

# The Bourne Courier

## Sociologist studies Cape conch fishery

By Rich Eldred

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REGIONAL -

Snails are considered an esoteric foreign sort of delicacy, certainly not associated with a New England fishery. But our largest snail, the channel whelk or conch, is a multi-million dollar product based around Cape Cod.

Dr. Ilene Kaplan has been studying the conch fishery, from her summertime Woods Hole base, for the past 20 years or so. She sees it as a laboratory for fishery management techniques and their impact on the local community.

“I feel the small scale of the fishery allows you to get a nice sample of fishery management, fisheries science, commercial fishing, and policy making and education,” Kaplan said.

She believes the conch fishery reflects changes in the industry as a whole.

The conch fishery was a southern fishery, usually caught with trawlers in the Caribbean. However, in the 1980s whelk became overfished (the fishery is now shut down) and New England conch, formerly a minor bycatch of the lobster industry, became much more desirable. It is a different species but apparently acceptable.

Conch is primarily an ethnic food and quite a bit is sold in Asian communities.

“Scungilli salad is mostly conch,” Kaplan noted.

Conch salad is popular in the Bahamas, usually with chopped celery, green and hot peppers, diced tomatoes and lime juice.

“New England whelk is very tough compared to southern conch,” Kaplan said. “But if it’s shaved thin and pummeled and tenderized, it can be cut up and used in salads or chowder.”

Kaplan has spent this summer checking on conch prices and reviewing economic changes. She noted that since she started her work the price for fresh conch has increased from 59 cents a pound to \$1.99.

“It still can be twice as high if it’s used for conch salad,” she noted. But recipes aren’t her focus.

“My focus has been on co-management and how much input fishermen have,” Kaplan said.

### Unmanaged till 1992

The Massachusetts fishery was unmanaged until 1992 when the state began regulating the catch, concerned that overfishing would do for the New England conch what it had done to fellow snails of the south. The number of licenses was limited, the number of pots a fisherman could use was limited to 200, fishing hours (daylight) were set. Currently a harvestable conch has to be two and three-quarter inches across.

In 2007, \$2,351,482 worth of channel whelk (conch) was landed in Massachusetts. Much of that was from the Buzzards Bay, Nantucket Sound, Martha’s Vineyard Sound area.

“It has reached 2.4 million annually,” Kaplan said of the fishery. “I’m not sure what it is currently. It started off just as a bycatch of lobster. Now quite a few fishermen are doing conch primarily. Quite a few are on Martha’s Vineyard. Some are on Cape in the Chatham area or Woods Hole and there are more in Fall River.”

Whelk are really very large snails with relatively ornate coiled shells. They slide along the sea bottom in shallow waters.

“It’s more of an inland fishery, in the three-mile area, which is why they’re regulated by the state,” Kaplan said.

While conch will shuffle into lobster traps, they have their own traps.

“The trap is open on the top with a lip and a wire on top so they can drop in and can’t get out,” Kaplan explained.

Trap caught conch are more valuable. Those hauled up by draggers are often damaged in the process. Conch in Massachusetts’ waters also is usually larger than Rhode Island conch and commands a better price.

A friendly fisherman gave her some older style wooden traps so she could try her hand at conch fishing off Woods Hole, just to get an idea of what she was writing about. She wasn’t highly successful but she gained an appreciation of the fisherman’s routine.

“I first became interested because I’m interested in interdisciplinary work looking at science and policy and how they intersect. Barbara Boyer, who is a biologist, was looking at a flatworm that lives in the mantle

cavity of the conch so she was interested in collecting conch to collect flatworms. Fishing is interesting to me because I'm a sociologist," Kaplan explained.

This was an opportunity to look at marine management policy and how it affected fishermen and people in the business and what their reaction was to it.

"I'm studying the impact of marine policy on fishing people and how fishing people participate in the policy process," Kaplan said. "Also I'm interested in interdisciplinary studies. I think it is the most effective way to assess policy and to make policy. It is really what we now call ecosystem based management."

#### Policy frustrations

She has been at it since 1992 and is happy to report fishermen are much more involved than they used to be. Kaplan spends much of her time, or her research assistants' time, interviewing fishermen, fish dealers, gear dealers, policy makers and scientists.

"Every time they change the regulations, that has an impact. Say the net mesh has to be a different size. The gear sellers have all these traps in inventory and they all have to be changed.

These are the kinds of things I look at. I look at the frustration in the policy process," Kaplan said.

She has developed a lot of respect for conch fishermen and what they do.

"Fishermen are experts too," she declared. "They may not have a formal education degree but they are experts. I feel they need to be included more often. They also feel there needs to be a more widespread group of fishermen involved, it's always the same fishermen. They'd like to see a wider net cast."

The conch fishery doesn't exist in a vacuum. Other fishery regulation impacts conch as well.

"The state just started regulating the horseshoe crabs and that impacts the conch fishery because horseshoe crabs are used as bait in the traps for conch," Kaplan explained. "Since it has been regulated, they have to use different baits. That's a good example of how interdisciplinary work can help in understanding the impacts."

Kaplan and Boyer are both professors at Union College in New York. Kaplan is based both at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole while Boyer is at MBL.