

Art Barton: 1978, prior to that, I was just here during the wintertime.

Karen DeMaria: What you said now, then we will start.

AB: Twenty years.

KDM: I got to write all of these down.

AB: Okay.

KDM: You came down in the wintertime. What years?

AB: From about [19]72 through [19]78.

KDM: You moved here year-round?

AB: From [19]78, I came here and I've not left yet. I'm still living here.

KDM: Now, were you ever here before [19]72?

AB: Yes. I've been here many times before.

KDM: As like a visitor?

AB: Not just like a visitor, you may say a tourist. Although we didn't have tourists back in those days. We just had visitors. There were very little tourists, in fact, there was no tourism at all. But yes. I've been visiting here for years and years before then.

KDM: When was the first time you came here?

AB: Let me see, about [19]62, [19]63 somewhere in there. But I came down regularly every year after then. Sometimes I stay away, sometimes longer. Then when I retired in 1972, I decided I want to live here permanently. But trying to make the transition, I only lived here during the wintertime. In [19]75, I've been here ever since. I'm deeply involved in fishing. I've spent all my time in fishing.

KDM: Now, you are a guide. Are you not?

AB: Yes.

KDM: What kind of a guide?

AB: Backcountry and also, out front I do boats. I have two different kinds of boats.

KDM: When you go out front, do you troll or do you do mainly reef fishing?

AB: 50 percent of the time, we're just trolling. 50 percent of the time, we are reef fishing or bottom fishing or drift fishing. The one I liked the best is the backcountry.

KDM: Is 1410 Ashby Street your correct mailing address?

AB: Yes. I use a post office box as my business address. It's post office box 2005. That's 33045.

KDM: How old are you approximately?

AB: Sixty-nine.

KDM: Now, the years that you have visited the Keys and lived here, have you always been in the Key West area or the Lower Keys, Key West?

AB: Yes, always.

KDM: What area? You said backcountry and reef fish. What is your area of fishing experience?

AB: I fish from Key West south is always down Dry Tortugas. I have fished down there many, many times. Usually, out in the Atlantic it's would be from, say, American Shoal to Old Cosgrove, in that general area. I didn't first start it in the Key West. It was done years ago. But when the new modern electric reels came in to be, I was the first one to buy some electric reels and go out in the Atlantic in around eight hundred to a thousand feet and catch a grouper and tilefish.

KDM: The snowy groupers?

AB: The snowy groupers. I was the one who developed the method of how to do it. But it took me about two years before I really got it down to – before I knew what I was doing.

KDM: When was that? What year was this?

AB: It must have been about [19]79, [19]80, [19]81, somewhere in there. It was such a novelty down here that Jim Parks moved his party. He came down so fast. When I took him out, I let him catch the fish.

KDM: [laughter]

AB: Then he had a complete novelty spread. He had pictures of my reels and hush, and the rigs and everything. He had a complete write-up in *The Herald* about it.

KDM: [laughter]

AB: Then for about six months after that, I had more phone calls. People would call, "How'd

you do this?" "Where'd you get the equipment?" They would for several years after that. All the guys here in summertime, that's what they do. They would catch up – I know one boat and two of our local guides, Penny Harris and – I think his last name was (Weatherby?), I think they went out one day and caught nine hundred pounds of groupers in one day.

KDM: Snowies?

AB: Snowy groupers.

KDM: Wow.

AB: They've found a spot down here into the west and bought it and cleaned it out. Several other guys did the same thing. They did that for about three summers in a row. All the times and all the fishing increased out here just inside the drop-off. I'd say, usually, there's an area out due south of Key West, about eight hundred feet of water, where you have some very, very rocky mountainous terrain. That's the location where we found the snowy groupers and also the golden tile, snowy grouper and golden tile. But over the years, we also realized that those fish were not migratory. They stay in the same place. So, we caught them all out which was a real, real stupid thing to do. I've gone back to some of those spots before I even get to catch a plain fish. Now, you hardly get to fish.

KDM: That is true. Because I remember the South Atlantic Council is going through the deep grouper fishery, the tilefish fishery. It was always sort of, "It is not a pile down here in the Key West. We do not have them anymore." [laughter]

AB: That's right. The South Atlantic Council is now having this under consideration with some kind of limitation on snowy groupers. The last communication I had also included the golden tile.

KDM: That is what...

AB: But I don't have to worry too much about it because there's no fishing going on anymore. You don't get to.

KDM: The only ones that are doing it all are off Jacksonville and the Carolinas. Those groups out there. Same type thing, it is a fairly young fishery up there, and they are having great years just like what happened down here.

AB: Well, there was no laws or rules whatsoever. I have to confess that while I didn't catch that many – well, when we proved the point, we proved the method and the fish were there. I had another man who fished. He came in one day with five hundred pounds. That's what started it. It was like an Oklahoma Land Rush. But I never did see that one again. My wife and I used to go out. We catch a hundred, hundred-fifty pounds of fish. It's been a day. We'd have fun.

KDM: Well, I mean, it is like you catch one snowy grouper that is a good-sized fish.

AB: Well, I'll say in your term. The average snowy is going to weigh probably ten to fifteen pounds. The largest one I'd ever caught weighed forty-three pounds. The largest golden tile I'd ever caught weighed forty-four and a quarter pounds. That's a big golden.

KDM: Yes. [laughter]

AB: That's the largest I'd ever caught. The snowy grouper does not get to be monster fish. But it's very common when you're fishing, you learn the technique. It's very common to catch four or five each time you dropdown. I had installed on my boat a type of equipment that I could spot – I could see it on the scope, and before you dropdown there, you get them [snaps fingers] just like that. But we used to go out, I never did this for marshes. I didn't go out to fish for marshes.

KDM: Was there ever a big market for those fish?

AB: Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely.

KDM: I mean, I had both, and I have not liked both.

