

John Sutton

Interviewed by Jen Brown and Michael S. Wetz
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Corpus Christi, Texas

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Jen Brown]: We are recording. This is Jen Brown. It is May 5, 2022. Um, I'm here at the Harte Research Institute to interview John Sutton for the Baffin Bay oral history project and also present is Mike Wetz (coughs). Excuse me. Um, to begin do I have your permission to record?

[John Sutton]: Yes.

[Brown]: Okay, thanks. Um, so, a great starting point today would be, can you tell me more about your background and early life?

[Sutton]: Uh, I've spent most of my life on the Texas coast living in different cities and Brownsville, Corpus Christi, and a little in Kingsville, but most of my early life, I think, being on the coast, my family were fishermen, sports fishermen mostly, grandfather, father, and myself. I started at an early age. One of my first memories of Baffin Bay is in 1957. When I was thirteen, I caught a—went fishing with my grandfather, and I caught an extra-large speckled trout, and I thought that was the greatest thing, and really made me long to be in Baffin more. We lived in Brownsville, and my grandparents lived in Kingsville, and I could come and visit them and fish in Baffin on the weekends and so forth. Uh, but it—most of my life through high school, even after high school, has been involved in fishing.

[Brown]: Can you tell me how the fishing was like back then, and what sort of lures and tackle you used?

[Sutton]: The fishing was great. I mean, I hear a lot of people say it's just as good as it used to be, but in my opinion, it doesn't equate to it at all. One of the differences is, not as near as many people fishing, and you could go to different places and not worry about someone else being there or coming along and wanting to fish where you're fishing, things of that nature. So, we—seems like my family was always lure fishermen. We very seldom ever used a live bait, things like that, and at that time, your lures were numbered and like Mirrolure, Bingos, things of that nature, but the predominant lure was spoons, gold or silver spoons. Mostly gold spoons seemed to be the favorite of most, and we used baitcasting reels, uh, and we used the old, for a while, used the old cloth line and nylon lines that after a couple of seasons would rot (both laugh), and we were very happy to see the advent of monofilament. At that time, monofilament was hard to use because it wasn't real limp, you know, it had a lot of memory, and so when you cast out it would just—they coiled up if you didn't watch what you were doing, you know, you'd get a big bird's nest, and then the reels at that time were the smaller ones, like baitcasting were direct drive. They didn't have a drag system on them, so you had to use your thumb on the

spool if you got a big fish to kind of slow it down and so forth, and we always would take a leather glove, a heavy leather glove, and cut the thumb off of it and then use that on your thumb to protect you from getting line burn when you caught a big fish. Uh, the—most of the rods at that time were bigger and heavier and you don't have, didn't have anything near what we have today as far as fishing rods or the lines either so great improvements there.

[Brown]: Yeah. So, did you grow up entirely in Brownsville and then you went to school there in Corpus?

[Sutton]: Uh, I started school in Corpus and moved. I think I went here from the first grade through the fourth grade and then we moved to Brownsville, and we stayed there until '63, which is when I graduated from high school and then after that we moved up to the Freeport area and stayed there for several years between there and Pasadena and then I got my chance to move back to Corpus (laughs).

[Brown]: Yeah. What—why did you want to move back to Corpus?

[Sutton]: Uh, the fishing for one. Seemed like there was more freedom to come and go different places that I wanted to fish than there were around the Galveston area. Galveston had good fishing, but they had a lot of people enjoying fishing up there too, and my older brother lived in Corpus, and I moved here to spend more time with him, too.

[Brown]: Okay, and, um, speaking of Baffin Bay, so you started fishing there when you were thirteen. Um, what other places around Corpus did you like fishing when you moved back?

[Sutton]: Uh, I fished on Padre Island a lot in the surf. They, you know, on calm days, you could go down there and catch trout and redfish and so forth with lures just as easy as you can in a lot of places. So, I enjoyed the beach, and I enjoyed the Lagoon [Laguna Madre].

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: Mostly the Upper Lagoon that I fished.

[Brown]: Okay. Um, so speaking of Baffin Bay though, what do you think makes Baffin Bay so special?

[Sutton]: (Laughs) Uh, the thing that I always enjoyed about it was, it's remote. A lot of people don't even know it's there, and there's no development on it except on the backend around Riviera and so forth. You got the two large ranches that surround it, and there are times you can go like up into Alazan Bay, you don't see anything but the brush and so forth. It's a remote place to me, and if you start here and go down the lagoon all the way to Port Isabel, there's not much development anywhere. It's—the ranches have kept it that way, which is, I think is great (laughs). I like that part of it.

[Brown]: What does Baffin Bay mean to you?

[Sutton]: Just a great place to enjoy the outdoors, the Texas outdoors. We've been given a lot of great things here in Texas and that's one of them to me, the treasure of Baffin and being able to go and enjoy the remoteness of it. And a lot of my family memories are from Baffin Bay, you know, my grandparents, fishing with them, and then times when our whole families would meet there at that park, and the guys would fish, and the ladies would prepare a picnic or whatever we wanted to have so a lot of family memories there. Uh, I have three brothers and a couple of good friends that live there on Baffin Bay that—well, it seems like most of my life since I've got out of high school has been spent around those people fishing and so forth. I have a T-shirt that says, "I spent most of my life fishing, the rest of it I just wasted" (all laugh), but that—I really have enjoyed that part of my life. I feel like it was a gift given to some people that you just take to it (laughs).

