

**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)

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

**Date of Interview:** March 3, 2018

**Interview Description:** 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.

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**Transcription by:** Kaitlyn Clark, College of the Atlantic

JP: John Peabody

GK: Galen Koch

KC: Kaitlyn Clark

J: Jenny

Galen Koch: [00:00] It's the 3rd.

John Peabody: [00:06] That's what my watch says.

GK: [00:08] That's what the watch says.

JP: [00:10] It's all blended together this weekend.

GK: [00:11] It's hard to keep track.

JP: [00:14] Oops, I'm not a parent. Yes, I am, but not of me.

GK: [00:16] Thank you. John, can you tell me your name on the tape?

JP: [00:21] John Peabody.

GK: [00:23] And where are you coming from today?

JP: [00:26] I have been here a couple of days, but I am living presently in Point Judith, Rhode Island, area. But I grew up in Maine for the first –

GK: [00:32] Where'd you –?

JP: [00:33] In Cape Elizabeth. 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. I've been there ever since.

GK: [00:44] And when was that?

JP: [00:47] Mid-'80s. I've been like thirty years in Maine and thirty-plus years there.

GK: [00:54] Were you fishing when you were in Maine?

JP: [00:56] Yes.

GK: [00:58] Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit of your history in Maine?

JP: [01:02] 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: [01:10] Let's see where we –? This one. Do you mind moving that, Katie?

JP: [01:21] Yeah, I grew up right here by Portland Head Light. Whoops. That's two lights. Here at Portland Head Light.

GK: [01:29] You can use that.

JP: [01:30] Yeah, my father's house is right here. We always fished out of Portland. I fished all down along in here. Eventually, I fished all outside all through here. A lot in here.

GK: [01:44] When you made that move, you said that you were more attracted to offshore. What about –?

JP: [01:52] I like catching big lobsters. 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. It was never popular in this state. I liked it down there down in Rhode Island when I went to school down there. 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 because 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: [02:23] Can you mark those places? And tell me – because look, we don't have anybody that's going out –

JP: [02:28] Yeah, I fished lobsters up here. I fished lobsters up here. I fished – you don't have Cashes [Ledge] on here, but – oh, yeah.

GK: [02:34] It's kind of there.

JP: [02:36] Yeah, the top. Well, yeah, 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 was just a couple [inaudible] shoal places here [where] there were lobsters.

GK: [02:49] And why these places? Were there lobsters?

JP: [02:52] I don't know. People that were gillnetting used to show me places, so we'd go out and try them. It seemed to be these places that were shoaler than thirty fathoms had lobsters. Now, I guess they're all over the place, but they weren't back then. 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. Lobsters everywhere have moved outside. I like going where there's nobody. I like chasing big lobsters, so offshore is the place to be if that's the game you want to play.

GK: [03:25] Yeah. When you come back to Maine, or you come back to Portland now, have you seen a lot of changes happen? Do you still have family in the area?

JP: [03:34] Yeah, I do. Portland's ruined. It's big and fancy. It used to be the Commercial Street district was fishing boat, and you could walk around. You could park for free. Fishermen's bars. 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 in Cape Elizabeth, but I'm not up a whole lot. I've got four kids, and I'm pretty busy. I got a lot of crap going on, so I don't sit on my hands much.

GK: [04:10] But you come up for the Fishermen's Forum. Why's that?

JP: [04:13] I hadn't been up here for a while. But I went to the first, probably twenty of them. I knew a lot of people. They wanted me on a panel today. I guess you sat there because that's where you grabbed me from.

GK: [04:23] 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: [04:32] I was on that panel because I do what they wanted to do. I sample lobsters, crabs, Jonah crabs, and sea bass. 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 is going on. Things are changing, so they wanted people up here to see what we're talking about and what we're doing. They know that if they put me somewhere, I'm going to have something to say. And I usually do. [laughter] I just checked with them first that I was going to be able to say whatever I wanted. They said, "Go ahead." Okay, sign me up. Just cause I'm going to say whatever I want. [laughter]

GK: [05:16] Why did you agree to do that research? Why is it important?

JP: [05:24] 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: [05:49] What are some of your more colorful opinions about these things? I mean, are you feeling like you're seeing things that contradict regulatory practices?

JP: [05:59] Well, I mean, if 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. Any one of us on the boat – "Look, found one." Yeah, okay, take the picture, document it. We got it. We'll find more. So, it's fun that way. I had the guys come up after the meeting, like self-defense. "We understand where you're coming from, but it's...we didn't mean it."

