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Don Raffensberger oral history interview by Terry Howard, March 22, 2010

Donald Raffensberger (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Hello, good afternoon, my name’s Terry Howard. Today is March 22, 2010. I’m at White’s Tackle Shop in Fort Pierce, and I’m conducting an oral history with Don. Don, would you say and spell your name, please?

Don Raffensberger: Raffensberger, R-a-f-f-e-n-s-b-e-r-g-e-r.

TH: We’re here with Don for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation’s project with Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. And with that, welcome, Don. Please—you just stated your full name. Would you state it one more time and spell it one more time, so we’ll be sure to have it?

DR. Yes. My name is Don Raffensberger. It’s spelled D-o-n R-a-f-f-e-n-s-b-e-r-g-e-r.
TH: And you were born where and when?


TH: Okay. When did you move to Fort Pierce?

DR: In 1957.

TH: In 1957. What brought you to Fort Pierce?

DR: My mom and dad. (laughs)

TH: Why did they pick Fort Pierce?

DR: Warmer temperatures and the fishing.

TH: Fishing was one of the main—

DR: Main things for my dad.

TH: Okay, you married?

DR: I am.

TH: How old were you when you got married?

DR: Thirty-eight.

TH: Okay, and do you have children?
DR: No, we do not.

TH: Okay. How much schooling do you have?

DR: High school education.

TH: Okay, and what do you do for a living, or what have you done for a living?

DR: The fishing; sold fishing tackle.

TH: That’s been your primary?

DR: All my life, pretty much.

TH: Okay, and you and your father ran White’s Tackle?

DR: From 1973 to 2007. We were the owners.

TH: Okay. Other jobs that you’ve had?

DR: Minor stuff, just—you know, sales and paint. I worked for Sherman Williams right out of high school.

TH: Okay. Have you worked in the fishing industry? So your experience with the fishing industry is mostly with commercial, recreational, or recreational and—

DR: Recreational, with some commercial.

TH: Okay. Dealing with the fishermen, mostly?

DR: Mostly.
TH: But you do fish yourself?

DR: Yes.

TH: Okay. And you currently own a boat?

DR: I don’t now, no.

TH: Okay. You don’t have a canoe or anything?

DR: No, don’t have anything like that.

TH: Kayak?

DR: Go with friends.

TH: Okay, there you go. Now, I’d like to ask some questions about the Oculina Bank and then we’ll get back into your personal fishing history. First, how familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

DR: Pretty familiar.

TH: Was the Oculina Bank—do you know why it was designated as a protected area?

DR: No, I don’t.

TH: Okay. Do you have an opinion as to why?

DR: Yeah, I do have an opinion as to why, because the coral out there was being—the Oculina coral was being destroyed.
TH: Okay, and what do you know about the Oculina coral?

DR: I don’t know much about it. I know it’s fairly delicate, and that’s about it. (telephone rings)

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

DR: I think it’s ridiculous.

TH: Why?

DR: ’Cause the anchors are not tearing up the Oculina. And not many people anchored in the Oculina in the first place, and the guys drift fishing across there are certainly not gonna tear up the Oculina.

TH: Okay, the Oculina coral. Has the closure of the Oculina Bank affected your fishing and how, or your fishing business, and how?

DR: It certainly affected the fishing business. We’ve seen a decline in bottom fishing tackle that we’ve sold in the past.

TH: Can you elaborate?

DR: Yeah, the electric reel sales that we had. Typically, we would sell into summertime a dozen of those units in one month; and now we sell ’em mostly for fishing in the Bahamas, and not nearly as many as we used to. Plus, all the deep jigging equipment that we’ve sold in the past: that is all tapered off to just about nothing. The deep jigs themselves—I don’t know many people that even end up talking about deep jigging anymore.

TH: When the Oculina was open to bottom fishing, you did have a lot of business?

DR: Absolutely, a lot of bottom fishing business.
TH: So, the closure has affected your business.

DR: Yeah, to the extent where we’ve seen, even in some of the fishing tournaments, where they’ve eliminated the bottom fishing categories.

TH: And you’ve—okay, if anchoring and bottom fishing in the Oculina was not prohibited, would a lot of your customers fish there?

DR: Yes, yeah.

TH: How and for what?

DR: Grouper, mostly, and they would deep jig again.

TH: Deep jigging for grouper mostly, or—

DR: Deep jigging for grouper.

TH: And snapper?

DR: Yeah, they deep jig for snapper as well. It’s not as common as grouper jigging.

