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On How a Fisherman Supports Fishermen: Oral History with Patrick Shepard | *Natalie Springuel*

*Patrick Shepard, 30, grew up in a fishing family in Stonington, Maine. He graduated high school in 2006, went to college and returned home to work for Maine Center for Coastal Fisheries. This interview was recorded in March 2018 at the Maine Fishermen's Forum, part of a project of The First Coast, Maine Sea Grant, and College of the Atlantic. Pat Shepard was interviewed by Galen Koch and Matt Frassica with help from intern Katie Clark. Natalie Springuel*

I was born and raised in Stonington. Well, I wasn't born there. I was born in a hospital. But I was raised in Stonington in a fishing family. My father is a fisherman, still is a fisherman. His father was a fisherman. His father before that, and so on. I think, so my brother and I started our first fishing business when we were eight and nine. And we were fifth generation fishermen at the time. So I worked for my brother basically all through my childhood. We were business partners, you know. And before we turned ten years old we were working with each other. We started out with I think three traps apiece and by the time we graduated high school we were working from our third boat. And had eight hundred trap allocations between us.

We started out in a twenty-one foot Privateer, outboard. My father paid about \$7,000 for it when we were eight. I was eight, my brother was nine. We had paid him back by the end of the summer. And that wasn't atypical. Kids in my generation, when we were growing up at the time, you started off working for your father. In our case, we skipped that step and went straight out on our own. But it was pretty typical to get into the fishing industry early at a really young age and have your own checking account when you were eight years old. And managing your own business and finances. It's pretty cool. It's one of the cool things about being from a small town, sort of learning the value of a dollar at a very early age. I think it's something that the rest of America, urban America, misses.

My parents would write sick notes and we would go fishing. And when we came to school the next day, the teachers would ask how much money we made the day before. No, it wasn't like that every day. But some days in the height of the season, especially in June, and definitely in September, my dad would write us a sick note if we wanted to go tend our gear. Didn't happen very often, but once in a while he'd throw us a bone. But definitely when we got out of school in the afternoon, we'd go haul a few traps and then head home for supper. Definitely on the weekends. And then we'd fish all summer long.

My mom that first year when we were eight, eight and nine, my mom went with us just to be the safety, be a parental figure sort of on the boat. And she used to sit on the bow and read magazines. And after a few weeks of her going with us, we woke her up one morning and she rolled over and looked at us and she goes, "You know what? You guys are prepared to handle anything that would happen out there a lot better than I can, so just go."

I remember the first really foggy day that we went in the skiff, my brother, we were leaving the dock. And I was asking my brother, I was like, "We can't see anything." We didn't have equipment like what exists now. We didn't have radar and a chart plotter and three different GPS machines. We had a compass and a depth finder and a steering wheel. And we were leaving the dock, and it was so foggy out that we couldn't see sort of the last row of boats in the harbor. It

was just pea soup. We could barely see the bow of the boat. And I remember asking my brother, I was like, "Matt, we can't see anything. How are we going to do this?" And he said something like, "Don't worry about it. Get back there where you belong." And I remember leaving the harbor and my brother had a compass bearing for his first string of traps. And we steamed for a little while, didn't turn, and just ended up landing right on the end buoy. And we hauled through that string of traps, and he took another compass bearing, and we ended up right on the end buoy for the next string. And we did that all morning long. And by the end of the day, we had hauled through all of our gear in pea soup fog with no equipment. And it cleared off, and it was the most beautiful ride home. [Laughter] But, you know, we didn't have equipment like we have now. And you had to learn. My dad had taught him how to navigate without any of that stuff, so he was comfortable. And it was then that I learned that I would never be a captain. [Laughter] My brother's always had a knack for it. And I could definitely do it, but I chose a different direction in life I guess.

Now, I am a sector manager for a group of groundfish fishermen that operate from, well they hold permits from Jonesport, Maine all the way to Cape Cod. We're one of 18 groundfish sectors in New England. We have 33 permits in our sector. Most of them are lobster fishermen who hold groundfish permits in hopes that the groundfish resource will rebound in eastern Maine so that they can have the opportunity to go [fish] again.

I'm 30. In my lifetime, I've witnessed an entire coast full of fishermen, boats of all different sizes, fishing for all different kinds of things, fishing for scallops and groundfish and herring and shrimp. My dad would fish for lobsters in the summer and fall. And then he'd re-rig his boat for scallops in the winter, and he would drag for scallops all winter. And then he would take the scallop rigging off and he would go either seining for herring or groundfishing in the spring. And then he'd roll right back into lobstering. And that was what you had to do to make up an income. You were a diverse fisherman and you had licenses for all these different things to fish. And in my lifetime, over the past 30 years, we've been condensed to just one fishery here on the coast of Maine. And lobster is king and we don't really have access to much of anything else.