AB: Well, the snowy grouper is a delicious thing. I'd say, very right out there with black grouper. The golden tile, it's okay. I'm not too fond of it. It's kind of rubbery. It's a very (gawky?) meat than the common golden tile. There's a golden tile and a regular tilefish.

KDM: Grey, I mentioned the other one.

AB: The grey tile maybe was – anyway, they're a grade above the common tile. Anyway, I missed another example to show you of what can happen to a fishery. The snowy grouper fishery off of Key West is far too dead.

KDM: When did that kind of go away?

AB: It lasted about five, six years, I'd say in probably [19]87, [19]88. Now, this is not to say that – they do still catch some.

KDM: But not the quantity or not like it used to be.

AB: I could remember one day when Ralph Delph, Gary Marconi, and I went out. Each of us in our own boat. We went to the west. I think between us three that day, we caught about fifteen hundred pounds of snowy groupers. That's how plentiful they used to be if you could find where they were. If you could find ledges, drop-offs or peaks, you could always catch a fish. They were just everywhere. Well, the fishery was gutted, and now it has not rebuilt itself. The fish are not migratory. They tend to be territorial. They stay in the same place all the time. But I think slowly they'll open up. But it's taking a long time.

KDM: Just like everything else, I am sure.

AB: I just gave you an example. Now, I used to do that quite a bit. We'd do it just for pleasure.

Johnny and I would go out there on Sundays. We'd come back and give all our neighbors fish and give everybody fish. I never did exploit it as far as a commercial fisherman. Other than that, I spent a lot of time out there bottom fishing, sailing fishing.

KDM: What did you do before you did backcountry?

AB: I was in the Navy.

KDM: Navy?

AB: Yes.

KDM: You retired from the Navy in [19]72, right?

AB: [19]72. Well, I should say I was in the Navy Reserve. I was not on the actual –

KDM: Navy Reserve?

AB: Yes.

KDM: This is a fish with kind of a made-up look to spark everyone's memory that we will comb front and back. I got two, and make comments about the different fish if you can. If you do not have a name, do not worry about it. It is just sort of to help people spark their memories, to find the people who see something that kind of remember more.

AB: Well, first, the yellowtail snapper which is the most popular down here. I have fished for yellowtail many, many, many times.

KDM: Have you noticed a difference in the size of fish being caught?

AB: I would say this that I think the yellowtail snapper has been the least affected over the years. That there may be a change in the size of the fish, where we're getting smaller fish now. I believe that if there's been a decrease in quantity, I don't think that it's that noticeable with yellowtail.

KDM: So, the population appears still to be healthy?

AB: Yes. I attribute that to the reason that there's never been a method devised where you can trap them or seine them. It's still by hook and line, which proves my point. By hook and line, you're not really going to significantly affect the fishery. That's I think the quantity of yellowtail barely showed that. Although, I do think the size is very small. I also noticed there's not as many people fishing for yellowtail today. That was brought about by the first new laws as part of the regulations. You have to have a restricted species endorsement to really catch any quantity of yellowtail. I mean, what you normally call the bucket fisherman can't do that.

KDM: Well, do you think the regulations have helped?

AB: No, not really. I'll tell you why. The law and regulation are so fractured with fraudulent permits that anybody who really wants to get a permit can get one. I'd say the only people still at sea are old timers, the elderly retired people, they're all depending their income by catching up in boatyards. They are attempting to offset the costs about doing their boats. I don't think it [inaudible].

KDM: You still have people who are coming down here on vacation and selling their fish when they are going.

AB: That's true. I believe once they tend the law was to stop people in Florida from coming down here. So, they're still citizens like we are. It didn't stop them.

KDM: No.

AB: I know the problem is many as ten fishermen that live in South Florida, on mainland. That come down here and go out here in the Gulf, spend all weekend or come down and go out and come back with several hundred pounds of snapper, grouper, that sort. Take them back to Miami and sell them. Now, that's what we don't like is these people from Miami to come down here to catch fish. The law did not affect that. They're still citizens of Florida. So, they still can get permits. What the law did was stop tourists from coming down. Well, I don't believe the tourists was ever that big of a problem anyway. Because I have taken tourists out fishing for years, and many times, they will say, "We don't want to fish."

KDM: The only thing that they might need is an offer to take it to restaurants, to have it for dinner.

AB: They just want to take it easy. The law didn't really affect the tourists that much. I think the law was greatly unfair on the tour captains. In many cases, like in saltwater fishing license, where we have to pay the cost of a license, not the tourists. So, I oppose that. Anyway, that's yellowtail.

KDM: [laughter]

AB: On the gray, the mangrove, what I have seen several years ago, by fishing in the backcountry, I have personally observed many people, normally of the Cubans, pouring Clorox or bleach around the Keys. Then fifty yards or fifty feet or a hundred feet with a net around that Key or that they would chase all small snappers out of there, and catch them in a net. Now, that totally destroys the fish in that area. Generally, you're talking about baby fish. You're not talking about big mangroves.

KDM: No. They are still juvenile.

AB: That's where they are growing. The big mangroves you're going to catch it in a different place. But I've personally seen that.

KDM: You ever talked to Vernon about that?

AB: I've talked to a lot of people about it.

KDM: Because that is one of Vernon's biggest peeves right now. He had found garbage bags full of empty bleach bottles underneath a bridge.

AB: Well...

KDM: When you said that, I was like, "I heard this kind of a story before."

AB: That is absolutely the truth because I have seen it. The other thing is if you get this impression, "I would never want the Cubans blamed for it." But you see those people have very little regard to the laws and certainly, conservation. They just kill anything they could get whether it's three inches long, they'd kill it. I think that's one of the worst things that's happened to conservation in the backcountry. That's basically mangroves. Of course, everything else is in there, too. Mutton snapper –

KDM: Well, the mangroves, have you noticed anything different about them on the reef area or out like the size differences or population at all?

