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Oculina Bank Oral History Project  
Oral History Program  
Florida Studies Center  
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: O6-00028  
Interviewee: John Conlon (JC)  
Interviewer: Terry Lee Howard (TH)  
Interview date: July 15, 2010  
Interview location: Sebastian, Florida  
Transcribed by: James E. Scholz  
Transcription date: August 24, 2010 to August 27, 2010  
Audit Edit by: Christine Toth  
Audit Edit date: September 1, 2010  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS  
Final Edit date: October 11, 2010



[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Researcher. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

**Terry Howard:** Good afternoon. This is Terry Howard. Today is July 15, 2010. I'm at ... in Sebastian, Florida, conducting an oral history with John Conlon 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, John. Please state your name, spell your name, your place of birth, and your date of birth.

**John Conlon:** John Conlon, J-o-h-n C-o-n-l-o-n. I was born in Escambia County, Florida, Pensacola. My date of birth is 2-13-50 [February 2, 1950].

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

JC: Well, we started fishing out of Fort Pierce in about 1974, I believe it was.

TH: Okay. What brought you to this area?

JC: We were working in Orlando at the time, and we spent most of our weekends in Fort Pierce fishing and at some of the local motels on the Intracoastal [Waterway] there, that type thing.

TH: Okay. You say “we”?

JC: My wife and I.

TH: Okay. How old were you when you first started fishing here? Do you recall, or can you guess?

JC: Well, in seventy-four [1974], we were twenty-four years old.

TH: Twenty-four years old. (phone rings)

JC: Mm-hm.

TH: Now, you and your wife would come here to fish on weekends?

JC: Yeah.

TH: And you were working in?

JC: Orlando.

TH: Orlando, as a landscaper?

JC: As a landscaper, mm-hm.

TH: Okay. Are you married? I assume you're married.

JC: Sure.

TH: How old were you when you got married?

JC: Twenty years old.

TH: Twenty. Okay. And you have children?

JC: Three.

TH: Okay. How old are they, and their names?

JC: Brian Conlon is thirty-nine.

TH: Brian Conlon. Okay.

JC: Is thirty-nine, and Eric is twenty-nine. Eric Conlon is our youngest. He is twenty-nine.

TH: And?

JC: And Bettina, B-e-t-t-i-n-a, is thirty-four.

TH: Okay. How much schooling do you have?

JC: Two years of college.

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

JC: I'm still a landscaping contractor. I've been doing it for almost forty years now. And I have part-time charter fished as a kind of a supplement for my fishing. And that's how we make our income.

TH: Okay. Have you worked in the fishing industry before?

JC: No, only as a part-time charter captain.

TH: Okay. What other jobs have you had?

JC: That's it.

TH: And you currently own your own boat?

JC: I do.

TH: Could you describe the boat, what kind, length and power plant?

JC: Oh, sure. I currently fish out of a thirty-one foot center console boat that is built in Florida, and with a trailer that is also built in Florida, and it's ten-foot beam. It's kind of a guy's fishing boat. It has a big center console in it for storage, that type thing. So, it's pretty much a fishing boat. There's not air conditioning, there's not an ice maker; it's pretty much a guy's type fishing boat.

TH: Does it have livewells?

JC: Have two livewells, and two four-stroke outboard motors on it.

TH: Two four-stroke. How many horsepower?

JC: Two hundred and fifty horsepower each, total of five hundred.

TH: Okay. Now, I'd like to ask some questions about the Oculina Bank.

JC: Sure.

TH: How familiar are you with the Oculina Bank?

JC: I had fished in the Oculina Bank until they closed it, starting in 1974 when we first started fishing out of Fort Pierce.

TH: So, from seventy-four [1974] to ninety-four [1994], I think, is when they closed it.

JC: Exactly, closed in ninety-four [1994]. That's why.

TH: Why was the—so, you're very familiar with it?

JC: I am, I am. Part of that is, at one time, they wanted to close the Oculina Bank to everything. I mean, you could even—they didn't even want you to troll that. So, we brought our fishing club over from Orlando for their meeting that they had opened to the public to protest that, 'cause it was just going too far, in our opinion.

TH: Okay. So, why was the Oculina Bank designated as an area to protect?

