

Russell Frost

Russell: It's all sort of paddocks.

Amy: So, yeah, you would have seen a lot of change.

Russell: Oh, yeah, a lot of change.

Amy: We're sitting in a beautiful window looking out over the sea and the hills. Amy Tsilemanis here doing this interview on the 14th of April 2023 for the Apollo Bay Historical Society. So do you want to just start with telling me your name and where and when you were born?

Russell: Yeah, my name's Russell Frost. I was born on the 9th of June, 1953 at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. Just in time for lunch, Mum said. Twelve o'clock.

Amy: So yeah, let's, let's start back there and we'll get through into the present. How did you come to be in Apollo Bay?

Russell: I was at university in the early seventies and I met this guy who was doing the same course as I was and he we both surfed.

And we actually did a trip, there was three of us actually, did a trip out to Cactus in the Bight surfing. And Mick said, oh we'll go, mum and dad are in Apollo Bay, we'll go through Apollo Bay on the way home for a look. So I think it was 1970, something like that. We... 1971... anyway, it's around that era.

Got to Apollo Bay in just after New Year, early January. It was screaming easterly, raining, couldn't see Cape Patton. I think, God, this is a terrible place. What a, what a ugly, God forsaken place Apollo Bay is. Anyway, we hung around for a little while and then the sun, you know, the easterly cleared up, the sun came out and the beauty of the place just opened up.

Oh, yeah, okay. And then, sort of, we stayed for the summer and then, just after that, we came down every weekend, virtually, until I finished uni and then I moved here.

Amy: So the sun came out and everything changed?

Russell: Everything changed. The whole complexion of Apollo Bay changes with the sun.

Amy: Do you want to tell us about where we're sitting? It's sort of got to be captured.

Russell: Yeah, we're sitting in 43 Noel Street and probably the bottom half of the house is one of the older houses in Apollo Bay. It was built by a man called J. P. McLennan, who was a bit of a mover and shaker around town. There's a street named after him, and, or J. C. McLennan, I'm not sure, but Heather's got all the history. There's my wife, Heather, over there. There's Amy.

Amy: Nice to meet you.

Russell: And I bought the place in 1980, and it was, you know, that, that, Renovator's Delight, you know, worst house in the best street, as it probably was. And then I did a few things.

Then I was married previously with a couple of kids and that dissolved. And then I met Heather in, oh, probably the late 80s. And from there, we sort of got, moved in, she moved in, and then we started to change the house. And then, we had three children and they, they started to grow a little bit, and thought, oh, there's only, there's only a two bedroom house.

So we said, okay, bite the bullet and we'll go up, trying to make it look like it hadn't been added on, which I think we've done a pretty good job with. Luckily, my father was a builder. And he built all the windows in the house, in the upstairs part of the house and downstairs. So, you know, he, he, old school builder, knew how to build because they're all the windows with the weights in them and, you know, they're proper double hung sash windows.

And we, a good, a good friend of ours, Peter Depleth, one of the, probably one of the better, well, he is one of the better builders around town. He did the renovation upstairs and as you can see the cathedral ceiling was his idea, that wasn't in the original plan. It added a bit more cost to the project but it certainly made a difference, it opened the house up.

Because as he said you were coming from old, the old part of the house had 10 foot ceilings, 3 point something meter ceilings and they were going to put 2.4 in here, he said it would have felt like claustrophobic. But yeah, it's made a really nice house, quite a beautiful house. And we tried to match everything as we could, you know, the floors are the same timber as downstairs.

Amy: Hmm. Oh, it's absolutely beautiful. And tell us about the view.

Russell: Oh, well, if you look out to the north, you see the hills, the ocean, and then up to the northeast, you can see Cape Patton, keep going around and you can see out to the, the east, a little bit of sea there and keep coming around and up until about 12 months ago we could see virtually right through the reef at Marengo way out to the south, but we've been built out in the last 12 months.

Amy: Yeah I wonder while we're thinking about that, what changes you've seen over the time with the town?

Russell: What changes? Well, when I first came to Apollo Bay it was a really different place, it was, like the fishing fleet was probably three times as big as it is now, your timber was still going, tourism was a part of the economy but only a very small seasonal, you know, like Christmas and Easter and that was it.

Then it became much a, very much a local's town again. Saturday mornings everything shut at twelve o'clock and in the winter everyone went to the football. So, you know, there was nobody on the streets. The pubs closed at ten o'clock at night, didn't open on Sundays. So yeah, it was, I think it was a much freer society probably, the things that we did were probably a bit frowned on now, you know, like disregard for a lot of stuff, which young people do anyway.

It was yeah, it was a really different place. And I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with it now, I just, it's a different place now. There was a lot more, what would you say, parochialism. A lot more old families still were very prominent in the town. And now you, it's very hard to find any of the old families.

Which is sad in a way, but that's how history goes, things move.

Amy: Yeah, it's interesting driving around and all the street names echo those families.

Russell: Yeah, that's right. Look, all the fisherman's streets up the back of town. Barrand, Ramsden, Ferrier. And the, and the, you know, all the old, the Telfords and the Cawoods.

Amy: Hmm, yeah, the names really tell the story of the town, don't they?

Russell: They do, they do.

Amy: And have you always been Frosty?

Russell: Yeah, pretty much all my life.

