

Sz3Ep4 The Conch FionaRobinson_Final.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are cruising along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean and most importantly, showcasing 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 so excited to have a very special guest joining us, Fiona Robinson. Fiona is a fellow sea dawg and the Development Director of SeaShare, a Seattle based nonprofit that focuses on seafood as a source of nutrition for hunger relief, working with fishermen, processors, distributors and importers across the country to generate truckloads of seafood for food banks and feeding centers. Welcome and, thank you, Fiona, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's get to it.

Fiona Robinson [00:00:52] Awesome. Thank you for having me.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:53] Well, you're welcome. I know we've been talking about this for a long time, so I'm really excited to get some more information about the fantastic organization that you work for, SeaShare. Could we start with a little information about SeaShare and what is its mission?

Fiona Robinson [00:01:06] Sure. So, we're a nonprofit that works with food banks. We're based in Seattle. And our official mission is to engage the seafood industry in a collective effort to improve nutrition for the people served by food banks and feeding centers. It's a little bit of a mouthful, so essentially, we work with food banks, mostly Feeding America food banks, to make sure that they have seafood that's accessible to their clients.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:31] When was it founded?

Fiona Robinson [00:01:31] So, we were founded 28 years ago.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:33] Oh, wow!

Fiona Robinson [00:01:34] We actually started, as we were called, Northwest Food Strategies, and we actually started on Alaska pollock trawlers working on taking the bycatch that they were pulling in, which is bycatch, for those of you who don't know, is any incidental catch that's brought overboard and harvested, but it's not your intended species. So, if you're fishing for pollock and you're bringing in salmon or anything else, that bycatch is just tossed overboard. So, what we were then called as Northwest Food Strategies would take that product. You know, we worked with NMFS and the Alaska pollock industry, and we set in regulations that allowed us or allowed the harvesters to keep that product as long as it was donated directly to us, which went directly to food banks. So, it was taking this product that was literally being thrown back overboard and actually creating a market in food banks for it, and it's seafood that food banks weren't getting at the time. Years later, we transitioned to renaming ourselves to SeaShare, which meant more for the industry. And it also indicated that we were going nationwide. We weren't just working in the Pacific Northwest. We actually get seafood into food banks nationwide. So, yeah, we're almost 30 years old, which is hard to believe.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:56] That's incredible. So, let's back up just a second. So, NMFS, that's an acronym for National...

Fiona Robinson [00:03:01] National Marine Fisheries Service.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:04] The way I understand. So, bycatch right, so incidental catch. So, that's not the target species. And what I understood is from before or in some places still is that if you catch something that you're not targeting, you have to throw it back overboard. And so SeaShare or the previous incarnation worked with NMFS to get kind of an exemption to that, where you would be able to take the donation of the bycatch and donate it to food banks. That's how it was, and that's how it is, right?

Fiona Robinson [00:03:33] Correct. So that was how we started. But as it stands now, that only accounts for about 5 to 10% of the product that we deal with.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:43] Oh.

Fiona Robinson [00:03:43] So, you know, bycatch is sort of a loaded word these days.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:47] Yes.

Fiona Robinson [00:03:48] And anyone outside our industry gets kind of freaked out about it. But it's such a very small percentage of what we deal with now. Most of the product that we're dealing with is first run product. But instead of going to retail or foodservice markets, it's being processed directly for food banks.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:04] So the bycatch, yes, you're right, that is a loaded word. But in this case, it's doing a good thing. But it only represents a very small amount of what ends up being donated to SeaShare and to the food banks. Prior to SeaShare, how much seafood was actually ending up in food banks?

Fiona Robinson [00:04:23] That's a good question. I'm not going to guess at it. I don't know, but a very small amount. I mean, I think probably the large tuna companies were probably donating product because it's canned product and it's shelf stable. But in terms of getting frozen product into food banks, I would say little to none. There are seafood companies that work directly with their local food banks and feeding centers, which we really applaud. But where we come in is working with seafood companies, you know, helping them along the way basically. They might not be connected to a food bank. They might need help with paying for processing to get product into a food bank because you can't necessarily just take a product that's ready for foodservice and retail. It needs to be Feeding America standards. They want the seafood frozen in 4 lb packs that can easily feed a family of four.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:14] Mmm mmhm.

