

The Conch- Leigh Habegger_CSA_FINAL.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:05] Hello, my name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We're bumping along on our journey with this podcast talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some of the incredible people working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are excited to have an amazing guest and friend joining us. Leigh Habegger, Leigh is the Executive Director of the Seafood Harvesters of America. She has extensive experience in fisheries management, coastal restoration and ocean policy, having spent time working on the Hill and in both the private and the nonprofit sectors. Welcome, and thank you, Leigh for joining me today on The Conch. Let's get down to business.

Leigh Habegger [00:00:48] Thanks, Julie. I'm so excited to be here and to talk with you today.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:53] I'm really excited to have you on. Finally. We've been able to do it. It's been a while. I think we've been thinking about this. So, I'm really happy to have you here. So, tell us about Seafood Harvesters of America and what you do.

Leigh Habegger [00:01:03] So Seafood Harvesters of America is a national commercial fishing association. As many groups who are based in Washington, DC often are, we are an association of associations. We have member groups from around the country, regional trade associations, nonprofits, any fishing, local fishing organization can all join harvesters. We have groups ranging from Alaska to Hawaii to Florida to Maine. So, we really span a very wide breadth of the commercial fishing industry in the United States. We represent commercial fishing interests in Washington, DC. I spend most of my time tracking what is happening in the halls of Congress. So, bills that are being drafted, introduced, debated, hearings that relate to not just commercial fishing, but more broadly, the ocean. A lot of what goes on in Washington, DC maybe doesn't always touch commercial fishing directly, but there are a lot of conversations and discussions and debates around, more broadly, the ocean. Those conversations can impact how we conduct business and how we fish. So, I track a lot of what happens in D.C. Aside from what's happening in Congress, we also work very closely with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. And in particular, we work very closely with the National Marine Fisheries Service. They're responsible for conducting the stock assessments, putting together the science that really helps us manage our fisheries. They provide the science back to each of the eight regional fishery management councils. Our members work and participate and engage in the council process in their particular regions. So, we really rely on the work that NOAA and NMFS, the National Marine Fisheries Service, do on a daily basis. So, we want to work with them. We want to make sure that they understand the challenges we're facing on the water. We want to make sure that they hear from commercial fishermen and the needs that our industry has. Aside from just congressional work, we also work with the administration and try to, again, make sure that they know what's happening in our world, and we hope that we can work with them to find solutions to some of the challenges that we have.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:36] So tell us about some of those challenges.

Leigh Habegger [00:03:39] One of the biggest things I think the fishing industry is facing right now is we're sort of on this cusp of data modernization. And, you know, we're seeing the use of AI and a lot of new and novel ways. The technology that the fishing industry

uses is, I would say, not maybe up to the 21st century standards. Probably the Gen Zers on TikTok would balk if they saw some of the ways that we collect data, report our catch. And so, I think we're really on the cusp of this, call it a revolution, maybe, of how we use data in the fishing industry. To answer your question, Julie, I think one of our biggest challenges is data collection and the science of research of fisheries management. I think we're seeing so many different uses of the ocean, including offshore wind, that the collection of this data pre any offshore wind turbines or pre any aquaculture or pre any sort of use of the ocean is really important. So, we understand how things change. This issue of data we are hoping that NOAA is taking very seriously. I think they have indicated that they are. The problem, as you know well, and probably a lot of our listeners also do, it costs money, and Congress is not doing a whole lot of great investment in things across the federal government. Right now. We're seeing talks of pretty significant budget cuts. It's a challenge to get NOAA and them to invest this money. It's got to be appropriated by Congress. I think there are many people within the agency that wants to see this happen, but we are hitting some roadblocks in Congress, if you will.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:35] Why do you think that is?

Leigh Habegger [00:05:37] Oh man, I feel like we could do a whole podcast just on how dysfunctional Congress is right now.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:43] I'm sure.