AB: Not really. There are still certain times in the year I think there's plenty of big grays, not so much reds but big grays. I like to use live, little fish to catch them. I caught the big ones off the reef, but primarily on the Gulf, on the west, off the rock piles on the Gulf. There's a big, big, big reef out there. Now, I think there's been probably a depletion of grays, red grouper, mutton snapper on the rock pile down through the – which would be the northwest of Gulf of Mexico down toward the Rebecca Shoal except on the Gulf side. Years ago, ten, twelve, fourteen years ago, that was fished pretty heavily. That was by snowbirds as we call them. They'd come down here, say Indiana, Michigan, places like that. They would literally pay for their subsistence down here for three, four months by going out every day or every other day in bottom fishing. They really did a disadvantage to our fishery. So, the law now requires you to be a citizen of Florida. That has stopped. I don't see that much anymore. Although there's still ample fish out in the Gulf, I don't actively fish that way anymore. I haven't seen a lot of that type of fishing like that. But I know of one time there was everything. Every day there's a whole bunch of people. I knew these people quite well. We have one fishing farmer. Everybody down here knows fishing farmer. He still comes down, but of course, he's been curtailed. He doesn't do that anymore. I'm going to comment now about the mutton snapper. Off of Dry Tortugas, on Riley's Hump, favorite spot for the commercial fishermen catching mutton snapper. I'm thinking this one story was on the newspaper. One boat came in here, and they had ten thousand pounds of mutton snapper. I am so opposed to that. I'm so opposed to one boat going down there and slaughtering ten thousand pounds of mutton snapper. But I will say this, that I believe in the last three to five years that I've seen an increase in the available mutton snapper population, same way with the black grouper, mutton snapper. I attribute that to the fish traps, the laying of fish traps. There's no doubt in my mind that that's one conservation measure that has worked. Now, I still feel there's probably some traps out there that they are still killing fish. But at least there's only few ones being put out there.

KDM: Well...

AB: Well, they are. But every time I see one, I report it. I know the marine control does watch that. But I have seen an increase in that fishery, too. This year, there were plenty of mutton snapper, I mean, big mutton snappers. I'm talking about not the commercial one, I'm talking about sport fishing. There's a lot of mutton snapper. I just happen to see a family the other day. They caught – they weighed it – a twenty-five-pound mutton snapper.

KDM: That is nice.

AB: What a fish.

KDM: I saw on the paper a couple of people catching twenty-plus pounders, too.

AB: So, there's a lot of mutton snappers, and I'm very, very happy to see that.

KDM: I think the one good thing of getting rid of fish traps is that instead of, you said, that one boat catching ten thousand-pound of fish, now everybody is having a chance to catch few hundred pounds or few fish, whatever.

AB: Absolutely. Well, if you stop and look at the pre-law limits on sport fishermen today, if you stop thinking about it [phone ringing] you can catch lots of fish.

KDM: Hello? Sorry, telephone.

AB: Well, on the mutton snapper, it's very good to see that fishery comes back, see people go out and catch fish. I was talking about the sportsman limits on fish. Before, you can even catch five groupers. In yellowtail snapper, five of which you can exceed five or more. In mangroves, ten snappers, five groupers, and in three people, that's a lot of fish. So, there's plenty of fish. But the pre-law limits only allow you to catch twenty. Most people won't even catch that many. So, I'm very happy to see that a lot of people are against these rules, but I'm for it a 100 percent. We used to have a situation over here in Garrison Bight, if you walk by there late in the evening and see fish tails sticking out the garbage cans. Well, we complained and we went over there and bitched and moaned and complained about it. We finally got that to stop. Incidentally, I'm the idea in favor of what they presented you, and they gave us, too.

KDM: I knew you were something.

Female Speaker: [laughter] [inaudible]

KDM: Well, I know he was very active in all these different...

AB: Well, while you're on that, I'm executive director of the Key West Fishing Tournament. I just finished the term as president of Florida Keys Fishing Tournament, which is an umbrella for the Monroe County Council. I wrote basically all the terms in Key West Fishing Tournament. I



had one this week is the east by sea Hemingway.

KDM: Hemingway.

AB: I've been running him away now for about eight years. Then next week, we got the Key West to take over the show. We just finished the show terms. I hate to this all alone.

KDM: See, I remember then your (bulking?) name and your picture, getting the prize and stuff like that. [laughter]

AB: Red snapper, we really don't have that many red snappers here. I know one spot for really catching red snapper, and there's very few over there. I don't think we have a red snapper problem in the Key West.

KDM: Do you think we ever did have a population of red snappers?

AB: No. I'll only say this, the genuine American red we have here is a different fish than the red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. You hear about a lot of talk about the red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. That's a different fish. It's a different species altogether. They're smaller in the Gulf than they are here, but we have a few here in the Keys. There's never really been a problem. It's not a fish that you see very often. I don't think we ever had a problem.

KDM: Because none has ever caught one that I know in five years that I have been with them. It's great – [laughter]

AB: But I know a spot where you can catch them. Not every time, but you can catch them. Cubera, no problem. I think there's plenty of Cubera. A few of us don't fish north. You got to fish at night. Usually, in all these [inaudible 00:27:37]. We don't fish them, but I have seen a few of them. Dog snapper, well, most people catch a dog snapper, schoolmaster, they wouldn't even know what a dog snapper or a schoolmaster was. But there's no problem with those fish. Lane snapper, no problem, I don't think.

KDM: Is there many lane snapper down here?

AB: Oh, yes.

KDM: I never realized that until I talked to a couple other charter captains in the area.

AB: The problem with lane snapper is most people catch the small ones, very rarely catch the big ones. But they're never hoarded, almost as plenty as brooks. There's no problem with lane snapper. Hogfish, yes. We really have a problem with hogfish. One of the, probably, my opinion, prime fish in the ocean as far as the taste. The hogfish population is coming back. It's bouncing back. But the hogfish is the fish diver. Before, the hogfish, it'll turn its side right to you and go down the water, you couldn't miss it.