TH: Okay. How has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area, overall? Now we’re getting away from Oculina for a while.

DR: I’ve seen the rule changes a lot that have, you know, just closed down fisheries. I’ve seen a lot of big decline in the fish in general, in just about all the species over the years. I’m not sure as to what to attribute all that to. Certainly has hurt our sales. We’ve seen a decline in our sales over the years. [It’s] a little hard to tell right now because we’re in a new location and our sales have increased.

TH: All right. Overall, you don’t know what to attribute the fishing—
DR: I think—

TH: —decline in fishing?

DR: You know, the longer I’m in this business, the more that I realize that I think it’s—there’s a lot of cycles in the fishery. And, you know, there hasn’t been any real history as to what those cycles are. I don’t know that there have been a lot of logs kept by the fishermen.

TH: Has more water been released into the river as the years have gone on?

DR: Yes. There’s no question that there has been a population increase, which has affected it. There’s been a lot more water runoff into the lagoon. I’ve seen satellite photos of the nutrients coming out of the inlet, so I’m sure that that’s hampered it a little bit. I’ve seen a lot of the reefs that have been covered or uncovered during the hurricanes and things of that nature. So, it’s really hard to pinpoint what causes the changes in the fisheries.

TH: So, you have seen cyclical as much as decline?

DR: Yes, absolutely.

TH: What species are in an upswing right now?

DR: Genuine red snapper. I hear that is becoming big numbers there. Also grouper, actually. That’s what’s a little bit curious about why they’re having the closure on grouper in the Atlantic, because divers are telling me that the reefs are covered with grouper.

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

DR: I have not, no.

TH: Now, I want to talk about your fishing history; then we’ll come back to some of this, to the Oculina Bank history. When did you begin fishing? Your earliest memory of fishing, how old were you?
DR: Well, six years old, six or seven.

TH: Your father took you?

DR: My father took me.

TH: Where was that?

DR: Mostly in the river, at that time.

TH: Here in Fort Pierce?

DR: In Fort Pierce. Oh, yeah, yeah.

TH: Okay, so how did you learn how to fish?

DR: My dad. My dad taught me everything that he knew.

TH: What kind of fishing in the river did you do? What did you fish for?

DR: Primarily trout and snook.

TH: Okay, when you first started. With live bait or with—

DR: Artificials; my dad was an artificial type of guy. He taught me how to fish with artificials. Rarely in my lifetime have I used live bait.

TH: All right, where did you go to fish when you began fishing? You said the river, like—

DR: The lagoon. Well, we fished—
TH: Be more specific. In the river?

DR: Yeah, there was a radio station on Melody Lane that my father worked at, and we fished on that seawall. [That] is where I first started, at the seawall.

TH: I remember going to that tower, the tower right there, radio tower. You’d fish around that. That was the hot spot.

DR. Well, yeah. Dad had—Dad was the manager of that radio station, so he had keys to get out on that dock that went out to the radio tower. So, we would fish out there, and along the wall itself. I mean, at that time, there was—it was very healthy. There was sea grass, and it was great trout fishing in there.

TH: Okay. Where we’re talking about is right in front of Fort Pierce Hotel, I think—and it’s not even there now. Part of the old hotel is there; it’s right at the waterfront of Fort Pierce proper, the old Fort Pierce. And I will tell you, we used to come over from Causeway Trailer Park in a small boat with my grandfather and I fished with small—with shrimp right there. That was a hot spot.

DR: It was a hot spot.

TH: I would catch sheephead, little sheephead.

DR: That was the main reason we fished it. We didn’t have a boat at the time.

TH: Mangrove snapper.

DR: Mangrove snapper. But back then, the old South Bridge was linking the mainland to the South Beach, and when they built that bridge, there were changes that that bridge affected. There was a sandbar that was deposited south of it, and I’m not sure if that was just from the currents or the eddies of the bridge or how it happened, but that whole area from the city marina down to where the radio station used to be, out front, changed completely, after that bridge was built.

TH: The new bridge, the new South Bridge.
DR: The new bridge, South Bridge, which isn’t all that new anymore. But when I was a kid, we’d fish on the South Bridge. It was an old wooden bridge with a turnstile type thing, is what they called it. And that was like going to the aquarium, you know, you’d just stand up and see leopard rays and all kinds of sea life at that time.

TH: Yeah, it was a hot spot, it really was, to fish snook. You caught snook there?

DR: Snook there, oh, yeah.

