Fox Watkins oral history interview by Terry Lee Howard, March 1, 2010

Maltby Foxworthy Watkins Jr. (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)
COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This Oral History is copyrighted by the University of South Florida Libraries Oral History Program on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of South Florida.

Copyright, 2011, University of South Florida.
All rights, reserved.

This oral history may be used for research, instruction, and private study under the provisions of the Fair Use. Fair Use is a provision of the United States Copyright Law (United States Code, Title 17, section 107), which allows limited use of copyrighted materials under certain conditions. Fair Use limits the amount of material that may be used.

For all other permissions and requests, contact the UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA LIBRARIES ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM at the University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Avenue, LIB 122, Tampa, FL 33620.
Terry Howard: Okay, first question for you. Today is March 1, 2010. I’m here with Captain Fox Watkins. Captain, what is your full name?

Maltby Watkins: Maltby Foxworthy Watkins, Jr.

TH: How do you spell that first name?

MW: M-a-l-t-b-y.

TH: Maltby.
MW: They’re all old family last names.

TH: Fox Watkins—

MW: Foxworthy.

TH: Foxworthy.

MW: Yeah.

TH: Okay. Foxworthy Watkins. When and where were you born?


TH: When did you move to Fort Pierce? Or, you were born here?

MW: Born here.

TH: Yes. Excuse me.

MW: I’ll move the chair over here so you can sit down.

TH: What brought your family to Fort Pierce?

MW: My dad was a doctor and he grew up in West Palm [Beach]. After med school, he didn’t want to stay in West Palm because Granddaddy was superintendent of schools down there and he knew—everybody knew him growing up. So, he was on his way to De Land to look at a medical practice, stopped here for something, looked at the almanac and saw the income per capita, which was phenomenal. So he ended up getting a private practice here, and he always kidded later that he didn’t realize that five families had all the income.

TH: Yeah. Huh. And they were probably the wealthy families.
MW: Right. McCartys, Peacocks, Adams, Carlton.

TH: Right. Are you married?

MW: No, sir.

TH: How old were you—okay. Do you have any children?

MW: No, sir.

TH: How much schooling do you have?

MW: College and an RN [Registered Nurse] degree.

TH: Did you graduate from college?

MW: Yes.

TH: Four year?

MW: No.

TH: Two year—oh, the associate’s degree. Do you have another job besides charter fishing?

MW: No, I don’t.

TH: Do you currently own a boat?

MW: Yes.
TH: This boat. What’s the name of the boat, and the length and the kind of boat?

MW: *Ruby Jean*, forty-eight foot. It’s a Pace Maker.

TH: Okay. All right. I’d like to ask some questions about the Oculina Bank. How familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

MW: Fairly—pretty well familiar with it.

TH: In what way? I mean, you fished it—bottom fished it?

MW: Bottom fished it all my life—well, not all my life, obviously. I mean, we did a lot of bottom fishing there.

TH: And you trolled?

MW: Oh, God, yeah.

TH: What did you catch there?

MW: In trolling? Wahoo, sails. I’ve had marlin out there, dolphin. In bottom fishing, of course, plenty of grouper and snapper.

TH: Why was Oculina Bank designated as an area to protect? Do you have any—what’s your thinking on that?

MW: I think it’s misinformed people [who] panic. It’s like they all—everybody—they did it to protect—supposedly a survey the first time, and to do a study on the grouper populations, and then they just extended it now indefinitely.

TH: Now, is there a peculiar or particular kind of reef there?

MW: Yeah, the Oculina coral.
TH: It’s the Oculina coral. Okay. Is there anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank? Why do you know about it?

MW: It’s such good fishing. It’s a living reef. It’s the best bottom fishing in the East Coast of the United States, probably.

TH: What do you think about the closure of the Bank to anchoring and bottom fishing?

MW: With the depth out there, you’re not going to anchor anyway. I mean, it’s 285 feet average, probably. So you’re not going to be anchoring out there—a normal person isn’t. I think bottom fishing should be allowed. If you adhere to the limits, you’re not going to do any damage to the reef just drifting or power fishing it.

TH: So most of the time when you do fish it, you’re not anchored?

MW: No. You’re power fishing.

TH: You try and hold the boat in one position with your engine and bottom fish that way?

MW: Yep.

TH: Has the closure of the Bank affected your fishing?

MW: Certainly.

TH: How?

MW: Well, you can’t go there. I mean, that was—you were guaranteed when you went out there. You were going to catch or have shots at plenty of grouper and snapper. You take that away, you took one of my—took the best bottom fishing away from us.

TH: That is the best around off the East Coast?
MW: Oh, gosh, yes. Oh, gosh, yes.

TH: Because of the living reef?

MW: Well, yeah, the living reef, the depth, the—

TH: If anchoring and bottom fishing on the Oculina Bank was not permitted, would you fish there? I mean, if anchoring and bottom fishing in the Bank was not permitted, would you fish there? I mean, it’s not permitted now; do you fish there anyway? (both laugh)

MW: Terry, I don’t know you well enough, buddy! That’s, ah— (laughs)

TH: That’s all right. (laughs) Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area? Overall, how has fishing changed?

MW: It hasn’t changed that much. You certainly see less dolphin than we used to. Sails have made a tremendous comeback. Kingfish, since they put the closure on the high rollers. Kingfish have just—my God, it’s just as good as it ever was in my life.

TH: Do you still see the black wads they used to talk about, though?

MW: Yeah, I have. I have.

TH: Have you? Recently?

MW: Yeah, but up on the beach.

TH: Now, can you explain the black wads, when I say that?

MW: Just schools of kings. Solid kings.
TH: On your recorder.

MW: Yeah.

TH: Okay. Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in Florida? Do you think it’s—

MW: Maintained. It’s cyclical. I mean, it’s—this year is the best sailfish year, probably, of my life. Two years ago, there was no sailfish. I’d say two, maybe three, but I mean, it’s just—and snook. I mean, I’ve grown up fishing this river since I was five. There’s great trout years and there’s bad trout years. There may be a three, four-year span of poor trout fishing, and there’ll be a three or four year span that you go out there and you can catch fifty, sixty in a half a day.

TH: Have you had any experiences with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

MW: No.

