

Interviewer: How long have you been fishing?

Mike Larkin: I've been fishing since I was five, and so I guess that's thirty-five years. I am giving away my age there.

Interviewer: What is your best catch?

Mike Larkin: My best catch was a twelve-pound bonefish in the Florida Keys, which they are really rare up here, but that's my best catch. It's not my biggest fish, but I would say my best, because of the effort that it took to find the fish and catch the fish. That is my favorite.

Interviewer: What is a bonefish?

Mike Larkin: A bonefish is a really silver fish. The reason they're really silvery is because they aggregate in schools, and so they reflect a lot of the sunlight, and it makes it difficult for predators to see them, but they live in real shallow water.

If you go out to the banks, if you go down to the Florida Keys in that clear water, what really attracts me to them is it's like sight fishing. You can go off of a bridge and fish on the bottom, but, bonefish, you are looking for them.

They don't have any spikes. If you think of like a snapper or a grouper, they have spikes on them. Bonefish don't have any spikes on their fins at all, because their defense is I'm just going to outswim you. They are extremely fast. That's why I like to fish for them.

One, they're in shallow water. They're really spooky, because they've got to be able to use that speed if something sneaks up on them. Anyway, you've got to sight fish them and you've got to cast to them. If you get too close, you're going to scare them and they're going to swim off, but when you hook them, it's like a little rocket ship. They're really streamlined and designed for speed. Anyway, that's my favorite fish to fish for. That's what a bonefish is.

Interviewer: What was your biggest catch?

Mike Larkin: My biggest actually was a bull shark down in the Florida Keys as well, and so not my biggest, but that was kind of like you put a dead bait on the bottom and you wait for the

shark to eat it and you bring it up. Then it's a long fight, whereas the bonefish, there's a lot more skill involved. If you guys think of hunting, it's like a combination of hunting and fishing.

You've got see the fish and you've got to cast to it without getting too close. Then the fish has to eat it. Then you've got to land it, and so you've got a ten or a fifteen-minute fight, while it's running around and trying to avoid like mangrove islands and sponges. That's my most memorable catch, other than the pinfish I caught with my son about three years ago.

Interviewer: What kinds of fish do you catch?

Mike Larkin: Right now, with my son, I mostly fish for snapper and pinfish. They're smaller and they're easier to catch. We're more interested in numbers and activity, and so we're not just throwing a bait out there and waiting all day. This way, we're actually out there just to keep the action going and to keep our attention spans from being overrun, and so keeping busy with that.

Interviewer: Have you ever been freshwater fishing?

Mike Larkin: I grew up in the Northeast, and so freshwater fishing for bass and sunfish, and we do that occasionally too in the lakes in the summer, in the ponds in St. Pete, and so we do some freshwater fishing as well.

Interviewer: Which one do you like better, the saltwater or the freshwater?

Mike Larkin: I like the saltwater. If you go to ponds, you kind of know what you're going to catch, and you're not going to catch something too big, whereas, in saltwater, there is more opportunity, in terms of there is always surprises, especially with climate change. You never know what you might catch out there, but there is always a new species of fish that you might not have caught before, as well as you might get something really big.

You might be bringing in a snapper and a shark comes by and eats it or something, and so there's more action. There's also dolphins and turtles and stuff like that, and so I prefer the saltwater, because you've got that unknown

element. You could catch stuff that you're not expecting to catch and potentially really big fish, too.

Interviewer: Was fishing a hobby before it was your occupation?

Mike Larkin: Yes, and I like to think that I kind of chose my career because of fishing and going into the field of marine science. I was young when I started fishing, and I really liked it, and so I just wanted to learn more about the fish and really mostly for selfish reasons, in how could I become a better fisherman, and so I would say, yes, it was definitely my hobby and really shaped my career choices.

Interviewer: You said something about marine science.

Mike Larkin: I went to college to get a degree in marine science. Then I worked in the field of marine science for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute. They have a big lab here in St. Pete. Then I went back to get even more education, to get my doctorate degree in marine science as well, and so I like to think that I have pursued my education quite thoroughly, which really the -- Again, it's selfish reasons. I want to become a better fisherman.

Interviewer: What is one of the most exciting stories you have since you started fishing?

Mike Larkin: I will tell you two quick stories. I guess it was two years ago that I was fishing with my son, and we were fishing for snapper with shrimp. He had a Diego rod, which is a really simple push-button rod, but it has no drag system like on the advanced spinning reels, where you adjust the drag to how much tension you want on the line. We were fishing for snapper, and a snook came by. He ate the shrimp, and it was interesting, because we couldn't stop it.

