Audio file length: 00:37:33

[00:00:20]

Thank you so much for meeting with me and agreeing to tell us a little about your life, your work as a fisherman. We're on February 11th, and we're with Interviewee…

-Interviewee.

-Tell me a little bit, what is the name of the community where we are here or what is the name of this place?

-This is called the El Faro sector.

-The El Faro sector, but we are in Cabo Rojo and we are in the middle of a nature reserve.

-Yeah, in the middle of a nature reserve.

-And what is your name?

-Right now, the name we have here is Punta Águila.

-But you are a fisherman, right?

-Sure, all my life.

-All your life. When did you start fishing?

-I've been fishing since I was 7 years old.

-7 years old and how did you learn to fish?

-Because I lived on the beach, and so my dad was a fisherman, my brothers were fishermen, my whole family, even my wife is a fisherman.

-And he learned.

-And I learned.

-And tell me a little about what your family was fishing for when you started, what type of fishing did you do and where were you located?

-When I started learning to fish it was in Joyuda, we lived in a little house on the shore of the beach, there where that Joyuda bridge is.

-What bridge?

The bridge has a strange name, they call it the "Farter Bridge." That's Joyuda. Our little house used to be there, on the shore, almost right next to the water. In the mornings, I'd catch fish with a rod on the shore and throw out a line. When the rod bent, I knew there was something stuck. So they'd go and catch the big Nassau grouper.

-A black one? (Nassau grouper, \*Epinephelus striatus\*)

-Grouper (Nassau grouper). They can't be caught now, because if you catch a grouper (Nassau grouper, \*Epinephelus striatus\*), you'll be jailed.

-Oh yeah?

-Yeah, now you can't even look at the Nassau grouper. I used to catch mutton snapper, snapper, and yellowtail snapper.

-Even when you were 10, could you already pick up so much?

-Until I was 10 years old. After that I started diving, I dived for spiny lobster (Panulirus argus), queen conch, harpooned hogfish, wrasses (Labridae), mutton snapper, and snapper.

[00:03:12]

-And what did he do with the fish, where did he sell it?

-We sold it to Joyuda restaurants.

-Yourself?

-Yes, my father and my brothers were the ones in charge of selling it.

-You fished and they sold it, but did they fish too?

-Yes, they fished too.

-And they fished with a boat or…?

-Yes, those were small boats, not ships.

-The yawls, without the motor.

-No engine. Later, the little engine started to appear, and things started to improve.

-When did you change the engine, in what year, more or less?

-More or less 15 years.

-15 years ago.

-And how did fishing change when you bought that…?

Even better, because back then you could go further and to different places, and each time I kept getting better and better, until today, when I'm still fishing. And today, well, things have improved even more, because prices have gone up, and the fishing is quite good. Because here, if you look, everyone makes a good living fishing, because a pound of spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) is worth 10 dollars, a pound of queen conch is worth 10 dollars, a pound of silk snapper is worth 10 dollars—that's selling it to the person who's going to resell it. If we sell it here, we sell it for 12 or 13 dollars a pound, but since the baby that was waiting when we arrived is coming here, we give it to them for 10 dollars.

-If someone waits for you on the shore, it's cheaper, but if you have to go sell it, it's a little more expensive, and where are you going to sell it?

-Sometimes we sell it right here, and people come here looking for it…

-Tourists?

-We've sold to tourists, we've sold to Puerto Ricans who buy a lot, and some tourists, when they're staying in a place where they can cook, that has a kitchen and all that, they buy from us.

-And the Puerto Ricans who buy, are they families buying for themselves or to sell?

-They buy food for themselves.

-Like they know you…

-Sure, yes, they know it's fresh and it sells out quickly.

-You sell lobster (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*) and what else?

-Silk snapper, spiny lobster, queen conch. I catch everything.

-And how are you fishing now?

[00:06:08]

-I've been fishing for silk snapper lately; that's deep-sea fishing. I've been fishing for yellowfin snapper, blackfin snapper, vermilion snapper, and queen snapper.

-And what do you use for fishing?

-Sometimes I catch sardines (herring), or if not I catch jarea (White mullet, \*Mugil curema XXXVI\*) (white mullet), whichever ones are around.

-So, are you fishing with the line?

-Yes, it's a line, but it's with an electric motor, because it's quite deep. I shoot at 700 feet, 800, 900, 1000, even 1500 feet.

-Tell me a little bit about what a day of fishing is like, from the moment you wake up? What do you do, how do you do it?

