

Narrator: Kurt Kawamoto, known for his work to promote the use of barbless circle hooks through the National Marine Fisheries Service has been a commercial fisherman for more than 30 years. It's what he's loved doing his whole life.

Kurt Kawamoto: When I was a little kid, my parents well, my dad he worked for the plantation, Ewa Plantation and he never had any patience. So he was not a fisherman. He was a ball player. But my mom came from Hilo and she always used to tell me stories about going torching and fishing, and all of this stuff. So it really piqued my interest and once in a while, like maybe once a year we'd convince my father to take us fishing bamboo pole fishing, and that really got me hooked. Remember the Gold Bond stamps? Got my first fishing pole from that. Man, I had to save a lot of stamps and we finally got a fishing pole. I was like, oh man. I think I still have it to this day. When I was in college I used to go fishing with my good friend, Clayward. He was the first guy I really went fishing bottom fishing with and we learned together, you know. We'd go out Hawaii Kai or to the banks and, you know. We didn't have any electric reel. We had to use the regular Senators, and stuff. Man, your arm really got sore, but we'd give it a try.

Narrator: After college Kurt was hired by Skippy Hau from Hawaii's Division of Aquatic Resources to work on a boat in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

KK: So Skippy had contacted me to be an observer. We had to log every single fish. I measured every fish that the boat caught. We stayed out there 46 days, going all the way pretty much all the way to Midway. We were up there 46 days, ran out of food. Of course, we had plenty fish, so. So that was a very interesting experience for me, as first time being way out at sea like that. I always wanted to go up there. And after I came back, you know, because I did so much stuff on the boat and the captain really liked me, he hired me. And the first mate on that boat – well the person who was running the WICKED WAHINE was Charlie Yamamoto man of few words. We had to watch and figure out what they're doing. And I'd ask him a lot of questions about how do you catch fish, how do you find fish what do you look for, where do you go I had a million questions. But you know, he wouldn't answer because a lot of it was, yeah, you got to watch and you got to learn and, you know, you internalize it and you take that and you make it your own. He must have really liked me because he started opening up. And I'd ask him, how do you do this, why do you do this and he would tell me in so many words. The places we would fish, he could tell you how deep it was how long ago he had fished it what size fish you were going to catch what species of fish you were going to catch. Every single spot we stopped at, I asked him and he would tell me, and that's exactly what we caught. It was amazing. There was just so much knowledge in his head. You know what I learned from Charlie, the way he fished up there, because he was an onaga fisherman, one of the top onaga fisherman in the Main Islands when we'd go up there and fish we never targeted onaga. Never. Except this one time that I begged him. Because he said, he always told me, there's more onaga in the ocean than opakapaka. That's what he thought, there's more onaga out there than opakapaka, and it's probably because not everybody can catch onagas. I fished with him for quite awhile, and then . . . until we actually crashed the boat on Maui and then he switched to his smaller boat, a sampan. Sometimes we'd go fish Niihau or Kaula Rock but most times we'd head down to Maui or the Banks, or places like that. So I've pretty much fished from South

