

Working

Katie Lynch, Fisheries Observer

By Janis Hewitt

(07/29/2009) As an observer who supplies data for the National Marine Fisheries Service, Katie Lynch collects fish scales and other samples from bluefish, striped bass, and scallops. She weighs in or estimates

the weight of squid hauls from draggers, and she said she is always excited when she sees what the trawling nets pull in.

An employee of AIS Inc., Ms. Lynch is based in New Jersey near the Barnegat Light on Long Beach Island. She drives to Montauk two to three times a month and is required to jump aboard commercial boats for at least 12 to 15 trips per month. If she doesn't, she has to make up for it the following month.



An employee of AIS Inc., Katie Lynch, observing catches off Montauk - Janis Hewitt

She bunks in local motels and either takes her own food aboard or eats what is served on the boat. Her hosts can request to be reimbursed for feeding her. She goes out on draggers, gill netters, and scallop boats and stays out with the crew anywhere from one night to a week, depending on the size of the boat. Sometimes she doesn't get a bunk and sleeps on the floor in a sleeping bag. On smaller boats without toilets she takes a bucket. "Hey, if you have to go you have to go," she said.

She usually contacts the boat captains to let them know she is ready for a trip or shows up on the dock to find out when they're sailing next. She is only 23 years old, but she has never had a problem with any of the crew members, she said. "The fishermen show me a lot of respect," she said. "My information will not get them in trouble."

Ms. Lynch is off this week for a conference in Portland, Me., with observers from all over the world, including Alaska, the Bering Sea, and Australia. She is also a certified trip trainer, teaching and shadowing new observers.

With a degree in biology and a concentration in marine science, Ms. Lynch came across the job online. "I couldn't believe a job like this existed," she said. She applied and was accepted by AIS.

She trained for four weeks in Woods Hole at Cape Cod, learning how to record her data and produce trip reports. She has been at it in Montauk for over a year. "That's a long time for an observer," she said, explaining that her job was just a stepping stone at the company.

According to the A.I.S. Web site, observers collect maritime and ecological data that help regulate the fishing industry. All of them are certified by the government agency they serve, such as the National Marine Fisheries Service or the Army Corps of Engineers.

Ms. Lynch declined to say what the most unusual catch that she had seen was, as she can tell no one but her employer what a boat has landed. "That's confidential," she said, quickly adding, however, "but I think everything is neat. When everything comes up at once my jaw drops."

Her favorite time for observing is summer, but she is required to take winter trips as well. For those, she dresses in five layers and wears thermal undergarments. She takes hot patches with her. "It's so cold out there; I stick them all over," she said.