

*Interviewer:* What is your name?

*Brent Gaskill:* My name is Brent Gaskill.

*Interviewer:* How did you get involved with fishing and at what age?

*Brent Gaskill:* I grew up in this area. I am fourth-generation native to this area, and my whole family always fished. I have my grandparent's tarpon trophies from the mid-1940s, and I have my great-grandfather's captain's license from 1914. He ran a boat from the Hillsborough River in Tampa over here to the beach, and so it just became part of what we did in our family, and it evolved until I became a professional fishing guide myself.

*Interviewer:* What do you like about fishing?

*Brent Gaskill:* I enjoy the water, and I enjoy being outside. I enjoy boating and I enjoy all the things that make up fishing. It's just multiple things. It's not that I have a passion for fishing as much as just being outside and being part of nature, and fishing just involves all of those things.

*Interviewer:* What are some of your greatest experiences while fishing?

*Brent Gaskill:* It's hard to narrow that down, because we do pretty much everything that swims in this water. We catch everything from -- Trout and redfish and snook are popular ones, and I do a lot of Spanish mackerel fishing and snapper fishing and kingfish and grouper fishing, all the way up to catching large goliath groupers and sharks.

*Interviewer:* What type of sharks do you catch around here?

*Brent Gaskill:* You've got bull sharks and you've got blacktip and spinner sharks and lemons. Those are the most common of the larger sharks. There are a few hammerheads here and there, but the common ones inshore are bonnethead and Atlantic sharpnose, just the common gray shark.

*Interviewer:* Have you ever had any experiences getting bitten?

*Brent Gaskill:* No, not with getting bit, but I've had some pretty close relationships with some sharks. Just last weekend, I was on the east coast surfing and a shark popped up between me

and the beach and the lineup. He was feeding inside of the lineup where we were surfing, and so we kind of had to keep our eyes out there.

Right out from here, at Fort Desoto, on my stand-up paddleboard, I was in only a couple of feet of water, fishing off of my board, and I had a five-foot bull shark come put his nose right on my board and smell it, and so I just stopped fishing and watched him. He was a beautiful creature. He was all lit up, and he had that attitude. They're very protective. They don't like other ones in their territory.

I was on a twelve-foot board, and so he came to smell my board. When he realized it was an inanimate object and I was of no threat, he finally calmed down and left, but we've also had bull sharks inside the bayou here at Fort Desoto, on a higher tide, chasing mullet and rounding them up and chasing them up into the mangroves.

We just paddled right up to him, and we were watching him. We were only a few feet away from him, and he was ramming his head into the mangrove roots, and he can't get through because of his pec fins. He comes out and rounds the mullet up and was swimming right underneath our boards and things. It's just unique, and it's fun. It's interesting to be right there observing what's going on with things like that.

I have also seen large, huge, like twelve-foot, nurse sharks mating in the shallows, and I have found out now, after watching some National Geographic specials on that, that that's a rare occurrence, and it happened down south, in the bay, off of Rattlesnake Key, and we were able to pull right up to them in the boat, and they didn't mind that we were there at all. They were doing their mating rituals right there, and it was interesting to watch all that.

*Interviewer:*

Do you see any barracudas or anything?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Yes, we see barracudas all the time. They are very common. I have had barracuda jump in the boat, not hooked, and they come in with their mouth open. We've been very lucky that we haven't had to call the helicopter to come evacuate somebody out to the hospital, but barracuda

are a lot of fun to catch. They are intimidating looking, but they're very docile animals. They are to be respected like everything else, but I get in the water and swim with them all the time.

*Interviewer:* Are they actually attracted to shiny objects?

*Brent Gaskill:* That's what everybody says, and they will chase down shiny lures and things, but, as far as like shiny jewelry and stuff, it's probably a good idea to take that off when you're in the water with them, but they have very good eyesight, very keen eyesight, and they know what they're after. If they're all jacked up and they see a flash, they might have a reactionary strike, but their eyesight is so good that they can tell what they're after.

*Interviewer:* You were talking about what kind of fish were familiar to you. Have you ever caught anything that was like unfamiliar or invasive?

*Brent Gaskill:* That I didn't recognize what it was? I have been doing it so long and in the same area that it's hard to find something that I don't recognize completely, but like I've never caught a lionfish or anything like that, and that's an invasive species, obviously, but, pretty much, I am able to recognize or identify most things that we catch in this area. There might be an odd one here or there that I have to look up. What I have to look up a lot is what the regulations are on those fish, because it keeps changing all the time.

*Interviewer:* Is there anything that you haven't caught that you've always wanted to catch?

*Brent Gaskill:* That I've always wanted to catch? I have not caught a sailfish. I've been sail fishing. My wife has caught a sailfish and my buddy has caught a sailfish, but my turn on the rod just never happened when we had a sailfish on. It might be fun to do that one time.

