

Interviewee Name: Valerie Peacock

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:

Eliza Oldach (UC-Davis) and Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant)

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Interview Description:

Valerie Peacock, an education consultant and head of the Eastern Maine Skippers Program from Bar Harbor, ME, speaks about how she came to love the ocean and fishing communities, her background working in the fishing communities of Bar Harbor, and her concern about Maine communities losing a sense of the cultural value of fishing.

Collection Description:

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Transcription by: Eliza Oldach

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[17:58]

EO: Eliza Oldach

NS: Natalie Springuel

VP: Valerie Peacock

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EO: Val, thank you so much. Um, could you start by just saying your name and spelling it please?

VP: Um, my name is Valerie Peacock, V-A-L-E-R-I-E P-E-A-C-O-C-K but everyone calls me Val, so.

EO: Yes, so did I.

VP: That's fine.

EO: So just to get us started, what brought you to the Fishermen's Forum this year?

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VP: Um, I came as um part of the Eastern Maine Skippers Program, so the, um, Skippers Program is a program that's in eight—or nine high schools from Vinalhaven to Jonesport for students who are looking into going into fishing after high school, or students—what we've found is we actually attract a lot of students who are just interested in living in uh, what it's like living in a fishing-dependent community, um, so we have about a hundred students across the schools that I work with that program as a, the curriculum creator. And every year the students do a project and they present their project at the Fishermen's Forum so we actually organize a session where the kids bring their, um, bring their posters of where they are in their project and we ask the public to interact with them, to look at their posters and ask them questions and make connections and so I help to put all that together, and to organize the day, and so I come for that. And then I usually end up staying just because, I'm interested personally in sort of what's happening in fisheries but also, um, it's a good chance for me to sort of see what's going on in fisheries. I'm actually an education consultant and so even though this is a fisheries program, I'm not spending all of my days immersed in the fisheries world so it's good for me to kind of know what's going on and issues, and to meet people so I can kind of connect them to students in the program or write curriculums around things in the program, so, um, tomorrow there's some sessions on, um, fishermen finances which is something that we work on in our program, around business and um personal finance and so it's good, I got to them and meet people and get the information, like take that back to schools, so.

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EO: I know you have a long history in fishing communities as well. Could you describe that?

VP: Yeah, so, I'm actually from New Hampshire (laughs). I moved, um, from away. Um, but I came to College of the Atlantic in 1994, um. And I had a little bit of sort of ocean background before that, my, my, I had sort of a uh, um, I'd say like a, um, split personality childhood where I, I had a really messy family, and like my parents were divorced when I was young, it was a messy divorce, there was a lot of drama in my family, but one thing along the way my mom my stepdad bought a, like a summer place in, um, Harpswell, Maine. It was just like this tiny little cabin but it was actually on the water, and we had a boat and so we'd go there in the summertime, and I'd get to be on the water, and my parents, my mom and my step-dad are actually scuba divers as well, and so it's something that I got interested in when I was young and wanted to learn how to do that. And so when I was 16, I, my, I asked my parents to like help me do it and they wouldn't pay for it, and so, I did it myself, it was really expensive to buy the gear and get the lessons and I just drove around to all the dive shops in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, around New Hampshire, and asked them if they would trade dive lessons for work. And I found one guy who said yes (laughs). Um, this crazy guy, Don Stevens, who, um, if you're around in the right area you know who he is. Um, and so he, he just taught me how to scuba dive and, um, helped me piece together gear from like leftover stuff around his house. And so when I came to COA in Bar Harbor, I was really really, had just into scuba diving and like being on the water. And so the first thing I did was went- figured out where the dive shop was and hung around, which was in Bass Harbor, and I just kind of made myself at home there, like just sort of moved in, like literally for a little while, um, and um, what I found out was that fishing, scuba diving's not really a recreational thing in Maine, it's a commercial thing. So I was around Chris Eaton, who owned the shop, Chris and Elaine, um, and they were doing, like, commercial boat work and they were scallop divers, um, and then I met Eddie Monat, Diver Ed, at that time, and so, and they also had this tour boat that they were running out of Southwest Harbor that's similar to the tour boat that Eddie has now where they take video cameras underwater. So I just right away kind of moved into that place. And pretty quickly was on boats all the time doing work, um, and just kind of meeting fishermen and um, and I actually was a scallop diver right off the bat, and, in between, I went to COA, so we have that long break between, um, first term and second term, I actually was scalloping that whole time. Um, and so that just kind of kicked me into a place there. Um, and it was a pretty interesting place to be, like it was kind of at the downhill slide of scalloping at that time, like scallops are coming back up now sort of not in good shape back then. And um, there definitely weren't any other girls doing it for sure (laughs). So it was a really interesting place, fishery to be in, I think even on the back of lobster boats there wasn't really that many females, but, there were no other females lobstering so I went into a diver safety course the people were just like, well what are you doing here? You're totally not in the right place. And then selling scallops was a totally funny thing, too, like sort of you know being 18 years old and, um, being a female in that was an interesting place to be. Um, and so I actually moved up scalloping for a few winters, and then, um, I don't know, I only went to college for a year.