TH: No, never bothered you. Do you know anybody who has?

MW: Yeah, I know several people who have been boarded out there, but they didn’t get into any trouble. They just were told to leave.

TH: Who boards them?

MW: It was the MWC that boarded them, the boys I know.

TH: Florida Wildlife Commission?

MW: Yep.

TH: Your fishing history, specifically. What is your earliest memory of fishing and how old were you? This gets into your biographical—
MW: Four years old. Dr. David Sims was a dentist here in town, a big bottom fisherman—you know David, don’t you?

TH: I know of him, yes.

MW: Yeah. Took me over on surfside by Jaycee Park, took me fishing. I was three or four years old, but I remember we didn’t catch anything. I used to go sit on the seawall when I was five over on Thumb Point because we lived over there, moved over there from Binney Drive. I’d go sit over there. Mother had a bell she’d ring when it was time for me to come home and take my nap.

TH: So who taught you to fish? Different people?

MW: Yeah. I’ve been so fortunate. My dad wasn’t a big fisherman, but he took me as a little boy over to the seawall all the time. Dr. Sims. Sam Crutchfield was huge in my learning how to fish and stuff. Billy Yates was huge. And then offshore, Ronny Lang, Chip Shafer, Sam Crutchfield, again. I’ve had some of the best teachers anybody could ever dream of having.

TH: How did you decide to become a charter captain?

MW: I was a mate off and on forever and ever and it just was a natural progression.

TH: Elaborate more on that. I mean, did you just finally decide that you could run the boat as well as some of the captains you worked for?

MW: Yeah, better! (laughs) What mate doesn’t think that, though, I mean? Yeah, it was—

TH: Did you reach a point where—

MW: I’d get mad and say, “Captain, we weren’t doing this or they quit doing that.” I thought, “Hell, I could do better than they are.”

TH: When did you start fishing in the Fort Pierce area, age and year? We already talked about

---

1 Sam Crutchfield, Billy Yates, and Chip Shafer were also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOIs for their interviews are O6-00032, O6-00024, and O6-00002, respectively.
that, but could you just mention again?

MW: I started fishing in the river; I’d say I was three or four years old, five years old. I remember I got my first cast net. So from then on, I was ready to start going out in the ocean when I was probably twelve.

TH: Did you start fishing commercially before you became a charter—got into the charter industry?

MW: Yes. Oh, God, yeah. I did a few longline trips in the seventies [1970s] but I had a couple different net boats pompano fishing, and fished the river with nets back in the early seventies [1970s].

TH: Tell me about pompano fishing. You had—what kind of boat did you have for that?

MW: The old Suncoast; twenty-seven foot Suncoast.

TH: Talk to me as though I don’t know anything about fishing.

MW: Okay. (laughs)

TH: Do you understand?

MW: Yep.

TH: Pompano, tell me about pompano fishing.

MW: These are boats designed really for this. You use trammel nets, which is a three-walled net. You run the beaches at night, you’d put a stab net—you put it—you’d stretch it out at night, first dark, and then after you hauled that, you’d go try to skip the fish. Pompano will, as you’re running, come up in your wake and actually skip, and you can hear ’em with the engine running, hear the slap. And you see that, you’d circle them up, run around inside of it and then haul it in.

TH: Were they paying well for—
MW: Yeah. Pompano has always the highest paying fish there is. I don’t remember what we got back then, but probably like $1.50 or $1.95 a pound, maybe.

TH: You owned your own boat, the Suncoast?

MW: No, that was Herman’s.

TH: You were fishing for Herman—

MW: Summerlin. Sorry.

TH: How were you related to this person?

MW: Just knew him. He was a Fort Pierce legend. (laughs) He ran—he was big in the—

TH: Was this when he had a fish house of his own?

MW: Yep.

TH: He had boats—he had several boats?

MW: Yeah, he owned several boats, yes.

TH: Where did you go to fish when you began fishing; can you show me on this map? I’m supposed to have a map of the Oculina Bank. Well, okay, no, just in Fort Pierce. We don’t need a map. Where did you go to fish when you began fishing? Started in the river on the west, around Thumb Point.

MW: Thumb Point, Jaycee Park area, then as I got a little bit older, I got a little boat and go down to Bear Point, Middle Cove—

---

2 Herman Summerlin was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00031.
TH: It’s your first little boat. What was it like?

MW: A little thirteen foot Wellcraft with a little forty-horse [horsepower engine] on it.

TH: That’s a nice one.

MW: Yeah.

TH: How old were you when you had that?

MW: I was twelve or thirteen.

TH: That was your first boat?

MW: Well, I had a rowboat before that.

TH: Okay.

MW: Just like a—

TH: Wooden or—

MW: Yeah, wooden.

TH: You maintained it yourself?

MW: Yeah, I remember Mother teaching me how to row, of all things.

TH: Did your mother fish?
MW: No. But she—I don’t know how she knew it, but she knew how to row. Because I remember, again, I really was five, six—I was five years old, six years old and I remember Mother taking me out there. I remember getting so frustrated with the oarlocks, popping them out of the— (TH laughs) It’s funny how you remember stuff like that. And my first blisters.

TH: For a fish—let’s go back to pompano, ’cause she [the researcher] wants—they want me—I would like to get an in-depth description of how you catch the different kinds of fish that you’ve caught and that you catch now. So on pompano, how long was the fishing trip? Just overnight?

MW: Yeah.

TH: How much was an average trip’s catch, if you can—about?

MW: You know that, it’s hard to know. There is no average. There’s nights you didn’t get a single damn fish and loaded up on bunker or sharks; and there was nights that you—hell, you struck—I dunno, we never had 1,000 pounds, but you might get 500, 600 pounds.

TH: And they’re four or five dollars a pound?

MW: No, back—

TH: Three dollars?

MW: Three seventy-five. Back then they were $1.75, $2.05 or—

TH: Which was good money.

MW: Huge money.

TH: I guess bunkers are the same size as pompano.

MW: And they get in that damn trammel net and just sink it.
TH: And you’d spend all night—they’re not worth—

MW: They’re not worth—they weren’t back then, weren’t worth anything.

TH: Yes, okay. How many years did you fish for pompano?

MW: Just probably two.

TH: What were—you remember a transition from going from pompano fishing to—what was your next transition?