KDM: [laughter] I know. It was the stupidest fish I have ever gotten with. I know.

AB: But it's a delicious fish to eat. On hook and line, I caught some big ones down in Rebecca Channel. I was mooring on the reef. I caught some big hogfish down there. There's still hogfish, but it's a seriously depleted source right now.

KDM: Do you think maybe the population basically – do you think there is a size problem, too?

AB: There's a size problem with hogfish and a problem with the numbers of them. I think it's primarily due to people with speargun shooting.

KDM: What do you think about the size? What is the problem with the size?

AB: Well, it's just in fact that they're any size – the speargun will shoot any size. Almost all fish, the juvenile fish are killed before they grow old. Although, I think it's fair to say the further west you go, the larger the hogfish will be caught. Because it's less diving there.

KDM: I know there is in Dry Tortugas. There is a lot of fish. I was like, "I have not seen a hogfish that big."

AB: Big ones around towards it. Okay, on tuna, are you ready to go to that one? Yes. Skipjacks. No problem here. We got plenty of them. Very few people catch. Most of them to catch a skipjack thing. It's a Bonita, anyway. They really know the difference. Yellowfin, okay, now here's a fishery that a few years ago – seventy-five years old. White taco, the tarpon went underneath one of the docks down there. So, he just jumps off the boat and swims underneath the dock with his fish. They had to go rescue this old man. He wouldn't let the fish break the line. He jumped off the boat and went underneath the dock.

KDM: That is funny. Right up in the paper about that. It was funny.

AB: Yes. This is a really good category of fish grouper. Well, black grouper. It is probably the dominant group right here along the reef line during the siege. The same thing applies to the black groupers and the mutton snapper. We are now seeing increasing numbers of black grouper, larger black grouper, because of the less fish traps. But I'll be very quick to add that I don't see the large – I'm talking about the thirty to fifty, £60 black grouper that I did ten years ago. We are now getting some big wins, but they're slowly coming back. But I used to see black groupers on – God. It wasn't anything to see a £50 black grouper.

KDM: Now you talk about that, you are seeing them more because of the ban on fish traps now. Then you are just telling me that ten years ago, you used to see a lot more of the biggest ones. Now, is that ten years ago? Now, I know fish traps have come and gone and come and gone.

AB: Ten years ago. Twelve years ago, we didn't have fish traps that we had there for a while. I'm talking free fish trap days. There were big black groupers out there. A lot of them. I caught a black grouper. I'll tell you this story. I was out, I'd come back from the fort one day, and I stopped out here. I still had a lot of charm left on my boat, just all frozen together, and I took this big block of chum and just threw it overboard. Another fellow with me is, of course, we

threw our base in right behind us and color-flipped-sized black grouper.

KDM: Right off the port here?

AB: Well, right off the reef, off of Sand Key back there. To get that black grouper up all of a sudden, it's just like a new grab that another black grouper swallowed him. We tussled and tussled and tussled and finally got him. But first, we finally pulled the one we had hooked. We pulled it out of the mouth of the other one, but we got him up. He was skinned, and his skin was taken off of him. So, it was either a big black grouper or a jewfish that tried to swallow him. I've hooked up Jewfish. Or there is no way you could give me that to follow them in the boat. I saw a Jewfish out here on the rock pile one day. So, the next day, I had some people from Canada go, and I took them fishing out there. I stopped for a big old drunk, and we threw that drunk off on the rocks. It didn't even hit the bottom. This guy had it, and we fought that Jewfish I know for two hours. This guy from Canada. I'll never forget that. He could not. Oh, he couldn't believe a fish could pull that hard. So, I said, well, come on up here and get ahold of this rod and you'll see. I'll always remember that. We alternated three of us on that rod for, gosh, a couple of hours.

KDM: When was that?

AB: Oh, this has been in the early [19]80s.

KDM: How big would you say the Jewfish was?

AB: Oh, I saw him. I'd say that Jewfish was £400 at least. Because we saw him swimming. We'd see him and wouldn't you know it. There was one lone lobster trap or some kind of trap with one lone float up there and he didn't get around that rod. I saw [inaudible]. I had a picture of it, but when you are driving and playing on [inaudible]. And they had six-year old boy in the [inaudible].

KDM: I have heard stories of Monster Jewfish and Hawks channel off of Marathon. There is one guy who swore that one day he was crawling along on this wreck trying to figure out this wreck, and he saw these white marks, and he is going forward. He did not realize it and did not register until all of a sudden he realized he was inside the mouth of a big fish because he had stuck his head in his shoulder like he was about this far in and he kind of backed out. He said it had to be a Jewfish.

AB: The largest Jewfish I've ever seen is £600. Have you ever seen one £600? Yes. You could very easily [inaudible].

KDM: Oh, yes. His mouth is huge.

AB: The largest Jewfish that I've ever caught myself, I think was £368. We never got it in the boat.

KDM: Well, this one, they did not get in the boat. They had to tow it in.

AB: Usually it was only one person in the boat. Normally, you can't. You got to drag it. But we used a method which I think a lot of people just don't know how to do this. You take the wave action or the swell action of the water, and you get the fish right alongside the boat. Of course, you pull him up as far as you can, and then as the boat goes down into a swell, just kind of flip it in the wave. Water action just lifts the fish right into your boat. You can do that. It's not easy, but that's the only way you get a big fish in the boat. But the black grouper is coming back. We're seeing more of them, not as big as they were back ten years ago. I attribute that strictly to three strikes.

KDM: What about remember when the fish trap was banned and replaced and then it got overturned? Corang got it overturned. Did you notice anything in that time span?

AB: No, it was too short a period of time. The hundred-foot level is the first major rule we had to know they could trap within a hundred feet. But there are virtually no traps out there now. There are still traps there. Believe me, I know they're there. But it's improving. I think that this is a conservation effort that will pay off. No doubt in my mind.

