

Interviewee Name: Dana Morse

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:

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

Interview Location: Rockland, Maine

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Interview Description:

Dana Morse, from Walpole, ME, describes his work at his day job as an extension agent for Maine Sea Grant and his side job as an oyster farmer on the New Meadows River. He tells the story of the past six years—and four boats—of Nice Oyster Company and how getting involved in the industry has changed his role at Maine Sea Grant. He shares his vision for the future of aquaculture in Maine, where capture and culture industries can work together.

Collection Description:

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019 is a project of Maine Sea Grant, The First Coast, College of the Atlantic, and the Island Institute, with support from the Maine Fishermen's Forum Board of Directors.

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Transcription by: Eliza Oldach

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[22:05]

EO: Eliza Oldach

NS: Natalie Springuel

DM: Dana Morse

[0:00]

EO: So basically this project is to capture stories, um, about the Maine coast. Um, they use it, could end up on radio and certainly posted online on the First Coast website.

DM: Okay.

EO: Um, other than that we'll let you know if we want to use it in any other way.

DM: All right.

EO: If you could go ahead and write your name and then, um, this, I'll start this.

DM: Hello, producer.

EO: Who are we saying is producer?

NS: Um, actually you can put Ellie and Natalie. Okay. We're the ones who are physically—

[Indistinct.]

DM: No payments are due me, I was expecting to get a really good.

NS: You were gonna make the big bucks . . . 13288 I'm not finding it

EO: Oh [indistinct], I thought you I just memorized the numbers.

[1:22]

DM: Is it the first?

EO: And then would you be willing—it is the first—to be contacted about any follow-up?

DM: Oh, sure. Yeah.

NS: Here we go.

EO: Yeah. And so we put up a chart with mylar in case there are stories that you end up telling that you want to, um, place on the map.

DM: Okay. Good idea.

NS: Thank you. Oh, let's switch it so you guys can look at it. Okay, and I can finish this if you want to get started.

EO: Sounds good. Great. So.

DM: I feel like I've made some prompting on this because it's feeling a little, uh, unusual, I suppose.

EO: That is, uh, yeah. That is all good. Uh, Natalie do you keep the headphones on while you're interviewing?

NS: Yeah. Yeah. Because that way you can hear if there's any change in the audio, that means that the mic's not capturing. So.

EO: Okay. Sounds good. Uh, I'm, gonna—

NS: Dana, you're helping us train Ellie?

DM: Okay.

EO: And it's

NS: You're recording.

[2:50]

EO: All right. So, Dana, can I just get you to start by saying your name and spelling it for me?

DM: Yep. My name's Dana Morse, D-A-N-A M-O-R-S-E.

EO: Okay, okay. Thank you. No, no, no. This is the, don't feel alarmed by it. And so you're here at the Fishermen's Forum? How many years have you been coming to this?

DM: I don't know. It's probably around 23, or maybe a little bit more. I had come to the Forum a couple times in prior jobs. And I've been with the Sea Grant Program it'll be 21 years this July. And I think in those years, I've missed one or two.

EO: Wow. So can you describe why you're here this time, in what capacity?

DM: I'm here my capacity in my day job, my career with Maine Sea Grant. And I'm here because it's, uh, it's sort of essential presence, I suppose, to talk to the people, to meet new people, to network, to get up to speed on the things that I need in my job, uh, and which I'm curious about anyway. So it's, it's just a, a really valuable event to be at for all those reasons.

EO: You say your day job? Is there a night job that is also

[4:10]

DM: Uh, there's a side job I as an oyster farmer.

EO: Oh, okay.

DM: And that helps a little bit, but it's really, uh, I've only been working in that capacity for I guess this will be the sixth year. So it's a lot, lot more time as a Sea Grant uh, professional, uh, than the oyster farming gig.

EO: Have you found that the Shellfish Day was a useful thing to go to as an oyster farmer?

DM: Yeah, Shellfish Day was, Shellfish Day was great. Um, it wasn't so much bearing on my oyster farming business, um, a little bit, but it was very informative I thought for all the other stuff I do with Sea Grant as an extension person working with scientists and fishermen, all those constituents.

