Interviewer: Good morning. I’m here at the Frenchtown –

Interviewee Interviewee: Gustave Quetel Fish house.

Interviewer: Gustave Quetel Fish house, which is right down here in the harbor. I'm with Interviewee. I'm going to have Interviewee introduce himself. This morning, we're going to listen to Interviewee's story about his experiences in fishing and about other aspects that he is a part of as a fisherman. So, good morning, Interviewee. Good to see you again.

Interviewee: Good morning.

Interviewer: Feel free if you want to [inaudible] this or keep it closed.

Interviewee: Yeah, go ahead.

Interviewer: Go ahead and just feel free to tell us your story and let us know what it is that you want us to know about St. Thomas, about the history of St. Thomas, about the current conditions of St Thomas. But just start off with who you are.

Interviewee: Well, I'm Interviewee Interviewee. I'm a commercial fisherman from 1989. I'm also the chairman of the Fisherman's Association, chairman of the District Advisory Panel to the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, also, a member of the Gulf States Institute Fish Initiative. I'm also a member of GMRI [Gulf of Maine Research Institute], and I am also part of the Steering Committee and planning team for MREP [Marine Resource Education Program] for the USVI [U.S. Virgin Islands].

Interviewer: Excellent. Well, that shows all your credentials. Can you tell me when you got started in fishing? Was fishing something that was a family thing, or was that something that you picked up?

Interviewee: I'm a fourth-generation fisherman. My grandfather, my great-grandfather, my father were all fishermen, and I took up the trade growing up here in the islands.

Interviewer: At what age did you get started fishing?

Interviewee: Well, I started fishing with my grandfather and my dad from a very young age, which was about twelve years old, until I started my own business in 1989.

Interviewer: Since the time that you started and the time of your dad and your granddad, what would you say are the most significant changes that you've seen in fishing, the fishery, or the environment?

Interviewee: Well, there's several changes. We can start off by how they used to fish back in the day from small boats with no engines and fish with sails, and then they went to engines, pulled the traps by hand, made the traps out of [inaudible]. Then, we eventually moved up to making traps out of wire with wood. Now, we make the traps out of coated wire and welded steel. So, it's been a big transition to where we are today. Just like how everything in the world changes and modernized, the fishermen are doing the same thing.

Interviewer: So you see technological advancement in your fisheries. With that technological advancement, have you seen greater efficiencies so that fishermen are able to be more proficient at the jobs that they do?

Interviewee: Yes, most definitely. Before we used to take marks for our traps by land [inaudible]. Now we have the Global Positioning System, GPS. So, with that system, we can fish better, more efficiently. We don't lose any gear because we're able to mark our gear [inaudible]. Technology nowadays has made it much better for the fisherman.

Interviewer: Excellent. Has technology allowed you to diversify your fishery, to change what you target, or has it just allowed you to become more effective at what you target?

Interviewee: Well, our fisheries are market-driven fisheries.

Interviewer: Explain what that means, a market-driven fishery.

Interviewee: So, with it being a market-driven fishery, we harvest what we can sell. Nothing is exported out of the Islands. Each fisherman has its own set of clientele, and they will target what their clientele want. The rest of it is released back into the ocean because there's no use to catch something if you can't sell it. So, market-driven has been around for a very long time and more than ever right now.

Interviewer: Does that change your system of marketing as a result of disasters, such as hurricanes or COVID? Did that alter how you marketed your catch, or were you able to continue basically in the same manner that you had done before?

Interviewee: Well, nothing is the same as how it used to be. So, I am one of the few fishermen that have created a market with the local residents, with the local businesses, and some hotels. So, in other words, I cater more to the local people that might just want a little ten pounds of fish for their house. So, I set up myself with a Facebook page, and I advertise my weekly catch. Also, I'm part of the [inaudible] program, which my number and information is all there. Pretty much, I market my business, and that's how I run my business. That's the only way to be efficient.

Interviewer: For you, though, your primary clientele is the local consumer, the local individual family –

Interviewee: And local restaurants.

Interviewer: – and local restaurants.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: So, you're not hitting the high-end Ritz and things like that, but you're feeding the local people with local food and local restaurants.

Interviewee: Yes, the only thing on the high-end side that we mostly push is the lobster. Some of them do the bigger fish as whole fish or filets, but as for most of the different species of fish, the local people are the ones that I target.

Interviewer: Right. Having been a part of management, you started getting involved in management back in 2000? 2002?