Amy: Okay, so you came here in the 70s and got lured by surfing.

Russell: Yes, and fishing.

Amy: And fishing, yeah, tell me about that.

Russell: I grew up in Port Melbourne, so I was always on the water. You know, whether it was swimming, surfing in the bay, fishing off the piers. And when I turned about 13, there was a local commercial fisherman in Port Melbourne who, who a lot of kids used to go fishing with him. I sort of started with him. And it became a, pretty much a, you know, every weekend, that's what I did. And I learnt my trade from him, really. I was sort of not bad at school, so I got an opportunity to go to university, which I took. But I still worked on the boats on the weekends for a bit of money, because in them, I was in the, when Whitlam got in and we got free education, but that was only, I was nearly finished by the time that came in, so I still had to have money, and my mum and dad weren't what you'd call rich. Oh look, they were comfortable, but we weren't rich. So I just kept it up, and when I came here I said, oh yeah, I can do this. You know, I had long hair and looked a bit out of place when an official looked at me. But, you know, I had skills that a lot of the people here didn't. You know, a lot of the deckies on the boats didn't have. As soon as I started to show them what I could do, you become accepted.

Amy: He's alright.

Russell: He's alright. And then I just worked my way up, you know, skippered a couple of boats and bought my own.

Amy: Yeah, do you want to tell me a bit about your fishing life?

Russell: Fishing life? Yeah. Yeah. It's, let me just say, it's a, it's something that I think you're more called to than you want. You know, a lot of people try, but they don't, you know, you've got to be able to turn your shore life off. You've got to go, when you go to work, you've got to go to work, and all right, there's a lot of outside influence saying, oh, don't go, don't go, and you're probably, when you're young you do, but when you start to get responsibility, you just, you know, surfing goes by the by. Everything, you know, family and that, that's costs marriages, you know, cause you're driven, you're driven by it. I would just

say provided very well but in saying that there's been lots of ups and downs and, you know, crises and, you know, lots of changes in the fisheries over the years. You know, went from open fishery with very few limits to heavy quota and reductions in quota that you had to somehow try and battle your way through. Then the export market sort of picked up, or started, and that saved us to a degree. Yeah, but, you know, I don't think I'd have changed it. But yeah, like, we had lots of times when you're thinking, why am I bothering with this, you know?

Like, we're just... every 12 months, they kept changing, the fisheries kept changing the goalposts, you know, okay, we're going to do this and the next year we're going to do this and thinking, and I was heavily involved in the politics and management of it for a long, long time as well. And having to make these decisions for the fishery was quite hard because you know, you knew it was going to create hardship for a lot of people, especially even yourself.

But when you're managing a fishery you can't manage it for the people, you've got to manage it for the fish. Because it all boils down to the fact that if there is no stock, there is no fishery. And if your stock's getting down to levels where it's looking a bit, like precarious, you've got to do something about it. And that's what, that's what they did.

Amy: That's interesting about the, the politics. What were all the different... obviously you've got the people and the fish, but what were the other elements sort of in the mix?

Russell: Government, changes of government and different ideologies bureaucracies that don't listen. Yeah, and people that work for you, like we had a guy that was the boss of our fishing industry sort of union, for want of a better word. He got a job with the government, he was a completely different man. One day he was for us, the next day he was against us. That sort of thing. It's very difficult to navigate our way through.

But in saying that, what we did, I think has proved the right course. Because the fishery now, especially the lobster fishery, is in a really good state. Because I got some figures yesterday. Their catch rate now is how they manage, they sort of, the parameters they use to manage a fishery, is the highest it's been for, I don't know how long, a good 25 years. So they've got, they've achieved what they wanted to achieve. And I think that this year they might even give us some quota back. I hope.

Amy: Yeah, it would be a very fine balance to hold...

Russell: The thing about it is, is when they started to cut, we ended up losing 40 percent of our asset. And with no compensation you were just and if you owed money you had to carry the debt and a lot of people owed a lot of money And we were in that positions as well.

Amy: So you still kind of keep up with all the latest news.

Russell: Well, I did, they base a lot of, or they used to base a lot of their stock assessments on my data. I did what they called population dynamics studies for about 25years. And I won an award for it up there. I tagged and measured 25,000 lobsters.

Amy: Wow.

Russell: And I was, because I was consistent every year, they used a lot of that in their computer models.

Amy: How did that process work?

Russell: Well, I did a lot of voluntary stuff all year. I would tag and measure the undersized, write it down, let them go. And then in February every year we did, they did what they call fixed site surveys. I don't know if you've seen the cray pots, but they've got like a hole in them. They're the escape gaps to let the little ones out. And when you do the fixed site surveys, you cover them in. So that when you pull that pot up, you get a better cross section of what is actually there, the population dynamics.

So you used to do that for four days in a couple of different places. And that was the data that they would use. That sort of, you know, undersized, how many undersized fish. Because if you've got a good amount of undersized, you know, that's going to come through to the fishery. And if you've got none, well then you've got issues.

And it got down to stages there, probably 15 years ago, where there was none. No one seems to know why. And it wasn't just here, it was right across southern Australia. There was a year when something went environmentally wrong. And when you, if you, if you lose one cohort, it puts everything out. Then we got hammered by the seismic testing when the gas plant blew up in Gippsland.

