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Wang: It's recording too. Okay. Cool. All right, so, this is an interview with Mike Mitchell. The interview is taking place on August 7, 2018. And, the interviewers are Susan Wang—

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Lesyna: And Kristine Lesyna.

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Wang: And then, we'll have you, Mike, introduce yourself.

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Mitchell: Yeah. My name is Mike Mitchell, and I have the fishing vessel the Linda Noelle. And, this interview is being done at my berth at Fisherman's Wharf, San Francisco, California.

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Wang: Thank you. So, we're going to just start off with some of your, your background. So, can you tell us how you got into fishing?

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Mitchell: Well, I started fishing when I was real young, and I started to work when I was 16 and I worked up until about I was 20 years old. And, a friend of mine told me that I, him and I could make a living fishing if we bought a boat. I didn't think that could happen, but we tried it anyway and I struggled. And, after a couple of years, I did start making a living fishing. So, that was back in 1970.

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Lesyna: Was that in San Francisco?

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Mitchell: It was in San Francisco, yeah. I had a fishing vessel. It was called The Dolly, and then we changed the name to the Gemini. And, it was just a 30-foot Monterey, and actually made a pretty good living off that boat until 1980. I had this boat built and sold that boat and, and just enhanced my fisheries even more.

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Lesyna: What was your first commercial fishery?

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Mitchell: Let's see. My first commercial fishery, I was about 11 years old. I was, I was fishing perch off a pier, and selling them for two for, two for a quarter. That was my first commercial fishery. I didn't even know I was commercial fishing, but actually, I was. And then, I started fishing for fish in the Bay, and then, we got, more for fun than anything else. And then, I bought the boat, and then, I started fishing salmon. And then, after four or five years of fishing salmon, I bought crab pots and started fishing crabs in 1975 or 1976.

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Wang: And—Oh, go ahead.

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Mitchell: And, and then, after I got this boat, I started—Oh, and I was fishing gillnets with the Gemini, also for herring. That was back in the middle '70s. That was, that was a very good fishery. So, I did that and then had this boat built and kept fishing salmon, herring, crabs, and we were gillnetting Halibut at that time. I wasn't dragging for Halibut, and then, they, after, I think it was seven years, six, seven years, they stopped the gillnet fishery because of bycatch, not for Halibut, but for bycatch. And then, I was involved with the Alternative Gear Program after that. They told us that, if we could catch Halibut without bycatch, we could still have a fishery, and so, they called it alternative gear. So, we started to drag for these Halibut inside three miles and did very good. Zero, zero mammals, zero birds, and

all the bycatch was returned alive. But then, it turned political that the sportsmen said they want that, they wanted to fish inside three miles, and they didn't want us to fish inside three miles dragging. And, they took the bill to Sacramento, and we got voted out. So, that pushed me outside three miles, which I didn't plan to do, but that's where I ended up at. And, that was in 1992 I started dragging outside three miles after they closed the Alternative Gear Program, and here we are.

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Lesyna: How long were you involved with the Alternative Gear Program, and what, what types of gear did you test out?

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Mitchell: I was involved with that for five years, and I started with Danish seining, with this boat. That was one of the gear types that was allowed, and that didn't prove very practical because it was too much tide and, and snags inside here that just didn't prove practical. So, I switched my permit to, to trawl. That was more practical, and we, we had very, very light gear, light doors. We were very restricted on what kind of gear we could use, how big of gear, how heavy of gear, and the size of the gear, and that worked out very well, as far as Fish and Game was concerned, but not as far as the political, sportsmen especially. And sports writers, they did, they did everything they could to put us out of business, and they did. The power of the pen. And, that's what happened, and this, we were on the news, on the paper, every, every two or three times a week, what damage we were doing. Even though the Fish and Game, we had observers on the boat every day documenting what we caught, how we fished, what kind of gear, but they, they didn't believe it, the public.

So, anyway, they took the gear. They took that level to Sacramento and they put it on a ballot and, and they voted us, voted us out. That was it, and that was, that was the second fishery I got put out of. The first fishery was the gillnetting, which was a good fishery too actually, gillnetting Halibut, a really good fishery. But, they stopped that, and, and then, they, they told us we could do this. So, we did that, and then, they stopped that. And now, I'm doing this. So, I don't fish, I don't fish salmon anymore. I just fish crabs and drag for Halibut.

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Lesyna: Where did the gillnetting that you participated in take place? Was that out of San Francisco also?

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Mitchell: Yes, yeah. South of San Francisco and north of San Francisco and right out close, Seal Rocks, and basically inside any place that we're dragging now. You know, so, the north side, south side, and but, it was all inside three miles, probably all, all, mostly maybe inside a mile probably would be more accurate. So, but, it sure is a shame to lose, lose that fishery. This boat I built for gillnetting, not to drag with, but I ended up dragging because I was forced into it. So, anyway, that's, that's where that story ended there with the alternative gear, and that was, that was a fair, fair, good program, you know, and we did exactly what we planned to do, as far as Fish and Game was concerned, like I said, so, but, not as far as the sportsmen, and commercial ones too. People were jealous that we were fishing where we were fishing, and that's the way it kind of worked out.

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Wang: Have you always fished in the San Francisco area, or have you fished in other places?

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Mitchell: Well, I fished as far north as Crescent City for crabs and as far south as Morro Bay for Albacore. Oh, I did fish Albacore a few times also, not too many times though, and salmon, Monterey, you know, and maybe Fort Bragg, Shelter Cove. That's about as far as north I've gone for salmon back when I did fish salmon.

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Lesyna: So, you said you started commercial fishing when you were 11 years old.

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Mitchell: Yeah.

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Lesyna: And, like how did you, did you have family members that participated in the fishery, or did you just have friends around that you learned from?