Fiona Robinson [00:05:14] It has to have nutritional information on it. And sometimes they have fliers and handouts that allow the clients to learn more about the product and learn how to cook it if they don't know how to already.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:26] That was going to be one of my questions. I'll ask more about that in a bit. I'm really curious how did you end up at SeaShare? And I want to talk a little bit about your journey too.

Fiona Robinson [00:05:35] So I'm a trained journalist. I graduated from journalism school from the University of New Hampshire, and I went right into newspapers and then I migrated into trade journalism, starting with writing about gourmet foods. I did a brief stint

in book publishing in the mid-nineties I got a call from a former editor, there was an editorial job that had opened at Seafood Business Magazine, which was a trade magazine and was published by Diversified Business Communications, which produces the Seafood Expo North America in Boston and Seafood Expo Global. And, you know, they have trade shows in many, many industries around the world. So, I helped to produce the magazine, I became editor, and associate publisher, worked on, let's see, the Seafood Handbook and worked on the Lempert Report, which was something we produced for supermarket guru Phil Lempert, who was on the Today Show for many years.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:29] Wow!

Fiona Robinson [00:06:29] I know there's a lot of stuff that went on before the internet! Haha!

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:33] Honestly, I don't know any of this and I'm not saying I've been around forever, but I have been around for a while and I think that's great that there was a lot of groundwork laid, right,

Fiona Robinson [00:06:41] Sure.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:41] before current day, and I'm super interested in listening to all of this and hearing from you with your experience, and Diversified, of course, I think they have something like 150 trade shows or something around the world. I don't even know at this point, but they have a lot, right?

Fiona Robinson [00:06:54] Correct. Yeah, so there was even something called the Seafood Source Book, which was like literally a printed guide that buyers would use if they needed to find a source of wolf fish or something they would open their Seafood Source Book and look to see who sold it. Hahaha, that's essentially.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:09] Like an actual hard copy of something, right?

Fiona Robinson [00:07:11] An actual hard copy, yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:13] Like the Yellow Pages.

Fiona Robinson [00:07:14] Yeah, exactly. We also had a hand in starting the Seafood Report, which is actually the predecessor to Seafood Source. So this was, you can think of it as an email newsletter that went out and that morphed into Seafood Source after about a year and a half. So yeah, I started in journalism, went into trade journalism, which made sense. And my husband, Tom, is in seafood sales, and at one point we owned a seafood retail store that did wholesaling and retailing. So, yeah, lots of experience. Prior to leaving Diversified, I had actually joined the board at SeaShare, the board of directors, so once I left Diversified in 2015. I stayed on the board even though I actually asked to retire, but I was told I wasn't allowed to.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:59] Hahaha. They didn't want you to go?

Fiona Robinson [00:08:00] Yeah, exactly.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:02] Did you have any experience with seafood before you transitioned, it sounds, organically into the seafood trade business, documenting through

journalism. Sounds like you did through your husband and through your own store... retail...What did you say, it was a retail store?

Fiona Robinson [00:08:18] Yeah. York Lobster and Seafood. So that was in York, Maine. So I'm located in Kennebunk. SeaShare's office is in Seattle.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:26] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:08:26] But I work remotely.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:27] What was the retail store like, and when was that?

Fiona Robinson [00:08:29] We started that before our twins were born, so that was around '97ish. My answers would differ drastically from my husband's because, you know, it was 99% him. My involvement was, you know, the supportive spouse and, you know, dealing with, you know, at that point, I think I was associate editor at Seafood Business and dealing with all those products. So, I trekked up to Portland, worked, came home and then still was, you know, dealing with seafood stuff via my husband. So, you know it's, any kind of small business, it was open year round, but it was largely seasonal. You make most of your income in the summer months and it was interesting and fun, and after many years of doing that, my husband realized he never took a vacation. So when you own a business, there is no vacation.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:17] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:09:18] There were lots of upsides, but there are also lots of downsides to it, you know, dealing with the seasonal business and kind of struggling through the winter, learning things, the ropes as you go kind of thing, so,

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:28] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:09:28] We wound up closing that, tryna remember what year, well, I think he did that for about 12 years and then he went to work for one of his competitors at the time, so he's actually at Taylor Lobster and Seafood in Kittery now.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:41] Oh, gotcha. Okay. That's great.