[Brown]: Are there any of those memories that stand out that you wanted to share?

[Sutton]: Oh, quite a few, but I don't know if we've got time for all of them (laughs), but just some of the fishing trips with my father and when he got older. You know, I enjoyed fishing with him and being able to—we were wade fishermen, you know, we very seldom fished out of the boat, and we could wade the shorelines and as his vision left him, you know, couldn't see the fish quite as well, and I got to where I would wade with him and spot the fish and tell him where to cast and seeing his enjoyment for catching those big trout, it's something that I'll always will remember probably.

[Brown]: Do you have a most memorable experience in Baffin Bay?

[Sutton]: Uh well, there again, it would be fishing, you know, that we went to Black Bluff one morning, and very nice morning, real calm, and water was clear and my youngest brother was fishing with me, and we waded up to a little flat there, and you could look out there and you could see the big trout up there in water in about, you know, a foot deep, eighteen inches deep, and they were feeding on finger mullet, mostly. So, we stood out in the deeper water and cast back to them, and I can't tell you how many big trout we caught that morning, but that's back—I date everything usually by pre mid-seventies. That's when things started changing for us it seemed like, but that one particular fishing trip was just fantastic. I had a great time fishing, and everybody enjoyed their selves.

[Brown]: Caught a lot of big trout (laughs)?

[Sutton]: Uh, yes (laughs).

[Brown]: Um, so you said you dated things to the mid-seventies. What—can you talk about the changes you've seen in Baffin Bay over time?

[Sutton]: Uh, that's when I started noticing differences in mostly number of people utilizing the

bay for fishing, started going to places that you used to fish, and then there were maybe two or three other boats there or the people that would fish the shoreline increased whereas in the past a lot of people fished out on the reefs. They would anchor up there and use a live bait or whatever, but the amount of shore fishermen, wade fishermen increased, and the advent of the shallow water tunnel boats. That changed things a lot for people that fished on the shoreline because that's where—you get a shallow water boat, that's where you're going to run it most of the time. There was always the little saying of, "Run deep, fish shallow." That's what a lot of people then started just running the shorelines, looking for fish and of course that ruined the fishing for the other people that were coming behind them. Started noticing those things and then of course the fishing guide numbers increased greatly in the seventies, and that was always a point of concern. Get up early and you beat the guides to the best stops, or they could get up early and beat you there, but it just seemed like, in the mid-seventies, that number just it kind of exploded, the number of people. It was something that was easy to get into if you were a fisherman, you know, you could get your guide's license and so forth and just a lot of people did it and then a lot of people didn't get a guide's license at that time, they just told everyone they were a guide and fished without insurance and so forth. But we got through all of that and then the, the freeze in the late seventies, that put a dent in the fishing for quite a number of years. We had two freezes in '79, one in February and then another one in December and that did a pretty good number on the number of fish there were. And then the improvement in tackle and communications, to me that's when I started noticing the GPSs, the cellphones, things like that, whereas in the past, you know, when you went fishing, you told somebody, "Okay, go down to the big mesquite tree and go a hundred yards past that" and so forth, but then when you can punch in a waypoint on your GPS, it will take you right to it. That changed things a lot, and then communications and cellphones, people could talk back and forth, I didn't catch anything here or the fish are over at so and so reef or whatever. That improved a lot. And one thing that I remember is in the—along about '78, somewhere in there, when the blackened redfish craze hit, people had gillnets all over the bays to catch just about anything they could and sell it for redfish fillets, and I think that damaged the bay quite a bit. It just seemed like there was no end to it. But aside from those things, the freezes and so forth, I guess the next big event would have been in '90, when the brown tide came to town (laughs), and that affected us for a number of years. The water quality in Baffin was just, you just couldn't see into the water. We struggled with that for a couple of years, and then figured out how to still catch fish, even if the water was stained, they can still hear (all laugh). But one example I have is that I had a bucket in my boat just for bailing or whatever. I dipped up about four inches into the bottom of it, and looked into the—I put a bright red lure into the bottom, and you could not see it, you couldn't see that lure. That's how dense that brown tide had become, but we fished other areas for several years and made our way through the brown tide too (laughs).

[Brown]: What did the brown tide do to the fishery besides it's harder to catch fish?

[Sutton]: Well, to me it harmed the baitfish or weeds, sea grasses, and stuff, that's where it really hit. Areas that had been covered in good seagrass just became sand, you know, they died one way, 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, you know, in some places knee deep or just old weeds and stuff would gather up. And then 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. Didn't seem to bother them as much although I have caught a couple of trout during that time that their gills and so forth had the—seemed like it had the growth on them like the brown tide had attached to their gills, but that was pretty uncommon, just a couple of times I noticed that. I really don't think we've ever recovered fully. The fishery hadn't from that time.

[Brown]: Do you have any questions, Mike? You've been quiet over there.

[Mike Wetz]: Yeah, so I wanted to circle back, you know, you talked about when you started fishing in 1957, you talked about some great speckled trout that you caught (Sutton laughs), and from your grandparents, from your folks, did they ever talk about what fishing was like before the Intracoastal [Waterway] was opened up? How did it compare before and after?

