

Interview Log

Interviewee: Ron Fithian (R.F.)

Tape #:

Interviewer: Shelly Drummond (S.D.)

of Tapes: 1

Date: November 26, 2003

of Sides: 2

Location: In his office at the Rock Hall Municipal Building

Topic: Maryland Watermen's Association, Bayside Park, development, fishing

Theme: Commercial fishing, Rock Hall town management, vision and plans for the future, Marine Trade School, Rock Hall Seafood

Comments: Mr. Fithian is loud and clear, but Ms. Drummond sounds a bit distant from microphone.

Documentation:

Audio: 51 minutes recorded on CD

Video:

Digital Photos:

Slides:

Field Notes: The recording was done in a fairly quiet room, we cut the fluorescents and the radio, but traffic still filtered through. I recorded with Shotgun mike.

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BEGIN SIDE A

S.D.: This is Shelly Drummond from the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum. I'm with Ron Fithian, and it is November 26th. Tell me a little, tell me what your family did when you were young.

R.F.: Well my father was – worked on the, done some work on the water at different times. Later on in life he moved away from the seafood business and went on to work for **American Dredging Company** and the **C&D Canal** when it was being built, run the crew boats and that type of thing. But when he wasn't working there and before he started working there, he worked in the seafood business, like probably 90 percent of the people in Rock Hall did at that time.

S.D.: When did you go on the water first?

R.F.: Well I probably started kicking around the waterfront when I was old enough to go around there and watch what was going on, and I always wanted to go out on the boats with my relatives and family members and friends, and it was just something that I was attracted to early on in life. I managed to stay in school. I graduated from high school in 1969, and then went directly into the seafood business. Was married at the age of 19, and was able to have a family, support a family and have a good way of life for about 28 years before I then got out of the seafood business, and took the job as Town Manager of Rock Hall.

S.D.: What kind of fishing did you do?

R.F.: Just about a little bit of everything, except possibly – I never worked on a skipjack, worked around them a lot, saw them operate, but we crabbed, soft-shell clammed, oystered, fished, and I guess out of those four occupations, my – what really attracted me to the seafood business and the part that I loved the most was the fin fishing, fishing for striped bass and perch. Mostly striped bass. We would driftnet in the winter months for them, and then we would, before it was outlawed, we would set stake nets and stuff in the spring to catch the spawning run going up the Chesapeake Bay. We also drift-netted up the bay in the spring, shad fished up there in the spring. But it was drift-netting or stake fishing was the way we, most everybody fished around here. In the summer months, we either crabbed or, for about 15 years, I soft-shell clammed, those little soft-shell clams that probably 90 percent of what we sold went into the New England states where they used them up there. But we had, you know, we crabbed, oystered for 15, 18 years in a row till that, till I kind of replaced that with the clamming, oyster, you know, the disease started taking effect, and the oysters were kind of getting scarcer and scarcer. But we did a little bit of everything. Whatever we thought we could make the most money out of, now that didn't always pertain to the fishing because I've had lots of years where I was doing pretty good oystering, but when it got cold in the winter and I was ready to go fishing, I was always attracted to that, and sometimes it paid off, and sometimes I would've been better off to stay oystering. The thing I liked about the fishing the most was oystering, if you went out there and worked, you could make a day's work. The oysters weren't going anywhere, you could go out there and if you worked hard and harvest them, you could catch them. But when you caught that fish, it was like you outsmarted him or something because he's got a head and tail and, you know, he would use both of them. And a lot of days you could go out there and there would be plenty fish, but you couldn't catch them for whatever reason. The water's too clear, or

it wasn't cold enough or whatever. But when you caught them, you had that feeling of self-satisfaction where you'd accomplished something. And, you know, I've went lots of years where you go two or three weeks and never have a paycheck, and then in a week, you could make a winter's work. And it was that, kind of a little bit more adventurous than most other of the occupations.

S.D.: Tell me a little bit about your memories of what the harbor used to look like.