EO: Sure. Has there been anything about the Forum that's been particularly useful for this new oyster farming venture of yours?

DM: Um, you know, I don't think so. The, the good thing, weird thing, whatever is that there's obviously an overlap, a big overlap, in what I do for my day job versus what my avocation is. And I started an oyster farm partly because I'm pretty familiar with the industry and the mechanisms and I felt comfortable there. So it's hard to separate those two things, I guess.

EO: Can you tell us a bit more about your oyster farm?

[5:28]

DM: I can. Um, my business partner and I, um, John Swenson, we started the Nice Oyster Company in 2014. And the name of our oysters, we called them Iron Island Oysters because Iron Island is right close by, it's on the New Meadows River, and the funny thing about it, can I point on the on the chart? Um, let's see here. Thanks. Um, this is the New Meadows, right here, and Woodward Point, uh, kind of runs directly north and south, and there's Lower Coombs Island right here and Upper Coombs Island, this little Woodward Cove is also referred to as the Bullpen, and then there's a little island right there that doesn't show up on the chart. And if you go to the navigational charts, um, for NOAA, they will call it Hamish and Andland Island. But all the locals they're known as Iron Island. So if you're looking for Iron Island in the New Meadows, you won't find it, unless you get some kind of the local parlance there, which we thought was kind of fun. So, um, we started in 2014, out of a 12-foot aluminum skiff (laughs). That was fun. And, um, we had, um, one limited purpose agricultural license for about a year. And then we acquired another one. So we had two of these LPAs. And in late 2017, we were granted 2.7 acres of experimental lease. And so it's still a pretty small farm, we have maybe 120,000 oysters on there right now. Um, and it is a ton of work. And it's really fun.

[7:17]

EO: I have to ask about the name. Nice Oysters?

DM: Yeah (laughs).

EO: Where did that come from?

DM: It was, it was totally kind of a marketing gig. And we really haven't done very much with it. But, uh, we, and that's just the name of the company. But we fed our oysters to people, and we tried them ourselves, and when you eat them you say, "Hm, that's a nice oyster" (laughs). So we can work with that, we can do, "We're the nice oyster guys," for example, or "We grow em nice" or whatever. So, that was kind of the, the reason for the name of the company. Um, and it's a little bit in the weeds, but it starts to work a little bit at odds with what you want people to know your oysters as, 'cause we want our customers to say I want to buy Iron Islands oysters, where can I get some of those Iron, Iron Island oysters? So we have some thinking to do about how to make both of those things work?

[8:12]

EO: Is it still just you and your business partner?

DM: It is, yeah.

EO: Okay. How far have your Iron, Iron Island oysters extended across Maine?

DM: Uh, I don't know. I don't know. Um, we sell to one restaurant in, uh, Bath. And that's our one direct account to a restaurant. And we have a wholesaler in Brunswick that we sell to. I have seen them at, uh, places like Eventide and Scales in Portland, so I've known, I know that they have gone to some of the pretty nice oyster places and restaurants there. But how far outside of the state they may have gone? I'm not sure.

NS: Can I ask a question?

EO: Yeah.

NS: Uh, what made you guys decide to go from LPA to experimental leases?

DM: Um, we wanted to grow a little bit. Um, and we had probably 70 to 80,000 oysters on two LPAs, and rather than acquiring two more LPAs, 'cause the rules say that we could have four in that immediate area, we decided to go to an experimental lease. And each one of these permissions, the experimental lease, the LPA, a standard lease, they all have their conditions and their pros and cons. So we thought that that was a, um, a good stepping point. We will have to file for a standard lease by September of 2020 when our experimental runs out. So we'll have to get there.

[9:44]

EO: So you talked about starting off in a 12-foot aluminum skiff. Um, was that a challenge?

DM: Yeah (laughs).

EO: Can you describe what that was like?