TH: Yeah, I remember that, too. So, at first, you mostly fished from bridges and seawall.

DR: Right.

TH: Okay.

DR: At that time, the south jetty wasn’t capped, so it was a little treacherous to get out a lot.

TH: By “capped,” it didn’t have the walkway?

DR: Didn’t have the walkway.

TH: On top of the south jetty, okay. So, you actually had to climb over the rocks to—

DR: Yeah, my dad wasn’t gonna take me there.

TH: Okay, it can be dangerous. When did you get your boat? When did you and your father—you ever get a boat?

DR: Yeah, we had boats in the sixties [1960s], but our main boat we bought in 19—I’m gonna say 1971.

TH: Okay, and what kind of boat was it?
DR: It was a Mako.

TH: Okay, and can you describe it?

DR: A seventeen foot Mako with a Mercury outboard. Had it six months and it had gotten stolen, so we had to replace it. Insurance company didn’t replace all the money that we spent on the boat, so we had to change the brand a little bit. We went with a T-Craft [Thundercraft]. I think the T-Craft was like a nineteen foot T-Craft. We ran that boat for a couple years and then we bought a twenty foot Mako, again.

TH: What engine?

DR: On the—I don’t remember what was on the T-Craft. What powered the Mako was a 115 horsepower Mercury for three years, and then we repowered with a 140.

TH: Okay. During what months of the year—okay, who did you fish with—mostly would be your father?

DR: My dad and friends.

TH: Okay, and friends. And during what months did you fish for which fish? Which fish, you know, did you target throughout the year?

DR: Well, we would troll offshore, weather permitting, for dolphin in May, and that was always a good time for that. The weather was starting to settle down from the winter. And then, of course, all summer long, we’d troll for dolphin and wahoo. Then, we were always fishing for kingfish beginning about March. Usually fished the beaches for kingfish, for the smoker kings there in March.

TH: Smoker kings?

TH: Smoker king is a big kingfish. It’s smoked and dried right on the reel.
TH: Is that how they got the name “smoker kings”?

DR: I think it’s a lot of things. I think it’s the fact that people would smoke ’em—they’re too big to eat—and then they’d smoke and dry on the reel as well.

TH: How big a kingfish have you caught?

DR: Fifty pounds would be my biggest one.

TH: Okay, that’s a big kingfish. So, that was kingfish in March and throughout—

DR: Throughout the springtime, or early summertime.

TH: Okay, and then dolphin?

DR: Dolphin, wahoo, in the summertime, Spanish mackerel in the fall, bluefish from time to time. Of course, we’d fish for tarpon, too, on the beaches.

TH: Okay. So, the bluefish were on the beach?

DR: Bluefish on the beach.

TH: Spanish?

DR: Spanish mackerel on the beach, tarpon certainly on the beach and in the inlet.

TH: How big a tarpon did you catch?

DR: I’m going to say 120 pounds.

TH: You’ve caught ’em and—
DR: Yeah, I’ve released ’em at that size.

TH: Okay, how long did it take you to fight a tarpon? What did you use for it?

DR: Well, we all—back then, we used Penn 4/0s for just about everything we did.

TH: Penn 4/0 reels?

DR: Penn 4/0 reels. That was a Penn Senator, and it was referred to as a 4/0 for its size. That one that you’re holding in your left hand is a 6/0 step pedal, little step pedal.

TH: Step smaller than that.

DR: Yeah.

TH: Okay.

DR: And we fished thirty-pound test line.

TH: Okay, and thirty pound test line. Which was it, mono[filament], or—

DR: Oh, we fished mono, yeah.

TH: Before mono, did you fish nylon?

DR: Did Dacron, we did—my dad fished a little Dacron, yeah.

TH: Okay.

DR: And that was something that he liked to do, fish light tackle sailfish.
TH: And then you went out on your Mako for sailfish with your father?

DR: Oh, yeah.

TH: What did you use for bait for that?

DR: Ballyhoo, mullet. He showed me a special technique on rigging mullet that George Archer, a charter boat captain, long, long time ago, showed my dad how to rig. There’s an easy way to take out part of the backbone, not the whole backbone of the mullet.

TH; How far back did you break the backbone off of it?

DR: We’d actually take and cut out a little rectangular piece of meat and backbone right where the dorsal fin is. So you’re literally taking out a section of its backbone.

TH: So, you leave the rest of it in?

DR: Yeah, yeah.