They had no source of gas, but they knew there was gas here. So they started to do all the seismic testing. See. This go, this graph here goes from 2006 till now

in 2006, the catch rate was half just on half a kilo of pot lift. Now it's up to 1.28. So that's the difference it's made.

Amy: Yeah wow.

Russell: And I think we've come past that stage where that dramatic drop happened and the fish are gradually... and they cut the quota back. So the fish are gradually had a chance to build up. And as numbers build, they just produce more and more and as, and if they kept the TAC, which is how much it can catch, constant for about the last five or six years. So they're leaving, you're leaving like now, the TAC, I think 200 and TAC now, is in this Western zone is 246 tons. And at its peak it was about 600. So, they're trying to get it back up, but they're gonna, I think they're gonna cap it at 300 tonnes, so the stock just gets more and more and more and more.

Amy: So was cray always the top thing?

Russell: Yeah well I did a lot of shark fishing as well, I did both, I have licences for both. And that's what a lot of the boats here did, they did both, and that was a, you go cray fishing in the summer time, and the rest of the year you go shark fishing, but then people they started to split the fisheries up into fishery specifics and a lot of people said, oh, ah I can't be bothered paying for the shark licenses anymore. And so a lot of people just let them go. But I hung on to mine and I was the last one left here.

Amy: Can you tell me about what a day was for you, like going out and catching?

Russell: Well, it depended a lot where I was working. We worked a lot out of Cape Otway and we'd go out, come home every day. So we'd go out. Start of the season, put the pots in, bait them up, put them up. Then we'd work, before the quota, we'd work every day we could. Like, there was no limit. And every day I'd go out, pull the pots, change the bait, put them back, put them back, put them back. And if it was a really nice day, we'd put our shark gear in too and do that as well.

And then I'd sort of do that till... day trip until probably, the kids went back to school in early Feb, late January and then I'd go down and work down at Moonlight and the Apostles and Port Campbell and down that way. And then we'd stay out for three or four days. That's on this boat I had. And we'd do both.

We'd shark and cray every day because you're there and you just fill the day in. Because I never used to work a lot of pots, and I only ever worked 50 odd pots. Now they're working 140. So, different fishing. I suppose, so I owned everything, whereas nowadays hardly any of them actually own. A lot of the quota now is owned by companies.

It's corporatised the fishery. And that, that's what I do now. I lease my licences. That's how we, that's our super for want of a better word. It was never meant to be that way, but that's what happened. But, like, when I first came here, we were... I was working on, there was boats here that used to work Tasmania, and we, I did a lot of time working around King Island, like you'd go for two weeks, disappear, see you later.

Amy: What was that like?

Russell: Yeah, good, good. And there was no mobile phones, all you did, the only contact you had with the outside world was your two way radio, used to call in at quarter to ten every morning, everything's okay, if there was any issues at home they'd go and tell the co-op. So that was it. And you talked to the, you know, there'd be a few boats around you, so that was your social contact. But yeah, you sort of were totally divorced from anything going on here.

Amy: Yeah, I liked how you said you have to leave your shore life aside. So does your brain kind of go to a different place?

Russell: Yeah, I suppose. You know, you're at sea, you read.

Amy: Yeah, right.

Russell: I was, I'm an avid reader, so it suited me.

Amy: Okay, what kind of things did you read?

Russell: I'll read anything. Anything.

Amy: I have to get you to do a little reading. Yeah. Have you read Moby Dick?

Russell: Yes. Yeah, I've read Moby Dick. Long time ago.

Amy: Yeah. Are there any other good kind of sea related books that you love?

Russell: There's a good one about sailing alone around the world, a guy called Joshua Slocum, in the 1800s, in a little boat. First man to sail around the world on his own. Oh yeah, it's, you know, I don't know, I haven't read a lot of, I'm reading actually one at the moment about rescue of some Irish prisoners in Fremantle in the 1870s. They were, they were, they were locked up for being anti British and that, that's the true story.

Amy: I guess they would be like a real mix of quiet time and then action.

Russell: Oh yeah. Like when you're working down, when you're sharking, you're working in the morning and then you'll have a, have a few, you know, a few hours off and then you'll start again at dark and you might be working to two or three in the morning. Then you shoot them back, get up in the morning and just this cycle, it's all, the weather cracks up or you're full.

Amy: And you mentioned the co-op, how did they fit into the ecology?

Russell: Well... Oh, I'm a co-op member, director of the co-op just, it, it's sort of part of the fabric of our, our, our port. It's always been there, well it hasn't always been there but in my time it's always been there. And look, they sort of, supply all of your fuel and your bait and your ice and stuff like that. You don't have to worry about it. It just was there always there. We probably didn't get as much for our fish as you could have got selling out of it. But then you would have had to go and chase around getting that stuff. Anyway, it's good trade off.

Amy: Yeah, so did most people come back and sell to them?

Russell: Yeah, most people did. Probably a bit not so much now because there's a lot more financial pressure on the young blokes that are in it now. I think, I was, my generation was a transition generation, like you had my father's generation, even though I was a fisherman, you know, the guys that came home from the Second World War, the fishermen, their licenses cost them two dollars.

You know, it was virtually, oh yeah, you went fishing. Then when I, when my generation came in, they had acquired a value. And now they've acquired a huge value. So it's make the, the, the era of being an owner operator like I am is disappearing. As I said, it's becoming corporatised and you've got big concerns owning.

