Cliff Webb

Interviewed by Jen Brown
Corpus Christi, Texas
July 12, 2022

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Jen Brown]: [Ed. note: the recording cut this first few seconds off: This is Jen Brown and I'm out here on the Island, in Corpus Christi, Texas with Cliff Webb.] It is July 12, 2022, and we're here to do an oral history about his life and Baffin Bay. For the record, do I have your permission to record?

[Cliff Webb]: You bet.

[Brown]: Okay, thanks.

[Webb]: No problem.

[Brown]: Um, to start, can you tell me more about your early life and background?

[Webb]: Well, I was raised here in South Texas, so born in Port Lavaca hospital, and my dad was a game warden here. He started out in Port Lavaca, then in 1962, we moved to Corpus Christi, and I was, I think, five years old or so. I watched him, there was absolutely nobody protecting our bay systems, so he was in charge of Baffin Bay and Laguna Madre, and there were absolutely no game wardens here, just a lot of commercial [fishing] activity, illegal netters, and a lot of people from all over the state and all over Mexico and stuff, and it was almost unheard of to catch a nice trout on a rod and reel because the netters just pretty much took all the big trout and redfish out for commercial activity to sell. That's why they brought him down here [to Corpus Christi], to try to get rid of the commercial fishermen, and he was always, you know, watching my dad run and chase the outlaw fishermen, that was the deal, there were two sides. You had the illegal outlaw fishermen and you had what they called the "sporties," the sports fishermen. It was absolutely war down here in the sixties and seventies because the commercial people thought they owned that bay and those fish were [theirs for] commercial activities, and the sport people didn't want to see those mass numbers of big trout and stuff taken out by the nets, so that's kind of where we started, and I've lived in Corpus almost all my life and absolutely loved the Laguna Madre and Baffin Bay and just started guiding here in the early eighties, and the stuff I've seen change is just unbelievable. From the fish to the water quality and things like that, I've seen a lot of change.

[Brown]: Did you grow up hunting and fishing?

[Webb]: Yes, grew up hunting and fishing. That's pretty much all I've done. I started guiding in the early eighties, couldn't really get a real job, so I had to start doing something, so I started

fish guiding down here [ed. note: narrator added he was following his passion for fishing] and been doing it ever since I was—I guess I was the second guide down here. Doug Bird was probably the first, and I followed up, about 1980 with the guiding.

[Brown]: Okay. Can you tell me more about your father as a game warden and—

[Webb]: Yeah, right, when he came down here [to Corpus Christi], I think it was 1962. There were no game wardens here for over three hundred miles, and they brought him down here, and he said the guy that hired him says, "Are you afraid of anything?" He said, "No, I'm not afraid of anything." He says, "Good, we've got a job for you," and put him down here, and I think he made six hundred dollars a month from the state and had to furnish his own flashlight and gun. It was pretty bad, he chased these outlaw fishermen. These guys would put these giant gillnets out in the middle of Baffin Bay and just kill all these big trout and take them to the fish house [to sell], and his job was to drag these big hooks behind the boat in the middle of Baffin Bay and hook these big nets and pull them up and try to release the fish he could out of the nets then most of the fish were taken in and given [donated] to people to eat. But it was just absolutely war with the netters when he first started here and after two or three years, they started thinning out and the sport fishing got so much better. Before, it was really hard to catch a really big trout. There were a few big trout hunters that would fish the shorelines and wade fish, but the general guide was fishing with a pop and cork and shrimp and caught very few trout over two or three pounds because the netters were using four- to six-inch mesh and the webbing would catch in all the big trout, the big sows, and so by taking all these nets out, it really, really helped our bay to where the fish population was just incredible. And the next thing that I noticed, you know, after we got rid of the netters and the commercial guys, was that water quality was an issue. Where was all this beautiful water going? Why is this water changing color? When I started fishing down there, it was all sight casting [with lures]. The water was gin clear. You could see the bottom in nine foot of water. It was just absolutely gin clear, and as the years started going on, the water quality got worse.

[Brown]: Hm. Do you remember the first time you fished Baffin Bay?

[Webb]: Yeah, I was probably five years old, and they took me down to the Land Cut, I think out of their cabin and fished under the lights for trout. It was just amazing. They turned the big flood light on under the lights and just hundreds and hundreds of speckled trout, all of them, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen inches. Small trout by the dozens, and dozens of trout under the lights in the Land Cut. That was the first time that I really got to fish the saltwater and see what it could produce.

[Brown]: And when you mentioned it was kind of a dangerous job for your dad?

[Webb]: Yes, it was.

[Brown]: What do you remember about that?

[Webb]: Well, I remember that the outlaw fishermen just hated him because they're putting their nets out and expecting to get that harvest then he'd pick up their net [and burn them], and they'd take the net in to harvest, so they'd threaten him, and they'd cut his tires at the boat ramp and stuff like that, and it wasn't a real pretty thing. I guess one of the greatest things to happen was one of the big-time outlaws here was Bucky, and Bucky, my dad chased each other so much they became friends, and after Bucky quit being an outlaw, he thanked my dad. He said, "You know, I want to thank you for getting me out of that business because I was staying up all night long running this and just never had no money then I got up and got a real job, and I'm much happier, so you really did me a favor by getting me out of the illegal fishing business," but it was absolutely war down here between the commercial activity and the game wardens, and it was only one game warden here, and it was him and because he was so busy running this, I got to go with him a lot, but a lot of the guys that he hung around with would take me fishing, wade fishing when I was nineteen years old, Dick McCracken, Chatter Allen, Jack McElroy, all those guys would take me wade fishing, and all we did was sight cast. We're not ever allowed to cast, make a blind cast. It was all, you see the fish, you throw at the fish. You don't wave your arms around like a seagull till you see the fish. You don't cast till you see a fish, and, boy, that was a short period of my life, you know, I got to see all the way up to the probably mid-eighties where it was just nothing but sight casting then after that we did a lot of structure fishing, lot of blind casting just simply because there wasn't as many fish up shallow, and you couldn't see them as much. The water had changed colors. It was a lot dingier.

