

Narrator: Manny Toledo

Interviewers: Vanessa Navarro Maza

Location: Miami, Florida

Date of Interview: July 16, 2019

Project Name: Endangered Fishing Traditions of the Greater Miami Area

Project Description: Broadly, the project seeks to preserve the rich history of endangered fishing traditions in the Greater Miami Area. These oral histories expand our knowledge and enrich our understanding of the region's fisheries as well as the role that fishing has had in shaping the region's economic and cultural life. Our goal was to interview key individuals connected to the fishing history of Miami, including commercial and for-hire fishers, fish dealers/processors, fish markets, and bait and tackle shops. Geographically, we aim to cover major fishing areas that are endangered and undergoing rapid change. These include the following: Miami River, Coconut Grove (Montys), and Haulover Park in North Miami. The first collection of interviews is focused on the Miami River. These interviews are conducted in English and Spanish.

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Abstract: Manny Toledo's interview, conducted on July 16, 2019, provides a detailed account of his experiences and reflections related to the maritime industry, particularly focusing on his career and personal history. Toledo shares insights into his early life, the influence of his family, and his introduction to the maritime sector. He discusses his professional journey, detailing various roles and responsibilities he undertook over the years, and emphasizes the challenges and rewards associated with working in this industry. Toledo also reflects on the broader changes within the maritime sector, highlighting technological advancements and shifts in industry practices. His narrative offers a personal perspective on the evolution of maritime work and underscores the significance of adaptability and continuous learning in maintaining a successful career.

VM: This is Vanessa Navarro Maza. I'm here with Manny Toledo on July 16, 2019. We'll be talking about fishing traditions on the Miami River. Can you say your name, please?

MT: Manuel Toledo.

VM: When and where were you born?

MT: Here in Miami, Florida, January 20, 1973.

VM: And have you lived here your whole life?

MT: Yes.

VM: And in what areas you have lived in?

MT: Miami. Right here, close to the river. The farthest I've ever lived is on 67th for a couple of years, otherwise, within ten minutes.

VM: When and how did you start fishing?

MT: That was easy. My dad had a fish house in Cuba. When my family migrated here, he started building the lobster traps commercially to sell to fishermen. As we grew up, we were building traps. We naturally fell into fishing.

VM: So it's something you've been doing since you can remember?

MT: Since I was ten.

VM: And is your dad the only person that was involved in introducing you to fishing? Or were there other family members, other people in the business with your dad?

MT: It's my brother and I. We're a team. My older brother. So we did it together.

VM: What was that process like of learning?

MT: Hard. [laughter]

VM: What was hard about it?

MT: Making all the mistakes and losing out. But you learn.

VM: So then, when did you come --? So you said your dad had his business in Cuba, and then he brought it here. You were born here. So tell me a little bit about your dad coming here to this country and continuing with fishing.

MT: Well, they came in 1965, I believe, with the clothes on their back. So he didn't bring his business over. He had to start over. He worked in factories. As a second job, he would build the traps and sell it to fishermen here because he knew them all. Most of them were from Cuba already, fishing. Until it slowly became the primary business that he had.

VM: Were a lot of these fishermen from the same area in Cuba?

MT: Yes.

VM: Which area?

MT: The same town. It's south of Havana. It's called Batabano. Surgidero de Batabano.

VM: So that's interesting. So there was kind of a community of fishermen who had a very similar experience and were trying to – you're saying doing odd jobs.

MT: Yeah. Most of the fishermen in the Miami River are from the same hometown. Other places in the Keys, they're from different places. But here in the Miami River, it's the same hometown, a fishing village. It's still a fishing village.

VM: Who are some of the outliers in terms of that community? Most people are from Cuba and the same hometown. Are there any other smaller groups that have come and have been working on the river?

MT: Not on the river.

VM: No?

MT: They're all from the same place.

VM: The same place. So this is related to that. One of the things that we're hoping to learn about is techniques or skills or even terms for certain things that people bring from their home countries. I'm assuming because it was a large community of fishermen from Cuba, a lot of it is Cuban techniques. Do you happen to know if there's anything special about the way that people were fishing in Cuba, and they brought those skills here to Miami? Do you know if there's anything specific like that?

MT: No. I think it's very similar to the techniques that were being used here already. The traps are different. The trap styles that they found here, they adopted them basically and continued with that. They used different traps in Cuba, different grounds, different materials available, things like that.

VM: Can you give me some specifics about what's different?

MT: Okay. Let's take wood, for example. Here, we use pine. Whether it's from Central America or domestic from the US, we use pine. It's cheap, abundant, grows fast. In Cuba, they

used mangroves. It lasts a long time, very strong. You shouldn't touch the mangroves, but that's what they had available. So there's differences.

VM: How about in the technique of putting them together or the actual build of the traps?

MT: Well, my family has been – is the oldest trap builder in Florida because there's been others through the years, but we're the ones that are still here, I guess, due to my generation. But no, aside from the materials, we use staples and nails here, fasteners that weren't available there, stainless steel versus steel and things like that – even tying the mangrove sticks together with lines instead of using fasteners, things like that that are different. But it comes down to materials, availability.

VM: Now, is there anything that sets your traps apart from other trap builders here along the river?

MT: Yes. For a commercial trap, we're the best quality so far. A fisherman can buy premium wood – premium materials and build every single trap perfect. But they only have to build a few hundred a year. But when you have to build tens of thousands, production is different than just building what you need. So for production, we're the best trap built. And we do all kinds of custom orders, wire wrapping, different sizes. Fishermen are very superstitious. They believe that lobsters carry around a measuring tape, and they might decide that certain sizes are better and fish more. Very superstitious.

VM: Can you tell me a little more about that?

MT: I have a fisherman – I have several. But anyway, one of them swears that thirteen and a half inch trap by twenty-three and a half is the ultimate trap as compared to other sizes like fifteen by twenty-two or sixteen by twenty-four. You try to have uniform sizes so that you don't go crazy when you make molds because we have to have production. But he swears by the size, and it's just superstition. Some fishermen believe – you know, the lobster goes into a funnel to fall into the trap. They believe colored funnels fish better, even though I've heard some scientific research saying that lobsters are color blind. So they'll swear by it, and it works for them. They believe it, so you have to agree.

VM: So you have to make it?

MT: Yes.

VM: So, aside from trap building, can you tell me a little bit about other roles that you play in the fishing industry here in Miami?

MT: Well, aside from actually fishing, I have a group of fishermen that I basically act as their dealer for the seafood that they catch, lobster, stone crab, things like that. I get them the best price that I can. We work as a team. It all goes through me. But we're like a small co-op. We all take of each other. We're there in a small place where we're like family. We don't let strangers in to disrupt our Zen. I do the best that I can for them, and it works out.

VM: Can you tell me a little bit about who these people are that are your team?

MT: Four other fishermen. Like names?

VM: If you're comfortable, yeah.

MT: Sure, sure. One is (Jorge Quintana?). Another is (Pedro Ruida?), (Ricardo Ataye?), (Vicente Monteagudo?), and that's them. I'm the other fisherman.

VM: How long have you been working with this group in this way?

MT: Well, Ricardo's been with me for, I don't know, ten, twelve years. Pedro came on about four years back. The other two just came on board last year right after Irma. The river's changing. Everybody's running out of places to be and having to move. They can't afford it. There's only two fish houses left. It's very difficult to be in those fish houses. They have outrageous – you can't call it a fee. They just don't pay the fishermen what market price is because they say they have to cover their expenses. So they're better off. They're better off coming with me. I don't have more because I don't have any more room.

VM: So that coming together, that teaming up, that's a way of kind of adapting to some of these changes?

MT: Yes, yes. We don't know where the future lies yet. I still have a lease. I don't own any land here. It's too expensive. It's millions of dollars. And fishing just doesn't cover that. We can't even come close.

VM: Can you tell me a little bit about where you've worked along the river? Because you've moved, right, a couple of times? Can you walk us through that?

