

Michael Jepson: Well, this is Mike Jepson. I'm in Steinhatchee, Florida. I'm with Scott Childress, and we're going to talk a little bit about red tides in this area and the history of red tides. Scott, usually I start out just like an oral history. How'd you get into fishing and what kind of fishing do you do?

SC: I'm a Florida native, born and raised in Tampa. I started fishing offshore, probably when I was fifteen years old or so. I got into spearfishing when I was twenty-nine or thirty and recreational spearfished, and I recreational grouper fished and started running charters and had charter permits for offshore and pelagic for five, six years and just kind of saw the way the fishery was going and didn't want to do my private investigation business that I had for twenty years. I said, "Time to try to do the commercial side of it. Maybe I can make a living at both," and ended up keeping the charter permits on one boat for a little while and eventually sold them. Ninety-nine percent of my fishing is spearfishing, so I'm underwater looking at everything.

MJ: Spearfishing for what species?

SC: Spearfishing for grouper, mangrove snapper, hogfish. We shoot Key West grunts on occasion. It's a white grunt. Cubera snapper, black grouper, red grouper, gag grouper, amberjack – anything that is of harvest – lionfish, of course, since they have come into play. So yes, that's the nice thing about what I do is I can be very selective – myself and my crew – of what we shoot. So I hadn't been affected by the red snapper quota, not having any quota near as bad as fishermen, because I can swim past them. I don't have to shoot them. It's nice to get a little quota sometimes to be able to shoot some of them, especially since we're starting to see some big ones, which are kind of fun to shoot. I am going to get back into it. Since I'm getting a little older – I'm fifty-one now – and my crew's getting older, I'm going to start doing a little bit more fishing starting this year. I'm gearing up to fish again.

MJ: Using what kind of gear?

SC: Using a rod and reel. Yes, rod and reel, hand gear, and probably some electric reels as well. But so that's the plan – just do a little bit more of that, and just more days on the water when we don't have visibility.

MJ: For grouper, then, you have to have some IFQ [individual fishing quota].

SC: Yes, sir. I have IFQ for any of the groupers and the red snapper. Primarily, my biggest fishery has been gag grouper and hogfish over the years, so I own the most of gag grouper because that's what I built so that I wouldn't have to lease it. I was up to somewhere around twenty-thousand pounds of red grouper at one point. After this last cut, I think maybe now I own maybe eight thousand pounds of red grouper. Primarily, I would lease out a lot of that because we didn't catch – or we didn't spear as much of it as a fisherman would get because we're on different bottoms, and red grouper if you're going to target them, you're a certain type of bottom. We target all the other fish that are on structures. Red grouper like that low-bottom Swiss cheese, they call it, with potholes and things. But we do get red grouper on the structure as well. So I probably averaged – I started commercially in 2006, and I would venture to guess that I averaged somewhere around five-thousand pounds of red grouper every year. Gag grouper

certainly was more than that, probably double that for most of the years. Hogfish was a huge part of my catch until they raised the size limit a couple of years on us. Now, it doesn't hurt me when I go to the Florida Middle Grounds offshore, because those fish are normally bigger. But my inshore take in hogfish has probably dropped like eighty, eighty-five percent, just because the normal fish we shot was – the size limit was twelve. I'd say most of the fish we shot were thirteen to fourteen inches. Now, the size limit's fourteen – and just haven't seen the increase, and I frankly don't think they'll increase because there're so many of them. Anyway, I've gotten to see red tide my whole life on the beaches and stuff.

MJ: Before you go there, what size boat do you use?

SC: Currently, I have a thirty-eight-foot – it's an old Wellcraft Scarab. But it's customized.

MJ: How big of a crew do you have?

SC: Normally, I take two divers with me for anything that we do inshore, inside of a hundred feet. If we do go the Middle Grounds, I like to take a third diver, so it'd be four of us diving whenever we're out there. The boat I had prior was a forty-foot Downeaster, and I would do a lot of two to three-day trips, whereas this boat is a good single overnighter boat and a lot more day trips. Everybody's getting older, so they want to all get home and not have a ten-hour chug a hundred miles offshore and a ten-hour chug back.

MJ: Are you fishing out of Steinhatchee?

SC: No, sir. I actually fish out of New Port Richey, so I'm a little bit south of here. I don't come up to Steinhatchee much – on occasion – but I'll usually be – if I'm up here, I'm kind of southwest of here sixty miles. I would say my inshore fishery is up to Cedar Key down to Tarpon Springs, sometimes Clearwater, St. Petersburg – not a lot – primarily north of Tarpon.

MJ: I don't think these maps [inaudible] cover all that area.

SC: That's all right.

MJ: Will that cover that area?

SC: Let's see. Yeah, that comes a little bit further down. I think we're at – because that's –

MJ: I can't [inaudible] Cedar Key there.

SC: Yes, that's Cedar Key here, right?

MJ: Yes, I think so. That's Cedar Key.

SC: Yes, that's Cedar Key. So I'm going to be down – Crystal River would be right here. I'd be down another probably twenty-five miles, thirty miles south of there, nautical. Like I say, I

do work everything out to the bottom of the Florida Middle Grounds all the way to the very tippy-top of the Middle Grounds. We'll work anywhere we need to go, basically.

MJ: Well, we don't have to map it out. I guess what I wanted to start out – because we want to do it chronologically and talk about the first red tide that really remember and can describe.

SC: Going back years?

MJ: Yes. What was the first one that you remember the most?

SC: Honest, probably 2004 or '05, somewhere in that area. I was doing a lot of chartering then, so we would have trouble keeping the live bait alive in the live well because you'd run through a patch of red tide, and it may only be a small patch twenty miles offshore that you're like, "Uh-oh, the water got ugly," and it's brown, and all of a sudden, your bait dies.

MJ: That water is being recirculated into your bait well?

SC: Yes, sir. Picking it up from a thru-hull on the bottom of the boat and circulating it in. So whenever we would get out there, and you knew there was some because you ran through it a couple of days before, you'd shut your live well off and try to get past it. I never ran into it – honestly, more than twenty miles offshore would have been a long way offshore for me to have seen red tide. You'd maybe see some floating fish out there a little bit further, but most of the time that was probably from the wind blowing them out, it seemed like, because there were still fish where we were fishing; it wasn't any problems there. I've seen it over the years on all the beaches – Sarasota northward up to where I'm at, in Hudson. Where I've fished out of for years was Hudson, just a little to the north of New Port Richey. But I've seen it all along there – dead fish on the beaches. To me, I always thought it was more of a coastal thing, within a few miles of shore. Moving forward, I don't think I ever saw it – never saw it horrible, horrible. Maybe '08, I think, somewhere in that area, there was one time that it was pretty good fish kill offshore. But when we moved into that 2014 red tide, I was fishing inshore – I think it was inshore – I could look in my logbooks – Jim Zubrick was actually on a trip in the Middle Grounds. He called me, and he says, "Hey, you got to get out here." He says, "This is something we've never seen before. We're scooping netfuls of shrimp that are just all – all the stuff's moving, and we just did dives where the fish weren't on the bottom. They were up in the water column. All of a sudden, the vis was horrible on the bottom, and something's going on. These fish are all pushing together." He says, "It's got to be the red tide moving south." So I don't know. It was probably maybe a week after that that I actually made it out to the area that he was in. It was like nothing I've ever seen before. Now, this is in the Middle Grounds toward the north, so it's within the top five or six miles of the end of the Middle Grounds to the north. The fish were so stacked up on the bottom. The water was clear. Beautiful diving conditions. No sign of anything dead on the bottom or anything like that. But it was – everybody jokes that spearfishing's shooting fish in a barrel. It's actually very, very difficult. I'm fortunate that I have a great crew of some of the best spearfishermen in the world, and I'm decent. This was as close to shooting fish in a barrel as you could have possibly wanted to do. You would get down on a dive. We're limited to maybe twenty-ish minutes if we're in a hundred and twenty feet, and we're doing repetitive dives throughout the day, so you have a certain amount of bottom time. So we would literally use our

bottom time up, fill our stringer with maybe fifteen red groupers, gags, hogfish – whatever was there. Predominantly, it was red grouper. They were to the point that you'd fill your stringer up and look at twenty other fish – and these were big fish, eight to twelve pounds probably average. You didn't even have to think about sizes on them. They were all that nice. You'd look at them and go, "Hang on, I'll send somebody right back for you." The first trip out, I didn't know what to expect. I brought my normal two-thousand pounds of ice, which I can ice about – because I'm only there overnight – so maybe three-thousand pounds of fish maximum. By, say, eleven o'clock in the morning on the second day, I had three thousand pounds of fish in the box. I think the first day, we had thirteen-hundred. It was my estimate, just in looking at the fish, keeping track of the weights for our IFQ call-ins and things – had thirteen-hundred-and seventy-six pounds of red grouper. Now, mind you, I averaged about five thousand a year. Now, I just caught fourteen-hundred pounds in a day. We still had maybe three, four, five-hundred pounds of gag grouper. So that trip, we ended up with about three-thousand pounds of fish, maybe two-thousand pounds of red grouper and the rest was a good amount of hogfish and four or five-hundred pounds of red grouper, scamps, mangrove snapper – everything.

MJ: So all these fish were congregating around a structure that they'd been pushed out to [inaudible]?