[Brown]: Hm. What do you think makes Baffin Bay special?

[Webb]: I think what makes it so special is, of course, the rocks, the prehistoric colonies of worm rocks, and the structure and the way it's laid out where the whole bay system is surrounded by ranch, you know, Kenedy and King Ranches, where there's no public access to the bay, which you don't have a lot of housing and a lot of stuff running into the bay, a lot of traffic so there's areas there that take you thirty, forty-five minutes to get to by boat, period, no matter where you are, so those places have pristine where the fish live, and they may never see anybody, and they grow and just the salt. Salinity's another thing. The salinity level's higher there, it seems to make bigger fish. I just really believe the higher salinity level on the big trout seems to help bigger fish and then also it's just an estuary for all types of baitfish. It's just amazing all the bait we have in that bay, the shrimp, the crabs, the mullet, just a mecca of a bay system. It makes it so special, I think, just because the rocks and the King Ranch and Kenedy Ranch around it where it's all closed in and can never be really commercialized with houses and stuff. It makes it a really unique place, and there was never a place on the entire coast you can catch big trout like Baffin. Back when I started guiding, a thirty-two-inch trout, ten pounds is what you tried to go for and as the years went on, it went down to thirty inches. Now the thirty-inch trout's a big deal, but back when I started guiding, it was thirty-two and a thirty was okay, but everybody, the trophy guides were looking for that thirty-two-inch, ten pound trout and believe me, we caught them.

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

[Webb]: It means [ed. note: narrator addition: It means everything to me]. My whole life I made my living on that bay. It holds a very special part of my heart because my father was there protecting that bay and helped preserve it, and getting to work for all the ranches and Kenedy and King Ranches and being able to go all around the inside of the bay and see the structure just five or six miles inside off the shore, just lets you know what was so special about that bay. It was just—no other place like it where you can go in your boat and get away from everything, all the noise, and see deer walking down the shoreline, turkeys, quail, and wade down the shoreline and catch big trout with no refineries around, no activity. It was just a place to be alone, by yourself, a very special quiet place, a very quiet place.

[Brown]: Hm. What's your most memorable experience about Baffin Bay?

[Webb]: Most memorable was the giant schools of big trout. Nowadays, they talk about these big schools of reds. Well, we had giant schools of trout and back in the seventies and early eighties for five dollars you could buy a fishing permit from the King Ranch, allowed you to drive your pickup down the shoreline of the King Ranch and very few people had those permits, and I remember the guys that did and being able to drive down that shoreline and see a big black wad of trout, nobody sees that anymore, you know, just a big black ball of trout coming down the shoreline, just hundreds and hundreds of five to six, seven pound trout and now those schools are busted up, they don't school like that, their schools are five to seven fish, they're wolf packs, they're not big giant schools. The redfish are still schooling, but the thing that was amazing was how many schools of big trout we had. That was just unbelievable and the clear water, you could see those fish in five or six foot of water. You see those big balls of—black balls of trout around the deep rock structures, and it was so easy, just throw anything you want to in the middle of them, they'd eat it. Yeah, that was something else.

[Brown]: What sort of tackle and gear did you use?

[Webb]: Well, I was mostly an artificial man. I just loved the artificial lures, and that's all I throw now, and I've done the bait thing here and there but mainly I was a topwater guy, loved the topwater lures, caught some of my biggest fish on topwaters. That was the go-to thing, and before topwaters, the old anglers, Chatter Allen and Dick McCracken, Jack McElroy, they made their own spoons. The silver and gold spoon was really the go-to, and they would take the treble hook off and put a straight hook with a straight red bass worm. That was a big deal. Right after the spoons came in, the tout tail came in. That was a rubber plastic shrimp tail, and you would get them in a package with one lead head, a shrimp tail, and an extra shrimp tail and that was the first thing that, the soft plastic that showed up. After the tout tail showed up, the soft plastics went nuts, and I say the soft plastics, the shrimp tails, all the root beer and firetail shrimp tails, red stuff, was the next phase before the brokenbacks, and after that, of course the brokenbacks came in, so it seems like every five or six years, it was some kind of a big deal, a new type of lure, but in the beginning, it was spoons, and then my deal was topwater. I just loved to catch those big trout on topwater. There's nothing more exciting than watching a big old eight, nine-pound trout eat a topwater. It's just incredible!

[Brown]: Do you have any good fish stories?

[Webb]: I've got a bunch of fish stories. Do I have any fish stories (laughs)? How much time do you have?

[Brown]: All day.