R.F.: Well when I was a kid, you know, early on and even in the beginning of my career, there was – the harbor was just full of commercial workboats. Some of them were crabbing, oystering, fishing, clamming. You name is, there was – some people didn't choose to work at fishing like I did. There was people that clammed year-round. Did nothing else but that. There was people that would crab the whole season as long as they could, and then when that was over, they'd step into oystering, and they might only crab in the summer and oyster in the winter. But it was boats going in each and every direction, and you know, at that time, we were sending tractor and trailer loads of rock fish to New York. And the same day, sending tractor and trailer loads of oysters to Virginia. So, I mean at one time, without any exaggeration, I would say that Rock Hall could be considered, could have been considered the rock fish capital of not only Maryland, but the whole east coast. There was more rock fish caught, and that's what this town was all about was the fishing. The oystering and all that stuff was kind of secondary, to me it was, anyhow. We were just a fishing town, and like I said, tractor and trailer loads, two and three, four tractor and trailer loads a day of oysters going to Virginia, couple tractor and trailer loads going to Fulton Fish Market in New York with Rock Fish on them, and it was a hustling and bustling little town.

S.D.: How did Rock Hall get its name?

R.F.: Well there's a bunch of different theories about that. I'm not sure that I really know. Somebody said one time there was a – there was a hull made of rock or something, and somebody said it was for a big catch of rock fish. But, you know, I've fooled in the museum and seen where people have been asked this question, it's been researched, and I'm not sure anybody really knows. The town was first called Rock Hall Crossroads when it was established in 1706 or something like that, and that was – it was called Rock Hall Crossroads. And then over the years, it lost the Crossroads and just become known as Rock Hall. But I'm not sure anybody really knows where the name comes from.

S.D.: Do people make the relationship between the rock fish and Rock Hall?

R.F.: Well it's certainly an obvious connection, and a lot of people think that. And I'll tell you, as far as I'm concerned, that's the best answer yet. Because as I said, without exaggerating or bragging, there was probably more tonnage of Rock Fish caught out of this little town than any one little town on the entire East Coast of the United States. Bar none.

S.D.: What do you think changed that?

R.F.: Well there's a whole bunch of things. No one real – no specific thing. I can give you some examples. The oyster industry was definitely harmed by two things. MSX and dermo, which are two diseases that kill oysters. And they – the funny part about it, it's not funny, but the way it works is they're not – that disease is not harmful to people, it doesn't bother the oysters until the oysters get just about 2 7/8 inches big. Now I guess that's probably the third year of their life. It takes about three years for an oyster to become legal size. We can't harvest them till they become three inches. That disease will let that oyster get, it seems like, to about 2 3/4 inches, and then it kills them. And what's so important about that is that over-harvesting, I mean I can

have a group of oystermen that can over-harvest one oyster bar. But when a disease hits, it hits from shore to shore and everything in between. And over-harvesting, if the oysters produce like they should, there would never be anything such as over-harvesting. But when disease comes in and kills everything from one shore to the other shore, it just wipes it out. And you just can't recover from that. This disease thrives on salt water. And it started out in the lower part of the bay, actually started in the Delaware Bay years before it hit here and wiped them out of the oyster industry. Then the saltier areas down Crisfield, Deale's Island, they were affected by it. But up here in Rock Hall in the fresher waters closer to the Susquehanna, we were kind of – we weren't affected by it because it couldn't live in fresh water, this disease. But as the bay becomes saltier, we have some droughts or whatever, but it constantly kept moving forward norther and north. And then at the same time, it was kind of accelerated by Hurricane Agnes. It seemed like back in, not exactly sure the date of Hurricane Agnes, but it was in the 70's, I'm going to guess. No, I'm not going to guess because I'm not sure. It was in the 70's. That disease, coupled with all the silt and stuff that come down from the Susquehanna, and the bottom was silted over, and it become hard for the little oysters to catch onto the fresh – but the disease was really what kind of played havoc with the oyster industry. Now the oyster industry was the, probably the nucleus of the seafood business. And what I mean by that is that there was more people statewide employed in the oyster industry than any one of the other industries at all. Like at one time, there was 6,000 oystermen in the State of Maryland. There was never that many fishermen, never that many clambers, never that many crabbers. But there were 6,000, I mean that was the backbone of the seafood industry.