Leigh Habegger [00:05:43] I think we're seeing changes across the board in so many different sectors. It's not just the environmental sector, it's not just the ocean. It's not just the commercial fishing industry. We're seeing massive changes across health care, within our food systems, in technology, and there are so many different competing interests who are lobbying Congress for support for their specific interests or their specific sector. I think it can be hard to go to Congress and say, hey, you need to care about fish. You need to care about climate change. When there are other interest groups and other lobbying groups who have either a ton of money, who are pouring money into races and candidates who are running for Congress. But I think it's also we struggle because there's this immediacy effect. There's a mom who may go lobby about a health care impact that she's experienced within her family or on her child, and we are over here saying, hey, we're not going to be able to fish in ten years, or this specific species that we really rely on is having a hard time. We need to invest now so that in 5 to 10 years we're able to adapt and still be able to fish. And I think it's interesting because we're seeing that in real time in Alaska. We've seen the declines in the Yukon and Kuskokwim River salmon due to climate change. We're seeing that down the West Coast with salmon populations. I think it's going to be really interesting in the next three, five, ten years to see how Congress starts to confront these issues because it's no longer in the future. We're seeing the effects of climate change now. And so they're going to have to figure out how to balance all of these competing interests.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:33] Yeah, that was one of my questions. What are some of the climate effects that your members are noticing?

Leigh Habegger [00:07:39] Great question. We're seeing a whole host of climate impacts from large to small. So, I mentioned the same in declines on the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers. We're seeing changes in salmon throughout Alaska. There are some winners and losers. We're seeing blockbuster Bristol Bay salmon years. Copper River sockeye salmon have done very well in recent years. So, we're seeing some species of salmon do very well

under climate change. But then we've seen other species like the Chinook and the chum salmon not do so well. We've seen species around the country move and shift, expand their ranges as they try to get away from water that is too hot and seek water that is more amenable to their biological needs. Another Alaska example, I really feel like Alaska is on the front lines here. One of the hypotheses around the declines in the Alaskan crab fisheries is that the prey species that feed on larval crab have done very well. So, if my memory serves, I think that is the Pacific cod fish. And they feed on small juvenile crabs. Hmhm Pacific cod have done very well under climate change, and we've seen an increase in their populations. And so, there are some scientists who are investigating how that trophic shift is affecting the crab populations. As the Pacific cod populations have slowly grown, as the waters have gotten warmer, the crab population potentially could have reached that threshold where it's just crashed, and there aren't enough juvenile crab to support the population. So, it really it's not just shifting stocks. I think we hear a lot about shifting stocks. There's tons of research being poured into ocean acidification and not just how it impacts shellfish, the oysters, you know, I think you've had other guests on here, Julie, that have talked about the impacts of ocean acidification on oyster farming, on clams, crabs. But we're also seeing impacts of ocean acidification on fish species and their ability to navigate predator-prey relationships and their level of danger when they're around potential predators. So, it's really I think a lot of folks in Congress and at NOAA have just sort of latched on to shifting stocks because that's a very visible and tangible effect of climate change. But we're really seeing climate impact a whole variety of parts of our ocean system. It's not just one thing, it's really all intertwined.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:25] So your members are reporting the things that they see in real time on the water, and you're kind of taking this back to our representatives and saying, hey, look, this is what we're really seeing out there. We need some money, you know, to do more research and understand this, or what are some of the solutions that are being put forth by the people on the ground, on the water.

Leigh Habegger [00:10:45] That's a great question.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:46] Yeah, I realize it's a big one too. So, I mean, maybe you have a couple we could talk about.