GK: [06:35] What are some of those species that you're seeing? Give me an example of that.

JP: [06:40] Well, they said real small lobsters, you don't get them offshore. You don't get as many as you do inshore, but they said there weren't any. But there are some. 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. They'll say it's such a waste, and we're just throwing over gazillions of pounds of them. You can't keep them. So, I use every weapon I can. The pictures are on Facebook. They're everywhere. Other 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.”

GK: [07:25] That's the black sea bass?

JP: [07:27] Yeah, we probably throw a hundred thousand dollars worth a year over the side. They all die because, in deep water, their bladders blow up. “Throw them back,” they say, “they'll live.” No, they really won't because they're swimming right behind the boat; they're upside down because their bladder is 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: [07:54] Hold on a sec. I hear a phone. Is that someone's phone?

JP: [07:57] It might even be mine.

GK: [07:58] Oh, it's yours.

JP: [07:59] Oh, yeah, I do, but it's shut off.

GK: [07:59] Oh, no worries.

JP: [08:00] No, I had the ringer shut off.

GK: [08:03] If you were allowed to catch them and bring them in, would you? Do you diversify your catch in that way?

JP: [08:12] Oh, yeah. Sea bass is 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 five dollars 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. Please don't ask why because I don't know the answer to that.

GK: [08:41] So, what are you catching these days that you can sell?

JP: [08:44] Jonah crabs are right now. Jonah crabs is huge right now. It's the best we've ever seen it.

GK: [08:52] And you can sell them?

JP: [08:54] Jonah crabs, yeah, we can sell. Although the market's been – yeah, I can sell them. I can sell all I can catch, and I fill the boat.

GK: [09:02] Has the fishery changed in Rhode Island since you've – do you need to take that? Is someone calling you incessantly?

JP: [09:10] Yeah, let me just see because it was two in a row, and there's just two in my crew.

GK: [09:12] Yeah, that's what I noticed ... How many crew do you have, John?

JP: [10:06] I have three guys ...

GK: [10:10] Okay, I'll pause this.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

JP: [10:13] I've never busted one there.

GK: [10:16] From what? The storm?

JP: [10:17] Apparently, it's blowing extremely hard down that way.

GK: [10:21] Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about how the fishery's changed in Rhode Island since you've been there? What changes have you seen on the coast?

JP: [10:31] Well, when I went down there, the lobstering was better down there than it was in Maine. Since then, Maine's gotten a lot better, and down there has gone downhill. 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 as a lot of the boats went broke, sold out, and went elsewhere. We don't think there are more lobsters, but there are so much fewer – so much less gear, that it's actually pretty good fishing right now during the regular season. There's never much right now. But there's more Jonah crabs literally than you can hold on the boat.

GK: [11:15] How many boats are going –? What town are you in again?

JP: [11:20] Point Judith.

GK: [11:21] And how many boats are going from that area? Do you know?

JP: [11:26] 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. I mean, there's probably a hundred fishing boats fishing out of there. For offshore lobster boats, I think there are maybe half a dozen left. The draggers are doing pretty well. Everything's changing. Different species, different efforts. People are making money. It's getting tougher. 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. I mean, I'm an owner/operator. I'm one of almost none because 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: [12:24] Are most of the fishing boats owned by corporations or companies? Is that what you mean?

JP: [12:30] Yeah, down there, there's several fish companies that have bought most of the dragging permits up and most of the boats. There's a few big operators from the south who 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. There's that big outfit in New Hampshire; he's got a dozen boats. It's just a different way of doing things. Maybe if I had to do it again, maybe it'd be easier. 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 because I'm working always unless this is considered not working.

GK: [13:14] What does that mean? What is your schedule like?

JP: [13:18] Well, if I'm not fishing, I'm doing the paperwork or the groundwork and the stuff to get ready to go again. It seems like I'm always playing with numbers and things, and there's a license for this, and there's a license for that, and then there's a license for the other thing. And then, oh, yeah, you forgot that one, which you're probably never going to need, but you might need it. 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've got all these use-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 five pounds a year, but [inaudible] I still have the permit, and it's more valuable when I sell out. But there's a lot of paperwork to keeping that license.

GK: [14:03] So what's important about being an owner/operator? Why do you keep doing that?

JP: [14:10] Just to piss people off. I'm out there by myself. [Like] 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 my own thing. People don't do well telling me what to do. I don't do well at having people tell me what to do.

