

Interviewee Name: David Myslabodski

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Interview Description:

David Myslabodski

Rockland, ME

Seaweed Consultant

Interviewed by Galen Koch

David Myslabodski, who was born in Mexico, lived in Israel, and is currently living in Rockland, ME, is a seaweed consultant. He describes his efforts to improve the quality and cost-effectiveness of growing and processing seaweeds and speaks in detail about the economy, demand, production, and tensions in and around the seaweed industry in Maine.

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Start of DAVID_MYSLABODSKI_VMFF2018_AUDIO

[0:29:38.07]

GK: Galen Koch

[00:00:00.00]

GK: Now, I'll have you say –

DM: You have my card, right?

GK: I would love one of your cards.

DM: There you go. I tell you, whenever people ask me, “How do you spell your name?” Well, you can –

GK: Look right there. Yeah. Tell me your first and last name.

DM: David Myslabodski.

GK: How do you spell your last name, for the record?

DM: M-Y-S-L-A-B-O-D-S-K-I.

GK: Great. David, where do you live? Where are you coming from?

DM: Let's make it very short. Born in Mexico. Raised in Israel. Got my education in (Baja?) [inaudible] San Diego marine sciences. Went to Norway. I got my education in seaweed processing. Came to Maine. Hired by then Marine Colloids. If you're from Rockland, people they still remember Marine Colloids. They used to harvest Irish moss locally from here, Massachusetts or Prince Edward Island from the Maritimes. They were processing carrageenan.

[0:01:10.4]

DM: I worked for them three years, went down to Jersey – big mistake. Came back to Maine. Became an independent consultant and have been servicing the seaweed here for twenty-plus years.

GK: Over that time, how has that evolved for you? What does that look like?

DM: Something happened four or five years ago. Before that, in the States, people use a lot of seaweed-derived products. There is a lot of agar, carrageenan, [inaudible]. Even if the name doesn't mean nothing to you, they're food additives, but you have to read the label. The Japanese sushi revolution, the sushi wave, came couple of years ago. The seaweed salad came to Vegas twenty years ago.

[0:02:01.2]

DM: But couple of years ago, I would say that almost everybody under thirty-five they don't have any more the yuck factor. They eat seaweed snacks, salads. There are a couple of places where you can actually buy. You can do your own cooking. I have seen more seaweed cooking books published in English in the last two years than in the previous twenty years. There is something odd, of which I'm fine with it because that's my industry. Seaweeds are sea vegetables, greens from the ocean. It's incredible. So, the industry is growing. Maine has more harvesters. Maine has a couple of farmers. They're actually farming kelp. There are factories that they process rockweed for farmers. We don't have nothing – I mean, this is Maine. The only big guy that I know is L.L. Bean. Everybody else is small and slow and nice. So, there are seaweed companies in Maine.

[0:03:09.7]

GK: What is your work? What does processing mean?

DM: It can be as easy as people from restaurant, from Japan, that they don't know what is here. So, we go down to the beach. We harvest. Some of that they have never seen before, but then you go to the kitchen and you do the adaptation. Okay. You remember your grandmother taught you how to do [inaudible] wakame. This is not wakame. This is not [inaudible]. This is [inaudible] and this is kelp from Maine. Do the process. This is something very basic. The other one, a company that they process and they dry seaweed. So, just improve a little more the process you get. Better yield. You get a more homogenous product [inaudible] project or they are cooking seaweed for the farmers.

[0:04:09.7]

DM: That couple of drops per acre, they make miracles. So, we went through the whole process. Better cleaning, better cooking, tighter formulas, new instruments. Test that they took for hours, now you can do it in twenty minutes. So, I just walk in and make the process tighter so you get better quality, you make a little more money, and that's good. So, I walk in and improve the process. Most of my projects, they haven't been in the United States. I have projects in other places. An interesting one – we had red seaweed in seaside ponds for [inaudible] jelly, agar or [inaudible]. Then, the industrial partner left and they were going to close the project. Then we said, "Give us ninety days and see what we can do with it."

[0:05:08.5]

DM: So, we founded the first sea veggie farm in Israel. It still exists. It takes too long, but some other day I can tell you the funny story, how can you make seaweed kosher, because you know the religious Jewish people they want it kosher. So, it's a lot of learning. It's a lot of learning.

GK: How do you make seaweed kosher?

