

Captain David Rowsey

Interviewed by Jen Brown

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Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Jen Brown]: Okay, we are recording. This is Jen Brown, and it is March 13, 2022. I'm here with Captain David Rowsey to do an oral history interview and talk about his work with Baffin Bay and Baffin Bay water quality samples. So, for the record, do I have your permission to record?

[David Rowsey]: Absolutely.

[Brown]: Okay, great. Um, so this is an oral history and always we like to start with can you tell me more about your background and early life?

[Rowsey]: Um, early life, I was born in Ferriday, Louisiana, and raised by a bunch of fishermen. I was blessed on both sides of my family and had a great background in sportfishing (coughs). Mother divorced and my sister and my mother and I moved to Natchez, Mississippi, and lived there till I was twelve years old, and mother remarried, and I landed in Hunt, Texas, which is the headwaters of the Guadalupe River about, I don't know, seventy-five, eighty miles northwest of San Antonio, and always fished all my childhood, was always my number one hobby, my favorite thing ever to do, and I got a taste of saltwater when I was in high school, and it just kind of changed my life and I went from being a freshwater bass fishermen to falling hard into the saltwater scene, and, um, I, as a career, I became a real estate appraiser when I was about twenty-one years old, and I learned the trade in San Antonio while I was going to school up there, and I became state certified as a real-estate appraiser really young, and I was spending all my free time on the highway driving from San Antonio to here [Corpus Christi], you know, to have three-day weekends so I could fish. I did that for years, for every week, or three weekends out of every month I was down here fishing, and once I became state certified I could work anywhere in the state, and as a young man and not really (laughs) understanding responsibilities and everything, I just pulled the plug in San Antonio and moved down here on a whim so I could fish more (both laugh). And, um, anyway, so appraising allowed me a lot of free time. I could set up schedules around weather and if it was going to be a really gorgeous morning, in two days I could set up appointments for the afternoon to do my money job and, you know, I could fish for three or four hours, come in, shower up, go do my work, come back to my home office, write appraisals at night, I just did that for years and years and years.

[Brown]: What got you hooked on saltwater fishing?

[Rowsey]: Um, well, I am known as a trout guy, specifically, I'm known as a guy that loves to chase big trophy trout, and that's where my clientele generally hires me. I get some clientele

that hires me to just learn how to fish lures and what have you, but saltwater fishing, you know, what got me hooked was actually fighting a redfish for the first time. It was just a, just a bulldog compared to a canary, you know, the difference between (laughs) a trout and a redfish as far as the battle goes. They're very strong, drag tugging, can't turn them, and I'd never felt a fish fight like that, and I just thought that was the coolest thing in the world. Being very new and green at the deal, it took me some time to realize that trout were very similar to the bass that I was always pursuing as a young man. In other words, they're just great predators, they, you know, they basically eat the same kind of artificial lures so a lot of things that were in freshwater transferred right over into saltwater, and I realized, or I didn't realize, but it, you know, records are, oh I don't want to go down that road, but trout was just more similar to bass fishing, more elusive of a fish. Just a big trout is really a great accomplishment. Redfish are plentiful, they're all kind of the same size, they're fun as heck to fight, but the large trout become loners, and to pursue them and to get them to commit to an artificial lure after standing hours in the mud, and wet, and for day after day after day, it's just really rewarding to land them. So, I just became addicted to it, but that's what first got me into the saltwater and how it just mushroomed from there.

[Brown]: Um-hm, yeah. Um, so can you talk more about how you shifted from going to real-estate appraisal to being a fishing guide?

[Rowsey]: Uh, yeah (laughs). That's kind of a funny story. Um, I loved appraising. It was a great career, and as much as I loved fishing, I never had any desire in the world to be a fishing guide. I mean that was just, that was so far, it wasn't even a consideration, and what happened is in the, like around 1995, they started using croaker as a baitfish down here and croaker was so effective that, I mean, in the right hands, they're more effective than a gillnet that, you know, commercial fishermen, that is outlawed now in Texas, and so I had already fallen in love with these big, giant trout, of which Baffin has a lot of or did have a lot of them, and so, in '95 it started, and in about 2000 we had about thirty guides in the whole Coastal Bend that were considered full-time guides, and Coastal Bend being to Corpus Christi to Rockport, and by 2005 we had over three hundred guides because of croaker, and it was so easy and so effective, it was an easy way to make a buck off of a, you know, a state resource. You didn't really have to put much in the pot, and you could make good money being a guide, and a lot of people saw that, and today's 2022, and I just heard that there are over seven hundred registered guides now in the Coastal Bend. So, it went from around thirty in '95 to 2000, thirty guides to now we're in the seven hundred range, and watching these big boxes of fish come in day after day with all these huge, giant dead fish, you know, it just really started affecting me in the head. I was too attached to these fish. And a friend of mine was fishing with a guide one day, and I asked him, he was like, "Man, we had the most incredible day," and I'm like, "Yeah, but there's no sport in that, you know, where's the honor?" He said, "Well, I don't know how to do what you do. Nobody will teach me how to lure fish," and I was like, "That's the only thing holding you back from doing the way I do it?" And he's like, "Yeah." So, I got the thought in my head somewhere along the way that if I can teach people how to lure fish and take the more conservation route, enjoying the sport versus a picture at the end of the day with a box of dead fish, and I'll go back and I say, I tell people all the time, I started guiding out of spite. So, I said,

