

*Jason Delacruz:* My name is Jason Delacruz, and I'm from Wild Seafood Company and the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance.

*Interviewer:* When did you start fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:* I've been fishing my whole life, but I've been commercially fishing, mostly spearfishing, starting about 2003.

*Interviewer:* Is that your favorite way to fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* Me personally, yes. If you let me go commercial fishing, I will go spearfishing. I like to be in the water.

*Interviewer:* What was your inspiration to start fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:* I grew up here in this area, from a little kid. From the days of being on the beach and catching whiting on the beach with sand fleas and just growing up here, I always just loved fishing.

I also had an aunt, when I was about ten or eleven, that actually worked on commercial fishing boats. John's Pass Seafood was just directly across the bay from us here, and she was somebody that I was really close to. She always took me fishing. Actually, I spent a lot of time, as a ten or twelve-year-old kid, catching bait down at the fish house and giving it to the guys who went commercial fishing everyday, selling it to them. That's how I earned money as a young kid, and she was probably my inspiration and probably what drew me the most into this business.

*Interviewer:* Did your parents have any influence on it?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, absolutely. My mom and my aunt were really close. If it wasn't my aunt taking me fishing, it was my mom, and my dad occasionally. It was really my aunt that drew me to it, and my mom kept it going.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any brothers or sisters who fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* No, actually. I have one brother, but he's not a real big fisherman. He's in the boating business, like I was before I got into the commercial fishing business, but we've always been a water family.

*Interviewer:* When did you get your first boat?

*Jason Delacruz:* I bought my first boat when I was nineteen, right out of high school. It was a seventeen-foot Chrysler. At the time, it was thirty years old, when I bought it.

*Interviewer:* Do you like that? Have you changed boats since?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, I am a fellow with what a lot of people call a boat addiction. I think, right now, I probably own, not counting my commercial boats that fish for me that I own, but I probably own another seven or eight boats.

*Interviewer:* When did you decide that you wanted to fish for a living?

*Jason Delacruz:* It was about 2002 or 2003 when I started commercial fishing. I was part-time commercial fishing, and I was also working in the boating industry, and so I repaired boats. I had my own company. That's what I did, and I did that on and off, and it kind of got accelerated, where I commercial fished more and more.

Then, as the fishery began to get stronger and stronger and we moved into a better regulatory environment, where the regulations were more amenable to a long-term business plan, I really took a more significant role into that, into where I am now.

*Interviewer:* Are there any regulations that limit the way you fish in Tampa Bay?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, there are absolutely are. There are different types of gears that can be used in different areas at different times, but the value in those regulations is actually really what has gotten us to where we are now, which is a fishery that is actually -- We have one of the most robust fisheries in the world. The Gulf of Mexico, ironically, has not been over-prosecuted, and so it really is in a position to be considered one of the top fisheries, literally, in the world. Not just the United States, but the world.

*Interviewer:* Because of this large amount of fishing in Tampa Bay and the Gulf, have you seen a decrease in the population of fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* I think the decrease happened, but it happened twenty years ago. I think since we have really started to build regulations that actually have good limits, you are starting to see trends up now. Now we've kind of already gone down. We've fallen off the cliff, and, luckily for us, it was kind of like falling off a hill, because we just haven't hurt our fishery that bad in the Gulf, and we are already starting to climb back up.

We've seen a resurgence of red snapper and an incredibly strong red grouper fishery. We still have stocks that have issues, but, for the most part, the stocks that we have are in really good shape.

*Interviewer:* Do you fish in this area a lot?

*Jason Delacruz:* I now own a seafood company, and so I buy fish off of boats, boats that I own and boats that I don't own, and I turn around and sell them. In doing that, in the last three or four years, I don't get to go fishing as much as I want to, but I still probably do maybe eight or nine trips a year, maybe ten trips a year, but they're two or three-day trips. I still get to go, but I really like to do it. It's my first choice, if I have my choice, but I started a seafood company. I just couldn't help myself.

