Interviewee Name: Ali Berlow

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:
Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Eliza Oldach (UC-Davis)

Interview Location: Rockland, Maine

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Interview Description:
A graduate student from Martha's Vineyard, MA, Ali Berlow is studying how the role of Atlantic herring has changed in the U.S. food system. She came to the Forum to ask fishermen for their perspectives and talks about her findings as well as how she connects marine fisheries to her work in local-regional food systems and how eaters can support fishermen.

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Transcription by: Eliza Oldach

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[24:36]

NS: Natalie Springuel
EO: Eliza Oldach

[0:00]

NS: Um, if we could start by having you state your name and spell it for us.

AB: Okay, I'm Ali Berlow. It's A-L-I. And Berlow is B as in boy, E-R-L-O-W.

NS: Great. And where are you from?

AB: Good question. I am from Madison, Wisconsin originally, but I've been living on Martha's Vineyard for the last, uh, 26 years. I also spend time in Vermont. And then I go back to Wisconsin as well.

NS: And, um, what do you do?

AB: I am primarily a writer, so I write, um, it for print. And I write for radio. Uh, I'm an independent radio producer. I'm also currently a student at Vermont Law School, um, a master student in, um, food and agriculture law and policy. And I'm a mother.

NS: What brings you to the Maine Fishermen's Forum?

AB: Uh, this semester for the for my master's program, I'm kind of focusing on fisheries policy, specifically through the lens of the, uh, Atlantic herring and the lobster relationship, um, through food systems kind of perspective. I'm trying to kind of narrow down aspects of what does it mean when we take a food fish like a herring out of, kind of that aspect and turn it into a bait fish? And you know, it hasn't happened overnight, obviously. Um, so my interest is kind of a culinary history of the Atlantic herring. I think you could parallel to the lobster in some ways, and then how did this relationship come to be? And maybe what, what were the drivers or pressures, whether they were economic and or policy, culinary tastes, um, infrastructure changes? I don't think there's probably one answer, but I'm kind of looking at that. And now we have, uh, it seems to me that there's a dependency of, uh, the Atlantic herring for the lobster fishery, which as we're learning today, and you know, with the decreased quota, that that's causing stress, and actually the, the bait crisis was what the Maine Lobstermen Associate—Association described it as. So I'm new to fisheries, so a lot of this is from an outsider's perspective and a food system, land based person. So I'm learning a lot. And that's why I'm here.

[2:27]

NS: And, um, so looking at herring as a food source.

AB: Yeah.

NS: Presumably, you're sort of look going back and looking at, like the sardine history, and how people?

AB: Yeah. Looking at that a little bit. And then I'm looking through, uh, the, um, Nantucket, the Nantucket newspaper is all digitized. So I'm kind of looking at when when did recipes stop for herring kind of as a way of, of kind of approaching it. And I don't have—I, I feel like this is going beyond this, this is some project that will, it's completely fascinating me for some reason. And, um, so what will, for my goal for my semester is to create a couple of radio pieces about this current situation and this relationship. But I, I think I'm going to keep digging and looking into the culinary history of it and seeing the shifts of it that way. Um, so I'm looking at different resources that are traditional and non-traditional, I guess, in terms of policy.

NS: When did it stop being something that you see in recipes?

AB: Well, it's, it's, it seems like, and I don't have that answer yet. It seems, though, I mean, with the, um, last cannery, that in the U, in the United States, I can't remember exactly the date that it closed but then somebody told me today that they know people that used to work in the other cannery up in Downeast Maine and that that was more of a hands-on cannery, there was a mechanical cannery apparently, and a hands on cannery. So I'm just finally finding that out. But I would seem, to me, my impression is in the antidotal [sic] evidence is that herring was kind of associated with different immigrant groups and immigrant food ways. Whether it's like, um, Norwegian, kind of a food, or Jamaican food, the different thing, tastes like that. Salted or, uh, smoked, um, pickled. Um, but that that's, just has, it's still seems to have gone out of, our taste for it.

[4:31]

I mean, we can buy canned hearing pretty readily. Where I live, there's a lot of Portuguese and Brazilians. So we get, we, we can find that in our community. But that's not a local herring at all. And I was talking to a fisherman today from the cape, and she's used to be herring coming in her traps, Atlantic herring, not alewives, not the river herring. But they're not coming in anymore. But, um, so it's definitely, there's just shifts, you know, which is, of course, it's oceans, there's going to be shifts and changes. So.

[5:04]

NS: Um, can you talk a little bit about food systems? And what that means?