Point all the way up to -- almost to Midway. You know, Charlie was really amazing. You know, these old-time guys, because they didn't have electronics. Everything was like up here, and we'd go out in the middle of the night towards the Banks and he tells me, okay, we're going to fish Third Finger this time. Then he set the course and then he'd go on time. So I'd be up there and ask him, how do you know. He said, oh, yeah, set the course, the speed is about this, and it should take us this long. So maybe a little while before that, he'd turn on the depth recorder and we'd be on top the bank and he'd go, you know, this deep, this deep, this deep, and he's watching it. Then he said, oh, pretty soon, within the next so many minutes we're going to hit the drop and then it's going to go down to this deep and then it's going to come up to here and then that's the spot. And he'd walk out on the back deck and he'd look towards Oahu and then he'd look towards Molokai and then he'd look towards Lanai and get his line-ups in the middle of the night, which just blew my mind. And it's like, okay, go outside, I got to -- had to throw anchor, so. Everything we did was anchor, anchor, anchor, anchor, anchor, which is how the old guys used to do it. And . . . you know, when we fished onaga, you didn't fish on the bottom. You'd let out the line because there's no line counters, or anything. You hit the bottom, you pull up. He always told me, pull up 10 fathoms. Pull up 10, hold the line, and we'd wait. And then if the fish bit, it's like, ho guaranteed we're going to anchor there. And then we always tried to bring the fish higher and higher and higher. You know, fish segregate by size off the bottom because the small ones need to hide. So the higher you can get 'em, usually the larger the fish are they're going to be higher in the water column because they don't have anything to fear as much as the small fish, yeah. And if you're using palu, what happens is the more aggressive biting fish are going to come up for that palu. So now you've got them even closer to the surface takes you less time to turn that rig around and catch more fish. So you've got to cover the water column wherever they were. And in those days, the kinds of depth recorders we had, you know, I used to be amazed that when I first started fishing with Clayward, we had the regular paper recorders with the stylist and we smelled that burnt paper all night, you know. And that's what Charlie had. And he watched that thing, and . . . I'd be watch -- right there next to him watching that recorder and that stylus would go and it would make those marks, yeah. And I wouldn't even see anything, and he goes, that's the spot, right there. That's the ledge right there. I was like, what. I wouldn't see anything. But he was watching where it was igniting, and stuff. And it was just a little bit, because the boat is moving and just -- you know, the ledge might only be a boat length, or something, you know. And that's the kind of stuff that he was targeting. You know, structure, because if you couldn't see fish, structure was very important. Structure was everything. We fished a lot of structure. Even to this day, when we go out we fish a lot of structure because that's where the fish are going to be.

Narrator: Caring for the fish after it was landed after it was landed was just as important as finding and catching them.

KK: Well, after you catch the fish, you kill it, throw it in the brine box. After it got stiff, you know, what you're trying to do is actually chill the fish down enough so it when you actually pack it in the dry -- dry pack it in the ice. You know, if the fish is warm and you pack ice on it, it's gonna make a little envelope. It's gonna melt the ice around it, yeah? That brining process was so important for that, and then so the ice would all stay soft. And when we came back we

unpacked them all. I had to break the ice. Nowadays, guys are lazy. What they do is they shoot it down with water and I would have gotten killed from my captain if I did that. Because what you're doing, is you're changing the temperature. You're spoiling the fish. We tried so hard in the old days, guys would get on you if you didn't carry the fish with two hands. They just grab them like this and shake them around and throw them in the stuff. Oh, brah, that is not happening. You respect that fish because you caught it, you killed it, somebody is going to eat it and you need to respect that fish. You carry it like this and you put it in there carefully.

Narrator: The great care taken in bringing back quality fish paid off in ways that couldn't be calculated. Kurt, along with Ed Ebisui Junior, would go the extra mile to share what they had.

KK: There were times when people asked us for fish because they're having a party or a wedding, or whatever. So we would always go out for them, no problem. When it came down to Christmas and New Year's time when most of the fishermen were giving away fish because you know, to thank all the people that helped them out in the year, or your relatives or your neighbors we would make special trips. It didn't matter how much it was selling for at the auction. We would make a special trip in that week before Christmas and the week before New Years, we'd make like maybe three trips. Two trips we would sell and one trip we just give it all away no matter how much the price was, no matter how much fish we caught whether it was 200 pounds, 300 pounds, or what. We'd just give that away, and we did that for years. I feel really proud to be a fisherman like this, that I can catch this fish, I can provide fish for people to eat, people who can't go fishing, who can't catch fish. You know, they're too old. You know, all of our kupunas, All of our grandmas and grandpas, and everybody they can't go out and catch fish. You know, people seem to hate fishermen now. In the old days, they were very respected because they could provide for the community. And I feel a lot of pride in that, that we can do it. And we give away all this fish, we share a lot.