

Interviewee Name: Bruce Bourque

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Matt Frassica (Independent Producer)

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Interview Description:

Bruce Bourque lives in Freeport, ME, where he has taught archaeology and conducted research at Bates College since 1972. Now retired from teaching, he is working on a documentary film on the history of Maine's fisheries. Bourque came to the state originally to study Maine's prehistory, the period before 1600, and the people that lived on this coast. He was able to collaborate with others to combine this archaeological record with more recent accounts of fisheries history to build a longer timescale of context for how the Gulf of Maine has been changing. In this interview, he describes the themes that have come out of his work including the expansion of fisheries and fishing effort and the factors leading to their ultimate decline.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Molly Graham

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[0:22:35]

MF: Matt Frassica
BB: Bruce Bourque

[00:00:00.00]

MF: Can we get started by telling me your name and what you do?

BB: Hi, I'm Bruce Bourque. I'm an archeologist by training. I've worked for about forty-five years on the Maine Coast, pre-history. Recently, became interested in ecological history, reaching beyond archeology specifically, into history and the history of fisheries. I'm currently engaged in making a documentary on the history of the Gulf of Maine, both natural and cultural.

MF: Did you grow up in Maine?

BB: No, I grew up in Massachusetts, but I spent my summers here. Moved here in '72 to take a position at the Maine State Museum and to teach at Bates College.

MF: My wife teaches at Bates.

BB: Really?

MF: How did your early work transform into an interest in history of fisheries?

[0:00:55.6]

BB: It's an interesting story. I worked on a large site on North Haven, called the Turner Farms site. It was a stratified shell midden, which means it was laid by prehistoric Indians one layer at a time. The bottom layer was about five thousand years ago. The top layer maybe five hundred years ago. As we excavated down through it, we began finding larger and larger fish vertebrate. At the bottom, they were the size of quarters. We were looking at each other saying, well, this looks like a cod vertebrate, but it's just way to big. We put it aside for years. Then, I began working with Bob Steneck at the Darling Marine Center. We began doing research together and he said, "Yeah, that's cod." Then, I began to realize how much the sea had changed and how unaware I had been of it all the time I was working on the Turner Farm site. Bob and I went on to be engaged in, I guess you would call it, ecological history projects in the Gulf of Maine. We published several articles. Come to an understanding that my archeological data and historic data generally are hugely important to the state of the Gulf, to where it may be in the future, and that those data are not part of the discussion at the moment, which prompted me to undertake a documentary project. [telephone rings] Pardon me. Let's turn this baby off. Sorry about that.

[0:02:28.4]

MF: That's all right.

BB: So, just to resume, working with Bob Steneck on a series of ecological history projects drew me into a circle of people, including Jeff Bolster, Bill Leavenworth, Karen Alexander and others, who have paid attention to the historic record of the Gulf of Maine, fishing in the Gulf of Maine, from the seventeenth century to the present, or to the nineteenth century. With my archeological data combined with their historic data, we think we have an excellent new, or at least underutilized, perspective on the present state of the Gulf. As we like to say: if you don't know where you've been, you really can't say where you are now.

MF: The historical data to this point has been a matter of decades, not centuries.

[0:03:10.3]

BB: That's right. Yeah. I think most people think things were okay in 1970, but people had started fishing down the Gulf by 1670.

MF: Wow.

BB: Well, the thing is that the evolution of fishing gear, the number of fishing boats—shall we say “fishing effort”—kept increasing. So, the landings stayed roughly on a power over that whole time, until 2014 when everybody realized the game was up.

MF: There was increasing effort to keep the same amount of landings.

BB: To meet the market needs. I think it was—the Boston Basin used to be an excellent cod fishery. I think by 1650, the merchants had taken orders for London that they could not fill, which propelled them to move to Cape Ann and then onto the Isles of Shoals and then to Portland. Really, the fishery and its expansion, because of depletions, propelled settlement along the New England coast.

MF: Fascinating.

BB: It is.

MF: Let's talk about where you live and things that concern you about your community. Where do you live now?

[0:04:19.6]

BB: I live in South Freeport.

MF: Are there changes that you've seen there that are of concern to you?

BB: Marine changes?

MF: Yeah, could be marine changes or anything that springs to mind.