AB: Yeah, so I come, I've, I've done food systems work before, I'm the author of a couple books about it. And I'm interested in the region, local, regional food systems and kind of that's one piece, I think that in the food movement, and I kind of say that in air quotes, is that, um, it hasn't always incorporated the ocean fisheries, um. So I see that there's a trend, I feel like there's a trend happening now, which is a really great trend is that the land, good food movement, and sustainable fisheries, or, and or fisheries that are managed in a value-based system are coming together. And I think that that's really advantageous for, uh, local and regional food systems. Um, when I think of food systems, I think of, uh, all the parts, you know, both the physical parts, the infrastructures that it takes to take a chicken from the field to the plate, but then also the cultural aspects of that, and the social justice aspects of that as well. So, there's hard data points, I guess you could say. Um, and there's markets and

obviously, community-supported fisheries, that's an aspect, I think, that's a piece that's been borrowed from the community supported agriculture, um, so food systems is how all this kind of how this all works together. And I'm very interested in the local and the regional. Um, I know we're part of a global food system. But I think the bigger picture with climate disruption and federal government really not functioning, that when we look at local and regional systems and solutions and resiliency, that that's, for me, that's my interest, my focus.

NS: I'm fascinated by this, the food system, and thinking about the cultural dimensions of food. And going back to what you were saying about herring, where herring was such a staple for so many decades and decades and decades, in terms of like a basic food source, but also the basic way of making a living for so many families. And we don't, we don't really think of it as a big food source, now. I can't go to my fish market in Bar Harbor and buy herring.

[7:34]

AB: And it's inter—it's, the farmer I was talking to, on the, she's on the cape, and she said, if you're going to look at herring that way you should also look at mackerel, because she said, we get mackerel in our, in our weir, but we're, um, we're either selling it as food fish, but not a lot of people eat it, or it's a bait fish. But the market price, of course is different, whether you're selling it for food, or for bait. And so I asked her to elaborate on that thinking, well, maybe, I wondered if that happened to herring like, you know that it used to be sold as a food fish at a certain price, but then people either didn't want it anymore, they could get a bait price for it. Like, I don't know, you know, that, I just learned this today. So it's an interesting idea that—it's also interesting that we've taken up, I mean, and I kept saying "we" but I'm not quite sure whether we so like I said, I'm just a student in this aspect, not an expert at all, but—it's such a healthy fish, you know, right? We're all kind of health-obsessed with omegas and all these oily fishes. And now we're, we're trying to replicate that in different aquaculture situations and these things, and it's like, well, we used to, you know, there's this fish over there, that is also, of course, incredibly important to the ocean ecosystem, like every animal seems to love herring, from the birds, the mammals, the whales and ground fish. So I'm just dipping my toe into this. You know.

[9:01]

NS: What made you interested in looking at food systems initially, when you first started?

AB: Um, I am a classic—I read Michael Pollan's Omnivores Dilemma, had two kids, little kids, I'm a home cook, I, my entire entree into food writing, into food systems, has been through the kitchen. So, um, I was like, well, I live in Martha's Vineyard and it's a rural community, despite the press, you know? And we have a thriving agricultural base. And I was inspired by Michael's book, and I kind of at that point, which was two thousand and—and it was, must have been 2007, when, I can't remember, when that book came out, 2005? I was like, well let's—basically I invited a bunch of people to my house that were, had different aspects of the food web. So whether they were grocers, or food pantry, gardeners, fishermen, shell fishermen, cooks, caterers, garden—you know, the gamut. And I think I had like 30 people, and I'm like, Okay, so what is this—at that point, we were using the word sustainability, specifically—and we're saying, what does this word mean to us, and what are we gonna do about it? And so, I was inspired by Michael's book as a big reveal of different issues of the food system, but then it, it left me like, ah! what do you do? And because I'm

not a farmer, I'm not a fisherman, I'm not even a gardener, like, I'm a home cook. I'm a mom. I rely on the fishermen and the farmers in the garden, like that's, and I want to support them.

[10:36]

So I kind of did this salon convening thing. And from that a nonprofit grew and a Slow Food Convivium grew out of it, and the nonprofit continues today, and it started a Farm to School program, we did an ethnic crops program where we're growing appropriate Brazilian crops for, to match our immigrant community. Um, we built a mobile poultry slaughterhouse and got it permitted through the state of Massachusetts, so now we have farmers that can raise, um, poultry and um, slaughter them on their farm humanely, and sell them through the market in any way that they choose. So it was really a way—it was, projects came out of it. And we went to the farmers and said, so what also do you need? And slaughter was a big piece of that, access to slaughter. So a lot of different programs developed, and so now there's an island-grown initiative still exists today. But it was, it came out of that, um. Then I learned the word food system. I didn't know the wor—you know, that's all, I'm fifty—I have to remember, 54 now (laughs). So, you know, I studied anthropology and African history, but, um, there's something about the kitchen, and cooking, that is my, uh, was, was my entree or whatever, that into doing more, to trying to support the people that are, like I said, raising and catching and processing the food that I hope that can feed my family and our community.