“If I can convert one croaker fishermen over to teaching to lure fish and take a conservation mindset, it’s a win.” So, I decided to do that, and I got my guide’s license, and I could only guide on the weekend. And, a little bit of back story, I used to fish a lot of big trout tournaments and was blessed to win quite a few so I had some pretty good name recognition out there already as a guide that catches big fish. So, that directly just went into the guiding thing and once my name got thrown out there the people started coming. I had way more business than I could even begin to handle and I was—and something happened in the real estate market and around 2010, and a lot of changes were made to the appraisal industry, and I wouldn’t say I was burnt out, but I was kind of on the edge of it, and the phone’s just ringing from charters and I just, on a whim, said a prayer, said, “All right God, if we’re going to get into this deal, you better back me up.” And so, my wife and I had not been married very long (laughs) and I told her I was going to quit appraising and guide full time and she thought I was crazy (Brown laughs). But, anyway, I’d been very blessed, haven’t skipped a beat. My clientele rarely keeps a fish, you know, occasional redfish or drum, one for a fresh meal. Since the freeze, we’ve released every single trout. We’ve had a few DOAs [Dead On Arrival] that come in, get caught in a gill or something, and so of course we clean them up so they wouldn’t be wasted, but the younger generation is really up to speed and all in on the catch-and-release thing. Generation probably older than myself, I guess, the—I don’t want to—but yeah, they’re a little bit older. There’s an older way of thinking that there’s plenty of fish in the bay, and at one time there probably were, but there’s not anymore, when some of these guys now that are in their late seventies, eighties, when they were really young men, there were, you couldn’t hurt them with a rod and reel, but there weren’t that many people participating in it. Um, when they changed the, the harvest regulations in 1983, they changed it, your bag limit was ten trout and three reds, and that was based on 250,000 saltwater stamps sold at the time. So, we recently went to five fish just prior to the freeze of 2021, and at that time there was, I think, a million and a half saltwater stamps sold. So we went from 250,000 to a million and a half, and I’m probably light on that number, and we still have the same limits. So, you can imagine how many fish were coming out of the bay, and guys like myself that are on the water every day, we can see it. We can tell by rod and reel, you know, we are just not catching the fish where we should, when we should. Uh, well, we’re just not catching the numbers and certainly not the trophies. You take out the middle of the gene pool, and they don’t have a chance to get big, so the trophies really took a big hit. I’ve just been on a pulpit for, I started guiding in 2006 part time, and I’ve just used it as a pulpit to preach conservation and do what’s right for the bay. I love to eat fish as much as anybody, but just take what you need. I mean, just because the state says this is the law and you can take that many, doesn’t mean it’s right. I have all the respect in the world for Parks and Wildlife, but I feel like I’ve got a better handle on things out here than what they actually see in their nets when they do their spring net surveys, you know, talking to people and seeing what comes in the boxes, 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, and— But I’m fifty-two-years old now and guiding should be getting easier for me every year with the knowledge I have out here, and its harder every year because there’s truly less fish to catch. But that whole thing, the whole trout kill was the reason I became a guide. It certainly wasn’t for

the money; I can promise you that (both laugh). I made a lot more money appraising real estate.

[Brown]: So, what are, what type of lessons do you try to teach your clients?

[Rowsey]: Um, well, I, I try to teach them a lot of things, but conservation's the number one. If you, say I've got a forty-year-old on the boat, and he's got two sons that are ten years, ten and twelve years old, I mean if you want them to enjoy this fishery you've got to be proactive now. You got to teach them and that it's not right to kill everything out here, and if you ever want to catch a trophy fish, just like the analogy I just told you, you just, if you take out the middle of the, the middle mature fish, the twenty- to twenty-five-inch fish, if you're killing those, you're never going to grow twenty-seven- to thirty-two-inch fish. I mean it's just simple, and I really, I'm real big on selling the sport of fishing. Not a lot of people, and, you know, their idea of a good day is catch as many as you can as fast as you can and get back to the dock, and people were paying guides to go out and do that, but I hear those same people go, "God, we were only out for two hours, and I got charged nine hundred dollars." That's not what it should be about. It should be, out there with your family, with your friends, making memories, and even if the fishing's slow, enjoy seeing the dolphins, the birds, and me explaining why a fish should be there versus there, and just teaching them the tools of the trade, and how to be successful out here, but be good stewards of the bay. I mean that's just the bottom line for me, just respect the bay and, you know, and my whole goal is to get the fishery back to the trophy size and we've got potential for that now since the freeze, you know, this week, Wednesday, the state of Texas, Parks and Wildlife, the law's changed from five, right now the limit is five fish. What is the limit? Five fish and I think the minimum is fifteen inches right now, and there's no upper end limit, you only have one a day over twenty-five inches, but as of this Wednesday, March the 16th, for the next two years the limit's going to be seventeen to twenty-three, no fish over twenty-three, and a bag limit of three fish because of the freeze, and if everyone gets on the board and releases what they catch, I mean we actually the front, not the front, the freeze, can actually have a positive effect on us, I think. It can almost be a blessing if everybody gets on board and starts releasing their fish. In two years, them changing the regs to that is going to give us a twenty-six or twenty-seven percent increase in spawn and so that's going to be huge for us, and in two years releasing all these fish that are now illegal to keep over twenty-three inches, those fish are going to have the opportunity to get really big again, and that's what people come to this area for. It's what it's known for. The state records are set here. I mean these are some of the biggest trout, speckled trout, in the world, and they come to this destination to catch those big fish and so that's just, I guess, my purpose or what I try to sell when I'm standing on my quote pulpit. It's just conservation, look to the future, don't live in the moment, don't be selfish, take some to eat, but just take what you need fresh and let the, let the rest go. To keep a fish as a trophy, to get a skin mount, I mean that's not necessary anymore, you have fiberglass replicas that look even better (coughs). A picture on the water holding a beautiful trout is a lot better than you standing next to an ice chest (Brown laughs) with a bunch of dead trout with gray eyes, and it's just, I just try to sell that and just the conservation side of it.