Leigh Habegger [00:10:52] I think as we've seen more real time impacts to our fishing industry and pretty significant disaster declarations, the Alaska crab disaster declaration recently, I think last year, is the most recent one I can call up. Also, a number of the salmon declarations. I think it's becoming more real to our lawmakers that climate change is having an impact and it's going to be expensive. I think they have seen so far, the impacts of climate on our ocean in terms of severe storms, hurricanes, flooding, and it hasn't necessarily been a resource-based disaster yet, but it's starting to be that. And so, I hope that our lawmakers are now starting to have these conversations of how do we make future investments so that we are not paying millions and billions of dollars on the back end of whether it's a hurricane, whether it's a fisheries disaster, whether, whatever other ocean related disaster. And I think one of the things we've also tried to do in the last couple of years is start to make ties to our food system. Seafood is such a great, nutritious, high protein, low carbon footprint source of food for our nation. And so, when we start to talk about seafood in terms of food security for our own country, that's huge. And that has started to get some traction in Congress. We are working on getting seafood included in the 2023, well now 2024, Farm Bill for the first time. Aquaculture is covered under USDA, but traditional seafood is not. And so, we are trying very hard across the seafood industry. We've partnered with processors, with aquaculture folks. I mean, we've brought in a very

broad group of folks who want to work on this as a pro seafood in the Farm Bill coalition, trying to advance the interests of seafood within our national food system.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:05] Yeah, I think that's a good approach. And it just always baffles me when someone says something like, you know, seafood hasn't been considered in this, that, or the other bill or even just considered, right, at all within our government. And it just is so weird, like why? It's such a huge, like you said, important, nutritious protein that we have that we have access to and we should support it and really do everything we can to protect those resources and, and the people that fish and farm them.

Leigh Habegger [00:13:33] That is such a great question, Julie. I think one of the reasons is that the fishing industry didn't always have a strong national presence in the halls of Congress in Washington, DC, more broadly. Harvesters is a sort of the first of its kind national fishing association. The seafood industry is notoriously fragmented, whether it's between vessel size or gear type or region or management system. We have not always worked well together, and I think some of that maybe comes from, you know, the the personalities that fishermen tend to have. They're rugged, they're hardcore. They see some of the roughest weather, you know, they have to be on it. They're, you know, taking care of their lives, but also their crew's lives. They're very much focused on what their vessel is doing, how to keep everybody safe. And they're working very long hours. I mean, some vessels stay out at sea for up to three weeks. Three months. Some only stay out three days, and some come back every day. So, there is such a wide breadth of differences in operations, and there's very little time for them to spend off their boat working on policy issues. And I'll just give a quick example. So, I fished on a salmon trawler this past summer for two weeks. That's it. Two weeks. And we came back every day. We left probably, you know, anywhere between 4:30 and 7:00, and we were home by eight every night. But at the end of those days, I was so exhausted. The last thing I wanted to do was look at my email and catch up on work stuff. Fishing is a physically demanding job. Like I said, long hours. At the end of the day, these guys are offloading fish. They're taking care of maybe what broke on their vessel before they go out the next day. So, I think part of the issue of why seafood hasn't really had such a national presence is we've just been busy fishing. The men and women who go out on the water are focused on that. And so, then we see the rise of these trade associations, and they're representing certain species or certain vessel types or, you know, state water fisheries or what have you. And they start to make relationships with their specific congressional delegations on the Hill. That's great. I think we start to see more attention being paid to fisheries. The Magnuson-Stevens Act passes. We have amendments to that. We have the American Fisheries Act. We have these sort of landmark pieces of legislation over the years that I think indicate greater attention being paid to seafood. But there's never been any sort of national push for seafood. And I think Linda Cornish has been on your podcast as well. Like there's never been sort of this big, whether it's a national seafood nutrition push or a national commercial fishing push. We've not had these groups like the National Pork Council or the National Dairy Council, like we haven't had basically lobbyists going to bat for us as long as some of these other commodities have had. And so, I think we're starting on our back foot a little bit because we haven't, we don't have the history in D.C. I think it's been hard to get seafood inserted into these conversations because, you know, the dairy and the beef and the chicken and the pork all have their sort of carve out. And now we're saying, hey, you need to pay attention to seafood. We're also over here and we provide food to the country. But everybody's sort of in their own camp. And so, I think that's why we've tried to really bring a broad coalition of seafood user groups. It's not just wild capture. We're including the processing sector, we're including aquaculture. We are including wild