JC: As my understanding, the Oculina Bank, it's the only place in the world—there are two reasons, as I understand it. It's the only place in the world that has Oculina coral. They wanted to protect that coral, which I think was discovered by the—what's the place in Fort Pierce where

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TH: Harbor Branch<sup>1</sup>.

JC: Harbor Branch, with their deep dive submarine, one. And two, to protect and provide a spawning ground for the grouper fishery: not so much the snapper at the time, but grouper and grouper fishery. That was my understanding of it.

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<sup>1</sup> 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: Now, it was closed first in 1984 to dragging.

JC: To dragging, pretty much commercial fishing. And there's several spots in there that were widely fished for amberjack, grouper. The thought there was to—again, to protect the coral from the dragging, keep it from being broken off, and [to keep away] the hooks and the nets, and that type of thing that were in there, and the longline gear.

TH: Have you ever heard of it referred to as “the peaks”?

JC: Absolutely.

TH: Okay. Is there anything else you can tell me about the Oculina Bank that you know about it right now? I mean, just quickly.

JC: Yeah. It's an absolutely—was, in the late seventies [1970s], early eighties [1980s]. It was probably some of the best grouper fishing from Daytona to Miami, was in that area, and everybody knew it. Everybody that fished it knew it. It was a lot of fun to fish in there. It was right in the middle of the Gulf Stream, was some of the best peaks—we called 'em steeples and peaks at the time—that were in there. So, you constantly had a north current, and the north current would push you to the north on a regular basis. You had to learn how to fish that and the fishing was very consistent and very good. Typically, when a day's fishing with no live bait, the way we used to fish it, we called it deep jigging. We had a jig that weighed sixteen ounces, typically blue and white, and we would put a strip bait on it and we normally would catch a dozen to eighteen or nineteen grouper in a day—in a day.

And it really wasn't that important to have numbers to it. Now, the only numbers you'd get at the time was LORAN; there wasn't GPS at the time, just LORAN. It was new, in its infancy at the time. It came out, I think, early eighties [1980s], eighty-three [1983], eighty-four [1984]. I remember buying my first LORAN: it cost me \$1800 and I hid the box 'cause I didn't want my wife to find it, and I got home and she had found it, and I had new carpet in the house. (both laugh) So, I remember that well, but it was very—\$1800 was a lot of money for a LORAN at the time.

TH: Was that the old one that you had to line up the lines?

JC: No.

TH: No, this was—

JC: That was LORAN-C, and the old one was LORAN-A, and this was new one. It took a long learning curve. It took a good thirty or forty hours to actually learn how to use that machine.

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

JC: Well, I mean, at first it was a tough pill to swallow because it was taking our best fishery away from us, and it was a lot of fun to fish that. So, we obviously—our knee-jerk reaction was to—you know, for Pete's sake, let us fish our grounds. We've got the right to do that. Later, as the grouper fishery progressed, it continued to get poorer, harder to catch the types of numbers that we'd been catching and that type of thing. So, it really did provide some type of safe harbor for those grouper, particularly the spawning stock. And I've got to say, at this point in time, that's a good thing.

TH: Okay. Has the closure of the Oculina affected your fishing?

JC: Yes. Oh, of course, absolutely. We can't run out there and catch grouper like we used to; but then again, you can't go anywhere and catch grouper like you used to.

TH: If anchoring and bottom fishing in the Oculina Bank was not prohibited—in other words, if you could do it, would you fish there? I mean, if you could fish there now, would you fish there?

JC: Of course. Absolutely, just like anybody would.

TH: How and for what?

JC: Probably, if grouper were closed, we would go there to fish for amberjack. If grouper were open, we would go there to fish for grouper and red snapper.

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

JC: Wow, that's a real good question. Well, like I mentioned earlier, we would catch fifteen fish a day, and typically just with a jig and a strip bait of mullet on it. Today, one good grouper is a good day, and that's sad to say, but it is very, very true. So, that's how it's changed. From that, I know guys that aren't fishing anymore because the grouper fishing isn't what it used to be. They've just quit.

