old at the time. And my dad got into it and I talked myself into going out on a Saturday which against my mother's will, but I get it anyway. And I liked so I did the summers the summer I did that first year I did some Saturdays when I could and then the second year we I did weekends. I did Saturday and Sunday. Course, my dad paid me I don't remember the exact what he paid me five bucks or four bucks, whatever it was, but it was like a good rich kid. Going to Penny Candy Store get through for a penny. So I thought I was rich guy. We really two catastrophe that year. And the story is documented in New London. But we were out on a very rough day with an old Opal my father had bought me, it was a very, I think was 45 years old. I don't remember the exact names. It was "The Windy" and we got in trouble out there with bad weather the engine conked out and we didn't have nobody out there. And back then the radios and stuff were not the way of the future that you know you could do to get lobster pot haulers and stuff that are also innovative today. But that was ancient. So we had after a couple hours my father had talked me into going up on top we saw a submarine, and it was the United States submarine I don't remember the name of it. It was Chilean people were running the submarine it was like for rent back then I don't remember the whole details but I do remember that they finally came too close to us and because of that we they understood that we're going to go on in and that we needed a tow. So they thought the United States submarine and come all the way around and then come alongside us and they threw us a two inch crosser rope to tow us. The old submarines had what's called prop guards. And and alongside the backing stub to protect the prop. And my dad was up tying the bow up in I was down below and my grandfather was on the bow and the prop guide which is underwater just just barely on the waterline punched a hole. It's a big hole. So we're sinking and I'm yelling to my father "get down here." And in the meantime we're drifting away from the sub because we're all tied up and he's going to tow us in. It was quite an

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an event because by the time they realized the boat was sinking, they put us on the winch on the back to get us back in because we were probably good 100 feet a 150 feet behind them with a line now. By the time they got us to the sub. My father and grandfather arguing about taking boots, my grandfather. He is one of these old fisherman who's like going down with a ship and my father he'd be like you know he only cared about saving my life to be honest with you. The bow was a foot underwater by the time we got alongside that sub, what I do remember was once they got the sailors came down the side of the sub my father only cared about getting me off that

sub. I remember them trying to run me down the sub, and I'm looking at my grandfather and father, arguing who was gonna go next and my father went on, and then they grabbed my grandfather. And you know, it was only two steps. That's all he got. I'll never forget it, two steps on that sub. And that line potted and there goes the boat. Why tell the story because you think you'd never going back on a boat. My cousin, Donald was getting a new boat. So we took over my cousin Donald's boat, because he really got a lot of lobster year out and stuff. And my mother was like, you ain't going back? Yeah, I'm gonna go back on the boat, mom and mom said, you're not going on that boat. But I did. And this, again, the reason for the story, I became one of the biggest flops in the state of Connecticut later in my life. My summers were, you know, go out early in the morning, four or five o'clock in the morning, we get up and go out and do a lot of story, a lot of different crew people, including my own family, a lot of learning. Plus, back then it was all wooden traps. It stayed that way. I've been through my high school years. So that was my job. And it's even in my yearbook, they call me a class clown. But, I mean, I just read a joker, but what we're going to be on, I'm going to be a lobsterman. As much as colleges want me to go there, I was a very smart man wasn't going anywhere, I was gonna be a lobsterman. And that's what I wanted to do. I loved I loved the game, learning how to catch lobsters, how to be good at it, and where to go find more lobsters. It was it was a really interesting event of of how good you could be at something. And there's not a lot of people doing that, you know, it's not like it was, you know, everybody did it. It was something different. So I got good at, I mean, I worked with my dad. And then finally I got married. And I think I was 24 years old. And they come out with GPS, as we put it on a boat and my dad, you know, we had radios, we had all kinds of things. And my dad would hit on he used all sites to find where the gear is. He knew where everything was. And he taught me everything. Even in the boat, we just couldn't walk in the fog. You couldn't find the things you couldn't find the buoys, we were up in the race. I remember learning how to use GPS, I was young aggressive. I said, Well, Daddy you're still putting on that line of yours. He goes, I don't want to steal that line you're talking about so we use that word to do it. And then finally, one day, he just started to come out with wire traps. And now of course, I was all for that it was a lot easier to haul and maintain. He said, then why don't you run the boat, then one day and I did, and he's like Jesus take it easy. And then my brother would be like, Well, I'm going with dad. So it wasn't too much as a go user, why don't you just wonderful, I'll get off the boat, you run the boat. And that's how it ended you know, as far as my dad, he became the doc pro. And of course, now I'm going to build the business and wire traps and cell phones was I think it was second or third person to have a Verizon bag phone, which I'd call him and he you know, he couldn't believe that we were out in thick file hauling lobster gear and watched again, because everything's so easy. You just learned to setback on the same line that you you're on. So you can't tangle with everybody. Like me. Lobstering's come a long way. And there was a lot of back then there was good