capture. It is sort of an all-in approach because we want seafood on the plates of America, and I'm hopeful we're going to see some change, and we're going to see seafood be a bigger part of the food system as we continue to make these inroads in Congress. But I think we've got a long road ahead of us.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:53] That was a really great explanation, I think you're right. I think you hit the nail on the head. And yes, Linda Cornish was a guest. And I can't even remember what season, but we'll put a link to it in the show notes. I think another reason why seafood isn't kind of top of mind is because we can't see it. We don't have a real relationship with it because it's all under the water, right? And so, you know, you can go out to a farm and see a pig and see a cow and look at your vegetables growing, but you can't really see seafood, do you know what I'm saying? So, there's really no relationship with it unless you were brought up fishing, you know, out with your parents when you were a kid or something.

Leigh Habegger [00:18:28] Yeah, absolutely. And one of the things that we like to try to educate Congress on is the fact that commercial fishermen are providing seafood to the rest of the country. I think there is a level of privilege to be able to own a boat, to be able to go out on the water and fish recreationally, and that is wonderful. I like to fish recreationally. Of course, I don't have a boat. I just mooch off friends, but this is something that I really love. But there is definitely a level of privilege attached to that. And a family from Kansas might not be able to pay for a flight to get out to the coast and then pay for hotel and then pay for charter trips. What the commercial fishing industry does is provide a connection to the ocean for that family in Texas or Kansas, or any non-coastal state. Even coastal states. Yeah, I live in inland North Carolina right now and really, until I came into this job, my family didn't eat a lot of seafood, but now they love to eat fish. And so, I really take pride in the fact that we are connecting the people who don't have a beach house, who don't have a boat, who don't have easy access to the ocean with a little slice of nutritious, high protein, climate friendly protein from the ocean.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:45] I love that. So, you mentioned the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and I want to ask you about that. So, on your website it says, quote, since our official launch in June 2014, and this is the Seafood Harvesters of America, we have defended the core principles of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, advocated for policies to improve accountability, and reduce industry costs, and supported robust funding for NOAA's core mission, including surveys, stock assessments, fisheries management councils and commissions. Can you tell us in a nutshell, what is the Magnuson-Stevens Act and what is its status today?

Leigh Habegger [00:20:21] Great question. Unless you're in the fisheries world, people don't really know what the Magnuson-Stevens Act is. And it's a very important piece of legislation that mandates that our commercial fishing industry is sustainable. I have gotten a lot of questions, Julie, about what makes a fishery sustainable. Like, what does that actually mean? And so, what I like to say is we, the US commercial fishing industry, are required by law to not take out more fish out of the ocean than what is scientifically advised. There is a whole framework set out in the Magnuson-Stevens Act that provides for the regional fishery management councils, provides for science and research that goes into our stock assessments, our annual catch limit setting process, various management systems that provide for accountability. And when I say accountability, that just means that the commercial fishing industry is reporting every pound of fish that they catch. We are required to do that by law, and some people do it through electronic logbooks. Some people do it, remember when I said Gen-Z would be appalled, yeah, well, we're still using

