

Karen DeMaria: Do you understand what my report is all about and why I want to talk to you?

Dave Nolan: I think so. You're trying to collect information about some of the changes that have occurred over the last fifteen years or so here.

KDM: I am also at the same time collecting old stories from some of the old timers because a lot of time, their old stories relate to things that have occurred. So, it is a combination of both. Okay. How long have you lived in the Keys?

DN: Thirteen years.

KDM: Full time?

DN: Yes.

KDM: Where were you before that?

DN: I was in the Navy. I was in Japan [inaudible].

KDM: When you came here thirteen years ago – first of all, how old are you?

DN: I'm still forty-nine, but not for long.

KDM: [laughter]

DN: In a couple of weeks, I'll be fifty.

KDM: Did you ever visit the Keys before moving down here?

DN: Yes. That would've been in the earliest [19]60s, Upper Keys.

KDM: Did you graduate from high school?

DN: Yes.

KDM: Did you graduate from college? Four-year degree?

DN: Yes.

KDM: Did you ever go to graduate school.

DN: Yes.

KDM: When you got out of the Navy, you moved down here?

DN: I was here in the Navy.

KDM: Okay. You left the Navy here in Key West?

DN: Yes.

KDM: What did you do after? Workwise, not education wise.

DN: The chartered boat thing.

KDM: Then what else did we do? Anything else?

DN: Then this.

KDM: What is your title here?

DN: I'm the director of the AIDS Prevention Center.

KDM: You did not do much charter boat fishing anymore?

DN: No. I mean, the last time I did it, I paid. [laughter] It was great.

KDM: Why? [laughter]

DN: Well, I really enjoyed. I went out on the (Lucky two?) and walked away from it at the end. It was a lot cheaper than buying a boat that I could go after.

KDM: You still have your boat?

DN: I have another boat now that's a sixteen-foot flat bottom stiff keeping on the house.

KDM: Where is most of your water experience at? Locations.

DN: Around here, you mean?

KDM: Yes.

DN: From the Marquesas to American Shoal on the Atlantic side, and from Marquesas to like Smith Shoals on the Bill. In the back country, back up to the Jewfish Basin.

KDM: Do you do much diving or snorkeling?

DN: Snorkeling, only when it's warm. Not a lot. I do quite a bit during winter when the lobsters are out.

KDM: But you pretty are a fisherman?

DN: Yes.

KDM: Have you ever been a volunteer involved with the water? Like fishery advisory council or a member of any organization associated with the water?

DN: No.

KDM: In the thirteen years, what is probably been the most striking thing that you see different?

DN: In the water?

KDM: Yes. Now, the three areas that I'm aiming at includes everything. But basically, I have fisheries, water quality, water clarity, and then I have the [inaudible] communities, i.e., sponges, corals, seagrasses, mangrove, et cetera. What to you has been most obvious or your most experience?

DN: Probably the relative decline in some of the fisheries. In exception, some things have seemed to have, at least down the road, is most notably the yellowtail fishery. Because I don't remember, when I first got here, being able to catch as many large yellowtail as I did like last winter, for instance. It's the only time I would.

KDM: So, you are noticing an increase in the size of the yellowtail. What about the population of the yellowtail?

DN: That seems to be very strong too. Yes.

KDM: What about some of the other fish?

DN: Well, okay, let's see now.

KDM: Let us back up for a moment. What was your target fish when you are chartering?

DN: Well, depending on the time of year, but I mostly fished out in the Atlantic.

KDM: You were trawling more for striking fish?

DN: Trawling more, yes.

KDM: That just gives me more knowledge of your background. What about the other fish types?

DN: Well, I do remember that when I first came here, of course, the most obvious one was the – in 1980, I guess a tremendous numbers of kingfish that were here.

KDM: In what time?

DN: Yes. January, February, and March. I mean, lots of boats out there, and everybody just catching them until your arms fell. Just couldn't even find the bottom on your machine because it was blanked out by the fish.

KDM: Oh, through the column there? Yes.