MW: Jeez. Well, you’d still fish the river when pompano—different times, you know, pompano’s seasonal. Then fish the river for trout, channel bass, snapper, sheepshead, mullet. It wasn’t, you know—

TH: Did you use the same net for the sheepshead, the mullet—?

MW: No, no, no, no. Different net.

TH: Would you explain?

MW: It’s a whole different net. You’d run straight—it’s a stab [net] out there. I want to say two and a quarter, two and three-quarters in—I don’t even remember the net sizes.

TH: And drift after the mullet?

MW: Yep, but they’re not drift nets, they’re stab nets that have lead enough to hold—they’ll stay stationary on the bottom.

TH: That’s what a stab net is?

MW: Yep. It doesn’t move, and you put it out and you let it soak for two hours depending on
how hot it is. Wintertime, you can let it sit for four or five hours and pull it up and clear it as you pull it. You’ll make three or four sets a night.

TH: For mullet?

MW: Sheepshead, mullet, trout, red fish—

TH: And you’d use—now, I know that you’re using different mesh for the row mullet?

MW: Right.

TH: As for, then, the silver mullet?

MW: For—in a different mesh, you’d have—good God, at least four or five different—not four or five, three different sized meshes.

TH: Depending on what was—

MW: What you were after.

TH: Yeah, what you were targeting. When did you start working as a charter boat captain? How did you—when did you transition from commercial fishing? So, obviously, you commercial fished for a number of years. This was while you were going to school?

MW: Yep.

TH: At Indian River State College, or Indian River Community College at that time?

MW: Yes, and I’d go back and forth. I would fish, then I’d go work somewhere else for a while, a year or two. I farmed, I owned a car lot, I had a marine construction business over in Orlando for a year and a half, that sinkhole in Maitland, Winter Park. I’ve been—Herman came over to help me, we did the initial—started working there. Everything that just—every ten years it seems like I take three years. Not by design, it hadn’t been, because looking back, I’d take three years and go do something different.
TH: You always gravitated back to fishing.

MW: I’d come right back to it.

TH: So, when did you start working in the charter boat industry and stick with it?

MW: Well, really just about ten years ago. When I was going to nursing school I was running boats twenty years ago. Yeah, I mated twenty-five, thirty years ago, would mate. Then about ten years ago, I bought my first boat to charter. I was running—before that, ran a boat, private boat—not a private boat but ran a charter boat here—

TH: For somebody else owned it. What boat was that?

MW: That was the old *Sea Squirt*. It was a twenty-nine [foot] Topaz.

TH: Okay. When did you start working as a charter boat captain in the Fort Pierce area? So you just [worked] off and on for years, and then you—finally, it stuck?

MW: Yeah, I said, “This is it.” After I got out of nursing—I went and got my RN license because I had all the prerequisites and it looked like a field that was going to be stable. I did that after I graduated. I worked for not quite two years at that and then just said, “Go buy a boat and go fish. This is the only way you’re going to be happy.”

TH: What do you fish for now and how? Now that you’re a charter captain, what do you target mostly and how?

MW: Well, again, that’s seasonal. December, January is certainly sails. February, March, April, I mean, kingfish, grouper, snapper was huge this time of the year but they’ve closed it down to us now.

TH: There’s no place as good as the Oculina Bank?

MW: Oh, I go out there and get plenty of snapper and grouper in an eighty-five foot width. Last
Sunday I said, “We have to keep moving because of the damn red snapper.”

TH: You kept catching them.

MW: Yeah, it’s all you could catch. We threw back four or five grouper and we busted off a couple of big ones. So bottom fishing, that’s really going to hurt us, ’cause people are not going to pay me $1200 to go catch triggerfish. And the people last weekend, they’re the ones that said, “Let’s move. All we’re going to catch is red snapper. We want something to take home.” You know, which is legitimate.

TH: So that’s the snapper-grouper ban right now that’s really hitting you hard, and a lot of boats hard, I guess, right now. You go for fishing for snapper and grouper. Oculina Bank is probably your number-one best?

MW: It’s certainly my favorite spot there was.

TH: That area around there, and then you can come into the ninety, eighty-five and ninety foot [depth] area and catch some; both northeast and then straight east to the inlet, I assume?

MW: Right, and south. It goes on south down almost to the 220 [feet depth]—

TH: Two twenty-five [feet deep] off shore is where kingfish—on average, how far do you go offshore to fish?

MW: There is no average. My customers ask me that. Fifty percent of them ask me, “How far are we gonna go?” I tell ’em, “No.”

TH: I know, I know that. People ask me that and I always say, “Ten to fifteen miles.” That’s average. (laughs)

MW: That’s twelve. If I have to give an answer, I say, “Twelve.”

TH: How do you decide where to fish or where you will fish for a day?
MW: (laughs) You’ll appreciate this, but nobody else will. Chip Shafer used to always—I’d ask him, “Why’d you go north? Why’d you go south? Why’d you go straight out?” And he’d always say, “Fox, I don’t know. You just get out there and you just do it.”

TH: You decide at the inlet or do you decide before you leave the dock?

MW: No, there’s no way you decide at the dock.

TH: (laughs) Okay.

MW: I thought Chip was being evasive. And then after I’ve been running my own boat for a while, one of the customers—they had fished for three days. For two days we went south and the third day, I went north, and all three days we did well. And the guy said, “Why’d you go north today?” And I said, “I don’t know, you just—you got out here and you saw it, you went north,” and I started laughing. I thought, “Damn it, Chip Shafer wasn’t lying to me, it’s just—”

TH: (laughs) Sometimes I just follow the fleet and I say, “I ain’t following the fleet today, I’m going the other direction.” I’d rather catch fish by myself if I can, but then oftentimes you lose money not following the fleet.

MW: I’ve done the same. There’s some days that you go out there and there’s four of y’all heading out and everybody’s going north and I’m like, “You know, I’m going to go south.” And the majority of the time I do better if I follow them, but then, you do have those days where you nail ’em and they don’t.