SC: Well, they were all – it appeared that the tide was moving from the north. So I started actually working to the north on various spots of structure that I normally have fished for years. It's always fishy. You're always shooting fish up there. But this was just like, wait a minute, there's not supposed to be this many red grouper on a spot. It's never like this. AS I worked north a couple of miles, all of a sudden, somebody – I think I might have actually done the dive – and I'm like, "Whoa, our visibility just went to almost nothing on the bottom." Now, I'm seeing dead fish on the bottom, fish dying, swimming abnormally on the bottom. The next diver that I picked up after I got out of the water said the same thing. The sharks were actually right in that area, too. He's like, "Hey, there's no vis, sharks, and dead fish. It's nasty-looking water. Let's go back south." So I turned and started working back to the south, and we never got into that. So it was obvious that those fish were moving from that going toward the south. I was able to get three trips in over a period of about three weeks. I turned around, maybe went back just a few days later, and then the weather got bad. I tried to go as far north as I could each time to where the water would get yucky-looking. I'd turn and kind of go back a little bit and start working south on new bottom. It was almost the same. The third trip out, the secret was out. Everybody'd heard. There was a pile of boats in that area catching these fish, but it was still record red grouper trips for myself as far as dive trips, every one of those trips. So I want to say I did about five-thousand pounds in those three two-day trips.

MJ: So your adaptation to that red tide was you moved up to where the edge was to fish [inaudible]?

SC: Correct, and then worked south, because I figured it seemed like there was more fish right on that edge because they were just staying out in front of it. After that, I knew the party was over, so to speak – that the congregations had stopped. Everybody was fishing them. I think the fish had kind of got further ahead of it, so they weren't clumped up as much. The weather went bad because I want to say that was in October if I'm thinking right. I can look in books and tell

you. If you'd like me to, I can get you an exact date here. I'm very anal with records, so I apologize. [laughter] But I should be able to find it. Right here. October 1st was my first trip out. We had a hundred and fifty-three red grouper on the first day that I estimated it –thirteen-hundred-and-eighty-seven pounds, fourteen scamp, twenty-three gag grouper that we estimated at two sixty, forty-nine mangroves, and we only had two hogfish. But that area of the Middle Grounds doesn't normally produce a lot of hogfish up on that very far north end. It just never has. They're smaller size up there too. The second day, we ended up with eighty-three red grouper that I estimated at about six-fifty, which gave us two-thousand pounds for the trip, and we had eleven gags. We had more mangroves – eighty-three mangroves, twenty-two scamp, and only a couple of red snapper. I didn't have the quota. I didn't probably have a lot of quota. We certainly weren't concentrating on that. We only had six hogfish that day. I think the hogfish actually maybe were ahead of it even more so than the other fish because they weren't hanging around. I got back out on the 7th. On the 7th and the 8th, I was still in that very north part, maybe within – well, I actually went back to a spot that we triple back dove because there were so many fish on it on this particular day. And we started there and worked south, but I was probably five miles from the very tip of – if five miles, maybe even less – three to five. That day, the first day, we did a hundred-and-twenty-three head of red grouper. I guessed them at nine-hundred-and-twenty-three pounds. We only had twelve gag grouper. We had fifteen scamp, forty-four mangroves. I'd moved down a little bit further south; we actually had forty hogfish, so we had a lot better hogs. My guess on those up there – and this is a total guess because I'd have to look at a logbook to see what kind of weight we did on them – maybe a six-pound average. They're smaller up there. On the 8th, we did another banner day; not as good, but we had seventy-two head of red grouper, only four gag, twenty-six scamp, twenty hogs, and thirty-nine mangroves. So still a decent amount of mangroves for the day. On this trip, we were about fifteen-hundred pounds of red group, which is crazy. The weather got bad. We didn't get back out until the 18th. Again, this is when everybody was there. The party was a little bit over. But we still had forty-seven head of red grouper on this day, estimated at three-hundred-and-seventy pounds, nineteen gags, estimated at a hundred-and-ninety-two pounds, so they were healthy fish. We had a hundred and twenty-one mangroves on that trip. We were still up in that top four or five miles of the Middle Grounds. We were actually on the west side. All three of these trips were on the west side the first five days that I was out there. It got a little bit less fish that day, so I decided, "Well, let me jump over to the eastern side," which is – we call it the bunny ears. There's an east and a west, and it's like bunny ears, so I was on the far east side all the way up north and worked that edge for the second day. Now, mind you, we woke up to probably eight to ten-foot seas on this day and probably didn't start diving until ten in the morning at least because I was trying to let it lay down. It's just too dangerous to get in and out of the boat for us. We still did thirty-seven head of red grouper that day for three-hundred pounds. Three hundred pounds of red grouper, for us, in a day, was still a lot, because that's not a normal amount that we would get diving out there most times. Twelve gags, twenty-two scamp, a hundred-and-ten mangrove snapper again, and the mangrove snapper was – this area up there has always been good for mangrove snapper since I started diving in 2006 commercially up there. Now, I have to say, there's almost no mangroves up there.

MJ: [inaudible]

SC: Yes, they're all very tiny. These were all big mangroves.

MJ: Go back to when you say the bunny ears. You're describing the Middle Grounds?

SC: Yes, the Florida Middle Grounds. It starts down south and works more of a straight line up and a certain amount wide. Then it starts to split off to the west a little bit. It's of a clump in this area here, and then there's two distinct rows of structure. One runs to the northeast, and one runs to the northwest. It looks like rabbit ears, so we've always just called it the bunny ears. That last day, we finished up on that eastern side, so it would be the far northeast corner of the Middle Grounds at that point. Like I said, it was still a great day. I did not get back out there to the Middle Grounds. I stayed inshore due to weather and the time of year. November, December, the gag grouper traditionally move into shallow water, so I worked a lot of shallow water grouper. In November, we had ninety-one head of gags, and we were probably – this stuff's all about fifty foot of water off of Weeki Wachee, so that was a seven-hundred-and-thirty pound day of gags. A lot of these were normal for that time of year. When the water gets cold, we would have good trips. I can tell you that, for the last couple of years, we have not come near any of these numbers in that shallow water. The fish left. A lot of this area that I fish inshore, I was lucky that the red tide did not – it missed a little bit. It stayed to the west of about – right off of Crystal River, there's an area that's fifty to sixty foot of water – say thirty to sixty – didn't get affected by the red tide. Somehow it went around it to the west.

MJ: Which red tide are you talking about?

SC: This is the same red tide event of '14. Yes. We were still diving in areas for several months after that October time. I've got one in here, if I can find it, that it would have been the first time that I ran into the red tide that year inshore. Let me see. I know the number we started off on. Well, I think it was this year, but I could be wrong. Maybe we had a different red tide event.

MJ: Do you mind if I take a picture?

SC: As long as there's no numbers on it as far as my –

MJ: It [inaudible].

SC: Yeah.

MJ: (Patty?), could you take a photo?

SC: Certainly. Certainly. Just to show my – [laughter]

MJ: Just to show –

SC: I call it due diligence, because this book, when you go back to it, and you look at water temperatures and things like that, you get a plan of where you need to go when the water temperature is a certain amount. For this, it's really interesting.

F: Do you need light?

MJ: No. I think you just have to press that red button.

F: Okay.

MJ: This just shows us action, or I guess I can tell [inaudible] here and did [inaudible].

SC: There you go.

F: We ready?

MJ: I am. Thank you.

F: Man, you have some nifty little stuff there.

SC: Yes, that's a pretty cool little camera right there.

MJ: I got this when I went to Italy. Also, it takes video. It's actually the camera that they put on drones.

SC: Really? Okay, yes. You know what? It does look like that.

MJ: Yes. But it's got the stabilizer, so you can walk so it stays [inaudible].

SC: Oh, that's awesome. Yes, I've got one of the Phantom 4s, and that thing takes incredible pictures. It's amazing.

MJ: Isn't it amazing what they do?

SC: It is absolutely astonishing. Well, I cannot find where this was inshore when I ran into it.

MJ: Well, do you normally come up this far north?

SC: I usually stop about Cedar Key for my shallow stuff. Deepwater, the Middle Grounds is more up here. It's definitely past Cedar Key, to the north end of it. So like I say, that area from Tarpon Springs north to Cedar Key out to sixty, seventy-foot is kind of a normal stomping grounds. I do a lot of stuff in that area out to a hundred foot, fifteen to twenty miles inside of the Middle Grounds, before you would get to it, so east of the Middle Grounds and then up here in this area as well, out in that hundred-foot stuff. But it's a little more south of here, so my perspective inshore is definitely different. In that same red tide event, as it was moving down south and got down by me, we actually got into it in fifty-five foot of water and were running up to an area that we're going to dive, and we're seeing Key West grunts floating on the surface and bait floating on the surface, and still alive, actually in the process of dying. We're like, "Uh-oh, we're in the red tide. This stuff's got in here now." That was the first time we'd seen it in there. We started diving working to the north and only maybe did half a dozen dives before we literally

had to stop because it looked like people had dumped out cast netfuls of whitebait, which is greenbacks, pilchards, and, covering the bottom, red grouper on the bottom and hogfish. Mainly red grouper and hogfish were the only ones you could tell – and Key West grunts that were actually dying on the bottom, swimming funny and just acting weird. The water had gotten so nasty; you didn't want to be in it because you thought, "Okay, this can't be healthy for my skin to be in this," because it was warm if I remember right.

MJ: I was going to ask– you talked about the visibility, and you could see it in the water. What did it look like? [inaudible].