[Brown]: Yeah. Um, so let's talk about Baffin Bay. What do you think makes Baffin Bay so special?

[Rowsey]: Well, that's a great question. Baffin is very special because Baffin, kind of like a lake, is essentially landlocked, and the closest big passes, north and south, are Port Mansfield and Port Aransas, and they're roughly forty-five miles north of Baffin and roughly forty-five miles south of Baffin. So, Baffin doesn't have a lot of water exchange, so it's really salty, you know, two to three times saltier than some of the other bays, it's considered a hypersaline bay, and the trout that have been there for however many thousands of years, they don't migrate back and forth like a lot of other trout do. They just stay there and get big and big and big. So, there's this genetic trout back there that just has superior genetics to other trout up and down the coast and so that's what makes it special as far as the trophy fishing goes. Baffin has the famous rock formations that are fossilized worm matter, should I call them, and it only occurs in two bays in the world, I believe, and both of them are hypersaline bays. Baffin Bay and a bay in Australia is the only place they, and I may be wrong, but I think I'm ninety-nine percent right, the only two bays that have these rock formations, which makes the bay very hard to navigate. If you don't know what you're doing, you could tear your boat up and hurt yourself, so that makes it really special. Um, and 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 ranch—I mean 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, but 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 that's really unique and different than most.

[Brown]: Um-hm. What has been your most memorable experience fishing Baffin Bay?

[Rowsey]: Oh, gosh. Impossible to answer (laughs). Impossible question, but I don't know. There are all kinds of things, you know, I was just making a wade this past week and we were walking towards a rock pile. My clients don't know that it's there, but there's a little pole sticking up and I recognize it, and I said, "Hey, there's a rock pile right there," and I said, "Be careful to go around it because you'll trip and get cut up," and they're like, "How do you, do you know that rock pile?" and I'm like, "Yeah, as a matter of fact, the first trout I ever caught over seven pounds on a topwater lure was off of that rock pile." So those kinds of things are special memories. The first time I ever won a big trout tournament was in Baffin. Uh, the first time that I ever put a client on a ten-pound trout, which is like a huge deal, I mean it's like a crazy big deal, that was in Baffin. I've got a cabin on one of the spoil islands in Baffin, so the waters on my back porch and my front porch and I've spent countless nights down there watching sunrises and sunsets and watching dolphins come to the end of the pier when you pull your boat up wanting something to eat and shrimp migrating through and under the lights at night, and skipping all over the water, and there's a big pelican migration that happens right after sunset that's just unbelievable that most people never get to witness unless they've been down there, and I've got just tons of good memories, got some memories that aren't so good like sinking boats and things like that, you know, those kinds of things are great memories now,

everybody's safe, but at the time they weren't the (laughs) making of a great memory. Um, but I think the ultimate thing, because I started doing it so young, and being a wade fisherman, and that is how I fish, I mean, you saw my boat out there. I've got this big, gorgeous, heavy-duty boat, but we really just use it as an Uber or a taxi transport. We get to where we're going, we have on our waders, we get in the water, and we fish, and so a lot of my great memories are just—that's all I ever did was I would park my boat, and I'd walk all day, and it's literally how I learned the bay, you know, like I had eyeballs on my feet, and I just remembered these things and with the development of GPSs, you could start plugging things in. So, I know the bay very uniquely, you know, I would almost call it an intimate relationship (laughs). I've fished every nook and cranny of it, and I walked all of it and that's how I know it, and those things have made it very special to me, that whole learning process. I've been asked, "Wouldn't you want to live somewhere else and trout fish over in Florida or something," and I was like, "No way, man." I was like. "It's taken me thirty something years to learn all this, I don't have the time or the energy to go learn things as well as I know this." This is like knowing your best friend, you know what's going to come out of their mouth, you know what she's going to give you, every little wind that comes through, it's like, all right we need to get out of here because it's fixing to get real ugly, just knowing every little nuance of the bay, and I've just learned those over the years, and going through that learning process has made it all very special to me.

[Brown]: Yeah, that's cool. So, I hear you and John Sutton have a funny story, about a fishing spot?

[Rowsey]: Um, well, John Sutton is a great, and hopefully he won't get offended when I say this, he's a great old timer fisherman. He's one of the guys you look up to. John's one of the few guys in the world that has actually landed a thirteen-pound trout, which is like, you know, ten is just unheard of. John's actually landed a thirteen, and honestly I don't know the story you're exactly referring to, but John has got a little special fishing hole that he fishes here on the King Ranch shoreline, and I didn't know John at the time, but it's a place I like to fish, too, and I was always like who is this guy in my spot (both laugh), and eventually I got to know John and realized who it was, but I don't know if that's the story or not—

[Brown]: —Yeah—

[Rowsey]: —But it's kind of essentially how John and I started talking, saw him at the boat ramp one day and I'm like, "Man, you're always over there," and he's like, "Well, that's like my favorite place, short close trip," and I say, "I get it. There's some great trout in there at times so," but John's a neat guy and, uh, lot of respect for him. He's done some things in Baffin that most anglers would only dream of.

