

Karen DeMaria: It goes to the tape. Yes, I got a tape.

Bennett Orr: I said a lot of bad words really. I'm not saying anything. Don't say dirty words, but keep talking.

KDM: The tape is mainly for me so that I do not have to sit here and write detailed notes. So, it is not like his dirty words are not going to go any further. He did not say anything that dirty. Everything you said was in the dictionary. [laughter]

BO: Kaka and poo poo.

KDM: Italian dictionary. Ben, what is your mailing address?

BO: P.O. Box 104.

KDM: How old are you?

BO: Fifty-eight.

KDM: How long have you lived here?

BO: I went here in [19]93.

KDM: Here in the Marathon area?

BO: Yes, Key West.

KDM: Then Marathon?

BO: Yes.

KDM: What area do you fish most?

BO: I fish in the east [inaudible] west to north shore.

KDM: What do you do?

BO: Crawfish and stone crab. I try and catch a dolphin in the summertime.

KDM: In the summertime, do you hand line or hook and line?

BO: Hook and line.

KDM: Hook and line summertime? Apart from dolphins, is there anything else that you like?

BO: Mainly dolphin.

KDM: Mainly dolphin. So, what about you? How old are you?

BO: Sixty-three.

KDM: What is your mailing address?

BO: P.O Box. 4428, Marathon.

KDM: 4428?

BO: Yes. [inaudible].

KDM: That is right. Yes. I have 420, down in Summerland.

MALE SPEAKER: I first moved to Summerland. That's where I spent about ten years in summer. It's nice. You know the old cock house, four-mile marker, one on stilts?

KDM: Yes.

MS: I lived there for about a year.

KDM: I looked down and went for a drive by the airport, the runway. Did you graduate from high school?

MS: Yes.

KDM: Go to college?

MS: No. I spent twenty years in the military.

KDM: What branch?

MS: [inaudible]

KDM: What kind of fishing do you do?

MS: Oh, basically, the tan liner. I did a little bit of [inaudible] when I first got out in [19]71, I got out. Fishing for about six months and they stole my line. So, I quit before I killed somebody.

KDM: Who stole your line?

MS: Everybody. Cubans, mainly from Cuba.

KDM: Filling in the trap itself or stealing the whole trap?

MS: Oh, you're stealing from the trap like what I did, I went down on American Shoal Light and spent two days and one night and watched them assholes pull my traps using the telescope and all this old bullshit. I went back in, and I sold my traps because I knew that if I waited around, all my good buddies pulled my traps. I'd end up killing somebody. So, I just got out of the crawfish business. So, I then went into hand lining and did hand lining with Tortugas and local type hand line. Then I went in [19]76, I guess, [19]75. I started grouper fishing, deep-water grouper fishing. That lasted for about two or three years until that played out. Everything got fished out and quit, [inaudible]. From there, I went to fish trap, fished that for about three years along the reef, which was good, and made a good living. The fish were always there until I got too many people into it and abused it. Then after that, after they outlawed the fish traps, then I started net fishing and I had fished pompano fish until this year, well in [19]92. I never made a nickel in [19]93. The last time I caught any fish was the 18th of December last year. I had 350-something head pompano. Then after that, the next night, I went out. We had about ten heads. After that, there wasn't any fish around. They all left the weather and everything.

KDM: Why did you change all kinds of different...

MS: Oh yeah, you're out there to make money. If you can't make money at it, why do it at sea?

KDM: Pretty much you change is because of other things besides...

MS: No, I changed because you couldn't make any money as I was doing before. I mean, you have to go with the flow like everything else. If you can't make money on it, you quit it.

KDM: What are you going to do next?

MS: They're making it tough on people like my kid. He's 36 years old, and I got him a boat and just getting started. But he's still paying for it now and coming down with all these regulations. Too bad. It's really ridiculous how bad it is. I feel sorry for the guys. Now, I have a 43-foot boat. I'm going to turn it into a houseboat. Move on. I've got to talk to dockside and screw them on. Sit back and drink my beer.

KDM: So, where have you pretty much fished?

MS: Well, all the way from Tortugas to Tennessee Light.

