

Interviewee Name: Glenn Robbins

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations: Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant)

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Interview Description:

Glenn Robbins

Rockland, ME

Commercial Herring Fisherman

Interviewed by Natalie Springuel

Glenn Robbins is a herring and lobster fisherman out of Rockland, ME. He has extensive experience on the sea as he started fishing when he was 12 years old. He compares purse seining and trawling and talks about their effects on marine ecosystems. Robbins also speaks about the changes, as well as the rises and falls, in the fisheries over the past 60 years. Robbins emphasizes how important it is to fish sustainably and protect fishing grounds.

Collection Description:

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Transcription by: Teagan White, College of the Atlantic intern

Start of GLENN_ROBBINS_VMFF2018_AUDIO

GR: Glenn Robbins (Interviewee)

NS: Natalie Springuel (Interviewer)

[0:00:00.0]

GR: L-E-N-N. R-O-B-B-I-N-S.

NS: And I'm fiddling with your levels a little bit, can you repeat that?

GR: My name is Glenn Robbins, G-L-E-N-N. R-O-B-B-I-N-S.

NS: Great, thanks for coming in Glenn.

GR: Welcome.

NS: So, tell us a little bit- you're a fisherman!

GR: I've been a fisherman since uh, off and on since I was 12, I started lobstering first. And herring fishing with my dad when I was 15. Herring fishing looks totally different than it did back then.

NS: Where do you fish out of?

GR: I fish out of Rockland now.

NS: Okay, so you're right around here.

GR: I don't live here, I live in Elliot but I fish out of Rockland, and I have a business here. We've- we've been having problems in the fishery since the 1990's to late '90's when the trawlers came over from Europe and introduced their way of fishing,

[0:01:01.8]

GR: When the North Sea was closed due to overfished, they were supposed to be closed down for five years but it was only three years and then they talked the government into letting them in but they was, they had a reduced rate. They couldn't just fish openly anymore. So they kinda

settled in, they bought a lot of our herring in the meantime in those three years they were shut down.

NS: And when was that?

GR: In the mid-70's.

NS: Okay.

GR: Yeah. Since trawling has been here, they've predominantly fished on George's, which is, they call area three and area two, which would be the back side of the Cape, Cod, down towards New Jersey. And, at first, uh, they caught a lot of fish, they caught pretty much their quota. Our fishery is divided up into three main areas: area 1, which got divided up into area 1A,

[0:02:00.8]

GR: 1B, 2, and 3. I fish in area 1A with a purse seine.

NS: Okay.

GR: And we've always had spawning closures in our area which protect the herring when they're ready to spawn. We leave them alone and then they drop their eggs and then we have, uh, reproduction. The trawlers have never had a spawning closure on George's in the 20-something years that they've fished out there. And then the last two years, their catch has gone from 50-60%, back down to the 20%. And for the summer fishery and in the winter fishery, which is area two, fish migrate back to the south just like people do. And that's dropped down to 11%. And that's happened for the last two years and it doesn't look like this winter is any better than last winter, so I would assume

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GR: that it's gonna be probably 10 or 11% of the take of the 100% they could have taken. Our fishery last year dropped down for the first time in a long time that we didn't get our full catch either because there has been a drop in herring population around. Uh, this caused by the trawlers bec- by-, because they didn't have a spawning closure out there. Nobody wanted to address it. The government didn't want to address it because they were always told that there was plenty of herring out there. Now there is a crisis coming down and nobody wants to face

that but it, it's getting tight. Everything eats the herring, it's the bottom of the food chain, so what I'm saying, if we don't do something soon, we may lose our fishery. We still have quite a few herring in the Gulf of Maine because those fish are protected

[0:04:00.1]

GR: and they do give their eggs and we've heard a lot of, last year I heard of a lot of fish in around the shores that are juvenile herring. And they'll grow up and reproduce, but there's also an intermixing between the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank of 20%. Now that's when we did tagging back in the 70's, 80's - I think stopped in the 90's. But we don't know what's happening now.

NS: Okay.

GR: But if the herring inshore go offshore somewhat, they'll be caught up quick because trawlers can fish 24/7, whenever they see fish on bottom they drop the nets and catch them. Purse seiners can only fish at night.

NS: Can you describe purse seining?

GR: Purse seining, of course we go out and find a bunch of fish with our sonar, circle around them with floats on the top and leads on the bottom, and then purse the bottom together,

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GR: rings on the bottom with the wire in uh, I would 95% of the time we don't come in contact with the bottom, unless there's real shoal. Trawlers will tow on the bottom, and whatever's on the bottom they catch. Uh,

NS: And how far out to sea are you, for seining?

GR: We go out as far as 50 miles from the shore.

NS: And you, but you also fish inshore? Closer to –

GR: We, we fish inside 3 miles lots of times, yeah.

NS: Yeah.

GR: Yeah, but we fish in the Gulf of Maine, and predominantly out of Rockland we fish from here down towards Jonesport, and then towards Portland.

NS: Okay.

GR: In that area. That's where most of the fish are in the summertime.

NS: And can you describe how the trawlers operate?

