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Ben Bryan oral history interview by Terry Howard, September 1, 2010

Ben Bryan (Interviewee)

Terry Lee Howard (Interviewer)

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Terry Howard: Good afternoon. This is Terry Howard. Today is September 1, 2010. I’m at … St. Lucie Village, Florida, conducting an oral history with Beau Bryan 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, Beau. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth and your date of birth.

Beau Bryan: My name is Beau Bryan, B-e-a-u B-r-y-a-n. I was born in Fort Pierce on August 7, 1965, and have lived in Fort Pierce my entire life, short of about a year of half away at school.
TH: Are you married?

BB: Single.

TH: How much schooling do you have?

BB: Graduated from John Carroll High School in Fort Pierce. I attended Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina, for a year and a half, along with a little bit of schooling at IRCC [Indian River Community College], but no graduate degrees in anything.

TH: What do you do for a living?

BB: Currently, I’m in tackle manufacturing right here in Fort Pierce, and prior to that, I was in—I grew up working in marinas and had gotten into— kinda escalated into a sales position prior to the tackle manufacturing. Left the boat sales because of the economy two years ago, and have been able to get a decent income from the tackle manufacturing business.

TH: What specifically do you manufacture?

BB: Right now, primarily, it’s lead sinkers, downrigger weights. Trying to get into more of the jig market and things along those lines: a little more specialty items is what I’m hoping to expand into.

TH: Did you sell boats?

BB: Yes, I did.

TH: What kind?

BB: For a couple of dealerships locally here in Fort Pierce. Taylor Creek was my first adventure into sales.

TH: Taylor Creek Marina?
BB: Taylor Creek Marina, which included at that time Wellcraft, Tiara, their larger division, and Mako, and then we had Mercury outboards. Most recently, I was at it for a little while. Then, I was with Lindsey Marine selling Maverick, Hewes, Pathfinder, which are locally made in Fort Pierce along with regular Parker; and then my last sales job was with Bud and Vicky Tillman at St. Lucie Outboard.¹ Their lines included Steiger Craft, we had Sea Chaser and Carolina Skiff, and a couple of other lines that were kinda in and out, and then Evinrude outboards is his main line.

TH: Okay. Have you worked in the fishing industry: commercial, charter, industry?

BB: I have not. My closest thing that was possibly getting my charter license, which I never went anything beyond taking a couple of classes.

TH: Okay. Do you currently own a boat?

BB: I do. I have a 1988 twenty-five SeaVee.

TH: Twenty-five foot.

BB: And it’s a center console.

TH: SeaVee?

BB: S-e-a-V-e-e.

TH: Okay.

BB: Single power Yamaha on it.

TH: Horsepower?

¹ Murray “Bud” Tillman was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00001.
BB: It’s a 300 horsepower and does everything I want to around here, along with giving me Bahama capabilities, also.

TH: Twenty-five foot. Yeah.

BB: Mm-hm.

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

BB: I would say I’m pretty familiar with it. My younger days of growing up—when I was just first getting into the marine business, I was working at Taylor Creek Marina and I was on the docks from the age of thirteen until I went away to college. So at that time, the Oculina was an opened area for fishing, and we had a number of customers that would frequent that area and were successful, because it is a good fishery. Since then, I’ve started fishing myself and, I would say, getting into bottom fishing in the last ten to fifteen years as the thing that we generally choose to do. We’ve gone to some of the deeper depths in the 170 to 180 foot range west of the Oculina and done, you know, pretty good at times. With the closure now, we haven’t been out as much. But I did have a chance before the closure to experience some fishing inside the Oculina, and it’s a difficult place to fish. But we generally—for as long of a run as it is, it was usually worthwhile going there.

TH: Productive?

BB: Yes, sir.

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

BB: My understanding was the Oculina coral and the damage that the bottom gear was doing to the coral. I know the shrimpers were out there pretty heavy in that area, so their gear on the bottom was just wrecking it. As far as the closure of it, that was my understanding, that—I think it was done as a fish enhancement, but mainly because Harbor Branch had gone out there and designated the Oculina coral as only occurring in the world in this one particular spot, and they didn’t want to see it get damaged anymore.²

² Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution at Florida Atlantic University conducted scientific research referenced in the Oculina Bank closure. It is a non-profit oceanographic institution dedicated to marine and ocean research and education operated by Florida Atlantic University.
TH: Is there anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank, just offhand right now?

