

by Kim Gavin
photographs by Herb Segars



Eleanor Bochenek is a busy marine scientist who's comfortable sharing her interest in ocean issues with commercial fishermen, anglers and schoolchildren.

A Full Agenda

New Jersey marine scientist Eleanor Bochenek puts in long hours as a teacher, environmental researcher, fisheries consultant and marina advisor. And where does she spend her spare time? On her center console, of course.



Eleanor Bochenek, left, reviews data with Jen Conwell and Chelsea Gittle at Canyon Club Marina in Cape May, New Jersey.

Eleanor Bochenek says she should be updating her résumé (it's already 31 pages long), but she just doesn't have the time. A resident of Cape May, New Jersey, Bochenek's (pronounced bo-HAN-eck) schedule is already more than full, as she juggles researching species like squid, scup, summer flounder, bluefish, mackerel and black sea bass with other projects, such as teaching Spanish-speaking residents of Newark, New Jersey, about the dangers of contaminated shellfish. As a consultant, she's preparing comments on the development plans of a Barnegat Bay marina, while also teaching undergraduate fisheries students at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (formerly Cook College) of Rutgers University.

And that list doesn't include the community-outreach programs that turn to Bochenek as an environmental speaker or the hands-on research cruises and various recreational and commercial fishing associations throughout New Jersey that want her to help bolster their arguments for or against proposed bag, weight and catch limits.

Bochenek does all that on top of her regular day job as a marine scientist at the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences, Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, also part of Rutgers, where a lot of her work affects exactly how much fishermen will get to take from the sea. And, of course, she also tries to find time for her own boating and fishing adventures, enjoying the ocean that she works so hard to understand and protect.

"[Bochenek] has common sense, whereas some of the people who do marine science have lost touch with the fishermen, lost touch with reality," says Tom Fote, legislative chairman for the Jersey Coast Anglers Association, a group that represents 75 fishing

clubs. "She's a common-sense scientist who can work with different groups of people. She even works with kids. She does it all. When you tell her you need her, she's there, even if it's on her day off and she's not getting paid. She loves the resource."

The eldest of three sisters, Bochenek developed her interest in the natural world early in life. Never one for frilly dresses, she liked to hang at the heels of her father, an emergency-room physician. "I had a pet frog once. It died, and he dissected it," she recalls. "I saw all the insides and I thought that was so cool."

She learned to appreciate living creatures and the places they call home even more during family summers on Lake Musconetcong in north-central New Jersey. Her father bought her a 10-foot aluminum rowboat when she was 12 years old, and she would take it out alone to go fishing whenever her parents allowed. She still remembers the biggest bass she ever caught: 6 pounds, 14 ounces. "I let it go after I weighed it on my father's scale," she says.

Bochenek shares this story just after boarding the *A.J. Meerwald*, a 70-foot oyster schooner built in 1928 and restored in 1996. The *Meerwald* is New Jersey's official tall ship, and on this

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day she's sailing out of Cape May Harbor on a three-hour educational tour for the conservation-minded Bayshore Discovery Project. The cruise features Bochenek as a guest speaker. About a dozen people are onboard, plus the crew. Two of the visitors are sisters, one a teenager and the other just shy of 10 years old.

"So, have any of you ever had clam chowder?" Bochenek asks. She isn't much bigger than the teenager, barely five feet tall, but with a purposeful stance and a confident voice that no doubt serves her well in any commercial fishermen's bar.

The kids and adults alike listen attentively as she explains how clams are harvested, where they're living now because of changes in the environment and which species are starting to die off as the oceans get warmer. After about a minute, people start posing questions, everything from "which ones are quahogs and which ones are surf clams?" to "why do dolphins jump?" Bochenek answers them all.

About ten minutes into her talk, members of the boat's well-tanned, well-traveled crew are asking questions alongside the visitors. Bochenek can certainly talk like a geek, but she also knows how to take her Ph.D. knowledge and filter it into sentences that anyone can understand. She talks like a friend, but with the facts and figures of an encyclopedia. She's not exactly a smiler, but she gives out information with the same tolerance with which a granny gives out hugs.

Preservation and conservation, as Bochenek explains them, are two different matters. Preservation suggests leaving creatures alone in their natural habitats, while conservation permits the harvesting of fish and shellfish while working to protect critical spaces for them in the environment.

"They're pushing everything to be a marine preserve," she says of some of

today's environmentalists. "But fishing grounds are like farms. They've been around forever."

Bochenek has made it her job to help people see things that way, in large part because she's a boater and an angler herself (she has a 16-foot center console built by Swan Point in North Carolina). For instance, there's a controversy in New Jersey right now over catching summer flounder, better known to anglers as fluke. Bag limits have become a major issue, because, according to Fote, some 40 percent of the state's recreational fishing trips are made in search of the tasty flatfish. Fote says the National Marine Fisheries Service is trying to lower the quotas in a way that would eliminate most of those trips, so his group has been looking for counter arguments that go beyond dollars and cents.

That's where Bochenek comes in. She doesn't know whether the National Marine Fisheries Service or Fote's group is right, nor exactly what an appropriate catch limit should be. But she's willing to

get grants, put together a coalition that includes all sides and do some research on the water to help come up with an accurate count of the summer flounder stock. At the end of the day, she wants to go fishing, too, so she's eager to help measure the impact of recreational fishing on the environment.

"Jersey Coast [Anglers Association] runs one of the largest one-day tournaments in the world," Fote explains. "We [wanted] to do a research project to get a snapshot of what happens in a typical day with summer flounder in New Jersey. The National Marine Fisheries Service paid for part of the funding, and Eleanor has been doing all of the tabulating to analyze the data and show the economic impact of that tournament. She does that for a very reasonable amount. If I went to another university, that kind of study would cost \$200,000. She does it for a fraction of that amount because she cares."

It's the same kind of work she did in her previous job as associate director and extension program director for the New Jersey Sea Grant College Program. That's where Fote first met her, and she made an instant impression.

"One of the things that impressed me early on with Eleanor is some of the work she did for her Ph.D. She was trying to make some sense of the recreational catch of bluefish," Fote recalls. "But you have to break the barriers of the good ol' boys club. When I suggested we hire Eleanor, it was all men working on these things. But none of them had a Ph.D. They all had masters' [so] she was smarter than they were."

Bochenek made a similar impression on Greg DiDomenico, executive director of the Garden State Seafood Association, which represents commercial fishermen. "If you've met her, you understand that she's extremely bright. You're not going to find a more conscientious, committed person."

Bochenek also helps marinas comply with the federal Clean Water Act, figuring out how to perform environmentally friendly washdowns and create effective pump-out stations. "She's run the

gamut to protect the boating and fishing industries," Fote says. "She tries to find answers to the questions that are perplexing us all."

For her own part, Bochenek seems to feel such work is just what her day should be about. She makes no excuses for her love of boating and fishing, and she's more than happy to use her scientific background to help ensure that boaters can take to the ocean in a way that's doing it no harm.

Her advice to her fellow boaters, in spite of the complexity of most marine

issues, comes down to a few simple sentences:

"Enjoy your hobby, but don't throw trash overboard and create oil slicks. Try to be a good conservationist. Teach your children about the environment. Respect it."

No wonder so many people respect her, too. ■

Frequent Northeast Boating contributor Kim Kavin, the author of several books, writes about maritime subjects from her home in New Jersey.

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