Now when you do away with that, you take that one piece out of the puzzle, those people don't just quit being watermen, they went to something else. So they crabbed longer than they would normally crab, more people crabbed that never, ever crabbed before because there was no oyster industry, more people went fishing. So all you're doing when you eliminate that one industry is you put all that additional pressure and effort into other parts of the industry that don't need any more pressure, but they get it because you have no choice. The oyster industry was definitely killed by the diseases. And then your crabbing, you know, we've put a lot of extra pressure on that. Three's still a viable crab industry. It hasn't been affected. It's still doing reasonably well. The fishing, there was problems there that the fish weren't reproducing properly, coupled with DNR was saying that we were catching too many of them, and they were saying that there was over-harvesting was the problem with that. I disagree with that. I think there was things that we were doing that wasn't just right, and we could've changed it. But nevertheless, we were kind of regulated out of that industry. As a matter of fact, there was a moratorium in '85 or 6, something along those lines, where they eliminated it completely. So you had an oyster industry in trouble, put a moratorium on the rock fishing, so you've got clamming and crabbing left. So all those people that were doing – spread out over four industries are now into two industries putting all that additional effort. And just one thing snowballs after another. Then there was a disease come in and wiped the clam business completely out. There was 47 clambers that I was one of, 47 boats going out of Rock Hall Harbor catching 15 bushel a day. And went on for several years, and there was a lot of money made out of it, a lot of people done very well. Now there's none. It just wiped the clamming out, and it hasn't – there hasn't been any amount of clamming went on here for probably eight years now. So little by little, industries were affected in different ways till right now you're down to a crab season, a very, very limited rock fish season where they control the pounds you can catch, and the amount of

days you can go, and a non-existent soft shell clam industry. It's gone. And the oyster industry is just about there. It's about gone. But you still have a good crab industry and a weak fishing industry. That's where we've come.

S.D.: When did the recreational boats start filling in?

R.F.: Well I tell you, fortunately for the Town of Rock Hall, it happened at just about the same time that the seafood industry was starting to fail. And the – and the recreational boating activity started increasing, and we, you know, it just become a period of time when the seafood business was on a downward spiral at the same time the boating industry was taking off, and I'd say it's probably been 15 to 18 years ago this really kind of took off and has really been a salvation to the Town of Rock Hall because, you know, we were very fortunate. You know, some towns, they might have a Chrysler Auto Plant in their town, and it goes out of business. Well they're dead. You know, the town dies. But, you know, our Chrysler business was our seafood business, and when it basically died, we were fortunate that something come along and picked us up, kept the economy of the town going, you know. It was really a good fit for some of the fellows that worked on boats and watermen were better to work than if you weren't going to work in the seafood business, work in a marina where you were dealing with boats and around the water, and it was kind of a good fit for some people. So, you know, that come along about, I'm going to guess and say 15 years ago or so is when it really took off. There were some rough times there when the seafood business, you know, some of the people that were in it didn't want to give up to some of the recreational boating, and there was a transitionary period, everybody went through. There was a hard feelings, but I tell you, it's kind of worked out to where I think both user groups accept the other and know that it takes both groups to make a town, and we both understand the importance of one another. I think the recreational boaters, the people in that business understand that a lot of these people come to Rock Hall because of its heritage, because it is a seafood town, because, you know, they think a guy comes in in an old workboat. We think, well we look at it as an old workboat, but people that come from around here, that's pretty neat to them. It's something they don't – so one industry, I think, feeds the other. The boaters also buy the crabs and stuff that they catch around here. It seems to work real well, and I don't – I think, as I was talking about that transition period, I think there was one, and like I said, it was some hard feelings and some rough times, but that's over with, and now everybody's working together to make a good, a nice little town.