lobstering and even then you still had some lobsterman that did some shady stuff. You know, that's, that's part of the business. So I became really good at what I did. I worked at EB like him. Two jobs, two full time jobs, had four sons. And I don't know if the story goes on from there. Whether it's how great things got in the 90s in the fall of 1990, when they had the great washout, and mosquito spraying and the disaster that's taking place since then, and the regulations that have gone absolutely crazy, wrongly, crazy that to this day, I'd be the biggest advocate of abolishing all Connecticut lobster laws, to have someone look at it and say these need to be restored. We're not doing anything all we've done V notching

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RM: seven gauge increases, four vent size increases, and not one thing has helped lobstering because it doesn't have anything to do with it. And you know, I always have this great saying is we put if I could just speak clearly had a mediator between me and the DEP in Connecticut and talked about this, they would side with us like What makes you say that there's this is the way to catch all lobsters when you don't have any proof and that's the you know the restoration part of this to this day to this day is that they still will never receive why lobstering is not coming back. Because they don't care. They don't they don't care. We don't believe they did. If they really cared they'd have protected different species of fish today. Like I'll say like please call Courtney fish pin pin scup. We used to catch a few of them in the traps and they're small, you know, they're only tiny fish. God today you catch two and a half, three pounders they're monstrous. Well, that's not right. We call that the Viper, the ocean, the Viper, the ocean, sea bass. Those are the smallest things you ever seen in the pots back in the day, we're slaughtering lobster and we'd have stockfish, lobsters. The traps were full. And you don't see any of that anymore, and the sea bass. Those are over five pounds, some of them, but they're protected. So if you've got one of them sea bass and look in your stomach, you will see the Viper the ocean. Crab, lobster, flounder, small baby flounder, anything that that fish can eat. He is the Viper of the ocean. So when you protect someone that's a predator to all your other species, how do you expect that not to suck up lobster eggs and all the things that make lobstering grew so big. You're letting that predator live. I'm just using common sense analysis. There's nothing proven. But at least mine makes common sense. But just to keep going gauge sizes and vent sizes and all kinds of stuff. There's no proof behind it. It doesn't make any sense. Unless you're proving that we're going to have lobsters back well. That was 1998 disaster hit. And the only thing we've done is go backwards since then. No, they got no proof behind them that they've done one thing, one thing, including protecting licensing and getting people out of the business, and now it's closed seasons. I mean, they've tried everything to make lobstering come back, the only answer is it's going to be extinguished someday. they'll probably never, it's only because of you guys, you don't

listen to us. You're protecting the predators of the ocean. Think about a lobster egg as a piece of caviar. So how do you build a population of lobsters, which is very profitable for all Connecticut industry? They'll never be my son has got my business now. But how are we ever going to build a business that was so profitable in the early 90s? It's never going to be again. Because you'll never build the population. You've tried everything your way, won't try some other way? Don't God forbid, they won't listen to one part of that. They say you don't know what you're talking about. That's their answer. You know, a lot of awards have to come out of the Commerce Department and Magnuson Stevens Act there's so many laws that fishermen and lobstermen pay constantly because the powers to be the DPS the Atlantic States fishery, all these guys. You know, the problem they have is they make a law based on science. And that's I don't have no other way to put it, other than you're basing it on science. You're not basing it on facts when you make that law. Special option. I'll give you a for instance. The last I knew I was living in the United States, brought up in the United States follow the laws in the United States. Oh come if you really think about what I'm about to say. It doesn't make sense. From Maine to Maryland is Atlantic lobster. You understand that right? We catch them with their claws. So why is there seven gauge sizes?

