



SPIRITS UNDAMPENED, Marguerite Stroosma-Jacobs and Deidre Stroosma display two kings. They were sein-
ing Southeast, aboard the Eleanor.

DEIDRE STROOSMA, 1991

SEEKING THEIR FORTUNE

Alaska is known for its bountiful ocean, but these women have found its greatest treasure within themselves.



JACK KARUZA

SEINE SISTERS: Stephanie Dyer (left), author Jennifer Karuza, and Cassandra Wright, with a deckload aboard their father's boat, *Vis*, and her builder, Larry Hilty.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

Commercial fishing in Alaska could be described as a man's kind of world. It's a world of unrelenting weather and endless labor. Foul language and scruffy beards are everywhere.

It could also be described — scruffy beards notwithstanding — as a woman's kind of world.

Just like the men who go North, there are women who relish the excitement of racing for the first set, who save sinking boats, survive storms, thrill at a deckload, and return each season to embrace whatever Alaska has to give them.

Make no mistake: The women in this story didn't go to Alaska for one season just to say, "I did it."

These are women who purse seine in Southeast and gillnet in the Copper River and Bristol Bay. They work on processors on the Aleutian Chain and Prince William Sound and longline in the gulf. They fish with fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles and husbands. They are even doing it all on their own and making it work.

"It's true what they say; fishing gets in your blood. You do it once, and you keep going back," says Gina Bornstein, 28, who has fished off Washington and California as well as Alaska.

During the six seasons I spent piling web in Southeast (for my dad, Jack Karuza, with my two sisters) I truly learned the value and reward of hard work. Alaska is where I learned to appreciate the luxury of sleep and to delight in well-deserved play. In Alaska, I found life I didn't know existed, a life that was real. Laughter was genuine, nature was untouched, and money was made through honest labor.

I went to Alaska largely to pay for college, but the rewards for my toil turned out to be more than financial.

I was not predisposed to the sort of labor that involves the work of a deckhand, but found I could do more than I'd expected. Perhaps I did hose the deck clean more effectively than I caught heavy tie-up lines, and maybe I never did get the hang of a knot or two. What mattered was that I did my best and put out all my effort, and left each season knowing I had done something not

just anyone could do. I felt strong and I felt proud — and I also had another three months' worth of fish stories in my memory and tuition for the next school year in my pocket.

I am not alone. Women who have fished in Alaska have different stories to share, but they are essentially the same. We worked when we thought we could work no longer. We were on deck in all kinds of weather, in emergencies, and when there were deckloads and when there was noth-

"You can't be afraid to get down and dirty. There are no showers, there is no makeup. It isn't for everyone."

— Denise Jackson

VETERAN OF SEINERS, PROCESSORS

THE LEGEND BEHIND 'THE BIZ'

Three words have been used by fellow Alaska fishermen to describe Sue Laird, who has been fishing commercially in Alaska since 1978, and alone on the Copper River flats since 1981.

"She's a legend."

Laird, who fished her own wild-harvest kelp operation until the Exxon oil spill, also worked as a deckhand in the herring, groundfish and halibut longline fisheries, and a Cordova-based crab fishery.

Her boat's name is Bizzy Bitch — and she's quick to let you know she didn't name it. "It's kind of a bad deal," she laughs. "But I'm kind of stuck. It's bad luck to change it. I just refer to it as 'The Biz.'"

Laird ventured to Alaska in 1974 to set up a veterinary clinic in the bush and decided Cordova was where she would plant her roots. She began work as a deckhand in 1978, and three years later, made her first solo voyage.

"I found out I liked working alone and I liked making my own decisions," she says.

Laird doesn't see her job as extraordinary, even though a very small number of women fishing in Alaska own and operate their own boats. "I always say the Gulf of Alaska is the great equalizer. Once you cross it, they don't care what or who you are," she laughs. "Cordova is a 'live and let live' sort of place, and most of the fishermen are

pretty nice folks just trying to make a go of it."

The ocean may be inscrutable, but to Laird it is neutral on the role of the sexes. "The breakers and the waves don't care too much who is out there," she says. "Some men come up and only last for one season or one week. It isn't a gender-based thing, and it isn't for everyone. I've seen God more than once out there. Your soul is stripped bare.

"You are always learning about yourself out there because you are so alone."

Laird divides her time between fishing and her role as vice president of Prime Select Seafoods, a Cordova-based seafood company dedicated to catching, processing, and promoting wild Copper River salmon. She'd like to return to more active fishing.

