

**Interviewee Name:** John Cox

**Project/Collection Title:** Voices of the Maine Fishermen's Forum 2019

**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation:** Galen Koch (The First Coast)

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**Interview Description:**

John Cox, a clam manager in Jonesboro, ME, gives his opinion on topics relevant to someone working on flats. Through a thick Downeast accent, Cox talks about the business acumen that fishermen ought to have, the impact of green crabs, and the opportunities and pitfalls presented by farming.

**Collection Description:**

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**Transcribed By:** Annaleena Vaher and Griffin Pollock

START OF JOHN\_COX\_VMFF2019\_AUDIO01

[0:06:18.4]

GK: Galen Koch

JC: John Cox

[0:00:00.0]

GK: This is just going so—we use this, COA students will transcribe the tape and then

JC: Yeah.

GK: NOAA will have it archived in their “Preserving the Fisheries.”

JC: Yeah.

GK: And then we use it just like on—we have a website with the stories from the Fisherman’s Forum.

JC: Yeah.

GK: So we can...

JC: ‘Cause I go back 50 plus years. And it’s like I’ve seen not just the clams, the lobsters. I’ve seen the codfish from trawl to gillnet. That was downfall. I mean before, the trawl was a gamble, but when you got a fish finder you go set the gillnet. Is that playing fair?

GK: Yeah, and you saw that change.

JC: I was on some of the boats that went through that change. I mean I trawled myself but I went pulling with gillnets just to observe, and I said “This is—could be the end.”

GK: What made you think that?

0:00:59.5

JC: Well, before—I mean, you watch a fish finder, and there’s the fish. You just figure out where they’re going and you might set the gillnets and come back. And you know, actually you’re taking . . . you don’t gamble there. You’ve got a sure thing. Now how many sure things before you ain’t got the product anymore? I mean, back then, there was not really no checking balance, there was plenty of fish. Now, checking balance is there, but we ain’t got the fish.

GK: Right, it was almost like too little too late.

JC: Yeah, yeah! And that was that. And I have seen mussel dragging, and up inside, which . . . We had lobster nurseries where you put a trap over, of course, no vents. And be hundreds of these little ones come up.

[0:02:00.7]

JC: They come in and dragged, with a two ton drag, to drag the kelp off. There ain't no nursery there anymore. I've said . . . There's changes here. Now when you ain't got a nursery anymore, then you ain't got no small stuff anymore.

GK: Can you tell me where—well, first we launched right into it, can you just say your first and last name for me?

JC: John Cox. C-O-X.

GK: John, where do you live and where did you grow up. Like where these . . .

JC: Mostly around the . . . Jonesboro, Washington County.

GK: Yep.

JC: But I'm familiar with a lot of the flats and the fishing. I started out worming, which from Calais to, well, Bar Harbor. Then I run a trap company, my own. Started off with wood ones. I watched a transition to that to wire. And I met with fisherman, talked to fishermen, and way back in the 70s. About late 60s, 70s up through. So I have seen the change from . . . a lot of changes. And, some are good and some is debatable (laughs). It is still got to wait for evaluation.

GK: When you were talking about the mussel dragging, was that mussel dragging in the intertidal zone or was that . . .

[0:03:26.0]

JK: Yep, it was everywhere. Because at that time, the state—it was something, a new industry, so they was trying to promote it and get it going. And the draggers were supposed to be dragging below low water mark, the tide mark. Well, just keep on still getting mussels. I mean, that was not—it was a new industry at the time and lot of controversy, 'cause the lobster fishermen say, "Ah, it's dragging my traps." And there were some wars. I mean, It was just a mess.

GK: What and that was in 70s?

JC: Yeah.

GK: Okay!

0:03:59.3

GK: And so then that was . . .

JC: And early 80s. It and then . . . It kinda fade back. There was like a gold rush and then I think it was Carter Newell was brought onto mussel farming. And in 1984, I was on this cooperative extension service and we started a 4H clam hatchery in Jonesboro. The kids, to the [inaudible] of Sam Chapman. It was one of the first in the world. I mean, we wasn't, we was criticized for being economical. Feasible. But that was not our goal, we was educational.

[0:04:39.1]

JC: It's teaching the fundamentals, then you can take that. And it was interesting 'cause in 1984, when we was doing this, Brian Beale graduated and he couldn't find a job, he was headed back to New Jersey. Three or four of us went to university and got Brian on as a aide to help Sam. And at that time, there was conversation all the time, of having a Downeast Technical Insti—well, a college on the coast. And that's where—and Brian got to be teaching, and this is how we got a Downeast Technical Institute. He's worked up. So that was just a conversation that took off.

