

*Interviewer:* What is your name?

*Jim Hitch:* Jim.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me a little about yourself?

*Jim Hitch:* I am from Ohio, originally, and I came down here about twenty years ago. Of course, in Ohio, I liked to fish with a willow pole and catch little sunfish. I had always wanted to catch a big fish. My mom and dad came down here in the winter to take a vacation in 1939, and I remember we could see the boats come in, and they had a fish laying on the dock. We would look at them, and I would say, well, when can I go fishing? When can I get one of those big fish?

I have always wanted to fish. I came down here, and I've been doing pretty good. Captain Mike has the boat that I go out on most of the time. I started when I was sixty-five, and I have made 950 dives, as of now, and it looks like it's kind of tapering off, and that's the problem. I've had a couple of heart surgeries, open-heart surgeries. COPD, that has given me some problems diving, but you can do it, and I'm not going to quit. I am just not going to quit.

*Interviewer:* You moved here a while ago. Have you noticed any changes in fishing since then?

*Jim Hitch:* I have noticed changes, because I got better. I like to spearfish, and, when I first started diving, I wasn't too successful, but, if you watch these old guys fish, you learn a lot from them, if they will tell you, and they are very, very secretive about telling anybody anything. They like to tell you how many fish they caught and how big they are, but where did you get them? They will tell you out in the ocean there. They won't give you any numbers. Mike, he has made thousands and thousands of dives, and he has a book of numbers, and he does share them with the guys that come on the boat, some guys, but mostly girls.

*Interviewer:* More specifically, like the water, and has there been -- I was told that it was very, very clear a couple of decades ago.

*Jim Hitch:* I think it's the same. Sometimes we get visibility top to bottom, say to a hundred feet or eighty feet and you can see the bottom of the boat, in the Gulf. It isn't like if you're

diving in the Bahamas or the Honduras. We don't have that clarity everyday, but we do have clarity. All we want to do is see about six feet. There is a lot of people that take pictures. Of course, they want better visibility, but, really, I don't care much about the visibility.

*Interviewer:* On a good day, how many fish do you catch?

*Jim Hitch:* The limit.

*Interviewer:* What is that?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, whatever it is. I don't know what it is at this moment on hogfish and grouper and the size. I don't know. The captain usually takes care of that. If you come up with undersized fish, he may tell you to throw it overboard.

*Interviewer:* Are there some spots that are better than others?

*Jim Hitch:* Sure, there are better spots. They have ledges. Mike has got maybe -- I bet he's got 8,000 points out here in the Gulf that he can go to. Some are better than others, but we dive everything. We dive wrecks and we dive the ledges, and so I don't know if he has any one particular spot better than the other. I don't care where he goes, as long as he puts me on the fish.

*Interviewer:* What type of fish do you normally catch?

*Jim Hitch:* I get more hogfish than anything. They're easier to shoot. They will swim right up to you, but the grouper, they're a little more challenging, but I do shoot grouper. I do pretty good.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any interesting stories you would like to share?

*Jim Hitch:* Basically, I started diving, like I told you, when I was sixty-five. What happened was I had a fear of the water. I had a terrible fear of the water, and so I go to Jim's dive shop and I said that I would like to scuba dive. Well, we go in the pool, and you're in water this deep, and I panicked.

He told me to go over and sit on the steps, and then we go again, and I panicked again. Then they want you to take your mask off in the deeper water and put it on and clear it,

and I thought, I'm not taking this mask off, and so they wouldn't certify me. To make a long story short, finally Jim, who owns the dive shop, he took me out by himself, and he certified me, but I was a very poor diver, I can tell you that. In fact, I claim the record for the worst one that he ever had. I overcame the fear, though. I have no fear. In fact, I have no fear of anything anymore. I just overcome it.

*Interviewer:* You had mentioned before that you had a fear of the water. How could you overcome that into something that's now your hobby?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, actually, when you say you have a fear of the water, you have a fear of dying. That's what it amounts to. I have no fear of dying. I'm a Christian. I've got the story straight, and I know where I'm going. How could you beat me on that? You just can't do it. When they say he's going to a better place, I'm looking forward to it, and I can prove that.

The last time we went out with Mike, he had a friend that had a new boat, and the water was cold, and we were in four to five-foot seas. I knew better than to dive, but Mike has got to have somebody dive with him, and so I went in. I came up the anchor line, and we were on five-foot seas. I get there, and I couldn't breathe. COPD doesn't allow you to breathe out, even with the mouth piece in, and so there we are going up and down.

Scotty, one of the boat captains here, he got my hands, and now we're going up and down like a doughnut and a cup of coffee, up and down, up and down, and I am panicking. I said let me go, just let me go. I knew what that meant, when he let me go. I was ready to go, period. Mike, he grabbed me, and he pulled me in the back of the boat. I've had some more experiences than that.

*Interviewer:* Where do you usually fish?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, the Gulf.

*Interviewer:* Have you ever traveled anywhere besides here?

*Jim Hitch:* Yes, I went to Honduras and Little Cayman Islands. That's diving, but most of our fishing is done in the Gulf of

Mexico. This is the best place to fish anywhere. You see more fish here than anywhere I have ever been.

*Interviewer:* Are there a lot of exotic fish in Honduras and the Cayman Islands?

*Jim Hitch:* You see a lot of fish that you would like to put in an aquarium. The last time we went to Little Cayman Islands, I saw one grouper and one hogfish. If we spent that time out here, we would have had a ton of fish in the boat, but they just weren't there. They were beautiful, live reefs everywhere and tunnels and stuff, but no fish.

