

S2E4: Watersheds: Something Amiss in Baffin Bay, Texas

The Gulf Podcast

Introduction: It Started With a Phone Call

[Jace Tunnell]: So I think it was about 2012 timeframe, somewhere in there, where this fisherman named Scott Murray, who has a house down on Baffin Bay, had contacted me, and said, “Hey, uh, we’re having some really odd issues down here with black drum.” The black drum were coming in emaciated, when they were filleted, the meat was greasy, and they looked like skeletons. And he said, “We need to figure out what’s going on down here, it might be a water quality issue.” That’s really what kind of kicked off working down in Baffin Bay.

[Mike Wetz]: I’m Mike Wetz, and I’m the Chair for Coastal Ecosystem Processes at the Harte Research Institute.

[Tunnell]: Jace Tunnell, and I’m at the Mission-Aransas National Estuarine Research Reserve, where I’m the Reserve Director.

<<a few musical notes as a short interlude¹>>

[Tunnell]: 2006, I started working with the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program, and they’re a nonprofit. Uh, within that, we have water quality projects, restoration projects, things like that, and so whenever there’s a water quality issue, somebody would come to the estuary program and say, “Hey, what might be the problem here?”

[Scott Murray]: For some time down on the West End, we were experiencing a lot of talk in the community every time we’d go somewhere, to a restaurant or to the store, people were talking about what is wrong with the bay, and these are people that you have to listen to because they lived their whole lives down there, and you don’t disregard that. So I began to listen, and I also saw big changes myself, and decided that it was time to really do something about it, so we called a meeting at my bay house. We invited commercial fishermen, fishing guides, sport fishermen, a bed and breakfast owner, a restaurant owner, a couple other entities. I also invited Dr. Mike Wetz and, uh, Jace Tunnell with Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries. They came, and they listened, and we vented for several hours. We all knew there was something wrong with the water because of the blooms we were having and the episodic fish kills, you know, were getting more and more frequent. So, that’s how it started.

<<musical interlude²>>

¹ Lee Rosevere, “Curiosity,” *Music for Podcasts – The Complete Collection*, April 6, 2021, <https://leerosevere.bandcamp.com/track/curiosity-2>. This song is licensed under a Creative Commons attribution license (CC-BY).

² Lee Rosevere, “Curiosity.”

[Dr. Jen Brown]: That was Scott Murray. Today on The Gulf Podcast, we're traveling down the coast to Baffin Bay, Texas, and hearing from Scott Murray and some of the other longtime trophy trout anglers. These folks have spent decades fishing Baffin. And when the fishery started to decline, they were the first to notice.

This is Jen, by the way, and I want to let you know that the Watersheds series is made possible by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

In this series, we've been focused on water *quantity*, that is, the importance of how much fresh water flows into our bays and estuaries. Water *quality*, as we'll see in the Baffin Bay story, is also needed for good fishing.

A decline in water quality has ripple effects for the seagrasses, shrimp, crabs, trout, and almost everything else in the bay. We're going to hear about that from the lived experiences of the anglers interviewed in the [Baffin Bay Oral History Project](#). That's a project that I started to document and preserve this history. If you're interested in hearing more, you can listen to the full audio interviews and read transcripts on The Gulf Podcast website and digital archives. The Baffin Bay fishing community bears witness to a fishery that has declined over many years. But their special ties to the bay, as we'll see on the next episode, prompted many to get involved in restoration efforts.

<<musical interlude³>>

Chapter One: Mapping Baffin Bay

[Scott Murray]: Well, Baffin Bay, to me, is, uh, a very special iconic bay. There's just nothing like it on the Texas coast or anywhere in the United States for that matter. It's just a super, I guess you might say, remote area that hasn't experienced a lot of development. Most of the shorelines are unencumbered, they're undeveloped. It's still a wild place and that's what really drew me to Baffin Bay and my interest in it. It's, uh, the only hypersaline estuary in the United States and very few in the world. There's about ten square miles total of serpulid reefs in Baffin Bay, scattered around the bay.

