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Human Connection to Our Nation's Fisheries Comes Alive through Oral History Project

Voices from the Fisheries, an archive of oral histories of recreational and commercial fishermen, and the communities and families that rely on them, documents the human experience with the nation's coastal, marine and Great Lakes environments and living marine resources.

Social scientists Susan Abbott-Jamieson and Patricia Pinto da Silva of NOAA's National Fisheries Service have partnered with academic institutions, historical societies and other government agencies and organizations around the country to create Voices as a clearinghouse for oral histories related to NOAA's mission. Support for the project has been provided by the Preserve America Grant Initiative and NOAA's Office of Science and Technology.

"All of us, as different as we may be, have common struggles and are often united by our experiences," said Pinto da Silva, a social scientist at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, Mass. "The human connection to our nation's marine resources is one of those experiences we want to preserve and share. So many people have stories to tell, and we don't want that history and perspective to be lost."

The researchers note that people may have audiotapes in boxes under their desks or in drawers that aren't available to others, but with a little bit of guidance they can be added to the collection and shared. Individuals can also record an interview for the collection by following some simple steps provided on the Voices Web site (<http://voices.nmfs.noaa.gov>). Museums and smaller organizations may have oral history collections that would gain far greater exposure by being part of this central repository.

"The goal of the project is to consolidate existing collections and encourage the creation of new oral history collections from around the U.S.," Pinto da Silva said. "We want to make the collections that already exist much more accessible to both the public and to researchers, and to give people an opportunity to share their stories by recording oral histories which can then be added to the collections. These oral histories have the power to illuminate common themes, issues and concerns across diverse fishing communities over time and illustrate the rich cultural foundations of our nation's fisheries."

Each oral history provides an in-depth view of the personal and professional lives of an individual. Entries from the Northeast, for example, range from Sarah Broadwell, a female

fisherman from Montauk, N.Y., who talks about being a woman in an industry dominated by men, to Adelmur "Tuddy" Urquhart, a retired 77-year-old fisherman from Jonesport, Maine, who discusses how the fishing industry, technology and fishermen changed over his lifetime.

The Voices project started five years ago in Maine as the Local Fisheries Knowledge Pilot Project, with funding from the NOAA Fisheries Office of Science and Technology. The project goal was to train high school students to conduct oral history interviews with local fishermen and others in marine-related fishing industries to explore the connection between their communities, fisheries and the marine environment. A database for these interviews was created as part of that effort, which has now evolved into the Voices from the Fisheries project.

Abbott-Jamieson and Pinto da Silva are now contacting people and organizations with oral history collections to see if they are interested in consolidating and making available their collections in a central repository or archive. The interview database is searchable in a number of ways, from regions of the country to the gender and occupations of the participants.

While most of the interviews in the database to date come from the Northeast, Abbott-Jamieson and Pinto da Silva plan to add interviews from other regions of the country and from U.S. territories such as the Pacific Islands. Interviews with net maker Charles Thompson and oyster shucker Janice Richards, both from Apalachicola, Fla., have recently been added to the collection.

Project partners include MIT Sea Grant, Rutgers University, the Working Waterfront Festival in New Bedford, Mass., and the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi. Guidelines have been developed on how to register and submit digitized interviews, and a handbook will be available in 2009 to help classroom teachers and other marine educators develop projects to add to the collections.

A Voices project participant may be a commercial, recreational, or subsistence fishermen or be involved in services that support these activities, such as businesses that furnish gear, bait, ice or fuel, or build and repair fishing boats. Project participants can also be processors and dealers, people who have worked in fish processing factories or plants, fishery managers or fisheries scientists, as well as individuals who married fishermen or grew up in fishing families.

To date, more than 120 interviews have been included in the database, and new oral histories are being added daily. The Voices Web site includes a bibliography with web links to books, films and other materials related to oral histories, as well as links to related collections around the country.

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Related links:

Voices from the Fisheries: <http://voices.nmfs.noaa.gov/>

Local Fisheries Knowledge Project: <http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/lfkproject/>

Fishermen's Voice article: <http://www.fishermensvoice.com/archives/0306fishinghistory.html>