

The Conch- Anoushka Concepcion.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are coasting along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some of 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 excited to have an incredible guest joining us, Anoushka Concepcion. Anoushka is an associate extension educator focusing on marine aquaculture with the Connecticut Sea Grant program, a faculty member at UConn's Department of Cooperative Extension and on the board of directors for the nonprofit organization Minorities in Aquaculture. Welcome and thank you, Anoushka, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's go.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:00:48] Hi, Julie. Thank you so much for inviting me. I'm really, really happy to talk to you.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:52] I'm happy to talk to you, too. And so you and I have talked a few times in the past, and we've actually crossed paths very quickly at an event or two. So, I'm really excited to get you on the program and learn more about the exciting work that you're doing. So, your focus is on supporting marine aquaculture stakeholders in Connecticut and this includes the nascent seaweed aquaculture industry and associated stakeholders. So, tell us about what this entails.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:01:18] Thanks. Just to start, I think it's important to understand what Sea Grant is, just to kind of give you a little bit of background on what my role is. So Sea Grant is a federal university partnership. We're part of NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Essentially, Sea Grant are the boots on the ground for NOAA. So, I work with everyone in Connecticut. So, anyone associated with the marine aquaculture industry, whether it's the farmers or the regulators or the end users of those products and general audiences, folks who just want to know more about marine aquaculture and about aquaculture in Connecticut. So, Sea Grant is the non-advocate and as a non-advocate, we have a very important role and a very unique role. So, we also fund research. We provide the science-based or evidence-based information about the research and about aquaculture and other coastal issues and challenges, but it really enables us as a non-advocate to work with all the sectors because we really don't have a stake or a vested interest in a particular outcome or objective. And we have that non bias role. Really our programing is based on what the needs of the industry is. We assist with identifying gaps in knowledge, working to find common ground amongst the various sectors of an industry. And a lot of what I do is also applied research. In addition to that, I facilitate meetings between different sectors, and I develop the extension and outreach resources that provide the knowledge so that folks can make more informed decisions. So, for example, seaweed, you mentioned the nascent seaweed aquaculture industry in Connecticut. There's a lot of interest in seaweed aquaculture, however, there are many practical challenges or barriers that exist preventing this new industry from expanding, and so helping folks navigate information, but also help them understand what these barriers are. A lot of my job is assisting them in differentiating between the perceived opportunities versus actual opportunities, perceived challenges versus actual challenges, but it also helps make folks more aware about what their potential role could be. So, it really sets them up for success and it also helps them understand whether or not this is something that they want to become involved in.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:47] So that's a really great starting point to understand exactly what Sea Grant is, because I actually didn't know all of that so thank you for that.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:03:54] Sure.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:55] It's really helpful. And we did have a woman from NOAA on here. Her episode hasn't been released yet, but it's exciting to see Sea Grant is like the boots on the ground for NOAA, which I think is really cool and a good way to put it.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:04:07] Right. And just also something to add. There are 34 Sea Grant programs. We have a national office, but then there's 34 different branches essentially of the national Sea Grant program in every coastal Great Lake and Pacific Island region and state. And there's essentially over almost really 3,000 extension professionals within the Sea Grant network in all of those programs, including the national office. So really, we are a pretty big network, but we're also relatively small and pretty close knit. It's really, really great working within the Sea Grant network but also, I feel very privileged because I have a lot of experts that I can reach out to whenever I have a question.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:50] Yeah, that's awesome. And there's nothing better than a network, honestly, I firmly believe. So, you mentioned the word extension several times. Can you explain what that is?