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## Trevor Corson

**The Secret Life of Lobsters**  
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### **How did your lobster obsession begin?**

It's hard to pinpoint the exact moment I realized that my interest in lobsters had changed from simple curiosity into an obsession. It might have occurred during one of the tranquil afternoons that I spent hunched over a pile of scientific papers in the zoology library at Harvard University — perhaps at the moment I found myself fascinated by a paper on "electro-ejaculation" experiments on male lobsters. (Embarrassed, I had to hide that paper whenever another library patron walked past my carrel.) Probably like most people who have read my book, I was astonished to discover that scientists were conducting all this bizarre research to try understand to these animals. The more I learned, the more surprised and intrigued I became.

### **What did you learn in your research that surprised you in the most?**

Probably that lobsters use urine, sprayed out the front of their faces, to communicate with each other — during both combat and courtship! And that they recognize and remember each other as individuals. They have this complex social life involving both belligerence and, well, something akin to romance. I can tell you that I had no idea what I was getting into when I started researching this book.

### **What is your connection to Little Cranberry Island?**

My great-grandfather had visited the island after the turn of the century, and in 1940 my grandfather bought a house there. Along with many aunts and uncles and cousins, I spent the summers of my childhood on the island. Of course, being a summer kid doesn't make you a "Mainer," by any stretch of the imagination — I grew up in Washington D.C. But some of my childhood friends from the island later decided to settle there and work in the lobster business. So when I moved to Little Cranberry in my mid-twenties to work on a lobster boat, I already knew many of the people there.

### **Was it difficult for you to join the lobsterman "brotherhood?" Did they initially resist or resent your presence as you researched this book?**

At that stage it wasn't a foregone conclusion — even to me — that I would write a nonfiction book about the island. What I was doing at that point was general observation, rather than specific research, so I don't think the lobstermen minded my presence. Later, when I knew what sort of book I was going to write, I went back to the island and did research and interviewed people specifically for the book, and at that point I asked their permission to write about them.

That being said, yes, it did take some time to earn the respect of the lobstermen. Imagine: a summer kid shows up and insists he wants to work on a boat — the lobstermen have seen this before. At first they don't take you too seriously, because they don't know if you can handle the job. The lobsterman I worked for, Bruce Fernald, was rather noncommittal about hiring me, and I can't blame him. But once it was clear that I wouldn't be spending all day puking over the side, and that I could do the work, I guess he figured I could hack it, and he kept me on. Still, that was in the spring, and I suspect it wasn't until I had survived the brutally hard work and bad weather of the late fall and winter harvest that the other lobstermen considered me to have earned my stripes.

### **What did you enjoy most (or least) about being a sternman?**

I hated getting up at 4:30 in the morning, but once I was up and out on the water, I loved seeing the sunrise on the ocean, and watching all of the natural beauty that surrounded us out there — incredible bird life, surprising things coming up in the traps, and endless permutations of color and texture on the sky and the sea: Despite being totally exposed to the elements, I felt comfortable on the boat. Bruce Fernald was a steady and conscientious captain to work for. Of course, there are parts of a sternman's job that are just miserable. You're face down in a big tub of rotting fish for much of the day, and the work is extremely tough on the back. I only did it for two years, and my hat is off to the people who do it for many more.

### **Did you identify with one group — lobstermen or biologists — more than another?**

I think I identified more with certain individuals than with others. Some of the lobstermen I got to know seemed more conscientious or thoughtful than others, and likewise, some of the scientists I spent time with seemed more open and curious than others. It was fascinating to see the differences within and across the different categories of people I was writing about.

That said, if you read the book it is clear that I concluded that many of the lobstermen and several of the academic scientists I wrote about had, in my judgment, a better case to make about the state of the lobster fishery than some other scientists, many of whom were either employed by, or acted as advisors to, state and federal government. Readers can make their own judgments about whether or not I was fair in this assessment. And I should add that even in the short time since I wrote the book, the situation is changing. Some academic scientists have entered government positions, and government scientists have been reaching out more to academic colleagues, in an attempt to improve their data collection and assessment techniques.