

Merle Stanfill: [laughter]

Karen DeMaria: Is this your correct mailing address? 55 B Avenue...

MS: Avenue E.

KD: Avenue what?

MS: E.

KD: E?

MS: Yes.

KD: Did you get my mail?

MS: No. [inaudible] I don't know what you sent me.

KD: Christmas cards. [laughter] You got Christmas cards from me. How long have you lived in the Keys?

MS: Seventeen years.

KD: Were you a commercial fisherman when you moved down here?

MS: No.

KD: What did you do?

MS: Hard work. [laughter] [inaudible]

KD: Well, what did you do?

MS: I didn't do anything.

KD: What was besides that? Just you were pretending to be a fisherman?

MS: Retired.

KD: Retired. Okay. But you spent a lot of time on the water?

MS: Yes. Had a boat, a sailboat then.

KD: All right. I was going to tell you. It is safe to say you have seventeen years of experience on the water in the Keys.

MS: All right.

KD: How long have you been a crab fisherman? You notice I did not say legitimately.  
[laughter]

MS: It was very portable income. [laughter] Thirteen, fourteen, years, whatever.

KD: You used traps, right? Have you always used traps?

MS: No. They [inaudible] for a while.

KD: What did you do when you...

MS: The last eight years, I've used traps.

KD: Right. Last eight years.

MS: [inaudible] years now. Seven, eight years.

KD: You used wire fish traps, or did you use lobster wood traps?

MS: I used wire fish traps. This year, I also used [inaudible] traps.

KD: Before that, what did you do when you...

MS: Put the line band in, longlines [inaudible].

KD: Have you always targeted snappers and groupers?

MS: [inaudible]

KD: Now, do you understand what my project is all about?

MS: No.

KD: I have been hired by the Nature Conservancy and the Center for Marine Conservation to go up and down the Keys and talk to longtime residents and user people of the water. My job is to [inaudible] and find out what changes they have observed that have occurred.

MS: Who do they answer to?

KD: Who is they?

MS: Who do you work for?

KD: They are a not-for-profit environmental agency. This is donations. They get money from

donations, and they put out research grants.

MS: What type of donations do they get?

KD: I was hired through a research grant. They were like, "You know" – but you remember (Don Asarac?) who was the director of Marine Conservation and The Nature Conservancy here? Big guy from Australia.

MS: Probably [inaudible].

KD: I think you met him at least once [inaudible]. Well, Don had spent like a year and a half here. All he kept hearing at all the meetings he went to that fishermen were fishing and complaining saying, "We told you that ten, fifteen years ago. No one listened to us then."

MS: [inaudible] they asked for restrictions. [inaudible]

KD: [inaudible] fisheries, water quality, how Florida Bay became a big issue in the recent one year. Before that, fishermen had been saying, "Something is wrong with Florida Bay." For the last ten, fifteen years, they have been saying.

MS: Well, then he knew what it was.

KD: Yes, but no one listened. So, Don was like, "We should really – somebody should sit down and do a research project and go talk to the people and find out what they are saying and what they are seeing." So, that is where I come in. I was hired. I was picked out of twenty people. So, I went through the whole interview process. I was picked from twenty people to do this report. I have to have it finished in three months. I am just running around talking...

MS: No extensions available?

KD: Yes. [laughter] Are you kidding? Don...

MS: I'm just being a realist.

KD: Don just got invited to Indonesia for the month of May. I have been invited to go too. I am just like going, "Oh, God, I cannot." I get paid straight salary.

MS: Just put this off another month.

KD: Well, I might ask...

MS: Extraordinary circumstances.

KD: No, I cannot. I might ask for two weeks and explain all. I do not know. I am honest, Merle. I cannot help it. I am an honest person.

MS: Well, this is honest.

KD: [laughter] Yes, he is going over there. It is like the dividing line of species. It is like the point at which there is marsupials and regular – all the weird things you can ever think about, of animals and fish and stuff that are there, that is at this point on the world. I was like, "I want go." [laughter]

MS: I want to go.

KD: I do not want to see videos. I want to go. I mean, two weeks at a luxury resort and two weeks on a boat.

MS: Yes. I think I'd want to go too.

