

Interviewee Name: Philip Conkling

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Matt Frassica (Independent Producer) and Giulia Cardoso (College of the Atlantic)

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Interview Description:

Philip Conkling, co-founder and former president of the Island Institute from Camden, ME, recounts how his early work as a forestry surveyor on offshore Maine islands led him to focus instead on the sustainability and development of their year-round communities. He recollects some of the most salient first successes of the Island Institute and shares his insights into the most pressing issues that fishermen and islanders have to face today.

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Transcribed By: Giulia Cardoso

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MF: Matt Frassica
GC: Giulia Cardoso
PC: Philip Conkling

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[Inaudible.]

MF: Alright, that's great. Alright, so uh, for the tape, can you say, uhm, who you are and what you do.

PC: Sure. My name is Philip Conkling and I am the founder of the Island Institute, uh, which I retired from five or six years ago and I've been doing environmental and non-profit consulting since then.

MF: Alright. Uhm, so, we're just sort of asking people open-ended questions about, uhm, changes they're observing in their communities, uhm, things that they're worried about, issues that concerns them. Uhm, so, I mean, off the top of your head, what's, what's going on in the community where you live, or the communities where you've worked that, uh, is of concern to you?

PC: Well, uh, the, you know I think the, c—the, I, I worked, uh, among the 15 year-round island communities to begin with. Uh, that was at the start of the organization.

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And then it expanded into uhm, we launched a, a coastal newspaper called The Working Waterfront. The idea was that uhm, islanders and, and, and residents uh, particularly those who were, uh, focused on the marine economy had a lot in common. Either small, isolated, rural communities, whether they are at the tips of peninsulas or on the islands, and you know, part of the concept was to build a bigger constituency for uhm, this kind of uhm, balance of uh, on the one hand economic development, in particularly in the marine realm, uh, with natural resource management and protection strategies. 'Cause obviously, you know, businesses can't be sustained over time if they're depleting their environment. So that, that was uh, you know, that's where I started with 40 years ago and I'm, you know, more or less doing the same things now.

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The issues aren't, you know, uh, ironically, are not really hugely different. I mean, the, Maine is geographically isolated, these working waterfront communities, whether they're on islands or the mainland, they're isolated, they're small, uh, they don't have a lot of scale in most uhm, on the marine economic development arena, with the exception of the lobster fishery. The lobster fishery has been thriving and uh, they, it's a very well-led uh, uh, section of the industry. The uh, the groundfish sector, which used to be as large if not larger, I mean at one

time it was the only part of the industry, but for most of my early life it was at least as large as the lobster industry. And it's comp—more or less completely collapsed.

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Uh, so that means that those uhm, communities, working waterfront communities are now entirely, almost entirely dependent upon one fishery. And uh, so, the even small perturbations in that cause, you know, huge sur—tidal waves of, of concern on the one hand and uh, real economic, uh, anxiety and consequences. The most recent example of that was in 2012, I don't know if you've heard about that, the, you know, the, the way the uh, the bubble burst in terms of price and uhm, the price was, went down to its lowest, \$2 a pound from, you know, almost cut in half after uh, the financial crisis sort of rippled through the entire global community at a time when the lobster industry was trying to expand into more international uhm, markets.

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Uh, the, uh, so you know, uhm, that's uhm, so the economics uh continued to be very finely balanced. Uh, 2018 it turns out, was a really pretty good year. Wasn't the best year ever, but was in the top 6. The price was up and uhm, and the ca-, you know, the catch was, was very significant. So, uh, the, but uh, the leaders in the lobster industry are, you know, I'm sure you've heard this, the whole industry is shifting in terms of the center of, of abundance is shifting to the North and East. So, uh, you know, Midcoast, the Midcoast area, not to mention, you know, the islands communities, working waterfront communities in, in, in Southern and Western Maine are, they're uhm, they're hurting.

