

*Bill Tucker:* My name is Bill Tucker, and I'm a commercial fisherman out of Dunedin. I'm originally from Maryland, but I came down here when I was in high school with my buddy, whose uncle was a commercial fisherman, and my first experience in Florida was really on his commercial fishing boat. It was kind of neat, when we used to come down in high school, and we loved to fish, and the idea that we could get paid to go fishing was even more attractive, and so the fishing down here is very good, and I have managed to make a living out of it for a long time, and so I'm happy to be a part of your program.

*Interviewer:* What do you enjoy most about being a fisherman?

*Bill Tucker:* Being independent and being responsible for your successes and your failures. When you spend a week offshore, you have to be prepared. You have to be prepared before you go, and you have to know what the weather is going to do, and you have to have an idea of what the weather is going to do.

You're in a boat bobbing around in the Gulf of Mexico, and there is no support system out there. You take your support system with you, and so you have to make good decisions, and you have to take care of the basics. You have to make sure that the fundamentals are intact, and, if you do that, you can oftentimes make it home alive, and so I think it's the independence and the being in control of your situation.

There is a lot of responsibility. I have a crew out there, and you have to bring them back alive, and you have to be disciplined, and there's a lot of freedom, and those are the upsides. Is there a following question of the downsides?

*Interviewer:* We can do that, yes. What are the downsides?

*Bill Tucker:* When you're a commercial fisherman, you spend a week of your life fishing, and you spend about ten days of your life offshore, which means that basically half -- You're offshore for a week, and then you come home for a week, and then you're offshore for a week, and you come home for a week, and you spend about half your life away from civilization.

It makes it hard on relationships. When you come back,

the grass needs to be mowed, and so, when I come back from a fishing trip, I cut the grass and do all the things that I neglected onshore during the period of time when you were offshore. There are downsides.

Also, when you take what you love to do and you turn it into a job and a career, it puts a different perspective on it. Now, not only is it something you like to do, but it's something that you have to do, and you have to do it successfully, in order to survive financially, and so there is a pressure to produce.

If you're just out fishing for fun, and you have a bad day and you get skunked and don't catch anything, well, that's just -- It's like going bowling and you just bowl all strikes, or gutter balls, for that matter. At the end of the day, it's no big deal, but, if you're a commercial fisherman, and you go offshore and you don't catch any fish, all the money you spent to go out there fishing you don't get any of it back, and so there's a financial aspect to it, that you have to produce, and that changes your perspective on it somewhat. You're not doing it for fun. You're doing it for subsistence.

*Interviewer:*

You were talking about the weather and how you kind of have to watch out for that. What safety precautions do you take to ensure that you're safe?

*Bill Tucker:*

We watch the weather, and we watch the jetstream, and we want the cold fronts coming through, and we listen the forecasts, and we go to several sources. Weather forecasting, over the last thirty years, has gotten very much better. There's been a lot of improvement in weather forecasting, and it's been a big help.

You don't want to go out in the teeth of a storm. The object is to go out fishing and catch fish and bring them back and sell them, and that's how you earn your money, by bringing fish to the market. You want to get them back fresh. The fresher they are, the more value they have, and so you watch your weather, and you don't want to be out there in big storms, and you don't want to go out in front of hurricanes.

If there's a really strong cold front coming through, you will probably wait until it goes through, and then you'll go

fishing. If it's a just minor cold front, you may go out and fish a day and let the cold front go through, and you may sit on the anchor for a day and not even fish, because it's too rough to fish, and, when the front goes through and the seas calm down, then you can go back to work and fish for two or three or four or five days, until the next cold front comes through. In the summertime, the weather is a lot calmer than it is in the wintertime, but you always have to watch it. It's like walking into traffic. You need to be careful.

*Interviewer:*

How did you get into fishing? Did someone encourage you?

*Bill Tucker:*

Well, I guess, when I was a child, my father and my grandfathers, they were all recreational fishermen, and they loved to fish. One grandfather fished for smallmouth bass in the Potomac River in Maryland, and my other grandfather liked saltwater fishing for striped bass, and also in the Atlantic Ocean for billfish and dolphinfish and whatnot, and my dad liked fishing in the Chesapeake Bay, and so, growing up, we did a lot of recreational fishing and crabbing in the Chesapeake Bay, and so I always liked it.

In high school, my very close friend had an uncle who was a commercial fisherman in Florida, and so one summer he came down to go fishing with his uncle, and he spent several weeks in Florida commercial fishing, and, when he came back, he showed me all the pictures, and he said, well, next year, you ought to come with me, and I said, okay, next year, I'll come with you, which I did, and that was in the late 1970s, when we came down and went on several week-long trips with his uncle, commercial fishing with rod-and-reels, mostly for groupers, primarily, and we caught a few snappers as well, and so that was in high school.

After high school, I went to college, and I actually attended the University of Tampa, and I was originally from the Maryland area, and so, in college, I went one year to Salisbury State College in Salisbury, Maryland, and I transferred to the University of Tampa as a sophomore.