So, I think, and this is the reason I do what I do, I see a lot of value in having a diverse set of fisheries to go after. And I think the ecosystem benefits of having a diverse set of species out there that have sort of all intermingled. And the benefits to communities to having a diverse set of resources to process for infrastructure and shore-side businesses. We need to get back to that.

You know, fishermen are incredibly intelligent. They will figure out how to do things more efficiently. They'll figure out how to catch more fish with limits and regulation. That's what they do, they innovate. They're constantly innovating to try to run more efficiently and make more money and catch more fish. And that's the beauty of what they do. But unfortunately that also causes some problems, right? We see innovations and technology that allow us to catch more fish. We develop these 3D scanning sonars that allow us to see fish in the water column. We have 3D depth finders that show us the exact contours of the bottom of the ocean. And fishing, through these technological innovations, has become a video game. Anybody can jump on a boat with a wheelhouse full of equipment and go find fish or lobsters or whatever it is. Technology, I think, has been one of the demises of a lot of the fisheries that we've lost. So, we need to figure out how to use the innovation and creativity of fishermen to start to restore some of the fisheries

we've lost and start to sustain them over time. Sort of harness the incredible ability that they have to innovate and use that to our advantage.

I think in some fisheries, yeah, it means being able to make a profit off of less and less fish. Or less and less product. The groundfish fishery used to be, in its heyday, 10,000 pounds in a day trip. Just going out, setting the drag, loading the boat, coming back home. And that's not what it's gonna look like in the future. It's gonna look like, how do I make the most amount of money on 1,200 pounds of fish, 1,000 pounds of fish, 800 pounds of fish. And we have a fisherman in our sector who's starting to figure that out. [He has] a 36-foot boat and his average catch for the day is 1,200 pounds. And in order to make a business work on that few, on that little amount of fish, he's had to innovate in the market place. So he markets his catch directly to restaurants instead of selling to the traditional auction-style fish houses. And because of that, because of his fishing methods, he fishes with all rod and reel, hook gear, he's able to preserve the quality of the fish and sell his story to the people who are buying them.

We need to figure out how to either aggregate and transport to places like [Portland, Boston...], or figure out how to consume that in our own communities. And I think that latter part is going to be even more challenging. You can get your product to, you can ship your product off to a place where there is a population of people who appreciate it. Or you can teach the people in your own backyard how to appreciate it. And I think that's one of our big challenges.

We want our food, we want our seafood, we want it portioned, packaged, vacuum-sealed, frozen with a YouTube video on how to cook it. And, you know, everything short of somebody picking up a fork and stuffing it in your face. It's pretty ridiculous that we don't know how to cook whole fish anymore. And that's one of the things that we're trying to do with the sector is educate people on how to prepare a whole fish in their homes. It's pretty easy when you start to learn how to do it. Even filleting. If you wanted to fillet a whole fish. I could probably count on two hands and a half a foot the number of people from here to Eastport that can fillet a fish. That's pretty staggering. Probably the same amount of people who could tell the difference between a haddock and a cod. So we need to educate our neighbors on how to handle this stuff and capture that value in our own communities.

Well, unfortunately, the way [change has] happened in the past is through a major crash. A species will just take a digger. And we have to figure out, okay this resource has all but collapsed. If it's starting to come back, we need to limit the amount that we're taking and we need to figure out how to make a profit from that. Some of these other species like lobster. We have an amazing resource in lobster. Is it going to take a crash in the lobster fishery to start to change people's minds about the volume that they're bringing in? I hope not. I hope we can start to figure that out.

Shrimp, the same story. The shrimp fishery crashed in the state of Maine. We may or may not be seeing that resource come back. There is some talk of maybe having a fishery next year. But it's going to be very limited in scale. And through these species crashes, we've figured out how to innovate. And some of the best ideas, actually probably all of the best ideas, on how to capture the value of a limited amount of resource have come from fishermen. And that's been pretty cool to watch.

We saw it in the scallop fishery along the eastern half of the coast of Maine. Our organization held I think over 125 meetings with scallop fishermen as the resource was starting to come back. At each of those meetings, we said, okay, it seems like there might be something happening here with this resource. Anecdotally, we're seeing things start to build back up. How do you guys want to manage it? And in eastern Maine, we heard a resounding opinion of the fishing fleet that wanted to try out this rotational style management. So fishermen got together with each other. Basically divided the whole eastern coast up into big sections. And said okay, based on what we know about the biology of the animal, they should be either two or three year rotations. So we designed this three-year rotation, rotational area management for the eastern half of the coast. And I think we're seven years into it, six or seven years into it now. And we've seen the most boats that have participated in that fishery in the past ten years, just sort of bounce right back. It's not perfect. It's got its issues. The management structure has its issues. But we've effectively figured out how to harness the knowledge of fishermen in order to preserve a resource and make it more sustainable. And guys are making a little bit of a living in the wintertime. Which is a pretty cool success story.