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And the uh, so, the statewide averages, although robust, uh, mask what to some degree uh, what is happening at the uh, at the edges of the distribution of lobster effort in Maine. I'm sure you also know that uhm, in Southern New England the lobster fishery has basically collapsed also there, and so that's kind of a real harbinger, it's a flashing red light for, uh, for Maine and the, you know the leaders of, of the largest, the two largest uh, lobster associations are very aware of what uh, is happening you know, upstream, upwind o—of Maine.

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And so the uh, but you can't, you really, you know, you can't deal with a global issue at the local level in terms of, of having an im—you know, a real impact. So, you know, they're very frustrated as to, you know, what to do. They . . . Uhm are they, are they supposed to go to Paris and you know, and, you know (laughs) and hand out information? You know, it's, so uh, it's beyond the, people feel I think powerless as a result. Whereas in so many of the other critical uh, issues there's been a lot of, of local mobilization and local influence on, on big policies, even the, even the right whale issue, which is a national, you know, level issue.

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The fishermen are, you know, have a seat at the table. On climate change, there's, there's hardly been a table, you know, (laughs) left. So uh, it's uh, you know, it's a fraught time.

MF: Uhm, tell me about you, where, where did you grow up?

PC: I grew up in the Hudson River valley of New York, in a small town. It had a, it had a small fishing community when I was a kid growing up. There were shad fishermen who used to uh, set nets and uhm, I remember I was five years old when uhm, we were told we couldn't swim in the river anymore. And, and that was a, you know, I didn't know, I didn't kinda know much about, you know, when you're five, it's like, well, you know, and my parents helped the community get together and pull funds and built a swimming pool, so it wasn't until I was in high school, you know, it was obvious that something terrible had happened when I was a kid and, you know.

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Uh, this was the 60s, it was before Earth Day and before all of that and—

MF: This was industrial uh, pollution?

PC: It was, yeah. Both, it was, you know sewage, untreated sewage and industrial pollution in the, in the Hudson River estuary at a place called the Tappan Zee, which is where Henry Hudson had sailed up and anchored the, the Half Moon, his, his ship and so forth. Anyway, uh, so you, you know uhm, the, I went off to college and uhm, my last year was uh, was Earth Day, you know? I graduated in 1970 and you, you know, kinda, it was clear that there was uh, an opportunity to get involved in a level of activism that would uhm, hopefully make the world a better place,

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So uh, I ended up uh, uh, ke—I mean it's a little bit of a long story, but I went to graduate school in, in Environmental Studies. And the uh, I thought that I would be, you know, my degree would have let me work in the forest park industry of, in Maine, which is where, you know, you could kinda get a, get a job with an environmental background, cause that's, you know, that's what the industry, uhm, that's part of what it does. Uh, but between my two years of graduate school was the '74-'75 housing recession. First year in like, decades, that none of the, the uhm, indust—the forest products companies were hiring for, f—kinda for their interns at the graduate level and there was a little notice on the Forestry School bulletin board.

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"Collect baseline data on 12 Maine islands." And I had been living in Maine for the previous two years and I thought, well, I, you know, how hard could that be? You know, they're all uh, you know, they're all covered in spruce, there's granite underneath and uh, you know, it will be a fun way to spend the summer but, sh—uhm, anyway and I convinced them and anyway, they hired me and uh, it was uhm, a volunteer organization that owned these 12 islands. They uhm, knew nothing about them because they were quite literally little old ladies and little old men in tennis shoes. They were not boat people, they had not been to any one of these islands uhm, and, uh, it was called the Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy. Which as I said at that point had no staff, just volunteers, and it's now the largest environmental organization in Maine, but that, you know, this was that many years ago and so they uh, so uh.

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So I started going around, you know, I had to figure out how to get to these islands. Lobstermen and, you know, one thing and another and the, the uh, it, it actually, it actually uh, I was totally blown away because every single island, the constellation of plants and animals on it was different than the previous one, whereas I thought they'd all be the same and it was the, the land use history, you know, sort of slide ov—whether it had been grazed or uhm, you know, granite had been quarried there or uhm, sheep pastured or you know, what have you, uhm, uh, whether there had been a shipyard on it or boat building, you know, so it would, would alter the trajectory of the ecosystem. And that was kind of a revelation. I went back and I took for my last year, I took uhm, uh seven courses the first semester and 6 courses the second semester to get the extra sort of ecology that would complement the, uh, just sort of the forest management stuff.