Fiona Robinson [00:09:43] We still talk about seafood.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:44] I'm sure, haha, your whole household revolves and has revolved around seafood, it sounds like, for many years.

Fiona Robinson [00:09:50] For many years. Yep. Yep.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:52] Let's go back to SeaShare, I'd love to hear about, you kind of mentioned a little bit, but how does the donation process work for SeaShare? Walk us through what that looks like and how do seafood companies donate to SeaShare?

Fiona Robinson [00:10:04] The way I describe it to people is it's almost like we're a super involved logistics company, you know? Seafood is not like any other commodity, there's so many different kind of layers involved. So it's not like you can just pick up the phone and call one person typically. So, a seafood processor or importer might have product they

want to move for various reasons. And so we're able to either connect them directly to a food bank near them or else they might actually have a whole run of product they might need help moving for various reasons, whether it's got labeling issues or packaging issues or they're doing an actual processing run specifically for us. So they'll either donate the product 100% free or we'll chip in a certain amount per pound, which prior to the pandemic could have been \$0.50, could have been a little bit more it kind of everything is a little bit different. Or we would chip in transportation money to get it into the nearest food bank. And that's kind of where I come in as development director, my job is to raise money, fundraising, writing grants, doing individual donor campaigns, that kind of thing, because we're not getting a product for 100% free. We need money to be able to either ship it, process it, or kind of all of the above. We're a strategic partner with Feeding America, which I think I mentioned before, so they have specific requirements. They want it in a 4lbs package so they can feed a family of four. We also take dents and discards of canned product like salmon, crab or other stuff. And our Executive Director, Jim Harmon, is trained in inspecting cans to make sure product is still safe. Our sweet spot is kind of being able to connect so many different seafood companies, and know how they operate, when product might be available if its wild product, and also knowing the food bank industry and what they can and cannot handle. They typically are pretty short on space in, you know, cold storage and freezers, so sometimes they need help with nutritional information or cooking information, and that's something that we can help with. We have a nutrition area on our website: SeaShare.org, and that actually is one of the most heavily trafficked areas of our website is the nutrition area.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:14] That was going to be one of my later questions, but I'll ask it now. The average consumer pre-pandemic didn't really know how to cook seafood or was scared to cook seafood so that's why everyone tended to eat seafood at restaurants. And then the pandemic hit and then everyone said, hey, I really want to eat seafood, I can't go to a restaurant, so I'm going to try to learn how to cook this on my own. And, you know, all the recipe guidance and in-home seafood cookery just exploded. So, how does that work at a food bank? You prepare clearly like some guidance and recipes and how to cook it and how to store it and that kind of stuff, or how does that work?

Fiona Robinson [00:12:51] Yeah, I think in the early days of SeaShare there was a lot of that. And by now we've worked with so many food banks that they already have that information at their fingertips that we've already given to them, or it's already a consumer who knows how to prepare the product and how to prepare it for their family. But you're right, there's a certain amount of education that can and should go on for folks who haven't tried it before. So we're getting product into food banks and feeding centers. So, it might be a meal prep center feeding homeless. We get a lot of product into Union Gospel Mission in Seattle. So those obviously they're getting an actual meal. So, we don't have to worry about that. But it's really more the food banks where they're handing out bags of product to folks.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:36] I read that you started your position in August of 2020, really early in the pandemic. Right. So how do you think the situation with food banks and feeding centers is different between pre-pandemic and now?

Fiona Robinson [00:13:49] Well, the early days of the pandemic were pretty stressful for everyone and food banks, especially, because most of the food banks around the country, we're seeing quadruple their client base and they weren't set up for contact free distribution of product.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:03] No, right.

Fiona Robinson [00:14:03] They weren't mobile enabled on ordering or delivery, but they shifted their model in really short period of time. Nowadays, there's lots of food banks that, you know, they're still doing kind of contactless delivery or contact free pickup or whatever you want to call it. Some of them set up online ordering and that still goes on from the food bank supplier and things that were emergency COVID funds that we and other suppliers and food banks were able to access. So, 2020 was a challenge, but many food banks benefited from the fact that restaurants were closed and the product was diverted into food banks instead. On the SeaShare end, we're able to access another 2 million servings of Alaska pollock from suppliers to distribute to food banks just because the product didn't go into the foodservice market. We were recipients of that windfall, if you want to call it, and put a positive spin on what was going on. We're back to struggling again because food prices across the board are up anywhere from 10 to 25%, including seafood.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:06] Wow.

