

Interviewee Name: Daniel Devereaux

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Galen Koch (The First Coast) and Griffin Pollock (College of the Atlantic)

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Interview Description:

Daniel Devereaux, from Brunswick, ME, is harbor master, clam warden, and cofounder of Mere Point Oyster Company in Maquoit Bay. In this interview, he talks about the problems that his new farm is facing at the hands of coastal property owners, how those conflicts are being resolved, how aquaculture ought to be accepted by environmentalists, and the continuing gentrification of the Maine coast.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Griffin Pollock

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[0:24:44]

GK: Galen Koch

GP: Griffin Pollock

DD: Daniel Devereaux

[0:00:00.0]

GK: So how do you say your first and last name?

DD: My first name is Daniel, D-A-N-I-E-L, Devereaux, D-E-V-E-R-E-A-U-X.

GK: Perfect. And where are you from and what's your occupation currently

DD: Um well, I have several, uh, different occupations. I'm from, uh, and live in Brunswick, down on Maquoit Bay, um, and I've been in Brunswick-Freeport-Harpswell area for the majority of my life, um. Lived there and worked on the sea, and uh started out in government regulations at the municipal level. And then, um, I'm still doing that to this day in terms of doing the clam warden work and, uh, harbor master work, but I also have—am a partner in a new oyster farm called Mere Point Oyster Company, and we've been doing that 2016 and we're getting ready to gear up now as our crew starts to grow and production starts to grow.

GK: And so is that—am I right in thinking that's the oyster company that's been the subject of some controversy in Merrymeeting Bay? Is that—

DD: Maquoit Bay.

GK: In Maquoit Bay.

[0:01:06.0]

DD: Yeah, yeah. Yeah that's—that's the, that is the oyster company that's been—had some controversy.

GK: Yeah.

DD: Um, yeah. The—we looked at when we—we looked at that area—first off, my partner, the other farmer, is a generational Brunswick guy, his family, his great-grandfather started the publishing company in Brunswick. Um, they've been there for a long time, his two sons are lobstermen, they're college students right now, but they lobster in the summertime. Um, and we really felt that we knew the area pretty well in terms of, uh, the best place to grow oysters and we had also experimented around Mere Point to—there's Maquoit Bay, then there's Mere Point, then there's Middle Bay. And we experienced around that the last couple years and figured that this would be a really great spot because we watched activity, boating activity, fishing activity,

and stuff like that. And, um just knowing the history of the area, we located the area, the farm, in an area in Maquoit—outer Maquoit Bay that doesn't interfere with the ecological, um, particularly the submerged aquatic vegetation like eelgrass. It didn't—we didn't feel that it, uh, interfered with any type of fisheries because it's a high ground between two channels with a soft sediment bottom. Um, we surveyed the bottom, did benthic hauls, um, to try to see what types of sediments were there. And, uh, and we put in a lease application, and when that lease application, um, essentially became public, there was a, a stretch of homes along the side that abutted that area that, uh, were not very happy with our decision to place the lease there. The proposed farm there. So we've been in a battle, in a public hearing battle.

[0:03:00.8]

DD: We went through 14 hours of public testimony, um, ended up being three to one in support of our farm, um, which was—which made us happy, but both my partner and I live on the bay. He lives down on Mere Point and I live at the head of Maquoit Bay, so both of us can see the farm from—the area where we wanna put the farm—from where we live, and we weren't expecting the type of, uh, resistance that we're having. Particularly from folks that have claimed, over the years, to be environmentally conscious of, uh, of the bay, and the water, and the coastal resources. One advantage that I have, uh, being in the area, working in the area, and spending thousands of hours on those bays is the fact that I've seen the resources decline, I've seen the mussel beds drop off, I've seen, um, heavy harvests of other types of species, and they drop off. I've seen an emergence of hard shell clams in the upper—uh, in the intertidal areas and the mudflats. Um, so we've seen dynamic changes over the last 25 years, including, you know, a loss of, of, of almost—nearly all the eelgrass in the bay, an influx of green crabs, um solid ice that, uh, you know, 20 to 30 inches thick that moves sediment around and kills things.

