

Interviewee: John Banyas
Interviewer: Tina Bucuvalas
Consultant: Kristin Sweeting
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Transcriber: Kristin Sweeting

Abstract: John Banyas is a third-generation Cortez fisherman. From the Carolinas, his maternal grandfather chased mullet down Florida's east coast then up the Gulf Coast in the early 1900s, until he decided to make Cortez his home. Banyas' grandmother met him when he was fishing with her father. His mother was born in Cortez in 1932.

Born in 1910, Banyas' other grandfather fished his whole life. He started building boats in the late 1920s, and founded NE Taylor Boatworks. Located on the shoreline, the boatworks is equipped with a rail system to haul boats in and out of the water. Cortez had a good fleet of skipjack sailboats at first, to which they gradually added small motors and made other changes. Banyas fished on one of them until about 15 years ago, and it is now in the Maritime Museum. Banyas' father, who worked in concrete and masonry construction, met his wife on nearby Anna Maria Island in the 1950s. Banyas grew up surfing and fishing. His grandfather taught him how to fish and work on boats, and he regularly fished with grandfather throughout his school days.

Banyas continued fishing after high school, working for various companies in Manatee County and Ruskin. He also gradually started acquiring boats. When he was 30 in 1995, he had the opportunity to buy Cortez Bait & Seafood. He added a small retail market, more freezers, and slowly built it into a major operation. Today the business processes thread herring, sardines, mullet, mackerel, and more brought in by 20 to 30 self-employed fishermen. There is a full-service boatyard, since Banyas brought the NE Taylor boatyard back to life in 2000. In addition, they have a 300-seat, water-front restaurant and another retail market on Cortez Road. One of only two remaining fish houses in Cortez, they have become a well-known brand throughout Florida and in California.

Banyas still enjoys the fishing business because he likes being outside on the water. He also appreciates the connection with his family heritage. Currently, his son does stone crabbing and has a bait fishing boat. Unfortunately, Banyas perceives increasing problems with Gulf water quality. With increasing population and diminishing water quality, the fish are losing habitat. But he notes that it's not the fault of the commercial fishermen: "We're just here to survive."

[Production related conversation]

[00:02:10] **Tina Bucuvalas:** All right. So, first of all could you tell me your name, please?

[00:02:16] **John Banyas:** My name is John Banyas. I'm third generation Cortez fisherman from Cortez. My mom was born in Cortez. My grandfather came here in the early 19 hundreds and chased mullet all around Florida and settled in Cortez.

[00:02:33] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Could, could you please tell me a little bit more about your grandfather and where he came from?

[00:02:39] **John Banyas:** Yes. My grandfather came from the Carolinas. A bunch of settlers came from the Carolinas chased mullet down the east coast and stopped here in Cortez and made this their home for generations.

[Production crew interjection]

[00:03:27] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So when your grandfather got here, I mean, did he end up marrying here or bringing a family? You know, you said your mother was born here, you know, but what was the other side of the family? Were they into fishing business? If so, what kind?

[00:03:43] **John Banyas:** My grandfather fished, you know, his whole life, his father fished he was also a boat builder. So, when he got here, he built. All the boats in Cortez, it was N.E. Taylor Boat Works. So, he built most all the fishing boats in Cortez in the early 1900s, probably from the thirties on.

[00:04:09] **John Banyas:** He was born in 1910, so he was building boats when he was 25, 30. And they built a lot of wooden boats outta Cypress, mostly Cypress, and had a good fleet of, of fishing boats here in Cortez.

[00:04:26] **Tina Bucuvalas:** That's a really important part of the fishing.

[00:04:28] **John Banyas:** Boats, you gotta have a boat to go fishing. And they had, you know, they were sailboats at first. They were called Skipjacks and they had sails on 'em, and then they went to little, little motors and just developed from there. But he built a lot of, lot of boats here. Had a, a boat works down the shoreline here with the little rails system, like a little rails to pull the boats in and out of the water. Built the boats under his house. and was real nice looking

boats. I fished one of those boats up until probably 15 years ago, and now it's sitting in the Maritime museum here in Cortez.

[00:05:06] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Good. I'm glad it has, I'm glad it hasn't been.

[00:05:08] **John Banyas:** Yeah, there's still a couple still alive.