*Interviewer:* What do you think the biggest change over the years has been, whether it be the environment or the way you fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* The biggest change has been the regulatory landscape, the regulations of how we fish. Back in 2010, we had a change in the regulations to what they call in the commercial fishery an individual fishing quota fishery. What that did, is it locked down what everybody could catch for the entire year. You know, at the beginning of the year, what you can catch. You can space it out over the year.

What that let you do, as a commercial fisherman, is plan your year and focus your catches on when the value was the highest, and so you built your strongest business plan. In that change, that was the biggest general change in the reef fish population, which is what I do, that we've seen in the last twenty or thirty years in the Gulf of Mexico.

*Interviewer:* Was that hard to adapt to?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Yes, it is a lot more sophisticated, and it requires probably more business planning, but the change is for the better, from the standpoint of that we really do have a fishery that we kind of can know what we're going to do and we don't get shut down.

The problem was, prior to that, we had about three years where we shut down early. What happened with that is we were losing our market shares. Because we didn't have any fish, the people that bought fish and supplied them to restaurants, they couldn't count on us, and so they were ending up sourcing other products, and we had to build our way back into those markets.

*Interviewer:*

Since you have been fishing so long, have you had any challenges in fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:*

There is always challenges with fishing. Weather is incredibly unpredictable and markets can be a little unpredictable, but they're actually more stable, so we know what's happening.

It's funny, because you see ebbs and flows in different types of species, in the fish, and so we saw a lot of sharks back twenty years ago. Then our shark population kind of dropped off, and we've done a pretty strong job of protecting them, and we're starting to see a resurgence of sharks.

With that, we have more shark interactions, but not necessarily bad interactions. We're catching them more because we don't harvest them, and they just get cut loose, but it's showing us that the dynamics of the fishery is that our apex predator is coming back, and it's always one of the keys of a really strong fishery.

*Interviewer:*

What is your biggest accomplishment in fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:*

I think starting my seafood company. In 2011, I actually started my company, Wild Seafood Company. Within the last four years, we have been fortunate. We have become a good fish house. We land a lot of fish, and so we've landed upwards of almost 10 percent of Gulf of Mexico grouper, and you can literally see my building from here. It's directly across the bay, and so I think that's far and away my biggest accomplishment.

Also, working in the Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance. It's a fishermen advocacy organization that I'm a part of, and it's a group of guys that really are much more conservative than most fishermen. Our concept is to protect the stock now and continue to maintain low catch levels and good catch levels that are science-based and the stock will continue to trend up, and it's better for us in the long run. We would rather take a hit now and throttle back the catch if we need to and let it climb up, because we see the value in the long run.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any children?

*Jason Delacruz:* No, actually I don't. It didn't work out for my wife and I, and so I kind of turned my seafood company into my child, I guess you could say, and also we've had a lot of dogs in our life.

*Interviewer:* Does your wife like to fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, and, actually, she goes and fishes with me somewhat regular. It's not as much as we used to when we were younger, but she still likes it very much. We're probably going to go fishing this afternoon, if I had to guess.

*Interviewer:* Have you ever had any life-threatening experiences while fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, absolutely. Because I spearfish, and I tend to spearfish in pretty deepwater, you are scuba-diving. We have had a couple of times where I've been bit pretty good, and we managed to get ourselves back in the water and recompress ourselves.

There have been a couple of times where we've come up and we've had a boat that wouldn't start, and that was when I was much younger. I think probably the biggest one was we came up one time, and we weren't in very deep water, and the guys that were on the boat, I said, okay, come get us. Normally, the boat would drive over and pick up the divers, depending on where they were. When they went to do that, the boat wouldn't start.

Then you literally have a boat drifting away from divers that are in the water. The boat is drifting, and you have a

boat that won't run. Then you have that imminent thought of I'm trapped in the water. They managed to get the motor started, and they managed to get back to us. That was probably the one that was the biggest fear. It was about thirty or forty minutes there that I was like, this is not good at all.