S.D.: How did you get through the transition period? And I guess I'm also talking a little bit about the development of Bayside Park.

R.F.: Well I tell you, **Bayside Park** come really at a late date, and I was a part of that because I had been a county – I was in local government. I was the County Commissioner for Kent County, which is, you know, we have three commissioners that govern Kent County, one of them being the president, and the other two board members, and I was there for a four-year term. Then I was re-elected to another four-year term, which I served as the president of the board at that time. And there was an opportunity for years and years, and even through other groups of commissioners, there was always, everybody was always looking at finding a place in Rock Hall Harbor where commercial boaters could rent slips, have a place to tie their boat, do their business and not interfere with recreational boaters. The marinas were really good to the seafood industry when they started springing up as far as, you know, every marina would save a few slips for some watermen. And they really done it at a price because they could've got a lot more money renting those slips to recreational boaters, and they probably heard some flack when

somebody would – some crabber would start his diesel up 4:00 in the morning, and these recreational boaters don't want to get up that time of the morning. And I'm sure that it just didn't fit right. But nevertheless, it went on. But we were always looking for a place where we could let these watermen call home, I guess. And there was a lot of slips that, for whatever reason, weren't – you know, the seafood business used to use them, and they weren't available no more because they were turned into marinas. So there was becoming a shortage of slips. Well then the opportunity come that there was this –

(Interruption - ringing noise.)

S.D.: I can pause.

(Off record.)

R.F.: There become, we were fortunate that there was a small marina that had 40 slips that come available for sale. We were told, through the grapevine, that it was for sale. And the thing that attracted us to that little marina was the fact that it already joined right up with a large county land, and that we already had. It was a bulkhead area. There was no slips there, but we used – the watermen used it a lot for loading and unloading. This little marina was right next door to it. So it seemed like a natural fit. It had 40 slips, and we went to the people and asked them about selling it and they were interested. So we went and took upon, you know, the county government, we went and made a project out of it. We had to try to – the asking price was a million and a half dollars. That was kind of expensive for us to come up with, so we went to the state looking for help through waterway improvement funds, and Program Open Space. We managed to secure \$1,100,000 of it. And that left to borrow \$400,000 from county tax money, used – well we've actually borrowed it. And then we had a travel lift that come with the marina that we sold for \$25,000. So we had \$375,000 in the project, and the day we bought it, we rented every slip down there and the place is probably bringing in somewhere around \$35,000 in slip rent from the watermen, so it's paying for itself, and it really didn't cost the county hardly a dime. And in that place now, we were able to have 40 slips for a mixture of people. The larger slips are basically rented by the commercial watermen in Rock Hall. And then we have some smaller slips that other residents have, speed boats and things. So it was a nice little mix. We also had, were able to secure one of the – put on the end of this project a real nice boat ramp, launch, boat-launching ramp where they can launch two boats at one time, which seemed like a perfect way to bring tourism to the town to help bring boaters and trailer vessels to the town. There's a little swimming pool there that's heavily used by the kids in town. Parks and Rec brings the kids there on a regular basis. So and it's room there for the watermen if they have to load and unload and things, and it's worked out real well. So I was a commissioner for eight years, and that is one of the projects, I think, we are most proud that we were able to put together while we were in there. And I think, I think it's been very successful.

S.D.: What do you think is one of the biggest losses, change to the harbor, some of the old icons?