[Sutton]: They really didn't.

[Wetz]: Okay.

[Sutton]: I don't remember much of that. A lot of what I learned from that about those days were from commercial fishermen and talking to them about how things were. The, the family that, well, Ernie Butler, I don't know if you know Ernie or not, his family, I worked with his father and his brothers and so forth, and they had all worked as commercial fishermen, and I got a lot of information from them, some of the Yaklin family from Riviera, uh, things like that, and they used to run their nets right out in front of where Snoopy's is now, you know, they didn't go fifty miles that way, they'd run right over there.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: And their old commercial skiffs, they would just run over there, catch their fish, and come back across the Lagoon to where they lived, run their boat up on the shore, leave her there, unload the fish, and so forth. Uh, but the amount of fish, they concentrated up mostly on drum and redfish, and the number of fish in these schools sometimes would be unbelievable, and they'd run their gillnets, and they'd have a load of fish.

[Wetz]: Yeah, I've just heard a lot of stories about how harsh the environment used to be, you know, before the Intracoastal—

[Sutton]: —Yeah—

[Wetz]: —opened up, so I was just curious if—

[Sutton]: —Well, I really don't know, not being there, but you hear one fisherman sees it this

way—

[Wetz]: —Yeah—

[Sutton]: —one sees it this way. Um, the—but almost everyone agrees that the Intracoastal and opening up the Land Cut and stuff was a big improvement. And even after they opened the Land Cut, you still would have fish kills from the salt content in the water.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: Uh, can't exactly remember when they addressed Yarborough Pass. It was the end result of a giant fish kill they had in Baffin and that part of the Lagoon, and most people think the Yarborough was a natural pass, but it wasn't, just a real low spot and the ranchers used to use it for running their cattle across the ships that were waiting out there. They'd load them on barges, and they had mules that would pull the barges across the Lagoon, before the Intracoastal, and that was a good spot because the island is narrow there, it's low, and then the ships could come out there, send in a barge, swim the cattle out to them, there they'd go. Murdock's Landing is one of the places there. It's named after, I think, the foreman that ran the place.

[Wetz]: Yeah, I hadn't heard that story before. Well, before you jump out—

[Brown]: —Go ahead—

[Wetz]: —I was hoping to get a funny story out of you (Sutton laughs). I remember you saying one time that you ran into David Rowsey, and you kind of shared a fishing spot at one point.

[Wetz]: Would you be willing to—

[Sutton]: —Sure—

[Wetz]: —share that. I thought it was a pretty funny story but—

[Sutton]: Well, I met Rowsey at Roy's Bait and Tackle. I'd seem him around and kind of, you know, this and that, but saw him in there and I'd wanted to talk to him about, he was writing for the *Texas Saltwater [Fishing] Magazine*, and I wanted to tell him how much I appreciated some of his articles, you know, that I really enjoyed them. So, I introduced myself, and we started talking and so forth, back and forth, and at that time, I had a pretty unique boat that was a Majek commercial skiff, just a small eighteen-foot, flat-bottom skiff, but it was a great fishing boat for me. And so, David and I began to talk and this and that and he's like, "Oh, you're the guy with the white Majek," and I said, "Yeah," and he told me, he says, "You sure fish a lot in my spots," and I said, "I was fishing your spots before you were born" (all laugh). But anyway, we talked a little more, and we seemed to hit it off real well, and he told me, he says, "I want to tell you this story, and I hope it doesn't offend you," and I said, "Yep, fine." He said,

“Well, I can remember one morning. I told my clients, ‘Be there early. We’ve got to beat this other guy to this place because I know, he knows the trout are there,’” and so they got there like an hour early, something like that, loaded in their boat, and said, “I got everybody in there, and we took off, you know, it’s still in the dark, and we ran down the Laguna Bays (phone rings), found our spot, and—I’m not going to answer that. But anyways, he said, “We ran down there, and we found the place we wanted to cut into the shoreline, and we started easing up there in the dark, in the dark. I got closer,” and he said, “I looked up to the shoreline and there was your little white boat sitting there already. All I could think of to tell the clients was ‘that old son of a bitch beat me here again’” (all laugh). I always liked that, but through the years, Rowsey and I, well, I don’t think we ever really have fished together that much, you know, just talk at the boat ramp and things like that about general information.

[Wetz]: Yeah, I thought that was a funny story when (both talking at once)—

[Sutton]: —Oh, I like it—

[Wetz]: —you. You got any other funny stories from Baffin that you’d be willing to share?

[Sutton]: Uh, I don’t know if I can.

[Wetz]: Any bloopers or blunders or anything (laughs)?

[Sutton]: Oh, there were plenty of those things that we did, but none that I can remember—

[Wetz]: —okay—

[Sutton]: —right off, you know, that I, I’m sure I can think of a couple hundred once I leave (all laugh). Probably not right now.

[Wetz]: Fair enough. No problem.

[Brown]: Well, we’ll come back.

[Sutton]: Okay, all right (both talking at once)—

[Brown]: Maybe you’ll remember something by then. Um, so I’d like to shift to your work as a citizen scientist, and we kind of talked about noticing changes to Baffin Bay. Were there any changes in the 2000s, 2010s?

