

Vineyarder claws out a living in the lobster business

Despite increasing quota reductions, Chilmark fisherman Wayne Iacono keeps his lobster business on an even keel.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - June 22, 2016

1 of 7 < >



Wayne Iacono hauls in one of the 100 pots he'll check that day. Barry Stringfellow

A fog bank hugged Menemsha Harbor in the dull gray light of a recent dawn. The smell of strong coffee wafted out of the Menemsha Texaco station, the nerve center of the up-Island Martha's Vineyard fishing community, where regulars fueled up on caffeine and talked about the weather and the upward-trending Red Sox.

"This is our oasis," lobster fisherman Wayne Iacono said, as he paid for his coffee and headed out for another day at the office.

As he's done for the past 35 years, Mr. Iacono boarded his 35-foot boat, Freedom, and prepared for his morning commute to his offshore pots. "I named it Freedom because it gives me my independence," he said.

The Freedom is still scarred from the 2010 Menemsha Harbor fire — the wall and ceiling of the pilothouse have black char marks, the windshield is spiderwebbed, and several of the steering wheel spokes have been replaced with long bolts.

"I was really lucky," he said. "Chip Vanderhoop [Aquinnah harbormaster] cut my lines and towed me away from the dock. He saved my business. I still had to absorb a \$30,000 loss. Quite a few of us took big losses."

Mr. Iacono said he's gotten used to the damaged windshield. "A new one would cost \$300 or \$400," he said. "There's always something else I need more."

Today will be a short run, a circuit of about 20 miles, south of Menemsha Harbor, where he'll pull a total of about 100 pots. He typically begins lobstering in April and continues until the end of the year, when demand spikes over the holidays. When the season peaks in early July, he'll pull 120 pots a day.

The Freedom headed to open water; a roll of duct tape on the console served as a cupholder for the coffee that Mr. Iacono wouldn't get to finish. He checked his weathered, waterproof notebook with long rows of

numbers and letters that indicate the location of his pots and the dates they were last checked.

Although he has a GPS system, he prefers using the coordinates on his electronic compasses, which he checks frequently. “The GPS isn’t always reliable,” he said. “Satellite transmissions can get interrupted by weather and sunspots.”

Hauling the trawls

By the time Freedom approached his first “trawl,” marked with a fluorescent orange and black buoy, the sun had broken through, and Gay Head Light was a matchstick on the horizon. Each trawl is about 1,800 feet long, with 10 pots spaced 30 fathoms, or 180 feet, apart. Mr. Iacono always sets his trawls to run northeast to southwest. He makes the crucial decision of where to drop his pots based on instinct, experience, and “trial and error, with a lot of error,” he said.

Floating rope used to be favored by lobstermen, since it wouldn’t snag in the rocky bottom that lobsters favor. However, for the safety of the whale population, sinking rope is now required. “You get snagged a lot more, and it’s more dangerous,” he said. “I’ve heard about guys having half their pilothouse torn off, and I’ve heard about guys losing fingers.”

There is a long list of things that can go wrong on a solo-piloted lobster boat, not the least of which is becoming entangled in an outgoing trawl line, or falling overboard in rubber Grundéns overalls. But Mr. Iacono doesn’t wear a personal floatation device. “I’ve thought about it. Maybe I should start,” he said with a shrug.

After snagging the buoy with a gaff, he put the deafening 210-horsepower diesel engine in neutral, then began a grueling process that he repeated many times over the next six hours. He looped the rope around the wheel of a well-worn winch, which creaked and moaned as it lifted each 50-pound trap out of the water. Mr. Iacono hauled each trap on board and measured the lobsters, making sure the carapace, the section from the back of the eye to the beginning of the tail, is at least $3\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Lobsters in Area 2, which includes Vineyard waters, that measure over $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches must also be thrown back. The larger lobsters in seafood stores and restaurants are from Area 1, which covers the Outer Cape up to New Hampshire.

Mr. Iacono also tossed back females with eggs visibly attached to the underside, dropping them gingerly into the water on their backs so as not to dislodge the eggs.

Pots left in the briny deep for four or five days can yield all manner of by-catch. In his 40-plus years of lobstering, Mr. Iacono has caught one blue lobster, which was unfortunately boiled in a fire at the now-defunct state lobster hatchery in Oak Bluffs in the 1990s.

Over the course of the morning, Mr. Iacono’s by-catch included yellow eel, black sea bass, ocean pout, hake, and a Jurassic-looking lucky fish.

The “keeper” lobsters were put into a tray. They flapped their armored tails and flailed angrily, but then quickly calmed when he put a wet towel over them.

“Lobsters are cannibalistic,” he said. “If they’re in a fight, they can literally throw off a claw, then eventually grow back another one. They can also throw off a claw when the water is extremely cold, to conserve energy.”

After the trap was cleared, Mr. Iacono repacked a mesh bait bag — on that day, skate and mackerel were on the menu — and latched it to the roof of the “kitchen,” the compartment that has entrances on either side,



which angle up toward the bait. Once the lobster is in the “kitchen,” the only way out is a ramp which leads to the “parlor,” where the lobsters will remain until harvesting. Traps have vents in the parlors that allow juvenile lobsters to escape. Door clamps are also made of biodegradable material, so lobsters can eventually escape when a trap is lost.