GK: [14:34] In Maine, that's the majority of –

JP: [14:39] They're smaller operations. It's apples and oranges. But you can do it with an inshore boat. They don't have that many licenses. Most all they got to deal with is a lobster license. And that's one license. I've often thought – and haven't – to sit down to see how many licenses I have for things. It's a lot. Even if they don't cost anything, you got to fill the stuff out. But that's most anywhere with government regulation stuff. Crazy.

GK: [15:10] So are you catching –? Do you have licenses for things that show up in your lobster traps? Or you have licenses for things that you're –?

JP: [15:17] I keep every kind of fish that I can keep, I have a permit for, and I sell. It's extra stuff.

GK: [15:23] And you're catching them in your –?

JP: [15:24] In the traps, yes. We have a permit for catching mahis with fishing rods when we're offshore. And tuna fish. There's stuff for everything. I've got permits. We keep hake, sea bass, monkfish, eels. Oh, what else do we got? 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. Sometimes, you

think you're not going to catch much of it, and you might catch a lot. I mean, twenty years ago, sea bass was a joke, and now it's – we'll probably catch twenty-thousand dollars worth in a year. So, it's not trash anymore. 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 going to let me keep some of the stuff I catch. But I'm skeptical.

GK: [16:20] Did you have a question, Jenny?

Jenny: [16:22] Have you ever thought about going back to Maine for fishing?

JP: [16:25] Not really. I probably couldn't get a permit back anyway. 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. That's home now.

GK: [16:45] When did you start –? I mean, when did you start working with the scientists? When did that kind of –? You say you decided to so that you could have some say in things.

JP: [17:01] 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 – the way they're set up, where we kind of made our own program, it's much more enjoyable. I've done stuff with temperature probes for twenty 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 tried to do some kind of data before, but it was pencil and paper-type stuff. It was a lot more work. It's a lot harder to do. Now, with this

electronic stuff, 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. It's a lot more doable now. It's satisfying when you can get good data [and] when you can use it. We had to defend ourselves down there. The government tried to shut us down. Said there's no – [in] Southern New England, the only way to save it is to shut it down completely. 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. They tried real hard to shut us down, [but] they gave up.

GK: [18:15] To shut down the lobster fishery?

JP: [18:17] Yes.

GK: [18:18] When was that?

JP: [18:21] Maybe five 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 that you'll give up long before you're going to wipe stuff out. It's not like inshore, where someone might have a skiff and ten traps. It doesn't cost them anything to do it. When you're running these expensive boats and tons of gear, 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 anyway. So far, it's worked. [laughter]



GK: [18:56] Do you go for days at a time? Are you out sleeping on the boat?

JP: [19:01] Oh, yeah, it's a big boat. It's a seventy-foot boat. We usually try three working days. That's always a pissing match between me and my now ex-wife. They say I was gone five days; I say I was gone three days. I went out, worked three days, and came in. I used to tell people to guys, that's three days. To women, that's five days. So, I don't know which that is. It's once a week.

GK: [19:25] Your sense of time is different.

JP: [19:31] [laughter] We're gone a hundred hours on my hour meter.

GK: [19:37] But it is something that these guys aren't contending with as much down in Maine, where a lot of people we talk to – with that schedule being hard to have a home life.

JP: [19:54] 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 in, and I know I'm done for a few days. 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 doing something on the weekend. They can do that. And they like that. They'd rather put in weather and be on a schedule. Inshore, it wasn't possible to ever do that. We looked every single day. And it's like, "Oh, I can't go fishing. [inaudible] last night." But it's a different way of thinking. Most guys would rather sleep at home every night. Yeah, great, you got home at ten o'clock at night, you're going to sleep, and you're getting up at five o'clock in the morning. Are you home? The women say yeah, you were home. I say you weren't home.

GK: [20:48] Quality of your time at home. Yeah.

JP: [20:53] Yeah, I get a couple of days – I get a few days off, in theory. In reality, it's probably not because I'm doing stuff all the time.

GK: [21:03] Jenny or Katie, did you have any questions for John?

Jenny: [21:08] 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 to sell them to if they're so rare?

JP: [21:18] They're not rare. It's just that you might not catch them in traps. I have permits for stuff that you don't trap. The draggers catch them and stuff. Ninety-nine percent of the lobster boats don't keep the stuff. But we keep hake, and they're ten 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 ten bucks. But we also had checks for five thousand. You don't know. It's like draggers when they're swilling; they fill 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. It's interesting.

