

FISHERMEN SPOTLIGHT:



SEABORN SEAFOOD

An interview with Captain Kerry Harrington where he shares the story of how Seaborn Seafood got its start and his hopes for the future.

VOICES
OF THE
COASTAL BAYS



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I met with Captain Kerry Harrington, the owner of Seaborn Seafood, on his dock during a chilly day in February. Nearby, Kerry's son and grandson were hard at work getting the boat, the *Seaborn*, ready for a trip. Music was playing through the radio as people came to purchase their fresh seafood, and a few patient seagulls were waiting for the possibility to steal a stray piece of fish. It was quite the charming setting to me, but to Kerry, it is all part of his familiar and routine workspace.

Captain Kerry is a native of the Eastern Shore. Born in Milford, DE, he got his start fishing in the Indian River Inlet in 1968 and began fishing full-time the following year. Like many fishermen in the area, Kerry came from a fishing family. His father was an avid sport fisherman. Although he passed away when Kerry was six, Kerry continued his legacy of sportfishing, which took him to many places around the world, including the Bahamas, Mexico, and the Virgin Islands. Though he enjoyed traveling, he was often gone for up to three months at a time, which made it hard to settle down and start a family. Eventually, his brother proposed they work together, and Kerry settled back on the Eastern Shore in 1979 - the year of the famous ice storm that turned the Atlantic Ocean into an icy slush. Kerry remembers watching the pier collapse from ice damage and thinking to himself, "I made a bad move", after leaving the tropics for a cold, icy mess.

Despite the rough winter, Kerry stuck around and sold seafood off his boat, *Seaborn*, for quite some time. It wasn't until right before the COVID-19 pandemic began that his current business, Seaborn Seafood, was able to come to full fruition with the help of his son and grandson. With his son taking over operations on the *Seaborn*, and his grandson taking over operations on the *Integrity*, another one of Kerry's boats,



Captain Kerry with his son, daughter, and grandsons

Kerry was able to shift his focus to starting a more permanent seafood market, and thus, Seaborn Seafood was born. Currently, three generations work at Seaborn, and another generation is right in line to learn the family business. Kerry's daughter also helps with cutting fish and operating the market. Kerry explained that when it gets busy in the summer, he is thankful to have some extra help with cutting, as it is difficult for them to cut fish as quickly as they sell them.

Though not nearly as busy in the winter, Kerry explained that even during that time of year they bring in a great diversity of seafood including lobsters, seabass, monkfish, squid, porgys, and mackerel. Moving more into spring, they will begin to catch more tuna, swordfish, pomfret, and mako shark.

Seaborn Seafood is able to bring in such a diversity of products because they utilize several different fishing methods. One of these methods uses a longline, which is comprised of a very long trail of fishing line with many baited hooks. Kerry said that they typically use about 20 miles of fishing line during their longline trips. These lines can be set at many different depths depending on what species the fisher is trying to catch or avoid. Recently, Kerry has been seeing pilot whales "by the thousands," while in the past it was more common to see pods of twenty to thirty.

These pilot whales are large predators that often take advantage of a longline's bait or catch, and have been known to bite tuna right off the hook. This increase in pilot whales has caused longliners like Kerry to adjust the depths at which they set their hooks, and they now fish at depths around 1,100 feet, below where pilot whales are typically found. Due to this change, Kerry says they have been seeing more opahs and pomfret on their lines. These are deepwater fish that are frequently caught in Hawai'i, where fishermen often set their longlines to greater depths. According to Kerry, we have plenty of opah near Ocean City, but common fishing practices in the area do not typically bring them in.



Fresh fish packed and ready for sale.

The *Seaborn* also utilizes traps known as pots, similar to the well-known ones used to catch the blue crab. Kerry noted that out of all his gear, pots typically take the most preparation as you have to set, retrieve, and clean them and make sure they are in running order for the start of the season. And, though Kerry does not fish using trawls, the *Seaborn* is also perfectly equipped to set and drag trawls. For a relatively small boat that Kerry built himself, it is impressive that the *Seaborn* has three different fishing options on board.

Kerry built the *Seaborn* from scratch, and it has been through everything with him. He has taken the *Seaborn* to the Yucatan Peninsula, the Florida Keys, and even Cuba. It is equipped with living quarters, showers, a galley, and is still able to hold twenty thousand pounds of fish below deck. With amazement, I asked him how he learned to design a fishing vessel, and he replied "trial and error". He said he took components he liked on other boats and put them all together to create the one-of-a-kind boat of his dreams. He made sure to build it heavy-duty too because he knew it would one day be passed down to younger generations.