There's two, two zones in the west, in the cray fishery, virtually the line runs here. The eastern zone is virtually owned by one, one company. And they own stuff in, in South Australia, the western zone and Tasmania. So they, and they're

a Kiwi company. And the shark fishery, there's one mob owns about two thirds of the quota in that.

And they can dictate price.

Amy: This is a slight tangent, but what would you say for people when they choose the seafood that they buy? Is there anything they can do to do it more ethically than not?

Russell: Not really. Just make sure that it's Australian fish. And that, that, there lies the problem, you know, like, there's not, well, not just Australian, Kiwi fish is good too, cause it's, you know, there's not much difference between New Zealand and Perth coming into the eastern seaboard. Just, yeah, try and get locally sourced fish because don't, don't buy the rubbish out of, you know, the sewers of Asia. That's just, you know.

Amy: And is that information readily known?

Russell: It's supposed to be labelled, but often it isn't labelled and there's no one that actually polices the labelling, and that's an issue because, you know, we're catching, like, you know, we, we're sharking catching good quality gummy and school shark and, and we sell it in the shop and then someone says, I bought flake in the South Melbourne market for half that price. I said, you may have, but it wasn't gummy or school shark. It was spotty or a bit of, you know, some carpet ball shark. Yeah, like it was second or third grade fish. Not that it was inedible, but it just wasn't as good a quality. And people can't understand that. They think, oh, float, it's generic. It's all the same, but it isn't all the same.

Amy: Yeah, that's interesting. And do you still go out fishing yourself?

Russell: Ahh no, I haven't been on a boat for over 12 months. I retired in 2020 and then last year the co op bought a trawler and wanted, asked me to skipper it for a while. So I did a bit of that last year.

Amy: What was that like?

Russell: Yeah, it was different. Different. I'd never done it before, so it was a bit of a challenge I suppose, but it was hard work. If I wanted to go fishing, I still had all my licenses and boat. If I really wanted to go fishing, I could have wet fished. But I did it, and then I said, oh no, I've had enough.

Amy: So what does skippering involve?

Russell: I'm fairly hands on, so you know, I drive the boat, make the decisions, but also get in and do the work. It's a way I've always been.

Amy: What do you think drew you to it?

Russell: The fishing. I don't know, I just, I just always liked the idea of being a fisherman. From a very young age.

Amy: Do you think there's a certain kind of life that goes with it?

Russell: There is. And, and look, I think I've got my ancestors, oh my grandfather, my mother's father came from Labrador or Newfoundland, so you know, there's a bit of sea in the blood somewhere. But yeah, all my uncles sailed and my dad sailed and we always had boats, so you know, I've always been around boats and water. I learned to swim at very young ages and things like that.

Amy: Yeah. Did you learn to swim in the sea?

Russell: Yeah. My grandmother lived on the, in Port Melbourne, right on the beach front. And we just spent our summers there, you know, one of my aunts lived there and she was always keeping an eye on us and we just learnt to swim.

Amy: Yeah, you almost would just learn yourself I guess.

Russell: Gravitated, yeah. Well you did. And then when you went to school they put the finishing touches to you, doing the learn to swim programs, but we could all swim by then. We might have had ungainly strokes and things, but we could swim.

Amy: And yeah, in the sea, it's its own kind of wild place.

Russell: Yeah, yeah. Well, Heather's just come back from a swim. She swims every day.

Amy: Oh, there you go. Yeah, what, I'm sort of asking people what their relationship to water is. Obviously, you've got a very particular one.

Russell: Yeah, yeah, I have.

Amy: Do you go swimming as well?

Russell: No.

Amy: Done with that.

Russell: Done with that. Look, if the water's 25 degrees, I'll go for a swim. Yeah, I don't like getting cold.

Amy: Can you tell me about any dramatic things that happened over your career?

Russell: I've seen a few things. I lost a good mate. About, oh, it was about 20 years ago. We went out one morning and left here in the dark and it was sort of, it was a nice morning, sort of. We get out, we're about 8, 9 miles south of Cape Otway. It was only us and two other boats out. One was at Moonlight and one was out further. And we finished the gear and the weather changed dramatically. Within half an hour it went from very little wind to probably 60 kilometres an hour. The tide started running back into the sea. The sea went from, there was a bit of swell there, but the sea went from like 2 or 3 meters to 8 and 9 metres in half an hour and we were coming home, so we were just taking it easy going home. The sea was behind us. You have to be a bit wary when you've got a following sea as that big. And I got a, I had the radio on and one of my best mates rang up and said, T. O. 's just gone over the side, across the back of the Otway. I've got him on board, but he's not breathing. And the guy that was with me knew a bit of CPR and he was talking to Nick trying to explain he was, T. O. was dead. We got home and it was just sort of like so sad.

Amy: Oh, that's horrible.

Russell: But, but yeah, I've never lost anybody. I've dropped, a few have dropped over the side, but I've got them back again.

Amy: What do you have to do to get them back?

Russell: Just grab hold of them. Pull them back on. But look, I've seen some really beautiful things too. I've had whales serenading me. I've had one night out off the Twelve Apostles. We were pulling our shark nets. When you work in the dark. It was about this time of year in the autumn. Really beautiful night. And got a lot of flood lights on to see. So we finished the gear. And we were coming home and we had to steam back into moonlight to sleep for the night.