And two, it makes our fishing—we have to realign our fishing. So, now instead of catching grouper—for example, on a charter—we would go amberjack fishing in lieu of grouper fishing. We really look forward to dolphin season, sailfish season, and a new fish that's in the mix is tilefishing. We never would have done that before, fished in 650, 750 foot of water for a fish. That's a lot of work, but it does provide at least one fish per person on the boat. So, our fishing has changed from that.

And I want to make sure this goes in the interview: It's not so much the fishing pressure. Part of the fishing pressure that hurt these fish was longlining, one; and freshwater runoff, two. Freshwater runoff is really important because that freshwater—these fish actually would spawn and grow in the grass in the Indian River and then go offshore. So, now we're seeing—and they still do to this day, can be caught on rock piles on the Indian River when the salt count is up. When the freshwater is there, you can't catch a one.

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

JC: Not personally. I do know some guys who've gone to great lengths to fish in it illegally, but not personally. I do know the fines are pretty severe. And it is nice every now and then to go in there and look at some of your old spots to see if fish are on 'em. And I have done that, and there are fish on 'em. So, it would be nice to drop a jig on 'em or to drop a live bait on 'em, but we haven't done that.

TH: Now, you didn't—when you fished the Oculina, you did not anchor? You drift fished, you motor—power fish, I think, is what it's called?

JC: Exactly. We would actually call it motor fishing. And again, remember, there's a nice current in there, two and a half, three knots on a good day. So, in the center console boats, your bow would blow out from the current first, because it's the lightest end of the boat. So, you have to back up to get to it, and when you back up—in other words, you can't hold your bow into it because eventually it's gonna come to one side or the other, and it's gonna blow out on you. So, you have to back over your spot. So, you back into the current and drop down, and you have to get used to having what we call a loop in the line, because the current will blow a loop in your

line. And the braid lines have helped that a lot, because they're not as thick in diameter and you can get down a lot quicker and easier with it.

So, we still fish in those depths of water, and that's something to be noted. The Oculina Bank is deep. It's 245, 300 feet. So, it's deep fishing and a real challenge to the fishermen to fish in there. Now, out of it, to the north, are still some steeples that are fishable, legally, and we fish those to this day on a regular basis. And typically, we fish for amberjack on 'em, because that makes for a good day.

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

JC: I started fishing when I was thirteen years old. I fished for Spanish mackerel on the beach with a Clark spoon and twelve pound line. (laughs)

TH: I still do that. (laughs)

JC: Still do that, exactly.

TH: So, you fished for mackerel on the beach with—and you had a boat?

JC: Had a little fourteen foot boat with a pull start Sea Horse outboard motor that only started one in every hundred pulls. (laughs)

TH: (laughs) Did you take that out of Sebastian or Fort Pierce?

JC: Well, we didn't live here then. We lived up in the Panhandle in the Gulf, and I fished out of Pensacola in that boat. I can remember sharks bigger than the boat, hammerhead sharks coming around the boat, (laughs) and it didn't scare me a bit. So, that was fun.

TH: Okay. That was when you were around thirteen years old?

JC: Yeah. That's when I started fishing.

TH: Now, once again, where was that in Florida?

JC: Pensacola, in the Panhandle, Escambia County.

TH: Okay.

JC: Some of the other fishing we did that I dearly loved was mullet fishing. We would throw—I'd go with my uncle and we'd throw the cast net, and we would fry the mullet up on the beach, and it was just a ton of fun to do that. That really started—that built the fire in me that made me love to fish so much.

TH: Okay. So, it was your uncle and your father?

JC: Just my uncle; my father didn't fish with us.

TH: Okay. So, your uncle really taught you the first—

JC: He taught me to how to throw a net at an early age, and the Clark spoon kind of came naturally. (laughs)

TH: People are still using the Clark spoons.

JC: Still using it.

TH: When did you start fishing the Fort Pierce area, age and year?

JC: Nineteen seventy-four, and the first fishing we did there was kingfishing. We would go out and kingfish and we had a lot of fun doing that, typically with spoons. I can remember seeing on the recorder in 1984, have it just black out with kingfish.

TH: That's what the commercial fishermen call "the black wad." You saw the last of the black wads on your paper machines.

JC: Exactly.

TH: Paper recording machines.