TH: I’ve never heard that. Is that—and that’s—and you use that for—you put a hook in the front and back?

DR: Just one hook. Take it and come up through the stomach cavity, run the eye of the hook up through its mouth, and then run a piece of wire through its chin, through the eye of the hook, and then through the head, this way through the (inaudible). And in some cases, we’d put a lead sinker on it for swimming mullet. My dad liked to skip mullet. And that technique that he had, when the boat speed was just proper, the mullet would just sit there and kind of flip along with their tail flapping this way. It’s pretty cool. I mean, it really was.

TH: So, it’d be on the surface, where you would see ’em around the surface?

DR: Yeah, and it’s a technique that’s pretty well forgotten about now. I mean, it’s a—most of the guys that are fishing mullet today, they go to a great extreme to take out the backbone. Just split
tail of the mullet, and do all the other things. And it’s a good—it’s an effective way, but so is that way that George Archer did it, too.

TH: Okay, it’s here right now, George Archer. Okay, fascinating. Now, how ’bout, again, bait for the various fish? Let’s go with tarpon.

DR: Tarpon, that’d be—there, we would use live bait, and you’d use croakers or live mullet.

TH: Okay, and for kingfish, smoker kingfish?

DR: For the smoker kingfish, our pick back then, our choice of bait was a Rebel plug, a seven-inch Rebel plug.

TH: Okay, and that’s what Sam—oh, who was the *African Queen*?

DR: Stan Blum.

TH: Stan Blum; he used to fish the plugs.

DR: Yeah, and we literally had people that would buy those from us by the dozens. That’s how—they’d come in and order a dozen seven-inchers just for the—

TH: Smoker kingfish?

DR: Smoker kingfish.

TH: Okay, and for Spanish mackerel?

DR: Spoons. Clark spoons, primarily.

TH: And bluefish?
DR: Again, spoons.

TH: Clark spoons.

DR: Yeah.

TH: And what other fish did you mention for the ocean? Cobia and—

DR: Dolphin. Dolphin, you can catch a dolphin with just about anything, artificials or ballyhoo.

TH: Did you find ’em and then cast into ’em, or troll?

DR: Just trolling along to ’em. I mean, occasionally, you’d come upon something floating, some debris that you’d see a dolphin underneath. You can cast to ’em that way or troll past the debris.

TH: And you’d troll ballyhoo, or—

DR: Yeah, we’d troll ballyhoo. You know, interestingly, the ballyhoo really didn’t make it into Fort Pierce until—I’m gonna say maybe the early seventies [1970s]. They were just becoming pretty popular in this area, or just starting to become popular, right around 1972, seventy-three [1973], I’d say.

TH: Interesting. Now, before that, was it mullet strips?

DR: Mullet strips, and mullet.

TH: Now, when you say mullet strips, you quarter them, or you fillet the mullet?

DR: You literally fillet the mullet, and then fillet them fairly thinly, and then take the—there’s a way that you can take the mullet, and when you come down with your knife, you can actually split the tail so both strips have tail on it. You’ve seen that?

TH: Yeah. Okay, and then you’d make those into four different baits?
TH: Uh, yeah, that’s what the kingfish are. (DR laughs) Let’s see, and the months of the year? You’ve gone through that, pretty much.

DR: Sailfishing was pretty much a wintertime thing, although the biggest sailfish that I caught was during a tournament, the Fourth of July weekend.

TH: Oh, yeah?

DR: Yeah.

TH: And how big was that?

DR: That fish was sixty-five pounds, which is interesting because it, at the time, was a record. It beat the record that was caught in the tournament the year before, which was only forty-five pounds. And the following year, Dom Siano’s son caught one, eighty-five pounds.

TH: How do you spell that name?

DR: Siano is spelled S-i-a-n-o. And his first name is D-o-m.

TH: S-i-a-n-o. Okay.

DR: And I know that, at that time—I think the one time that Dom Siano caught his, that was the last year the Sport Fisherman Club kept sailfish in their tournament.

TH: Okay, why do you think that is?

DR: Well, because of the peak of it, it’s becoming more popular to release fish and the popular outcry wanted everybody to release sailfish. The reason the sailfish were incorporated in the tournament in the first place was they had a thing called the Fort Pierce Sport Fishing Club Slam,
or Fort Pierce Slam, which included all the fishes that were in the logo of the club, which was sailfish, dolphin, wahoo, and kingfish.

TH: And a “grand slam” was when you caught one of each?

DR: Caught all four of ’em.