[00:05:12] **Tina Bucuvalas:** I mean, just for my own, do they have to redesign the boat at when they put the engine in? Because I know like up in Tarpon, you know, like the sponge boats, they had to, you know, like cut off the back end, you know, used to be a, you know, kind of a double ender and then they chopped off the back.

[00:05:28] **John Banyas:** They don't have to re-engineer 'em, they just do what Cortez style because he engineered them when he built them anyway. There was no real people engineering the boats. They just did it by what worked and didn't work most likely. Here in Cortez, we always like to lengthen our boats. Till this day, even fiberglass boats are never big enough. We're have enough room , so we usually lengthen 'em four foot, six foot, 10 foot, just to have more room on the deck for working.

[00:06:01] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And so now what about your mom's side of the family? Did they meet here?

[00:06:06] **John Banyas:** So my mom was born here in 1932. Went to the schoolhouse here in Cortez. And yeah, she graduated here at the school and went out here in the, this body of water we call "the kitchen". And she would got there and get scallops when she was a little girl and shuck scallops, sell 'em for 50 cent up for a pint or something, and just grew up here on Cortez and on the island.

[Production and phone interruption]

[00:07:09] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Oh, but and your grandmother, so your grandmother was already here in Cortez and they met, was she, has she also multi-generational?

[00:07:19] **John Banyas:** My grandmother was also from Cortez. Okay. Yes. My grandmother and grandfather met when they were young here. He was working, my grandfather that is with his dad. And, you know, they met when they were young and, you know, got married and grew up here in Cortez. Mm-hmm, was she from a fishing family? She was, because everybody was fishing,

you know, orientated here in Cortez back then. Downtown Bradenton, I don't even think was established back then.

[00:07:56] **John Banyas:** This was more of the first part of town in Manatee County, and then the city of Bradenton got more established as they grew.

[00:08:09] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And then your and then, so you talked about your mother a little bit. And what about your father?

[00:08:18] **John Banyas:** My father was, he was in construction, so my mom and dad met on the island back in the fifties. Yeah. So he was in construction. He didn't, you know, concrete masonry stuff. So, but my mom, all the fishing was on my mom's side of the family. So that's where I got it from. I grew up surfing and fishing and just been fishing all along, working hard and fishing.

[00:08:49] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So did you learn from your grandfather?

[00:08:51] **John Banyas:** I learned from my grandfather you know, fishing, working on the boats. We went fishing pretty regular, you know, through school and it was a good experience. Loved it.

[00:09:07] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And what kind of fishing were you doing back then

[00:09:13] **John Banyas:** We were mullet fishing mostly. Yeah, we were just mullet, fish and trout, Pompano, just, he was pretty much retired at that point in time. So we just, after school I would go fishing with him a little bit here and there and make a little extra spend in cash and I'd buy my first boat and then, and fish some more and then get another boat and some more tackle. And then it turned into Cortez bait and Seafood.

[00:09:40] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So it was, it, it was both commercial and recreational, it sounds like. Recreation...

[00:09:40] **John Banyas:** I, yes. Well, my grandfather, we fish mostly commercial a lot, but we would go, we called it hook and lining and we would just go out and was a little, little boat and catch trout and eat canned sardines and mustard sauce for lunch. Yeah. Yeah. It's fun.

[00:10:05] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Did he smoke mullet too?

[00:10:07] **John Banyas:** He did, yeah. We smoked him in a just a 55 gallon drum, mostly with a top and bottom cutout. A piece of plywood over the top couple metal racks. Yeah, just little spears of steel rods through there and expanded metal for a rack and put 'em on that simple.

[Production crew interjection, John is asked to repeat]

[00:11:17] **John Banyas:** So my grandfather smoked mullet quite often in a, in a 55 gallon metal drum with the top and bottom cutout. And little piece of plywood over the top and some metal little metal shafts in it to hold the racks, and they turned out quite well.

[00:11:37] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Do you still do that?

[00:11:38] **John Banyas:** I don't as much as I used to. We have some people in Cortez that smoke mullet for us, you know, some of the older gentlemen like to smoke fish all day, and you know, that's what they do.

[00:11:53] **John Banyas:** So I still eat 'em, still eat, smoked mullet all the time.

[00:11:59] **Tina Bucuvalas:** One of the great things about Florida from my perspective is a smoked mullet, but, okay. So, could you tell me, and you started talking about Cortez Bait, but could you, could you go into a little more specifics about how you started the business and whether you were commercial fishing a lot before that or for bait or how that came about?