[Webb]: I guess I've had some incredible days, but one I'll always remember was with Doug Pike, the guy that wrote the *Houston Chronicle*, and I couldn't get any business in Baffin in the winter. It was just dead. I was either duck hunting or working for the Kenedy deer hunt. I could just not get no fishermen. Nobody wanted to fish in the winter, and all these monster trout were eating big mullet in the winter. Seventy percent of the fish that would leave the bay system were small were not big enough to eat mullet and dogfish so they had to follow the shrimp, the smaller baitfish out of the Laguna Madre, and they would end up in the front of the bay or out in the bay system or in the front of the Gulf, and they follow the small bait out, but then the A team, I call it, the fish that were twenty-eight to thirty-two, thirty-four inches long, they stayed in the bay system simply because they could eat what was in there. They could eat the mullet. They were big enough to chase a mullet down, eat an eight-inch mullet or a dogfish or an eel. They were big enough to stay in there, and in that time, those fish, I believe, got smart enough to know that when the barometric pressure was a certain, they knew it was going to get very cold, they would move deep, and this is before all the barge traffic would stir them up on the bottom. They were able to save themself, and so I think that the big trout in Baffin were like no place ever. So I had Doug Pike, and we were in this place called the Badlands, and it was very seldom touched, and there was a school of trout in there that was probably between three hundred and eight hundred fish. It was just an amazing school of giant trout, and I had been on them several times, and I caught several fish over ten pounds in this school, and I called Doug Pike and said, "Hey, man, I'm down here in the middle of Baffin, I'm all by myself, and I'm catching giant trout every cast on topwater. It's just unbelievable. Get down here. Come." He says, "Oh man, I got to work." I said, "Quit your job. You can always get a job (both laugh). You'll never catch fish like this, just quit your job," so he meets me at Bird Island about three thirty that afternoon. I'd been fishing all day, and I'd already caught a bunch of fish over thirty inches, I mean, some monster trout, and so I got him down there, and this was just when Jumping Minnow had came out, the topwater called Jumping Minnow, and Jumping Minnow was a great topwater, but it was a real light water, a real light in the water, and when the fish charged at it, it was so light, the water in front of the fish was pushing, like a wake and would push it out of the way, and they would miss it, so they would come back and hit it two or three times before they ate it. It was the most exciting bait to ever fish. Well, Doug and I got into this big school of trout I'd been on all day, and it was a giant fish every cast. Doug caught one over twelve pounds that day. It was over thirty-two and a half inches, had a girth of nineteen inches, over twelve pounds on a topwater. It was so good, he says, "I'm going to let it go. I know I'll catch a bigger one." I said, "Doug, you'll never catch another big fish like that." We released that fish, and I told him, I said, "I want to keep the next ten fish I catch," and on topwater. Those next ten fish were ninety-six pounds, the ten fish in a row weighed ninety-six pounds just to give you an idea of how big these fish were. These fish were from twenty-eight

to thirty-two, thirty-two and a half inches long, and you would miss one, and you stopped the lure and work it again, and another one just pounced on it, and it was so good we never got out of the boat. I would catch up with the school with the trolling motor. They'd pull out in front of me, I'd ease up to them with the trolling motor, turn the boat sideways, and just hose them again. It was just a joke, and this went on and went on and then Doug wrote the article in the Houston paper, *Houston Chronicle,* and I went from nobody down here to everybody and their grandmother down here. I had plenty of business after that article came out, and then Mr. Wallace saw the article, Jim Wallace saw the article and he says, "Hey man, I'd never fish in north shore Baffin," so I took Mr. Wallace over there for several years and fished that north shore, and he actually caught the state record, over thirteen something pounds and that same day, I caught one about twelve pounds, and it was several fish over ten pounds caught that day, but he was actually one of the few people that actually saw that giant school of fish that were in Baffin, and as the years went on, the more pressure those fish received, the smaller the schools got, and the more split up they got. Mostly it was people with boat traffic running through them. You can't run through these fish in shallow water and bust them up. That was some of the fishing back in those early nineties, it was the mid-eighties and early nineties was some of the most incredible big trout I've ever seen in Baffin. I mean, just dozens of thirty-inch fish. Doug Pike went to the John Glenn's Taxidermist. He was the taxidermist at the time. He took everybody's big fish, Sheka, Bird, everybody that was fishing here, trophy hunters, all the big fish went to him, and so Mr. Pike went to interview him, and I think he had over three hundred trophy fish that year, and I think I'd taken over 180 of those fish to that taxidermist that year for my clients. That's how good it was. There was no such thing as replicas. It was all about skin mounts. You actually had to kill the fish to take them in and now that's unheard of. Now it's all about replicas and releasing the fish, but back then it was all about trying to catch that perfect skin mount, like a big deer head, you know, trying to catch that ten-pound trout and mount it, so we had a lot of trophy hunters, and Baffin was known for a trophy [trout] bay system. It was known for the angler that wanted to come catch the trophy. You want to catch a trophy trout? Come down here to Baffin Bay, that's where they are, so that's what that bay was known for.

[Brown]: You mentioned this a little bit, but can you tell me more about the changes you've seen over time to the bay?

[Webb]: The major thing is water quality. It's an unbelievable difference, so it seemed like in the eighties and the early eighties [ed. note: narrator meant early nineties], I could start with a north wind, I could turn the corner at Compuerta Pass and turn the engine off, put the trolling motor down and start working across the Badlands. I'd work it all the way out to Riviera Channel and see the bottom all the way out. It was nine feet, just absolutely gin clear. I'm talking about the kind of water you see in the Bahamas, the kind of water that's so clear that when you raise your arm to cast to a trout, if he saw you, he'd spook because he saw you. You had to wait till the fish were facing away from you to make a cast. That's how clear it was. You stand on the bow of the boat, and you look at three rocks, you see the third rock's got a big black ring around it. That's all trout, swimming around in circles on top of the rock. The mullet would be on top of the rock staying away from the ambush. They would stay on top of the rock

to stay, they wouldn't dare swim over the edge of that rock. You could always tell that the rocks that had fish on it, would have the mullet on top of them. If they had mullet on top of them the rock, you had a bunch of predators under it. It was like a bunch of wolves waiting for the sheep to make a mistake, and that's what was happening (Brown laughs). It was really neat (laughs).