[...]

What do I value about our community? Well, I mentioned that my brother and I started our own business when we were very young. Obviously, that's something I value about Stonington and places Downeast. Our kids are our most valuable asset. And to be able to provide them the opportunity to get into fishing work for a living, transferring our knowledge to them, I think is pretty important. Finding, listening to our kids, this is one of the coolest things about one of the things that we're doing, the Eastern Maine Skippers Program, is engaging elementary and high school kids in projects that will sustain fishing.

And some of the coolest ideas have come from these high school kids that have an idea about something and want to go pursue it. I think the first year that the Skippers Program had started they had built and designed winter flounder traps to try and catch winter flounder. So they designed this whole project themselves with a little bit of help from community members and teachers. They wanted to try to take what they could learn about the species and design a trap to be able to go catch it. And they sort of realized along the way that you can't just design a trap and go set it in the ocean. You need a permit to be able to do that. So they learned the process of applying for a special license to start a new fishery. Not only apply for that special license but design a research program to be able to gather data from what they were doing.

And the commissioner of marine resources, Pat Keliher, sort of kicked off the whole project by coming down, meeting with all the students, and saying, you know, "You guys are at the helm here. We've got this winter flounder resource that may or may not be coming back. I need you guys to figure out how to do it." And the kids were just jazzed right up about it after that. I didn't know who the commissioner of marine resources was when I was in high school, 10th grade, 11th grade. These guys have his cell phone number. You know, they call him up and it's the coolest thing to be able to connect those kids to a management agency in that way and sort of bridge that gap at a really early age. Because it's the most important thing that they'll ever learn, is how to interact with the science community and the management community in order to start a fishery.

I mean, not a whole lot of kids come back [after they leave], right? We send them off into the world, and they learn what they want to learn and become who they want to be. And oftentimes they'll just stay away. And we lose a lot of kids in our community, I think. Sometimes they come back. Sometimes it takes them an entire career and they come back here to retire.

I was one of the ones who came back fairly early, I think. You know, we came back to our hometowns because we value the place that we're from and we want to make a difference and hopefully make it better. And I hope my daughter does the same.

Kids are going to end up being the entity that finally makes change. I don't think I've seen so many rattled politicians. And it takes kids to do it. You know, you get a bunch of adults in a room and they can't get along with each other. And then a kid comes up with a good idea and they're like, "Oh, maybe we oughta listen." And, you know, we're seeing it on the micro level in the Eastern Maine Skippers Program. A kid comes up with a cool idea and all the adults are like, "Holy shit, he's pretty smart." So, just allowing our kids to have that kind of creativity and freedom to say, "Oh, okay, I can affect national policy or state policy." Whether it's fishing or guns or whatever it is. Allowing them the ability to do that and to know that they can do that and empowering them with the tools that it takes. It's pretty exciting.

I created my own job I think wherever I've gone. That's actually a cool segue into a story that I wanted to tell. It seems like every other week I get the question, "Why didn't you become a fisherman? You're from a fishing family, you're fifth generation, your brother fishes, your father fishes, why didn't you fish?" And you see what has happened in the lobster fishery. Yeah, so people ask me all the time why I didn't follow in my family's footsteps and become a fisherman. You know, my brother's a fisherman, my father's a fisherman, and his father before that and so on. I sort of took a little different career path, and I keep finding the answer to that question for myself and the work that I do.

I was sitting in the stern of a boat the other day with a fisherman that I work with really closely. And he said, "Pat," he goes, "I got to tell you something that I haven't told really many other people before." And I was like, oh no, what's coming. So, he said, "Have a seat. I want to tell you something." And I was kind of nervous, and I sat on the stern. And he said, "Pat, I don't think you realize how important you are to me and to my business." And I said, "Okay." And he said, "Before I started fishing in the sector, my house was in foreclosure. My wife and I had lost both of our vehicles. We were getting ready to move in with my parents. I would leave on a fishing trip and know that my family had 60 bucks to live on for the week." And he said, "After joining the sector and working with you folks to develop my business plan and to build up my business, today I made the last payment to bring my house out of foreclosure. And I just put a down payment on a truck."

And that, just solidified for me, how important it is to do the work we do. You know, that sort of made it rock solid in my mind. That this is what I need to be doing. It's pretty cool. I have a really good relationship with the guy and I didn't know that I had that much of an impact. Stuff like that keeps me going.

- Interviewed by Natalie Springuel, March 2018