

## Observers get a glimpse of life at sea

By BECKY W. EVANS, *Standard-Times* staff writer

They are trained to identify fish, sea turtles and marine mammals that are scooped from the ocean in fishing nets and scallop dredges.

But fisheries observers, who collect data for the National Marine Fisheries Service, witness much more during their adventures at sea.

Some have watched unsuspecting fishermen haul sofas, television sets and airplane wreckage out of the ocean depths.

Others have survived freak storms and hurricanes or plucked stranded fishermen from life rafts.

Each has seen brilliant sunrises and sunsets stretch across an endless horizon.

Experiencing these and other mystical moments offshore is what drew Michelle Cho to her job as a fisheries observer.

"Few people get to see it," said Ms. Cho, who joined the NMFS Northeast Fisheries Observer Program in August.

Ms. Cho is one of about 25 observers who work out of the port of New Bedford.

The observers tag along on commercial fishing trips to gather data that is used by scientists and fishing regulators to estimate the size of fish stocks and set catch limits for fishermen.

"It's the only way to get information on what's caught and thrown back," said Amy Van Atten, who coordinates the Northeast observer program.

### Working at Sea

Observers monitor fishing activity on vessels of all sizes and gear types. Some travel offshore for weeklong trips aboard 100-foot dragnets and scallopers. Others take day trips on smaller vessels that fish closer to shore.

While at sea, they poke through piles of fish and shellfish that fishermen plan to throw overboard due to size, landing restrictions or low market value.

Observers sort through the unwanted fish, known as discards. They take weight and length measurements and collect scales, ear bones and other so-called age structures that help scientists identify the age of fish.

Other duties include monitoring fishing quotas, measuring gear performance and collecting economic data such as fuel and insurance costs.

Like fishermen, observers must have strong stomachs to handle turbulent seas

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Firmino Pereira, captain of the F/V Cowboy, meets fisheries observer Neal McIntosh for the first time as they prepare to go out to sea.

and a willingness to work outside in all types of weather.

Official requirements include a four-year degree in marine biology or biology and at least a one-year commitment to the observer program.

The job attracts recent college graduates who want to gain research experience before pursuing advanced degrees in marine science, Ms. Van Atten said.

"It's a very challenging job," she said. "You have to learn to juggle a lot of priorities."

The best candidates are outgoing, adventurous people who can work independently and accomplish set goals, said Luke Szymanski, who coordinates observer trips in New Bedford for A.I.S. Inc. A former Peace Corps volunteer, Mr. Szymanski has worked as a fisheries observer in Hawaii and New England.

A.I.S. Inc., which is headquartered in New Bedford, is contracted by NMFS to provide observer coverage from North Carolina to Maine.

The contractor hires and pays observers, who make a minimum of \$185 per sea day. Full-time observers, who receive benefits, are required to work at least 12 sea days per month, Mr. Szymanski said.

Approximately half of the 120 Northeast fisheries observers are female. But few women complain about working and sharing living quarters with all-male crews.

"It helps more than it hurts," observer Neal McIntosh said while preparing to leave on a recent trip aboard the fishing vessel Cowboy. "Sometimes having girls around tempers them."

The 24-year-old, who double-majored in biology and ecology at the University of Georgia, joined the observer program in September after passing a three-week training course at the NMFS Observer Training Facility in Falmouth.

"I thought (being an observer) sounded cool," said Ms. McIntosh, who commutes to New Bedford from Boston in a white SUV decorated with sailing and surfing stickers.

She said she finds the job interesting but admits it is difficult to have a social life when you are hundreds of miles offshore.

## **Playing it Safe**

When asked if she worried about her safety at sea, Ms. McIntosh shrugged. "You don't really think about it," she said.

During training, observers learn how to shoot flares, extinguish fires and don survival suits on land and in the water. Observers, who are required to get certified in CPR, carry their own survival suits and emergency position indicating radio beacons (EPIRBs).

"They are often better trained than fishermen," Ms. Van Atten said.