So we pulled the gear and the deckies out on the deck cleaning up, you know, and we've still got all the lights on so it's blinding anyway. He finishes, we turn

the lights off, the whole southern sky's pink with the auroras. And we go, this is alright. And then we've got dolphins all the way home, back into moonlight for about an hour.

Squeaking and carrying on and jumping out the water and I said to Jay, you couldn't pay for this. And the whole pink, whole southern sky was pink at one o'clock in the morning.

Amy: Oh, how special.

Russell: But I've had blue whales next to me, lots of whales. Had a whale rammed us one night while we were anchored out of a place called Melanesia.

Cooking our dinner. And there'd been a lot of whales. It was sort of late winter in August and there'd been a lot of whales around. We've had them all around us and we're just sitting in the wheel house cooking dinner and the next thing, thump, a sting. It must have misjudged its dive under the boat, and it's just clipped its head on the way through it.

The whole boat's shattered. We raced out and it sort of stuck its head out and, oh God, took off. But yeah, oh, lots of wild stories. My youngest daughter used to, we used to ring up every night and she'd say, have you seen anything Dad? And I said, oh no, not, not tonight, Maya. As soon as I put the phone down, this blue whale, about 80 foot long, popped up next to us.

So, Maya I've got this big blue whale next to us. She said, Oh, that's good, Dad. See ya.

Amy: I was going to say, so by that time you could call.

Russell: Yeah, we had mobiles.

Amy: Could have their song playing to your daughter. So yeah, how has technology changed over the time?

Russell: Oh, incredibly. Technology is, like when I first started fishing in Port Phillip Bay, we used, we still use natural fibre ropes, and I, and I was there at the start of the, the synthetic rope. And then they had to be a lot more aware of their ropes. They used to have to dry them, otherwise they used to have to tan them, in the wattle bark, and tar them, you know, used creosote to preserve the rope. And then when the nylon rope came in, or the synthetic rope, it revolutionised fishing.

And when I first came here, not many boats had radars, very few. They were very rudimentary echo sounders, but also quite primitive compared to what we use nowadays. No positioning systems like we use now, but that technology over the years has just made fishing much easier because when I first started, you, you used to work a lot with landmarks and you, you know, then. And that, that means you, you got to know where you were by the landmarks and the positioning and all that. And when you got the GPS's and the plotters came in, well you could just, oh, we're there, bang. It's there, it's there forever. Which got quite, quite frustrating because you'd find all this bottom, and I used to work away from everyone, and I had a lot of stuff that I, I was the only one that ever used to work. And then you got a few out of towners come in. They'd find your gear and plot, and that's it, it's gone, nothing you can do.

Amy: That's so interesting, because I'm thinking about different kinds of maps. So that was your way of mapping the sea. But then others could also hook into it.

Russell: Yeah, hook into it. Yeah, but they did. So, and that ability, like when, when, it didn't have that ability to go exactly to where you wanted to. If you couldn't see the land, you couldn't see the landmarks. So a lot of the bottom, it didn't get worked. You know, you can always find the big prominent reef. The heavy reef was easy because it was there. But I used to work a lot of little bits and pieces all over the place. Because the lobsters live in the rock and the coral, and you've got to be able to discern where it is. But then, when you had the, when you got the GPS, you could go and methodically work every bit, every year, so, you know, the technology without the quotas would have absolutely destroyed the fishery.

Amy: Yes.

Russell: Because it was never really taken into account, the technology creep, you know, and it, it, it made it, it made it easy for the fishermen, but it made it hard for the fish.

Amy: Yeah, that's so interesting. The technology makes it easier, but also more challenging to actually manage.

Russell: Yeah, very hard to put the technology aspect into a computer model. But, you know, even with the technology, some people still couldn't catch fish. Then you've got ability as well. Because you don't just go out and throw the pot over and hope. You've got to be able to land it on that bit of bottom where you want it to land, which takes time. You know. Years.

Amy: Hmm. Can you talk about some of those skills that you need?

Russell: I think, I think after years and years of it, you just do it automatically. You know, you know how much tide there is running. You know where you are, the depths and you, you know, just, it becomes a very, when you've been doing it for 40 or 50 years, it becomes very yeah, mechanical, automatic. We're there. You're right inshore, you don't even have to wait, you just throw it over, but if you're out in 70, 80 metres, you, alright, you might see the bit of bottom, because you always go into the tide and float the pots back, you know, if you, if you're working in 80 metres, you might have to go two or three boat lengths before you let the pot go. And, and, so how do you do that, it's not what you just do.

Amy: It's like in your body, too, yeah. So interesting people that don't have that, you know, for me the sea is like this scary kind of wild thing out there, but you've got this whole kind of language that you understand.

Russell: Yeah. Oh, look, you see some incredible things. We took a friend of Heather's that she swims with in 2020. We're just doing a bit of sharking out front here after I'd finished the crays. But we were doing quite well, only an hour, hour and a half away, so this guy who is a keen photographer came with us. But we went out this afternoon to put the nets in, and it was a beautiful calm afternoon, and we had dolphins with us all the way. The water was crystal clear, you know, everything was going on. And as we were sort of putting the gear in the water, the, the sea erupted with bait fish. There was a lot of bait fish around. But the dolphins were rounding them up, like you see on David Attenborough. It was just, I'd never seen it before.