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Mitchell: No. My father was a surgeon, and I just loved to fish. He liked to fish, but I liked to fish more. I had two brothers I grew up with, and they didn't like to fish. But, we had someone that took care of us, and she liked to fish a lot. So, she used to take me fishing at the marina. That's where my house was, in the marina district. That's closer to water. So, we'd go down there and, and fish, but as far as perch goes, I, I mean, I didn't know I was commercial fishing, like I said. I was commercial fishing though. You know, I was catching fish and selling it. So, if I would have known then what I know now, I would have probably made a fortune before I was 15, but I didn't. I had no car. I couldn't take the fish to Chinatown. So, I sold them two for a quarter to people walking by.

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Wang: So, you already had the, the savviness to be a fisherman.

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Mitchell: Fishing was good back in those days. Even in San Francisco Bay, the fishing was very good.

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Wang: How about when you started commercial fishing? Like, did you learn from others, or did you just learn while you're trial and error?

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Mitchell: Well, the first year commercial fishing, it's a big ocean, and we didn't have radar. The only thing we had was a compass and a, and a radio. That was it, and we went

out of this place at 2:00 in the morning, foggy with ships. That proved out to be a lot more than I, than I wanted to do because I was afraid to do it. And, I had a partner at that time. We bought the boat together, and he was, he was just like me. We didn't know what we were doing. So, I think I made \$500.00 that year commercial fishing. That, that was it, \$500.00, maybe, and the second year, maybe a little bit more, not much more than that.

And, and then, there was a group of boats up in, that used to tie up at Point Reyes. At summertime, they'd moor their boats up there, and they kept the boats down here in the wintertime. And, that, that was the Yukon gang. There were six boats, and I got to be friends with them and they took me in. I was the seventh boat, and I ran with them. And, they, they didn't teach me so much how to fish, how to use and how to catch fish, but what they taught me was how to run a boat and how to get in and out and go places safely. And, that was, that, that information would prove to be invaluable. You know, I mean, after I learned how to catch fish, but I didn't really know how to run a boat. And, to me, you have to really know how to run a boat and know where you're going and how, how to get there before you even think about catching a fish, that's, that's just one part of it.

So, that's, I mean, they took me under their wings, and I fished with them for, I don't know, eight years, seven or eight years. We used to tie up and slept together up at the bunk house. We had a bunk house at Point Reyes that was owned by California Shellfish Company. We'd unload. We'd unload there and then go out and we had our moorings, that we'd pick up the mooring and secure our boats to it, then row to shore. And, we slept in a bunk house. So, it was really nice. It was inside Drake's Bay. It was, it was all protected, and then, when rough weather would come, we'd just drive home with the car. And then, we'd drive back up there. We had our freezer, and everything was taken—You know, we'd fuel up there. So, it was all self-contained, and, and a lot of the city boats here would offload there too. So, that was really an era that, that was really a great era in commercial fishing, that dock up there at Point Reyes.

In fact, there were two docks. There was Alioto's up, up there too, and maybe three at one time. Paladini's, I think, at one time, had a dock up there too. So, a lot of fish, a lot of crabs were off, offloaded onto that dock, and they, they would truck that fish either to Santa Rosa or down here, wherever, wherever it needed to be. And, you know, at night time, we'd be in our bunks, and we had a cook. One of us

cooked and took turns doing all the things that needed to be done, and it was good times, a lot of fun. It was one of the best years of my life fishing with them up there. So, fishing was a lot, like I said, a lot of fun back then. So, not as hectic as it is today. Not so much a dog eat dog world here that that's—You know, permits for this and permits for that. You just bought a license and went, went fishing. Whatever you, if you wanted to fish fish, you fished it. Your license covered everything, so not like today.

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Lesyna: So, can you tell us a little bit about your experience with the California Halibut Trawl Fishery specifically, after the Alternative Gear Program and when you started fishing outside of three miles?

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Mitchell: Well, dragging is dragging actually. You know, we would get into situations and, snags, or whatever we'd have to deal with, and learn how to use the gear. And, it was a learning experience that we just—After five years, we had, we knew how to drag, you know, we, I'm talking about the other boats that, that I was doing this with. And so, we had it pretty well handled about the gear itself. The only thing we had to find out is where, and we just knew that these boats, these areas that these boats were fishing were areas there were Halibut. And, they would—We just kind of went by their tows. So, we knew if they were towing there, it was okay for us to tow there, even though we'd still get snags and things. And so, we didn't have to learn how to drag. We knew how to drag.

So, it'd be just like fishing salmon or any—If you knew how to fish salmon, if you'd have to boat, go 10 miles down the coast, you still know how to fish salmon. It's just a different area. That's all it is. So, the weather's worse, and the currents are worse. It's a lot harder outside, and so, we, I had to be very careful with this boat because it's not really built to be a drag boat. So, that's why I had to be very careful with it, you know, to know my limitations to a 70-foot drag boat compared to this boat. So, other than that, we do okay.

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Lesyna: And how, how big is your boat?

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Mitchell: Forty-four feet.

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Wang: How, so how long have you been fishing, and then, how long have you been trawling for Halibut?

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Mitchell: Well, I started fishing in 1970, and I started dragging for Halibut in 1992.

00:15:58

Wang: Oh, okay.

00:15:58

Mitchell: So, that's 20, 20-something, 25 years, 26, something like that, 26 years.

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Wang: Oh, okay.

00:16:07

Mitchell: Yeah. So—

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Lesyna: And why have you stayed with this fishery instead of moving to something else? I know you fish crab during the winter, right?

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Mitchell: Yeah. Well, when I'm fishing salmon—I quit fishing salmon and started gillnetting because it goes back to gillnetting because I wanted a fishery that I could be home at night. That's when I had, I had kids, and I missed my kids. And, I figured there's got to be a better way to, to make a living than being away from home all the time. Fishing salmon, you have to be away. You know, you leave for a couple weeks at a time sometimes, sometimes longer. You end up in Fort Bragg or Monterey or whatever and you, you can't get home. And, the next thing you know, two weeks goes into a month and you never see, see anybody. And, I didn't think it was a good way to, to, for my kids never to see me.

