

Interviewee Name: John Peabody

Project/Collection Title: Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018

Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Galen Koch (the First Coast), and Kaitlyn Clark (College of the Atlantic intern)

Interview Location: Maine Fishermen's Forum, Rockland, Maine

Date of Interview: March 3, 2018

Interview Description:

John Peabody

Point Judith, RI

Offshore Lobsterman

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Kaitlyn Clark

John Peabody is an offshore lobsterman, although he maintains licenses for many species, out of Point Judith, RI. He is an owner/operator of a boat that goes out on multi-day fishing trips. He focuses heavily on the importance of fishing for a diversity of species and his frustration with there being too many regulations and too much paperwork to maintain each permit. He also speaks about his satisfaction in proving scientists wrong when they are not willing to listen to fishermen's observations. He works to collect data with other fishermen in southern New England to provide a broader dataset on species in the region.

Collection Description:

Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 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.

Citation:

Peabody, John, Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2018 Oral History Interview, March 3, 2018, by Galen Koch and Kaitlyn Clark, 14 pages, NOAA Voices from the Fisheries. Online: Insert URL (Last Accessed: Insert Date).

Transcription by: Kaitlyn Clark, College of the Atlantic intern.

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JP: John Peabody

GK: Galen Koch

KC: Kaitlyn Clark

J: Jenny

[0:00:00.0]

GK: It's the 3rd.

JP: That's what my watch says.

GK: That's what the watch says.

JP: It's all blended together this weekend.

GK: It's hard to keep track.

JP: Oops, I'm not a parent. Well, I am.

GK: Thank you. So John, can you tell me your name on the tape.

JP: John Peabody.

GK: And where are you coming from today?

JP: I have been here a couple days, but I am living presently in Point Judith, RI, area. But I grew up in Maine, in Cape Elizabeth. And I went to school at the University of Rhode Island and decided I wanted to switch from inshore lobstering to offshore lobstering. And that was the place to be. And I've been there ever since.

GK: And when was that?

JP: Mid 80s. So I've been like 30 years in Maine and 30 plus years there.

GK: Were you fishing when you were in Maine?

JP: Yes.

GK: Yeah, so can tell me a little bit of your history in Maine?

[0:01:01.5]

JP: Yeah, I used to fish out of Portland when I did. And down off the Cape, the Cape Elizabeth shoreline and offshore. Down that way.

GK: Let's see where this one . . . Do you mind moving that, Katie?

JP: Yeah, I grew up right here by Portland Head Light. Woops, that's two lights. Here at Portland Head Light.

GK: You can use that.

JP: Yeah, my father's house is right here. And we always fished out of Portland. I fished all of down along in here. And I fished all outside all through in here. A lot in here. Stuff. So.

GK: I mean, what, I mean, why when you made that move, you said that you were more attracted to offshore, what about—?

JP: I like catching big lobsters. So. And we tried fighting and seeing if we could ever get the state to remove the old size measure, some of us, so we could fish outside. Was never popular in this state. And I liked it down there down in Rhode Island when I went to school down there. [0:02:07.5]

So I moved down there and I can just fish down that way. I've fished Georges Bank, I've fished the Gulf of Maine, I've fished south of New England, where I am now. I've fished down off New Jersey cause I'm curious so I've been all over the place. There's almost no place I haven't been. I've been here, I've been here.

GK: Can you mark those places? And tell me, cause look, we don't have anybody that's going out—

JP: Yeah, I fished lobsters up here. I fished lobsters up here. I fished . . . Okay, you don't have Cashes on here, but . . . Oh, yeah.

GK: It's kind of on there.

JP: Yeah, well, the top. I fished over in here somewhere. At the time there wasn't lobsters in the water in these areas, but now I guess there's lobsters everywhere through here. At the time, there wasn't. Just a couple shoal places here there were lobsters.

GK: And why these places?

JP: I don't know, to tell you the truth. People that were gill-netting used to show me places and we'd go out and try them. It seemed to be these places that were shoaler than 30 fathoms had lobsters. Now I guess they're all over the place, but they weren't back then.

