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William Thiess oral history interview by Terry Howard, August 28, 2010

William Thiess (Interviewee)
Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Good morning, this is Terry Howard. Today is August 28, 2010. I’m at … in St. Lucie Village, Florida, conducting an oral history with Bill Thiess, who is the Mayor of St. Lucie Village, Florida, 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, Bill. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth.

William Thiess: Bill, or William, Thiess, T-h-i-e-s-s, middle name Gay, G-a-y. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia, on January 3, 1949.

TH: What brought you to Fort Pierce?

WT: Well, a long way around to that—
TH: When did you come to Fort Pierce?

WT: Actually came to Fort Pierce in 1971. At the time, I had dropped out of college and was working construction, and came up here to work on St. Lucie Nuclear Unit 1.

TH: Are you married?

WT: Yes, married to Beverly Thiess Sanders.

TH: How old were you when you got married?

WT: I was twenty-five.

TH: Do you have children?

WT: No children.

TH: How much schooling have you had?

WT: Well, I’ve got a bachelor’s degree in environmental engineering and a master’s degree in environmental engineering.

TH: Okay, from what school?

WT: Bachelors was—most of my undergraduate work was at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute up in Troy, New York. Actually finished up the bachelor’s degree at Florida Institute of Technology and then went back for a master’s at Clemson University. That was, like, 1978.

TH: Okay, what do you do for a living?

WT: I’m the director of Fort Pierce Utilities—public utility.
TH: What other jobs have you had?

WT: Well, in the professional line, I worked for a consulting outfit in Gainesville called Water and Air Research. We did a lot of—

TH: Water—

WT: Water and Air Research.

TH: Water and Air Research.

WT: Water and Air Research. Yeah, we did a lot of lake and stream and estuarine studies. We did a lot of pre-impoundment studies for dams up on the Savannah River and a couple other dams in the Southeast. And we did a lot of Department of Defense work, looking at hazardous waste disposal practices. That was part of the installation restoration program where they were going back and cleaning the military bases from all the sins from the thirties [1930s] on up to date.

TH: In the water.

WT: Water and soil.

TH: Soil, okay. Have you worked in the fishing industry?

WT: Never worked, just been strictly recreational.

TH: Do you currently own a boat? What kind and length? Describe your boat.

WT: Yeah, we have a twenty-five foot Dusky, had it since 1993. We get out in it pretty regularly.

TH: Okay, what’s it powered with?
WT: Right now, we’ve got it powered with twin 140 four-stroke Suzukis—actually Johnson Suzukis, “Jizukis.”

TH: Johnson Suzukis?

WT: They’re Suzukis with a Johnson nameplate on it.

TH: Okay.

WT: Bombardier wasn’t making four-strokes, so they just borrowed the Suzukis.

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

WT: We fish out in that direction pretty regularly. We’re probably 90 percent trollers, so, we don’t fish much on the bottom; we do it now and then. But we go out there to troll that area because it’s a pretty productive area for wahoo and dolphin.

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

WT: Well, that Oculina coral, those peaks out there are massive. I mean, we go over peaks that have a hundred-foot-plus elevation rise. And those corals are very slow going; you know, we’ve seen the exhibits at the Smithsonian. I can see why you would want to keep any ground tackle or bottom fishing gear off of that because it can do a lot of damage, you know, to those corals. So, yeah, we support the closure for bottom fishing 100 percent.

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

WT: No. Like I say, we fish around the edges of it, but we never fish in the out of bounds area on the bottom. And we troll over the top of it, which is strictly legal, because it’s a good area to fish out there. There’s a lot of—on a calm day you can see the upwelling where the currents hit those big hills. It holds a lot of bait fish, and we do pretty good on the dolphin out there.
TH: What do you think about the closure of the Oculina Bank to anchoring and bottom fishing?

WT: I support it 100 percent. We do a lot of diving, too, and we’re always very careful to throw our anchor in the sand and dig it in. We go to the Bahamas a lot and, you know, wherever we go we make sure we drop our anchor in the sand. So, any anchoring on coral ought to be strictly prohibited and, I think, enforced by fines.

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

WT: Not at all. Like I say, we’re not much bottom fishermen. We do some, but we have plenty—from what little we do, we can find plenty of places to fish outside of the closure area.

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

WT: Bottom fishing?

TH: Yeah, if it were not prohibited.

WT: Well, that’s a good question. We might try if it wasn’t prohibited, but we’d have to assure ourselves we’d do it in a way that wouldn’t leave any tackle on the bottom.

TH: A lot of the charter boat captains, a lot of the other fishermen that I’ve talked to that bottom fish out there, they power fish.

WT: Right.

TH: They just hold the boat without anchoring.

WT: Right, and when we fish those areas, usually we fish right inside the eighty longitude line, which is the western edge of the Oculina off-limits area. And we do the same thing. It’s really when you find a structure, it’s much easier to keep the boat on top of it under power than to try to anchor and get set up on it, because—
TH: The depth.

WT: The depth and—yeah, the tide and everything else. I mean, that would be the only way to fish there, I would think.

TH: So, if it were allowed, you might.

WT: Yeah, we might try to do some power drops.

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

WT: Let’s see. I’d say there’s more boats, more people, and I think a lot more fishing pressure on the fish. You have to spend more time to catch the same amount of fish, it seems like—and the fish we chase a lot is dolphin, dorado—

TH: Dorado?

WT: Dolphin. Well, down south in Mexico and all, they call them dorado, where we spend a lot of time. But anyway, it seems like there’s not as many big fish as there used to be. We used to go out in the peak months of May—late April, early May—and always got a lot of big fish. Now seems like there’s a lot of smaller fish.

TH: Big wahoo, big—

WT: We catch wahoo occasionally. We don’t target them a lot, but we’ll catch wahoo on and off throughout the year. We’ve caught a lot of over fifty pounds. I think there’s so much pressure now that—and the dolphins seem to migrate in the spring, from what I read, from south to north. And I think the fishing pressure south of here in the cities with larger populations—you know, the Palm Beaches and Lauderdale and Miami—there’s so many boats out of there that the fish get hammered so hard on the way up that it puts a pretty good dent in them by the time they make it up this way. Most of the really good fishing for the decent sized fish, the dolphin, is on the east side of the Gulf Stream because not as many boats, you know, make it over to that side.

