

**Interviewee Name:** Congresswoman Chellie Pingree

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

**Interviewer(s) Name(s) and affiliations:** Galen Koch (The First Coast), Corina Gribble (College of the Atlantic Intern)

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**Date of Interview:** March 2, 2018

**Interview Description:**

**Chellie Pingree**

North Haven, ME

United States Congresswoman

Interviewed by Galen Koch with Corina Gribble

Chellie Pingree, a United States congresswoman from North Haven, ME, whose work focuses on fisheries policy issues, speaks about her work speaking to local lobstermen and how this year's conversations have focused on concerns about the future of the fisheries with warming temperatures. She describes her own concerns for the future of her island community and the values and necessities of island life.

**Collection Description:**

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**Transcription by:** Galen Koch, The First Coast

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CP: Chellie Pingree (Interviewee)

GK: Galen Koch (Interviewer)

K: Corina Gribble (Intern)

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GK: Here, Chellie, the map of your home.

CP: Great I feel like I'm in my home territory, that's good.

GK: I'll just have to state your name and where you're coming from today.

CP: Chellie Pingree and I live on the island of North Haven.

GK: Great and actually, can we switch off this fan.

(old man John Higgins comes by)

GK: Yeah so name and where you live -

CP: So this interview you don't stop and start

GK: We'll edit it.

CP: Great, my name is Chellie Pingree and I live on the island of North Haven.

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GK: And Chellie, what brings you to the Forum?

CP: Well, I'm also the representative for the First Congressional District, so I work on a lot of fisheries policy issues. And I like to come talk to the fishermen who are here, we try to meet with NOAA or any federal officials who are coming through and you know there's a lot on everyone's plates right now so it's a good chance to catch a lot of people in one place, plus it's kind of fun.

GK: What are some of the questions that you ask when you come to something like this?

CP: Usually with the fishermen that you encounter, most of the fishermen tend to be lobster fishermen. You ask them what's worrying them, how did their season go, what are they seeing that's unusual. To tell you the truth, you hardly ever meet a lobster fishermen that you have to ask them a question - they are wonderfully outspoken and usually have something on their mind

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and usually if I'm just walking through the hallways you know I get stopped every few seconds, somebody saying something they want to talk about or just saying hello. I mean, I have been coming to the Fishermen's Forum for a long time and many of the people who come are my friends and neighbors or I haven't seen them for a few years and we catch up so it's just a good place to be.

GK: And when you get stopped what are some of the things, like this year, that folks are saying to you?

CP: Well with the lobster fishermen I think they're really worried about the future of the fisheries with the warming temperatures. Some of the more southern lobster fisheries are really seeing a huge decline and so everybody worries about... is that gonna hit me? What does the future look like. There's a lot of you know unpredictableness about what's going to happen

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and I often hear from fishermen before I hear from somebody else about you know strange species that they see in their trap. Why did the season start later? Questions come up that I think have always been around the fisheries and right now I think because of the issues around right whales, so many right whales being killed this year, fishermen are always worried about what impact that will have on them, you know do we have enough goo scienceq to know why it's happening? They of course never want a regulation imposed on them before we're sure its the one that's going to fix the problem because it's hard not to get everything right in fishing, they don't want to have a lot of new things that they're going to have to add on if it fact that's what's going to end up being the thing that works.

GK: yeah, and what for you as a Maine resident and coastal Maine resident, an island resident, what are the concerns that you feel personally?

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CP: Well, I live in Penobscot Bay, that's the heart of lobster fishing territory really, maybe in the world and the communities all around the Bay, the island communities, for many of them their livelihood is dependent on lobster fishing. The community sense of well-being, the culture, everything and so you know there's inevitably going to be changed because of climate change the Gulf of Maine is warming at a rate you know faster than anywhere else in the world and we had some unique circumstances here and it's something we've never encountered before and so I'm really worried about the future of the fisheries. I'm worried about how we're going to deal with it, are there things that we can do and of course I'm on the federal side so I spend a lot of time in Washington trying to fight to try to get people to pay more attention to climate change and some of the challenges that we're facing and I see it through the lens of the impact it could have on my home community or the people that make a living fishing in Maine.