JC: And this is interesting: you could put a live bait down on a lead, and the kingfish would eat the lead. (laughs) Probably the second kingfish, but it got ate. (laughs)

TH: I had heard that they, you know, when they were thick like that, that they would not eat bait; they would eat the spoons—probably wanted the spoons.

JC: Probably true.

TH: But that, too, sometimes they wouldn't bite at all. You could see 'em like that, and they said they would not bite at all.

JC: Exactly, whatever they were feeding—and that was real true. Whatever they were feeding on, that's what their interests were if they were spawning. It's kind of become common knowledge that—and it's really not true every year, because of the conditions. But the two weeks before the full moon in April was a great spawning time for the kingfish. St. Lucie Inlet just lit up with kingfish during that time.

TH: Okay. What else did you fish for and how did you fish for 'em, gear and bait?

JC: Yeah, we loved to grouper fish and we called it deep jigging. We used a sixteen ounce jig, blue and white. Most of 'em we had to make ourselves. We would catch mullet with a cast net. We would fillet 'em, strip 'em, put 'em on these twelve aught hooks and these jigs, and we would drop 'em down on the cones or steeples, and it was very easy to find fish then, even with the paper machine. And we would go to the cones and look at them, and if we marked fish, we would compensate for the drift, drop our jig down, and typically, that's how we caught our fish. That was my favorite type of fishing at the time.

TH: When you stripped the mullets, did you split the tails?

JC: Yeah.

TH: Just like you do for trolling?

JC: Yeah. Actually, we would fillet the mullet. And then, when you filleted the mullet, if you were good at it and you had a nice fillet knife, you could split that tail right in half. And on your fillet that you put on your jig—two hook rig on the jig—you would have half the tail, one from each side.

TH: Yeah. Okay, where did you go to fish when you began fishing? The beach, I guess?

JC: Yeah, fished the beach.

TH: You mostly do your fishing in your own boat now?

JC: Yeah. Once you have your own boat and you fish it, you're really more at home on your own boat and you feel more comfortable fishing it. It's nice to go with your buddies and to be a guest, but it's a lot more productive to do it your own way. (laughs)

TH: You think you can catch more fish?

JC: I think so. (laughs)

TH: (laughs) Okay. Who do you fish with? That's my next question. Right now, who do you fish with?

JC: Some of the same guys that we that we fished with in the 1980s, that we've known since then, eighty-three [1983] and eighty-four [1984]. We've all kind of moved to different locations, but live in Sebastian now, and we still fish in some of the same waters that we fished in back then on a regular basis. For example: the cove, Bethel—

TH: Well, let's go back. The cove is right off on the beach in Vero Beach.

JC: In Vero Beach, that's right, just south of it.

TH: Bethel Shoals.

JC: Bethel Shoals, due east of Vero.

TH: Okay. And those are two of your favorite spots?

JC: Actually, yes. What's really cool about Bethel is you can go there and you can catch your live bait, and it gives you a lot of options after that. Now, we've gone to live bait now for dolphin and kingfish and sailfish, and it's a lot of fun to fish the live bait and it's very productive. So, that's what I like about Bethel: it provides that. And then you just step offshore into ninety foot if you want to kingfish, or seventy, eighty foot. And then if it's dolphin season or sailfish season, just a little bit further and you're right at home there. And we've caught on Bethel—right to this day, we've caught dolphin right on top of the buoy last year in the afternoon. There's a huge concentration of jewfish there, and normally, plenty of bait. Now, that changes, of course, from tides and weather and wherever the fish are.

TH: Okay. How much would you catch on an average trip? Now, this is just—

JC: Today or then?

TH: Well, let's start back in the eighties [1980s].

JC: Early eighties [1980s], it was not uncommon until the first week in July to catch ten to fifteen grouper a trip. Now, this was interesting, because if you were in that range fishing in the deep water, you seldom got to see dolphin, and you would catch a dolphin or two to go along with the mix. And there was always a snapper or two that you just caught by accident, really, on a jig. So, you would have a nice box of fish in the early eighties [1980s]. It wasn't as hard as everybody thought it was. Really, if you just hunted around, looked for your marks, you could catch fish.