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:05:00] Yes. So, extension, really the translation is, transfer of technology. So, we sort of bridge that gap of taking the research knowledge because we're scientists, but also having it more with an application in mind. And so, we have that understanding because many of us also come from industry. And so, we're able to mesh the research with application really well. And so that's what our role is. A lot of the time the research is very focused on something to address an immediate question, but I have to take that information and say, how does this translate to the real world? How can farmers, for example, actually apply this and implement the results of this research to their farms? And so that's a lot of the work that we do. And again, we provide that facilitation because we have an understanding of, for example, permitting when someone wants to site a seaweed farm or a shellfish farm, we have that understanding of what the potential criteria is or are. But then we also understand the needs of farmers and the costs of gear, for example. How challenging it may be for a farmer to start a business. And then we try and work with the two different parties to say, okay, you have these needs, you have these needs and these requirements. Where can we find common ground so that we can grow, for example, the aquaculture industry in a way that makes sense, that addresses everyone's needs. But essentially, it's creating a workforce. And so, these are the type of things that extension folks do for scientists. We also have that knowledge of industry, but then we also work in the communities that we live in as well. And so, we have that really 30,000 foot view of the whole story that we can apply to our work.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:58] Yeah, that's really helpful. Thank you so much for that explanation. You also collaborate with industry and regulators to address emerging challenges associated with; we're using seaweed aquaculture as the example here. So, what are some of those challenges?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:07:13] So the challenges, it's not unique to Connecticut. I mean, it's pretty much many of the same challenges globally, nationally as well. Really, some of the challenges start with markets and access to markets. Something like sugar

kelp, which is the predominant species of seaweed that we're growing in the United States. It has a very short harvest season of only two months. And considering our marine aquaculture industry is primarily bivalve, mollusk, and shellfish, so it's oysters and clams and mussels, and these organisms are sold alive and whole. And so, we're not really processing those animals. And so, we really don't have processing facilities that a lot of the seaweed farmers need to extend the shelf life of their kelp. And so that makes access to markets beyond the fresh market season, which is fantastic, fresh kelp, there's nothing better, but it's a very short window of two months. Access to markets, access to processing facilities, and establishing processing facilities to transition all that biomass into something that's more shelf stable is also a challenge. And for folks in southern New England, especially Long Island Sound, I think we have a unique challenge of access to seed. And seed is essentially the reproductive tissue where folks can produce sugar kelp. It's the seed that goes on the long lines and gets deployed out into the environment. And so, part of the reason why we have the challenge of access to seed is, well, rising sea surface temperatures. Sugar kelp is a cold-water species and with the increase in sea surface temperatures, it's getting really challenging and difficult essentially to find that reproductive tissue to make more sugar kelp. And with concerns of importing seaweed from other regions where we don't want to bring in non-native strains, it's really limiting what southern New England sugar kelp farmers can do in terms of ensuring that they have a long-term consistent supply of seed year after year. That's a challenge that's, I think, unique to southern New England. However, again, as rising sea surface temperatures continue, that concern may also impact farmers north of the Cape, too. So how do we go about that? I think there's a lot of research that needs to be done, but there's research that's being conducted right now to help address those concerns in terms of access to seed. But the markets and processing, that kind of takes a little bit longer because those are much larger investments, which a lot of our small-scale seaweed farmers just don't have access to.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:07] Yeah, those sound like some really incredibly difficult challenges. And the rising sea surface temperatures, that sounds very connected to climate change. And I do have a question about that, but I want to get back really quick to you and how busy you are based on what I read about you. You're super busy. And you also lead the National Seaweed Hub, which is a collaborative effort of 11 Sea Grant programs and their stakeholders. And you're addressing the emerging needs of the national seaweed aquaculture industry. And so, I think you kind of mentioned a few of these needs when you were talking about the challenges, right? It's like markets, processing, capacity. So, tell us about the National Seaweed Hub. And there's 11 Sea Grant programs, but you said there's like 30 plus Sea Grant programs total. So, I'm curious like how are some members and some aren't and you might be able to shed some light on that.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:10:59] So, yes, there are 34 Sea Grant programs. So technically there's well, Sea Grant programs that are involved with the National Seaweed Hub. Officially there are 11, and those are the Sea Grant states that are producing seaweed at a commercial scale.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:14] Gotcha.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:11:15] And so not everyone is producing, for example, sugar kelp, because it's a cold-water species. In the southern states, waters are too warm. Sugar kelp doesn't grow there. So that's where we initially started. But the whole impetus behind the National Seaweed Hub was back in 2018, I was getting a lot of phone calls from folks who are interested in learning more about seaweed aquaculture. And I reached out to my