paper records in some regions to report our catch. And then we're also moving towards electronic monitoring to verify catch accounting. So, Magnuson-Stevens Act has been critical in ensuring the long-term viability of not just our ocean health, but also our commercial fishing industry. One of the things I also like to say when people find out what I do and how I work with the commercial fishing industry is no. U.S. commercial fisherman wants to fish the last fish out of the ocean. Our businesses are predicated on there being fish for the long term. We rely heavily on the framework that the Magnuson-Stevens Act set up for the sustainability of our fisheries. So, each regional fishery management council, remember, those were set up in the MSA or Magnuson-Stevens Act, has jurisdiction over the fish stocks within their region. So, the councils will work with the Science and Statistical Committees - SSCs - to review the data that has been provided by NOAA, the stock assessments that have been conducted, and they will put all of that into a model and then provide guidance and data to the council as they set the annual catch limit. Annual catch limits, or they're also called ACLs, basically are the greatest amount of fish that we can extract from the ocean and still leave enough in there for there to be a healthy population that will continue to procreate, put more fish back into the ocean so we have a healthy fish population into the future. If at the end of the year it is found that we have gone over that annual catch limit an accountability measure is put into place, or we also call them AMs, Accountability Measure. And that is basically a payback provision. So, say we've gone over the ACL by 5,000 pounds. The next year when the ACL gets set, we subtract 5,000 pounds from that overall amount. So, we're leaving the 5,000 pounds that we took that we shouldn't have. We're leaving that in the water to help the population repopulate. That is one of the key measures of the Magnuson Act that I think a lot of people don't maybe know about. And it's the underpinnings of keeping our fisheries sustainable. And it's why the US has been such a leader in sustainability globally. And so, one of the things that Harvesters is really proud to do is defend those catch limits and accountability measures. We are the only national fishing group that is advocating for appropriations, and our priorities over the last five years have been fish surveys, scientific surveys, stock assessments and fishery management councils and commissions. Those three pieces are the most critical parts of our overall management framework in the US. If one leg of that stool is not funded adequately, the whole system breaks down. And so we're there in Congress every February, March advocating for appropriations. And then we work with the Appropriations Committee throughout the year, reminding them that these are important things to be investing in. We need that committee to prioritize our fisheries, our science, especially in a changing climate scenario.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:17] Yeah, especially in that scenario. So, I want to talk about you really quickly. So, you recently became the new US commercial industry commissioner for ICCAT, and that's short for the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. And I think that's amazing, so congratulations.

Leigh Habegger [00:25:35] Thank you.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:36] You're welcome. I'd love to hear how that came about. And what does ICCAT do? So, tell us about the meeting you just attended because it's fascinating.

Leigh Habegger [00:25:43] I would love to. ICCAT, as you said, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, has, I think, 52 contracting parties. We call them CPs in the ICCAT lingo. And these 52 CPs meet every year at the annual meeting in November to basically set the ACLs, like I just talked about. We set these limits for the entire Atlantic Ocean. Each country is sort of vying for their slice of the pie so they

can fish various types of tuna. There are five different species of Atlantic tuna. Let's see if I can name them, albacore, bigeye, bluefin, yellowfin, skipjack. So, each country, depending on the focus of their industry members, are vying for little slices of quota and catch for those species. We also, ICCAT also deals with sharks. So, I think we adopted a measure on blue sharks. They're also concerned with the conservation of different mobulids and ray species. It's not just fishing. It's also how do we conserve the other bycatch species within these fisheries. It has been very fascinating. This organization has been around for a very long time. They work diligently throughout the year. There are four different panels and one, two, three and four. They break down all of the different species and put them into these different panels. These panels meet throughout the year, and then everybody comes together at the annual meeting, and they deliberate and try to divvy up all of the catch that has been scientifically determined. Oh, it was very fascinating. So we were in Cairo, Egypt this year. It was my first ICCAT. As you mentioned, Julie, I was just named the new U.S. Commercial Industry Commissioner for ICCAT back in August. And so, in that role, I liaise with the U.S. HMS fleet. So, we have pelagic long liners, we have harpoons, we have the general category. There is also a recreational commissioner who serves as a liaison for the recreational crowd. So, there is actually a decent amount, as you might imagine, a decent amount of folks who love to go out and fish for bluefin tuna, swordfish, marlin, any of these sorts of like game and trophy fish, that's also covered under ICCAT. And the recreational commissioner's job is to relay the concerns of that sector. So, there is Dr. Kelly Kryc is our federal commissioner right now, and myself and then the current recreational commissioner, Ray Bogan¹, are the three official commissioners for ICCAT. And then there is a very large team of brilliant scientists and managers who work so hard on behalf of NOAA to set the three commissioners up for success. So, it was fascinating. The meeting lasted ten days, 9 to 6 every day. We had delicious food, but we worked very hard, and it was the first time I had been in bilateral meetings with other countries. That was a wild experience. We would meet with these heads of state of these different countries and just negotiate back and forth and try to get to an agreement. So then when we got out to the floor, we could agree on the final measure. The US delegation spent a lot of time poring over the science, preparing motions and measures that would promote science-based management and catch limits. It was very impressive, and it really hit home for me, Julie, just how much of a leader the US is on the global scale in pushing for sustainability and accountability in commercial fishing. The men and women of our industry, I am just so proud to work for them because they, across the board are pro sustainability. They want healthy oceans for the future. They want kids to be able to enjoy seafood. They want kids to be able to scuba dive and see big fish in the ocean. It's not just about a paycheck. It's not just about how much money can I make? The men and women that I get to work for are some of the most forward-looking folks, and it was really incredible to see that reflected at the international scale. I get chills thinking about it, just like how hard these men and women work to ensure that we have a great source of protein, but also, we have a healthy ocean.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:35] That's awesome. There's a variety of different sizes, you know, of countries that are reliant on Atlantic tuna, right, regardless of species. So how does that quota or divvying up the quota, how does that work? What's it based on?