[Brown]: Um-hm. Um, so can you talk about the changes you've noticed to Baffin Bay over time?

[Rowsey]: Um, yeah. Um, you know, the big changes that I've seen that come and go, and I know we're going to get into that, has been the brown tide. That's one of the major changes.

The introduction of croaker as a baitfish was a huge change to Baffin and how it changed the dynamic of kill fishing and sportfishing, just really kind of drove a wedge between fishermen and, for most of the sports is what I mean, you got your lure guys on one side, you got your bait guys on the other so there's kind of this, croaker kind of put a wedge in between them. Because of that, I'm not saying all, but the mindset of that type of fishermen, the croaker fishermen, is to get your fish in the box and be done with it and that's opposite of what I do, which is catch and release, and that's had a real detrimental effect on the numbers of fish especially like I said a while ago, the big trophy fish, because they kill so many of the breeder fish, the twenty, twenty-fives that become the trophies. So, we've watched the trophy fish take a big decline over the last ten years, and we know what it's attributable to, and I don't think, people will argue the point, but that is the truth of the matter. So, brown tide, croaker fishing, and one of the side effects of brown tide is when it comes in, there's not enough sunlight penetration to get to the bay bottom, so in the one to four foot of water where the grass grows, when you don't get the sunlight penetration, we lose a lot of grass in the process, and you don't have all those little sanctuaries for the bait fish and those sorts of things so that's why water quality was always a really big concern down here when the first brown tide blooms popped up. I haven't read up on this in a while, but the first brown tides occurred in the eighties when they first popped up, and it lasted for years and years and years. It lasted into the nineties and that's really part of the reason that croaker started was, it was, you know, they make so much noise when you hook them and shake them that it gives the trout that are there something to come to. They can't see them in this water so it actually gives them a reason to come over to it, check it out, and eat it, and that's what made them very vulnerable to be caught. Those are the major changes, oh, one more though, the amount of pressure, the—oh my God, the amount of people on the water now is unbelievable and that goes back to that million and a half saltwater stamps sold. Technology, fast boats, more people, I mean, you used to go to Baffin was an hour plus drive down there in the smaller boats that we had. Now we got boats that go seventy to ninety miles an hour and you can be down there in a matter of minutes. Something that was remote and really special and just that it was an adventure to go to Baffin is now easily done because of all the new technology, and then there's a lot of people that have it so all the fishing areas, you know, the boat lanes and everything. Everything's just a lot more crowded now, so.

[Brown]: You know, you talk about how you're an artificial lure fisherman.

[Rowsey]: Um-hm.

[Brown]: Can you talk about, has your tackle changed over time? Has your approach changed over time, types of lures, that sort of thing?

[Rowsey]: Yeah, I mean like everything else, technology and everything, there's always improvements and modifications in things and when there were a lot of fish in the bay you could just go out there with just about any kind of little piece of plastic on a jig head and catch a fish, and the lure manufacturers have figured out that, like I said very early on, that trout and bass fishing are so much alike, you know, they've taken a lot of their lures and repackaged them as saltwater because they're so effective and I've got, I mean they're kind of behind you, but

I've got tons of them hanging on the walls, and on the racks, you know, things that have progressed over time, and a trout can be caught on soft plastics, hard spoons, subsurface plugs, topwater lures, a popping cork with a jig and plastic under it, you know, those are all different lure ways to catch fish, and every year they make some kind of a modification to make this lure, or any of these lures, look more and more natural in the water. So, there's a—versus when the saltwater lures first started, I mean they have just, it's amazing how much it's grown and the way the industries taking it, and I always tell people a new lure does most of its catching at the counter. Okay Because it's catching the fisherman (Brown laughs) because it's pretty, it's shiny, and a lot of them don't even work. They're just, somebody will do something gimmicky and advertise the hell out of it on Facebook or Instagram, and it's the new hype thing, but I've just learned over time a lot of the old lures that, or a lot of the new lures now are just little modifications on some of the lures that were built in the, let's say really the lures really started getting an overhaul in the nineties and the two thousands and the teens, that's where a huge transition took and they started coming out with all these new designs and everything, and I'm guilty of buying all of them (both laugh). I mean, this place is a museum to lures, but I'm at the point now that I can go out with just a handful of confidence lures, some of them are old, some of them are kind of new, and the most productive is still the little soft plastic on a jig head. So, these lures, they keep progressing and getting changed and everything, but it basically all comes down to can you make a lure look like a wounded fish, and it doesn't matter how old the lure is, if you can pull that off, you can catch a trout so, you know, but the lures are, like I said, they do most of the catching at the cash register (coughs).

[Brown]: Yeah. Well, let's talk about your work on the Baffin Bay monitoring project. So, can you tell me how that all started?