colleagues starting off in the Northeast and I was just curious to see how they were handling all of these calls. And then I began to realize that we're all getting similar questions and that the information that was currently available was very limited, but also advocacy driven, which didn't provide answers to the questions that folks were asking. And I thought this was an opportunity for Sea Grant being the non-advocate, being science based, said, well, this is what we can do to not only help one another, but to help answer those questions that it's clear that there's a need or a gap in knowledge. And so that's when we applied for funding with the National Sea Grant program in 2019. The Seaweed Hub is one of 11 aquaculture hubs that were funded that year. Anyway, the National Seaweed Hub is meant to be a publicly accessible non-advocate resource about the domestic seaweed aquaculture industry. It's also a mechanism where we were able to identify national needs and barriers, but also work with stakeholders in all of our states to develop practical pathways towards addressing those needs, but also provide the status of the industry. So essentially, it's for everyone, it's for prospective farmers, current farmers, the different regulatory authorities, so folks involved in permitting or siting of seaweed farms, but also public health folks. And users of seaweeds and general audiences. And so while there's a lot of great information and great work happening out there with seaweed, we're providing that service where we're providing just the basic information that kind of helps people get more informed about what the realities are of seaweed farming. Being an aquaculture farmer may sound great, but it's really a lot of work. You know, some folks may think it's very glamorous and they have a romanticized idea of aquaculture, but again, it's really hard work. It's not for the faint of heart, especially seaweed farming, specifically, it's done in the wintertime. So, it's very dangerous water conditions as well. And so, we just want to make sure people are prepared and well aware also before they invest all their money into something when they realize, for example, you know, these challenges, which I look at as opportunities. For example, kelp is only available two months out of the year, so making sure folks are set up. You know what I tell folks? Well, I hope you have something for the other ten months of the year because it is about creating a workforce and making sure people are financially secure. What I do with my time is work with my amazing Sea Grant colleagues from across the country. You know, we collaborate on small projects that could then be implemented through the Seaweed Hub. We held the second National Seaweed Symposium in Portland, Maine, a few months ago, and it's really about sharing information, making sure folks can foster relationships. We connect folks with one another from the different states and just making sure people have the information that we need. So it's a lot of work. It keeps me very busy, but it's really rewarding.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:56] Yeah, it sounds like such an invaluable resource and, you know, seaweed and kelp farming and all that is so hot right now, right? And so, I'm surprised. I don't know. I guess it feels like there should have been something like this way earlier. So, I'm happy that you came up with it. But I mean, you said 2018. It just seems like the convergence of everything right now is super timely, right?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:15:17] Yeah, I think so. It is timely. And I think that, again, the idea of seaweed farming, the potential is very exciting. But we want to make sure again that folks have that understanding of excitement potential, but also where they fit in. And I think there's a lot of opportunities to help this industry expand. Not everyone has to be a kelp farmer. There's all these other associated sectors that really support moving the industry forward. And I think again, like I said, there's room for everybody.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:50] Yeah, there definitely needs to be a good reality check and it sounds like you're providing that. So, you mentioned public health, and so I was curious. I read that you're working on addressing public health concerns with seaweed aquaculture,

production, and processing. And I'm curious, what are those concerns in terms of public health?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:16:09] So, what we realized in Connecticut when we had the first kelp farmer who wanted to sell their kelp, they were selling it raw. There's food safety hazards with any raw food. And at the time, this was back in 2012, the state of Connecticut, the Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Aquaculture, which is the lead regulatory authority for both permitting and food safety of all aquaculture products in the state, they realized there was no federal guidance at all regulating food safety of seaweed. At the time, there really wasn't a lot of seaweed aquaculture occurring. And so, this was something completely new. They had no idea where to start because they wanted to make sure the farmer was able to sell their crop, but they also wanted to make sure that it was safe, there were no human health concerns. And so, what they did was they came to Connecticut, Sea Grant said, we need help figuring this out. I applied for grant funding, was able to get funding to support seven years' worth of research to investigate food safety hazards with fresh kelp. And