BB: Not too much, other than—I can’t even think of anything else, other than it has proved to be—now that I’m bottom fishing more for myself—I think back in the days we used to do it, it was pretty much strictly jig fishing because of the speed of the current out there, which is some pretty difficult fishing. These days, I don’t know that most people would really even go in there if it was open for bottom fishing these days, anyway. Some would, but most wouldn’t, because they’re going to be out there trolling and doing things that are a little more on the easy side of—

TH: It’s a difficult place to fish.

BB: It sure is.

TH: Are there peaks?

BB: There’s definitely peaks, and mainly the current. I can remember when we did fish it, I was amazed at how far we were running after, you know, essentially making a drift from a position where we would want to start and a target we would want to hit, and then once we were beyond it, you know, the captain or whoever was running the boat at that time would say, “Okay, crank up.” We cranked up, turned around and run a half a mile or more, in what was a very little amount of time of drifting. And I just thought in my mind there was no way we went that far, but after doing it a few times, I realized that the drift is very misleading—

TH: The current’s very fast.

BB: It sure is.

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

BB: Anchoring is virtually impossible. You’re talking about depths of 200 feet plus, and I don’t know people that carry enough anchor line to do it. Bottom fishing—I would be a proponent of it opening up for bottom fishing. I think the damage to the coral, the majority of it, was from the shrimp trawls, surely. You know, I know the Oculina is a sensitive coral that a sixteen or twenty ounce jig hitting it isn’t going to it any good; but like I said, I think the number of people, if it opened, that would be going out there and fishing it would be very minimal.
TH: Has the closure of the Oculina Bank affected your fishing, and how?

BB: I would say it’s affected it only because if it were open, I surely would go into it and, you know, look at things on the recorder on the favorable days when the current is backed off, because of knowing how good the fishery is in that area. You know, that place holds a lot of grouper and snapper. Surely, you know, if I’m running twenty-five miles to go to places just west of it and they’re not producing, I’d run on another half a mile or mile into it to take a peek and see what’s going on.

TH: That’s the next question. If it were not prohibited—in other words, if you could fish there—you would fish there?

BB: I would surely look at it. It wouldn’t be a place that I was getting up in the morning to go to, other than I would get up in the general area. And I’ve still got numbers in my machine that—I can’t say we troll all that much, but when I do wahoo troll or something, we run over those areas. The bottom machine is usually pretty lit up with activity on the bottom.

TH: Excellent. How and for what, you would probably—

BB: There had been—well, now there’s closure on red snapper. They’re probably the biggest red snapper I’d seen as a youngster on boats coming back into Taylor Creek. One gentleman in particular, a fellow named Roland Reems, I know he would fish—he wouldn’t always be in the Oculina, but prior to the closure, but—you know, in that 160-plus range, there were some really, really big snappers that he would catch. Some grouper catches that were coming out of there were always nice gags, and occasional Warsaws and some scamp groupers. So, targeting, I would say—I’d be going in, kinda looking for a mixed bag, and any one of those four would be something positive.

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

BB: I would say it’s changed for me in the fact that we’re generally going to the deeper depths these days. I can’t say I’m really pro-diving as to the harvest that the divers are able to collect. I continually hear of the stories of when these thermoclines push in and the divers slap their wetsuits on and go down and find a cave, you know, that’s full of big grouper, and they can pretty much pick and choose the ones they want. So, the inshore side of things has become more difficult for me, anyway, to find fish to catch, so I’m going a little deeper. It’s not as productive out there, although—I shouldn’t say that. I’m still kind of learning about that, and the times of
year and the gear and everything. I generally live baitfish, although I need to change that song, because I’ve got some buddies that fish with me, and when the live bait’s not happening, they’ll switch over to different gear—

TH: Jigs?

BB: Jigs, generally, and end up producing a catch here and there. But overall, I’d have to put the diving thing as the biggest deterrent as far as where I go these days. You know, I—

TH: Deeper water that’s out of the range?

BB: Out of the range of what they’re diving. Yes, sir.

TH: So that’s how fishing has changed. Have you had any experiences with law enforcement within or regarding the Oculina Bank?

BB: One time and one time only. We were fishing to the west of the Oculina. It was a summer day, either late spring or early summer, about three or four years ago. I was actually just running from—I was on a plane running from one number to another and was stopped by an inflatable, which was the small boat off one of the fishery’s boats out of [Cape] Canaveral, which was their cutter, and I guess they carried the little boat on the back. They had been patrolling the Oculina. They came up and asked for IDs, fishing licenses, and looked at our catch, which that particular day I did have a nice grouper that was about thirty pounds. We had a couple of smaller fish, being red snappers, and we were boarded. They checked us out; everything we had was legal and we weren’t in any illegal areas with bottom gear. So, we went about our way, they went about their way. However, they did have some fish laying on the deck of their boat that they had confiscated from some people that had illegally harvested in the Oculina that day. But that was my one and only run in with enforcement out in the area.