So, I wanted to have a fishery that I could still make money, so make a living, and yet I would be home at night. And, gillnetting was that fishery, and at that time, salmon was good. We were making, we weren't making nearly as much as, as folks fishing salmon, but I was home every night. So, I gave that up for that. But then, two years down the line or whatever, then they closed the salmon season, and these guys had no fishery and we were fishing every day. And, we got better at it. We started catching more fish, and then the next thing you know, that fishery turned out to be a very good fishery. And, like I said, that fishery, I would probably still be doing it today if they hadn't have closed it.

That was a great fishery. It's like crab. You put your gear out, and you go out the next day and pull it. You know, I'd be back in the wharf at 10:00 in the morning, 11:00 in the morning. My day was over. So, now, now, we put 12, 14-hour days in. You know, this fishery was—And, and the gear was inexpensive. Fuel was, you know, burning very little fuel, and, but that led us to this, out of, out of them closing it. It wasn't because we wanted it. It was because we were forced into it, literally forced into that to say we're just, that's it. You're done, you know. And, and, that Alternative Gear Program led me to outside dragging, outside three miles, which is good too. It's a good fishery. You know, I'm not sorry about it. I, I like doing it, but it's, you know, it's not an easy fishery.

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Wang: I guess, how is it—You mentioned you have, like, 12, 14-hour days. So, could you describe what a, like, what a typical day is or what it's like for you on a, on a day of fishing?

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Mitchell: Well, a normal day, we leave here about 4:00 in the morning, and I get back anywhere from 5:00, 5:00 to 6:00 at night. And, sometimes, we offload then and it takes another half, 45 minutes, and so, sometimes, it's 7:00 before I get off the boat. And, if I drive home, it's a half-hour, 40 minutes, depending on traffic. So, the good news is, when it's that late, I don't have traffic. If I come in earlier and I've got traffic, I get home the same time. It doesn't make any difference. So, but, that's what the, the normal day is. But now, I only fish maybe two or three days a week. I don't fish any more than that. I get tired, and so, I don't, I don't drag every day. If the weather's good every day, after two or three days, I'm tired, and, and that's it. I will take a couple two or three days off before I go out again.

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Wang: What is it like when you're out on the water? Like, what, what are you usually doing?

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Mitchell: I'm watching for boats, watching for snags. I'm trying to catch—I'm trying to find some Halibut, you know. If you can zero in on them, that's good. It's a big ocean. Just because you're fishing doesn't mean you're catching. You have to, you have to drag over a spot where there is Halibut, and then when you pull up the net, you've got to decide, find out where you caught those Halibut, you know, and hopefully, zone in on that. So, but, there's a lot of things: the current, buoys, crab channel buoys, boats. Things break sometimes. You know, there's a lot of things you have to deal with. A lot. So, some days are easy, and some days, you're, you say, "Thank God this day is over with." You know? And, that's it. I guess, like anything else, good days, bad days. Call it an omen or whatever you want to call it, you know. But, anyway, that's, that's what we do.

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Wang: How about, like, where you fish? Do you, do you tend to go back to the same places, or do you—Like, how do you know where to go or figure out where to go?

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Mitchell: Just historical places we fish at, bait conditions, weather conditions. Some places we know there's, there's, there's fish there, but we can't fish there because the weather's too swelly or whatever. We fish in shallow water, and even though the weather could be three miles, two miles outside us, the weather is good right where we're trying to fish, it's not. So, sometimes, we know there's fish there, but we can't fish there at that time because the weather conditions just aren't suitable. It's dangerous. You know? Especially with this boat, if you snag or whatever, a six-foot swell could be very dangerous on this boat if you're snagged or whatever. It'll break something. You know, so that's—If everything is going good, it's hard enough. But, if something breaks, then you're really in trouble. We can't be in trouble. So, I, so, we have to be careful what, you know, what type of conditions we actually work in. So—

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Wang: Yeah. That's a lot of things to pay attention to. Gosh.

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Mitchell: Yeah.

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Wang: What—Go ahead.

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Lesyna: I'm curious, if we can kind of switch gears a little bit. If you can tell us how you have seen the California Halibut Trawl Fishery change over time, with all your, like, 20, about 20 years of experience? So, have you ever changed your fishing tactics, and, if so, why?

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Mitchell: The only, the only things I've changed is to, to try to make my gear lighter to where it, where there's not, not so much drag in the water, and lighter, but, on the same hand, stronger to where it doesn't chafe too much. Because, where we fish, the bottom is very, very abrasive. It's like dragging over sandpaper, and it wears the gear out quick. I have a new engine that's more fuel-efficient, and, I guess, the only, the more you fish, the more you see, the more you have experience on handling something if something comes up. You know what to expect.

I think the fishery is, is, is good. There, there's not as many boats as used to fish it, and it's good for the fishery and it's good for the marketing condition. Because, like any fishery, if you have a fishery that you're catching a lot of fish and you can't even sell it, that's not good. Because, then, you have to be able to make a living with the, with the price, and if the price goes down to, to a very low price, you can't make a living at it. It's just, you're just, you're just spinning, you're just spinning your wheels, you know. What money is coming in is going back out again. There's not, not much profit in it.

So, there's a lot of boats in our, whatever fishery, if the fishery is, the fish you catch is bigger than the market conditions that they have where you're fishing, it ends up to be a mess because they, they can't buy the fish. They won't buy it. You know, you can't sell the fish. Then, the next thing you know, you're just, you know, it's just not good fishery anymore. So, and, that's, I guess, that hasn't changed. We still have, we still have a lot of problems with that. We have hook and line Halibut we compete against, and we have Mexican Halibut that comes up from Mexico that they don't really say it's Mexican Halibut, but it's Mexican Halibut. They call it southern Halibut, where it comes from Mexico. They sell that very cheap, and we have southern Halibut from Monterey or, or Santa Cruz, you know, Moss Landing, and maybe Morro Bay down there also.

