

Karen DeMaria: So, I don't have to sit here and write detailed notes, especially on a Friday afternoon. What is your mailing address?

Ed Swift: 601 Duval Street.

KDM: Is it company title?

ES: Just add Swift 601 Duval Street, Suite 5.

KDM: Occupation? A businessman?

ES: Yes, that's correct.

KDM: How old are you?

ES: Forty-six. I had to think. [laughter]

KDM: How often does someone ask how old are you, right?

ES: Not often.

KDM: Did you graduate from high school?

ES: High school, yes.

KDM: Did you attend any college?

ES: Yes. Junior college.

KDM: Did you graduate from junior college?

ES: Yes.

KDM: You told me on the phone that you had lived in the Keys for forty-two years or no?

ES: Forty-two.

KDM: Forty-two years?

ES: Yes.

KDM: You come down here when you were quite young then?

ES: Four.

KDM: Wow. Have you always lived here in the Key West area?

ES: No. I grew up in Marathon.

KDM: Marathon, okay.

ES: Until I was twelve, then I came to Key West.

KDM: Now, your experience on the water, where is that located at, your primary experience?

ES: Well, in memory, in Marathon when I was a kid, I spent a lot of time on the water. But my clearest memories of it, quite frankly would be when I moved here. From the time I was like a junior in high school until now, I have made absolute ritual. I am on the water at least once a month and usual more than that. But at least once a month. I take one work day every month. For instance, I have a friend, I take one work day every month and my best friend and I would go out and whatever. Like last Friday we went diving. I dive as early as I can and the weather is [inaudible] as I extend it.

KDM: How was the diving?

ES: Cold.

KDM: How was the visibility?

ES: Great.

KDM: Right back here, where did you go?

ES: I was out with a colleague in Shoals.

KDM: What area do you spend more time in the oceanside or you spend more time in the gulf?

ES: I would say I have spent more time in the gulf in the [inaudible] in that area. I know that area really well both on the islands. I'm probably one of the few people I have been over every island by foot.

KDM: From what Key to what island, to what area?

ES: From the furthest down the bay keys all the way to a little bit past next point, just that area there.

KDM: What about on the oceanside? What's your distance?

ES: Oceanside, I did a lot of diving when I was a teenager out in the...

KDM: This opens up if you want to look at it.

ES: Yes. I did a lot of diving out on the reef. Any of Pelican shore areas in there, the eastern Sambo, middle Sambo, western Sambo, American shoals, all that whole area I'm familiar with. And I did a lot of stuff inside here in the lakes. Also, out on the other side of Woman Key all out in this area out here, all the coral heads that are along here. Early on I did a lot of spearfishing but I really go out there and just go out and get away. I don't really...

KDM: It is more of an enjoyment.

ES: Yeah. We rarely take anything. We just go out, maybe we'll fish, maybe we won't fish.

KDM: The first question I usually always ask everybody is what have you observed that is different from when you were twelve years old?

ES: Well, I know a lot of people have fond memory. I'd say that people talk about, "Well, there's no fish on the reef. I'd go to the reef." There was never any what you can call great spearfishing right on the reef. When I was a kid there was never great spearfishing. So, I think even that point, there were people go out there way before me ever since somebody invented the face mask who had already scared those fish. Those fish knew if you went to the reef, they get disturbed. So, the best spearfish was always in places the coral head and stuff, the Shoal has come up.

KDM: I have never dived [inaudible] and my husband is spearfishing.

ES: So, there never was to me – now, maybe it goes back further than that before people had dive masks and all that. Although I do tank dive, I know how to tank dive, I'm not a tank diver. So, it's free diving. So, I can't speak for the really deep water. Anything over about 25 feet, I really never bother to –

KDM: The main thing is I want get from you what you have observed from your thing because each person, the more I can get.

ES: I see no drop off in the fish population personally from what I remember.

KDM: Is that groupers and snappers, or everything including tropicals?

