

Darius Kaspzrak, Jig fisherman, Kodiak, Alaska  
Interviewed by Josh Wisniewski and Marissa Wilson  
01/24/2022  
American Folk Life Center

Darius Kaspzrak was born in 1969 is a long-time resident of Kodiak Alaska, having moved to a remote area on the south end of Kodiak Island when he was 6-years old, hitch-hiking through Canada . Darius has lived on Kodiak Island most of his life and has participated in multiple Kodiak area fisheries including set-gillnetting, seining, longlining for sable fish and working on draggers before eventually acquiring his own boat to commercial jig for cod and rock fish. His life story is one of growing up and being raised in and by a fishing community, and developing a intimate relationship with the marine ecology of the North Pacific, though jig fishing.

- 0:00-05:00 Born 1969, Growing up on ranch 30 miles north of Flagstaff. Building geodesic dome house. Selling firewood, raising rabbits, living on homestead.
- 05:00-10:00 Logging companies move in, logging around ranch, parents oppose logging, decide to move to Alaska. Hitchhiking through Canada, friendly people, easy to get rides in Canada and Alaska, not in Lower 48 United States. Staying at remote lodge, learning to tie shrimp flies and take steam baths. Arrive Kodiak Island, travel to south end of the Island, arriving in remote Alaska Native community on mail plane
- 10:00-15:00 Slow life on south end of the Island, Dad gets care taking job at local cannery. Fixing up old cod fishing dory. Exploring south-end of the island. Moving into set net cabin. Set netting with dad. Age 14-15 move to City of Kodiak for school.
- 15:00-20:00 full share deckhand at 16. Living in dorms and with foster parents, learning social skills, rough first year. City of Kodiak was boom town, alcohol culture. Large parties, high rate of mortality of fisherman and young people from substance abuse.
- 20:00-25:00 Home schooled by mom before moving to town, trained educator, teachers flying to remote camps delivering educational materials. Breezing through high school, graduating early. Return to southend to help parents build sailboat, college in Fairbanks. Start halibut fishing at 16, different gutting techniques, east coast and west coast styles. Becoming professional halibut butcher.
- 25:00-30:00 Diversity of the fleet. Professional halibut fishing schooners. Different techniques Portuguese technique, seining out of Old Harbor. Running seine skiff at 18.
- 30:00-35:00 24-48 hour halibut derby fishing in 1980s, 1990s. Using the wrong tyle of gear, black cod fishing, gear work.

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- 35:00-40:00 Dangerous fishing conditions, 56,000 lbs of halibut in 24 hour opener. Big money at 19, almost falling off the boat, nature of Kodiak style fishing.
- 40:00-45:00 Abundance, getting away with unsafe fishing practices. Large halibut bio-mass. Travelling to Dutch Harbor, boat misses opener. Tying the wrong knots, loosing gear. Important lesson about speaking up. Skipper decides to not pay crew, leaving boat.
- 45:00-50:00 Dutch Harbor, Long black cod seasons 1980s-1990s. Fishing prior privatization, no idea of privatization of halibut fishery. Working on large boat with no safety gear and not set up right for fishing.
- 50:00-55:00 Boarded by coast guard. Catching 25 thousand lbs. Skipper falls asleep, using navigation skills taught in high school. To bring boat back to Kodiak. After privatization, can't get halibut fishing job.
- 55:00-60:00 Boats not hiring experienced deckhands, didn't know about jigging, professional skiff man, walking the docks to find fishing jobs. Working on draggers, making good money.
- 1:00-1:05 Visit parents in Mexico, meet Earle Flynn son who has boat in Alaska, gives boat to Darius. Finding boat in Seldovia, totally rotten. Salvaging materials from boat, finding boat in Kodiak.
- 1:05-1:10 Working on a dragger, skipper drives over a reef, boat almost sinks power goes out plugging hole with a survival suit.
- 1:10-1:15 Coast Guard nearby helps save boat. Observer eating pickles. Repair boat return fishing. Skipper mad, that loose fishing time, in area closed to trawling for State cod fishery. Seeing cod jigging as viable fishery to enter. One fish first year, 25,000 second year.
- 1:15-1:20 Becoming a jig fisherman. Started jigging in 1996-1997. Had not been much commercial cod jigging in Alaska in 70 years. Jigging machines were available, started jigging by hand friends donating gear to get started. Prior to jigging, professional skiff man in seiner. Started postponing salmon fishing to jig for cod until cod collapse in 2012-13. Buy the *Hightide* in 1997, 39 ft jig boat, getting .32-.40 cents per lb. Boom cod years w/warmer water, cod famines in colder water, famine not the same as stock collapse. Cod collapse base on water that is too warm.