They have Halibut grounds there. There are guys who drag for Halibut down there also. That fish comes up, and then, we also have northern Halibut that we can compete against, and northern Halibut being the hardest because people prefer northern Halibut over California Halibut because it's thicker, it freezes well, and it's harder to overcook in restaurants. So, restaurants don't really like California Halibut too much because it cooks—It's thinner, and it's very easy to overcook it. And, after they overcook it, it's not a, it's not great compared to if it was cooked

correctly. So, they don't like dealing with that, and rather than deal with it, they just stick with northern Halibut.

So, we have all those things that they are saying. But, that, that was with the gillnet Halibut too. We had the same problem. It wasn't, it was just a species of fish. It wasn't a type of gear. It was just a species of fish. The California Halibut is, at times, there's a lot of, a lot of competition from different spots of Halibut coming in that we compete against. So, it all comes into the, the same market, and it hasn't, it hasn't really diversified. It hasn't gotten bigger, which I'm surprised, to go further out of this little area that we're in, the bay area. It's doesn't seem to expand. If it did, it'd be easier to sell the fish, but it seems like it never has. And so, we're just, at times, when we're catching the most fishes, that's the hardest time it is to sell it. So, because of other, you know, other hook and line and the other different people fishing Halibut or bringing it up by truck or whatever. So...

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Lesyna: During your career, has the market demand changed at all, or has it been, have those issues that you mentioned been the consistent problem?

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Mitchell: That hasn't changed. It's still, it's still, it's still not good. It's still—If there's anything, I think we can see more, more Mexican Halibut coming up than we used to, and they sell that cheap. And, even though people realize it's Mexican Halibut, they don't like to buy it. But, sometimes, they don't know it's Mexican Halibut, so they, they buy it anyway and it's not fresh. Our fish is very fresh, but so, like I said, we compete against that. Hook and line fish, there's more hook and liners fishing all the time, you know. I think it probably, if it doesn't double every year, it goes up 50% anyway of the hook and liners every year.

They, they're, they were sportsmen that, that, that liked to fish, going out, catching Halibut and striped bass. And, they found, well, we can sell this Halibut for whatever price. They don't even have no idea what to sell it for, but they sell it. And, on a good day, they're commercial, and then, on a bad day, they're sport. They're both. They save the fish, you know. The fish—Then, that way, if they're fishing sport, they can catch striped bass or sturgeon or whatever they want to fish

for, and then, if it's a good day, they'll catch, you know, more than two or three Halibut, then they're commercial. Then, they're, then, they're a commercial boat. And so, that goes on a lot, which I, I don't understand how that law hasn't been changed. It should, it should be one or the other, not both.

So, that happens, and, and besides that, the Fish and Game really doesn't know how much fish they're catching besides—They know with the party boats. They can only guess how many Halibut are being caught in this bay, and, and then, these same boats, they don't go to wholesale. They go to restaurants or whoever's going to buy their fish. So, that fish is, you can say, off the market, you know. No one ever knew they caught it. So, and that's, that problem is getting a lot worse. That is one big problem, and small Halibut. You know, they catch a lot of small Halibut, 22-inch Halibut, that, for us, the markets don't hardly even want to buy it. So, you know, for me, that'd be good to raise the size limit to 24 inches, and that would stop a lot of these guys fishing Halibut inside the bay because the fish aren't that big usually. You know, they couldn't catch that many of them. They wouldn't even pay their, pay their expenses, but it would be good for the resource because that fish wouldn't be fished on and the small, those 22-inch, 22-inch Halibut wouldn't hit the market. And, it's that fish—Wholesalers don't even want that fish. They would much rather have 24-inch fish, at least 24 inches long before you could keep it. It would be much better, and that problem is just—That's one thing that's really getting, getting out of hand. It's really getting out of hand, and I don't, you know, I don't know. I talked to deaf ears sometimes at the Department. They don't, they really don't care. They don't care. So, that's it. That's, that's all the issues that I have a problem with.

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Wang: Do you think it's just more interest, like why, why there's an increase in that issue? Like, is it because there's more Halibut available or just more interest in, in fishing?

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Mitchell: More boats and, and people like to fish. People like to fish. They go out there and enjoy it, and, and then, the next thing you know, you know, they say, "Well, if you buy a license, then I can sell this fish. My friend does it." And, it's monkey-see, monkey-do, and, like I said, but they're both. They go out there for sport, and then,

if they catch a lot, you know, then they, then they're commercial. Or, they just don't, when they're sport, they just, you know, take the sport fish home and keep the Halibut on board, on ice. And, the next day, they're commercial and catch, and just add to that catch. And then, they go in and, and, you know, talk to someone and, and, and they sell it. So, I, I would think, like I said, it would be pretty easy to do. They do it for salmon. For us, I can't fish salmon and sport fish salmon too. I can't do that. It's illegal. I'm one or the other.

You know, and they could do the same thing with, with, with this fishery, or they could, they could even go a step further. They could raise the size limit to 24 inches, you know. But, then, the biologists will say, "Well, there's nothing wrong with the fishery. You know, it's a healthy fishery." Which it is, but, but a healthy fishery isn't, isn't really helping the market conditions on that because you catch, just because you can catch it. You know, if you want it, if you want to, you know, fish sport, fine. You know, you can catch, like, salmon. You can catch a small Halibut. But, for commercial, it's got to be 24 inches. And, but, they could do that too, you know, very, very easily, but, like I said, I'm not, I'm not involved with the Fish and Game.