what we were able to do was take what was, again, perceived concerns, determine what were actual concerns and what were not concerns, and then develop guidance for what the state consider could be concerning. So, bacteria making sure you keep the kelp hold so that it limits growth of bacteria because again, we're selling our kelp fresh. States like Maine, for example, they process their kelp into value added products, which not only increases the shelf life, but it's also to kill stuff. And so, you can get it off the shelf. And it's done in a way where standard federal food safety processing guidelines come into place. So, it ensures the food safety. But with fresh kelp, it's very different. It starts to decompose very quickly. And so, we did have to implement some sort of parameters to ensure that Connecticut kelp is safe to eat. What this did was we developed guidance that was then adopted in the state. We had farmers and the regulatory agencies review the guidance and put their stamp of approval on it. And since 2013, kelp farmers in Connecticut have been able to sell their fresh kelp directly to all sorts of consumers, whether it's restaurants, final consumer, because essentially, they get that vouch of safety from the state of Connecticut, which is really awesome. That's one example of the type of work I do or what my role is, where I collaborate with industry as well as regulators to address an emerging challenge or need. And essentially this guidance document that we came up with has been adopted by other states, but also other countries. Essentially, it serves as a model, which obviously has to be adapted to the different situations around the world. But it was very exciting to know that our little state of Connecticut is playing a big role in expanding seaweed aquaculture globally. So it's really exciting.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:14] That is really exciting, and I might have missed this. Is there a federal law about the food safety and handling of seaweed, or no? Or is it just by state?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:19:24] It's by state. But the FDA did make a declaration, which they say they consider fresh seaweed as a raw agricultural commodity. And that's important because now it gives guidance to the states on how they should regulate seaweed.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:42] Gotcha. Okay. That makes sense. So how did you become so passionate about aquaculture? What was your journey to get where you are today?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:19:51] Oh, that's a great question. I actually love this question. I have always been interested in marine science because some of my friends that I grew up with still can't believe I'm doing this, but I've always been interested in

marine science. But I wasn't so sure how I could make a career out of it. But I went to UNC, Wilmington, got my degree in marine biology, and it was after I graduated and thinking, okay, what am I going to do? I took a trip with my family to visit India, where my family's from, and we passed by a fish farm and my father said to me, this is what I should be doing with my degree in marine biology. It's growing fish to feed people in this village. And that's when a light bulb went off. And I thought, yes, food production and food security, that is what I should be doing. It just made complete sense to me. It was a perfect connection. And after that I got a job at a shrimp hatchery in the Florida Keys, and then I decided I want to go to graduate school for this. And then I went to University of Rhode Island and got my master's degree in fisheries, animal, and veterinary sciences, essentially in aquaculture. And I never looked back.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:03] How long have you been at Sea Grant?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:21:05] For 12 years.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:06] Oh, wow. That's a long time. That's awesome.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:21:09] It doesn't seem like a long time.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:13] I mean, you've done so much, so it's great. I love it. And that's a great story about India. And, you know, I mean, you can't look at the news or just read about aquaculture and not hear about the incredible aquaculture farming that's happening in India.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:21:30] Oh, right. It's all over Asia. And what's really nice is to see that there are a lot of small-scale family farms, just like here in the US that really comprise the aquaculture industry in a lot of Asian countries. And so, I think there's a lot of similarities between the challenges we have and what they have and vice versa. So, I think there's a lot of learning opportunities.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:54] Yeah, I totally agree. Can you share a favorite seafood memory?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:21:59] Oh, I don't know if it's a good memory. It's more of an embarrassing seafood memory.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:04] Love it.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:22:04] Just recently, a few months ago, or not even a few months ago, last month, I was helping a farmer take their lines out of the end of the harvest season. Not paying attention, and I just sliced my finger open.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:18] Oh, no. Are you okay?