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MF: And this was at the University of Maine?

PC: Uh, this was at, uh, Yale School of Forestry. And they have, and so when I came back uh, I was ultimately hired by uhm, the Hurricane Island Outward Bound School to survey the 200 islands privately owned that they had permission to use. And at the end of that two-year project I had been to more islands than anybody else. Now, there was always somebody that knew more about a particular island than me, but nobody knew more about, nobody had sort of the big picture. And people started saying, "You oughta try to bring that into the non-profit realm." The other thing that happened pretty early on, you, you know, so I had a pretty rigorous background in terrestrial ecology.

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But I knew no—uh, I knew nothing about marine ecology. And uh, you know, my, my first view of the islands were the i—you know, was, you know, the island itself. But it was clear that what had happened in terms of the history was tied directly to what the, what people had been able to harvest or not. You know, it was intimately bound up with the marine environment. So it was fishermen who began teaching me how, about marine ecology in a way. They would say things like, "Oh, well that's the warm part of the bay." And, you know, uh, you're looking out at this bay, what do you mean the warm part? You know, it's like (laughs), you know, ain't it all the same? And, or they talk about how the tide would run in a counter direction at the bottom than it does at the top, or you know, very sophisticated understanding of the three-dimensional uh, qualities of the water column.

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And, and the, how, and there were a lot of smart fishermen. This is a uh, tongue-in-cheek thing that I say, but uh, every third lobsterman might, you know, quote Herodotus or something like that. They were, you know, they had, you know, a very interesting and broad-based uhm, background, many of them. And they, uh, whereas the, the groundfishermen were all about keep it, you know, we don't wanna talk to anybody who's not in the industry, we don't trust outsiders, we don't share information. I—the lobstermen communities that I got involved with were, they certainly were distrustful of an organization like the Island Institute,

but they also uh, were willing to share information on a very carefully, controlled basis. And a real turning point came when uhm.

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S—so one of the sidelines was that we got involv—I got involved, I'd been, I'd done a lot of GIS mapping as a forester to, you know, one of my jobs was managing 100,000 acres parcel of timberland. And you can't, you know, that's, I mean, you can't know what's on there. You have, you have to use remote sensing technology. And what uh, and so the first uhm, commercially available color infrared uh aerial photography had just come out, we were the first company to invest in it and the, this was during the sp-, spruce budworm outbreak and you could, the, you could for the first time uh, tell spruce from fir from the color infrared signatures. And that, and that was, that was revolutionary in terms, because you can reduce the threat of losing your inventory if you can harvest the fir before it's, they, even though it's called the spruce budworm it builds up to epidemic levels on fir and then crosses over and kills the spruce.

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So if you can get the fir . . . Anyway, so this became, like, wohoo! This is great stuff. And that was what I was doing sort of for my day job, and I was doing island consulting for my, you know, just cause it was so fascinating and this was, so when I started the Island Institute we began investing in the first uhm, commercially available uhm, uh, satellite imagery that had an infrared band in it. And that's a temperature-sensitive band, so suddenly you could see the, what fishermen had been talking about. You could see the temperature variations at the surface in a bay. Or, you know, in our case on the whole coast of Maine.

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And so, you know, basically, we had a little bit of a, you know, we, we had something to show fishermen that they wanted to see. You know, it was like, ca—I mean, they, they had anecdotal and experiential information but they didn't have the picture. And we were able to uh, get how, we went down to Washington. This is the old Casey Stengel line of, "I'd rather be lucky than good any day," where we ended up in Senator Snowe's office and NOAA, a division of NOAA, was looking, you know, which had, the country had spent billions and billions of dollars to get satellites in space to, you know, to uhm be able to sense the, you know, to Landsat, to do uhm, remote sensing, but, but it wasn't connected to, you know, management at the local level. And they were looking for demonstration projects where this national investment could be useful at the local level.