When I moved down here, in the summertime, I would fish with his uncle, who had subsequently purchased a charter boat, and so I fished with him in the summertime and between semesters. That's kind of how I got into it.

After college, I took a job, and it wasn't exactly what I was looking for, a real job, and so I left there, and, right before Christmas, around Thanksgiving, I left this job and jumped on a boat, just to get me through the holidays, so I would have an income and I could be productive, and I got through the holidays, and January came and went, and I was making some money, and, about six months later, I got a chance to run the boat, and so I started running a boat, and I figured, well, I'll do this for a year or so, and then I'll go get a real job.

One thing led to another, and I got involved in the policy end of it, and regulations, and I was just kind of hard-headed, and I ended up sticking with it, and I've been doing it for close to thirty years. That's probably more than you asked.

*Interviewer:*

Have you seen an increase or decrease in the population of fish like from 1990 to now?

*Bill Tucker:*

The increase or decrease in the population of fish, because more people want to get into fishing, I think it depends on the fish species. I fish mostly offshore, for groupers and snappers, although I have done some fishing in the bays and offshore, just off the beaches, and there's so many different kinds of fish.

Of course, as you're probably aware, red snapper has been a fish that -- When I started fishing, we didn't catch very many of them, and we might have caught five to ten individual fish in a whole trip. Now, you go out, and 60 percent of the fish we catch out here are red snappers, and so that population of fish has come back, for various reasons, and we noticed -- When I started commercial fishing, red grouper were the prime -- Red and gag grouper both were what we caught, mostly, west of here, and so, on gag grouper, I think it's interesting.

My buddy's uncle ran a charter boat out of Clearwater Beach, and this was back after the Vietnam War, and this was in the 1970s, and he had a charter boat, and, with charter boats, you normally run either a half-day trip or a full-day trip, and he would have a charter in the morning, a half-day trip, and he would say, to the customers, if I go out and I fill this cooler up with fish, can we come home?

Most of them said, oh, yeah, if you can fill that cooler up with fish, that's plenty of fish for us, and we'll go home, and so he would go out, and he would fill that cooler up with gag grouper in just a couple of hours, and he would bring them back. Back then, they could sell those fish from charter boats.

When he brought all those fish back, other people would come up and say, hey, can we do that, and he would take them back out and do it again, and so he could actually book three half-day trips for gag grouper in one day, and there were tons and tons of fish.

Now, it's hard to go out and catch a gag grouper on a half-day charter boat, and so I would say that the abundance of them nearshore has severely diminished, more than likely as a product of expansion of recreational fishing in the nearshore waters. It has stressed the area, but, as you get farther out, that changes, because you don't have the same amount of fishing pressure on those fish stocks, and that's gag grouper, but red snapper is a completely different story in the northern Gulf, and even out here.

They have come back gangbusters, and we have noticed that the population of red grouper, in our estimation, has declined in the traditional red grouper habitats, and so these fish species, like a lot of things, they go in cycles, and we don't always know the frequency of the cycles, but, just about the time you think that you've caught the last one, a year or two later, they come back, and they seem to be abundant, and so things do change, depending on the stocks, and it's hard to answer that in a blanket statement. Then other fish, mullet and snook and trout, I don't deal with those fish species enough to know anything and give a good response.

*Interviewer:*

When is the best time of day or night to go fishing?

*Bill Tucker:*

When the fish are biting. When they're hungry, that's the best time to go fishing, and that's a good question, and you don't always know that. Sometimes it seems like the wintertime is -- Sometimes the frequency of catches is greater in the wintertime, but the opportunities are fewer, because the weather is not as good.

Your question is basically what is the best time to catch fish, and that's a hard question, and I wish I knew, because that's when I would be fishing, but, when you commercial fish for a living, you're fishing mostly all the time, and you're always fishing, and sometimes like right before a cold front is a good time, and right after a hurricane oftentimes is a good time to fish, because it's a disruptive factor, and the fish tend to group up, and they tend to concentrate.

*Interviewer:* Do you prefer to fish at day or at night?

*Bill Tucker:* I prefer to fish in the daytime, but I have fished at nighttime plenty, because they were biting at night, and I have had days where I fished all day long and all night long and part of the next morning, because the fishing was so good, and so you go close to thirty hours with no sleep, and those times are exciting, and they are tiring, but you do that, but, personally, I would rather fish in the daytime, and I would rather sleep at night, but you don't always get that choice.

*Interviewer:* My question is regarding do you see a lot of invasive species in the area around here where you fish, and, if so, does that affect the amount of income that you make?

*Bill Tucker:* It's not particularly noticeable, because like lionfish and things like that -- We have caught a couple of them, but I don't notice it to be a problem. Now, I guess, if you said red snapper, I guess you could construe that to be an invasive species, even though the waters west of here are part of its traditional range, and it's certainly been a comeback and a re-population back to their historical grounds, and so I don't know if that's going to fit into your invasive category, although there has been somewhat of an invasion, and it's been fine, and it's certainly been a good thing.

*Interviewer:* If it brings in money, that's good.