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- 1:20-1:25 Bitter over loss of access to halibut fishery from rationalization. Fighting efforts to rationalize the cod fishery. Mentors, learning the ethic of single-handed fishing. Learning that one can fish alone. Issues with privatization of fishery. Kodiak fishing community "Ratz Wars" and grass roots resistance to privatization. Begin participating in North Pacific Fisheries Management Council process.
- 1:25-1:30 First develop relationship with Alaska Marine Conservation Council (AMCC) Advocate for jig access to cod fishery. Mentors in navigating the Council process. Jigging is recognized as a viable fishery. Portion of cod fishing quota set aside for the jig fishery. Elected president of the Jig Association.
- 1:30-1:35 Buys the *Marona* in 2010. Wanted a jig boat that was also a salmon troller because of seaworthiness of trollers. Buys from Neil Rickman who was extraordinary jig fisherman. who would catch half million pounds annually fishing solo. Neil as fishing mentor. Had good season in 2010, supports buying boat.
- 1:35-1:40 Cod crash begins 2012 was a good fishing year. 2013 the cod were gone. Survive by fishing for rockfish. Mentors encourage to go out to Sand Point. Never ran that far in the boat prior. Mentors say to not make it a big deal out of it. Arriving in Sand Point. Mentors showing him how to fish new area. Abundance of cod and rockfish at Sand Point and Shumagin Islands. Out-fished by mentors.
- 1:40- 1:45 Making enough in Sand Point to pay for repairs on *Marona*. Mentors and bulk of Kodiak jig fleet go to Sand Point the next year. Makes choice to stay in Kodiak and fish for rock fish. Focus high quality fishery over high-volume fishery. Evolving marketing for rockfish. Evolving markets and community supported fisheries. 15 years to learn how to catch dusky rockfish. Spread gear out right, tie own shrimp flies, that learned to tie as a kid when first came to Alaska. Begins working on tug boat to supplement income.
- 1:45-150 Working on tug boats and returning to working as a skiff man to supplement fishing income after cod crash, some cod are starting to return, opportunity to run a seiner. Building jigging gear. Started by learning to tie shrimp flies as a kid. Active in sports fishing. Used allowance to save up to buy a fly tying vise. Waiting for mail plane, day off from school work when plane would come. Parents get fly fishing rod.

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- 1:50-1:55 Making rubber gear for cod, seeing transition from J hook to circle hook. Snagging fish and crab from cannery dock as a kid and making a periscope out of a coffee can. Circle hooks used for jigging; Circle hooks based on Alaska Native technological adaptations. Begin jigging using circle hooks with bait. Small enough circle hooks not available. Making circle hooks from J-hooks. Learning about hook gap, offset and barb curl. People don't spend time bending hooks in. Speed versus quality, learning to make lightweight durable circle hooks.
- 2:00-2:05 Building durable shrimp flies, time consuming, willingness to make multiple flies daily. Swivels plastic, making into circle hook, off-set, hook gap correlation.
- 2:05-2:10 Transferring skills from longlining and sport fishing to jigging. Not wanting to snag or hurt fish unnecessarily. Facing challenges glad started young learning by exploring and not having obligations. Detailed local knowledge.
- 2:10-2:18 Fishing places that make you second guess your knowledge. Challenges in fishing today. More technological short cuts, less fish. Putting in time to learn fishing areas without making money. Facing criticisms, more appealing to work for less fishing by self than working for other people. Trial and error.
- 2:18 End of Interview.