[Rowsey]: Um, I'm involved with quite a few groups, and a lot of people, some of them are retired, some of them live on Baffin, and I believe Scott Murray was the first one that brought this to my attention, that they were going to start this program and when he told me what they were going to do we were in the midst of a brown tide, and I was just disgusted with the bay because this thing keeps reoccurring. We'll get a year or two of beautiful water, then it comes back and it's just, it's just horrible and I was like, "Look, I don't know what y'all need or what, but I'm in as a volunteer." I said, "I'll volunteer my time, my boat, I'll pay for the gas just to get y'all, whoever needs to be where," and so it really just started off like that, just a simple conversation and it was a subject close to my heart, so I wanted to be involved in it and so I just started doing it and just started running the boat for them, just doing—sometimes without the scientists doing other field samples where I would see an occurrence where the water was really pretty and it looked normal, but there was something on the shoreline that was making it real brown and ugly, something was occurring. In those spots I would GPS them, take water samples, get them to Mike's group, that sort of thing. So, just whatever I could do to keep them informed and keep the information line open and anything they needed that I was willing to do for them. So, I just kind of stayed on that level.

[Brown]: Can you describe what the brown tide looked like in those years?

[Rowsey]: Yeah, a really super dark, dark tea, you know, just a really strong tea. Um, almost looks like some brackish waters I've seen in Florida, but in their case, it's different because they have trees dropping leaves and stuff in and you're getting dyes off the leaves that change theirs, so there's a big difference there. We don't have those types of trees to drop foliage in the water to do that. So, it looks like a dark tea and if the wind blows it gets mixed up with the muddy water and I mean the visibility in it is like a half an inch if that, and then like I mentioned earlier, the sunlight doesn't get a chance to make it to the grass, the grass dies off, you lose all those sanctuaries for the shrimp, the bait fish, all that, so it has a really detrimental effect on the fishery and, uh, this is not scientific by any means, this is just me talking to what I experienced with a rod and reel. First of all, you know you're limited using lures because they've got to see or feel the vibration off the lure and so fishing would regress. Fishing just wouldn't be as good, and then you would think fishing is so bad, have these fish left the system, and gone out to the mouth of the bay or tried to go south through the land cut to find cleaner water, and so you had that going on. You're playing mind games. Where are these fish? You can't tell anything. There's not life in the bay. There's no mullet on the surface or no shrimp flipping or anything, so you have the feeling everything's gone. So, another example of how the brown tide is, so every year from Port Mansfield, north to Baffin, through what we call the land cut, which is just a dredge through the flats for barges to go through, the brown tide has crept into the land cut. So, every year coming from Mansfield, we'd always have what we call the spring tide and the trout run, and there's a certain amount of trout that are migratory, and they come up through the south, infiltrate Baffin, do their thing, and mate. Some of them stay, some of them leave, but there have been times, and you'll hear word on the street all the trout are starting to come through. So, you can start at the south end of the land cut, and you can get a trout bite up until the point they have progressed to, but they haven't, you know, they're coming to Baffin, but they're not all the way there yet. Well, then the brown tide will come in and those trout will hit that wall of brown water, and they won't go any further north. I mean they just, they do not like it, they stall, they turn around, and those fish never come through. So, that's, amongst the fishermen, that's something we talk about a lot during the brown tides. So, I don't think these fish are in the cut now but are they going to come through to start trying to replenish some of the fish out of Baffin or is the brown tide going to stop them. So, those are some of the side effects of the brown tide that we have concerns about as fishermen.

[Brown]: How did it impact your guiding business?

[Rowsey]: Um, you know, I had to, I had to make a lot of excuses for tough days. People still came because there's still a chance. At that time, there were still a lot of big fish in the bay, so you still had a good chance of catching a trophy. Numbers fishing was pretty dang tough so monetarily it probably didn't affect my guiding business a whole lot, but results at the end of the day, it impacted it a lot. You just weren't getting the action and you'll get clients get bored and you're just like, "Oh, God, this is tough" and I'm like, "All you can do is keep casting." But, like you said, monetarily not so much, but fish landed, fishing opportunities to see your trophy fish and actually have the chance to catch one, it diminished those chances greatly.

[Brown]: Yeah. So, that makes sense why you would get involved in the water monitoring—

[Rowsey]: —Exactly—

[Brown]: So, can you walk me through what that was like and, um, and how often you did it and that sort of thing?

[Rowsey]: Um, you know, it seems like we were doing it every couple weeks, and there were many volunteers like myself and some of them on the other side of the fence than me. I mean, there were guys that were throwing croaker that were concerned, too, and some of those guys even got involved because bottom line is they're making a living off of it now and they want a good fishery too (phone dings) or as good as possible, and—sorry, lost my train of thought.

[Brown]: People involved at the—

[Rowsey]: Um, so—I'm sorry, can you re-ask the question again? That phone threw me off.

[Brown]: No worries. Um, can you kind of walk me through the process of the work you all did and the—

[Rowsey]: Okay. So, yeah, it was like an every two week deal, and you'd volunteer your time and there were set locations out in the bay where they would do very specific water samples from. They would do them at different depths in that same location every time just so they could have a line, I guess, to base it off of, high and low, if it's—and I remember they had a black and white disk like cut into pies, quartered up, and you would drop that down and you could see how far the water clarity went down. The rope was numbered so you could, you know, it was kind of one of their tests they did, and they would take these different samples, and I believe there was a mud sample taken off the bottom each time, um, then they would gather the samples. I would at that point, you know, I just had to get them out there and get them in safely. They had a lab set up originally in the back of Baffin in the Loyola Beach area, and they would do their samplings and take their notes and do all that back there, and I believe it was eventually moved to a lab at Texas A&M here in Corpus.