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:22:20] Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine. But it's just one of those things where you think it's, oh, kelp farming. It's glamorous, it's fun. No, it's not. It's not. But it's very dangerous. And, you know, I realized that day I was probably talking too much and not focusing on doing what I was supposed to do. But lesson learned, especially when I'm holding a knife, I need to be really careful and focus on what I'm doing.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:46] How does a knife come into play when you're working on these lines, you're cutting the kelp off it?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:22:50] Essentially. So kelp grows on long lines. And when we were removing, I was helping the farmer harvest the last of their kelp. And essentially, we pulled up the long line and just take a nice sharp knife and cut the kelp right at the stipe, which is essentially a stem, cut out right off the line and put it in bins. And so I kind of looked away at what I was doing, and I just spliced what I thought was the kelp. Oh, right through my glove and right through my finger.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:26] Did you have to get stitches?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:23:27] I did not, because I asked not to get stitches. Why? I don't know. But it seems to be healing ok.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:34] Ok.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:23:35] My kids are fascinated by this every day. They want to see it, watch it heal.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:41] Maybe there's some medicinal qualities in kelp that we don't know about yet and you're a test case.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:23:45] Maybe. Maybe

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:48] That was really helpful, because I actually don't know how kelp is harvested, so I think that's in my homework after this episode to watch a YouTube video or two. So, I want to get back to climate change and I read an interview. I say this all the time. I read some things about the people that I'm going to be interviewing on the show and having conversation with. And I read an interview with you and there was a quote in there and you say, "I am an extension agent with Sea Grant in Connecticut, and I work with the aquaculture community in Connecticut, which mostly grows shellfish. So, oysters and clams. And a lot of what these men and women are facing now with climate change, they are looking for ways to diversify in what they are growing." So, what are some of the things this community is facing in terms of climate change?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:24:35] With climate change. I think, you know, it impacts so many aspects of the seafood industry. Really in Connecticut, changing climate is impacting production as well as food safety and with rising sea surface temperatures, what we're seeing are potential predators that usually don't live in Long Island Sound. They're beginning their prevalence is starting to increase and that impacts shellfish production because a lot of them are predators of shellfish. And so, we're seeing a lot of those organisms show up in greater abundance. One example I can give you in terms of change in climate is the lobster crash in the 1990s. Before my time with Sea Grant, it's I think a great sort of example of how a changing climate can really impact and devastate an industry. Connecticut was just part of the Northeast lobstering industry for decades. Lobstering families, multigenerational lobstering families were very successful in Connecticut and through a combination of events, multiple factors. the industry crashed in the nineties, but with rising sea surface temperatures, the lobster industry has not been able to recover. And many of those lobstering families transitioned into aquaculture, mostly shellfish aquaculture. But I think it's a good example of, you know, you think things are great, but it's always good to have a backup, right? And so now with the growing interest

of seaweed farming, there is interest in incorporating kelp into shellfish operations as well. And really, the hope is to generate additional income and sort of have a backup before their season really gets busy, which is in the spring and summer time. So, I think it's more of kind of like a lesson learned. We saw the situation happen with the lobster industry in Connecticut, and I think a lot of our seafood producers are thinking now, you know, how can we not go back to that situation? How can we maintain our working waterfronts? How can we maintain our employees and the people that have been with us for years? How can we keep them employed? And I think they're looking for ways without impacting the environment, to work with the native organisms so that they can grow multiple crops on their leased site. And so that's sort of where the interest with kelp farming comes into play, but also with maintaining food safety, with warm temperatures, bacteria start to grow. And so I think now a lot of seafood producers, including kelp farmers, they want to maintain the food safety of their products because Connecticut has very conservative guidelines for food safety. And really, it's because of the industry following all these guidelines, they're able to ensure that the food that they're producing is safe for human consumption. But I think now aquaculture producers have to start incorporating additional measures which they maybe wouldn't have had to do 20 years ago to maintain food safety and quality. So, I think that's, again, multiple factors that are seafood industry is employing to kind of keep ahead of a change in climate.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:05] Yeah, that's really helpful. Thank you. Maybe it's just me. I just feel like we're not paying enough attention to what's happening in terms of the climate impacts. I don't know. Do you have that sense?