[12:19]

NS: And, um, what triggered you to make a connection with fisheries?

AB: I live on this island, and I would, you know, really there was, there came a point in my life where the sea was like, it was after I had children, you know, like all women, and like, you know, like that, I had just this incredible connection to the ocean. Um, and I was really interested in a woman's connection to the ocean, specifically, and then I think I you know, it was my kids are in their 20s, and I just I, I didn't, this, there was a spirit for me, it felt almost spiritual kind of a in a holistic way. And I was drawn to it—I'm from the Midwest, like I said originally—so there was something about it, but I went in, in the development of going to do the community work that I did and start this nonprofit, it was focused really on, on the land-based and I don't know if, that's, why exactly that was, I don't know, if it grew out of the local food movement. If that was just the zeitgeist in the, in the country or something, I don't know, it felt like we were basically connecting dots in a constellation of food system. Um, and the shell fishery, the aquaculture on the island's very strong.

[13:37]

Um, the market for that is there because of the, you know, there's a high demand for oysters and things like that. It didn't feel like the, I guess, maybe in retrospect, that, that it needed that, as much, that it needed something, whereas the farming aspect in the agricultural system, felt like, wow, there's, there is need here, you know, I mean, even just getting SNAP into our farmer's market was something you know, we didn't have that. Um, and now, I, you know, I, um, my children are more grown, and I'm looking and I'm thinking more like, people kept saying "Fisheries policy, it's so complicated, fisheries are so complicated." And I'm like, is that just like something to say stay away? Like, don't come look over here? You know, a little bit cynical and suspicious sometimes. Like, it can't be that complicated, I mean, dairy's complicated, we can, I mean, you know, like, there's a lot of—and I'm surrounded by it right

now, I'm kind of like emerging in a different way, and then being an older student going back to school, saying why do they keep saying fisheries policy is so complicated? [laughs] Like, is that, I just, it's like, come on, there's people doing this. So I think through the, the food system lens, 'cause that's the only way I can kind of look at it, cuz I'm not a fisher, um, I think that there's things there to kind of look at and poke at. You know, I've heard the Magnusson-Stevens Act be called the Fish Bill. But it's, I think it mentions food like once or something (laughs). Yet, I was speaking to a fisherman today, and she said, "You know, we're catching food." And I said, "Do you think that the policy reflects that?" And she's like, "Not at all," you know. So that's a fascinating thing, you know, to me, and to kind of pull that unravel. And of course, I'm near Woods Hole. And, um, that's interesting. And of course, the island, so strongly identifies with, with its fishing community. And it's a little bit of a wild west. You know, it feels, but I'm drawn to that as well.

[15:42]

NS: It, um, I'm really sort of reflecting on what you're saying. What's striking me is the really the disconnect between fisheries management and food.

AB: Exactly. Yeah. I mean, for me, I remember, I'm friends with Niaz Dorry. She's the, the co, now she's co-leading the National Family Farm Coalition, as well as she's been the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance Executive Director. And I think that, that, just going back to what I was saying, at the top of our interview, that this kind of, how fisheries and land-based kind of good food movements are kind of starting to join forces, I look at that as a model. But I remember Niaz saying, like, we have, you know, seafood, you know, there's the word food and this, you know, but yet, it's just not really looked at, it seems like what you said in the management of it as a food source. And I've been, in part of my semester, looking back at Garrett Harding's, you know, tragedy of the comments and then Elinor Ostrom, you know, her perspective on it. And I'm kind of like, right on, you know, her, her perspective of being like, it's not necessarily a tragedy, it's a problem. But how do we solve it? And I, I feel like what I keep hearing in different ways is local, regional, local, regional, you know, maybe it's and—that, that works for me. Maybe I'm also just so myopic. My friend Noli as a say, saying, you can only change what she can see. And I feel like sometimes I feel like why don't we, you know, it can work really super hyper local. But maybe that's just perfect and enough, you know? I mean, not to the detriment of other communities or other things, but, um, but I do.

[17:34]

You know, I think the fisheries piece also does definitely expand that definition of what local is or what regional it is, and I, um, so that's why I think one of the reasons why I'm drawn to it and curious about it, and starting, I am so an outsider (laughs) to this and such a beginner, you guys know so much more, you know. Um, so I, I'm, Niaz has a saying as well, working at the speed of trust. And I think that that is, I saw that with the farmers when we first started working with them back in the early 2000s. Like, what are you doing here? And how are you trying to help us? And it was like, we're eaters, you know, trying to help. And I think that getting that point across to the fishermen as well, like, just listening a lot is important. So I appreciate this project and hearing what they have to say, but like, then really making a strong action to connect it to the management and connect it back to the policies that are driving it.