KDM: Everyone is.

AB: Okay, on the red grouper. Well, the same things happened to the red grouper. Basically, out in the Gulf of Mexico is the only place you catch the reds here. You catch a few red grouper around the reef, but mostly in the Gulf of Mexico. The red grouper, no question. It was decimated there for a while. Off down to the northwest in the Gulf of Mexico and water thirty to fifty feet deep, basically on rock piles all the way down to Rebecca Shore. We had a lot of people coming down here.

KDM: Snowbirds are...

AB: Snowbirds, yes. So, there was a lot of red grouper, a lot of them. What I think is still a healthy population, is red grouper. I'm still seeing some big red. Red grouper doesn't get to be a very big fish. But I still see some healthy catches.

KDM: Catches are still legal in the Gulf?

AB: Oh, yes.

KDM: They are still legal for cruises.

AB: Oh, yes. Warsaw. It's a fish that you don't see very many here. The Warsaw grouper is in that stage between, say, the black grouper on the reef up to a hundred feet. The Warsaw usually going to catch him in 300 to 500 feet of water. He's not a real deep-water fish, but he's not a real shallow-water fish. So, there's not much fishing for Warsaw grouper. I've seen a few. I don't believe it's a shortage of them. I think they're still there. There's no problem with it. The gag. Yes. Real problem with the gag. That's my most favorite fish. In the Gulf of Mexico, primarily the gag grouper. With the new limits on gag, I think that conservation effort on the gag grouper

will – in fact, there was even some talk about not catching any gags at all.

KDM: January to April.

AB: Yes. So, I think that's good and the gag grouper will come back. It's a very, very popular place.

KDM: I am working on that, pushing that good friend.

AB: The yellow mouse. I got quite a few of those. Again, it's a mid-depth grouper. You don't catch them in real deep water, but then you don't catch them in real shallow water either. I usually catch the yellow mouse in 300, 405 feet. I don't think there's any problem with him. It's not a very popular fish here, but a lot of people don't fish in those depths. The tiger troops. I never thought a tiger troop. I don't think there's any problem here with them. I know they exist, but I don't have any experience with them. Snowy grouper. We've already talked about that. That's all. To tell you the truth, I haven't seen a Nassau grouper in. I caught him, but I think that was an excellent rule to prohibit catching Nassau.

KDM: Here?

AB: No, we've never had very many of them. Jewfish is just right here. I can remember talking to some of the abundance of jewfish. They were slaughtered. Now with a total ban, all jewfish, all kinds. I've looked into things that I know were a jewfish.

KDM: I guess after you.

AB: Jewfish is going to do the same thing as the queen calling. Look, we have plenty of abundant Jewfish population again.

KDM: That is going to be the hard thing is how are you going to decide? It is like with the Queen Kong. If you let everyone [inaudible] the jewfish. Would it be sort of safe to say that it used to be probably one of the...

AB: When it was a good, Jewfish was an abundant fish here off of Key West. All right. There was Jewfish that used to live down here at the very end of the quicksand. We knew this jewfish was there and the mineral HD up here. Make the [inaudible] Oak fisherman. He went overboard. He went down. He shot this fish. So, they brought it up to the surface and got it in his boat. Gosh, the fish is over three and it literally tore Nick's boat up. I mean, even knocked the console. I told Nick, I said, "Well, that's justification. You should have never shot that fish." There's a big fish. It was such a slow, gradual thing. It was a slow, gradual. But I would say –

KDM: They are like a moment when it...

AB: Four years ago. About that time is when all of a sudden we started to know there is jellyfish in Portuguese. Brown back there off of that walkway ahead of the pier of the dock entered a big jellyfish in our tournament. He catches very loose, and it was the same few fish

every year he got out there and caught. You can't catch him. There's a lot of them. All right. In Jack's grades.

KDM: I hear very rarely. I get a jack and I know immediately what I got.

AB: I can remember back on one of the wrecks. But no matter where you go, you couldn't hardly get your bait everywhere. I remember one time, Johnny and I were down fishing down. I just set the rod in the rod holder and let him go. Remember that, honey? I never healed him. John went over to try to gab. He didn't know how to gavel fish, and he had to guide his small. I personally don't care for him, I don't care. It is, of course, made. So, now we have length limits on amberjack. You only catch nine. That's nine times out of ten. I don't think we're going to have a problem with them. Yellow [inaudible] jackets, not bad. But the jack crevalle commercial fish. I don't believe we have any problem losing Mark Jackson. I don't think we have a problem with Jack except the amateur. We don't have a problem. It's mine out there. I don't know. I don't like it, and support African pompano. That's got some pumps down here in deep holes by – not something you're going to bring home and eat.

KDM: What about in the back area?

AB: Right here?

KDM: You do not see that in the back down here either.

AB: As far as I know, there is netting for the – but strictly for sport, I don't see any decline in the numbers. It's a hook. Cobia starts in the sea off the coast around here. We called it Cobia. Generally, its meat is not actually white. It's kind of a yellowish. I like some of the wrecks out here in the Gulf. He had never been right out here in the Gulf of Mexico, lived here, some of them big Cobia. Go and check them out of your hand. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Hector's a little small. Hector started throwing his hand line out. Of course, he hung in for a bit. But if you just throw your line out. This was their new office. Ralph and I went down into the Northwest Gulf and we literally had to take a jig and tow it over on this side of the boat. That's how many Cobia there was. Now, that's during the days when there was no basically caught in the Gulf because it's a shallow water hook and line. Basically, hook and line. In fact, you know a story. I took one of the boys from the robbery. Everybody was fishing for tarpon. In the meantime, I'd thrown a line out on the other side, and I had about a fourth, and I said, "Well, Bob, you can have the fish if you want them." So, he took me where at one time. This year, the reason for that is we're chumming for tarpon. Of course, they have plenty of Cobia once again, because we have a virtual breeding ground. Same way. Grouper, everybody hears it. I thought it was only nineteen feet. I couldn't keep it. It's the same this year. Probably in January and February. Red drum as you know, we don't have any red drum here, but it is the blue marble. It is the fish that saves your day in court. I say.