Not so today. Today, you have to have a really tough game plan. And what we've done today is, pretty much our mark is going to be amberjack, because they have survived well and they're in good numbers. So, we can catch one per person. We'll catch our amberjack. We'll catch two kingfish. And typically, if we've got time left and the weather permits, we'll go fish in 650, 700 foot for tilefish, and that'll give us a good box of fish. Not every trip do we limit out on everything. So today, our type of fish has changed completely because there are no grouper in the mix, and maybe a red snapper, but typically not. And amberjack is part of it, and we still catch an occasional Warsaw while we're amberjack fishing.

TH: Okay. So, your catches have gone down? (laughs)

JC: Way down. And we've had to change species to catch any fish at all.

TH: Okay. Where else do you go fishing in the Fort Pierce area?

JC: I like to fish South Beach on the beach for trophy kingfish. That is one of my favorite fishing [spots], particularly after a thundershower in the afternoon when the day's cooled off. It's just beautiful to watch the sunset and to have your live baits out there. Typically, you'll see one or two kingfish sky on a bait, and it's just a real nice place to fish. That's one of my favorite spots.

TH: Where south of the Fort Pierce Inlet?

JC: Less than a mile, less than a mile. Really, you run south until you see bait, and when you see the bait, that's kind of the key. Jump in there and start looking.

TH: Okay.

JC: You kind of look for that sign that says, "Fish here, stupid." That works for me. (laughs)

TH: (laughs) I'm still looking for that.

JC: Exactly. (laughs)

TH: Here?

JC: Here, yeah.

TH: Okay. So, during what months do you fish for which fish? Let's see if we can go down that. You're gonna be writing this in a minute.

JC: Okay. I really like—I've grown to love sailfishing live bait. That, typically here, is a December thing. I remember Sam Crutchfield<sup>2</sup>, who's fished here all of his life—since the early fifties [1950s], actually—taught me that the first week of Christmas is when the sailfish typically show up, and we'll start fishing for 'em actually a little bit before that. Now, with the new generation of boats that are faster and drier and more economical to run, we can run up to the north and kind of intercept 'em at [Cape] Canaveral and fish the way down with them. So, that's kind of nice.

TH: That's December?

JC: December, and we'll fish for 'em to March. April, the first two weeks in April is big dolphin season. We look forward to that every year. I have to say it's hit or miss anymore. If they're here, it's good. If it's not, typically we'll run to Bethel and catch our live bait, and we'll steam east until we find a good condition and we'll set up there. Now, it has gotten so that—

TH: Good condition being water temperature?

JC: Weeds, bait, and birds, water temp change. But we like—during dolphin season, particularly trophy dolphin season, where we're looking for a really nice fish, we like to have the weed line all to ourselves. So, we'll run a little further offshore, as much as to the other side of the Gulf Stream, which will take us about fifty-five out.

TH: Fifty-five miles?

JC: Miles out, yeah.

TH: Okay. Average trip, we've already talked about that. How many years have you fished for these things? You've pretty much talked about that. Now, how often do you go offshore fishing?

JC: Well, when I was younger I could fish three or four times a week. I can't do that anymore, but I love to fish. I would love to fish once a week, anyway. So, I probably average maybe thirty-five, forty trips a year.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Crutchfield was also interviewed for the Oculina Bank Oral History Project. The DOI for his interview is O6-00032.

JC: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. The winter—two things in the winter: it's rougher and it's colder. So, when the sailfish are absolutely thick, we'll fight the rough water. If it's a maybe situation, we'll just avoid it. But if we know they're there, we'll go fish for 'em. And the summer, it's particularly hot in July and August. So, it's an early morning or late afternoon thing for us. We'll fish on the beach or that type thing, fish early in the morning. Tarpon on the beach is a lot of fun, and we do that some.

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

JC: Yeah. August is tough for me to fish in, and so we kind of sit back in August and maybe avoid that month, just because it's so hot.

TH: I understand. It's hot right now.

JC: Yeah, it is.

TH: On average, how far do you go offshore to fish, on average? So, that's a tough one.

JC: Further and further. Further and further every year. What's happened is, again, with the new generation of boats, it's very easy to go to the other side of Gulf Stream at thirty knots. And you can be there in an hour and a half and have places to fish that are not as much pressure. Now, if you're tuna fishing, those guys are running eighty, ninety miles on a regular basis and not batting an eye. I would prefer to stay in that fifty-five, sixty mile range, and then there's a good catch of blackfin, yellowfin and dolphin. So, that probably our longest run. Then, typically, we'll run a wreck that I really like to AJ [amberjack] fish on, is thirty-one miles out. We fish that probably more [in that] spot than anyplace else.