[0:03:05.5]

And there wasn't much once you get outside the edge of the bottom, like along the light strip here. The lobsters didn't go much outside in here, but I guess they are now, so. Lobsters everywhere have move outside so. But you know, I like going where there's nobody. I like chasing big lobsters, so offshore the place to be if that's the game you want to play.

GK: Yeah, what was, I mean, when you come back to Maine or you come back to Portland now, how, have you seen a lot of changes happen? Do you still have family in the area?

JP: Yeah, I do. Portland's ruined. It's big and fancy and. It used to be the commercial street district was fishing boats. And you could walk around. You could park for free. Fishermen's bars. It was, but now it's very trendy. You can't even park there anymore. But I don't stop here that much anymore. I got a sister in Falmouth. I sometimes stay with her. I got another sister down on Cape Elizabeth, but I'm not up a whole lot. I mean, I've got four kids and I'm pretty busy. SO I got a lot of crap going on so I don't sit on my hands much.

[0:04:10.7]

GK: But you come up for the Fishermen's Forum. Why's that?

JP: I hadn't been up here for a while. But I went to the first probably 20 of them. I knew a lot of people. They wanted me on a panel today. Which I guess you sat there or? Because that's where you grabbed me from?

GK: I was in there. I didn't grab you from there, but I was in there. Can you talk about why you were on the panel today? What were you talking about?

JP: I was on that panel because I do what they want me to do. I sample lobsters, crabs, Jonah crabs, and sea bass. And they're worried that some of these trends might move into Maine as things have come from the west. From where the water's warming up or whatever going on. Things are changing so they wanted people up here to see what we're talking about and what we're doing. And they know that if they put me somewhere I'm going to have something to say. And I usually do.

[0:05:04.7]

I just checked with them first that I was going to be able to say whatever what I want. And they said go ahead. Okay, sign me up. Just cause I'm gonna say whatever I want.

GK: And how, I mean why did you agree to do that research? Why is it important?

JP: Well, as I told people in there, I said, I like to bitch about the regulations. I like to bitch about the scientists and everything else, but if you don't have anything to put up there, what're you going to talk about? You shouldn't talk about who's in political office if you don't vote. I vote and I do my data, so I figure I have every right to be a loose cannon because whatever I'm doing I'm backing up or at least participating. So everybody should participate or you shut up.

GK: And what're some of your more colorful opinions about these things? I mean, are you feeling like you're seeing things that contradict regulatory practices?

[0:05:59.3]

JP: Well, I mean, you saw it in the meeting. I welcome it when the scientists tell you that something isn't out there. We're on a mission. So, tell everybody on the boat, this is what we're looking for because they say they're not there. You know, and any one of us on the boat, look we found one! Yup, okay, take the picture, document it. We got it there. We'll find more. So it's fun that way. Had the guys come up after the meeting like self-defense. So well, you know, we understand where you're coming from but it's . . . You know, we didn't mean it.

GK: What are some of those species that you're seeing? Like, give me an example of that.

JP: Well, they said real small lobsters, you don't get them offshore. You don't get as many as you get inshore, but they said there weren't any. But there are so. And so we get those. They talk about sea bass. They used to say there weren't any sea bass because the regulations are really screwed up on those. We catch so many of them, it's crazy. And they'll say it's such a waste we're just throwing over gazillions of pounds of them.

[0:07:04.5]

You can't keep them. So I use every weapon I can. So the pictures are on Facebook. They're everywhere. And all the friends are like, wow, you must be making a lot of money. No, can't sell them, closed. Why is that? Beats me! They say there aren't any, but there's tons of them so.

GK: So that's the black sea bass?

JP: Yeah, we probably throw a \$100,000 worth a year over the side. And they all die because they're deep water. They're bladders blow up. Throw them back, they say, they'll live. No they really won't. Cause they're swimming right behind the boat upside down because they're bladders hanging out. And the seagulls are feeding on them. They're not going anywhere. It's not a good thing. It's such a waste. No win situations.

GK: I hear a phone. Is that someone's phone?

JP: It might even be mine.

GK: Oh, that's yours?

JP: Oh, yeah I do.

GK: Oh that's fine.

JP: No, I had the ringer shut off.