DN: I guess that had a tremendous decline. I don't know, it was [19]83, [19]84, in there. But by [19]88 or so, it seemed to have come back pretty nicely, I thought, presumably, because of the controls that were put in place.

KDM: The regulations?

DN: Yes.

KDM: So, basically, the regulations worked?

DN: I think so.

KDM: In the last couple winters then, have you noticed the same type of thing that you did in [19]80, [19]81, where the water column on your fathometer was completely blanked out?

DN: I haven't really seen that, but I've always felt like if you wanted to catch a kingfish, you could do it. I know from what you hear and see and read about they're very catchable. When I first came here in the winter, I guess like December through February, there used to be lots and lots and lots of mackerel in the harbor. Right in the harbor in the ship channel out to...

KDM: Spanish mackerel?

DN: Ceros. Yes. Mostly ceros and Spanish. You'd see the fish breaking. You'd see birds working on them, and they weren't very easy to catch because they move around so fast. But there were just lots and lot of then. Now, that's just not true anymore. That just doesn't happen. Same thing with Jack Crevalle, especially right at the center of the harbor between Christmas Tree and Tank Island and over to the docks there, there'd be just lots of crevalle. They'd even breaking on the surface and you could go and catch them. Not that they're worth anything, but, well...

KDM: Well, that is pretty much the message. Is that the same area that the tarpon fish? No. The tarpon fish is just south of that.

DN: South of that. Yes.

KDM: When did you notice change in the ceros, Spanish, and the Jack Crevalle in the harbor?

DN: I'd say around [19]84, 1984.

KDM: I wonder why.

DN: I don't know. I think I remember reading something at the time. It wasn't about Jacks. It might've been about mackerel. That there was a decline in the number of brown shrimp that are in this area. That was being attributed to water salinity, the lack of rain water, all that stuff up in the bay. I don't know. I never did much of that, catching shrimp with a dip net. I know it used to be done quite a bit on the docks where the hydro boils are, Coast Guard station. I did do that a couple of times. You'd see quite a few shrimp there and it would be the late winter.

KDM: Edible shrimp or beige shrimp?

DN: Well, the same thing. Brown shrimp, but some of them would be this long with the head on really. You caught them to eat them.

KDM: Right there at the Navy docks?

DN: Yes.

KDM: I guess they are not there anymore.

DN: I don't know that for a fact. I don't think so. But it used to be quite a thing. You'd see a lot of people out there with nets. You'd could put a light in the water and...

KDM: I do not see that. I have not seen that. You want me to give you fish list you can look at. I am going to just all different ton species, the double column, front and back. See if any of it sparks memories.

DN: I don't know. It seems to me when I first got here that you'd see a lot of big hogfish just snorkeling around and it'd be the order. I don't see that anymore where I do it.

KDM: So, sizes are different. Sizes are smaller?

DN: Smaller, yes. That's my impression.

KDM: Anything about lane snappers? Did you ever do much with the lane snappers or the mangroves?

DN: Mangroves, I can't say that I've seen much of a change. I never really targeted them. As a matter of fact, last December, I guess it was, I went out with a guy in the Gulf and we had a tremendous snapper [inaudible] mangrove in the shallow water out there, twelve feet of water on that bar off of the lower harbor tees. Well, it was good. We just were hooked up – and that was very impressive.

KDM: December [19]92 or [19]91?

DN: Yes. [19]92. Cobia, seems to me that at the start of the charter boat thing, which was in [19]86, I used to see a lot more big Cobia, big ones. Then by the time I stopped in [19]89, you

didn't see any big ones. I didn't. As I read the paper and so forth, and the net fishing curve, I get that feeling that I guess up in Miami, they did catch some great figures. But it seems to me, we used to get a lot around here that were forty to fifty-five pounds and that's not some [inaudible].

KDM: When are the big times for catching cobia? What time of the year?

DN: Winter. Triggerfish, I guess they're still around. Tarpon, some years are better than others. I guess I would not say I've seen anything like evidence of a big decline there though, tarpon.