MT: Okay. The first place is what use to be Atco Marine Fisheries. I also fished for some years for Miami River Lobster. I partnered with Garcia for some time. That didn't work out. Then I just went on my own.

VM: What were some of the reasons for you moving around, working with different people?

MT: I've always been independent. Other than when we first started as a kid, we started with Atco Marine; he helped us out, the owner, previous owner. Other than that, we were always independent. We never needed the fish houses' help. But I fished independently for these fish houses. So I always received, say, an extra fifty cents because I didn't owe them anything. I didn't need anything from them. But we've always been independent. That's why we've moved around, trying to adapt, find our place, or go where we couldn't in some cases.

VM: In terms of the relationships with these fish houses, what are some of the things that make or break a relationship? What are some of the things that are really important in terms of you maintaining that relationship with them, for it being beneficial to both sides?

MT: Well, the only benefit to the fishermen is that we have the dock and the trap space. There is no other benefit. It costs them one way or the other. Some fish houses charge – it's very low. It's very cheap rent for the dock and the trap space. It's very low. Agreeably, it's low. But where they really charge them is on what they don't pay them in market price for their product. It's dollars. Dollars on the pound difference.

VM: Let's see here. Because I want to talk to you also about your work as a dealer, but focusing still on fishermen and on these relationships, how has that changed over time, the relationship with fish houses, and things like dock space? Have these things always been a struggle? Or have they changed over time? Have different issues come into play?

MT: Fishermen and fish houses? When I was young, it wasn't a struggle. Not at all. Sure, the fish houses always underpaid the fishermen a little bit on the market price. Now, it's grossly underpaid because they claim ridiculous expenses, like the purchase of land. But they own the land. It's not that they rent the land. Now, it's one-sided, completely one-sided. I'm not just defending fishermen. We need the fish houses, obviously, but to an extent. If I fished for a particular fish house now and I wasn't independent, it could cost me in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand dollars a year just for being with them. It's a lot of money. It should cover my rent somewhere, and it does. But we'll see how long that lasts.

VM: So are fishermen just – how are they adapting to this? Is there something that they're doing to supplement what they do? Or like you said, some of them are just taking off and not working on the river anymore?

MT: No, it's an old generation of fishermen. They're reaching the point – a lot of them have reached the point of retirement. When I say retirement, it means they can't fish anymore. It's not that they up and decide to retire. Some have sold out. There's no young generation. I'm just about the youngest one.

VM: Really?

MT: Yes. There's, I think, two others that are younger than me, and that's it.

VM: So I guess you're not seeing that in terms of family businesses, that next generation isn't coming in and taking that on?

MT: The problem with that is the cost of fishing. If you want to make a living from fishing nowadays, you literally have to invest a minimum of about five hundred thousand dollars. You're not going to make that back in the first year. It's always a risk. You could always encounter a hurricane in your first year of investment and lose half of it. So it's very risky. It's very expensive. Especially if you don't know the business, your first year is going to be disastrous because it's natural. You don't know how to fish. So there's no incentive. It looks good, and it sounds good, and it is. It is a great life. But money-wise, it's tough.

VM: What are some of these things that you have to invest in specifically?

MT: The biggest expense is the trap certificates that we have.

VM: Tell me a little bit about those.

MT: It was a program – I can't remember now what year it came into effect. There was a combination of stakeholders along with Florida Fish and Wildlife, the Conservation Commission. They wanted to regulate the amount of traps in the water, all in the conservation of our resources. They came up with a plan, the trap certificate program. This limited the amount of traps in the water. It was going to passively, through the years, go limiting the traps in the water by a passive-aggressive approach of a discount – a percentage discount on every sale. So I could have my tags my whole life. But if I sell them, the buyer – not me – the buyer will lose a percentage of it. That will go back to the state. It will go to reducing traps. Right now, I can't remember what year it came into effect. But it's all something you can find out. That came into effect, and it started – well, they claimed we at one point had a million traps in the water. I don't think so. But they said that. They want to reach a point of four hundred thousand traps, which I don't think we're far from it. So that, with many other fishing regulations.

VM: So that's one huge expense.

MT: Huge. These used to be cheap. They started off for many – at the beginning cheap, ten dollars, fifteen dollars, twenty dollars. We've seen them go to two-hundred dollars. When you multiple that times a thousand, times three-thousand, times five-thousand that I have, it's a lot of money. Then you have your boat. Then you have all the traps and the gear that you have to get into – any operation's half a million dollars. There are small ones. But any operation that's going to make money is half a million dollars.

VM: So we talked a little bit about the overhead of the fishing component of what you do. How about as a dealer? Can you walk us through a little bit about that part of your business and what's involved?

MT: Well, I would be considered a very small dealer. I only have five boats. We had been in the live market [in] China for some years now. We probably saved the industry because they came in the year after the recession was in full force here. I believe it was 2008. We got paid two dollars and seventy-five cents for a pound for the lobster, which puts us in red. We didn't make any money. We lost money that year. The year after, the Chinese market started. And since then, we've been in that Chinese market, which is now greatly affected by all the tariff wars. But as a dealer, I don't hold the lobster. I don't process it since it's live. So it goes from one hand to the other. We take it straight from the boats. They come in alive and in tanks with oxygen. They pick it up. They go to their tanks. That night or the night after, they package it and ship it off. So I don't have any huge expense, other than the land, the lease, which I need to provide the space, both dock and land for my fishermen.

VM: Can you talk a little bit about that transition to the live market? You said it basically saved the industry. Can you talk a little bit about that?

MT: Sure. It was great for a few years at the beginning. We saw in peaks – festivals and holidays in China. We saw peaks of twenty. These are boat prices, twenty and twenty-one dollars. That's what we would love to have. But no, the average now, with all these tariff wars, is about seven dollars. Now in August, when we begin this season, the average will be five. That's borderline to us being able to fish – five dollars. Anything under, we're not going to cover. Everything is too expensive. The live market did literally save the industry after that disastrous year of 2008. I didn't even fish all of my traps. I left twenty percent on land that year because, at 2.75, we knew we weren't going to cover it. There's so much – our industry doesn't have a huge volume. We're not like you would see on TV, these Alaska fisheries where they have huge volumes. I think the State of Florida is somewhere between four to seven million pounds commercially. Out of all of the hundreds of fishermen, when you divide that, that's not a big volume per fishermen. So price is important. It's the only way that we survive with all the expenses that we have. And it is expensive to operate a fishing business here.

VM: So you've kind of walked us through once there was a switch to the live market and changes since then. Can you tell us a little bit about how it was before then?

MT: Oh, all whole, but it all was frozen. They processed, and they cooked also. There were markets to Europe. They had whole cooked or whole green, which is the whole lobster, but frozen, not cooked, with preservatives in them. But it was a very, I thought, stable market. We didn't see many price fluctuations through the year. The increases would be twenty-five cents, fifty cents. So would be the drops. In the live market, you see ups and downs of dollars. But it was stable. It was easier. But I think buyers had to have the capacity to hold lobster. They had to have the capital to buy for a good period of time before they sold. So in that sense, I suppose now for the live as well, you have to have enough capital because it's more expensive. But it was a different time. It was easier. As a processor, they had to process. So if I were a buyer in those times, I would have had to have more equipment, more employees. It would have been different.

VM: So you told us a little bit about different buyers, like buyers in Europe and then, obviously, buyers in China with the live market. Can you tell us a little bit about other buyers and how that has changed throughout the time that you've been working in the industry?

MT: You mean the other buyers that exist?

VM: Yeah. Who has been buying locally and internationally, and how has that changed over time? Who's been constant?

MT: Well, as far as before, I don't know the buyers that were overseas, other than Europe and things like that. But the buyers that exist now were, for the most part, the same buyers that were around back then. They survived. They processed. They were big buyers then, and they're still big buyers now – buyers like Keys Fisheries, Carlos Seafood, big processors that survived all the economic disasters and things like that, all the hurricanes and everything. They're still around. So they're solid.