And you had the diving birds going in and the dolphins going around like, like herding dogs. And it was just beautifully clear. And John said, is it like this all the time? I said, no.

Amy: Yeah, there'd be so much patience and then moments of, of those magical things.

Russell: Yeah. Oh, look, there's a lot of mundane, not mundane, but there's a lot of, you see it every day and it's like the beauty of the coast to the west of here is just, it's beautiful. And uh it becomes so blasé about looking at it. Some, there'll be an atmospheric thing or you'll have a lot of rain overnight and the mist will be down over the cliffs and there'll be waterfalls coming out of the clouds and that's pretty neat. You know, you see the apostles in the sunset because you're anchoring sort of up off Moonlight and in some lights they just stand out and

that's pretty, pretty good. Sunrises, sunsets. It's just, but it's part of your everyday job. It's part of your office.

Amy: Yeah, that's interesting that you get used to it, but it still breaks through the wonder of it sometimes.

Russell: Oh, it does. It does. You know, thinking, wow, this is pretty neat. You just don't realise where you are, you know, and then other days you like, I don't know, if you remember that all those yachtsmen got killed in the Sydney to Hobart in about... It was ah, it was really nasty. We, we worked that morning too, the morning that they got cleaned up that evening, but we worked out here and it was, I said to my deckie, it's not, it doesn't feel very nice today. You could just feel the anger or the viciousness in the ocean. It wasn't really, the wind wasn't really strong. But did get stronger. And I said to David, I said I'll be glad to go home today. I don't think I've ever said that before. I've had deckies thank me for saving their lives because the, the weather was that shit. But that's, I said to him, that's what I do. That's my job. I think I instil confidence in most people that worked for me because most of them stayed for long periods of time. My last deckie, 15 years.

Amy: Yeah. What's that relationship like?

Russell: It's when you're with the same guy for a lot, same person, it's like a marriage, I suppose. But we had our own space, you know. And he was easy to get on with, I don't know whether I was, but he was easy to get on with.

Amy: And you mentioned before having your dinner, what would a standard kind of meal be?

Russell: Oh, we ate really well. We had a night in the wheelhouse, we had a little stove with an oven, so we ate really well. I'm a good cook. So you've got to, if you're going to work like that, you've got to eat, well you can't live on a, on cans of stew and stuff like that, no, anything you'd cook at home, I'd cook.

Amy: What kind of things do you like?

Russell: Ah, look, we used to eat a lot of pasta and roasts and fish, of course.

Amy: Yeah.

Russell: Ah, curries, all that, anything, I could cook anything.

Amy: So, the weather.

Russell: The weather.

Amy: Again, people that have different relationships with the water or different jobs like that. The weather means different things, but yeah.

Russell: Did you see that photo downstairs?

Amy: No.

Russell: Just go and have a, go walk down the stairs and have a look at the picture on the wall.

Amy: Who got that photo? That's pretty amazing.

Russell: Ah, local bloke. That's us coming into the harbour in a bad easterly.

Amy: Oh, wow.

Russell: The weather's about keeping you, keeping... Your head together. Not letting it get on top of you. And knowing what your boat is capable of and what you're capable of. Not pushing it. Well, we used to push the limits, but within reason, I thought, you know, I always brought it home. You know, we had a few hairy moments at times, but we always got on.

Amy: What did it feel like when you were in that?

Russell: Ah, that was alright. Looks worse than what it is. Yeah, that, we were working down at Moonlight and the weather come in really shitty during the nights, the southeast, which is about the worst wind you can get here. And we just, just idled around because we knew we had to come home. We couldn't stay there, but we didn't want to come home when the tide was low. We wanted to wait till the tide was full. So we just come up, come in just on dark with the weather. So you'll see a lot of pictures of the blue boat around the house.

Amy: What was it called?

Russell: It was called the Carlene Marie. Okay. It was built by a local bloke, a Fisk. There's a Fisk Street in town. And I never changed its name. They reckon it's bad luck to change the name of a boat.

Amy: Did you have any other interesting names through the years?

Russell: Boat names? I had that one for a long time. Oh but... Skipped a couple of boats, one called the Nerida, which is a nice boat. Another one called the Doris R. And I worked on a few others. The Defiance. Olga Star.

Amy: You'd have a special relationship with your boats too, I imagine.

Russell: Yeah, well, often the boat got more attention than anything else, because if you didn't maintain the boat, well, you're putting, you know, you're just, you're going to sea on it. You need that boat working properly to bring you home and it's not only you, it's the people that are working for you.

Amy: Yeah, there's a real self-sufficiency to the whole thing.

Russell: Yeah, we used to do all the work ourselves. You know, I made all my own gear, pots, you know, these, I make these, these are just toys. But I make all that. I, I learned old school where you did it all yourself. Nowadays they buy it all out of a factory. I made all my own nets and all that sort of stuff.

Amy: Yeah. Can you tell me about the design of the, the nets?

Russell: The pots?

Amy: The pots.