GR: Trawlers aren't allowed to fish inshore anymore because when they did fish inshore, they caught so many tuna and so many

[0:06:00.5]

GR: whales and the whales are, course there are, the whales are dead, the tuna are all dead, because they can't come to the surface, so they would cut the net open and pull the whale out and let it go, and they tried to cut holes in the whale so it would sink and not be seen. Um, that maybe part of our right whale problem now. Last spring, when I started fishing in May offshore we went out as far as 65, 70 miles before we found any herring but, we saw also a hundred whales at one time. Most of them were humpbacks. I couldn't tell if there were any right whales, I was looking for herring and the whales were on the herring. So we got a trip and then the trawlers found out where we were and they went out there and then they busted them up and next time I went there were only eight whales left. And then I don't know, from there we didn't go

[0:06:59.9]

GR: back out there cause they had disappeared. But trawling has been outlawed in China in 2012, in New Zealand, and then Australia, they let them trawl but they can't come within 50 meters of the bottom. If they touch bottom they can lose their boat. They're pretty strict. Canada does not allow trawling. But in the United States, we let too much go. Just like the illegal immigrants I suppose, that causes us harm at times. We're all immigrants but most of us came the legal way, so. It's a problem we have. Uh, so, I just wanna let you know that that's what I see and we hope this year is okay but last year I didn't see a lot when we got done –

NS: You didn't see a lot of?

GR: Of herring.

NS Of herring.

GR: Because usually when we're finishing there is still a lot of herring

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GR: in the ocean that we see when we come in. This year uh, we struggled towards the end and we never did catch our quota, so we finally gave it up.

NS: And when you're out there looking herring, what do you see? In terms, do you see any activity on the surface that makes you think there's herring here? Bird activity?

GR: Yup. Bird activity indicates that there's herring usually. Whale activity indicates there's herring. There, uh, these two are the best indicators. See a large group of, we call them gooney birds, or a large group of whales and they're always eating, and they're on the fish. They're on the food chain.

NS: What does a gooney bird look like?

GR: Uh, just like a duck. A small duck.

NS: Okay, great. And what, how many purse seiners are there these days in the coast of Maine?

GR: There's four larger purse seiners and then there are a few that convert from trawling to go back

[0:09:00.4]

GR: seining because they've wiped out their fishery offshore so, in order to stay fishing, they'll put on a purse seine and come into the Gulf of Maine. Now, the two years ago when they did that, uh the commissioner met with the seiners and the trawlers that were coming in, and after figuring out how many fish we were gonna be catching, he cut us back to 15 trucks a week, rather than 20 or 30 trucks. A truck is 40,000 lbs of herring. So at that time, we could see that we weren't gonna do very well, financially. The lobster fishermen were having a hayday. They had 130 million lbs that year. We didn't know they had that many, we knew they were doing well, but that year we put the price up and they could absorb it. Last year, they had 110 million, which is great, cause back in 1980 they were only at 20 million,

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GR: they dropped 20 million, from one year to the next, but then they were already at 20 million in 1980. Um, but they need lobster bait, and mostly what they use is herring so, they may see more of a problem coming down the road. Just wanted you to know.

NS: Yeah, can I ask you a couple more questions?

GR: I go lobstering also,

NS: oh, okay.

GR: I started lobstering early. I've done different things, I've been in the service, been in Vietnam, taught school, so I know, I've been around. Yeah.

NS: And how, um, so you've been fishing for a long time.

GR: I have.

NS: What's different about being a fisherman today compared to say, in the 70's?

GR: In the 70's it was a market issue. You had to take and try to find out where you can sell the fish, you could only catch so many. And you went out and made one set or just,

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GR: ran a few rings into the fish, there were so many of them around. Now, now we have to hunt for a lot of fish, make several sets to fill your market. Before there were everywhere.

NS: The fish were everywhere?

GR: Yeah. And when I first started fishing back in the 50's, uh we were fishing with weirs, and stop twine. I don't know if you know anything about that.

NS: Could you describe them?

GR: A weir is something where you drive stakes into the cove and make it so when the herring go out, they go into the weir and finally go into the holding part of the weir, and then you use a purse seining, take those herring and remove those herring. Uh, stop twining is where you go into a cove, the fish come in it in the evening, uh under the dark and uh on the incoming tide and then you shut off the cove when there's enough herring in there. You run a piece of twine across the mouth of the cove. That has stopped mostly

[0:12:00.4]

GR: because of light pollution. They don't like the lights. Summer people have bought up most of the shorelines and they don't go to bed early, so it's not dark anymore around the shores. We've also depleted the resource so there's not enough really to come in that much more either. So you got a couple problems, it's more noise, more light pollution and less herring around. The 70's, 80's, you could steam for 20, 30 miles and never run out of fish. Now we don't see much anymore.

NS: I feel like I've read stories of herring runs that were 15 miles long.

GR: Easily, I've seen it.

NS: That's amazing.

GR: Never run out of them.

NS: And so how, how big is that run? So it's 17, 15 miles long, how wide?

GR: Millions and millions and millions of pounds.

NS: That's so hard to fathom.