DM: In principle, all the plants, everything from the veggie world, it is kosher, but when you're start into politics and which stream of Judaism you are, how close to God you are – and that's your own decision – then you can follow to extreme requirements, but for us, it was okay because we were in modern Israel.

[0:06:03.2]

DM: We were outside the territory of biblical Israel. Had we been inside, it was going to be much harder because for farmers, you have the fallow year. You have a lot of processing things. It's not just not eating pork. There are a lot of anal retentive – being Jewish is not fun. You want to join, be my guest. [laughter] But it's making it kosher – you make it kosher, you make it halal. The Muslims, they accept kosher as halal. They are not as restricted.

GK: What would be not kosher about seaweed? Is it proximity –?

DM: It's funny. When people start talking to me, my brain works. Another funny story. They ask me, "Can you give me kosher or vegan nori?" I say, "Well, you know, it's growing in the sea. You have plankton, copepods – the small shrimp – they're going to be there."

[0:07:08.4]

DM: So, it cannot be one hundred percent vegan because you have protein from animal. Kosher depends how do you read the [inaudible] because you're going to have shrimps that they are not kosher hundred percent, but an important concept in Judaism is kavanah – the intention, the meaning. You didn't intend it to be there. Even then, if you have 1/64 of the wrong stuff, it's still kosher. So, we won, but it was funny.

GK: These are like microscopic shellfish that might be in there.

DM: Yeah. One company that they really, really wanted the certification, they got a mashgiach. It's not a rabbi. It's a young seminar student that is trained in the [inaudible]. He went to Japan. There is a video. You can see him puking. He's [inaudible] in the boat going out because he has to go through the whole process.

[0:08:13.7]

DM: Once they were in the plant, they did one or two extra rinses. That's fine. It costs much more money. Some people, they want to have the – what you call – the stamp on it. Fine. So, there is really high grade kosher-certified nori.

GK: Wow. Interesting. I never thought of that.

DM: You are not a Jew.

GK: That's true. [laughter]

DM: Wild guess. Wild guess.

GK: Where do you live? Do you live in Maine now?

DM: Yeah. I've been in and out of Maine. I used to travel a lot. I have been in Maine, physically in Maine, for pretty much the last five years.

[0:09:04.0]

DM: I am three blocks from downtown Rockland. One of the old houses from the 1860s, that's my home office. Running out of space, like the crazy professor with all the seaweed books, but thank God, they are much more easier to get them now. I don't own a factory. I just sell technical services. There are more and more people right now in Maine. It's kind of incredible the history that we are losing in Maine because New England – we got Scot, we got Irish, we got Welch – all the Celtic countries. They brought the tradition here. Originally, they were importing Irish moss from Ireland, which doesn't make any sense. But I can imagine south of Boston, Scituate – that's where everything started. I can imagine those guys sat through the night after a couple of pints, going down to relieve themselves on the beach, "Oh, shit. Look. That's like home." "Yeah." That was the beginning of the industry in the 1850s in Scituate. They started collecting Irish moss.

[0:10:15.4]

DM: They were drying, bleaching it, selling it, and you could find it in all the kitchens. They were even processing what they were calling sea farina, that it was flour, seaweed flour. You had the small boxes and it was in the house. It was not just a jelly for dessert. You could do jellies for everything. I still have the original cookbook from [inaudible], *100 Recipes for Irish Moss*. Somehow, we lost the tradition. Now, look at me – McDonald's boy. We lost the tradition. The farmers, some they still go autumn, winter. Before it freezes, the first storms, they go down to the beach, whatever it's dropped. It doesn't have to be [inaudible].

[0:11:05.8]

DM: All the seaweeds have good stuff. They rack them up, throw them into the field. Some people they – what you call – they [inaudible]. Some people they [inaudible] and you have a very good start for your crop the next year.

GK: Is Irish moss a type of seaweed?

DM: Okay. This can go for hours and this can get funny because there are a lot of funny names, but Irish moss is the common name for chondrus crispus. Chondrus crispus is the latin designation for one very specific seaweed. It grows from Portugal, Spain, all the way up, down to – not sure about Connecticut but Massachusetts. So, when people talk about chondrus crispus, you have to assume that they know the very specific type of seaweed that they are talking.

