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Getting fishermen and scientists seated at the same table

A profile of Rollie Barnaby, University of New Hampshire

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By Kirsten Weir

Some people seem born to follow a particular path. Others find their calling through a series of happy accidents. Rollie Barnaby falls into the latter category. Yet his achievements are anything but accidental.

Barnaby, an educator with New Hampshire Sea Grant and the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Cooperative Extension since 1988 and a lifelong New Hampshire resident, started his career as a basketball coach at a small liberal arts college. Today, Barnaby serves as outreach coordinator for the Northeast Consortium (a partnership that funds cooperative research between fishermen and scientists) and for UNH's Open Ocean Aquaculture Demonstration Project. His official titles may be a mouthful, but his diverse duties all stem from the same basic mission: to help fishermen in the Gulf of Maine.

A decade after putting out a few lobstering traps as a hobby, he found himself juggling 200 traps and decided to go fishing full time. He bought a boat and gill nets, and hit the water.

The first thing Barnaby noticed about fishing is that it wasn't so different from the coaching career he'd left behind. "I came in after my first day, and saw that the guy next to me had 8,000 pounds of fish. I had 1,000," he said. "I realized I'd have to use the same competitive juices that I'd used coaching basketball. So I fished hard." Barnaby applied that competitive spirit to his new profession, and within a few years he had opened a retail/wholesale seafood market and restaurant. His plan was to sell his own catch so he could stay involved in the seafood production chain from net to table. But the business took off and he ended up with little time to fish.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ROLLIE BARNABY

Rollie Barnaby holding a handful of blue mussels during the harvesting of mussels grown at the University of New Hampshire's Open Ocean Aquaculture Demonstration site, which is about 7 miles (11 kilometers) offshore of Portsmouth Harbor.

Fishing and politics

Almost from the start of his fishing career, Barnaby, eager to help solve problems, was engaged in fisheries politics. He also was on NH Sea Grant's policy advisory committee, offering his fisherman's perspective and helping to identify candidates for a new outreach position. "Two days before they were closing the applications, I had a brainstorm," he said. "I thought, 'I could do that!'"

One of his proudest accomplishments with Sea Grant was helping to start the Yankee Fisherman's Cooperative in Seabrook, New Hampshire. Thirty local fishermen now use their facilities and services, which include access to current research results and liaisons with scientists. Despite that success, something had been nagging at Barnaby for years. "I'd realized that when you went to a meeting, there were fishermen on one side of the room, environmentalists on another, and scientists on another," he said. "I thought I could help people sit at the table as partners."

With that partnership goal in mind, Barnaby helped start the Northwest Atlantic Marine Alliance, an organization that aims to unite diverse parties in an effort to create a healthy and sustainable marine ecosystem. Barnaby was also a driving force in the creation in 1999 of the Northeast Consortium, which funds cooperative research projects between scientists and fishermen in the Gulf of Maine, and gives fishermen an opportunity to earn money while sharing their expertise and equipment.

Steps offshore

With the Northeast Consortium up and running smoothly, Barnaby was able to spend time learning about a new subject that quickly became a new pet cause - aquaculture. The United States imports about 70 percent of its seafood, and 40 percent of that is farmed. Barnaby read up on aquaculture and visited fish farms around the world. He said he soon realized that in North America, any significant new aquaculture operations would have to be done either in warehouses or far offshore. "Our coast is just too busy," he said.

In offshore aquaculture, Barnaby saw unique promise. "I am interested because I thought there was an opportunity for commercial fishermen," he said. "Their vessels and knowledge are going to be needed for open ocean aquaculture."

Barnaby works closely with the Open Ocean Aquaculture Demonstration Project, a partnership between UNH and the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). At a demonstration site in the deep waters near New Hampshire's Isles of Shoals, researchers are exploring whether fish farming is environmentally, economically, and technically feasible in the Gulf of Maine. Barnaby is encouraged by what he's seen to date, but growing finfish, like cod and haddock, offshore certainly presents challenges. "We're still in learning mode," Barnaby said. "Everything we do in the open ocean is brand new, and it has to be sustainable."

Barnaby thinks offshore aquaculture is the next logical step for seafood production in this country, and he feels legislation allowing it to take place in U.S. federal waters, which extend from three to 200 miles offshore, would be a good thing. The U.S. Secretary of Commerce in March proposed revised legislation to allow commercial aquaculture there, with proponents citing growing consumer demand that cannot be met by wild fisheries production. Critics voice concerns over the potential environmental impacts of an expanded marine aquaculture industry.

Tremendous opportunities exist for growing shellfish in the open ocean, Barnaby said. He works closely with Andy Lang, a fisherman who in 2005 received the country's first permits for farming mussels in the open ocean. The blue mussels grow on lines submerged 35 feet (11 meters) below the surface, about three miles (6.4 kilometers) offshore. Other fishermen are keeping a close eye on Lang and have expressed interest in shellfish farming. "It's proved to be feasible," Barnaby said, "and it's environmentally sustainable."

Barnaby also appreciates the journey of shellfish to his table, where the mussels are tender and tasty. According to Barnaby, they're best cooked simply with a bit of garlic and white wine. He has clearly worn many hats over his career, and one he still enjoys wearing is a chef's hat. He's often recruited to head up a lobster bake for friends and family.

Whatever hat he's wearing - whether he's working to start a fishermen's cooperative, helping fishermen and scientists sit down at the same table, or getting the fishing industry interested in growing mussels at sea -- Barnaby has perfected the art of bridging gaps. To succeed, he's had to learn as much as he teaches. "We're learning more about the Gulf of Maine all the time," he said. And whether you're a fisherman, a scientist, a coastal resident, or an outreach specialist who can whip up perfect *moules frites* (mussels with fries), learning more about the Gulf of Maine is a good thing. For more information see <http://extension.unh.edu/WatRes/Pubs/nhut06002.pdf>.

Kirsten Weir is a free-lance writer in Saco, Maine, who focuses on science, health, and the environment.

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