SC: Just out in the Middle Grounds, when we were diving that, we stayed out of it, where it was nice and clear. The fish were ahead of it. When we got into that portion to the north, it was almost brown. I'd say it was brown. It may have been red, but you lose so much light in eighty to a hundred feet, it would have been hard to say it was red. It was just almost like a blackout, where the light was taken away from you at that point, so you had maybe ten to twelve foot of visibility is all we had. The same thing happened in that shallow water, other than we didn't lose as much light because we're only fifty foot. So we had very reduced visibility and just murky-looking yuck is the only way to say it.

MJ: Did it affect your skin?

SC: No. None of us had any reactions or anything from it. Now, we did get back on the boat after each dive and literally just washed ourselves off with fresh water. But no, we didn't have any effects from it. You didn't really even smell it on the surface, where you think you would. It was actually deeper. The red tide was not on the surface. It was on the bottom. So some of these spots, you would dive, and you'd see gag grouper twenty feet off the bottom swimming around. You're like, "What are they doing up in the water column and not going down," because normally you would push them down. They would go down with you and try to get away from you down there. They were actually staying above you. It was, "Like what are they doing?" So they knew they didn't want to go into that bad water. Aftereffects – so you want me to – any more about the current stuff? That red tide – we continued to dive in it for several months as it worked south. It seemed to get to Clearwater and stop.

MJ: This is in 2014.

SC: This is the 2014 event. It stopped in Clearwater. It made it in to, say, thirty feet, and it worked north up until Bayport, Weeki Wachee area. It didn't get inside of about forty feet there – was as far as I saw it creep inside. So thankfully, I was actually left with some of my shallow-water diving in, say, fifty feet and into twenty feet for the next year or two, to where it didn't get affected, and a lot of fish were in there because the bottom was good and– nothing was killed. The stone crabbers – I sell my fish to a stone crabber down in Homosassa, Shelly's Seafood. They had a banner year in '14 and a banner year in '15 because the red tide doesn't affect the stone crabs. Not safe to eat them when the red tide's there, but they had – all the dead fish that were on the bottom was an endless food source. The other thing it did is it killed all the octopus, so they had no octopus for several years after the red tide, so it was great for them because the octopus – normally, they'll come in and they'll start pushing their way to the beach. So you're

trying to get your traps into shallow water is how he tells me. He says, “They have no octopus to contend with for a couple of years because it wiped them out.” [It’s] bad in the fact that it wiped out the octopus, which is a main staple of red grouper.

MJ: Really?

SC: Yes. Red grouper. So now, when the octopus came back, all that shallow water – because we had a pretty good red grouper fishery in fifty to eighty feet off of Crystal River down to Hudson, I’d say, in that shallower water. You go out and shoot a couple of hundred pounds or catch a couple of hundred pounds in a day in that area. Gone. They were completely gone after this red tide event. So when the octopus came back a couple of years later, there was nothing to eat the octopus, so then they went crazy and destroyed the stone crabs for them. So, yes, it’s crazy all the different cycles of everything. One thing affects everything else. It’s like, holy cow. It was an incredible thing to experience just because it was – it was just incredible. I can’t tell you. I mean, I found one spot out in the Middle Grounds that I – it was probably the second trip out. I got down, and I’m like, “Where are the fish? What’s going on?” It was a bigger – a tall ledge. I’m like, “This is weird. There’s no fish here?” I started to swim up toward the top because a lot of times, you’ll have coral mounds or different things on the tops of these big breaks. So let me go up there. All of a sudden, one red grouper came in, coming down the break. I shot him, strung him, looked up – “Oh, there’s another one a little higher up.” It was kind of a roll. I shot him. Now, all of a sudden, I have ten red grouper around me. Now, all of a sudden, they’re all kind of going up to the top, and there’s a coral mound on top. Well, lobster actually – would have been open season for us to get lobster recreationally. We don’t commercial harvest them. But I got to this coral mound, and there were probably twenty spiny lobsters that I could see on this coral mound. It was nothing but antennas. These are all four to maybe eight-pound lobsters – big ones. I got my hands full of red grouper. I filled my whole stringer. It was the last dive of the trip. We had a five-gallon bucket of ice to try to keep the fish cool for the ride in at that point, but –

M: They were having an ambush party up here [inaudible] lobster.

SC: Just so incredibly neat to see it. I don’t ever want to see it again, just because of what we’ve had to deal with for five years now after this event. I fished the Middle Grounds. We dove it probably for half of 2015 and didn’t really go back. We went up to that north area a little bit, but you could start to see everything dying. Corals and different things were turning white and bleached out. Not a lot of fish. We did okay. But I started working further south. You could see where it had gone through, and stuff was starting to die. Well, then it came wintertime, so I concentrated on my inshore stuff more. When we went back out there at, say, the end of ’15 or the beginning of ’16, we did a day and couldn’t shoot enough fish to pay for anything. We literally left and went into a hundred-foot and tried to do some different stuff. Tried it again six months later – one day, had to go back in. There was no fish. Everything was dead still. By dead, it’s bleached out. I mean, all the stuff that had color prior to the red tide is literally white. Your little pieces of coral are white, so you know they’re dead – no tropical fish. Everything is just gone. Now, did all that die? I don’t know. A lot of it, I’m sure, moved with the other fish. But there was definitely a significant amount of red grouper that died in that event.

MJ: You've seen other red tides, but it didn't have that effect?

SC: I never had seen it that far offshore in my lifetime ever. Like I said, I've seen it out, maybe twenty miles offshore, we'd run through a patch and kill all the bait in the live well. Prior to that, I'd never seen it diving anywhere where I actually saw something killed. Now, the stuff that did get hit off of Crystal River, Weeki Wachee, Homosassa – all that area there – it was a little deeper, and you could see, right when you got to an area – because the coral and all the bottom was just – it wasn't lively. A lot of times, when you're diving, you can actually hear all the coral and whatever the little animals are that are down there. It's a crackling sound that you hear. There was no crackling anywhere where the red tide went. It was just gone. So I'd say, this past year – 2019 – is the first year I've actually dove the Middle Grounds again and had success to where we're finally able to go out and have a good trip again. Between that, '16, '17, '18, we went out there a couple of days, and probably eighty percent of my diving was out there prior to that. We lived to go to the Middle Grounds. That's where we wanted to go, and you just couldn't do it. So I was inshore – stuck inshore, and we did well. We did well – some of the inshore stuff. But you just don't have the pretty dives and the big hogfish and some other bigger fish. It's more fun to dive the Middle Grounds, I guess, is what I'm trying to say. So yes, I cut a lot of that out. I never want to see it again, just because of how bad it really affected it. It took three years for it to really recover.

MJ: Start to recover? How about this last red tide? How did that affect you [inaudible]?

SC: The inshore one, we had it come probably to Clearwater. I'm just a little north of Clearwater. I'm maybe fifteen miles to the north, in New Port Richey. I'd say, yes, ten to fifteen. I didn't get any effect from this one where I was at. Everybody else that I talked to that was St. Pete, Clearwater – horrible. I don't know how far offshore it went. I didn't talk to anybody about that. And it seemed like it was more of an inshore event, even down Fort Myers area, and stuff like that. I've got some friends that fish down there. But yes, that one did not affect me at all. Nothing was hurt anywhere from Tarpon Springs northward at all. I saw no signs of it at all.

MJ: Well, tell me about – you mentioned that you're going to maybe switch to some other gear and start a different type of fishing [inaudible].

SC: The last three years of my fishery have been my worst three years since I started in 2006, just because the fish – I mean no red grouper. If we got forty pounds of red grouper, it's like, wow, we got forty pounds of red grouper. It's like, wow, that's crazy. I think we might have had a trip this year in the Middle Grounds – I don't have my newest book – we might have got a couple of hundred pounds a trip out in the Middle Grounds. I'm like, "Wow, they're starting to come back." We were seeing a lot of short fish, a lot of sixteen- to eighteen-inch fish. We need to be eighteen or bigger, which was really nice. You might go down and shoot one or two nice red grouper on a spot, but you might have seen ten small ones. So there's hope. It's coming back. We're seeing it. Even in shallow, any of the stuff that I'm diving in thirty to fifty, sixty feet, I've seen a resurgence of small red grouper. When we went a couple of years [ago], we didn't even see one. So they are coming back. On another note, on that '14 tide, people down in Fort Myers – I've got several friends down there, and Facebook – you see everybody's thing and

this and that. A lot of people that weren't good fishermen instantly became really good fishermen in the end of '14 and in '15. Honestly, I feel like it was all these fish that moved south. They kept going and going past Clearwater, and they went down there. So I would venture to guess, if you checked logbooks and landings and things out of Fort Myers – Venice south, Venice to Naples – I think you would see the vast majority of our red grouper in the last three to four years have been caught down there. That's where the fishery has been. It just has not been here, because that red tide got down to Clearwater.

MJ: So you think they moved, and they haven't been back because the habitat hasn't been [inaudible]?