TH: Do you go over there often?
WT: We don’t go over there often. We do go there: we go to the Bahamas and we fish that side. But we don’t make day trips from here to the east side that often; they’re very infrequent. Have a lot of friends that do.

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

WT: I’ve seen the Fish and Wildlife Service boats near there. They boarded us—diving. We were diving at ninety feet in that area, but well to the side of the Bank. But no, they’ve never stopped us on the Bank.

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

WT: Well, actually, I distinctly remember the first rod and reel I had.

TH: Okay.

WT: My parents bought it with the S & H Green Stamps. Do you remember that?

TH: Yes, I do. (laughs)

WT: Yeah. And it was a Hurricane rod and a big Mitchell spinning reel, and I went down to Haulover Inlet in Miami and fished off the sheet pilings on the south side of the inlet and—

TH: Is that Government Cut?

WT: No. Haulover’s north of Government Cut. Haulover’s the little inlet, the northernmost inlet in Miami, right by the Haulover Pier. It’s a fairly narrow inlet compared to Government Cut. It’s right—

TH: Now, did you live down in Miami for a while?

WT: Well, I grew up in West Hollywood, but my father managed hotels on Miami Beach. So we
spent a lot of time on Miami Beach.

TH: So, your first rod was a—

WT: Hurricane fiberglass spinning rod and a big old Mitchell reel, and I remember fishing off the sheet pile there on—

TH: Now, was the Mitchell reel a spinning reel or a cast?

WT: Spinning reel.

TH: Okay.

WT: Yeah, and I remember catching grunts and a jack or two, and fishing with my old childhood friend there. That day (laughs) still stands out in my mind.

TH: Do you have any idea how old you were?

WT: I was probably thirteen or fourteen.

TH: Okay.

WT: I remember my mother dropped us off and picked us up.

TH: What did you fish for?

WT: Whatever we could catch, and I think it was mostly grunts and jacks.

TH: Now, who—how did you learn how to fish? Who taught you?

WT: Well, never really had a teacher, just bought some stuff and went out there and gave it a try. But after a while, when we bought our first boat—my family bought our first boat: it was a 1946
Jafco Sea Skiff made in New Jersey.

TH: Jafco. J—

WT: J-a-f-c-o. Lapstake hull, the old tumblehome stern, you know—

TH: What’s a tumblehome?

WT: Tumblehome, where it goes out like that. When you look at the boat from the stern, it’s rounded.

TH: Oh, a rounded stern.

WT: Yeah.

TH: From the top down.

WT: Well, from the side, the side will go out like that—(gestures)

TH: Huh.

WT: It’s not—they stopped—they don’t use the name in the boat designs but—

TH: When you show me that, it doesn’t come up on the tape.

WT: (laughs) Yeah, well, it’s wider at the water line than it is at the—

TH: Okay, it tapers in from the water line.

WT: Right.
TH: It was a runabout, they used to call them.

WT: Yeah, yeah, a little six cylinder Gray Marine engine. We bought that back in—they bought that probably back in sixty-two [1962], maybe, something like that. So, then we started fishing in the ocean. And of course dear old Dad, he was a novice as well, but he taught me what I knew at that time about fishing offshore. We started trolling, mostly, and fishing for dolphin and drift fishing for kingfish. And back in the sixties [1960s] off Miami in the summertime, you’d catch fish just about any time you went out there.

TH: All you wanted.

WT: Yeah.

TH: Huh, cool. Okay, when did you start fishing in Fort Pierce?

WT: I moved here in seventy-one [1971] and got married in seventy-five [1975]. You know, in that period from seventy-one [1971] to seventy-five [1975], we did a little bit of fishing off the beach and off the jetty. We’d fish down off the north beach when the mullet run came in and all the action would pick up there, right in the corner of the jetty on the beach side.

TH: Surf fishing.

WT: Yeah, surf fishing. But we bought our first boat, Bev and I did, right after we got married. So, that would have been probably late seventy-five [1975], early seventy-six [1976].

TH: Your first boat was—

WT: It was a thirteen-foot Boston Whaler, 1966 edition. Actually, it was a classic. It had factory built in Plexiglas viewing windows in the bottom.

TH: Oh, yeah?

WT: Where you could go to reefs and, you know, pull the cover off and look down on the reef.
TH: Cool. I didn’t know that.

WT: Yeah. Actually, Sam Comer still has that boat out west of town.

TH: Sam who?

WT: Sam Comer.

TH: Cover?

WT: Comer, C-o-m-e-r. He’s one of my regular fishing buddies, and he’s still got the old—the name of that boat was the *Blue Mullet*.

TH: *Blue Mullet*. (laughs)

WT: We fished the heck out of that boat. We fished inshore for kingfish a lot and we fished offshore in that boat.

TH: What kind of motor did you have on it?

WT: We had a forty horse[power] Merc [Mercury] with tiller steering. We had a CB radio. The boat had—those old Whalers had oar locks, and we’d carry a set of oars with us. That was our get home insurance. (TH laughs) We had a little compass on there, and we fished—you remember Don Atkins?

TH: Don Atkins.

WT: Donald Atkins, Bob Atkins’s son. Bob used to be mayor of the Village. Don had a building business. His brother Daryl tended bar at Bourgeois forever. But we went out—we built houses together for a while.

TH: You and?
WT: And Don.

TH: Don?

WT: Don Atkins. Actually, Sam Comer was on that trip with us, too. The three of us—and I was the smallest of the three. I’m six foot, 180 pounds. Don, he was about six-five and about 250, and Sam’s a little than I. Three of us in that little Boston Whaler went offshore on a pretty rough day.

TH: Thirteen-foot.

WT: Thirteen-foot Boston Whaler, yeah. (laughs) And we caught a couple—we were kingfishing and dragging strip bait for kingfish, and we caught about a fifty pound sailfish and boated it.