Another quick story is I was bonefish fishing in the Florida Keys. I was fly-fishing, and I was bringing it up, and these rods are nine feet long. The fly rod that I use is nine feet long. It helps you cast farther, and you can kind of get a little bit more speed when you're casting. Because it's nine feet, they come in several sections. That way, you can store it in your car or your house.

Anyway, I caught about a nine-pound bonefish, and I was fighting it, and the rod came apart. I only had half the rod

there, but then, just to make it more complicated, about a 500-pound bull shark came up on the flat and could sense the bonefish was in trouble or fighting it, and he actually started chasing it.

I knew if that shark ate that bonefish that I would lose the tip of my rod. There was a lot of selfish motivation here, because the line would break, probably, and that rod tip could sink and I could never find it again. It's really skinny.

That was really exciting, and so what I did was I just opened up the drag and just gave that bonefish as much -- I reduced all the drag, so he could swim around freely, as much as he could, and it was interesting that that bull shark was chasing it, but eventually that bonefish got away and he lost his motivation. Then he slowed down, and then I could see the bonefish.

The shark kind of went off the flat, and then I reeled and reeled and reeled and reeled, and then I was able to bring the fish in with half the rod, and so that was exciting, the fact that I didn't lose my rod. I don't want to scare you guys about fly-fishing, but this was a very expensive fly rod. It was about a \$600 fly rod. Don't tell my wife that I spent that much on a fly rod though. Anyway, I didn't want to lose it. It was exciting to be able to bring it back, and I caught the fish. I have a picture of it at my house, too.

Interviewer:

What kind of rod setup and reel setup do you like?

Mike Larkin:

I prefer light tackle and fly rods, just because I feel like it makes it more challenging. If it's like a 500-pound bull shark, you don't want to spend all day, and you can't put much drag on it. I just like it more for the challenge of it, because you can use heavy tackle, but, one, it's not as comfortable in your hand. You've got a ten or fifteen-pound rod and you've got real strong line, and you just kind of force it in, whereas I prefer the light tackle.

Also, with that lighter line, you can cast farther too, which is a big difference, and so I like it because you're casting a lot. With that lighter line, like an eight-pound or ten-pound, you can cast a lot further to it. Plus, it's not heavy. It's more comfortable in your hand, and so that's what I

prefer, the light tackle, and the fly-fishing is great, because it's even more challenging. The weight is on the end of the line, and you're going to chuck it and then that weight, whether it's a lure or a sinker or a heavy bait, it pulls it out.

With fly-fishing, you can throw something like the weight of a penny. The weight is all in the line, but it makes it more challenging, because you've got to cast the line, and, really, you've got to watch out for wind. It's a lot more influenced by the wind. Like if you were out there today with a fly rod, that wind will actually blow that line this way or that way, and so it makes it very frustrating, but, when you do catch a fish, I feel like it took so much more work and skill to get there.

If I can just go into something. I feel like with fishing, I feel like when you start off, at least from my experience, when you start, you want numbers of fish, how many fish can I catch. That's why we're targeting pinfish and snappers now.

Then you go to another phase, and I feel like that's the biggest fish you can catch, and so you try to use heavy baits and heavy tackle. Then, eventually, I feel like you get to the stage of what's the most challenging fish you can catch. That's how I think of it, and I feel like, my personal fishing, I try to target that third level of what is the most challenging fish to catch, because you can throw a bait out there and sit and read a book and wait for it to hit it, but the fish that's maybe difficult to find or maybe it's difficult to get it to eat the fly or the lure.

Interviewer:

What kind of bait do you use?

Mike Larkin:

Fly-fishing is my favorite, and so, a lot of times, if I am using bait, shrimp, I think, is a very effective bait. It seems like everything eats shrimp out there. I mean I know I eat shrimp, and so it seems like you have a lot of diversity of catching many different species out there, but, if I can, personally, if I'm fly-fishing, then I will use -- I might use a fly that imitates a shrimp or imitates a small fish or something like that.

Interviewer:

Can you tell me a little bit more about your marine science career?

Mike Larkin:

I guess I was really into fishing when I was five and younger, and I wanted to learn more about -- I got really interested in fish. Like I said before, I had a lot of selfish motivations of how do I catch more of them and what is their migrations and how long do they live, and it really sparked an interest in fish.

I really tried to use that as my focus. In high school, I was in Pennsylvania at the time. My parents moved around a lot, but I volunteered for a trout hatchery, and so that was enjoyable, to see how they spawn the trout and they raise them and then release them out into the wild, but I knew that I wanted to get more involved with saltwater, and so I chose a college that had a marine science degree program.

