Robert Cardin, 2010 oral history interview by Terry Howard, August 30, 2010

Robert Cardin (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Good afternoon. This is Terry Howard. Today is August 30, 2010. I’m at … St. Lucie Village, Florida, conducting an oral history with Bobby Cardin for the Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation’s project with Fort Pierce fishermen on the Oculina Bank HAPC [Habitat Area of Particular Concern]. Welcome, Bobby. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth.

Robert Cardin: Robert Cardin. That’s Robert and C-a-r-d-i-n. I was born in Fort Pierce, August 31, 1960—right up the road here, about two miles from here.

TH: Where?
RC: Well, my mom was going into labor at the Coast Guard station. My dad landed the boat at the Coast Guard station and I was supposed to be coming out at the front door of the—I was kind of delivered in the lobby of the hospital.

TH: On Seventh Street?

RC: Yeah.

TH: Okay, the old hospital on Seventh Street.

RC: I was almost delivered in the Coast Guard station wagon.

TH: You didn’t tell me about that!

RC: Well, the way I remember it (laughs)—

TH: The way it was told to you, what happened?

RC: Well, my daddy either had a thirty-six foot boat that went nine knots or a thirty-nine foot boat that went six knots, and he was diving the *Amazone* [artificial reef]. Back then, you know, just a buoy would mark the wrecks; people now with electronics can just go to it, dive it. My mom said he came up and asked for another speargun, and when she reached over the side of the boat, she broke the water. So of course, you know, my dad dove a half-hour, then there was a fifteen, sixteen mile ride at six knots. So, that’s a few hours. I guess it was so desperate that they either had to make radio contact with Coast Guard station or they just pulled into the Coast Guard station, I don’t know which. But supposedly they went to the hospital and—

TH: From the Coast Guard? They transported you?

RC: I was in the station wagon. My mom said she was in the station wagon. I don’t know if it was an official Coast Guard station wagon or just one of the employees’. But that’s all I know. But I do know this much: according to South Atlantic [Fishery Management Council], that is not a historical dive site. So, I kind of just—my mom will dispute that one with you.
TH: It’s not a historical dive site. Now, where—the *Amazone* is sixteen miles southeast?

RC: Oh, Lord, I haven’t counted miles in years. It’s fourteen, fifteen, sixteen miles.

TH: Southeast of the—

RC: It’s a 12 [buoy] wreck. Everyone thinks 12A buoy is where a wreck is. But years back, there was actually a 12 buoy further offshore. You know, the wrecks, you trolled over ’em. That’s where the 12 buoy used to really be at.

TH: The numbers for it are what?


TH: 206.8, so it’s further south. I go down to the—225 is about where the reef ends.

RC: Right. Well, if you look south, you’ll see boats down there fishing south (inaudible) and that’s—

TH: 208?

RC: 206.8.

TH: 206—

RC: Two miles. So, you can see boats with your eyes from miles—down there south and a little bit inshore.

TH: And then it’s 75 line?

RC: Yeah, 61975.4.

RC: That’s one of those ships that was sunk during World War—by the German subs in World War II.

TH: Okay. So, you were born here in Fort Pierce.

RC: Yes, sir.

TH: What brought you here to—are you married?

RC: No. I’ve been married. I have two children: Jimmy, age twenty-one, and Cody, age seventeen.

TH: Okay. How much schooling do you have?

RC: When I turned sixteen, you could take this test. I took this thing called a GED test and immediately quit school. My mom said, “You can’t quit school till you had a diploma.” And I said, “Well, here, Mom. I got one.” So, I quit school and moved out of the house right when I was sixteen. Actually, I was fifteen. You’re supposed to be sixteen to take the test, but I kind of fudged a little bit on it. So, I probably don’t even have an education, officially. (laughs)

TH: So, you have a GED.

RC: I have a GED, and then I took, like, welding classes and metallurgy and stuff like that at the junior college. But that’s just technical, trade stuff. I don’t have an education.

TH: Do you have a welding permit or certificate?

RC: No. Just as a young man, I wouldn’t say mastered many trades but I just piddled around, you know, find myself. When I was sixteen, I went to work right for a ranch.

TH: Yeah, that’s was I gonna ask you next: what jobs besides fishing, other jobs you’ve had. You’re sixteen; you went to work for whose ranch?
RC: Well, when I was fifteen, I started riding bulls and stuff in rodeos, or jackpot rodeos; that’s kind of a job. You pay $20 and you might win $150 or something. And then—

TH: In Okeechobee or in Fort Pierce?

RC: In Wauchula. When I was ten, my father was murdered here in Fort Pierce; when I was twelve, my mom moved us—bought a ranch in Central Florida. But when I was fourteen, I’d ride the Trailways bus back to Fort Pierce, get out at Avenue D Friday night. My uncle would pick me up. We’d go diving and fishing Saturday and Sunday, then he’d put me back on the Trailways bus and I was back in—

TH: Wauchula.

RC: —Wauchula. (laughs)

TH: How big was the ranch?

RC: Well, it had like 140 or 180 acres, something like that.

TH: Wow.

RC: Would have been a lot bigger, but my mom could have bought this 650 acres for what she paid to build the house. And she said, “Well, we could have had 780 acres and a house trailer, or 180 acres and a nice house.” (laughs)

TH: In Wauchula?

RC: Yeah. (laughs)

TH: She still live there?

RC: No, she finally moved back to Fort Pierce this year. She’s been gone since 1972.
TH: How old is your mom?

RC: Maybe close to seventy, sixty-nine, something like that.

TH: All right. So, that brings me to other jobs besides fishing. Now, you’re pretty much a full time commercial diver, fisherman?

RC: Are we on other jobs still?

TH: Yeah.

RC: Okay. Well, I guess the first—I was selling fish when I was, like, eleven or twelve. After my dad died, my mom would launch us over there next to Chuck’s Seafood and I was supposed to stay in the river. But she was—

TH: She would launch you?

RC: Yeah.

TH: In what?

RC: In my little—you know, my dad had boats and when he died she kept the boats, and it was a little, riverboat. And you’d see her go over—when you saw her go over the bridge, then we would turn away from Coon Island and run right out the inlet and anchor it in the jetty and spearfish all day. But I mean—

TH: She didn’t like you to go out in—

RC: Oh, I wasn’t supposed to be going out in the ocean at eleven years old.

TH: Okay. So, you spearfished and—
RC: Yeah, you can—

TH: Who’s “we”?

RC: Just neighborhood kids—I was always—older boys. Ronald and Steve Hawkins; they were like thirteen and fourteen. I was always the young kid.

TH: Ronald and Steve Hawkins. Okay, so that was at eleven. Now, fifteen, sixteen?

RC: So, then I quit the school. I went to work at a ranch, you know, working cows, getting ’em shots. I did the day work. That’s where you take a horse and your truck and trailer and just go to different ranches and round up cattle. You know, that was all fun. Soon as I turned eighteen, I went to work for the mines.

TH: What mines?


TH: Where?

RC: There in Bartow, Florida, right next to Wauchula. And the whole time—it was a 108-mile drive. Sometimes I’d drive back and forth to Fort Pierce. You know, as soon as I turned sixteen, I was back over here in Fort Pierce. But then I had girlfriends in Wauchu—you know, just a young man. I was all over the place doing everything. In one year’s time—I was always getting those union grievances on me, because I got qualified on every piece of machinery at the mines other than that great big drag line. You know, the shift workers wouldn’t show up for work, [I would say], “I’ll work it.” [My co-workers would say], “Oh, yeah, he ran the bulldozer all night last night.” [My bosses would say], “Okay, go run the bulldozers.” So, I was qualified on every piece of equipment, other than the drag line, at the International Mineral & Chemical Corporation. So, after a year of that, then I went back—

TH: But you said you were written up for what?
RC: No. Well, the union people, like, if you called ’em, they wouldn’t want to come in anyway. But since the company didn’t call ’em to go run the bulldozer this morning on Sunday morning or what have you—

TH: And you were there?