GK: And it started with, on a project you were working on.

JC: Well, it was a 4H project and he was part of it. And then Sam Chapman, we all sat down and it kind of happened. What do you think this is—where is this is gonna go, or problems. And I said, "We need a college. Not up on dry land, we need somebody to walk out the door and apply it, in the water. Hands on." And he's worked—Brian has worked hard to get it there.

GK: Do you think it's been successful?

[0:06:00.3]

JC: It's hard to [inaudible] he's just getting it going. And, it's hard to evaluate until you get any track record. And it is interesting but . . . It's badly needed, it's like . . . I'm the Clam Manager at Jonesboro—

[0:06:18.4]

START OF JOHN\_COX\_VMFF2019\_AUDIO02

[0:00:00.0]

JC: —Get that, 'cause that two bushel just walked up the road, I mean (laughs).

GK: Right.

JC: But then just . . . you gotta have [inaudible] out of his truck. I mean he's told me I get two bushel, or two and a half, or couple hundred pounds. But that's good because I'm trying to

document that, of where the clams come from. So I could turn around and evaluate where they come from, and what we gotta look at, make sure there is more left.

GK: Yes. So, John, can you kinda tell me what you do as clam manager and what that means? And how you got there?

JC: Well, uh . . . It's hard to fishermen, no matter what you're in, to regulate yourself. And you've got to be really self disciplined to forget about personal, and come in and do business.

[0:00:45.0]

JC: And I've been trying to . . . Uh, we went up through, and the committees didn't work. So I said "Why don't we try this: the selectman of the town is responsible for that law." Alright, your town clerk does all the work. Paperwork, correspondence. Why don't we go with . . . Let me try this. You need five members. And a monthly meeting. Well, they meet once a month anyway. So, I said I'll be a field manager and bring it back, we put it on a table and turn around and run this as a business. Which is something new because these towns . . . The other day in here, they all said "Oh . . . Well, we need more enforcement." Well, wait a minute, it's been your lap! It ain't in the state's lap. There's a lot of things that they ain't getting. And I went around and told a lot of the towns . . . I'll back up.

[0:01:43.0]

JC: And late 90s, early 2000s, I was on the state board shellfish. Which represented most of Washington and Hancock County. So, I'd go around with, at the time it was [inaudible], it was Dave Clifford, to meet these people and get their problems. And so I could address 'em at the state level. And I just shook my head at some of how the programs are being run on me, I just... "Uh . . . you people . . . you don't even realize you've got a million dollar industry down there. You don't even know how to run it." So, I've been slowly settin' up a five year business plan for 'em . . . So, you can go this way, but then you gotta figure the variables. I mean, years ago, '72, we had red tide. But now we have pollution, red tide, toxin, and rainfall. So, a digger can say "Well you might be—how many weeks in a year you are going to be out of work?" This is another thing in the equation.

[0:02:47.2]

JC: There's a lot more to it now than there was. "Oh well, fresh market, big all year."

GK: So, people—are you, you know, telling people when and where they can dig or they are still regulating themselves?

JC: Well, uh . . . Jonesboro has had a problem with pollution. And we've been closed over half the river. And I get a call the other day, there's a possibility that we'll open up this summer. It might be seasonal, whatever. Well, I've seen this coming, I've been telling a local buyer in town, and the rest of the board that we ain't gonna get—we ain't—we grow these, hang onto these clams, grow them out. We ain't gonna give 'em away. We're gonna set a price of what we want

for our return. But not giving us like a dollar. We want two. Alright. We're gonna talk to the buyer, when the market gets to the point of two, well, we're gonna open up to get our harvest back. I mean it's not just . . . Yeah . . . it is frustrating to some of 'em, but this is only good business. You gotta stick to the business plan. And I'm slowly setting this up, which a lot of 'em are looking, a lot of the older diggers are set in their ways. [inaudible] So you turn around like I did in 4H. the younger ones. Get to the younger ones. You got a fresh start. It takes them how to—the fundamentals and how—where it should be. Because it's their industry, I keep saying, "It ain't mine, it's yours, I'm just trying to manage it for you."

[0:04:22.8]

GK: And have people been pretty receptive to that? I mean, does it seem like they're . . . you know, you say the younger ones but did they see that they are getting more return on their . . .