*Interviewer:* What do you usually do with your fish when you catch them?

*Brent Gaskill:* It depends, because we do like to eat fish, and so occasionally I will keep just enough for a fresh dinner. I don't put any in the freezer. I only keep what I'm going to

eat fresh that night or within the next night or two.

Most of my parties, most of my clients, are tourist families and they're staying in a hotel. They don't really have a way to prepare the fish themselves, and so we do a lot of catch and release. I am insistent on -- I don't take snook. I don't even buy a snook stamp. I discourage anybody from taking redfish on my charters, and, since the red tide of 2005, I rarely take any trout, because they got hit so hard, and I'm still trying to make an effort to let those trout come back, but if people want dinner and when they book the trip they say this is part of what we want to do and we want to target these fish and we would like to have dinner tonight, and we're not catching snapper or mackerel -- I will keep snapper and mackerel, usually, for my parties for their dinner. If we're not getting those fish and they do want to keep a trout and they're going to eat it that night, then I will take a legal trout for them, but I discourage it. Reds and snook, I don't like to take those at all.

*Interviewer:*

Has anything changed since you started to now?

*Brent Gaskill:*

I would say one of the major factors that has changed over the years is the water clarity in the bay, the water improvement, and a lot of that is because of Tampa Bay Watch and the efforts they've done and just a general awareness of how bad our bay had gotten.

The water clarity has improved. Along with water clarity, habitat has improved. There is more seagrass beds now than there was, because the clear water is allowing sunlight to get down, and so the grass beds, and they're growing deeper than they used to be. Places where it was just sand bottom now have grass beds on it, because of the clear water and the sunlight.

*Interviewer:*

So you catch more now?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Everything goes in cycles. You can't really say that fishing is better now than it was then. I would say, from back in the 1970s that, yes, it is a lot better now, but things change though. There is different things, like when we had the net ban pass and they took the gillnets out of the water. Everybody thought that that was going to improve the fishing. It hasn't really improved the fishing because of

that. It's different.

Places where I used to be able to go make my living fishing before the net ban is very difficult to fish now, because of the way everything has changed. It's hard to equate, but laws passing don't necessarily improve the fishing all the time.

*Interviewer:*

Were there any years that it just wasn't good and that everything kind of went downhill?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I kind of just stopped fishing all together for several years, just because it wasn't very productive for the areas and things that I was doing at that point. It has definitely improved a lot since then.

*Interviewer:*

What got you back into it?

*Brent Gaskill:*

You know, what got me back into it really was when I was first married, and my wife and I do a lot of things together. I like to surf, and she grew up liking to go to the beach, and she realized -- She said, you know, I enjoy doing this, but we're at the beach and you're out in the lineup surfing and I'm sitting on the beach by myself. She said, I know you used to like to fish and I used to like to fish. If we get a boat, we can fish together and we can be together doing stuff, and we started fishing together, and it just kind of multiplied from there.

*Interviewer:*

Was it successful?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Yes, we started figuring more stuff out and branching out and picking things that I hadn't done before and going and learning. It was like, okay, I'm not catching a lot of snook, and so kind of dial in and focus on going out and targeting specific species and then start narrowing in on, well, I haven't been to this part of the bay before and I haven't been up this creek or I haven't been here, and plotting on charts and figuring out how to navigate and get in and out of areas and start exploring and just broadening out. It just took several years of searching.

*Interviewer:*

Has pollution affected anything?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Yes, it has. A lot of that is cleaned up, but it's still not right, and a lot of the red tide and things that we experience now I think is generated from a lot of the pollution, especially some of the agricultural runoff. It seems like whenever they drain down Lake Okeechobee for hurricane season that all of that water runs out, and that's all the farming down there and all the pollutants of all the chemicals and things that they're using on the farms.

They run out the river, and then there is always an algae bloom out in the Gulf when they do that, and it's feeding off of those same nutrients and those same fertilizers and things, and that is part of what I believe is what is making it blossom. When I was a kid, we used to have red tide in the heat of the summer, and it would last for a few days or a week, but it wouldn't go on for months and months, like it does now.

*Interviewer:*

What do you think is the best season to go out?

*Brent Gaskill:*

The best season, I think, to fish is spring and fall, and so anytime around Easter and anything around Thanksgiving. What you have in those two seasons is migratory fish that are coming through the area. They're here that time of the year. Usually, in the springtime, they're heading north and, in the fall, they're heading back to the south. You have not only your resident fish that are here, but you have migratory fish that join them, and that adds more species.

The water temperatures are cooler and the air temperatures are cooler. The fish feed better. There's an abundance of baitfish those times of year, and all those things just mean that spring and fall are definitely the best seasons to fish.