SC: I think the habitat was not good for them to come back to. I also think – remember, your fish like your gag grouper – anything that can swim and is up in that water column, your red snapper especially – we had a great recruitment year, I believe, in '14 on red snapper. Well, there was no fish in a lot of these areas. The red snapper have fins, and they started spreading out. So I think a lot of them moved in. I saw a direct correlation inshore in, say – we've actually had red snapper in thirty foot of water down by me. I know Jim has up here, right – thirty foot? So one year, probably, it's nineteen. So I haven't even done it – eighteen, seventeen – probably sixteen. Started doing some dives where I would drop on a rockpile, and I thought it was a bait show. I came up from a dive, and I'm like, "Guys, you're not going to believe this. In sixty foot of water, there's thousands of six-inch red snapper down there." I'm like, "I don't know I don't even know what they're here for. I've never seen one." Thousands of them on a rock. And you'd go to another spot, and you'd find another pile of little ones. Well, then the next year, those little ones had gone to – maybe there was a hundred on a rockpile or something. All of a sudden, I saw my gag grouper not be there. I'm like, "Okay, well, I know they feed a lot, and they're voracious. Are they pushing the gag grouper off?" The next year, the same thing – more red snapper, bigger red snapper, less gag grouper. So 2019 is the worst year I've had for gag grouper since I started in '06. I probably averaged about ten to eleven thousand pounds a year. This year, I think I killed five, maybe. Yes. But I will say, on my last couple trips in that same depth range, in forty to sixty feet, not many red snapper yet, and we started to see – we actually had a really good gag trip. I think we had five or six hundred pounds in a day, which was – that was great compared to what we were doing years back. So I think stuff's starting to shift and come back. But yeah, I think the red snapper – they moved in because they weren't killed in the red tide, so they kind of moved in. That's probably slowed down the red grouper coming back because you don't want to come back to fight for food if you're sitting at the buffet.

MJ: Are red snapper more resilient to red tide?

SC: Yes. I think they can get away from it is my idea. I've never seen a red snapper dead, floating from a tide. I'm sure it could happen. But you remember I told you the red – we saw like the gag grouper staying up above it, and they wouldn't go into that dirty water. The hogfish and the red grouper and the grunts – they're still down in that yucky stuff because it's like they're not – I don't know if they're not smart enough or fast enough. I know they're fast. But yes, they didn't move as much. So I think the red snapper did that same thing – staying up out of it and moving forward. Then I think they just came in behind it. There was areas where there was no fish, and they're like, "Hey, looks like a great place to set up camp." So yes, the red

snapper fishery is insane. Never seen anything like it before. So it's great. I wish I could get more quota. [laughter] We all wish that, right?

MJ: Everyone wishes that.

SC: But yes, other than that, the red tide, like I say, I just don't ever want to see it again, because it had such a tremendous impact for four years after it. We're still not back yet. But there are signs that it's coming back, thank gosh. I think I can still be a commercial fisherman now for a few more years. [laughter]

MJ: What do you think – what caused that [inaudible]?

SC: The actual red tide?

MJ: [inaudible].

SC: In everything that I've studied or learned, it's a natural phenomenon that goes back to the days of the Spanish galleons being over here and conquistadors and all that stuff, so it's a natural event. Do I think it's one hundred percent exacerbated by all the pollution and fertilizer and things like that that's run off into the Gulf? Yes, without a doubt, especially the stuff down in Fort Myers that comes out of the Caloosahatchee River from Okeechobee, because that wasn't red tide. That was killing crabs and invertebrates that don't usually die in a red tide, and then I think all that on top of it just makes that red tide bloom even more, once you add everything to the mix. Hopefully, you don't have another one but – not of that magnitude. That was just unbelievable to have it that far off, because from what I heard, it was – I don't know how close to Carrabelle did it get up on the coast up there – did it start on the coast?

M: Yeah, it was probably thirty miles from Carrabelle.

SC: So you figure from twenty miles offshore and thirty miles off of Carrabelle all the way down to Clearwater. I mean what a massive – all the stuff that we were diving was out in the Middle Grounds. The closest point of the Middle Grounds on the south end is probably seventy nautical miles from where I'm at in New Port Richey, or seventy to almost a hundred nautical miles from me. It's a vast area that it just – it really decimated. I have stuff down off of Hudson to New Port Richey out at eighty feet. It's more of that pothole bottom that I described, where it's sandy, hard bottom, limestone, where the red grouper dig holes out. We would go out there twice a year. If you didn't want to fish it, you could actually dive it because there were so many potholes; there were so many red grouper on them. We dove that a year or two after – maybe the year after, we tried to go out there, and it was devoid of life – not anything. The holes were filled in from silting over because there was no fish there to clean them out. So I haven't been back there probably – I bet you it's been three years since I've even attempted to do anything out there. That was something – we'd go out there at least once a year in the summertime when the red grouper were thick, and we would kill gags. Believe it or not, we'd see a lot of red [snapper]. That was one of the places that we started seeing a lot of small red snapper when they started coming in. I was like, "Why are they out here?" But they like sand. So I don't know why – they like sandy, hard bottom. Yes, it was definitely just crazy.

MJ: Well, switching to a different type of fishing, do you use the same crew? Is this a different boat?

SC: Yes, I would use the same crew – a lot of it being I don't fish a lot at night out in Middle Grounds. We used to a lot. My crew works hard diving all day, so they don't want to mess with the anchor. The boat that I switched to two years ago is very difficult to use the anchor, getting to it – gets tangled with the windlass. It's not set up for that. It's not set up to drag the anchor like a traditional commercial boat. So I actually put a trolling motor on it, with an i-Pilot. I just put it on two months ago. Only got to use it once. It was nice not to throw the anchor, but it's just to do – we're not catching as much diving for a day, so if we could fish for two, three hours and put another few hundred dollars in the boat that evening, it would help.

MJ: So you're doing both?

SC: Yeah, try to kind of do both, just because catches are down. Like I say, stuff's starting to come back, but catches definitely have been down. Like I say, the last three years have been my worst three since I started. Some of it's weather. I'm not going to lie. Some of it's weather. Like December this month, I fished one day, had the opportunity to fish a second day. That was the only two days that it's been calm enough where I'm at to do what I need to do. So there is some weather issues with it. But switching over to it, I think I'm going to have to switch to trying to get more red snapper allocation, and go out and actually try to gag grouper fish and red grouper fish if they're coming back. I need that for the bycatch. If I can bring back three, four-hundred pounds every time, two different gentlemen that I normally sell to – a restaurant and Shelly's Seafood – they don't want a thousand pounds of red snapper at a time. They want a couple of hundred pounds. So it would work perfect as far as that goes. There's times when the wind's blowing – I know I can't go dive now because it's mud out there. You can't see anything. So now, I can go ahead – if I get a chance, I can try to go fish, so just to try to fill the void, I guess, is what I'm saying. I used to say I just – my game plan used to be, if I could do two two-day trips a month, I could make a living. Now that's not the case because those trips, if they were seven to ten thousand dollars in two days, now they're maybe four to six – something like that, so there's money left on the table. Part of it, like I said, with the hogfish inshore, there's definitely a part of that – the size limit. That's hurt me a lot on my day trips because normally we might have shot a hundred-and-fifty pounds of hogfish in a day. Inshore, an average day for us now, is twenty-five to forty pounds. They're just not big enough. There's piles of them. I mean, I could have had banner days with the old size limit. So there's more of them – just not getting bigger.

MJ: Why aren't they getting bigger?

SC: I was told by Angela Collins, who was one of the leading biologists for National Marine Fisheries – I believe she was – or was she FWC [Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation]. Yes. So she did a huge hogfish study years ago on them. I talked to her in private because we were real good friends. I said, "Angela, what do you think? When they were talking about increasing sizes, they wanted to go to sixteen." She said, "Scott, a few fish are going to get to sixteen. But there's not enough food for the quantity of hogs that are inshore – there's not enough food to go

around for them all to grow bigger, no matter if you don't catch them at all." I go back to people that dove thirty, forty years ago. There was no pressure diving. You know what size hogfish they shot? The same size we shot now, maybe smaller. They weren't ever big in those inshore waters. Yes, you'd shoot one at five pounds here or there or something. But they were never big, even when there was a pressure. The other thing that worries [me] about the hogfish for me is there's a lot – since the red tide, since the red tide pushed all those hogfish inshore from me, where I fish, down to Clearwater, St. Pete area, they had a huge increase in hogfish down there, so much so that they started charter fishing for them, and it became an actual fishery for hogfish, which never existed, except in the Keys years and years ago, to my knowledge. Well, the Keys – I don't know what happened, other than they fished them out or something, but my understanding is the mortality rate on a returned hook-and-line hogfish is in the ninety percentile. So they raise the size limit two inches. Now, if they caught one that's thirteen and a half, it's got to go back. It's probably going to die. So I do worry that that's going to be a lasting effect because just the grouper season is now there are six months starting January 1 that the recs [recreational fishermen] can't shoot – they can't catch or shoot gag grouper. They're shut down. So now, they have to target something else. I saw this morning on Fox News Captain Dylan Hubbard out of Hubbard's Marina –

F: We love Dylan.

SC: Yeah. The fishing report – what's going on? Well, guess what? Grouper's closing, but the hogfish bite is awesome and should be great through the spring. And I'm like, "No, shh. No." [laughter] But that's the nature of the beast. You close one; they want to find something else to fish for. I understand.

MJ: Well, that's my last question. Is there anything management can do to help with when red tide is there? Is there anything they could do?

SC: Man, you know, I would have loved to have seen the red grouper cut after that red tide, our quotas and recreational quotas cut. The weird thing – what was it – two years after – '16 – did we get the increase or '17?

M: Yes, well, we got the increase in – there was a delay. There was a couple-year delay in that stock assessment.