JC: Yeah, because they realize that they've been pushed right in to a—we've lost a lot of our flats, so we've got to manage ours very—we ain't got much to manage because we can't open and close flats, or . . . I keep setting . . . And I said, thank God we ain't got a lot of diggers. Because then I would have to go to the limited/unlimited. That—come on. Which, that was a godsend because lot of the townspeople that'd been clam diggers for years, you only sell so many licenses. Well, it comes to them, no more licenses, come back next year. But don't forget to pay your taxes! Uh . . . that, that irritated me. So, I worked with Dave Clifford and a few more of the area biologists, and we got limited/unlimited. Limited resource, but unlimited harvesting. But you gotta watch that balance to the point where: "Okay, there's limited, so you can only take a bushel and a half to a bushel." But everybody can still go. That's the thing, it's not shutting people out. It's bringing it down to say, it's still a Maine resource and regulated by this town, but it's still opened for that. Different than the rest of the fisheries I've seen. That the state is . . .

[0:05:45.1]

JC: "Okay, you got a license but nobody else can have one. And you are doing good but nobody else can." And I've said like . . . Well the elvers for instance. Just—I look back and I said, "These elvers, instead of somebody making 200,000, if they [inaudible] the fyke nets, went to dipping, which that's, that's . . . Half of—this is what you get out of it. A lot of these families in Washington, Hancock County, if they made 5000 during that season. That is like "Go!" Instead of somebody else making 250,000 I said, "Divide up, break it down and divide it up. And still have your quotas." I said, "You can still control it." And I mean . . . that's one. And then I was a scallop dragger for a while 'til they closed the door on entry. I said, you've fully just run against . . . I mean, you should have turned 'round, still had open entry. But size the boats—do other things so somebody can get in. In fact, the other day I was up here and this waiting list on the lobstering. That's a sore with me 'cause I fished for 32 years, missed one year. State lost my paper, so I've been apprenticing. I put my kids through their 800 hours, both of 'em. But I still got zero. So I started 'prenticing. My license is, uh . . . Cut three-four years ago. They put me on the wrong boat at the year—forget it. They don't want me in it.

GK: So you lost your license twice? Through federal, through—

[0:07:28.8]

JC: Once. And then I just—you can't just get back in.

GK: Yeah.

JC: And there's other issues there. I was told anybody over 24 can't run the boat. Or learn to haul. Hmm! But a kid can! I said, "This is age discrimination!" Where, where's OSHA! This—somebody needs to be held responsible for this. But, "Well, you can't do something because you'll destroy the industry!" That needs to go away. This day, you gotta get somebody outside, that's non-partial, that can come in and say "Well these fellas have got it all. Wait a minute. I think this would work, let's put some things on the table here." That you had nothing to gain, but the people that you're sitting there representing both sides. But it's hard to find somebody.

GK: Yeah, and it sounds like you wanna kinda spread the wealth a little bit more.

[0:08:32.2]

JC: But I mean, it's a Maine resource. That's why I fought the clamming, to keep the participation open. And I said, "Well, here's the elvers. And here's the scallops. I mean, and the lobsters." And in fact, I asked Willy [Too?] on the ten-year waiting? I said, "You know, it'd be good, Willy, if they took the crab industry, and if they're on a waiting list, done their time, give 'em a crab license!" That's a whole new industry that needs to be, you know, that could be brought up. And employment! You know, they ain't catching lobsters, they catching crabs! And a lot of the crab people have been scrounging for crab shops, and supply their markets. So what is wrong here? I know, the fishermen don't wanna give up anything, but sometimes you have to take—you want lobsters? There it is. You want crabs, go buy a license, participate in our new fishery. I mean, open that fishery up.

GK: Yeah, it's pretty forward thinking.

[0:09:40.1]

JC: And 'cause I've watched, over the years, you had to go out—in the 70s, you went out to 60 feet of water is where you started getting any jonah crab. Now it's 3. I said, "This crab fishery," I've been, I go with the kids on the boat, I fish, I—and I said, "They're up in here, alright." This fishery could open up without affecting the line on the gray whale. Right whale. This fishery doesn't go out in further waters, this is back—an inshore fishery. Smaller boats, I mean they ain't gotta have a million dollar boat, but they can get into it while it's reasonable, and don't have to apply much pressure 'cause they ain't got a lot of overhead!