RC: And I ran it. Then they would say, “Oh, well, you didn’t call me. You owe me a day’s pay.” It’s like a union grievance. They never filed against me, but they were—

TH: It was against the company?

RC: Yeah, they were always filing. Oh, they loved me. Them guys got paid for—I’d go their work and they got paid for sitting at home.

TH: And you got paid, too.

RC: And I got paid too, yeah. (laughs) I busted ass when I was a young man.

TH: Okay, go ahead. Then you came to—

RC: And then at nineteen, I came back over here, played in the family plumbing business, you know, after work—at four o’clock, if I could make it out in the inlet before dark, I would fish all night: snapper fish, grouper fish, spearfish.

TH: You actually fished rod and reel fishing?

RC: Back then I’d go out and at daylight, I’d try to kingfish, get me some kingfish.

TH: Troll for kingfish?

RC: Yeah. Then, you know, like Moby and Tommy McHale and all them guys, as soon as the boats balled up, they’d start—you know, Moby used to be pretty rank on the ocean. (laughs) And Tommy McHale would push you off and stuff.
TH: What do you mean, they’d push you off of spots?

RC: Yeah. Well, I just had a little twenty-foot Shamrock, you know, and I was like—I don’t know what it was. I just wasn’t one of the gang. And then I’d go off and anchor up and dive or grouper fish. I used to do it all in one day.

TH: Okay. They would push you off spots if you were there first?

RC: Well, you know how, at daylight, boats are looking and then they would ball up.

TH: If somebody finds fish, they all—

RC: Yeah, you know. And I was rod and reel fishing, so my circles would be bigger than—you know, I might have two rods out and two hand lines. So, my circles would have to be big, and you’d get cut off real easy.

TH: And get in everybody’s way.

RC: Yeah, which was fine with me; I just went to the next thing.

TH: Okay. And then you went diving.

RC: Yeah. Eleven, twelve o’clock in the afternoon, I’d jump in—if lobster season was open. And back then, I wasn’t much of a spearfisherman. You know, I’d catch fifty lobsters or something and shoot one or two groupers and get back on the boat. I wasn’t really—you know, lobsters—I could hook and line the groupers. Lobsters is what you dove for. Then size limits came in and—fishing, you had to throw back little dead snappers and stuff like that. That’s when I kind of went—like, I kind of hung my fishing gear up and just went with the spearfishing about twenty-five years ago.

TH: Now, how deep of water were you diving in back then? Did you have tanks?

RC: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I still had tanks from my dad when he died.
TH: I gotcha. Did you ever get certified?

RC: When I was fourteen, my uncle put me through one of them junior class things and then somewhere in there, I took some Nitrox certification back fifteen or twenty years ago. But yeah, I’ve taken classes.

TH: All right. So, you’ve done a little—now, you have family plumbing business?

RC: Yeah. (inaudible) plumbing, and then there was Cardin and Sons floor covering. That’s both sides, my mother and father’s side. Everyone’s been kind of self-employed in this family. Which was good, because then when the wind didn’t blow, you’d just told your uncle or your grandpa you’re going fishing and—

TH: When the wind—

RC: It was like fishing is my job, but plumbing was on my days off. Let’s put it that way.

TH: So, you have had other jobs besides fishing and you’ve mentioned those, pretty much. Any others that you want to add to that?

RC: Well, when I was, like, thirteen or fourteen, I had a fur-bearing animal license and I actually harvested fur-bearing animals.

TH: You went out where, on the ranch in Wauchula?

RC: Yeah. See, there’s this license that you could have a flashlight and a gun. I bet you didn’t know Florida had that license.

TH: Uh-uh. When was this?

RC: They might still have it. It’s so you can shoot fur-bearing animals at nighttime, and you could take a single shotgun or a pistol.
TH: With a flashlight?

RC: And a spotlight, yeah.

TH: Then it would be legal if you bought that license.

RC: Yeah. And then I had a dog named Bo and you know, he’d just take off. We had things that killed our cattle and things that killed our chicken. So, it started off killing off raccoons and bobcats and stuff that were eating your livestock.

TH: Predators.

RC: Yeah. And then it just went on from there. You know, I’d run trout lines and sell turtles; you know, I was doing all that.

TH: Where’d you sell the turtles?

RC: Just anywhere you wanted to. (laughs) I mean, different ethnicities have, like, different animals.

TH: So, what are some of the animals you shot or killed?

RC: I’d catch the possums alive. I would get to shoot the raccoons, bobcats, coyotes. Over there, when I was a kid, I came home on the ranch and a bunch of calves were laying there dead. There was half a dozen dogs out there just pulling them to pieces.

TH: Wild dogs.

RC: Yeah. A dog will kill—a dog’s the only animal that’ll kill to kill. You know, most animals will kill to eat, but a dog will kill one animal, halfway eat it, then just keep killing.

TH: When they’re in a pack, especially.
RC: Yeah. And when you’re out in wide-open country, people dump their dogs out. There’s one wild pack of dogs—I swear to God one of them great big poodles acted like the leader. (laughs)

TH: Standard sized poodle?

RC: Oh, this great big thing, yeah.

TH: They’re smart. So, you hunted dogs for a while?

RC: Well, the rancher next door, I came home—you know, I’m like a little twelve, thirteen-year-old kid and you’d hear the calves out there (makes mooing sound), just—

TH: Horrible noise. They’re dying.

RC: Yeah. I looked out there and I mean, one of ’em—the dogs got the ear and they actually peeled the hide off the face.

TH: Oh, God.

RC: So anyway, I killed animals for a living most of my life, I guess you could say. I’m getting off track here.

TH: Well, that’s interesting. Okay.

RC: I shot those dogs. I threw them over the fence in the woods, thinking I’d hide ’em so no one would see I did it. Then the rancher next door pulled up to the fence and he kind of said something to me. And I was a kid, thought I was in trouble and I tried to act like, “Oh, everything’s cool.” [The rancher said] “I’ll tell you what, for every dog I find on this side of the fence, there’ll be a box of shells sitting on this fence post right here.” (laughs)

TH: So, he liked it that you shot ’em?

RC: I thought I was in trouble, but he knew what I did. I guess he had been losing a lot of cattle to ’em, too.
TH: All right. Besides—the raccoons, did you skin ’em or anything?

RC: Yeah.

TH: And you sold the raccoon skins?

RC: Skin and raccoon.

TH: Meat?

RC: Meat, yeah.

TH: Who would buy it?

RC: Just whoever wanted to buy ’em. Rabbits, whatever—you could even shoot a hog at nighttime. Most people don’t realize that.

TH: Yeah, but a hog—a hog’s good eating, and I know you can eat a raccoon and you can eat possum, but I was wondering where the market is. It’s out there, okay.

RC: It’s out there.

TH: All right. Let’s get on to fishing. Overall—let’s see, do you currently own a boat?

RC: Yes.


RC: The boat I use most is a twenty-two foot Shamrock.
TH: You still have a—is that the same one you had?