TH: You were going back over the months of the year that you fish for the various fish. You want to elaborate again? Let’s see, sailfish in the winter, December and November, and the first of January—

MW: Thanksgiving till the end of January, the sails; and dolphin are in there, too, and wahoo. Certainly March—February, March, April, May, predominantly bottom fishing. I mean, you go pull spoons first thing in the morning or strip baits to get your kingfish and then you go anchor up and start bottom fishing. That used to be our—

TH: And the kingfish come back pretty strong?
MW: Yes.

TH: Tell me about your length of a trip. You had half-day charters and full-day charters. Can you describe those?

MW: It’s not a half-day, it’s a three-quarter day, ’cause you’re an hour and a half from the time we leave the dock to where we’re going to be somewhere to fish. So, you got an hour and a half in and an hour and a half back: you take, thus, three hours. You’re going to have an hour and a half of fishing on a real half-day. So, what you do are called three-quarter days, and we get back in around 1:30, 2:00, versus coming back in at 4:00, 4:30.

TH: How much for a three-quarter day?

MW: It’s $800 for a three-quarter day and $1,200 for a—or, $850 for a three-quarter, $1,200 for a full day.

TH: This is a tough one, I know, and I understand, believe me. I’m just—

MW: Yeah, I know—

TH: How much is an average trip’s catch? (laughs)

MW: Enough. (laughs)

TH: What’s a successful trip? How about that?

MW: Honestly, I (inaudible) answer, but the customers are happy. I mean, that’s all I care about, that they get off the boat wondering when can they come back. I’ve had customers be elated. We caught two dolphin and two kingfish.

TH: Couple bonito. (laughs)

MW: Yeah. I had people last summer—it was amazing. Three days in a row, I had different groups, not related. We’d go out on the barge, on that fifty-five foot water, and there was a lot of
them all looking for kings and cobia there, and we’re catching big barracuda just as fast as we can get baits in the water. After like an hour of it, I told the mate, I said, “This is B.S. Pull ’em in and let’s go.” And I did that three days in a row, three different groups, and all three said, “Why are we leaving?” (TH laughs) And I said, “I want to catch some real fish.” They go, “My God, Captain, these are huge! What do you want, what are you looking for?” And I’m thinking like you and I think, “I want some real fish.” But you forget, these Yankees and Midwesterners, they catch forty pound barracuda, my God, they’ve—

TH: I’ll never forget when I caught my first bonito on a little spinning rod, (laughs) and I thought, “My God, this is wonderful!”

MW: The first fish I caught in the ocean was a bonito.

TH: Yeah. For how many years have you been a charter boat captain? Ten?

MW: Yeah, I’d say ten.

TH: Begin the sixty-minute mark—(phone rings)

MW: That’s my phone; they’ll leave a message.

TH: Okay, we’re gonna—finally, I would like to talk about how your fishing has changed over time in regards to the Oculina Bank. Since 1984, several changes have been made in the regulations in the Oculina. I’d like to know if any of these regulations affected your fishing and if so, how? Do you know the chronology of the changes on the Oculina Bank?

MW: I just know it’s closed and they keep extending the closure and expanding it.

TH: Well, it began with dragging. So that didn’t—that wouldn’t affect you. Then anchoring, and you already addressed that. You generally don’t anchor in the Oculina Bank.

MW: No.

TH: Now, it’s just having any—then it was you couldn’t have any fish from the Oculina Bank, you couldn’t even fish there. So that’s when it—
MW: That’s when it hit us.

TH: Okay. Let me go over this: “Initially closed to trawling and dredging.” Here it is, right here. “Nineteen eighty-four, several changes were made in the Oculina Bank. I’d like to know if any of these regulations affect you. Prior to 1984, the Oculina was initially closed to trawling, dredging, bottom long-lining.” Did that affect you?

MW: No.

TH: You didn’t long-line. “Did this affect your fishing?” No. “In 1994, Oculina was designated experimental closed area where fishing for and retention of snapper/grouper species was prohibited.” Did this—

MW: That’s when—

TH: That’s when it sunk in?

MW: Yeah.

TH: Yeah. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation? Can you elaborate?

MW: Certainly. We couldn’t go doing bottom fishing anymore, and again, that’s a tremendous part of my business or every charter boat’s business.

TH: In 1996, all anchoring was prohibited in the Bank, did this impact you? No. It had already—the impact was that you couldn’t take grouper [or] snapper. That’s your main, targeted—

MW: That’s all you’re out there for.

TH: In that area, okay. In 1996, trawling for rock shrimp was prohibited in the area east and north. They extended the area for rock shrimp to incorporate the Oculina Bank. Fishing for a bottom longline, trawl or dredge, was prohibited in the expanded area. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?
TH: No.  Designated marine area that [is] closed to fishing is being used more frequently as a fishery management tool. Let me say this—again, I want you—this is an important question. The designation of marine areas that are closed to fishing is being used more frequently as a fishing management tool. What do you think about the use of closed areas to fishing compared to other types of management regulations: quotas, closed seasons, ITQs [individual transferrable quotas]?

MW: Yeah, I think closing an area is one of the dumbest things that—you make people outlaws, for one. If you enforce your regulations, you don’t need closures. That’s—

TH: Be specific. Enforce what regulations?

MW: Yeah. You’re allowed X amount of grouper or snapper, each different type, then really working and enforcing it.

TH: So quotas—

MW: Right, is the answer.

TH: Do quotas work?

MW: If they enforce them. It’s like any of the speeding laws. Do they work? Yeah, if you put up radar and you start checking everybody, then people slow down. But because everybody speeds on a certain section of road, you don’t close the damn road. Closing it is—you not going to get—there’s a thing called growth inhibition factor with fish, and—

TH: Growth inhibition?

MW: Inhibition factor. Like, you put a goldfish in a bowl this big, he’s going to stay this big. You put him in a five-gallon bowl and you keep him in there for two years, he doesn’t grow. You put him in a larger bowl, he will grow. It’s a scientific fact; it’s not a theory of mine. But, couple that with the fact that a certain habitat will only support X number of fish. There’s not enough
food, not enough everything that—the root structure, the little outcroppings and stuff. So those fish are going to be there. You’re not going to get ten times the fish for closing it for twenty years. It’s not going to happen. It’s not, it cannot. It’s physically impossible. You can take a new tug and sink it, go out there in a week and there’s grouper on it. The habitat’s what they need to do, and do the quotas.