GK: But, yeah, I mean, would you, if you were allowed to catch them and bring them in, would you? Do you diversify your catch in that way?

[0:08:13.1]

JP: Oh yeah! Sea bass are a big thing for us down our way. Yeah, we catch a lot of them. It's not unusual to catch a few thousand pounds of them. It's a fish that's worth \$5 a pound. So it's not like it's nothing. At times, it's the most valuable thing we're catching. But, when those times are, we're never allowed to keep them so. Please don't ask why because I don't know the answer to that.

GK: Right. But so, what are you catching these days that you can sell?

JP: Oh, Jonah crabs are right now. Jonah crabs are huge right now. It's the best we've ever seen it so.

GK: And you can sell them?

JP: Jonah crabs yeah, we can sell. Although the markets been . . . yeah, I can sell them. I can sell all I can catch and I fill the boat so.

GK: And how, I mean, has the fishery changed in Rhode Island since you've been . . . Do you need to take that? Is someone calling you incessantly?

JP: Yeah, let me just see because it was two in a row and that's just two of my crew so.

GK: Yeah, that's what I noticed.

[0:09:14.5]

(JP makes phone call)

[0:09:56.3]

JP: They snapped a bow line.

GK: How many crew do you have John?

JP: Three guys.

[0:10:09.9]

(JP responds to text)

[0:10:13.8]

JP: I've never busted one there.

GK: From what, the storm?

JP: Apparently it's blowing extremely hard down that way.

GK: Yeah, so can you tell me a little bit about how the fishery's changed in Rhode Island since you've been there? What changes you've seen on the coast?

JP: Well, when I went down there the lobstering was better down there than it was in Maine. Since then, Maine's got a lot better and down there has gone downhill so. But between Jonah crabs and sea bass adding up I can still do just about as well as I was before. Lobsters dropped off a lot, but now they've been coming back some. A lot of the boats went broke and sold out and went elsewhere. We don't think there's more lobsters, but there's so much fewer, so much less gear that it's actually pretty good fishing right now. You know, during the regular season. There's never much right now so.

[0:11:07.4]

But it's more Jonah crabs, well literally than you can hold on the boat so.

GK: And how many boats are going, where, what town are you in again?

JP: Point Judith.

GK: And how many boats are going from that area? Do you know?

JP: Well, it depends what kind of boats you're talking about. It's a huge fishing port, although it's not what it used to be. But, I mean, there's probably a hundred fishing boats fishing out of there. For offshore lobster boats, I think there's maybe a half a dozen left. The draggers are doing pretty well. It's just, everything's changing so. Different species, different efforts. People are making money. It's getting tougher, but. Working the regulations is a nightmare. But you see more companies buying all the other boats cause it's pretty tough for an owner/operator to keep up with the paperwork.

[0:12:07.9]

I mean, I'm an owner/operator. I'm one of almost none. Cause it's impossible to keep up with everything and run the boat. I'm definitely the oldest guy running his own offshore lobster boat. There's no competition there right now.

GK: So there, most of the fishing boats are owned by corporations or companies? Is that what you mean?

JP: Yeah, there's, down there, there's several fish companies that have bought most of the dragging permits up and most of the boats. And there's a few big operators from the south that

have made tons of money in scallops and they're trying to get into the crab racket and the lobster racket and they're buying boats. And, you know, there's that big outfit in New Hampshire. He's got a dozen boats. And it's just a different way of doing things. Maybe if I had to do it again, maybe it'd be easier, well it'd be easier for sure, just to run a boat for somebody else. It's pretty tough right now. I'm divorced twice, and nobody's going to marry me with my lifestyle. Cause I'm working always so. Unless this is considered not working.

GK: What do that mean? What is your schedule like? What're you . . . ?

[0:13:19.1]

JP: Well, if I'm not fishing I'm doing the paperwork or the groundwork and the stuff to get ready to go again. And it seems like I'm always playing with numbers and things and there's a license for this and there's a license that and then there's a license for the other thing. And then there's, oh yeah, you forgot that one which you're probably never going to need, but you might need it. And you got to have this license because if you don't renew it, you won't be able to renew it the next time you go. These use it or lose it regulations so we get permits for stuff that we don't even use because we might use it and if you don't use it, then you'll never be able to get the permit again. I get permits for fish that I might catch 5 pounds a year in, but it makes it so I still have the permit and it's more valuable when I sell out so. But there's a lot of paperwork to keeping that license.