BB: Freeport is a bright spot in the Maine economy. It's a huge outdoor mall and it's doing rather well. Sometimes I wonder if mail order retailing is going to have an impact, and I expect it will, but so far, things seem fine. A fellow that I work with at the house sometimes is a clam digger. I asked him, I said, "How are the clams?" He said, "Well, declining all the time." One of the things that he singles out as a problem are something called ribbon worms, about which I had never heard anything. These are apparently predatory worms that can actually do more than consume the prey that they're eating, but they can sometimes kill a whole flat. So, that's something new to me. We hadn't even entertained the notion of discussing that in the documentary, but there are changes afoot. Green crabs are a problem down my way. Of course, the inability to fish. I think even the lobsters are not increasing as fast as they are in Eastern parts of the state. So, yeah, sense of change is in the air everywhere.

MF: What do you like about your community? What do you value about the community that you're in?

[0:05:48.1]

BB: Frankly, I lived in Newcastle for a while. I took over my mother's house after her passing. It's hard to say. It was a small town. I grew up in a small town. But it was a particularly small town, not to denigrate it at all, but we found ourselves isolated from Portland and found it difficult to get there. The bridge in Wiscasset is a major problem. I'm sure it is for the whole economy east of Wiscasset. I really hope they resolve it soon, although I've been watching it for forty years and we don't seem to be any closer now than we were then, except the traffic is exponentially heavier.

MF: Did you grow up in Newcastle?

BB: No, I grew up in Princeton, Massachusetts, but my family always summered in Ellsworth, Maine.

MF: Right. How would you described the people, either in Newcastle or in Freeport? What's the character of the people?

[0:06:43.3]

BB: Well, I can't really—I know the area east of Newcastle better because of my thirty-five, forty years working in Penobscot Bay. I know those folks pretty well. But in Freeport, there are two Freeports—at least two. I know of two, the one centered around retail and those businesses. Outside that congested urban area, it's a small New England town with the kind of folks you run into in small New England towns everywhere. It's really two separate towns.

MF: Does that a separation lead to problems or conflict in the town?

BB: Not so far as I can tell. Folks are happy to have all that nice retail economic boost there, but they still tend to the land and to the water in particular. Increasingly, of course, it's a suburban area for Portland and the real estate market in Portland is very hot right now, so we expect to see spilling over into the area. But there's a lot of room and it seems to be [inaudible]. The carpenters are happy for new house construction. It's not a perfect picture, but it's a generally positive one.

MF: What about in the Penobscot region where you did your work? What kinds of changes did you see there over the time that you were there?

[0.07:59.9]

BB: Well, I worked the Fox Islands. North Haven happened to be—think of it as a hub of a wheel. I could get anywhere in a half an hour from North Haven. I reached out to all the islands. I know when I got there it was a two-tier society. There were the people who lived off the land and water, and the summer people. Even at that time, beginning of my generation, those two populations had begun to emerge a little bit with the summer people marrying islanders. A lot of those marriages are sound marriages, some of them are not. The most recent wave, I would say, beginning roughly 1990, saw the influx of—let's call them—super wealthy people, who tend to go to North Haven because it's North Haven, a trendy place. They built super large houses. Unlike the folks that I knew, the summer people that I knew, they aren't particularly interested in being involved with the community. They have their million-dollar Hinckley Picnic boats, moored off their shore where they remain all summer on their mooring, and their huge super houses on shore and really not much interaction between them and the rest of the community. I know the community notices that and is a little sorry about it, and I am as well. The surrounding area, the islands have been—I arrived there just after they'd come out of a period of neglect. A lot of natives had owned those islands and they say, "Geez, I sold that whole thing for \$1500 dollars. It just went for five million."

[0:09:38.1]

The islands were discovered, but at the same time they weren't overexploited in my view. Many of them have gone into easements, which will help prevent them from over exploitation. The fisheries, of course, are shot. On the other hand, the lobster industry is doing pretty well. On North Haven in particular there was always a split labor force, the summer people employed a lot of the islanders as caretakers and carpenters and service people generally, but many of them also did some fishing on the side, lobstering in particular. That seems to continue. The thing about North Haven in particular—I know less about Vinalhaven as a community, although I certainly have visited it. North Haven seems to be a place where you can actually get a job.

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In other words, when I was working there during the '80s and '90s, the employment was a little hard to come by, but now I think there's a net inflow of people, at least when I look at the website, the Facebook page, there are all kinds of new names there.