VM: And what would you say – you’ve talked about a lot of them. But some of the major drivers for change in the market and as a dealer in that part of what you do – what are some of the major drivers of change? How do you adapt to them?

MT: Well, the next problem now is going to be, for example, the Chinese market. We don’t really see confidence in it. It’s too volatile. We don’t know how it’s going to end. Will it continue? Will it end. Will it reach a point where it’s not worth it to us to have a live market? I don’t know. Uncertainty. Tariff wars. Who knows how long that’s going to happen. If they’ll find something that will stabilize it. Also, China, it’s just one market. We’re greatly affected by just everybody selling to one market. We need our European markets back. We have to have both. We can depend on another when one is having trouble. I think that’s the next hurdle, finding a balance between our markets.

Suzana Blake: Can I ask you – I don’t know if it’s clear for me, why was the European market lost?

MT: Because the Chinese market that came into strength – you could even call it came into power because they took over the industry – was a price that we couldn’t say no to, the fishermen. The fish houses were a little more reluctant to turn because being live, the issue of the live market is that the fish houses in between, those buyers that are the ones actually exporting to China, if the product arrives in China dead, they don’t pay for it because it’s not frozen. It doesn’t go on ice. It’s just gel packs in the boxes to maintain a temperature. So if there’s any issues with flights, which there are all the time, and they don’t – whatever percentage doesn’t arrive alive doesn’t get paid. So it’s a big loss. It’s completely out of the buyers’ control. The hauling, there is really no insurance. The airlines don’t pay the loss. So the Chinese market took over, and we lost the European – they were going to continue to consume lobster. They got it from other countries.

VM: So let’s keep talking about that, about drivers of change, some of the major pressures, and then also that idea about adaptation. You mentioned a couple of times hurricanes. Can you tell us a little bit about how natural disasters have impacted your work in the past and how you adapt?

MT: That’s easy. There is no adapting to a hurricane. Every time a hurricane hits directly, you lose everything, basically, as far as fishermen. The fish houses on land – dealers can have an effect, but nothing compared to the ocean. As a fish house, okay, it can take maybe the roof or damage a roof, things like that, the structure. Not too difficult to replace. When it’s your fishing gear, as a fisherman, it didn’t just take away the gear. It crippled you for the rest of that season, which almost every fishermen depends on every season. Not that many fishermen have reserves. So every time a hurricane comes, and they lose everything, it’s like almost starting from scratch. Hurricane Irma, I lost basically a hundred percent. I recovered fifty percent. But it was so damaged that I couldn’t use it for the following season. So it was basically a hundred percent. Then, the loss of income. Usually, lobster just disappears after a hurricane. They run for self-preservation. They don’t come back as quickly as they run. They trickle back. So it’s a loss. Every year with a hurricane is a loss.

VM: You were working during [Hurricane] Andrew. How does Andrew compare? Because there's certain things like on land, we might assume, oh, this one's – this is such a worse hurricane. But I guess as a fisherman, comparing different hurricanes that you've experienced, what makes for a really bad hurricane in your industry?

MT: I'll take Andrew over Irma. Andrew was fast, stronger winds but fast. The speed that he was traveling, if I'm not mistaken, it was traveling twenty miles an hour. Irma was a slow grind. She was giving us winds for over twenty-four hours. We saw hurricane winds with Andrew for, what was it, four or five hours? Maybe six? Irma was four and five times that amount. So even though Andrew was stronger, Irma created more destruction on the water. Waves develop over a period of time of sustained wind and tidal surges and things like that and currents. The longer the weather is on you, the more it builds the waves. So I'll take Andrew better. I lost a lot in Andrew. [laughter] But still, we have a better chance.

VM: A hundred percent is a hundred percent, yes.

MT: In Andrew, I was missing experience. I was much younger. With Irma, I had more experience, but you can't cover the time. If you beat on something long enough, you're going to break it. It's that simple.

VM: Similarly, talking about regulations and adaptation, how have regulations changed since you've been in the industry? How do you adapt to those changes?

MT: Night and day. When I started fishing, there was no limitation on traps. Sure, we had parks and reserves where you couldn't – sanctuaries where you couldn't fish. But the limitation on the gear and the economic impact of that limitation on the gear – we went from fish as many traps as you can afford to build to – to be honest with you, after the certificate program was put into effect, I was left with only ten. They only gave me ten tags because initially, when the program took effect, you didn't have to buy those tags. They had a formula for what – using past history, catch histories of each fisherman. I think they used three particular years, catch history. They worked out a formula where they thought that X-amount of pounds divided by X-amount of traps, that's what the fishermen actually had. That's what he's going to start with. We're going to go reducing from there. It was supposed to be something fair. But I wound up with ten. Well, because I was with a fish house in Denver Port, my catch. So I didn't show any catch for those three years that they used. I appealed. I think they gave me nine hundred. Of course, I had to provide my own documentation of what I caught. But that didn't make a difference. I currently have almost five thousand. Through the years, I've had to buy more into the industry to be able to make enough money with everything. It was cheaper back then, also. The cost of living was less. Fuel. When I was a kid, diesel was thirty-five cents when I started fishing. So all the expenses, they make a difference.

VM: What are some of the other major regulations that have drastically changed the way you do your work?

MT: That's the one that's really impacted us. Everything else has been completely logical and rational. I agree with most of it. There has been a change since Irma, which is beneficial to us.

We used to begin our trap soak on the first of August. When I was a kid, when I started, we dropped in July. We had more time to draw the traps. They got a longer soak at the beginning. So it made it easier. Then that changed. They changed the regulation to drop on the first, and we could pull on the 6th. So that meant that within five days, we had to drop everything we had. You could continue dropping. Nothing kept us from doing that. But when everybody's able to pull their gear, you want to start as well. So it was like a gold rush, a derby, or rush to get it all as quick no matter what the weather. We've dropped traps through tropical storms on us. So the risk was higher. But now, since Irma, they changed that back to almost what it used to be. Now we're allowed to drop the Saturday after mini-season, lobster mini-season, which is the last Wednesday and Thursday of the month of July. That gives us an extra four days, some years five. Now we can drop patiently, relax. If there's bad weather, we don't have to go out with the boats loaded, which is a major danger. So that is a positive regulation change. Everything else, nothing's really impacted other than the trap gear, the trap certificates.

VM: How about with the actual – the materials for the traps or the way that the traps are constructed? Have regulations affected that throughout the years?

MT: There are regulations for everything. All of our gear is regulated to specifications, maximum sizes, limits on everything. There haven't been many changes to that. All the trap specifications that we have, they're pretty reasonable. I don't really think anybody has an issue with it. The traps, they're not as efficient, which is a good thing for the resource. They have a chance to – if we lose a trap, it'll deteriorate. It's not going to be killing lobster or a crab or whatever it is for years to come. It'll deteriorate. They still fish for us. We used to dip them. When I was a kid, we used to dip the traps in a mixture of diesel and tar. And it extended the life of the trap another three or four years. I hated the process. Can you imagine in June and July, this heat, being covered with diesel and tar? I was glad when that regulation came in. When they made that illegal, no problem. Great. I think everybody else – oh, and let's not talk about for the next two months when you drop those traps in the water, there wasn't a day you didn't go home with your hands dark. The diesel and the tar got on everything because it'd take a couple of months for the ocean to leech out the diesel and the tar. So things like that. But that was a good thing. [laughter]

VM: When was that changed? When did that happen?

MT: I'd like to say it was around – I'm not sure. But I think it was around 1990. It could have been in the '80s. But I think it was in the '90s. I'm not certain. All the years get blurred together when it's that many. I'm not sure. But it's around that time.

VM: Has there been anything else like that, like a major change in the way that you prepare the traps or anything like that?

MT: Not really.

VM: No?