[0:14:04.1]

GK: So what's important about being an owner/operator? Like why did you do that, why do you keep doing that?

JP: Just to piss people off. I'm out there by myself. If I was everybody else . . . I like doing my own thing. I probably couldn't work for anybody else. I certainly couldn't at this point. It would be easier. I like doing by own thing so. People don't do well telling me what to do. I don't do well at having people tell me what to do.

GK: And it's something, I mean, in Maine, that's like the majority of . . .

JP: There's smaller operations.

GK: Yeah.

JP: It's apples and oranges.

GK: Right.

JP: But you can do it with an inshore boat so.

GK: Yeah.

JP: They don't have that many licenses. Most all they got to deal with is, what, a lobster license. And that's one license. I've often thought in Heaven to sit down and see how many licenses I have for things. It's a lot. Even if they don't cost anything, you've got to fill the stuff out.

[0:15:01.8]

But that's most anywhere with government regulation stuff. Crazy.

GK: So are you catching, I mean, is this like, do you have licenses for things that like show up in your lobster traps?

JP: Yeah, I keep every kind of fish that I can keep and I have a permit for myself. It's extra stuff.

GK: And you're catching them in your—

JP: Yeah, in the traps. Yep. We have a permit for catching mahis with fishing rods when we're offshore and tuna fish. You know, there's stuff for everything. I've got permits, we keep hake, sea bass, monkfish, eels. Oh, what else what we got. I don't know. It all adds up. Up here there's so many lobsters, they don't need to worry about other things. They can just throw other stuff over, but . . . You never, sometimes you think you're not going to catch much of it and you might catch a lot. I mean, 20 years ago sea bass was a joke and now it's a, I mean, we'll probably catch \$20,000 worth in a year. So, it's not trash anymore.

[0:16:05.9]

GK: Yeah.

JP: If they ever actually let us catch a lot, let us catch what we catch, it would really be something. They might someday. There's always that hope that someday before I die they're gonna let me keep some of the stuff I catch. But I'm skeptical.

GK: Did you have a question Jenny?

J: Have you ever thought about going back to Maine for fishing?

JP: Not really. I probably couldn't get a permit back anyways. But I like it where I am. I've been there. I've raised my kids there. I'm not from here anymore. I mean, it's nice, but I like it where I am. It's not to say anything bad about here. But that's home now.

GK: Yeah. And when did you start, I mean, when did you start working with the scientists? When did that kind of, why did you, I mean you said you decided to so that you could have some say in things, but . . . ?

JP: I'm trying to think when they actually started. Whether they got a hold of me or what it was. But this is a different, they way they're set up where we kind of made our own program. It's much more enjoyable.

[0:17:15.3]

I've done stuff with temperature probes for 20 years or something with Jim Manning. I don't know if you've seen him. He does temperature work. We had probes in traps since he first started doing it. We've done, tried to do some kind of data before but it was, you know, pencil and paper type stuff. You know, it was a lot more work. A lot harder to do. And now with this electronic stuff it's, it's easier. It's not easy, but it's easier. It's as easy as it can be. But I don't know if easy is even the right word. But it's a lot more doable now. And it's satisfying when you can take good data, when you can use. We had to defend ourselves down there. The government tried to shut us down. Said there's no, Southern New England the only way to save it is to shut it down completely. And we fought that off. We gave them the data they didn't have. Whether they listened to our data or they just threw up their hands because they saw we weren't going to roll over and let them do it to us.

[0:18:10.0]

They tried real hard to shut us down but they gave up.

GK: To shut down the lobster fishery?

JP: Yes.

GK: When was that?

JP: Maybe 5 years ago or so. I don't know. They were trying for a while. I still think they think that they need to. But it costs so much money to go offshore, you'll give up long before you're gonna wipe stuff out. It's not like inshore where you can, someone might have a skiff and ten traps. It doesn't cost them anything to do it. We're running this expensive boats and tons of gear. You know, it costs a lot just to get out there. You're not going to do that if there's no money in it. I kind of figure being an owner/operator I'll outlast the other guys anyways. So far it's worked.