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GK: I wondered what that was like - I heard the MLA talk for a little bit and just thinking about the challenge of representing a population that you care so deeply about but there may not be a lot of reason for lawmakers and people in DC to listen to the voices of the fishermen, I wonder if that's true or you find there are a lot of people that say yes understand what you're saying and we care about the Maine lobstermen, too.

CP: We're less of a fishing oriented culture in the United States because so much of our seafood is imported, people have less of an understanding that we had fisheries in states like ours and they have a huge impact on our economy and our culture. But I will say that I often talk to people about climate change through the eyes of fishermen because I think sometimes people mistakenly think talking about global warming, climate change, all these issues it's an ideology it's only environmentalists, it's people who want to ruin our way of life or destroy fossil fuels or something

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and I think there's - I use the argument of what I've been hearing from fishermen over the last decade, really, as things have been changing as a way to kind of add credibility to the topic and I think you know these are people who you know they're making their living off the fishery but they're also really worried about the future and you know they live in communities where they want to be sure their kids and their grandkids can go fishing, too and have the same way of life. So they have a lot at stake. So for me in Washington, I often think it, it's a good way to bring the argument up to my colleagues.

GK: And it's a population that they may not assume has that perspective.

CP: Exactly.

GK: Would you say that that stereotype is there? That there is a stereotype is there that people won't be climate change advocates?

CP: I think so, even Mainers sometimes when I tell them, "This is what the fishermen are telling us." or they're the first ones to sound the alarm I think a lot of Mainers think... "Oh the fishermen?" They're diehard individuals who don't like the government to tell 'em what to do but in this case they're really worried about the impact

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that the rest of the world is having on them.

GK: What are some of the values that you have about community and where you live and what you think is important as a year-rounder.

CP: Well I've lived on the island of North Haven since 1971. So... that's a... most of my life, I came there as a teenager and ofcourse when you're not born somewhere in Maine people like to remind you of that but my children, my grandchildren have been born there. I've run multiple businesses in the community and own a farm and a restaurant there today so it's a really big part of my life and while in many ways if you've got to commute to Washington every week it

might be easier to live in Portland or some other community I could never give it up. It's definitely for me. You know there's a lot of grounding in living

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in an island community because it is very tight knit. You have a sense of stability of knowing the same people year after year after year and even though island communities can be like families, we can fight over a lot of things. People have this sense that we're very dependent on each other. You know when the last ferry comes in - it gets in around 6 o'clock, that's the last boat of the day. You can't really easily get on or off the island and if something goes terribly wrong in the middle of the night you've gotta count on your friends and neighbors to be there and people really do see it in that way and they also really see it in this notion that we're all in it together.

You want to have a good school in your community. Even if you're struggling to pay your property taxes you want that money to go to the school because you want to make sure that young families want to live on the island. And you think about it in that way whereas in some communities retirees might say, enough of these schools they can move to some other town.

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It's not like that. People show up for school events, they're all invested in the basketball team and will they make the tournament or will something good happen to me and you know. Little kids think nothing of talking to old people because there's such an intergenerational familiarity with people whereas in some places you know little kid might never speak to a strange old man on a street or something. But there's just a lot of really wonderful things that happen out there and it's been a really important part of my life, my family's life, two of my daughters live on the island and they're both involved in businesses in the community and part of that is because we really feel a sense of responsibility to have a healthy economy and make sure people can find a job and you know do our share to contribute in that way. SO it's a really critical part of my life and I know traveling back and forth to Washington I always sort of get back in balance when I'm home for a couple of days

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and can sort of face the work again.

GK: You mentioned the school and I think about what kind of institutions for year-round communities to thrive, if you've got any thoughts on what makes that community stronger than...