Fiona Robinson [00:15:06] And the seafood supply is so tight right now, it's kind of a weird time to be in the market. So, food banks are seeing fewer donations we're having a hard time accessing product at affordable prices. We're faced with paying double or triple the prices to get product processed for food banks. So it's a difficult position to be in, but we're reaching out to everyone that we know to get whatever product we can. So, if you're listening to this podcast and you have product, whether it's 100% free or something that we can supplement, email me at fiona@seashare.org.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:39] Yeah, and we'll be sure and share all of your information in the show notes. So, you just mentioned that the seafood supply is tight, I think that was your word. So, what does that mean? Why is it tight and what's happening?

Fiona Robinson [00:15:51] With all of the supply chain issues that happened, you know, the first year and a half of Covid. You had harvesters that were having difficulty just getting employees on factory trawlers or whatever boats you had because they had to quarantine and then you had processing lines that weren't necessarily running at full capacity because they didn't have employees. Whereas before, when all of that stuff prior to the pandemic was running smoothly, cold storage warehouses were full of products as that supply chain interruption started happening and trucking issues and basically everything from boat to plate, there were disruptions everywhere and everyone read about all of the container ships that were backed up in ports around the world, and that for the large part had ironed itself out. But you're still finding that, you know, there aren't huge stockpiles of product in cold storage warehouses anymore because product is moving fast. And there was a huge demand, especially for retail products in the first year of the pandemic, like everyone's freezers were full of products, including fish sticks and whatever other frozen fish that you could get. So demand is still there. I read definitely that kind of retail frozen prices are, volumes are down a little bit, but that's to be expected because frozen seafood producers hadn't seen that demand ever like there was such a huge spike. So that's when I say supply is tight, we're talking about frozen products.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:14] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:17:15] You know, food banks can't take live products. They can't take fresh product. They really just don't have the manpower or the refrigeration capacity to be able to deal with that product.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:25] SeaShare focuses on seafood as a source of nutrition for hunger relief. Why is seafood so important in terms of nutrition?

Fiona Robinson [00:17:33] Well, this is pretty near and dear to my heart. When I was pregnant with my twins in 2002 and I was told by my doctors to avoid seafood, which just like made my blood boil, but I knew it was so wrong only because there was actual research way back then about the benefits of seafood and there was a lot of news about methylmercury, which was unfortunate. And I think a lot of that has kind of ironed itself out. But I actually went up on hospital bed rest for two months and there was no seafood in the hospital at all. Well, I shouldn't say at all. Once every other week, nebulous whitefish on the menu, which I would eat, but thankfully, my husband would bring in sushi and other stuff that I love but back to the nutrition and Seashare. Consumers of all ages, they need access to seafood and it's critical that mothers, you know, that's near and dear to my heart. It's critical that mothers and pregnant women have access to seafood. Infants in utero needs seafood for nutrients and vitamins for brain development and optic nerve development and heart health. And young children need it for cognitive development. Adults need it for preventing heart disease and for their mental well-being. The nutrients in seafood go a long way to fighting inflammation in the body, and that builds immunity for everyone. So as you saw in the pandemic, actually seafood consumption was really necessary. And SeaShare doesn't want to just feed hungry people, we want to feed them well. For those people facing food insecurity, if they can eat a nutritious meal to boost their health, they're better equipped to be able to handle other challenges in life, such as finding a job providing for their families, so we want to be able to make sure that that nutritious seafood is available to those families who really need it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:17] Yeah, I mean, you and I are both part of the Eat Seafood, America campaign and with Seafood Nutrition Partnership and Linda Cornish was a guest on the show. Seafood Nutrition Partnership, again, has so many great resources, as does SeaShare, about the nutritional benefits of seafood. And I agree with you, it's frustrating because people around the world eat fish when they're pregnant. And why wouldn't we listen to that sage advice, right?