R.F.: Well the biggest change or biggest loss to me is just the way of the seafood industry, the way of the seafood industry, the way it was. I mean, listen, I love the town the way it is now. But if I could snap my fingers and put it back like it was 30 years ago, I'd do it. I mean everybody, you know, people around here, they've worked hard, they've played hard. And, you know, the harder you worked, the more you made, and almost the entire town was involved, in some way, with the seafood business. If they didn't actually work out on the bay, maybe they had a seafood business, they drove trucks hauling seafood, they loaded seafood, you know. Then

we had our storekeepers and stuff. But everything was centered around the seafood business. And just that camaraderie among all the citizens of the town, everybody had a common interest, and it was the bay, and we all worked together, we helped one another.

Unfortunately, a lot of that's gone because, you know, the business has really had its problems, and now it's, you know, I don't know, it's just different. And, you know, I think the future of the seafood business is that it's boiling down to I think there will always be watermen, people working on the water, but it'll be the guy that retired from some other job, and he's supplementing his income in the summertime by crabbing, or someone who has a job where he has two or three days a week off that he can do it. I think the day that a guy invests his life into the seafood business, raises a family, pays for a home, lives a good lifestyle, I'm afraid, will come to an end real soon. And I think it has. And to me, that's sad because it was a way of life that we all loved, and it's kind of gone away. I can assure you that if I was still doing as well on the water as I was 20 years ago, I wouldn't be the Town Manager of Rock Hall. I enjoy this job, and I was very fortunate to get the job. A lot of people haven't had that chance that I have had. A lot of people are stuck doing that job, whether they make it or not, there's not a whole lot of places to go, and I'm one of the fortunate ones. But even though I've got a good job, I enjoy it, I wouldn't have traded it for nothing in the world if the business hadn't have changed. Take it back 20 years, I wouldn't be here. I'd be working on the water.

S.D.: A couple people have told me about a few places in Rock Hall. Do you have any stories about like Hubbard's?

R.F.: Well Hubbard's Pier was, I guess, the centerpiece of the town. That was, Hubbard's Pier was a restaurant. The land where it set is no longer there. They dug it out and made a marina out of it. That's one of the examples of where the seafood business lost slips because you used to, all those slips around Hubbard's Pier were for commercial watermen. And when that place was sold, went out of business and was sold, they actually dug that all up, and that's a recreational marina today. But it was – Hubbard's Pier, it was a restaurant that all the watermen met there in the mornings, you know. It was a place you were coming and going from all the time. Plus, right next door to it, they bought seafood there. It was retail and wholesaling of seafood. And a lot of us sold our product there. The other place right next door to it was, at that time, Mr. Roy Evans's, and it was on a smaller scale, but basically the same thing. It was a seafood, retail and wholesale place. I'd say, just guessing, I'm going to say that Hubbard's Pier probably bought, at that time, bought two-thirds of the seafood that come through the jetties, and Evans bought the other third. But it was, you know, it was part of the – it's been there ever since the beginning, just about. It was – early on, in my whole life, there was a Hubbard's Pier there. It was part of that business, and it was just a very important part of the life around here. It's where we all worked out of, sold our product, tied our boats. You know, you got done dinner in the evenings. A lot of us would slip down the shore and, you know, you talked about what you done the day before. It was just a meeting place, restaurant and place you sold seafood.

S.D.: Did you go to the open house of the condos they built there?

R.F.: No.

S.D.: Do you remember any comments or what people thought about the condominiums when they were first put in?

R.F.: Well some of the condos, I don't know that there was really that big a deal about the condos. The one thing that we wanted to make sure that never happened, and we still feel that way today and will still fight for that, we thought very early on that, you know, condos are

fine in their place. But the thing that makes Rock Hall very, you know, viable, and it's a thriving little town is the fact that all the way around that harbor, there's many, many places you can ride around, and you can see the harbor, and nothing blocks your view. And we wanted to make sure that we never allowed condos to just be built all around the edge of the harbor so that only a select few could enjoy its view and its beauty. And we've stood behind that, and we maintain that. And, you know, the condos that are there now area across the road, and frankly, I don't think anybody's upset about that. For what reason I could – you know, they're over there, there's one little set of condos. Up the head of the creek there is a set, one of the first groups that was sold off, piece of land that was sold off, there's some condos. But that was an area that was kind of off to itself, wasn't really used much. But we've been able to maintain and protect the entire harbor from large buildings such as condos being built up and closing off the harbor to the public. We don't want that to happen. And we've stood fast with that, and I think we always will.