MT: I think everything has been small. There's a good – a decently major change coming up in some crab traps. They're going to require an escape hole in the trap. It's major – not individually for fishermen, because of the cost and the work. It's going to be, I don't know, somewhere in the neighborhood of three or four million dollars to change all that gear for stone crabbers. So that's going to be somewhat major. But so far, we're all right on that.

VM: So, in continuing to talk about pressures, adaptation, how about development? How is development on the river been an issue for you?

MT: That's another hurricane. Development on the river is another hurricane. We don't have a way out of that one. We don't know what the future holds. Development, if I'd have known, I would have bought up a chunk of the property on the river when I was much younger. Expensive property on the river was a few hundred thousand back then. Now it's a few million. It's just going that way. If you notice, I started out – what is that, Flagler, where Atco Marine is? Or 1st? Atco Marine was at 1st. That's where I started out. Now I'm at 12th Avenue. We keep getting pushed up the river to more commercial zones. So I don't know where we're going to wind up.

VM: How does that affect you specifically, being pushed up the river?

MT: Well, it's all about economics, how much money I have to pay out on a lease, then a balance between how many fishermen I've got to try and have to be able to cover that lease securely and safely. I'll give you an example. Irma hit. We lost half the income for that season. I couldn't do anything to get more money from the fishermen. That wound up coming out of my pocket, what I was missing to finish the lease off for that year, and get to the next season. So the economic impact on where we keep getting pushed is major and uncertain.

VM: So, aside from what we've talked about, are there any other major drivers of change in this industry? We talked about environmental, regulations, development. Anything else?

MT: No, not that I can see right now.

VM: So now we're going to get back into the nitty-gritty of actual fishing. We've talked a lot about lobstering. But can you tell us a little bit about the different seasons and the different patterns as a fisherman? Can you walk us through a year and what you're working on?

MT: Okay. So beginning of the season, August – usually good weather, very hot. But good weather to work with. Usually plentiful. It's the beginning of the season. Lobsters have been stocking up for four months. Usually, also the lowest price of the year because, since it's the beginning, a lot of lobsters are coming in at once. We're not the first country to open their lobster season. So we're like, I don't know, about the fourth. Central America, Bahamas, all those countries, Cuba – the Caribbean opens up before, a month, an easy month before we do. So there's a lot of lobster already on the market. We bring in more lobsters onto the market. The price is low. Then September, depending on the year, we might see tropical storms. Hopefully no hurricanes. But not even touching hurricanes, we might see some tropical storm roll by. Not a terrible thing. Tropical storms are not a terrible thing. They're not as strong as

hurricanes. Lobsters tend to move with weather. So it can be beneficial because September can get slower as far as the catch. You've already had the first month of taking out lobster. There's still a lot of lobster, but it's not as plentiful. So the weather can move it around a little bit. It can make or – it could make a good September. Or, without one, it could be slower. Then October, we're getting into fall. Weather begins to pick up around mid-October. Usually, October is pretty good. Until we get the first weather to come in, some breeze pick up strong, October's slow. But when that does happen, which is typical when the winds usually come in for fall, October can be great. November – the same. Also, by November, we're past that fear of a hurricane, usually. So it's a little bit of relief. Then it's just about, from thereon into winter, it's about windy weather, rough seas, in between cold fronts. Once we start to go past November and into December, trying to fish in between cold fronts, depending on whether we get runs, lobster march, which begins in October. A lobster march? You've never heard?

VM: No. What is this?

MT: Really? When they begin to migrate due to the weather's coming in, they migrate in a march. Literally, say a male usually takes the lead. The biggest male out of that colony takes the lead. They start marching, usually out to deeper water, to start to migrate. If it's in October just due to weather, they'll just start marching to deeper water because it's safer, not beginning the migration yet. But they literally walk one behind the other with the whips touching the tail of the one in front. So wherever the one in the front goes in, the rest follow. That's the lobster march. You see a lot of it. It's a very fruitful time for us. If we're ready, if we know what to do, it could be a great month. So most of the time, it's our best month out of the year. That can vary, though, due to nature. That best month could be November. We've had years because the weather's been kind of behind. Instead of October, that's been – the best month has been November. But that varies. So once we get into December, your season has pretty much begun to wind down. Water's changing, getting colder. She's already begun to migrate. She doesn't like – lobster doesn't like cold water. We believe they go to warmer water. You see an up migration when you go into Cuba and southern countries. When we're losing our lobster, they catch more. So we believe they migrate south. We're not certain about that, but we believe. Then January, January's usually slow. We might see a trickle of lobsters, like females coming back, because from January forward, they've got a cycle where they – a mating cycle that they have to begin the process. The first thing we see come back are females. We see an abundance of females. Mind you; these are in small numbers. We don't see the numbers that we do at the beginning of the season because they trickle back. But let's say you have a three-hundred-pound day. Seventy percent will be female. So females come back first. Then from February to March, we don't know when or what triggers it. But then we'll see the males come back. Then you'll see that shift, sixty or seventy percent will be males. They start as soon as they get together because we've seen lobster pregnant lobsters already from January forward. Then March, the season's over, end of March.

VM: Then, do you fish for stone crab? Is there anything you're fishing for –

MT: I do.

VM: – throughout [inaudible]?

MT: I fish for stone crab. So we begin stone crab in between – the seasons overlap. So we stone crab in October. Then it finishes in April. So we're still fishing, but past – once we finish the lobster, we pull all of that gear out, and we're just on stone crab.

VM: I'm assuming it's a pretty similar process in terms of the traps and everything. But what's different about lobstering and fishing for stone crab?

MT: In some places, it may be different, but for us here in Miami, crabbing is easier. It's shallow water. Most of it's done in the bay. I don't like the smell. The bait that we use for stone crab is pig feet – not to say that the cowhide that we use for lobsters is that much better. But there's something about pig feet I don't like. I let the crew mess with it, not me. I'm better off with the cowhide. But it's easier. It's much easier shallow water. So usually what I do is, all those tough windy days out for lobstering, I'll do the crabbing and then work those in between. Now, there are times that I have to go lobstering no matter what the weather because it's good. But when it's – like a full moon. A full moon's usually bad for lobstering.

VM: Why?

MT: They don't like the full moon. It's too visible. So lobsters are nocturnal. If they go out to eat, it'll be at night. If the full moon is in effect, you can see that much better. So they're susceptible to predators. So usually, they like to somewhat hibernate during the full moon. So there's a few days before the full moon and a few days after where lobster comes down to half or less of what you were catching. So all of that – windy weather, full moon, stuff like that – I do the crabbing.

VM: Is there anything specific about stone crabs like that, where it's an optimal time to be crabbing or anything like that? You talk about migration patterns with lobster. Is there anything like that with stone crab that you are paying attention to?

MT: Again, different places are – different regions for stone crab are better. Miami's not good stone crabbing grounds. We have very little grounds to fish. It's such a small area. For us here, the beginning, the first month is the best month. It's all about they've been stocking up for four months. It's somewhat plentiful at the beginning. But then every catch thereafter is less. So there's not much. There's small migrations in crab also – same thing. The females, males, coming together. But here, there's small migrations. Unfortunately, we don't have a lot to talk about there on the crab here. It's a small fishery.

VM: Other than lobstering and crabbing, is there anything else that you focus on?

MT: No. When I was a kid, we sponged in Biscayne National Park, which was interesting, somewhat interesting. We lived on the boat, not because it's far. But back then, the boats did five knots, five miles an hour. That meant that you wouldn't want to go and come in the same day. You wouldn't have enough work time. So we would literally stay on the boats out in the park. We dove them. There was a small dock that was made on a sandbar where we would pile up the sponge, let it die out. Then you'd have to toss it in bins, let it soak for a few days, and

pound them out to get them clean, a cleaning process. That was interesting. But at one point, which I think it was in the '80s, they made that illegal, and we never fished sponge again.

VM: Is there anything else like that, that you were fishing for in the past, that then you just, for whatever reason, you stopped?

MT: No, the sponging.

VM: The sponging.