[Brown]: Hm. Um so, what happened with the water clarity then?

[Webb]: Well, I think a lot of it was, I hate to say it, but a lot of runoff from the ranches and stuff. Like Scott Murray was saying, that before all this agricultural runoff, they cut a lot of brush down in the last forty years on the King and Kenedy, and the way that they do the rows for the crops, and they took the rows all the way to the creek and took the brush down too, took all the brush away from the creek, and I think that was the filter because back when all the stuff would run off, the chemicals and defoliants they had to use—the rain would take it towards the creeks but then the roots of all the plants would filter it out, and it not really get into the bay system, but once they started cutting all the stuff away from all the creeks, the chemicals were able to go into the creeks, and I first started noticing the big difference in water quality in the back of Alazan, so I was really big on Alazan. When I worked for the Kenedy, I actually had a boat ramp back there for the Kenedy Ranch and I ran their fishing operation, so I did a lot back in Alazan. That was the first thing I noticed, was the salinity level was different, the water clarity was different, the sludge. There was a lot of sludge on the bottom, dead water, dead grass, the slime grass was missing, some of the rocks were covered up from the silt, and so it all started back there, and it's kind of worked its way toward the front, and the only thing that's really helped us was the development of Packery Channel. Packery Channel was like taking your finger off the straw. The upper Laguna Madre now is filtered and so our upper Laguna Madre is better than I've ever seen it. The dead grass on the King Ranch shoreline is moving. There are not as many dead zones. The grass is longer, better grass along with this current, and so it's helped the upper, the front part of Baffin Bay gets a little current now, before it didn't, so just that little one thing we did, by opening up Packery Channel, has already changed our water quality a little bit, but it goes to show you how fast and how easy it is to destroy your water quality. It's all about not being able to circulate. Now with all the chemicals and stagnant water and pressure, and then you got some people in the back of Rivera, the septic tanks go right into the bay system so that is all stopping now with the new watershed protection program, we're hoping, but that was the main thing was watching the water quality go from, I say from the early eighties until about mid-nineties was what a difference. By the mid-nineties, there was very few days you could see more than three to four feet in Baffin. There were a few areas but now there are very few days that you can see all the rocks in Rivera Channel, like we've never been able to see Razor Rock. 1987 was the last time you could see Razor Rock. Razor Rock's in nine feet of water. It sits on the edge of Rivera Channel. Well, before you could see Razor Rock, no one's seen Razor Rock in years now, only on your GPS. Things that changed the water quality, that's the one thing that has changed a lot, is our water quality in the bay.

[Brown]: You know, a few people have mentioned the freezes and the brown tide.

[Webb]: Um-hm.

[Brown]: Did you see a lot of that?

[Webb]: Oh, yeah. Let's go back to freezes [in 1983 and 1989]. The freezes were amazing. So, the '89 freeze was so bad, it was just devastating to us the amount of fish that were killed. Back then, there was only maybe six or seven guides in the whole coast that worked from Mansfield down to Port Aransas, and we all had to move up to where Port Aransas, and there was hardly any fish in our bay system, it was just amazing how that freeze just took them all out, but what it did, the ones that were left were so much better quality of fish, so the ones that were left were the cream of the crop, so after '89, look at '92, '93 with some of the biggest trout we've ever seen, the healthiest, biggest bunch of big trout we've ever seen. It seems like Mother Nature took out all the weak, and then so we get in 1990, we get this brown tide, and I really think that brown tide was just from the water quality, the stagnant water and water quality. Well, what the brown tide did was, after the freeze in '89, it protected what big fish were left. People didn't go down to the bay and take them out, they didn't catch them, so those big fish got really big and multiplied, so it was almost like the brown tide helped are bay system after the '89 freeze simply because it wasn't killing the fish, it discolored the water. It was harder to catch the fish. People didn't go in the bay system. It was before the GPS. They didn't know where a lot of the rocks were because GPS wasn't really around at that time, and so a lot of people were afraid in the bays, so actually I think the brown tide in '90 really helped recover the fish kill in '89. I really do.

[Brown]: What about the most recent freeze in 2021? What did you see down there then (both talking at once)?

[Webb]: Oh man, that was amazing. I was really involved in that. I just could not believe the amount of dead fish. It just shows you how many fish we had. I've traveled all over Alazan, and I guess the most heartbreaking thing to see was the Land Cut, lower Land Cut, that twenty miles, so I went into the Land Cut with Clayton, a friend of mine, on a Sunday after that freeze, and there were just hundreds and hundreds of twenty-eight to thirty inch fish dead and all of them were floating with their tail straight up like a fly swatter, every one of them, and the reason was their gills were covered in mud. You pick one up and just mud would just gush out of their face and gills. What happened is they pulled them to the bottom of that Land Cut, were laying on the bottom, and then the barges came by and filled their gills up with mud, they couldn't get out of the way, and it was heartbreaking to see all those dead fish in the twenty mile stretch, and we tried to do something about the deal, but it was only a four hundred dollar fine to run through there during the—it was a voluntary deal. The Teamsters weren't really interested in doing anything about that, so (knock on door)—hold on.

[Brown]: I'll just turn this off

(pause in recording)

[Brown]: [Ed. note: the recording cut out again at the beginning ten seconds or so and picked up here] again, um, we were—you were talking about the last freeze and the barges.

