

Thu Bui Interview

Interviewer: Matilda Asuzu

Bui: Hello, my name is Thu Bui. I am the fisheries extension agent at Louisiana Sea Grant. As a fisheries extension agent, my primary responsibility is to plan, execute, and evaluate certain programs for fishermen. We do a lot of programs with—I, myself, primarily do a lot of programs with shrimp fishermen who are primarily Vietnamese of Asian-American descent. They hold about—The Asian-American Vietnamese hold about 1,000—thereabout 1,000 licensed commercial fishermen here in Louisiana who have limited English language proficiency and so my primary responsibility has been to plan, execute programs for these fishermen due to the cultural diversity a lot of times these fishermen would like to receive help from extension, from Louisiana Sea Grant, however, a lot of times they feel that they may not fit in, or they're not the traditional group that we deal with and so, because I am Vietnamese, it's easier for me to relate to these fishermen. I come from a background where my father was a fisherman and still is now. My in-laws are actually dock-owners and before I was with Louisiana Sea Grant my background primarily was with working with the fishermen. And so, being in the industry before—it had helped me to network with different groups such as seafood processors, dock owners, fishermen, and even their wives, who a lot of times do a lot of their financial management. A part of what I do mainly with Sea Grant is, I do workshops, programs, outreach to these fishermen. I try—I think one of the difficult tasks of working with fishermen, whenever I have been specifically here—with my specific background is that I've worked so much with Vietnamese fishermen that sometimes I feel that I need a deeper understanding of the traditional fishermen that we have and so that's one of the things that I've struggled with and that I've continued to try to work through to where both the traditional clientele that we have at Louisiana Sea Grant and the Vietnamese fishermen can unite and I guess, reduce their conflicts amongst each other. And so that's one of the things we deal with. One of the other programs that I've worked closely with in Louisiana Sea Grant as a part of my own program with another agency is—with U.S. Coastguard is I'm on the advisory committee for commercial safety and so through Louisiana Sea Grant, a lot of fishermen have voiced to me that one of their main concerns was safety at sea when they're out at sea—especially in this economy—how they don't have the financial money to actually put more maintenance into their boats, much less, you know, consider their safety. And so I've worked with the U.S. Coastguard in advising—as a part of the committee—to advise U.S. Coastguard on what can be done to help the fishermen. And I think that's one of the main goals with Louisiana Sea Grant. As a fisheries agent I feel that extension—when we do outreach to fishermen, we want to help them as much as we can while staying pretty, you know, non-biased to any organization. We work with public leaders, we work with private sectors, private landowners and coastal issues, we work, um, through issues of wetlands, restorations, but in my position I feel that uh, what we wanna do the most is help when we're needed, help where we can, and actually bring in research from the university—from Louisiana Sea Grant College to the people, let them know

what's going on, give them the correct information. I guess we wanna give them scientific research information so that they can make the most informed decision possible for their business. And um...

Asuzu: That's it?

B: That's it.

A: Okay, um, and you are of Vietnamese descent?

B: I am of Vietnamese descent.

W: Okay. Um, you said that some of the Vietnamese fishermen don't feel that Sea Grant can help them or that they're eligible for that help?

B: It's not that they don't feel that Sea Grant can help them, I guess, because of their culture diversity, um, I think that Sea Grant, before, has always been tailored to serve the traditional white male clientele. And so knowing this, and because they don't speak English as well, a lot of times when we have these meetings fishermen tend not to come because they feel that they don't understand and so part of my meeting has been a bilingual meeting, where it's open to the public, you know, Asian-American and American fishermen are there and we go through the same topics. It's a little bit more drawn out when we do the bilingual meetings but we've had some great outcomes, because in the area that I'm responsible for. It's primarily Vietnamese fishermen, and so these fishermen are able to understand and they get the information.

A: And which areas are you responsible for?

