

Interviewee Name: Bruce Fernald

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Interview Description:

Bruce Fernald

Little Cranberry Island, ME

Commercial Lobsterman

Interviewed by Galen Koch

Bruce Fernald, a lobsterman from Little Cranberry Island, ME, speaks about his concerns for the future of his island community and the Maine lobster industry. He emphasizes the importance of getting internet out to islands to provide other options for making a living. Fernald also talks about how none of the young people in his family want to fish and that six generations of lobster fishing will end with this generation. He speaks about the importance of comparing notes with other fishermen about the changes they are seeing, particularly about how lobsters respond to changes in temperature, to be prepared for future changes in the fishery.

Collection Description:

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GK: Galen Koch.

[00:00:00.00]

GK: Okay. We are on. Bruce, I'm going to have you – before we go here, I'm going to have you state your name. I just want to make sure my levels are good. Your name.

BF: Bruce Fernald.

GK: Bruce Fernald. Where are you coming from today, Bruce?

BF: Little Cranberry Island, Maine.

GK: You got it there right on the map.

BF: It's right there. [laughter]

GK: Can you tell me – I've got my little list here – what your work is and why you're here today?

[0:00:42.3]

BF: Well, I'm a lobster fisherman. I'm here early because we were at the Island Institute yesterday for a climate change workshop that they've been doing for twelve years. I've only missed one of them. They get fishermen and scientists together and Island Institute staff, talk about what we've seen on the water and all that. So, I was here yesterday for that. So, rather than going all the way back home, I stay here until I get overwhelmed. [laughter] So, about Saturday I'll have to leave.

GK: What happens at that climate change –? You said it's a conference.

BF: It's probably twenty people sitting around a table. We talk about what we've as – I think there's two-thirds of them are fishermen. So, we tell what we've seen on the water and pictures of what we've seen in the water. And just compare notes there from up and down the coast. There are scientists there.

[0:01:46.7]

BF: One of the guys talking about algae blooms. Then there's people that talk about stock assessment and all the lobsters. We are observing any climate change stuff that we might see, whether it's water temperature or tides or currents, whatever. We're observing and comparing with the scientists. So, it's a pretty good session.

GK: Yeah. What have you seen this year?

BF: I have weird pictures of lobsters. Notice tidal changes in direction. Water temperature change. I work with Jim Manning out of Woods Hole. He does a project called the eMOLT project, which has a temperature probe. You put it in one trap, which I put it right there. It's in one hundred and eighty feet of water. I've had it there for, I think, twelve years.

[0:02:53.3]

BF: It's there when I'm fishing and I take my gear up in November. I'll set it back in April. So, that one little probe has been in that trap for that long a time. It records the bottom temperature at a hundred and eighty feet constantly. So, I'll keep it until I take my gear up and then I send him the little tube, about half as big as a cigar tube. He downloads all that information for the whole year onto his computer and sends me a graph of what the water temperature did the whole year. That's pretty cool.

GK: Yeah. Is there a temperature range that you're shooting for?

BF: Well, when the water gets to fifty two, three, four degrees, the lobsters usually will start to shed their shells. Then the Spring, if it warms up, forty-ish, they start moving around more. You're looking for those at temperature range and the different times a year.

[0:03:55.9]

BF: I've known some guys that have had underwater temperature – like they put in a jar or something and put it in their trap – traps all over with different – so they can know different depths of water what's going on. That's very scientific way to go lobster fishing. I commend that guy for doing that. Yeah, you're looking for these water temperature fluctuations because they're so sensitive to what they do in their life, whether they're feeding, mating or shedding their shells.

GK: Right. I'm going to give you something that, of course as my first test run, I forgot to give you this. I want you to – what color marker would you like to be your color for the day?

BF: I'm doing what with it?

GK: I want you to mark where you said you dropped that –

BF: Okay.

GK: And then any other things you have on the chart. If you could just tell me what color you chose, so we know.

BF: Okay. I have red.