Interviewee: 2004, when we formed the Saint Thomas Fisherman's Association to combat the Sustainable Fisheries Act document, which was a seven-hundred-page document that was about to shut the fishery down for the Virgin Islands. Since then, the fishermen have got involved. We have formed an association. At first, it used to be a battle fighting with the federal government and the local government, and over the years, it took us about, I would say, approximately ten years – eight to ten years that we have built a working relationship. Instead of a fighting relationship now, it's more of a working relationship.

Interviewer: That's fantastic. This idea of it being more of a collaborative thing, does that lead you to see positivity in the future? Do you see positive outcomes of making stronger fisheries, making a stronger fishery for the fishermen, making a healthier and better environment, or are you –? Tell me what your view is of the future for the fisheries here in St Thomas.

Interviewee: Well, before we go to the future, we're being involved in the process. The fishermen themselves have put lots of regulations in place to help protect the fishery. Some examples are we moved from the inch-and-a-half mesh wire to two-inch mesh wire, which we are able to release a lot more bycatch. We have put seasonal closures in place. We have put area closures in place.

Interviewer: And these are things you were instrumental in helping to create?

Interviewee: Yes, these are instrumental by the fisher. We were the ones that put it forward to stop the federal government from shutting our fishery down. So, being part of the process right now, we have a voice, and we have a voice from the beginning of any more decision-making that should take place now and in the future. So, is the fight over? No, it's never over because there's always environmentalists, NGOs [non-governmental organizations], everybody that wants to turn the ocean into a big aquarium for themselves and forget about the local people and the communities that they serve that we need to continue feeding our islands. We have been designated a fishing community here in the USVI.

Interviewee: You speak of your service to your island. Can you explain how that happens after you go through something like Hugo or Marilyn or Maria and Irma? How is the role of the fishermen essential at that time?

Interviewee: Well, everybody comes together. You have no other choice. We went through Hugo. I just started my business. I lost everything. Went through Marilyn. I lost everything. But did we ever give up? No. Some of us had to get land jobs until we got to rebuild. Some of us worked with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] and the federal government. Fortunately, after Hurricane Maria and Irma, we were able to get some federal grants to help kick us back into full gear. We're still trying to get into full gear, and we're here up against a heavy hurricane season that we don't know what's going to come out of it and where our future lies. But our main goal as fishermen is to feed the people of this island, feed our visitors, and protect our heritage and culture for the future generation.

Interviewer: How long do you think it is after a hurricane, depending on, obviously, the severity of a hurricane –? How long is it before fishermen are back on the water feeding the island at a time when oftentimes other services aren't available because of the loss of power and things like that?

Interviewee: Well, immediately, the fishers have to try to go and see what gear they can find. So, whoever still has a boat that survived the storms gets together, and we go out, and whatever we harvest – if people don't have the money or the resources, what we do is we do a trade-off. So, give us something. We must feed the island because the island is dependent on it because sometimes it takes months to get relief coming into the island. We work very closely with our community, and our community works with us.

Interviewer: Is it just family, or is it neighbors and friends as well?

Interviewee: It's everyone.

Interviewer: Everybody.

Interviewee: It's everyone, from young to old.

Interviewer: Is that why you believe the island itself is a fishing community because of its connection to one another?

Interviewee: Most definitely. Being involved in this for twenty-plus years, it's a passion. It's a passion that I have. Sometimes, I want to give up, but I do it for the future. I do it for my upcoming generation. I have no other choice.

Interviewer: Speaking of upcoming generations, throughout the continental US, we're seeing a lot of what's called the graying of the fleet that's getting older, and as a younger generation, it's either too hard or too hard to get into, and some fisheries, they don't want to be involved in it. Are you seeing that here? Are you seeing a graying of the fleet, or are you seeing a younger generation with a renewed interest in fishing, learning from the elders, and continuing on the proud tradition?

Interviewee: Well, I think we are a dying industry. This is not only here; it's all over the world. The cost of running a business sometimes is not worth it. It's very expensive to run this business right now. All the prices has doubled or tripled since COVID. Are we going to see those prices coming back down? I don't think so.

Interviewer: You mean the cost of living prices?

Interviewee: The cost of everything. Cost of the material.

Interviewer: Has the cost of fish gone up?

Interviewee: No, we've been maintaining.

Interviewer: So you guys are taking a lot of the hit in the cost of living increase in that you keep fish available for people.