SC: For the red grouper. So they gave the recreational three million pounds, and they said, "Well, we got to be fair and give you guys three million pounds." We're all going, "Whoa, we don't need it. There's none out there. They're gone. We don't need that three million pounds." Now, they took most of it – they took sixty-five percent back from us this past year. I hear more cuts coming too. What's funny is there's more cuts coming right as we're starting to reestablish, so now they'll be a glutton of red grouper in a year or two and no quota to go catch it. But that's just the nature of government and trying not to do the knee-jerk reactions. I understand it to a point. But I would love for them to listen to us a little bit better, especially somebody like me diving and actually seeing things down there. They have had an attentive ear, I think, more so in the last few years. Only thing with hogfish is I was fully on board when it's all about managing

by science. Hogfish was not science – not in our area. Hogfish – they said it was not undergoing overfishing and was not overfished.

MJ: Here's a precautionary –

SC: Just in case, we're going to cut the limits, and we're going to raise size limit too. Well, actually, they raised size limit first. Then they came back and said, "Hey, guess what? Great. We're catching less hogfish, so now we're going to go ahead and cut your limits even more. I'm like, "What? I'm like, "There's no science in this, so now I'm not onboard anymore." It's like, I'm done.

M: [inaudible].

M: I know [inaudible] the taste in your mouth.

SC: It drives me crazy. Yeah, just it leaves that taste – like, wait a minute, you should – I mean, there's times this year where my diver (Richie?), who has – and I've done it before – we've all done it – shoot twenty-five hogfish on a dive. Your stringer's full, as much as you can get. There's times this year that we've all come up from – in a day – almost every dive going, I could have filled the whole stringer – no issues – and probably started putting them on one of my spear shafts. That's how many are out there that we're seeing in the areas where I'm diving. They're just not big enough. So the population is doing great.

M: [inaudible]. [laughter]

F: Economically, did you see any difference?

SC: Yes. A hundred percent economically, because there wasn't as many gags, there was no red grouper. You could literally look at my logbooks for the last three years, and I bet you – I think last year, in '18, I was two hundred pounds for the year. That's just running into an errant red grouper someplace. In twenty-five trips, you shoot one. We got one fish or something, you know? Gag grouper down, mangrove snapper – there's a lot of them, but a lot of little ones. I think they just moved. I think they moved a lot out of the Middle Grounds, and they have not come back to the Middle Grounds, because we used to – years ago, we called them over the rail and into the pail at night. It was just one after another – nice big three to six-pound mangrove snapper, and they're gone. Are they dead? Not in my opinion. They moved because they're a fast fish that's not going to stick around in that red tide. They got out of there. They just have not come back.

MJ: And talking about economically, do you find yourself traveling further or spending more money on fuel to go places?

SC: Yes. Certainly, spending more money on fuel because I used to be able to go to an area, especially like in the Middle Grounds, and I literally would work a mile area for two days, because we would find the fish, and I would just stay right there. I don't ever leave fish to find fish. If we're putting fish on the boat, you stay right there. I would never move. Now, you go

out there, and you find one area that's got a little bit of fish, and you move a half a mile, and it's a ghost town. The bottom's great, and everything looks lively, but it's all little tropicals, little tiny mangrove snapper. I've seen herds of – I was telling them – I don't know if you ever heard – we did some stuff earlier this year where I didn't think it was bait on the bottom machine, but it was twenty, thirty feet tall, looked like bait but not like bait. It was just too dark to be bait. It was bigger. I'm like, "I don't know what it is." You drop down, and it was thousands of eight to ten-inch mangrove snapper – thousands and thousands. They were all in one section of the Grounds, to where we did half a dozen dives, and we're like, "We got to leave. That's all that's here." So I ended up going probably ten, twelve miles to change – so yes, definitely more running and gunning, I guess you would [inaudible] – just trying to find an area that has some fish that have moved back in. The shallow stuff, too – the shallow stuff down in front of me off of New Port Richey, Tarpon – that was hit very hard even into twenty-five, thirty feet of water. It's just now starting to get a few fish back on it. So I don't even have the option to go ten miles in front of my house and start fishing, hardly, because there's nothing there – like I have to run north or run deeper or things like that. So yes, it limited off of Clearwater – I haven't been down there in a couple of years, just because I knew that other red tide was coastal, so I didn't know how far it went off. The '14 red tide – or not '14 – they had one between '14 and last year. They had another one a couple of years ago that I –

F: '17.

SC: – know was out deeper and messed up – they're like, "There's no fish. Don't come down here. There's no fish." Yes, so it's been a couple of years of not good stuff, but nothing like the '14 one. That was, by far, the worst thing I've ever seen.

MJ: So are these more frequent than you remember?

SC: I mean, every year, I went to the beach when I was a kid in Sarasota. Your eyes were burning. There was dead fish floating. Every year, you knew that it was going to be there, no matter what. But I would say they're more spread out versus being confined to more of an area that I used to think that's the only place red tide was. Never heard about it in the Panhandle, but I guess it was always there, but I wasn't up in Panama City [inaudible] like that. Yes. In my areas, yes, I definitely would say it's more frequent now than it was.

MJ: And they're expanding?

SC: Yes, the areas are getting bigger than just being confined to that nearshore waters. And you get an east wind that starts blowing that junk offshore, and then it gets even worse offshore. You got to hope for – sorry for the inshore anglers, but you got to hope for a west wind pushing it in. [laughter]

F: [inaudible]. If you are a tourist and you make your reservations, you're just out of luck.

SC: You're out of luck.

F: It should be a natural disaster of some sort at this point, I believe.

SC: Yes, that stuff down there, where they were literally piling up with bulldozers on the beach – I mean, they were hiring fishing guides and commercial fishermen all along Clearwater and St. Pete beach. I know several people that did it. They literally, every day, would go fill their boats with dead fish and bring them back and offload them to the dumpsters.

M: Shippers were being paid to drag – surface drag.

SC: And dragging.

MJ: Really?

SC: Yeah. Yes, it was crazy.

MJ: That '14 red tide –

M: There was a tide [inaudible] right out here.

MJ: – there was no fisheries disaster declared for that, was there?

SC: No. I don't believe so.

M: No.

F: [inaudible]

SC: That was far worse than anything inshore as far as an effect. The inshore, I think, just comes back a lot faster– your snook and your redfish and your trout. I think these fish were just displaced so far away from where they were; it's just taken them forever to come back. That bottom – deep water is going to come back a lot slower because you're talking corals and things now that need sunlight. All that stuff grows so much slower; I think it was a lot longer recovery process for the offshore waters.

F: I don't think they were ever hit quite so hard as we were in '14 in that depth.

SC: No. I've never seen it.

M: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) but out of sight, out of mind.

SC: Correct.

M: That's exactly what happened. If this had been St. Pete Beach and a catastrophic event like this one – because as far as I'm concerned – and we know how bad it was down in Fort Myers last year – this event was even worse, because this is five years later, and we're just now starting to see some improvement.

SC: Starting to recover.

M: They had already had some improvement since the one last year, and fishing started to improve because Captain Van Hubbard, good friend of mine down there in Port Charlotte – and now they're faced with another – they're dabbling with it. But this tide here, because – and Florida missed it – now they're realizing how bad it was. But there was an eighty-square-mile area of pure death.

SC: Yes, complete.

M: Sponges, live rock, all of it.

M: I've seen the critters come back, Jim – way out there. [inaudible] snakes.

SC: Yes. Just this year, down in the southwest corner of the Grounds – I say corner – probably middle of the Middle Grounds, there was a southwest area that I go to, and it was devastated, and it's usually beautiful. This is the first year – this is where I saw those little mangrove snapper – first year that it actually had life on it again, and everything was pretty on the bottom – tropicals everywhere and the coral and sea fans and everything was back to where you wouldn't almost know – yes, you could look and say, "Okay, there's a dead clump of coral." But for the most part, I'm like, "It's back. Finally, it's back." So maybe next year, we'll be able to come over here and harvest some fish.

MJ: So that coral will recover?

SC: I don't think the – the stuff that dies is just dead, from my understanding, and it's just new growth.

MJ: New growth?

SC: Complete new growth. Correct.

M: Don't forget our coral and live rock [are] two different animals.

SC: Correct.

M: But listen, nobody probably has a better feel for the inshore than the spongers.

SC: Oh, without a doubt.

M: My sponging guys that I know – they talked about the sponges and the death. They also were a good example of where we're at with our groupers – our gag groupers. A guy working the bottom out here off Steinhatchee or down off of Tarpon has a chance to spend long periods of time on the bottom, an hour and a half.

SC: Cutting sponges, yes.

M: Cutting sponges. Actually, the spongers came back this year. They were out there earlier in the year, so there is some sponge growth happening.

SC: That's a good sign.

M: But this is where now – I told you that Ryan Rindone is looking at the new data. Sorry about this table. We moved [inaudible]

F: Yes, it's got a leveler on it.

SC: I think the house is falling. [laughter]

M: Well, we set it over here. Now, you just keep leaning.

F: Just don't send that coffee my way, okay? [laughter]

M: We didn't lose the gags bad, though.

M: But Ryan –

M: [inaudible]

M: – mentioned that up to thirty percent –

M: Like he says about [inaudible].

M: – they're realizing thirty percent of all the red groupers might have been killed in that '14 event. Then, when you corral them like we did – we corralled them, had our biggest catches during the red tide because they all got in that corner.

SC: Yes, they were just right there.