*Interviewer:* Would you ever go back just to see it again, to see the kind of species of fish that there are?

*Jim Hitch:* No, I'm not interested in the fish, unless you put it in a frying pan. That's all I'm interested in.

*Interviewer:* What is your favorite fish to catch?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, grouper is a nice fish. They usually get a nice size. Hogfish are easy to get spearfishing. I have never caught on on a hook and line.

*Interviewer:* Have you had any times where the pole was really pulling you in and the fish was really strong?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, yes. I have caught fish that haven't pulled me in the water, but it's more than I can handle and I had to say, here, take my rod. Actually, it was a blacktip shark. It was about ten feet long, and that's a big fish on a rod and reel. They are very powerful. They would pull you in if you weren't ready.

*Interviewer:* Do you catch sharks a lot or not?

*Jim Hitch:* Yes, we catch a lot of sharks. Blacktip sharks are good to eat, and I eat them. I know the old fishermen don't, but, like I said, when I started fishing, when I was a kid, we would get little sunfish and clean them. I would go home with maybe ten fish on my stringer, and I would think, man, we really had a good day, and that was a little fish. We ate every one of them. We would put them in the pan and fry them. My mother would do that.

*Interviewer:* Do you do fishing for a job or as a hobby?

*Jim Hitch:* It's a hobby. It becomes a job though, the side part. You have to work on the boat and do things like that.

*Interviewer:* What was the best experience when you fished?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, the best experience is when you come home with a full stringer of fish from a dive. Fishing, we really don't do that much fishing. When you're on the boat, you take a rod and reel with you to fish, but, as soon as you start diving, the fish are gone. You might as well not try to fish. What we do is spearfish. I have a kayak and do some snook fishing, which I catch snook occasionally, but that's not my thing.

*Interviewer:* What different depths have you dived before?

*Jim Hitch:* The deepest I have ever gone was 176 feet, and I don't particularly like it, because you can only stay down so long and then you go into decompression. You shoot one fish and that's it. Now, these guys are getting fish now in these tournaments that we have, and they go over 200 feet. They take extra tanks. They've got tanks hanging down off the boat, and they will use those to come on up while they're in decompression. Otherwise, you run out of air. That's what happens.

*Interviewer:* What kind of fish have you seen in the decrease in the population?

*Jim Hitch:* I haven't seen any decrease. I haven't seen any decrease in the population. Like Mike said, you've got better fishing now than you've ever had.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any other job besides fishing?

*Jim Hitch:* No, I'm retired. For twenty years, I've been retired.

*Interviewer:* When you first came here to start fishing, where did you fish mostly, in what area?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, I hooked up with Mike. I have dived with a lot of captains, but once they find out you've had a heart attack or had open-heart surgery, basically they don't want you on their boat. They don't want to be responsible for this old

guy dying on their boat, and so they're kind of shaky, but Mike doesn't care. I have good equipment. He says, well, what kind of equipment do you have? Get it? He ends up with the equipment. I willed it to him anyhow, and so he has no motive to see me drown.

*Interviewer:* What type of fish do you see a lot around the Tampa Bay area?

*Jim Hitch:* There is a lot of hogfish around here, in Tampa Bay, and grouper. There is grouper in Tampa Bay. You just have to know where to go to get them, that's all. It's just a matter of knowledge, and the guys that have the knowledge are like Mike. There's a few people that have the knowledge. There's a lot of people that fish and don't get anything. I have been with captains and their boat and we go out and they dive in sand. There's no fish in the sand. You're just diving for nothing. It's a wasted day. They don't have the knowledge. I'm not saying that they won't get it. They have good equipment, but they just don't know how to use it.

*Interviewer:* How long have you been fishing?

*Jim Hitch:* Ever since I was a little kid. I would walk up to the creek and get a little sunfish and take it home and my mom would fix it.

*Interviewer:* Has pollution affected your fishing in the waters?

*Jim Hitch:* I haven't noticed it. We get that red tide. If red tide is pollution, we go around it. We don't dive in it. I don't know what causes it. They say fertilizer running off the ground, but I have no idea, but we can get away from it. If it's down south, we go north.

*Interviewer:* Do you prefer to do spearfishing while diving or to fish off the boat with a line?

*Jim Hitch:* No, we don't fish off the boat with a line. We've tried it, and it just doesn't work. You just don't get any.

*Interviewer:* What is your favorite thing about fishing?

*Jim Hitch:* Well, I like to catch fish. I'm a meat hunter. That's all I want. That's my favorite thing, is to put the fish on the

stringer. You can do all you want and look around at the scenery and all of that. We've got girls that go out, and they get aquarium fish, and that's their thing. They really love to do that. We get people that just like to take pictures, and they get good pictures. They are beautiful pictures, but put the fish on the stringer. That's where we want them, on the stringer. I have had some experience with some of those girls. They will be taking a picture of a nice grouper, and I'm above them, and I will shoot it. They don't like that.

*Interviewer:* What kinds of baits do you use?

*Jim Hitch:* We use sardines, usually, and we use live bait, pinfish.

*Interviewer:* Is this your absolute favorite place? If you could choose anywhere in the world to dive or fish, where would it be?

*Jim Hitch:* Right here in the Gulf of Mexico. It's the best fishing that there is anywhere. Now, I'm sure people down in the Honduras know spots down there, and, when we dove down there, we went with a group. We're not even allowed to spearfish, and so I'm sure they know how to catch fish, but we learned here, and that's naturally the place you would want to go, and I think we do very well.

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