[0:04:55.2]

GK: That was what?

BF: Let's see. It's right in there, where I had the probe.

GK: Cool.

BF: And I live right there.

GK: What's it like out on Great Cranberry?

BF: Very quiet this time of year. There's maybe sixty people. We just got fiber optic wired to every house, so we have all the internet that we could handle. It's not totally done. These islands here, these three islands are all going to be wired with fiber optic. We're the first one because we – that's a long story. We are basically almost all hooked up.

[0:05:52.3]

BF: Then, they're going to do Sutton Island and they're going to do Big Cranberry. It's a 1.3 million dollar project that the town has taken on. We just want to – this is survival. We want to be able to attract people. if you don't have good internet, it might not happen.

GK: What did you have before that?

BF: We had Redzone, which is a wireless VHF kind of signal. Well, sometimes you didn't have enough bandwidth to do a speed test. [laughter] So, that would be like a half to three-quarters of a megabyte. Other times, you'd get a couple – two or three. So, streaming movies was almost impossible. But you could internet and download stuff some, but it wasn't very efficient. That ended in November. They started putting this in over the winter. Probably when we're done we can be the best in the state.

[0:07:01.7]

GK: Wow.

BF: That's pretty cool. So, you can get up to a hundred megabytes on a plan or more, if you want.

GK: How do you think that's going to change the –?

BF: The island?

GK: Yeah.

BF: Yeah, it's going to change because – whether it's people renting their houses – “We don't have internet.” “Oh. I don't want to rent.” That's happened a lot. People move there. We have a college professor who teaches to a college in Maryland. He does it, but he has to go to the library

where they have a T1 line and he can get enough signal there to do what he has to do between the college and him. We've had another person who does the same thing on Big Cranberry. These people like that really could use high speed internet. They've been struggling along before, but now, they'll have everything they need and more. And it will help attract more people to the island.

GK: Is that something that is important there?

[0:08:06.9]

BF: Very much. It used to be – I was probably in my teens – over a hundred people on the island. Now it's down to sixty or sixty-five. It's getting harder and harder. People just want more stuff. Then, there's a lot of people who don't want quite so much stuff or be around quite so many people. I like that ninety percent of the time. I'm here because this is a ten percent of the time. [laughter]

GK: Can you say where "here" is, just for the audio?

BF: This is at the Samoset in Rockport, Maine at the Fishermen's Forum. I think it's the fortieth or something. I've only missed one of them.

GK: That's amazing. So, did you grow up on Great Cranberry?

BF: Yes, Little Cranberry.

GK: Little Cranberry?

BF: Yeah.

GK: So, this one is Little Cranberry?

BF: This one, yeah. This one's little, this one's Great and this one is Sutton. This is another part of our town, Baker's, and this is another part of our town, Bear. These two have lighthouses on them. Two houses on this one and one house on that one.

[0:09:08.8]

GK: Year round?

BF: No. Sutton's is basically just summer. There's only like thirty houses on there, but they pay a third of our tax bill. [laughter] So, we got get them the internet. [laughter] No, I grew up there. I'm sixth generation from there. I have twin boys. They're thirty-five. They've moved away.

GK: Really?

BF: One's in Baltimore and one's just outside of Portland.

GK: What was that like for you?

BF: Well, I also have three other brothers and two sisters. Two of my brothers are lobster fishermen. One has two sons, one has one son. They're not lobstering. My younger brother, he has two sons. My younger brother is not a fisherman and nor do his children want to be fishermen. So, that's the end of our sixth generations of lobster fishermen from Little Cranberry. That's a little – I didn't push them. I said, "You guys want help, I'll help all I can." But no, they wanted to do other things. One's a commodity broker in Baltimore and the other's a chef outside of Portland.

GK: Wow. Did you want them to go into it?

[0:10:27.7]

BF: Well, I thought it would be cool. I just wanted them to do what they wanted to do. So, I just said I would help them in whatever way they needed, but if they didn't want to go, that's fine.