[Sutton]: Uh no, not noticeable things to me. Uh, the fishery seemed like it was steadily, was each year, smaller fish, fewer fish, for most people, and talking to Scott Murray, a couple other people, about the—what are we going to do? You know, are we going to just let her die like this? The water quality was off. You get little patches of brown tide during that time, more than just a solid bloom and then Scott approached me with the idea of doing this study. I said, “Yeah,

sign me up. I could do that,” and that’s how I got started with it, was mainly because of Scott Murray, and we both shared the same concerns about the water quality and the fishery.

[Brown]: What motivated you to get involved?

[Sutton]: My fishing desires, you know, I hated to see something like that just fade away and get to a point where, well, a lot of bays, fishing places have done. They get overcrowded and no one does anything to improve it, and we had an opportunity to improve it. One thing that kind of stuck in my mind at that time was the fact that no one did anything for Baffin Bay. I mean, nothing was coming into Baffin as far as help from the state of Texas, or the counties, or anything. Kleberg County has done a little bit, you know, before that time, but no one really did anything.

[Brown]: Why do you think that is?

[Sutton]: I have no idea. Uh, maybe partially because the King Ranch, Kenedy Ranch, had it blocked off mostly from public access. That may have had something to do with it, but you’ve always been able to get there if you had a boat. If you could launch at Riviera or at the Flour Bluff, and you’d make your way there, but talking with Scott, other people that, you know, we can find out a reason why this is happening, you know, something to rely on that this is the cause and this is how to fix it rather than fishermen’s ideas, which were quite numerous back in that time (laughs) about what has happened and why and so forth. I was amazed at all the different stories I’d heard about what caused the brown tide and this and that, and so it gave me an opportunity to learn too.

[Brown]: Hm. Do you remember that, um, meeting when Mike and Jace Tunnell came down to Scott Murray’s house? Were you there?

[Sutton]: Uh, probably. I’ve been to a couple of them.

[Brown]: Okay, just wondering if you remember like, how the ball got rolling on everything?

[Sutton]: Uh, I’m not—most of my information came through Scott. Scott would call me, and we would talk and so forth, and I knew Jace but didn’t spend much time talking to him about what he had in mind and so forth. I guess you could say that Scott was my main source there. A good breakfast and tell a couple of stories, and we knew what was going on for the most part.

[Brown]: Okay, so when you started the water sampling work, can you tell me more about the work you did and what the experience was like?

[Sutton]: When we first started, I came to the institute here [Harte Research Institute] two or three times, and Ken, uh, can’t remember his last name.

[Wetz]: Ken Hayes.

[Sutton]: Hayes, yeah.

[Wetz]: Yep.

[Sutton]: He trained us on how to take the samples and what all to do and even how to run some of the samples, and I really enjoyed that, you know, to learn things I'd never even thought about, and I guess that was the main thing there. We learned those and then when we out to get samples, it was just volunteers. Uh, two in a boat usually is what I did. We covered the area at the mouth of Baffin. We could launch here, go down and then people from Riviera could catch the backend of Baffin, and we'd go down, we'd take our samples and so forth and then on the way back, you know, fifteen, twenty minutes before we got to the ramp, I'd called Ken, he'd have somebody come down and pick up all the samples and then over a period of time a lot of the students would come in and help us with the samples and so forth and that was more enjoyable to me. I didn't have to do too much, but I always enjoyed talking with the people, and some of the young ladies that came were from Connecticut, which surprised me, but they were just amazed by the things that they saw. They wanted to know who owned all that land, and I was like, "One guy," and they were like, "What?" (Sutton and Brown laugh). All the way from Corpus to wherever and then we'd made one trip that was kind of a special trip that they'd never seen a school of dolphins, and I said, "There are some real close here," and I said, "They'll"—so, I boat over there, and they would follow the boat. They would run right up behind your boat, touch it as you go along. They were amazed by that. I was like, "I'm glad I got to do these things, to show people and teach people." We had some bad days, too, weather wise and things like that and different problems with outboards as you can always expect, but I will always tell people one of my favorite trips was just one young lady showed up to help me, and she was from China, and her English was like my Chinese. We really—but we got along great. She was just a fantastic worker, and she wanted to see everything I was doing and with the motor and this and that, and she impressed me.

[Wetz]: I know who you're talking about—

[Sutton]: —Yeah—

[Wetz]: —and, in fact, we're working on some of the data that y'all collected right now.

[Sutton]: Yeah.

[Wetz]: She and I—because what she's done is—sorry, I'm going off topic here a little bit (both talking at once)—

[Brown]: —It's okay—

[Wetz]: —but she's taken all the data you collected from that instrument, you know, you—

[Sutton]: —Yep, yep—

[Wetz]: —you dropped it in the water that measured dissolved oxygen, and what she’s done is build a model where you can actually tweak things like water temperature or the amount of nitrogen in the water, and it tells you what the oxygen levels are going to do in the bay. So, this is going to be a critical piece of information that we need for managing the water quality in this bay. So as we speak, we’re working on that right now.

[Sutton]: Yeah, that’s great.

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: I’m glad to hear that.