[Brown]: Um-hm. What kept you—so how long did you do this?

[Rowsey]: That's a good question. Uh, I can't remember, you know, maybe a couple years or maybe not quite that long, a year and a half or so, I think is how long the whole study took.

[Brown]: Um-hm. What kept you, like, going out again and again and spending all this time to bring these samples out and that sort of thing?

[Rowsey]: Um, what kept me personally doing it?

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Rowsey]: Oh, my love for the bay. I mean, is that the type of answer you're looking for? I mean I was passionate about it. I mean the bay is, I mean it's, it's my life, it's what I'm passionate about, it's how I ended up here, it's just, I mean, it is who I am (laughs). It, quoting some girl movie, it defines me (both laugh). But, I mean, that's what I'm, I mean that's just—anybody that knows me knows I'm a man of that bay. That's my number one passion outside of my family, but I just I've spent my whole twenties and now fifty-two years old, I've spent my whole life just being there and I just want it to be healthy, I want it to be full of giant fish again, and anything I can do, as little as it is, as one guy, I want to, if I can participate and lend a hand, I want to do it.

[Brown]: Um-hm, and what did you hope you would learn or what did you hope to see out of the work, just—

[Rowsey]: I wanted to know the root cause of it. I mean, I always had my theories of what it was, but I wanted scientific fact because there were some studies done on it that, and I'm not a scientist, but I've got a lot of common sense and it just didn't make sense to me, and I really want to say something, but, you know, so the, like I said, the late eighties were the first brown tides. A lot of the ranches were around the area, uh, they went from just being wild ranches without very little agriculture and then they started going to the agriculture side, growing cotton, growing, like, commercial grass, Bermudas and St. Augustines, and that kind of thing, and that all started in the eighties also, and then, you know, I know there was one study. I can't remember where it was from, but there were along the—there's two creeks that feed Baffin, very small tributaries. One's the Petronila Creek and the other one is the Olmos Creek, and the Petronila Creek specifically runs right through the heart of South Texas agriculture. I mean it just cuts right through it and when all that started, it was at that time the late eighties, early nineties, was when those blooms took off. It just kind of went along with when all the agriculture really got going. Where they, you know, all of a sudden there was fifty, sixty thousand acres and commercial grass fields that obviously had to be fertilized and got to be watered. The water runs off with all the water, you know, it only can go, it either goes in the ground or runs to Petronila Creek. There's no buffers for it or anything like that at the time. I think there are now, and because the bay's been in pretty good shape for a while so I'm hoping the work that Mike and everybody's done has a big part of that, but I just wanted the proof that's that what it was, and everybody's saying, "No, it's a natural occurrence," and I'm like, "This is not a natural occurrence. This is not from fish dying laying on the bottom of the bay." And, then studies started coming out other places like in Florida and some of the Carolinas that never had brown tide all of a sudden started getting it. What do they have in common? Well, these areas along these bays all of a sudden went to residential development and people, and they fully admitted it over there, you know, they're like, with all the fertilizers, nutrients, phosphorus, and all that is leaching into the bay, and they clearly state what it is, but I love Texas as much as any human being, but Texas was, in my opinion, very slow to admit what the problem was.

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Rowsey]: And so, I just wanted it, I wanted something to be done about it. I mean, I'm all for commerce and people making a living and farming. I mean, part of my Louisiana family is farmers and my mother's side, they're all farmers. I get it. I want everybody to be successful, but not at the loss of the special place that we have down here.

[Brown]: Yeah. Thank you. So, what do you think success looks like in terms of current efforts to restore the bay?

[Rowsey]: Uh, you know, I'm optimistic. The things I'm reading that some of the farming they're putting in these buffer zones and putting up natural blockers like native grasses and that sort of thing to keep the runoff from getting into the creeks and I don't know if that's mandatory now or if just the ranches realizing or the farmers, ranches, whatever you want to call them, realizing that maybe they're contributing to this and are taking the steps themselves, being proactive. Because I mean, one of my best friends is a farmer. I mean, he loves to fish. He wants everything healthy too. So, and this fishing thing, it's, yeah, it's a passion for me and a lot of other people, but it's a huge economic boost to this area. I mean, way more than the aquarium or the Lexington or anything like that (laughs), not knocking them, but just making an analogy. I mean, people are buying these hundred-thousand-dollar boats, staying in hotels, eating at restaurants, buying thousands of dollars' worth of lures, hiring guides, buying Simms waders. You know, it is a huge economic boost to this area so if you got an unhealthy dying bay system people aren't going to come. They're not going to support all these industries, so it's even—you can play that angle. Um, it's just such a big part of our lives down here. It's just better for everybody if we've got a healthy bay. It's just better all the way around, so I think farmers and ranchers are starting to do the right thing and again don't know if they're forced to do it or on their own, but whatever the end result is on that one, whatever they can do to hold the fertilizers, and everything back is going to make a big difference.

[Brown]: Yeah. This is the question for the—I would consider you not an older generation, but this was one of the questions (both laugh)—

[Rowsey]: —Okay—

[Brown]: —that Mike and I came up with, so what—how can we get younger generations to want to be stewards of Baffin Bay?