TH: I’m going to talk about your fishing history, specifically. What’s your earliest memory of fishing, and how old were you?

BB: My earliest memories would be having grown up along the Indian River just river fishing, between catching trout, and redfish and snook, an assortment of others; whatever were hitting the shrimp, which everything will. Then I would say—

TH: Were you in a boat or just off the bank?
BB: It was actually both. We would do some wading. We did boat fish a little bit and do some drifting. Then it was probably around the age of nine or ten that I had my first ocean experience with Captain Sam Crutchfield. The first couple of trips with him were pretty much strictly kingfishing, because I kept looking at some old Super 8 movies that we have, and you can see the shoreline within a mile or half a mile of where we were fishing, and it was very abundant. It was pretty much catching one king after the other. Then I would say my progression into working Taylor Creek and then getting, at that time, first a seventeen-foot center console. Then when I turned—I guess eighteen—we got a twenty-foot Mako. That’s when my ocean fishing really started to take off as far as the time I spent in the river versus the ocean.

It’s been kind of diverse over the years. There was a few years we got into a lot of tarpon fishing just right along the beach, just a lot of catch and release stuff. We fished at the power plant on the outside a lot, at the nuclear power plant. When the weather was right, being in a twenty-foot boat, that kind of permitted me, when the weather was right, to start getting more and more offshore. Started with trolling, catching dolphin, sailfish, kingfish, and then that kind of led in my interest in bottom fishing. I like bottom fishing because of—kinda the hunting aspect of it: finding places, knowing where to be with what direction the tide’s going, how fast the tide’s going, what kind of baits you got, and things along those lines. I got to say, the tug-of-war with the big fish is probably one of the most appealing things when you do get a big one on.

TH: How did you learn how to fish? Who taught you?

BB: I’ve got to say, it’s pretty much been just gathering information from fishing with friends and relatives—that are obviously friends over the years—that I can’t really say that there’s one specific person that I’ve learned a lot from. I would say there’s definitely some advantages of working in the marinas and seeing what people were catching and talking to them about what gear they had, where they were, that I definitely got a wealth of information from them. Then it was, I got to say, a lot of just kinda going out with me and a few buddies off of on our own, and I would say we all kinda picked up things as the years have gone on.

TH: So, I guess you started fishing when you could first fish. (laughs) Do you remember how old you were?

BB: I sure do. My father and I, we always had some kind of little johnboat or something that he would get myself and my brother, Tom, who’s a year and a half younger than I am, out in. I guess once I started fishing, and actually more into cleaning fish, I’ve become a little more of a fan of it, because my father, as good as he meant to kinda teach us things, he didn’t know a

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3 Samuel Crutchfield was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00032.
whole lot about it. But we still had a great time. Had to pick through a few bones when we were, you know, eating fish that we had caught. (laughs)

TH: That’s when your father cleaned them?

BB: Yes. No, it was a pretty young age, and definitely fortunate to have lived adjacent to the river, which was definitely one of the reason I’m into it as much as I am, because during the summer months—I know I’m going to have skin cancer issues, because I was in the sun either throwing a cast net or gigging this and that, or pushing a push net through the grass to catch shrimp and then go fish. It was really an opportunity that I’m blessed to have had.

TH: To grow up on the Indian River Lagoon?

BB: Sure. Yes, sir.

TH: What did you gig? Flounder?

BB: A few stingrays. (laughs) It was, I would say—these days in conservation I would shy away from things, but it was more just kids being kids and target practice.

TH: Anything you could stick the gig in?

BB: [Anything] it got thrown at.

TH: Okay. I probably should say here, your father, he was not a fisherman? What was his profession?

BB: He’s an attorney and circuit court judge, prior to retirement.

TH: When you began fishing, where did you begin fishing; where did you go? I guess that would be the Lagoon. That’s south of Fort Pierce. Mostly?

BB: Yeah, primarily we were where our home was—it was on South Indian River Drive—and just from the proximity of where we lived at that time. Generally, right on the west side of the
river somewhere pretty close to the front of the house. As I got older and friends had boats and stuff, then it started expanding. And I gotta say, the north side of the bridge and the North Intercoastal area proved to be very productive spots; so I would say, boating these days, if I dropped a boat in the water to fish one direction or the other, it’d be to the north.