TH: (laughs) No room!

WT: Yeah, we have pictures of it. We took it down to Baywood [Smokehouse] and weighed it and had it smoked. But we caught sailfish out of that boat. We caught dolphin over thirty pounds out of that little thirteen foot Whaler.

TH: Isn’t that something. Okay, so you fished for everything, really. Did you snook?

WT: Yeah, we did some snook fishing in the inlet and off the beaches.

TH: How did you fish for—well, let’s start with: How did you fish for the sailfish and the kingfish?

WT: We were either dragging shrimp baits or ballyhoo.

TH: Okay, and shrimp baits with a sea witch?

WT: Yeah.
TH: Did you make your own sea witches?

WT: No, we bought them.

TH: Okay. So if you, you know, it says—the next question is here: When did you start fishing in Fort Pierce? That would be probably when you first got here.

WT: Yeah.

TH: Here on the beach. What did you fish for originally on the beach, was—?

WT: Generally it was when the bait was in there. There was snook and occasionally bluefish.

TH: Okay.

WT: In fact, I remember catching a lot of bluefish off the north jetty in wintertime.

TH: Did you eat the bluefish?

WT: We’d eat them fresh. We wouldn’t freeze them.

TH: Okay.

WT: They don’t do too well in the freezer.

TH: So, you fished for a little bit of everything.

WT: Yeah.

TH: Where did you go to fish when you began fishing? Okay, you’ve already said on the beach. And then, with the thirteen-foot Whaler, you went everywhere.
WT: Yeah.

TH: How far offshore did you go with that thirteen-foot Whaler?

WT: Well, we never had a decent depth finder on the boat. So, we didn’t know how deep on the boat—

TH: (inaudible)

WT: Certainly out of sight of land. So, we were at least—

TH: (laughs) Okay, so that’s at least ten miles.

WT: Yeah.


WT: Yeah, we fished that boat out of Marathon, too. We fished it far enough offshore we could barely see Sombrero Light looking back toward the north.

TH: Cool. That was—you traveled that boat down there for—

WT: Yeah.

TH: Did you dive from that boat, I guess?

WT: Oh, yeah, we did a lot of diving, mostly free diving back then. We didn’t really do much scuba diving back then.

TH: Wouldn’t be room for any tanks on there.
WT: No. (laughs)

TH: Did you mostly go fishing in your own boat or boats of others?

WT: Mostly my own boat.

TH: Who did you fish with? You’ve already named Sam—

WT: Yeah, Sam Comer is a regular. He probably goes with me more than anybody. And probably the one that goes not quite as much, but almost, is Don March.

TH: Don March?

WT: Yeah.

TH: M-a-r-c-h.

WT: Right.

TH: I don’t even know these people.

WT: Another one that gets out there fairly regularly, but not nearly as much as those two, is Mike Daly, D-a-l-y.

TH: Just no i.

WT: Just D-a-l-y.

TH: Okay, these are all Fort Pierce residents?

WT: Yeah. And occasionally Paul Senate goes with me. In the Village, I’ve had my neighbor Jimmy Clark with me a couple times. Whoever I can get for a crew: just go down the top of the
TH: During what months of the year do you fish, and for what?

WT: Well, just almost any month. We seem to fish—you know, April and May’s the month we try to get out there a lot because the cobia are out usually in April and even into May, and sometimes on into the winter. But May, historically, has been the dolphin month, and sometimes starting early into April. But it doesn’t really matter; if the weather’s anything but really bad, we’ll try to fish, you know, at least a couple times a month.

TH: Now, it sounds to me like dolphin is probably your—if there’s one fish that you target more frequently than the other. So, you could say you’re a dolphin fisherman.

WT: Yeah. Well, we go after kingfish, too. We like to live bait for kingfish ’cause I like the action, you know. I like the—you know, we go after them with light spinning tackle and live bait, and we usually smoke those and make fish dip. Fresh, we’ll throw them on the grill or something like that. The kingfish and dolphin are probably the two fish we catch the most of.

TH: So then, you talked about April. What about summer months?

WT: Summer months. Well, we get kind of in the doldrums around August. There’s still kingfish around, but sometimes they’re hard to find. We went out a couple weeks ago, and let’s see, I think we had one—you know, it was pretty slim picking. We caught one kingfish, one shark and two bonitas.

TH: Sounds like a day of fishing with me. That’s what I had yesterday: I had two bonitas and a kingfish.

WT: Slim pickings. I prefer to dive in the summer, if the water’s clear.

TH: Okay, the water’s pretty clear now. How long did a fishing trip last? How long does a fishing trip last, average?

WT: We typically roll out of here at least probably an hour before sun up and run the boat and pick up gas if we need it. We usually launch out of Little Jim Bridge. I like to be breaking the inlet before the sun comes up. So, you know, we’re out at first light and we’ll come in—if it’s
one of those days where we’re catching nothing all day, we can pretty well take a hint by noon or one o’clock and come on in early. If we’re getting into some fish or into some stuff that looks good, like finding some floating structure, we might stay out till four, five o’clock. But typically we’re out in the water at six-thirty and back in around two-thirty.

TH: How much would you catch on an average trip? Now, this is—I know, ’cause you talk about fishing for everything and all your years of fishing, but can you kind of—an average trip, how much pounds, how many fish—good day, medium day, average day.

WT: We’ve had days where we caught fifty dolphin and took all day to clean ’em. And then we’ve, of course, had days where we just come in and hosed the boat down with no fish to clean. I guess if you had to pick an average, maybe a couple or three fish per trip, maybe twenty or thirty pounds of fish per trip on the average, ’cause there’s a lot of pretty lean trips and there’s a lot of trips where you just end up throwing everything back, too. We don’t keep the real little dolphin or anything like that.

TH: Okay. For how many years have you fished for—so, let’s see, how many years have you fished for dolphin?

WT: Well, we started with my folks around sixty-two [1962] or sixty-three [1963], so we’re getting up to forty—

TH: Forty or fifty years.

