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BANNER

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A fisheries observer's tale

Woman translates
Provincetown
upbringing into
science- and
water-based career

By Peter J. Brown
Banner Staff

PROVINCETOWN — As the daughter of a commercial fisherman turned whale-watch naturalist turned tugboat inspector, perhaps it's not surprising that Talilla Schuster herself ended up in a career where she spends most of her time out on the water.

Since April of last year, Schuster, who currently divides her time between Provincetown and Steuben, Maine, has worked as a fisheries observer for East West Technical Services, a Connecticut-based company contracted by NOAA Fisheries to manage observers.

She goes out 40 to 50 times per

year on different fishing vessels. Her job is to identify and quantify both kept catch and "discards," including not just fish, but everything that comes onboard, from invertebrates and seaweed to debris and bones.

"You can't grow up in Provincetown without an attachment to the ocean," she tells the Banner.

Born in Boston, Schuster grew up in Provincetown, where her mother owned a restaurant and taught French at Provincetown High School. Her father currently works on tugboats as a dredge materials inspector but was once a commercial fisherman and then a naturalist on a whale-watch boat.

As a kid she even spent a half-year aboard a research vessel with her father, as well as days on end aboard whale-watch boats, which sparked an interest in science. After getting her associate's degree at Cape Cod Community College, she went on to finish her undergraduate studies at UMass-Boston in environmental science, with a focus



Fisheries observer Talilla Schuster holds a golden tilefish. PHOTOS COURTESY TALILLA SCHUSTER

on marine biology.

Her upbringing also instilled in her a love of travel, and she likes to look at each fishing boat as a new country that she has never been to before.

"I have to learn to adapt to the local way of life, learn to get along with people who may or may not be very different from me, and I get to have some new experiences," she says. "Of course, I also have to do my job, so it's not like a sightseeing

vacation."

She likes her workspace at sea, and the people she works for, too. She also enjoys the flexibility, choosing when to observe and when not to. While she enjoys the chance to "disconnect" aboard a vessel — read and listen to music — she can never disconnect entirely. There are always things to do, like uploading lots of data, which is often a lengthy process. And then there is the paperwork, too — lots

of it.

But the job is more than just paperwork. "It is quite demanding physically, starting with the vast amount of equipment that I need to lug around," says Schuster. "During the trip, I weigh fish, and frequently move large quantities of discards. Once the haul has been identified and quantified in my waterproof notebook, I get ready for the next

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New businesses gear up for summer boom



Michelle Axelson is the new owner of Womencrafts.

By Peter J. Brown
Banner Staff

PROVINCETOWN — The long, hard winter has given way to a sunny spell. Weekday crowds even before Memorial Day appear a bit larger than normal for this time of year. And, with the promise of a busy summer 2015 ahead, business owners are gearing up and getting ready for the summer rush.

Up and down Commercial Street, new business owners are scrambling, too, getting last-minute touch-ups and hiring done. In addition to brand new businesses, this year's line-up in the "new" category also includes

new owners taking over some longtime businesses.

Womencrafts gift shop and bookstore, for example, at 376 Commercial St., has a new woman at the helm. Former store manager Michelle Axelson has become the new owner

and is making a few changes. New products include a line of environmentally sustainable, fair trade goods hand-made by women's collaboratives in Malawi and Brazil, "with a nod

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SCHUSTER

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haul.”

Coping with homesickness, eating food that she is not used to, losing sleep with an erratic schedule, “grumpy fishermen and [her own] grumpiness” also are all part of her job.

The erratic schedule also includes a lot of driving, along with last-minute cancellations, delays and timetable changes. She travels between Portland, Maine, and Point Judith, R.I. She may find herself aboard boats out of New Bedford, Gloucester, Chatham, Newburyport, Kittery and Scituate.

And the trips can range from eight hours to 12 days, but four days is the average, she says.

She knows her presence is not always a picnic for the fishermen either.

“Having an observer onboard is a bit of a nuisance for the fishing crew. There are certain things I do in order to do my job that disrupts their routine no matter how hard I try not to,” she says.

Each time the fishing gear is being brought onboard with catch, she is out on deck so she can see everything that is hauled in.

“The crew sorts through the catch, separating what they are keeping from what they are not keeping. Once it’s clear to me what

they are discarding, I often help sort the catch by collecting discards,” she says.

What she gets to keep, however, is up to the captain and crew, not her. The information she gathers is added to NOAA’s fisheries database and then used to monitor the overall health of various fish populations in the region.

“Besides identifying and quantifying the catch, I might collect fish scales or a section of the vertebrae which need to be frozen and sent overnight in a cooler. That data is used to determine population health, for example,” she says.

If any “incidental catch” has been caught in the fishing gear, such as marine mammals, sea turtles or sea

birds, she must sample, document and tag it.

In addition to fish bycatch, sometimes other creatures are caught in the nets. There are special procedures Schuster must follow if sea turtles are brought aboard, alive or dead, or dead seabirds or dead marine mammals.

Once a blue shark was brought on deck. “It was very much alive and thrashing about. Its sharp-toothed mouth was a little closer to me than I would have liked,” she remembers.

There are different routines involved in life aboard the fishing vessels. When it comes to dinner, for example, it is often prepared

by a crewmember and they all eat together as a group.

“The observer should be offered whatever the crew is being offered,” she says. “However, on one boat they did not do any cooking whatsoever, nor [did they] eat any meals together, and barely had any food aboard. I survived since it was a shorter multi-day trip, and because I always bring a lot of snacks and soups with me anyway.”

Having had a somewhat adventurous childhood growing up in Provincetown, Schuster says this job is reminiscent of that.

“Becoming an observer brings a sense of adventure to my life again. It allows me to be out on the water and to be involved in science.”



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