TH: In the river?

BB: Yes, sir.

TH: Do you mostly go fishing on your boat, or boats of others?

BB: You know, actually, these days, I would say, primarily on mine.

TH: I mean, did you?

BB: Oh, did I?

TH: Back then.

BB: Yes. Yeah, I would say back then it was generally on my boat.

TH: Early on, who did you fish with?

BB: Gladwin Enns is probably—well, I shouldn’t say probably, definitely the person that I have fished with. He’s just a year older than I am, and we both—when I started working at Taylor Creek Marina when I was thirteen, he had a seventeen Mako that his father owned. I was working and he was always down at the boat, and I was jealous that he was going out. We had been friends for years, but that was pretty much about the time that I would say we started fishing together, and that has continued right to this day.

TH: Okay. That’s—with E-n-n-s, two N’s?

BB: You got it. Yes, sir.
TH: During what months of the year did you fish for what fish?

BB: Weather permitting, I love fishing in the wintertime, but it would be more wind dependent because we were generally in smaller boats in the early years, and still are. And I would say kingfishing on the beach was a real popular thing for us, you know, getting offshore and sailfishing in the wintertime. Then with the bottom fishing thing, that’s pretty much year round as far as fishing and us targeting them; however, there’s better times of year that there’s, you know, gonna be more productivity.

TH: For which?

BB: For the grouper and snapper species.

TH: What would that better time of year be?

BB: Well, I would say the spring and the fall.

TH: Okay. How long would a fishing trip last? Every trip’s different, I know, but there’s an average; how long would it be?

BB: Yeah, I would say we were pretty hardcore about it. If we were dedicating ourselves to launching the boat and going into the ocean, if we were going offshore, it was going to be a pretty early morning—you know, not much after sunrise—leaving the dock, and getting back in the late afternoon hours.

TH: How much would you catch on an average trip?

BB: Kingfish, you know when they’re schooled up, you can catch really as many as you wanted prior to them putting the limits on. We would get to the point of, obviously, what we felt like we needed and what we wanted to clean.

TH: Did you live bait?

BB: First thing, I would say, I was pulling plugs and baits, and—
TH: Spoons?

BB: I definitely can’t say—not too much with spoons. I can’t say we were—biting means the originators of fishing with live baits, but we did get in at the early stages of guys with using the gold hooks to catch the baits at the time. It was before there was ever any Sabikis in the store, so we were buying boxes of gold hooks and tying our own rigs up and doing it that way. But prior to that, there were definitely plenty of days I was pulling plugs around the schools of live baits. We were productive there.

In the springtime, you know, the dolphin fishery—you know, that has its good and bad years. When it’s good, I would say catching eight or ten, fifteen dolphin in a day wasn’t out of range by any means. And I got to say, I did shy away, mainly, because I really didn’t like the way it looked when people would come back to the marina that I was working at when they would have a cooler full of the schoolies that you could just catch one after the other.

TH: The little ones?

BB: Yes, sir. That didn’t make much sense to me. I know I’ve kept a lot of fish at times, but to see some of those people coming in with, you know, fifty or sixty in a cooler or more was a little depressing.

TH: The next question is: for how many years did you fish for each fish? I assume you probably progressed from river fish to?

BB: Yeah, I would say through up—until my high school years, it was the inshore side of things, and then it was—probably through high school and my early twenties was more of the ocean, but near-shore fishery and that was about the time, getting into my twenties, when we started progressing more offshore as far as running our own boat. My opportunities prior to that would’ve been either fishing on charter boats or fishing with friends on bigger boats, which I definitely didn’t shy away from, you know, wanting to go offshore.

TH: You got an opportunity?

BB: Yeah, and I would say one of the things that changed for me that made a big difference was as a youngster, I used to get seasick pretty much every time. So, there was always in the back of my mind of that happening on an offshore trip, and I think the Scopolamine patches and running
a boat myself and thinking about things other than going out and getting seasick changed. Once that ended, which was probably around—I was probably around nineteen or twenty years old—I don’t get seasick at all anymore and don’t have any issues with it. Because of that, I’ll jump on any boat, really any weather these days, and go if the opportunity is there.

TH: You never mentioned snook. Have you fished a lot for snook?

BB: Sure do. Love snook fishing. Have gotten a little bit better at it, just learning kind of tides and places. We did a lot down at the power plant when we were doing more the inshore thing around, you know, the later teen stage.