Leigh Habegger [00:30:48] Good question. I'm still learning that ICCAT is a whole new world, and I learned a lot as this was my first one. Countries will sort of team up and create alliances for different fisheries, and it's fascinating to see what countries sort of team up for

¹ Martha Guyas was recently appointed as the Recreational Commission, replacing Ray Bogan since this recording.

various species. So, like the U.S. didn't have a huge tropical skipjack fishery. We don't necessarily play in that realm, but a lot of the Central American countries and then the Western African countries will team up in that because they're sort of right in that latitudinal region where the tropical skipjack occur. But like the EU and I think Japan maybe has a distant water fleet also participate in that fishery. And so, you start to see these alliances sort of arise from some of these smaller countries who feel like, you know, maybe Japan or maybe the EU has a bigger pull because they have a larger presence within the international sphere. So, a lot of alliances get formed, and then those alliances will put forth a measure, and there may be 3 or 4 measures that all get put out onto the floor. And then the chair of that particular panel under which these measures fall will bring the measures to the floor. Everybody will kind of speak to their measure. And then most of the negotiation honestly happens behind closed doors or like over lunch or over coffee, but then they have to negotiate, and they have to come up with one measure. And so some of that happens on the floor in a very formal way. Japan will come to the mic and say, well, we have spoken with Guatemala, and we agree that they should get X amount of quota. And, you know, we're prepared to support their measure. And so, it's like a wild experience because you see all these very important people in the fish world, these heads of state, these people who run their department of fish basically at these meetings. And you just see them working all the time. And to be fair, the U.S. is doing that, too, because we want to advance our interests. We worked very hard on an electronic monitoring measure. We worked hard on some IUU measures. So, we are also out there doing that. I think it's a little different because the US feels like a big presence in some of these spaces. And so it was interesting to see how, you know, a lot of the Central American countries team up on a lot of things because they're small and they have a larger impact when they sort of all vote together on things. There's a group of Western African countries, I think it was formerly called COMOFAT. I think it's called ATLAFCO now. So, they sort of team up. It's more formal. They have an executive secretariat. He will do some negotiating with other countries. And it's a fascinating process. It's not cut and dry and things will change on a dime, so.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:49] It sounds super complicated. And we could probably spend, like you said, whatever else it was we were talking about earlier, that we could spend a whole podcast talking just about that. So, I want to switch gears here a little bit.

Leigh Habegger [00:34:01] Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:02] So SAGE, of course, is about promoting gender equality in the seafood industry. This is a real non-sequitur between ICCAT and gender equality. But we're going in. We're going in. Can you share 1 or 2 aspects of the seafood industry in the sector and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector, and what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities? And you're such a great person to ask this question because you are an executive director of an industry association, which is, I'm going to venture to guess, mostly men, right?

Leigh Habegger [00:34:32] Yes. Yeah. Although I will say, I think we're working very hard to try to change that. We are just we're about to bring on our second woman board member at the beginning of next year. We lost one about a year ago, so she just stepped down. Let's see. So, one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture that contribute to inequality. Gosh, this is such a great question. I feel like I want to say, well, everything and nothing at the same time.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:02] It's complicated.