[0:04:27.1]

So, um, Doug Niven, my partner and I are very, very conscious of the ecology, um because we know this stuff, we've lived this, we've seen it. The bay actually died in the 1980s, came back, uh everything died because anoxic—went anoxic because of the nutrient, uh intrusion into the bay. Um, since then there's been more development, there are strong land use laws around the bay, but, um one of the reasons that we, uh really looked at starting this farm was because we really cared about the ecological health of the bay, um and we feel that, um the more filter feeding shellfish that we can have in that bay—not only us—will help other small farmers that don't have the capacity—that are also growing in the bay. Yeah, no they use some of our infrastructure because we live right there. And, uh, so we're all about trying to put those biological filters back into, uh the bay. And like I explained to people is that, you know, if you—if you compare the ocean or a bay environment to a pool, and if you've ever owned a pool, you know how hard they are to maintain to stop the algae from growing. Let your pool go for a couple weeks in July and tell me what color it is. You have this intense algae buildup. And the same thing happens in the bay when you take the filters out of the bay.

[0:05:59.1]

DD: Um, and you know, not only does this exist in Maquoit Bay, but pretty much all along the coast of Maine as we have harvested things over the years, not necessarily irresponsibly, but unknowingly. You know, thinking that there's an endless resource of, of, of stuff out there. Um, we've put ourselves in a position where, um that in the climate, obviously, warming oceans—have put ourselves in a position where we need to start thinking outside the box. And most of the oyster farming that's been done in the state of Maine has come from the Damariscotta, I mean it's world renowned for its oyster production. Um, but when you look at the university and, uh Sea Grant research and data and what they've done along the other—the other parts of the coast outside of the Damariscotta, there're some great growing areas, uh in other areas along the coast that're open bay environments. So, um we're excited to do this, um, unfortunately it's been, uh a tough and bumpy road. Um, and we live in the community with the same people that are not supportive of it, but are supportive of aquaculture. Um, and it really makes us sad to think that, you know, these same people that are claiming to be supportive of aquaculture are, are um also not supportive of aquaculture, especially when it's in—right in front of their cottage or their house. So, um, you know, we also, you know, you deal with a lot of these people are part time residents, so, you know, we get, uh we get stuck in a, you know, a kind of a battle between residents and non-residents, “You're a local,” “I'm not local.” But in reality, this is something that needs to happen in a lot more bays than just Maquoit Bay. As we—as our shellfish populations trend downwards, particularly the mussel population, um the fastest filter-feeding shellfish out there, I think. And they can really purify bays, and, you know, just 40 years ago you could go into Maquoit Bay and stand on one side of a mussel barn and not look—not see the person on the other side. You can't, you can't do that anymore, it's completely flat.

[0:08:15.2]

DD: So, you know, um that coupled with development, um uh, and then the, the, the nutrient runoff, um the increased pressure from pollution runoff in general. We feel that this is really the right thing to do, and we're sticking by our guns, and we're putting our life savings into it, and we're um, we're gonna run until we can't run anymore, and we have, you know, like I said, my partner's sons are lobstermen. They're young, twenty-somethings. My two sons are also involved, um one is the farm manager right now, um doing a great job. Um, they're—lived, and worked, and recreated on the ocean their entire lives since they were young, young boys. And we feel that this provides not only opportunity to help the ecology of the bay, the um economic part, um but it also helps to keep those younger kids that've grew up in the local environment and local communities there. Which is a problem. I just sat through a working waterfront where there's all these concerns about property being bought up and losing our working waterfront. Um, and this is really important, one old codger stood up and he said, “Ya know, we're seeing a lot of different changes here and there, and mostly we're seeing changes at these smaller community levels. Where you have land-use zoning and planning.” So, what I've experienced in my town in Brunswick is the last two planners we've had have—one has been from Pennsylvania, and one has been from Colorado. So if we extract all our local people, younger people and send them out of state, and then more people move here because Maine's a beautiful state to move in—I mean the winters are a little bit tough, but they're not really not that hard—um, and people realize that so they move up here, and they wanna be a professional, so they come and they do their job. Well, being a land-use planner in Colorado is a hell of a lot different than being a land-use planner in Brunswick, Harpswell, or Freeport. You know, or Casco Bay.

Um, you just can't compare it, and the passion, and the bloodlines aren't tied, and they're starting to fray.

[0:10:36.1]

DD: You know, so uh—we need to find a way, and I say “we,” thinking collectively as working watermen, not just, you know, fishermen, or oystermen, or mooring providers, or yacht drivers, or anything, we just need to find a way to maintain that heritage so that people move in, um in the last decade, and if the bay is not being used, they move in and they buy, and they get this beautiful view, and they can go water skiing out here, and they can run their jet-ski across this. And then, all of a sudden a resource comes back. Aquaculture, per se. Um, uh, you know, and an industry comes back and tries to fit in there, and then you get put in a position which Mere Point Oyster Company is in right now, which is really trying to establish themselves in an area that has always provided, um an economic opportunity for the local people. Um, except for in the last decade? You know, because the loss of mussels, the loss of soft shell clams, the movement of the lobsters. Um, I don't care what people say, I've been on the bay (laughs) from April to December and, um we—the lobsters don't crawl on the bay anymore as often. So you may get a week in there now, they're just, they're just not here.