TH: Near the boils?

BB: In the boils, and had some really, really fun and successful trips as far as the quantities of what you could catch down there.

TH: Okay. So, I guess you’re still fishing for most everything you started fishing for. Do you still fish for trout?

BB: I sure do. I can’t say the inshore side of things is as much as we used to, because we’re spending more time in the ocean, but I surely don’t shy away from an opportunity to jump on a boat and go throw some plugs. My father still does—actually lives on the north end of the river now, and we’ve got a couple of small boats there, which I hope to be using more once I get a little closer proximity to him with the home I’m going to be moving into.

TH: Okay, the next thing is: where else do you go fishing in the Fort Pierce area? Now, you’ve mentioned—let’s see if there’s any place that you’ve left out, because you’ve mentioned the south river, the north part of the river—

BB: I’ve fished the Turning Basin, I’ve fished the Inlet, I’ve fished north and south in the river, I fish north and south of the beach, and anywhere offshore. I would say county line to county line we cover it.

TH: Specifically north here, do you fish out on the west shore or on the east shore, mostly?

BB: You know, it’s kind of a flip of the coin there. What would probably determine that is the
boat I’m in, whether or not it has a trolling motor and, based on that, what wind direction if it doesn’t have a trolling motor, and what the tide’s doing. The west shoreline I’ve found to be very productive on redfish up north around Lane Port, trout fishing on the—did I say the west side?

TH: Mm-hm.

BB: Yeah. The east side is a real productive trout spot, and around the islands, the spoil islands, especially above with the trolling motor, actually getting out and wading the snook fishery around them. Throwing top water either early in the morning or late in the afternoon is a lot of fun.

TH: Again, what do you fish for? There’s a lot of repetitive questions here. Do you usually go in your own boat now, yours or your father’s boats?

BB: I would say for the most part, yes. Kind of the only reason that I’d venture off of that is getting back to fishing with my buddy, Gladwin Enns. He has an identical boat to mine, and he and I have never really gotten into trading gas money back and forth; we just go in one trip on mine and one trip on his and it just kind of averages out.

TH: You just answered my next question: do you usually go on your own boat, or the boats of others? You just go back and forth.

BB: Yes, sir.

TH: You usually fish with Gladwin. He’s kind of—out of all your friends, you settled in and you fish with him, primarily?

BB: He’s the one I spend the most time with on the water.

TH: How much would you catch—again, now, today, how much would you catch on an average trip? What’s an average trip, a good trip?

BB: If it’s bottom—well, really, anything. In general, I would say things are a little slower. We’ve had some unusual weather patterns in the last year. This past spring with the cold winter that we had, I would definitely say that there was not the dolphin fishery. Now, that’s not to say
they didn’t come through here; it was just the opportunities that we had, between either work
days or weather days, we just didn’t have the catches that I’ve seen in the past few years.
Bottom fishing, I’ve come to learn that that can be just a hit and miss. I would say a productive
day is catching two or three gag groupers, you know, maybe an assortment of snappers, and
maybe some scamps or red groupers. Kingfishing, that kind of—I can’t say it’s hit or miss, but
surely, if we go out on the beach and there’s not any bait pods there, then it’s not a place we’d be
necessarily stopping. On the other hand, if there’s a lot of bait there, that could be a productive
bite.

TH: You going to the beach for the larger kingfish?

BB: Sure.

TH: Live bait?

BB: I definitely—if I’m on the beach, I’m looking for the bigger ones.

TH: What’s the biggest kingfish you’ve ever caught?

BB: Forty-nine pounds. Haven’t been able to break the fifty barrier.

TH: That’s a big fish. That’s a very big fish.

BB: I was—that was caught, actually kite fishing on the beach. We don’t do that a whole bunch,
but similar technique to the way they do some sailfishing.

TH: With live bait?

BB: We were just kind of giving it a whirl one day, and this one whacked it.

TH: Forty-nine pounds.

BB: Long, skinny fish. He should’ve been seventy. (laughs)
TH: He didn’t have a big girth.

BB: No.

TH: That’s interesting. The biggest ones I’ve caught have had a big girth. So you’re still fishing for—for how many years have you fished for all these? I guess all your life, whatever you target. And you’re still fishing, primarily now—primarily now, what do you target?

BB: I would say leaving the inlet these days is what—we’re primarily gonna go bottom fishing. Surely, you know, we can get out there and change plans: if the tide isn’t in our favor, or if bait’s been hard to find, I would say I’d probably go out with too much gear, but we definitely leave a little bit of a flex zone as far as, you know, trolling some if the conditions aren’t right for what our first target is.

