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Joseph Clanton oral history interview by Terry Howard, July 15, 2010

Joseph Clanton (Interviewee)
Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Good afternoon. Today is July 15, 2010. I’m at Fire Station Number 4—is that correct?

Joseph Clanton: Yes.

TH: —in St. Lucie County, Florida. I’m here today with Joe Clanton, conducting an oral history for the Gulf & South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation’s project with Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. Welcome, Joe. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and date of birth.

JC: I’m Captain Joe Clanton, J-o-e C-l-a-n-t-o-n. I was born in Fort Pierce, Florida, on August 11, 1976.
TH: Okay. What—I mean, are you married?

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: How old were you when you got married?

JC: Twenty-three.

TH: Do you have children?

JC: I have two girls, a five and a ten year old.

TH: And their names?

JC: Brooke Clanton, B-o-o-k-e, and Hailey Clanton, H-a-i-l-e-y.

TH: How much schooling do you have?

JC: High school diploma with two years of college.

TH: Did you get an associate’s degree?

JC: Almost.

TH: Do you have another job besides charter boat? Obviously.

JC: St. Lucie County Fire District is my main job. As a part-time job, I run a saltwater boat, mainly live bait stunt fishing.

TH: What other jobs have you had?
JC: Sear’s termite and pest control. Worked in a grove for two years as a fruit harvester, a field foreman. Installed security alarms and fire alarms in the past. And some construction when I was younger.

TH: You currently own boats, or a boat?

JC: Yes, I do.

TH: Can you describe the boat, the kind and length?

JC: I have a twenty-one foot center console Sea Pro with a T-top on it, three livewells, and a Yamaha 200 on the back. And I also run a nineteen-foot Pathfinder with a Bimini, saltwater trolling motor, and a livewell. For fun, I run a thirteen-and-a-half foot airboat, a fiberglass airboat with an aircraft-powered airplane motor on it.

TH: So you have a twenty-one foot boat, a Sea Pro. A nineteen-foot Pathfinder; now, that’s for the shallower water fishing?

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: Or bass fishing? Do you bass fish?

JC: Gator hunting, flats fishing, and speck and bass fishing.

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

JC: Not very.

TH: Do you know why the Oculina Bank was designated as an area to protect?

JC: Sounds like a protected reef as far as the number of species that it holds, but I’m not 100 percent sure.
TH: Anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank that you know?

JC: Don’t get caught fishing it.

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

JC: If it’s a plus for the sport, I’m okay with protecting it. If it’s a plus for that reef, to a certain degree, but if it’s a needed action some protection needs to be implemented.

TH: If it’s required to perpetuate the health of the reef, you think it’s okay to close it?

JC: If it needs to be closed for our grandkids to be able to catch different species, I’m okay with limitations on it. I wouldn’t say closing altogether.

TH: Okay. Overall, has the fishing changed since (telephone rings) you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area?

JC: (telephone rings) Very little. There’s been—

TH: Let me push pause.

Pause in recording

TH: Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area, Joe?

JC: More expensive, from the license to the fuel. Tougher regulations. Smaller slot limits on pretty much every species that I target. It’s more expensive to target them and harder to keep a slot-sized fish as far as the rules and regulations. I feel the bite has improved. I don’t feel the bite out of St. Lucie County is tough to catch a saltwater fish; however, the limitations are very strict, very strict.

TH: Have you had any experiences with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?
JC: I have not. Not within that area.

TH: I want to talk about your fishing history, specifically. What is your earliest memory of fishing, and how old were you?

JC: Five years old, freshwater fishing for bass with a Sam Scott rod. I had a six pound bass on which he distangled my reel from the rod seat, took the reel in the water, but I still had the rod in my hand.

TH: He had the reel? (laughs)

JC: He took the reel off the reel seat, off the rod, so I had to get in the water and actually grab my reel and line and hand-lined him in to catch him. He was six and a half pounds. And I was—it was before my sixth birthday, and I do remember that.

TH: Where was this?

JC: This was in the Savannas.

TH: Okay, south of Fort Pierce. It’s the Savannas.

JC: The White City area of Fort Pierce.

TH: That’s your earliest memory of fishing, and you were just about six years old. How did you learn how to fish? Who taught you?

JC: My dad, Lewis Clanton, Senior. L-e-w-i-s C-l-a-n-t-o-n, Senior, because I have a brother that’s a junior, also. He showed both of us, and my sister. There’s two boys and one girl, and my father showed us—got us interested in fishing at an early age.

TH: Was he a commercial fisherman?
JC: For a short period he was, until his boat burned down at the dock, and that’s one of the best things that my mom said ever happened to their relationship.

TH: He had a large net boat?