MT: That's what they – well, I guess you can't – you don't think of it all at the moment. I did fish trap for some years, which was very good. I like fish trapping. But they found that fish traps were too efficient. They were made out of wire, so they were too efficient. They didn't give the resource enough of a chance. So they reached a point where they made it totally illegal.

VM: And what kinds of species were you catching?

MT: Oh, everything. All kinds of snappers, all kinds of groupers, all kinds of bottom fish, porgies, grunts, parrotfish, doctor fish, everything. The fish traps were super-efficient. Other than yellowtail and some like mangrove snappers, some snapper species, which nocturnally, they're very efficient. They get out of the traps. The fish traps were very efficient. But again, we didn't have to fish a lot of traps. We only had a hundred, and that was enough. So while they were very efficient, I don't know that they were that harmful, as opposed to, for example, I have five thousand lobster traps. But that's how it happened. We had to stop that as well.

VM: Anything else? Anything else you used to fish for you no longer –

MT: No, I think that covers it.

VM: That covers it? And in terms of these seasonal patterns that you follow with what you do, have those changed over time? Or is that kind of –?

MT: They have.

VM: Okay.

MT: Yeah, they have somewhat. I do believe in global warming. We see a sharp difference in the past seven, eight years, where patterns, weather patterns have shifted, have changed, and so have the – species in the water, they're very instinctive. You could see lobster do almost the same thing year after year. It was somewhat predictable. At a certain of the year, due to certain weather, waiting for a certain moon, they would do a certain thing, have a certain pattern. We see the weather change. The water is warmer. Reefs are dying off. Reefs are changing. We see things growing in the water that we never saw before. The past eight years, we've seen a bloom of a certain type of – not the algae bloom that everybody's heard of on the news, but similar. The algae bloom is green. We see a bloom of a – I'm going to call it a seaweed for not knowing what to call it. But it's red. Wherever that falls on the reef, everything leaves. We start to see it

– and it's in patches. We start to see it come up on our lines and on our traps. From that point on, we might as well move those traps because they won't fish anymore. Everything leaves. It gets washed away when winter comes. Currents change. Weather changes. But patterns have changed because I never saw that stuff when I was a kid.

SB: When was the first time you noticed that?

MT: About eight years ago.

SB: Eight years ago?

MT: Yeah.

SB: And where exactly [inaudible]?

MT: Not to point at the sewers, but the sewer discharges are what I believe have somewhat affected that because they've been close to the areas. It's been increasing. It's been increasing as years go by. When we first started seeing it, we saw it near the sewers. We have sewers off Miami here, Key Biscayne, and there are discharges off of Lauderdale also. Wherever there's a discharge, you start to see it, and it's begun to grow. Now, depending on the currents, we might see it reach fifteen, twenty miles further south, where we, at the beginning, never saw it before. Tides, I've seen an increase in tides. Tides that we can't fish, tides where we have to come inshore because we can't fish anymore, which there's always been strong tides because we're in the Florida Straits. But I'm pretty sure that it's not because I'm getting older, but I'm seeing stronger tides. I'm sure that it's about weather. When I was younger, you never saw an October without rough weather. Never. You'd see good strong northeasters come in. We've seen years where October hasn't had any weather, and November has had to save our season. But you never saw that when I was younger. You talk to older fishermen than me. And they always tell you the same thing. It was easy. October was a windy month. You expected the blows to come in. So weather has changed and has affected. At the beginning, we always caught lobster inshore. Years back, that started to change with the weather patterns, and we would catch some lobster offshore also. So it's fluctuating. Now, instead of relying on what we've learned for many years, we see what's happening and try and follow it.

VM: Do you have any follow-ups? I know this is more specific to your interests.

Michael Jepson: Does this grow off – you're saying it settles on the reef. Is it something that grows on the reef?

MT: It doesn't grow on the reef.

MJ: No, it's just –

MT: It just settles onto what – I guess it's in the tide flow.

MJ: Do you see fish kills? Like –

MT: Fish disappear? I don't see anything come up that –

MJ: But you don't see the dead fish floating around.

MT: No. But it's hard to explain what it's like because it's not seaweed. But you saw the algae bloom. Picture that, similar to that, but red.

MJ: Right. Well, we've had red tides over in the Gulf that have come around. But usually, with the red tides, that's toxic to fish. So you see the fish kills.

MT: Yeah, it soaks up the oxygen.

MJ: Well, it soaks up the oxygen as it's actually toxic. And then as, in the next phase, as it dies, it'll soak up the oxygen and create those hypoxic zones. But that's usually after some time. But the initial is just there's certain fish that are sensitive to the toxins.

MT: I've never seen it. Is it like seaweed? I've never seen that red tide with – we don't usually get it on this side.

MJ: No, that's why I was curious. Just there were reports last year of the red tide coming around and actually showing up farther north. So [inaudible] –

MT: Which we never saw it.

MJ: – looking at. You've never seen it before –

MT: No.

M: – so I don't know how this would match up.

SB: Was it that you noticed these blooms in a certain time of the year?

MT: Well, we begin in August. So the four months that we don't fish, I don't know. But I do know that they're there in August when we begin and that they start to disappear as winter comes in.

SB: It's very similar with the red tide, that pattern, the seasonal pattern.

MT: Also, this stuff is only from the reef out. We have a couple of reefs, a shallower reef, and an outer reef that's in about sixty-something feet. It's only there. You don't see it inshore, and you don't see it out in deeper water. This stuff seems to get caught up or something on the reef.

F: Very interesting.

MJ: But you say this is something that you started seeing – observing about eight years ago?

MT: Yeah. We never saw it before in our life. We always fish the reef. From the first day that we started fishing, when I was a kid, we fished the reef.

VM: And it's been every year for the past few years?

MT: Yeah, once it started, it's just it grows each year a little bit more. The area that it covers grows a little bit more. When we first started seeing it, it was just right here. All we had to do was eliminate fifty traps in that section, and that was it. Then we've seen that grow for miles. But now, sometimes, I don't know if it's the tide, sometimes we get some upwelling at the beginning of the season. We'll see inshore a little bit – not inshore, but in the hundred and fifty, hundred and ninety-foot range, we'll see a tide going south, as opposed to what it should be doing, which is going north. I've seen that stuff reach past Fowey, which we never saw before, in different spots. It's suffocated. It's like suffocating once that reaches –

MJ: Does it have a bad, strong smell?

MT: I don't know because I think my nose is – my senses are a little dull with the cowhide and the pig feet and stuff.

MJ: I think it's a different –

MT: I can't tell.

SB: But you don't have any symptoms or anything like that. Fishermen [inaudible] –

MJ: It causes respiratory ailments for people and stuff like that –

MT: No.

MJ: – because they breathe it in. No? Huh. We'll have to see what that is.

SB: Did you notice any concentration of fish around that area that – so you said that there was the area where the bloom is, on the margins of the –

MT: As soon as you get out of it, it's back to normal.

SB: But not more than normal?

MT: No.

SB: No? Interesting.

MT: But the only thing I have noticed is that I think that it's coming because of the discharge, even though those things have been there forever. But I don't know if the chemicals change or anything. That can affect a bloom. And stuff is goeey. That's why it's not exactly seaweed.

SB: And the color of the water is reddish?

MT: No. The color of that.

SB: So it doesn't really change the color of the water?

MT: No.

SB: You just notice the color of the bloom being red?

MT: Yeah.

SB: Interesting.

MJ: In what areas have you seen it? You say the reef. But what is the extent?

MT: You go up and down the reef, you can start off of Key Biscayne until you go – you'll see it in and out there now. It's reaching past the Government Cut, a few miles past. But it's not solid. That's the thing. It's not solid. So we wind up dropping traps through it to get the patches in between. There is life in those patches in between that doesn't have it. I don't dive, so I can't see it, what it's doing. We do see – on clear days, though, where water clarity is good, we can see down. In thirty and forty feet, we can see down where sandy bottoms are; you can see these patches. They look like it's rock, but it's not. It's those red patches of seaweed, whatever that is.

