Fishing for Answers

Emilie Springer’s office at the University of Alaska Fairbanks may lie a few hundred miles from the ocean, but the Homer native and longtime commercial salmon fisher clearly still has both feet on a boat deck.

“I’ve pretty much worked all over the gulf … and I always really loved doing it,” Springer said. “My undergraduate degree is in English and creative writing, and the creative writing part almost always focused on Alaska issues, and fisheries quite a bit of the time, and boating in general and being on the water.”

Springer, who hold a bachelor’s from Stanford University and a master’s in marine affairs from the University of Washington, is studying toward a doctorate in anthropology at UAF under the Resilience and Adaptation Program. She’s one of 26 2006-07 UA grad students funded by EPSCoR. Springer, who is of mixed Aleut heritage, is also one of two students this year with Native roots.

Springer has spent much of her life out on the water, first toiling as a deckhand on the boats of various family members, then as a grad student interviewing fishermen for her Master’s thesis on the Bering Sea groundfish industry.

“I interviewed about 40-50 people from different gear types,” she said. “It’s actually pretty much impossible to get them to sit down anywhere, so I got a lot of those interviews on boats, just getting to know who the people were, how they got into the industry.”

Springer described her master’s work as a mixture of policy and anthropology, and said her doctoral thesis is likely to continue along those lines. She admits her nascent thesis is still nebulous and “way too huge,” but said her general plan is to study various Gulf of Alaska fishing communities and look at ways they can adapt to the decline of the industry.

“I see a lot of change in the communities … and a lot of money and effort leaving the communities,” she said. “(I plan) to look at how effort is leaving those communities in terms of fisheries and what opportunities there are to make the changes necessary to keep some kind of industry, it could be tourism, it could be some kind of adaptive change in fisheries.”

In the long term, Springer is hoping her study leads to conclusions that can be incorporated into state or federal fisheries guidelines. She figures her first-hand familiarity with the sometimes insular world of commercial fisheries will help her to that end.

“I’m working on the social side of fisheries, which I really think is an upcoming field and there are a lot of opportunities to bring that kind of research into policy, because there aren’t that many people who can interact that well with the fishing community.”