GR: Yup. Yup. And this may not stop right off but if we continue to go it as we're fishing,

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GR: we're gonna have problems down the road.

NS: So you're concerned?

GR: I'm very concerned. Yeah. Uh, we will have scoping hearings coming up in April and May and I will go to those and I will tell people what I know and what I've seen and uh, hopefully people will speak up for what they've seen because, trawlers don't have any friends in the fisheries. I don't care what fishery it is, nobody likes the trawlers. The tuna fishermen hate them, the whale watchers don't like them, the draggers don't like, the lobster fishermen, they snarl up lobster gear towing through those, and ruin people, and uh. The tuna fishermen wouldn't, before we could get them out of 1A, they pretty much wiped out the tuna that year.

NS: Cause the tuna get caught-

GR: In the nets. And they were not allowed to bring them in. They tried to smuggle some in but they got caught.

[0:14:02.9]

GR: And the whale watchers were losing whales because they were catching too many whales and if you don't have your whales you take people out free. If you don't find any whales they ride free.

NS: Yeah. And the whales eat the same thing.

GR: Yeah. Yup, but if they can't find them, they're not there. And tuna fish, they need a body of fish to go through, not a little sample. When a trawl goes through it will divide a group of herring and split it again and split it, and now there's fragments everywhere and it's not enough for tuna to survive on so they go to find a bigger bunch of fish to go to. For, for lunch, dinner.

NS: Huh. Um, how big is the trawler industry compared to the seiners in terms of number of boats.

GR: They have more boats than we do now. And their boats, I'm one of the larger purse seiners,

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GR: but their boats are four times as big as mine. They carry over a million pounds, I carry 280 thousand.

NS: Totally different scale.

GR: Right. And when they get into a bunch of fish they don't give it up until they've caught them out. Herring fishing with a purse seine, you have to have a good size bunch and they have to come up the bottom. Trawling, I've talked to guys that have trawled, they had a good idea there were fish down there, they couldn't even see them on their expander and the expander is on a fathometer, shows the white line, shows about everything you could see on bottom, but he couldn't even see the herring. He dropped his net down and then after he started towing they started coming over the footrope, which he has a camera watching what's going on, and after 4 hours he loaded his boat. We, we can't even do that. But maybe we shouldn't. We get too good and we destroy

[0:16:00.6]

GR: our industry. So it's, trawling, if you wanna wipe something out, go trawling. When they first came in, I started losing my market cause they could catch fish when I couldn't so I invested 850 thousand to go trawling. I still have most of the stuff, I'm selling her off a little at a time. After two, three years of trying it, you're catching stuff that you shouldn't catch. Whales. I said enough is enough. We've done more damage in two years than I've done in 40 years with a purse seine. I says this is not a good thing to do. So I gave it up and I've tried to convince other people to give it up and I don't think the National Marine Fisheries wants lawsuits against them, that's why they haven't proceeded to get these guys out. Um, so we're going a different route.

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GR: But it will happen before long cause they, they have run out of fish where they fish most of the time.

NS: They have run out?

GR: Yep. And if we go through these scoping hearings and we can get them out of the Gulf of Maine, they'll have to leave and go somewhere else.

NS: Where are their headquarters?

GR: Uh, Gloucester is probably the biggest factory they put in. It's uh, came from Ireland, the money came from Ireland to put up and they got a couple of big ships, they had three at one time but after towing around and catching a lot of herring, they were after mackerel when they first came. They didn't want to catch the herring, they would make tows down off the Long

Island in the winter time and there was so many herring down there, they made a tow, catch a million pounds and dump them, and then look for mackerel and move out a little deeper and make another tow. And then at the end of the week if they didn't find any mackerel, the owner would tell them to come on in and

[0:18:00.6]

GR: bring 2-3 hundred tons of herring to pay for the fuel and give ya some food money but they wanted mackerel. They went through a lot of herring in this procedure. I know because the guys that went on those boats used to work for me and they told me all this.

NS: They used to work for you, on your siener?

GR: Right. And I hear stuff all the time because I've been in this fishery as long as anybody. I hear too much sometimes. But that's the way it is.

NS: What do you say to the next generation of young people who want to get into the fishery?

GR: Go purse seining and your fishery will remain stable. If you try to trawl, you'll wipe it out. And you'll catch fish for awhile and then you'll wipe it out and it's not gonna be sustainable. And, and you create a lot of enemies in the procedure.

[0:19:02.1]

NS: What do you love about being a purse seiner?

GR: I like fishing because it's quiet out there, you do your own thing and nobody tells me what to do, I'm the boss. And I know I'm helping people out that work with me, I know I'm helping the lobster fishermen out by catching bait for them. When I first started it was 100% cannery market, so sardines. But the canneries went out and then we had switched to the lobster bait. And uh, I'm 71, my crew wants me to work till I'm 90. They don't want me to stop. They make good money doing it, and they like me as being their owner and captain of the boat. Yeah.

NS: Great.

GR: Alright?

NS: Thank you so much!

GR: You're Welcome

NS: If we could grab a picture of you,

[0:20:00.7]

END