B: I am in the St. Mary Parish Iberia and I work a little bit down in Vermillion Parish when I'm needed. There's a large fleet boat of shrimp fishermen in Intracoastal City which is—they land a good amount of shrimp for Louisiana and so that's my primary responsibility, is St. Mary, Iberia, and part of Vermillion Parish.

A: Did you have a special connection to that area that you were placed there or was it just arbitrary?

B: Actually I grew up in Vermillion Parish, and again, my dad was a fishermen, he fishes out of the Gulf of Mexico, which—he docks in Intracoastal City which is in Vermillion Parish, and the dock that my in-laws own is in Vermillion Parish and she actually owns a dock that has probably one of the bigger fleets of shrimp fishermen. And before I started with Sea Grant, my background, I worked as an assistant manager to the dock so I was—I'm familiar with the networks in the industry in that area. In the Iberia area I'm familiar with the seafood processors and the seafood packagers and stuff like that and different groups of people.

A: And what kind of reactions have you personally seen working with the Vietnamese fishermen with your help and being able to explain the programs, the different helps, and the information that Sea Grant has for them?

B: I think one of the hardest things that I've had to explain to my fishermen is that I am with Louisiana Sea Grant. A lot of times they associate anyone with the government as just with the government, or I guess, Wildlife and Fisheries. And so I've had to explain to them what is Louisiana Sea Grant? How can we help them? What can we do for them? What role we play in the fishing industry. And so that was one of the things that I thought was the hardest to explain to a group of fishermen,

and to go back to your question, in dealing with the fishermen, because of the culture diversity, I've had to alter a lot of programs to where—you know, what we think may look good on paper, it might not work with the Vietnamese fishermen because a lot of times a lot of things offend them and so even in a lot of my newsletters it's been difficult because I have to word things the way I know they will perceive it as well...As, you know, because it's just the culture. It's very hard to work through culture diversity even though I am Vietnamese and I'm in the—you know, I understand their mentality, I understand their hopes, their mindsets, but still it's difficult for me to try to reduce these conflicts and struggles.

A: And what kind of cultural differences have you found make that bridge difficult to get across?

B: I think that the Vietnamese culture is not as open as the American culture. A lot of times fishermen are hesitant for changes. Maybe that's the same for both, but meaning that these fishermen are experienced fishermen, they've been here for a while...One of the difficult things I find is being a woman, these men are—they look to leadership from men usually and so being a woman, that was a difficult port to get into the community, but I think that I was lucky enough to have the background that I've worked with these fishermen before I started with Sea Grant, was that I'd actually been in the business before to where they knew me, they trust me, and so it has helped, I know, to get into the community. One of the superstitions that the fishermen have is that no women can be aboard their boats. That's a Vietnamese cultural difference from, you know, a superstition that many Vietnamese fishermen still hold but I think that I'm lucky enough that at three-fourths of the fleet will let me on their boat. And so I try not to get on anybody's boats though, I stay on the boats that I know would not say that, "Because she was on my boat yesterday my boat broke down!" you know? So I think that—it has been fun with the fishermen because we know each other, we work well with each other. They've come to me and I think it was very exciting when I first started off with Louisiana Sea Grant I had hardly any phone calls, you know, from Vietnamese fishermen and now, I start to see that they're calling me and so I know that obviously there's some trust between us that, you know—we've developed some trust.

A: Okay, um I was talking to Roy. He said you grew up in Lafayette?

B: I grew up in Erath and I currently stay in Lafayette now. Which is pretty much about thirty minutes from Intracoastal, which is where the coast is.

A: And what was it like growing up in a fishing family? Did you have any special responsibilities to help with the business and—? Describe that childhood.