MJ: I'm going to find out what it is. We'll let you know.

MT: I've been saying it for years now, but nobody knows.

MJ: Now we'll have somebody go out and take some samples.

SB: At the very least, yeah.

MJ: Or maybe you can take some samples for us and we can [inaudible]

MT: I could bring some in, but it dries up. Maybe I could bring it in in water.

SB: Well, we can figure it out –

MJ: I'll follow up with you about it.

MT: Okay.

SB: Yeah, how is the best way. But – yeah. That's interesting.

VM: So there are two more topics I want to ask you about – we want to ask you about. So one of the topics is something that the museum and the folklife department is a little bit more interested in, which is the actual knowledge and skills that you use and that you've learned and incorporated and how those have changed. So can you walk us through the process of lobstering and crabbing? You don't have to go into every detail, but talking to us a little bit about the essential gear, the roles that are involved, skills that you need to learn in order to carry out this whole process.

MT: Well, if you're just a deckhand on a boat, you don't need that many skills. But if it's your operation and you run the boat, you wind up being a mechanic, a carpenter, a handyman of all sorts. You do fiberglass, painting. You troubleshoot. You run hydraulics, and you have to know how to pull them apart and put them together, how they work, electrical. You get all kinds of problems on boats. They're a walking problem, a floating problem. You're a carpenter because you build your traps. You cement because you've got to pour cement in everything. You become a weatherman because you depend on the weather. You learn nature and all the seasons. You learn to observe patterns and species and weather and how they interact with each other. Patience, you learn a lot of patience.

VM: How do you learn?

MT: Observation, struggling, making mistakes. Nothing better than missing a run, for example, to learn.

VM: What does that mean?

MT: You see everybody around you knowing what they're doing and catching a march, a lobster march – we call it a run – catching a few thousand pounds, and you're coming in with a couple hundred because you didn't know what to do, where to be at the right time in the right place. So mistakes teach a lot. There's others around us, so you see when you make a mistake.

VM: What happens when you make a mistake? Is it the kind of thing where it's understood that someone is learning and somebody will stop and be like, "Hey, this is how you do something?" What's that relationship like of actually learning from your mistakes?

MT: Fishermen are not that helpful. It's very much competitive. No, they'll see you making a mistake, and they'll let you make it. And if you learn or don't learn, that's your problem because if they see you making it again, they're going to let you make it again.

VM: So you're saying a lot of it is observation, seeing what the other guy is doing and, "All right, that's what I have to do?" Modeling.

MT: Very much so. Obviously, there's little things that you learn all on your own. But when you see the others do well, and you don't, you start learning. You may not see what they did because you're on your own boat. But you start learning. As fishermen, we know where everybody is, where everybody has their gear, in general. So where they had it, where you didn't have yours. Species are interesting. It's very much – fishing is hunting. I could have my traps

here, and he had them there, and right over there was the right place because I didn't catch it in my spot here.

MJ: Does every fisherman have specific fishing grounds or areas where they lay their trap traditionally?

MT: Traditional fishermen love to claim grounds. But it doesn't exist. It's open. It's free. But they do like to have turfs. So it does become an issue. You have seen fights and arguments about it.

MJ: What kind of turfs? Are there turfs, certain turfs, certain rules that exist –

MT: Kind of.

MJ: – about where you can put your traps?

MT: Yes.

MJ: But what are they?

MT: Kind of. Most fishermen would say that I own the deep here, the deep water. It's not that. I'm not going to say I'm the friendliest. But I believe in – I don't have the right to make you have a hard time. I claim the same right. You shouldn't make me have a hard time. Deepwater, all the factors multiply exponentially. You have four times the current that you have inshore. You have the combination of current versus depth versus seas in weather. So all kinds of effects. The tension on a line in twenty feet of water isn't a tenth of the tension of a line in a hundred and fifty feet of water. So when you drop gear on top of each other, it's thousands of pounds of tension with all the factors settling in – tide, weather, everything. The weight of all the lines, the lines snap, hooking those lines back up, splicing them together. So, for those reasons, I prefer where it's very difficult and tough, it's not that you can't fish here, but if you're going to fish here, let's come to an agreement. I'm going to fish here. You're going to fish right there. You're going to fish there; I'm going to fish right here. We don't cross each other because I'm going to lose gear. You're going to lose gear. We're both going to have a hard time. In the end, it's not a winning scenario. That's my issue with turfs. Other fishermen, it's just the ignorance of catching.

MJ: But you've probably seen, for example, up in New England where they're really well-defined turfs. If somebody new comes in and puts a line down in somebody's established turf, there can be some serious –

MT: It's the same thing.

MJ: It's pretty much the same thing?

MT: Yeah, the same thing. Nobody likes when new people come in, not only because they're new, but you don't know what they represent, what they're going to do. You don't know if they know what they're doing. You don't know if they steal. So it's a real factor here. It's true.

MJ: Most people put their traps in more or less the same areas –

MT: Every year.

MJ: – year after year.

MT: And we do –

MJ: And people know where those – what those areas are –

MT: Yes.

MJ: – where you're supposed to [inaudible] –

MT: We are together. There are many areas inshore where the lines are all crossed up. But we pretty much respect each other. You uncross your own line, and you keep fishing. You don't cut the other person's line. When those things start happening, arguments come up and turf wars.

MJ: How do you identify the different lines? If you find a line that stuck to yours, how do you know [inaudible]?

MT: Well, you have to reach the trap to see the trap and see the number on the trap. The line itself won't tell you.

VM: What's the etiquette for something like that? How is it that somebody would typically resolve an issue like that?

MT: A problem? It's a fight. Or it's a trap war. Fishermen will start cutting each other's gear and see who can last the longest losing gear and loss of income, of course.

VM: And then, how does that eventually –

MT: The climax is –

VM: – somebody's got to give.

MT: –the actual fight. Or one gives in and says, "Okay." Common sense should prevail. It should be the – but a lot of times, it's a trap war.

VM: But this is like, you come together. You have a face-to-face meeting. You talk it out. How does this happen within the community?

MT: Usually, first, if there are sensible people there, they'll be – for example, if it's me, if I come cut the first time I'll let the first one go. If I come back and I'm cut again, or if I continue pulling my line and there's multiple cuts, then I will approach them. A lot of times, they'll be, "It wasn't me." Nobody ever says that they did something. They never do. But it's very simple. It's very much black and white. When you come back, if you find it again, that it happened again, you don't have much doubt. You're there with that person. There's no one else. So usually, the first thing that happens after that, if they continue, is trap war. So if he cut me a few times, I'll multiple that by three. If I come back and it persists, then the trap war begins. We don't have cuts. We start eliminating gear. Then you're waiting for that fight to happen, or for one to give up. It's just the truth. It's the way it happens. Anybody that says otherwise, we're not that sensible.

MJ: Is this frequent? Or is it very unusual?

MT: Well, I'm already a vet, so usually they don't mess with people that have been around that long or the bigger operations. I can afford a trap war. If they can't, it's more sensible not to have it, not to reach that point. But yes, usually –

MJ: Every year, there's –

MT: – here's one every year. Minor scales or more. But there's one every year, and new people – new people, there's always a problem.

MJ: Is that usually provoked because of somebody new or somebody perceives that somebody tries to extend their turf a little bit and moves into somebody else's turf? What usually is it that provokes that?

MT: Pretty much when a newbie comes in, they're not accepted. Period. Nobody wants more competition or fishermen. Not only for the competition of the actual catch but a lot of times, smaller operations to survive. I'm not placing blame, but a lot of times, they do begin stealing. There's so many things that come into the mix. They don't catch as good because they don't know. There's so many years of experience that others have on them, not only of how to fish but knowing the grounds. Sometimes it is that sharp. Sometimes fishing is that sharp where you put your trap here, and it doesn't fish nowhere near as well as if you put it fifty feet away but closer to that reef, not on it. The new guys will come, for example, and drop right over the reef. That's not the place to drop. You want to be on the sandy patches, on that edge, on the edge of the reef, not on the rock. Weather will come through. It'll break up their gear. When they don't have any gear, or they see others do ten times what they catch, they start stealing because it's hard to make a living out of a small operation. It happens ninety percent of the time.