JC: He was netting, years ago. He was netting, him and Lester Revells.

TH: And that’s when his boat burned?

JC: Burned down. It had some maintenance on it, they bumped the key. Shouldn’t have bumped the key and it did—the exhaust vent wasn’t on, and boom! It physically blew up and caught fire.

TH: A gasoline engine?

JC: Burned to the ground. Yes, sir.

TH: Where was that?

JC: I’m not sure.

TH: You don’t remember what time?

JC: My dad was twenty. So, we’re going back.

TH: That’s way back.

JC: Forty-five years ago.

TH: Yeah. Okay. How did you decide to become a charter boat captain?

JC: Interested in the style of fishing that I do. Got comfortable in the style of the fishing that I do as far as repetition and success, and decided that I was comfortable with people and that I could
deal with people, and wanted to pay for my habit. Don’t want to become rich, but pay for my habit as a fisherman for the overhead that I’m gonna have tied up anyway in fishing.

TH: Okay. When did you start fishing in Fort Pierce, what age? Already talked about that: five years old. What else did you fish for in Fort Pierce when you were growing up?

JC: Bass, specks, and bluegill.

TH: Mostly freshwater?

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: Okay. When did you start fishing in the river? In the ocean?

JC: When I was fifteen.

TH: Okay, how?

JC: I have a seventeen-foot center console with live bait.

TH: And you started fishing for snook, I guess?

JC: Started snook fishing, the turning basin area with a trolling motor.

TH: Okay, with a seventeen-foot boat with a trolling motor. Were you fishing commercially at all, or was all this recreational fishing?

JC: Recreational.

TH: Okay. What did you fish for?

JC: Snook, snapper, trout, and redfish.
TH: How did you fish for snook?

JC: Live bait with a pinfish or pigfish.

TH: Pigfish or pinfish live bait. How’d you fish for the snapper?

JC: Saltwater mojarros; some guys call them “Silver Jennings.” A saltwater shiner, or mojarro.

TH: Not live bait?

JC: Yes, they’re live bait.

TH: They’re live?

JC: A live, saltwater shiner.

TH: Okay. I know what a shiner is. And what was the other one you fished for?

JC: Trout.

TH: Trout.

JC: Trout and redfish. Artificial on the flats; sometimes live shrimp with a popping cork. A troll rite, a popping cork, and a live shrimp—some people call that cheating, but it works—and occasional artificial, cotee jigs.

TH: For trout?

JC: Yes, sir.
TH: Who did you fish with?

JC: My brother, Lewis Clanton, Junior—L-e-w-i-s Clanton Junior—and my dad. Whoever would give me a ride to the ramp. (both laugh) Their boat was running at the time.

TH: Did they like fishing as much as you?

JC: They did.

TH: Where did you go to fish when you began fishing?

JC: Started in the Savannas, freshwater; but the beginning of my saltwater was the South Bridge, the North Bridge, and the turning basin were my go-to spots for the first few years.

TH: And who owned the boat?

JC: My father owned one, Lewis Clanton, Senior; we fished his occasionally. And then my brother owned one as well, so my dad and my brother.

TH: Okay, and then you had one of your own?

JC: I had a Jon Boat, but I couldn’t get it to the water with no driver’s license.

TH: Okay. This was before you were sixteen. Where did you go to fish when you began fishing? Okay, in the river. Where did you say? In the turning basin around the bridges, and you went with your father and your brother. What months did you fish for the snook?

JC: Every month.

TH: Every month, okay.

JC: Twelve months out of the year.
TH: And you could fish snook twelve months a year?

JC: They had it where it was closed for the spawning season, but I found myself fishing for them year round—

TH: Catch and release?

JC: —’cause I enjoy it. Catch and release, maybe get a digital picture of them. Make sure they’re gonna bite on that tide and that water temperature. Just staying on top of ’em so you know what to expect when you invite a friend, you know, to go catch a snook.

TH: How long does a fishing trip last; say, a snook fishing trip?

JC: Four hours.

TH: You like the morning or the evening hours?

JC: I go around the tide, whatever the tide’s doing. It’s not really a set time. Whatever tide I’ve caught them on that week, I’ll adjust that fishing trip to when I feel they’re gonna bite.

TH: And you use live bait mostly?

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: And how much was an average trip’s catch for you? How many snook—you know, in a four-hour period, what’s your average snook catch?

JC: Between your highs and lows, even on some trips where you strike out and they don’t cooperate, I’d say eight to ten snook.

TH: Average?
JC: Yes, sir.

TH: Wow. So how many years have you fished for snook, then, if you add up all your years?