KDM: But on the reef, how? The barracuda.

AB: Yes, that's a bite on a reef. Every one of these big reefs. We no longer have an abundant supply of barracuda. Knock it down, young man, his wife and her girlfriend just got married.

KDM: Right. Shrimp stories.

AB: Well, I was telling you about that story. There's no doubt about what's happened to overfishing. Simply said overfishing. Now, with some better controls, creating new shrimp sanctuaries. Hopefully, the shrimp will come back, I hope so. But the story I heard was in the shrimp sanctuary, some of the old shrimp boat captains. At night, they keep track of where the marine patrol is, and they'll take a chance to make one pass through the shrimp sanctuary. The story is they didn't do that. They wouldn't make a living. Well, so you have to sympathize with them on one side to make a living and on the other side from a conservation standpoint, they're never going to rebuild the stocks if they keep doing that.

KDM: There is a reason why that is a sanctuary, right?

AB: Well, they still do that, but let's hope it does rebuild itself. But that's why you're seeing all the shrimp coming in from China, South America and everywhere else.

KDM: Well, is it not? I think most of the market now here, especially in Florida, the shrimp is being farm raised.

AB: Well, you're going more to that. Just ironically that you mentioned it. I just went over at the Key West High School last Thursday. They had a career day. So, I spent the whole morning over there, making a little speech to all the students about fishing generally in the Florida Keys. One of the things we talked about a great deal was the shrimp sanctuaries and also the new shrimp farming that's going on in fish farming, which in the State of Mississippi now, during a major business in catfish farming.

KDM: Catfish farming in the Carolinas.

AB: Carolinas, and the Army, I think last year, bought £4 million of catfish when I was in the Army. Then we got in Texas, we've got shrimp farming experimenting, and they're now producing shrimp. We got shrimp farming right here in the Keys and also a snapper. Red snappers or mangrove snappers. So, there's no doubt in my mind that in the future we're going to see much more of this seafood and crustaceans of all kinds, and the farming. Okay, let's move along here on the...

KDM: Check out the bait fish on the top right.

AB: Okay, ballyhoo. Oh, yeah. The ballyhoo has definitely been affected. There is a shortage of ballyhoo. I can remember the times back eight, ten, twelve years ago out here, what we call a nine-foot steak. It's just a particular spot where some big boulders there and a lot of coral. I have seen the Ballyhoo shower around my boat and would cover a whole layer. You very rarely ever see a ballyhoo shower anymore. A shower means they all jump out of the water at one time. You hardly ever see that anymore. So, I think it's been for two reasons. Well, basically overfishing by the bait people, over-catching. Also, there's been a trend here in the last few years, more and more fishermen carry their own nets, and they catch among themselves. Then

there's the other problem with ballyhoo and bait fishing. It's they follow the water temperature down the reef and almost all bait fish do that. As such, the predator fish that feed on them also follow them down the reef. So, it was a combination of factors. But ballyhoo, we don't have nearly as many ballyhoo as we used to have. They in fact, sometimes down here. There's an absolute shortage. We don't have any at all. As far as the [inaudible], the Glassman is you can always find a good place mentally. You may not find it as big as you like, but I haven't seen any noticeable changes in a while. Spanish sardines, well, we don't really have those here. (Canned?) fish now millions, millions. Not stressed. There are plenty of pilchards. There are as many coaches as we always had. It's just hard to find them sometimes, and you have to know where to go look for them. I usually end up around the mark or around like Nancy or Woman T in that shallow water in there and I use the old Cuban method of they just take crackers and throw them up and throw them in the water, or they'll take stale bread and tear it up and throw it in the water. I do the same. I was taught that by the old humans that I used to meet down on the white street here. I don't want any trouble catching pilchards. Some people just go out there without any bait or any charm, and sure, you aren't going to find him. Did you throw the crackers or bread or something in the water and filter your job? Same way with the moolah. So, I don't see any problem with pilchards.

KDM: The only other thing on there might be spiny lobsters or the crabs. Then on the bottom of the list, I get some of the oddities.

AB: Well, the stone crab. We have more people putting out traps today than we used to have. Since the ban on issuing additional permits, the state doesn't issue permits anymore. If you got one, you better keep it.

KDM: Right, or you sell it.

AB: Yes. So, we have more people putting out traps, putting out a larger number of traps, because the law now says, how many traps can you throw? I would say they seems to always be an ample supply of strong crabs. Also, when the law was changed, now you can take both crabs, instead of one. A long time, you can only take one. They grow fast. Down here, we see that place of the wild. Same way with spiny lobster. Some years, we don't catch as many. Just like now. Last year. The last see, which is actually in effect right now. I know it just ended. We had an abundant supply of lobster. I still probably have £3,540 out in my freezer. I think that probably with this state and federal government, combining their sport lobster season together.

KDM: It seems like lobsters – are you seeing that? As you said, it depends. It kind of goes up and down and up and down. Is there any rhythm or cycle you think, or is it?

AB: No. It does go up and down. But when I think back now, I'm going to go back to probably fifteen years ago. There was less marine patrol. Less enforcement of the lobster. Voters. I can recall certain people coming down here from other parts of the world. For example, on the sport lobster, they would run back and forth. They'd go out maybe ten, fifteen times. Always bring in. They'd have maybe three, four people on the boat. So, they'd bring in [inaudible]. By the time they got ready to leave here, three or four days later, they would have these big igloos packed full of lobsters. Okay. That was no enforcement. That was, well, one time. Is it? Also, over



the years, I've seen back years ago a lot of shorts. I would say I don't see that much in it. I think we got better. I think primarily we got people more conforming to the laws pertaining to lobsters. [inaudible]. But lobster supply seems to go into exactly what's the long-term effect of the situation [inaudible]. We don't seem to have a shortage of it.