WT: Fifty years, yeah.

TH: So all these fish—actually, you fished for all these fish for—

WT: Oh, yeah. We used to fish for kingfish a lot, too, off Miami.

TH: Huh.

WT: Back then we went on the head boats off Miami. Back then you could go for like twelve dollars a day on the head boats. They would drift ballyhoo with maybe a feather, sea witch on ’em or something like that. That was just the style of fishing for kingfish back then.
TH: Just drift and—I never heard of head boats drifting for—well, they do. They drift for kingfish.

WT: They just drift, and they’d drift with rigged ballyhoo and a little sea witch on it, or a jig head with the ballyhoo on it and a trailer hook.

TH: Jig head, you mean like a hook with a feather?

WT: Yeah, a big jig, hook through the head. Yeah, we used to fish—we fished on a boat that specialized in dolphin fishing. That was out of Sunny Isles, Miami, and they would go to the east side of the Gulf Stream off Miami. I can remember being on that boat when I was about fifteen years old, and they caught almost 300 dolphin on that trip.

TH: Wow. Did they have, like, a pool for who caught the most?

WT: They did. We were like fifteen year old kids. So, I think my buddy and I got like five fish. We were happy. But we saw a lot of big fish come in that day.

TH: You still fish today; mostly you fish for—you troll fish for whatever strikes.

WT: Yeah, dolphin—

TH: Do you release sail fish today or do you bring them home to smoke them?

WT: We release all the sailfish. We’ll catch anywhere from six to ten of those a year.

TH: Okay. About how many dolphin do you think you catch a year?

WT: Well, this past year has been pretty slow, one of the slowest ones ever. But usually over the course of the year we’ll catch—who knows, thirty or forty, maybe fifty. Like I say, we caught fifty in one trip, several times, you know, limited out with five licenses. But, you know, that’s when you find the big floating log. Yeah, we followed that log all the way up to—we were north of Sebastian by the time we pulled off it.
TH: You caught fifty—nice?

WT: Yeah, there was a good size—they were mostly ten, twelve-pound fish.

TH: Wow, that’s a lot of action. Where else do you go fishing in the Fort Pierce area now?

WT: Occasionally I’ll fish with friends with flash boats back in the river for trout and stuff. I don’t do a whole lot of that. I usually go as a guest on their boat.

TH: Like who?

WT: I’ve been with Dave Crane. Dave’s certainly one of the best around at that.

TH: C-r-a-n-e?

WT: Right. Yeah, he’s one of—probably the best fishermen, one of the best at the inshore fishing in the county, I would say. Another friend of mine I fish with occasionally, Marty Rippe, R-i-p-p-e.

TH: M-a-r-t-y.

WT: Yeah.

TH: Then R-i—

WT: R-i-p-p-e. Yeah, I haven’t fished with him in a while. He’s been working out of town a lot lately.

TH: Okay. What gear and bait do you use? Let’s go back to trolling. Today, when you go out trolling, you use sea witches and ballyhoo or mullet?

WT: Our typical rout—well, we rig some swimming mullet sometimes for flat lines and we
typically rig ballyhoo with single hook rigs, and I like to fish ’em naked. The old naked ballyhoo has been a pretty steady performer over the years.

TH: Just a hook and a ballyhoo.

WT: Yeah, just a, you know, single hook up forward—

TH: Up forward underneath?

WT: Yeah, underneath, and either with a weight under his chin or without. And sometimes we’ll put some flat head or cup head lures on them like the Alien plastic. They break the water and leave a little bubble trail. Those are pretty productive. And sometimes we’ll just, you know, throw a little rubber skirt under. I like those little Mylar skirts they make now that just add a little bit of color and flash.

TH: Mylar, M-i—?

WT: M-y-l-a-r. Mylar skirts.

TH: Okay. And you usually now, mostly, go in your own boat?

WT: Yeah, almost always.

TH: Does your wife go fishing with you? Does she like to fish?

WT: She does a lot. She used to do it a whole lot, but she had a neck injury a while back and that’s kind of limited her.

TH: Okay.

WT: Boat time, lately.

TH: Who do you usually fish with? You’ve already named quite a few.
WT: Sam Comer and Don March are the two that go the most, and I think I gave you the next three in line, are on the list there.

TH: We already talked about average catch. For how many years do you fish for all these fish? So mostly now, you still like to go offshore and troll and whatever action you get—

WT: Well, I like to bottom fish, but the problem with bottom fishing is you have to have a crew that doesn’t mind working a little bit, (laughs) you know? You can go out trolling and take your relatives and whatever. You know, you put the spread out and go. But if you’re bottom fishing, you have to have people that want to crank the baits up and do the work, and sometimes it’s hard to find that crew. But we’ve got a couple spots out here that have been pretty productive, where we’ve caught some nice grouper. But I have to have my ace crew (TH laughs) to go do that. We do a lot of—

TH: Who’s your ace crew?

WT: That would be Sam Comer and Don March, and my brother in-law is starting to go with us too. That’s Sam, another Sam, Sam Shields.

TH: Sam Shields.

WT: Yeah, he’ll work his butt off. He’s a good crew.

TH: S-h—

WT: S-h-i-e-l-d-s.

TH: Okay, good. Now, how often do you go offshore fishing?

WT: Well, we used to hit is pretty much every week, but I’d say—we’re in the summertime now; we’re lucky to hit every other week.

TH: So, how many times a week? You say you used to (inaudible) when you were a little bit
Younger.

WT: Well, just more commitments these days, more stuff to do. But, you know, I’d say we get out a couple times a month now, anyway. And if the fishing good, like if we’re in May and the dolphin bite’s good, we’ll go out every weekend.

TH: Are there some months you go fishing more frequently?

WT: Definitely May. May, April if the weather gets nice early, June. Those three months are when—

TH: Do you ever go mackerel fishing?

WT: Oh, yeah.

TH: You like to catch mackerel?

WT: We got little Clark spoons, yeah. Again, that’s another fish—they’re really good if you eat them same day catching, or smoke them, but they don’t freeze that well.