TH: What do you mean, “do the habitat.” Just, uh—?

MW: Put more habitat out there. I mean, and—

TH: Create more natural—I mean, more man-made reefs.

MW: Right. If you want to increase the number of fish, bottom fish, put more habitat.

TH: Do you think that the fishing that you do affects that Oculina reef? When you did—say you could catch fish grouper and snapper out there, would the fishing that you do harm the reef?

MW: No.

TH: All right.

MW: Absolutely not.

TH: Thinking ahead—well, anything else you want to say about the regulations before we move on, because I think this is the key of the whole—your opinion on how, and how best to regulate fishing. You don’t—do you believe that there should be no regulations at all?

MW: No, no, no. You gotta have regulations. I’m all for that.

TH: Okay.

MW: I’m all for that. You can’t have wholesale slaughter going on, I mean, that will—we proved that with the high-roller net boats wiping out the kingfish here. You can deplete a species, but if you’ll enforce—put decent quotas and manage those, everything will work, it’s
TH: As far as fairness, you think that quotas are the most fair approach to managing fisheries?

MW: Yes.

TH: I don’t want to put words in your mouth. (laughs)

MW: No, but that’s the only way to do it.

TH: For example, for the kingfish, after the commercial harvest has reached a certain number, they shut off the area. So, that’s a quota. But it’s not a—the area closure doesn’t come until a certain quota is met.

MW: Right. I don’t know how they come up with their numbers.

TH: (laughs) Lottery.

MW: I think you got a lot of people making these rules, quotas, and closures that have no earthly idea on what is really going on.

TH: Would an example be—give me an example in the grouper or snapper as you—I think you just mentioned—alluded to it earlier.

MW: There’s more red snapper out here right here today than I’ve seen probably in my lifetime, and yet they’ve closed it because they’re concerned about the species being overfished. There’s more grouper—the divers I’ve talked to, and the fishermen, and the fishing I’ve done here in the last month. My God, there’s more—the grouper, I don’t think I’ve ever seen them as thick as they are. And yet, these people making these laws are saying that they’re in danger and they’re getting—we’re overfishing them. They have no idea. When the scientists from the state came down here to talk to Glenn [Cameron] and myself a little bit over a year ago teaching us how to vent—

TH: Vent?
MW: The red snapper. When you catch them from down deep, you know, their air bladder—they can’t go back down. So you gotta take a—I use an IV syringe, and you go in right by the—

TH: Gill?

MW: Caudal fin there, and poke it in, and air comes out and the fish go right back down. But he told us, and I believe this, he said, “The genuine red snapper’s physiology is so fragile. You bring one up in sixty, seventy feet even, he is gonna—80 percent of those are gonna die. Even if you vent them, they will die.” They told the state, “Lower the size.” They were down there asking us, “How many short red snapper do you catch to get your legal ones?” Some days, hell, we’ll catch fifteen, twenty shorts to every one legal one. So then he says, “Well, you’re killing 80 percent of those you throw back.” And they told the state, “Lower the size limit to sixteen inches. You’d only keep two per person.” In essence, you’d be saving hundreds of thousands of fish.

TH: Yeah, you figure every charter boat, every sport boat—

MW: Right. So they close it. They don’t take that into consideration. The easiest thing to do, rather, is just close the damn thing. And what I heard this weekend, they’re fixin’ to close red snapper for eighty-five years. They got a bill in and processed to close red snapper for eighty-five years on the East Coast.

TH: Thinking ahead, what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years? This is really an important question.

MW: Yeah. Well, first of all, I think charter businesses won’t be alive in ten years, because there’s nothing you can keep and catch. I think the fishing will be the same in ten years as it is today. I don’t see the kingfish being—I mean, I see kingfish just as plentiful now as they were five years ago, ten years ago. I see sailfish just as good, grouper, snapper. There’s—other than the pollution, and dumping Lake Okeechobee does a lot of harm.

TH: How so?

MW: It causes fish kills. I remember—

TH: What do you see when they drain Lake Okeechobee that changes?
MW: (laughs) You can go out there to 100 feet of water and you’re in fresh water. You see hyacinths floating. That means that everything that’s out there is either runoff—you just took away all that habitat area, and I see floating fish dead. I’ve seen grouper; I’ve seen snapper—dead.

TH: How does it affect the river right out here? What do you see?

MW: It shuts it down. This is supposedly a brackish river. The fish are—that’s what they’re accustomed to. Snook’s the only one that can manage the fresh water.

TH: And mullet.

MW: And mullet. When they do those dumps, the trout are nonexistent.

TH: How about the clarity, clarity of water?

MW: It’s being able to see top to bottom out here on the river, to being able to see six inches at best.

TH: When they’re not draining—I noticed last year there was a drought, and during that period, what did you see in the river?

MW: Oh, saw it like it was when I was a kid. You had clear water, you had mullet jumping everywhere, you had snook galore. You’d go out there and catch—a buddy of mine fly fishes every day in front of his house. He’d go out there and catch all—just trout, pompano, snook, redfish, ladyfish—

TH: A lot of these are the lower fish in the food chain.

MW: Come right on up. And the sea grass gets killed when they do the dumps. And everybody talks about all this crap saving the sea. They’re worrying about the docks and they’re worrying about this, that and the other for sea grass. You dumped the lake; you killed all the sea grass. It doesn’t matter what you all do: you screwed it.
TH: So you’d say, probably, if there’s one thing that’s adversely affecting—

MW: The river, there’s no question; the paramount issue is dumping that damn lake into my river.

TH: All right. Now we have, we started—we have a few minutes left, and I’m gonna ask you a couple questions that are not on here. I’m trying to think if there’s anything we’ve missed. Anchoring, you don’t really anchor. You motor into the—

MW: Right. You power fish it.

TH: That’s called motoring into the tides?

MW: Right.

TH: I guess if there’s anything I—she wanted to know exactly how you fish for the different species. Maybe I should touch on that again, and then I want to—we’re well inside of an hour. I have a couple of other questions that are off the charts. First is—let’s go back to—for bottom fishing. You fish—when you’re fishing for snapper or grouper, what do you use for poles, rigs, leads—

MW: This one right here.