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: But—well, everyone actually that came with me was—nope, didn’t have any problems with anyone at all about anything. One—oh, there was one young man, I’d guess he’d been out late, and he wanted to sleep, but I told him, I said, “No, you can’t sleep in the boat,” you know, when we were running the boat. I said, “Because if you fall out, that saltwater is hard,” you know, when you hit it (laughs). He said, “Well, I can’t stay awake.” I said, “Stand up or something,” but that’s the only thing, and it really wasn’t a—

[Wetz]: Trying to think who that would be now (laughs).

[Sutton]: That was the only trip he made with us.

[Wetz]: Yeah, well, one of the things that I always really liked hearing are the stories from some of the students coming back—

[Sutton]: —Yeah—

[Wetz]: —and some of the things they learned.

[Sutton]: Yeah.

[Wetz]: They really enjoyed going out with you all, and I thought that was one of the best parts of this whole study was just the students getting those experiences and learning.

[Sutton]: Right. Yeah, it was enjoyable for me too. I enjoyed the trips, and a couple that, cold or rain and stuff like that but overall, we had good trips.

[Brown]: What kept you, you did this for four years?

[Sutton]: Yeah.

[Brown]: What kept you going back every month and going out in the rain and the wind (Sutton laughs) and that sort of thing?

[Sutton]: Just, I guess the knowledge that we were going to get some answers. During that timeframe and so forth, I was amazed. I got a lot of phone calls from fishing guides and so forth that I really didn't know, and they wanted me to tell them what was happening with the water quality, and I said, "Well, you know, you go to Dr. Wetz." "Well, I want you to tell me. Come over, and we'll have breakfast at the cafe" or whatever and things like that, and it amazed me the different views that people held about the problems. And then you could—it was nice to have an answer and say, "No, it's this." Like this right here, everybody seemed to take it. Uh, initially a lot of the fishing guides, recreational fishermen, were against the study. The guides thought we were trying to prove that there weren't any fish here, you don't come fish in Baffin Bay or whatever, but we got through all of that, and people began to—once we came out with some findings about the nitrogen levels and so forth, people really changed their views, in my opinion. The general public did about what was going on in the bay and what we needed to do.

[Brown]: What sort of things did you hear prior to those studies coming out?

[Sutton]: (Laughs) I don't know if I remember. A lot of the things that, oh, things like the King Ranch was poisoning the water because they didn't want any fishermen down there along their shorelines and stuff like that, which that's—I can see them doing that (laughs). A lot of people felt that way about the King Ranch because King Ranch keeps their business to their self, they're kind of, you know, that—of course, there's no truth to any of those things about that, and, oh, the other one was that the guides had done it, you know, that they were putting something in the water where the general fishermen couldn't find the reefs and stuff. You know, they wanted the water to be dark colored and so forth and that would cut down on the general population going down there to fish and none of that was true, but it was nice to finally get some answers for people about what had happened and what was going to happen.

[Brown]: So, what did you learn from your involvement in this project?

[Sutton]: (Laughs) Well, I learned the value of knowledge, I would say. So many rumors and so forth about the fish, about the brown tide and stuff, but once you start learning, and you're able to teach other people. You know, I'm a big believer in education and that you educate people that sure knocks out a lot of ignorance (laughs), but I really think that, that would be one of my biggest things that I learned was the value of knowledge and not going off half-cocked about your ideas of what you think was happening. And a lot of people got really upset about what they thought was happening to our Lagoon and the bays and so forth. It's just especially true if someone's making their living off of a bay or system and so forth. They get pretty upset about things.

[Brown]: What did you hope would come out of the work besides just the knowledge?

[Sutton]: I really hoped for a way to change the water quality in Baffin Bay, to make it a place where the general public, everybody could go and enjoy it like I did when I was younger, and I never wanted to see it become like a sanctuary or something like that where it kept the people out, but we could make it where people wanted to go there and could still enjoy it.

[Brown]: What do you think success looks like in terms of current efforts to restore Baffin Bay?

[Sutton]: Uh, clean water, good fishing, and I think, like I just mentioned we'd—not to make it a sanctuary, but to make it a resource that everyone can enjoy, see what a treasure it really is. I would like to see a station set up in Baffin to monitor it because it went so long without anyone checking on any of its water quality or anything but trying to think about what I envision for Baffin and, you know, it just—the fishing was the most important thing to me, and I know that, that comes from water quality. We have to improve the water quality, and we need to impress upon the generations coming up about how to protect this thing. I get tickled at people that, I guess they fall victim to the sliding edge syndrome. People that are in their thirties talking about the way Baffin Bay used to be, okay (laughs), but to get good information to the younger generations coming up about what this was like, and as I mentioned before, about pre-seventies let's say, in that area on back, and while we've had some great years here recently, you know, water quality and fishing, then the freeze comes to visit us, but if we can get the younger generations involved in these things and start them when they are little kids, teach them the value of conservation and stuff, and if you hang around me a lot, you'll come to find out that's my children. All you ever want to do is talk about Teddy Roosevelt (Brown and Sutton laugh). Well, he was a hero to me in a lot of ways and a lot of the things he said about our natural resources and never allowing a monetary reason to overtake the beauty of our natural resources. He said, "You just can't let them do it." I guess that would be the main thing to me as far as success goes is getting the younger generations involved as they come up and keep this thing going.

