

Narrator: Jimmy Albright

Interviewers: Karen DeMaria

Location: Islamorada, Florida

Project Name: Changes in the Florida Keys Marine Ecosystem Based Upon Interviews with Experienced Residents

Project Description: "Changes in the Florida Keys Marine Ecosystem Based Upon Interviews with Experienced Residents" is a collection by Karen DeMaria of Summerland Key, FL completed in April 1996. Funded by the Nature Conservancy and the Center for Marine Conservation, the project sought to describe through oral history interviews, environmental changes in the Florida Keys marine ecosystem.

Principal Investigator: Karen DeMaria

Affiliation: The Nature Conservancy; The Center for Marine Conservation

Transcript Team: National Capital Contracting; Molly Graham (reviewer)

Date of Interview: April 1996

Abstract: The oral history of Jimmy Albright, recorded in April 1996, provides a detailed account of his life and experiences as a fishing guide in the Florida Keys. Albright, originally from Indiana and later Detroit, moved to Miami Beach in the mid-1930s and eventually settled in Islamorada in 1944 after World War II. He describes the significant changes he has witnessed in Florida Bay, including the decline in fish populations, water quality, and the impact of technological advancements on fishing practices. Albright highlights the transformation in the bay's ecosystem, noting the reduction in water depth and the increase in mangrove coverage. He recounts the early days of fishing in the Keys, the shift from commercial to sport fishing, and the introduction of catch-and-release practices. The interview captures Albright's personal stories, his observations on environmental changes, and his contributions to documenting the history and evolution of fishing in the Florida Keys.

Jimmy Albright: – among other things, a boat underwater [inaudible] what we output is [inaudible] –

Karen DeMaria [inaudible]

JA: – some of the engines. They have different – among other things – have different distances.

KD: Okay. That would be interesting to read.

JA: It is. Everything published that I know of [inaudible] – if you would want a copy of it, you could write to him.

KD: I'd like to look through it. Should I write to him to get a copy, or can I borrow one?

JA: Sure, if you could get it back to me.

KD: Yes, I can just read through and then mail it back to you when I'm finished reading it.

JA: You could do that?

KD: Sure, I can do that. But like I said, people make comments about glass-bottomed boats and how the fish would come [inaudible] they know the noise of the boat.

JA: That's right.

KD: They understand. But I hear it, and they're all ready.

JA: Yes, and this is another [inaudible].

KD: Yes, I will look through them, and I'll email them right back to you.

JA: [inaudible] if you could go through them and mail them back.

KD: On that subject –

JA: [inaudible] give them to Mike so he can read it.

KD: Right. Is your mailing address 320 Johnson Road?

JA: Box 938.

KD: Box 938.

JA: 938.

KD: Islamorada?

JA: Islamorada. [inaudible]

KD: How old are you?

JA: Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine in January.

KD: Have you always lived in the Keys?

JA: No. I was born and raised in Indiana and then spent my young years in Detroit. I left Detroit in, I think, '33. Came to Miami Beach. I started fishing in Miami Beach in '35, '34. I had my own charter boat up there. [inaudible] the war. [inaudible].

KD: Did you go to Europe or the Pacific?

JA: Both. [inaudible] Then my wife, at that time, her two brothers-in-law who died – one of them lived down here with his wife.

KD: What was her name?

JA: Bonnie and Bill (Spencer?). He was a guide here. The other brother was [inaudible]. So, we had a piece of property down here, and she came down in '44 and got [inaudible] war was over, I came here. I've been here since '44 [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible] Islamorada? You've always lived in this area right here?

JA: I always lived right here.

KD: Well, I bet you've seen some changes.

JA: Oh, so many changes.

KD: [laughter]

JA: [inaudible]

KD: Yeah. Did you graduate from high school?

JA: High school.

KD: Go to college at all?

JA: No, I [inaudible].

KD: When you moved to Islamorada, you were a fishing guide?

JA: Five dollars a head, but [inaudible]

KD: [inaudible]

JA: When I came to Islamorada, I had a new T-boat and backcountry boats.

KD: So you did a little bit of backcountry also?

JA: The way it turned out, I did more of the backcountry than I did offshore. What I would do was a thirty-foot bass boat, and I would tie two skiffs on the back of it and go back to [inaudible] or wherever I was going to fish that day, then [inaudible].