Fiona Robinson [00:19:43] Right. When you're pregnant with multiples you're told to kind of frontload your nutrition because for the most part, you're not going to carry twins or other multiples full term of over 40 weeks. So, I got pretty big, pretty fast and I got pregnant, and I think it was January and it must have been January. So, I had to tell my boss pretty fast because the seafood show is always in March. And this was back when the show was in the Hynes Convention Center in Boston. And I was pretty big, and it was pretty evident I was pregnant by the show in March, and I actually had to do some television interviews. There was a lot of news going on. It was about methylmercury. So, they propped me up on this chair in all my girth and started asking me questions about methylmercury in pregnancy and the news clip aired like the next night. And they had pretty much twisted all my words. And it's like, here's this reporter who's pregnant. She's eating seafood. She's putting her children at risk.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:42] Oh, my gosh.

Fiona Robinson [00:20:42] How dare you? I was so horrified. I just remember my boss at the time going, okay, take a deep breath. We weren't expecting this. It's nothing that you could have prevented, you know, Let's just move on.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:20:54] Yeah, well, 20 plus years later, you can go back to them and say, hey, look at my kids. They're strong and healthy. Okay?

Fiona Robinson [00:21:00] Yeah, exactly. But you still see that methylmercury message out there, drives me crazy. Everyone in the industry knows that we need to eat seafood. We just need to keep sounding the good word about nutrition and how important it is for everyone. Not just expectant mothers, pregnant women and children, but literally everyone.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:18] So this is a good segue way into the next question I have because, again, it's clear you've been involved in the seafood industry for a long time and working as the associate publisher and editor of the trade magazine Seafood Business for what I read 17 years writing and speaking about seafood at other events and in this journal. Also, in another podcast I heard you describe when quote-unquote sustainability became a thing, even a trend, very much like it's almost like talking about this mercury and fish as trendy, right, it kind of pops up in and out of the discourse every few years. And you were discussing with your team if sustainability would stick. So, tell me what that was like, because I remember also when sustainability was like, Wait, what's that and what is it? What is it again? So, we didn't know if it was a fad or if it was something that was here to stay. So, what were those conversations like in those early days?

Fiona Robinson [00:22:13] Well, a lot of the conversations I don't know if I could repeat.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:15] Okay.

Fiona Robinson [00:22:17] You know, as a journalist, you're trained to be pretty skeptical of everything.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:21] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:22:21] And there was so much involvement of NGOs that had never been heard of before. They weren't necessarily working with the industry at the time at all. It was more of a like an us versus them mentality. As journalists, we were trained to look at both sides and report objectively, which we did. There was a lot of readers who were very anti NGO because, you know, how dare these NGOs come in and tell us what we should and shouldn't be doing. So, it took a lot of thought and work by leaders like John Connelly and NFI. He had started years before the sustainability stuff kind of came to the forefront in 2006 to 2010. So, it took a lot of work by leaders to start working with NGOs to try and get seafood consumers, seafood buyers, you know, that was our audience that seafood business was focusing on the seafood buyer. We were literally trying to figure out what the term sustainability meant ourselves, but also then trying to convey that to readers and how important it was literally, because we're talking about the future of the industry. We're not just talking about products being imported, we're talking about products being harvested here in the United States and the importance of the fisheries and so that skepticism remained throughout. But it was a privilege to be actually covering the industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:47] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:23:47] During that pivotal time. Steven Hedlund who is now at Global Seafood Alliance was one of our writers and editors, and he wrote the first Sustainable Seafood Buyer's Guide in 2008. It was really just defining everything that was going on

and trying to get readers to see that it wasn't an us versus them mentality and report on all the work that was being done and why it was needed, for the industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:24:14] Yeah, that's really a good history and I think it's super accurate. I came onto the scene in 2008. The Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, which is the membership organization that kind of rallied all the NGOs together that were in the sustainable seafood movement at the time. It also started to get the NGOs kind of all on the same page because not only was there the us versus them mentality around NGOs versus business, but there was also NGOs infighting with each other. The funders got us together and said, okay, you guys need to stop fighting and actually learn to work together. That was successful. But I think it's still interesting when we talk about sustainability, there's no definition of what is sustainability, right? And maybe that's a good thing it's morphing, right? Because at first it was really just about the environment and then it kind of morphed into a more holistic definition where social responsibility and people and planet, right, were kind of together. So, I don't know, the whole thing is very interesting, and someone should write a book, maybe you should write a book, Fiona?