KDM: It seems like in Key West does a good one year. Marathon does not do good. So, there is something else going on that we do not quite understand.

AB: I don't see a problem. Turtles. Oh, yes. I see a lot of turtles. Well, I'll tell you. The new rules are coming about. Turtles are coming back. I see turtles all the time now where you would hardly ever see a turtle. This new turtle-release gadget is on shrimp nets. Obviously, that's going to help, but he never really enforced that these shrimp boats use them. I released a big leatherback turtle this year. A few weeks ago, in fact, [inaudible] sitting a long time to not only get too close to these things. You got a head that big.

KDM: It is huge. The biggest hurdle there is.

AB: We finally got him a loose, and he took off, I'm hoping.

KDM: Where were you? Where did you find [inaudible]? Where was he?

AB: It was out here in the Backcountry, just a little bit east of Jewfish Basin. Huge fish return. But I see a lot of green turtles, man. I see green turtles now. A few years ago, you didn't see any turtles. Go back fifteen years ago, you saw a lot of them. But the turtles were very, very few there for a while. But now you get to see more of them. There was a total ban on harvesting or even possession of the turtle. No doubt is having its effect, and I certainly agree with that.

KDM: As I have heard some of the old stories of how they used to fish for turtles. Pretty interesting, I must say.

AB: Well, I can tell you the stories I've heard on the beach around the turtle. A lot of people think that the return of the old cannery, the turtle soup, and cannery, was closed primarily because of the shortage of turtles. It was closed for health reasons.

KDM: Really?

AB: Oh, yes. I'm going over some of the old stories by some of the old divers that they'd get this log or it's a big bundle of turtles. They just throw them in a pan until they get rid of them, make the soup. In the meantime, they came in and some of them had disease. Some of them had big sores on them. The place was full of rats. Some of the rats got killed. So, when they'd scoop all this up to put it in the pots, rats and the tumors and everything else going to pots with it. So, it was from a health standpoint that the turtle crawls were closed, not from – that's just a story. But I can also tell you this. That I have seen this happen. I was in Jamaica for a number of years. They have a beautiful coral reef there on the North shore of Jamaica which is only like a place as much as a hundred yards offshore could easily [inaudible] to it from land. When I first went to Jamaica around 1962, the coral reef was alive with fish ever since you could think of.

Over the next twelve years with unrestricted fishing, sailing, shooting, whatever you want to do is leave. In twelve years' time, even crawfish, even lobsters, were used for bait. Baby lobsters is ketchup babies, which we call shorts. We use them officially. But in twelve years, over a period of twelve years, that reef is absolutely desolate. There was nothing left. There's no fish, no lobsters. There were times that I used to sit out on a little island at night and we would catch big red snappers, which they call red snappers. To us is mutton snapper. I would catch big mutton snappers, eighteen, twenty, twenty-five. I mean, just have a great ball. Catch it. No repair. At twelve years, they got down to none. It was nothing at all to see the local fisherman with big nets, and they had nets all over the place to trap turtles. All the turtles. They would take a swimming pool area that some of the resorts used for swimming or a beach area, and they'd surround that with a net, and they would literally catch everything that was in there. In Jamaica, they ate everything. Everything that they caught out of the sea, they ate. It was no fish too small because they were all eating. Well, Jamaica, and the fact they lost all their tourists. Now it's coming back. Now they are trying to get their tourists back. They modified some of their laws where they've got some protection as forest conservation of the environment. But I saw that happen when that reef went. Absolutely.

KDM: What about the other things like whale sharks?

AB: Okay. Whale shark. I see them every once in a while. Beautiful animal. Very gentle.

KDM: Do you think they are showing up in more frequency, like in the last five years or so than you did ten years ago?

AB: Yes. I see more whale sharks. In fact, I don't think we'd ever seen whale sharks out here until just maybe four or five years ago. I don't think I've ever seen it. We see quite a few of them now. There seem to be a lot of them out there. Sawfish, I can only remember two or three being caught in the last seven years. Generally, it's by accident in shallow water. They're usually very shallow water. I don't read as many. I don't know who knows. I don't know. Nobody fishes for him. Bola. Bola. What do you mean by that?

KDM: Sunfish.

AB: What?

KDM: Sunfish.

AB: Oh, sunfish. Yes. Right. This is almost the same thing. Oh, I still see you. I still see them all the time, and some of them are huge. You know the story about when I first came down here, I was out there fishing by myself. I felt a German boat. Bumper boat. Another bombshell. It didn't take much to get me excited because out on the ocean. So, I got to looking around my boat at the huge sunfish right down to the tail end of my boat. He would bump my own boat, and he'd slam all the way around the boat and come back. Scared the hell out of me. I've never seen one before. But you could feel my boat would just kind of quiver a little. That was my first contact with the sunfish. Oh, marvelous. You see a lot of them. I can't really say that you see any more of them now than we did then. I still see them. So, I don't think their numbers have

been impacted.

KDM: Yes, it's a weird fish.

AB: Well, manatees. We don't have that many here. But I would say over the last few years, I've seen more manatees here than we did back years ago. We just had a manatee come into Garrison Bight Marina for a second. I think we're all fairly clear-bought lettuce bedding. We had some over Oceanside Marina and their channel over there. We do seem to have more manatees here now than we used to. Why? I don't really know. Corpus. Right here in homestead. I see them a lot of time, almost every time I go out and I see plenty of them. I don't see any more than we used to see ten, fifteen years ago. I don't see as many. Stingrays. I've only encountered them.

KDM: What about manta rays?