S.D.: How about the plans, or what would you like to see to use or some of the history of Rock Hall Seafood and maybe the marine school plan?

R.F.: Well that marine school, that's, I think, is a great idea. If they can put that together, and we can start educating some of the – you know, we have a, we don't have a lot of job opportunities in Rock Hall. So if there's a school here that you can send some of your young people to, and they can learn refrigeration or learn how to work on diesel engines or things that pertain to the marina business and to, you know, your yachts and your sailboats, you know, if you can teach people to specialize in the trades that their skill can be used at these marinas, I think is certainly a plus for this town, and the whole county, you know. You got – you're sending people to learn these specific trades, and then you've got all these marinas surrounding you that use those skilled people. It just seems like a natural fit to me, and I wish them well with that endeavor.

S.D.: How about arts programming, like the **Mainstay**?

R.F.: Well, you know, that's one of the things that I like about the Town of Rock Hall. We got, we don't have a whole lot of anything, but we got a little bit of almost everything. And those that like the finer arts, and the singing and the music and that type of thing, look, we're extremely proud of the fact. Not a whole lot of little towns around our size has a Mainstay that attracts such a variety of really top notch singing and musical groups that entertain the people who choose to go there. And, you know, they've done a great job since they've started. They attract a lot of people. Certainly a lot of people enjoy it. I think it's, you know, it's run on donations, and I think it's a great asset for the town to have something like that. I've been there a couple times myself and I enjoyed it, wished I had time to go more. They have some excellent musical groups there.

S.D.: What do you think are some of the things that protected Rock Hall, like the main street, it's not a historic district, and I mean there's a lot of people that have moved in here. How do you think Rock Hall has protected its –

R.F.: Well our zoning and stuff was kind of put in place, and just like I'm talking about, you know, we've had developers come to town that actually, one in particular. We had a developer come to town one time that really wanted to turn Rock Hall upside down and build a city within this little town. And it was – we all rallied around one another, and figured that was too big a change, and we didn't want to, we didn't want to completely change Rock Hall overnight. I think we can stand some gradual change, but we looked at those type of – and, you

know, we were successful in defeating it. And through our elected officials and, you know, raising the roof off of some of these hearing rooms from time to time and expressing our opinions, I think everybody's kind of realized that we're not going to stand by and watch the town destroyed for any few developers. But we are open to people coming in and living and buying a home, and the town growing. You know, that's what it's all about. But this great big development of just turning Rock Hall upside down, we don't want any parts of that.

S.D.: What do you want people to know about Rock Hall?

R.F.: Well it's, you know, we're proud of the fact that we feel like it's a friendly little town. You know, it has – although the seafood business has changed dramatically, it's a quiet little peaceful little town. It's known for its waterfront, its seafood business, the boating, recreational boating. That's what Rock Hall's known for, and I don't think anything will ever change that. I mean people, you go anywhere you want and people can reminisce about the days when they used to come down first day of oyster season and buy gallons of oysters, you know, or if they say well I'm going to go get some fish, somebody'll say are you going to go to Rock Hall? That's where you go to buy – and that's what we're all about. Not as much today as it used to be, but the thing that's happened that I think has been good is it, again, it hasn't been turning Rock Hall upside down overnight. It's been a gradual change, and people can deal with gradual change. But when you have somebody come in that wants to turn it upside down, that's when everything goes to pot as far as I'm concerned. You know, we know that a town has to change, just like, you know, it has to grow, it has to change with the times or it will die, just like a person, I guess, but you got to do it gradually. And I think we've done a good job with that.

S.D.: Okay, I have a question.

R.F.: Okay.