ES: I'd say hog snappers are about the same. Snappers, gray snapper are about the same. Groupers went down and now are back because of the size limits. So, I think the size limit probably has been a good thing.

KDM: What about the size of the fish itself?

ES: The gray snappers are hard to spear and they seem really plentiful there. The yellowtail snapper, absolutely no difference.

KDM: Everyone said that. Actually, some people said that it's actually increased. They felt that the numbers have increased.

ES: Of gray snappers?

KDM: No, of yellowtail.

ES: Of yellowtail, there are more yellow tail than I remember. You can go out now and really pull yellowtail. I've gone out the last fifteen years on commercial boat because I have friends that own them. Basically, as a recreation them its business go out in the boat. But you know, we always can pull yellowtail in big, big quantities. In fact, yellowtail have gone down on the market place. But right now, it's just too much quantity. I mean, you go South America competition but grouper was the only that I really saw of a follow up in. That was the larger grouper. But in the last year and half or so, they're back strong now, whether that was cyclical or whether law did that, I don't know.

KDM: What about hog snapper?

ES: I'm not opposed to size limits. I'm not particularly fond of bay limits, but size limits, I have no problem. Hog snapper, it's funny. The hog snapper moved for some reason and it probably has to do with feeding. But I can still always find hog snapper.

KDM: Pretty much the same size as they've always been?

ES: No. In my mind, they're smaller. There's not as many big hog snappers. But I don't know who the fools are, who are shooting the big hogs [inaudible]. Because I wouldn't eat them if they get that big. I don't think it's safe like black grouper. I stay away from them.

KDM: I heard someone get a hog snapper and got sick on it?

ES: Sick with [inaudible]. The big hog snappers – tell you don't want to eat the big ones. That comes from some place, it comes from the fact that people fifty or hundred years ago got sick of the big hogs. We had a cold snapper and a lot of water came up. It was a high tide. The water got really cold up on the banks and I want to start running down into the ship's channel and down to the Key West and to the main channel there. It was real cold that day. This has been about six years ago. Interestingly enough, a lot of what came up were big, mutton snappers and big hog sapper that I never even suspected were in there. But this stuff all came up with the cold. We went out in a Korean boat with a fish net and a scoop. We had our pick of fish which really after they came back from the cold were the healthiest fish we ever got, because they had no struggle. They weren't a hook fish.

KDM: That was right in the channel?

ES: Right in the channel. That happens every once at once in a while. But it's only happened once in my lifetime.

KDM: Have you ever done much fishing like right off the piers or right into the harbor, anything like that?

ES: No.

KDM: Have you heard of any stories about fishing like that?

ES: No. When I was a kid, you could always go down and fish down there. But it depends on the food source. The fish are attracted with the food source. For instance, in Marathon, I used to go down and had shrimp down in the back of a 7-mile trailer park down there in the shrimp house. All the black ladies would sit there with [inaudible] wrap on a stick usually. I had mine in my back pocket. I always carry it with my fish hook. You get a little shrimp out on the table. Because when you're heading, you're heading by the pound so a little shrimp might kick out, which the owners hated. Those shrimps will go under the table. You get under the table, which is really stinky work. All the juice running down and you collect like a coffee can for the little shrimps. I take some of them, I'd fish with them. The snapper in there were incredible because that's what they do, is after they finish heading, they take big long poles with a push and they push all the shrimp heads under the table and it would go into there.

KDM: Into like a basin to the water.

ES: Right. Now, they say that's polluting and they won't let you do that which is really stupid because the fish guts and all that stuff did nothing but attract fish. There would be eight or ten or fifteen black women from the Rock in Marathon sitting down there fishing, and white people too. I was a little boy and I'd get my line out and I took up a few of those shrimps. I'd fish, you could catch as many fish as I can take.

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KDM: You know Larry (Cole?).

ES: Yes.

KDM: I just heard a similar story from him. That's why I was grinning when you were telling me how you did that.

