

## Ocean Gazing: Episode 48

### *Clams in a jam*

<intro music>

**Ari:** This is Ocean Gazing. It's the podcast where we head to sea, spooling out our neural nets to gather knowledge from the salty depths. I'm Ari Daniel Shapiro.

**McCay:** I would call myself an environmental or ecological anthropologist in that my work has always been focused on human beings relating to their natural environments. To anthropologists, the world is our oyster.

**Ari:** To be accurate, Bonnie McCay's world...is a surf clam. She's based at Rutgers University, and she studies fishing communities up and down the eastern seaboard from Virginia to Cape Cod. And she's gotten to know a story that impacts clams and clambers alike, and it's been building steam for half a century. Stay tuned.

<fade up intro music>

**Ari:** As an anthropologist, Bonnie McCay immerses herself in the worlds of the people she's studying.

**McCay:** Without going out on the boat, you cannot appreciate and cannot really understand the fishery. Many people in the fishing industry are very, very upset that people who are in positions to develop the rules and regulations do not go out on boats and do not understand what they're all about. So you hear all the time, people saying, "If they would just come out on the boat, it would make a big difference." And part of it is just showing that you care enough to experience with them what they are doing. Just being there is important.

**Ari:** It's by going out on the clam boats like this and talking with the fishermen that McCay has learned a lot about the surf clam.

**McCay:** The surf clam, or the Atlantic surf clam is a fairly large clam, maybe 4 or 5 inches in width that's found out as far as 20 or 30 miles from shore. But it's also found really close to the beaches.

<sounds of actual dredging> It is harvested by vessels – large fishing boats that use something called the hydraulic dredge system. So these boats have very, very large steel dredges in the back that're dragged along the bottom. And hydraulic hoses are used to pump water into the ocean bottom to basically lift up the clams so that they can then be captured by the teeth of the dredges. These clams are taken to processing plants. <fade out processing sounds> And the clams are not usually eaten as raw clams or even steamed clams as we think of the clams that're caught in the bays. These clams are instead processed, they are shucked either by hand or by machine, and cooked. And then they appear in cans in the supermarket for clam sauce and chopped clams that become your spaghetti and clam sauce. Or they often appear as clam chowder.

**Ari:** Marketing of these clams goes back to the end of the Second World War.

**Commercial 1:** Away we go to Howard Johnson's Clam-boree featuring Howard Johnson's 5-clam plate. Delicious! And special this month, only \$1.29. Set sail with your family now to Howard Johnson's Clam-boree. It's good!

**McCay:** Yes, Howard Johnson's, which used to be ubiquitous along the highways, would sell fried clams. But that was one of their signature meals. And that's really how this clam became an important fishery. The demand that came from people who were beginning to travel in automobiles and going to Howard Johnson's.

**Ari:** Is this kind of like one of the first fast foods?

**McCay:** Yes, it is. I think you could say that. It's one of the very first fast foods.

**Ari:** Clamming, it's hard work.

**Martin:** Yeah, it's very hard work.

**Ari:** Sam Martin is the vice president of operations for Atlantic Capes Fisheries in Cape May, New Jersey.

**Martin:** I grew up clamming myself. In fact, that's what I did since I was a kid in and out of school. You work long hours, you're on the boat 24 hours a day. You might get a few hours of sleep while you're out in the ocean but primarily you're working the whole time. Until you come back in and you're working several trips a week. So it never ends from start to finish.

Years ago, it used to be that we only had 6 hours every other week to work, and that's how the government regulated our quotas. If the weather was so bad you couldn't work, you lost your two weeks worth of work in a matter of 48 hours. Many people were losing their lives because we were going out and working weather that we should not have been working, we were putting loads on boats that we should not have been doing.

**Ari:** Things changed in the late 80s with the introduction of ITQs, or Individual Transferrable Quotas. The government determined the total amount, or quota, of surf clams that could be caught each season, and then divided up this total into shares for dozens of fishermen, which they could use, or sell and lease if they wanted to. This made the whole operation a lot safer. And it was more sustainable for the fishery too. Which meant the supply of surf clams thrived. Demand remained high as well. Here's a commercial from the late 80s.