Russell: Oh, it's really just a traditional, you know, bit of wire and a bit of cane. Just have a, what they call a pot stand and you start with the wires, the sticks, straight wires and then you just, well you weave the, the inside the neck bit, you weave that up and then when you want to turn it over you, yeah, you weave, you start with the cane around the wire and then you do the wire around the cane as you come out, cause then it gives, you can see the wire coming down, all that gives it its strength. But that's a traditional pot. Nowadays, they, they don't use these sort of pots anymore.

Amy: Was there a culture of people having any like special touches on their pots?

Russell: Everyone was a bit different. Everyone had their own style to a degree. Yeah.

Amy: Different colours or anything?

Russell: No, not really. Although, I used to like having in the neck bit. In the end we were using plastic in the necks. Red, I found red was a really good colour. They seemed to like the red. For some reason, I don't know why. It's just a thing that I found, I always made red neck ones if I could get it.

Amy: Yeah, there's something beautiful about sort of being part of every stage and then eating it at the end.

Russell: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, well we never very often go without having fish. I've been eating a bit of the tuna lately. Local tuna, sashimi. It's been really good.

Amy: Is that a new thing?

Russell: Oh look they've been getting a few for the last 10 years or so, yeah, all the people are chasing her a bit more.

Amy: I was just going to ask before about the weather. Do you find it's still just always in your mind, like knowing the tides and...

Russell: Oh, I always look at what the weather's doing. Because people ask, what's the weather doing? Oh, okay. But because I'm not working, I'm not as, probably, what would you say, that up on it, I don't, doesn't worry me that much. I, I... I get up in the morning, I walk the dogs every morning, look at the sea, and some mornings I think, oh it would be nice to be at sea today, other mornings you say, oh I would have been there, it wouldn't have been very nice. It's such a big part of your life when you work on the sea, the weather is, it dictates everything.

You know, it dictates where you're going to work, when you're going to go to work, where you're going to anchor for the night.

Amy: I'll just ask you a couple of questions about your life now in relation to the place, but I was going to ask about Cape Otway.

Russell: Yeah, Cape Otway's a fairly wild bit of water. It's a unique place. Well, in saying that, the top end of King Island is very similar to Cape Otway. Lots of water trying to get through that small gap, in and out, in and out. And it picks up all the swell. It's different. It's a absolutely horrible place to work. I kept away from that as much as I could. But I'd still go there occasionally. Because you've

got it, the tides just ripped through there. And it makes it, you've got to wait around for pots to come up. It's, it's, it's unique. Very unique.

Amy: Can you imagine the ships coming through there back in the day?

Russell: Yeah, you can see why they mucked up. Oh, not mucked up, but they, you didn't have to be out much, your chronometer didn't have to be out much. And in the context from Otway to Cape Wickham, so probably a hundred nautical miles in, I don't know how many thousand they travelled. It wasn't a very big gap to get through. Then you had that shallow ground at the Otway and you had King Island out in the middle and there's just wrecks everywhere.

Amy: Was that ever an interest of yours?

Russell: The wrecks? Not to a degree, but you know, I've got bits of wreck, a couple of the wrecks downstairs that we've got in gear. Interesting. Like, there's, we used to work places where you knew there was a wreck there, but what it was, because your ropes had come up all covered in black stuff that wasn't natural. So it had to be old steel or something. And every time you went there, it would be the same. So, yeah, and then, well, the City of Rayville, that one, the first boat, the first American boat that they, that sunk in the Second World War, well, a friend of Gerard Wormack, he found that. But we broke our nets off on that one day. I've got a bit of that downstairs. Yeah, but there's a lot of them.

Amy: Actually, yeah, that reminds me of the um... was it the Copal Resin?

Russell: The Copal. We were, we were trawling and we were out, well, it was about eight miles south east of here. And the net come up, pulled the drawstring, fish fell out, there's a rock in the middle of it, you know, yay big, sort of dirty looking. And ah, we did, the boys cleaned it up and one of them, Mitch picked up this, this orange stuff, it looked like glass. He said, oh, what's this? He comes... I don't know Mitch. Anyway, they cleaned up and the other deckie picked up the rock, thinking it's going to [00:46:00] weigh, 30 kilo. Oh, it's as light as a feather. So he brings it up and he said, I don't know what this is, but it doesn't weigh what it should. So I said to one of them Mitch, just chip a bit off the end and we'll have a look at it. He chipped a bit off the end and it's this bright orange thing. So it's okay. Orange rock. Googled orange rock. Garnet. Oh yeah. Five to seven thousand dollars an ounce. 20 kilo. We're rich. The boys are just, you know, Mitch is going to buy himself a Lamborghini. It was really, it was really funny. They're all jumping around. Oh, just a Toyota. Yeah it'll do. And then we said, okay, calm down. It can't be. And then we went through the process of working out what it was. Then we thought it might've