TH: Okay, so you always have a Plan B.

BB: Generally, (laughs) We kinda stare back and forth at one another when it comes to Plan B, but we generally like to have an option if Plan A doesn’t work.

TH: How often do you go offshore fishing?

BB: These days, with the closures that we’ve had in this past year, it’s changed a lot. I would say—if you were to ask me that same question about last year, weather permitting, I would say it’s almost once a week. This year, it’s probably been once a month getting into the summertime and the opening of grouper season again as far as—I think it opened May 1—then maybe once every couple of weeks.

TH: The closures on the grouper [and] snapper?

BB: I would say there’s definitely some things that have affected it, because I’m not trolling as much, so I can’t say other than sailfish season. We get up going, “Okay, we’re going trolling and this is what we’re going after,” which sailfish we do, and that’s not a real regular thing. I can go out—I love catching sailfish, but a trip or two and having a few good bites and you know, seeing a few fish jump and releasing them, that’s enough for me for the year. Like I said, with the dolphin thing this year, we would’ve gone more had the weather been in our favor on the days we could go versus work and things along those lines.
And then, I would say, as far as not going, I could throw a few different things in there: the closure with the grouper species this year definitely had an effect on how many times we were going. The cost of fuel and what it takes to get out there and make a day of it has an effect. I’m by no means, a big dollar guy, so it’s usually trying to get a few buddies together to where it’s not a huge cost to go out. The live baiting that we do, I don’t know what has affected it, but it’s definitely not the concentrations that I’ve seen really prior to the Frances and Jeanne hurricane year [2004]. I don’t know what could be attributed to them as to why things haven’t rebounded.

TH: You say there’s less bait?

BB: In my opinion, there’s definitely less. We had a few—you know, a few weeks ago, I was hearing of some pretty large concentrations of greenies along the beach, the threadfin herring, but didn’t have an opportunity to get out during those times. But it was the first I’d heard in years that there were schools of—really acres of bait. So, that really affects. There’s times when, in the last couple of years, that we’ve gone out bait fishing, been unsuccessful, and we’ve pretty much turned around and gone in and just called it a day.

TH: There’s some months that you go fishing more frequently?

BB: I would say the spring is probably my favorite, March through May.

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

BB: It just seems because of, generally, the weather, the later fall November, December; although December starts to crank up the sailfish season, so, we generally do try to look for a day or two that month to get out. But I’d say late October, November, you know, we’re at the end of the hurricane season but we’re starting to get the cold fronts blowing through, so it gets pretty brutal out there.

TH: Well said. On average, how far do you go offshore to fish? The average?

BB: Twenty, twenty miles, and that’s not necessarily directly east. That’s, you know—

TH: From the inlet?
BB: Yes, sir. I know that just because of the GPA functions when I go plug it in either in a roundabout way getting to where I’m fishing, but when I’m coming home it’s in that twenty-mile range.


BB: Yes, sir.

TH: How do you decide where you will fish? That’s an interesting question.

BB: There are, I would say—in my GPS machine, it stores 3,000 numbers. I’ve got—I was just adding some the other night and I saw—I looked down at my counter and it said I’ve got 1300 numbers in it. There’s probably, of those 1300 numbers—which do include a lot in the Bahamas—but I would say there’s probably to the northeast grounds, maybe ten to fifteen numbers that we’re generally going to go to one of those areas. It’s not always fishing, exactly, on top of one of those numbers, but it’s going to be one of those fifteen, and that’s not to say—it could be almost be at a year’s time between I might go to the same spot. There are some that we frequent a little bit more; they’re a little more isolated. There’re numbers I don’t go to on the weekends because I don’t want people to see me there, (TH laughs) but they are productive spots and they continue to be productive. And we try to keep that in mind that, you know, we don’t want to overfish them; they’ve produced good for us. I would say there are a half a dozen that are my favorites.

TH: Very interesting. Follow-up question on that: now, you go to these spots now, today. Do you mostly power fish, drift, or anchor?

BB: I would say outside of 150 feet, we’re drifting. I have set up my boat—I can’t say I’ve done it much, but I carry close to about 750 feet of anchor line that I got from a company down on Fort Lauderdale with the intention of trying to anchor in some of the 170 and 180 stuff. I have anchored there; I can’t say I’ve never done it. But primarily those areas we are drift fishing.

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a specific target there where I know it’s a little cave, you know, a ledge or something that has held fish and continues to hold fish.