AB: I see a lot of manta rays. See them jumping. Huge ones down here in Pearl Basin. I see a lot of manta rays down in the lakes, you see a lot of manta rays as many as I've ever seen. I'm not aware of any problem with manta rays. Flying fish. I believe I see more or less flying fish as we did years ago. I know when I'm out there trolling, it used to be flying fish were flying everywhere. You don't see them much anymore.

KDM: It is not a gradual thing you think?

AB: It's been gradual. There just don't seem to be as many flying fish as we used to have. I'll tell you another thing. I think there's no reason that you see more and more fly-fish in the beach today. Down in Jamaica, that's what we use down there. We use flying fish. Flying fish is becoming more popular here in the Keys for rigged bass. A reason that, at certain times of year, that's all you can get. They make a good living. The other thing is, I don't think we do that here yet, but someday we may. Flying. Fishing. Food Fishing. I don't think anybody down here needs to get well.

KDM: That is like what the fish trappers say, that they should be able to catch trumpet fish, angel angelfish. So, to feed the minorities in Miami and stuff, that is what they are used to eating.

AB: Well, that's true. We saw it over here in Oceanside [inaudible]. People came down. They were fishing off the dock and they were [inaudible]. Even in the Bahamas and Jamaica, I'm not sure. I saw these angelfish down around the docks. So, they jumped off the dock with their mask on. They caught a bunch of them. Franco came along. Gave him a trick. Well, they didn't really know. Yes, they eat those. I'd be scared to death. A terror for them.

KDM: It is perfectly acceptable. Just like the Koreans, it is acceptable to eat dogs and cats.

AB: In the islands, these barracuda. I mean, that's a delicacy. Or here, I don't know.

KDM: Some people eat the smaller ones.

AB: Small ones. There's a fear of – same with grouper. I just eat a small grouper, I wouldn't eat. Their food is the main thing. They eat them over there. Well, I hope that helps you.

KDM: What about a couple of follow-up questions? We notice a change in the clarity of the water.

AB: Yeah, that I have noticed. Obviously, following fishing is as much as I do, but I'm very conscious. Yes, I have noticed around this whole Bay area of Key West Harbor, back out here in the Bay area and surrounding, going into the backcountry. Fox Channel. There's no doubt in my mind that the water is, for lack of a better word, dirty. It's just dirty. It's cloudy.

KDM: Do you see things in the water?

AB: Yes, it's dirty, and it's cloudy. I see cups and plastic and things in the water that we didn't used to have. You see a lot of just trash. Just trash. Also, you see a lot of – the base is oily. Oil accumulates along the fresh water. Well, that's from increased bilge pumping boats or where that oil comes from, I don't know. But I see a lot of trash in the water [inaudible] and cups thrown and everything. But the water is nice and clear and it's crystal white.

KDM: When did you think that sort of...

AB: Well, this goes back a while. I'd say that it's been [inaudible] playing all over the last eight years, seven to years. Even the water out along the reef and across the region, used to be clear crystal. Nothing more. You have that [inaudible]. Visibility used to be something we were reporting on every day. They don't seem to be as good. I know [inaudible] in more cases. I have fished a lot of the hard cases, and the clarity of the war is not as good. I was just down in Boca Grande Channel just last week. The Boca Grande Channel, there used to be a time where you could see the bottom down there. You can't now. You can't see nothing. The water is so muddy-looking. Even up in the lakes, parts of the lakes that I used to go. You can imagine some Black guy, places that you could perform were just crystal clear and it doesn't seem to be that clear.

KDM: Is that something that is more noticeable in the last few years or...

AB: Just gradual over the last few years. Yes, I'd say over the last few years. It's just gradually.

KDM: So, is it safe to say that now the water is just not as clear as it used to be more days in the year? Because I know there is seasonal variation.

AB: Of course, the weather has a lot to do with it. Yes, I think that'd be the best thing.

KDM: Yes, I have had other people say that. It just seems like it's not as clear as often during a year when it should be.

AB: Yes, I think that would be true. I also find this out across the region, what we call blue

water. It's not as clear out there as often as it used to be. The other thing that I have real problems with fishing in the backcountry. Our most backcountry guides respect and take care of the water and the Keys, certain of the grass beds and things like that. We do not disturb them. We do not run our plates over them. I certainly have noticed over the last two or three years the increased number of appellate trials going into such places like Jewfish Basin and content features. Barefooted game where people are going out there. They don't know exactly how to get there. So, they're running there. They're running right over the grass beds and when a propeller goes through a grass bed, it cuts a path right through. I see a lot of it. Seemed like more so than usual. The other thing is the personal watercraft, the jet skis. They scare all alive waterfowl away. They disturb people fishing. They have absolutely no consideration whatsoever. [inaudible] sort of the Keys in the backcountry. They have made me so mad at times. I think if I had a gun, I'd shoot them. We did have a moral man down here. Did you?

KDM: I know, and everyone was cheering him on. Go for it.

AB: But you're always going to have some people doing things like that. But I'd say, generally, the backcountry is suffering from the destruction of the turtle grasses. It suffered from a crash. The dirty water. It suffered from [inaudible]. It's been such a gradual thing. I can't really say exactly what happened. I certainly uphold conservation. I believe in this sanctuary. I know there's a lot of resentment against it. But I say this, if we don't do something to regulate ourselves, it won't happen without my lifetime.

KDM: But I think we have already shown we cannot do it ourselves.

AB: We must have regulation. I find no fault with it. I always find fault with the government telling you what you should do. You're trying to regulate your life. But I say if we don't do it, [inaudible]. I like Key West, I like it. The weather. I like to climb it, I like the conditions here. I like fishing. But I'm really sad with what's happening here. That's how you can cross the river. You can see the reeds. You could see everything. In thirty, forty, fifty feet of water, you could see the bottom so clearly. You sure can't today. At times of the year, you can, but not as much as we used to. Got on down, I guess, many, many years.

[end of transcript]