JC: Since I was probably fifteen. I caught my first one when I was fourteen or fifteen. I remember that one as well. I don’t remember the age, but I remember he had a live pigfish in the turning basin. I broke my dad’s seat, his trolling motor seat. I physically broke the back off of it. I was on my knees with my knuckles on the gunwale and then tied a rod under the boat. And that was a twenty-three pounder, and I realize now that’s your hardest fighting snook. The ones bigger than that are lazy and they don’t pull as hard, or as long. An eighteen to twenty-four pounder fights the best. But as far as the question, when I was fifteen. I’ve been hardcore snook fishing since I was fifteen, and I’m thirty-three now.

TH: When did you start working as a charter boat captain in the Fort Pierce area? What age and year?

JC: I’d say five years. I have to renew my captain’s license now, so we’re pushing five, seven years, however long they’re good for.

TH: As a charter captain, you say that snook is your main target.

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: What else do you target?

JC: Bigger snook than that. (both laugh)

TH: Bigger snook. Okay, but what other fish? I think you mention you do dolphin?

JC: We catch redfish accidentally [while] snook fishing. But if I’m gonna target something, it’s gonna be dolphin, king[fish], sail[fish], or cobia. I do target those as well.

TH: Who do you work with? You own your own boat?
JC: I own the boat, and it’s kept at the house and all that.

TH: On average, if you go offshore, how far offshore do you go, when you do go offshore?

JC: Ten miles.

TH: About ten miles? Ninety foot—

JC: Yes, sir.

TH: —that’s a ninety-foot drop? How do you decide where you’ll fish, and what you fish for?

JC: The seas, the time of year, and the water temperature. If it’s rough, I’m staying close. If there’s a temperature break, I’m looking for it, as far as that area, and the time of year. If I feel I’m gonna catch a dolphin, I’ll burn a tank of fuel chasing him if the seas will let me. I like dolphin fishing, and you always have a chance for, you know, dolphin, king, sail or cobia if you don’t go deeper than, say, that hundred foot depth. If you’re on the beach, obviously, you’re restricted to kings or bust. So, that eighty to a hundred foot—sixty to a hundred foot is pretty good.

TH: Just curious, do you ever take any charters to go mackerel fishing?

JC: Didn’t take them to go mackerel fishing, but ended up mackerel fishing. The bite was slow, so we ended burning the rest of our baits up on mackerel. I don’t target them when I leave the dock, but I have hit them on the way back to the trailer. If I’m struggling, I’ll look for them.

TH: People enjoy catching mackerel?

JC: They want to bend the rod.

TH: How long is an average fishing trip? You said four hours, even if you go in the ocean?
JC: No, sir. The ocean, I tried that on some charters, some half-day charters: it doesn’t work. By the time you catch your bait, or even buy your bait, and find your fishing area—so it’s full days. An ocean trip will be an eight-hour trip.

TH: Okay. That would make more sense. For how many years have you been a charter boat captain?

JC: Five to seven. I’m not quite sure.

TH: Okay. Finally, I’d 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 of the Oculina Bank. I’d like to know if any of these regulations affected your fishing, and if so, how? Okay, the Oculina Bank was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining in 1984. Does this affect your fishing, and if so, how? They closed it to just trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining.

JC: That didn’t affect me directly, no.

TH: Indirectly?

JC: Maybe. I was a little bit younger, obviously, back then. Sometimes it’s a snowball effect as far as a closed area. Usually they close species in areas in groups of twos and threes. So, maybe indirectly, it has helped tighten up some of the other species. While it’s on the table of closing and tightening and taking things, indirectly it may have affected, you know, our snook, our length and our bag limit, which changes every year, getting less and less and less.

TH: In 1994, the Oculina Bank was designated as an experimental closed area where fishing for and retention of snapper grouper species was prohibited. Snapper grouper fishing boats were also prohibited from anchoring, so they can no longer catch snapper grouper, or they could no longer anchor to catch bottom fish. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

JC: No, sir, not too much.

TH: And then, in 1996, all anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing, and if so, how?
JC: It did not.

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

JC: No, sir. That didn’t affect me either.

TH: Okay. 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 closed areas to fishing compared to other types of management regulations, such as quotas and closed seasons? This is probably the most important question. What do you think about the use of closed areas to fishing compared to other types of management regulations such as quotas or closed seasons?