KDM: Yes. It is sort of like cycles, you think?

DN: Some years are great and some aren't. Sometimes, they become more numerous at a different time of the year. Slightly later in the spring.

KDM: No real rhyme or reason –

DN: Not that I know of.

KDM: – that you have been able to figure out.

DN: No. No. Weather. If the water gets below seventy-two, they disappear. Even if they're around, you don't see them. I don't know where they go or what they do. They do actually leave for some time. Sometimes they...

KDM: They do not like that cold water.

DN: No. Jacks, amberjacks. I never fished for amberjacks. So, I don't know how badly they've been affected by always people that have caught them to sell them. I really don't have much feel for that. I mentioned the bar hardly for, crevalles. Bar jacks, I guess they're okay. I don't see much problem with them. Barracudas, they seem to be pretty good. Down here, you've got here trout fishing.

KDM: Yes.

DN: That's a real mystery to me because I've caught some pretty steadily throughout the whole time I've lived here in [inaudible] Basin. This year, the weather was so bad. It was starting to get pretty good and then the wind started to blow. So, I don't know. But an odd thing I noticed this year, and I don't know if it's a temporary weirdness or what, but usually, there's millions of Ladyfish down there when the water's halfway. I haven't caught a Ladyfish back there in now two years on this part of last year. I don't know where the heck they are. Usually, you get Ladyfish, small jacks, trout, all that stuff mixed together. The trout seem to be there, and tarpon are in there.

KDM: So, it is just that the Ladyfish are missing from there.

DN: Yes. It's just this year. So, I don't know whether it's just – they may be there today. I don't

know. But usually, they're pretty a lot of groupers. Well, I never fished or did anything with jewfish. I mean, I caught one once, a little kind of like this. So, I don't know about how they're doing. Did you hear anything from people diving or they're more and around?

KDM: Yes. They are starting to show up and become brighter than some, different wrecks and stuff like that. Some of the dive shops even have pet jewfish now, where they take out, feed them, and people are allowed to take pictures of big jewfish and stuff. In fact, we think we are documenting the resurgence of an old spawning aggregation right off of Sand Key that we noticed last year. This year, we'll watch it again and see.

DN: Where do they do that? What kind of terrain are they on there?

KDM: It is the deeper water. Currently, there's two different things in jewfish from what I am hearing talking to people. I always thought that it was the August, September full moons, and the deeper water, like a hundred feet. But I am also hearing that there is also a spring spawn in shore in the shallower waters that people used to catch them with full a row like in the spring time where would catch them closer up in the back areas.

DN: Yes. I've heard of that, these stores where you could see their back sticking out of the water.

KDM: Yes. Exactly. The same story. Same stories, I know. But old timers have told me there used to be an old spawning aggregation within a mile of Sand Key. It disappeared. It was caught out, I guess you could say. Well, yes, that and the hooking liner – hand liner because it used to be a real bad problem if you fish with the yellowtail. They said they would chum up and get the yellowtail up and it was like the jewfish would come up too. So, you are trying to pull your yellowtail out of the water, the jewfish would take it, so you ended up with the head. But on one of the dive shots documented on the wreck of the curve is that all of a sudden, there were eight jewfish on the wreck in August. That was last year. We did some filming, and then they were gone. The end of September, all the jewfish were gone. So, they were only there –

DN: For a reason. Yes.

KDM: – for months. So, we are just going to continue to watch it and see that. That is a positive sign. It is a good sign.

DN: Oh, yes. I think so. When I first moved here, we used to fish out in the Gulf around Smith Shoals in like forty-five feet of water for groupers a lot. We caught a lot of like, but at that time, we were able to keep smaller fish. I haven't done that in a while. My impression was that you could get a lot of undersized and a lots and lots of them. But anything big enough to be legal, it's pretty rare. So, I really don't know what the status of that is. Maybe I'm wrong, it seems to me we used to catch a lot of really nice, four to eight pound red groupers out there. We'd always have these hookups with things that you never saw, even if they were too big.