KD: I do not know. I have to stay.

MS: That is great.

KD: But anyway, that is what my report is about. That is what I am doing. That is why I want to sit here and talk to you. What I want mainly from you is information regarding changes that you have observed that have occurred while you have been out in the water, either with fisheries, water quality, water clarity, sea grasses, coral areas, algae, anything just that you have noticed a change. Anything that stuck out in your mind in the last, what, seventeen years.

MS: That's very long in a while for [inaudible].

KD: Well, but down here, the...

MS: [inaudible] algae or anything, I mean, I did it for five, six years, stuff like that.

KD: But a lot of the other stuff seems to have occurred since 1980 when I am getting down here.

MS: [inaudible] decline of fish, but local ones.

KD: Well, that is just that. Water quality and clarity is really drastically changing.

MS: It is [inaudible].

KD: Is it mainly Tortugas? Where from?

MS: [inaudible] Tortugas. Now West of the [inaudible].

KD: North? The north side, south side?

MS: All sides.

KD: All sides of Tortugas.

MS: Primarily the west now.

KD: How deep?

MS: Anywhere from 280 – no, anywhere from like 360 up to 990.

KD: That area is deeper water.

MS: That's where [inaudible].

KD: Yes. [inaudible] stuff like that. Is there anything that you can tell me that you have observed? What is the first thing you would like to tell me about the changes, if anything? For better or for worse.

MS: Environmental-type changes?

KD: Yes, in fish stock, [inaudible] sea grasses, water clarity.

MS: There's no decline in the fish stocks. The only thing I can see is that the average temperature for the last six years has been higher than it was previous years.

KD: Yes, temperature of water.

MS: So, no.

KD: [laughter] Summertime it is.

MS: No, I mean the winters have been so much milder. I mean, you don't see any fish kills like you used to see ten years ago from cold water and things like that.

KD: Where did you see those?

MS: Right here in Key West in the harbor.

KD: In the shallow water or the deeper water?

MS: The shallow water. They go floating all over the harbor and off the islands. [inaudible] dropped down way into the thirties. I mean, we had all these fish kills. I mean, [inaudible] floating everywhere.

KD: When was the last time there was a big fish kill? Do you remember the year?

MS: Ten, eleven years ago, maybe?

KD: Remember any other significant storms?

MS: That was as far as temperature [inaudible]. It did affect the shallow waters. I don't think it had any other effect on the deeper waters.

KD: Right. That is [inaudible]. But these observations you have had from running back and forth. See, that is also part of it.

MS: We had enormous fish kills. It was everywhere. [inaudible] As far as the total fishing that I know, I mean my fishing has suddenly increased every year. My fishing has been better than it's ever been.

KD: Are you still getting a lot of snappers and groupers? Or are you...

MS: 90 percent.

KD: Are you seeing a change in the other stuff you are catching?

MS: Methods of fishing.

KD: In the methods?

MS: Just things like [inaudible] areas. But this place still seems to be just as productive. Some places did fall off. But you leave there. You can go back there six months from then, a year. I mean, you don't continue [inaudible].

KD: Are you seeing a change in the overall composition of your catch, the other stuff, during the years? Or is it all pretty much been the same?

MS: [inaudible] I switched over to using shrimp traps.

KD: Excuse me?

MS: Using shrimp traps. [inaudible] I get forty, fifty baskets of traps. [inaudible] which greatly increases your catch of snapper. If there is an increase in snapper, there is a corresponding decrease in groupers. From a change of [inaudible] I mean, they increase. Instead of catching maybe 200 pounds of yellowtail out of 300 pounds [inaudible], 2,000 pounds of fish, you're catching 1500 pounds of yellowtail out of 2,000 pounds of fish. You're catching, instead of 200 pounds of hog snappers, you're maybe catching 800 or 900 pounds of hog snappers.

KD: Are you saying a difference in the size of the fish that you are catching in the last ten, fifteen years?

MS: Fish seem to have decreased in size. But I mean that could be attributed to a lot of things.

KD: Exactly. Exactly. See, what I am trying to show is –

MS: [inaudible] amount of fish.