RC: Yeah, I’ve had it for a long time. I actually had it in the Gulf [of Mexico] for a while when I was fishing the Gulf. Used to I’d fish in the Gulf September and October.

TH: For kingfish?

RC: Groupers.

TH: Groupers.

RC: Right now, when we had this (inaudible), this wind is when I’d start thinking about running over to the—my mom had a beach house in Bradenton Beach.

TH: Oh, yeah?

RC: That’s where that boat used to be all the time.

TH: The Shamrock, now you trailer it?

RC: Yeah.

TH: What kind of engine do you have in it?


TH: How big is it and how many horsepower?

RC: Two-forty.

TH: Yahnmar, spell that.
RC: Y-a-h-n-m-a-r.

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

RC: Well, to be honest, I’m pretty familiar because on the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council, I’m on the Oculina Evaluation Outreach Team. So, you know, periodically, I get informed about a lot of stuff going on, and I fished it quite a bit. And when I was part of this South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s LAPP [Limited Access Privilege Program] workgroup, I had dozens and dozens of fishermen call me, talk about—you know, with IFQs [Individual Fishing Quotas], they used to catch fish there; now they aren’t allowed to fish there no more, does that history count? You know, just the fact that the Oculina Bank is there and how it affected their possible future in IFQ. So—

TH: You’re very familiar with it.

RC: Yeah, I’ve heard about it from a lot of different people from a lot of different angles.

TH: Well, why was it designated as an area to protect?

RC: Well, I can tell you from my recollection. I can remember in the nineties [1990s] going to meetings, I remember, at the old Holiday Inn down here and they were telling us they were closing it. It was a coral issue; since, it’s been turned into a grouper issue, you know, to protect spawning groupers and what have you. But I believe it was originally closed to protect the corals.

TH: Okay. Is there anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank?

RC: It’s a pretty unusual area. I mean, it’s where our Gulf Stream hits—it's quite often—most of the time it’s a better condition on the Oculina Bank than it is in here. And that’s how I used the Oculina Bank, because when we had bad conditions inshore, I knew that nine out of ten—90 percent chance it was gonna be good fishing there for bottom fishing. It’s pretty neat. You know, I guess that the Gulf Stream is what built it over the many, many millions of years or however long it took to build it. I guess the Gulf Stream is what was feeding the sea, you know.

TH: With clean water.
RC: Well, that’s probably what transported the little larvas [*sic*] or whatever there in the first place.

TH: Now, are there peaks there?

RC: There’s high spots, yeah. I mean, I remember I thought it used to come up to—some of ’em—to 185. Now, you know, I’ve been trolling and stuff and ran across there going tilefishing and stuff—going tilefishing, not coming back—and I don’t ever mark anything over about 200 feet. It seems like, to me, they’re a little bit shorter than they used to be.

TH: They’re breaking off, yeah.

RC: Well, I remember seeing ’em jump up to 185—I know they came up to 195, and I haven’t seen one that high in the past several years.

TH: And then how deep?

RC: On the sides? Oh, God, it’s like—they’re over 240 on the inshore side and then, of course, it slopes off on the back side to 300-something.

TH: Okay, 100 foot.

RC: In places, they might look 100 foot tall, yeah. On the old paper machines—I got pictures from the old paper machines that it just, you know, takes up the screen all of a sudden, like it’s gonna jump out and poke you in the eyeball or something.

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

RC: Well, from a personal perspective, it’s kind of like a hit and a miss because, as an experienced fisherman, I don’t really want to fish right on the structure because I know I’m gonna get broke off and stuff. And when I fished it, I fished away from the structure and try to get the fish to come to me. So, in my mind, I think that I can probably fish it without messing up corals.
But with that said, I know there’s inexperienced—I know there’s people that like to drop their rigs right into the reef. I know that there’s people that actually put their anchor into the reef and they’re actually fishing behind the fish, but they think that that’s the way to fish it. So, I can see anchors could damage the coral. I can see fishermen could damage the coral. But like I say, if there’s any way to tell who knew how to fish and who didn’t—I guess what I’m trying to say is, in some cases, I guess it’s a good thing it’s closed, but in others, it’s a shame it’s closed because you can utilize a resource in the area. You know, I think only 1 or 2 percent of that whole closed area is actually Oculina coral. So, there’s a whole bunch of places you can drive across. You know, this transit kills you when you’re trying to drive back from offshore fishing.

TH: And you got a load of fish on.

RC: Oh, God, and you got to turn and run fifteen miles into a three and a half knot tide and the wind’s out of one direction and you either got to go north or south.

TH: Has the closure affected your fishing? That’s my next question. And if so, how? That’s one way it’s affected it.

RC: Straight up fishing the Oculina Bank—you know, used to quite often I fished it, but it wasn’t a primary for me. I mean, I’ve always been a smaller boater. I’ve always been more of a day boat. There’s one time I was going big. Well, actually, I was going big in ninety-three [1993], then when it closed, I went back little again.

TH: So, it did affect your fishing.

RC: Yeah. Well, I knew I could go bigger, because—

TH: That was one of your primary spots to target?

RC: Yeah. Well, if you was bigger, then you needed to catch more fish and you had more range, more hold, then you wanted to go to where more fish were. I would go diving inshore or fishing inshore, and if I didn’t have the conditions, then I would go to the Oculina Bank. If there’s a south tide in here or if there a ground sea and the water was dirty in here, well the ground sea slows down the north tide. Chances were if I went to the Oculina Bank, the tide would be slow enough for me to bottom fish with my shallow water gear, ’cause with outboards, it doesn’t put out much charging power for your bandits. So, to sit there and bandit fish in the Oculina Bank all day would run my batteries down. So, it was more of a—but now, if I went there with a slap
day tide and I could only fish with five pounds or six pounds, well, then my outboards would keep the bandits charged up enough to fish it. I mean, I went there one day and had sixty-three gags.

TH: Gag grouper.

RC: Yeah. I had over a thousand pounds. It seemed like I caught ’em in thirty minutes. I mean, you know, sweat was pouring out of me and there was fish flopping all over the deck, but it’s just a phenomenal place to fish.

TH: A thousand pounds, when was that about?

RC: That was in the *Pursuit*, so that would have been—I bought the *Pursuit* in ninety-one [1991], so that would have been ninety-one [1991] or ninety-two [1992]. How it really affected me is when it closed all a sudden, it just blew my mind. All a sudden, there’s these thirty, forty, fifty-foot boats anchoring up inshore. It was just like a light went off in my head. You know, those boats that tried to fish out there to try to stay in the business, they tried to come inshore with me. And then of course, Neil Logan, you know, he was a top-notch day boat grouper fisherman.¹ I mean, it was nothing for him to come in with five or six hundred pounds a day by himself. And he approached me in May to start diving with me, because on June 15, the Oculina Bank was closing up. So, he was an offshore fisherman that was moving inshore and wanted to fish and dive. So, he could either A, be my competition; or B, we could work together.

TH: As divers?

RC: As divers. So, yeah, it totally changed the outlook of my business. It went from me with a junior person—me keeping most of the money and the new guy keeping what little bit he got or a fifty-fifty business arrangement with a fisherman. So, in some aspects, it lowered my income.

TH: So it did affect your fishing.

RC: Yeah.

TH: In all kinds of ways.

¹ Neil Logan was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00017.
RC: I mean, I could go on for hours. (laughs)

TH: If anchoring and bottom fishing in the Oculina Bank was not prohibited, if you could do it, would you fish there today?