Leigh Habegger [00:35:03] One of the things that has been on my mind, particularly in the last couple of months, is awareness. And I think, as you mentioned, Julie, the commercial fishing industry has been largely man dominated for decades, and it's only probably in the last, I would say, decade and some change, that we've started seeing in a more visible way. I definitely don't want to take away from the women that have worked in this industry for many, many decades, but they were effectively invisible. And so, I think in the last, like I said, decade and some change, we've started to see a more visible role for women in the seafood industry. But I think there's still a very deep unawareness in many fishing industry participants minds of a woman's experience in this industry and how comments may make us uncomfortable, how situations may make us uncomfortable. And I think I probably tend to be overly sensitive to how people are feeling or like the vibe that I'm getting from them, if you will. I try to temper how I talk about awareness because of that, but I think there is a large unawareness in a large swath of this industry about the experiences of women in this industry. I think until we start to shift and have more men think about and be aware and tuned in to the body language, to the facial expressions, to the discomfort of women in rooms, we're not going to see the change that we need to see. For me, when I first started in this industry way, prior to Harvesters, I was in a lot of rooms with older men and I never felt like in danger, obviously, but there were certainly times where I was made to feel uncomfortable by a comment. It was made in jest, it was playful, whatever. But the men in that room were not tuned in to how that might have made me feel as a young woman, as an early career fisheries person. And without that awareness, we're going to continue to make young, middle age, older women keep feeling uncomfortable. And maybe they don't feel especially. I mean, I was in no space in my early career to call them out on that. I was like, I don't want to be, you know, have a scarlet letter on my chest for the rest of my career. Like, I am not going to call this guy out. I like I've heard about him for the last five years of my career, and I know he's really smart. Like I'm not going to say anything to him. And so I think until we start to get men to be aware of our experiences, it'll be a challenge.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:11] Yeah, that's really insightful and thanks for sharing that. That kind of leads to my next question. SAGE is about building awareness and raising awareness. And so, I'm wondering, you know, aside from that, how else can we support you as a woman in seafood?

Leigh Habegger [00:38:24] I have loved being part of The Bloom community.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:28] Oh, amazing. Thank you.

Leigh Habegger [00:38:30] Yeah, I've loved the conversation that has gone on, and I feel like I could put something in our chat, and I would have 5 to 10 women either respond in the chat or email me. And I think growing the network, you know, Julie, I reached out to you, I think, earlier this year about some resources that I was looking for. I think just being able to have other women in this industry who understand the experiences that we've probably all had, at least to some extent. I think having access to a group of women who just deeply understand experiences is so valuable, and so I would love to see The Bloom community continue to grow. I also love the work that you all are doing to prevent manels from continuing to happen. And for those listeners who don't know what a manel is, it's a panel full of men. And so, the resources that you and your team are working on. I forget what it's called, Julie, maybe you can speak just a moment to it, but it's like women can sign up and provide their areas of interest and expertise, and then folks can go there when they're looking for panel members.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:42] Exactly. That's the [Speakers' Bureau for the Seafood Sector](#). So, anyone can put your profile up. It's really simple. Like you said, you just list your areas of expertise, kind of prior speaking experience, how to contact you. And it is a resource for those who are looking for speaking engagements, as well as those who are looking to be more inclusive in their panels or, you know, conferences or events. And I do love it. I love it so much.

Leigh Habegger [00:40:10] That's an amazing resource. The last thing I want to do is get invited to speak on a panel and be the token woman. You know, I just think you are moving the needle in very tangible ways with that. So, I love that. Thank you.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:24] Well, thank you for those amazing words of encouragement and support. I really appreciate it. So, on that note, I'd like you to offer some advice. We didn't really dig deep into your career, but it's clear that you started out as a young woman in the sector and have moved your way up to the executive leadership position and, you know, representative on a global stage at ICCAT. So, what advice would you give to young people who are looking to break into this exciting industry? Because I love the seafood sector, too, and I want to see more people think of it as a viable career option. So, what advice would you offer?