KD: – has it been a gradual decrease? Yes, it is not something real obvious. It is kind of gradually been occurring.

MS: Yes, especially in the [inaudible]. Just like I said, [inaudible] target certain species. That doesn't change [inaudible] target the yellowtail, cods, and mud snappers.

KD: During the course of the year, how often do you change your target size? Or is it more in terms of years or months?

MS: More in terms of years [inaudible].

KD: How often? Every two years, four years?

MS: I can say like every three years [inaudible]. I used to target groupers then in those areas. Other people go there. If you're doing good in one area, it doesn't take long for other people to move into it. I just don't want to compete with anybody else. I move out somewhere else. I always seem to do better.

KD: The old [inaudible] just trudges along, right? [laughter]

MS: They won't quit.

KD: Do you do anything else besides fishing right now?

MS: No.

KD: What did you do before fishing? [inaudible] or something?

MS: [inaudible] a lot of it.

KD: Did you ever work for IRS?

MS: Did I ever work for them? No.

KD: You do help people with taxes?

MS: I used to [inaudible].

KD: Nice. It came up in another conversation.

MS: But that was when I was traveling obviously.

KD: See, I never knew that part of you.

MS: [inaudible] Monday, and I was gone. Never got back to the main office, which is mainly Virginia just out of Washington. Never got back until Friday. Then Saturday and Sunday in the office, getting ready for next week.

KD: Anything else you have noticed about fish? What about what you are pulling up on the traps? Are you pulling up any kind of a different algae or other type of plant life or weird creatures?

MS: We haven't had any algae problem for several years. [inaudible] two years that we had it. Eight years ago – two years ago I think, we had the big algae problem in the south side of the brown grass. They call it grass, brown and slimy grass. The strippers, they're more than [inaudible]. They can't work at all.

KD: It is too heavy, the nets and everything like that.

MS: That's only one trap. [inaudible] They can't work it off. But it seems like about a six-year span there. But I mean, where there's any type of [inaudible], I mean, you can't make any determinations from just two [inaudible].

KD: Not unless I have talked to people who have been here eighty years and have that sort of the same thing.

MS: Yes, [inaudible]. Right.

KD: That is why your information and then when I go and talk to these other people [inaudible].

MS: Two years ago and then like seven or eight years ago.

KD: Was it all throughout the waterfall, or is it down on the bottom?

MS: No, it stayed in there. It stayed...

KD: Deep water?

MS: No. It was all through the water because if your line was coming up, it was hanging off of the line. [inaudible]. I mean, it was south of the bottom. Of course, whether it was uniform south the bottom, I don't know. Used to bring it [inaudible] whatever's there, it keeps catching it all the way up.

KD: You notice anything else like that? Tortugas is supposed to be this big, pristine area, that is why.

MS: Well, this is primarily a Tortugas [inaudible]. Because I mean, I know there's been other instances, but this is fairly intense. We [inaudible] much more than the [inaudible] than the other stuff.



KD: Have you ever noticed any interesting coral formations out there? Are you too much in the water to be going nearshore and stuff?

MS: [inaudible] in the water.

KD: I do not know much about Tortugas. I have been out there once.

MS: Well, there's plenty of beautiful corals, a lot of green corals and a lot of dead [inaudible] coral. Enormous batches of that. I mean, it's been dead ever since I have been going there – probably even before I came to the Keys eighteen years ago. I mean, it's the same batches. They were there then. I haven't seen any other areas [inaudible].

KD: Have you noticed a size change in the hog snappers?

MS: [inaudible]

KD: Catch more now?

MS: I catch about 700, 800, 900 pounds of hogs. But before, I always used to put the line before. It was primarily after the spawning seasons. I think you have to use shrimp [inaudible] because that's all they eat, shrimp and stuff. [inaudible] when you catch them in January and February when they're spawning, you have to have [inaudible] 400 or 500 pounds in a trip, like five or six days trip. [inaudible]

KD: I just remember when I was at Tortugas that when I did see a hog snapper, it was a lot bigger than what I am used to here.

MS: Yes. Well, they were [inaudible]. I mean, you're catching [inaudible].

KD: Like [inaudible], right? [laughter]

MS: Well, see, that was the Bahamas when they were fishing [inaudible].