S.D.: And if you don't want to tell me one, that's okay. During the transition time when it was a little more difficult between the watermen and the recreational boaters, do you have a funny story of a particular incident?

R.F.: Well (laughter), I guess if I had a chance to think about it I probably could. It's going to take me – I guess that one development group that come to town and wanted to, you know, they wanted to kind of hollow the town out. Dredge a canal up into the middle of Rock Hall and basically buy up everything around it and hollow out the center of it and have this large basin. They had plans that it was unbelievable. There was a lot of funny stories come out of that. But I mean we went through that, we fought that for probably six months or a year. You know, if – it was kind of funny because the guy, it wasn't funny at the time and it probably won't be funny to anybody that hears this, but living through it and being a part of it, it was kind of funny. If there was an individual that, say, was into retailing seafood or something, and he was openly complaining about he was one of the people that was most outspoken, maybe, about this development, well that next day, the guy that was heading this up would be at his doorstep and would promise him the world as far as we're going to build you this, you'll have the first retail businesses that come into town, to try to buy that individual off. And it was kind of funny to watch an individual think that they could come through the town, and that we were dumb enough to fall for all the promises that they made. And it was really comforting to see, you know, this isn't New York City, and maybe we're a little bit backward compared to some places in the country, but the people knew the B.S. when they heard it, and they know how to say no to it. You know, I was proud of what the people in the town done. So I don't, you know it's not a funny story, but it's just – it was one of the biggest things that we had to deal with, because they

were throwing around a lot of money, a lot of promises, very few people fell for any of it, and we're all glad we didn't because it wasn't right for the town at the time.

S.D.: Do you have – and I've been meaning to talk to **Larry Simms** more about this, but during the time of the moratorium when they were negotiating to be able to fish again, were you – were you part of that?

R.F.: Well, yeah. I was still – like I said, one of my main jobs, I guess, was I was a fisherman more so than I was a crabber or anything else. I was really into the fishing industry. And when the moratorium went into effect, I fished the last day, and I fished the day they opened it back up. So but for those years in between, you had to, you know, I had a lot of fishing equipment. I had to put it aside, I had to go out and buy new equipment to be able to do something else, to be able to crab, to be able to clam, all these – you know, a person that's making a living out of the seafood business, if they eliminate the fish, your bills don't quit coming, and you can't sit there and twiddle your thumbs until they decide to open the moratorium back up, or do away with the moratorium, so you've got to do something else. And we had to change our whole way of life and the things that we were involved in, and we had to buy different equipment, and it was quite an ordeal. We were a little bit disappointed that when they brought it back, they brought it back at such a, on such a small scale compared to what – you know, we realized that they put the moratorium in effect, and we gave up a lot. You know, we gave up our way of life for several years. And we were just hoping that when they did bring it back – they brought it back on a very, very small scale. It was almost like a token fishery so they could say they had one, but it didn't amount to a whole lot. It kind of makes people in this – in the seafood business a little more, a little more reluctant to go along with scientists and politicians and biologists and stuff when they say well let's try this with something else. You're sitting back saying why do I want to go along with that when you promised that when we brought the fish back, we would be going back to work like we used to, for the most part. I mean we all knew that there was going to be changes. But they brought it back on such a limited basis that you really couldn't, you really couldn't make a living doing it. I mean like I used the word, it was a token fishery. Some people felt good by saying that they were opening it back up. But as far as making a living out of it, it was many years, and still today, it's nothing like it used to be. So yeah, it affected us. And it changed that industry forever. We had, we had given up a lot of things prior to the moratorium that we thought would make a big difference. We – there was no limit to what you could catch. You know, whatever you could catch, you could sell. When they brought it back up, brought it back in, we were allowed 150 pounds a day. One of the most productive times of the year was in the spring when the fish were coming up the bay to spawn. We, basically, done away with that ourselves. We recommended to do away with the spring fishery completely because there was other things we could do in the spring. But the winter fishery was really important to us because that was the period of time of the year when there was not – you don't have crabbing and other things that you can do. So the watermen themselves basically gave that spring fishing up on their own, like really trying to buy more time in this thing, and to keep from having a moratorium. So, yeah, it was a big change, that was.