MF: Those people are being employed in construction or in the lobster industry?

BB: I'm not really sure. I think the marine services. I think the island services, mainland, yachtsmen, and folks like that. What other industries might have developed there, I don't know. I have lost touch with the island in the last few years.

MF: What period did you study when you were you studying the more terrestrial archeology?

[0:11:12.0]

BB: Well, prehistory, which means, in this area, before 1600 roughly. It isn't that European presence hadn't been felt maybe for seventy-five years before that, but it was an indirect presence. The traders up on the Gulf of Saint Lawrence were sending manufactured goods down into the Indian Market and so they were reacting to that. Possibly disease, European disease, had spread into the area by that time. But basically, from that time backward, to about five, six thousand years. No doubt people were on the islands before that, but slow tectonic downwarping of this part of the crust has seen to it that the older sites are washed away. I was very lucky to find something as old as the Turner Farm site on North Haven, because it had been protected from storm surges. It's one of the only sites that achieved that amount of antiquity on the Maine coast.

MF: You have a very long view about how populations move in and out along the coast.

[0:12:11.9]

BB: Yes. I think that's the unique contribution of archeology. In other words, time is our main dimension. Most folks arrive a situation that they want to experience or to participate in or to improve, and they perceive it as it is and they go about interacting with it in a way as if it's always been that way. Intellectually, of course, they acknowledge that it couldn't have been, but they don't operationalize that assumption. They deal with the moment. I find that often very inadequate. You see divisions in the community, wonder why are they there. If I'm trying to work with a community, perhaps to help it or to become part of it, it's nice to know what those divisions are about, where they came from. When I was there, the summer person/islander division was quite stark. There was some resentment that played itself out in a few unpleasant events when I was first there in the '70s. I came to understand it and I was able to get along with everybody pretty well. Over time, I'm happy to say that tension has generally ameliorated, except maybe for these new folks who aren't really trying to fit in as much.

MF: What about the work that you're doing now as a documentarian? How is that different or similar to the work you were doing as an archeologist?

[0:13:44.6]

BB: It's really very different. It's a retirement project, if you wish. I retired from Bates and from the State Museum about three or four years ago. I'd been the chief archeologist at the museum and a senior lecturer in anthropology at Bates. It was time to move on from both those place and

I was casting about for some interesting projects—in fact, projects I couldn't do when I was employed at those place. They had many other tasks for me to attend to. Free of those obligations, I decided to strike out in a couple new directions. The main direction right now is the documentary. I teamed up with a fellow who had actually just gotten out of Emerson film school in 1973 and he decided to come film my work at the Turner Farm site. He never did anything with the footage and when he cleaned out his mother's house—he was from Lewiston—he dropped the footage off at the museum and we re-contacted. He was moving toward retirement and wanted to get back into documentary-making. I was moving toward retirement and wanted to do something besides academics and archeology. We decided to try this venture.

MF: What kinds of things are you learning from the people you're interviewing that you didn't already know?

[0:14:55.7]

BB: Many, many things. It's a little hard to summarize. It depends who I'm talking to. We're talking to managers, a sense of frustration and futility about the current management strategies. From the historians, the wonderful richness of the record and the wonderful detail in which it recorded the taking down of the fishery, as people—literate people watched it go down and some reported on a case by case basis that this new gear is going to kill it. It went on and on and on and on. As an anthropologist, that fascinates me. You could see this folks eroding their own economic base and unable to do anything to stop it. It wasn't that they were being necessarily overridden by huge capitalist forces or anything. It was something ineluctable about this pressure on continuing to fish. That surprised me. People obviously are not acting in their own interest and obviously not able to change course. The other thing I learned was how important the fishery was historically to this region. It was foundational. It wasn't just something—people didn't come here for religious freedom, they came here to fish, as Jeff Bolster's pointed out. The fishery began the industrial revolution, the need for certain kinds of goods in large volumes—clothing, bronze casting, on and on. These are the things that founded the industrial revolution in New England. The departure of that huge economic basis had a severe toll on the pride, the culture, the traditions, and on the economic conditions of the old ports.

[0:16:42.2]

MF: Is there a difference in the approach to using a resource versus conserving the resource? Is there a different in the way that you see that playing out in the lobster industry versus the ground fish?