B: Oh! Let's see. At the early age of about...I would say, about 8, I was doing income taxes, fishermen's income taxes. Because a lot of the fishermen and their wives would turn to their kids who were in school at a young age—elementary school—to help them with their financial matters because of their limited English that they had and so working with my dad as a fishermen, I was with him basically through the whole process. He started off as a deck hand, at that time—it was around the 80's I guess you could say—a lot of fishermen who came to the United States were scattered. They weren't along the coast where they needed to be, they were working in factories, they were working, you know, doing whatever they can to make ends meet. I know my father, he worked in a factory, my mom worked in a factory and

they would take shifts so that they wouldn't have to bring me to a babysitter so that they can save money and at merely, I guess a dollar something and hour, you know, but--and had nothing when they came here except the clothes on their backs basically, but after they realized that Louisiana had a fishing industry and there were people here that were priests and nuns—there were priests and nuns here who were willing to help the people—they came here to Louisiana and they worked together, they united, what they did was they made loans to each other, you know, my father continued to work—I believe he was doing sewing at the time—for a man to be sewing you know? But I mean they basically took whatever job they had and they saved their money, they lived on a budget, they spent less than what they made and they lived off of that, and eventually what happened was, one person would loan to another to start up their business and then everyone else would loan to him to where he can start up and as soon as he was doing well enough as a fishermen he would help the next person, and so there was a chain reaction and at that time when I grew up we had nothing but being able to know that there are people there that are willing to help you when they have nothing, that showed me, you know, that—it gives people hope when you can do that. You know, and I guess grew up with that mentality that I wanted to help others, you know, I wanted to let people know the truth, the facts, bring the research to the people give them outreach, let them know, you know, give them the knowledge to make their decisions work, to make their business work. And so growing up, going translate various fishermen, I learned that, you know they trusted me, and I mean, to trust an 8-year-old, a 9-year-old, with your financial matters, you know, that showed a lot—that you're pretty much on a limb here. And so working with the fishermen at a young age really helped me to be who I am now, to realize that I wanna help these fishermen and so I have—I'm deeply rooted to the fishermen, I really want what's best for them whenever I work with them. And not every time can we give them good news but what we can give them is the truth and I like that.

A: When did your parents immigrate over here?

B: My parents came here around '83 and we moved to Louisiana about '85 I wanna say. Yeah. And basically, I mean, I can remember, we would move house to house wherever the rent was cheapest and we didn't mind that and you know--my younger brother—bad, but he was left home with me to watch and it was a lot of responsibility and I guess because we came here as immigrants we really wanted to succeed so...it was tough.

A: So the Vietnamese community must be very tight with each other.

B: They are...

A: Very strong, very...close.

B: It is a very strong community, you know, you have—people don't wanna share some of their trade secrets and all that but they will help each other out: they work in groups, they work as a fleet. Um, the Vietnamese community is pretty tight knit; they work together from the beginning to help each other start up their businesses. Now they're still continuing to work together anytime a boat is out there that runs into trouble someone's gonna tow him in. He's not afraid that he's gonna be left out there alone. They communicate frequently to each other to let each other know

where's the catch at? You know, what are they doing differently with their boats? What are the new gears they're using? They'll let each other know, you know? You know, how effective these gears are, what's the best way to manage their catch? They share these things with each other and so it's helped the industry, I believe, when fishermen are able to give each other pointers to better improve themselves in the business.

A: What are some of the really big issues that you've found in your work with the Vietnamese community, with your extension work? Like what are some of the biggest problems that you've faced?

B: Um, allowed the Vietnamese community is pretty tight-knit, that becomes a problem when we ask them for information. They'll share with each other but sometimes it's hard to share with us. And so I guess a lot of things we do—sometimes we do like advisory committees, things like that, because we wanna know what the industry needs, yet fishermen are hesitant to do that because they don't like talking about themselves. They have this um—I guess it's part of their culture, that you're not supposed to talk about yourself. It's not right that you talk about yourself because it's seen as boasting, or that you're too proud and so these fishermen don't like to be viewed that way and so it's been hard to draw them out of their shells to let us know what they really need from us. And so, I've had to do a lot of one-on-one interviews more on casual talks at the docks not so much as sit-down, advisory committees or sit-down meetings. We've had to work more one on one basis to really get their trust and that's one of the difficult things I find is to actually gain that trust and to actually work with the fishermen and really deliver what they need by actually listening the way they want us to, you know? Because when they don't like talking about themselves you have to ask them different things to try to bring it out of them.