RC: Yeah. I mean, I would have never stopped. But let me get this straight. I’m saying no way that Oculina Bank was the number one source of my revenue or my first choice. But it was an important part of the pieces. You know, if you got 25 percent income here, 25 and 25 and 25, it was one of the pieces of my income. And as a businessman, every little bit helps and alternatives is what helps, what was a great part about it. Like right now, how many fishermen you know are fishing?

TH: Nobody.

RC: ’Cause the ground sea is muddy. I guarantee you could go out there today, if you wanted to fight the fifteen to twenty knot wind and go out there and anchor up on the Oculina Bank, I guarantee you could sit there and catch amberjacks and groupers all day. And you’d catch ’em like crazy. You know why? Because they know a hurricane is on the way up.

TH: It’s probably a good time to be out there.

RC: You could probably go out there right now today and catch two or three thousand pounds of fish. So, that option—it was so nice knowing that option was there. Maybe I wasn’t capable of using it all the time, but it was there.

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

RC: Well, it’s—what, from what aspect, the commercial aspect?

TH: Overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in the Fort Pierce area? You fished here all your life.

RC: Okay, well, there’s a lot less boats—commercial boats—in my opinion. The grouper boats, they seem nonexistent. I mean, I guess there’s three boats that produce. One of ’em is a longline tilefisherman and the other one are me and Neil, and we work together. So, you know, basically
you might call it two full-time operations. And I remember back in the day, there was always fresh grouper, and the Bairds would come in with loads of pinkies and—

TH: The who?

RC: Like, Billy Baird and or Ronny Baird, they’d come in with a load of pinkies and all the red snappers.²

TH: Now, pinkies, describe ’em.

RC: The pink porgies. You know, there was always some fresh fish hitting the dock a couple days a week, if nothing else.

TH: Bottom fish.

RC: Yeah. Now it seems like if I don’t go, there’s not no local bottom fish. (laughs) So, our grouper fishery is basically non-existent. Well, I don’t know, what would you say? Fifteen years ago, there was probably twenty grouper boats here?

TH: I didn’t have much contact with the grouper boats. I was just strictly kingfishing. Plus, I was—

RC: Well, there were three dive boats, so, now there’s one. Well, there’s two of us, but we’re either on Neil’s boat or my boat. So, I’d call that one.

TH: I think you’ve interviewed most of the other longliners, the tilefishermen.

RC: Right. Well, that’s the problem. Now, fifteen years later, most of those people are gone.

TH: Out of that business, anyway.

² Billy Baird was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00021.
RC: Yeah. So, the grouper fleet got a litter; the whole commercial fleet in general got littler, I think. The fish houses have dropped out. The areas we’re allowed to fish have, of course, got smaller. In Fort Pierce, we have two Special Management Zones we can’t fish in; they draw fish off the natural bottom.

TH: Speak slower. Two—

RC: SMZs, Special Management Zones. Like the 12 wreck, that’s become a Special Management Zone.

TH: You can’t fish there?

RC: I can’t harvest there, but they’ve put a lot more artificial reefs in place. Now, the natural reefs from several miles each way don’t hold fish nothing like they used to, but yet all summer there’ll be fish piled on it. The fish like the higher inlet water column and stuff. I mean, let’s face it, you’re living in a one-story house you’re paying for and right over there is a six story that’s free that all you got to do is go in there and occupy it, you’re gonna go to the nicer, higher place.

TH: So, you think the fish are leaving the natural reefs for a lot of the artificial reefs?

RC: Oh, I know they are.

TH: Fascinating. I’ve never heard that.

RC: Well, down here all summer, there’d be fifteen, twenty groupers on every spot. Now there’s none, but you go to the Muliphen and there’ll be 300 groupers. Well, you know, fifteen or twenty groupers a spot times fifteen or twenty spots comes out to about 300 groupers. (laughs)

TH: So, the fish are leaving the natural—why? Why would they leave the natural reefs? Are the artificial ones better?

RC: Well, they’re higher. They’re further up in the water column and they disturb more water. If you walk out your dock here and see water going by the piling and the seaweed hit it and it knocks a crab out and a fish hits it—
TH: I gotcha.

RC: You look at the piling and see the eddy behind it, you see the sunken pieces, all of a sudden the frozen crab or frozen shrimp kicks his tail. He’s an in ambush zone. So yes, the higher wrecks create more of a disturbance. Look, the reefs are built on tide flow. Your dominant tide in the water is gonna be the predominant tide, the way the reef lies. So in other words, it doesn’t—that’s like a surfboard’s fin. It doesn’t disturb the water much. Now, places in the places where there’s bins and there’s a lot of water being disturbed, these are the spots that hold the fish. These are the zones. Now you’ve taken—when you sink one of those wrecks, while it’s going down, the tide catches it and it usually lays crossways to the tide. Now there’s a lot of water disturbance going on there. You know, it just creates a better feed-zone.

TH: For the fish. Interesting.

RC: So, if they leave twenty small feed-zones—it doesn’t create new fish, it just puts the same old fish in a tighter proximity where they’re easier to hurt or damage.

TH: Now, tell me this: If on a very calm day, can you see the action that’s going on under the water on the surface? In other words, the boils, the—

RC: Like the Oculina Bank, if you went out there and you saw blue water and you saw a dirty green spot back there, you might as well turn around. That meant the tide was running four knots. And actually, sometimes a half a mile away from one of the peaks would be boils on the surface of the ocean.

TH: Those boils, are they ever right over the wrecks on a calm day out here?

RC: Yeah, but they’re not right over ’em. It hits—it actually comes up, you know, down tide from wherever it is.

TH: All right. I’ve always wondered about those boils and exactly how to fish ’em. I’m seeing out there. All right, interesting.

Okay, have you had experience—so overall, how has fishing changed since you began fishing in Fort Pierce? We’ll come back to that in a little bit.
RC: Let me add this: used to—talking about spots, used to [be that] you’d see ten boats and nine of ‘em wouldn’t be fishing on the spot, would be fishing it all wrong. You know, as a diver, I know right where those groupers sit, and as a diver who used to fish and dive—remember when I said when I’d come here I’d fish, then I’d jump in and dive? I’d hit the bottom and watch someone on the boat sitting with a beautiful live bait twenty foot behind ten groupers, and them groupers don’t turn around. You know, they got their nose in the tide. You want that bait in front of ‘em, not behind ‘em. So anyway, used to it was—it’s like nine out of ten boats, they’re in the wrong place. They look odd and maybe it’s not hurting nothing. Nowadays, there’s a lot more better fishermen. You know, nowadays, nine out of ten people are using the right bait, they’re sitting on the right spot, they’re anchored up the right way.

TH: They have better electronics.

RC: But just in general, it seems like people are a lot better fishermen. You know, you’ve been kingfishing a long time. How much has your tackle changed, your fishing methods?

TH: Not a lot.

RC: We’re dinosaurs. This recreational fishery is like super science. They got clear sinkers. (laughs) You know, we’re stuck in our old ways.

TH: I’m learning that in these interviews.

RC: We’re getting our butts spanked these days.

TH: Interesting. Have you had experience with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

RC: Yeah, years back. I guess a sheriff’s boat went out there, and there weren’t supposed to be trawlers there and they asked if we’d seen trawlers last night or something and wanted to know if we could go down to the courthouse and do some kind of a affidavit of something.

TH: That’s before—that was when the trawlers were banned, but not the bottom fishing?

RC: Right. That was—
TH: Between 1984 and ninety-four [1994].