GK: Do you have any young folks on the island that you do act as a mentor for or anything like that?

BF: Well, there is probably – we have a co-op on the island with twenty-five members. Out of those twenty-five, there's probably nine that are thirty or younger. So, that's really good. A lot of us are in our sixties. So, it's good to have those younger guys, but we're going to need even more. But a lot of people live on the island half the year and move to the mainland the other half of the year because of school kids, their kids going to high school. We do have a school on the island, but it just goes through eighth grade.

[0:11:38.6]

BF: Some parents want more for their kids than what the island can offer. It's a positive-minus kind of thing. There's one on one teaching practically because there's only eleven kids in the school and they got two teachers. You get a great education. There's not so much of the social activities, but a lot of kids that come off the island, as far as sports go, are great runners because that's one thing that you can do real easily. My son actually came home his sophomore year – we moved off to Mount Desert Island – our twin sons' high school years. One of my sons came home his sophomore year and said, "I'm going to go for pole-vaulting." I said, "Pole-vaulting?" Said, "Yeah, I'm going to try it." Well, his senior year, he ended up being state champ. So, I thought that was pretty cool coming from Little Cranberry Island, he's the state pole-vault champion for 2001.

GK: Wow.

BF: I just thought that was cool.

[0:12:40.4]

BF: There is a lot of positives about the island as far as kids go. It's a great place to grow up because it's a safe place. In the summertime, it's like a summer camp for them. All the summer kids are there. It goes up to three hundred or so in population. So, kids coming for the first time, they can get on their bikes and go wherever without any hassles. So, it's a good place to grow up or to spend your summer.

GK: What's that like, that big shift in population?

BF: Well, by the time September rolls around, you're ready for some peace and quiet. [laughter] That's fine. I used to not like winters, but sometimes now they're not long enough because I like sitting by the wood stove and watching movies – now that we can stream them. We don't have to get them by mail anymore. So, watch movies and just chill. Get my head back together after eight months of pounding my body on the water.

[0:13:46.1]

GK: Are there other things that would make it – I don't know if easier is the right word, but more livable for people coming from –?

BF: We don't have a store. That would make it somewhat easier for – we always used to have one and then – it's hard to compete. There is a store on Big Cranberry, but somebody who owns that store, they have a lot of financial backing. There's a lot of money there. We've just learned to live without one. You just go off – one or the other of us goes off once a week or every two weeks and we have a big pantry and cupboards and freezer. We just keep stocked up. That is one issue that some people just have a hard time adjusting to. No store. No mall. [laughter]

GK: Definitely no mall. Store could be remedied sometime maybe.

[0:14:51.1]

BF: But now you can go on Amazon Prime and you can have your whatever – as long as it's not fresh produce or whatever, you can have almost everything delivered to your door in a day or two. You don't even have to go off. [laughter]

GK: Yeah. I'm curious about when you had to live on Mount Desert. That sounds like that happens often for people when they're doing high school.

BF: Oh, yeah. There's three ways of doing it when it comes to high school. There is a boat that runs. It's a subsidized boat that runs early in the morning, so the kids could take the bus or whatever. That boat runs, unless it's blowing really hard. Then they cancel it and they have to miss school. Or parents move off with their kids for the school year and then move back. Or there's boarding school. All of the above has been done. I went to boarding school when I was in high school. Most everybody did then. Now it's mostly either living at home and taking the boat or moving to Mount Desert Island, which worked fine.

[0:16:01.4]

BF: It was good to do it. Our kids actually wanted to move off in their junior high years and we just said, “Nope, you’re going to finish school here. You won’t regret it later. It’ll look really good on your college applications,” which it did. We got many letters back saying, “They did what? Where? We want these guys.” So, it worked good. They dealt with it.

GK: So, can you tell me – just going back to some fishing questions before we stop – just a little bit about where you fish and maybe how it’s changed over your lifetime?