[18:40]

NS: Do you have any questions?

EO: I do, yeah.

NS: I figured you did.

EO: So you're here in a different capacity that not a lot of the people that have been coming to the Fisherman's Forum for decades, which I am certainly not one of. Um, how has it felt being here? What have your conversations been like?

AB: Well, it's interesting. I start I, I have asked a few people. What about the herring? What about the Atlantic herring? And a lot of them are like, well I'm not an expert. I'm like, Well, I don't, I don't really, I'm not, I don't need an expert. Like really? Like, what do you think, you know, like, kind of that? Tell me about you. Tell me about your experience with there? Do you have any thoughts about it? You know, or, this stuff? And I don't know if I'm asking the wrong questions, which that could be too. But it was like, Oh, no, I'm not, I'm not the expert. And I wonder, just, I and I, again, I wonder if that is because it's been managed so siloed, you know, by species, that, like, we can't, why can't we talk about this? I mean, and then then again, I'm an outsider, but if we just speak about the species, then how do you how do you reconcile everything else from the ecology to the, I guess, I guess, the culinary foodways of it, you know?

[20:02]

Uh, so that's been an interesting reaction. And it's again, I've only been here for 36 hours, but it's, um, I was like, Oh, I guess there's experts, you know, (laughs) you know, but I also thought people may be you know, I mean, even if you don't grow—I guess the land-based model would be, or maybe analogy, would be like, if, if you had a garden, and you were growing kohlrabi and corn and tomatoes, and string beans or something, each one would have a different management plan. And it's like, but that takes it out of the entire ecology of a situation. So maybe that, maybe that contributes to the idea of like, I'm not the expert of that. But I can tell you about this. Yeah, I don't know. Just a theory.

NS: So interesting. Um, we probably have to kind of wind down

AB: Mmm-hmm.

NS: because we have somebody coming in in a few minutes show what um, as you're discovering sort of the world of the ocean, from a fisheries management and connecting with food ways, um, what do you hope for the future?

[21:16]

AB: You know, I really hope that the cultural divide—I feel like there's, right now my immediacy is, what's pinning me is, uh, the desire for renewable energy. And we have a large wind turbine, offshore wind turbine coming off of the south of Martha's Vineyard. And fishermen are really, you know, against it, and I, my concern is that the, there's such a mandate for renewable energy and green energy that if the fishermen, and I'm speaking just

locally, if they if they decide to take a stand against this, that it could actually be cleaving into, into the community. I don't think that this is, this is again, um, I'm a perspective, community perspective, like wanting or kind of wishing or hoping that they, that maybe fishermen would be like, "We want to get in front of this and maybe be the innovators around it." And the the, the, the ones that are doing creative, you know, if this is gonna disrupt our fishery, all the fisheries around it, how do we mitigate, mitigate that? And, and how do we set those examples for future communities that may be facing offshore wind turbine? Like I don't see how we cannot move away from fossil fuels. I also see it as an environmental justice issue, I don't feel like, that the communities have been marginalized, that have borne the brunt of our fossil fuel thirst, you know, in their terms of land and water and air pollution. In the, in Virginia, for example, or coal miners, you know, they haven't had, you know, they've suffered the consequences of our desire for this. So I feel like it's time to, kind of, we all have to shift and change and take, you know, make changes.

[23:07]

Um, it's kind of a big picture thing, that, so I, my hope for it is that our small fishing communities thrive with an identity, that they thrive with, um, pride and they're leaders in these new, these, this new paradigm of climate disruption, because I feel like climate disruption is, that, that's, it, we cannot not address that. Um, all of us. So, it's not a us or them, it's not a—but how do we help you? How do we, or how do you become the leaders? Whatever that is, that isn't to say that we know the answers, but like, community, like again, I kind of do this thing, put my arms together and say, it's not just like fishermen over here and all these other people just like with the farmers, it's like, we all eat. So, how can we as eaters support you? Or, you tell us what you need? And, but also listen to what we're, we're stakeholders too, in your viability. So, um I just hope for peaceful transition (laughs). I don't know, you know, I know it's an it's, but, yeah. It's wild. It's interesting, I am totally transfixed (laughs).

[24:27]

NS: Thank you.

AB: Yeah. Thank you.

NS: Thank you. I feel like we could keep talking.

AB: Yeah. No, no, no, I know. Yeah. I think it's good.

[24:36]