[Webb]: So, the thing that killed me the most was those barges running through, and that was really the only safe area in the south Land Cut. That's where everything went to get away from the freeze, so a lot of the big fish were moved into the cut. They moved south and they entered that cut, and they would have been fine if it hadn't been for the barge traffic. They would've been fine. They would have layered in the water, but once you stir the water up and the cold water stirs up like that, the main thing was the mud in the gills and the worst thing was the south end of the cut from Marker 17 to 21 and that's where the cut opens up into the south end [towards Port] Mansfield, and those fish were laying up in about a foot, foot and a half of water all sunning their self, trying to survive, and the barges were going so fast that they washed them up on the bank where they couldn't get back in the water, hundreds of them. If they would have slowed down just a little bit, but there's six or seven barges in a row, and they're getting it. They're emptying their haul, and pushed all those fish up in the shallow water where they couldn't get back. And the amount of sea turtles was—that was very disappointing. PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] was not coming down here with all the sea turtles because those sea turtles were in that Land Cut, and those barges broke all their shells. You could just hear the shells breaking when they hit the barges, and PETA wouldn't even think about coming down here. I mean, it was just ridiculous. Well, that hurt, letting us know that we are on our own here in South Texas. They're not really going to do much for us, so I guess it's kind of for us, but that was really hard to see all that, those big fish that didn't need to be killed. If they would have just shut it down [the barge traffic] for just a couple of days, it would have saved so many fish. It was heartbreaking. It really was.

[Brown]: Hm. Can you tell me more about the changes to—you've mentioned kind of the fishery a little bit and water. What about crabs and shrimp and that kind of thing?

[Webb]: That's the big thing I don't understand, so when I first was in Baffin, the crabs and shrimp, for instance, the Land Cut, there were so many shrimp in the Land Cut. There were two or three cabins in the Land Cut. If people turned the lights on at night, and it was just solid eyeballs under the lights, shrimp popping out of the water. It was so thick when the current ran, if you stood in the water with a pair of shorts on, the shrimp would hit your leg so hard, you had to get out of the water. The current was running with so many shrimp were in the current, you could wade in knee deep water that would just hit you in the legs, you'd have to get out of the water. You could put a dip net down and fill up a dip net with shrimp. There were millions of shrimp, and the shrimpers, they came up with a shrimp net that was a big square that sat on top of the boat called a push net, and it never reached the bottom. It'd go under about three or four feet on the top, and they would idle it against the current, and the whole net would fill up with thousands and thousands of shrimp, pure shrimp, and that was amazing, the amount of shrimp that came through that cut and the crabs. So, after a while, Baffin being a closed system, our salinity level got so high, we lost a lot of our crab, and I think a lot of that was water quality and salinity level because the crabs disappeared for a ten, fifteen-year period. There were no crabs in our bay system. The crabbers left, you couldn't see a crab trap, there were no

crabs and then we had this giant rain, a cold—maybe three or four years ago. We had a lot of, there was thirteen, fourteen inches of rain, and the crabs really came back, and now they're not as thick as they could have been twenty years ago, but now we have an abundance of crabs, shrimp, and stuff in our bay system. Our water quality, I really think is a lot better simply because of Packery. I just think Packery made so much difference in the water quality, just letting our water flow a little bit, letting the storms come in and push water into our system. You see, our causeway's like a dam. We're in a wind driven water situation, so our tides move more with wind driven water than natural movement of the moon, so you get a real hard north wind against the causeway, pushes pressure against the causeway, so the openings in the causeway pushes a lot of current through our system, and it pushes the current down Humble Channel on the King Ranch shoreline, it pushes water now through the Humble now through the JFK Causeway because of Packery we have a lot of water flows through the upper Laguna Madre. We didn't have that before. This did a lot of things, for instance, there was never an oyster in Laguna Madre. Now there are oyster beds all along the shoreline within about four or five miles of that opening to Packery, all along the Marker 37, there are oyster beds everywhere, so it really changed our system, letting the fresh water in, so I think the closed system is hurting us more than anything. I'm thinking the runoff not from the fertilizers from the ranch, not being able to get out of here and closing in there is just hurting us, so I'm thinking we're moving the right direction on water flow. That's for sure.

[Brown]: Um-hm. Well, what do you think success looks like in terms of current efforts to restore and conserve Baffin Bay?

[Webb]: I think it's a slow process, talking to Scott Murray, it's a twenty-year plan, but I think starting with the runoff on the chemicals is a big deal. You can't dump all these chemicals into a closed system like Baffin Bay and expect it to bounce back and not kill our grasses and our bay system. The chemicals are not good, so I think we're moving in the right direction. I think the fish limits are going to make a big deal because the bay's only so big, but yet we add more fishermen to it every year. I always tell everybody, it's like having a deer lease. You've got five thousand acres, you're the only one hunting it. Now you've got two hundred people hunting the same dear lease. You're not going to see the same deer that you saw. Everybody's got to get on the same page and protect this, but I love the idea of a limit on big trout. I don't know why we don't have a tag like we have on redfish for big trout, so the guy that is a trophy hunter, so why don't we have one tag that you can keep a trout over thirty inches, and everything under twenty-four inches, you've got to throw back. You get one trophy tag a year. Just think of the breeding stock because once the fish reaches twenty-two inches, he's past the predator stage. He's not being chased by birds. He's not being chased by dolphin. He's more of a survivor. He puts more eggs in our system than a fifteen, eighteen-inch fish is probably going to be eaten. He's got a good chance of being killed by something, a dolphin, a bird, or something. Once they make it past that predator stage, they're our producers. They're the ones that really put a lot of fish back in our system. I would love to see that deal where the bigger fish are released, and we eat more small fish. I think there's a lot of small fish, and that's one thing that's done with the bait, and I've seen a lot of different types of bait used. I've fished every kind of bait in the world. I've done live bait, artificial, I've done it all. I'm a strict lure fisherman