Maybe someday I would, I would be, and I think I'd, I would change a lot of things. I'll tell you, and then, put a sunset on it. After a couple years, take a look at it again. Say, "Hey. This is working pretty good." Or, "This hasn't changed anything." One of the two. But, I think it would change a lot, especially for the future of Halibut because, right now, there's going to be more boats fishing Halibut than Halibut. So, and, anybody that, that monitors the San Francisco Bay can tell you how many boats are fishing Halibut, a lot. In fact, that master plan I read on the graph, hook and line Halibut is more than trawl now on landings, and that's landings on paper. That's not, that's not landings going south that no one knows about. So, and that, to me, we've got to have a log of every scale that we catch off a fish, and now, the landings are going the other way. And, that's only part of them. So, I, I don't understand that either, why Fish and Game is a little bit more strict on, on looking at landings. If you, if you want landings, you've got to have a pretty accurate account of landings and not, and not just what someone says, you know. So, what they think.

Lesyna: So, you said there's more boats in the Halibut fishery, and you're referring to the commercial hook and line boats. How about the trawl fishery?

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Mitchell: Trawl fisheries, there's not, there's very, there's not too many of us.

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Lesyna: Did there used to be more?

00:34:10

Mitchell: There used to be a lot more. And, they were big boats, and they found out that it's a small boat fishery because, after, after it's all said and done, there's not a lot of money to be made to support a big boat. A big boat has got a lot more expenses, you know. I would say dry dock could be 10 times more than what I pay for dry dock. I don't know. Fuel is, is triple. Expenses, overall, have got to be, well, five to 10 times more than, than I pay there. Anyway, and then, and it's just not a big boat fishery, you know, but people still do it because that's all they have to, that's all they can do. You know, and, if they have something else to do, that's fine, but when there's nothing else to do, that's when they, they look at it and say, "Well, we're going to do it even if we don't make money. We're still going to do it." But, they're going to do it to an extent that overdo it, you know. And, that being said, like, fishing every day 24 hours a day and going up and down and that can, that can hurt their resources out here, you know. Any, any time, in my experience, that you can, that you fish 24 hours a day, every day, on something, you're going to eventually wipe it out, you know. So, anyway. That's how I feel about that.

00:35:46

Lesyna: Have you seen the Halibut population change over your career?

00:35:50

Mitchell: It's in cycles. It's in cycles. It goes up and down, and like crabs. Salmon is different because, salmon, they're at the mercy of the rivers and dams. So, there could be



millions and billions of salmon. If they can't spawn, there's not going to be that many in four years, no matter what. Crabs, Halibut, other species of fish. Rock cod was, was hurt because of mid-water dragging and roller gear. That's what hurt the rock cod fishery. It wasn't hook and line. It was dragging, and the government sponsored that. They're the ones that, that, that sponsored all these big boats to get into, to roller gear and big boats, mid-water trawls. They couldn't catch the fish. I mean, they could catch the fish. They couldn't sell it, you know, and the same type of deal. They're catching much more fish than can be marketable, marketed, and they'd be fishing 24 hours a day. And, and, with the roller gear, they basically pretty much mowed down all the reefs between here and I don't know how far up the coast, as far as up as they could probably—Oregon, Washington, all of the reefs got wiped out, and, and after that was all said and done, then the government stepped in and said, "Oh, we've got to fix it." And, it was a little bit too late. But, Halibut is not like that yet.

So, but, rock cod, Halibut, the crabs, herring, even, are pretty much on cycles where they have good years, bad years. And, the last few years have been good. It's been good for the Halibut. You know, there have been a lot of small Halibut. Crabs, last, last year, wasn't good, and this year's not going to be very good. And then, it'll probably be good in 2020, or, I guess, it'll be 2019, 19, 20. It'll probably be good again, but that's, those are all, all the cycle years, up and down. So...

00:38:06

Lesyna: What do you think causes those cycles? Is there anything you've been able to pinpoint in the marine environment that you think causes that?

00:38:17

Mitchell: No. The only, the only thing I ever saw that Mother Nature had anything to do with it was El Nino, and the waters got very warm. And, that, that killed off the krill really, and then, everything that ate the krill, the anchovies, they all got small. And, anything—It was like it put the ocean on a big diet. It didn't kill the fish, but it put them down to where they were, you know, not starving to death. But, it pretty much, knocked the whole year out of their class. A three-year-old salmon was the size of a two-year-old salmon, and a two-year-old salmon was the size of a one-

year-old salmon. And, it just made them that—And, that happened.

You know, I saw that happening, and that was, that was pretty amazing what, what the ocean can do. It was good. It killed jellyfish though. It helped us, you know, and also, the Halibut liked it. Halibut like warm water. Crabs it didn't seem to do anything to. But, but, a lot of the fin fish, it did, you know, anything that had to eat fish for a living, short of Halibut. I guess they were on the bottom. I don't know what they, they—They didn't seem to like them. I don't, I don't remember them being smaller. But, that's the only, only ocean condition I remember that actually I saw had a big effect on, on, on, on the fish in the ocean around here. And also, fish left the area too to go find cold water, but the fish that remained were, you know, very small. So...

00:39:56

Wang: So, did you see that change in your catch? Is that how—

00:40:00

Mitchell: Yeah.

00:40:00

Wang: ...is that what you observed?

00:40:01

Mitchell: Yeah. I'd have, you know—I have a whole—You know, I have 12, 14, 15 salmon. They didn't make 100 pounds. You know, they're like cigars. You know, it was like they were on a, on a Mediterranean diet, Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers. I don't know, but they were, they lost a lot of weight. In fact, the only way you could tell how old, how old they were by them looking at the ear rings because that fish is only just, should be a 25-pound fish and it was about nine pounds. I said, "That's impossible." But, that's how much it was.

00:40:42

Wang: Yeah. That's really interesting stuff.

00:40:43

Mitchell: Yeah. It was interesting.

00:40:46

Wang: Have you seen any other, like, changes over—

00:40:49

Mitchell: Any other what?

00:40:50

Wang: Any other changes in the environment over your 40-plus years of being out here?

00:40:59

Mitchell: Let's see. Other than the observers and, and people working in the Fish and Game got cuter. Other than that, no.

00:41:11

Wang: How about the marine environment?