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And uh, that's how they gave us a grant to uhm, experiment with remote sensing technology to determine whether the lobster fishery was overfished in Penobscot Bay. And that, that uhm, so just you gotta sorta, wind back twenty years, the federal regulators, so the cod had collapsed and everybody was paranoid that, you know, if the lobster fishery collapses also, you know. I mean, not only is Maine SOL but, you know, we as regulators have, you know, have failed in, you know, the most fundamental way that you can fail as a bureaucrat.

MF: Twice.

PC: Twice! And so they were very concern—you know, they, they came out with a study that said, "Based on our information, the lobster fishery is overfished and the number of, of traps in the water has to be cut by 50%."

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Well, you can imagine, you know, it's, it was an existential threat the way that, that right now the right whale issue is an existential threat. And we said, uh, but lobstermen were telling us, you know, "We've never seen so many baby lobsters! We've never seen so many berried, you know, egged females. We're throwing tons of oversize back. We just don't believe it's overfished." And, you know, this comes, this all came down to in the final analysis what's called the eggs per recruit index. So any time that there, you know, so you, the, the gold standard is to have for the lobster fishery ten eggs per recruit. You, you know, so if uh, and you, you know, you have to get a sample of, you know, how many females are in the population how many of them have eggs, what's the numb—you know, sort of the approximate number of eggs.

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Well that was based, the way they did that was to base it on the harvest. The, you know, sampling the harvest. Well, the harvest didn't sample, you know, juvenile lobsters, it didn't sample oversized lobsters, and it didn't sample the v-notched lobsters that were thrown back. So it basically was a skewed uh, you know, finding. And the only way to produce rigorous information that would challenge that was to uh, recruit lobstermen who would take interns on the sterns of their boats to sample the number of juveniles, egged, you know, berried females and oversized that were being thrown back to get a, you know, view of the entire population. We thought, if we could get 15 or 20 lobstermen in Penobscot Bay the first year to cooperate, you know, that would be a success.

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And we got 75 that year. Because they, they realized that this was the way to avoid, you know, Ar—kinda Armageddon in their minds, you know, because they were so convinced that the population was healthy. And they also were uh, I, I want, charmed is also too strong a word, but very willing to take interns aboard their boats, rather than, you know, go to a meeting wit—you know, with scientist and try and present information. Also, interns were by definition not experts. So they would open up about, you know, a whole lot of things and the, the idea was that the information was pooled so that, I mean, part of the reason that this was very difficult to do at the government level is that the information basically shows what an individual fisherman's fishing strategy is and where he's catching lobsters, and where the areas of abundance are.

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And it, you know, if that gets shared in too granular a detail, it, you know, you're sort of sowing the wind for yourself. So, anyway, these were all complications, but the, uh, the net result of that was we got uhm, five years of funding, we became the clearing house for uh, our, our new sort of uhm, base for uh, real-ti—real-time uh, surveying and sampling integrated with remote sensing data and, you know, bathymetry and circulation data and so

on and so forth. The, basically, uh hypothesize how uhm, larvae are distributed, where they settle, how to sample them and so on and so forth and that uhm, put us into a whole different realm with the fishing community.

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Suddenly we were partners rather than you know, uhm, you know, before we weren't the enemy, but, but uh, we were sort of, you know, kinda susp—suspects in the environmental community and that, that was uh, that was a huge breakthrough and, and uh, you know, the good news is that the lobstermen were right. That, you know, so this was late '90s, early 2000s, you know the harvest had been going up uh, but that in a way was even more alarming to the, to the regulators. It's like, the reason it's going up is 'cause effort's going up and it's, you know, this is, this is, you know, the boom before the crash. And of course, it's been sustained for a long period of time now, and uh, you know, there's still, there's still a lot of problems, but the sea sampling program uh, the, the guy that I hired to coordinate that became the Chief Lobster Biologist for the State of Maine, Carl Wilson, and the people were on the sterns of those boats, a handful of them ended up at DMR, or teaching, or, you know, they uh, and it developed . . .