RC: Yeah, it was probably eighty-eight [1988] or something like that. That’s when they’d grab their anchor—I’d been anchored up there at nighttime sleeping and wake up being dragged by a trawler. You know, it’s pretty scary. (laughs)

TH: (laughs) Yeah.

RC: Especially when you’re in a twenty foot boat laying on the deck sleeping. (laughs)

TH: You’re just darn lucky that they didn’t run right over you.

RC: Yeah. And then—I guess that’s about it. Four or five years ago, I ran way around the north corner ’cause I had snowy groupers and tilefish onboard. And there at the northwest corner, I went between the corner and the satellite areas. You can look on my GPS and see real square movements where I actually drove around the box. And I saw a cutter come running towards me and I stopped and it stopped. Then I ran and it ran, I stopped, it stopped. (TH laughs) And I’m like, man, I want him to come board me now while my electronics are showing the clear picture, not forty miles from now at the inlet when this picture of how I drove around the box is just gonna be like a bump in the screen. You know what I’m talking about, how your plotter remembers your pattern?

TH: Yeah.

RC: Well, if you have it in a zero to two mile mode, it shows very detailed. But now if you’re at Fort Pierce Inlet, had to show the eighty mile mode—

TH: That wouldn’t mean anything.

RC: Yeah, it wouldn’t look like much.

TH: So, you were hoping they would board you while you could see that. Did they ever board you?
RC: No, he stopped and I ran for a mile or two and he ran for a mile or two. I stopped; he stopped. And I went, what the hell is going on here? So, I think that was a cat and mouse game that had to do with—

TH: The Oculina Bank.

RC: With the Oculina Bank.

TH: All right. Now I want to talk to you about your fishing history specifically, and you’ve already talked a lot about it. But what’s your earliest memory of fishing and how old were you? Is that when your mom had you in her womb?

RC: (laughs) I just—there’s so many. I mean, we had a lake house and every day my dad—we were wading in the river snook fishing. We were in the savannas, bass fishing.

TH: You had a lake house; where was the house?

RC: Lake Istokpoga.

TH: Where on Lake Istokpoga?

RC: There on Cat House Road. Just go down the public boat ramp and turn right. They built that in fifty-nine [1959], I figure, or fifty-eight [1958].

TH: Is it still in your family?

RC: No. They wanted to give it to me and I told ’em—Grandma—to go ahead and sell it. But I wish I would have taken it.

TH: Yeah! Okay.
RC: It’s all memories. I mean, my dad went every—I remember it’d be pitch black, I’d be out in the front yard crying, my dad would be loading the boat, and my mom would be saying, “No, you got to go to church today.”

TH: You can’t go with your dad?

RC: Yeah, I remember when I couldn’t go, and I have memories. You would think he’d drown every time. See, he would free dive. He would stay down for two or three minutes, then when he got to a—if he had a wounded fish or something, then he would put his tanks on. So, it was always like—

TH: He was a commercial diver?

RC: I don’t think he was a commercial diver. You know, he worked for his family in the floor covering business. But he was one hell of a sportsman. I mean, if it wasn’t a twelve-point buck, it was a fourteen-foot gator. If it wasn’t a fourteen-foot gator, it was a 500-pound jewfish; if it wasn’t—you know, it was constant. We were fishing or hunting or something seven days a week. I had a blessed childhood.

TH: I guess. Sounds wonderful. So, you remember fishing. What was the first fish that you remember—it’s just all a bunch of fish?

RC: It’s all a blur. Whether it’s two years old or four or five, I don’t know. It was a daily part of my life. You know, it was an everyday thing.

TH: Now, while your father was alive, you lived here in Fort Pierce.

RC: Right.

TH: Where?

RC: Let’s see, it used to be Holly Road. Now, it’s Twenty-Fifth Street. Down there on Devine, I guess almost to Midway Road. White City, down to White City (inaudible).

TH: But didn’t you say you lived on a lake, that you had a place on the lake?
RC: No. The lake house was a weekend and you know, a Thanksgiving—we’d go out here and clean oysters and go to the lake house and have clam bakes and oyster bakes and stuff like that. The lake house was a family type deal. You know, maybe this weekend an uncle and aunt would have it, next weekend—you know, it was just a family lake house. Grandma and Grandpa would be there. We’d have barbeque steaks, lobsters, whatever. It was just an old—you remember how everyone would used to—every family took a vacation. Every family had, you know, a summer home or what have you. It was just like that type of traditional lifestyle.

TH: Cool. All right. So, what did you first fish for? What fish did you first target? Do you recall? And this is gear, bait, and how did you fish for it.

RC: Myself, the first fish I really targeted was snappers and lobsters when I was like ten, twelve years old, there around the jetties and on the beach.

TH: North Beach, mostly?

RC: Yeah. I remember we had—my mom counted 167 head of lobsters. Eleven and a thirteen and fourteen year old boy. (laughs) So, I would target snappers and lobsters. And yes, I would sell ’em, probably too cheap.

TH: Who do you fish with now, or who did you fish with? I guess your father?

RC: Right. What I’m talking about—the snappers and lobsters—before, I said Ronald and Steve Hawkins. Their real name was Buckmeyer. They had a stepfather—

TH: Slower, slower.

RC: Ronald and Steve Buckmeyer, B-u-c-k-m-e-y-e-r. Their father is Tommy Hawkins, H-a-w-k—

TH: Buckmeyer. B-u-c-k—

RC: —m-e-y-e-r.
TH: Okay. And their father was?

RC: Tommy Hawkins. They’re paving contractors here in town now.

TH: H-a-w-k-i-n-s?

RC: Right.

TH: Any relation to Chuck?

RC: No.

TH: All right. Now, these are the guys you fished with. You grew up with, I guess, Ronald and Steve?

RC: Yeah.

TH: Whose boat—who owned the boat?

RC: Well, I guess you would say my mom owned it, ’cause it was my dad’s and he was dead.

TH: Okay. How were you related to these people? Just friends?

RC: My dad. Oh, those guys? At the corner of our horse pasture was their house—the back corner. They’re just neighborhood kids I hung around with.

TH: Did you have a horse pasture in White City?

RC: Yeah.

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3 Charles Hawkins was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00018.
TH: All right. So, did you have acreage there?

RC: Yeah. What was it? Twelve point five acres or something like that. Just some horses and chickens and stuff like that.

TH: Okay. So, where did you go to fish when you began fishing? Did you fish much in the river or as soon as your mom left, you went out to the ocean?

RC: Soon as Mom left, we were in the ocean. (both laugh) You could see her going over the bridge.

TH: I love it.

RC: She had one of those two toned—the top of the car was colored different. What was it? It was an Oldsmobile 98, dark green with, like, a beige top on it or something.

TH: So, you started fishing basically around the inlet?

RC: Yeah.

TH: North jetty, North Beach, Pepper Park, the reefs along there.

RC: Right.

TH: Okay. During what months of the year did you fish for—

RC: That was a summertime thing. Well, actually, we got the lobsters. That was, I guess, a summer and fall thing.

TH: How long did a fishing trip last?
RC: That was just a day trip.

TH: You just did mostly day trips?

RC: Yeah.

TH: An average trip catch back then—you just said you had—

RC: Believe it or not, I bet you we probably did 150 to 200 pounds of stuff a day.

TH: A hundred and fifty to 200—

RC: Little boys.

TH: —pounds a day, good Lord. Where did you sell your catch?

RC: Grandma and Grandpa. I think, when my dad was alive, he sold a lot to Chuck’s. And I think—

TH: Chuck’s Seafood.