*Interviewer:* What kind of fish do you spearfish for?

*Jason Delacruz:* Mostly grouper and snapper and amberjack and hogfish, anything in the reef fish species.

*Interviewer:* What is your most profitable fish to sell?

*Jason Delacruz:* For a diver, it's almost always hogfish, because you really can't harvest them any other way, and so the demand is always really high. Probably second is gag grouper.

*Interviewer:* You mentioned that you like to spearfish. Have you ever gone diving just for fun?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, and it's surprising that I've been doing that for so long now that I catch myself a lot of times, even when I'm supposed to be spearfishing, harvesting fish, that I will just swim around looking at stuff. As I have kind of gotten past the -- You grow up and you mature, and I have begun to appreciate the world that's around me, the underwater world, and it truly is amazing.

Two weeks ago, we had a really nice, clear water come into the bay here. It was crystal clear, and you could see thirty feet underneath the dock. You could see everything, and I couldn't help myself. I went home and I got my scuba gear. I threw it on, and I swam around underneath my dock for forty-five minutes.

Usually my dives aren't that long offshore, but I swam around, just looking around. Just right here in this bay, I probably saw thirty different species, tarpon and redfish and lookdowns and seabass and sheepshead and snook. It was just unbelievable. It was really amazing. When that happens like that, I'm just really awestruck by what we have in our backyard.

*Interviewer:* What would you say is your favorite fish?

*Jason Delacruz:* Hogfish. Hogfish, far and away. It's just a really neat fish that you don't get to see in any other aspect. You don't catch it hook-and-lining, and they're neat, from the standpoint that they actually only eat crustaceans.

They have a really different dynamic. They're a harem species. You have one male and several females, and they transition, where they move from female to male. If there is no male in a group of females, the biggest female will convert into a male, and so it's a really cool fish. It really is.

*Interviewer:* What would you say is the hardest fish to catch?

*Jason Delacruz:* Probably black grouper. The amount of effort just to land one of those, it's by, far and away, probably the most amount of work.

*Interviewer:* If you weren't fishing, what do you think you would be doing now?

*Jason Delacruz:* Probably doing something in the boating industry, because I love the water. I don't think you could keep me away from it. It would have to be that. I would probably be building boats for a living, to be honest.

*Interviewer:* What is the longest fishing trip you have been on?

*Jason Delacruz:* I think about four days. I did a trip with a good friend of mine, who has been a commercial spear fisherman for about fifteen years longer than me, and I actually buy his fish now. We did a trip in the Middle Grounds, and we were diving for three days, but the trip actually four days to do.

*Interviewer:* Where did you go?

*Jason Delacruz:* West of here, to an area called the Florida Middle Grounds. It starts about eighty miles offshore and goes all the way to about 120 miles offshore. That was from 100 feet all the way down to about 150 feet, at the deepest points.

*Interviewer:* What do you mostly enjoy about fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:* The surprise. You never know what's going to happen. You never know, from one spot to the next, what it's going

to be. One of my favorite things on the boat is if we come across some sort of new spot that we're just driving along and we see something on the fish finder, it's the fact that some of the guys that dive with me are like, well, I don't know what that is, and I love new spots. I love interesting and something new and different, when we see something I've never seen before.

*Interviewer:* What would you say your greatest catch was?

*Jason Delacruz:* About eight years ago, we spent a lot of time down off of Fort Myers and Naples and that area, looking for big black grouper. I managed to spear and land a 104-pound black grouper. Since that, I have done that one other time. One of them was about 102 and then some ninety and stuff like that. I think that 104 was probably the biggest one, and that's the only actual real fish mount that I have in my house. I have a lot of fish rubbings, but that's the only actual real fish mount.