Fiona Robinson [00:25:11] I'll leave it to folks like Ray Hilborn in Washington. You're right. I mean, sustainability for a seafood buyer can mean something totally different than just someone who's a fishery scientist. It is, I think, easier to define if you're a fishery scientist versus anyone else, because everyone else is looking at all the other factors of what sustainability means versus what the stock harvest level is versus what the maximum potential yield of the fishery kind of thing.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:39] Yeah, it definitely depends on who you talk to. In fact, I have this ongoing question in my mind. Is it sustainable seafood? Is it better to say that or ethical seafood or responsible seafood? These are the questions that I think about. And I'm actually moving more towards saying ethical seafood, because I think that kind of encapsulates a lot of the meaning that we're thinking about when we talk about sustainable versus responsible.

Fiona Robinson [00:26:03] From a reporter's aspect and seeing that history of the involvement of PETA in the industry that I think if you use the word ethical that a lot of people in the seafood industry in particular might find that as a negative aspect.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:16] Sure.

Fiona Robinson [00:26:17] PETA is still around. They still protest here and there. So, I guess word choice for me as a former editor that I kind of tend to look at it from that aspect.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:27] So, what would you use? Sustainable or responsible?

Fiona Robinson [00:26:29] Sustainable, responsible. Either one, but ethical? Probably not.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:34] So, I get that from an animal welfare point of view, and this actually is another great segue way into my next question. So, back in the day, sustainability could have been easily a trend that kind of fizzled out, right? Same thing with, you know, animal welfare also pops its head up every once in a while. And I'm not saying that that's a trend by any means, but I'm saying that it hasn't been a major focus of discussion in the sustainable seafood community. It is a discussion. It does pop up, but it's

not a leading force, right? So, what other trends, I don't want to say sustainability or animal welfare are a trend, but they could have been easily. What other quote-unquote trends have you noticed in seafood during your tenure that have either stuck or not? And if they haven't, why? The reason why I'm asking this is because your focus generally is nutrition and nutritional seafood. And my focus is gender equality in seafood. So, I don't want these to be seen as trends that eventually will fizzle out. So, how do we learn from how sustainability was kind of integrated into this larger thing, right? What do you think about that?

Fiona Robinson [00:27:40] It's not a trend. I mean, it's here to stay.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:42] Right, yes.

Fiona Robinson [00:27:43] It took a leap of faith on behalf of buyers to start changing their buying habits, incorporating sustainability as part of their practices. And once you have buy in from big companies like Darden, Sysco, and Bon Appetite that moved millions of pounds of products, that writing's on the wall. I guess a trend that didn't stick around was certainly like the dotcom, aggregate, seafood online seafood purchasing of kind of the rise and fall of dotcoms, like, Go Fish and Catch, that kind of thing. They certainly plugged millions of dollars of marketing into the industry, which opened our eyes to different marketing techniques and campaigns that hadn't been seen in the industry. But moving all that seafood purchases from an industry that could see price changes on a daily basis on up to hundreds of SKUs and product purchasing relationships that were relying on one-on-one relationships. So, the writing on the wall, you know, that wasn't going to work, but a trend that has been three decades in the making is restarting that national seafood marketing campaign. Now, I'd love to see the National Seafood Council restart it. It just makes sense to me from my background in covering the industry. But now as being part of SeaShare is that I can see that consumers would totally benefit from having some sort of council that markets seafood and how nutritious it is. Consumers are pummeled so much negative information about seafood that other commodities never have to deal with. So, educating them about nutrition could go a long way for improving people's health in their lives.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:20] Yeah, I totally agree. I mean, we discussed that again in the episode with Linda Cornish around the National Seafood Marketing Council and I just also am flabbergasted that to this day we haven't had something like that, like even the avocado industry has that and seafood doesn't.

Fiona Robinson [00:29:34] Avocados from Mexico.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:36] Yes.