RC: I think I actually sold to Chuck’s a little bit. Back then, it wasn’t all the fish market and all the licensing requirements and all that there is these days.

TH: You didn’t have to have any licenses.

RC: Right, right, back then.

TH: When I first started, you didn’t have to have a license. For how many years did you fish for—I guess all your life now, for all these things.

RC: Yeah.
TH: And you’ve kind of zeroed in to grouper, snapper, amberjack, and lobster?

RC: I really wouldn’t call it zeroed in. I mean, it’s kind of a little ethical thing with me when we started having these size limits. Remember, there was no size limit on size limits on groupers. Then it was twelve, then it was eighteen, then it was twenty-four. You know, twenty-five years ago, there basically weren’t many size limits. So, if you caught something, you kept it. Then the size limits come into place and things being closed came into place. It just really irked me, sitting there throwing fish that I know were totally stressed out, but—

TH: Probably would die.


TH: ’Cause they’re maimed, they’re hurting?

RC: Well, the ’cuda hangs around underneath your boat when you’re sitting there throwing back fish. I mean, they’d related it. They’d related to the anchored boat and then throw the fish back. Then in ninety-one [1991] or two [1992] or whenever it went to a twenty-inch red snapper limit and I went out there snapper fishing, like I did for years, at nighttime, and I sit there and throw forty-one fish back, that just—you know, that killed it for me and I just started relying more and more on the spearfishing. So, if I can go fish for something and not have—like, when the kingfish are thick and I can sit there and catch kingfish all day and maybe one or two ’cudas and maybe one or two bonitas—which, by the way, someone uses and I can sell—I will do that. Now, on the other hand, if it’s a fishery like—you know, like if I can go bottom fishing—when I’m diving, if I see 150 groupers, I’ll throw that dive gear in the cabin and run out there and grab a fishing pole out of the cabin and sit and anchor up and fish ’em. You know, I can catch a hell of lot more than I can shoot. But when you see a big ball of groupers on the spot and there’s not a by-catch there, then I’ll fish it. So, I’m not really zeroed in, but I try to stay away from by-catch things.

Here, we’re talking all this stuff about stories. Sometimes my dad and me would go hunting, and he’d go with five or ten men or something and I couldn’t go. So, I’d sit there around the house and shoot a half a dozen quail or a couple of snipes or something, you know, with a BB gun. Well, I shot a mockingbird. Well, you know that son of a gun boiled it and made me eat it. (laughs)

TH: Your father boiled it. So, you—
RC: He said, “You do not kill nothing that you don’t eat.” You know, you don’t—oh, this is choking me up a little bit. I guess that’s kind of—I don’t know if it was drilled into me, but it kind of irks me to sit there and sit there and just waste, kill things and throw it back knowing it’s got a small chance of survival. So, I just weasel my way through different fisheries. You know, if I think I can catch it—and another thing: if fish aren’t worth much, there could be a million groupers out here and if they’re not worth but two dollars a pound, I’m not gonna go kill ’em for nothing. Then I’ll jump over and maybe I’ll kingfish, if it’s worth it. I try to stay away from by-catch and I try to make—if I’m gonna kill something, it’s gonna be for a reason, not just to put gas in the boat and kill ’em again tomorrow. Now, did that answer your question? (laughs) What was that question, Terry? Oh, you made a statement.

TH: Okay. It was: What do you target?

RC: You talked about how I zeroed in.

TH: Yeah. The question here is how many years did you fish for what? What did you stop fishing for? What did you do next?

RC: I haven’t stopped fishing for anything. I—

TH: But you pretty much explained all of that.

RC: Dive fish, bandit fish, hand catch lobsters, rod and reel fish, hand line fish, and troll fish kingfish.

TH: And mackerel. I’ve been out fishing next to you for mackerel last winter.

RC: I do everything but net fish, and swordfish. I ain’t quit none of ’em. I’ll do ’em all tomorrow, whatever looks the best.

TH: Whatever—the price, you look at the price and what’s running.

RC: And the price for effort. I mean, you know, you can go fishing and just pay your expenses and kill the fish for nothing other that fuel for the boat—
TH: Expenses, yeah.

RC: And I’ll just sit at home.

TH: Done that. (RC laughs) So, who do you fish with now?

RC: I’ve got kind of a little—like, Neil Logan and I have been dive partners for—well, how long has the Oculina Bank been closed, sixteen years?

TH: Well, since ninety-six [1996].

RC: Ninety-four [1994].

TH: Ninety-four [1994].

RC: Yeah. So, that’s been sixteen and a half.

TH: No, that’s ten years.

RC: No, ninety-four [1994]—


RC: Sixteen.


RC: And Joe Klostermann, he used to dive with me some.⁴

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⁴ Joseph Klostermann was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00011.
TH: Klostermann, C-l—

RC: K-l-o-s-t-e-r-m-a-n [sic]. I tilefished with him, some on the longline quota and sometimes he bandit fishes with me a little bit on the (inaudible).

TH: Okay, those are your main partners for fishing?

RC: Yeah.

TH: And your son.

RC: And my sons: you know, they’ll go take the boat and go catch—they might go catch a bunch of grunts. (laughs)

TH: They like to fish for fun?

RC: They can fish whenever they want to.

TH: So, you usually go on—well, I guess Neil and Joe Klostermann both have boats, too. So you go on—

RC: Right. I go on a couple boats.

TH: You alternate whose boat you go out on?

RC: Right.

TH: Depending on what you are targeting, I assume.

RC: Yeah, kind of set this boat up or set that boat up or that boat for this or that.
TH: Okay. Where did you go to fish for what? So, if you’re gonna go bottom fishing for—if you’re going tilefishing, where do you go?

RC: Just go out here to the east, 600 feet or deeper.

TH: Okay. If you go grouper fishing?

RC: Grouper fishing, it depends if you are going deepwater grouper fishing. You know, go fish the little wrecks and stuff outside of the Ocu—on the east side of the Oculina Bank. And if I’m gonna grouper fish, you got to stay inshore here inside of the Oculina Bank.

TH: I’ve heard there’s some good rocks inside, just inside the Oculina Bank. A lot of charter boat fishermen say they fish there.

RC: Yeah. That’s the thing with the Oculina Bank. Even inshore—

TH: Inside the eighty—is it the eighty-degree longitude?

RC: Right, and even inshore where the bar [is] where you kingfish, there’s fish pushing in and out of the Oculina Bank. They don’t come out of it as often as what you would think. Now, when they were closing it, they said you were gonna have this overflow effect. It’s gonna fill up with groupers and then they’re gonna just overflow into your fishing grounds.

TH: It’s not happening.

RC: We’re still waiting on the overflow. (laughs)

TH: Okay. So kingfish, you target those probably on the ninety-foot line?

RC: Yeah, I’ve kingfished everywhere. This past year I went to Hatteras [North Carolina] kingfishing, and I kingfish up to Daytona. I usually—those runs, when the fish are up over three bucks a pound, I’ll usually try to hit ’em.

TH: You trailer your boat up there?
RC: Yeah. This past year, I fished in Destin. Well, I’ll go to Jupiter, too, but I’ll go a little bit earlier before everyone, you know, when the fish prices are high and it’s hard to catch 300 pounds. Well, 300 pounds at $3 a pound is more than 500 pounds at $1.25 a pound. (laughs) So, I’ll just kind of—if you hear it’s going off somewhere, chances are I’m leaving where you hear fishing is good.