BF: Well, there’s all these different harbors. There’s Southwest Harbor here. There’s Northeast Harbor up here. Then you got Bar Harbor, Bass Harbor, and we’re kind of in the middle here. So, in most places you usually try to get – you usually try to have some boundaries.

[0:17:08.1]

GK: I think my maps are falling. We’ll just let them fall so that they don’t disrupt your thing and then you can tell me. [laughter] There they go.

BF: [laughter] My boundary where I fish basically is around the Cranberry Islands and Baker Island and off towards the Duck Islands and off to the east, maybe a mile or so from Baker Island. I go off about ten miles and that’s where I fish. A lot of the guys from our harbor now are going thirty or forty miles or more out, whether it’s to the southwest or to the south or southeast. That’s something I don’t – I’m getting too old for that. I don’t want to do that. So, I just stick where I am. Out of the twenty-five that we have in our co-op, I think there’s six that go outside of Mount Desert Rock to the southwest or south of it.

[0:18:15.9]

BF: The rest of us are pretty much within three miles or out to fifteen miles.

GK: Have people always gone that far out?

BF: No. Well, there’s always been some people that have tried it, but things have changed. Whether it’s water temperature or what, there never used to be the body of lobsters out in the deeper water twenty-five, thirty miles off as they are now. They’re there almost all year round. So, these guys are able – they have to have bigger boats and bigger traps. Of course, they’re spending more on bait, more on fuel. But they are out there where ten or fifteen years ago, they wouldn’t be out there that way because the lobsters just weren’t there. People have tried it, but they just weren’t there until later in the year, like in December, January, they’d be doing good out there, but now they’re there almost all the time. It’s like there’s a wall that these lobsters, wherever they’re coming from, they’ll stop.

[0:19:27.5]

BF: My theory is some of them trickle in and go into the inshore, where it's traditional – what lobsters used to do – but now they're not doing it quite so much in the same numbers, because I think water temperature it's warming up and they like the colder water out in the deeper water. So, that's not proven, but that's the way it's been talked about by a lot of people.

GK: That's a trend people are seeing.

BF: Yes. Yeah. Like I was talking to a guy last night from up in Steuben. His catch dropped off fifty percent last year. Mine dropped off almost twenty percent. A lot of people know have dropped off between ten and twenty-five percent. That's the inshore fishing. The outside guys have done as well or better than they had. So, something's going on. Whether it's water temperature or what, nobody really knows, but that's my best guess.

[0:20:30.4]

GK: When you were a kid – was there a shift in the industry over your lifetime?

BF: Oh, yeah. Major shift.

GK: Can you talk about it a little bit?

BF: When I was a kid – my eighth grade year I had twenty traps and a skiff. I did it for one summer and I never did it again. I didn't like it. So, I worked different jobs on the island and stuff. Then I went to high school. Then I went in the Navy, spent four years in the Navy and came back home. Got home one day in late afternoon and having dinner that night at my parents' house, my father said, "Well, see you in the morning, five-thirty." I said, "What? I just got home. I need a few days to chill out." "No, see you in the morning." So, that was in 1973. I haven't stopped since. But I had an old wooden boat then. You had wooden traps. It didn't cost a lot to get into the business.

[0:21:34.3]

BF: I probably got into the business for ten thousand dollars or less, which, back then, was a fair amount of money. Now, if you're going to get in the business and be serious about it, it's hundreds of thousands and some guys are spending over a million on a boat. So, that's changed a lot. The gear has changed a lot. The electronics have changed a lot. Before, I had a compass and a flasher that would show me how deep the water was. Now we have GPSs, plotters, radars, temperature sensors on your bottom machine that tells you what the water is on the surface. Just much better gear, much better boats. So, everything has just, since I started, leap-frogged, basically. Wooden buoys that we used to have. Wine bottles for toggles between the buoy and the trap that would help hold the rope up.