TH: It’s gotta be oral. (laughs)

MW: Yeah, I’m sorry. Yeah, if we’re deep, we use drop-lead like that. It’s the tear-shaped lead.

TH: Tear-shaped. It’s about a, what? Eight ounce?

MW: No, that’s a twenty-ounce.

TH: Twenty-ounce.
MW: On a three-way swivel. You got your main line attached to one of the ends of the swivel; you got your sinker attached to another.

TH: How far—how long a line on the sinker?

MW: The sinker’s just eight inches, six inches.

TH: Then how long a leader line to the hooks?

MW: Six to eight feet.

TH: What size—circle hooks, I guess?

MW: I use circle hooks [for] bottom fishing. Grouper or amberjack fishing, I’ll use a fourteen. If I’m snapper fishing, I’ll use a six or an eight, maybe even.

TH: You generally—do you anchor at ninety-foot or do you still try and—

MW: Ninety foot, we anchor.

TH: You anchor.

MW: Yeah.

TH: Then you try and anchor on a ledge?

MW: Yeah, on a ledge, just outside the ledge.

TH: You try and anchor off the ledge.

MW: Just outside of it.
TH: Okay. And then trolling, do you troll pretty much the same for wahoo, kingfish, sailfish?

MW: It’s just dolphin, it’s—well, yes and no. Sails and dolphin, I want to use mono leaders.

TH: Why?

MW: ’Cause they’re leader-shy. They’ll see that wire, I promise you.

TH: How long a leader?

MW: Six foot.

TH: Six-foot leader. Do you use primarily ballyhoo?

MW: Yes. I use a lot of strip baits, also, other than sails. Sails, I use ballyhoo, that’s it.

TH: And strip baits? Mullet?

MW: Mullet.

TH: Mullet strips. Two hooks?

MW: Bonita strips.

TH: Behind a sea witch?

MW: Sea witch or an islander.

TH: An islander. Would that be an islander over there?
MW: No, that’s a cobia jig. An islander is just a type of skirt with a chrome-looking head on it.

TH: Okay. Once again, you just use mono for sailfish and—

MW: Dolphin.

TH: Dolphin. And for wahoo and kingfish?

MW: Wire.

TH: Wire leader. Because of?

MW: The teeth; they’re toothy critters.

TH: Very sharp teeth, okay. I shouldn’t talk—

MW: No, no. I’m not good at this. (laughs)

TH: What I want to ask, since we’re well under our hour, I believe, is: Tell me a big fish story. (laughs) Or just any story that comes to mind. Just slip one in here.

MW: Oh, Lord, I’m going blank. Out here recently, that guy from Dubai [United Arab Emirates], he was over here to buy a boat and several people told him he needed to go out with me. The first two times that he was over here, I was booked the days he could go, and this past October, middle of October, he came down. We went—he chartered a boat by himself. He’d never really—this guy is thirty-five years old, he’s worked eighteen-hour days for the last twenty years, finally sold his business: he’s retired. He wants to learn how to fish.

TH: At thirty-five?

MW: Yeah. Yeah, he called me this morning at four [AM]. He’s got a fifty-five foot I take care of for him now, here, and he’s leaving here because the fishing’s so good here, he’s ready to fly his family over here five or six times a year for two weeks at a time—
TH: From Dubai?

MW: From Dubai. Yeah, that’s what I— (laughs) You gotta know Nick. I took him out there and then went on one of the wrecks. I just—actually, the week before, we had gotten a thirty-two pound grouper on that wreck, and some others, but that was the big one. Took Nick out there, and make fires down blue runner.

TH: What now? You—

MW: Blue runner.

TH: Live?

MW: Yeah. Oh, yeah, that’s the best. Grouper love ’em, and they’re the best AJ baits there are—amberjack. And we fired it down on the [USS] *Muliphen*.

TH: The *Muliphen*?

MW: It’s a shipwreck [artificial reef] out here.

TH: Oh, okay.

MW: Artificial—and the rod just (makes sound effect) and the mate got it up off the bottom and handed the rod over to Nick—

TH: Was it grouper?

MW: Yeah, a thirty-five pound copper-belly. And he thought, “My God!” You’d think the guy had never fished before. Pulled a thirty-five pound and had a tag in it, which I had never seen a grouper tagged before. I guess the Marine Patrol gave him the tag. And I told the guy, I said, “I really want to—I’d like to know more about this fish.” And he came back and told me it was tagged thirteen years earlier, 350 miles north of here.
TH: Good Lord.

MW: And he would never tell me. I said, “Well, how big was it when it was tagged?” And that’s very important to me to know, ’cause I—

TH: Thirteen years, how much did he grow?

MW: Was he a two-pound fish and they tagged him? Was he a twenty-pound fish? Do they all talk about—they all talk about how slow grouper and jewfish grow.

TH: Yeah.

MW: So, that was this guy.

TH: Sorry. Let’s turn it over. Stop right here.

MW: We certainly have proven that jewfish grow a whole lot faster that they’ve said they did. So, I think they intentionally won’t tell people—let me slide this (moves recorder). But anyway, then we caught some amberjack. But Nick loved—he’s sold on this area for fishing because of that experience.

TH: But you never did find out that it wouldn’t—why wouldn’t they—I still don’t understand why they won’t tell you how big the fish was when it was tagged?

MW: They kept saying they’d get back with me; they’ll get back with me.

TH: You know who to contact?

MW: Every time I see the guy. He said, “Well, they haven’t given me the information. They keep telling me they’re going to sent it to me.”

TH: That’s—I’m very curious about that.
MW: I think it’s intentional. I really do.

TH: Why?

MW: Because that probably was a three-pound fish that in thirteen years became—’cause they try to say grouper will grow a pound a year.

TH: So, you’re thinking maybe it grew faster?

MW: I’m sure they do, based on what I see with the jewfish.

TH: Jewfish are just a—it’s just a type of grouper.

MW: Right. It’s the large—it’s the alpha grouper, and their growth rate is phenomenal.

TH: Have you ever caught one?

MW: Oh, hell—

TH: Giant? Goliath? How big?

MW: Oh, God, I’ve caught them at a good 250, 350 pounds.

TH: Oh, yeah? Were they legal for—

MW: Oh, we used to—hell, we killed the hell out of ’em back in the seventies [1970s]. We speared ’em, power headed ’em. We used to get, I think it was a nickel a pound over at Baywood.