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In Maine, the good thing is, that it's uh, it's a really well-wired waterfront. So that once you established your relationship, the ability to work those uhm, networks of trust begin opening up. And uh, and so that, you know, that's been a good thing and the new Island Institute people are doing that, they're investing in small-scale aquaculture, and other innovative operations on the waterfront and . . . So that's, that's how I got involved and that's kind of what happened (laughs).

MF: That's great. Uhm, we uh, we have a, we have a 1:30.

PC: Yeah.

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MF: But uh, before we go, are there any, any uhm, issues or things on your mind, or concerns, or s—or, uh, stories that you'd wanna pass on to a future generation?

PC: Uh, well, there are a lot, you know (laughter in background), there are a lot of stories. Uh, you kn—so uhm, as your colleague knows (laughter in background), you know, my, so I've got five boys. And uhm, they all were educated here in Midcoast Maine and uhm, you know, have pretty deep roots on Vinalhaven and, so Maine is the place that they come back to, but four of the five of them will, you know, are, they're involved in computer technology and other pursuits that don't, you know, there's just no way that, that they could make a living doing what they wanna do in, in Maine. But one is coming back, and he's getting a, a marine, uhm, an environmental education and biology training to be a science teacher here in Maine, so.

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Uhm, I'm, uh, I'm very encouraged by that and, you, you know, twenty, so 20%. The brain drain is still 80%. That's the biggest, I'd say that's the biggest issue that all of Maine faces. Islands, you know, it's even more acute. One figure to remember is that between 1880 and 1980, so for a hundred years, the population of Maine in 1880 did not re—which was roughly a million people, did not, went through 100 years of decline until 1980, Maine got back to a million. So that means for a century the most valuable export Maine had were its children. And, you know, I fe—ou know, I see that still, you know.

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Uh, so it's, uhm, you know that's, Maine gets older and uh, every year, and some of that is because it's a good place to, for many people to retire, so that's sort of, that inflates that a little bit, but the fundamental fact is that, is that there are not enough high-quality jobs for people who graduate from either high school, not to mention college. And that's uhm, that's, that's kind of flatline, it's not, it hasn't gotten any better in the 50 years that I've been doing this. It, I don't, you know. A good thing I guess is, it hasn't got worse, but (laughs) . . . Oh, so, I, I think uhm, you know, various people uhm, politicians have, have uhm initiated programs to, you know, to try to address that.

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What we did at the Island Institute was, has been, is, is kind of like, you know, is a small-scale example of what has worked. We, we created something called the Island Fellows program, where young, you know where college graduates, and some with Master's degree, get their first job in an island community on a pro—a community project that the islanders, you know, wanted. And uh, there would be a local committee that was, that supervises them and we, I think there now have been about 120 Island Fellows. They're uhm, about 10% of them have uhm, you know, partly because the jobs were real, I mean, they weren't uh, "Would you put these paper clips in order on this, somebody's desk," it was, you know, something whether was cataloguing a library, doing a, a digitizing the tax maps for, for a community, you know, serious level uh, projects often uh, arts enrichment program, you know, what have you, dependent on the needs of the, of the community.

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About uh, a dozen of those Island Fellows stayed in those communities, married somebody and have produced children. So we call the Junior Fellows Program (laughs) and that's uhm, anyway that's uh, y—you know, it's that kind of thing at the state-wide level, ways of, of uh, encouraging people who, if they go off to get a degree elsewhere or even if they get a degree he, you know, here, keeping talented people in Maine the, it's a pretty simple strategy for doing that, you invest in the edge, in the education and in debt reduction for getting an education. It's, it's not rocket science, it costs money. And uh, I, I'm just surprised that there isn't a more robust way of doing that.

MF: Mmhm. Uhm, I wish we had uh, an hour (laughs) or two to talk with you, I feel like there are a lot of uhm, threads we could've followed up there, but.

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