In addition to their adventures, Kerry and the *Seaborn* have also seen many changes to the commercial fishing industry and the OC Fisherman's Marina since their first voyage. Kerry mentioned that he has been noticing some shifts in the species around the area, as warmer waters are presumably bringing in species commonly seen in more southern waters. Over the years, the marina has also seen shifting currents and shoals, more condominium development, and many different businesses come and go. However, out of all the changes Kerry described, the most notable was how the harbor has quieted down in the past couple of decades.

The reduction in activity can be attributed to several challenges fishers have had to face over the past 40 years. In the 1980s, they were still adapting to the challenges that the 200-mile-limit, or the Magnuson-Stevens Act of 1976, brought. Because of very limiting regulations, many fishermen had to quit early on. Those who now remain have adapted and the regulations have been adjusted to meet the needs of the fishermen better. The 1980s also brought developers seeking to construct condominiums in the greater Ocean City area. If the marina was developed, this would push the fishermen south, which is farther away from the inlet, the only access point to fishing grounds in the Atlantic. Kerry remembers being in the courthouse with his fellow fishermen until one o'clock in the morning fighting to stay in the marina, and they eventually succeeded. Kerry also mentioned that a current challenge is the difficulty of being a small-scale fisher in the wake of large corporations with boats much bigger than Kerry's.

Perhaps the most current and controversial challenges facing Kerry and the other fishermen of Ocean City come from the proposed wind farm offshore of Ocean City. When built, the wind farm will take up eighty thousand acres and will be built about fifteen miles offshore, though exact plans for the project continue to change. Supporters of the project are looking forward to the clean energy and well-paying jobs that the farm is projected to bring. Those in opposition are largely against the many unknowns that this project will bring about, such as how it will affect the beach views or wildlife offshore. The fishermen, however, have their own concerns regarding this project. Many fear that the farm will block their access to important fishing grounds and displace species vital to their fishing operations - something that Kerry worries will devastate the commercial fishing industry in Ocean City altogether. While fishermen have been told that they will be able to fish around the site,

Kerry is unsure how that will work out. Fishing around wind turbines, he says, will be dangerous navigating around, especially with long fishing nets and lines that can get snagged on the turbines. Beyond fish, Kerry is worried about the turbines' effects on other wildlife that help keep marine ecosystems balanced, such as horseshoe crabs, marine mammals, and seabirds. Kerry understands the need for cleaner energy - "We [humans] do a lot of damage. Don't get me wrong. We can do better [at reducing pollution]" - but he worries that not enough research has been done to know the full impacts that the wind farm will have.

Despite its many challenges, Kerry loves the life that fishing has given him and appreciates all of the places he was able to see. Every day he is on the water, he enjoys the "excitement of the unknown" and the anticipation of seeing what is in his net or at the end of the lines. With the establishment of Seaborn Seafood, Kerry has been able to get experience with the market and retail end of seafood sales, where he enjoys some added bonuses. "The neatest part [of retail] is to meet so many people. Everybody's got a story to tell. That is another really rewarding part of this job", he says. Alongside the great people he meets at the market, he also appreciates other fishermen in the harbor who are like family to him.

In the future, Kerry is looking forward to further mentoring the younger generations at Seaborn Seafood. His great-grandsons, seven-year-old twins and a two-year-old, already practice throwing a cast net with him. He worries a lack of young people will cause the industry to die off, but he always hopes to "keep the light lit" so the commercial fishing fleet of Ocean City can continue to persist.

Though he is unsure about the future of Ocean City's commercial fishing industry, Kerry only has plans to expand his company.



Captain Kerry looks into the *Seaborn* with the seafood market in the background



The *Seaborn* docked in the West OC Harbor

He is currently working on rebuilding a 55' steel boat, which had to be completely torn apart and started from scratch. Previous owners were going to send the boat to the junkyard, but Kerry "hate[s] to see a good boat go to waste". This boat, which will be completed around May, will be the third boat running for Seaborn Seafood. Captain Kerry has worked hard to provide a good life for his family, and now he is passing his lifestyle and knowledge down to his children and grandchildren. "It's a passion you develop. It's not easy. Most people would throw their hat down... sometimes it's really rewarding and sometimes it's not. But life is that way."

If you want to support Kerry and Seaborn Seafood, you can find his market at 12906 Sunset Avenue, Ocean City, in the OC Fisherman's Marina. You can also follow Seaborn Seafood on Facebook and Instagram, and give them a call to subscribe to their text message chain and stay up to date on the latest catch!

This interview is part of the *Voices of the Coastal Bays* interview series. *Voices of the Coastal Bays* is a project by the Maryland Coastal Bays Program that aims to promote local commercial fishing companies, highlight the local fishing history, and educate on the seafood found in our waters. For questions regarding this project, please reach out to Liz Wist at lwist@mdcoastalbays.org. You can find more on this project at mdcoastalbays.org or on our social media pages.

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