TH: Now, do you make a few drops before you do the anchor; do you drop some baits down first?

BB: Terry, I would say we do that sometimes. That’s kind of dependent on the tide and the wind. A lot of times in the shallower stuff where I’m going to anchor, we pretty much just pull up and —

TH: Know where you want to stop.

BB: —stop where I want to, try to figure out which heading we’re gonna be on once we drop the anchor. And that’s where—I gotta say I think I’m pretty good with the GPS. And that’s big with bottom fishing, ’cause you don’t want to anchor and then be looking at your number fifty yards away from where you end up. So, I would say a lot of times—there are times when we make a drift, but I would say primarily we’re running up, looking at the bottom machine, and if we’re marking some fish on the bottom where we want to be, we’re dropping anchor and starting that way.

TH: Once again, now today—we talked about it earlier, but today, how long does an average fishing trip last?

BB: To use last weekend as an example, left the inlet at—oh, it was probably 7:30 in the morning, ran around pursuing live bait for more than an hour. Went to a 170 foot spot, fished that. Two spots out there was unsuccessful, other than a couple of heads. We didn’t catch anything. I know I got some grouper heads. I just set up on fish with a circle hook that I know I pulled it right out of their mouth, thinking I had a j-hook on. Then we came into some inshore spots, fished them, and we were getting back to the inlet about five o’clock that evening.

TH: Ooh. Long day.

BB: Yeah.

TH: What was your catch for the day?
BB: That day was pretty slow. We caught on the inshore spot some of the smaller red snappers, a lot of little sharks, and had one cobia opportunity that I failed on because I didn’t have a rig ready to put a bait on and cast to him; casted the jig that he looked at and caught three more sharks on that.

TH: So that was probably an average to poor day?

BB: That I would class as a poor day.

TH: Okay. All right. 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, and if so, how?

BB: At that particular time, it had no effect other than, I would say, an occasional trip that I would have the opportunity to go on with friends that have been fishing the area. At that time, I had not fished it myself, personally. Didn’t have the equipment and the LORANs and the numbers to go out there and feel like I could go there and be successful.

TH: Okay. In 1994, the Oculina Bank—that’s ten years later. The Oculina Bank was designated as 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?

BB: I would say it’s impacted now from that regulation, and the fact I have learned more about bottom fishing. I would say if it were open, I could definitely produce some target areas I would go and look at. At that time of the closure was about the time I was getting into boats big enough to venture to the area—that I own personally—and learning more about bottom fishing at the time. So in ninety-four [1994], I would say it had no effect. Since then, I would say yes, it has.

TH: Then in 1996, all anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing, and if so, how? That’s two years later; they said no anchoring at all.

BB: No, and the anchoring side of things—like I said, I don’t even know that I’d really try it at those depths, even to this day.
TH: And the current, too.

BB: Anchoring, no.

TH: In 1996, trawling for rock shrimp was prohibited of the area to the east and north of the area—to the east and north of the designated Oculina Bank. In 1998, this area was incorporated into 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, and how?

BB: No. Didn’t change.

TH: Finally, 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, slot limits, whatever?

BB: As far as regulations and what we target, I’m sure that closing an area—I mean, it could only do good things as far as the fishery. On the other hand, I got to get back to the diving side of the snapper [and] grouper species, and I feel like the population is seeing more damage from them than anything. So, I can say if I had my choice of regulations being put on things, it would be spearfishing those species. Closing particular areas versus seasons and things along those lines, I guess time will tell, because this grouper thing—I don’t know how many years it’s gonna be enacted for, if it’s permanent now, but—

TH: This grouper thing?

BB: With the grouper closure that we just had this year from January through May 1: it was closed season, where prior to this year we’ve never had a grouper closure before. I think they’re targeting the spawning months, I guess, is the reason for doing that. I will say that some of our better grouper fishing, generally, is in those months. I’ve got one number in my GPS that is reflective of that; it’s “Super 42” is what we call it, which was Super Bowl Sunday, the forty-second year of the Super Bowl just a few years ago, and it was a good grouper day.

But as far as the closures and things, I guess I personally need to see more information as to what the scientists have, you know, retrieved from catches and things. And that’s really what’s kind of hard to judge by, even saying that I’m looking for that information to learn more from, is that I find a lot of—with kind of looking on to the snook side of things—with the research information
that they’re retrieving where their guys are sitting at the docks or the ramps between ten o’clock in the morning and three in the afternoon, where the majority of the snook fishermen I know are going out the opposite times of that, and they’re not getting the best information that they should.