00:41:13

Mitchell: Oh, marine environment. Let's see. No. Everything, like I said, cycles. The weather, weather. You have—It's like the weather, you know. You have good years of good weather. You have years of terrible weather. You know, we had a winter a few years ago that was absolutely amazing. It was just like—You know, I mean, the storms that we had were just phenomenal. And, like last year was, was pretty, was okay. The year before, we had some weather. So, weather changes, we have, we have that to deal with sometimes with, in the wintertime mostly. We have fierce winters and sometimes good winters that go onto, to bad, you know. We

have storms, but we don't have terrible storms, you know, hurricane winds and, and things like that. So, that changes. And, we don't know.

00:42:22

Wang: Yeah, yeah.

00:42:23

Mitchell: Except one time, I can tell you that—I think Kristine, I told her. There was these acorns that were falling down while we were walking, and these acorns started falling from these trees about 12:00 at night, in the morning. And, they were about the size of maybe two or three times, two or three times the size of a walnut. Okay, big. And, I never saw that before. So, I asked a, a person that was working on the trees, and he goes, "Well, I don't know. But, my father, he was an old-timer." This was in August it happened, in August now. That's when these were dropping. And, he says, "My father told me, that when that happens, it's going to be a bad winter." And, I go, "Really?" And so, I thought about that, and I went and came back. And, the next day, I told people at the wharf, "I heard something that these walnuts, these acorns, whatever they were falling, it's going to be a bad winter." And they go, "Ah." No one believed it. It was a bad winter. It was a very bad winter. Coincidentally, I don't know, but, but that was, I was told that in August. And, December, all hell broke loose. So, there you go.

00:43:46

Wang: Yes.

00:43:46

Mitchell: Go figure that.

00:43:46

Wang: Yeah. That's interesting. Do you—I don't want to take your question.

00:43:58

Lesyna: So, you said you made your trawl gear lighter. So, you've modified it over time. How did you do that?

00:44:05

Mitchell: Just the twine, the size of the net, and, but not too light to where it doesn't hold up because it has to hold up, hold up to, to the bottom and, and things like that. So, that's all. It's just smaller probably. Yeah. And, because, we just, because, we had gear on the inside that was—I told you in the beginning. It was very restricted what we could use on the inside and it could only be a certain size, and it worked pretty well. So, and that's the same gear they used down in the Monterey, down in Monterey and, and Moss Landing, Morro Bay, I should say. They're trawl grounds down there. They have to use gear. It can, it can only be so big, and it, and it measures out to be big. And, and, it works pretty well. So, you don't have to have massive gear to catch Halibut.

00:45:08

Lesyna: So, are you using the same gear as they do in southern California?

00:45:11

Mitchell: No, smaller mesh. Some of it, half and half.

00:45:14

Lesyna: Okay. So, you have some 7 1/2 and some—

00:45:18

Mitchell: Yeah.

00:45:18

Lesyna: ...4 1/2?

00:45:19

Mitchell: Yeah.

00:45:20

Lesyna: Interesting. Okay.

00:45:22

Mitchell: So—And, the 4 1/2-inch gear, we're, we're only allowed 300 pounds of bycatch. So, we're not—So, you know, before, you used to be able to catch all your bycatch. So, that's—We don't have to worry so much about, about trying to catch that anymore. We'd rather not catch it. We're only allowed 300 pounds. There's no sense catching it. So—

00:45:46

Wang: You mean, like, you can only physically catch 300 pounds, or you can bring it in, 300 pounds?

00:45:53

Mitchell: We cannot. We can't bring it in.

00:45:55

Wang: Oh, okay.

00:45:56

Mitchell: You know, so, you're only allowed to bring in 300 pounds of bycatch, flounders, Sand Soles, whatever, so other than Halibut.

00:46:11

Wang: And, I guess, over time, you said before, when you started, you only had a compass

and something else.

00:46:21

Mitchell: A radio.

00:46:21

Wang: A radio. So, obviously, things have changed over time.

00:46:26

Mitchell: Yeah.

00:46:26

Wang: So—

00:46:27

Mitchell: All the, the, the technology has changed tremendously. Now, now, you can only be a professional. You can just buy a boat and, and go out there and then, and then, technology tells you everything. You know? Which is good, but, you know, just you think back on the days when you started. It's a big change. But, you know, it's a lot safer, you know. I mean, today, I don't really like going out without my phone, you know, let alone and radars and stuff like that. They—You really depend on them so much you don't even want to go out without them, even though in the old days, that was, you didn't have them. You didn't have to worry about not going out because you didn't have them.

And, that was one of the reasons when I first started I was actually afraid to go out in the ocean in foggy weather. I didn't know where I was going, you know, how long it was going to get, take me to get me there, and if even I was going in the right direction. You know, you had no way of, of knowing that, except for you had direction finders where you could find—They had different radio stations. You had one on the Farallon Islands. They had some different stations, different frequencies, different spots. Like, at Point Reyes, there was one. Bolinas, there was one, and

there were different frequencies. Well, if you had one of those, you could turn to that frequency, and then, when you got close, you would pick it up and it, you know, would, it would point towards that direction. So, that was the closest, closest thing you could get to that.

And then, they came out with LORAN. We got, using LORAN was very, that was very accurate. But, so, that was probably the radar, then LORAN. Then, radars, radars helped out a lot, for ships especially. That for, you know, I mean, to see where you're going is, is probably the most important thing, you know, and, and hopefully not go in front of a ship.

00:48:23

Wang: Yeah.

00:48:24

Mitchell: If it's foggy, you, you can't—You know, I mean, they don't see you. You don't see them. It's not a good scenario, especially fishing out of this port. There was a lot less ships then than there is now, not nearly as many ships back in the '70s than there is today. Today they're just—I don't know what the, I mean, how many more there are, but there's a lot of them, you know.

00:48:53

Wang: Fishing ships?

00:48:54

Mitchell: No.

00:48:55

Wang: Or just ships in general?

00:48:56



Mitchell: Cargo ships.