DM: Yeah. And I met my, my partner and we became friends, uh, John Swenson, through an oyster gardening program that I used to run. Um, and we just got to know each other. And we

decided to do this together and kind of try it out and see how it fit, and the boat that we had available to us that we decided to use was called an Aqua Swan. Twelve foot, aluminum, about a six horse outboard on it (laughs). And we knew someone who would let us keep the boat at the, at their house so we could kind of go back and forth. And that was occasionally challenging when the weather was not so good. Um, both of us could not be on the rail of the boat at the same time. We couldn't really haul anything of any weight over the rail of the boat. Um, because we'd just tip over and swamp (laughs). And so that was just the boat that we had. So we worked within our limits for a while. Um, and as I say this will be our sixth growing season and we're already on our fourth boat (laughs). So it's been a really good excuse to buy boats. The second boat was a 17-foot Carolina skiff, um, that had an electric pot hauler on it like an Electra-Dyne. And so we could carry some gear and haul our mornings and do that kind of stuff, but it was also a little too small. Um, then we purchased a 19-foot Carolina skiff, also again from an oyster company, an existing oyster company, which also had an electric hauler and a, a davit on it so we could haul and, and service our gear. Meanwhile, the 17-footer got sold. Um, but we also found that since we don't have a raft, we don't have any shoreside facilities, we're doing all the work on the boat. Um, and we couldn't really carry any more than say three bottom cages at a time. in that boat. It was it gets pretty crowded. And so this last summer, um, we purchased a used 24-foot Carolina skiff. And I'm all excited right now because we're having, uh, some fabrication for it for a davit so that we can put a hauler aboard because the boat came with no capacity to haul cages or moorings or anything like that. So that's in the shop right now. But we paid for it with company money. So, because we had income, and that also feels good that we didn't have to dig into our pockets to pay for that particular asset.

[12:32]

EO: It sounds like, um, challenging work, what are some of the benefits of taking on this project?

DM: There are a few. Um, and some of them accrue to me as a, just an interested person in the industry, and some of them wash over into what I get paid for on a daily basis. It's, it's fun work, you're outside, and even though I can remember days where I would get up, and I have lots of other things to do other than go to the farm. And not, would not necessarily be looking forward to going to the farm. But I'd jump in the truck and I'd have a cup of coffee, and usually it's nice and I start to feel a little better. And I get in the boat, and how bad can it be if you're in a boat, and it's not blowing sideways out, so working in the boat on the New Meadows is a nice place to be. And it's, it's usually kind of a mood lifter. Like, I might have started the day kind of down in the dumps or in a crummy mood, and after a while, we're just working and shooting the breeze. And that helps. So, um, it's physical work, which can be good and bad. Um, between the day job and this, it got to be, uh, pretty grinding. But it's also, that also leads me to the other point, which is that I have learned a lot through this process, having to start a business, create an LLC, learn firsthand about the marketing and the sales and the bills and the husbandry and the decisions and all that kind of stuff, which helps me in my day job. And part of that is also understanding just how much of a grind it can be. And so, you know, I'm kind of whining about how much work it is, but everybody at this Fishermen's Forum, they know all about it and more, 'cause that's what they live every day. So there's been a lot of stuff that I've learned through the process that I think helps me understand my job better. Um, and what the lives of the people that I work with better as well.

[14:36]

EO: Can you describe your day job?

DM/NS/EO: [Indistinct.]

DM: Yeah, I do have, we probably all have our own little elevator speeches, Natalie's nodding. Um, the elevator speech that I commonly use is that extension work is a mixture of education, educational programming, and in my case, it's informal, that is, I don't teach college classes, or I don't teach a high school class or anything like that. So it's workshops and seminars and that sort of stuff, um, or programs. So it's education. It's applied research, and sometimes I'm assisting with a researcher on some element, um, or providing outreach support. Um, sometimes I'm acting as the principal investigator. Um, and then the third part is technology transfer, which I think all of us really enjoy, because you're trading in ideas and trying to figure out something that may have worked really well elsewhere, can we do some of that here? And what are the constraints to that? And what are the boundaries under which something like that might, uh, work? And so it can run the gamut from helping someone dig clams, a researcher might need some clams, and I'll go out and get some clams to kind of help that research effort, um, to planning and in implementing a long term educational program, uh, which Natalie and I are both involved in and a number of our other colleagues. Or it could be proposing and writing a grant, and working with a bunch of fishermen or others to collect data and do the data analysis and outreach and stuff. So it's really varied. And it has been a very rewarding job.