I went there and then enjoyed it and got a degree in marine science and then worked out in the field for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute for several years. Then I wanted to actually advance my career even more, because it really helps. The more education you've got, the more opportunities you have for jobs and stuff like that.

I went back to school again, where I actually did my dissertation on bonefish, which is ironic, because I was the only person on the planet that has ever done a dissertation on bonefish, as of now. I think a lot more research is being done on them now, but, anyway, I'm kind of proud of that. Then I worked at NOAA, also working in the field of fisheries and marine science.

Interviewer:

What is the best fishing spot, in your opinion?

Mike Larkin:

I think the Florida Keys, because, even if you get tired of bonefish fishing and fishing the shallow banks, there is so many other opportunities, the reefs. The water is real clear and there is great reef fishing out there. Then, if you go out to the east, it actually drops. The reef tract goes about eight miles out, but, after that, it drops from thirty feet down to about a hundred feet, and then it keeps going from there, and so you're not that far. You're like ten miles from getting in really deep water, if you want to go for mahi-mahi or tuna or even marlin and sailfish.

Plus, there's also a lot of shallow banks near shore for bonefish. There's a lot of mangrove islands for snook, and so I feel like there is so many opportunities in the Florida

Keys for different types of fish that you can fish for, and so that's my personal favorite. That's where I hope to retire someday.

Interviewer: If you could fish anywhere in the world, where would you fish? Would it be the Keys?

Mike Larkin: I feel like I've already fished there, but if I could fish anywhere in the world, there's a place called the Seychelles, which is off of Africa. That's one place on my bucket list of where I want to fish before I die. They have really big bonefish. It's in the Pacific. Also, there's a lot of other different types of parrotfish and snapper and fish like that I don't have experience with.

It's a different species of bonefish than we have in Florida, and so that's another thing. I would like to catch a different species of bonefish, but there's also big jacks that come over on the flats over there. They have real shallow banks, like they do in the Florida Keys, and so I would say the Seychelles Islands. Before I die, that's where I want to fish.

Interviewer: What is the most common fish that you've caught?

Mike Larkin: I would say snapper. They are very common in the mangroves, from the reefs to the shallow water. You can probably get them back here in the mangroves, the small ones, and then you can also get them as you move offshore more. They're very, very common. I would say gray snapper, specifically, would be the fish that I have caught the most, because they are highly abundant and they live in a wide range of habitats.

Interviewer: How does red tide affect you and your business?

Mike Larkin: I guess, with NOAA, it's more of an influence to the State of Florida. They keep an eye on that and monitor it, but it does reduce our catch rates, and so I would say with NOAA, where I work now, we have annual catch limits, and so how many pounds of a specific species of fish, to kind of try to make it simple, fishermen can catch a year. If they're going to exceed it, if we predict they're going to exceed it, we'll actually close the fishery.

A lot of the red tide, I would say, would decrease that.

There is certain areas that the fish are, unfortunately, dead, so they can't go harvest them. The natural mortality rate would be really high, and so there is less of fish for them to catch. Just thinking off the top of my head here, that could really decrease the catch limits. They wouldn't reach them, but, unfortunately, a lot of those fish would die by other means. They would die by natural mortality.

We get a lot of phone calls from fishermen, and I think they would be pretty upset about it. We get a lot of phone calls about that, which is understandable, about fish dying out there, and it could also hurt future recruits. A lot of these juveniles that could potentially get bigger -- A lot of these fish, they have to be a certain size before you keep them.

Anyway, it could kill a lot of those small guys, the recruits. Therefore, there may not be as many adults when they do get older, because they are dying from those red tides, and so that could really reduce the harvest in the future and really reduce the species, the abundance.

Interviewer:

What attire do you wear when you go fishing?

Mike Larkin:

I'm out on the water because I enjoy it. I'm not out there to get a suntan or anything like that. In fact, if I come back from fishing and I'm pale white, that means I did a great job, and so I wear a lot of breathable clothing. When I go fly-fishing, especially in the Florida Keys, where you're on a boat fly-fishing, you've got have no shade. If you're fly-fishing, you're going to hit your line on that and that.

Anyway, you are completely exposed, and so I will wear real breathable clothing, breathable pants. I will even wear breathable socks. I will take my shoes off. I will wear full long sleeves and these things called -- They have all different names now, and I'm trying to remember what they're called, but you kind of put them over your neck. I think they're called hads. Anyway, it's like a sweater or a turtleneck that's really breathable and comfortable, and you can put that on and pull it up around your ears. Again, I'm wearing a hat here.