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Why is it one all the same gauge size so the enforcement will never have to worry about lobsters like in the seafood dealers world we have to worry about lobsters we bring in from other states. Because Maine has one size fits all the whole state. Massachusetts has three sizes exists in the state of Massachusetts, can you imagine three sizes in one state? Please someone explain that to me. And then you'd have two gauge sizes in Rhode Island. I mean, the whole thing is absolutely insane. Instead of regardless of what's happened to lobstering, it still shouldn't change the gauge sizes. It shouldn't be one size fits all. React regardless of what you catch it, as I told you, if you're worried about lobsters produces more lobsters, because that's the only reason why you wouldn't want us to catch what we call chips or chicken lobsters or one pound lobsters which we use that all the restaurants used to have the twin lobster special, all kinds of things that they did in the summertime to increase business. If we can't like the smallest lobsters we catch now is a pound and a quarter. That's the smallest lobster we catch. Then you also have an oversize gauge which anything to do with one of those things that I just told you has to do with them trying to produce more lobsters. Again, going back to the theory of how do you produce more lobsters with more eggers trying to protect the eggers, v notching the female lobsters. You've tried just about everything. And not one of them things in these new DEP's or anybody else I can say, honestly, can say yeah, that worked. So if none of that, what you've tried, and believe me, there's quite a few things that they tried to include, all the gauge sizes and the vent sizes, and whatever

else I told you. There isn't a time for you got involved with the lobstermen to think what they think. But this interview I'm having you I agree to because of why I like to get the voice out there says the DEP if you ever go to a meeting, we used to have a lot of meetings back when they wanted to make changes. And you go to that meeting. And I remember when Eric Smith was present, then it was Dave Simpson. And you go to these meetings, and you might have 50-60 lobstermen there at one single meeting. And they're doing proposed changes to the law. And you would have every single person there, against what they're doing. So if you hold a meeting, to get an opinion of the people that are going to be that the changes are affecting, and everybody's against it, then why are we increasing the regulation? So I just answered that for you too. You're going to do it regardless of what you think, or what's best for the business. So that's how much power they got. And with that much power, and I mean that much power. No one can tell them anything. The only way this would ever stop is if they wanted lobstermen to be a part of the regulation. So that old time lobsterman that been through the good, the bad, then the really good. And now the really bad that understand this game more than them. They're just the regulator. They're just the person who goes out and toes a camera in the back of a boat. They have no frickin clue what we've been through in all these years. But it's when they're making the law, . For a guy like me who's been at it since he's been eight years old, and knows a lot about the changes that we've dealt with. That we're never gonna win. We're never going to solve anything and we're never going to make it better until you give the voice to the lobstermen, the honest guy that will try their hardest to show you how to increase lobsters. There was one thing I did mention to you when those lobsters we were slaughtering them, and I'm back in the 90s 6, '96, '97, '98. All of them starfish. We used to get mad at the starfish after four or five nights in the pot. They would suck onto a lobster and suck it dry. You know we would be mad to stop you know there's not a stockfish out there now. I mean pots full of these big starfish. We don't have a starfish and we haven't had one for five years. Places that were full of them why?

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Remember that predator I told you about that's what he eats, he eats those two starfish. The DEP knows everything I'm telling you indirectly. They've busted open sea bass and stuff. They know all this. The problem is they won't do anything about it. It's a protected fish. Why? A protected fish would be maybe a tuna or something. But a protected fish that's a predator that's gonna wipe out a species. We've got 1234 species while you're protecting it. I don't think that's a winning battle. I think you're I think that my common sense of high school education will tell you I just lost the battle. Because you want to protect one fish, you're gonna go kill off how many species. Boy that makes a lot of sense. You're allowed to speak but every part of those public hearings were very, very argumentative. I mean, I was an alternate on the council to New York and Connecticut,

which sides with each other they make the same rules. And I mean, I can recall some of the New York guys coming over to Old Lyme, Connecticut, to a public hearing. Absolutely. Go right off on the DEP. And for making REG again, we're talking about making regulations with nothing to back you but a camera behind a boat, you're not seeing what's going on. You know, you you you gotta be a lobsterman to understand this, what is transpired in all those years, why things are getting good, and why things were getting bad. And, you know, if you can't give the lobstermen a voice of reason, an idea of themselves then we're going to lose that battle. And that's what the DEP has done today. They've lost this battle, the battles over they've won and I hope they're happy. In 1998 we had 300 commercial license alone in the state of Connecticut. this is just a state run there's no federal there's no federal waters in Connecticut just state run. Forget all those those recreational licenses. Our breakwaters used to have from Stonington used to have, you could walk on the buoys in the summertime, and everybody caught lobsters with their 10 pound licenses. But we still had 300 commercial licenses just our state alone. Never mind the recreational licenses. Very very income driven business it was only better and better all the time. Every year was getting better, right through 1990 and making it like I said when the shit hit the fan. It was a storm that started the problem but that's what they'll always go back to is that storm in '98 that insecticide this then sprayed mosquito spraying we had the floods and it all got in the water and they're never gonna say that killed off the population. That's theory. That's the theory. That's all that is a theory. But how do you rebuild even if that was a true statement? Which some of it I'm sure it was because it all the coastlines all got washed out so bad. That theory is fine until you say how do I rebuild it? Well, the rebuilding was made up statements. I've been in the paper before making statements of 1970 was the only year we ever had a case. You produce it and you put them in our fishery, we even did a study how much it would cost to do this. But you just have wasted you've been released the lobster you released and you go release the female and then you raise the eggs. And when they're you know, anywhere from between six and nine months old, they become you know, once they become a lobster and they can swim at nine months old, for sure they can swim you go and release them into the ocean because they can go down swim down to the crevices and hide from the predators. Think about what I was telling you with the eggs, we can't even get the eggs to hatch anymore without them getting scooped up by fish. How the hell are we ever going to have small lobsters again.?