ES: Then I'd take the fish and the shrimp and the coffee can. I'd take them home and that's what we'd eat for dinner. That was big time. We were living in the trailer part. Man, I mean that was a change from usually, it was kingfish and mackerel and anything that was really cheap.

KDM: That was back when there was a trail [inaudible].

ES: 1955, [19]56, [19]57.

KDM: Well, I mean shrimp fleet.

ES: Shrimp fleet.

KDM: Right.

ES: Yes. They had a good shrimp fleet.

KDM: One of that fleet go away from there? Do you remember?

ES: I don't know exactly. I would say in the [19]60s, a lot of it moved to Key West. It could have been after that. I'm not a good person to ask because I was a little kid at that time.

KDM: Do you remember anything else about that time with the shrimping and making it at Marathon?

ES: Not shrimping, particularly the charter boat fishing. My father was a diver. [inaudible] pictures which was going down on the dock and shooting the people when they come in. We had a little receiver. We'd sit there and the camera we had and he'd listen. When he hears someone's had a good catch, they'd always say, "Hey, Ed. You better get down to the dock. These people really need a picture. This catch is fantastic." Everybody always builds it up. This is the best catch of mackerel I've ever seen. Then he'd go down and he'd shoot a picture. He'd come back and develop a film using old speed graphic 4x5 camera and he'd shoot a picture and develop a film and make 3/8s x 10. He'd write a story about the catch because he was a newspaper photographer and it's before we came to Marathon. He was a journalist, and he'd write a story about the incredible catch. Then he'd go to the people on the hotel and he'd sell them a picture. Then part of the deal is he'd send one to their local paper at their hometown with the story. They get themselves in the [inaudible] Marathon, Florida and these people are sitting up there in the snow. Then he'd give one to the fishing captain and he'd got each fishing captain would have like an album. They'd put the picture in the album. They use it for promotion. Now, in return for that, we would get the junk fish. We'd get kingfish or mackerel or whatever for our table. That's how he made some money and also, we got to eat.

KDM: What brought him to Marathon? Why did he bring your family to Marathon?

ES: Dropout. He's just very brave now that I'm his age or have pass through the age when he did that. He had a little baby and my mother had a lovely home. He's making like a hundred and a quarter a week which back in [19]46, [19]47, [19]48, after the war was big money. I mean, they had a really nice house and car. He came home one day and said I want to be a photo journalist and I want to travel around and shoot pictures and write stories. They sold the house, had a little trailer. We lived in a trailer. It's 8-feet wide, by 32 feet long. That was a little custom-built trailer they made there right at St. Louis. We dragged that trailer around the country for a couple of years. Then it came down at Marathon out of Miami just one winter and just pulled into Marathon trailer park right in the front spot, right on [inaudible] highway. After about two weeks, they said, "This is it. This is where I want to live." That was it.

KDM: That's being brave.

ES: All the time, we think about escape, I couldn't do that. I don't have the guys. So, I appreciate them moving. Of course, for me, it was growing up with wraps and sailboats and Huck Fin and Tom Sawyer all rolled into one. Out in Sister's Creek and down in all that area and

the channels and the mangroves, tree houses. My friend, (Franklin Greenman?), he's daddy on the boat work. He's an attorney in Marathon.

KDM: Frank Greenman?

ES: Frank and I grew up together. We were best buddies. His daddy on the Boat works and he own the boat, the (*William Merriweather Buffalo III?*) It was an old cabin crew. It's (*William Merriweather Buffalo III?*). It took me a year to remember it. We'd play on that. We'd play under the boat works and we'd play down where they raise the boats up, the boat lift. We had rafts and we had fortresses.

KDM: What was the water visibility like? What do you remember seeing in the water when you were playing around?

ES: It depends on which way the wind was blowing. The water gets real muddy when the wind is blowing the wrong way. So, like yesterday, the water at Pelican Shoals, you had the 30-foot visibility. It's beautiful. It's magnificent. That wasn't yesterday, the day before yesterday. The next day, the wind blew like hell and I know that water out there was shit.