Interviewee: It's not only the cost of living. It's the cost of the bait. It's the cost of the boats, cost of buying the material to build the traps – cost of everything. Inflation in your home for food and groceries and all that is one thing. Electrical, water, because here in the island, electrical is a big problem. That's just one side of it. We're getting it from every angle. But as far as it pertains to the future, I don't know where we're going. We do have some young guys that are in the fishery. Are they going to maintain and grow? It's to see. But it's only a handful of guys. Here in the islands, here in St. Thomas, we have maybe hundred and thirty registered fishers, commercial fishers, but out of that hundred and thirty fishers, you maybe have forty to forty-five who are really commercial fishing. If you look at that forty to forty-five, it's really about fifteen guys that are catching the product for this island. So, coming up, we have maybe ten or twelve young guys who are into the lobster and fish trap fishery. That’s yet to see its future because the NGOs always are on the council's case to do away with traps. Well, if we was to do away with traps, then we have nothing. This has been our way of living from my four generations of fishing, and we continue to put measures in place to protect what we have out there for the future.

Interviewer: Right. You mentioned that the total number of fishermen is around forty that are active commercial fishermen. Do any of those guys also engage in charter fishing to supplement money, or are those what you're talking full-time active commercial –?

Interviewee: Full-time active commercial fishermen. Charter fishermen can't sell their catch. Only if you have a commercial license, you can sell the catch.

Interviewer: What would you consider to be the top fisheries commercially here?

Interviewee: Both fish trap and lobster trap industry.

Interviewer: And the fish trap is targeting species such as?

Interviewee: Well, it's about thirty-two different species. So, we target everything, and every individual has its own taste for what they want. As you can see right here, doing this interview, my phone's going off. People are ordering what they want, what they want to eat.

Interviewer: They're calling you right now to tell you what they want.

Interviewee: Yeah, they're texting me what they want to eat.

Interviewer: So they're already thinking about dinner at 4:30 in the morning.

Interviewee: Exactly. Well, some of them, it's all night long. That's how I cater to my people. We used to have a very strong yellowtail fishery, but nowadays, the older fishermen for that fishery don't do it anymore, and the younger ones want to be home at night. That's a dying industry.

Interviewer: So you're seeing a dying night industry?

Interviewee: Yes. It's very small.

Interviewer: It used to be very lucrative a few years ago.

Interviewee: That used to be one of the biggest fisheries. I used to do that when I first started out and very small number of traps. Now I just do traps. I don't want to be out at night. So, it's a big difference. That's been a major shift.

Interviewer: Four generations, you and your family, and you look four generations from now, and it sounds bleak in terms of the existence, but yet, your cultural connection to this is strong. It's a part of your – for example, you're having a Bastille Day fishing tournament tomorrow. You have, I'm sure, fish that's involved in every kind of ceremony here on island. How do you think the people will survive without that cultural connection to fish?

Interviewee: Well, let's use the tournament. Let's start off with that. Even to the tournament, there's a lot of talk that this might be the last year for a tournament that's been running for thirty-four years. We used to have the Father's Day Fishing Tournament for many years. All the years I grew up, we had a Father's Day tournament. For the last three, four, five years, we haven't had a tournament. Is that going to come back? I can't say yes. I can't say no. Because I don't see who's going to push it forward. We don't have no young people that's getting involved in the committees in my area to push back that tournament, and it takes a lot of work to push these tournaments out. On the north side, you have six main people that push that tournament. Sure, they have community help, community support, but where is that going? … So, I don't know where that is going ahead. As you said, looking forward another three generations, I don't think we will exist. I could be wrong. We would always need to feed our island, and the chances of the fishermen and the few farmers feeding this island is getting more and more on the higher priority list because of what's all going on in the world. Nobody knows the future, and we might have to be the ones to feed this island. Everything that we get here comes on boats. So, if there are major disasters, any part of our main supplying places like Miami, Puerto Rico, stuff like that, it could be weeks, it could be months before we get food into this island. People will be starving if the farmers and fishermen don't go out there to feed the island. So, I see us going back to some of the hard times that I grew up with. I don't want to see it for the generation that's growing up right now, but we, as adults, need to prepare our kids and our grandkids for the future because it's a very scary situation. Times are changing. Everything is changing.

Interviewer: Are there opportunities that could be provided that could assist in that process?

Interviewee: Well, as for the fishermen and the farmers, I think our local and federal governments need to invest more into food security. We do not take food security seriously enough, even throughout the United States. We depend solely on imports in the United States. The fishermen up there are going out of business. They're finding something else to do because they don't have the support of the government, or there's so many closures in place that they can't sell their product, or the imports are coming in at such a low price from Asia or Belize, Nicaragua, wherever, that the markets don't want to pay the local fisher for their product what it's worth. Fortunately for us, that hasn't been a major problem. It is a problem, but not a humongous [inaudible]. It's more a problem than the lobster imports that are killing the fishermen and restaurants selling swai as grouper and snapper, and that's a major problem. But we've been trying to work with federal enforcement to help us in those areas.