M: We literally shot fish in a barrel. He had an over two-thousand-pound day trip. Okay? I had a fifteen-hundred-pound day trip. He had two or three-thousand pound red grouper days on diving.

M: I caught one-hundred-and-thirty-eight head in one spot in two hours. And we're just three guys.

M: In two hours. [laughter]

M: So we ended up hurting them –

SC: That's insane.

M: – on top of the injury.

M: They were stacked up.

M: Don't forget that the charter guys out of Homosassa, Cedar Key corralled the fish in twenty feet of water because two things happened. It was like the parting of the Red Sea. Okay?

M: Yeah, they [inaudible].

M: So fish went toward shore.

MJ: [inaudible].

M: Fish went offshore.

SC: And went deep and south.

M: So the ones that got caught, they got caught – especially the ones that went inshore, they got caught because the red tide came in the Steinhatchee River – Ellis might have mentioned that – they actually came, just dabbled for a day and a half, two days.

SC: Really?

M: And it was gone. It just pushed out. The wind changed. Recreational fishermen never felt this impact because – face it – out of ten fishermen here, nine are trout and red fishermen. So down there – Fort Myers, Port Charlotte – nine out of ten are redfish and trout and snook and so – and there's no tourists with the motels, so we go unnoticed. But this was truly – and I've been in Florida all our lives. We remember St. Pete beach. There was always a red tide every couple of years. We remember the snook devastation. If it wasn't the winter cold, it was a red tide getting them. When it comes into Tampa Bay, that's when it was bad.

SC: Yes.

M: But it stays offshore. It doesn't get into the bay. But the one we had in Sarasota back in like 2005 or '06 – that was a really bad one – killed everything in Sarasota Bay. First thing to come back was the shrimp. That's why there was hundreds of people on all the bridges at night with lanterns getting all the shrimp they wanted

M: Dipping shrimp.

F: We were doing it.

M: I'm seeing surface critters at night now [inaudible] that ain't been there in six years.

SC: Right. Yes.

M: Got snakes and crab [inaudible].

M: Listen, disaster relief –

F: Squid.

SC: I would definitely check – like I say, check the landings if you can – check the stuff – Fort Myers, Naples – and you’ll see that all the harvest of red grouper was right there because they’ll put in their logbook their section that they were fishing, and it’s all going to be down there. There was nothing north of Venice.

MJ: I’ll get (Mandy?) to do that. [inaudible].

F: Yes, or (Claude Peterson’s?) son. What’s his name?

M: I’m not sure what Claude – he’s in charge of bluefin for the trip ticket.

F: Yes, he’s in charge of the trip ticket program.

M: [inaudible] she can get it.

F: They can do all kind of reports.

M: I bet she can get it.

F: Yes, Mandy’s got that.

MJ: I don’t look at them as much as my economists do, but they look at logbook landings when we’re doing various amendments. So we know that that’s there. But no one’s really looked at the effects of red tide in that way, but I think that would be a good idea to go back and look at those landings and see how they’ve changed. We’re getting a better picture of what happens, so we can know what we’re looking at that way.

F: Did you lose your crew because of economic –

SC: No. I’m lucky that they both have – Richie just lives very meagerly. Dean has a lawn service, so he only hurts during the wintertime, when he’s only cutting the yards once every once in a while. So he’s not horrible, so I got pretty lucky with that, and that’s my two main guys that I’ve had forever. Back then, I actually had Paul [Varian] from the TV show – the guy that was on the TV show, Paul – from the East Coast.

F: What’s the name of the TV show?

SC: *Catching Hell*.

MJ: I think I’ve seen it.

SC: On the Weather Channel.

MJ: [inaudible]

SC: That was the big boat I used to have; that was the *Just Shoot Me*.

MJ: Because I was watching it one day, and I said I didn't know those guys had a TV show.

SC: Yes. One-hit wonders – one year.

MJ: That was fun. Well, that's all I got, Scott, unless there's anything that you wanted to ask me about.

SC: I think that's about everything that I can think of on it. I wish I could tell you more.

MJ: It's been a lot. (Mandy?) will be really happy, because she's been wanting to get up here and hasn't been able to and wanted to get this perspective, especially on this 2014 red tide, so this is going to help.

SC: Okay. Yes, if she needs anything in the future, you're welcome to call me again if she has any specific questions.

M: What's your name?

MJ: Mike.

M: Mike?

MJ: Yes.

M: Did I meet you at Karen Bell's one night.

MJ: You might have. I lived in Cortez for about a couple of years when I was doing my dissertation research, and I'd go back there quite a bit.

M: Yes, I got your card. We were sitting at the bar drinking. I remember you now.

M: Do you remember that guy? [laughter]

MJ: He looks familiar.

F: No, I don't think he was there. Yes.

M: No, no, that wasn't me. [laughter]

M: I would think that they probably covered about everything that I could probably cover, but there are – if I'm going to –

F: Is that enough?

SC: I think it was fifteen bucks or something, wasn't it? Whatever [inaudible].

M: It was fifteen-something. Wasn't it?

SC: Yes. I don't think it was over – I think I got three dollars and change back or something like that, if I'm thinking right, so it's fine. Good enough.

MJ: Well, that's surprising, because I didn't know all these guys were down there in Cortez at that time.

M: I was down there – that was years ago before I got my boat put back together, and I was down there running – going to run that Liberty Bell.

MJ: I've known Karen since the '90s.

M: When they were building that – yes, I knew her dad. I knew her when she was real young because I mullet fished out of Palmetto. I didn't fish for Walter; I fished for Bud Pillsbury on the other side of the river.

M: Karen was on the council for a while, made her stint there. Of course, Bell –

M: They were young girls. We was in our twenties. [laughter]

SC: Time flies.

M: The thing that I've [inaudible] most is the travel time. Listen, nobody ever went out two hundred feet here and fished. You never needed to. My guy that was fishing my boat called *The Tide's Up* was doing three to four-thousand-pound red grouper trips in five and six days, fishing out here in ninety feet. The red tide forced him to go down then, to travel, and he had to go deeper and farther south. So the reason that those red groupers got caught up here was because they historically – this is the time – that was when they migrated north. Red groupers love to come up into this northern gulf, and they feed on those spawning seabass. So my argument is that the reason we're not getting a lot of our red grouper back is because we're catching all the –

F: Seabass?

M: No, the forage fish – the grunts, the seabass. They're cleaning them out here with these traps. So we're so far behind the eight ball, I had twenty-eight pounds of red grouper on my last trip.

MJ: Twenty-eight pounds?

M: Twenty-eight pounds. I never got deeper. I was forty-nine –

SC: I had twelve the last day trip. [laughter]

M: – miles from Steinhatchee, but forty-nine miles from Steinhatchee before, in the three days that I was fishing, was a seven, eight-hundred-pound trip. I had twenty-eight pounds. Of course, I'm catching red snapper. I made a movement. Ninety percent of everything we catch is red snapper now. I've had to position myself. I know you were involved with some of the catch share, right?

MJ: Well, I wasn't on the council. I was working for NOAA when they established the program. I was actually on the Gulf Council's SEP [state expenditure plan] years before when they first started.

M: Yes. With Roy Williams.

MJ: Yes.

M: When Roy was on the council when we – did you know Will Ward?

MJ: Oh, yes.

M: Well, Will just passed on.

MJ: I heard that. Yeah.

SC: I cannot believe that.

M: What a terrible –

SC: I really can't believe that.

F: I can't either.

SC: He told me the other day, and I'm like what?

M: What a guy that cared about this resource. I loved when a conservative cares about the resource, like myself and Scott.

F: He's going to be so greatly missed in this fishery.

SC: Oh, man.

M: Oh, man.

F: Let alone on like a personal level.

MJ: Well, let me just say that Jim Zubrick is talking now and – but I wanted to ask Jim when – how long have you been here fishing in Steinhatchee?

JZ: I've been here twenty years.

MJ: Twenty years? And before?

JZ: It was Madeira Beach.

MJ: Madeira Beach before that? Now, what type of fishing do you do?

JZ: Well, now, almost all of my trips are rod and reel, electric-assisted Bandit trips.

SC: We have a nickname for him.

JZ: But prior to the last eight or nine years, did a lot of diving – a lot of spearfishing.

SC: [inaudible].

MJ: Why did you switch?

JZ: Well, I was also, at the same time, in a charter business, so they complemented each other. We do commercial and then do charter diving – and because of red snapper. If I go out of here on a dive trip, I can't nearly do as well with the dollar amount as I can by catching red snappers with – unless I'm going to put a lot of miles on the boat and go grouper fishing, which puts me out in the two hundred, which puts me a hundred miles offshore. I like to stay around fifty miles.

SC: That was another thing you asked me about converting to hook and line is I want to get into some of the deeper water. Most of the gag grouper – we actually had a very good first couple of months of the year this year on gag grouper when it was cold, and it was toward the spawn. But they were all in two to five hundred feet of water. I'm not diving any of that, but that's electric reel territory at that point and totally changing your game plan and learning how to do something different. Why they were out there, I don't know.

MJ: But this change that you're making is partly because of this red tide?

JZ: Oh, yes.

SC: I would say it's associated a hundred percent.