Kaitlyn Clark: [21:57] Do you sell all of your catch to the same dealer when you get back to shore?

JP: [22:01] I have one dealer that buys all the fish. Then, one guy buys the lobsters and crabs. And they're right next to each other. Point Judith is a great port because everything's right there, which is the other thing I like. The dealers are right there, the engine builders are right there, and 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. I mean, when I was in Maine, sometimes some of the parts – I'd drive to Massachusetts for stuff. You lose a day just doing that. I live five 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 pretty protected; it must be pretty wild down there right now.

KC: [22:44] What do you see as the future of Point Judith, as the fisheries are changing and as the people living there are changing?

JP: [22:51] Point Judith [has] very well-rounded, very intelligent fishermen. They adapt to whatever. They've changed their species a few times. That place will probably outlast all the other places. Maine, where they're only relying on lobsters – they better hope the lobsters hang in there because they've driven everything else out. Nobody else here. Everybody I knew that used to go dragging a gillnet, they're all lobstering. They sure better hope there are lobsters because otherwise, there's going to 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. 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 guy's catching them anyway, so they're just not bringing into Maine. But whatever works.

GK: [23:43] Yeah. But for you, I mean, it sounds like diversity means longevity. I mean, that will sustain – having different species to bring in.

JP: [23:54] 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 wonder of the fishing business; you never know. Some people like a steady paycheck. You like a steady paycheck. Most fishermen like the idea that you might make a million dollars. And that's enough to keep us going. You're like, "Oh, I will make five hundred dollars this week." "I might make a million dollars this week." Which of those is better? It depends. I might make nothing. So then that five hundred dollars looks pretty good. But I might make a million. Would you rather make a million? Would you rather maybe make a million? Wouldn't you love to go to work and think that I might be really rich at 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. [laughter]

GK: [24:57] I know. The uncertainty – it's exciting.

JP: [25:02] That's the difference. You'd probably never get a crew on the boat if you just paid a regular salary. "Okay, I'll pay you a hundred bucks a day to go fishing." "Well, gee, that might

work out. But what if you pay me a share? I might make five thousand. I'll take a chance." That's what makes us go, I think. No way would I go if you told me – if you said, "I'll pay you a hundred thousand dollars to run the boat for you. That's going to be it," which might be more than I make a lot of years, then I'd say, "No, I might make a million." So you can put me on the share thing.

GK: [25:40] Yeah, you want the option.

JP: [25:43] I said, "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 a thousand dollars, as long as that guy loses fifteen hundred. I don't care if I only make a hundred if that guy only made fifty because I'm going to make more than that guy. That's the competitive thing. It's huge in this stuff. Huge.

GK: [26:08] It drives you.

JP: [26:09] Oh yeah, doing the best is everything. 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 gets you going. Right now, we're making money, and the crew's happy, and everybody's happy. It's like, "When are we going back out again?" When you're doing lousy, "It's oh god, do we have to go out again? We're doing squat." But when you're catching, everybody's glowing. You can tell; you can see it in their eyes. I had a picture – we had it up on Facebook, a picture of the crew. A guy says, "That's an amazing picture. Everybody's smiling." I said, "Because we're making money now."

GK: [27:03] That's great. Well, John, is there anything that you wanted to talk about when you came in?

JP: [27:09] I didn't think I wanted to talk about anything anyway.

GK: [27:11] [laughter] You did a great job.

JP: [27:15] [laughter] You're not causing enough controversy. I'm better in controversy. You got to stir me up to really get me going.

GK: [27:21] We're just asking questions.

JP: [27:25] See, they gave me a platform in there, so I was having fun.

GK: [27:27] I know.

JP: [27:28] 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: [27:36] Well, what was a question that stirred you up in there?

JP: [27:38] I don't think it did. 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 or anyone to start telling me what I don't know because usually, at regulatory meetings, first, they get up and tell us everything. They don't ask us; they tell us. Then, that sets the thing, and then we're all, “You're wrong on this. You're wrong on that.”

GK: [28:05] But that didn't happen in that.

JP: [28:07] No, not really. That one regulatory guy came up afterward, and he was kind of self-defensive about it. “Well, we're really not ... but I'm really glad you brought it up.” And I'm thinking, “He definitely isn't.” [laughter]

GK: [28:22] Definitely not. Well, thank you so much. We're at thirty minutes. I don't want to keep [you].

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----  
Reviewed by Molly A. Graham 1/11/2023