"If it remains a viable resource, I may just fish out into the sunset. Fish hard, or take what you need and leave the rest."

— J.K.



COURTESY SUE LAIRD

"FISH HARD," says entrepreneur Sue Laird.

ing. Sometimes we surprised ourselves, and sometimes we confirmed what we knew all along, that we were stalwart and capable and could handle challenge.

"You need to be strong, to have that stamina and endurance," says Kathy O'Connell, who spent 15 years as a deckhand for her brother, Matt O'Connell, in Bristol Bay.

"Sometimes I felt like I couldn't do anymore — but you get up, wipe the tears away, and get the fish picked. Then you think, 'Hey, I did that!'"

Women go to Alaska for the same reason men go: money, adventure and nature. But it's what we find when we get there and what we take from it when we leave that makes the difference. We reach into places before untouched to gather the strength, aptitude and sense of humor we

didn't know existed. We leave Alaska with a new sense of ourselves, and we carry the lessons and the knowledge with us for the rest of our lives.

"I was one of three girls growing up, and fishing was completely out of the realm of anything I had done," says Deidre Stroosma, who fished for several seasons in Southeast with her husband, Sven, on the Eleanor. "It was a huge thing for me — the late nights, being so tired, maybe not catching fish, but digging deep within myself to keep going, to keep persevering."

My aunt, Patti Karuza, 48, spent 16 years gillnetting and longlining in Southeast and fishing for herring in California with her husband, Mark, on the Scorpio.

"You have to be adaptable, willing to learn, willing to try," she says. "We unloaded fish by hand then — one year we

unloaded 160,000 pounds by hand.

"You just don't know what you can do until you're there, and then you're amazed. You realize how little potential you've been using."

More often than not, commercial fishing transforms a timid woman into one of self-assurance and initiative.

You learn to jump into the middle of chaos — a torn net, a hydraulic leak, a quick tide change — and solve the problem. If there is work to be done, you do it. If something is broken, you help fix it.

I discovered that I really could hold it together when I watched the net go off the stern and realized that I hadn't separated the leadline from the corkline. The fish jumped over the sunken section of corks and out of the net. It was not one of my better moments, but I learned — later — that I could laugh at myself, and not take myself so seriously.

So did my sister. "I was a reserved, shy person, but it gave me confidence," says Cassandra Wright, 30, who seined 11 seasons for our dad on the Vis and on the Devotion. "The whole experience affected my entire outlook on life and life's challenges.

"My dad used to say, 'Each set is like a new day.' And it's true. You also learn that you can deal in physical situations and hold back under tons of stress."

A woman working in a male-oriented industry faces particular challenges that can be hard to overcome. Menacing, what's-that-girl-doing-up-here? glances from male fishermen create self-doubt. Physical limitations because of strength and size can create conflict. The looming possibility of sexual harassment hovers.

Marguerite Stroosma-Jacobs, 34, spent several years fishing in Alaska, seining in Southeast, longlining in the gulf, and gillnetting in Bristol Bay. She also worked aboard a processor in the Aleutians. She found that although she faced more physical limits on a longliner than on a seiner, she could compensate for her lack of strength by focusing on

different parts of the job.

"I couldn't really bring the halibut on board or gaff the big fish, but I would stand at the table for hours, baiting hooks and cleaning blackcod," Wright says. "I found that the men did respect the women if we were out there working just as hard and giving it our best effort."

Descending into that jungle of thunderous machines, also known as the engine room, can inspire terror. Mechanics is the



DEIDRE STROOSMA, 1991

HER EFFORT to climb out of the fish hold amuses Marguerite Stroosma and deckhand Brian Doerner.

area where women seem to have a tough time. Indeed, the prospect of mechanical work has deterred more than one woman considering getting her own boat.

Nevertheless, women who take the plunge find they can conquer the unknown.

"I learned how things worked very quickly when I could hear the roar of the breakers over a silent engine," says Anne Mosness, who has skippered four boats in the 26 years she has been in the industry. Mosness took classes on engine repair and maintenance, electrical and hydraulic systems (not to mention maritime law and net mending) to bring herself up to speed.

Patti Karuza found that while she did not know much about mechanics before joining husband Mark on his gillnetter, she was able to catch on and learn, thanks to the patience of her teacher.