now, but I've done it all. I've fished all the live bait and one thing I did see about the croakers is that croakers target a lot of female fish because the croaker is the predator to the female. Even though she's not going to eat that croaker, she's going to kill it because it eats her eggs, so the majority of female fish that are caught by [using] the croaker versus male fish is a lot different. In the last five years, I catch more male fish than I've ever caught in my life. I keep a record. The other day, four of us caught two hundred and fifty fish in Baffin, counting everything, really good fishermen, fished all day, a lot of little fish, but the amount of male fish that was in that was probably seventy-five to eighty percent were male fish. I did the same thing, a record in 1987, caught a hundred and fifty fish and only twenty-seven percent were male so somethings going on with the lack of female fish, and I hate to say it, you use what you want to, to catch your fish, but the release—what you do after you catch it is what makes the difference. I don't care what you catch it on. If you don't need it, throw it back, put it back. If you don't need to eat it that day, don't give it to your friend, put it back in the water (laughs). That's what's going to make the big difference, and that's what we can do as anglers is try to tell everybody, "Look, if you're not going to eat it, catch and release. It's fun to catch it, take a photo of it, you don't need to have a dead fish picture hanging up on a string, on a board, just take the live picture in the water and release it," but that's one thing I've noticed about the new guides though. In the old days, there was nobody catch and release. Now, a lot of these guides, I don't care if they're bait fishermen or lure fishermen, they're releasing the fish. All of our guides out of Marker 37, perfect example, we had this major fish kill sixteen months ago, hardly any of our guides targeted trout. Even though the limit was three, they let them go or they targeted drum or redfish. Nobody brought them in. They did it on their own. That's what we need more of. People do it on your own. Look, we got hurt, put the fish back. So, that was a great think I saw, was the younger generation. They realize it. They saw, they see, they're listening, so I've got a good idea that the future's going to be pretty good in Baffin. I've got high hopes it's going to come back. I really do.

[Brown]: How do you think we can—you mentioned this a little bit with the catch and release, but how can we get younger generations to want to be stewards of Baffin Bay?

[Webb]: Well, that's a very good question because the young generation is so into electronics. I think the great thing about the iPhone is now that the guys catching fish can video catching a big fish, release it, and it's on social media. He doesn't have to bring it back in an ice chest and show people, and I think that the young people want to catch big fish. There's so many of these fishing tournaments, like for instance, a great thing that Chad Peterek did on the Legend's series. Now, all the fish are photographed and put back where they caught them. They're not taken [back to the docks where] people handle them a lot and taking pictures of them and taking them in and out of the live [well] and putting them back and the putting them in a strange water [source]. Now, you take a fish out of Baffin Bay, and you have a tournament in Port Aransas, the weigh-ins at Port Aransas, you took all your fish out of Baffin, you weigh them in at Port Aransas, you dump them in the ship channel in Port Aransas, those fish are lost. They've got a good chance of being eaten by a dolphin. They don't know where they are. They're disoriented, so what's the survival rate of that? It is all about the young people doing this. This is what I love about these young guides and stuff. They're the ones pushing, pushing

the catch and release, pushing the catch on video. Let's take a picture of this live fish and turn him loose. Let's don't hang him up on that board and take a picture. There's still people who want to have the hero shots of twenty fish on a board, standing in front of a bunch of dead fish. There's also the guide that's on social media that you're watching let go of live fish. He caught it and let it go, and it's still there for you, so I think there's a really good percentage of guides coming up that just get it. They get it. There's a future there. There are hundreds of guides now, back when I started, there were two. There are hundreds of them, and a lot of the fish that are taken out of the system are by the guides and stuff, and the guides are the ones that are going to have to protect them. You've got to be more respectful for the guides that fish the weekends. A lot of these guides think that they own the bay, and that's a bad thing. There's only a few—and the new guides are real considerate to the sport fishermen because the sport fishermen, these are everyone's fish. You can't think that you're a commercial guy and come in there and push people around, and that was happening four or five years ago. All that stuff's quit since the freeze. There's no more of that, you know, fighting over spots. Everybody's kind of on the same page, so it did change. The freeze let everybody know, "Hey man, Mother Nature's taking these fish out. We've got to protect what we've left," and I think that all the guides are on the same page with that. We want to keep our trout. We want to keep Baffin something special because Baffin's been the trophy trout bay system. It really has.

[Brown]: When did you start getting into catch and release and what do you tell your clients?

[Webb]: It's great because at my age now, I'm in my sixties. Most of my guys have been with me thirty, forty years, and they've caught all the fish they want to catch. They're all about coming down and having a good day on the water. They don't carry stringers. They catch and take a photo of a big fish, they go back and eat at a restaurant. They're not interested in taking back fish. That's a different cliental I have. I don't have to tell anybody about catch and release. I say, "Look, if you want to keep some reds, flounder, trout, you're welcome to it. Here's the limit, you do what you want." Ninety-nine percent of them don't even carry a stringer. I've even had them gill hook a fish and let them go. I said, "Well, I know it's dead. It's probably not going to make it, but I'm going to give it to nature. I'm not going to put him in the ice chest. I want to let nature do her deal," but that's one thing about my business, throwing lures, it's not about trying to fill up an ice chest. We're about having a good time in a bay system and enjoying the bay and watching the fish hit topwater and trying to figure out what they're eating and what color they want and all that. It's more of an enjoyment, it's not a meat hunt anymore. We don't need to eat the fish, and that's what the three-limit fish has done, just think how many fish are not being taken out, and this is what happened after this last freeze. Out of seventy-three days, we had sixty-one days of over thirty mile an hour wind in the spring. The fish were not caught in Baffin Bay. The anglers were not able to get to them, so it was Mother Nature's way of protecting the fish. She protected all those fish that were saved, and it was her way of doing it, and I just think it was amazing how things work out like that. Every time we have a big fish kill, the next year something better happens, like a lighter winter where they grow faster. Now, we have a lot more bait than we have predators, so it's like living at the Golden Corral. You wake up in the morning, you just eat anything you want. You just roll over and eat anything you want. There's bait everywhere. They don't have to swim, they don't have to chase stuff, so they're