[Rowsey]: Um, have a healthy fishery. The more fish they catch, the more addicted they get to it, um, and I think, and once they fall in love with it because they're having a lot of success they become like me, because I didn't start out the guy that I am. I used to kill fish, but I realized there was a problem and I changed. People to this day call me a hypocrite. They say, "Well, I remember when you used to bring in a lot of fish," and I said "Yeah, I made a mistake." I said, "Those were different times, we could bring in fish now," but, I think, a healthy fishery, a lot of fish which, you know, all this is tied together because the fish need the habitat, brown tide kills the habitat, there's just an endless circle, but as long as you got a healthy fishery and people

are down there having a good time, the more time they are going to want to spend down there, and I think that's how you get more people involved, and I take a lot of fathers out mostly that will have a son or a daughter and I have a lot, and it's really neat to watch these kids. I mean they'll catch fish and I'm like, "Man, that's a great one. Let's get a picture of it," and he's like, "Yeah, let's do it fast. I want to let it go." These kids are already learning. They're hearing things, reading things, or maybe their father told them because I'll tell their fathers, "Hey, we're not keeping any trout. You can keep your couple redbfish for dinner, but that's it." So, maybe they're relaying the message beforehand, but you can see the change, you can see people going more to the conservation side now which just thrills me to death, but I think that's how you get the younger generation. The healthier the bay is, the more fish they're going to catch, the more they're going to want to come back, and once they build that love for it, they're going to naturally do like I evolved into. They're going to fall in love with the bay and want what's best for it.

[Brown]: Um-hm. So, those were the main questions that I had, but can you tell me some fish stories (Rowsey laughs)?

[Rowsey]: Give me a subject (both laugh).

[Brown]: Okay, big trout. Big Baffin Bay trout.

[Rowsey]: Big Baffin Bay trout, have hundreds of them. I'll tell you some of my—I'll tell, uh, one of my favorite stories doesn't even involve me, but it involves a very close friend of mine, and I told this on a podcast a while back, and when I was fishing tournaments towards the end of my tournament career, a fellow named Mark Holt was my fishing partner. And I'm fifty-two, so Mark's probably about ten years older than me, maybe twelve, and he's just a fanatical fisherman, and he's from up around the Houston/Galveston area, and he's got a cabin in Baffin, and there's the Alazan Bay, which is an offshoot of Baffin Bay, Mark caught a really big trout back there one day, and he'd never mounted a fish although he's caught huge fish for many, many years, and this fish came up and this fish was so big he's like, "God, I'm going to mount this fish. I'm finally going to mount one," and he tells this story as he pulled her up. She kind of rolled on her side and he's like, "Her eyes like a half a dollar, she's so big," and he said, "I instantly knew that I couldn't kill this fish, and he said, "But I didn't have anybody with me, and I wanted a picture of it." So he fills some water up in an ice chest, no ice just, you know, puts the fish in there, takes off and Mark drives a little bitty boat with a small gas tank so all this running is a big deal. Drives back towards the mouth of the bay, nobody's on the water, but he finds a commercial drummer drum fishing, idols over to him, asks the guy if he'd mind taking a picture of this big fish. He wants to let it go. The drum guy does, takes a picture and Mark throws it back in the ice chest and the commercial fisherman said, "Oh, I thought you were going to let it go," and he said, "I am, but I'm going to take it back to where I caught it," which is like seventeen miles away, you know, in his boat. So, he—well, there's a good chance he's going to run out of gas doing all this, but it was so, such a big deal that to him to release her exactly in her home where he caught her, so that's just one of many cool stories, or stories that I think are cool. Um, I can and I'm just freelancing here, but I can remember what a topwater lure called a