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RM: So, you know, that's why we don't catch many small lobsters because small lobsters because this is where we're at. We're at a defining time of the industry is in trouble. But I do believe DEP has just as much responsibility as anybody else. You know, they their whole idea of getting more lobster and so that 300 commercial like

this I don't know if it's 15 in the state today I don't know if it's 15, maybe 20. I don't know because some guys don't even go lobstering anymore. And a lot of those guys. Go see guys who had 3000 a pop, 1500 traps, 1200 traps. Go see how many of them are in business? 0, 0 men, not one. When you are starting to face the no lobsters in the pots, regulations that are absolutely, you know, strangling you. You're fighting a losing battle. And you both guy after guy, when DEP did anything, a lot of lobstermen, they just couldn't make it anymore. The regulations were just absolutely mind boggling. So they killed you, they wiped you out. And one guy after another, you seem sell out. I mean, I bought a few guys out, during times, I thought it would all come back and all that and, you know, you get things for cheap prices, of course, you got to try to buy somebody out, but it just didn't come back enough to make it profitable anymore. And that's where we're at today. It's just like my son struggles all the time with lobstering, he's so much like me, he works for DEP as a crane operator, and he runs the business. And it's just not profitable. Like you know, I had all four of my sons in the business at one time, as each one of my sons turned nine they'd start on the dock and called the dock crew that go in the big tent, working there. And with my dad, it was great. I mean, they spent time in there, and they're they've worked couple hours a day and I pay him so they you know, they understood the value of blue-collar work, because that means so much to me. You know, a little inside joke of lobsterman, anybody could be a lobsterman and today because you didn't have to know shit. You put a pot anywhere and you catch lobsters. Good golly, the lobsters were all over the place. So you sit there, and that's how you understood it in those 90s going every year was crazy. I mean, just plain crazy. The amount of lobsters. Thank God. I mean, I shouldn't say it that way. But I was working two jobs and making, lobstering was like my full-time job and, on second shift and stuff. I mean, at 26 I had two boats. And it was it was that profitable. And to look back and say, you know why it happened? Well, I can give you some some small thoughts of what I already told you. My cousin Timmy had a little boat called the Susan Francis. Another family friend had another boat I'm trying to think the name of it. Now back in those days they used to let these guys tow in, right in Fishers Island Sound. They stayed there, there were river sand bottom is still has sand bottoms today. And there'd be plenty of flat fish, flounders and daylights and they'd catch them Scup, sea bass. And they that was all they sold to the dealer. You know all those lobster eggs that those all those females are turning over year after year, more and more females. Releasing eggs? Who's eating them? So why aren't you getting more lobsters. Because all the fish are getting scooped up by these little draggers that fish in the sound" At least make sense? Because then they stop them from dragging in the Sound. They weren't allowed to drag anymore in the Sound. So now that fish stocks building up getting bigger, you could see them getting bigger. And next thing you know, you have the flood and the '99 was happening what you caught it 98 and 2000 was half of what you caught in '99 And you're sitting there saying what the hell's going on?