JZ: Yes, it is associated with it, because the fish we have the vast majority of are red snapper. So it just makes sense to me – I make less money per pound, but the poundage is a lot easier to catch, and so I made this transition. Not everybody's fortunate that they can do that. Right? Some guys are traveling twice as far as I am. Now, I do, at times go offshore, when I want to

actually catch some groupers, beeliners, things like that. I do two or three dive trips a year, so I have a fairly good pulse of what's out here in the sixty, seventy, eighty-foot. But there was a time – that's why I never went to the Middle Grounds on a commercial dive trip for four or five years. I went three years without going to the Middle Grounds. You didn't need to because up here was a lack-of-effort area. There weren't people – there aren't people here still, as compared to Clearwater.

SC: I'm coming. I'm coming. [laughter]

JZ: But since the red tide, it destroyed all that. We still have –

M: Virgin ground. [laughter]

JZ: We still have bleached spots that are out there. [inaudible] I'm not getting into the water. It's been three years since I've got in the water. I hire guys now to shoot fish for me. They come, and they – and guys who used to dive with me in the heyday say, "Man, that spot's still bleached over." Some spots are never –

SC: They won't come back. Yes.

JZ: Yes, I don't think they'll come back. I mean, it's been five years. When you take the coral out – these areas actually have some coral in them, and those are the areas that got hit. But ninety percent of everything you have out here is live rock.

MJ: Well, I was going to say – you mentioned that difference between coral and live rock. Does live rock come back faster?

JZ: Oh, yes.

SC: Yes.

MK: Takes three years for worm rock. But the plant rock will grow in about six months.

JZ: Coral's an organism of its own, and live rock is basically organisms that attach to the rock.

SC: To the rock.

JZ: So, as time goes on – well, we saw this whole transition. We saw the little red snapper. The red tide was devastating. I drove through it. I drove through – all of us who fished up here to get to the deeper water drove through the fish. If you went at night, you would hear thuds hit the bow.

MJ: Just hitting the fish?

JZ: Hitting the bow. They were floating. I wanted a guy from Cedar Key who's a charter captain down there on the *Grouper Therapy*. He had done videos and pictures of it. A charter

guy – he had his best catches ever in his years of fishing as shallow as fifteen feet of water – red grouper limits in twenty minutes for everybody on the boat because, when that red tide forced those fish up off of Cedar Key, then it came in. Cedar Key got it, and then they just all died, or they went south. That’s what we think also happened. Fish kept moving, deposited a good size of the stock Tampa Bay and south.

MJ: Oh, really?

SC: Yes.

JZ: We’re thinking – because some of those fish – that’s what they did. They would come up here – not every one. But people from Madeira Beach would fish in the northern Gulf in that May, June, July, August times. They would make the trip up here. Those were good months to red grouper fish in the ninety to a hundred feet.

M: My buddy Jim had an eighty-two hundred trip down there off of Tampa, just south of the fairway this past year, this past summer. But he said it took him more days. It took him like six or seven days to get eighty-two hundred. But me and him seen days, back in the ’90s, when if you caught four thousand in thirteen days, it was a good trip. We’ve seen worser times.
[laughter]

JZ: Well, you know, Michael, there are sometimes you get far enough removed on years of data that it’s not significant. What it is, is historical data. Obviously, nothing’s like it used to be – effort, the population, and water quality – but this particular red tide, we were out there in it. We kind of discovered how bad it was. I was the only dive boat out here. That was in ’14. I was doing a commercial trip.

SC: You called me on a cellphone.

JZ: Yes.

SC: You’re like, “You got to get out here.” I’m like, “I can’t.” [laughter]

JZ: Yes. But we finally found the fish squeezed into that northern part of the Middle Grounds. But the death – and my guys were coming up and –

SC: [inaudible] kept my mouth shut [inaudible]

JZ: I dove a spot on that trip. I call it rust-colored. I call the water not red because you lose red at depth. People would say, “Hey, I’ve been shooting a lot of fish. Man, the red was everywhere.” “Really?” Well, red’s green on the bottom. But it had that copper-colored rust, blackish dark tint to it. It was amazing. But the most amazing part was one night when the tide wasn’t at the spot where we were anchored, and we had just got there late in the afternoon – that was my first trip to see how bad it was offshore. Where they’re anchored, the guys had come up right there at sunset with huge stringers. We’re going, “Oh my God.” They said, “Jim, you’re not going to believe how many fish are down there.” While we’re sitting there and I’m getting

dinner ready for my three divers and everything, the red tide must have come across the [inaudible]. Now, the surface was full of sea snakes, crabs, shrimp. We netted up two five-gallon buckets of rock shrimp.

SC: Rock shrimp. [laughter]

JZ: Every square two inches had a sea snake, a crab, a rock shrimp, toadfish, all that kind of stuff –

SC: Getting the heck out of Dodge.

JZ: – that came to the surface. Never seen nothing like it. The guys on the –

MJ: They were still alive?

SC: Oh, yes.

JZ: They were full of life.

SC: Oh, yes, they were just leaving.

JZ: They left the bottom to come up. That's when the guys dove, the next morning, not knowing that the tide had come in – the red tide is – that mile it was away, probably, the current brought it in. When they go down, they were about forty-some feet off the bottom – couldn't see it – but as they're all down, teeming with snappers, groupers –

SC: Up in the water column.

JZ: – up in the column – sea snakes, all of the shit in the midwater. We were in a hundred and ten feet or something. [inaudible] sixty feet of fish. They guys tried to shoot fish. But most of the guys didn't go down with line guns. That's about impossible to shoot in midwater – groupers and snappers and things like that.

MK: What could be on the bottom that, if you stirred it up really, really good, it could come to the surface and be bright orange, as if you had an orange soda and just poured it in the water?

JZ: Mark, that's a whole different issue. Let's stay here with this.

MK: I'm just wondering what the heck [inaudible].

MJ: I have no [inaudible].

JZ: Afterwards.

MJ: I'm a social scientist. I'm not [inaudible] biologist, so I don't know how to explain those things.

JZ: Anyways, we had no idea how bad it really was. We knew it was bad. But we know now because here we are; we're just now coming back almost five years later to where things are looking up, but you still can't make a living inside of fifty miles unless you're red snapper fishing, or you're diving [inaudible] the gag [inaudible]. But my last dive trip, you shoot forty, fifty pounds of hogfish where we used to shoot four hundred before the red tide.

MK: No grunts back yet. No seabass [inaudible].

JZ: No grunts, seabass – that's why the trap (sp?) issue is so important to me.

MK: [inaudible] seabass up here.

MJ: Are you buying red snapper quota or leasing more red snapper quota?

JZ: I do them both.

MJ: You do both?

JZ: Yes, only because – listen, I'm a big IFQ proponent. I helped work on the grouper IFQ. The red snapper was a done deal. We didn't have red snappers here. That was like distance. Oh, yes, in the Middle East, what are they doing? That's how far removed we were from red snapper. So I know that I think you were involved with trying to formulate the effects of the catch share program socially. You might have sent me questionnaires in the past or worked with the folks –

MJ: Yeah. You did it. I remember you filling out some.

JZ: I've always done them. You can have a lot of folks against the IFQ because they felt they got left out. I'm working with some changes right now. I don't think people should own shares forever. I think that once you leave the industry, once you're no longer actively fishing, you should be given a time limit like some of the Alaska programs, some of their fisheries; you have to sell your shares to fishermen, people who are active. The biggest mistake we made was allowing the speculation without having a permit. That's what's driven this quota up.

MK: Yes. Again, everything's being owned by somebody that just [inaudible] –

JZ: Well, it's not everything.

MK: – has an investment.

JZ: Actually, it's not that much.

MK: He's making the three dollars and something a pound for the fish you're catching, and you're making a dollar seventy-five.

JZ: Actually, Mark, it's only about twenty percent of the people. But that's enough to make a difference.

MK: But that's enough to kill me. [laughter] I ain't got no [inaudible]

JZ: Most people don't – most people are catching and fishing their quota. They're not leasing their quota. Fish houses that have it, they're fishing it okay. So we're going to make some changes, need to, but this was – if you remember the history that went into it – this was the CCA [Coastal Conservation Association]. This was how that sausage gets made, where once you see how sausage is made, you can't eat it. That's what went into that IFQ system to get – what's her name – (Julie Morrison?). Everybody under the catch shares program –

SC: They had to throw a couple of ingredients in there [inaudible].

JZ: Yes, you had to throw some ingredients in. After five years, any American could buy it, and CCA thinking that they were going to go and buy up some quota and try to get it over to the recreational sector; it's never happened. Nor did the environmental groups – the EDF [Environmental Defense Fund], who I work with –

SC: Yes, they thought the environmental groups were going to buy it all.

JZ: – Pew [Research Center], Ocean Conservancy – thought they were going to buy it up. It never happened.

MK: No, but I had to pay twelve thousand dollars for my reef permit from a broker that don't even fish. [laughter]

MJ: Reef permits are expensive.

SC: Now they're up to twenty, eighteen. [laughter]

M: What's the alternative?

JZ: The alternative is nine days – because we're going to catch this, and if we had an open fishery right now, we'd derby it. The prices would be in the crapper. Safety at sea, because the derby – I know that those are true things that the IFQ – grouper and snapper – have fixed. You can regulate when you go.

SC: Yes, I actually went fulltime when the IFQ program went into effect because I thought it could be viable at that point. I'm like, "Okay, there's no uncertainty. I'm not done in October. I can still fish for three months."

JZ: That's when I went into it in 2010. That's when I left the charter business, sold my charter permit, and became a fulltime commercial fisherman because I saw –

MJ: But did you have a catch history?