KD: You used little boats [inaudible]

JA: Yeah. See, we only had – the largest [inaudible] had at that time was a seven-and-a-half-foot motor [inaudible] what we had.

KD: [inaudible] the little boats, right?

JA: Yes. The big boat, I had [inaudible].

KD: Usually, at this point – do you understand what kind of information I am looking for, or would you like me to make a quick comment about it?

JA: Well, you better make a quick comment about [inaudible] I have my own opinion or my own idea.

KD: Okay. [inaudible] hired to go up and down the Keys and talk to people who have spent a lot of time on the water and document from them what changes they have seen occur to the waters of the Florida Keys. So, one, document the changes. Two, just try to collect enough information to build a picture of what Florida Bay used to look like once upon a time. Three, is to collect old stories and try to identify the people who have some really good old stories. I have three parts to it. Mainly, it's to document the changes and try to identify what Florida Bay really looked like back in the '40s and '50s, whatever, before all the changes started to occur. I am looking at water quality, water clarity, some of the seagrasses, benthic community – sponges, coral – [inaudible], basically everything. [laughter] Hopefully, put everything together and try to see if there is a bit of a pattern that develops based on what the people say [inaudible]. That's where I'm at. Now, this is usually the point in the interview where I ask people – what is the first thing that comes to your mind about changes that are on the water [inaudible] changes?

JA: Well, probably, the biggest change that I've seen throughout the entire bay is, number one, would be the lack of [inaudible]. We don't have [inaudible]. This lake right out here used to be as light as these walls [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible]

JA: That was for three miles [inaudible]. When I fished offshore, I would drive north. I lived on the bay out there. I would go out in the morning at 4:30 and drift until I heard [inaudible] getting that [inaudible] fish all day. I don't think there's been a [inaudible] in that bay in the last, probably fifteen years.

KD: Now, when you say that bay, you're talking about Florida Bay, the area inside the park or outside the park?

JA: This is outside the park. This is right here at the Little Bay [inaudible]. Then it would go on back even into the park. I'd go back into the park [inaudible]. So, it used to be that [inaudible] wasn't too bad in the '40s and the '50s. But in the '60s, you couldn't go back there [inaudible], and that's where I went to school.

KD: That was the commercial fishing [inaudible]?

JA: Yes. The other thing would be that we don't have the water depth on a lot of the flats on the – this is on the bayside and in the park and [inaudible].

KD: So, it has gotten shallower overall?

JA: It's gotten shallower, yes, and increased the mangroves [inaudible] only good sign I guess there is.

KD: [laughter] Back in the '40s, describe the Florida Bay community. Describe what it was like to go out in the bay, impressions you remember from back then, or [inaudible] earliest impressions.

JA: Back in the '40s, at 6:00 o'clock in the morning, there was probably no [inaudible]. That's the thing. It used to be that I can go in the bay five miles [inaudible]. From there, over to the mainland, I could go for thirty days, and there would have to be another boat.

KD: Now, when did you see the [inaudible] of the boating [inaudible] occurring back?

JA: That would have had to be in [inaudible]. Then when the large motors came out, we didn't have [inaudible] too. On the island here, there were probably six or eight guys at the most.

KD: Amazing what technology can do. I hear that a lot.

JA: [inaudible] In 1952 or '53, [inaudible] that there were [inaudible]. I had a big boat, and this had [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Mainly a [inaudible] the backcountry. I'd, on occasion, catch a lot of fish as [inaudible] fish. But they didn't [inaudible] the skin off them. What was popular [inaudible] a lot of people don't fish for something that's not [inaudible].

KD: Cook?

JA: [inaudible] strictly food fish [inaudible] quality and all these other fish [inaudible] that combined with over sport-fishing.

KD: I have heard people who keep [inaudible].

JA: Yes, [inaudible].

KD: In your fishing crew, is there a lot of [inaudible] a lot of catch and release type of fishing?

JA: There were a couple amazing guides [inaudible] catch and release. If they caught a large [inaudible] fish [inaudible] fish from then on, they were all plastic [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible]

JA: But before that time, there was a lot of fish not so [inaudible]. I've got pictures of six and eight sailfish hanging. A lot of people, if they caught their first one [inaudible].