[Brown]: How do you think we can get the younger generations involved?

[Sutton]: Well, there was a time when I never thought that people would accept catch-and-release fishing in saltwater. They did some in freshwater, bass fishermen and so forth, but through a period of years and teaching, education again, on the benefits of having clean water, keeping it clean, start them in grade school, to me. Something that I noticed at Riviera Beach, they would put up signs there at the ramp about what was going on with the water quality and so forth. And the more people that will take their children fishing, these people that learned catch and release, now they're teaching their children catch and release, and a lot more people seem to be interested in the water quality then were twenty, thirty years ago, but I think CCA [Coastal Conservation Association] has done a good job with that, spreading the word, and keeping people involved about the water quality. But I know now when I take my grandchildren or somebody young with me, we'll always mention that to them about the water quality things, that you can't depend on the other guy to do it for you, got to learn to do it for yourself.

[Wetz]: I was just going to ask, you know, so getting kids out there with all the distractions the kids have in their lives now—

[Sutton]: —Um-hm—

[Wetz]: —that even I didn't have when I was growing up, you know, the digital devices and things that, how do we—

[Sutton]: —How do you—

[Wetz]: How do we get through that, you know what I mean? You got any thoughts on that (both laugh)?

[Sutton]: Make them leave their phones and stuff at the dock (laughs).

[Wetz]: Yep.

[Sutton]: They—we utilize one of the cabins down the Lagoon for several years, my brother and I did, we had a pretty unique thing. It had gotten really run down, and so we went to the GLO [General Land Office] and found the owner of it or who paid the rent for that spot on their little island, and we told him we'll fix it if we get to use it. He said, "Sure," so we redid a lot, and he never came down for four or five years. We had it pretty much to ourselves. We had taken the kids down there, and they'd ask me that, you know, "Can we use our phones down here?" I said, "Yeah. Once" (Sutton and Wetz laugh). But I told them, I said, "When we're here, we're here to enjoy what this island gives us and stuff," and being on an island, we really didn't have too many problems with that. They enjoyed the birds nesting there and so forth. But that's a big question, Mike, you know how do you get them off of this technical world that we live in?

[Wetz]: Um-hm. That's something I struggle with, with my son too, you know?

[Sutton]: Yeah.

[Wetz]: He always wants to go fishing, but his attention span is probably a couple hours and then—

[Sutton]: —Yeah. That's it (both talking at once)—

[Wetz]: —I know something else is working in the brain there, you know, video game or something so.

[Sutton]: I was fortunate with my children and getting them early, getting them involved in fishing, getting them to enjoy it. We had kind of an unusual family in that we have six children, but four are mine and two are my wife's. When we remarried, um, pretty much we had three boys and three girls, and at one time we had four teenagers in our house (all laugh), just the

way it worked out, but when they were all young, I would take them to the beach and let them catch little whiting, skipjack, whatever was biting until they lost interest, and then we'd go on to something else, and then the next time, maybe stay a little longer and let them work on their patience some. But one of my favorite stories that I like to tell about my grandkids is one of my grandsons, I said—that was the nicest thing I ever heard was, we went out fishing one morning, just me and him. That's when he was about six, maybe seven years old, and I told him, "There are a lot of redfish in this area, and we'll go up, and we'll anchor and cast this way and let the wind—it was a little float with a red worm. So, that wind carried us away. So, we got set up, and he hooked a redfish, and now he's like, "I got one." So, we got it up, and I got it netted and I said, "Okay, I'm going to take the hook out, and I'm going to put him in the livewell, and you cast right back you were," so he did. I was messing with the fish there, and all of a sudden, I heard him just scream out, "Papa, I've got another one" (both laugh). I thought, "Okay, that's good, that's what I came for (laughs)."

[Brown]: Do you remember what you were like when you were fishing with your grandfather?

[Sutton]: What I was like?

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: Well, I don't know. He, my grandfather was more of a, okay, stay here, follow with me, you know, and do what I do, and when fishing with my dad, he was more, go have a good time (all laugh), you know, here's the stuff you need and so forth, and he would show us what to do when we caught fish and so forth, but I always enjoyed fishing with either one of them. I knew my grandfather, if we caught fish, we'd have a fish fry when we got home that night and so forth and spend time with my grandmother and him. They lived in a trailer, house trailer, big one, and so pretty happy with those setups. In Brownsville, my family, we lived in a farmhouse, that one of the farmers had retired, and he had, I don't know how many hundreds of acres out there that he farmed and built a real nice house on it, so we got the house, and we had all that acreage. He still farmed it, but we had the access to go and come as we pleased.

[Brown]: Do you have any more questions?

[Wetz]: Well, you talked a lot about, you know, what you hoped to see in improving the water conditions, but you also mentioned that you see more and more people down there. Is there anything that you feel like the angling community needs to do better in terms of, you know, conserving the resource and making sure it's there for (both talking at once)—

[Sutton]: —Yeah—

[Wetz]: —future generations.