TH: One of each.

DR: When you got your Fort Pierce slam.

TH: Okay, cool. When was your last fishing outing, fishing trip?

DR: Oh, a year.

TH: Been a year since you’ve gone fishing?

DR: Mm-hm.

TH: Now, I do know, too, that in some of the last few years you’ve gone freshwater fishing.

DR: I’ve done some of that all my life, on and off. Bass, bluegills; I like to fly rod for bluegills.

TH: Okay, and your last fishing trip, do you remember a year ago?

DR: I suppose it was at least a year ago, yeah. Working more is a reason. I just spend a lot of time at the store.

TH: Okay, how much would you catch on an average trip? I know as a recreational fisherman, this is kind of kind of a hard question, ’cause you don’t know what you’re fishing for.

DR: Yeah, it’s hard to answer that question.
TH: I know.

DR: How much would I catch on an average trip? I mean, it just depended on the season and what was going on. I mean, if the kingfish were—if the smaller kingfish were offshore, you could fill a box up.

TH: And let’s see, back when you fished in the river, did you ever fill a cooler?

DR: Oh, yeah, yeah.

TH: Of what? Of mangroves?

DR: I’ve done that, and I’ve done it with sea trout.

TH: Sea trout?

DR: Sea trout in the wintertime.

TH: Wow, that’s hard to do. What’s your biggest sea trout?

DR: Biggest trout for me is ten [pounds].

TH: That’s a big fish.

DR: Yeah, but it’s—I’ve seen bigger. (laughs)

TH: I caught a thirteen-and-a-half [pounder].

DR: Right. (laughs)
TH: That’s why (inaudible). I haven’t caught as many as you, I’m sure. How much do you fish for, for how many years? Do you—okay, so all your life. That’s pretty much it. Okay. So, you’re mostly running the store now, you’re not fishing as hard, not as much as you used to.

DR: No, lot of health issues with family that we’ve had to deal with since 2004, really.

TH: Okay. Now, how long has your father been—

DR: He died in 2007, July 16.

TH: It hasn’t been that long. Where else do you go fishing in the Fort Pierce area? You pretty much covered that: all over the river.

DR: All over the lagoon, out front on the ocean, offshore in the ocean, freshwater, any freshwater I can find west of town that’s open.

TH: Now, have you—the Oculina Bank, have you spent any time there personally?

DR: I trolled over the Oculina a lot, but not—I’ve never done any real grouper jigging out there.

TH: What do you troll over the Oculina Bank for?

DR: Believe it or not, that’s where I caught those two big sailfish, to the north end of that.

TH: North of the—

DR: Or to the northern end.

TH: Okay, interesting. Well, they follow the other fish that are—

DR: I’m sure that the Oculina holds some bait over it. The fish are there for a reason, and it’s mostly food-related.
TH: Okay. And you already talked about fishing the river and the inlet. Have you spent much
time fishing the inlet?

DR: Spent a lot of time fishing the inlet.

TH: Okay, and we’ve talked about the different gear, different baits. Do you usually go on your
own boat when you go fishing now? I guess you haven’t gone for quite a while. And how long
has it been since you’ve had your own boat?

DR: Mm, a couple years.

TH: Okay. So, you usually fish with friends. We already talked—you usually go in your own
boat. What months of the year do you fish—okay, we’ve covered that. How much would you
catch in an average trip—still fishing—and, once again, repeat why you no longer fish very
much, ’cause you’ve moved the store, White’s Tackle?

DR: Yeah, we moved last February, so we’ve been here just a little over a year.

TH: How long had the store been in its previous location?

DR: From 1945 until (telephone rings) 2009.

TH: Now, it pretty much was an institution or a local—

DR: Well, it was started in 1925 and moved to the location that we owned it in 1945.

TH: On Second Street?

DR: On Second Street.

TH: Which used to be the center, the head for all the commercial fishermen that used to live on
that street.
DR: All that. The whole street was full of commercial fishermen, and it was known as Edgartown for some reason. They had—you know that Fort Pierce was broken up into these little—

TH: A-c-r-e, Acre?

DR: Edgar, E-d-g-a-r.

TH: Edgartown. Okay, that was Second Street?

DR: The Second Street was sort of the Main Street of Fort Pierce back then.

TH: Okay, and it was, you say, all the commercial fishermen. Anything else you want to share on that? ’Cause this will be—this is history.