*Interviewer:*

Do you have any stories of anything that's happened, that can be good or bad?

*Brent Gaskill:*

I've got lots of stories, but I just need a topic to go with sometimes.

*Interviewer:*

What's your most memorable catch?

*Brent Gaskill:*

For myself or for my parties, because the truth is, as a fishing guide, as a charter captain, I don't really get to fish anymore. I drive the boat and I bait hooks and I take fish

off of hooks and I clean fish and I do all the rest of the things, but I don't actually get to fish that much anymore.

A very memorable catch would be my wife catching a forty-four-pound kingfish, and I had a friend with me, and so we got some nice pictures of that. It was the day after a tournament, of course. We weren't actually in the tournament, but we were fishing in the Egmont Hole, the deep hole at the north end of Egmont, and the big kingfish hit there. That was a lot of fun.

*Interviewer:* What exactly is a kingfish?

*Brent Gaskill:* A kingfish is in the mackerel family. It's the larger cousin to the Spanish mackerel. They're one of the migratory fish that come through our area in the spring and the fall.

*Interviewer:* How much fun do you have while touring people around?

*Brent Gaskill:* How much fun do I have? You know, it becomes a job, and it's definitely a job, but it's not a bad job. When my office is my boat, that's a pretty cool job. I really enjoy taking kids fishing, when I do a lot of family trips and take a lot of young kids. I had almost all my trips this summer were with young kids, like six or seven or eight or nine or ten or eleven, but I had some -- I had some twins that were five I think, four or five. They were young. It was a girl and boy twins.

They get on the boat, and I had taken my straw hat that I wear, and I had kind of put it down under the console so it won't blow out of the boat, and the little boy comes back around and he looks at me and he says, where is your hat? I told him that I put it away, and he says, no, no, not that one. Where is your captain's hat? He expected me to have this special captain's hat and this special uniform and everything, because I'm supposed to be the captain.

It's little stories like that and watching kids just light up and have a good time catching little sea bass or little snappers and all kinds of stuff. That's really more fun for me, as a guide, than trying to put somebody on a trophy tarpon or some big fish. I enjoy taking kids fishing.

*Interviewer:* So you're more into just the enjoyment rather than trying to

find larger fish?

*Brent Gaskill:*

One of my questions when I'm booking a trip is what's our goal here? Do you want to target something specific or just have some fun and catch some fish and have a good time? Most of my people say they really don't care what they catch, but they just want to have a good time and catch a bunch of it, and so that really takes a lot of pressure off, because I'm not having to hunt a big trophy. I can go catch thirty or forty or fifty or sixty Spanish mackerel and watch everybody grin from ear-to-ear and you're done for lunch and you call it all good.

*Interviewer:*

Where are your favorite spots to take the groups?

*Brent Gaskill:*

It varies by species, obviously, but I run out of Gulfport, and my stomping grounds are typically -- If you kind of did a 180 from Blind Pass out into the Gulf, up to maybe twenty miles, and a 180 all the way down to the south end of the bay and up as far as say Coffee Pot Bayou or the pier downtown. That radius encompasses my stomping grounds of where I run. I am hardly ever up in North Bay, and I do both offshore and inshore, and so anything from the south side of the bay to anywhere around the south tip of Pinellas Point, that's my area.

*Interviewer:*

If you're looking for game fish, where would you go?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Game fish, as far as snook and things like that, some of my best snook fishing is on the south end of the bay, across the other side of the Skyway Bridge, because there is so much more habitat and less seawalls. This side of town is all seawalls everywhere. I go over there and it's country. It's old Florida, and I catch more snook over there.

One of the reasons that I don't like to keep snook is because I need to come back and catch the same thirty or forty fish day after day, and it's almost like a game. I can pull up to the same tree, and people can throw baits in and there's nothing going on. I reach in the well and I pick up some chum, some free bait, just to broadcast out. I throw it by the tree and it's like, okay, thanks for the snack and boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Then they will feed for like two hours, and we catch thirty or forty snook. You get them and you take their picture and you let them go and



you will see them tomorrow. You come back the next day and it's the same thing. You go to the same tree and throw some baits in, they say thanks for the snack, they cooperate for a while and take some pictures, and then it's see you again later. You just get on patterns like that, and I can form a pattern better down there than I can on this side of the bay.

*Interviewer:* Do you buy your bait or do you catch it?

*Brent Gaskill:* I catch all my minnows, as far as scaled sardines and threadfin herrings and Spanish sardines and pinfish. All that kind of stuff, I catch it myself with a cast net. During the wintertime, baitfish pretty much leave the bay, or they go really deep, and the fish key in on crustaceans during the wintertime, and so they're eating shrimp and crabs. During the colder months, I buy my shrimp from the marina that I run out of.