KDM: Tennessee Lights up that way, right?

MS: Tennessee is right off Concrete Honky. It's pretty much from Tennessee Tortugas. I used to make Tortugas trips all the time.

KDM: Did you ever go do much in the back in the Gulf side?

MS: Yes, that's where we do the pompano fishing and used to go snapper fishing. When I first came to Marathon in [19]74, I fished for snapper out and around Fullerton, and we'd catch 150,

£175 of snapper every night. Buy or sell mangrove snapper. But I don't know. It's just the regulations are killing us. That's what it is. Every time you try to do something, they put regulations where you can't do it anymore. Just as well I'm getting out of it. I'm getting an attitude.

KDM: When he starts developing that attitude after and starts to get out.

MS: After a while – no, I was fortunate. Like I said, I'm retired military, and I get my \$900 a month from the military. So, that's \$900 start on everybody else. So, I don't have to catch many fish to make my money. But the rest of these guys are out, busting ass trying to make rent and child support and rent and whatever he had.

KDM: [laughter] Ex-wives.

BO: But I had that. I had enough money that I could sit back at the dock, and like you say, why did I change so much? Because I went where the fish were when there was a lot of fish, like when the mangoes were in from June until August. I fished the mangoes and fished the yellowtail in the spring, in April and May when there was a lot of mangoes. You just have to use your head instead of something else, and you can make money.

KDM: It is a round grouper.

MS: It's a deep-water grouper. I used to average 1500 a day. Now, they're lucky to get 1500 a week.

KDM: What was the main species of groupers that you used to get?

MS: Snowing.

KDM: You did the deep-water snow?

MS: Yes. I was one of the ones that helped break out the snow.

KDM: Is there much snow out there now?

MS: Not very much.

KDM: That is something that never really came back.

MS: Well, the fish, the way the snows do, when they spawn, they go up north, they spawn here, and the spawn comes out and goes north with the Gulf Stream, and up north the snows get about this big, and the farther down they get. Then when they get down here, the £20, £22, £25 average. That's when they have the spawners. Well, what we did through them, of course, two or three years, we wiped out all the spawners, and basically what we did was our own downfall.

KDM: They were pretty much a sedentary animal, too, were not they? They pretty much stay in

one area.

MS: Well, yes, they stayed in that certain area where they are on those ridges and big high rocks, and they had certain places to spawn. But I don't know, it's hard to say what's on those fish because they're from basically from 500 to 1100 feet.

KDM: What else did you use to catch with them?

MS: Oh, you didn't catch queen snapper? You catch those queens. Beautiful fishes like this. Looks like a yellowtail. Only it's really red. Looked like a yellowtail, only it was really red. Beautiful, beautiful fish. Catch him on 1100, and catch barrel fish. Barrel fishes was – they still catch a lot of barrel fish once in a while out there when they get a good spot.

KDM: You get many tiles?

MS: I never fished for tile much. We used to go down off the Marquesas and fish tilefish once in a while.

KDM: When you fished for snowy group, just where was that? Just right out here off the Marathon?

MS: Strait on between what they call the humps and Key West all the way down the line. That's 700, 800 feet.

KDM: When you were hand lining and stuff, or even fish traps, brother groupers, what was the most popular grouper that you would catch?

MS: Well, we always caught black groupers. So, out here lining you very seldom catch black grouper with a hand line anymore because they're a live bait. They like live bait and once in a while you'll catch one, but you don't catch that many black groupers. But in the traps, you knock the hell out of them in the traps. We'd average, like I say, about £300 of black grouper every day. It was just me and my girlfriend. We'd leave the dock about 8:30 a.m., and we'd be back to the dock by 4:00 p.m., and we'd pull sixty traps. We pull them twice. Say about £300. I'd make about \$3 or \$400.

KDM: What other stuff would be in there?

MS: You'd catch grunts and some buttons. Very few snappers, very few yellowtail or mangos. I wasn't fishing for them. Those traps are really selective. Whether people realize it or not, they are selective. So, you can open the throat up and catch the lobster and grouper. But when you open the throat up, then you don't catch any snapper or any of the other stuff because they swim in and eat the bait and then go. So, it's very selective.