MJ: They start pulling other people's traps?

MT: I know it's a tough temptation for new guys to come across an older guy's gear who just went through a good set. And they're loaded, and theirs are coming up empty. So the

temptation is there. Most times, they take it. But we always know. We know whether a trapper pulled our trap or a diver stole from it.

MJ: How do you know? What's the difference?

MT: It's like forensic evidence all over the trap. Everywhere, every single bottom, you have even the slightest film of mud. Some areas have a lot. Some have less. The reef is the cleanest patch, deep water. But there's always a light layer even of mud. And you can just put one finger on there, and you see it, much less a complete handprint. I'll say it. So if it's a trapper, the lines will be marked by our haulers because the bite of the hauler on the line spirals, and you see the clean spiral in the line. So you know if it was a trapper. If the line is still dirty, but the traps are marked, it was a diver. Then the difference between an experienced diver and a weekender, a weekender will take – break a few traps. And they'll break them. An experienced diver, a commercial diver that lives off it, he'll open and close each one. He won't break a single trap. He won't take from five or six traps to make a meal out of it. He'll go through your whole line, and he'll come back the week after that, and the week after that until you have to take the gear because you hardly ever – you're never there at the right time. It's real easy. Divers that want to steal from you just have to start going out when we're coming in at the end of the say. There's still plenty of light left. So yes, there's evidence.

VM: So turning back to all the different rules, I know you said there's a very big difference between the head of operations and a deckhand. Can you tell me a little bit about the people on your team, what their job is, and their part in this process of lobstering and crabbing [inaudible]?

MT: Okay. Well, for instance, on my boat, we run four men. So my brother's at the wheel. He's the oldest. So I don't want him working too hard. He makes sure the boat is in the right position all the time, the right speeds, any maneuverability that we need, he handles that. I handle hydraulics. I put all the gear on board. The mate behind me pulls the lobster out, baits the trap, measures the lobster. Anything that's legal goes into one hole. The undersize, we leave an under-size in the trap as bait, not be eaten, but to lure. We're allowed a maximum of fifty at a time onboard constantly in the well. They have to be alive, and we need them alive. Slides it back. Then the last mate in the back washes it down, makes sure lines don't tangle. If we're decking, he decks it onto the deck. If we're running the line, pulling drop, he makes sure it goes out the back without a problem. That's basically the process.

VM: And how about building out your team? What's that like? Is there like [an attitude of], "You'd better come knowing what you're doing?" You give people a shot? Or you've had the same group of people with you for a long time?

MT: Crew is tough, and especially in Miami, so much diversity of jobs. Being a deckhand on a fishing boat isn't the most comfortable job. We go out if it's hot, cold, rainy, stormy, windy, real uncomfortable stuff. If we have to go out, we have to go out. Other than a hurricane or a slow catch, nothing else will keep us at the dock. You'd be surprised how uncomfortable days can be. Everybody thinks we're out on the water; it's all great. I don't think so. There are times that we spend all day covered in mud with an itch on us that you can't stand, sea lice and everything, jellyfish stinging you, everything. Wind is in the wrong direction. It's all coming up on your

face. The guys in the back, sometimes we look like snowmen. We're covered in mud. You can't avoid it. It's just the spray. Cold. It's very uncomfortable. We have a lot of good days. But we have more bad days than good days. All fisheries have that, probably more bad days than good days.

VM: Is there a certain toughness thing that is associated with being a good fisherman, like being able to put up with being itchy and being hot and all of these things? Is that something that is –?

MT: Absolutely necessary. No fisherman is a good fisherman unless he can put up with it. There are days when as soon as I walk out the door, I just look around and, [I say], "This is going to taste like shit today." I mean that literally. You know that taste that you get when you're exercising? Sometimes we spend all day with that taste in our mouth because we're hustling at that pace, and there is no stopping. I fish specifically a certain way, which is very uncomfortable. I fish deepwater. Because I fish here in Miami, there's a lot of boat traffic. So I make very long lines. To my knowledge, the longest lines in the industry. Nobody fishes lines as long as we do.

VM: How long are your lines?

MT: I have some ten-mile lines. An all-day line, I start at six-something in the morning and finish at three, without stopping. But I've had to do that through the years because it's impossible to fish in Miami with the amount of boats. It's a nightmare. Anchors – we fish [inaudible] lines. We don't fish up and down buoys because of the boat traffic. We all started with up and down buoys. But have you seen a weekend here in Miami with boat traffic? You look at the reef, and they look like flies on the horizon. Too much boat traffic, you'll lose too much gear. So we've evolved to doing trap lines. Ninety percent of the fishing in Miami – or maybe it's ninety-five – is trap lines, very few buoys, and that's why. Then you multiply that by going deep. Everybody wants to anchor in deeper water to catch better fish. They snap your lines off. If you have short lines, the common deep water line is fifteen traps. Some have twenty-five. So very common – we have to, by law, have a buoy on each end. So whether the line is ten traps long or four hundred traps long, there must be a buoy on each end. Something very common for you to see – I get out there, and there's a boat tied up with my buoy. He's anchored off on the line with my buoy. They don't drop an anchor. So depending on which way the line runs and the tide is running, it's dragged ten of my traps and tangled the end into a ball, which I then have to start cutting up after I tell him to get off my buoy. Another occasion would be, we'd be pulling our line. Towards the end of the line, they cut – an anchor hooked the line and snapped it off. I lose the last couple of traps. When it's just a couple of traps, two or three, that means that there is a minimum of one line in between the two traps, or a maximum, if it's three traps, of two lines. When that gets up in the tide because the anchor literally has to yank on it and start lifting it off the bottom, before she gives away, she gives before she snaps. By then, it's mid-level. The tide affects it. So if the traps were here, they don't fall back down right there. They drift. A lot of times, that two or three traps will become just one ball. The only way I have of recovery is dragging for it until I hook it. It's not in place, and it's all balled up. You would lose that. So with all those things happening, at the end of the year, it would add up to trap loss. I started making longer lines because with a long line, sure, the same effect. These couple of traps, when they snap, it's like a rubber band. Sure, they drifted. But I've got a long

line. So I hook it further forward, and I come back till I fix the mess. I splice the line back up and then continue. So it's a lot of endurance and toughness to hook a line at six in the morning and finish at three. We don't eat. We drink gulps of water in between, taking turns. He's going to stop for a minute to go to the bathroom, but the boat keeps working. We just take up each other's slack. Let's not talk about a tough day. A tough current day, a lot of weather, everything pushing the wrong way. The only time it's really good with that long line if it's a real good catch because the boxes fill up real quick, and it's continuous. But yeah, there is a toughness required and a tolerance – a big tolerance.

VM: So the last topic we want to make sure to touch upon is specifically on the Miami River, which we've talked a lot about changes in terms of regulation, development, all those things. But can we talk about –? So you started working on the river since you started. So during your time, what have been some of the significant events or changes or time periods on the river that you can remember?

MT: Significant events.

VM: I don't know. Maybe the '80s had certain things that were going on during that time that really changed the working river, or before that, after.

MT: I guess there haven't been – the recession – this is not the '80s. But the recession was a big factor on the river. Some people went out of business. Big events, basically, it's been diminishing. It's been a constant diminishing of the fishing in the river.

VM: Since you started?

MT: Yeah. Maybe I started in the peak. Maybe I could say that because factors that affected us, for example, like the trap certificate program, the reduction of traps, that was a big factor. Every hurricane that ever hit us was a big factor – Andrew. Wilma didn't hurt us, not like that. We just got some wind. But I don't know.