"First, I get the gas, I get the bait, I have them. I get up at 6 in the morning, check if the weather's good, if the wind's like it is now, well, I can't go fishing because I have to keep the engine running all the time, I have to hold myself in reverse, the squid are climbing up there, I have to keep an eye on the drain, on the engine, and on the line. It's not that easy. You have to be there to know what it's like. If the fish are pulling, well, sometimes they pull you in the morning, but there are times you have to wait, because they stop eating, you have to wait until 3 or 4 in the afternoon for them to start eating again, and you have to be in that sun waiting, all those hours there, and then they start pulling again, and you start catching again. When that fish comes up, its eyes pop out, it comes out swollen..."

-How do they come out?

"His eyes are bulging out. You know, if you catch a little fish like that, you have to bring it in on a line or throw it away, because it comes out dead. Because it's so deep, when you pull it up, the air gets inside and what that does is kill it. And then I see how it's doing at 4 or 5 o'clock. If I see that they're pulling, well, I hold on a little longer, otherwise I'll come back with what I have. Because I know I have 20 or 30 pounds, but that's enough for me."

-How much fish do you catch on a good day?

[00:09:07]

-On a good day, you can make 30 pounds, which is $300, which is good enough for a day. And I tell myself that's fine for me, $300 in a day. That's more than good enough.

-And a bad day?

-A bad day is 15 pounds, 10 or 12 pounds.

-Does that only charge you for what you spent?

-No, I don't have that many expenses, because right now with the motor I have, I fish with 5 gallons of gasoline and I can be out from 4 in the afternoon with the motor on and I have no problem, because it's an economical motor, that's what it's for. So on that side, and the baits; I fish with 2 boxes of squid (Squids, \*Order Teuthida\*) (squid), but I also carry jarea (White mullet, \*Mugil curema XXXVI\*) (white mullet), or if I have sierra (zero), I carry sierra, if there are sardines (herring), I take sardines. I carry different baits, because there are times when you throw a sardine (herring) and they don't want it, sometimes when you throw jarea (White mullet, \*Mugil curema XXXVI\*) (white mullet) and they don't want it, you throw squid...

-Everyone comes…

-They all come, so you have to bring different baits, because sometimes they like one and sometimes they like another, I don't know why. Sometimes what I do is I put in a little piece of squid, a little piece of jellyfish, (White mullet, \*Mugil curema XXXVI\*) then with the squid I surround them, you know, I lure them so they get hungry and eat.

-And when you go fishing, do you go alone or with your wife?

-My wife hasn't been able to go with me for a few months now because she hurt her back a bit, but she's always fished with me. Now I'm going alone, whatever I catch out here…

-When you were fishing with her, how did you share the work, what did she do, what did you do?

-Well, she's in charge of steering the boat. I'm in charge of the line, putting in the bait, throwing it out, and pulling it out. I'm in charge of that. She's in charge of staying on course, keeping the boat in position, because you have to keep the boat in position, otherwise the line will get tangled. You have to be aware of that because of the tide. Sometimes the wind is from this direction, but the tide can be from that direction, so she has to be aware of that, but she knows.

-Where did you learn?

-The whole family is fishermen. She learned with me, but her whole family is fishermen.

-And what technology do you use to prepare for your trip and to know where the fish is?

[00:12:10]

-I have a GPS, which is a little machine, that gives you the, I mostly look for the depth and the bottom, I look at the bottom, like there you see the bottom, you don't see it as if you were seeing it from here, you see it differently, but more or less you know where there are fish (Blue Marlin, \*Makaira nigricans XLII\*) and where there aren't.

-Because of the type of landscape there is…

-Yeah, because of the type of landscape. So, look for the depth. If you're getting bitten at 700 feet, you go to 700 and stay there. But if you're not getting bitten there, you have to keep looking: 700, 800, 900, 1000, 1200, you keep looking there. Wherever you get bitten, you'll have to hold on.

-When there wasn't that technology, how did you know?

-Marks along the edge.

-As?

-Marks on the land.

-And how did you know that?

-Suppose there's an antenna there, the headlight is here, and there's an antenna here. You put a part here with the antenna and the headlight, and it stays there at the exact mark, at the mark you want, and it stays there and it doesn't fail.

-But he uses things in the territory to guide him in the water, but how does he know where the fish is? (Blue Marlin, \*Makaira nigricans XLII\*)

-The fish, (Blue Marlin, \*Makaira nigricans XLII\*) you know where it is, by the marks, you already have marks that you know, you know that the fish is there and it always hits there.

-It's like from experience...

-Dog.

-What role did your father and family play in teaching you these things? Where did you learn from in the beginning, when you started?

-The thing is, we lived on the shore, and if you lived on the shore, you learned all those things, you know. And then your parents were fishermen, they learned it, so you learned it from them, and it's a chain that continues.