JZ: Yes, I commercial fished at the same time. But I was only going to get eight thousand pounds of grouper. I had enough for a boat. So Scott and me and a fellow by the name of John (Schmidt?) – we bought, between us, probably twelve, thirteen permits. We split –

SC: Wish I would have had more money. [laughter]

JZ: Well, [inaudible].

SC: I did what I could do without the wife kicking me out of the house. [laughter]

JZ: I bought a longline –

MJ: Endorsement?

JZ: Not an endorsement. No, I got the –

SC: The boat.

JZ: I got the boat and the quota and paid the guy seventy-some thousand. But the permits at that time were going for two-grand, twenty-five-hundred. That was before we voted on it, Michael. [inaudible]

SC: Yes, we were gambling.

JZ: We gambled because it made such perfect sense. But did I think about leasing quota?

SC: No.

JZ: I never thought about that. I thought about my guarantee that I would [inaudible] –

SC: I'd have fish to catch.

JZ: – sixty, seventy, thousand pounds of red grouper that's now been cut by sixty percent. Okay?

SC: Well, yes, look at the gag. They cut us fifty percent just to start. It never did come back.

JZ: Didn't think about those things.

F: I have some errands to run. It was a pleasure meeting you.

MJ: Thank you, Patty.

F: Good seeing you again. [inaudible].

SC: Good to see you. Have a good [inaudible].

F: See you, Mark. If you're going fishing, good luck.

MK: I've got to go [inaudible].

JZ: So we didn't figure all that out. But guess who did? The EDFs, because they knew these things because they'd already paid attention to Alaska fisheries and New England fisheries. We came up with a really good – when you think about the (bitches?) that we have in the Gulf, they're minuscule compared to the (bitches?) that New England has with their catch shares and their quota systems and localizations, it's so complicated. Ours is pretty straightforward. But I had a class-two snapper permit. I would have been allowed – I was able to catch two hundred pounds a trip –

SC: The last eight days of the month.

JZ: The first ten days.

SC: First ten days? Okay.

JZ: So it was really only nine, because you had to be back and sell by a certain time on the date, so the bottom line is that was ninety days a year. But here, we didn't have it, and I had to go so far to catch them. But that was a good permit to have out of Louisiana, where you can go out, and you're looking at the beach, and you can catch your red snappers. Didn't know that we were going to rebound this. We are working – believe me – there's a group of us, even my shareholders' alliance, who I work diligently with – I'm at odds with the Buddy Guindons and Glenn Brooks because I want to give up some of these increases to help a guy like Mark, who doesn't own anything.

SC: Yes, zero.

JZ: Now, he can't get the shares. But he can get – we can afford when we get this – we got this last ten percent increase, then I can afford to give a percent of that increase and throw some quota. But the problem is there's so many red snapper, it's just kind of like pissing on a forest fire, on a house fire, because he needs more than a hundred and fifty or two hundred pounds it might be.

MK: You got to catch that many or more just to catch the five grouper on one [inaudible]

MJ: Are you thinking you want the council to implement this program, or are you guys doing this privately [inaudible]?

JZ: Well, we already have a quota bank set up called Shareholders Alliance. Eric Brazier – I don't know if you've dealt with Eric.

MK: [inaudible] go and lose some new snapper [inaudible] grouper [inaudible].

JZ: Anyways, we want the council – the problem with the council is not everybody’s a Tom Frazer that knows how to analyze something and knows there’s another flipside to everything. You can’t just act on emotion. The recreational votes that are on that council are thinking about one thing. They got a peripheral vision with getting more fish for their sector because they are now the real strong proponents of aquaculture, because if aquaculture was the big daddy –

SC: Don’t need commercial fishermen.

JZ: – my group, Fish for America, we brought – I signed on to the lawsuit. I’m listed as I’m one of the folks that did it. I didn’t get put on the Reef Fish Panel, and I know it because Roy had – I know I [inaudible] a lot of people. They sent me to Maine – sent me up there for a week at the Maine Research Institute. We learned about aquaculture. But that’s inshore, some salmon and stuff like that. We’re getting ready for our first offshore farm from Scott Peters – a wonderful guy – wish him well. They picked the right fish because it’s not controversial – almaco jack.

SC: Where is going to be, Jim?

JZ: Boca Grande, off Port Charlotte.

MK: [inaudible] anything in this world that the State of Florida was the [inaudible].

JZ: They don’t have anything to do with the State of Florida. This is a federal program.

MK: No, we just want to swap states. All you tourists [inaudible] –

JZ: Mark, please.

MK: [inaudible] everything against us go there, and let us live like people in Idaho here. [laughter] Let us be the Idahoans and instead of Floridians [inaudible].

JZ: We want the council – the council needs to get involved. But the politics at the council level – it’s a mess right now. They want some restrictions. I’m not happy with the guys who are sitting on their quota, making this huge money. [inaudible] guys making half a million a year.

MK: At least.

JZ: Okay? But guys who went out and actually spent forty dollars to buy a pound of red snapper, and then they want to lease it for four, four and a quarter – I can’t blame them.

MK: I can’t afford the diesel to go fish for them.

JZ: So what happens is those people have an investment, but the guys who actually were awarded, based on the historical – and they can go back and check. I was awarded, and everything on my permit – everything I’ve bought since then – so there’s going to have to be a formula. It’s so controversial right now.

MK: [inaudible].

JZ: But I think we're going to – I think are we going to go ahead and get to the point where we're going to have set-asides and part of the quota increases.

MK: I pray every night to the good Lord above that them beeliners and porgies come back because when there was enough of them to catch over a thousand, you'd get paid the same amount for them; you don't have to pay that three dollars and seventy-five. You're not making a dollar fifty or a dollar seventy-five – in my shoes, through my eyes, I have to make that four dollars too to afford the same stuff everybody else does in business. I can't keep a decent crew. I can't keep nobody on the back of the boat that wants to work. Can't keep diesel fuel. Can't keep the motor running.

MJ: Have the red tides affected the fisheries like keeping crew? I mean, is it difficult? Has that had any adverse [effects]?

MK: I can't keep a crew [inaudible] for nothing.

SC: My guys know, because –

MK: And I catch more fish than anybody around here and can't keep [inaudible].

SC: – they had other jobs. They're fulltime for me, but when it's time to go fish, they're ready to go fish. But if we're not fishing, they've got something else to fall back on. I did too, up until 2014. I got rid of my private investigation business.

MK: I just get the really, really tough old men – retired. My crew members are a retired fireman from Long Island and DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration] drug agent for the sheriff's department, for the cops up there. So I just find the tough old men, like Jim. [laughter]

JZ: Listen, the IFQ guys like Glenn Brooks, Jason DeLaCruz down there – they don't have trouble with their crews –

SC: No.

JZ: – because they're making money. [inaudible] the IFQ –

MK: They own a lot of quota.

JZ: – he was under –

MK: They got longline boats. They own a lot of quota.

JZ: Mark was undercapitalized when he got into this. Okay? So that's the difference. The guy that has to lease everything doesn't own anything –

MK: I was a net fisherman.

JZ: – just barely got in –

MK: Got banned.

JZ: – by a string – what can he expect? He’s listening to me, but it’s a fact. The guys who are in this, who are catching the majority of fish, they’re making money. You see what these captains are making. They have a yearlong – don’t forget, before we went to the IFQ, for three years straight, we shut down. You didn’t fish. One year, it was October, November, December. Another couple of years, it was in November [and] December. So you close out the year by not being able to work. It wasn’t until that lawsuit – because we shut down gag grouper when they shut red grouper down, too, because you were catching some gags. But then that lawsuit – there was a lawsuit filed by a guy named Danny (O’Hearn?) – and fishing rights were –

SC: FRA [Fishing Rights Alliance]. Yes.

JZ: Anyways, that’s what the IFQ had done. If you have quota, those guys aren’t going anywhere. Those captains are making good money. They know what they got. The problem is if they’re not able to get enough red snapper quota to cover –

MK: The fish came in the early 2000s. Then everybody’s seen how many fish was here. But I didn’t see it coming. I should have known that the guys that were in it were going to say, “Whoa, whoa. We just got blessed. Let’s make sure nobody takes it from us,” is what happened. That happened only into the 2000s. They started the quota system because I’ve been fishing thirty years. I was a gillnetter. I watched the grouper. I’m a very wise fisherman. [laughter] I take my time about [inaudible]. I mean, if I’m going to invest all this money, I got to pay it back – in my investors and everything. So I kept in touch with longliners that I trust that I’ve known all my life, like Joe Pillsbury. He let me know every couple of years how it was going and progressing. When I saw it level off, where there was a good living to be made, I started getting back into it. Then this IFQ thing – that’s what happened to me.

JZ: Well, here’s the thing. We didn’t go to an IFQ until 2010. We’re only nine years into it for grouper. So there was a –

MK: The year I [inaudible]

SC: The red grouper quota’s been affordable since day one.

JZ: It’s affordable. Listen, I bought – you could buy a red grouper quota for a dollar a pound –

SC: To lease it.

JZ: – when we went to this. There was a guy in town named Bob Benton. I gave him his permit because one of the permits that I bought didn’t have nothing on it. But a guy gave it to me – the

(sea tow?) guy. He had a couple of hundred pounds of red grouper. I said, “Bob, listen, I got a permit.” Me and Scott ended up buying this permit from the guy in town. Had about twelve, fourteen thousand pounds of total history on it –

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/28/2020