

*Interviewer:* Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

*Tonya Singleton:* My name is Tonya, and I grew up in West Virginia. I moved to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I went to Coastal Carolina to study marine biology, and I ultimately just liked scuba diving so much that I quit going to school for a while and started scuba diving. Then I moved down here and continued at USF for environmental science. I did an internship with FWC, and that's how I ended up working for Florida Fish and Wildlife.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell us a little bit about your scuba diving experience?

*Tonya Singleton:* I was training to be a dive master, a dive instructor, and I made it up to about dive master and I met my husband, who is terrified of the water. That kind of went out the window, and so I figured that I would just work with fish instead of seeing them under the water.

*Interviewer:* What got you interested in marine biology?

*Tonya Singleton:* I grew up in the mountains, and we used to go to the beach every year for vacation, and I just thought that it was so mysterious and so interesting that I wanted to be a part of that, and I wanted to be a part of the study and to help figure it out and know what was going on.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell us a little bit about your job?

*Tonya Singleton:* I go to marinas and I go to docks. I go to boat ramps and I go to beaches, wherever people are recreational fishing, and I talk to them about what kind of fish they're catching, what kind of fish they release, how often they go fishing, why they release the fish, if it's not in season or if it's not legal or if they're just catch-and-release fishermen only or they just don't like to eat that kind of fish. Then I weigh and measure the fish that they do harvest and they bring in.

We also take little biosamples out of the fish called an ear stone. It's a little otolith. There's one on each side of their brain, and it's a little calcium deposit, almost like a bone. Every year the fish is alive, it grows a ring, like a tree. We shave into it and polish it. Then we can tell how old the fish are, to help to see how the fish population is doing.

*Interviewer:* What is your most interesting interview you have ever done?

*Tonya Singleton:* I like seeing different fish. Usually you see the same-old-same-old, but when people go way offshore, especially the differences between the fish that we have on our coast versus the fish on like the east coast or down in the Keys or something. Down in the Keys, they catch sailfish and dolphin, but, here, we usually just get grouper and mangrove snapper and gray snapper or spotted seatrout and red drum and stuff like that.

Whenever anybody brings in like a big cobia or, when I work fishing tournaments, they will bring in huge black grouper, like ninety-pound or hundred-pound black grouper, or, when I help with the commercial fisheries, we go down to the fish houses and see these huge, big warsaw grouper and just the different types of fish that I get to see.

*Interviewer:* What is the most common fish you see?

*Tonya Singleton:* If I work at marinas, it's mostly red grouper or king mackerel or Spanish mackerel. If I'm at boat ramps, it will be gray snapper or white grunts or seatrout or redfish or stuff like that, more inshore species. If I go to marinas, they go offshore, and they bring back red grouper and mackerel and stuff like that.

*Interviewer:* What marinas do you usually go to interview fishermen?

*Tonya Singleton:* The most common is Clearwater Marina. Occasionally we will run into some of the captains at this boat ramp or we will run into them at Gulfport Marina, but Clearwater comes up the most, because they have the most charters there.

*Interviewer:* Do charter fishermen usually catch more fish than commercial fishermen?

*Tonya Singleton:* I don't do commercial fishermen. Commercial is a completely different thing. I just do recreational, and so that's why -- Commercial fishermen come in and they sell their fish to restaurants and stuff, but the recreational fishermen will rent a charter for the day, but they're guaranteed to catch fish, and so that's why people want to take a charter, because they will be guaranteed to come in

with fish.

A lot of the guys just go out on their own boats or they will go off a pier or something, and I mean you could fish all day and not catch a legal fish, and so it gets very frustrating. It takes a lot of patience to be a fisherman.

*Interviewer:* What is the biggest fish that the people that you interview talk about or you hear about?

*Tonya Singleton:* It depends on what they're talking about. If they're very frustrated because it should be legal or it should be open -- A lot of people think that red snapper should be open, because there are so many out there, but there is so much science behind making the regulations that they don't understand. They have a certain age span, just like everybody else, but the average age that they were catching was too small, and so they were trying to get that age higher.

We hear a lot about red snapper should be open or gags should be open longer, but it's all about grouper. Everybody is always complaining about grouper. Snook is always a big one too, because when we had that big freeze a few years ago, a lot of the snook population died off, and so we had to close that for a couple of years, until it came back up. That's another popular fish that we hear about.

*Interviewer:* Do you ever run into problems with any fishermen? Are there a lot of problems? Are there too many rules that they're angry about?

*Tonya Singleton:* Sometimes. I would say about 5 to 10 percent of the time they will give you a hard time, but it's usually just because of the regulations. Once they realize that I don't make them, and I'm just here to collect the data and I have no authority. Like I said, I'm just here to do research and collect the data. Once they understand and once they really comprehend that the information is there to help them, then they're more cooperative.

*Interviewer:* How many years have you been working this job?

*Tonya Singleton:* Seven.

*Interviewer:* Do fishermen report any differences in their catches?

*Tonya Singleton:* Actually, yes. A lot of fishermen become concerned with the fact, which is nice, too, and it's interesting, because, out of all of them that want to catch -- Like I said, snook was closed for so long, and they opened it up, and a lot of them actually wanted it to be closed longer so the population would increase more, and a lot of them get concerned with the fact that some of the species aren't regulated as much.