TH: Okay. Thirty-one, that's off Sebastian?

JC: Mm-hm, off Sebastian. It'd be northeast of Bethel.

TH: Okay. Who do you fish with? Now, when you say we, do you [mean] charters? Do you have people who—

JC: Part-time on the charters. I have about twenty clients that I charter with. But mostly friends, you know, friends that want to fish, and we split up the expenses and we go and have a good time.

TH: Good. Okay. How do you decide where you will fish? I think you've already answered this. It's the conditions and time of year?

JC: Depends on what you're fishing for.

TH: Okay. How long does a fishing trip last?

JC: Oh, wow. Forever, it seems like. (laughs)

TH: If you're not catching anything.

JC: Right. Let's see, typically, it's a nine to ten hour day.

TH: Okay. [On] an average trip, you try to get one of each: one of the amberjacks, one of the—

JC: Amberjack, tilefish, maybe a Warsaw if we can find one, and a dolphin or two.

TH: And kingfish.

JC: And a kingfish, yeah.

TH: 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 was initially closed to trawling, dredging and bottom longlining in 1984. Did this affect you fishing?

JC: Yes, of course. We stopped fishing for grouper in our favorite spots and we had to find 'em in new spots.

TH: Wait a minute, wait a minute. In 1984, the Oculina was initially closed to trawling, dredging and bottom longlining.

JC: Oh, no. That didn't affect us at all. That was more of a commercial regulation.

TH: Okay. In 1994, the Oculina Bank was designated—this is 1994—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, and how?

JC: Yes, this is where we had to give up fishing in our favorite spots for our grouper and amberjack and red snapper in those areas. They did leave us the twenty-seven fathom line, 180 foot, just inside of the Bank to fish on. So, that was kind of good. And we could go in there and fish and still be somewhat productive, but it really took our best grouper spots away that we really liked to fish. And I really got to say this: the grouper fishery continued to decline anyway, even though they shut it off.

TH: That's interesting. All anchoring—in 1996, all anchoring was prohibited within the Oculina Bank. Did this impact your fishing? If so, how?

JC: No. No, we're not much of an—

TH: The impact was already made.

JC: Already made, yeah.

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

JC: Well, no. And again, I'll say this: it was too late. The longline was probably—it impacted the grouper fishing more than anything else. And even though we did very well with our fishery, there would be a handful of boats that would go out maybe twice a month that caught that kind

of fish—fifteen to twenty fish a day. Well, twelve to fifteen a day on an average. But the longliners were thousands of pounds, and they were laying down two, three miles of longline, right on the—typically on the twenty-seven fathom line, because that would be just inside the current from the Bank—and then they would pick it back up. That’s when you noticeably—I mean, absolutely noticed that the fishing changed, and became worse.

TH: Interesting.

JC: And I’ll say this, too: the time and year when the grouper would kind of shut off would be about the first part of July. I kept hoping they would get into the Fourth of July, because Fort Pierce always had a tournament down there at the fishing club at the Fourth that we fished for years. My wife and I and friends fished it, and we had a great time doing that, loved going down to Fort Pierce during that time. We hoped that we could hang on to that one spot that would allow us to catch a grouper in there. And we did win the grouper in that tournament, I think, twice. And we won dolphin in that twice, and that was a lot of fun. That’s when the grouper would shut off and stop biting.

TH: But you attribute a lot of it to the longlining for grouper and bottom fish?

JC: On a permanent basis, yes. Yes.

TH: 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 like quotas, closed seasons, trip limits?