not burning the energy, so the fish are growing faster. You don't have to chase twenty yards to get them, you just roll over and eat it and just sit there and get fat, so these fish are growing so much faster. I just caught a fish the day before yesterday, was only twenty-two and a half inches, weighed four and three-quarter pounds. That is a girth. That is heavy, heavy fish. The fish had fat all the way to her tail, and you can always tell when the fish are gorged, and they get fat past the anal fin. They're fat on the tail. That's a healthy fish, and that's what I'm seeing. I'm seeing a lot of healthy fish.

[Brown]: Well, I think that's all the questions, but do you have any more fish stories to tell?

[Webb]: I've got a lot of fish stories. Oh my God (laughs). I guess one of my personal best fish was a great story, so I fished in some shallow rocks, and I've got one client with me, and we're sight casting this huge fish up on the sand bar, and there's some scattered rocks in the middle of them, and he sight casted a twenty-nine-inch fish that weighed eight pounds, just a gorgeous trout. It was his personal best, and he was going to take it to John Glenn's to get it mounted. At that time, the old stringers were a cable stringer and they had a hook on them, you know, like a [large] hook, and so I hooked the fish on a stringer and put him on my belt, and he went on away about two or three hundred yards to sight cast another one. I went the opposite way. I've got this fish on my belt. I'm dragging this fish because we were a long way from the boat, and I look up and next to this rock, is the biggest trout I've ever seen, absolute monster fish, and I just start shaking. I know that I can't throw because the fish is not facing the right way. She can see me, so I just froze. I just sat there and finally she turned the opposite way, and I threw it right over her shoulder, and I watched her suck it in. I watched her take it, and I set the hook, and this fish is right in the middle of a bunch of big rocks. This fish is twelve pounds, thirteen ounces, almost thirteen pounds, and I set the hook, and of course she goes around those rocks, and at this time there's no such thing as braided line. We're all fishing monoline. I'm fishing twelve-pound big game, and when it comes in contact with those razor rocks, it's game over. They cut it quick, and so it's in the wintertime, and I'm in waders, and I know I can't swim out to far or I'm going to go over my waders, and she starts peeling line and going out towards these rocks, and I just swim over in my waders, and I fill my waders up and thank God, I'm a surfer all my life. I can really swim good, and she swam out to this deep rocks. She's going around this rock, and so I swam to that rock, climbed on top of that rock, and I'm fighting this fish right on the rock, and I look at my line, and she frayed it for five or six feet around the hook she ran across the rock. It looked like spider web. It was just frayed. I just knew it was going to break, and so I backed my drag way off, and I'm going around in circles on top of this rock and the stringer I had around my waist is now tangled up around my legs with this guy's big fish on it, and without thinking about it, I unhooked that thing from my leg, just let it go, just let that stringer go. I didn't think about it. I was just in the fight. I let that stringer go, and that stringer drifts off about fifty yards away from that rock, and I finally get that fish in and of course, I don't have a net. It's just me and her, and I finally wear her down, and I grab her by the base of the tail and with these big trout, I grabbed her by the base of the tail, and I flipped her over like a shark, and I disoriented her. When you flip them on their back, they don't know what's going on for a second, so I flipped her over real quick, and I ran my hands down behind her head, and I could barely get my big old hand around her head, and I got her by the gill, and I said, "I got

her." Now, I'm in about twenty yards of deep water to the next rock I can swim to, so I stuck my rod in my mouth and I swam with the waders full of water, bouncing up off the bottom trying to get some air, and I finally got back, and I look out, and there's that guy's stringer with that fish on it about two hundred yards floating away in the bay, so I take my fish back to the boat, I throw it in the box, I get on my trolling motor, and I go back out to that stringer and lucky that stringer had the hook on it, that fish would of stolen my hook (both laugh), and I pull that fish up, and I put him in the ice chest with my fish, and that poor guy never saw nothing (laughs), so I just go—I was going to have to give him my fish. I was going to have to go, "Man, here. I lost your fish, but here's mine," It was bad because I didn't want to put my fish in his box because it was really a lot bigger, so he comes back, and he's looking, and he says, "God, that's really a great fish. That's really great." (unintelligible), "Oh, my God. What's that?" I said, "Well, I caught another one," but anyway, that was my personal best, and of course I get him mounted on the coffee table. He's just one ounce under thirteen pounds, thirty-three and a half inches, sight cast, and that was probably one of my best fish ever, just the whole thing, the way it unfolded and everything. Landing that fish was something, I still have dreams about that one for sure (laughs).

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Webb]: Lots of fish stories, you know, that's one thing is after forty-one years of guiding, I've got lots of fish stories (laughs).

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Webb]: That's for sure. Anyway, that was a good one.

[Brown]: Any ones that got away?