"I had to know how to do things with the engine and understand it, because it

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If you were in Seattle during the first week of April, you may have seen Anne Mosness surrounded by camera crews, distributing pamphlets.

You may also have spotted her a little closer to the water. She's been a commercial fisherman — "fisherwoman," she would say — for 26 years and has fished the waters of the Pacific Northwest as well as Alaska.

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

character.

In addition to operating four vessels during her career, she has been a powerful force behind industry politics and issues affecting the livelihood of all commercial fishermen and has raised two children.

"I can't imagine anything that could have provided the income, challenges, legal thrills and time off as fishing," she says.

Mosness grew up in a fishing family and began work as a deckhand for her father in Bristol Bay after graduating from college. She has spent seasons on Alaska's Copper River flats, Bristol Bay and Prince William Sound, and Washington's Puget Sound.

She fished until she was eight months pregnant and returned shortly after the birth of her son, who is also a fisherman.

In 1980, she joined the Women's Maritime Association. She served as its president for eight years.

"It is an organization dedicated to improving maritime safety, including the protection of women with a sense of adventure who were going to sea and sometimes into hostile work environments," she says.

After receiving reports from women who were assaulted and raped on vessels, the group worked to improve protections for workers at sea.

Mosness is heavily involved in campaigns to promote wild salmon and has written and testified on the ecological and health risks of farmed salmon.

She was instrumental in the defeat of two anti-commercial-fishing initiatives in Washington state, in 1995 and 1999, and works to develop alliances with environmental groups.

— J.K.

DAYS ASHORE aren't days off for Anne Mosness, a proponent of wild salmon and their genes.



COURTESY ANNE MOSNESS

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was just him and me,” she says.

“Mark wanted an equal partner. He took time to explain things — tides, patching gear, changing the oil, learning the engine, electronics and hydraulics. I had to be up on everything in case an emergency came along.”

Sue Laird, 48, has been fishing commercially in Alaska for more than 20 years, and has gillnetted the Copper River flats on her own since 1981. She estimates that out of 500 permit/boat owners in the fishery, fewer than 10 are women.

“People get held back by mechanics,” she says. “I was determined to make an independent living in a place I wanted to live. If that meant turning a few wrenches, then that’s what I chose to put my time into.”

“I think the mechanics stuff is more about fear, like math. You build a wall, but it’s all in our heads.”

Women are subjected to the real deal. We’re familiar with flat-calm seas that become stomach-wrenching swells in an instant, pitching fish out of hatches, and taking skiffs to explore shorelines during down times. We are doing and seeing things that most of us didn’t conceive of earlier in our lives.

Marguerite Stroosma-Jacobs was part of two rescues. One took place while she was part of a longline crew out of Kodiak that responded to an SOS from a longliner 40 minutes away.

“We were the closest boat to them, so we dropped our lines, threw buoys on them and took off to help the boat,” Stroosma-Jacobs says. “We got to the boat — it was sitting so low in the water

— and the guys there were panicking.

“Our guys jumped onto their boat — they were bailing water and not making much headway. We helped for about two or three hours until the Coast Guard and another boat got there.

“I just held the bumper between the boats, and it was scary, watching other people’s responses to panic.

“We helped get them out of imminent danger and we left them in good hands, but I wondered how we could leave when the boat was still in dire straits. I also felt bad because I left, thinking, ‘Wow, I’m glad that didn’t happen to us.’”

The majority of women fishing in Alaska find their way there through family. The woman who ventures north out of her own sense of adventure and finds work as a deckhand all on her own is somewhat mythical — the reality is that many women come from fishing families, or have married fishermen.

In any case, though, fishing is fishing — a tremendous life experience for men and women, whatever they bring to it.

“It’s always rewarding,” says Laird, who did get into the business on her own. “It brings self-confidence, strength, and aptitude. Anyone who goes fishing cannot be a wimp. It’s all outdoors and it’s all physical.”

It is, she says, an education and a way of life. “You always gain something. You never walk away without some sort of lesson. Fishing with your family doesn’t diminish what you do. It lends itself wonderfully to a family business. It would be nice if we could keep it that way.”

Family represents a safety net. The boat with a familiar crew becomes a refuge from dockside leering that a woman

might experience, and our shipmates become our cheerleaders when we ask ourselves, “What exactly am I doing here?”

The opportunity to spend time with fathers, husbands and siblings in a fresh setting, and sharing moments of crisis or celebration, put relationships on a whole new level.

