

Interviewee Name: Glenn Robbins

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

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

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

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Interview Description: 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.

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Transcription by: Teagan White, College of the Atlantic intern

GR: Glenn Robbins

NS: Natalie Springuel

Glenn Robbins: [0:00:00] [G]-L-E-N-N. R-O-B-B-I-N-S.

Natalie Springuel: 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 off and on since I was twelve. I started lobstering first and herring fishing with my dad when I was fifteen. 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 been having problems in the fishery since the 1990s to late '90s when the trawlers came over from Europe and introduced their way of fishing when the North Sea was closed due to [being] 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 it was at a reduced rate. They couldn't just fish openly anymore. So they settled in. They bought a lot of our herring in the meantime in those three years that they were shut down.

NS: [0:01:22] And when was that?

GR: In the mid-'70s. Yeah. Since trawling has been here, they've predominantly fished on Georges [Bank], which they call area three, and area two, which would be the back side of Cape Cod down towards New Jersey. At first, they caught a lot of fish; they caught pretty much their quota. Our fishery is divided up into three main areas: area one, which got divided up into area 1-A, 1-B, 2, and 3. I fish in area 1-A with a purse seine. 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 reproduction.

[0:02:23] The trawlers have never had a spawning closure on Georges in the twenty-something years that they've fished out there. In the last two years, their catch has gone from fifty/sixty percent back down to the twenty percent for the summer fishery, and in the winter fishery, which is area two, fish migrate back to the south just like people do. That's dropped down to eleven percent. 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 that it's going to be probably ten or eleven percent of the

take, of the hundred percent they could have taken. Our fishery last year dropped down for the first time in a long time; we didn't get our full catch either because there has been a drop in herring population around. This was caused by the trawlers 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's getting tight. Everything eats the herring; it's the bottom of the food chain. What I'm saying is if we don't do something soon, we may lose our fishery.

[0:03:53] We still have quite a few herring in the Gulf of Maine because those fish are protected, and they do give their eggs. Last year, I heard of a lot of fish around the shores that are juvenile herring. They'll grow up and reproduce, but there's also an intermixing between the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank of twenty percent. Now, that's when we did tagging back in the '70s, '80s – I think it stopped in the '90s. But we don't know what's happening now. 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. 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, rings on the bottom with the wire. I would say ninety-five percent 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.

NS: [0:05:17] How far out to sea are you purse seining?

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

NS: But you also fish inshore?

GR: We, we fish inside three miles lots of times, 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, in that area. That's where most of the fish are in the summertime.

NS: 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 whales. The whales, of course, are all dead. The tuna's dead. The whales are 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. They tried to cut holes in the whale so it would sink and not be seen. That may be part of our right whale problem now. Last spring, when I started fishing in May offshore, we went out as far as sixty-five, seventy 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.

[0:06:46] We got a trip, and then the trawlers found out where we were, and they went out there, and then they busted them up. The next time I went, there were only eight whales left. I don't know. From there, we didn't go back out there because they disappeared. But trawling has been outlawed in China in 2012, in New Zealand, and in Australia, they let them trawl, but they can't come within fifty meters of the bottom. If they touch bottom, they could 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 cause us harm at times. We're all immigrants, but most of us came the legal way. It's a problem we have. I just want to 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: [0:07:53] You didn't see a lot of?

GR: Of herring.

NS: Of herring.

GR: Because usually, when we're finished, there's still a lot of herring in the ocean that we see when we come in. This year, we struggled towards the end, and we never did catch our quota, so we finally gave it up.

NS: When you're out there looking for herring, what do you see? Do you see any activity on the surface that makes you think there's herring here? Bird activity?

GR: Yup. Bird activity indicates there's herring usually. Whale activity indicates there's herring. These two are the best indicators. Seeing 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: Just like a duck. A small duck.

NS: Great. How many purse seiners are there these days on the coast of Maine?