DR: I mean, that whole area there is historical; it’s been declared historical. Most all the commercial fishermen lived right there. Just down the road was Backus Boat Works; it was on Moores Creek, and they built a lot of the commercial boats. And there were even pictures that I’ve seen, you know, drawing nets and stuff, near that area there as well.

TH: Painted by?

DR: Painted by?

TH: The pictures.

DR: Gosh, I couldn’t tell you the artist. I mean, they’re mostly drawings.

TH: Oh, okay.

DR: And photographs.
TH: And which Backus was it that built the boats?

DR: Beanie’s brother, I believe.

TH: But do you know his name?

DR: I don’t know his name.

TH: We’ll try to figure that out today. Okay, and his first boat works was on—

DR: Moores Creek.

TH: Moores Creek, ’cause later on, it was moved over to the causeway.

DR: Causeway.

TH: On South Beach, by where the museum is today, is that correct?¹

DR: That’s correct.

TH: Okay. And how far—how close did the river come to Second Street? Well, early on, it’s before you came here, even.

DR: Well, the houses across the street from the tackle shop that were—

TH: On the east side of Second Street.

DR: They were waterfront. They tied their boats right behind their houses. So, that fill was pumped in at some point—it was before my time—behind those houses out to where it is now, to the east of Indian River Drive where the community center sits.

¹The A. E. "Bean" Backus Gallery and Museum houses the art work of the establishment’s namesake, a renowned artist who created rural Florida paintings.
TH: Which would be about a half-mile?

DR: I’d say it’s not quite, yeah.

TH: Almost a half-mile. It’s more than a hundred yards. It’s more than 200 yards.

DR: Yeah. Well, it’s probably, I’d say—yeah, it’s more than 200 yards.

TH: Okay, interesting. So, that was the Edgartown, and that was the headquarters of fishing.

DR: That was the headquarters for fishing.

TH: Historically, let’s see, I guess the early part of the twentieth century, what were the three main industries in Fort Pierce?

DR: Back in the old days, it was known as a trading post, and the fishing was a big part of it from the very beginning. Citrus was another big part of it because of the port. And the third industry? Gee, I don’t know. Maybe (inaudible).

TH: Cattle.

DR: Oh, the cattle, yeah. I missed that.

TH: And I don’t want to be telling you it was cattle. (laughs)

DR: No, no. I understand.

TH: Seems like it was cattle, citrus, and fishing, essentially.

DR: Oh, yeah, that’s it, yeah.
TH: Yeah, early on. A lot of the—slip this in there, this question, but a lot the land that was prime fishing, or fisherman land, today is used for what?

_Pause in recording_

TH: Just before we shut off, you were talking about how the waterfront has changed.

DR: Well, I’ll give you an example. First off, the old-timers told me years ago that when you got to the end of Orange Avenue, where it became Orange Avenue Extension, basically that was all—that property was all drained. It was all pretty much swampy land out there. It was all drained for development, and for citrus and for cattle.

TH: That’s west of town.

DR: West of town. One of my customers, who’s basically born and raised here, and who was a fairly old person at the time, told me that when you got to the end of Orange Avenue, there was a dike, and you’d walk up on the dike and look out into the swamp. That’s as far as it went.

TH: That’s like the Everglades down south.

DR: Right, and then it became Orange Avenue Extension after they drained it and turned it into property. Of course, eventually, as citrus changed, I believe some of the big developers came in and bought the property, and the population boomed around here. The population has impacted a little bit.

I was gonna tell you a story about the roundabout in downtown Fort Pierce. When they first built the roundabout, you know, there was a lot of controversy about the roundabout in the first place. And then they got it built, and then the folks who built it went around town and gave slide presentations as to why they built it and how they built it. And I was at one of those meetings and asked the guy at the end of the meeting, when he described the traffic. They wanted—they were trying to encourage walk-around traffic rather than cars speeding up and down Indian River Drive, and that roundabouts have a tendency to do that. It was all very fascinating, but then I just asked him a question that people in my shop had been asking me about: the need for more boat ramps, because the boat ramps would swell, the use would swell during the summertime. It was chaotic at the boat ramps, and they needed more high-volume boat ramps.

TH: And this was a city planner.
DR: This was a city planner that I was talking to, and he said to me—when I asked the question about boat ramps, he said, “That’s the problem with boats in Florida: they either want to put up a parking lot, or they want to use the waterfront property to put in a boat ramp.”

TH: And boat ramps in Fort Pierce are well used?

DR: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

TH: On a weekend, when the parking lot’s full?