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:28:15] Yes and no. I think that our seafood producers are very resilient. And they see things happening. I think before the rest of us realize it, they may not be ones to throw their arms up and, you know, they're really very practical people. If they see a problem, they'll figure out a way to address it, because the bottom line is it's their business, right? And so, they're doers, right? They make things happen and they again see something coming on the horizon. They try and nip it in the bud to the best of their ability, so it doesn't negatively impact their businesses. So yes and no, I think we're not paying enough attention but at the same time, I think a lot of folks are already implementing measures we just may not know about it yet.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:09] Yeah, that's true. That's true. And I'm interested in hearing more. So, if anyone has any good insight on what some measures producers are implementing around climate solutions. I would love, love, love to hear that. So, feel free to reach out. So, I mentioned in your bio at the top of the conversation that you are on the board of Minorities in Aquaculture, and I would love to hear why you wanted to become part of that incredible organization.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:29:36] Oh, my goodness. Let me tell you, this organization really spoke to me when I first learned about it. When I learned about Minorities in Aquaculture, I wanted to be a part of it immediately as a member. And I tell Imani Black, who's the founder, that I wish there was something like this when I was started, when I got started in marine science and in aquaculture 25 years ago. Representation means everything. Nobody looked like me. Nobody grew up like me or had the same experience as I did. I'm an immigrant who grew up in Queens, New York, so I'm very much a city kid. My family, I mentioned earlier, is from India. Like a lot of immigrant kids, I balance the two worlds between my Indian culture and as an American. So then going into aquaculture, a lot of folks, classmates, and friends that I grew up with, you know, as good immigrant kids, they became doctors and pharmacists and engineers and went into the financial industry.

And here I am. I just really love marine science, and this is what I want to do. So, through my journey, I've always struggled fitting in with my colleagues because I didn't grow up interacting with the coastline like they did. I didn't have anything in common with them other than my interest in marine science and in aquaculture. But with M.I.A. I am now meeting and mentoring young women who are just like me, who are trying to find their place in this field. I mean, they have a love of aquaculture, they have a love of food production, of, you know, environmental benefits that aquaculture can provide. But it's those nuanced ways of just kind of finding commonalities with colleagues in their classes or their classmates and their work colleagues that they also struggle with and. Again, I just think that miners and aquaculture is a perfect place, I think, for someone like me. As a little Indian girl growing up in the United States, just trying to find our way, but we can connect to our way of changing the world. And not having to fit in, but just being accepted for the way we look. You know, our culture, our religion, whatever the case may be. So, when Imani asked me to serve as a member of the board, you know, I was honored. But I wanted to make sure that in my role, young women, young women of color specifically, were able to find successful careers in the seafood industry. And I always tell young women, especially women of color, that you have to be practical. You can enjoy what you do, but you also have to be financially secure, independent and successful. And then that's when I say you don't have to be a farmer. There are many different roles that support seafood production, and that representation means everything. And there's always a place, you know, for us, and I think it's just having that support network that MIA provides, but also the internships that MIA provides. Not only do you have that safety net of MIA, but it sort of opens up practical experiences for lots of young women. And that's what I am really, really proud to be a part of this organization.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:53] That's great. Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think I also have nothing but incredible things to say about Imani and about Minorities in Aquaculture and just the importance. And also, again, it's like, how was this not a thing before? And I'm just so happy that it's thriving and that people like you are committed and involved in it. And not only just to support the industry, right, in inclusion in the workplace, but also just working with these incredible young people and showing them that you're here and they can be too. And you're right, there is a place for you. And also, you don't have to be a farmer to be involved in this industry. It's amazing. We also had Imani on the show. I want to say season two, I can't remember. Anyway, you can look for it on our website. I feel like season two, but it could be season one. So, I'm happy that you're also here. And just another big shout out for MIA and the incredible work that they're doing. So, SAGE just about promoting gender equality in the seafood industry. And I would love if you could share one or two aspects of the industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector. And what are some of the things that the industry can do about these inequalities?