Just to go through the whole lineup, everything I can, I try to cover as much skin as possible, because that sun is coming from up top as well as the sun is bouncing off the ground, too. It's unfortunate that a lot of the people who

have fished, especially bonefish fishing, where you have no shade and stuff like that, if they've done it a long time, they've had a lot of problems with skin cancer. I want to keep doing this for a long time. I'm not out there to get a suntan, and so I just try to cover up as much skin as possible by wearing breathable clothing.

Interviewer: What are a few of the oddest items you have ever found while fishing?

Mike Larkin: My dad and I were fishing off of Miami, and, unfortunately, Miami has a reputation for some of the drug trade, and they call these things square grouper. There will be a package full of drugs. I was fishing with my dad, and we had a box that was all duct-taped, and it came by us. I even told my dad, I was like just pretend it's not even there.

I just didn't want to risk it, and so I always wondered if that was like drugs or something. Anyway, we didn't touch it, because I just didn't want to go down that road of what if it is drugs and then what do I do with it and what if they're spotting, but, anyway, we saw something odd, but we didn't actually pick it up.

One time my brother and I were fishing and he caught a flipper on the bottom. We were fishing off of a dock and it was a flipper. It turned out that it was like a flipper company that stopped making their flippers in the 1970s, and so it was a really old-school flipper. I think he still has it. We caught it in the 1980s, and it was a company that went out of business, and it was just a really old-school flipper. At some point, someone was swimming off that dock, back in the 1970s or something like that, and lost their flipper, and so that was something odd, I thought, to hook a flipper.

Interviewer: What is your favorite reel and rod setup?

Mike Larkin: Since I like the fly-fishing thing, I find it more challenging, and so I use a nine-foot rod. Nautilus is a company that makes the fly reels, because they're really light. They have holes in them, and so it makes it even lighter. If you're casting, you don't want to have a bowling-ball in your hand all day, and so say a nine-foot fly rod with a light fly reel.

Interviewer: How have fish sizes changed over the years?

Mike Larkin:

I like to think they've gotten a lot better, because it was my experience that, back in the early 1990s, I would do a lot of fishing in the bays, like Biscayne Bay and also in Tampa Bay. In 1995, I believe it was, they started that regulation of the net ban. Before that, there were mullet net fishermen that were catching mullet, which is fine, but there was a lot of bycatch.

They go in the net, these mullet, and a lot of them were Spanish mackerel. I feel like before that, before that regulation, it was rare if I caught a Spanish mackerel greater than fifteen inches. Since then, it's actually rare if I catch one that's smaller than that size now, whereas, now, I feel like you go out and you get a much bigger Spanish mackerel, and I think that's really the result of that net ban, where a lot of them were being overharvested from those mullet nets, but, now that that's no longer in place, in my personal experience, I have seen a lot bigger Spanish mackerel and a lot more abundant sea trout, too. A lot bigger Spanish mackerel are being caught since that 1995 net ban.

Interviewer:

What is the best type of weather for you to go fishing?

Mike Larkin:

I actually like sunny, because my favorite thing is bonefish fishing. If it's cloudy, you can't really see them. There are occasions that they go so shallow that their fins stick up, but I like a sunny day, but it's odd that I don't want it to too calm, because it seems like they pick up on things a lot easier. If it's flat calm, you throw that fly down, and even though it's still light, they will still key in on it, but not too windy. There's like that balance. I like ten to fifteen knots.

It seems to give you enough wave action so you have enough cover so the fish don't know you're there, but if it's like twenty or twenty-five or thirty knots, then it's just so difficult. Even if you're throwing shrimp, you're trying to throw it and the wind pushes it over this way, and so you have to adjust for it. Then the fish goes downwind and you cast too far because the wind carries it, and so I like to find that balance of ten to fifteen knots is what I prefer, to give you the advantage so the fish aren't too aware of you being there, but yet it's not so windy that it's uncomfortable, that it's bouncy when you're trying to cast.

Interviewer: How did the bonefish get its name?

Mike Larkin: That's a great question. Their rib bones actually stick out. If you go to fillet a fish, the bones stick out so far that you will fillet them and knife will be hitting those bones. They are very difficult to fillet.

Also, they have these little y-bones spread throughout their muscle, to give them more support. If you go to cook it, you could bite into these tiny little y-bones, which can be very uncomfortable. In the Bahamas, what they will do is they will actually try to hack off the meat and then they will mush it up and try to pull out those y-bones, and then they will fry them.