KDM: Five-foot visibility is what they were saying in dive shops.

ES: So, it depends.

KDM: But I mean, when you were a kid, what do you remember seeing growing up? The live sea grasses, with the coral or sponges.

ES: Well, I think, I think probably when I paid attention to that stuff and really got in to diving and everything, I was down at Key West by that time. We had a 13-foot [inaudible]. We have an 18-horse engine which was a huge, monstrous engine back then. We've spent a lot of time out in the bay Keys in that area, outside the bay Keys and the Rocks and all out [inaudible] channel. All the Rocks out in that area, out in there. I used to go out there at least every Sunday probably for ten years. I've gone recently and I still see the same thing. I think about it and I [inaudible] two fish out there with two [inaudible] 454 pounds jewfish with a two [inaudible], no power head, nothing. I remember that and I said, "Boy, that must have been a lot of jewfish." But that's the only jewfish I ever saw in all those years. It's the only one I ever saw, of any size. We use the groupers and snappers anything, but I go back and I look at the pictures of my buddies and myself we used to make. We'd spend an entire day out there and maybe get nice hogs and a couple of red snappers maybe and a nice size maybe of 8- or 9-pound grouper or something like that. But it's not what I remember, those pictures are wrong. What I remember is thousands of fish. There were days when you hit it, but you after a day, you dive for a whole bay, eight hours and you'll get about the same amount of fish out of those rocks. To me, it hasn't changed that much. Now, people tell me, "Oh, yes. You can go right off the Smathers Beach there and get lobsters. I can go right off Smathers Beach there and get lobsters ten out of any twenty days in the season. You say, "I don't believe that." "Well, come with me. I'll go dive right off the beach and we'll swim out there and we'll get lobsters. They're still right off the beach just like they used to." The reason I know that is that lobster don't grow up and hang around rocks. They

come in and they go out. They come in and they go out. You can go at the seawall at my house on Tuesday and you get all the lobster you want. I got a trap that weights them in the water. If it's all overgrown, I never put date in it and the lobsters crawl in it. They sit in there for a while, use it as their house and they crawl out and they leave. People tell me, "Well, the lobsters, traps go down and you need biodegradable for the lobster can't get out. Bullshit, the lobsters walk in and they walk out. I watch them. I sat there and watched them go in.

KDM: We have them on video tape.

ES: It's craziness. I'm no commercial fisherman. I don't have to be a genius to know this stuff. But around the islands in the bay keys, I can take you out there right now, throw your cast net. You can still get all the [inaudible]. You can still get all the [inaudible] you want and you can still all get the hard heads you want and get [inaudible] depending on the time of the year, depending on the wind. People go out there and they make an assumption. Let me tell you something, there's more conchs out there right now than in any time in my entire life. I have no problem with somebody putting a size limit on conchs. But to say you can never harvest those conchs, there are conchs out there now that are dying this year. They have gone to full term. Their lips are huge. I mean, if you weighed the shell, it's unbelievable. It looked like conchs in the most remote part of the Bahamas. When they get to that thickness and that size, those conchs are going to die soon because they can't carry the weight.

KDM: That is true.

ES: So, right now all we're doing with this law is we're not harvesting a product that is there. Say, "Okay. We're going to have limit on size. You can bring –" "That's fine." Are you going to bring a conch for two months a year? What I'd rather see is you can only have a conch if you are a conch. If you live here.

KDM: [laughter]

ES: What I'm saying is I think that once these things get on the endangered species which I don't think they ever were endangered. Once they get on that, Pelican shoals and Little Sambo and Sambo out there week, if there was one conch, there was 10,000 conchs out there. I'm talking about huge rollers and huge progress. You only covered what I could see. I don't know how many conchs there are really in that area. But there are probably a hundred thousand conchs or maybe 200,000. I don't know, but it is a huge number.

KDM: It is like everywhere you look, it was just a common thing to see conchs right there.

