

Narrator: Dennis Kamikawa is a third-generation fisherman and continues the family's legacy as a bottomfish fisherman in Hawaii.

Dennis Kamikawa: My grandfather was a fisherman. He started out making spears, yeah. You know, diving spears, the three-prong. He invented the three-prong and the hinge gun. He was the original guy that invented that in Hawaii, spearing, then fishing rod and reel, ulua. Then eventually going out on a boat. Then deep sea fishing, like trolling. Then eventually got into bottom fishing.

Narrator: As do most beginning fisherman, Dennis started off small.

DK: A 17-foot Alii Kai, that's what I started out with, for like maybe 15 years. Then got a 20-foot Sea Craft, and til today that's what I still have. When we started out we used to take mostly the landmark because the GPS didn't come out yet. When I used to go, my friend, I used to just follow my friend. And he said, okay, here's the spot. So I didn't have to find the spot. So we go to the spot and he tells me, okay, you see that tree in the mountain, you line up that and you make another mark, line up, so you have a more accurate triangular, yeah, lineup. So that makes your spot right there. So usually, you have to have at least two landmarks for that one spot. Divers usually use all landmarks because they're close to land, yeah. But when you're far, like 20 miles or 15 miles, you know, you've got to use the mountain and maybe like a house or bigger hotel, or something. I used to go myself. Then eventually my brother started coming with me. And then maybe at the most at that time, just one extra person because the boat is small, yeah. But now I take maybe two at the most. First, we started out with ElectraMate and then eventually got into the Henry Ching. We usually fished with the branchline, you know, like five hooks. We braid our line, yeah. We have braided line, 30-pound Mason, we braid it, and the hookline is braided, 20-pound, so like 60 pounds. That's what I learned -- that's how I learned. So we braid all our line.

Narrator: A few bottomfish fishermen will go out for multiple days at a time. Dennis goes out for just one day, but it's a long one.

DK: For the day before, I load my boat with the ice and get all my bait ready. Then wake up like 3 o'clock in the morning, head out to the harbor . . . or actually, we fuel up, and then we head to the harbor, be there like 4:00, 4:30, and then head out to wherever our destination is. So the day, for the day til I come home, it's like roughly 16, 18 hours before I go to sleep. I would usually target the onaga, yeah, the red fish. Then if it's not biting too good, then we usually go maybe nighttime for the paka, opakapaka. Well, a good day would be like at least 150 pounds or more, up to 300, maybe 400 pounds. Rarely, 400. Maybe for the year, maybe you can catch 400 pounds in a days maybe three times for the year, yeah, the bottom fishing season. But average, maybe anywhere from 80 to 150 pounds, that's a decent day.

Narrator: Fishing is almost always a challenge, but once in a while they make it easy. We were traveling on the banks, and it was a really nice day in the morning, rather you know, we were going out to the banks, the Lanai side, and we were crossing over on the flats. And I seen something floating, and it was an uku, maybe about 15 pounds, just floating and kind of circling, like that. So we went over there, we scooped it and it had a big humuhumu stuck in his mouth and he couldn't swallow it. So it just floated up and just . . .so that was something, yeah.

Narrator: The abundance or absence of fish, Dennis said, is dependent upon many environmental factors and that physical closures don't necessarily protect fish that migrate throughout the island chain.

DK: The way I look at it is, that's nature, part of nature, yeah. Fruits, fish, certain years there's a lot of lychee, you know, a lot of mango, you know. Same with the fish. I think it's the same, you know, nature. Some years got more. What I realized, too . . . just because there's the closures doesn't mean the fish is going to always be there. Like all the other spots, not necessarily you go every year they're going to be there. You know, certain time of the year they come, but depends on the current, too. So if the current is not right for that year or that time, the fish won't be there. They're not going to be waiting and waiting and waiting for the food. They're going to go where they know where the food is, yeah.

Narrator: Dennis often fishes cooperatively with friends if they're on boats in the same area.

DK: And we kind of fish different areas and we notify each other where -- if he's biting or my side is biting, then we just fish -- you know, concentrate on that area. So mostly Kimura and Matsumoto, Toshi, the old timers, yeah, that taught me.

Narrator: One day Dennis noticed that the fish he was landing were spitting up pieces of sliced squid and he wasn't using squid for bait.

DK: There was no one else in the area except for friends a couple of miles away. We heard they were fishing and they were catching, and stuff. So we were catching a few, but the bite wasn't really good, yeah. So eventually, we started catching, and they -- the spot they were in kind of slowed down. So it was within what, like an -- more than one hour, yeah? -- was a couple hours, yeah. Two, three hours. So I told him, eh, what kind palu you guys using? Said, oh, ika. I go, hey, nobody fishing with ika over here, only us, you know, we're fishing here and we're not using ika. We're using anchovy. So he said, what? I go, yeah. So I told him, must be the fish coming from your area, and that was a couple miles apart. So that was unusual. I mean, like I said, the fish move, yeah. So I think they know -- when the current changes, they know where to go, you know, because they're going to eventually eat again, yeah.

Narrator: And then there are those moments that are literally out of the blue.

DK: We were fishing on the banks, the Honolulu side, we were going for paka. And a friend of mine, we were fishing together, yeah, Steven Kimura. So a reef shark bit his paka so he was fighting it, yeah. And he told me, Dennis, you know what, the shark, something is chasing the shark. So I went, what? You know, he's talking to me on the radio. His dad was fighting the fish, you know, handlining it. So eventually, the shark came up to the surface and a tiger just whacked . . . just took it right out of the water like a National Geographic, and that was something, you know.