[0:11:58.1]

DD: And so when I—it's really troubling to me to see, um fishermen sometimes get roped into this. “I'm gonna lose ground, and I'm afraid of, you know, things happening.” And other people taking advantage of that, um that really, their ultimate goal is to not have anything out there. So, um that's where we are right now. And, and it's—it's I wanna say fun. There's been a lot of sleepless nights, we're in a position now where we wait for 120 days for DMR to make a decision on our proposed farm, and during that time, um if—if you look into oyster farming or terrestrial farming, it's all about planning, it's all about patience, it's all about growth seasons, and it's all about planning your crop, and your crop rotation. And when you take 120 days out of 365 that you just can't—you know, we don't know where to put the, the effort. You know, whether to, uh try to change—you know. So we're stuck in limbo right now, and not really knowing what to do, and sometimes that causes sleepless nights. And then of course, you know, the people that don't like you, you know, they don't treat you very good in the neighborhood, and, you know, flipping you the bird when they go by your house and throwing stuff at your mailbox and, you know, but um. Change takes courage, and um that's—that's what we're hanging our hat on, is the little bit of courage that we have to—to continue moving forward with this.

[0:13:31.6]

GK: Yeah, and I—I was in the “Preserving Working Waterfronts” meeting, and I think—I thought about this with aquaculture a lot. Just how—you know, what would it take to change the perception, or change some of the perceptions around, like, the way that people think the waterfront looks, and working waterfront looks, cause right now it's a lobster boat.

DD: Right.

GK: And it's a lobster—I mean, ideally it's a cute one!

DD: (Laughs) with a nice painted buoy!

GK: Yeah yeah yeah (laughs), with a cute wooden buoy—you know, it's not happening anymore but . . . Yeah just, what the—you know, do you have any—have you been thinking about how to reach across the aisle with these people and try to change perceptions?

[0:14:15.5]

DD: Well, I mean, like—like the people claim to be supportive of aquaculture, just not there. Know what I'm saying? So it's not—it's a not-in-my-backyard syndrome. And, uh you know, I'm not sure, um—I do think that there's some, um some ability, and we've tried to communicate with these people on numerous occasions, even newspapers have tried to call both groups in to talk, but, you know, we'll—we voluntarily come and, and they don't really want to talk, you know. You know, calling—calling them out on their—their uh, you know, their faults, um. What's the word I'm looking for? Perception of oyster aquaculture. I mean, you, you—punch it up on google sometime and try to find something negative about oyster aquaculture. I mean, it's really hard to find something negative about oyster aquaculture. That—everybody that—from National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, to Sea Grant, to the University of Maine, to UNE, to the United States Navy is using oysters to restore systems. Um, so you know, how can this—how can this be so bad. We've been compared to a factory, and, you know, describe these trammels, and, I mean, you saw what Bill Mook has, I mean that's—it's floating cages that sit 18 inches above the water, it's not something that's gonna impact, uh, visually impact people too awful much. Um, so sitting down with some people is great, um other people I just think that, that, that they don't—they just don't wanna see it.

[0:15:57.5]

DD: You know, it's okay, it's almost like the royal waters versus the peasant waters, honestly. You know, that—and I explain that to people, it's like I feel like a peasant, you know, trying to get, you know, forty acres and mule, you know what I'm saying? I mean, that's what we're trying—I mean, we're going into royal waters, it's like oh my goodness! You know, I mean it's like they—I mean and they keep, you know, it's like death by a thousand cuts when they keep, you know, extending hearings, and then we've gotta pay because, you know, you don't ever wanna, uh, be a lawyer and represent yourself. Um, because you're—you'd be a fool if you have other lawyers that are representing the opposition, so we have to hire legal teams. Um, and then to convince people, we go out on a limb and hire experts, PhDs in, you know, submerged aquatic vegetation to talk about where are farms located, to look at the dynamics of the bay, and to assure these people that it's not gonna environmentally impact the bay. Yeah, good people, smart people that've worked in the bay for, for a while. We hire those people to come and say, “Please, you—can you explain—here's what we've got—good or bad! If you think it's bad, tell them it's bad!” But you know, you can't—there was never a, uh negative, um connotation associated with any of the experts, even theirs, when they called their experts.