JC: I feel our game and fish need to be regulated. I also feel that a percentage of the homework that goes into what’s actually happening in the water and in the woods, as far as their numbers, are inaccurate, meaning a lot of your local guys that hunt and fish these areas—I don’t know where they get their statistics from, as far as how many fish were caught this year or the success. ’Cause if you talk to somebody that went snook fishing that day, they have these younger guys and girls at the ramp and they ask you, “Did you catch anything today?” And they may answer, “No.” And they ask them, “What were you fishing for?” They say, “Snook.” Well, if you look at it, they’re not prepared for a real day of snook fishing, nor do they know what the tide’s doing, nor do they have a clue of fishing around a major feed or using the moon. And that gets documented, that these twenty boats went out—they all call themselves “targeting a certain species” and they didn’t catch that species. So, that looks bad for that species. Things need to get regulated, but the success ratio I don’t think is accurate on their polls.

TH: You mean the fish counts? You question the fish counts that they’re using to regulate the fish? You’re not sure that the evidence supports the closures is what you’re saying?

JC: Correct. And billfish, a lot of us were guilty as well. You should report when you catch even a sailfish. I’ve never caught a marlin, haven’t targeted a marlin, never caught a sword, never targeted—but sailfish, you can’t help but catch a sailfish out of our waters. And if you ask people, fishermen, a lot of them, I’m sure, don’t make that phone call and report that they caught a sailfish. So, in their mind, we don’t have as many sailfish as we actually do. And that’s one of the regulations. They’re gonna regulate how many you can keep, if any, and the size limits and bag limits, so if we’re not reporting that, you know, you caught three dozen last year, you might as well not caught any on the books.
TH: So you question, again, the counts that they’re using in managing the fisheries?

JC: Correct.

TH: Okay. If you could manage all the fisheries, how would do it? What do you think would be the fairest, most equitable way to manage the fisheries? Again, quotas, closed seasons, catch limits, trip limits?

JC: I would have bag limits, and I would have officers on the water. I would talk to your local fishermen. They know best. As a captain, if there was a problem with a species being extinct as far as your snook, which we’re down to one snook per person, from twenty-eight to thirty-two inches—if we needed that, great, but we don’t. We don’t need a law that tight, with that tight of a slot limit, when you can keep two bucks. Here in South Florida, in St. Lucie County, you can keep two bucks, two white-tailed deer with horns on them, per day. So, with their studies, they’re trying to say that there’s more keeper bucks walking around than there are snook. Don’t believe it? I’ve dove enough to know that’s not the case. So, with the information they’re getting, it’s leading toward kill more white-tailed male deer than keep snook, and that is off the charts inaccurate.

TH: I’ve never heard that analogy between the deer and the snook before. Interesting, interesting. You’re kind of opposed to slot limits; you would rather see a standard size. Is that what you’re saying?

JC: When they pass from—you had to pinch the tail a few years ago, pinch their tail to make it over on length. We didn’t give that enough time to see if it worked, if it helped the population. ’Cause snook, after about eleven pounds they turn to females, anyway. So, I’m okay with not keeping your larger fish, ’cause that’s your breeders, that’s your egg-layers. But if it’s a money issue, maybe sell a permit like a tarpon permit. Sell that permit to be able to keep one over the thirty-two inch slot limit or an unlimited length. Even if it’s fifty bucks, that money can go back into studies, law enforcement, and enforcing the laws we have now. Somebody may use that $50 permit for a fifteen-pounder, or they may wait for a forty-pounder, but the main thing is they purchase that permit and they have the chance to keep one a year over the slot limit.

TH: Okay. Thinking ahead to the future, what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?

JC: I feel that the licenses will increase dramatically. What you’re able to put—
TH: The number of licenses or the cost?

JC: The cost, I’m sorry. The cost of the license and permits will increase dramatically. What you’re able to keep will decrease dramatically, and there’s gonna be a loss of money in the sport from the license and permits to the tackle to the hotels and motels that fishing brings to this area. It’s gonna affect this area in a negative way as the cost of fishing goes up and what you can keep goes down. Financially, we’re gonna have a negative effect in this area because of that.

TH: Fewer people buying boats and fishing gear?

JC: Fewer people buying the license to go fishing, with the gas prices the way they are, and the way the boat prices—’cause boating is expensive to start with. You put fishing on top of boating, it’s twice as expensive. You’re gonna get less people interested in the sport.

TH: Okay. Thank you. One other question: what’s your biggest snook?

JC: Thirty-nine pounds. I have not caught a forty, but I caught three that were thirty-eight to thirty-nine pounds. I haven’t hit forty yet. Thirties.

TH: Big snook?

JC: Several, several. Literally, a couple hundred in the thirties, but I have not hit forty pounds.

TH: And your biggest wahoo?

JC: Never caught a wahoo.

TH: Never caught a wahoo?

JC: I’ve gaffed one. Never caught one.

TH: Biggest kingfish?
JC: Forty-four pounds.

TH: That’s big. Okay, with that, thank you very much for sharing your fishing history with us, Joe. And with that, we’re done.

*End of interview*