[David Rowsey]: The other thing that's really cool about Baffin versus other saltwater destinations, is it's surrounded to the east by Padre Island National Seashore, undeveloped, north side of the bay is the King Ranch, no development, south side of the bay is Kennedy Ranch, no development. So you go down there, and it's like stepping back in time. You don't see houses, well you see some on spoil islands, fishermen's cabins, but you don't see development or anything like that, so it's just a really untouched natural place, you know, that's really unique and different than most.

³ Lee Rosevere, "Curiosity."

[David McKee]: Memorable things down there are some of the storms that'll come over Baffin, and Baffin is located about twenty-seven degrees north latitude and that, if you look—go out to Padre Island out on PINS, Padre Island National Seashore, that's where two currents come together, one of them moving from the south to the north, another moving from the north to the south. They come together and one turns out and one turns in, and the one that turns in deposits a lot of large shells on the beach, and there's a lot of weather associated with that and a lot of that weather that occurs in the Gulf because of these converging currents will actually carry across the barrier island, over the Lagoon, and over Baffin Bay, and there will be storms that will generate in the Gulf and move west, and it will blow and rain and thunder and lightning like you've never seen but if you go one mile or even a quarter mile north of Baffin or a quarter mile south of Baffin, it'll be a blue bird day (Brown laughs). It's just that little isolated area, twenty-seven degrees north, where these storms will move across.

[Mike Blackwood]: Most of the people that would go down there were told constantly about the rocks and what they call the Baffin Bay specials, which are big storms that would come up unexpectedly, and you're down there, and you've got to figure out how to get out of there and maybe you're away from your boat, and you can have winds go from dead calm to fifty, sixty miles an hour and water spouts and everything else, and if you're smart, all you do is get on the shoreline and relax for a while, or get behind something else, but a lot of people try to come back and a lot of people don't make it. I mean, there's a lot of history of people being swamped and not living through it.

[Eric Kern]: So, it's a unique ecosystem, but there has always been a mystique about Baffin. One, it's difficulty to access. Two, the rocks. Okay? And there was kind of a mystique about the rocks back when not everybody had Garmins. There was a little bit of, you know, you better be careful, knock your lower unit off, there's rocks, the rocks, the rocks and I think a lot of the regular guys kind of promoted that theory trying to keep some of the less (Brown laughs) experienced people out, you know, "You better not go back in there."

[Cliff Webb]: You stand on the bow of the boat, and you look at three rocks, you see the third rock's got a big black ring around it. That's all trout, swimming around in circles on top of the rock. The mullet would be on top of the rock staying away from the ambush. They would stay on top of the rock to stay, they wouldn't dare swim over the edge of that rock. You could always tell that the rocks that had fish on it, would have the mullet on top of them. If they had mullet on top of them the rock, you had a bunch of predators under it. It was like a bunch of wolves waiting for the sheep to make a mistake, and that's what was happening (Brown laughs). It was really neat (laughs).

[Mike Blackwood]: And the more I was told about this and that, rocks here, watch out for this, don't go there, and the more I found that was incorrect (Brown laughs). That was—we used to call that a decoy. A lot of guys that knew much about it would use the big decoy. In other words, they'd tell you, "Oh, you don't want to go there. There's rocks all over that place," and this and that, and I'd go in there, and I'd say, "There's no rocks here." Most of the time it was mud line and lots of fish. They didn't want you to know about their fishing. And then I started

finding areas myself that nobody else knew about, and that's when the fun really began because I had a number of good years where I caught lots of oversized fish, which I caught a lot of static about eventually because that is what I loved to do, was chase the big fish, the fish thirty inches, thirty-four inches in length and weighing up to twelve or so pounds.

[Bo Kratz]: There were big fish as well, a lot of big fish in Baffin, which is the mystique of Baffin Bay anyways, big trout. That's the whole story behind Baffin Bay.