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:34:07] Yeah, this is a really good question and I think it's something that we all struggle with, and I struggle with. I'll just start off with some of the experience I've had and female colleagues have had, and I think a lot of challenges and this is not just specific to the seafood industry, but it's really being a woman in this environment, not being taken seriously, being talked over, being passed over for opportunities, not getting the credit we deserve for the hard work that we do, but also not being paid equally for the same job. And I think that that is just part of really the challenge of, for example, recruiting more women to the seafood industry, because again, it's a huge problem that really needs to be addressed. Another aspect is that many of us have been penalized for being working mothers and having to take time off to care for children or partners and even aging parents. Now I'm at that age now where my parents are needing

more help and my in-laws are needing more help, and it's taking the time away to make sure that they get to their doctor's appointments. So, I have my children and I have my parents to take care of, but it's time away, which again, we get penalized for. For those especially of us who have had to cut back hours or work part time, it's caused us to fall far behind our male colleagues in not only salary but other benefits, even though we work just as hard in some ways twice as hard. So, I think a lot of these underlying issues in the way the various industries are structured really have to address, especially if they want to recruit women and people of color and especially women of color. I think a lot of the structure of the way these businesses are designed is they really have to look at how their employees are being treated and how to create a more inclusive, welcoming environment. You know, what's helped me is to talk about some of these experiences. I've been fortunate enough to have a group of mentors have given me really good advice, even though I may not understand their reasoning at first. And I may say, why are you telling me to do this? This is not what I want to do. But, you know, I think a lot of their advice has helped me find other opportunities. But to also negotiate, you know, my value and how I'm being valued. I don't know if that answers your question, but I think it's so big and huge some of these challenges. But I think it's really important to continue highlighting these inequalities.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:54] Yeah, I totally agree. And I think you did answer the question. I did see a meme on social media recently. Someone said they were at a job interview and they're like. can you explain this gap in your employment? And the joke is no because I signed an NDA. So basically, if you're a mother and you have to step out of the employment, you know, game for a while to take care of your children or to take care of your elderly parents, that's the answer. No, you signed an NDA. Terrible, Terrible. How can stage support you as a woman in seafood?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:37:28] Well, first of all, allowing all of us to bring awareness and to talk about these challenges and experiences means conversations like this, that, yes, some people may say, oh, I've heard it before, but no, we have to keep talking about these challenges because I know that there are solutions out there. It's just reaching those folks that have those solutions and a way to practically implement those solutions. So it's really important, again, that you ask this question. I thank you for that, because it's something that we should never stop talking about until it's been resolved. But I think perhaps providing resources and the support and advocacy to implement change. I'm not so sure how this could be achieved, but maybe it's providing some sort of mechanism like a committee or a group, whether an expert can be provided at a workplace, an expert that's dedicated to developing pathways to prevent inequalities, not just highlighting them, or talking about them. But again, practical. Implementable measures. Also, these experts to come in and maybe assess current policies in a workplace and find ways to make them better. But I think overall, having programs that support even women's health as women's health issues are different from men's. I mean, it's just like little things like this committees, groups that provide support.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:58] I think that's really good advice. I think you're right. And, you know, we do have hopes someday to be able to provide solution services to companies, because I think a lot of them, you know, the problem specifically with the seafood industry is a lot of them don't even have like an HR department. You know, so it's like, how do you find the way in to say, hey, let's work together to kind of address some of these issues and challenges within your own company? So, we're thinking a lot about that. So, I think you're on to something.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:39:27] That would be fantastic. Just personally, I'm always looking for ways to improve, even myself. So having a resource to go to say, okay, maybe I can try and implement some of these recommendations into my company or into my program or my team, you know, with measurable objectives to achieve solutions that I think would also be a great even if it's something small.