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An Ocean Venture

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An Ocean Venture

Cover Page Footnote

I'd like to thank Captain Samuel Fuller and Kelo Pinkham of Boothbay for their stories; they're just two of the fishermen we have working on this project. People like them are what make my research rewarding.

An Ocean Venture | Mattie Rodrigue

It was my first time on a purse seiner and I had to pee. Normally the head on these giant industrial vessels had a nice toilet-shower combo, but Captain Sam Fuller of the *Ocean Venture* told me that his bathroom facility had accidentally been removed during repairs on the boat, which had been sitting in a harbor rusting for about ten years prior to purchase. He pointed me in the direction of a bucket on deck.

The *Ocean Venture* was a beast of a boat. Seventy-five feet long with a full galley and cabin complete with six bunks and a flat screen. This was a very different fishing trip than I was used to. A graduate student at the University of Maine, I'd been working on the eastern Gulf of Maine Sentinel Survey Fishery project for two years, but still marveled that a girl from Arizona could end up some days fifty miles offshore.

I had already logged dozens of hours longlining and jigging. Normally, I'd join fishermen on a forty-five foot vessel traditionally used for lobstering. We'd set two miles of longline along the bottom, and we'd jig for cod with hand-held lines while we waited. After two hours and usually no cod on the jig, we'd pull up the longline and I'd spend the next two hours getting fish thrown at me off the captain's gaff, slipping around on the deck covered in blood and crap, trying to get my data. The trips never lasted more than eighteen hours (including the drive down to whichever port I was fishing out of that day). But this trip was different. It was mid-November and we were fishing in the middle of Penobscot Bay for one day, and way offshore with no land in sight for another. We were jigging for two straight days, leaning over the sides of a giant, rolling steel monstrosity of a seiner that, on her best day, could get up to eight whole knots. Once a lobster boat came up to us and asked if we were alright; we must have looked ridiculous.

I had boarded the *Ocean Venture* at midnight on the first day. I joined the Captain, Sam Fuller, a recent graduate of Maine Maritime Academy who worked full-time on the *Ocean Venture* carrying herring for giant seiners working for the herring industry. That meant he stayed out on the water for days at a time waiting for purse-seiners to wrap a floating net around a giant ball of herring. Then he and his crew would use a kind of vacuum hose to suck fish out of the seine net and into the refrigerated hold of the boat. The *Ocean Venture* could carry 80,000 pounds of herring, or as the herring guys say, "two trucks," compared to the boat trips I typically joined, where we were lucky if we caught more than 12,000 pounds of fish for a whole season.

Sam's sternman, Kelo Pinkham, was an old-timer: a classic Maine fisherman with the accent to match. He'd done every kind of fishing you could imagine, and he'd had his hand in just about every research project in the Gulf of Maine. Kelo helped design fishing surveys, re-worked shrimp gear to be more selective and efficient, and trawled groundfish all over the Gulf. He knew everybody I knew at the University, everybody I didn't know at the state Department of Marine Resources and Gulf of Maine Research Institute. He was a legend.

A hotshot whip-smart captain, a steady old-timer who could read the Gulf of Maine like a book, and me. I was lucky these guys wanted to take me out on the boat, and lucky that they were putting up with my endless string of questions about fish and fishing and the ocean. These guys

had seen millions of pounds of fish caught in a day, millions packed, and millions of dollars made off the herring feeding in the Gulf. This was the crutch of the lobster industry. Herring is primarily used to bait lobster traps, and if the bait industry stopped, so did the lobster industry. I had been out with the lobstermen who worked part-time on the survey, and had heard their jaw-dropping stories of record hauls, by-catch, and market booms or busts, but I'd never seen the other side of the coin that was the herring fishery.

From asking questions and listening to Sam and Kelo, and talking with them about industry regulations and fisheries management, I was beginning to notice a theme. There was a communication gap between fisheries scientists and fishermen. For example, Sam spoke of the herring fishery closure after quotas were met. The idea was to keep the herring fishery going during the season for as long as possible, so that they could supply bait to the lobster industry. That meant trying to regulate catch numbers so as not to fill the quota in two days. The fishermen called the managers time after time, telling them they were catching thousands of pounds of herring. They must be nearing the limit they said, surely the fishery will be closed soon. The managers, sitting in front of computers at their desks in offices hundreds of miles away, did not react. Sam said the fishermen felt like the managers didn't believe that they were catching so much, because the computer models told them that only sixty percent of the quota had been caught. The guys kept catching the herring because the managers didn't adjust the limit; they would keep fishing and trying to make money until they heard the quota was met. Finally, the managers realized their predictive model was underestimating catch; fishermen had already filled more than ninety percent. The managers reacted by shutting down fishing, almost two months ahead of schedule. The captains were furious, Sam said. Kelo nodded his assent; he had seen his fair share of management-fishermen clashes. I had seen the aftermath of the herring closure on one of the other boats I jigged from. The captain was a full time lobsterman, and he had to start importing rockfish as bait because there was no herring available. He said it was poorer quality and a nightmare to thaw.

This incident was just a little blip on the timeline of fisheries management in the Gulf of Maine. But I began to wonder about how many of these little blips stemmed from the disconnect between managers and fishermen, and how many of these little blips would have to accumulate to result in a large-scale fishery crash. How many blips, little nodes in the system, needed to crash before the whole thing collapsed?

As I was considering all of this, a giant, freezing wave crashed over the side of the boat and on to me, sitting with my pants down, peeing into a bucket on the deck of the *Ocean Venture*.