Like white grunt, which is a very popular fish, a lot of them think that they should be regulated, because people come in with tons of them. Yes, we hear a lot about it, especially from the old fishermen that have been fishing these waters for years. They say that fishing isn't what it used to be. We hear some things about red tide coming down our coast, and so they've been having problems with that, too. People have been catching different species of fish that we don't usually see here. People catch bonefish and stuff like that.

*Interviewer:* There is a lot of invasive species popping in here.

*Tonya Singleton:* Yes, like lionfish. Lionfish is a big one, too.

*Interviewer:* Have they reported any lionfish?

*Tonya Singleton:* Yes, actually a lot of the tournaments that we work, we request people to bring in the lionfish. There have been some huge ones, good sized ones. They were caught like three miles offshore of the Indian Rocks Beach, and so they're pretty close. They're beautiful fish, but they're just -- I mean we have almost as much here at their native waters.

*Interviewer:* Do you ever discover new species?

*Tonya Singleton:* I have never. I wish. We see a lot of hybrid species. Well, not a lot, but occasionally you will see a hybrid species, which is like two different types of snapper like combined into one, which is interesting when you're trying to make an identification based on certain things and it has two different identification factors.

*Interviewer:* Does it make work harder?

*Tonya Singleton:* Yes, and whenever they have hybrid species, yes, because

we have to take an annual fish test, and they will bring in different species of fish that I will probably never see, but just to see if we know how to key them out and make a correct identification, based on certain characteristics. When you have one that has three different types of characteristics from two different fish, it has to be a hybrid of two different fish.

*Interviewer:* How do you regulate the hybrid species? Are there certain laws?

*Tonya Singleton:* No, because they're very few and far between. When we get them, we try to actually take them, just to be able to study them more, because it's very unique. It's amazing. Like it will have a certain tail of one snapper, but it has the body of a different snapper, and so it's kind of hard to see what it is. It's very interesting, but, when we do see them at the boat ramps or the commercial fish houses or anything like that, we actually try to see if we can take them back to our lab, so they can be put into our catalog and we can study them, but it's just hard to say.

*Interviewer:* When you first started your job, what was the most popular fish then and what is the most popular fish now?

*Tonya Singleton:* It depends on where you're working. If you're working at like an inshore fishing place, you will see a lot of seatrout and a lot of redfish, and that's been about the same. If you're working like an offshore site, it's always been mackerel, king mackerel, and grouper. It has pretty much maintained about the same, but the sizes are kind of varied.

*Interviewer:* What do fishermen complain about the most?

*Tonya Singleton:* The regulations. It's always the regulations, the slot sizes, because the slot sizes are so small.

*Interviewer:* I have no idea what a slot size is.

*Tonya Singleton:* That's a great question, actually. A slot size is a fish has to be between so many inches, like in between eighteen to twenty inches, for you to be able to keep it. It can't be smaller and it can't be larger than that. If it is, they have to throw it back, and it's such a small size. They complain about that all the time or the sizes of grouper. Grouper have to be a certain size, and so many people say they

shrink after you catch them and you put them in the ice. They shrink, and so that's why a lot of the charter captains won't keep them unless they are an inch above the regulated size limit, because they shrink. If they get boarded by marine patrol or anything, they get into a lot of trouble.

Me personally, I can't tell on them, because I'm just a biologist and I have no authority. If I turned in people that were catching illegal fish, we wouldn't have the cooperation from the recreational anglers, and so that's the first thing I say, is I'm just a biologist with no authority and I'm just here for research.

*Interviewer:* Do you ever run into any fish with parasites or diseases or things like that?

*Tonya Singleton:* Yes, and actually once we get into their -- We have to cut up their gills to cut out the ear stones, so we can see how old they are or cut into their brain. You see a lot of that, like a lot of worms and stuff, in like amberjack and grouper and stuff. Yes, they're all over the place, but you just have to know how to cook them to get rid of them.

*Interviewer:* Have you ever seen any species become extinct due to disease or parasites or just in general?

*Tonya Singleton:* Not that I can think of, not anything like that, but it's interesting once you see the captains that fillet and cut into them and everything. It's interesting to see what's inside, because like one guy pulled an entire whole crab out of a red grouper stomach. He said, this red grouper is so fat, and he cut it open and it was a whole crab. I haven't really seen any, not due to parasites or anything like that. A lot of it is just because of overfishing between the commercial and --

*Interviewer:* What is like the craziest story you hear from the fishermen or gross or something?

*Tonya Singleton:* My favorite stories are hearing about them seeing the whale sharks out there. They will just jump in and start swimming around with the whale sharks, because they're just so docile and they're just huge, amazing creatures. They just jump right in with them, and so I love hearing about the whale sharks, and it happens more frequently

than you would think. A lot of the charter captains see them out there.

*Interviewer:* Have you seen a whale shark?

*Tonya Singleton:* No, but I wish. I would love to, and I would be probably the first one in.

*Interviewer:* Do you have any fishing experiences?

*Tonya Singleton:* Not really, no. We take our kids fishing occasionally, but I don't have any fun fishing stories, unfortunately, not myself.

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