TH: That’s the way to be. Be there on the first day it bites. Okay. During what months do you fish for what fish?

RC: Terry, I really—well, nowadays, with seasons, I guess it does narrow me down some. Now I tilefish in January and February and March. Groupers and amberjacks is May, you know, May through the rest of the year. Lobster starts in August. So, you know, August and September and November. March is usually pretty good. Don’t do much in February anymore—I mean in March anymore, though, because the grouper season’s closed then. Terry, you can’t pin me down on everything. I’m back and forth with—you know, I bob and weave. You throw me a management punch and—(laughs)

TH: I understand. So, an average catch, you know, it’s different with everything you target. So, let’s say an average catch—let’s go through the fish one time. An average catch of grouper right now, average. You know, you have the highs, lows. Couple hundred pounds?

RC: Well, that’s hard to say. When the season started, it was over 500 pounds a day. Now, it’s under 100 pounds a day.

TH: Okay, your averages?

RC: I can’t give you an average. I don’t like to go for less than 200 pounds a day. I usually start backing off at that point.

TH: If you can’t reach 200 pounds.

RC: Yeah. It’s two people on the boat; that would be 100 pounds a person. It’s 500 for—

TH: So, if you’re not catching over 100 pounds, you tie the boat up.
RC: I want to go do something else, yeah.

TH: Now, it says for how many years did you fish for? Why did you stop fishing for anything? You’ve already explained some of that.

RC: The only thing you can say I stopped fishing for is I used to—when I had a shark problem, I’d shoot the shark and I had shark licenses to land and sell ’em. Usually at the fish house, you know, the guys would—people acted funny at the fish house, so usually I’d just turn around and just gave ’em to the shark fishermen at the fish house.

TH: The sharks?

RC: Yeah. And now that they took my shark license because I didn’t have enough shark landings, now if I have to kill a shark, I got to leave it lay, which is against my principals. But you know, I’m gonna get on my soap box and say, “You made me do it.” (laughs)

TH: Well, you’re trying to abide by the law. It’s a tough—okay.

RC: It would be so simple for me to throw it on a shark boat. I can throw it, tie a jug to it, and have a shark boat come pick it up and throw it on board. But then that would be considered—you know, if I threw it on a shark boat, that would be considered transferring at sea.

TH: It’d be a lot easier if you can just take it in and sell it.

RC: Yeah. Let me take it in and give it to a shark fisherman, or donate it to charity or what have you. I try not to kill ’em unless I have to, but sometimes it’s—you know, three or four I’ve killed, I didn’t even pull the trigger to shoot ’em. They ran into the speargun that hard.

TH: They ran into the—?

RC: Speargun hard enough to make the bullet discharge in the power head.

TH: They were attacking you?
RC: Yeah.

TH: And so you—

RC: They come up to me that aggressively and that close, just pointing my thing out in front of me and letting ’em run into it, discharging it.

TH: You were just protecting yourself, basically. Okay. There’s several groups here, and we’ve covered a lot of all these different fish.

RC: Sounds like the transcriber is gonna have to pick this to pieces.

TH: That’s all right, it’s all right. I think you’ve done quite well. Let’s just move on. You know, they want a detailed thing on each type of fish you fish for. Now—

RC: We can go back through the gear things. And gears and baits, I guess, is about as detailed as I can put it. Timelines, I can’t really do this.

TH: Don’t worry about timelines. Just worry about—let’s say the gear. Let’s go through grouper, snapper. That’s pretty much the same gear. Amberjack’s probably the same gear. What do you use for grouper, snapper, amberjacks?

RC: Well, like I say, I spear fish with just a spear tip sometimes for smaller groupers and stuff. I powerhead a lot, but I won’t—I’ll take the bullet out of it and just shoot it with the bare powerhead, which is basically a spear tip. Amberjack, of course, I like to powerhead those. It’s a bullet inside. A spear shaft hits and then a bullet goes off. It kills the fish instantly. You don’t have any loss. They don’t swim off. They don’t tear your shaft out. They’re not sitting there kicking, quivering, drawing in the sharks. So, that’s spearfishing. And of course, I hand collect lobsters occasionally while I’m spearfishing, and that’s when you just grab the lobsters by hand. Now, if I’m fishing for groupers, it depends a lot on what I’ve seen, how many there are, how they’re biting. If they’re plain old chewing, the bandit works fine.

TH: If they’re biting.
RC: Yeah. If they’re biting funny, sometimes you got to go to the hand line or these new flurocarbons they’re using. In the cabin of my boat, I have a pin 6/0 with 150 pound—

TH: Flurocarbon?

RC: No. Fins line on it, you know, and then with the flurocarbon leader, and as soon as a grouper hits it, it hooks itself. That line doesn’t stretch or anything. And it’s so fine, you can put a smaller sinker on it. You know, with that line, you can fish a heavier tide. With that line on the Oculina Bank these days, without that couple hundred—without that 100-foot of stretch in that mono, God, could you be deadly on these things. But anyway—

TH: What kind of line is it again?

RC: It’s the Power Pro and the Fins and the Spectrum. It’s like a Kevlar type line or something like that. It’s like a 150 pound test of that stuff is probably the diameter of twenty-five pound mono.

TH: I see. It doesn’t have the stretch either?

RC: No stretch. I mean, you feel a bite go click, and that hook drove through its lip right then.

TH: Interesting.

RC: So, when the bite slows down and you want to fish lighter gear, you know, that recreational method works great. It’s even better than the hand line. Now, sometimes I hand line groupers—you know, when the tide’s slack and you’re not wanting to use a five-pound or a big heavyweight. When there’s not much tide, a bandit ain’t very good ’cause you can’t really feel the bite. Remember how George and Steve used to go hand—and Chief, he would hand line the groupers? Well, if you can fish under two pounds, if you got a little pound or two—

TH: Two-pound weight?

RC: Yeah. Two pound or less a tide, the hand line works fine.

TH: ’Cause you can feel the bite going to jerk.
RC: Yeah, when you pull him in. You know, get him before he runs to the rocks. That’s groupers. Now amberjacks, put some power to them things, ’cause they’ll (laughs)—after four of five hand line or rod and reel, they wear you out. I use electric for amberjacks. I already said that I spear ’em. Then with amberjacks, you use a one-hook rig and a leader and a heavy sinker and you just let the electric reel fight him in. Usually on most of those fish—and it’s all live bait, either bait I catch in the ocean or some dead bait bought from the store, say sardines or something. Now deepwater groupers, I like to use the five hook rig and the squid.

TH: Five hook rig?

RC: That’s a bandit with a sinker and with four or five or six hooks, or what have you.

TH: Bug sinker?

RC: Yeah. You’re dropping down in five, six, seven hundred feet of water. Well, it takes so long to get (inaudible) to reel up, so while you’re there, you try to catch a couple, you know, more that one fish. Then tilefishing, I use either a—of course, you use power, like a bandit with a two hook rig or something, or you throw down a bunch of hooks and leave it sitting there.

TH: Tilefishing, it’s kind of like longlining or trout lining.

RC: Right. You know, I have hooks on (inaudible) or whatever they call ’em leaders. You got a clip-on clip and hooks and sometimes if I lay out a longline, that’s the way you do it. You just clip the hooks on. You know, you pre-bait the hooks and clip ’em on. Or you can bandit fish ’em two at a time with two hooks.

TH: All right. Then I guess—what’s left? You already get lobster by hand.

RC: The kingfish.

TH: Kingfish, you troll—sea witches or spoons.