I think, because they're very muscular, they have that extra support to hold their muscles. Anyway, that's a great question, but, essentially, those have those y-bones as well as their rib bones stick out. If you go to fillet them, it can be very difficult, hence the name bonefish.

Interviewer: What is the biggest fish you ever caught?

Mike Larkin: It was a bull shark. I didn't weigh it, but I like to think that it was about 250 pounds off of Miami. We were actually fishing for tarpon, and we were using these big mullet, but it happened to be a bull shark keyed in on it and came up and caught it, and I think that took me about an hour to bring in. I didn't pull it out and weigh it, but we brought it next to the boat, and so I am estimating, from the length and the girth on it, that it was about 250 pounds.

Interviewer: Do you have any tips for beginners starting to fish?

Mike Larkin: That's a good question. I think what I would focus in on is I like to start with action. That way, you can get familiar with setting the hook or removing hooks from fish. Like the pinfish is my favorite or even small snapper, by the mangroves or by some type of structure near-shore. If not, if you go out on a charter boat, you may have a great day, but you may just be sitting there getting a suntan. You may just be sitting there waiting for that one bite.

When you target those big fish, like those charter boats do, you may catch a big fish, but you may not, and so you end up spending a lot of time. I think in the beginning, you

might get quite bored, and so I recommend starting with the small fish, to focus more on the action. That way, you get to experience the fun of it, instead of just sitting around all day. I would hate for you to spend all day and catch nothing. Then you will hate fishing, and so I recommend targeting the small fish.

Interviewer:

What is your opinion on illegal fishing?

Mike Larkin:

I certainly am against it, and I don't agree with it, but I guess, to tell you a quick story, I was in the Bahamas many years ago, and so I think, in the U.S., I am definitely against it, and I think we definitely need more law enforcement to stop illegal fishing.

There was one time that I was in the Bahamas, and we were in a very isolated area. These kids were splashing by the water, and I went over there, and actually one of them killed a turtle, which is completely illegal, even in Bahamian waters, but I found that I didn't really -- That, I felt like, in my mind, was acceptable. We were in an area where I didn't know if these kids were going to eat. I mean it was so isolated, and that kid is probably going to be a hero to his family. It was small kids, and they actually speared a turtle.

In that case, I guess I was okay with it, and I am glad these kids -- We were in such an isolated area that I worry about those kids' nutrition as it is, but, in the states here, especially -- I also went to the Bahamas, in Bimini, one time and there some Americans over there which had like these big boats. They had a boat worth a quarter-of-a-million dollars and they're out there keeping lobster this big, which is very -- They were way below the size limit.

That, I found that rather disgusting, because I feel like they know the probability of them getting checked was very low, and these were guys that were very wealthy fishermen over there. That really got me upset, the fact that they were illegal harvesting, and I know they could afford to eat at Red Lobster.

These guys have a very expensive boat and they need to follow the Bahamian rules as well, but we were in such a far-away area that they knew that no one is going to catch them. Really, that kind of turned my stomach and got me

upset to see that over there, and so definitely I'm against it. It will probably never be zero, but, if we could eliminate that, that would be great, if we could eliminate as much of it as possible, eliminate illegal harvest, that would be great.

Interviewer: Have you ever been interested in going into a different fishing industry, like charter fishing?

Mike Larkin: I actually toyed with that a little bit when I was in college, but I feel like -- The problem, like in the Florida Keys and other areas, is the guys get paid for fishing, and fishing, to me, has always been my fun hobby, and I always felt like I was afraid that would take the fun out of it.

If you take somebody fishing, now they've got to catch a fish or you feel like you have failed. You've got that pressure for them to catch fish, and I realized -- I fooled around with it a little bit with some people in town or some friends in town and I was like, okay, let's pretend they're a client and I want them to catch fish, but I think it would just take the fun out of it, for me.

I respect people that do that for a living, but I want fishing to be my hobby, to be fun, and so I don't want that pressure of like, okay, well someone on the boat has to catch a fish, and I think that would suck the fun out of it, and so I definitely don't think I will pursue that career. I will keep it fun.

Interviewer: What is the best time of the year to go fishing?

Mike Larkin: I feel like it depends on the fish, what species you're targeting. October is my favorite time for bonefish, but like mackerel, Spanish mackerel, my favorite time is in January, and so I feel like it really depends on what you're targeting, because different fish move at different migrations or maybe are more abundant in some areas more than other areas at certain times of the year, and so, really, you've got to isolate what species you're targeting and then when are they most abundant in certain areas, but, since I like to bonefish, I like that October and November. That's always my favorite time to fish for them.