Skitter Walk came out. It was brand new and I was in the area called the Badlands one day and I'd been, my boat had been parked, I'd been in the water for probably five or six hours in waders, so I'm probably getting to the point when I need to get back on the boat to take care of business, and I'm throwing this top water and all of a sudden I get this big explosion on it, and I miss it, and it comes back and hits it again and I finally catch it and it's a redfish, let it go, throw it back out there and then I can see multiple redfish going after this lure so I'm just kind of toying with them because redfish just aren't the trophy that a trout is, and I'm just kind of toying with them and ta-ta-ta-ta, working the lure, and boy it just gets smoked by one of them, and I'm thinking now I'm just horsing it in so I can get it off to catch another one, and I bring it in and there's a giant trout mixed with them, the longest trout that I'd ever caught. It was like, it wasn't quite thirty-three inches, but it was over thirty-two and a half. I mean it was a really huge, huge fish. It was one of the fish that I've caught over ten pounds and so, the ten-pound fish I mentioned is kind of like the holy grail to the saltwater trout guy, so I've caught six over ten and one over eleven, but it's taken me thirty something years to do that. I mean that's how rare they are and that's not just thirty something years, that is, on the very conservative side, two hundred plus days on the water a year, and that's on the very conservative side. It's probably closer to 250, to 275. But catching certain fish during tournaments when you really needed that anchor fish to put you over the top to win the tournament. Those are all very, very special memories or the opposite of that, losing that anchor fish in a tournament. Funny story, I was on a flat one day fishing a tournament and I was throwing this Texas-made lure that the state record was caught on. There's a bunch of them hanging right behind you called a Corky, and I'll grab you one so you can play with it. Uh, that's a very famous lure that the state record, fellow name Jim Wallace caught February 6, 1996, on that lure, but I was throwing it on the flats and that things got this just awesome wobble under the water that just looks so lifelike, and I'm in this area where I know there's big fish. I mean, obviously I'm there first day of the tournament. I get this hit and I'm fighting this big fish, and she comes out of the water, and I just see the lure fly out of her mouth, and I'm just disgusted. I'm just heartbroken, and I bend over, and I'm only in about high knee deep water and I bend over going, "Oh my God," and another fish was tailgating her and hit that lure after it hit the water (Brown laughs), and almost rips the rod out of my hand, and it's just as big if not bigger, and I lose it, too. So, in one cast, I lose two different monster trout, and that gets in my head and I'm never going to recover from that during the tournament. Um, I had another day I was fishing by myself after I'd been appraising all day. I went down and I was fishing at the mouth of Baffin on a spoil island and that's using a really big, long topwater lure with three big treble hooks on it, and I caught a big trout and I'm excited about it. I get her up to me and I grab her by the back of the head gently to try to get the hooks out of her so I can let her go and she starts flopping around and I instinctively just went to grab her so she wouldn't get away and I forgot about the hooks and I've pressed her to my chest and now the topwater's in the fish, in my shirt and, oh, one more, in my hand. I'm hooked up three ways (both laugh) and I'm by myself. So, I've got an eight pound plus trout hooked to me and I meant I'm just, I'm baffled. I was like, "What am I going to do?" I got my rod in my hand and the fish is trying to wiggle and every time she wiggles the hook goes deeper, and I'm in pain and so I, nothing else to do, but walk to the island and get on my hands and knees and, you know, I've got some hemostats I keep on my side and I literally start cutting my shirt off, getting that one free, and then trying to get the fish unhooked

because it looks like it's the easiest one to get undone so I can then go to my hand, and as I'm doing that, it's not working out easy. She starts flopping, and the first hook was already deep then she got another hook in me on the same hook. But long story short, I eventually get her unhooked and release her back into the water. I cut a big donut around my shirt so I'm still hooked up, but now I'm free of everything. The hooks are out of the shirt, the fish is gone, but I got to get back on the boat and head to town and go to the emergency room to get hooks cut out of me, (both laugh) so lot—

[Brown]: —Geez—

[Rowsey]: —all kinds of crazy stories like that, and, I mean, all kinds of great catching stories. I've just been so blessed to land so many beautiful, big, big fish down there, and I can literally sit here and dang near tell you every one of them, but I have a really good memory for fishing, not much else (both laugh). But, finding a special group of fish during a summer tournament where big trout are really hard to catch, and I learned something that I had never put together before. I was leaving an area pre-fishing for this tournament and using my trolling motor to get back into the bay away from the rock piles so I can get my boat on plain. I see what I think is a school of big redfish and I'm like, "Huh, we'll have a little fun real quick," and I kind of troll over to them and throw into them and I get a hit first cast, and I'm like, "Oh, this is too easy," and bring it in, and it's like a seven-pound trout. Well, I proceed to catch five or six more of them like that, and they were just out in the middle of nowhere, but what the trout were doing, this was a great lesson for me. The trout were letting the school of drum go through, the drum make all the noise, and were picking at the bottom so all the bait fish on the outside edges are moving away from the drum, and the trout sit on the outside edges. So, they let the drum spook them and they're picking them off, and that's how I was catching them. Well, the tournament was a week later and so I was having, it was deep water so I was having to fish out of the boat which I never do, but I ended up winning this really big tournament and that was what I did all day was just I got out there and followed schools of drum around, fishing the edges of them, you know (Brown laughs), and everybody else was wading in the hot summer. It was an August tournament. Nobody was catching anything, but I was out there just catching these monster trout in the middle of the summer, which is kind of unheard of, but just doing something very unorthodox like fishing a school of drum. So, things like that are all great memories for me.

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Rowsey]: So.

[Brown]: Thanks. Well, do you have anything to add about Baffin Bay?

[Rowsey]: Um, you know, not much more than I said, I don't think, but I would just ask everybody to be respectful of her, you know, treat her like a lady, and just love and cherish her, and run your boats properly. Don't tear thing up meaning the shorelines and the grass beds and don't run in shallow water and prop chop fish, not that you're trying to kill fish, but it happens

when you're doing that, and just have a conservative mindset, and don't be greedy, leave some for the next guy or for you to catch again. If you want a future down there and you want to see big fish again, everybody's got to be proactive and responsible and a good steward of the bay. I mean it's really kind of that simple. I don't mean to pick on younger generations because I use social media too, but a lot of our problems nowadays seem to be people wanting what we call glory shots, these big stringers of fish. What's the point? I mean, check your ego at the door, take a picture of it alive, let them go, but that's kind of the new thing now, is social media. I think it's being pretty detrimental to the bay. I probably should have brought it up earlier, but it just occurred to me to say it.

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Rowsey]: Um, but I don't know. Like I just said a while ago, Jimmy Buffett song, I can't remember which one, treat her like a lady, and he's talking about a bay in that song (both laugh). It's just one of his sailing songs. Treat her like a lady so I guess that's it.

[Brown]: Okay, well that's a good place to stop then. Thank you (both talking)—

[Rowsey]: All right, great.

(end of recording)