KDM: What other species of grouper?

MS: We'd catch this Nassau once in a while or a red once in a while, but it was very, very

minimal. Black grouper was the predominant.

KDM: Were there ever many Nassau grouper out here?

BO: Never were many, never was.

KDM: [inaudible] that statements in.

BO: I've never fished trapped.

MS: Well, I'd say that I probably caught – we'd probably catch a thousand blacks to every Nassau. I'd probably catch two hundred reds to every Nassau. So, there was never any Nassau grouper out here in front.

KDM: That is part of that Nassau grouper on a zero-take right now. The fishery managers say there is such a drastic decline in landings of Nassau.

MS: When we got the Nassau, there were only the little ones like this. We never got the nice big ones like we used to get in Tortugas. We used to get nice big ones in Tortugas. But out here in front, we never did have any Nassau to speak of.

KDM: Someone had made a comment to me that they think that the landings on the Nassau grouper and why they look so wild is because a lot of the stuff that came in was actually from KSL Bank in the Bahamas, and that when the Lacey Act went into effect and was enforced, that stopped that. That is why it went from here to here.

MS: When I went up until 1981, that's where I fished. So, that's the only place I figured we'd make one-week turnarounds. We'd leave here on a Sunday, and we'd get back the following Monday.

KDM: When did the Lacey Act come in?

MS: Well, [19]81 when they had the Mariel shut, Coast Guard was coming down on everybody. They'd check you two or three times a day, and it got to a point where you it didn't pay to go there anymore. So, it must have been in [19]81, somewhere like that. But we could make a good living. We'd go over there, catch £17, £1,800 of fish, £2,000 in a seven-day turnaround and buy day's fishing day over day back and made a good living out of it. There are so many fishermen. It's ridiculous how many fishers over there.

KDM: Part of what I am doing is trying to document changes that have occurred. Have you noticed changes in the fisheries, like population or the number of fish, the size of fish?

MS: It's my, my opinion. I don't know if anybody sells it or not. But when we started taking the black grouper, and we used a fish trap in those three years, we fish trapped and took all those black grouper off the reef line. The yellowtail came in and we started getting big yellowtail after that. The big yellowtail did start coming in right after that. Now it's starting to get right back

into the same situation. We don't have the yellowtail that we did have a few years back. I still say that those big yellowtails are those blacks. They tear the hell out of them yellowtail because that's what they feed on, basically. They're a live bait.

KDM: What about you jewfish?

MS: Oh, I never fooled with jewfish. Once in a while, out in the back, I used to pick off the contents of that area. There was one place I fished over there that we'd catch. I've heard it always catches a jewfish out there if you wanted it, but we never.

KDM: I have always heard a similar story to what you are saying with the black grouper. I have heard in Key West regarding jewfish that when you get the yellowtail up to the surface after you are chumming and stuff, now you are trying to capture them. You get these big jewfish on the side going whoomph.

MS: Well, jewfish are getting to be so many jewfish now they're getting to be a problem.

KDM: Is there now? Where is that?

MS: Out in the bay. Because there are some of those times you get out on some of the rock piles and stuff, and you can't get a fish by them. You hook a fish, and they got it. You can't get a fish by it. Same as the damn turtles. He's getting off.

KDM: Seeing a lot of turtles?

MS: Yes, there are ten times more turtles than I ever seen when I first hit here.

KDM: Where? In the ocean?

MS: Everywhere.

KDM: Everywhere?

MS: Ocean and the bay. There are more turtles. Turtles everywhere. I don't know why you can talk about turtles in talking about species. This shark law they got. This is so ridiculous. I can go out and catch £3,000 of sharks any day they want 365 days a year. It's right out here in the bay. Any day they want it, I'll go catch them. There are so many of those little bonnet sharks and that type of – it's ridiculous. I'm saying restricted. It's so ridiculous. Now maybe the big sharks, the big-finned fish. I think that's what got the people going was the fin fish. The penguins were feeding them, taking them.

KDM: I would love to see someone take a live shark on a hook and take the fins off of that live shark. I just hear the stories about finning where a live shark's fins would be cut off. The shark would be thrown back in the water and be alive. I am sorry. I just cannot imagine someone actually doing that with a live shark. I have been on a boat with big live sharks. I am sorry.