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:55] Yeah, I totally agree. So, this podcast is to inspire people working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. And you are definitely representative of the person that I envision as a listener of The Conch and of course, you know, you're in the sector, so what advice would you give to people already in the business or thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector? And you know, you're the reality check, so I appreciate a healthy dose of reality in your advice.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:40:23] First, I would say find those mentors. Have your group of mentors that will ground you, give you practical advice, but that will also challenge you and want the best for you. I always tell young women, don't just find the yes people. You know, the hype men and women are great, but you want to find those people that know your skills, that know what you're capable of doing and help you achieve your goals. You know, they see something in you that you might not see yourself. So, value those people, find those people, and keep them. But also, to think outside the box. Don't just limit yourself to one type of job. You know, again, I said earlier, you know, seafood production is not just being a farmer, a shellfish farmer, or a kelp farmer. Think about the supporting sectors like regulatory roles or processors or dealers. Again, representation means everything. We need that representation in these different sectors to level the playing field. And having especially women who are great at multitasking in all of these different sectors, I think would really make a positive change. And I think really and I tell this to my daughters all the time, know your value and don't accept anything less. Now, if you can't find a job immediately, that's fine. You know, bide your time, gain skills in other areas like business management, electrical work. I think these skills can help make you stand out from the competition. I was not able to find a job after graduating with my master's degree in any sort of seafood sector. So, I went to the pharmaceutical industry, and I paid my bills. I was a technical rep. I was selling raw materials for these pharmaceutical companies to put into their drug formulations. And again, it paid the bills, was what I wanted to do? No. But I did presentations and I got to travel, talk to people. So, I was really able to hone those skills. But then also I learned how to talk to people who were not seafood people and it was still in science, different type of science. But I think it just helped me think on my feet, but also to be as practical as possible. I'm so glad I'm back in the seafood sector where I belong. That's what my passion is. But again, I just took that time again when my skills and reassess and transitioned seamlessly back into a job with Sea Grant.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:52] That's really great advice. Thank you for sharing that. So SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry and this podcast is one of the main ways we're doing this. So, I'd love to give you the opportunity to uplift someone. So who would you like to uplift and why?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:43:07] Oh, yes. I want to give a shout out to all my fellow working mamas. We don't give ourselves enough credit. You know, we juggle our careers, we're caretakers as well as trying to have our own lives. But I don't know how we can fit that in. Mm hmm. But, you know, I don't think anyone can fully understand the struggle unless they're in a similar situation. Again, whether they're taking care of children, taking care of aging parents. It is a lot of sleepless nights, a lot of worry. There's a lot of guilt and a lot of judgment, not only judgment on ourselves, but judgment from others. You know, we

don't get the credit we deserve. But again, just a shout out to all the moms. You're doing a great job. We'll make it through. Yeah, we'll find a way to support each other. And for any of the men that are listening, please help out every now and then. It won't kill you to do a load of laundry. And by doing the laundry, you also have to fold the clothes and put them away because the laundry isn't done until you fold the clothes and put them away. Just wanted to add that in there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:14] That's really helpful. And I love that shout out because yes, I'm a working mom too, and I have felt bad more times than I care to admit. To be honest.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:44:23] I don't know why we beat ourselves up, you know?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:26] Yeah, I do. I mean. It's how we're taught, right? It's ingrained within us, I think. But we're working on it. We're going to continue to work on it. So how can our listeners find you online or find Connecticut Sea Grant?

Anoushka Concepcion [00:44:39] I think you just google Connecticut's Sea Grant and then I'm there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:43] Yeah, you're on the internet quite a bit, which is great because it's helpful for me for this interview. You've done a lot of amazing things and we've come to the end of our conversation, and I just want to say thank you so much for your willingness to come on here and your openness in sharing all of your great insight and your knowledge and just amazing conversation. and I can't thank you enough, Anoushka.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:45:05] Oh, thank you so much, Julie. You are the best.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:08] No, you are.

Anoushka Concepcion [00:45:09] No, you are. You are.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:12] Thank you for tuning in to The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Crystal [00:45:25] The 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.