*Interviewer:* Do you go out and fish with your friends?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, and, actually, I do that more now than I do commercial fishing, just to enjoy myself. This afternoon, that's probably exactly what I will do, is me and a good friend of mine and his wife and my wife, and we'll go to about thirty-foot of water and we'll go messing around for the day and catch two or three fish and have a good time.

*Interviewer:* Do you ever do competition fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:* Yes, and I, for a long time, did spearfishing tournaments. One is called the St. Pete Open. It's here in town, and it's actually the largest spearfishing tournament in the world. At any given time, we have about 300 to 350 people that enter the tournament.

*Interviewer:* Have you ever won?

*Jason Delacruz:* Twice. I have won the St. Pete Open twice, one time with a ninety-six-pound black grouper and another time with a sixty-seven-pound black grouper.

*Interviewer:* What is the rarest species of fish in Tampa Bay?

*Jason Delacruz:* That's a good question. If you think of it from the bay



standpoint, I guess it's a little different, but I think of it more from a Gulf standpoint. I don't know if it's the rarest, but certainly the neatest and the most sought-after, if you do get a chance to see it, is whale sharks. We see whale sharks here, and people don't realize how often it happens, but, during the right time of year, in the summer, they will move in, when they're following the plankton.

I have been fortunate that I've had probably four different times now that we've come across whale sharks, and we were able to get in and swim with them, and it's truly one of the neatest things I have ever done. The first time was amazing. He was a big fish. He was almost fifty feet. It was unbelievable.

*Interviewer:*

Have you ever encountered a goliath grouper?

*Jason Delacruz:*

All the time. They are very common. They have actually done a really good comeback, as far as a stock. That's another stock that we've done a good job with. We have protected them, and they've come back really well. We see them even in the bay. I guarantee you there is two or three of them in this bay behind us.

*Interviewer:*

Have you seen any sharks?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Lots and lots and lots. When we're spearfishing in the Middle Grounds, which we do quite often, we see a lot of sandbars. We also see dusky sharks. Now we're starting to see -- A real good friend of mine was out a couple of weeks ago, and he was just fishing, and they had about a nine-foot mako swim around the boat, and that was only about forty miles off the beach. It wasn't very far, and so we see sharks more and more. The shark population in the Gulf is, in my opinion, beginning to come back nicely.

*Interviewer:*

Have you ever speared or caught a shark?

*Jason Delacruz:*

I have never speared a shark. I think I have only ever had actually -- I guess you could say I did spear a shark. I only had to defend myself from a shark one time, where I actually had to kill it. 90 percent of the time, with sharks, they look at you kind of like a mean dog looks at you. If he thinks you're scared of him, he kind of takes that stance. If you stay aggressive and you keep your eyes on him, he will just move away. Most of the time, it's the presence that

you pronounce in the water that depends on how the shark acts.

*Interviewer:*

Have you ever seen any rogue waves in the water?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Yes, that happens more often than you think. You will be sitting there and you will have a day where it's a little messy out, and, out of the blue, you're hit with a wave that's like where did this come from, and you end up with water in the boat or something. So far, I have never been in any of them that are so bad that it hurt anything. We've had some other issues happen, but nothing where I guess in the traditional sense of a rogue wave.

We're fortunate in the Gulf that our weather is fairly predictable, but a lot of people call the Gulf the washing machine. Even though our weather is predictable and our waves aren't necessarily real big, they are really steep, and so they can make it very uncomfortable for not a very big wave.

*Interviewer:*

Has there been any large decreases in the economy of fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:*

There has been definitely a lot of changes. The interesting thing is that the market dynamics with commercial fishing really change by what the presence of the U.S. thinks. In the last ten years, people have seen the fact that we don't want to eat farm-raised fish as much and that we want to stay away from antibiotics and things like that, and we've seen a resurgence in value of domestic wildy-harvested fish.