00:48:57

Wang: Oh, cargo.

00:48:57

Mitchell: Tankers, tugs, and tows, whatever. Yeah.

00:49:02

Wang: So, it's busier out there on the water?

00:49:05

Mitchell: Well, yeah. Not, not as many of us, but there's a lot more of them. And, I haven't, I haven't, I haven't tried to sink a ship yet either. I don't think I ever could, but they try to sink me sometimes, you know, if I'm not careful.

00:49:25

Wang: Yeah. That's scary. So, how, how has this, like, all this technology, because I see here you have all this stuff, how has that changed the way you fish?

00:49:37

Mitchell: The way I fish? It makes me more accurate on my fishing. I mean, I stay in a much better spot. So, I can stay in a spot a lot easier going back and forth. Salmon is very important with that, to go back, because, like I said, it's a big ocean, and you never, you don't have landmarks to go by to speak of, unless you're fishing by the, by the Farallon Islands. We used to use landmarks, but otherwise, you know, you have to go by your, your plotters and stuff like that. And, they're good. It makes everybody a professional fisherman. They could never follow a landmark or whatever, but they can follow a line. So, it's good. Technology is good. It makes it, it makes things a lot safer if people use them safely. So...

00:50:40

Wang: So, I guess, kind of switching gears to the future of the fishery. What do you think your, your future role in this fishery will be in the California Halibut Fishery?

00:50:58

Mitchell: Well, I don't know about my future because my future is probably going to be short-lived on fishing Halibut. I'm not going to be doing it too much longer I don't think. But, if, if, if the fishery remains controlled about how many boats are in it and the size of the boats and fishing effort stays the same, the fishery, the Halibut fishery is going to last a long time. If that changes, which I hate to say I think it's going to change with, with—And, the reason it will change because Fish and Game doesn't care if it changes or not, and I would think they'd be the first to care about that because a lot of people that are involved with protecting species or work for the Fish and Game and their hearts are in it.

And, if that, if the effort stays the same, the fishery will be fine. And, if, and if the effort changes, changes to, to what I think it's going to do, then the fishery is going to probably get, be in trouble in the, in the future sometimes to where it'll be, there'll be so much effort. The environmentalists are going to be very unhappy, and the Fish and Game's not going to be happy on that. And then, they're going to, and just probably say, "You know what? We'll just close it." Even though that someone could tell them 10 years before that, you know, just do this and that won't happen and they, and they don't do it. So, that's the way California Fish and Game works. Too little, too late. And, I think because their job and their future doesn't depend on it. You know, they, they, you know, the fishery's there, it's there. If it's not there, no, no difference to them. You know, they're just like a people's servant. What the public wants is political, and that's it. And, they want, the public wants it closed, then they're going to close it. And, the, that's the way I see it.

00:53:26

Lesyna: Why do you think the fishing effort is going to continue increasing?

00:53:32

Mitchell: Because there's less things for people to do, and, and if they have something else to do, they'll do it. And, it gets squeezed in other fisheries because they, like, you know, they have, they closed the salmon season in the future maybe or whatever. Or the crab season is bad, they look to do other things. They have to. And, that's okay if it's—But, not if you're something really big. You know, to go in something that small, if it can't support a, a big boat fishery, sooner or later, it's going to have problems. And, if you fish the way they'd have to fish, like I said, 24 hours a day, just keep fishing, then, what's going to happen? The price is going to go down, and no one's going to make any money then. The price will go down, and you have too much, too much supply for the demand. And then, the price will go down to nothing, and the boats that are fishing, they won't be able to sell their fish for much money at all. It's not that type of fishery, but that's what, I hope that's what it doesn't turn into, be that type of fishery.

And, I hope I'm wrong. But, with this bill that was just in, 1309, there was a lot of good language in it that the Fish and Game took all out and basically left it kind of open to what the crab fishery, the bills that was put in a few years ago about sponsoning a, sponsons of boats, making boats bigger and stuff like that. And, no one saw that coming, and yet, they're going to let the same thing happen here. They have a, they had a way to stop that, but they, they took all that language out to where the guys can basically make their boats much bigger and then transfer that boat to a bigger—And, it's like hopscotch, 30 to a 40, from a 40 to a 60. And then, the next thing you know, a couple transfers, the guy's got a 70-foot boat that started with a 35 or 38-foot boat, you know, a 40-foot boat. And, then, the next thing you know, from, from this boat, it's like the Pioneer over there, that size boat. It's over there by Scoma's, and it's a big boat, you know, or the Anna Marie. And, the Fish and Game is going to let that happen.

00:56:15

Wang: What is this bill that, that you're talking about?

00:56:18

Mitchell: 1309.

00:56:19

Wang: Yeah. What it is about?

00:56:20

Mitchell: It's about the cleaning up legislature about—It's with crab pots, the whale entanglement, addressing that problem, transferring the Halibut permit, being able to transfer from one boat to another. You know, so, we're in favor of that, but provisions about not letting it transfer from a small boat and have them make it from a big boat, and turn into a big boat from a small boat. So, anyway.

00:56:59

Lesyna: So, you said you don't think you're going to stick around in the Halibut trawl fishery much longer. Do you have plans to pass on your fishing expertise to anybody new?

00:57:11

Mitchell: No. You know, I'll, I'll, I'll, I'll pass on my boat and equipment.

00:57:20

Lesyna: Yeah.

00:57:23

Mitchell: And then, they can, they can fish Halibut themselves and find out. No. They're going to, they're going to have to learn how to fish Halibut, you know. So, I'm not going to, I'm not going to be telling them, make them, all the information that I know, no. I'll let them worry about that.

00:57:47

Wang: Why do you, why do you say that? Is it easier? Like, do you learn better just by trying it out?