Once the bait bag was secured, Mr. Iacono hauled the trap along the well-worn gunwales to the back of the boat, and began a stack. He nimbly repeated the process 100 times over the morning, his boat seesawing on the change of a full-moon tide.

He got only one lobster from the first five pots. The fishing has been slow this year, but not that slow. Mr. Iacono could tell from an open latch on one of the pots that someone had poached him. “Unfortunately it happens a lot,” he said. “Those boats out of New Bedford are brutal.”

But the apparent theft didn’t affect his unfailingly sanguine demeanor. He checked his notebook, wrote a few notes, and moved on to the next trawl.

From now until fall, he will go out seven days a week, weather permitting. “If the wind is over 20 knots, I usually stay in and work on things,” he said. “There’s always things that need fixing.” When he’s not lobstering, Mr. Iacono also does caretaking and occasional plumbing jobs, and he remains active in the Coast Guard Auxiliary.

After tending to the last trawl, Mr. Iacono pointed the Freedom toward Gay Head Light and put the boat on “autopilot” — after pointing the bow at Gay Head Light, he tied a length of rope between a spoke on the steering wheel and a pilothouse support.

On the way in to Menemsha Harbor, he put rubber bands that read “Vineyard Wild Caught ... Freedom” on the claws of agitated lobsters, while somehow managing not to get caught in the lobsters’ grip. “At the end of the day when I’m tired, they win one sometimes,” he said.

Regulatory clampdown

The day’s take was about 50 pounds of lobster, which will fetch him about \$7.50 a pound. It would all be sold at Larsen’s Market in Menemsha. Mr. Iacono rated the day’s take a “five” on a scale of one to 10. “Any day you make a profit is a good day,” he said.

Making a profit became much harder this year. The 2015 American Lobster Benchmark Stock Assessment done by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission found record abundance in the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank, but record low numbers in southern New England, which includes Vineyard waters. As a result, Mr. Iacono and his fellow lobstermen had to reduce their traps by 25 percent this year, and must shave off another five percent each year until they reach an overall reduction of 50 percent.

Mr. Iacono questions the methods of the crustacean census. “When they measure the juvenile lobsters, they put ventless traps in the same place every time,” he said. “You’re not going to get an accurate count that way. Cut open any sea bass right now, and you’ll probably find juvenile lobsters.”

Mr. Iacono said that the increasing regulation has led some lobstermen to sell their commercial licenses on the open market, which can be a lucrative proposition — a new commercial lobster license hasn’t been issued in Massachusetts for 30 years.

This Tuesday, a check of the Massachusetts Lobstermen’s Association website showed a Massachusetts commercial lobster license offered at \$35,000. “I’ll never sell,” Mr. Iacono said.



Mr. Iacono grew up in Vineyard Haven, and has spent his life on Vineyard waters, commanding his first skiff at the tender age of 10. "It wasn't unusual back then," he said. "A lot of kids had their own boats." He started lobstering when he was 12 years old, when he put out 10 pots off West Chop. "I just kind of picked it up after that," he said.

After graduating from Martha's Vineyard Regional High School, class of 1965, Mr. Iacono enlisted in the Coast Guard, spending most of his time on the Vineyard and Cape Cod, ending his career as Officer in Charge of Buzzards Bay Light Station. Throughout his Coast Guard years, he still fished commercially on his days off, except during his yearlong tour of Vietnam, where he went on river patrols that often saw heavy action.

After the war, Mr. Iacono ran boats for Louis Larsen and the Mayhew brothers, fishing for lobster and cod, and harpooning swordfish. He also worked as a crewman on various tugboats.

He continued to fish part-time while he was the Vineyard Haven harbormaster, and while the Freedom was being built at the Bruno Stillman boatyard in New Hampshire in the early '80s.

Now Mr. Iacono fishes for lobster, scallop, and sea bass, with a little bit of plumbing and caretaking worked in. On occasion his son Vinny, owner of Creekville Oysters and Creekville Landscape, lends a hand on the Freedom.

In an unmatched feat in Island fishing lore, father and son both won the Derby bass division, both at the age of 23. Vinny won for a striped bass from a boat, Mr. Iacono for a striper from shore.

Mr. Iacono lives in a house in Chilmark that sits on three acres on Tea Lane Road that he bought in 1972 with a \$10,000 Coast Guard bonus. He had to cut his own road and dig his own well. "People told me I was nuts," he said, grinning. "But I'll never sell."

The Times accompanied Mr. Iacono for this article prior to the death on Tuesday of fellow fisherman Luke Gurney, who drowned after becoming entangled in a trawl of conch pots. Mr. Iacono said he's known three fishermen over the course of his lobstering career who died the same way. "It happens a lot," he said. "We've all had so many close calls. It happened to me once, but the stern saved me. It really makes you think."