Fiona Robinson [00:29:37] Who doesn't remember that? It like sticks in your head.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:39] Yeah. And that's what we need. A catchy jingle and some seafood images and we're good to go. It's clearly more complicated than that. But the catchy jingle and the catchy slogan is what we need.

Fiona Robinson [00:29:51] Yeah, it's funny. Looking back, I have a fairly large library of old magazines here, only because I was in the industry. When you look back at the issues from the eighties and you saw the marketing that was done, not on a national basis, but

like the tuna companies, because they had way more money for marketing than any other seafood company did.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:09] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:30:10] Charlie the tuna and all of these other different things for so much avenue for working in a jingle or in a cartoon or something that would actually get the message across that you would remember. So, there's totally room for creativity in there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:22] That would be interesting to go back and look at those magazines someday. We'll have to maybe create a database.

Fiona Robinson [00:30:28] Go into the basement of Diversified. That's all there in a basement somewhere.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:32] That's right. That would be super interesting, actually. Yeah. Let's transition a little bit to talking about something that is near and dear to SAGE's and my heart, which is the gender equality in the seafood industry. And so as someone who has been in the industry for many years, I would love to hear your thoughts on one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector in your experience? And so, what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities?

Fiona Robinson [00:31:02] There are a couple of things that kind of stand out in my mind. You know, I remember attending my first industry event was in Boston. It wasn't at the show, but it was an industry event, and I was one of only maybe one or two women in the room. There was just a sea of men in blue suits. I remember coming back to the office and going what have I gotten myself into like, is this going to be it forever? It's not that I didn't want to be there, but it was very different. I was covering the gourmet food industry for whatever events you went to. It was such a diverse group of people in the room and then going into seafood and it was a stark difference. And I learned real fast to wear pants instead of a skirt, which is sort of sad to admit, I didn't experience gender bias in the industry per se. I experienced more gender bias in the publishing industry on many occasions, which, you know, made my blood boil. Actually, the last one was a pay equity situation that was actually addressed by my boss at the time, and a male coworker in the same type of position was getting paid significantly more, and it took my male boss to realize that and actually make it right. And so, yay, but seafood is such a male dominated industry or was up into the late nineties and I think the root of that was seafood harvesting. The beginning of the supply chain was largely a male dominated industry. The few women you saw were immigrants on a processing line, and there was only at the time one or two female buyers in the whole industry, buyers for restaurant or retailers. It was more of a women can't handle this hardcore industry mentality. You know, they're too soft, sensitive and we're kind of largely dismissed. You really had to have a really thick skin. As a reporter it was much different to look at the industry. I'm sure women who are in this industry decades ago felt dismissed at the time, but as women at the time were fighting for more equality in the workforce, you did start to see more female buyers in leadership positions. I left the industry for six years, I think it was, and then coming back into it a few years ago, I was amazed. The first event that I went to working as a staff person for SeaShare and I walked into a room, and I was just amazed at how many women there were in the industry. It was really nice and kind of a sight to behold for myself because so much had changed in a seemingly short amount of time. You know, six years is not that long a time, but having

women in leadership positions can go a long way to being mentors to other women in the industry and addressing their individual needs, which we as women know their needs are different, but we're just as equally as competent and in some cases more competent than our male counterparts. A lot has changed. There's still a lot of work to do. Everyone is saddened here about John Connelly's passing a couple of weeks ago. You know, he was truly a great leader. And now we have a new leader with Lisa Wallenda Picard as the new president and CEO of NFI, the National Fisheries Institute. I don't think she started her job yet. I think she starts mid-month. For me, it's inspiring. We've never met, but she's the first female leader of that organization. That says a lot.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:28] Right.

Fiona Robinson [00:34:28] She's got some big shoes to fill. And I hope over time she's able to draw more women into leadership positions in the industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:36] I do, too. That's great. Well said. So how can SAGE help you as a woman in seafood?

Fiona Robinson [00:34:41] You know, really just continuing the work that you're doing and advocating for equal representation in all aspects of the industry, you know, that didn't exist before, going from boat to plate is pivotal work. 30 years ago, women were told to quit being whiners and not rock the boat. That time is over and it's empowering for myself and for everyone in this industry and kind of looking in from the outside.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:04] That's great. And I will definitely continue to rock the boat and I think inspire others to do the same. This podcast is to inspire women and gender minorities working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. And you really represent the woman that I envision as the listener of The Conch. So, what advice would you give to people already in the business or thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector?