[0:12:05.7]

DM: But when they talk about Irish moss, it gets very confusing because lately – and I don't care – there is marketing. When you sell to a chef and when you are in the kitchen, if they use the wrong name, I don't care. Use the seaweed, feed the people, everybody's happy. But, Irish moss is one thing. Sea moss is a different story. Sea moss is a tradition in the Caribbean. They claim it's an aphrodisiac. As long as I can sell the seaweed, I don't care. It used to be gracilaria. It's a tropical red seaweed. They were making it into drinks. Now, they're having another seaweed. Some people, they call it Irish Moss. Some people, they call it Irish sea moss. It gets confusing. On my side, as long as you consume seaweed, hallelujah.

[0:13:01.4]

DM: But Irish Moss is one – now, in Maine, you can hear kelp. We have what's called the common kelp. We just call it kelp. The other one is funny because we use the scientific name, digitate, finger kelp, and that's the shape of it. A larger stipe, medium base. Then, you see the fingers. We have alaria. It's not wakame. Wakame has to be from Japan. Even the product, it's a very special way of preparing it. Here we have alaria. It's very close, but I'm kind of – if champagne is not from Champagne, it's a bubbly bottle of wine, but it's not champagne. So, we have alaria. Rockweed, asco – call it Ascophyllum. That's the one that they use for the farms, a little bit for food. Fucus, that's the other one, small ones that you see on the rocks that you can use for teas, for food, for spices, nice flavor.

[0:14:00.4]

DM: Dulse, I forgot Dulse. That's New England. That's us. That's not Japan. We took it to Japan. They spit it out. Say, "Okay. I get you don't like it. That's fine." They have no relation at all with Dulse, not the culture, nothing. Either you like it or you hate it. It's a strong taste. I'd rather snack just [inaudible] it's like chewing tobacco than chewing on – what do you call it? Tater tots or –

GK: Chips?

DM: Not chips. The real bad ones. The cheesy pinky that they melt on your fingers. Cheetos.

GK: Cheetos. [laughter]

DM: Cheetos. There you go. [inaudible] So, there are – and we have a list. There is something called the Maine Seaweed Council. That started many years ago. They have industrial processors. They have foragers. They have the farmers. Pity that I forgot to bring you a booklet because you have the guide for – I think they have ten or twelve species, some ideas, when you harvest, how do you harvest. Everyone is different.

[0:15:10.7]

DM: One of the issues – we call them seaweeds, but on land, you don't harvest the banana plant like an almond tree or an orchard of oranges. We know they are not the same. Or potatoes or

radishes. But because they are all seaweed we think that – no, they're very, very different. Ten thousand types of seaweeds. I don't know how many hundreds we have in the Gulf of Maine. We harvest ten, fifteen different types. If you go and you harvest your own, you don't need a license. This is Maine. I think as far as I know, you go down to the beach and whatever is for your own use. You can even have your traps for lobster as long as you are not getting into somebody else's traps, it's for family use. They're selling meat, but family-wise you are never going to go over the limit. Commercial, get your license, DMR, fifty-six, fifty-eight dollars.

[0:16:08.4]

DM: The money goes to a special research fund for us. So, it's not that that Augusta take the money and we don't see it again.

GK: So, I could go down to the beach and just – would I just go down and be like, "I'm going to pick this seaweed and go home and eat it?" You're saying there's –

DM: What people are recommending is David, shut up, give your email to people and whenever you go down to the beach, invite them during the low tides. That's an offer. You can contact me. I missed this low tide because you noticed the weather was kind of – so, the next low tide, let's go out. Ash Point. If you have a boat, we can do it, just to harvest. My harvest is just for fun. Just take people, teach, and then you do whatever. It's not my business, but I enjoy teaching other people. **If you go on your own, there is a discussion in Maine: who owns the beach?**

[0:17:04.4]

DM: **You are allowed to fish, fowl and navigate. Maybe you don't want to get into a fight. I don't care. I have my license. I have a small blurb that says, "According to Maine, we are good." I don't go by the private property. I have a public road. I go down to the beach. I keep going to where I have to go and I cross back. I don't stay on their beach. I don't party. I'm fishing. So, that you can do.** Now, what do you go after? Green ones, sea lettuce – I forgot to mention the green ones. It's like lettuce. It grows in the upper part of the tide, upper part of the beach. Be careful. If I'm close to Rockland, I'm not going to harvest because they like nutrients. You don't have to be much graphic. If somebody has a faulty leeching field, that's going to be nutrients. You are going to end up with two or three long nights in the bathroom. That's not fun. So, if you go out on the ledges, I'm going to think it's going to be clean, the sea lettuce. I don't harvest in any harbor. Not Rockport, not Camden, not Rockland.