[00:12:26] **John Banyas:** I fished all through high school, and when I got outta high school, I continued to fish. And then I've fished for various fish companies here in Manatee County. I used to fish for up in Ruskin. There was some fish houses up there. I used to take my fish to. And then when I was 30, I had an opportunity to buy this particular fish house in 95.

[00:12:56] **John Banyas:** So I started Cortez Bait and seafood in 1995 and remodeled, and grew it from there. Added a small retail market, added some freezers, fixed up the docks. Just kept, you know, fixing things up as we went, and slowly built it into what it is today.

[00:13:19] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And could you talk a, a little about what it is today? I mean, what kind of, what kind of fish are you getting, how are you processing? And then later we can go into distribution and things like that.

[00:13:30] **John Banyas:** Mm-hmm. Here at Cortez Bait and Seafood today, we are processing a lot of Thread Heron, sardines. We grind chum, we process the mullet, Pompano, mackerel. Anything that we can get our hands on. We have a full service boatyard here, which was my grandfather's, I brought it back to life in 2000 cuz he was retired. But when I bought the property, I brought Taylor Boatworks back to life. So, we have a full service boatyard. We have a 300 seat. Restaurant, the Swordfish Grill and Tiki Bar. It's a waterfront dining inside, outside. Very nice restaurant. It's doing very well. We also have another retail market up on the main road at, on Cortez Road.

[00:14:34] **John Banyas:** So we are you know, we're, we've got our hands in, little bit of everything. Little tourism, still want a commercial fish, still dealing with boats, building boats, repairing boats, fishing and keeping, keeping it alive.

[00:14:50] **Tina Bucuvalas:** That's amazing. Yeah. That you're, that you're doing so many different things. Yeah, it takes a little bit of everything.

[00:14:55] **John Banyas:** We got a lot of great employees cuz we have, you know, 60 employees, you know, between all the businesses. So, it's a lot to keep going and, you know, I take good care of my employees. They're happy to be here. They've been with me a long time and so everybody's happy to stay in the fishing business or closely related to the fishing business.

[00:15:20] **John Banyas:** And it all started from fishing, you know, we just expanded into the restaurants and the boatyards and retail markets from starting the fish house.

[00:15:31] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And why do you think everyone likes being in the fishing business?

[00:15:35] **John Banyas:** Well, it's unique. It's, you're not in a cubicle. We are here in my office today. I've been in my office a whole lot, but I think everybody likes being outside, being on the water.

[Production crew interjects]

[00:16:04] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Why, why does everyone like being in the fishing business?

[00:16:07] **John Banyas:** I think everybody likes to be in the fish business because there's not a people, a lot of people in the business. It's fun, it's exciting. You're catching fish, you're dealing with the water. You're not stuck in a

cubicle, you're not in an office, you're not in middle of the state. You're not getting snowed on somewhere.

[00:16:31] **John Banyas:** You know, sometimes, I don't take it for granted, but when I come back from a vacation, I really still appreciate what I'm doing.

[00:16:40] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Do you still go on vacation centered around water too? And fishing?

[00:16:45] **John Banyas:** I like to go to tropical places on my vacations. I like to go surfing and usually when I do, I head south to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, some island someplace where there's warm water and surf.

[00:16:59] **John Banyas:** So I find myself staying close to the water.

[00:17:05] **Tina Bucuvalas:** This is a little off the subject, but, but I used to work with a surfboard maker, you know, over in Melbourne, you know, who makes balsa boards and stuff. But, but do they do any surfing in the Gulf?

[00:17:18] **John Banyas:** Yes, actually we have a good surf break here. It's the Twin Piers in Bradenton Beach, and it actually is a known spot for surfing.

[00:17:28] **John Banyas:** It's a good little surf break. There's two or three breaks on Annamaria Island, the Twin Piers, Beach Street, the public beach. You know, there's a lot of good surfing spots.

[00:17:41] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Interesting. I had no idea.

[00:17:42] **John Banyas:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:17:43] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So, what can you, what is the volume of your business? Are you one of the bigger bait distributor or are bait people in Florida or.

[00:17:58] **John Banyas:** We've grown here at Cortez Bait and Seafood into a really, it's a well known bait brand. Killer Bait is a well-known brand. We're all throughout Florida panhandle, California. We're well known. There's really two operating fish houses here in Cortez left, and I'm one of 'em. So we're, you know, proud to, proud to be in business.