[0:10:21.0]

JC: That's the thing, is keep your overhead down and take home some money. Put it in your pocket, not on the bills! That again, is just educating the people, the fishermen into a business plan. Don't go overboard. Don't overextend. But another thing that bothers me, I've talked to

Bob Behr, and a few of ‘em a few years ago. I fished [inaudible] islands. The controversy, back in the 70s with wooden traps. There was a few of us out there. And it was a little—I said, “I don’t want to go out here again,” I mean I tried it one year and I said, “I’ll go back inside.” But out there, it’s—lot of the fishermen out there, and they’d say “Well. That’s good.” Now a lot of ‘em are 40 miles offshore. Which bothers me when you look at a map. How far is the broodstock out here? You know. How far do they extend out beyond Topham? Now how much can we take before we’re gonna hit—see a big effect?

GK: You feel like we don’t really know—

[0:11:35.6]

JC: No! No, we don’t. I mean, it’s like the clam industry. The diggers don’t like the biologist. And I’ve tried to turn it around, I said, “It’s simple farming.” Brian and I just had this talk over and over. I said, “It’s simple farming, but we need your expertise to fill in with.” You know, the [inaudible] what’s wrong with—what’s happening here? They come in, kinda do a study, and give us what the results of what they find. We need that. The harvester—because the harvester hasn’t got the degrees and the scientific [sic] to do it. So it all works together.

GK: And do you think to, you know, are they listening to you? ‘Cause you, you the harvester has knowledge too that they might not have.

JC: Well, yes. They listen ‘cause I’m a—well we’ve done some brushing here, on clams, simple brushing. And the green crab problem (sighs), that’s coming up. As I told ‘em, I said “We’re putting green brush.” Well the scientists ain’t down there every day, I’m there usually every day, observing. And I said, “Huh, give ‘em a place to hide. Let’s try hardwood brush. Hardwood brush works real good because it still catches, makes a current, drops a seed with no place to hide” (laughs). I said, “ooh, [inaudible] there” (laughs). So I mean, that’s another thing that I do and report back.

[0:13:04.7]

JC: And I mean, I’m willing to do some of the research, in fact, I worked with the state, Phil [inaudible]? I’m researching with DMR on making fish traps. We made a big wire fish trap, and we made 5 or 6 of ‘em. And we got all done, and Phil asked me, he said “Whaddya think?” I said, “You see this trap? Look at this map. That’s a big area to try to throw out that—where’s the fish gonna be, we gotta catch one!” He says, “You’re right.” Well, I mean, it’s a vast ocean, and we’ve got—how many of these would you have to have to make it self-sufficient? Well, it’s experimental. Another way of catch and release, I mean you float it in there rather than caught and dead. And another thing I see with the gill nets, a lot of stuff went overboard that shouldn’t have been caught. But I called the [inaudible] of regulations, I said, “Something—this is not good. It’s not good.”

GK: When you’re catching with a gill net, is everything that you pull up already dead?

[0:14:09.8]



JC: Mostly, yep. Drowned out, yep. Unless a shark or something has come along, taking part of the gillnet (laughs). Where'd that go, is that still fishing? That's another whole—I said, “What happened, what happened to part of these gillnets? Why've they got, you know . . .” And another thing, I took a course with Chris [Petersen] last year, at the College, and we got to talking about raising kelp. And in fact, I got to back up, back in the 70s I was interviewed by a great big bus, and that was the start of Sea Grant. And they come down and started questioning me, and I mean, that was . . . Professors, and everybody across the country. It was interesting, and I said, “I see—” I looked up the river I said, “I see farming. And a lot—we ain't even tapped it yet.” But what bothers me is we start farming, let's not overdo like the dust bowl. That means: we've gone overboard, now we ain't got nothing. So that was the start of Sea Grant and coming in and . . . Which is good, I mean, we need—we *need* some protection and some more research on our resources.

GK: And so you were doing—you were taking a class with Chris about kelp, you were doing—

[0:15:34.6]

JC: And the kelp, and seaweed, and leases, and I asked about the seaweed exchange. I said, “How's the market for sugar kelp and stuff?” He said, “Well, it's like a clammer could make a decent living.” I mean, I said “Well, I've heard you can make quarter million dollars out of a couple acres,” he says, “No no no, not on our market you—” Just, “okay, get that out on the table!” I said, I get to talking, and I said, “Where's most your markets?” “Well, Europe and over in Japan.” And I said, “Well I thought they was the leaders in this?” “Well they was, but their waters are so polluted now that they can't farm it anymore.” Well, I talked to another fellow there and I said, “Hm. Opportunity just knocked, why ain't we over there getting seed money from them, come back and grow and sell to them?” I said, “Turn it around! Go get some working capital and have 'em come over, they're an investor. Now we got a market that pays millions!” ‘Cause we got clean water and we gotta keep it clean, you understand? Don't look—we don't wanna go where they are.