-And if you didn't have GPS, what would be the most important thing? For example, if you were going to the seaside and suddenly you were broke, what would be the most important thing for you to do?

-When there's no GPS, you have to mark along the shore. Those are the marks I tell you: if there's an antenna, you look at the antenna, make a mark with the antenna, and you know that when those two things match, you're right on the mark, and that doesn't fail. It's like a compass.

[00:15:15]

-And he tells me a little bit, he told me that today for example is not good because it is very windy.

-There is a lot of wind and a lot of waves.

-Is there anything else you need to know? Do you sometimes use scientific products like…?

-We checked the weather.

-Where do they check it?

-On my cell phone, I turn on the radio, and I have a marine radio that I put on the weather, and it tells you all the time: the wind is so strong, the tide is so strong, and if there's something bad, it gives you a warning, you return to the shore.

-And do you always check it in the morning or what do you do?

-No, I check it the night before.

-How much do you use other scientific products, for example, from fisheries, from fish? Do you sometimes use things like fish population estimates? Are you interested in something like that? Do you use it?

-We have tags that you throw and catch queen snapper. And we have tags that you throw and catch silk snapper, but we have yellowfin mojarra tags, which are different species; they're from the deep, but they're not the same. Sometimes, by chance, you can catch silk snapper, you can catch queen snapper at the same time, or you can catch yellowfin mojarra and yellowfin mojarra in the same place. So sometimes they cross and come together, because it's happened to us a lot.

-And how does this influence you?

-It's good for us because we catch more, and different species.

-Tell me a little bit, what have you noticed in your experience throughout your life fishing, if you have noticed any changes in the marine environment, such as the abundance of fish or their size, has anything changed in that way?

-For me, it hasn't changed, because lately, there used to be a lot of fishing and now the fishing is the same. Because here there are fishermen who go out and every day they bring in 20, 30, 40 pounds of spiny lobster (Panulirus argus), there's a lot of spiny lobster (Panulirus argus), and queen conch (Strombus gigas), they bring in 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, a quintal, every day. If the fishing was bad they would bring in 5 or 3 pounds, but no, there's fishing.

[00:18:28]

-There's fishing. Do you think that has to do with the fact that he has a more efficient boat, that he has a GPS, that he can see the bottom? Or does it have nothing to do with that?

-No, I don't think so, because you can go out right now and drop in there, two miles from here, and fish there, and you don't have to use a GPS to catch a bite there. Or you can drop in here, past the mangroves, and fish there. Because we've caught 5-pound spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) stuck to the shore.

-And tell me, there isn't a town here, but are there fishermen who live here or come from somewhere else to fish?

-There are fishermen who come from Aguada, who are called chinchorreros, who sometimes fish these areas.

-Are there many of them?

-Yes, there are a few.

-How many do you think, more or less?

-There are like two brigades, right?

-(Cynthia) Yes, there are two groups.

-Two groups of how many people?

-(Cynthia) Like 8 or 10 people, yes, because they pull the boat to the shore.

-They're trawlers. And they catch. When they come, they catch 3 or 4 quintals. And that's: sama (Mutton snapper, \*Lutjanus analis\*) (mutton snapper), colirubia (yellowtail snapper), chapines (Trunkfishes, \*Ostraciidae\*) (trunkfish), even langosta (Spiny lobster, \*Panulirus argus\*) (spiny lobster), they catch during the day, pulling that thing.

-And you live here?

-We live here.

-Permanent…

-Sure, it was 20-something years ago, right?

-(Cynthia) For 25 years.

-Wow. And have you always caught more or less the same type of fish and location?

-Always, more or less the same.

-Because I tell you, there are times when I don't know if it's because of the currents or the moon, but there are times when you go and you have to turn around, because they don't want to eat. Other times you go and you throw here and catch, and you throw there and catch, and you throw there and catch, there are fish everywhere, and other times you go and they don't want to eat, you have to turn around and come back the next day, or else stay until almost 5:00 in the afternoon for them to start eating.

[00:21:05]

-Let's talk a little about your experience with natural disasters. Can you tell me if you've been through a natural disaster here, and what happened? How did it go?

-Here with Maria, right? It was with Maria that things got a little difficult.

-(Cynthia) And the last one was Fiona.

"Yeah, Fiona went to the last resort, blocking the ramp; we couldn't dump the boats. Then, Natural Resources wouldn't help us; they said yes but didn't come. Agriculture said yes but didn't come; the mayor said yes but didn't come either. And we had to do it ourselves, with the same boats because we had no other choice. And yet, to this day, we haven't seen any of them."

-But his little house and his boat were not damaged.