TH: Five cents a pound?
MW: Yeah. But you get a six-foot—

TH: You didn’t tell me about this. This is when you were younger?

MW: Yeah.

TH: You would shoot—you’d power head the—where was this, in the river?

MW: South—no, southeast wreck, out in the ocean.

TH: Southeast wreck.

MW: Yeah. Well, southeast—a lot of the—we’d see ’em on the reefs, um—

TH: But that’s just good grouper meat, isn’t it?

MW: It’s grainy at that size. You gotta really take it and cut the fillets and really cut ’em down thin. But hell, it's not—the cheeks are great. You get those big 600, 800 pounds, there’s a wedge of meat like this in the cheek. It’s a cone shape.

TH: Like a fillet?

MW: Oh, God, it’s just—that’s good eatin’, still. But the little ones we catch in the river, the twenty to forty pounds, just like eating any other grouper. We got a—this summer, coming down here, he was 350 this year; we got one that hangs out at the cleaning table.

TH: Oh, yeah?

MW: Mm-hm. And actually there’s—the big one is three feet and then he’s a good hundred pounds bigger that I am. His tail is like this. (demonstrates)

TH: Can he come up where the tourists can see him?
MW: Oh, yeah. It’s funny, ’cause I told my people this year that I’ll be cleaning fish; catfish are dried up, you know, when you’re throwing scraps in? And all of a sudden the catfish look like Hoss Cartwright had showed up and was herding cattle. They just haul ass. As fast as they can go on the surface and deep, they’re heading to the north. And the first couple times that it happened I said, “That jewfish is back!” [Person says], “What are you talking about?” I said, “There’s a jewfish that lives here in the summertime, springtime, and he’ll eat ’em.” Then a couple days later, I’m throwing—threw a piece in and (makes sound effect) up he came and grabbed it.

TH: (laughs) Cool. Cool.

MW: And there’s another 150 and about seventy-five that were with him a fair amount of the year, this past summer.

TH: Did you ever see any in the river?

MW: Oh, God, yes.

TH: When you were growing up?

MW: Oh, yeah. There was an old boiler down there by Pelican Island—

TH: Pelican Island?

MW: That’s what I call that first island north of North Bridge called Pelican Roost. And it was right on the edge of the channel there where the drop—and it’s right after Jaws came out, and I was diving with a lawyer named John Sherrard. And all of a sudden, Sherrard just (makes sound effect) was gone! I look around up underneath the boiler, what’s left of it: it’s about 125, 150 pound jewfish. Sherrard saw that, he thought it was Jaws and was gonna eat his ass. (both laugh)

TH: All right. Well, I have got to—let’s see, I could go on for some more questions. Let me mark two more. We started at 7:20; we have about five minutes left. Any stories that come to mind that you think—you know—
MW: Unusual stuff: I had some guy who’s a charter captain up in the New England area and his wife, this spring, and we were out there in the 242 on the offshore bar. Got a live-bail, slow-trolling kings, and caught a twelve-pound genuine red [fish]. And we were only—we had that one down—

TH: Trolling.

MW: Yeah, forty feet, maybe. And they kept saying, “What is it?” You know, when we were fighting it, and I said, “I’ll be damned, I have no idea. It’s not a king, it’s not running, it’s not a —” I fish with some of the SK boys. We’re out on the barge, their boat had—

TH: SKA, the kingfish tournament?

MW: The Southern Kingfish Association. They had a tournament here and their boat had broken down, so they had hired me for two days. And, of course, they were know-it-alls and made it clear that they knew more than I did up front. We’re out there, I said, “There’s a bunch of cobia up on surface at the bar.” I ran down, grabbed a live bait, threw out there. I wanted a cobia, and I saw six or eight cobia, no question. I threw the bait out there to them on the surface, nothing. It gets eaten immediately, and forty some-odd pound cobia—grouper, gag grouper on the surface—

TH: With cobia?

MW: With the cobia.

TH: (laughs) I’ve never heard of such a thing.

MW: Never thought I’d see it. I have no idea—it wasn’t a thermocline, it wasn’t—but he obviously was right there on the surface, ’cause he got it before the cobia could.

TH: So once again, now, we’ve put the closure of the grouper/snapper—really, your business is—does it hurt your business?

MW: Oh, yeah. Oh, God, yeah. Why would you go?
TH: Yeah, for bottom fishing.

MW: Yeah. I had a guy—this has been two or three weeks ago—that came down here, wanted a boat for a bottom fishing trip, and I said, “You understand we can’t keep any grouper or snapper?” And he says, “Yeah, I know about the limits.” I said, “No, you don’t understand, we can keep none of these.” And he said, “Well, that’s ridiculous. Why would I go?” I said, “That’s what I’m trying to tell you.” And so he said, “Thanks for telling me up front,” and he didn’t go.

TH: How about sea bass?

MW: (laughs) You ever clean those little rascals?

TH: I heard there’s some bigger ones out there.

MW: Well, yeah, yeah. (laughs)

TH: It’s like cleaning a triggerfish. Or it’s worse?

MW: No, no, no. I’d rather clean twenty sea bass than two triggerfish. You fillet it and skin it for hours to get two pounds of meat. Yes, they’re great eating. But again, are you gonna pay me $1,200 to go out there and catch pan fish?

TH: Gotcha. Could you catch a sailfish right now at this time of year?

MW: You can catch sail any time of the year, but not in the numbers.

TH: One other question: When I first came here years ago, I saw posters at the museum and books, and I haven’t seen in a while, but Fort Pierce used to be called the fishing capital of the world.

MW: Of the world.

TH: What’s the origin of that? What do you about that?
MW: I don’t know anything, other than when I was a kid—

TH: You grew up here.

MW: But we are. I have customers ask me all the time, “If you could go anywhere in the world and fish, where would you go?” And I tell ’em all, I say, “I can go anywhere in the world. I have no family—I mean, I have a brother and sister but they don’t live—they live in Washington and down in Miami. So I have nothing to hold me to Fort Pierce, and I’ve got a floating home. I could be in the Bahamas, I could be in Maine, I could be in Mexico. Year round, fishing is better out of here than it is anywhere I’ve ever heard of or seen. But they’re ruining that. It used to be ’cause you—when one thing stops here, something else starts; where everywhere else, it peaks and then it’s just flat.