“It was cool having that time with my dad, because it was time other than what you would have at home,” says Bornstein, who comes from a line of fishermen and joined her father, Jim Glenovich, on the Yankee Boy for several seasons in Alaska, Washington and California. “I found out how intense, how verbal he can get!

“But after the set, when everything is back on board and the fish are up, it’s ‘snap your fingers,’ same old happy-go-lucky dad.”

Denise Jackson, 38, worked on a Bristol Bay processor, and seined in Prince William Sound and Southeast. Some of the time she spent fishing with her husband, Mike.

“It was good for our relationship to be on equal footing and to be doing equally challenging work,” she says. “To be able to fully understand the call of fishing, and to share that sense of accomplishment.”

And share the work. “You can’t be afraid to get down and dirty. There are no showers, there’s no makeup. It isn’t for everyone,” she says.



ANNE MOSNESS HAS SKIPPED four boats during her career. “I learned how things worked very quickly.”

COURTESY ANNE MOSNESS

It certainly isn’t. But for all of us who can say, “We did it,” there are no regrets. Alaska is where we pushed our limits, tackled challenges and conquered doubts. We left each season with our heads held high (with or without a big check in our pockets), and knew that we were better women and better people because of it.

Stacey Rasch seined in Southeast Alaska with her dad, Merv Rasch, on the Favorite, and she has a story.

“One day another captain came to my dad and told him he had been fishing around us out at sea one opening. This other captain had a crewman who had not been doing his job very well on deck.

“The captain asked his deckhand, ‘Why can’t you do such a good job like that girl who is working so hard over there?’”

Chalk one up for the ladies. **N**

LEGAL AFFAIRS

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the Natural Resource Defense Council. “If the agency was more responsive at an early stage, they might be able to avoid [some of these lawsuits.]”

Pietro Parravano, president of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, agrees. “A lot of these suits could have been avoided if there was proper funding to allow more input into the process from environmentalists and fishermen.”

Indeed, increasing input and responsiveness appear to be a result of the leadership change at the agency. Hogarth, who took over from Penny Dalton in January, has already gotten credit from several fishermen’s groups for his willingness to try to negotiate a way out of legal wrangles.

“I don’t think we’ve been talking enough to the fishermen’s organizations,” Hogarth says. “We’ve got to try to do things a little differently, try to make the process more open by having more meetings with our constituents.”

Toward that end, Hogarth says the agency is in the process of setting up informal meetings with a dozen or so representatives of the environmental, recreational, and commercial fishing communities.

“We’re just going to sit down and talk for a while, about where the fisheries are going to be going for the next four to five

years,” he says.

Hogarth says that most of the cases the agency loses hinge on socio-economic and procedural factors, not science, but he approves the trend toward cooperative studies that include fishermen’s observations, such as a joint monkfish sampling program on the East Coast.

He also says NMFS will step up efforts to negotiate settlements during the 60-day notice period before cases get to court.

A development that could reduce the number of lawsuits may come from the industry. Bob Spaeth, head of the Southern Offshore Fishing Association, says his group is prepared to endorse marine protected areas as a management tool and is approaching other fishermen’s organizations to develop a unified approach.

Spaeth says the closed areas set up off New England to rebuild cod and scallops have proved beneficial for fishermen, and he hopes taking some grounds along the southern coast off limits will do the same. Further, he says, the closures could “get rid of these extinction lawsuits” filed under the Endangered Species Act, since smaller stocks that are sometimes inadvertently overfished would continue to thrive in the closed zones.

Such a move, combined with a more accommodating stance on the agency’s part (which may depend on whether the Bush administration allows Hogarth to continue in the lead position), may serve



LONGLINE RESTRICTIONS stemming from a court order to protect sea turtles shackle Hawaii vessels like the Archer, but not foreign boats working the same waters.

PACIFIC OCEAN PRODUCERS

to help NMFS shake off at least some of its load of legal entanglements.

Whether they’ll prevent the Southeastern Fisheries Association from losing its status as non-litigant, however, is questionable.

Association director Jones has been keeping a grim eye on a move being considered by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council to ban longlining in-

side 50 fathoms. Such a ban, Jones says, would amount to an unfair reallocation of the resource to the recreational sector in violation of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

If the ban is authorized, Jones says, his organization will almost certainly join in a lawsuit. **N**

Christina S. Johnson and Linc Bedrosian contributed to this report.