KD: Yes. It was [inaudible].

MS: [inaudible] working on Harvey [inaudible] big snapper like this. Awesome.

KD: You used to work with Harvey?

MS: No. My dad worked with Harvey [inaudible].

KD: Did he? I did not know that.

MS: [inaudible] [laughter]

KD: The one that [inaudible] told me about.

MS: No. I could probably take you and a few other ones.

KD: Oh, yes. Well, he has been opening up lately. [laughter]

MS: Got to figure out you were going to turn him in.

KD: Yes.

MS: [laughter]

KD: You said spawning, January, February, of hog snappers. Where?

MS: In the Tortugas.

KD: What side?

MS: Well, now west side, north side, all around the Tortugas [inaudible]. Pretty much [inaudible] in the northwest and the north side.

KD: What kind of [inaudible] that on the reef or in the bank?

MS: Up there on the banks, on the [inaudible].

KD: Have you noticed any other spawning groups?

MS: No. [inaudible] [laughter]

KD: Tell me. Tell me some.

MS: Well, the yellowtails usually spawn down there in May. The red groupers come in in January while the blacks come in in December and January.

KD: December?

MS: [inaudible] Yes. They call yelloweye snapper, the [inaudible] snappers. They are in [inaudible] April.

KD: What about [inaudible]?

MS: [inaudible]

KD: [laughter]

MS: Sure. [inaudible] I closed them this year. Didn't have the time to tie them.

KD: What?

MS: They didn't have enough time to close them.

KD: Really? I thought it was closed this year for good. I wonder –

MS: It was really. I don't know if I really approve of them. What I disapprove about the mud snapper where they want to [inaudible].

KD: Spit it out. Come on, Merle.

MS: But they want to say it's a – they are down there [inaudible] them or [inaudible]. I can't attest to that one really. What upsets me the most...

KD: But you got to give the species the chance to reproduce.

MS: I don't really know if it's being stressed. I mean you're talking about a real small area with a really prevalent fish in the area. You're talking about real small [inaudible]. What always upset me was the fact that they wouldn't get the money for them when they brought them back. The price range, \$1.75, \$2, [inaudible]. They would get on their [inaudible] and sell them for [inaudible]. That's what upset me more than anything. I mean, why? Why do that to a resource?

KD: Well, it seems like the fisheries just totally depended on supply and demand. The prices, I guess, twenty years ago, grouper was not in demand. The price went up on grouper. Yes, price started going up. Then all of a sudden, everyone caught groupers.

MS: Yes. [inaudible] I suppose, yes. But comparably speaking, I don't think the price has gone up in the last fifteen years on any of those fish compared to what [inaudible]. I think that's [inaudible].

KD: Have you noticed any difference with the clarity of the water?

MS: Not an overall fact thing. It seems to be [inaudible] with the weather.

KD: Nothing outside of weather?

MS: Yes, not outside of weather. [inaudible]

KD: I do not think a lot of what is going on has quite hit Tortugas yet. It is getting there. It will be there this year or next year.

MS: You got [inaudible].

KD: Yes. But then [inaudible]. That is why I think it might be – I mean, the last big storm we

had a few weeks ago with those really low, low tides were pulling all kinds of shit out of Florida Bay. I mean, you could see. It is just hell from here up. Really is bad. It is going too. It is creeping along. It is like within the last few years down here, it has become noticeable right here, just slowly getting out that way.

MS: The volume of the water here is nowhere near – what would take ten years here, it may take a hundred years or 200 years to get that volume out there. But if it didn't settle, I don't think it'd get [inaudible]. Well, it could always do that [inaudible] up shit out of that. In the Florida Bay though, if you go that far.

KD: Probably not. Probably not directly.

MS: I think they'll be [inaudible] just the toxicity level would be too green here to permit it. Then you level out there. [laughter]

KD: [laughter] Eat your lunch.

MS: Sure.

KD: What else? Is there anything, just think about, is there anything that you have noticed is different? You are basically telling me you have not really noticed anything?

MS: I really haven't. I mean, I haven't noticed any great decline in the fishing population...

KD: Even like driving out or anything?