[00:18:29] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And Florida has to be because of the 1100 miles coastline. It has to be one of the biggest recreational and commercial fishing places in the country, I would imagine.

[00:18:40] **John Banyas:** Yes, Cortez is known for its commercial fishing. You know, I have a lot of recreational buddies who fish and they also commercial fish. But yeah, the island is more recreational. Cortez is more commercial, but we do have charter boats tied to our dock. I just built a site seeing boat for my son so he can, you know, do dolphin tours, sunset cruises. So, we have to adapt to what's going on. But fishing is the mainstream for us and we're just adding on pieces as we go. Yeah.

[00:19:21] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And, and so what kind of boats are you building generally there in the boatyard?

[00:19:26] **John Banyas:** Mainly it's just repairs, repowers, wiring things like that. We're not really in production of popping out boats or anything. It's just when we feel a need to, we'll build something to suit the purpose. But we're not really manufacturing boats. We're maintaining boats that are around the area.

[00:19:51] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And you know, it's interesting that you have sort of the, the whole business from, from the, you know, the, I mean, you, you're catching fish too, right?

[00:20:01] **John Banyas:** We are still catching, I'm still running a boat. My son is stone crabbing and bait fishing a boat. I'm running a bait fishing boat. So, we have two boats fishing full-time, stone crab boat in the season, and 20 or 30 smaller little boats that are you know, self-employed fishermen that just go out and cast net or little seine fish in here and there and doing, doing what they can.

[00:20:32] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And then you, so you, so really you've got everything from harvesting to processing to distribution to feeding people,

[00:20:42] **John Banyas:** Right.

[00:20:42] **Tina Bucuvalas:** To to, to doing, dealing with the boats.

[00:20:45] **John Banyas:** It's, right, right. Yeah. And it's, it's a, it's good, it's a all sustainable, you know, fishery. It's, I don't see anything that is stressed out other than the overgrowth of population and, and water quality diminishing with a over influx of people in the area. Back fishing was good, is not that it's bad now, but you know, when fishing was good, the water was clear, there wasn't a

problem. There was plenty of fish around. A lot of people want to point their finger at the commercial fishermen, but there was never a problem when we were fishing.

[00:21:26] **John Banyas:** The only problem is now there's so many people around with the water quality diminishing and you know, it's just you're losing habitat and you're losing ground and you're losing environment. So anybody that's pointed the finger at the commercial fisherman in the past needs to look around and see the finger pointed the other direction. So, you know, we're just here to you know, survive.

[00:21:52] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. I think you're so right. You know, I mean, there's only thousands of commercial fishermen and there's millions of recreational. You know, fishermen and other people.

[00:22:10] **John Banyas:** Right. And the catches are documented. A lot of the state doesn't really want to recognize how many fish are being landed recreationally versus commercial. They're kind of turning their eye towards it. They don't wanna see the numbers. They know it's there, but they want that fish for the person paying, paying for it, paying the taxes, paying for this, paying for that. They get lobbied. They're just, it's kind of a sad thing. It's reality. I think all the politicians and government people know it, but they kind of, sort of wants you out and everybody else in, so that's kind of my opinion.

[00:22:58] **Tina Bucuvalas:** no, and, and, and that's, that's fine. I've heard, yeah. Mm-hmm. , I've heard from a lot of fishermen over the years. Right. I think everyone's pretty much on the same page.

[00:23:07] **John Banyas:** Yeah. I mean, we need to be fair about the rules. Fair about keeping the fish healthy, keeping the stock healthy. We're all about that. We wouldn't want to, you know, decimate a resource. We wouldn't be in business. It's gotta be maintained and regulated for sure, but we gotta do it fairly, and our opinion should matter when it just gets, you know, shoved to the wayside because someone else has more money or in deeper pockets.

[00:23:41] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. I think you guys are probably in the best position to curate what, I mean, what is your livelihood, you know, better than anyone else.

[00:23:49] **John Banyas:** Right. So with the, with the environment in mind and the fishery, when we were fishing, the hardest, the fishing was at its best. So, if we were fishing hard back in the day and there wasn't a problem, what does that

tell you today when we're not fishing as hard and there is a problem? So what's going on with that? I mean, like I said, you can't point your finger at the commercial fisherman because somebody went out the pass and couldn't catch a, a mackerel or something. I don't know. I don't know what to tell 'em. Yeah, I don't know what to say.