GK: Yeah.

[0:16:57.7]

JC: So, I mean there's another whole best opportunity right there. I mean, you gotta, you gotta look ahead, and a lotta people saying, “Hmm, well, no I look down the road.” Well you could be, and once it—then you go back up, what's it take to get there?

GK: Yeah, what do you think the next big fisheries are? The big . . . Do you see kelp happening in the Jonesboro—

JC: In the area, I see it fitting in. I don't see it—‘cause I don't know what the potential market of it is overseas. I mean, you'd have to go over there and talk to them. What are they consuming, and then come back and say how big a supplier, and acreage, and how much effort we got to meet that. I mean it's—again, back to a business plan, everything comes back to the business

plan that the universities are teaching. I mean, “I’m not a businessman.” No, but if you’re doing something on your own, you *are*.

[0:18:04.0]

GK: Yeah.

JC: Yeah! You need some of that expertise.

GK: Can I ask you, I have time for like one more question, but I wanna know from your experience, just what some of the changes in the clam beds that you’ve seen over doing this for so long.

JC: Well, there’s different sediment—it changes. And it’s . . . A lot of it has—I see a little, maybe a little global warming. But then we get a lot of [spat?]. In fact, and I’ve—I remember when we’d close for pollution, that’s our broodstock. That’s just impeding the other two area towns plus. And I said, “Well, we open it up, but keep some back for broodstock so as to maintain seed.” They’d say, “Oh, we’re gonna have a big one!” Well, the 4H clam hatchery under Sam Chapman, you do not need one big one, three two inch ones that pump out the same. So you look around to see what you—well you got a source of seed, smaller. You ain’t gonna have a big one. And he’s—even a half inch one will pump. So you got a hundred million little ones, they’re pumping as much—there’s where your brood—that’s where your seed’s coming from. And the next thing you do is catch it. And it makes you draw that flat as a good home for them, they like it (laughs) and you have to look at it sometimes in a funny way.

GK: So you’re doing that yourself? You’re helping in that process—

[0:19:41.0]

JC: I’m working with—well I work with Dennis Null and Hannah, our area biologists. And I’ve worked—if I got a problem or something comes up, I gave Brian a call. And we try and cross reference, in fact, I think it was in the 90s, I went down one night and walked out to the boat, this was about 9:30, 10 o’clock. In the fall—late fall, October. And I snapped the light on, ‘cause you could see a little bit, and I just stood there. And I—green eyes everywhere! The light would shine and all the green crabs had green eyes that’d reflect back at you. I went, “Oh God, this is a twilight zone!” I mean, where did these things come from? So I come back up, and the next day I call Brian, but he happened to be in Pembroke that night doing—finishing up a research thing, and he . . . See then, come daylight, they stay in the—they stay down until it’s dark. When it comes dark, up they come. ‘Cause their only predator is really the gull. And the gull can’t see at night.

GK: So that, was that like the first time you had ever really noticed—

[0:20:54.2]

JC: Really noticed 'cause it's like you . . . You know, in the daylight, you might find one hiding under a rock or something. But at night, they ain't afraid 'cause the gulls can't see, so they're out, they just cleaning. And everybody said, "Well, they ain't digging 'em out!" Well I learned to pull clams back in the 70s, but I kept it quiet for a while 'cause I was trying to think—everybody was digging. Me putting my hand in the mud, I ain't turning it over. Hm. But to keep this going I'd have to bring—you bring out seed and put more seed back, but you ain't turning it over like that theory. I mean, it might help in certain areas, in other areas it don't. So digging worms you can kill a flat if you roll it too much. It turns it black and nothing. No worms or nothing. And I said "You gotta keep—try to keep an even balance of what's going on." And it's all research. I mean we still don't know everything about it, and everything that's coming down the line. And I mean, it's "Well, get through today, day's been a good day," I mean (laughs). Yeah.

[0:22:14.3]

GK: Yeah, on that note, thank you!

JC: Yeah.

GK: Thank you for coming in and talking.

JC: Yeah! Yeah.

GK: There's more to be said, of course.

JC: Oh yeah, and it—

[0:22:21.4]