MS: But the thing about it is, why would I take a £400 shark, take his fins off and throw him back overboard when all I had to do is cut his tail off and his head off, and you're going to get sixty, eighty a pound for the rest of it?

KDM: Oh, I think it was just recreational guys.

MS: It was not only recreational. It's a lot of environmentalist bullshit, the same as a lot of the other stuff that comes down. They always see...

KDM: It started with some guy who was trying to cheat on a fishing tournament. That is how it started?

MS: Oh, yes.

KDM: Some guy. He had a long-line boat save him a big shark, he said, and he catches a big shark, save it. I will come out and get it. I got this tournament. Well, he did not come out, and he did not come out. So, the guys will say, "Well, hell with it." They cut the fins off the shark. Well, the guy finally comes out and decides he wants the shark. They had already cut the fins off. He goes, "Well, that is all right. I will just tell them that is how I found it." Took the shark's fin, hangs it up, and claims that he caught the shark alive and it had no fins. That is how the whole thing started.

MS: The damn thing couldn't have swum. It doesn't have its fins.

KDM: I would love to see a person take a live one.

MS: Boy, you got there about all the way up in the basin. Well, where's your net, Tony?

KDM: What was the first thing that you saw? The first question I kind of ask you guys is, I know I have heard the stories about ten, fifteen years ago. The commercial fishermen were the first ones to sound the alarm about Florida Bay and look at it all the way. What did you see that alarmed you? What was the first thing?

BO: Oh, here comes to kill us. The alarm didn't do anything. The alarm? You mean when they started complaining about what was going on?

KDM: Well, I know that. But what I am saying is what did you see? What was the first thing that you saw that caused you to be alarmed?

BO: Well, that you couldn't see the bottom in areas that you could traditionally see the bottom.

KDM: When did this happen?

BO: They got covered up with [inaudible]. Gumbo. Good old gumbo. All galvanized. Galvanising. No big stuff.

KDM: That was something that just all of a sudden happened. You could not see the bottom?

BO: No, no, no, no. I don't think. It didn't just suddenly happen. It just got progressively worse where areas that again, were so gin clear, kind of course of the quarter inch. I think I got some on the boat for the course of about five years, about 1973 or four to 1979. The area that I'm talking about is along the park from Sandy Key and the East Cape down to Sandy Key. That water was always clearer there. It was always an area for crawfishing. It used to start there because we knew we would catch undersized crawfish there, and you would go into that area with your traps, load up on shorts or whatever and spread them out to all your traps. It was just done. Every year, you would do the same thing, and that recipe deteriorated. The water got bad, and the fish were not available whatever size, crawfish were just not there and then now this is noticed, and there's no crawfish. That area produces crawfish early in the year historically for years. Now it just does not.

KDM: When did it stop?

BO: What? The last real good crawfish year we had out here was the certificate program was based on was probably [19]88, [19]89 and [19]87, [19]88. [19]86, [19]87 was a good year, but [19]87, [19]88 was a phenomenal year and [19]89. Since then, in the eastern part of Florida Bay, we haven't caught anything production in the eastern part of Florida. My own blood. I fished probably 75 percent of my year and what they now call the dead zone, and that's probably escaped. But it's down along the park boundary all the way to shore.

KDM: That is the dead zone that Carl was mapping.

BO: That's 75 percent of my gear in there. My production in the last four years is all at least 30 percent. You can see the deterioration in the bottom out there in the last five years has deteriorated more the last five years than it had, I would say in the previous ten years. This thing was always a problem out there, but it's just escalated so much that in the past five years. There's some up on the boat, but you'd have to go up and get it.

KDM: Yes, it was gradual. Then five years ago, it started steamrolling a little bit stronger.