[Webb]: Oh God, two that got away that haunts me to this day. The one that haunts me to this day. When my dad was a game warden, we picked up some trout that were thirty-six to thirty-eight inches [ed. note: narrator meant twenty-six to twenty-eight] in gillnets. In fact, we picked up one that was thirty, I think it was thirty-eight inches. They froze it in a five-hundred-pound block of ice and put it at Bucky's Fish House, and people could come by and see it. It was in 1991, February 6th at nine o'clock in the morning. I'll never forget that day. I'm throwing a salmon colored corky, and I just caught a thirty-one to thirty-two inch fish. I was on some really big fish, and I get the thump, and I set the hook and this fish just sits there and shakes her head, and I cannot move this fish and finally she starts peeling drag all the way down to my knot, and so I started swimming trying to get my line back and finally I stopped her, and she started coming back toward me and then she got within about fifty yards from me, this fish jumped and to this day, I've never seen anything like it. That fish was thirty-eight inches easy, thirty-eight inches long, just an absolute monster. When she came out of the water, her tail was like a fly swatter, just a big giant, just a giant, I'll never forget that tail, so I finally get this fish up to me, and she circles me. I'm trying to get a hold of her. I cannot get my hand around the base of her tail. I can't get a hold of her. She's a monster, so I'm going in circles trying to fight her, I know

I've got to get her worn down and then right when I'm getting ready to get her, the split ring pulls off the Corky and that fish swims off (both laugh), and I just wilted. My wife says I pouted for six weeks. I didn't even want to go fishing, I would just sit, just sit. Then about two years later, I had another in the same place, one of my favorite places. I had one on a Jumping Minnow, she had the topwater sideways in her mouth, another thirty-six, thirty-five, not as big as that one, but thirty-five, thirty-six inch fish, and she finally shook the topwater out. There were a couple fish there that I saw that I realized that there are some fish in that bay system that is just unbelievable at that time. You go back and look at the records, the 1942 of some of those fish they caught in Baffin that were forty inches long and that one freeze, I think it was '43, where they caught three fish over fifteen pounds in a gillnet for the Parks and Wildlife at the mouth of the Land Cut. I think David McKee was talking about that, just fascinating history about how big those fish were in that bay system. I'm not so sure how big the biggest fish are right now since all these freezes and the amount of anglers, so I look at these tournaments with one hundred fifty, two hundred of the very best trout fishermen in the coast that are fishing in the winter right now and they're not catching anything over six and a half pounds, so the freeze really took out a lot of our A team, but it left a lot of good breeders. It left a lot of those fish that are going to be big quick. Give it two years and see what happens. We may not have those big thirty-six inchers now but give it two or three years, we'll have some more. It's coming back. I really believe that. I think it's coming back. I don't think we're done. I think we just took a little lull, and we're getting it all figured out, and we're going to adjust to it as anglers, and we're going to come back and make it better. I really do.

[Brown]: Well, that seems like a good place to stop unless you wanted to add anything?

[Webb]: (laughs) No. I hope I did okay.

[Brown]: Yeah.

[Webb]: I just kind of talked, sorry.

[Brown]: No, it was great. Thank you.

[Webb]: Oh good, I hope it's okay, you know, I just have so much in my mind, its just—

[Brown]: Well, you can tell me more if you want.

[Webb]: No, I just—there's so much. I just don't know where to even start, all the stuff I've seen.

[Brown]: Okay.

[Webb]: All my aunts and uncles were shrimpers in the bay, everybody lived in that bay. Everybody made their living, my grandfather was a guide. That's, 1938, that's my grandfather. He was a guide at Mills Wharf near Rockport , which is Seagun now. He made five dollars a day

as a guide, and my other grandpa on my father's side was a Tivoli guide. He made ten dollars a day duck hunting and goose hunting, so all my family are—the only one that wasn't a fishing guide or commercial was my dad. He was a game warden. He chased all my relatives (both laugh). They called, "Are you home? Good." I'm serious. If he answered the phone, they'd go hunting. I mean, that's how it was. It was ridiculous.

[Brown]: How did your aunts get into shrimping?

[Webb]: Well, it was so funny because my whole family was born and raised up around Tivoli on the Guadalupe River and everybody was shrimpers and crabbers. They lived on the river, they ran trotlines for fish and shrimp boats all right out of Fulton. They're all shrimpers, and they're all dead now, but everybody in the whole family was, you know, my father and all my father's sisters, all three sisters were shrimpers and crabbers. It's just amazing. Everybody made their money or their living off the water, and I tried a real job, didn't work (laughs). I've got to be on the water. I'm eaten alive by all the sun damage and stuff, but I don't know anything else to do. I'm probably going to do this till the day I die, just absolutely love it. I'll fish till there's no more trout left, and I believe that we're going the opposite [direction]. I think we've hit bottom and we're coming up. I think that three years from now, we're going to see bigger and better fish. I really do. I think we're coming up. I'm seeing a big change in the people's attitude and people are caring about our bay systems, caring about what goes in the bay system. If we could just do something about these freezes and stopping these barges [in the freezes] from the damage they do in the deep water. If we could just stop some of that boat traffic in the deep water, protecting our fish and sea turtles. That's the one thing I just don't get, man. I know there's a lot of money in it, but there's a lot of money in our fishing as tourists coming down here wanting to catch them. Look at the long run, getting something through the Land Cut and killing all those fish or maybe we should back off for two or three days and let them get out of there and go back in the Flats and survive but anyway, we're headed the right direction. The future in Baffin Bay [looks good]. I think it's going to be really good and say, '25, '26, I think it's going to be awesome. I really think we're going to see a lot of big fish unless Mother Nature decides to kill them again, you know, she's in control.

[Brown]: (laughs) All right, sounds good. Well, thank you.

[Webb]: Thanks, and I hope I did okay. Man, I just—you know.

[Brown]: You did.

(end of recording)