JC: That’s an excellent question, and I’m so thrilled to at least have a chance to at least answer it. The Oculina Bank, to me, has proven that a closed area doesn’t work. The kingfishery in this state was dead, out of control, overfished by net fishermen. You didn’t close an area, but you managed the fishing stock. And today, the fishing stock is as healthy as it can be, and it’s not in danger in any way. Not by closed fishing, but by managing the breeding stock, we have a strong kingfishery. The same is true for redfish, the redfishery. We didn’t go close the Gulf so the fish could breed, or protect an area for ’em all to run to, ’cause the fish just aren’t that smart. But we did protect the breeding stock by putting stock limits and size limits so that the breeders, the big breeders, were allowed to carry on and laid millions of eggs each year. That—the same with snook. Go back to our snook fishery: it was in huge trouble. But by managing that, we were able to bring it back to a good point.

And I need to say this, in all candor: The net fishing in the river, as much as I love for everyone to be able make a living, but by protecting that breeding stock, has allowed the bait fish and the

grouper and the spawning fish to at least get to a point where they can reproduce. And I think those are the type of management ways that we need to look at. I think we're tripping over ourselves when we spend so much time and effort closing a rock because we think that fish are gonna go there to spawn; it's absolutely on the wrong page, the wrong decision. But to manage the breeding stock and to say, "Okay, we're not gonna kill the breeders. We're not gonna kill the adult breeding stock," is the way to make that come back.

Now, that's hard to do with grouper, I know. But I'm telling you, as sure as I'm sitting here at sixty years old, that our grouper fishery is in huge trouble. It is in trouble because today we fish for one fish, when in the past, you heard me say that we could catch a dozen. And that has changed. Now, nobody wants to admit it and it's certainly not a popular stand, but it's absolutely the truth as sure as I'm sitting here.

TH: So, if you could manage the fisheries, all the fisheries, what do you think is the most equitable and fair way to manage the Florida fisheries?

JC: Size limits, closed seasons for breeding time, and size limits would be my best shot.

TH: And trip limits?

JC: And trip limits, absolutely, and quotas. I hate to say that. The quotas is one that takes a lot of study because it can make the price of the fish go up, which is good for the fishermen and it can protect the fish at the same time. But it also—even though the price goes up, it takes livelihood away from men who are making their money on the water. So, that's an interesting one that would take some study.

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

JC: I would love to say that the fishing would be excellent. And I do believe that the kingfishing is gonna survive very, very well. But on the other hand, I think our snook fishery is gonna be in trouble again from freshwater runoff. I think that our redfishery is going to be in trouble from freshwater runoff, and our trout fishery the same. Dolphin, who knows? That really is managed on a deep water plane, and nobody knows where that's gonna go.

But I have seen this in the sailfish industry, managed by its own people with no input from any management area except to make it a sport fish, where the sailfishermen release their fish. I've seen that fishery get better and better and better every year, and world-class some years: twenty

fish a day by some boats. Now, the fishermen are good, they're better, but the fish are still here. They're still breeding and they're still providing a great fishery. So, I think the sailfishing is gonna hang in there and stay right on.

In the old days, we could catch wahoo on a regular basis in October. If you wanted to go wahoo fishing, you could catch two, three, maybe even four a day. Not so anymore; it's kind of a bycatch. So, for some reason, that has dwindled a little bit. But we are right next door to a great fishery, which is in the Bahamas on the wall there, and that fishery is still very strong. But again, those fish need to be protected, because they're being caught in good numbers while they are spawning. So, I think that would take—that needs some management, even though we bring 'em back here. We should need to save some of those fish. So, that's kind of my take on it as just—as a lifetime on the water. I fished on the water for almost forty years. I love it. It's become a part of me, and it's very dear to my heart.

TH: And the one thing I want to follow up on is: the Indian River Lagoon is the spawning ground for pretty much everything. Is that correct, almost?

JC: Well, here's some things that I've learned over the years. Now, I've heard this said one time, but now, you know, you can hear anything you want to hear on a dock. But I have read that the Sebastian River is one of the number one spawning areas for tarpon, and I believe it, because it is slam full of juvenile tarpon. And those tarpon leave here and go offshore and spawn, or come back here. They go offshore to breed and become adults. Now, they can take the freshwater and the brackish water. They're a different—they can handle that. So, I think that is true, yes. I've seen grouper spawn in the rivers here ever since I have fished here, and have known it well, and have known that you can catch 'em in the river for a very long time. So, I think we are taking that breeding ground away from them by not protecting our runoff waters. If our state had one environmental issue to deal with, it would be the runoff waters.

*End of interview*