GK: Do you go for days at time? Are you out sleeping on the boat?

JP: Oh yeah, it's a big boat.

[0:19:03.4]

70 foot boat. We usually try 3 working days. So that's always a pissing match between me and my now ex-wife. Said, they say I was gone 5 days, I say I was gone 3 days. I went out and worked 3 days and came in. I used to tell people to guys that 3 days, to women that's 5 days. So I don't know which that is. And it's once a week?

GK: (inaudible)

JP: We're gone 100 hours on my hour meter.

GK: But it is, I mean, it is something that, you know, these guys aren't contending with as much down in Maine. Where, you know, a lot of people with that schedule, that schedule being hard to have, you know, a home life.

JP: Day fishing is almost worse because you got to go every day. That's what I don't like. You wake up in the morning and you might not be going, but you don't know the day ahead. You almost have to wait and look every single day. I get my trip and I know I'm done for a few days. [0:20:08.6]

I know I have time off. My crew likes it. The boat's big enough so you can almost go regardless of weather, at least in the summer. If you want to plan stuff, they're going somewhere on the weekend, they can do that. And they like that. They'd rather put in weather and be on a schedule. You know, inshore it wasn't possible to ever do that. You know, we looked every single day. And it's like, oh, I can't go fishing. What a waste of last night. But it's, you know, it's a different way of thinking. Most guys would rather sleep at home every night but, you know, great you got home at 10 o'clock at night and you go to sleep and you're gettin up at 5 o'clock in the morning. Are you home? Yeah, the women say yeah, you were home. I say you weren't home.

GK: Quality of your time at home. Yeah.

JP: Yeah, I mean, when I get a couple days, I get a few days off. In theory. In reality, it's probably not because I'm doing stuff all the time, but.

[0:21:04.9]

GK: Did you, Jenny or Katie, did you have any questions for John?

J: Well I was wondering, when you go out and you catch these fish that you have permits for but maybe you don't catch that regularly, are you able to find a reliable person sell them to if they're so rare?

JP: They're not rare, it's just that you might not catch them in traps. You know, I have permits for stuff that you don't trap, the draggers catch them and stuff. 99% of the lobster boats don't keep the stuff. But I, we keep hake and they're like 10 cents a pound, but sometimes they're a buck a pound and sometimes you get tons of them. Sometimes you might not get anything. We've had fish checks for a trip for like 10 bucks. But we've also had check for 5,000. You don't know. It's like draggers when they're swilling and they said they filled the boat. And you never know what the price is. It might be worth nothing or it might be worth a fortune. It's not much like lobsters where you know the price and things. You know, it's interesting.

KC: But are you selling, do you sell all of your catch to the same dealer when you get back to shore?

JP: I have one dealer that buys all the fish. And then the one guy buys all the lobsters and crabs.

KC: Okay.

JP: And they're right next to each other so. I mean, Point Judith is a great port because everything's right there which is the other thing I like about it. The dealers are right there, the engine builders are right there, all the parts are right there. Yeah, everything I need to do to get that boat ready to go again is right there, and that's what I look for in a port.

[0:22:20.1]

I mean, when I was in Maine, sometimes some of the parts aren't there. I had to drive to Massachusetts for stuff. You know, you lose a day just doing that. I live 5 miles from the house. It's a wonderful state facility. It's a cheap place to keep the boat. I thought it was a really good price until those guys just snapped two bowlines. But it's a pretty protected, it must be pretty wild down there right now.

KC: What do you see as the future of Point Judith, like as the fisheries are changing and as the people living there are changing?

JP: Point Judith has very well-rounded, very intelligent fishermen. They adapt to whatever, they change their species a few times. That place will probably outlast all the other places. Maine, boy, they're only relying on lobsters. They better hope the lobsters hang in there because they've driven everything else out. Nobody else is here so. Everybody I knew that used to go dragging or gill-netting they're all lobstering.