[0:18:15.2]

DM: We make the round from Owls Head and all the way to Port Clyde. So, the only one that health-wise is sea lettuce, and as long as you are careful, it is going to be okay. You can blanch it, you can cook it to reduce the risk. There is one – it's small one, brown, looks like feathery. I don't know the common name. We call this desmarestia. If you know what it is, if you harvest, put it in its own Ziploc bag because if it is desmarestia, the moment it's out of the water, it's going to release all the sulfuric acid. You know the one that we use in the batteries? So, all your

bucket with good seaweed is going to go down the toilet because it smells like – I mean, it smells bad. But that’s the only one. This is not like mushrooms that you are going to end up in the news because you died from whatever mushroom. There are no poison seaweeds, none.

[0:19:11.8]

DM: Health-wise obviously. We don’t have heavy industry, given the nuclear plant they closed. So, there is not pollutants that the seaweed they can collect, not in Maine. Other places they could get heavy metals. Here we are okay. We have red tide. The red tide is for animals that they filter. The seaweeds they don’t filter the small particles. Having said that, if the beach is closed for red tide, I don’t harvest seaweed just because I don’t want anybody – “Oh, David. [inaudible].” No, no. This is closed. There is no risk. Call me chicken. There are enough other places where to go and harvest. Really, you can come. I can show you the system. I go with a wetsuit. I have my seaweed in my seaweed boat – it’s a small inflatable – behind me with all the tools.

[0:20:06.5]

DM: If you don’t have a wetsuit, you stay in the beach. There are a bunch of things that you can collect at the beach. I don’t know if you can get a – can you harvest sea urchins without a license?

GK: Probably only for your own consumption. [inaudible]

DM: No, not commercial. No. Absolutely not commercial. But this time of the year, oh, yeah. You can have a good meal. But then again, DMR, I’m not recommending it. Follow the law. You have to be sure that we don’t overstep.

GK: Yeah. What you were saying – what are your hopes for the future of the seaweed industry here? It seems like it’s had a bit of a renaissance.

DM: It’s definitely a renaissance. I claim that you don’t need to use chopsticks to enjoy seaweed. Doesn’t have to be Japanese or Korean. I claim that we are recovering the old colonial New England tradition.

[0:21:01.5]

DM: I am not fully aware and that’s my mistake not going and talking to the local tribes to see if it’s in their tradition. If you ask me why not – so, the tradition is coming back. The local industry is growing. Slowly, but it’s growing. Probably Micah [Woodcock] will know more, but there is going to be a conference, a seaweed conference, seaweed fair in Rockland, July. That’s good. So, people are aware. People under thirty-five, they don’t have a problem. I’m still trying to feed the old and tell them that they’re going to last until they’re a hundred and twenty. They tell me, “I don’t want to be a hundred and twenty in this crazy world. I want to go early.” That’s their problem. [laughter] No, it’s good. There is a lot of good things going here. I

don't know in Massachusetts what they are doing. Really, foraging stayed in Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island.

[0:22:06.1]

DM: Culturally – maybe I'm wrong, but we have a lot of things more in common with those guys than with Chicago, Texas or Alabama. So, this block of American, Acadians, French Natives, we kept the foraging tradition. So no, the future looks good. The future looks good. Part of coming here is trying to grab young people. We're trying to do things through the conference with some of the farmers. I would like to get some of the voc tech kids, just to tell them not everybody has to go to school. At age eighteen probably you have a trade, you know how to do something, get your license, find a couple of ledges and you can get good money. People are selling now sea veggies twenty-something to forty-something dollars a pound. I would like to drop it, but right now that's the price.

[0:23:00.9]

DM: Don't think about the price of fresh tomatoes. Think about the price of dry bananas or dry tomatoes, or spice or herb. So, yeah, I would like to drop the price, but those are their prices. I just do technology. I don't decide the price. So, a lot of families, they're still not able to buy them, but if you can, do it. If you buy, there are a couple of people – I don't want to give you names on the recorder because they will tell me “oh you are promoting this or that.” You can go online. There are a couple of the old and new harvesters. They sell directly to you. They ship UPS. It's from twenty-four to thirty-six. I buy a whole big box and it lasts the whole year. If you go to a supermarket or [inaudible] co-op and you are buy a small two-ounce bag, it's going to be painful.