[0:17:23.6]

DD: So, um, you know, you've—they've tried—it seems like that you're spending so much money that it's like—it's seriously like death by a thousand cuts. We have to work another two years just to cover our hearing costs, which means, you know, we don't take pay ourselves. Doug and I don't, we're doing it as part of an effort to—to grow oysters in Maquoit Bay as part of a restoration and remediation effort. And also, provide an opportunity for younger kids. You know, we've worked with some universities already, Bowdoin College, Brunswick High School, um and stuff like that. So we've—and everybody is jonesed up about it, but the small stretch of houses from, you know, on Mere Point that have about 15 houses there, maybe 4 of them are occupied year round? So...

GK: Did you ever—did you ever think that this would be so hard?

[0:18:26.2]

DD: I did not. Um, because also, being as a part of the local municipality and working as the clam warden, we have been talking with the clambers about doing stuff inside the intertidal, farming soft shell clams, and farming hard shell clams, and even farming oysters on the mudflats, we've been doing that for three or four years. And our meetings are all televised, and so, you know, we didn't do any immediate campaign that we were gonna start a farm, but the town and the society had—local society had been looking at that for the last three or four years. So, some of the people that, uh, you know, that supported aquaculture and helped build the public relations campaign on the town side of things, um happen to live in the area, and they happen to come out and speak against it, uh against our proposal, so it's like . . . You know, you hate to call a spade a spade, but, you know, I mean, it is what it is. You can't have your oysters and, you know, expect to have your beautiful view too. And it's like—because those same people that own along the coast are, in reality, um the people in Maine, anyway, currently that consume oysters.

[0:19:47.6]

DD: You know, it's—it's the, the upper crust I guess you could say, that love to buy oysters. Um, we want to make 'em available to, obviously, everybody, but they're a high value product, and usually they're found in, uh high-end restaurants, um and we just don't—Portland's got a few oyster bars, but that's about it in the state. And you go just south and hour and a half, and down on the cape, and everybody eats oysters! It's just—they fry 'em, they, they cook 'em in soups, I mean it's—they're everything! They do everything with 'em! And then they—then they're able to eat 'em and take the shells and put 'em back into the ocean and grow more oysters! It's like, we can't even—we haven't even gotten to the process in the state of Maine yet to even do shell recycling, which we should be doing to combat ocean acidification. Um, we're doing that on a local level with our farm. When we—when we shock and keep oysters, we're keeping them in a pile so we can actually try to, um, try to uh reintroduce those at some point. Either on the road surfaces near—near where we live, or eventually when the state comes up with a state recycling program, maybe we can use those inside back—put 'em back in the ocean where they belong.

GK: That's great. Yeah, I mean, I wish you luck!

DD: Thank you, thank you. Um, luck, we will need. Hugs and love, we need more (laughs).

GP: And a pro bono legal team.

[0:21:20.8]

DD: Yes, and a pro bono legal team.

GK: Yeah.

DD: So, um you know, it's um—it's a great—it's great. Our families are involved, it's become a family thing. Particularly in the summer, everybody is at, you know, the barn, and getting gear ready, and going out and doing different things, and, you know, so uh the two families have become a lot tighter than we—than we ever that we would be. And, uh it's—it's fun to see the young boys lobstering and then coming to the farm to work, because that's ultimately what it's about, for at least Doug and I, is the younger generations being able to do stuff on the water here. And maybe those people that are doing stuff on the water, maybe they'll be a planner, or an upland use—and they'll *stay* here, you know, so they'll know the history so we don't get people from away that come and join committees and all the sudden wanna change the way we do things. Um, some—sometimes we do need to change the way we do things, um but a lot of times, um the local—the local dynamics are what has made that community that community.

[0:22:34.7]

DD: And so, you know, every coastal community along the coast outside of the bigger, you know—Portland's got its' own unique niches, and you can see from the working waterfront stuff, they've got big issues going on down there. But, you know, even the St. George River, and all the shellfish towns that exist, they all have the very unique flair that you can't even—you can't script, even in a Hollywood movie. It's just unique. And it's uh—it's really interesting to, uh see how that stuff all comes together and, uh really local people solve big problems, and I think we have a big problem as we start to gentrify the coast line. Particularly in Southern Maine, you know. Um, I'm not sure it's—it's encroaching on Downeast Maine, but you know, when we think 100 years ahead, think how developed the state will be. And where we will be. So, you know, we're gonna hang in there, and we're gonna stay tough, and we're gonna put this farm in if it's over my dead body (laughs).

GK: [Unintelligible.]

GP: I hope you don't eat those words.

[0:23:44.6]