KD: I was reading that.

JA: They had an awful lot. [inaudible].

KD: Their (scales?) were used quite often.

JA: West Coast [inaudible] and over in that area. But [inaudible] did a lot of that in those days.

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Yes. It's a [inaudible] fish, and [inaudible] ever made. I knew there was a lot of that [inaudible].

KD: What did phase out down here?

JA: Quite a bit of writing about tarpon [inaudible] tarpon – hundred-pound tarpon.

KD: I only know tarpon when they swam by me when I was snorkeling [inaudible].

JA: Yes. But you could [inaudible] on the fish in those years.

KD: This is a quick list that I made up [inaudible] population, changes in the size of the fish, or we have any interesting stories [inaudible], aren't they?

JA: Whereas every fall, there's usually a migration [inaudible].

KD: Do they come from deeper water into the shore?

JA: Comes from out in the bay where [inaudible] and there were other migrations down there at that time of the year. That was [inaudible]. That, plus the decline and [inaudible] tuna used to be [inaudible].

KD: In the Keys?

JA: No, no. [inaudible] fish. The longliners – as soon as you hit the dock with a tuna – any size tuna – [inaudible] longliners [inaudible], there's been longliners for swordfish for years. Tuna boats over into the area – they know exactly where their fish [inaudible] every fifteen [inaudible] fishing probably have no trouble catching [inaudible], and we had a run of them – a good run of them in the bay, too, which is no longer there. [inaudible] what it is. I started [inaudible] probably had – well, you see, apparently, [inaudible] hundred fish will start moving at the same time. Schools get broken all up, and you never see any unless they move in from the [inaudible] fish [inaudible] stops in there at Dry Tortugas or wherever they came from until they hit –

KD: [inaudible] start coming in, and when they're hearing, is that based on the water temperature?

JA: [inaudible] probably [inaudible] I would say you'd see the [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible] makes sense to see it [inaudible].

JA: Yes. [inaudible] spotter plane [inaudible] years

KD: [inaudible]?

JA: Yes, [inaudible] channel [inaudible] and release them now. What it used to be – there [inaudible] netting [inaudible] those fish – all the spawners, small redfish.

KD: Where did they use to spawn, up by Ten Thousand Islands?

JA: Over that lowland in the shallow [inaudible] fish.

KD: [inaudible] production. [laughter]

JA: Yes. But you could make a circle, and you'll see the younger fish [inaudible] watch them do it. By May, seems like when they first [inaudible] bonefish spawn [inaudible] bonefish that spawn here [inaudible] their habits pretty much – they don't seem to feed in shallow water as much as they –

KD: Do you think that's because of more people? [inaudible]

JA: [inaudible] they probably feed [inaudible] a lot more than they used to [inaudible] flat [inaudible] mangroves [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible]

JA: [inaudible] deeper water in this area [inaudible] deeper water, fish, and there could be [inaudible] down below, [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Butterflyfish [inaudible] twenty-five years.

KD: You mean you haven't [inaudible]? [laughter]

JA: I haven't done any of that. [inaudible] I guess – I don't know. [inaudible]

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Yeah. We still catch a lot of [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible] feet of water [inaudible] what is she doing here in the [inaudible]?

JA: Yeah, in the back of the bay. For the [inaudible], go to the area where –

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Yeah. There's no bait stores down there on that side [inaudible] couldn't even buy shrimp [inaudible] as we used to [inaudible] couple [inaudible].

KD: [inaudible] live bait?

JA: [inaudible] they're still pretty much [inaudible]. Live bait, I always [inaudible] was much better –

KD: I used to fish when I was a kid to now what I'm hearing [inaudible] anymore.

JA: [inaudible]

KD: [inaudible]

JA: Yeah. [inaudible] a day on boats that were [inaudible]. [laughter]

KD: It's easier on Islamorada?

JA: [inaudible] But here they would [inaudible] bonefish and [inaudible] guide, go back and spend time back there, like we did later on when – he's, of course, seen a lot of changes, same as I have with the creeks and river.

KD: [inaudible] look like when you were out there? [inaudible] used to be able to see the fresh water in the creek.

JA: [inaudible] no problem [inaudible].

KD: Was the water coming out clear?

JA: [inaudible] experience the discoloration of water –

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 4/1/2024