TH: Are there some months you rarely or never go out fishing?

WT: I’d say that month we’re least likely to go would be—we fish every month of the year and we rarely ever go a month without fishing, but probably February, you know.

TH: Okay.

WT: But I can remember February going out and it was eighty degrees, and we got into the cobia and the rays off of the northeast grounds and limited out on cobia. So, you never know.

TH: It’s been productive for me in February, often.

WT: Yeah.
TH: Let’s see, I think I’ve—average fishing trip. On average, how far do you go offshore, on average?

WT: Well, we don’t fish much inside of fifty feet. Our close-in kingfish numbers are in that reef area in fifty, fifty-five feet.

TH: That would be north of 12, 12-A buoy.

WT: Yeah, that whole area north of 12. We don’t go out past three hundred a lot unless we want to go out and find the edge of the Stream.

TH: Three hundred feet.

WT: Three hundred feet. So, I’d say six to fourteen miles.

TH: Now, most of the dolphin you catch when you go dolphin fishing, is that beyond a hundred foot?

WT: I don’t know, we’ve caught them in—we’ve hit some big ones in sixty foot of water, you know, just—

TH: But I mean when you’re targeting them, you don’t target them in sixty feet, do you?

WT: No. Actually the day we caught them in sixty, we left—it was dark when we passed—there was a nice color change at the sixty feet. We couldn’t see it because it was dark when we were going out. We already had—we had three or four nice fish. We were coming in and we saw one thing, I have still to this day have never seen anything like it. There was two frigatebirds—

TH: Two frigatebirds.

WT: Two frigatebirds. They were doing these power dives from like a hundred feet high, and they were coming down and as soon as they got down close to the water, they’d pull out of that dive and they’d shower the flying fish out of the water and run them down in the air and catch
them.

TH: Catch them in the air?

WT: Catch them in the air. When we saw that going on, we said, “Get the baits back out, man.”

TH: (laughs) And you were trolling, you were coming in from fishing.

WT: We were running in. We were coming home. We were running in and we saw this, and we threw the spread back out and we had three big dolphin like (snaps fingers) just like that.

TH: When you say the spread—

WT: The trolling spread. We got all the outriggers out and put all the—

TH: How many would you troll?

WT: We usually troll five lines.

TH: Five lines?

WT: Doing the outriggers, two flat lines, and then we got one little one that we just (electronic noise) trolling the—

TH: Center of the—

WT: In the prop wash right behind the teaser.

TH: All right. You already talked about who you fish with. Now, okay, I like the five lines. I’ve fished four before, but I’ve never fished five. How do you decide where to fish? You know, you say you’re going to go fishing next weekend, how would you decide?
WT: Well, we try to talk to someone who’s been out there. (phone rings)

TH: You want me to pause it?

WT: Yeah.

*Pause in recording*

TH: Okay, how do you decide where you will fish? Do you hear word of mouth that something’s biting out there?

WT: Yeah, if we can talk to someone who’s been out, because the guys who go out every day, they pretty well have the edge because they know from day to day where the bait is and where the fish are. But if we can’t talk to somebody, we have—we like to fish around structure. So, we’ll go make a bait stop, either go to the 10-A buoy or get bait along the beach, just a few live baits. And we’ve got some—we have a lot of numbers where all the—there’s a lot of those east-west ledges in that area north of 12.

TH: Mm-hm.

WT: Which is usually a good area to fish: we’ve caught a lot of kingfish there and a fair amount of cobia. So, we’ll fish that structure. We’ll go out maybe to the Amazone, the Amazone wreck; you know, that’s east of 12. We’ve caught a lot of decent fish around the Muliphen [artificial reef] and occasionally drop for amberjack there if we’re really bored, because they’re not much good for anything but smoking. Then, we have a lot of reefs marked up north. There’s a barge wreck almost due east of the inlet that’s been pretty good for kingfishing.

TH: How deep of water is that?

WT: That one’s in sixty feet, fifty-five feet.

TH: Just straight east?

WT: Almost straight east, yeah. Yeah, that one’s—it says it’s a barge. It doesn’t mark like a barge, but it’s—the guy that gave it to me said that it’s a barge. I don’t know if it’s one. I think it’s one of the county reefs, because we’ve seen very few people fishing it. But it’s a good bait
stop, too. There’s bait there, and it’s been a pretty good kingfish area, too. And out from there, we’ve—

TH: You say structure; you’re talking on the bottom?

WT: Reef or wrecks.

TH: Yeah, reefs and wrecks.

WT: Then we got a slew of our dive numbers, you know, on the big offshore bar where you have the big drop. At certain times, that can be a good place for dolphin, kingfish, whatever. Then once we leave that, we—if we’re north, we’ll definitely usually go out there to the Oculina peaks and fish around there, because that can be very productive. It seems to concentrate a lot of bait on top.

TH: When you say you talk to people before you go, who do you talk to? You say it’s the people that go every day. You call the bait shop or White’s Tackle?

WT: Well, yeah, sometimes I’ll call there. They seem to give some fairly generic reports. I’ve got friends that are retired that fish a lot during the week, like Jim Huck. He’ll fish in—

TH: Jim who?

WT: Jim Huck.

TH: How do you spell that name?

WT: H-u-c-k.

TH: It’s a fisherman’s name.

WT: Yeah, Jim used to own that Huck’s Country Store out there on Glades Road and Alpha Road.
TH: Okay.

WT: But now he’s just got commercial rental properties and has a lot of time to fish. So yeah, somebody that I know has been out there; or, probably about 90 percent of the time, we just have to make our own game plan. We also have the sea temperature charts we print out from the Internet. We subscribe to the—I’ll think of it. It’s not Roffer’s; it’s one of the other services; it has the temperature, the chlorophyll charts. We’ll look and that doesn’t usually show a lot of—it’ll at least define the edge of the Gulf Stream very well, so we’ll know where that edge is.