[00:24:29] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah, no. And, and, and that sort of brings us to, you know, and of course there's other issues, which I don't think, which may bear also on the diminishment of the numbers of fishes, which are some environmental changes that have happened, which as you so appropriately is that, you know, maybe due to population growth and things like that. And I'm wondering if you could talk, even expand upon talking about the water quality and what, what, when it was, and how it was before and how, what is actually the difference now? I don't know if it's in terms of temperature pollution, you know, or whatever, but if you could talk about that a little bit more.

[00:25:18] **John Banyas:** Water quality pollution. I'm just thinking back about problems as they started. Phosphate companies up in Tampa Bay. We used to have a good fishery up in Tampa Bay for Pogies, Shad. Used to be a big thrive in fishery up there. And then one year the phosphate companies had a big spill and killed everything in Tampa Bay. And that fishery never came back. It was, we were catching, thriving. A whole fish house up in Ruskin was thriving.

[00:26:02] **John Banyas:** One year, one spill. It was done. Nothing. Just done. And so, that's, that was the start of it. And then you go on and on about, you know, you have your red tides, you had this runoff, you got that runoff. But everybody that was wanting to put the commercial fishermen out of business was also the person building a house, putting a golf course up, land developers. I, I mean, the list can go on and on. You can just imagine in your own mind what was running off into the bays. You have more streets. You have 36-inch drain pipes at the end of every street with every new development. Yes, there's retention ponds, but when the retention ponds are full, they overflow into the bay.

[00:26:52] **John Banyas:** Water quality's still going downhill. More and more red tide up until the present the, the acid spill here in Tampa, trying to think of the phosphate company. It's off my mind right now, but we just had a current spill here in Tampa Bay, which we were fishing, catching fish at that time. We had the Piney Point spill.

[00:27:28] **John Banyas:** Just, you know, out of the blue fish went to nothing at that particular time. I can't say it was, nobody's gonna admit it. They filed

chapter 11, nobody can go after him. But the fishing took a dive. I was actually fishing for the state of Florida catching red fish for their tag and release program, and we were fishing at that time, and it cut their catches in half at that time.

[00:27:59] **John Banyas:** And so they didn't get the fish they needed to tag and release for that particular time. Coincidental, or it's a direct contact with what happened. I'm not sure, but it just kind of all goes down at the same time. So, water quality is a big thing.

[00:28:23] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Have you seen effects from other environmental damage, like let's say the BP oil spill or the Tidy Point.

[00:28:36] **John Banyas:** Piney Point, other related you know, chemical spills or something, the BP thing? Could have had a direct, probably did have a direct influence on the fishing around here. Although we didn't see oil on our beaches.

[00:29:01] **John Banyas:** I don't really know long-term effect what's happening. It certainly hurt. You know, the Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, they were all directly hit, the oyster beds and Appalachicola. It all took a hit. It. But that's just one more piece of everything that's happening. So yeah, it's, it's all about the water quality and what we can do to, to help it.

[00:29:28] **John Banyas:** The, you know, the bay bottom is more muddy now. We used to have a sandy bottom in the bays where it turns to mud. Now that there's mud in other places where it used to be a harder bottom, it's more muddy. When the wind blows a little bit, it turns to mud quicker instead of being cleaner. So, you know, there, there's just a lot of other standing circumstances like that that just add to it also. Certain things like boat traffic in the Intercoastal waterway down in Sarasota Bay, the channel narrows a little bit.

[00:30:08] **John Banyas:** But the water doesn't get clean in there because there's boats all through the intercoastal now and their wakes peel off and hit the oyster bars and the shallow bottom makes the water muddy. And with so much boat traffic, the water stays muddy, it doesn't clear. So it's just a, it's just a lot of things to consider when you think about the water quality.

[00:30:34] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So now, what effect does having, can you explain what effect? Having the water be more muddy and a lot of be more muddy has down the line.

[00:30:44] **John Banyas:** Sediments in the water, you know, just it's, you know it's runoff sediments debris from the roads. It can be sand blowing off the roads. It just makes the bottom more muddier than areas and, you know, it doesn't clean up after that.