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I wasn't ready for that given my experience, but I was really attracted to the ocean parts of things, and so, um, I, I ended up taking time off and traveling and then I came back to Bar Harbor just because of the place and the community that I'd already started to get into, and I got a job with Diver, with Eddie Monat as Assistant Harbor Master in the Town of Bar Harbor which is a pretty hilarious place to be at 19 years old, um, sort of in charge of the fishing docks. And it was different than it is now, like there—it was a lot less touristy I think back then was sort of the beginning of cruise ships, there wasn't really—and it was kind of

coming off there was a big transition happening where, uh, there were still a few ground fishing boats in the harbor, but, uh, it had been predominantly ground fishing boats before then, and it was a pretty rough place right before there. And uh it was right at the beginning of lobstering kind of taking off, so things were changing, but it was still kind of a funny place to be as like a young female in a uniform, like trying to sort of figure out how to do, you know how to manage a group of fishermen which is in some ways (laughs). So, but I think I had a little bit of an advantage being young and female there.

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Like I wasn't, I wasn't, wasn't sort of test-tossed around and aggressive, basically I was able to kind of, like, I think work things out a different way maybe. Um, but I did that for 3 summers and I was scalloping in the winters and so that was when I was scalloping, and then I rolled out of that thinking that I wanted to lobster, to get on a lobster boat, so I, I actually fished, I fished the fall with Steve Strout, who they call "Mother," on the back of his boat. He's an old-time fishermen and it was an old boat, not his boat that he has now, it was an old Jonesporter, um, and, you know, he's, it was really fun and interesting and sort of different, and then, um, and then I ended up fishing another full year with um, um Robbie Higgins out of SW Harbor where I fished for the whole year, lobstering with him, and that was also kind of crazy times 'cause he was going through like personal madness in his life and so like it was, it was a really messy time to be on his boat, but. Um, yeah, so, I, I've sort of been around it.

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And then I've also done, um, one of the things was, I just was in the lobster research session, and I was a, um, I think actually Chris Petersen set me up with, from COA, got a call from the state they were looking for people to do sea sampling and he gave them my name. So I actually did the sea sampling, um, both the ventless trap survey and just the regular sea sampling for almost 10 years, um just like as a contracted person. And so that, one of the coolest things I think was to be able to, uh, the sea sampling program they want you to get on as many boats as you can, so I was going out with lots of different people that I didn't know, and out of different ports I didn't know, kind of cold-calling fishermen from the list. Um, and that was really cool 'cause I got such a broad perspective and different—got out of my comfort zone with people I knew, and got onto boats that I'd never been on, and could see the diversity of the fishery, um, even just in the little things of like, how they set up their boats or how they set up their traps, or, um, how they sort of manage their crews and sort of things like that. Um, and then I got to the ventless trap survey and I did that one from Cutler to Bar Harbor so I got to like sample that coastline, which was really cool, I got to see all of that for a lot of years, so. So, yeah (laughs).

[0:09:22.5]

EO: Long history. And now that you're no longer actively fishing, how do you engage with those communities?

VP: Yeah, so, so I think I sort of hinted a little bit, my childhood wasn't really a super pos—like, fun, safe, and, you know all the things that I'm doing for my kid are not all the things that my parents did for me. And so, and I grew up in this sort of weird urban spot, um, I didn't really have much of a neighborhood, it wasn't even suburban, it was like right on the

edge of like a strip mall kind of, just like right on the edge of town, so, I didn't really have—and I grew up in Manchester, New Hampshire, so it's about 250,000 people population there, and the downtown was literally boarded, like, it was an old mill town, all the mills were closed, and the downtown was like the main street of town was like closed, um, and now when you go there it's all hipster, you know the mills are all like condos and fancy restaurants but it wasn't like that when I was growing up. Um, and so, I didn't really, I don't, I think you don't really know what you don't know until you get to a new place, um, so when I came to Bar Harbor, like, one of the things I found right away was community. I found people that I could go in the grocery store and recognize and say hi to, or just walk down the street. And I, I found the fishing community even quicker, right? And so I sort of made my way into that and I think a lot of ways I felt sort of special to be accepted into it, to sort of be treated all right and be able, like, to have these guys who've been doing it their whole lives feel like I could do it with them and sort of hold up and fit in. And, I, I think I tried really hard to make that happen at the beginning, that was like really important to me.