ES: Everywhere. And we can go out there right now and take any environmentalist you want out there, they can jump in the water and they can jump in the water and they can see this endangered up like a zoo. I know that they all haven't gathered there. In other words, there are millions of these conchs. Yet this is an endangered species. I think it's a joke.

KDM: They are not endangered protected.



ES: Whatever it is.

KDM: I know, whatever.

ES: It's not necessary. There's something else that people don't understand and that is all this stuff is separable. You can go out there to Pelican shoals on a Saturday morning and there won't be a conch. By the time the sun sets, there'll be thousands of conchs. What people don't understand is the conchs going to the sand. They're there, you just can't see them. I'm amazed when people tell me, I was at a part the other night and some lady says, "Well, it's a shame all the conchs are gone." That is such a lie. It's not even reasonable. You have reasonable laws. I believe that the law on the grouper are criticized when it was a good law. I don't think there's a thing in the world wrong with that.

KDM: What about the jewfish?

ES: The jewfish is definitely a good law because jewfish is stupid and friendly.

KDM: [laughter]

ES: I think, again, if you catch a jewfish on the line, and you can take a measurement to be within reason, I think you should take the big ones. I don't see a reason why you can't harvest a big jewfish. But to allow a jewfish to be slaughtered with powerhead, everybody knew it was wrong. That's terrible. That's like the buffalo, they're too stupid to run. I was out the other with my [inaudible] and we build down and I had about 150-pound jewfish come out. It's a stupid thing, man. He wouldn't leave me alone. He followed me around. I tell you one thing they're going to find is they let the jewfish come back strong enough vacuum and you won't have as many crawfish you used to have.

KDM: Then they'll have to [inaudible] crawfish.

ES: They're back in [inaudible]. I've seen even the small jewfish, we'll take them out. Have you ever seen how they work? They'll go down and they lay against the ledge. They'll put their whole body and they'll wrap their tail in and then they'll go – like that and they'll turn around and suck them up. They'll pull them up just like that.

KDM: Wow.

ES: You wouldn't believe.

KDM: It will be wild to see.

ES: But the only large, really big jewfish I ever saw I killed. I had a lot of guilt about it because this is long time ago killing something that big was something I never done before. It just seems to me that was a pitiful thing. I know it's stupid but I felt bad about it. But I think a reasonable taking of jewfish of say, over 200 pounds, I don't think that's a big deal.

KDM: I think that they need to know a little bit more about their spawning as far as how old are they going to actually do that. Then determine what was appropriate because you need to at least give them a chance to do something so that we have more babies. But there has got to be –

ES: Hey, look. It's like the conch. If they really felt the conch was a problem, you got two or three years, they come back in this quantity. I think people look at that when they go out there and they go, "This is sad. All my life, I've been taking conchs." The guy says to himself, "I've been doing this all my life. They are telling me this is endangered and there's ten gazillion." If he knows anything about them, he knows they're going to term and they're actually dying out. Why can't you take a conch that's 8 inches, 6 inches on a row and up. How a damn conch, you can pick it up and measure that sucker.

KDM: Measure it down the lip?

ES: Sure. Measure down the lip or measure from point to stern. They can come up with a measurement between the top horns. So, I have not seen the deterioration, certainly in game fish, I haven't seen the deterioration. I still see snuck up in the channel, certain spawning times a year up in the mud keys.

KDM: When is that?

ES: I can't answer that. I don't know. I just know that there are certain times of the year, I'm diving in there and I usually dive in there when it's real rough outside just to dive, swim.

KDM: Get in the water, getting wet.

ES: Yes. I like to look.

KDM: What do you feel like when you are going back here. There are a lot of grass flats. Have you seen a difference –

ES: I can tell you this in the sponging business, I'm in the sponge business is I'm amazed with the number of sponges that are there that weren't there when I was a kid. As long as we only allow hooking sponges, the day we go to diving of the sponges, I think we're going to wipe them.

KDM: Why?