Before leaving on a trip, observers must do a walk-through of the vessel to check safety equipment and verify that the boat has passed a dockside safety examination.

While no observers have died while working at sea, there have been "several close calls," said David Potter, chief of the fisheries sampling branch at the

Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

An observer almost boarded the ill-fated Lady Lorraine, which caught fire five miles off Scituate on Feb. 20, Mr. Potter said. One fisherman was killed in the fire and two survived after being rescued from a life raft.

If the observer had arrived at the dock 10 minutes earlier, he "would have been on that boat," Mr. Potter said.

Another observer was working aboard the fishing vessel Diane Marie when the scalloper Northern Edge sank 45 miles southeast of Nantucket on Dec. 20. The crew of the Diane Marie rescued lone survivor Pedro Furtado from a life raft, but five other fishermen were lost at sea.

A few observers dropped out of the program this winter due to the high number of fishing casualties, Ms. Van Atten said. Others quit for different reasons including seasickness, bad weather and difficulty setting up trips, she added.

In response to increasing safety concerns, observers are now required to ask captains to conduct safety drills before leaving on a trip, Mr. Potter said.

"They're asking if (the captains) have done them and if they would do one with the observer on board," he said.

## **Relating to Fishermen**

Many observers speak favorably about their interactions with fishermen.

When they show up at the dock, "the crew is so cranky, but as soon as we leave, they are so positive," Ms. Cho said. "They are so hard-working."

Some fishermen welcome observers if only for fresh ears to listen to their well-worn tales.

"You are the new guy, so you get to learn everyone's stories," observer Paul O'Donnell said. "It helps pass the time."

Keeping out of the way of fishing operations is key to being a good observer, Ms. Van Atten said.

"They must try to figure out how to fit in without affecting the regular routine of the boat," she said.

Fishermen have mixed feelings about bringing observers along on trips. NMFS pays captains \$25 per day to cover food costs for observers.

"Some of them are OK and some of them get in the way," said Alan Sherman, captain of the fishing vessel Buzzards Bay.

"A good observer has a good personality and talks to people," Capt. Sherman said. "They want to get in to check the pile of fish."

Bad observers keep to themselves, fall asleep in the galley or wheelhouse and fail to estimate the correct weight of discarded fish, he said.

"I've had a few I didn't care for and do not want to see them back," said Capt. Sherman, who estimated that he takes observers on approximately 75 percent of his fishing trips.

"You can't turn them down," he said. "If you are assigned one, you don't have any choice."

Federal fishing regulations require vessels to carry observers on specified fishing trips. The amount of observer coverage depends on where vessels fish

and what type of days at sea they use, Ms. Van Atten said.

Vessels that fish in the U.S.-Canada Management Area in Georges Bank must notify the observer program three days in advance of leaving on a trip. A computerized vessel selection program helps coordinators determine which vessels must take observers.

"It's a balancing act," Ms. Van Atten said. "We try to make it fair."

## **Data Dispute**

Few observers escape criticism from fishermen regarding fishing regulations that have limited where and how often they can fish.

"We are a convenient whipping post for new regulations," Mr. O'Donnell said.

Observers insist that they are trained to collect unbiased data. The fact that they are employed by a private contractor is evidence that they are neither aligned with the government nor with fishermen, Mr. Szymanski said.

Observer data is often used to make regulations that harm the fishing industry, said Toby Lees, captain of the fishing vessel Seel.

"It's not the individual, the observers are fantastic," Capt. Lees said. "It is where the information goes."

NMFS scientists analyze the data and "spin it in their favor," he said.

Data collected by observers is processed at the Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole. Scientists use the information to estimate the size of fish stocks and determine if regulatory action is necessary to maintain a sustainable fishery.

Fishermen would be worse off without observers, Mr. Potter said.

"Having real data on what they catch always works to their advantage," he said.

Without real data, the government would make a more conservative estimate of fish stocks that could lead to stricter regulations, he said.

"The data may keep the industry in business," he said.

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