KDM: Something that [inaudible].

DN: Yes. Big sharks and whatever. I don't know too much about how those other things have gone. Dolphins, they've been pretty steady. I think that there were a couple years where I was in the charter thing where Dolphins just had a crappy year. It was associated with – for whatever reason, there was a lack of weed, and the regular summer dolphins, they swim again. But then the next year, they might be very good again.

KDM: I think pretty much it associated with the amount of weed that you could find or amount of floating stuff.

DN: Right. I think that sailfish seem to be getting better. I don't fish for that much. But I talk to people.

KDM: As in better?

DN: Better than ten years ago. More of them. More of them because they put some pretty serious restrictions on them size wise and the sale of them. So, I think a lot of people used to just sell those things for a small [inaudible], and maybe that's it. But I believe there seem to be more.

KDM: Well, then, that is a good catch and release, right?

DN: Yes.

KDM: You notice if the catches are getting larger?

DN: I believe they are. Yes. Oh, there's more.

KDM: Yes. About every target, every group on here.

DN: These tropical guys, I don't know much about them. Filefish, I guess they're still around as far as I could tell.

KDM: How about sharks?

DN: I never really fished for them but they seem to be about, you see them, like lemon sharks and bonnetheads and bulls and whatnot up in the shallow water. So, I don't know. I can't say anything about them really. Crabs, stone crabs. Lobsters, over the time I've been here, I think they've been pretty steady. This last season I thought was very poor, at least from a snorkeler's standpoint. But that's not to say it might not be good this year because I've seen I think only two lousy years in thirteen. One of them I think it was about six or seven years ago where there just weren't many and there were not many. There just weren't many, and it stayed like that. Whale sharks, I've never seen a whale shark. Sawfish, never seen one. Mola mola, yes. I've seen one. Stingray seem to be doing all right.

KDM: Yes. Those are mainly near because like the whale shark, so off of West Palm Beach, it used to be a rarity to see a whale shark. Well, it is now becoming almost a normal event –

DN: Oh really?

KDM: – to see a whale shark. Now, whale sharks are filter feeders. They are going to go where there is food, right?

DN: Yes.

KDM: So, obviously, there is something going on off of West Palm. I mean, I know what is going on.

DN: Yes. They're [inaudible] I guess. Yes.

KDM: Jacksonville is starting to see a high occurrence of basking sharks. Again another filter feeding...

DN: Is that a filter feeder? I guess it has to be, so. Well, have you ever seen one of them.

KDM: No.

DN: Amazing. Well, they're not as big as a whale shark in terms [inaudible]. I had an incredible experience where when I was in the Navy, 1972 we're out and – terrible. It was in February. We were out of Newport. We were south of Block Island. Actually, it didn't get terrible until later in the week. But before the weather got bad, we came upon these great pods of basking sharks sitting on the surface. I mean, they were stupid slow. They'd sit there and the ship would almost run over them before they get out.

KDM: [laughter]

DN: God, I don't know what they're doing. They do mate or something out there? I don't know. I mean, we saw like twenty or thirty of them.

KDM: Probably they were getting together for a spawn. That or there might have been a big upwelling area there. They are all there to feed depending on what the surrounding waters for light.

DN: Very little to argue. Basking is the word. Man, they just sat there.

KDM: [laughter] I mean, commercial fishermen are seeing it off the Jacksonville now and that is something they never saw.

DN: I would think – right. Yes.

KDM: So, I mean, that is the reason why I got whale shark and these other things down here. What about the turtles?

DN: Seems about the same to me. I don't know if I could tell a Loggerhead from a – well, I

guess they're all different sizes, aren't they? I mean these loggerheads are much bigger, for instance.

KDM: Leatherbacks are the biggest. That is the other difference.

DN: I've never seen one of those. They're really weird looking.