A: And, on the flip side, what have you had to do with traditional fishermen to kind of ease those conflicts you were talking about earlier? I guess first, what are some of those conflicts that there are between traditional fishermen and Vietnamese fishermen?

B: Back in the 80's I would say that traditional fishermen and Vietnamese fishermen had a lot of conflicts as far as where to catch and you know, the rules of the road kinda deal, you know, where can they fish? Where they can't fish. Because the Vietnamese community didn't know these rules of road, there was a lot of problems. Now, not so much, those are not so much the problems, I think that, you know, regulations sometimes draws up issues between fishermen when one is following them and one is not but now we've pretty much done good outreach, I believe, to where fishermen are aware of what's going on. I've done Vietnamese newsletters to make sure that the Vietnamese fishermen know the rules. You know, when can they catch, when does the season open up, that kind of thing to where the conflict as far as enforcement goes, there's not so much. The fishermen are following the rules now, they understand the rules, whether they follow it of course is up to them but they know what's going on and they're not misled by information and so when I deal with traditional fishermen, again, same with Asian-American fishermen, I let them

know the regulations that's out there, I let them know about the research that's out there, I give them the same outreach that I do the Vietnamese fishermen but it's been hard I guess, to balance out meetings and workshops—who am I directing the workshops to? And so sometimes I've had to do two workshops where it's open to anyone that wants to come and where there's one specifically just for the Vietnamese fishermen that I can be there to translate and so, you know, so that I know that they are completely understanding the information and so both with the Vietnamese fishermen and the American fishermen—traditional clientele that we have, we do the same thing as the fisheries agent, we try to give them the research and outreach that we have from Louisiana Sea Grant.

A: And why did so many Vietnamese people decide to settle on the Louisiana coast?

B: Um they're all along the coast actually, they're along Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi, and there's some that's in Florida right now. Fishermen traditionally in Vietnam lived along the coast and um a majority of the immigrants that came from Vietnam come from the coast because that was the—since they lived near the coast they were able to escape communism by way of water. And so when they came to America they were scattered mainly in—they stayed mainly in California where they united a lot, there's a big community in California, there's a big community in Texas, and of course, there's other communities all around the United States, but fishermen came to the coast because that's where—because that's all they know how to do and so it was familiar to them and being in Louisiana has helped them to actually do what they're best at doing.

A: [INAUDIBLE] Theresa, that um in Vietnam it was a French colony so a lot of people spoke French. Did the language—that common factor of language also help?

B: I think that when the French came to Vietnam, not so many people along the coast, because a lot of these fishermen probably has no more than a third grade education in Vietnam because at that time, during the war, most of them had to work to support their families, to bring back to their families, they had a big family most of them—probably ten-twelve kids in their families and what they would do is, when you work you bring all that money back to your parents to support the rest of the family and so when they came here to Louisiana, you know, they felt more comfortable along the coast, not because of the French community, more so because there were other Vietnamese fishermen here. And so they were able to form a community and they were able to go to church together and so building up a sense of community helps to build up the individual and so they didn't feel as scared, as lost in a new world.

A: And how long have Vietnamese people been settled on the Louisiana coast? Um, the worst--the fall of Saigon was in '75 and so at that time, there were many immigrants. There was about two—I guess there was--the ones that came during '75 were more educated Vietnamese that are probably your doctors, lawyers, you know, professionals, now, and then there's the ones that came around the 80's which is your coastal fishermen, and other immigrants and so...I got lost...what was your question? Can you read it?

A: Um when did the Vietnamese people settle on the Louisiana coast?

B: About um, the early 80's, late 70's is when most of them came. That's whenever they knew that there was a fishing industry and so that's when most Vietnamese fishermen came to Louisiana. They didn't start off as boat owners like that, they worked as deckhands even on American boats and eventually they got together, rounded up enough money, and made loans to each other to help build up one boat after the next.