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RM: Well, it wasn't just the flood. It was the fish. It's the best possible answer I can give you is they've allowed the predator to get so big to this day today. 2021 They still allow these sea bass and all these vicious animals get fished. It's so big. It just it's amazing. And like I said to you, and we can't keep one. So the draggers can go, or you can go handlining and catch a few sea bass and whatever they allow you . But go ask a lobstermen as a supplement to what my son does. These five pounders, is that a word? It's a very expensive fish. If he brought 10 of them in? Hell, that'd be his fuel for the week. Can't bring them in 2000 they shut down the little draggers from fishing there. It became more. They said the regulations from Jesus, '98 to 2005, agents really clamped down on how much fish then was how many days? Yeah. I don't really know all the fishing rules. But those guys all got out of business too, because they they couldn't keep up. The problem that we have today is the groups that back all these regulations. You know, that includes celebrities. That includes a lot of people that back these regulations in the environment. It's hard to uncover all the mess that we're in. I mean, there's some really great lobstermen that have gone out of business or you mentioned, you know, guys that got out the sites, the George Mean family and Johnny Whitaker, Mike Grimshaw, there's some families, the Soyers, there's some families that have been in this since long before me. There's people have been in this in, you know, early 70s 60s 60s and 70s. They're out lobstering with wooden traps, and you use your thing that helped was that you had to bring your traps in by the first of October, otherwise, the pots would get eaten up by the sea worms, the wooden traps. So that was a good little regulator in some fashion, you had to bring traps home, because they get eaten up. But, you know, that's that's a whole small story of how some of the best families in this business has gone south. And they're out. Well, there's no hardly anybody in it. I can give you some of the pot limits that some of these guys had. 3000, 1500, I was 1500. I mean, there was so much to between my two boats I had 2700. And I fished every tide, we caught lobsters everywhere. And now these families caught fish, how many, I can't remember the exact number of traps that were fishing in 1998. But it would be an exuberant amount on say, jeez how these guys survived? Everybody survived very well, including the recreation guys that fish in the breakwaters. And I mean there'd be a breakwater with 500 traps. I mean, you couldn't even use the rowboat to get them between the pots. But they all did well. They all catch their lobsters in summertime people really enjoyed it. But it's all gone now, you know, you don't see 10 pots there. I'm not joking either. There's not 10 pots at the breakwater in the middle of summertime. Because there's not a lobster to be found. Through the course of 1999, when they developed the Commission. They were trying to have the regulator's work with the lobstermen, I would say. I mean, they still have they still have panels today up in Maine.

I believe Massachusetts just had an awful hearing. They just shut some of the months. One of my guys and I get a lobsters from,

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RM: next year he can't fish from January to May, or January to April, whatever it is, he's, they're all upset. And again, it's based on catch, less lobsters. So we're going to shut down more days and see not why is being happening, it's that's, their idea. So even today still have these hearings. But it was very big back then. Because you're involving there's not many people left to have the hearings then. But back then you had a shit done. I mean, you had you know 30 guys from New York, in Connecticut, yelling and screaming at hearings to try to get these people to listen to you. To no avail. 5-10 years ago, things started getting to the point where we didn't you couldn't make it anymore. I'm 63 now I'll be 64 next month, so that's 56 years that I caught lobsters and part of catching lobsters. And my son's continue on my dad only had a year that we started. So that's my family's been in a long time. Yeah. And fishing for that and to think that, you know your name has been recognized with lobstering and that's all going out the window. It could be soon because I think they'll shut you down for long. They'll come out with that. That'll be the last thing. We're gonna shut down commercial fishing in Connecticut. There's a lot of sad stories and a lot of regulations that have done all this. So, you know there's not, you're not going to get too many good stories when you talk to people in this business. Now, granted, mine's a little different. I've been through a boat sinking at nine years old and you know, I've been through a lot. But you know, I'm a happy guy today. I'm in the seafood industry still. I'm retired from EP but I love being a seafood wholesaler. You know, I didn't realize the middleman does really well, does you know, I don't have to do much to make money in the middle. And the only thing I do is buy and sell not that bad. So the price is up well then the customer has to pay. You know, it's not that different. When you're a lobsterman you're begging for someone to pay you some good money, like I said, I would love to lobster, change around. But it'll never happen without the right people saying enough is enough. I'm passionate about lobstering. I love that game. Not many people do lobstering because it's such a blue-collar job whether it's it's not just catching lobsters, it's you know, power washing pots, building traps. I can go on and on. It never stops. But you better damn well be passionate to enjoy lobstering. But when you do when you are regulated out of it, and you take the passion away, because you have to have it to be good at it. If you take that passion away. Then what do you have left? And that's what they've done. They've taken the passion away. Think of a 25-year-old that would love to go out lobstering and get his own business started going how's he going to do it? You can't get a license you can buy someone's license. But what are you gonna do with it? In the state of Connecticut, you can't use the New York side of it? That's the profitable side while fish near fish, though. So what are you going to do? You're going to invest how much money in a boat with

traps, buoys ropes and you gotta go catch lobster and there's not much going on in Connecticut. So how you gonna make a living? So we can't have an industry. You see what I'm saying? There's no industry left. Oh, you build that business and figure out how to build a business. You're never going to do nothing.

End