00:57:55

Mitchell: Well, no. I mean, they'll try it out. The boat and the gear works fine, but it's not what you've got. It's how you use it. So, they're going to have to deal with that. So, but, whoever, whoever buys this boat, I'm sure they're going to be good fishermen. They might not go out there and do as good as I do right away, but they will. It'll just take them a little bit of time, you know. They have to have a market and everything like that. That's all up to the person who buys the boat. They might not want to fish in San Francisco. They could go down to Monterey. They could go up north to Bodega Bay, go down to Moss Landing, go down to Ventura. You know, it's a big coast. You know, because they buy this boat, it doesn't mean they're going to stay here, you know. They might go to Tahiti. They might go to Taiwan. You know, they might go to Australia, Hawaii. You know, who knows where they'll—Alaska. Who knows where, where the boats end up at? You know, they might not drag, you know. They might, all they want to do is fish salmon and Albacore. Who knows? You know, who knows?

The only difference is they'll be able to if they want to. That's the biggest thing. So, it's a big difference in if you have something and you're able to. It's a lot better than wanting to do something and you can't. You know, and things change. Like, say, they might want to fish salmon. Well, see, the salmon fishing hasn't been too good, you know. Crabbing, you know, crabbing with the tariffs, with, with these, with China and other places that's coming down, China buys a lot of crab. You know, and they drive the price way up, and now, if that happens with the tariffs and China says, "Well, forget about it. We're not going to buy anymore because we're not - with these tariffs on it, it's going to cost too much money." What's that going to do? That's going to, going to have—The high price a guy for, we're getting here for Dungeness Crab is going to be out the window, just like the farmers with wheat and stuff like that. And, squid, China buys a lot of squid. What? Tons upon tons of squid. Tariffs go in, and they stop buying the squid. Next thing you know, their market's going to go and say, wait a minute here. You can't sell it for that much anymore. So, we're not going to pay you as much anymore.

So, you know, the only thing good about Halibut is, you know, we don't export Halibut to, to China and Japan so much. So, a lot of things in the future that are not, you know, that are kind of smoky right now. We don't know what the effects of these tariffs are going to be, but I know it very well could be big time with fishing. So, with squid and crab for sure.

01:00:47

Wang: Halibut stays local in this community?

01:00:52

Mitchell: Local. And, I was trying to say that. I wish they would expand more. People I know can't buy fresh fish, but they have so much, you know—I mean, you can only do so much these in these markets. They only, they sell a lot of fish, and I don't think they're, they're into looking for, say, go where no man's kind of gone before, you know, and, and push things. But, they don't. They don't do that. They don't have to do that, and they sell what they need to sell and that's it. You know, that's the way it's always, that's the way it's always been. So—

01:01:30

Wang: Is it mostly, like, a person from the public who buys the fish, or is it mostly restaurants or stores?

01:01:36

Mitchell: Restaurants and, and restaurants, I told you, they don't buy much California Halibut. They buy the northern Halibut. And, then, there's fish markets, you know, mostly, and stuff like that. So, but, we can sell fish off the boat. You know, we can do that now at the fisherman's wharf. And, it's something that I really don't want to do after, after fishing, stay down here and, and try to sell fish to a, to a person, you know. You know, I want to go home. Thank you. Goodbye. I'm lucky enough to tie my boat up before I get off it, and that's it.

01:02:15

Wang: Yeah. Long day. So—

01:02:16

Mitchell: Long day. So—

01:02:21

Lesyna: So, is there anything you hope to see happen with this fishery in the future?

01:02:27

Mitchell: I hope it remains the same, you know. I'm going to, I will miss, I will miss dragging Halibut and, and the people that I see and work with while I'm doing that. I'm going to miss that a lot. But, I'll fish. I, I plan on fishing live rock cod. I'm not going to be out of the fishing business. I'll just be out of this. So, maybe if I'm lucky, I'll still be able to see those people that, that, that, that I'm accustomed to seeing once in a while.

01:03:10

Wang: What have you enjoyed the most about fishing that you'll miss or maybe that you won't miss because you'll keep doing fishing?

01:03:21

Mitchell: Being out on the ocean, pulling the net up and seeing what's in it and what's not in it. Situations, good weather. Going to sleep tired from having a good day or having a good day, you know. And, I'll miss that. You know, that's something that's, that's, that's kind of inbred in us, being competitive and, and dangerous situations, dealing with dangerous situations that pop up once in a while. All that stuff all plays, in effect, that, that, that were, that we've been doing for a long time. And, now, I won't, I won't miss bad days, but I'm going to miss a lot of good days, much more, more good days than bad days. You know, and so, it's, I, I—You miss it, you know, and stuff because, because we like doing this. We don't do this because—It's not just a, it's not just a job, you know. We enjoy doing it. It's not like it's really work, even though I'm tired at the end of the day. You know, it's not—You know, I don't get up saying, "Oh, God. I have to do this today." It's not like that at all. We enjoy it, you know, all of us, you know. So, if you didn't, you wouldn't do it. So...

01:04:47

Wang: Is there anything else you want to share about fishing, about your experiences?

01:04:57

Mitchell: Well, I guess the only thing is that the worst day fishing is better than the best day working.

01:05:10

Wang: I can see you really love it.

01:05:10

Mitchell: Well, it gets in your blood. You do.

01:05:14

Wang: Yeah.

01:05:15

Mitchell: You do. And, like I said, we make a living at it. We're lucky, you know. So, we're very, very lucky to be able to do something that we like doing. And, you meet the nicest people.

01:05:31

Wang: Yeah, definitely. So, well, thank you—

01:05:34

Lesyna: Yeah. Thank you so much.

01:05:36

Wang: ...so much for your time.



01:05:36

Mitchell: Is that longer than 35 minutes?

01:05:39

Lesyna: Oh, yeah.

01:05:40

Wang: Yes.

01:05:41

Lesyna: An hour and five.

01:05:42

Wang: Oh. Thank you so much for your time—

01:05:46

Lesyna: Yeah. Thanks again.

01:05:46

Wang: ...and sharing with us.

01:05:51 [End recording]