S.D.: Do you think the moratorium helped the population at all?

R.F.: No question about it. If you, if you – if you stop someone from catching something completely – well you got to have two things that happen. You've got to have, they've got to reproduce, and they were not doing that well at all when we were – towards the last, before the moratorium. But they got that turned around, and I don't think they, when I say

they, they didn't do it. It, whatever happened, but the fish started having some better years as far as the – they go out and they drag a seine and catch these little fish after the spring, and they can predict the type of hatch or how good it's been. And the hatch, they'd have – they went some years, and it wasn't so good, and then they had some years when they come back and they had some real strong hatches. But definitely, it had to help the population, 'cause if you never catch one – but when you think about it, what good is a resource if you never get to see it, or eat it or enjoy catching it? If you knew there was fish six foot deep out in the Chesapeake Bay, well you look out there and you can't see them, you know, you're never allowed to catch one, you're never allowed to eat one, you don't get to even see them. They're really not a whole lot of good to us. But so, yeah, the population went through the ceiling all up and down the entire east coast, and there's more fish today than there's ever been. And that's why I say, the only problem I have with it, I don't have a problem with that. I think it was a great thing that we brought this resource back, but I also think a little more emphasis should have been put on, you know, we don't want the fish to go extinct, but we also don't want to see the fishermen become extinct. So I think when the numbers did justify the fishery, and the population exploded all up and down the east coast, that they could have brought it back. They didn't have to be as conservative when they brought it back. They could have, you know, instead of 150 pound a day, they could have said 500 or something. I don't know what the numbers, but I think they brought it back, after all the sacrifices we the fishermen give up by not being able to catch fish at all for, I forget how many years it was, I think when we sacrificed that much that when they brought it back, they could have brought it back a little stronger.

S.D.: Do you think that the large fish population is affecting other populations?

R.F.: I think it's definitely affecting the crab population right now because it's coupled with a couple things. The number one food for rock fish was the menhaden, which is a little greasy old fish that's a bait fish, and full of protein, and that was his number one food. The populations of them have decreased to an all-time low. The number of rock fish has increased to an all-time high, so they've had to look for other food sources, and in this Chesapeake Bay, the crab is something that the rock fish eat a lot of now that they didn't used to. It's easier for them to feed on these crabs because the aquatic grasses have disappeared in the Chesapeake Bay. And these large fields of underwater grasses, they were used for a number of things. Believe it or not, we're having more of an erosion problem today because those large grasses, beds, with all these waves that would roll in, they've kind of calmed them down, and they filtered this – they didn't allow the seas to beat up on the shores. The crabs hid in this grass. They used it for cover. They fed in there. The duck population has gone away because of ducks used to feed in these grasses, the fish used to hide in these. But right now, all that's gone and all these crabs are still shedding in the soft crabs, you know, little crabs. They're sitting out on a sandy bottom, and the fish can go right along and pick them up like gumdrops off of the parking lot. I mean it's just, you know, you cut – we've had scientists that go cut the crabs open, they'll have 15, 20, 25 little crabs in their bellies. If you can imagine the number of rock fish that are in that bay, I mean I don't know how – I can't imagine, it's too big a number for me, but that they eat that many crabs, can you imagine the crab population there would have to be to sustain that and still have plenty for people to catch? So do I think it's harmed other species? I think any time man fools with something like that, something else is affected by it. We're saving the rock fish to an all-time high, and they're putting historically-high amount of pressure on the blue crab. And I don't think, I don't know how anybody could say otherwise or say that that's not true.

S.D.: Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

R.F.: No. I think I'm about out of wind, to tell you the truth. (Laughter).

S.D.: Thank you very much.

(End of interview.)