[Eric Kern]: That was where you went to catch a great big trophy trout.

[Phil Blackmar]: The size of trout and the number of large trout that came out of Baffin Bay were pretty much legendary on the Texas coast. The state record for the past probably forty years have come somewhere from the Laguna Madre, and Mike Blackwood, still fishing at eighty-one years old, still fishing, saw him a couple weeks ago, he had the state record for about twenty years, and he caught that fish in Baffin and then it was broken by a fish caught in Baffin, and then ultimately it was broken by a guy who caught a fish down in Port Mansfield, which is still is still in the Lagoon.

[Mike Blackwood]: I wanted to go check out a place that I hadn't fished before, which was around the corner, and I walked around the corner, caught a real nice trout, about a thirty-one incher, eight or nine pounds, and I eased around the corner and on the first sand bar that I came around the corner, there was a little side bay. There was what I thought was two trout, and it turned out to be just one, just one extremely large fish, about six feet from shore...and to try to make the long story as short as possible, we weighed it eight or nine times, one time even on a doctor's baby scale (Brown laughs), and it only weighed the same thing twice and that was right at thirteen and three quarters, but I took thirteen nine...and that beat the old record by a half a pound, and that was fine, and that turned out to be a very useful item because after that people would believe anything I said about fishing (Brown laughs).

[Scott Murray]: So it's very, very well known for trophy trout fishing and that's one of the things that really drew me to the bay because I've always been a maniac when it comes to trying to catch big trout (Brown laughs) and we have caught our share of them down there, believe me.

[Cliff Webb]: Being able to drive down that shoreline and see a big, black wad of trout, nobody sees that anymore, you know, just a big black ball of trout coming down the shoreline, just hundreds and hundreds of five to six, seven pound trout and now those schools are busted up, they don't school like that, their schools are five to seven fish, they're wolf packs, they're not big giant schools. The redfish are still schooling, but the thing that was amazing was how many schools of big trout we had. That was just unbelievable and the clear water, you could see those fish in five or six foot of water. You see those black balls of trout around the deep rock structures, and it was so easy, just throw anything you want to in the middle of them, they'd eat it. Yeah, that was, that was something else.

<<musical interlude⁴>>

Chapter Two: Something Amiss

[David Rowsey]: People saying they had a good day, and a good day is defined differently than it was fifteen years ago. I mean, a good day now, fifteen years ago was a horrible day, but a lot of people were just into it, they've only been fishing for five or seven, ten years. They don't know what the good days were. They don't know what the bay's capable of producing.

[Mike Blackwood]: People want to go to Baffin to catch the trophy trout, the TT, the trophy trout. Trophy trout have changed. It was interesting. I got honored by a group of people who like to do this last year and one of them, I was talking to him about it, and he said, "Well, you started talking catching big trout and trophy trout and then you said something about half-grown. What's a half grown?" And I said, "Well a half-grown trout is twenty-four, twenty-six, twenty-seven inches long. It's not a grown fish and grown until it's thirty inches or better." He just shook his head and said, "Those are our trophy fish now, your half-grown," and I said, "Well, that kind of says it all."

[Cliff Webb]: I guess the major thing is water quality. It's an unbelievable difference, so it seemed like in the eighties, in the early eighties, on a north wind, I could turn the corner at Compuerta Pass and turn the engine off, put the trolling motor down and start working across the Badlands. I'd work it all the way out to Riviera Channel and see the bottom all the way out. It was nine feet, just absolutely gin clear. I'm talking about the kind of water you see in the Bahamas, the kind of water that's so clear that when you raise your arm to cast to a trout, if he saw you, he'd spooked because he saw you. You had to wait till the fish were facing away from you to make a cast. That's how clear it was.