[0:22:39.6]

BF: A lot of guys got hurt by them because the glass flying everywhere. So, all that old stuff is done and now we're in a modern era. It makes it a lot easier to go fishing. With wooden traps

compared to wire traps, the wooden traps needed a lot more work all the time. It's easier to go. Guys can step right into a boat. They look at their – turn their GPS on and say, "Oh, there's a shoal here," put the cursor on it, that's where they go to. Before you had to know landmarks. "I have to line up this lighthouse with this mountain and then this island coming out by this island so far. I have to go until those points intersect. Then I have to remember where it is." Then, if you got fog, you got to rely totally on your compass and your fathometer to try to find that area in the fog or the snow or whatever. So, all this has changed big time with electronics.

[0:23:43.5]

GK: When you say you're looking for that shoal, what are you looking for?

BF: Well, in the spring especially, for example, you're looking for rocky shoal water because that's where the lobsters will migrate onto. Then, once the water starts warming up and they get ready to shed their shells, once they've shed their shells, they'll move from those rocky bottoms out on to mud bottom or sand bottom and start searching for food because they're really hungry. So, you're looking for the rocky shoals in the spring and then you fish around the edges or down off into the deeper water in the summer and fall, with a plotter that really just shows you where everything's at.

GK: Do you interact with the other island communities along the coast?

BF: Yeah.

GK: [inaudible]

BF: Talk to them on the radio. A lot of guys I know. From the forum here, I know a lot of guys down on Deer Isle, Swan's Island and over Corea and Winter Harbor and Bar Harbor. Yeah.

[0:24:52.6]

GK: Are people talking about some of the changes? What's the conversation like on the VHF?

BF: Mostly now it's fear of right whale regulations, which right now is probably the most serious stage we've ever seen. I don't know what's going to happen there. There's two or three lawsuits coming in. It depends on how they go. The conservation people want us out of business. That's the biggest fear. That's what a lot of people are talking about.

GK: What would be the alternative? Are there alternatives to you being out of business? Or compromises?

BF: As far as still going lobstering?

GK: Yeah.

BF: Or if they put us out of business totally?

GK: What are the many –?

BF: Or what do they want us to do?

GK: Yeah.

BF: Well, they want to –

GK: What do you want to do?

[0:25:54.4]

BF: Well, I want to keep going – I saw one whale last year, one Minke whale. Big deal. I just want to leave us alone. The whales, there was fifteen of them or so that were killed off Nova Scotia this summer. That was from crab fishermen up there. The whales were there, but they'd never really been there before. It's because the feed has moved there. Something's going on. Like I said with the lobsters, maybe not coming ashore, no shrimp in the area anymore, where it used to be a good cold water fishery – something's going on. So, the feed, whatever it is the whales are feeding on, copepods, has moved further north and the whales went there. All of a sudden, it's right in the season where these guys fish for snow crab. They use big traps and a lot of floating rope which comes right to the surface, and a lot of whales got wound up. It was like all of a sudden, boom, they're there, and they'd never been there before like that.

[0:27:02.6]

BF: That really sparked the lawsuits going. Even though we had nothing to do with it, we're still in the whole circle of things. That's just the scariest thing.

GK: That's a big fear.

BF: I'm sixty-seven years old, so I can retire if I get forced out of it and I'm fine, but a lot of the younger guys, I don't know, they better be on the ball. We all better be working together somehow so we can maybe fight this somehow. I don't know how it would be because there's a lot of money behind the environmental groups. I don't know where all our money is coming from to defend it.

GK: What would people do for work?

BF: Good question. Like I say, I can retire. I'm alright. But the younger guys, I don't know. Especially on the island, the island's probably ninety percent dependent on lobstering.

[0:28:01.2]

BF: We had a million and a half pounds brought into the co-op last year. Total sales are probably eight million dollars. That's not coming from painting houses and mowing lawns. That would be the end of the island or the way we see it and know it.

GK: A couple more questions here. I know you have to run. What does fishing provide you in an emotional sense?