been Amber, which is sort of, it is pre Amber, but then someone said, Oh, it might be Ambergris, whale's spit. Which you're not allowed to have. Then we actually, Heather plays bagpipes And she was telling these people and this woman said, oh, I know someone that might be able to help you with that. And we got in contact with this guy Jeffrey and we went to his house and he's a palaeontologist and he's doing studies on it to see how old it is. So he said we took the big lump and he said the big lumps not much good to me. And we had a heap of little stuff. So we took up some... There's little bits of leaf and that in it. It's pine. If you, if you rub it, it smells like pine. But it's pine sap. Early stage. Amber could be, well it's got to be at least 10, 000 years old. Wow. 10 to 12 because the land bridge sunk in about 12, 000 years ago. So it has to be that old. Could be a million years old. Jeffrey's place, he had, amber, he said, well, this is 20 million years old, but this guy's place was just incredible. We get his address and he said, oh, we said, how will we know if it's your place? He said, there's a T Rex in the front yard. And there was. And the house, I kid you not, it was like a museum. It was incredible. Incredible place. And he was a really nice fella and he, he said, well I'll, he, he actually got in contact long not that long ago and said, look, I'm still doing stuff on it and I'll let you know as soon as we know. But we gave a couple of bits that there was some indigenous girls here over the seafood festival. I gave one of them a few bits and she was rapt. She said oh my ancestors might have walked past this and they may well have done.

Amy: You obviously love living here. Have all that amazing history. What are your favorite places to go to these days.

Russell: These days? I really like my walk around the beach in the morning.

You know, we go down, we go and the dogs, we go down the street, go down onto the beach, at the river mount, walk around, come back, have coffee, and do the quiz with a few of my friends, and come home and start the day. When, when I was working, Moonlight is just a spectacular place from the ocean, that, that's probably, like, people see the Twelve Apostles because you can see it. Moonlight, you can't see it unless you go in by water, and it's much nicer from the water than the Apostles. There's caves all through it, and big cliffs in places, and the, you can see the twisted rock, and it's really, really pretty.

Amy: Would you need to have your own boat to get out there?

Russell: You need to go on a boat, you know, and there's actually remnants of apostle, which would have formed apostles if they were under the water in areas there, but they're on the land. Chimneys, but yeah, it's sort of, you know, you've got from sandy beaches at one end to the gable. Big high cliff. Well, I think it's

one of the highest maritime cliffs in Australia. I mean, there's a lookout on top of that. It's worth going down in... There's wrecks everywhere along the beaches there.

Amy: I'm just asking everyone as well if [00:50:00] there's any life advice you'd like to share.

Russell: Life advice? Ah, Jesus. I suppose if you've got something you want to do in life, follow it. It might not always work, but, you know. Often it does. And just be aware of your surroundings. You know, like, work with nature, not against it. I think that's, you know, what we try to do. Give, you know, like my backyard's full of fruit trees. These are all home grown.

Amy: Oh avocados. Amazing. What's good to grow here?

Russell: Just about everything I'll grow here except tropicals

Amy: Amazing. Oh, thank you so much.

Russell: That's all right.

Amy: I wanted to get you reading from a book.

Russell: What do you want to read?

Amy: Oh, just anything that you might have read out on the rocks.

Russell: If I can find it. I reckon it's the best opening page ever written. John Steinbeck, Cannery Row.

Amy: Okay.

Russell: There we go. Cannery Row. Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is a gathering and scattered tin and iron, rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honky tonks, restaurants and whorehouses and little crowded groceries and laboratories and flophouses. Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches, by which he meant everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole, he might have said saints and angels and martyrs and holy men, and he would have meant the

same thing. In the morning, when the sardine fleet had made a catch, the purse seiners waddled heavily into the bay, blowing their whistles. The deep laden boats pull in against the coast where the canneries dip their tails into the bay. The figure is advisably chosen, chosen for if the canneries dip their mouths into the bay, the can sardines would emerge from the other end and would be metaphorically, at least even more horrifying. Then cannery whistles scream, and all over the town, men and women scrambled into their clothes and come running down to the row to go to work. Then shining cars bring the upper classes down, superintendents, accountants, owners who disappear into offices. Then from the town pour whops and chinamen and polacks, men and women in trousers and rubber coats and oilcloth aprons. They come running to clean and cut and pack and cook and can the fish. The whole street rumbles and groans and screams and rattles. While the silver rivers of fish pour in, out of the boats, and the boats rise higher and higher in the water, until they are empty. The canneries rumble and rattle and squeak, until the last fish is cleaned and cut, and cooked and canned, and then the whistles scream again. And the dripping, smelly, tired, wops and chinamen, and polacks, men and women, straggle out and droop their ways up the hill. Into the town and cannery row becomes itself again, quiet and magical. Its normal life returns. The bums who retired in disgust under the black cypress tree come out to sit on the rusty pipes in the vacant lot. The girls from Dora's emerge for a bit of sun, if there is any. Doc strolls from the Western Biological Laboratory and crosses the street to Lee Chong's Grocery for two quarts of beer. Henri, the painter, noses like an Airedale through the junk in the grass grown lot of some, for some part of, or piece of wood or metal he needs for the boat he is building. Then the darkness edges in, and the streetlights come on in front of Dora's. The lamp which makes perpetual moonlighting Cannery Row. Callers arrive at Western Biological to see Doc, and he crosses the street. to Lee Chong's, for five quarts of beer. How can the poem and the stink and the grating noise, the quality of light, the tone, the habit and the dream, be set down alive? When you collect marine animals that are, that are certain flatworms so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole, for they break and tatter under the touch.

You must let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade, and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps, that might be the way to write this book, to open the page and let the stories crawl in by themselves.

Amy: Oh, that's so good.

Russell: It's great writing, isn't it?

Amy: Amazing.