TH: How current are those charts for those—

WT: They do several shots a day and, like, if—

TH: So, you have like a daily temperature—

WT: Oh, yeah, if we go on at night, like if we’re—if it’s dark, they’ll get their last shot maybe around five or six o’clock. So, if we’re going to fish tomorrow, you know, I’d go on after dark tonight and get the last shot, which would be five or six o’clock, and it’ll show the sea temperature and the chlorophyll.

TH: Chlorophyll, the clarity?

WT: The chlorophyll is just the chlorophyll content in the water, and it pretty well defines the edge of the Stream because that water is relatively chlorophyll free, doesn’t have a lot of chlorophyll in it. It’s just, you know, clearer, warmer water.

TH: What is chlorophyll?

WT: Well, chlorophyll is an indication of phytoplankton.

TH: Okay, interesting.

WT: Or algae or whatever. Mostly what I think they’re measuring is chlorophyll produced by phytoplankton.
TH: Okay, let's see. On average, how far—what was your last fishing trip? Tell me about your last fishing trip. Was that the one where you didn’t catch very much?

WT: Two weeks ago, when we were mostly—we did a little live baiting and a little trolling. Like I said, one kingfish, one shark, two bonitas.

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? The Oculina Bank was initially closed to trawling, dredging, and bottom longlining in 1984. Did this affect your fishing?

WT: No, not at all.

TH: In 1994, ten years later, 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. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

WT: No, ’cause we never did any of that anyway.

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

WT: No, we wouldn’t—even if we fished today, we wouldn’t anchor in that deeper water.

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 a bottom longline, trawl, or dredge was prohibited in this expanded area, as was anchoring by any vessel. Was your fishing impacted by this regulation?

WT: No. But I certainly support limiting the trawlers and that kind of thing. Just from what I’ve read, they can be fairly destructive on the bottom habitat, not to mention the by-catch and everything else.
TH: Trawl, dredges, 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, closed seasons, trip limits, et cetera?

WT: I think it’s a good idea. Actually, I was involved in the development of the National Marine Sanctuary in the Keys.

TH: Oh, yeah?

WT: Yeah, our company did the engineering part that looked at the wastewater practices. But we were involved in all that. We went to all the meetings, and of course, they ended up with lots of exclusion zones that they kind of scattered around.

TH: Exclusion zones?

WT: Excluding all kinds of fishing. And then there’s a lot of those down by the [Dry] Tortugas, and it makes a lot—and they’re marked. I think most of them are marked with buoys. So, if you see the big yellow buoys, you know you’re not supposed to fish in there. Now all the GPS software also has that included in there. I think they work a lot better than the quotas and all that, because the quotas and all that, you’re depending on people to be basically honest and tell you the right story, okay? Whether it’s recreational fishermen or commercial fishermen—I mean, we have a lot of those both of those groups that are very honest and do the right thing, you know. My neighbor back here, Tommy Jones, he’s probably a little more educated than a lot of the commercial fishermen around here, but he’s always been a by-the-book kind of guy, not somebody that’d go pilfer the resource.

But if you’re relying on the integrity of the takers to protect the resource, I think that’s—in today’s world, with the numbers of people we have out there, I don’t think that’ll work. But if you have exclusion zones where if you’re in that zone and you’re fishing, you’re arrested, that seems to be a more positive approach, a more foolproof approach. And I’ve been in some of those exclusion zones, and we’ve dove in, like, the Looe Key Sanctuary. Looe Key is off Ramrod Key, a really beautiful reef down there in the lower Keys. You can go down there, and of course you can’t take any spearguns or anything, but you can just go look. But it’s a beautiful reef—(clears throat) Excuse me. It’s not torn up and you can see—you can dive down there and you can see yellowtail like this swimming by—

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1 Thomas Jones is an interviewee for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00012.
TH: He’s holding his hands three feet apart.

WT: Well, yeah.

TH: Yellowtail?

WT: Yeah, good big yellowtail that just swim by, and you never see that on any of the reefs where you can spearfish. So, it gives the fish a place where they can hang out (laughs) and not get pilfered. And the grouper will come right up and look at you, so, you know. Those areas, if they’re big enough to—and you got to have—strike a balance because you don’t want all the areas off limits, ’cause recreational fishing’s big for the economy of the state. But if you have certain good-sized areas where the fish can propagate and breed and everything else, I think it’s a pretty good plan. If they closed—if you had more closure areas, I don’t think it would hurt the fishing; it might even help it, because those fish that breed and grow to a good size in that area might migrate to other areas and, you know, be caught somewhere else. (phone rings) I’m all for those. I think it’s a pretty good management tool. (phone rings)

TH: Okay, how about the enforcement of it? Is it—

WT: Well, that’s the problem. I know back when the Oculina Bank first went off limits, there was almost no enforcement. I talked to guys that fished there a lot, and the guys I talked to are pretty much law abiding citizens. They’ll fish west of that eighty-degree longitude line. But they say they’ve seen charter captains over there, you know, they’ll be just a few hundred yards west of the eighty line and they’ll see charter captains fishing out of bounds on a pretty regular basis. You know, they’re out to make a living and they’re trying to put fish in the boat for their charter, but still, you know, that’s—

TH: And they’re bottom fishing, they’re trolling.

WT: They’re bottom fishing, right. So, there was no enforcement at first, and now there’s some boats out there—I had a friend of mine that got stopped by the Coast Guard out there. So, I don’t know what they’re doing about enforcing the—but it is federal waters. I don’t know if that’s part of their mission. But if you have those zones, you need some enforcement, and whether it’s from the air, you got to have some boats in the water, too. So, that’s an expense.

TH: Follow up on this. If you were managing the fisheries—this is another wide open question. If you were managing all the fisheries, what do you think the fairest, most equitable means of
managing fisheries are? Again: quotas, trip limits, closed areas—you probably like those.

WT: I think it’s a combination of everything. You have to—I think you have to have slots or length limits. Like the fish that we fish for the most, dolphin, I think ten is a pretty generous quota. I would have no problem going to five and, you know, right now it’s a twenty-inch limit. That could even go up a little to twenty-four or twenty-two or something like that. In the old days when you would go out there and bailed dolphin all day long—ten fish per person is a pretty good thing, but back then there was maybe a couple thousand boats from here to Miami. Now, there’s probably a couple hundred thousand boats, you know? It’s just the numbers are—and there’s more every year.