I was interviewed last year, or I guess a couple years ago, about the red snapper closure and things that have been enacted now. I’m seeing some of the best red snapper fishing that I’ve experienced. You know I’m obviously bottom fishing more; we’re going to see more because we’re doing it. But when I started hearing they were going to close red snapper down, personally, on either my boat or my friend’s boat, I’ve seen some of the biggest fish in the last five years I’ve ever seen, and definitely not any problems catching quantities of smaller fish; the stocks seem to be doing very well.

TH: As a follow up to that, what do you think the best way to manage fisheries would be? And again, the fairest and most equitable for both fishermen and fish.

BB: I would say my opinion on managing fisheries, the best thing—I’m not totally against the closed seasons. I think the extent of the closed seasons this year with the grouper thing is a little too long; I think, you know, a couple months at a time. The snook thing, I definitely am not an opponent of that being closed in the summertime, because there’s times when you can definitely catch as many baits as hit the bottom; you’re gonna get the snook bite. But I don’t know that I’m big on closed areas, and the main reason with the Oculina is just I feel that it’s a difficult area to fish. It’s a difficult area to manage, and the same being said if they were to do something, you know, even on the closer reefs to the coast. Fishing is a recreational sport for me. It’s also an income-producing business for me. So, to just start shutting things down, I don’t know. I wouldn’t object to seasonal closures, you know, when they are the peak spawning months. I would say that would be something that I wouldn’t have a problem with.

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

BB: I think—I don’t know that it would change a whole bunch. I still see it being a very productive place. I think we’re very fortunate with our whole ecosystem here and the fact that we’ve got the Indian River, which is just a tremendous estuary. I do feel like we have a big advantage over the area south of us, with the proximity of the Gulf Stream and the range of shallower depth of water that we have. I got to give the guy credit with the St. Lucie County that is continually enhancing the artificial reef areas off our coast.

If you want to make some—as far as designating some MPA [Marine Protected Areas], I would have no problems with wherever they dump material that there weren’t any fish before, making those an MPA, because they’re only gonna enhance an area that wasn’t enhanced to begin with.
But I think we’re really, really very fortunate in the variety of what we have here. And long term, other than—if anything for the divers, let them start killing some of the goliaths again, because if anything, not harvesting those things seem to be kind of counter-productive as far as their—I can’t say this from scientific fact, but I think they kill a lot of smaller species that would be thriving a little bit more were the goliaths not there. But overall, I would say—well, I shouldn’t say “but overall,” but that’s about it.

TH: You think—you have a positive—you think fishing will be good in ten years?

BB: I surely can’t see it changing a whole bunch. Obviously, you know, if our population continues to increase, that would surely have an effect on it. But you know, barring having tremendous hurricanes that should disrupt anything—which I don’t think we will; I think a few years ago was kind of a one-shot deal for us, or three-shot deal. But the ecosystem that we have is a very productive system here. Have the divers shooting a few less fish would contribute. But I see guys—a lot of the majority of what I see on the ocean and in a day’s time fishing offshore is the majority of people are trolling, you know, the productive.

A dolphin, I think, pretty much reaches maturity in about three years, so that’s a fishery that’s continually replenishing itself. The kingfishing, that’s a life that we don’t—I generally don’t see as many guys out there kingfishing as we used to. I’m sure that has part to do with, you know, what they were catching; but they’re not harvesting it like they used to, so I would say if anything, that’s gonna stay the same but not get better. Sailfishing, in general, most people are aware that sailfish aren’t to be harvested, and even the handling of them has come more the forefront of—you know, people are more aware of not bringing a fish into the boat for the pictures these days. Although the tournaments, you know, they’re catching a lot of fish, but they’ve moved in to fishing with circle hooks; we’re not seeing the stomach-hooked fish. That’s something that, you know, determines. In the past few years, they’re producing record numbers, so that fishery definitely is thriving. But if anything, just have the divers shoot a few less, and maybe not have it quite as available in the restaurants. (laughs)

TH: Okay, so other than that, you have a positive outlook?

BB: Unfortunately, watching *Swords on the Line* last night, swordfish should not be available for sale at all.

TH: Okay. Well, thank you very much for sharing your fishing history with us, and I appreciate you taking time to do this interview. Thank you very much.

BB: Thank you for calling me, and it’s been a lot of fun. Hopefully, we’ll gain a wealth of
information from myself and the other anglers you’ve interviewed.

*End of interview*