[16:27]

EO: And you said that starting the oyster farm has helped you sort of understand the people you work with differently? Do you think it's also changed their perception of you?

DM: Maybe. Maybe. Um, there are, usually I'll try to make sense of this, I don't know if I can. Usually when someone in my position is talking with a group, we will use the language of, uh, sometimes like, uh, "the industry does," or "those of you in industry," or, um, "this is what the oyster farmers are thinking" and we kind of use those category categories to for our different constituents. And I've had a number of conversations where I'm talking with an oyster farmer, and I'll say, "So what I've, what I've heard from industry, you, the oyster growers of the muscle growers are thinking this," and I've heard a number of them come back and say, "Well, you you're part of industry as well." So I think they understand that even though our farm is still pretty small, we're, I guess, in some respects, as legitimate as anybody else. Um, that's as close as I can come to take a whack at that.

[17:35]

EO: Did you ever expect that you would be running an oyster farm?

DM: I suspected it for a long time (laughs). And, uh, I think I probably started thinking about this in about 2010 or 2011. And I had conversations with my supervisors at the time, and with members of the industry association, and at the state level, because I've got a pretty public job, and I wanted to know if there were going to be conflicts or problems that arose out of that. Um, and I wasn't going to do anything really to jeopardize my job 'cause I love it. So I kind of made those stops and kind of got the coast is clear. And even then it was probably another two or three years before actually doing something. Took a while.

[18:25]

EO: Natalie, do you have any questions you would like to ask?

NS: Um, yeah, we have a few more minutes. Let's see, how about, you have been connected to aquaculture for a long time and lots of different ways. What are some of the sort of big changes that you would say have been happening related to aquaculture that you've observed in your work in the last couple decades?

DM: Um, I think there would be two general categories. One is the breadth of geography and, and the people getting involved. When I started in 1998, the industry for shellfish was still fairly concentrated around the Damariscotta, and that, that concentration still exists. But there were very few outlying farms, if you will. There were a couple here and a couple there. And one of the things that really makes me know how little I know is that there are people growing beautiful oysters along Maine's coast now that I would, would have maybe suspected were marginal. And they tried these places because they were close to home. And lo and behold, there's some great growing conditions. So the breath of growing oysters, um, a little bit with muscles, and definitely with seaweed, the geographic range has spread throughout the whole state. Um, it used to be either, uh, mostly people who had come out of the academic background and oysters data, scientific background and shellfish, those who are principally the main growers, and now it's, uh, a much different audience, much broader. Um, and then, so those two things are lumped together. And then the third change is just attitude. I think. Um, and that's been that's been changing a little bit over a long time. And particularly understanding that aquaculture can play a role in diversification and economic benefits for coastal communities and I've, I've said this before, it's never going to be perfect. But it's, it's an opportunity and one that I think people are realizing exists now.

[20:41]

EO: Should I ask a wrapping up question

NS: That sounds great.

DM: Wow, that went fast.

EO: Yeah. So yeah, so those are changes that have happened in aquaculture. What do you hope for, for aquaculture in Maine, in the future?

DM: My, I think I can say this correctly, my real like brass ring that I'm hoping for, and this is like a career aspiration, by the time I finish my career, I hope we are further along the road, is that the, the capture industry, commercial fishing, and the farming industry, the capture and the culture, really work together as much as possible. And again, this, it will never be perfect, there will always be problems. But there is such opportunity and such power if we can, um, capitalize on those opportunities. And that's why it is so intriguing in watching these the changes of attitudes and in working with commercial fishermen, as farmers as well, so that they're producing seafood through a couple different ways. And so if we can get to a point where, uh, we're more stable, we can land more, we still got a good reputation, we're protecting the environment, that will feel like a real win.

EO: Thank you.

DM: Okay (laughs).

[22:05]