MS: – or the water quality or any of those things. Of course, I don't have any experience in Florida Bay. But as far as here on West, no. No, I don't. The only determining factors that I've been able to see as far as fish production goes, it's so determined on the weather and Mother Nature. They know that is the main factor when it comes to fishing. Mother Nature, she's the one that will stir up the water. The fish go to congregate in the different areas. They need their food and the [inaudible]. I mean, normally the [inaudible] stay in those areas. But when they're stirred up, they can't [inaudible] So, where do they go? They go to the rock bottom which are much fewer, much more centered. That's why when you have a storm, that's where you go fish. The weather is bad. The water is dirty. The fish are going to the rocks. That's where you fish .

KD: Fish stay in mud a lot more when the water is dirty too.

MS: Well, they're looking for food. The food supplies really diminish in dirty water. There's sea moss in most of the sea. But [inaudible] it's primarily the weather.

KD: Yes. We are kind of learning the little deep idiosyncrasies of the weather and what happens in the water, pretty fun those stories.

MS: The weather's probably [inaudible] except in this area. This area is just over-fished. That's totally the [inaudible]. We don't go out here and [inaudible] and catch 600, 700 pounds of

yellowtail [inaudible], which was feasible twelve, thirteen years ago. But they were nowhere near the fishing pressure at that time [inaudible].

KD: In the last ten years, have you seen a dramatic increase in the numbers?

MS: A dramatic decrease in the numbers of fish in this area.

KD: But I mean, [inaudible] the pressure.

MS: Oh, yes. Well, look at their receipts.

KD: Excuse me?

MS: Look at their receipts for ten years ago, what their headcount was and how [inaudible] sold ten years ago.

KD: I have not talked [inaudible].

MS: [inaudible] what they're doing now. [inaudible]

KD: I am going to meet with Bill Wickers on Monday.

MS: [inaudible]

KD: That is my first [inaudible].

MS: Well, all you have to do is how many days they worked for the last three years compared to how many days they worked fifteen years ago [inaudible].

KD: Well, you figure, I mean, I have seen a dramatic increase just when I have been down here. In five years, there has been a sheer number of people that are now charged with captaining [inaudible].

MS: The number of boats that are available?

KD: Yes.

MS: And the days they fish, the number of days fished. The number of days these guys fished twenty years ago compared to the number of days they fish now, I mean –the people that go out on the Gulf stream now are...

KD: The [inaudible] barge.

MS: One of those [inaudible] compared to the number of people that went out there to fish twenty years ago. The [inaudible] day they made back then [inaudible].

KD: What? They do two now and one men? Did they double them now?

MS: Well, they [inaudible] do two sometimes. Depends on the [inaudible] they are going to go [inaudible].

KD: Have you noticed any difference in the stuff floating in the water or [inaudible] and weed line or anything like that?

MS: I haven't noticed any weed lines that [inaudible]. I don't see any stuff floating out there. You don't see any [inaudible].

KD: That they come off the big...

MS: The big ship.

KD: Yes.

MS: You don't see anywhere near that [inaudible].

KD: They have a dining room table made of lumber [inaudible] teak and stuff from the [inaudible].

MS: Yes. [inaudible] I mean, you don't see anywhere near that [inaudible]. I don't know. I mean, is there different ways that [inaudible].

KD: You might be a little more conscious.

MS: I doubt that.

KD: Windy days [inaudible]. Windy days is a sign to just [inaudible] my eye [inaudible].

MS: Yes. [laughter]

KD: I cannot wait for it to get cloudy or darker to put my regular glasses on, take these out of my eyes.

MS: Why can't you do those?

KD: I do not have prescription sunglasses. So, I cannot see if I take my eyes out. [laughter]

MS: Is that the difference?

KD: But I have regular glasses. So, I can survive at night, but the sun really hurts.

MS: Well, they're sensitive [inaudible] the eyes probably are really sensitive.

KD: Very sensitive. Always have been.

MS: I mean, I know what [inaudible] sunglasses [inaudible].

KD: Really? How old are you?

MS: How old am I?

KD: Yes.

MS: Fifty.

KD: Okay.

[end of transcript]