DR: It’s insanity on the weekends.

TH: Okay. So, they could always use more.

DR: They don’t necessarily need more, they need to be able to handle the traffic better; maybe better designed, but certainly more would help.

TH: Okay, interesting. Now, back to the Oculina Bank: Finally, I would like to talk (telephone rings) about how your fishing has changed over time in regards—or the fishing of people, your customers, has changed over time, in regards to the Oculina Bank. Since 1984, several changes have been made in the regulations of the Oculina Bank. I’d like to know if any of these changes affected your fishing, or the fishing of your customers, and if so, how? In 1984, it was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining. Did this affect your business?

DR: Yes, it did affect our business.

TH: Even the longlining?

DR: Yeah, not as much as later on.

TH: Okay, and how so?
DR: Just—we saw the sales of bottom fishing tackle changing slowly, you know, not selling as much tackle.

TH: Okay. In 1984, it was designated an experimental closed area where fishing for and retention of snapper grouper species was prohibited. This was 1994. Snapper grouper fishing boats were also prohibited from anchoring. Was your fishing impacted, or your sales?

DR: Our sales were impacted even further at that point, because there were smaller areas for people to go bottom fishing. And that was a popular spot for bottom fishing.

TH: Okay. In 1996, all anchoring was prohibited in the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing, and if so, how?

DR: No, that didn’t impact the fishing so much, but every little regulation that they added did affect it.

TH: Okay. In 1996, trawling for rock shrimp was prohibited in the area to the east and north of the Oculina Bank, and then in 1998, this area was incorporated into the Oculina Bank HAPC. Fishing with a bottom longline, trawl and dredge was prohibited in the expanded area, as was anchoring of any vessel. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

DR: Absolutely it was. There again, it decreased our sales.

TH: Okay. And?

DR: No, that’s it. That’s all.

TH: The designation of—okay, here’s where you—it’s a little open-ended here. The designation of marine areas that are closed to fishing is being used more frequently as a fishery management tool. What do you think about the use of the closed areas to fishing compared to other types of management regulations like quotas, closed seasons, et cetera?

DR: I would rather see a quota system used more, and bag limits, more so than the closed areas, because they’re limiting the people access to areas where they can catch fish. And that certainly has impacted our sales, and it’s impacted everybody’s lives around here.
TH: How so?

DR: Well, I mean, there are people that have actually gotten out of fishing altogether. I know some bottom fishermen that simply don’t go anymore. Regulations are too strict, and there are areas where they’re trying to—where they used to fish, or where they’d like to fish, have closed. Another part of this thing that I’ve always wondered about is, you know, the actual enforcement of the closed area, and how well they actually work on the enforcement. They keep adding regulations in closed areas rather than working on the enforcement. I know that’s an issue that’s been brought up before.

TH: Okay, well, let’s elaborate a little bit. So, if you were managing the fisheries, you would not—you don’t think the closed areas are the best and fairest way to manage the fisheries. But you are—you do believe that the fisheries should be managed?

DR: Oh, I think they should be managed, but I think there are better ways of doing it than closed areas. And another thing that I would like to address here at this point would be why the impact is driven so much on the recreational fisherman, and I’m not hearing a lot of regulation on the diving industry. There might be some changes there. But keep in mind, too, divers can stay outside of the Oculina preserve. (telephone rings) You know, they can anchor their boat outside of that, or a boat can drop ’em off and swim into the Oculina preserve.

TH: It’s 190 feet.

DR: Is it?

TH: Yeah.

DR: Well, then, they’re not doing that.

TH: Okay.

DR: They’re not doing that.

TH: But, again, what about closing a season on fish?
DR: Closing the season on the fish?

TH: Yeah. For example, the closing of the snapper/grouper, and closing—snook, I guess, is closed right now for six months.

DR: That’s very hard on the charter boat guys. It’s hard on our business.

TH: Over here?

DR: I kind of lost my train of thought.

TH: The closures.

DT: The closures. Yeah, I think the charter boat business has changed dramatically. I mean, a lot of the guys that used to bottom fish out here now have—they literally take their boats to Mexico and sailfish during this time when everything is closed. You have to remember that the local—

*Pause in recording*

TH: You were just talking about the closure of the Oculina Bank, and you’re not in favor of closing areas because—?

DR: I’m not in favor of closing areas because I think it’s a little difficult for them to police those areas in the first place, and expanding it even further is gonna make it even more impossible to do that.

TH: Okay, and has it affected local fishermen?