*Interviewer:* What have you learned works more effectively, shrimp or baitfish?

*Brent Gaskill:* It depends on what my target species is, and it also depends on the skill level of my crew. When I get people that fish a lot or say they're avid bass fishermen and know how to work lures and artificial baits, then we'll use artificial baits, and they can sometimes out produce the live bait for certain species, but I would say, overall, the best bait, if you had to pick one, it would be the scaled sardine.

The Spanish sardine will out produce it, but they're not as prevalent. When I get Spanish sardines, it's like a bonus, but you can't always get Spanish sardines like you can scaled sardines.

*Interviewer:* Is there a specific area where you find baitfish, or are they just everywhere?

*Brent Gaskill:* You would like to hope they were everywhere, and this summer they were not. Bait was the hardest thing this summer to get going. It was just non-existent. We had bait show up in like one spot for maybe a month, and we had people coming from three counties away to catch bait at that one spot, because there was no bait. We had guys coming from Charlotte Harbor all the way up here just to

catch their bait. It was just an odd summer for baitfish.

I tend to target deeper places to catch my bait, where I don't have to chum, and so I do a lot at bridges and a lot at channel markers and things like that. As a last resort, I will go across the grass flats and chum and bring the fish to me there to throw the cast net on them. I like to go hit them in one or two throws in deeper water and be done.

*Interviewer:*

Do you use a larger cast net or a smaller?

*Brent Gaskill:*

I call it smaller, but some people would call it bigger. It's a ten-foot cast net. That sounds big, but a big cast net is a twelve-foot cast net, and that's just a lot to handle. One of the reasons I use a ten is because, when things are right, you have so much bait that I can't pick the net up and get it inside the boat.

I actually have to dump some bait out to be able to get it in the boat, and you can only shake so much bait out of your net without killing it. Plus, the ten-footer fits inside some of these bridge pilings better, where a twelve would get hung up in the pilings, and so I can fit my ten in tighter spots when I throw it.

*Interviewer:*

What bridges do you go to?

*Brent Gaskill:*

Skyway Bridge is probably the most popular.

*Interviewer:*

How far of a travel is that from here?

*Brent Gaskill:*

That's not far from here. It's just right across the way. It's only a mile. From Gulfport, it's about three or four miles for me to run down and catch my bait on the way out. If I'm going out, I will stop at one of the channel markers and get my bait there on the way.

*Interviewer:*

Have you ever been in a situation where before or after an earthquake, because of the way the deep-sea fish will come up?

*Brent Gaskill:*

As far as an earthquake, we don't have earthquakes here in Florida. We do have situations of hurricanes, and then we did see an influx of red snapper, American red snapper, after a large hurricane hit up in Louisiana, and the northern

part of the Gulf always has more red snapper than we did down here, but somehow, and some people also believe it could be the pipeline that was laid.

They have laid a pipeline all the way across the Gulf, up into the northern part of the Gulf, and part of it is buried, but part of it has mitigation reefs, and part of it is just covered with rock. People believe that the snapper followed that pipeline migrating down this way, but, when the hurricane hit up there, it seemed to push a lot of fish down this way, just running for safety or getting to cleaner water.

*Interviewer:*

Have you only fished in America?

*Brent Gaskill:*

I have fished in Belize before, a couple of times. I did a lot of free-diving and some fishing in Belize. Other than that, most of my fishing has been right here locally in the Tampa Bay area and a little bit maybe on the east coast.

*Interviewer:*

Has the oil spill affected your fishing?

*Brent Gaskill:*

It's kind of hard to say. When the oil spill happened, the media told the world that oil was all over Florida, and the truth was that it was on like a six-mile stretch of Pensacola for three days, and it was just a little bit. It wasn't covering everything.

Charters dried up and tourists stopped coming, because the media told them that the beaches were covered with oil. My regulars would call and say we heard it's bad, and is it? I would say, no, it has not affected the fishing at all. Our fishing was good as ever while that was happening.

The long-term effect is still hard to equate of all the dispersants and chemicals and things that they dumped in the water trying to solve that problem. As far as the spill itself, the crude oil coming out of the bottom is a natural substance and nature will absorb it, and there's always been small amounts of oil leakage at different places. Just naturally it occurs.

Now, when the media got ahold of this, it's hard to tell, knowing that the media sensationalizes so much, that -- If it really was the catastrophe they want to say that it was or if

it was just the fat kid peeing in the deep end of the pool. It didn't ruin the whole pool. It's not really good, but it didn't ruin the whole pool, and so it's hard to tell, long term, what we're going to see. I am hearing reports, scientific reports, of things happening now and things turning up that are pointing towards problems from the oil spill, but I have not heard real specifics that they quantify as that being the problem.

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