ES: If you ever hook sponge, when you're working a sponge boat from a [inaudible] and I've hooked sponge and I've cleaned sponge, so I've worked with it. When you're out there, first of all, you can only fish when it absolutely calm. Second of all, you can't take a sponge if you're a real master and a real strong guy and you got a really big pole you can get in about 15-foot water on an absolutely, absolutely crystal-clear day. That's your maximum. So, anything or any water deeper than that is spore stuck, and they release millions and millions of spores every year. So, gazillions of spores. They have a limit on the size, and the sponge hook itself, you can't pull a sponge under the sides. It won't pull that sponge through. You got all that, plus the fact that you see a sponge over here and you boat. You're usually working with your engine and you got a

rope on either side of your stomach so you turn the engine [inaudible]. So, you go over to the sponge and while you're pulling the sponge, there may be six other sponges that you're missing in as you pull it and get it in the boat and your boat has moved on. So, you can go back the next day to the exact same area. You sponge in and sponge all and you're back the next day after that and sponge and then the weather changes. Sponge is also buried up in the sand because that's where they go. It's in sand bottom and you get a lot of shifting bottom. So, after a good blow, you can go back to that area again. There's all kinds of sponges you never knew were there and you go, "Geez, how did I miss this?" You take a diver and put him on the bottom and he dives in any kind of regular pattern. He's going to take everything up the bottom. So, you're much better off hooking [inaudible] those sponges and this goes back to the sponges boards here. That's why they had the sponge boards because those guys were down there and methodically taking out every sponge. They wiped out most of the sponge, they don't have any. That's something I've been the legislature twice on the [inaudible] and they keep trying. The Tarpon Springs keeps trying to get the law change because (Monroe?) county is the only place you can't dive sponge. The day they let them dive sponge, we're not going to have sponge. So, this is one time when the old-fashioned, stupid method is better than the modern harvesting method. It's the same difference between this and handlining. If you're going to net everything or fish trap everything, then you are going to hurt the resource and you have to have some moderation. I'm not against all laws but I'm against stupid laws.

KDM: I have friends that are a couple they go out their handline, commercial hand liners. They bring in fish better than a lot of the other fishing that I know. They're just handliners. They're doing great. They're doing fine. It shows that the old methods work.

ES: Sure. You can still make a living point fishing. It is not the living you can make if you hit the crawfish, right? But again, (talk?) to your crawfish and initially, they die. The price suck, the quantity suck, everything was against them. They catch, I wouldn't doubt is down.

KDM: It's been down.

ES: But that also cycles. I've seen it go down and I've seen it go right back up. Sometimes, it's a three-year cycle, some is a five-year cycle. You can't just go in there and say, "Oh, it's down this year. Everything is wrong. Oh, my god, the resource is dying out." I am opposed to people saying, "We're going to keep reducing the number of traps," and that's going to increase the size of the crawfish and the poundage will be the same." I don't think it will work. But again, we're very good about putting laws in place and the bureaucracy is very bad about saying, "Wait a minute, we made a mistake. We shouldn't allow people to take a few pounds."

KDM: They are not even finding out whether or not their law is working half the time. No, there's no study. There's no one watching. There's no one observing. So, half the time, you don't even know if it works or not.

ES: Anyway, in my mind, I can go out there on any given day and get enough to eat. The commercial fishermen are pulling more yellowtail off than they ever had before and they're using old-fashioned methods to do it. The gray sappers are in great shape. The grouper are doing fine now that there's a size limit. I'm not sure they needed that extra inch that they put on.

KDM: Do you know much about mackerel fishing?

ES: Nothing. I can tell you this that from what I've heard and what I observed myself that there were literally millions of fish out there this year, the kingfish, the king mackerel, that just went to waste. They went to waste. They're totally under harvesting the product, totally under harvesting.

KDM: There are two different prices on the [inaudible]. The price that is on the mackerel that handliners brought in and then the price on the mackerel that the nets brought in.

ES: The net beats up fish. People are...

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