Fiona Robinson [00:35:26] Well, thanks. I would say don't be afraid to reach out to other women. Find a mentor that you can run ideas past. You can't do this alone. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and ask questions. There's never a stupid question. It's the question that's not asked. So don't be afraid to send emails or just call people just because. The relationships in this industry, they truly last a lifetime. And I had an editorial advisory board at Seafood Business made up of buyers in the industry and reconnecting with those folks now that I'm with SeaShare. We didn't talk to each other for six or seven years, but I run into them now at industry events or I can pick up the phone and it's like we never skipped a beat. And these are people that are just so genuine and willing to do anything to help you and having those relationships, but not having the conversation always be about, you know, what can you do for me? And that's really important in terms of building a valuable relationship with folks in the industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:30] Yeah, that's great advice. So, this podcast is one of the ways that SAGE fulfills its mission of uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry. And so I'd like to give you the opportunity to uplift someone. So who would you like to uplift and why?

Fiona Robinson [00:36:46] Well, you've mentioned her name a few times. Her ears are probably ringing.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:49] Ding, ding, ding.

Fiona Robinson [00:36:51] Linda Cornish. I thought about this for a while, actually, and a lot of the messaging we do revolves around the need for nutrition and nutritious product in the food bank industry. And I respect what Seafood Nutrition Partnership is doing and have been following Linda's work since before Seafood Nutrition Partnership even came to fruition. We were going to events that recalled seafood and health, and they were at conferences in D.C. and I think Linda is just so friendly and is such an eloquent speaker and has a knack for connecting people in the industry, especially around in this recent National Seafood Council and hopefully the potential work that's going to go on there and the marketing that needs to be done. I just really admire the work that she does and how well she does it. Kudos to Linda.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:40] Kudos to Linda. Thank you. That was an amazing uplift. So, I want to ask in our last minute we have together what's next for SeaShare and how can our listeners find you online and support you?

Fiona Robinson [00:37:51] There is always going to be a need for helping people who are food insecure. I'd like to be able to say in ten years that I won't have a job anymore, but unfortunately that's not going to be the case. There's always going to be hungry people to feed. SeaShare's biggest challenge right now is finding product from new suppliers who haven't donated before, either donating product or money for fundraising to continue the cause. We started in the Pacific Northwest and really need more representation from companies in the farmed seafood sector and on the East coast. We brought on Channel Seafood Processing in Massachusetts a couple of years ago. The first year of the pandemic. We started working with them and they've been great partners and we would certainly love to bring on more new partners who can donate processed product. We're always looking for that. So, I don't see prices going down in the near term, which is certainly a big challenge for me as a fundraiser. Do we need to double our fundraising because product prices are double or more? That's the question we'll be talking about with our board in the next month. So, we have some challenges going into 2023, but I'm optimistic. This is a great industry to work in and people really do want to help and it's just finding the right time and the right people to be able to come forward and help our mission.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:14] So how can we find you online?

Fiona Robinson [00:39:16] You can find us at SeaShare.org. You can donate online. You can find the contact information. You can reach out to our Executive Director, Jim Harmon, or myself. My email is Fiona@seashare.org. We have end of the year philanthropy programs that are going on with Trident, E&E Foods, American, Unisea. They're really successful if you want to know how to put one of those together, it's a great kind of engagement employee participation program, kind of end of the year kind of thing. You can certainly email me. Those are just kind of a gentle reminder of how easy it is to support those in need and keep employees engaged in your seafood company, you know, I've found them successful. We've found them successful. So, yeah, we're pretty easy to find on social media. We're on all the different channels. Pick up the phone, email, reach out, DM me. I'm here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:14] I know this is a busy time of year for you, and so I want to thank you, Fiona, so much for coming on and sharing your history and all about SeaShare and everything that you shared with us today. It was really a great conversation, and we

will definitely include all of the information about how to get in contact with you and support SeaShare in the show notes when those are ready. So, thank you.

Fiona Robinson [00:40:36] Well, thank you very much for the opportunity. I really enjoyed it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:39] Thank you for tuning into The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just 2 seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you!

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:40:52] 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.