TH: On fish, you’re talking fisheries?

MW: Right.

TH: But here?

MW: They just go through the year. January: sails, dolphin, wahoo. February: cobia, grouper, kingfish, snapper ,and some sails. March: kingfish, grouper, snapper. March, April, May: the same thing, and the dolphin come in. May: the mangrove snappers really get going, and the grouper are still here, and the kingfish are here, and the dolphin are here, and the sailfishing’s pretty good. That goes through to August. Then in August, the tarpon show up. August and September, I got tarpon fishing. Dan Dierdorf, the football announcer, used to fish with me a lot and he said Fort Pierce is the best kept secret fishing-wise he’d ever seen in his life. Larry Csonka emails me, wants to come down here and fish. He and I hooked through another customer. And then in October, October 15, the dolphins start showing again. Snapper fishing’s good in October. So you’ve got in November—

TH: How do you fish—okay, go ahead.

MW: November, you’ve got the snapper, dolphin, kings, cobia; and then you’re back to December, which is dolphin and sails.
TH: How do you catch the big—I see ’em going up the coast, these 600, 800 pound tarpon. Can you—

MW: Not 600 or 800.

TH: I mean, these are huge. How big are they?

MW: Two, 250 [pounds].

TH: Two-fifty.

MW: But they’re eight and nine foot.

TH: Yeah.

MW: Oh, yeah. That rod right there’ll do it, that first rod.

TH: It’ll turn ’em? You can actually be able to turn around with ’em?


TH: Can you get ’em worn down?

MW: Oh, yeah. We’ve caught ’em in the inlet here.

TH: Huh, that’s cool. How do you catch—what do you use for a lure for—

MW: Well, I’d rather—I don’t use a lure for tarpon. Big ones, actually, you can use a mullet or a bunker. You take a mullet, big mullet, and rip him in half. Don’t use a knife. I’m talking about grab both and twist and rip and break: rip it in half. One of the halves is the one that—you’ll see that group rolling down the beach, and you cast out ahead of ’em. Let that sink down to the bottom, and tarpon will eat that faster than they’ll eat anything alive. Split-tailed mullet. They did a big article—
TH: Where you’ll cut the—

MW: You cut the back, right behind the head; you cut the backbone out and split the tail, both sides, pull that out. Was developed—I wasn’t alive, so I don’t know, but supposedly—I don’t know if it was Captain Hagan or Captain [Pug] Eargle. But that was made; he came up with that to fish the inlet here for tarpon. Because like on the outgoing tide—I don’t know if you’ve ever seen on the water, but they just—my God, he’s just, I mean—

TH: The mullet?

MW: Yeah, the split-tail. He just—he’s alive. And you take an eight-ounce egg sinker, drop it down, put a twelve foot liter on it so that fish is coming up with the current a little bit and he’s back there just (demonstrates). And they used to catch—there’s pictures all around town of George Archer, Sam Crutchfield, Sonny Koblegaurd, catching eight foot tarpon.

TH: They gotta be from a boat, though.

MW: Oh, yeah. Oh, God, yeah! Well, I’ve hooked ’em. When I lived over on the inlet, I hooked one one night and (makes sound effect) bam! And that was cute, you know? Next! (both laugh)

TH: That was my experience with tarpon. I was in—my back is a sixteen-foot bass boat and I was out there chasing with my girlfriend—she’s my wife now. I threw a spoon out in front of ’em and finally got one and I said, “Yeah, I got one!” And (makes sound effect) pop! (both laugh)

MW: Yeah, that was fun.

TH: I think I got—he took all the line. I had another pole and the same thing happened, and that was my tarpon fishing experience.

MW: Would you turn these off? (referring to recorder) I gotta tell you a cute story about [Beannie] Backus.

---

3 Albert E. “Bean” or “Beannie” Backus (1906-1990), was an American artist famous for his vivid Florida landscapes.
TH: All right, I’m gonna shut everything off, and let’s see.

*Pause in recording*

TH: Talk to me about amberjacks.

MW: Well, with the closure of grouper and snapper, the only thing you have left is amberjack.

TH: You troll for those, don’t you?

MW: No, no. You bottom fish. Oh, yeah.

TH: Big amberjacks, the big ones?

MW: Oh, yeah. That’s for use, again, the bottom rig with the twenty-eight ounce lead and the twelve or fourteen circle-hook and a live blue runner.

TH: They’re good sport fish, but what are they good for other than that?

MW: They actually—and again, I’ll prove it to you, but they’re great smoked. The favorite fish to smoke is amberjack. And my mother’s old cookbooks from the forties [1940s] and fifties [1950s], a lot of the fish recipes will say, “Take two pounds of grouper or amberjack.” That top loin, you take it out—you got a forty, fifty, sixty pound fish, that’s a hell of a lot of meat right there. But you take that and finger it and go up here and have ’em fry it: you won’t know that difference in that grouper.

TH: You say, “Top loin.” Be more specific.

MW: From the backbone up. Take from the backbone; make a cut right down the backbone lengthwise.

TH: On the top, the top side of the fish?
MW: Right, and then fillet that. You know, cut that right that out like you would a normal fillet. And they’re very wormy, but the worms are in the—from the—

TH: Back.

MW: Back third of the fish.

TH: Down.

MW: Yeah.

TH: Cool.

MW: The other reason you don’t fillet them completely is if the customers see the worms, they ain’t gonna eat any of the meat. (laughs)

TH: It’s a little extra protein.

MW: That’s what I try to tell ’em. The thing—real quick, the thing they’re gonna do is put so much pressure on the amberjack. That’s what my worry is, that then it’ll come back and then in another six months or a year, they’ll want to close amberjack. But you’re only allowed one per person now as it is, which is fine, but now the guys with commercial licenses, the divers, will be out there spearing amberjack. And that, I don’t agree with. They do more harm than we ever thought of doing.

TH: The divers.

MW: Yes.

TH: We didn’t even talk about that.

MW: No.
TH: That’s—

MW: Oh, that’s a sore subject for me. I’ll tell you another cute story, after the thing’s off.

*End of interview*