DR: It has definitely affected local fishermen. The charter boat industry has been affected by it, the tackle shop business has been affected by it, thereby marinas, fuel, hotel sales; you name it.

TH: (inaudible).
DR: All of that. Yeah, boat sales, boat manufacturing, is all affected by it.

TH: So, if the area was expanded to cover other areas that are commonly fished off Fort Pierce—

DR: It’s gonna affect the local economy. I mean everybody’s lives here that make a living with regards to the lagoon and the offshore area is gonna be affected by it. It’s gonna be affected negatively.

TH: How ’bout closure of fisheries or closed seasons, lengthy closed seasons?

DR: I don’t like the idea of that. I think that the bag limits are probably the best way to go, and quotas.

TH: Bag limit and quotas on the fish, they are the most what, fair?

DR: Yeah, they’re the most fair, and I think it makes for a healthy fishery, to be honest with you. I mean, you’re still catching some fish, but the population isn’t just allowed to go unchecked.

TH: Okay, and are there any user groups in this scenario? Now, nets are pretty much out of the picture at this point, other than cast nets. Are there any other user groups? Commercial kingfishermen that troll primarily for just kingfish, and once their quota is met, they’re shut off. And they have trip limits, and bag limits for commercial fishermen. Are there any other fisheries?

DR: Oh, the divers. Yeah, the divers are—

TH: Commercial divers or recreational?

DR: They’re commercial divers, but the recreational divers do a pretty good job at stirring things up as well.

TH: Can you elaborate on that?
DR: Yeah, I mean, they can go dive down and pretty much pick whatever it is that they want to shoot, and they don’t seem to have the regulation on the divers that we have on recreational fishermen and commercial fishermen. I know they do have bag limits, and the closure of the grouper now has affected divers, and they are all upset about it, but—

TH: How many fish can a commercial diver [keep for] grouper and snapper?

DR: I mean, I’ve seen it in the day when one single diver could harvest 1000 pounds of grouper.

TH: Okay, and is that still legal today?

DR: No, it’s not legal today.

TH: What’s the commercial limit?

DR: I don’t know what the commercial limit is on diving.

TH: For grouper and snapper. You’re concerned that they’re not regulated enough?

DR: I don’t think they are, no.

TH: Okay. And again, just be very specific. If you were regulating—if you were in the National Marine Fisheries and you could regulate the fisheries, what would be the fairest and best way to maintain a good level of fish?

DR: Quotas and bag limits. I mean, if I had to sum it up, that’s what I would sum up.

TH: And strictly enforced? You mentioned enforcement.

DR: Enforcement, yeah.

TH: Thinking ahead to the future, what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?
DR: Gee, that’s hard to really know at this point. I mean, I didn’t think I’d see the kind of closures that we’re having now ten years ago. So, if there’s an agenda, I certainly don’t know where we’re gonna go from here, other than more restrictions. More restrictions are gonna make it more difficult for people to earn their living here in Florida, especially here, which this is a fishing community.

TH: Okay, have you ever heard that Fort Pierce was the fishing capital of the world, was billed as that at one time?

DR: Yeah, I think I have. I think I have, because I have some old chamber of commerce books that go back to 1950, and I think it’s stated in there at that time, that Fort Pierce was the fishing capital of the world.

TH: Okay. Is there anything else you’d like to add about, you know, the regulations or how fishing regulations affect tackle shops and whatever, anything else at all you’d like to add?

DR: Well, in collecting the data that National Marine Fisheries collects, or whoever is doing the regulation, I would like to know how, or if there is a better way to collect the data. I mean, I’ve been in the tackle business for the better part of my life, and I’ve never been asked questions about the fishery out here from somebody collecting data from one of those groups. And you would think that if they’re collecting data, they’d be collecting data from fishermen, from people who are in the trade—

TH: The industry?

DR: The industry. And none of them that I know of actually has told me that they have been asked those kinds of questions. So, where are they getting their information from would be the question that I’d have. At one point, I heard it was random telephone calls around the state, and they may call somebody in Lake Wales and ask him if he fished. Did he catch a kingfish lately? And of course, he’s living in the central part of the state. No, he hasn’t caught a kingfish lately. So, his answer would be no. How do they collect the data, and is it fair and truthful?

TH: Okay. Well, with that, I’d like to thank you very much, Don, and it’s been a pleasure. And with that, we’re gonna turn this off, and thank you very, very much.

DR: Well, thank you for including me today.
End of interview