[David McKee]: Another has been that of the degradation of the serpulid reefs in Baffin, and those reefs are geologically somewhere in the vicinity of, their last great formation, a creation of those reefs of which they're said to be about ten square miles of serpulid reefs in the bay. The peak of their establishment was about 3,000 to 3,500 years ago when those reefs formed, and it's a little marine worm, and they secrete, take calcium carbonate out of the water and form a shell which they live inside of. They're like our earthworms, the annelid worms are just a marine form, and they come out, stick their little heads out, little pinchers and all that and feed on plankton and the water. Well, apparently, those reefs have been in decline for many years...specifically the one in front of my cabin at Compuerta Pass...There's nothing left of the structure of that reef, and, of course, one of the real benefits of those reefs, are its great habitat...and these are big fish holders, so the habitat that Baffin is so famous for, the serpulid reefs, are just not as abundant as they once were.

[Bo Kratz]: We had some very strong freezes. This more recent one we've had didn't compare to the ones we had like in '89. We had one in '83 where on the southside of Baffin Bay there was a white line on the southside of Baffin Bay as you—from a distance you could see it. It

⁴ Lee Rosevere, "Curiosity."

looked like foam but what it was, was dead fish stacked up on the southside of Baffin Bay, and we—after the freeze of '89, I did not catch a trout for two years.

[Mike Blackwood]: And in 1983, I didn't catch a single fish out of Baffin Bay until the end of summer, and it was redfish. I'd go down and look for trout, and there wasn't anything, it killed dang near everything.

[Phil Blackmar]: And then the fishery came back and then we had another one in '89, and that was a really bad one also and with '89, it killed all these fish and then early in the spring, we had a lot of heavy rains...and the brown tide started that year. That was when the brown tides started and where Baffin used to always have this gorgeous water, when wind blew, it would get muddy but if it wasn't too windy, the water was this beautiful sandy green. You could see the rocks under the surface of the water, you could see the drop offs, you could see the potholes. It was beautiful. With the brown tide hit, then for the next five years, you couldn't see six inches in the water. It was a nasty brown look, and it totally changed fishing for me.

[Eric Kern]: And we got probably ten or fifteen miles down the King Ranch shoreline...all of a sudden, we come across a line and the water turns yellow, orange. They called it brown tide, but it looked almost orange to me.

[Reese Hunt, Jr.]: I tied orange flies, Clouser, with orange deer and some feathers. Anyway, I caught a lot of fish in the brown tide, fly fishing and plug fishing, but yeah, it turned out pretty good for me.

[John Sutton]: Areas that had been covered in good seagrass just became sand, you know, they died and went away, and a lot of the dead weeds and so forth matted up along your shorelines, and it really messed with the bottom there. The consistency of the bottom became like a muck, in some places knee deep. When your seagrasses die, well, crabs and shrimp, everything else dies along with it. And so, the fish, we found out, they were mostly still there...I really don't think we've ever recovered fully, the fishery hadn't, from that time.

[Eric Kern]: The grass is different. The wavy long grass, you'd be standing on Tide Gauge Bar and...when the waves would come in, it would just be like wheat, like have you seen wind blowing through a wheat field? That's what it looked like. The grass, it turned brown and then green and brown and then green, it was just beautiful...the water on the Tide Gauge Bar was gin clear, and the grass kept it that way.

[Cliff Webb]: For instance, the Land Cut, there were so many shrimp in the Land Cut. There were two or three cabins in the Land Cut. If people turned the lights on at night, and it was just solid eyeballs under the lights, just shrimp popping out of the water. It was so thick when the current ran, if you stood in the water with a pair of shorts on, the shrimp would hit your leg so hard, you had to get out of the water...You could put a dip net down and fill up a dip net with shrimp. There were millions of shrimp.

[Phil Blackmar]: The shrimp, in particular, there used to be a great shrimp run in the fall that we fished, and after we'd have a big cold front, a good cold front would come through, and it would lower the water level, and the shrimp would start heading out, and you had about a four- to six-week period there where you could fish under the birds, the birds would be working over the schools of shrimp, coming out...I think the number of shrimp and what not are significantly less than what they might have been at one time.