-No, it wasn't damaged.

-Did you keep him here or take him?

-We kept it here, but the water came up here.

-(Cynthia) Yes, for Fiona it came this far. But for Maria we took the boat from here. The boat didn't stay here.

-We'll take it for Maria.

-And you had to clean the ramp to get off?

-Clean the ramp.

How much did it cost you since the hurricane to be able to leave?

-We were there for a few months, right?

-(Cynthia) Yes, what happened is that it happened to us for Fiona and it happened to us for Maria, but for Maria, when the hurricane hit, it didn't affect us. But the currents that came in after the hurricane.

"Let's do it, because it won't be very audible from there," he tells me. "We'll talk to you later. You'll tell me what you know, and then I'll ask you the same thing, because it won't be audible for that very reason." You had to work yourselves for a few months to clear the ramp and get out…

"We and other fishermen came to help us. But for the last one, for Fiona, who tore off the end of the pier as well, we had to do that ourselves. No fishermen helped me. I had to do that myself and my son. And to get the money, it was a donation from the United States, from a friend of ours, who took some money to buy the materials to fix the pier, because Resources and Agriculture, which was the one that built the pier...hmm...

-It didn't help him…

-They didn't help at all.

-And when you were able to leave, were you able to sell the fish?

-Sure, yes.

-You didn't have any problems?

-No.

-But for a few months he couldn't get out...

-Yeah.

[00:24:06]

-And what did you do when you couldn't get out?

-Well, trying to survive with what we could.

-With your savings?

-Dog.

-And did you have electricity here?

-We were… how long were we without electricity?

-(Cynthia) We were there until after Christmas.

-A few months. And when you left on the boat, was the sea, the maritime environment, the same as before, or did something change with the hurricane?

-Nothing changed.

Have you noticed any changes in the water, the bottom, or over time? Is it the same now as it was when you started fishing, when you were 10 years old?

"I'm telling you, there are a lot of corals, because a lot of corals are being born. There was an area on the Combat Front where there were no corals, and the last time I saw it, it was full of corals."

-Are there more corals?

-Yes, more. This area over there, the part over there, is full of coral. There's one right here in front of you. You can see a wave breaking there. That's full of coral there, that's why you see the wave breaking.

-Why do you think so? Many people tell me that in some marine areas the coral is dying. Why do you think it's the other way around here?

-Well, as far as I know, the corals in the sites I've dived and seen are fine and plentiful. Because in that area I told you about, Combate, there were no corals, and when I dive there, I've seen those corals, they're like this, quite large.

-But why do you think so? Because there are areas, not here, where I've heard the corals aren't doing very well. Why do you think things are going well here?

-I don't know.

-I don't know, that's fine. Are you familiar with fish like snapper, schoolmaster snapper, yellowfin tuna, blue marlin (\*Makaira nigricans XLII\*), and parrotfish?

-Yes, they're in the corals, they're in the corals, and they're in the mangroves. In the mangroves, there's schoolmaster snapper, and there are mulatto snappers (Lutjanidae), and silver snappers (Lutjanidae). And the same with the corals; there are yellow ones, silver ones, and mulatto ones, and there are other kinds, there are some sea basses, white grunts, yellowtail snappers... What's missing?

-Of everything?

-Of everything.

-And are you doing well?

-Yeah.

[00:27:04]

-It's doing well. And you haven't seen any changes with these fish in the last 10 or 20 years?

-No.

-OK.

-If you were to dive and throw yourself on that rock I'm telling you about there, on that key, on those corals, it's full of fish there, snappers, those doctorfishes (Acanthuridae), white grunts, which are those shells, they call them concas, it's full there. Behind the lighthouse, I go and stand in a spot there and throw the anchor, on a little mark I have there and they're corals, but you can't throw inside the corals, you have to throw on the edge itself, what there are are lane snappers like this, and you catch mutton snappers like this.

-And was it always like this?

-It's always been like this.

-How many years have you been fishing in this place?

-We have been here for more than 20 years.

-From what you tell me, you can make a pretty good living as a fisherman.

-Yeah.

-Is it better now than when it started?

-It's better now.

-Why do you think it's better now?

-Now it's worth more and there's a lot of it.

-We have the spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) regulated, we have the spiny lobster (Panulirus argus) which is 3.5 inches to catch, we have the silk snapper, we have a few months when it is closed, you can't catch them, you can catch some and not others. And that helps a lot.

-Can you tell me what the sea and nature taught you, like the life of a fisherman, that you use most in your life, if there is something you think you should know just by doing this job?

-Like what?