People really want to know where their fish come from. They want to know that it's a quality, domestic product. You're seeing this trending upward in the species, but that's also coupled with good management. With good management, the amount of fish you can catch will be tighter, but, luckily, those two offset each other. You can still be profitable and catch less fish, and that's really the ideal scenario.

*Interviewer:*

Do you think pollution has been a problem recently?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Yes, absolutely. We have had some red tides that I think are directly related to some of the phosphate industry in the

Tampa Bay area. Unfortunately, and I don't know this to be a fact, but there's a lot of thought process behind the fact that the phosphate runoff they have causes some of the bigger algae blooms, which exacerbates that problem, but we've had red tide since the 1900s, before this, and so it's questionable, but they say that the ones that we have now tend to be a lot more oppressive than the ones that we had a hundred years ago.

*Interviewer:*

What are some of changes in techniques over the past few years?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Interestingly enough, in the Gulf of Mexico, we're very similar. We haven't changed a lot of drastic things. I would say that some of the stuff is some of the new braided lines. Those have helped a lot. A lot of the guys that are single rod-and-reel vertical fishermen have moved to braided lines, and the braided line is probably the biggest change, because it's far less stretch. You have to learn how to fish differently, and it really requires a real adjustment. There are the old-school guys that fish a little bit different.

Also, some of the technology in the boats has gotten better, from the standpoint of the engine quality and the engine reliability. That has definitely increased.

*Interviewer:*

If you could go anywhere to fish, where would it be?

*Jason Delacruz:*

There is an area down below -- Mostly, I have heard about it from much older friends of mine, but it's in Cuba. It's a bank that comes out of a couple of thousand of feet of water. It's southeast of Cuba. I would love to see that.

*Interviewer:*

What do you think the most beautiful fish is?

*Jason Delacruz:*

There is a grouper called a fireback. Actually, what it is, it's a yellowfin grouper. The nickname is fireback, because on the top back side of his body, it will turn bright red. Then, on his pectoral fins, he will have like a yellow line, and he has yellow in the back of his eyes. He can be one of the most striking fish you will ever see. It's just incredible, as far as a grouper goes. It's just the neatest, coolest fish you will ever see.

*Interviewer:*

What is your favorite kind of bait to use?

*Jason Delacruz:*

I really don't have a strong preference, but I can tell you what we use the most. What we catch here or what we have locally most is threadfin herring, and that's, far and away, our largest volume fish. I have found that that bait consistently outperforms, I think, any other bait.

The only challenge with it is it's kind of flat bait, and so, when it goes down on a single line, it wants to spin, and so you have to be careful with that. If you set yourself up right, that's definitely our best bait in the Gulf, and especially in this region, because it's natural. Anytime you pick a bait, if you pick the bait that is most common in that area, it tends to outperform some of other baits, overall, if you look at it.

*Interviewer:*

What's your favorite kind of fish to catch?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Gag grouper in really shallow water. It's literally a tug-of-war on a rod-and-reel. You go up north of here, like Crystal River or Bayport or Homosassa, and, in thirty feet of water or twenty foot of water, you hit some of these rock piles. You get hooked up with a nice gag grouper, a ten or twelve or fourteen-pound fish, and it's everything a grown man can do to get that fish to turn to get him to come back up. It's truly a tug-of-war. It's a battle.

*Interviewer:*

Have you brought anybody else into fishing?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Yes, actually I have. I am also part of a spearfishing club that I've been part of for fifteen years now, the St. Pete Underwater Club, who also puts that tournament on. In doing so, you sponsor members to be part of that club, and I have done that with about six people that I have brought into it. Since then, of that six, two or three of them have actually become commercial spear fishermen.

*Interviewer:*

What do you think the most important thing to remember about fishing is?

*Jason Delacruz:*

Don't be passive. Don't ever think that what you're doing, if it doesn't work, is the right thing. Always be willing to change and move to something else. If you're going to be successful, you've always got to be willing to adapt and don't ever think you know everything. No matter what happens, there is always something different happening you can learn.