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And now I feel like I don't try as hard now, now I don't laugh at all their jokes (laughs) because not all of their jokes are funny anymore (laughs) but at the beginning I did. Um, so, I think like I found this sort of sense of community and I found, um, you know, just like the talk on the radio, like people joking with each other and telling stories of, like their whole lives and then, seeing these people who are, working with people who are not sort of your traditional educated people, you know, but they can do anything with like, you know, amazing problem solvers and just really um, sort of experts on handling a boat or, um. And so I think I developed like a deep personal connection to like, what fishing is and what it, like, what I think maybe more than just sort of the practical of like catching a fish, but like this sort of lifestyle that, or the, um, you know the culture of it. And so I've always stayed connected, you know, I still live in Bar Harbor and I've been around, and I still know all the fishermen and I talk to them all. And I feel like I've just kind of grown up with them. And so, you know, some of them are like my uncles I feel like, and some of them are, you know, some of the guys we interviewed for the MDI kids last year, you know, I, like Jimmy Hanscom is in his forties now but he was in his twenties when I was the Harbor Master and just like brand new, starting out, punk kid on the block, who I was always like chasing around (laughs). It's like I have so much history, but, and so, I still have like, I'm on the water a lot, I have a boat, I have had my five-trap license over the years, you know, I stay connected and I feel right now like, um, just some of this work I've taken Mapping Ocean Stories classes at COA with Natalie, um, it sort of brought it back around again like just sort of how much I care about um wanting to make sure, like I know things change and like it might not be like it is, but I want to make sure that that happens intentionally, and not, as like default.

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You know, that we just, all of a sudden don't wake up one day and there's no face for fishing or no space for lobstermen, and you know I think, there's just sort of a lack of intentionality, like. And not that fishermen need to be protected 'cause I think it's not necessarily like that sort of that patronizing approach, but the rest of us need to think about what it means to have fishing happening around us and what that takes, and um not just the sort of economic value of it but also the cultural impact of that. Um, and I think there's a lot of people that live in Bar Harbor that don't really know that, especially Bar Harbor it's like. And it's changed I think

and it's changing, too, more. his sort of pressure, like making money off of tourists that, um, it's just easy to sort of forget I think what really makes Bar Harbor Bar Harbor, or this area. And so with my work with the Skippers Program, um, that also really cool because I get to go into each of these communities and really kind of understand what's going on there, and then work with the young students in those communities who, um, really care. Like they want to live in their towns, they don't want to move away, you know? hey want to be part of fishing, or even if they're not they know it's important and they can sort of feel it. And I think it's cool to be part of something where I can help them think about how they would do that, or give them skills or knowledge to be able to do that, so (laughs).

[0:14:40.9]

NS: Probably oughta wrap up.

VP: Yeah.

NS/VP/EO: [Indistinct, laughter.]

EO: Um, do you have a wrap-up in mind?

NS: [Indistinct.]

EO: I guess, as, as these communities continue developing, um, and hold on to, hold on to space for fishing, um, what do you think, yeah, what does a, a good future for, for Maine's coast look like to you?

[0:15:15.9]

VP: Yeah I think, um, it's a good question, but I feel like, um, it—when you're part of something you don't always think about what it is, right, or understand it all, and I think I've gotten a chance to both be part of it, and think about it, and understand it which I think is a cool place. And I, I feel that sort of, um, I feel like I can be in both worlds at times, you know? But, one of the things I feel I've gotten to do through my work in the Skippers Program is to really understand the fishing industry a little bit in terms of the management approach in terms of co-management, and um you know understanding that sort of, um, uh, the idea of um like a fishing community actually owning, or people feeling ownership of a resource, and then what comes with that when you take it, when you're able to like take care of that. Um, and so, um, I think I hope that the that the future of the of the coast sort of gets, doesn't become sort of corporatized, um, or um consolidated, that, that we still have this ability to be like the owner-operator model that lobstering is, you know, like you look at ground fishing and sort of quotas and the, sort of the big industry and business that's in that, and it sort of removes the people who are from harvesting, from having ownership over their resource, right, and I think there's lots of problems that come with that. And I think that sense of ownership really has a lot to do with Maine, you know, that, that, um, I, as a person as an individual I can put my own direct hard work into something, get direct feedback from that, um, and I think that's important for our fisheries.

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Um, and I think it we can help people understand what that means and what that is, and, and then what we need to do to sort of preserve that or protect that, I feel Maine's really vulnerable to sort of outside corporate, you know, people sort of come in and do things, you don't even know it's lost until it's done, and I think Bar Harbor in some ways is sort of, is an example of that. It's cruise ships, you know, they just come and no one at the beginning thought to say, like, oh maybe this isn't a good idea, you know? And maybe a few is okay, but maybe a lot is not, and then, now you're in this place where there's a lot and it's hard to sort of go back from that. And it's hard to even know what you've lost. Um. So I, I think that part of like, getting, empowering people to really protect things that are not based on money, um, is a key challenge, I think, that's my hope for the future (laughs).

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