[0:23:12.8]

They sure better hope there's lobsters because otherwise there's gonna be no fisheries because nobody's doing anything else as far as I can see. How many groundfish boats there must be, what, half a dozen for the state. And, you know, they won't let them bring in any lobsters so most of the guys they had all sell in Massachusetts. I don't know. They think they're helping themselves but then the other guy's catching them anyways so it's just not bringing in the bait. But whatever works.

GK: Yeah. But for you, I mean, sounds like diversity means longevity sort of. I mean, like, that will sustain, having different species to bring in.

JP: Yeah, I may stock more money in crabs this year than lobsters. I wouldn't be surprised. Because that's a big change. Maybe not, but never know. That's the wonders of the fishing business, you never know. Some people like a steady paycheck, you like a steady paycheck. Most fishermen, we like the idea that you might make a million dollars.

[0:24:17.5]

And that's enough to keep us going. You're like, oh I will make \$500 this week. I might make \$1 million this week. Which of those is better? It depends. I might make nothing. So then that \$500 looks pretty good. But I might make a million. Would you rather make a million? Would you might, would you rather maybe make a million? Wouldn't you love to go to work and think that I

might be really rich the end of this week. Or would you rather go out there and think I may lose my shirt, I'm going to lose the house, I'm going to lose the boat. But, god damn, I might pay it all off.

GK: I know. The uncertainty, it's exciting.

JP: That's the difference. You'd probably never get a crew on the boat if you just paid a regular salary. Like hey, I'll pay you 100 bucks a day to go fishing.

[0:25:10.4]

Well, gee, that might work out, but what if you pay me a share. I might make \$5000. I'll take a chance. That's what makes us go, I think.

GK: Yeah.

JP: No way would I go if you told me, if you said, I'll pay you \$100,000 to run the boat for a year. That's gonna be it. Which might be more than I make a lot of year. Then I'd say, nah. I might make a million. So you can put me on the share thing.

GK: Yeah, you have the option,

JP: And then I'm going to try a whole lot harder to catch stuff too. And there's more to it than that. There's more like, I don't care if that guy, if I lose \$1000 as long as that guy loses \$1,500. I don't care if I only make \$100 if that guy only made \$50. Because I'm gonna make more than that guy. And that's the competitive thing, it's huge in this stuff. Huge.

[0:26:08.4]

GK: It drives you.

JP: Oh yeah, doing the best is everything. And I think most guys feel that way. I have to say most guys would say that, they might not say that, but most guys would feel that way. Peer pressure. The thrill of the chase and being better than everybody else. It gets you going. Right now I'm making money and the crew's happy and everybody's happy and it's like when we going back out again? And when you're doing lousy, it's oh god, do we have to go out again? Yeah, we do. And they're like what? But when you're catching, it's just, everybody's glowing. You can tell, you can see it in their eyes, you know. And I have a picture, we had it up on Facebook, a picture of the crew. And a guy says, that's an amazing picture, everybody's smiling. And I said, that's cause we're making money now.

GK: That's great. Well, John, is there anything that you wanted to talk about that, when you came in, that you wanted to talk about?

JP: I didn't think I wanted to talk about anything anyways.

GK: You did a great job.

JP: You're not causing enough controversy. I'm better in controversy.

[0:27:17.3]

You got to stir me up to really get me going.

GK: We're just asking questions. I don't know.

JP: They gave me a platform in there, so I was having fun.

GK: I know.

JP: They didn't, I think I was a little too offensive for a lot of them. Because they didn't stir me up. I wanted to really get going.

GK: Well what was a question that stirred you up in there?

JP: I don't think it did. I just, I was ahead of the questions I think. So the questions never came out. I was just waiting for some of the scientists or anybody to say or any of the climate people to start telling me what I don't know. Cause usually at regulatory meetings first they get up and they tell us everything. They don't ask us, they tell us. And then, that sets the thing. And then we're all, you're wrong on this, you're wrong on that.

GK: But that didn't happen in that.

JP: No, not really. That one regulatory guy he came up afterwards and he was kind of self-defensive about it. Well, you know, we're really not . . . But I'm really glad you brought it up. And I'm think, he definitely isn't.

GK: Definitely not. Well thank you so much for 30 minutes.

[0:28:27.7]

End