*Bill Tucker:* Yes. As far as other invasive species, I haven't had much contact with them. The one that comes to mind is lionfish, and I can't really think of any others.

*Interviewer:* Have you noticed, during your fishing career, how pollution has affected your fishing, like oil spills or trash that you see in the water?

*Bill Tucker:*

We see trash in the water, and not a whole lot, really. I mean, every commercial fishing vessel is required, as a condition of being licensed -- You have to have a Coast Guard placard on your vessel that talk about what trash can and cannot be discarded into the water, and so there are rules, and every boat has got that, and I think people nowadays are pretty aware of throwing plastic and things that do not biodegrade.

Actually, you're allowed, if you're far enough offshore, things like cardboard, and that stuff is okay, and it's allowed, but I don't see a negative impact on that, and evidently the authorities don't either, and so I don't see a lot of trash.

After hurricanes, you see a lot of things that are washed into the water, just storm damage that gets taken offshore, and you see some of that, but I don't see that it has a negative effect.

Oil spills I think probably do have a negative effect, particularly on beach environments. I flew into New Orleans after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and you could see the sheen of the slick on the surface of the water, and it was a huge disaster, and millions of gallons of oil were discharged into the Gulf of Mexico, and I am sure they have had some effect.

When you fly over the Gulf of Mexico, and you look at it, and you look at the area of an oil spill in relationship to the whole Gulf, you realize it's pretty small, and it certainly was a tragedy and a catastrophe, but I don't know that it has driven any fish species to the brink of extinction, and nature has an amazing way of recovering from a lot of these disasters.

I think probably one of the biggest effects on pollution is development and growth. If you look around here, look at all the seawalls. All the water and everything runs right off the seawall and into the bay, and that's why you can't see the bottom when you look out here. There is no filter, and there is no shelf that traps the sediment before it goes to the water. I think that has probably had as big of an effect as anything.

Also, fertilizers and nutrient runoff that causes all these oil spills, that causes all these red tides, and I think the nutrient runoff and the nitrogen in the water, and it creates algal blooms that take the oxygen out of the water and kill fish, and whole year classes of young fish, and so red tide is devastating, these algal blooms, and that's had a very big impact on the offshore fish too, especially of groupers and reef fish, out as far as forty miles offshore of the coast.

That is the pollution that has had a big impact, and I know some of these hurricanes -- We were doing some cleanup around Dunedin, and there was so much rain that the sewage treatment plants can't contain all the sewage, and there was raw sewage in the water, and you could see it floating in the water, and it was horrible.

That type of pollution is -- That happens, pretty big discharges of it, and it's pretty bad, and you've got some chemical plants that overflow, and we've had some phosphate plant issues shoreside, and so those are the types of pollution that I see impacting the environment, chemicals and nutrient, and I would say they are probably more pervasive than oil spills, although the oil spills do some damage.

*Interviewer:*

Since you've been fishing for so many years, I am wondering what is the biggest fish that you've ever caught, and what was it, and what was the experience like?

*Bill Tucker:*

I've caught some big fish, interesting things, and probably the biggest fish we caught was a dusky shark that was probably 300 or 400 pounds, I'm guessing, and it was huge, and maybe it wasn't, and it was probably 200 or 300 pounds. That was a long fish, and it was probably ten to twelve feet long, and that was probably the biggest fish that I caught.

I caught an ocean sunfish, and it looks like a fish head with a couple of fins on it, and I caught one of those, and I caught it right in the mouth with a hook, and that was probably a 150-pound fish, a big fish.

The biggest grouper I have caught -- I have caught some jewfish, and they are called goliath groupers now, and I have caught those at a couple hundred pounds. Warsaw grouper, I have caught at almost a hundred pounds, and I

have caught an eighty-pound black grouper and a few gag groupers that were over -- The shark would be the biggest, and I have seen whale sharks out there, and they're pretty big.

*Interviewer:* How long does it usually take to get them up?

*Bill Tucker:* Well, we fish with fishing rods, the Big Penn 6/0 reels, and we took the handle off the side of the reel, and we put a little motor on it, and so you push the button, and it turns the reel, and that's how I fished for twenty-five years, with electric reels.

In probably 200 feet of water, it probably takes a minute, or a big fish might take a couple of minutes, and the little fish you can reel right up from the bottom, but, the big fish, when they start pulling, you have to stop taking in line and let them pull, and then they turn, and you reel them up, and they fight, and so the bigger fish take a little bit longer, but it's a couple of minutes per fish, would be the maximum.

*Interviewer:* How do you feel? Do you feel excited, or is it just --

*Bill Tucker:* When you catch a fish?

*Interviewer:* Yes.

*Bill Tucker:* When you catch a big fish, it's exciting. It is exciting. That's what you're out there to do, and it always is exciting, and we rod-and-reel fish, and so, every fish we caught, we fought. The fish fought against us, and we fought against the fish, and it's one-on-one, and it was interesting, and so it feels good. When you're not catching fish, that's when you start to wonder why am I out here and why am I spending my life out here, and I could be doing so much more. When you're catching fish, that answers it, and it's like, okay, now I know why I'm here.

- - -