A: Okay. Um, can you describe some of—I know you've already talked about the meetings, maybe the workshops or the different programs that you used to help the Vietnamese?

B: The first program that I did for the fishermen when I first started my job as a fisheries extension agent with Louisiana Sea Grant was a financial management program. At the time was two-three years—two years ago when I did this program. Um, the program was—the intent of the program was because there were many fishermen that was falling into a default—they were filing for bankruptcy, and you know, they would call our office and ask us about the programs but being that I'm not a professional in that field it wasn't my position to advise the fishermen on how they needed to deal with their financials, how they needed to deal with their bankruptcy and so we did a program where we got bankruptcy lawyers from LSU to come to the meeting to inform the fishermen, what are the different types of bankruptcy cases? What are the pros and cons? And not only did we do that, we also got local bankers from our area to come to let the fishermen know, what are their options as far as loans, how do they get a loan? You know, what do they need to qualify for a loan? And then we also had a group, a panel of financial managers come in to talk about retirement because a lot of fishermen don't think about retirement, they just think about what's now and not what's ten years from now and so that was the first meeting I did, which was completely different from what I thought I was doing because as a fisheries extension agent I didn't realize when I first started that your programs are what you want it to be, it needs to be tailored to your clientele and so that was the need at that time, that they needed to be informed of how do they deal with the treacherous waters of bankruptcy? And so, being that I wasn't a professional in that matter, we brought in people to help the fishermen.

A: And what research have you shown them to help with their fishing activities and their—

B: Um, I've worked with other Sea Grant—Texas Sea Grant—Mr. Gary Graham, he's with Texas Sea Grant. He works with gears—different gears, technologies. One of the problems we had last year was the high-soaring prices of fuel and so we did two workshops with the fishermen on what are the new gears out there? Or how efficient are they in fuel efficiency? Um, we've worked with other private NGO's as far as what are the different types of nets, how effective they are, and you know, we've worked with researchers to see, you know, what are the yields, what are the differences between what they're using now—the nylon nets—as opposed to these more high-efficiency nets, high efficiency gears. And so, to get back to your question, with the research, we've um, taken research from these individuals to bring back to the fishermen that may not have heard about it before to let them know that there are things that they can do to be more fuel efficient to help their business and so

that helps them to, you know, to prosper in their business and especially in a time of bankruptcies and defaults, that gives the fishermen some hope that you know, there are things out there that they can utilize. Um, we've worked with, um, federal agencies and state agencies, and after the hurricane, for fishermen to let them know what other financial assistance that's available to them so that they can keep their business going so that they can make those repairs that they need to make so that they can go back and fish. I mean basically with these fishermen wants to fish and so Louisiana Sea Grant works with other agencies, we collaborate with other agencies so that we can bring them this information so that they can make these informed decisions and then do what they really wanna do, which is go out and fish.

A: Okay, um, so when did you start working here?

B: I started in November of 2006. No, 2007, I'm sorry. So November 2007.

A: Okay and um, what made you decide to work with Louisiana Sea Grant? What attracted you to the position?

B: Um, I worked with Mark Shirley who's another fisheries extension agent over in Vermillion Parish. At the time I was working as an assistant manager over at the seafood dock and so I saw what he was doing, it interested me and I thought, "You know, I really wanna make a difference with these fishermen. I wanna be in an organization who's main goal is to help the fishermen, um, you know, who's main goal is the collaborate with other agencies to bring information to the fishermen, to um—and so it really just—it worked out.

A: Okay, and um, what do you enjoy the most about working with Louisiana Sea Grant?

B: Working with Louisiana Sea Grant has been different. Things are always changing, programs are always changing, we always try to—we all work with Louisiana Sea Grant. What I do is, I try to fit the needs of the people and so there's always a plan of action and we execute those plans and evaluate them. When I work with Louisiana Sea Grant it's flexible, my programs are what I want it to be—what the people want it to be really, and so I feel like I'm helping the people. And I've been brought up to help fishermen and so working with Louisiana Sea Grant just seemed to fit.