BF: Well, it's been my life. I have built a house. I have put two kids through college. I have built three new – bought one old one, my first one, and built three boats. I'm comfortable.

[0:29:03.0]

BF: I can retire and be fine. So, I'd say that lobstering's treated me very well. That's about what I can say. It's been right on through the years, even in the lean times, when the first twenty-five, thirty years, we still made a living. Fortunately, lobsters went through the roof when my kids went to college, [laughter] or I wanted to build a new boat.

GK: Well, they're more flush for [inaudible].

BF: Yeah.

GK: There's the right whale fear. Any other concerns that you have right now?

BF: This algae bloom, the domoic – I believe that's how you pronounce it – acid that happens when these algae blooms happen. It happened on the west coast last year and it shut the Dungeness crab fishery down for five months out of a six month season, something like that.

[0:30:01.1]

We had a bloom off Jonesport, east of us, two summers ago. It was quite a big area. But it was not to the point where they were concerned about the shutting the fishery down. The stuff will settle down to the bottom when it dies. Then, whatever's on the bottom will eat it. If a person eats enough lobsters say, or crabs, they could get sick or – it's like red tide poisoning, only it's a different creature.

GK: Wow.

BF: That's scary.

GK: I have not heard of that.

BF: It's scary. With the warming water temperatures – the Gulf of Maine is warming up really fast compared to other bodies of water, the warmer the water, the more chances of something like this happening. That's a little scary.

[0:30:56.5]

BF: Between that, the whale regulations – those are my two biggest concerns – and hopefully the population of lobsters will not take a serious drop because if it takes a serious drop, there’s a lot of people that have a lot of money into their boats. I don’t know what’s going to happen there. Those two first concerns are my main ones. My boat’s paid for. [laughter]

GK: Anything else you want to say, Bruce, while we’re in here?

BF: Let me just see the time.

GK: I think it’s probably ten thirty.

BF: Right about. I don’t know. You wanted stories or something. Is this kind of a story that you were –?

GK: This is great. Yeah, yeah. This is great. If somebody came in here and was like, “Oh, I want to tell you the story about the time, blah, blah” – we have those people.

BF: Well, I have one story that might be good on this, called “The Barbie Lobster.” I don’t know if you ever heard about it.

[0:31:56.3]

BF: A couple of friends – one fisherman and his crew – this was, I don’t know, fifteen years ago or so – they took a one pound female lobster that had a V-notch in its tail. They took Barbie clothes and fit a skirt up over the tail. They put a top on her. They put high heels on a couple of her legs. They started out in my brother’s trap. He hauled it up. “What is this?” [laughter] He gets on the radio. “I just caught this lobster that’s dressed up like a Barbie doll.” Everybody thought that was pretty funny. Well, then, they released it and somebody else caught it. By the time it was all – the last time it was seen was nine different people had caught that lobster. By that time, her clothes were getting to be raggedy. [laughter]

[0:32:57.1]

BF: My wife was a writer for the *Bar Harbor Times* at the time. She wrote a story on it with a column that she did every week. Then, Public Broadcasting called, picked up the story. AP called. There was Public Broadcasting calling from Michigan, all over. You can google Barbie Lobster and you’ll see all kinds of hits on it. So, that was pretty funny.

GK: That’s amazing. It’s also so funny. It’s almost like a research experiment. It’s like tagging a lobster.

BF: [laughter] You’re doing it with Barbie clothes instead.

GK: Where did it go?

BF: Probably it was caught somewhere around here. By the time it was last caught was probably ten or fifteen miles offshore.

GK: Can you make a note of that? The Barbie Lobster. [laughter]

[0:33:51.8]

BF: Right in this general area probably. Then, the last time it was seen was probably out here somewhere. [laughter]

GK: Wow.

BF: Nine times I'll say.

GK: That's a great story.

BF: [laughter] So, I'll have to end it on that.

GK: Okay. Thanks, Bruce.

BF: [laughter] Alright.

[0:34:21.0]

END OF TAPE