[Sutton]: That's, unfortunately, that's going to be a fight between recreational fishermen and guides and so forth as far as the trout and redfish are concerned, and even the drum to a

certain extent, but I am seeing a lot of improvement in the number of guides that have gone to catch and release or using lures only, things like that. That's the way David Rowsey fishes, and, you know, I don't remember when he first came out with an ad saying that it's only catch and release. Well, you're going to starve to death. Well, it didn't work that way. He's really prospered at it because he's a great fisherman and a good teacher. How we get the rest of them involved, I don't know Mike, because I've had argument after argument with, you know, friends or acquaintances just have different views about—some believe the state of Texas is stealing their fish from them (laughs).

[Wetz]: Why is that?

[Sutton]: Because they lower the limits.

[Wetz]: Oh, okay.

[Sutton]: You know, when they lowered the limit, especially this last winter. They just want the fish for themselves, and I don't know if you remember, when we first started the study, we got a lot of comments about, it was just a group of fishermen that wanted the big trout for themselves, and they want to keep the general public out, so that's why they're doing this, and I heard that one quite a bit.

[Wetz]: I had not heard that one.

[Sutton]: Well—

[Wetz]: —That's interesting.

[Sutton]: Yeah. They said, "Well, you and Scott Murray, that's all y'all want to do, is catch the big trout. Y'all don't want anybody else to catch them," and, you know.

[Wetz]: So, it sounds like there were concerns that they were just going to shut down the bay or something or put in some kind of limits?

[Sutton]: Uh, the people liked to spread that. They don't believe it, but they like to tell it.

[Wetz]: Hm.

[Sutton]: So, the public will think the state of Texas is the bad guy in this, so let's go and catch everything we can and keep it because they are going to take it away from us.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: Uh, well in, back in '78 when we—they call it the Redfish Wars that CCA went through, you know, trying to get some of their laws passed and stuff. I was amazed at the

stories I heard from commercial fishermen and this and that, and it got pretty angry with each other for a long time. I think they shot up a couple of people's houses and—

[Wetz]: I feel like I heard that somebody's cabin got burned down over this?

[Sutton]: Yeah, that was Wimberly's—

[Wetz]: That's right.

[Sutton]: Paul Wimberly's cabin that got burned, and, oh, it just—I still hear stories about that, that about how the CCA ruined the fishing in Texas. I always tell them, "If it wasn't for CCA, there wouldn't be any fishing in Texas right now, you know."

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: They mainly have proven that if it's a natural resource, and they make money off of it, they'll take it right down to the last dot, and take that and be done with, they'll move on to something else.

[Wetz]: Well, it's interesting you mentioned that because this seems very similar to the argument that's going on right now over oystering—

[Sutton]: —Yeah—

[Wetz]: —and commercial oyster harvest. So, it seems like we moved from one (both talking at once)—

[Sutton]: —One, yeah—

[Wetz]: —thing to another.

[Sutton]: Yeah, you need people that need to watch an aerial view of the oyster boats when they're working up there and see that they're just clustered in there like that. And then one of the programs on TV I watch occasionally is about Texas game wardens and what they do and stopping those guys up there, and they're looking at them like, "I don't care. Soon as you leave, I'm going to go back and do the same thing you've given me the ticket for in the first place."

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: It is unfortunate, but when, uh, there's money to be made off a natural resource, people don't have much conscience (laughs).

[Wetz]: So, I think that, at least in part, really emphasizes what you said about the education and getting younger people involved and—

[Sutton]: —Right—

[Wetz]: —making them aware—

[Sutton]: —Um-hm, well—

[Wetz]: —of the limits on the resources and—

[Sutton]: —I guess one of the things that's bothering me in the present day is the number of people moving to Texas. Of course, I would like to go back to the thirties or something myself (Sutton and Wetz laugh), but we're getting people from all over that are unfamiliar with our laws, game laws, things like that. A lot of people from different countries that come in that want to utilize the laws they have, which were nonexistent basically, and that bothers me that this is going to—if we don't educate them, let them know, don't do it this way.

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: You know, that was one of the big problems they had there at Seadrift when a lot of people from Vietnam moved there, and the way they would harvest crabs was a lot different than what the people who lived there had done, so they had a couple of scrimmages over that, and finally got it all—in fact, they made a movie about it, and I can't remember the name of it now. But I think that, that's something we need to stay after, you know.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: Nobody from California can move this far, you know, not past Austin (Wetz laughs). You've got to stop at Austin or something like that (Sutton and Wetz laugh).

[Wetz]: But even if they moved to Austin, it seems like we get a lot of people coming down here and using the bays and kind of—

[Sutton]: —Uh, yeah—

[Wetz]: —recreationally just at random, you know, times—

[Sutton]: —yeah—

[Wetz]: —and so it seems like you would want to make sure that not only are they aware of the laws, but also just kind of the culture of how—

[Sutton]: —right—

[Wetz]: —to do things right in the bays, and—

[Sutton]: —Um-hm. Everything is so much improved as far as transportation and communication, you know, it's nothing for a group of people to come from Dallas and spend the weekend here fishing. They take turns, they've got, you know, if they've got a four-door truck or something like that, some can sleep, some can drive, and it's just like for us to go down to the bay and fish. And also, seeing a lot of homes that are being bought by maybe four or five different guides, and they use it for a weekend home. They leave their boats there and stuff. They live in San Antonio, Austin, or wherever, and they come down pretty quick, have everything set up where they just fish and when they're tired of the house, they can sell it and make a profit on it, but—

[Wetz]: —yeah—

[Sutton]: —I don't like that so much. You know, I'm not real sure how to solve a lot of those things.