TH: Just the pressure.

WT: Just more fishing pressure. So, you know, the limits need to be reasonable. You need to be able to—you should be able to go out and catch enough to, you know, have some dinner, but you don’t need to fill the freezer and feed the whole neighborhood. You know, ten per person, you got four people in a boat, you don’t really need to bring back forty dolphin. So, you know, a combination of a good slot length—I went to a lot of those meetings when they were talking about changing the snook regulations, and those were some heated, heated public meetings. They had some in the school house here and down at the county commission chambers.

TH: Now, who had those meetings?

WT: That was the Fish and Wildlife Service was running those. You know, there’s some science behind that, and of course all the fishermen were questioning the science. You know, who knows? There’s some people with some college education that are trying to figure some of this stuff out, and you’re never going to make everybody happy. But I think it needs to be a combination of reasonable bag and length limits, some exclusion zones, and some enforcement. You got to get everybody. Everybody has to be treated fairly, too. You can’t just hammer the recreational fishermen and give the commercial fishermen a free license to do everything, too, and that goes to the commercial divers.

I mean, the commercial divers can go out there and powerhead grouper all day long. And when the grouper—I think this year was the first year they took the gags out for like four, five months, something like that. And the first few months after they’re back in, the commercial divers are out there powerheading every fish on the reef, because you could dive before that and there was grouper everywhere. They could pretty well clean out a reef area in a very short amount of time. They’re very good at it. So, I’m not sure the—one hand, I think that powerheading is too efficient, because they can kill all the grouper. On the other hand, they probably—if you’re shafting the fish, you’re going to get fewer fish and you might have more that you hurt and don’t
catch, too. So, there’s probably two sides to that argument. But it just doesn’t seem fair to the—looking at the whole resource and who should be able to catch grouper, that the commercial guys go out and powerhead every grouper on the reef, and then the charter guy takes his guy out there and he’s lucky to catch a legal grouper if the spots been dove on the last couple—few times.

TH: You’re saying that sometimes the regulations are more fair to one group than the other than they should be?

WT: You’re never going to make everybody happy.

TH: As equitable as possible across the board to all the different groups.

WT: Yeah, but that’s a pretty hard road to go down, because somebody’s always going to be complaining that they’re getting the short end of the stick. But, you know, the more people—I mean, look at how the population’s grown in Florida in the last twenty, thirty years, and it’s apparently going nowhere but up. So, it’s going to be more and more pressure on the resource, and they’re going to have to squeeze it down tighter and tighter.

TH: Thinking ahead to the future—now, one thing you haven’t mentioned: there’s a lot of pressure on the fish from fishermen. Are there other pressures on the coastal lagoon and fish that you haven’t mentioned?

WT: Oh, yeah.

TH: And being an engineer, an environmental engineer—

WT: Yeah, I’ve seen—I grew up in South Florida in the early fifties [1950s], and I’ve been in the water all my life. My father was a UDT back in the old days; he was in the UDT, in the Underwater Demolition Team, back before they had scuba gear. So, that kinda dates him, you know.

TH: Was he involved in World War II?

WT: No. He was in the late forties [1940s]. So, he was in, like, towards the end of the Korean War.
TH: Okay.

WT: Yeah, he still volunteers at the UDT Seal Museum. So, we were in the water all the time. We started diving when we were like ten, or probably eight years old. Back then, we went to the Keys. We started going to the Keys when I was probably ten or twelve. Back then, the water quality was just so superior to what it is now. There’s a difference. People go to the Keys now and they say, “Oh, how beautiful this is.”

When I was going to a lot of those meetings where we were working up the marine sanctuary plans for the Keys, and our mission in that was wastewater, I stayed at the same place where we used to vacation when I was a kid. I took my snorkeling gear just for grins and took a little underwater camera. They had these little islands that we used to go around. And the big thing in the Keys was there was no wastewater treatment. Probably there was something like six thousand cesspools. You know, they weren’t even legitimate septic tanks. And that kind of stuff has fouled that water so badly, there’s no comparison between the way it was in 1955 and the way it was in 1990 when we were doing that work. We used to dive around these little islands right off this little resort we stayed at, and the water was crystal clear. I remember spearing grouper there that were legal size grouper up under the rocks and we used to get lobsters there—

TH: Three feet long grouper?

WT: Well, yeah, no. (laughs) When I was a kid, they might have seemed that long, but you know, decent-sized gag grouper. And we used to catch lobsters all around, and the water was crystal clear, and there was no algae or anything like that. I swam out there from our resort to those little islands, and they were totally choked top to bottom with filamentous green algae. You couldn’t even get up close to the island. I mean, it looked like a sewage lagoon.

TH: Now, this was when?

WT: This was in the late nineties [1990s], when we were working on the wastewater master plan for Monroe County. So, in that time, in that whole area there—that was near the highway patrol station in Marathon—there was a community right there that was almost all on cesspools. So, you just have all those nutrients and stuff going out, and it has totally fouled the water. Even in the bigger cities down south, I mean, there was—there’s still some ocean outfalls, I think, but most of them are going to deep well injection now. The water clarity here, I mean, it’s different today than it was in 1971 when I moved up here. You used to be able to go out to Pepper Park on any day in the summer and just see right to the bottom. Now, it has to be very calm.
TH: But again, there’s another factor. You haven’t mentioned runoff and the releases from Okeechobee.

WT: Oh, yeah, that’s huge. I mean, that brings in the nutrients and the turbidity that doesn’t let the sunlight down. And the corals, there used to be a lot more live corals on the reef off of Pepper Park. You see very few now and all that, you know, because that’s all the nursery habitat where things get started. So, that—

TH: That’s right out here, too.

WT: Oh, yeah, and the inlet, too.

TH: In the Indian River Lagoon.