BB: I would have to say, from an amateur's perspective or from a fieldworker's perspective, the young bucks in the lobster industry seem to be behaving just like fishermen have always behaved: get the biggest boat you can, make it go as fast you can, get as much out of the ocean as you can. Devil take the hindmost. That seems to be the pattern. What's really interesting to me—another part of our effort is to talk to researchers, scientists, or people like Ted Ames, who have a historic perspective on the fishery, but also understand it biologically. That's where you can see the glaring insufficiencies of the current management plan. It tends to be managed as a large

embayment instead of complex inland sea. So, catch quotas are set over very broad areas, as if all the fish in that area intermingled on a regular basis, when in fact, they're organized into small sub-stocks based on a place where they can feed and a place where they can breed.

[0:18:07.9]

It turns out that replenishment of the stocks is quite difficult when you take the large fish out. It turns out they have a lot of memory about how to do things that are necessary for the well-being of the stock. Of course, those are the first fish that fishermen go after. Now having clean out several of the stocks, people are wondering, "Hmm, why haven't they come back?" Part of it is the fact that there's no elders to show them how to behave. Another thing that I found that I had no idea about was the depletion of forage fish. In particular, the river herring. I had been aware of river pollution. As a kid, you're aware of that much earlier than you are of fisheries depletion. I remember the Androscoggin River with brown water and huge cakes of foam floating down it, the paint peeling off houses near the river. But I never connected that to the fisheries. Well, it turns out that the river herring are critical forage food for the fish during spawning season when they're very small. Absent them, you can do all you can to stop ground fishing, but if there's no food, there's no eggs, there's no return of the ground fish.

[0:19:19.1]

Another thing was the diminishment of the marshes. Salt marshes are nurseries for these species. They've been paved over, ditch-drained, cut off from the sea, pretty much willy-nilly. While there's a welcome movement toward restoration of river herring, I haven't heard anyone talking about salt marshes yet. This is quite important. If you look at a map of the Shawmut neck where Boston was built and then a map of where Boston extends today, you would not believe the extent to which it is grown out into the harbor.

MF: Because it was fill?

BB: Yes.

MF: It was just a tiny peninsula and it got filled.

BB: It was a scrawny little peninsula with marshes all around, a wonderful fishery. Then, of course, people needed docks. Then they needed real estate on the docks and they need to extend the docks. Long Wharf used to be a very long wharf. It's now half a block long. It's part of Boston. That shows you what we've done. The Scarborough Marsh is another example. They built a railroad right straight across it in the 1840s, trestle. Although there's a passage for water underneath, it pretty much dried up the marsh behind it. It's no longer an effective nursery for small fish.

MF: Even though it's still a pretty massive marsh and has been conserved, I guess what's left of it.

[0:20:33.1]

BB: Well, they'd never build that trestle today, I'll you that, but it's not been taken away. It might not do any good if they did. I don't know. Marsh research and restoration are something we haven't quite gotten to yet.

MF: Are there any stories that have either happened to you or that you've heard in the course of your documentary work that you'd like to pass on? Obviously, you're doing the documentary work yourself, but what kinds of things would you want to tell the next generation?

[0:21:10.4]

BB: I think that the story of the human cost of this expansion of fishing is an important one that's not been told. You talk to any of the old timers—one of the guys that we spoke with is Russell Sherman, a veteran of the Gloucester fishery. He, in one of the clips that is on YouTube—you can see it yourself—he talked about he's almost the only survivor from a boat that went down off the Maine coast. A lot of the people in here today could tell you stories about how they almost lost it themselves. Boat was too small back in the day. They went out. The Perfect Storm scenario. That stuff's very common. The one thing I'd like to do—there's a wonderful piece of amateur research done in Gloucester. It's called Gloucestermen lost at sea from 1630, I believe—Ipswich it was 1630—from early colonial times up until—I'm not sure—sometime in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, it was put together in a way that doesn't allow it to be easily analyzed, but I'm sure that what you'd see is a huge upward trend as fishermen began to leave small boats to go into larger boats as crews. The larger boats began to go farther and farther offshore. I'm sure mortalities increased proportionately. It would be great to get that corpus of data boiled down so we could show it graphically.

MF: Fascinating. Thank you very much.

BB: Sure.

MF: This is great.

[0:22:35.7]