CP: Oh yeah, well a lot of people if you were here in 1900 there would have been 300 year-round communities and now it's down to about 14. And one of the last communities to kind of shut down was Crie Haven off of Matinicus and people will often say... and I don't even know how much is myth and how much is truth... but you know when the store closed it made it much harder, even if you have just a tiny little store that just opens up once in a while. Or when the church closed or when the school closed. There are certain things that are kind of essential in a community and I would say having a store, having a church, having a school, having a post office. We have a gas pump. They're just sort of certain things and then after that you're kind of adding on but you know each one of them plays a role. Young families generally won't live on an island if their kids can't go to school and in our community we have the smallest

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K-12 school in the state. That means we have a basketball team, that means we have a Christmas concert, and were not even that religious of a community in terms of like some communities but we have a church where you can go and you're all together when somebody gets married or when there's a funeral and you've got a minister in town that makes sure that people who are struggling but light not ask for help get that help. And you've got to have a store because every time you run out of milk you don't want to have to take a boat to the mainland so there's some certain essential elements. And I think people in island communities they really pay attention to that stuff in a way you wouldnt.. you take all that stuff for granted. I mean we don't have restaurants open in the winter and people spend much more time having dinner with each other or figure out other ways to get together or we have a community center that puts on events so you know seniors get out every you know couple of weeks to have coffee at 9am you know the church puts on donut events once in a while just so people get together and see each other

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and you wouldn't make that effort in another place you'd just go to Dunkin Donuts, get your coffee, and go back to work.

GK: I think about that when you hear about the loss of the small town and how towns have become this homogenized thing where you don't have community and you think about what builds community - there's lots of places along the coast that obviously have a very strong sense of community here.

CP: It's true in a lot of small towns in Maine, you know a lot of them are 30 minutes down the road from the next small town and people have a place where they go get coffee every morning or some way to gather but islands really, they kind of like emphasize it because you really are trapped on an island you know not that you can't get off in an emergency or anything else but it becomes your way of life.

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GK: And what role does the ocean play in your life?

CP: Huge and it's funny because I was born in Minnesota and I didn't really even see the ocean til I was a teenager but Minnesota kids they love to go swimming in a lake and we go out on rowboats and do other kinds of things but coming to the ocean I think kind of spoiled me for the rest of my life. I don't think I could ever live very far away from it and for me it's gettin on the ferry when I head home, it's just kind of a calming influence but it's also a way that you connect with your neighbors, you're all sitting in the cabin and you find out who's doing what or talk to people about things. I love to kayak, I love to be on the water, being close to the weather you see the rhythm of fishing boats every day you hear them getting out them early in the morning and you hear them in the fog. And you know you can just call your neighbor and say "did you get any scallops today if so can I Have some?" So you get really spoiled by everything being fresh

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And also I mean I run a farm there, we have a restaurant, I know part of the attraction for people to come there is you know we're just this far away from the source of fish and food and fresh vegetables and you know it's all kind of together for me and you know I don't think I could live in place where I didn't have fairly frequent contact with the outdoors, whether it's just shoveling out after a snowstorm or stacking your wood or working in a garden I mean there's just much more in a place like that that you do that is related to the outdoors and you know if you live in the suburbs or the middle of the city you kind of never think about stacking wood or you know all the things that we sort of both rely on but also appreciate as part of our lives.

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GK: Living in this thing I've been thinking about it a lot recently. And for my final question because I know you have a tight timeline but what do you hope to see in the next decade along the coast? What are your hopes for the future or fears for the future?

CP: There are a lot of criteria for keeping the coast lively and healthy communities you know. In island communities we worry about making sure enough young people live there or can afford the housing there. We worry about sea level rising and what that could do to certain places along the coast where it could change the makeup of the coast. I work in legislation around things like working waterfronts to make sure that communities even though as they get attractive and developed people want to move in and have their summer home there but we want to make sure that fishermen can always have access. But we will feel the impact of climate change more strongly than inland Maine or other places and we're really gonna depend on our country as a whole tackling these tough issues because we could be - all coastal communities could be the ones who feel it first from flooding to loss of fisheries and it could really have a bad impact. The reverse of that is we continue to have healthy communities

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and they're wonderful places to live and raise your kids and as a lot more people are choosing to move out of a city want to come to places like Maine, can live anywhere because they have internet access and they can do their jobs remotely these are ideal places to live, to raise your kids, to feel safe and to feel part of something bigger than yourself.

GK: Thank you! Anything else that came up?

CP: Nope!

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End