KDM: Loggerheads are the next bigger ones. Hawksbill have the certain size, and the shell has got a duration. Then when you get to the (kemps?) and the green, it is hard unless you really look at them and you know what you are looking for. But they usually are smaller. I would say they are about the size of the hawksbills. In the thirteen years that you have been fishing around here, have you had to change your areas of fishing? I know you change seasonally depending on the season.

DN: I'm thinking.

KDM: But is there any other reason why you would stay?

DN: No. Not at my level, I have not. Maybe I should have. [laughter] I definitely go into places where there wasn't anything. I am sure I told you once, but you may not remember about. Something that happened to these channels between the Pearl Basin and the [inaudible] Harbor.

KDM: That fish kill?

DN: I don't know what. It was gordonian kill. Ferns died and some sponges and just not near as many anything in there as there used to be.

KDM: Where was that again?

DN: Well...

KDM: I have a map. I am going to get rid of all those other excess stuff that are sitting here.

DN: What I'm talking about is these little channels that run through here.

KDM: Oh, okay. They are Pearl Basin. I see.

DN: They're are really quite nice and they're twelve-feet deep in place from the Shoal here, but there's a place I've always dodged the lobsters. They're just starting to come here as many and there as it used to be. But there used to be an abundance of brown sea pads out on the bottom there. There's nothing there now. I think last I saw was a few little plaque skeletal type remains. I have no idea what caused it.

KDM: When did that happen?

DN: Two years ago. Approximately, two and a half years go.

KDM: In the summertime or the winter time that you remember?

DN: Summer is probably when I noticed that because beginning of the [inaudible] season.

KDM: So, is it everything died? The gordonian sponges?

DN: Not all sponges. Still some sponges there. Sponges seem not so much affected. For instance, there used to be conchs in there and I haven't seen one in there in two years. I don't know what the connection there is. You'd see horse conchs and queen conchs, both of them.

KDM: Did you notice anything like S or maybe Y, or is it just all...

DN: I have no idea. No. I couldn't see, taste, or smell or anything like that. It seemed pretty local because you could go down to the lakes in a similar channel bottom there and see all that in good health. I don't know what happened.

KDM: Did you not tell me that you saw a fish kill? That you noticed a fish kill? Maybe this was the episode talking about...

DN: Maybe it was that because I cannot remember.

KDM: It might have been this. So, you are telling me that you observed something one weekend that was really strange.

DN: Yes.

KDM: You pretty much use a – when you are fishing, it is hooking line?

DN: Yes. I could give you an oral tradition anecdote from the past from a guy whole told me.

KDM: Sure. Go ahead.

DN: The guy's name was (Joe Platus?). He died a couple of years ago, kind of young, unfortunately. But anyway, he grew up here. Reportedly, the Navy dredged the main ship channel before World War II. Apparently, everything was a white sand from the Port over here up to the other end of [inaudible] was just – you walked out, it was white sand bottom and shallow water. Just beautiful.

KDM: From here to there.

DN: All along the south side of Key West. The whole island, limestone and stuff were covered with sand. I guess what happened was the currents change around and just sucked it all up. But anyway, what he did was, when he was kid, he used to fish for permit right off the beach. The method was, I thought quite interesting was, they'd climb up in a tree and look out. What they'd look for were – you may know what this critter is. It's either a hermit crab or a snail. It has a

black shell that kind of congregates in little pockets on the sand. I forget what he called it. The guy would get up in the tree and look for those places at low tide. Then the other kids would go and pick up some of these land hermit crabs that you see, and crack them open. Back then, they didn't have rods [inaudible] or anything like that. You'd see [inaudible] on the fishing rod probably painful with a reel and everything. But what they would do is, one of the kids would put bait up a hook and wade it out. Wade out into the plat. So, leave the rod in a rod hole or with somebody's hand. The guy in the tree would slide over the ride a little bit and then he'd see where he's supposed to leave it in there where they see it. Just put it on the bottom, walk back. Then they just sit up in the tree, and then they'd see the permit coming in. Whoever who had to watch on the rod would be told, "Get ready. It's coming. It's coming."

KDM: [laughter]

DN: They'd see it...

[end of transcript]