WT: And I can remember a while back where they had this outfit out of the Carolinas that was like a combine that would just vacuum out the Sargassum weed. They were using it for filler for animal feed, and they finally stopped that, but they were doing that for years. And that’s like, to me, like running a combine through the Everglades wetlands, because that’s where, you know, because everything—

TH: Sargassus [sic].

WT: Everything’s out there. We’ve been out there in, like, August, after most of the sea turtles have hatched, and you can pull up to those big Sargassum masses and there’ll be little turtles all over the top of that thing. And these guys were just—they had these, like, combine boats, and they were just scooping up all that stuff and hauling tens of thousands of tons of it back up to North Carolina for filler for animal feed. I mean, they finally stopped it, but that went on from like the seventies [1970s] up till into the nineties [1990s] somewhere. So, yeah, it’s not just the fishing, it’s everything. And a lot of it just has to do with the exploding population in Florida.

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

WT: Well, I think you’re going to have to get online every morning before you go and check what the recent—what the new regulations are. That’s where I go to print them out, because they do change fairly regularly. You used to buy a copy and throw in your boat for a year and you’re good. Now they change so frequently that you have to consult it pretty regularly.
TH: So, you consult the computer.

WT: Yeah. So, you know, personally I don’t go out to catch a whole bunch of fish. When we go to the Bahamas, we catch enough to eat while we’re there. We don’t care about bringing back a bunch. If we catch enough—we spearfish there, mostly, but we get enough hogfish and nice mutton snapper, too, and crank up the boat grill and eat a nice little dinner every night, and that’s all we care about. Same here: we only get enough to have a fish once or twice a week, maybe, and that’s all I care about. So, I don’t care about the big limits. If I can go out and catch two or three dolphin on a day, I’m happy for as I can be. Or a couple kingfish—you know, I don’t really care about filling the box up.

TH: So in ten years, once again—

WT: If I can catch my two or three dolphin, I’ll be happy. But I think the limits are going to get tighter and tighter, and probably the slots will get smaller and everything else. It’s going to have to, because you’re going to get so much fishing pressure. If you don’t do that, you’re going to wipe out the resource or get it off balance.

TH: Okay.

WT: And hopefully they’ll get the Everglades thing straightened out and get that water sheet flowing down south, because that’s—especially in the Stuart area—I mean, it affects up here, but it really affects the Stuart area. And—

TH: Do you know that they took some of the pressure off Stuart by re-routing some of the water to Taylor Creek, recently?

WT: I heard that they were going to do that.

TH: They’ve done it.

WT: They did it? Yeah. Well, they need to sheet flow it south. I mean, that’s the only long term answer.
TH: To the Everglades.

WT: Right, yeah, because the Everglades can use the nutrients and assimilate all that. It’ll do good down there, but out here in the ocean it wasn’t meant to—

TH: In the Indian River Lagoon?

WT: Yeah.

TH: Can you quickly describe the Indian River Lagoon and the inlet and the clarity and, I guess, turbidity of the water during a time of drought, compared to during a time of heavy rains and heavy runoff?

WT: Yeah, I love droughts. (laughs)

TH: Because?

WT: Because the water’s clear. I mean, you know—

TH: The water here is almost is clear as the Bahamas and the Keys certain times a year.

WT: It really gets nicer in the drought. I mean, the river’s clear. The incoming tide right out here in front of the Village—you can see the bottom all the way across the river in a drought. So the drought, it’s not good for wetlands and stuff, but they’re pretty resilient. They can come back. It’s good for water sales and utility business, but it really is good—I think it gives the reefs a break and gives the lagoon a break and the water clears up.

TH: Badly needed break.

WT: Yeah, and it probably looks—if you look at, like, Conchy Joe’s [Restaurant], they got all those pictures on the wall in there. But back a long time ago, way before I think there was releases coming through the locks from Okeechobee—I don’t even know if that canal was dug back then; probably wasn’t. But it looked like the Bahamas. It was just clear blue-green water and you wouldn’t believe it was the same place. So, that needs to stop, and they need to rearrange the plumbing of the whole Everglades and get that back the way it was and quit those
TH: Okay, any other insights on the next ten years, in ten years, what you see? Because you’ve fished a lot, you probably know as much about this river and the ocean and this area as anybody.

WT: Well, the biggest problem is going to be solving the Everglades problem. That had a lot of momentum going at one time, until we started spending all our money on other things, like two wars over in the Middle East and all that. But there was—and the money, it looks like it was in place to do the whole thing at one point, and now it looks like it’s going to come out in small buckets, you know, a little bit at a time. So, I think funding’s going to be the big issue, because there’s a lot of land purchases. There’s a lot of impoundment areas that have to be built and all that. So, it’s a matter of priorities over the next ten years; it’s what you are going to spend the money on? I think that’s pretty important. I’ve never—I wouldn’t even attempt to look at what the national budget is, but if I could personally go and take the money out of certain things and put it over there, I think it could be done. I think we’re wasting money on a lot of things that are way less important than that. But if we can elect people that’ll get up there and fight for it and get the money going in that direction, that’s what’s it’s gonna take, get our legislators moving.

TH: Strong environmental.

WT: Yeah, and that’s not a pork project. It’s something that has to be done. We—not you and I, but us people—screwed it up, the [U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers and all, in the name of development, and now it’s time to fix it. And they’re—I think the common thinking is starting to get in line with that kind of thought. I mean, they’ve done a lot to the Kissimmee River, putting back the flow into the old oxbows. We did a lot of that work back when I was with that company in Gainesville. We did the original modeling of the Kissimmee River and redirecting the flows and all that. Some of that’s been accomplished and that’s probably helping the lake out some, but it’s not the total solution. I think that would be the single biggest change they could make, probably, that would help the fishing and the fisheries and in the lagoon and the near shore waters is to get all that going that way. We got a lot here to work on locally with, you know, what we’re putting in it.

TH: Taylor Creek?

WT: Yeah, all that. I mean, everybody’s got a hand in it, the agricultural people. Everybody’s got to do their best effort and get on board with it and not fight it.

*End of interview*