GK: Do you have verify –? Do you have a way of verifying that it's from a source that –? Is there non-ethically sourced seaweed or something like that?

[0:24:06.7]

DM: There is a group of which I don't promote. Won't mention the name, but people that they're involved they know. They claim that we are raping the ocean because we are removing too much rockweed. We are having that discussion with DMR and there is a lawsuit. Hopefully, the lawsuit comes our way. If it goes their way, well, that's the law. But that's rockweed. That's the only one – I am saying it's okay. DMR says it's okay. The seaweed group of scientists in Orono say okay. So, tell me that's fake news, but that's on the table. I'm not hiding it. Everything else, nobody has raised an issue because regarding rockweed, we harvest between one and two percent of what's out there. Lobster is fifty percent, as a reference. Mother Nature can remove twenty, forty percent with storms.

[0:25:05.8]

DM: Actually, their storms was good to clean and start with new seed – super simplified, but you remove the old and you get the new. We are not having it. Actually, Rockport to Somerset,

where you could almost walk side to side on Rockport Harbor because it was full of rockweed. So, imagine the other ones that there are a couple of harvesters – we are harvesting. It's like – excuse my French – the kid that goes to the beach and “Oh, father, father. Tomorrow the tide is going to be higher because I took a leak in the ocean.” Come on, kiddo. That's not the rise of the ocean. So, it's nothing. It's nothing. So, some people have the organic certification. Some people, they don't care about the organic certification because they are known. You can go, you can visit, you can stay with them. Like the old farmer, they don't need – I don't have nothing against MOFGA. I go to MOFGA and I do the seminars. This is personal. Some people, they want – and MOFGA that's the best in Maine because we all know that those are the guys that really know what's organic in Maine.

[0:26:10.2]

DM: You have the people that they go back to tradition. Some people, they process better than others. I don't mention names. That's my own profession. I don't go there. There are people that they do old style on their own, people that have professional harvesters that they farm out the work, people that they started and they're still coming and you have to give them a couple of years. It's not bad. It's not poisonous. It's still good, but like any produce, when you go to a market you have your special provider and you like the food from here and your cheese from there and your bananas – we don't have bananas in Maine – your fiddleheads in Maine. So, that's really personal. But we're getting more variation. Some of the newbies they're actually processing seaweed into spices, mixes, mayonnaise.

[0:27:06.2]

DM: Somebody's going to open – I don't know going to open, I don't know if it is public, so many not tell, but somebody's going to open something in downtown Portland for tea, seaweed tea. I know it from Britain, the Bretton's from France. So, it's good. He may have sell trinkets in summer. That's fine. You have to pay the rent. But that's another place for Maine product to be sold and this may be L.L. Bean. Actually, it's already kind of L.L. Bean because one of the largest sea veggie processors mostly he sells out to the West Coast. He sells very little in Maine. I don't know if this is true or not true. We know about Fukushima. We know there was pollution. We know there is still a little bit of leakage. We know that even the local people, they did the first nori harvest.

[0:28:09.8]

DM: I don't know who's going to buy it because probably it has all the certificates, but the local people they don't believe anything that the government tells them. That sounds familiar. Like us. So, that's bad news for the farmers because they are fishermen. They have, I don't know how many years they haven't been able to sell their marine products. West coast, my opinion, you have nothing to be afraid. You got more radiation flying to Japan than back because you go high. Yes, there was radiation, but at what level. Even in Maine, we tell the tourists that we are okay. In Rockland, we stay away from the beach a couple of days during summer because we have the ozone days. So, yeah, just know what you're doing. But no, sea veggies, it's coming good. It's coming good.

[0:29:01.6]

GK: Great. Well, we're at thirty minutes.

DM: Wow. I can talk another three hundred. You're going to kick me out.

GK: That was amazing.

DM: Well, thank you.

GK: Is there any last thing you want to say before I turn this off for now?

DM: No. People just go out. There is a lot of hype. That's marketing. Seaweeds are good. For me, seaweeds are another veggie, it's gastronomy. If your grandma is still around probably she knows how to cook them.

GK: Cheers. [laughter]

[0:29:38.0]

END OF TAPE