**Commercial 2:** Finally, there's a New England clam chowder good enough to make a fuss over. So pick a cool day, tell friends to dress warm, and let them snuggle up to the best bowl of chowder Campbell's has ever made. Introducing Campbell's Home-Cookin' New England Clam Chowder.

**Ari:** But more recently, things in the surf clam fishery haven't been quite so rosy.

**McCay:** Climate change seems to be warming the waters in the southern region and the clams are not doing well. The clams are not reproducing in the southern parts of their range. Secondly, there is much more competition from imported clams from other parts of the world now. So that's reducing the demand for the clams. And the American consumer doesn't like to eat fried clams very much anymore. The cream based soups like clam chowder are not as popular as they used to be.

**Ari:** These troubles in the market and the natural environment don't come as a surprise to Sam Martin.

**Martin:** Well, me and my family – we were a group of independent clammers. It's impacted us because none of our family at this point...where we started out we had 8 boats in the family clamming. We don't have any now. And we just lease our quota out to other processors. And even that's becoming difficult now.

**Ari:** It's not just Martin. Morale's down across the fleet.

**Martin:** Right now there are a lot of freezers that are full, which means you have to cut your boats back from catching. When you do that, you're reducing income. Your crews are having difficulties making money. Our crews just don't really know what to do. They're wondering should they go find another job?

**Ari:** Bonnie McCay's heard numerous fishermen share these frustrations. She doesn't like how traditional management approaches view people as the problem instead of being an integral part of the marine ecosystem.

**McCay:** What is ignored is the fact that people do experience the effects of the problems, so the social and economic impacts are extraordinarily important component of the systems that we're talking about. People need to be acknowledged for being also the ones who at least try to solve the problems, try to prevent further deterioration, try to do something about it. People as actors in these systems.

**Ari:** Martin agrees. For him, being able to *adapt* is key, adapt to a new business and ecological landscape.

**Martin:** What can we do with this protein? It's a great protein, but the problem with this protein is it's not a center-of-the plate item. Like scallops, or fish fillet, or salmon. Center-of-the-plate: put a few nice vegetables around it and you got a great meal. Well, you're not gonna stick a clam tongue in the middle of a plate even if it is broiled or poached or whatever you might do. It's gotta have a good look to it. So clam meat is an ingredient so we have to find a way to use this ingredient in something else, and it *is* out there. We have to adapt in opening up new areas, we have to come up with technology so that we can utilize those areas but keep human consumption safe.

**Ari:** So do you eat clams?

**McCay:** Yes, I eat clams.

**Ari:** How?

**McCay:** The other night I stopped at a local diner and I had actually – in honor of our industry – I had fried clam strips. Do you eat clams?

**Ari:** Um, I mean, I live in Boston...I should eat more clam chowder, but I don't eat very much of it, but sometimes. I guess I don't eat them often.

**McCay:** Yes, and you're like most Americans. So the industry would love for you to increase your rate of eating them.

**Ari:** Which could explain why the clam commercials...keep on comin'. This one from Progresso aired just this year. In the commercial, a man sitting at home eating chowder talks to a fisherman at sea using soup cans connected by a very long string.

**Commercial 3 Man:** Are these really fresh caught clams in your New England clam chowder?

**Commercial 3 Fisherman:** We take what the ocean offers, be it clams, camaraderie, or heartache.

**Commercial 3 Man:** Wait, what?

**Commercial 3 Fisherman:** You know, the sea's a cruel mistress. If you take, she takes back, my friend.

**Commercial 3 Man:** So the clams are fresh? <gull noises>

**Commercial 3 Woman:** I think that was a yes.

<fade up transition music>

**Ari:** Visit our website – [oceangazing.org](http://oceangazing.org) – to hear Bonnie McCay's story of the time she spent weeks collecting clams with a fisherman.

**McCay:** He was so pleased he stopped by a florist and bought me a bouquet of gladiolas.

**Ari:** You can also drop Bonnie McCay and Sam Martin a note, and see a picture of a surf clam. [Oceangazing.org](http://Oceangazing.org).

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