[Wetz]: Yeah, just what you were saying reminded me of a talk I saw from, I think it was Chuck Naiser, you know, just talking about etiquette, and it just seems like there are a lot of opportunities for educating folks, and I don't know.

[Sutton]: Yeah, that's another problem, is etiquette on the water, which we seem to have lost a lot of that (laughs).

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: When I was still working, I told my friend, I said, "I'm so tired of people running up next to me in their boats if I'm out wading and stuff." I told him, I said, "I'm going to get a fluorescent orange vest and a .44 magnum." And I said, "People are going to stay away from me." He said, "Don't go over there with that guy" (laughs).

[Brown]: Well, do you have any more fish stories or anything else to add?

[Sutton]: (Laughs) No, I don't think believe so, right now. I think I'm, you know, I'm very pleased with what we've done so far, you know, the studies and everything. A lot of progress to me, a great thing, and last weekend, weekend before I went to a wedding up in Driftwood or outside of Austin, there my nieces got married. But a friend of mine was there that lives on Baffin Bay, and he was asking me about our group and stuff, and he said, "Are y'all still?" I said, "Yeah, still. We're growing every day," and he said, "Well, are y'all still about—what, fourteen, fifteen people?" And I said, "Not exactly, Jim." I told him, "Man, we've got a huge group," and I told him about the grants that we received and so forth. He was surprised—

[Wetz]: —Yeah—

[Sutton]: —that we had grown like that. He said, "I thought it was just you and Scott Murray,"

and I said, "Well, there's a few more now" (laughs).

[Wetz]: Yeah. We're getting there. I keep telling Scott, "We're getting there, we're getting there—

[Sutton]: —Well—

[Wetz]: —"we're starting it"—

[Sutton]: In my opinion, we really are. We really—people know who we are. You know, and they know that a lot of the things that, the misgivings they had at first about the water quality study and stuff had proven to be wrong, that this is working out to benefit the fishermen, and I'm happy to hear those types of stories.

[Wetz]: I'm amazed to hear that there were all these misgivings. You know, I—

[Sutton]: —Well (Wetz laughs), I don't know if it was actually the general population as much as it was initially some of the guides.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: You know, and their point of view, like I said earlier, was that they thought we were elitist fishermen that were trying to keep the trout fishery to ourselves, and that only lasted a year maybe or two or stuff, and then once we got going, people's opinions changed a lot, the misgiving and so forth, I would have expected them just because that's the nature of people here and fishing, you know. We're really jealous about our fishing, you know, don't want anybody to catch my fish or mess with my fish.

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Brown]: Well, if that's it, I'll turn off the recorder.

[Wetz]: I would like to ask one final question—

[Brown]: —Okay—

[Wetz]: —if you don't mind. Your trophy catch, what is your trophy catch over the years? Do you remember what?

[Sutton]: The biggest fish?

[Wetz]: The biggest fish, yeah, what do you consider your trophy?

[Sutton]: Uh, a thirteen-and-a-half-pound trout that was caught in, I believe, that was '72 when

I caught that, and I caught her in water that wasn't even knee deep.

[Wetz]: No kidding.

[Sutton]: Yeah, huge trout, you know, just really floored me that it was that big, and I got it, I'll tell you the whole story. Like, I caught this fish, and I realized, you know, once I got it close, that this is an unusually large trout, and I was fishing from a rented aluminum boat from Kratz's Bait Stand, and anyways, so I got her up there and got it over to her boat house there and weighed it and everything, and I said, "Boy, this is a great fish," but I really didn't think about it being the state record or anything, just I want to get it mounted was my thought, and it would have been a state record for years, but I got it home and got it in the freezer and three days later, Celia hit.

[Wetz]: Oh, no.

[Sutton]: We lost all our electricity.

[Wetz]: Oh, no.

[Sutton]: I lost my camera, all the pictures of it and stuff and, you know, about half my house was gone, and I really wasn't concerned with the trout at that time. So, I lost it, you know, we were without electricity for three weeks, I think it was, but I tell everybody now, take pictures (Sutton and Wetz laugh).

[Wetz]: Yeah.

[Sutton]: But that's—any trout now, if you catch a trout that's a double-digit trout weight wise, that's a true trophy nowadays because you just don't see many of them anymore.

[Wetz]: Um-hm.

[Sutton]: That's another thing that bothers me is people will show a picture of an eight-pound trout, you know, or nine, and we would release it, you know, and think, "Hm. Well, where are these fish at now, all these eight and nine pounders, we keep catching them every year, but no ten pounders. Where are the bigger fish at if you're releasing all these?"

[Wetz]: Um-hm. Yeah, well that's a great story. I'm sorry you lost it.

[Sutton]: Oh well, it's—it was a great time.

[Wetz]: Yeah. Okay.

[Brown]: Anything else?

[Sutton]: No.

[Brown]: All right, well, thank you.

[Sutton]: No problem.

[Brown]: Oh, I'm going to turn this off.

(end of recording)