BO: But there were so many things involved because we all fish the Bahamas waters, but a lot of us fish in the Bahamas. Then when they closed the Bahamas and everybody came back over here, there was another, I don't know, a hundred thousand traps or a couple of hundred thousand traps that were fished here and areas again, that one I know he's got to find a crawfish trap in. We're suddenly inundated with raw fish. To just differentiate between, why are we catching crawfish? Why is the catch now? Just because there are more traps out here for the damn water quality. It is getting so bad that there's just no fish out there. Ultimately, it just proved itself that the water quality is so bad that there just are none. I think most of the fish houses can document where I fish out of a little fish house, little Carl Wagner down at County, and our production for that area is down at least 30 percent. It gets worse if you go east. The area that they fish in is still catching good fish, and everything's moving to the west. The water is clean.

KDM: [inaudible] I have had colleagues tell me they are saying, "Well, I had some," and they

are seeing more birds in the Key West area than they ever have in their entire life. These are some people who have been down there sixty, seventy years down there, more bait fish. Fishermen are doing great, hook and liners. You cannot dive. The diving is horrible because there is no visibility. It is starting. But as you said...

BO: Salvation in the Bay. Again, I've fished most of my Key West. I had the best years.

BO: The salvation was in the ocean. The ocean always produces – not a lot of appreciation. Then they have the Bahamas close. This Mariel thing happened. There was so much. There was such a tremendous increase in trash in the ocean. But now the water quality in the ocean is going bad. We can see this green water right in the channel and out in the water. So, right there, it's not just isolated. It's an old fisherman used to be able to throw the Miami Herald down, and you could read the damn print off the bottom. Now, you can't even find a damn paper if you throw it overboard. Most people carrying it that aren't used to seeing it. You take them out on a boat. I take relatives of people from now to be honest. God, this is beautiful, and it is beautiful.

[talking simultaneously]

KDM: Well, it is even with me. I have been down here five years and driving. I drive back and forth to Key West to Summerland five days a week. In the shallow water areas, I have noticed a definite difference in the color. The shallow waters are always sort of a green tinge, anyway. But I mean, now it is sort of like it is a definite olive. Today there are some parts of it that had that yellowish sheen to it, which I know is really nasty. I was like going, I have noticed in five years a difference. But I am like anybody who is...

BO: Been here, you drive over a seven-mile bridge at high noon when that sun's up, and you can see they drive over that long. What the hell? Channel Five Bridge. That's spectacular going over the bridge. [laughter] That comes down here. It's from anywhere in the world looks at it. God, this is phenomenal. But people who used to look at it that every day and fishing out there every day, it's not beautiful.

MS: [inaudible] First five years I was in the Key, I didn't have a depth recorder. You didn't need one. You just go out and see the good bottom and throw your anchor, hook up and catch fish.

BO: But in shore, for the way where I fish, you get outside on land. You can land reefs and everything, and you could just look over for it and spot what you were looking for. You could [inaudible] say, "Here we are." You didn't have to look at her. Look at the two-up plotter. You had a land bridge. You could get right on it and see where you were going crazy looking for that day. I just can't do that. Let me see those. That's a work light. It's also the wrong line here. [inaudible]

KDM: What is different in your traps than before?

BO: I see a lot more catfish. I see a lot more. Are the critters that are used to living in probably where the obstacle to the water is not conducive, snapper, grouper, whatever.

KDM: Yes. Feeding time or something.

BO: You can take part in a program that was instigated, I guess, by OSF and DNR is a trap eradication program every year [inaudible]. I can put it on because now the season's over, nobody has messed with the traps, and they're sitting there. When you go up along the shoreline again, like the park boundary [inaudible]. Go on up to Sandy Key and cut off those traps. When you pull those traps, hold the bait and see what's in the bottom that they come up with. I mean, it's mud. It's terrible. It's just gross bottom in there. That used to be you could see the damn bottom. You not only can't see it anymore, but the bottom conditions have changed so drastically. Nothing will live in that mess.

KDM: Describe the bottom conditions.

BO: Mud. It's in black. There's nothing alive in that.

KDM: Is it really super fine? Or is it like grains of sand?

BO: It's a real silty mess, and there's nothing like there are septic tank, like sitting it...

MS: Like if you put something down here in this basin right here, like all the sediment of oil and shit for years, if you pull it out there, it's looking the same way out there.

BO: You don't even find any grass. You don't find anything alive.

[end of transcript]