GR: [0:08:55] There's four larger purse seiners, and then a few others that convert from trawling to go back seining because they've wiped out their fishery offshore. In order to stay fishing, they'll put on purse seine and come into the Gulf of Maine. Now, two years ago, when they did that, the commissioner met with the seiners and the trawlers that were coming in, and after figuring out how many fish we were going to be catching, he cut us back to fifteen trucks a week, rather than twenty or thirty trucks. A truck is forty-thousand pounds of herring. At that time, we could see that we weren't going to do very well financially. The lobster fishermen were having a heyday. They had 130 million pounds 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 because back in 1980, they were only at twenty million.

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

NS: [0:10:21] Yeah. Can I ask you a couple more questions?

GR: I go lobstering also. I started lobstering earlier. I've done different things. I've been in the service. I've been in Vietnam. I've taught school, so I've been around.

NS: 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 '70s?

GR: In the '70s, it was a market issue. You had to try to find out where you could sell the fish and only catch so many. You went out and made one set or just ran a few rings into the fish; there were so many of them around. Now, we have to hunt for a lot of fish and make several sets to fill your market. Before, there were everywhere.

NS: The fish were everywhere?

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

NS: [0:11:25] Could you describe them?

GR: A weir is something – you drive stakes into the cove and make it so when the herring go out, they'll go into the weir and finally go into the holding part of the weir, and then you use a purse seine, and take those herring and remove those herring. Stop twining is where you go into a cove, the fish come in the evening under the dark on the incoming tide, and then you shut off the cove if there's enough herring in there. You run a piece of twine across the mouth of the cove. That has stopped 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 of problems; it's more noise, more light pollution, and less herring around. [In] the '70s, '80s, you could steam for twenty, thirty miles and never run out of fish. Now we don't see much anymore.

NS: [0:12:33] I feel like I've read stories of herring runs that were fifteen miles long.

GR: Easily, I've seen it.

NS: That's amazing.

GR: Never run out of them.

NS: How big is that run? It's seventeen, fifteen miles long. How wide?

GR: 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, we're going to have problems down the road.

NS: So you're concerned?

GR: I'm very concerned. Yeah. 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. Hopefully, people will speak up [about] 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 them. The lobster fishermen – they snarl up lobster gear towing through those and [inaudible] people. The tuna fishermen wouldn't – before we could get them out of 1A, they pretty much wiped out the tuna that year.

NS: [0:13:54] Because 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. 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 [for] free. If you don't find any whales, they ride free.

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

GR: Yeah. But if they can't find them, they're not there. Tuna fish 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 it will split it again and split it. 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 lunch, dinner.

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

NS: [0:15:09] Totally different scale.

GR: Right. 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 off 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. After four hours, he loaded his boat. We can't even do that. But maybe we shouldn't. We get too good, and we'll destroy our industry. If you want to wipe something out, go trawling.

[0:16:09] When they first came in, I started losing my market because 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 and 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 forty years with a purse seine. I said it's not a good thing to do. I gave it up, and I've tried to convince other people to give it up. I don't think the National Marine Fisheries wants lawsuits against them; that's why they haven't proceeded to get these guys out, so we're going a different route. But it will happen before long because they have run out of fish where they fish most of the time.

NS: They have run out?

GR: [0:17:09] Yeah. And if we go through these scoping hearings and if we can get them out of the Gulf of Maine, they'll have to leave and go somewhere else.

NS: Where are they headquartered?

GR: Gloucester is probably the biggest factory they put in. It 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 wintertime, 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 bring two or three hundred tons of herring to pay for the fuel and give you 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: [0:18:18] They used to work for you, on your seiner?

GR: Right. 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. You'll catch fish for a while, and then you'll wipe it out. It's not going to be sustainable, and you'll create a lot of enemies in the procedure.

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. 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 a hundred percent cannery market – so, sardines. But the canneries went out, and then we had to switch to the lobster bait. I'm seventy-one. My crew wants me to work until I'm ninety. 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: [0:19:55] Great.

GR: All right?

NS: Thank you so much.

GR: You're welcome

NS: If we could grab a picture of you, that would be great.

GR: Have you had a lot of stories?

NS: We have had a lot of stories. I think we've had about – let me shut this off.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 5/23/2023