Interviewer: Well, you've hit on some super important issues. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about aquaculture as a means of not only providing food but also perhaps as an employment field, something that people might switch into as an alternative offshore/onshore. Any thoughts on that?

Interviewee: Well, I have a lot of thoughts on aquaculture. I was supposed to sit in an aquaculture committee here for the Virgin Islands twice, and our leadership took me off the two times. But as far as aquaculture, it's not going to work that well here in the islands, especially offshore. Reason for that is we have strong currents and very high seas and stuff like that, and there's no real place that can be havens to run these programs. Maybe in Puerto Rico, you might find places to do that, but St. Croix, St. Thomas – we are surrounded by water completely. We don't have saltwater havens that are healthy enough to try to do our aquaculture. Years ago, yes, but because of our land and water use plan and everything that falls with coastal runoff, etc., that’s hampering our ecosystem, that has taken away opportunities to use some of the small havens that we have to try to do a saltwater aquaculture. As it pertains to land aquaculture, tilapia is the only thing that they have really found to grow heavily, and nobody likes tilapia. People want the fresh local fish.

Interviewer: Which is why we're here at four in the morning as the market opens [inaudible].

Interviewee: Well, the market, I had people here already. We would have more people if it wasn't flooded.

Interviewer: No, but with the rain –

Interviewee: Aquaculture is a great idea, but I can't see it working here like that. Now, there's programs that can be put in place that can create a lot of jobs to help keep the ecosystem healthy, but that falls back on the government, and our government tends to lag behind on everything. So, the relationship with management and the users needs to continue to improve. It has started, but there's still a lot of gaps that need to be filled. We had a choir preaching all the time. We attend all of these meetings. Everyone in the meetings are getting paid, except for the users, and that's been a major problem. "Well, we can't finish the SEDA [Sustainable Economic Development Assessment] assessment – stock assessment – process without the users being involved." "Well, pay the users. You guys are writing million-dollar grants. Pay the users. They're not asking for a whole lot but pay them something so they can see that their time has been met in a manner that matches everyone else." The best information to collect – scientist goes out with a fisherman; the next day, the fisherman go in the office with a scientist to see what they do with the information that was collected. That's the only way that you can get true results of what's actually taking place in the fishery. Scientists hold a degree by paper. Fishermen hold a degree by fishing on the water. They see they have firsthand of everything that's going on, instead of the scientists always going into a meeting room and saying, "Well, the uncertainty." Every time that word comes up, it drives our catch limits lower because the scientist is uncertain. Well, we can close those gaps by working directly with the users, which are the fishermen.

Interviewer: Right. Makes sense. Well, listen, I appreciate your time this morning. If you think of anything else that you want to talk about or anything else you want to share with me, I'm happy to talk to you longer or to visit you again.

Interviewee: I was just going to touch on one little, small thing before we close. The fishermen have a real concern about this wind power and the ocean, and it's a very touchy situation, not only here in the Virgin Islands, but throughout the United States. I've been to Maine. I've been to Florida. I've been to all these meetings. Everybody's crying because here in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, we have very small areas to harvest our catch. There are a lot of closures in place, and to put any of these wind turbines in the ocean will create more larger area closures. That's a major problem for us. Major, major problem. I think that before anything moves forward, a lot of discussion needs to take place with the fishers and not the governments. Because the governments would always say yes once they get money in their pocket. The fishermen are the ones that lose, and we go back and turn that circle around – how will we be able to feed our people of the Virgin Islands? That's a big concern. If we lose more areas that is already so small, how are we supposed to continue to do what we do? And that's feed our people, feed our visitors. So, that's my last closing statement.

Interviewer: Right. I'm happy you touched on that. That's obviously one of our main concerns with what's coming up in the near future, as things are going to be impacting the US Caribbean, the USVI, and Puerto Rico. So, greater collaboration hopefully will make better decisions.

Interviewee: That's wind. That's a piece of wind coming in.

Interviewer: Hear that. You guys got some strange weather this morning, huh?

Interviewee: Very strange.

Interviewer: It must be because you and me are [inaudible].

Interviewee: I don't know where this is coming from, really and truly. I didn't see it.

Interviewer: Thank you so much, Interviewee. Let me get this thing turned off.

----------------------------------END OF INTERVIEW-----------------------------------