VM: Well, how have businesses on the river changed? Have you seen a significant change throughout the years of who's actually on the river?

MT: Less commercial and more development, has been the constant. Turning more from a working river into recreational, tourist. Hell, they want to do that river walk everywhere. Okay, marinas. You notice marinas have been going down as well. We used to have many of them. Now there's just a couple. And dry docks, the same thing – small shipyards, trade, and cargo. That's all been backed up into the further west end of the river. I imagine eventually – I think it's already being – that's already being affected. But development keeps gobbling up the commercial front.

VM: Is there a time that you almost think of with nostalgia, like, “Oh, the river during this time, it was like the optimum time to be working on the river?”

MT: Only when I was young.

VM: Really? Yes.

MT: It was free. An innocent time. It was free. When I started, the river had issues with – no, it was ending the issues with drug problems. It was at a decline in drug smuggling. So that was, I think, the best time when I was young and starting out.

MJ: This was like the mid, late '80s?

MT: '80s, yeah. But after that, you didn't see many issues with drugs in the river. You saw the remnants, basically.

VM: What was that?

MT: The businesses that were started with those drug trades. The businesses that went out with those drug trades. Some fishermen, of course, were smugglers, so they went to jail. So those were some of the businesses that went out.

VM: Did the community of fishermen change after that?

MT: No. They just slowly and slowly got older. But I would say from that point on, it was just fishing, nothing else.

MJ: Do you know when this community of fishermen started? Was it back in the '50s, the '40s?

MT: '60s, I think.

MJ: '60s? That was the origin of –

MT: Yes.

MJ: From the same people that came over from the village around the same time as your father?

MT: Yes. That era of migration was the early '60s. That basically was the large concentration of fishermen coming into the river and fishing.

MJ: Do you know why they settled into that specific area?

MT: No. I think if they came to Miami, that's where they wound up because the river was the only access basically for fishing. The bay's huge. But none of that really catered to commercial fishing where we had calm port, land for the storage of the gear. The fish houses were there because there's plenty of bayfront. But you didn't want traps all over the place. Dockage was more expensive. The bay was still cheap – I mean, the river was still cheap by comparison. I think it just naturally – the river was working for them. It just was natural.

VM: So I know we've talked a lot about this decline like you've said. But what do you see for the future of the river? What do you hope for the future of the river? Are there any opportunities? I know there are plenty of challenges. What do you see for the next years to come?

MT: Well, that development is our big challenge. I don't know what will happen. I'm hoping that at some point some politician realizes that we need a space for commercial fishing, a fisherman's wharf, just to say, something that's affordable for fishermen to rent from the city, and that that becomes our oasis, our only ray of light. But other than that, I don't see a future if something like that doesn't happen because I don't think anybody's going to come in and buy millions of dollars' worth of land to invest into fishing because it's better business to put up a building. So it's short, but I don't have any other hope. I don't see any attention from politicians, so I don't know.

VM: This is something I ask everybody. What do you value most about what you do?

MT: The life. There's nothing like fishing. No matter what struggles you go through, it's the closest that a working man can find to a great occupation. We don't fish in – we don't work in walls. We see great days, beautiful things. We see a sunrise every morning. We see the sharpness of nature. Great catches. Those few dozen great days that we have in the course of a season, that's just like the high that we keep looking for every year. I wouldn't change it.

VM: Is there anything else that you think is really important to make sure that we talk about, or you want to say?

MT: I'm sure there's plenty. But I wouldn't know right now.

VM: Do either of you have any follow-ups you want to add in here?

MJ: [inaudible].

SB: Yeah. You talked about [inaudible].

VM: Yeah.

MJ: I like the way that closed. So I don't want to go back.

SB: Yeah. It was very poetic. [inaudible]

MJ: But I suppose we could edit the tape if we needed to.

VM: Of course. We can always edit.

MJ: I would like to go back to the crew and ask more specifically where you find people. Do you put an ad in the newspaper? How do you find –?

MT: No. I'm going to say that, unfortunately, we take the homeless in. I don't literally mean the homeless, but homeless in the sense of misfits; guys that don't like land jobs because they're not skilled, low wages, things like that. Crew is tough. I'd like to say that in the time that I've fished, which is now thirty-six years, I've had twenty different deckhands. The good ones, they last – they can last fifteen years, twenty years, but something always happens. I don't know what it is. Unfortunately, it's not a position – a career that will grow. If it's a deckhand, as I can, every year we have good times, I give them bonuses. I try to keep them in a wage where, if they're a good crew, I want them to stay. So I know cost of living goes up, and I increase it as I can. I see that is necessary. But we're always changing crew. Illegal immigrants become an issue. Sometimes they're a good crew, but you can't have them. It's a danger for them. It's dangerous and difficult for us if we are boarded, and they have no papers. We get fined. We're not going to go to jail, but we get fined. But crew is difficult. It's a dead-end job. They can get experience. They can learn. But will they ever be able to afford getting into fishing? Because that's why you would want to be a crewman to learn and one day have your own operation. I think we all worked on another boat first. Even me as a kid, I was a deckhand for a little bit, just a little bit, on some boats. I learned very fast, enough to, with my brother, go fishing, or make the attempt. When I was a kid, that was possible. My first boat, I borrowed five hundred bucks from my dad. My brother and I bought a twenty-four-foot boat that was sunk in one of these boatyards. It was under the water. We pulled it up. My brother was mechanically-inclined. We got a gas engine from a car. We put something together like that. We never even got to run it. By the time we finished it, somebody wanted to buy it. I sold it, and we moved on to the next boat to get – and that's how we – I've had like sixteen boats. But when I was a kid, that was possible. You didn't have trap certificates that you had to pay two hundred dollars for each one. Then you have to renew it on a yearly basis from the state. Just like you pay your car tag, we renew each one for a dollar each year. But you could do that then. You can't do that now. It's a dead-end job. Because of that, you're never getting quality workers. You're never getting skilled workers. The same deckhands that work here in the river pretty much revolve from one boat to the other. They get fired from that one, or they don't get along with that captain, they wind up in another one, and like that.

MJ: Do you pay them on a – how do you pay?

MT: On a daily basis. We don't give them a percentage because we have negative days. There are days that we're paying to work.

MJ: It's a daily rate?

MT: Yes, a daily rate because a deckhand can't afford to not get paid. They don't have the opportunity that we have of good days of catch. So we give them a daily rate, whether we make or don't make. And I give them bonuses when we have good times.

MJ: And what about, for example, your father was in the business, and you got exposed to it that way and sort of, I suppose that was an influence on you deciding to –

MT: Completely. I was surrounded by fishermen.

MJ: And the same, I think we've met some other ones who've had that sort of same thing, where they're the next generation. What has happened now to those? I don't know if you have children or whatever. Would you like to see them continue? Is there another generation that's coming up that's being –

MT: I would. But that's selfish of me. I would for my own legacy to pass on what I've learned, what I've struggled for so many years and sacrificed and sweat and – to learn. For that reason, I would like my son to follow me. But that's selfish because it's a very tough road, which right now doesn't have a future here in Miami. We're talking about relocation if it doesn't work out here. A relocation is a turf war. Fishermen in the Keys, which is the only place he would be able to go, they're not going to want a big operation coming in. They're going to resist that. He's going to have to fight. He's going to have to turn into a person that maybe he's not. That's going to take all that from fishing because it's a wholesome life. At the end of the day, we get up every day early. We're working in nature. So I wouldn't want him to be a fisherman unless I saw things change.

M: If you thought he could continue along the river and take over your operations and the turf areas that you've developed and all that, then that would be a different story.

MT: Well, in my case, he would take somewhat my position. I'm the most respected operation on the river. I'm the largest. I've worked my whole life to get there. So he would be respected. I know everyone. But I would only want that if I saw that he would be able to fish here. But to relocate, no, I don't want that fight.

MJ: Okay, I think I'm done.

VM: Good? All right.

SB: Yes, I'm good.

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