Leigh Habegger [00:41:02] I love this question so much. I've been thinking about this since I agreed to be on here, because I imagine that this would be part of it. One of the things that I did not do well as a kind of early career woman in the fishing industry and more broadly the seafood sector, is find my people. So, I've been with Harvesters almost six years in May. So, I would say probably like over the last seven, seven and a half years, I worked really hard to find and create a network of people who I could lean on, because there are really great days in this field, and then you're gonna hit some crappy days. And I remember I was in the first month of my job here, and I made a really big uh-oh. And it was a very public uh-oh. And I left yoga class when I realized what had happened, and I just started bawling. And in that moment, I was like, I'm going to get fired. I've been on this job, like less than 30 days. Like I've already, like, royally messed up. And I called another woman who I had really cultivated a relationship with over the last year. And we sat, we talked, we mapped out the worst-case scenario. I get fired, and then what do I do? And in that moment, it was just so helpful to have a person to call. A person who would offer support. A person who will go down the worst-case scenario with you, but then pull you back out of it and say, you got this job for a reason. They're not going to fire you. You know, it's week three. It's okay. Own your mistake and let's move on. Like show them that you're going to make it better. It doesn't have to be like a mentor type person, but I'm cultivating those people even still today, and even within Harvesters, I work hard to have those people in each of our regions and each of our organizations. And I think it's so important, particularly in your early career, to have that network. And I wish that I had built that sooner. But it's never too late. So, start now and not to plug The Bloom again, I promise, you didn't pay me to say this, but The Bloom is a great place to start. I wish that I had had access to something like that ten years ago, just so you can plug in and get virtual coffee with somebody, understand their trajectory, and maybe that person becomes part of that network and you have a crappy day and they help boo you, or, you know, you're ready to leave a job and you're like, I don't know what's next. You have this network. You have these people who can help brainstorm. They can help pass along jobs to you. They can, you know, just help you figure out kind of where you go.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:55] So, yeah.

Leigh Habegger [00:43:56] I don't know, find your people. I know that's easier said than done, but it's an important part of staying afloat and really finding the excitement and the joy in the seafood sector.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:07] That's excellent advice. Thank you so much. And in our last minute, I want to ask you to uplift and amplify someone because this is SAGE's mission. So who would you like to uplift and amplify and why?

Leigh Habegger [00:44:20] This is an easy question. I would love to uplift and amplify Hannah Heimbuch. Yes, she is a consultant working out of Alaska. And if I may just be so bold, she is going to join the Harvesters board in January. And I am just so thrilled to have somebody so well-spoken, thoughtful, intentional, forward looking, and hilarious join our board and really get plugged into fisheries at a national level. I cannot wait to see what Hannah does as part of our board, but also just in her career in the coming months and years.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:57] That's an excellent shout out. And Hannah, I'm also a friend and I'm very excited that you have brought her on to your board. That's really great. I love that, and I will definitely link to Hannah's recent experience, filleting salmon with Martha Stewart in the show notes, because it was amazing. I just think it's so great. So how can our listeners find you online?

Leigh Habegger [00:45:20] Seafood Harvesters is on Facebook and on Instagram and on X, although honestly, I'm not super active on X and our website is www.seafoodharvesters.org. Some people like to put ORS so seafoodharvesters.org. If you're interested in joining, you can go to our Support page and you will see options for individual fishermen, fishing business, and a fishing organization.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:49] Amazing. Well, Leigh, I just want to thank you so much for this amazing conversation. I can't even tell you how much I learned and how impressed I am about how much you've been able to achieve. And I want to say, I couldn't imagine a better person to represent the interests of our fisheries sector in the halls of Washington or in the halls of Congress, or on an international level. So, thank you so much for what you do, and thank you for coming on the show.

Leigh Habegger [00:46:14] Thank you so much, Julie. It's been an honor.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:46:18] Thank you for tuning in to The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:46:32] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.