[Scott Murray]: The other, I guess, big change that you see is a huge increase in fishing pressure. You know, back in the fifties, the fifties and sixties, you could probably count the number of fishing guides on two hands at the most, and now in the Gulf Coast, there's around twelve hundred fishing guides, and there's more every year. Of course, the target species for years has been spotted seatrout, which certainly has an impact on the fishery. The number of saltwater fishing license sales is going up every year, and, uh, we're recruiting more and more saltwater fisherman to the Laguna Madre and Baffin Bay. So, pressure's a big factor, we've seen a huge increase in boat traffic, and at the launches, you can just see it expand every year.

[Cookie Cooper]: The rocks were so important because that's where the fish are going to hang around, and until the development of GPS, you really had to know where you were going and what you're doing. Well, nowadays, everybody has a GPS, everybody can buy all the tracks to all the places that they want to go for five hundred or a thousand dollars. So, now, instead of having some places where you can kind of maybe go and get away from some people because maybe they wouldn't want to come right in there to that spot because they didn't know exactly how to get there. Now, they're going to be right there, so instead of you being able to fish a little larger area, and I'm not talking about taking over half the bay or something with you and your buddies, I'm talking about maybe getting where somebody is not within a hundred yards of you or two hundred yards from you and actually get out without somebody running across your line with a power boat.

[Eric Kern]: My dad spent his last fishing days here on the bay and became fairly competent. He liked to go with me, but he had his own boat, and I'd see him sometimes, and I was standing on Tide Gauge Bar one morning, and I was down there with some friends real early. I hear this boat coming, coming from way around the corner and just throwing up a big rooster tail behind it and I thought, "Who is this yahoo, golly, going to run right over us," and it was my father (both laugh). "Thanks, dad," but at any rate, we spent some fun times here at the end of his life fishing and he liked it here as well.

<<musical interlude⁵>>

Conclusion: A Trip to Baffin Bay

[Brown]: The voices you just heard were Scott Murray, David McKee, Mike Blackwood, Eric Kern, Cliff Webb, John Sutton, Phil Blackmar, Bo Kratz, Cookie Cooper, David Rowsey, and Reese Hunt, Jr., as part of the [Baffin Bay Oral History Project](#). When bay health worsened, Scott

⁵ Lee Rosevere, "Curiosity."

Murray decided to take action and get some scientific help. That's when Jace Tunnell and Mike Wetz came in.

[Jace Tunnell]: So we wanted to see what had been done, talk to other fishermen and locals about what are the current concerns, you know, is there more than just the black drum that you're seeing that are emaciated? And it turns up there was because we ended up going down to Scott Murray's house, where he brought in a lot of the commercial fishermen, recreational anglers, guides. And, it turns out, that everyone kind of had a similar story to where it was really good in the late nineties of catching trout and fish and the crabbing was great and there had just been this steady decline over time.

[Mike Wetz]: A lot of those folks had been fishing the bay for a long time and so they'd noticed these changes happening...what we did is we went into it just to listen, just to hear what the ideas were, then we went back and formulated our own ideas on how to approach this issue, and I think one of the things we really realized is that we really needed to step back and look at this things big picture standpoint.

<<musical interlude⁶>>

Credits and Disclaimer

[Brown]: On the next episode of The Gulf Podcast, you're going to hear about the citizen science project they developed to look into the water quality issues in Baffin Bay, Texas. To learn more about the history of Baffin Bay, please visit The Gulf Podcast's website and digital archives and to learn about the current restoration efforts, check out the Bringing Baffin Back initiative. Before I sign off, I'd like to thank everyone for the interviews, thank my student production assistant Alyssa Lucas, and thank Lee Rosevere for the music.

The Watersheds series is sponsored by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Any opinions or views expressed on this podcast, however, may not represent the views and opinions of the Harte Research Institute or Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Until next time, thanks to you all for listening.

⁶ Lee Rosevere, "Curiosity."

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