RC: Or bug, I use my bandit as a—
TH: Bug reel?

RC: I keep saying bandit. I personally use Kristal reels as the recreational version of the electric reel. I bought one eight, nine years ago because it had similar specs to that a commercial bandit does, you know, the same retrieval rate and pulling power. I tell you what, they’re stronger that a commercial bandit. So I use—when I do it, I’m using a Kristal reel, a recreational electric reel.

TH: Okay, that’s not the same as what kingfishermen use. Does it work like a kingfish electric reel?

RC: Well, I don’t know if you’ve seen me on the little boat, but I take that Kristal reel and just run the wire up to a pulley and use it as a jerk bug reel. I’m actually using a Kristal reel as a bug reel. And I have a brand new bug reel at home for five years sitting in the garage. (laughs)

TH: This works just as well.

RC: Works fine.

TH: So you don’t have to switch out the reels?

RC: Yeah.

TH: Okay. Cool.

RC: It’s like I can be grouper fishing one minute, spin it 180 degrees and be kingfishing with it.

TH: Versatile. Finally, I’d like to talk about your fishing, how your fishing has changed over time in the Oculina Bank since 1984. 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? The Oculina Bank was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining in 1984. Did this affect your fishing?

RC: No.
Okay, ’cause you didn’t longline then. In 1994, the Oculina Bank was designated an experimental closed area where fishing for and retention of snapper [and] grouper species was prohibited. Snapper [and] grouper fishing boats were also prohibited from anchoring. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation and how? Nineteen ninety-four.

Yes. That messed up the tilefish, messed up the transit—messed up having to drive around it, took away the snowy grouper and the yellowedge grouper fishery. I didn’t say this before, but outside the peaks, you know, there between 300 and 600 feet, there’s some little shelly bottom and stuff, and that used to be good snowy fishing and yellowedge fishing. So, it took that fishery away from me.

Because you had to travel around?

No—well, now you can’t fish all the way out to 600 feet.

They expanded it.

Yeah. So, you can’t put your gear in there inside of 600 feet. So, it did take away some grouper fishery, cut back on my golden tilefishing, cut back on me going bigger. Me and Donny had bought a bigger boat. And then, of course, it changed my diving.

Donny?

He’s one of my dive partners.

What’s Donald’s last name?

Browning.

Donny Browning?

Yes. Doctor Calvin—you know, the doctor, the old chiropractor, you remember Calvin? His son.
TH: Donny Browning. Okay. Then, in 1996, all anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing, and if so, how? I assume it was already impacted.

RC: Yeah, it impacted because I knew some more laws were coming out and I was hoping they’d give us some transit provisions.

TH: To transport fish through the area. And they didn’t?

RC: Yeah. Then that basically—it didn’t directly impact my fishing, but it made me give up any hope of keeping up any deepwater fishery. So, I just changed the way I fish a little bit more. (banging noise) Excuse me.

TH: It’s all right. The designation—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 in the Oculina Bank HAPC. Fishing with bottom longline, trawl, or dredge was prohibited in the expanded area, as was anchoring by any vessel. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

RC: Yeah. Further, it reduced the availability of snowy grouper.

TH: Now, this is important: The designation of marine areas that are closed to fishing is being used more frequently as a fishery management tool. What do you think of the use of closed areas to fishing compared to other types of management regulations such as quotas, closed seasons, trip limits, et cetera?

RC: Well, you kind of got to have seasons because of spawning aggregations and stuff. Trip limits make sense. If you limit your trip, you probably shorten the trip. The shorter the trip, the more the fish are—the fresher the fish are, the more they’re worth at the market. Public health [and] safety concerns are addressing the trip limits.

TH: So you think trip limits are—

RC: It’s a thing that hurts, and as a fisherman, you don’t want like it. If they’re biting, you don’t want to quit. But just in general, it’s a good thing. Closed areas, MPAs—and let’s consider the Oculina Bank an MPA, a Marine Protected Area; it’s not its designation, but it’s basically the same thing. From that aspect, it seems a bit excessive, the size of it in relation to the amount of coral that’s actually there. It would be nice if there was some transit provisions.
But on the other hand, a lot of management measures don’t address some of the by-catch issues. You know, it’s gonna be hard to totally clean up any fishery. So, since by-catch is an issue, I guess if there’s areas that there’s no fishing, then there’s gonna be areas with no by-catch. And from that aspect, you might be able to protect some pretty—you know, species that are in bad shape. Give ’em some safe harbor. I don’t know, maybe an inshore closed area here, and fifty miles north an offshore closed area, maybe a system of marine closed areas. Let’s say if you want to do a 50 percent reduction in the take of your fish, if you closed 50 percent of the areas off, you might address some of the reduction. I don’t know. I think well set up marine closed areas distributed up and down the coast might actually—might be good.

Now, the problem is you have winners and losers with that, because there’s not much law enforcement. You got people that are gonna follow the law and those that don’t. And you’re gonna have aggressive fishermen that cross the lines, and you’re gonna have honest fishermen that don’t. Now you’re coming into a thing where you’re talking about IFQs and catch histories and stuff like that. The people who cross the lines and do fish illegal are gonna be the ones rewarded in perpetuity (laughs) through these IFQ systems and stuff. So from that aspect, closed areas without enforcement don’t sound very good, no.

TH: I have a follow up question. I’ve always asked this in my interviews, this follow up question: If you could manage the fisheries, and you kind of touched on this and some of your ideas are very good, but if you could manage the fisheries, what do you think the most equitable, fairest ways to both the fishermen and the fish [would be] to manage fisheries? Again, what tools are the most—the fairest and most equitable? You mentioned trip limits, quotas, closed seasons, slot limits, and then HAPCs.

RC: Fairness and equitability, that’s a three-hour discussion, Terry. (laughs) I mean, man, you’re opening up a can of worms. What’s fair? I mean, commercial fishing is way less than one percent. Recreational fishing is less than 5 percent of the nation. And you hear of people saying, “Well, there’s all of those wrecks. We should get it because there’s more of us.” But no one ever speaks for the 95 percent Americans that don’t fish, that don’t have access to it. And you’ll hear a charter guy or a wreck guy or a commercial guy say, “Well, they can go with me.” But do you realize that every trip you take, that means you got to take nine other people with you? There’s now way we’re giving equal access to other Americans. I really think they need to be addressed in this equation, and they never are addressed. Fairness and equitable, I don’t know how I can address that one with all that in mind.

TH: Thinking ahead to the future, what do you think fishing in Fort Pierce will be like in ten years?
RC: Well, I’m optimistic. A lot of these management measures that are really cutting our throats and that are hurting a lot of us, if people follow some of these limits and some of these closures we have, I’m optimistic. I don’t see how it can do anything but get better.

TH: You think that some of the laws are good and that the—

RC: Well, I mean like they’ve done the four month grouper closure. If the groupers aren’t touched for four months and they’re allowed to spawn unharmed every year, I mean, there can’t be anything but good results. But on the other hand, sharks have been so protected here lately, the last three or four years I’ve been seeing sharks hammer the spawning aggregations harder that I’ve ever seen ’em hammer ’em before. It’s like the grouper spawn is now, you know, a school of mullet to a school of jack crevalles. I mean, it’s just a food—

TH: Food for the sharks.

RC: I don’t know. I guess I’m gonna—sometimes part of the process. I’m gonna be optimistic and say I hope things might be better.

TH: Thank you very much for sharing your fishing history with me. And with that—

RC: All right.

End of interview