-I don't know, if there's something like how to live with nature, I don't know, I don't want to put words in your mouth, is there something that you think like 'well, the life of a fisherman taught me this'?

-Sure, you're at one with nature, because the fisherman is at one with nature, because he's in the water, surrounded by reefs, fish, birds, because the birds come and climb onto your boat so you can feed them, they eat on the boat too. It feels good.

-It feels good, do you like it?

-I'm sure it is. When I don't go fishing, I feel bad.

[00:30:04]

-When is it that you don't go fishing?

-When days are like this, I get, I don't know, like anxious, crazy to go see, but I can't.

-Can you go more than two days without fishing?

-More than two days, yes.

-(Cynthia) But he gets anxious.

-I have to be doing something to take my mind off things.

-I understand. He told me where he sells his fish…

-What's more, we sold him out. Where were those men who waited for me here when I arrived from? They were Americans. They hugged me and everything.

-(Cynthia) They were from California.

-Why did they hug him?

-I was fishing, she was here and they came in to buy a snail, (True tulip, \*Fasciolaria tulipa\*) so they asked for fish and she told them I was fishing, and she called me, I told her: ‘well, I'll go in a little while, I have a few pounds.’ I don't remember how many pounds I brought.

-(Cynthia) I think it was like 5 or 6 pounds. And you weren't feeling well, and I told him, 'If you don't feel well, run for land,' and to clean the fish so I could sell it.

"That man, when I arrived and saw the fish, went crazy. He went over to the car he had on the street and came back to thank me and hugged me. Something I didn't expect. It made me feel kind of happy inside. They were going to cook the fish, wherever they were."

-Why were they so happy that they could eat that fresh fish?

-Yes, and since they were going to do it themselves.

-(Cynthia) And they had never met... the only one who spoke Spanish was the lady, and it was the whole family: the lady, the gentleman, and a little boy, and they had never seen a mangrove, they had never seen a mangrove swamp. And when they started talking to me, I invited them and took them to the dock so they could see the area.

-And they were very grateful.

-You told me you have children, one child, two?

-I have five.

-And do they fish too?

-Two of them fish, but they don't fish to sell, they fish to eat.

-Just to eat, as a recreational activity?

-Dog.

-And they fish here, in this same place?

[00:33:00]

-Sometimes. One of them comes and fishes around here. Now, he sold the small boat he had because he wants a bigger one. He's looking for a bigger boat; I don't know if he intends to go fishing.

-But now they have another job…

-Yes, he's working on something else.

-And why do you think they are not fishermen like you?

-The thing is, they weren't raised here; he was raised in the United States. They came from there because of the cold, fleeing the cold, and bought here. And so the grandchildren look American: blue eyes, yellow hair, white, and they speak English. I don't speak Spanish, nor do I speak English.

-That's why, but do you think young people have a future in fishing here?

-There are many young people fishing.

-Was it always like this?

-I'm now seeing that there are more young people fishing than before.

-Why do you think?

-Because I've seen them.

-Why do you think there are more young people now than before?

-(Cynthia) Fishing has been encouraged more.

-Do they win?

-(Interviewee) And how the price of fishing has increased.

-(Cynthia) Yes, the fact that they are independent fishermen and earn more money.

-(Interviewee) They earn more than working outside, they earn more in fishing.

-Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about fishing here? Do you think it's important?

-Fishing is certainly important, if we don't have fishing we can't live.

-How important do you think fishing is for Puerto Rico, in general?

It's important because if they don't fish, they have to import fish from abroad. If no one fishes here, they have to bring it in from abroad, and from abroad, how long does it take for a truckload of fish to arrive from Australia? It spends months there, waiting for it to arrive. And here, the quality is from the sea to the land and from the land to the restaurants; it's fresh fish. And that's why fish sells so much here.

-What do you think of the fishing rules here? Do you think they help you?

-Yes, it has helped us a lot.

-How does it help you?

-Well, because it gives them time to reproduce more.

-Is there an example you can give me of a type of fishing where you think the rules helped with that fishing?

[00:36:11]

-Right now, I'll give you an example: the Chinchorros, a disaster. They restricted them, I think, for a few months, right?

-(Cynthia) No, I think they restricted the use of drag nets for almost a year.

-At that time, they didn't make a living from fishing, which is quite enough, because they throw in a catch and drag everything they catch back to the shore. It's not the same as you with five hooks and catching five little fish, which isn't a net that covers the entire shore.

-(Cynthia) From corner to corner.

-In that time, it gave the fish a chance to return to their spot again, because fish get scared too. I think the closed seasons help a lot.

-Well, thank you very much, if there's anything else you'd like to say.

-No.

-Well, thank you very much for the interview.

-Thank you.