[00:31:03] **John Banyas:** And every time. We get a storm or a cold front or something, it'll churn it up. It takes longer for the water to clear. Now, it doesn't usually in two days after a major cold front, the water would be cleaner. Again, it's five or six days for the water to clear up. So little subtle changes as times going on is, is affecting fishing.

[00:31:27] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And you know, I know there's, there's an old fisherman, maybe you know him. He's an amazing man. Wally Erickson up, up in Tarpon, Palm Harbor and stuff.

[00:31:38] **John Banyas:** I've heard of Wally Erickson. I know the Erickson name.

[00:31:41] **Tina Bucuvalas:** What a what a guy. He's done everything. But, but he says he remembers when he was a teenager where the water level was and where it is now.

[00:31:52] **John Banyas:** Yes.

[00:31:53] **Tina Bucuvalas:** And it's, he thinks it's a foot and a half higher. At least, you know. most places, and I know there's an island out, you know, in Tampa, off Tampa or in Tampa Bay that is now half submerged. That used to be Uhhuh there. I, I can't remember the name of it. But have you seen evidence of, of this kind of water level rise

[00:32:19] **John Banyas:** Water levels in Cortez, they seem like they're on the rise or they just built lower back in the day and it seems lower. I'm not really sure, but I know when they used to build on the island, Anna Maria island, for instance, the seawall cap would be lower. When they're building them today, they're higher. You know, the particular seawall, the old seawall around the fish house here is low.

[00:32:52] **John Banyas:** You know, the barnacle line is just under the seawall cap, maybe a foot. So, everything we do is coming up more and more. So it could be true, it could be true. I kind of think so. Yeah. Slowly.

[00:33:08] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Does that have any effect on you? It doesn't now. I don't think it'll affect me in my lifetime. But five generations, four generations maybe.

[Production comments/conversation]

[00:34:51] **John Banyas:** The water level rising in Cortez. Seems to be true in my opinion. The sea walls that used to be out of the water are more underwater, or at least have barnacles higher up on the sea wall than it used to be 20 years ago.

[00:34:12] **John Banyas:** Not by much, but a little something noticeable. So it might not affect this generation or the next, but maybe five or six generations down the line, it, it could have an impact.

[00:34:27] **Production crew question:** While, while he does that one, do you mind if we just do one more? Go ahead. The mud, just back to the muddy water for a second, the muddy, how does the muddy water really affect the fishing? I don't think I heard that in your answer. You said it gets muddy and then it stays muddy. But you didn't say like, fish don't come around for like a week, or it kills the fish. Or does this. How does the muddy water specifically hurt your fishing or the Cortez area?

[00:34:54] **Tina Bucuvalas:** You should, you're a great interviewer

[00:34:57] **John Banyas:** Yes. Yes. We'll get to the same point. We'll get to the same conclusion.

[00:35:01] **Production crew question:** Cause I'm just, yeah, I just, I want to hear that sound bite. Okay. The muddy because of the mud water being muddy for so long, it affects us by X, Y, and Z. That's what I think we're missing. Okay.

[00:35:15] **Kristin Sweeting:** I have something to interject after that.

[00:35:17] **Production crew question:** Yeah. Okay. Okay. So this is just, sorry to go back to muddy water to get any Yes, no, no, I think that's fine. Okay.

[00:35:23] **Tina Bucuvalas:** I think all of you guys should.

[00:35:25] **Production crew question:** Okay. Thank you.

[00:35:26] **John Banyas:** Because of the muddy water in Cortez taken longer to clear after storms and blows. It affects the fishing because they don't school up, they don't get back together, they stay busted up and scattered.

[00:35:45] **John Banyas:** So the muddy water contributes to the fishing because they, they don't get back together as much. They certainly would prefer the cleaner water and it, and it just stays stirred up. So they, they don't feed, they don't, they don't school up like they should.

[00:36:05] **Production crew question:** And does that affect your dollars and cents? Like, just add on to that and, and because of this, it's made our sale, you know, how, how specifically has it affected you or the area

[00:36:17] **John Banyas:** And because of the muddy water, we don't have as many days to fish cuz the fish don't get back together. They relocate. You can't locate 'em. So it cuts your time in half for, for fishing time, which in return affects fishing and what you're actually catching.

[00:36:38] **John Banyas:** So it's another small piece of why the fish aren't getting together and why it's, it's not as good as it used to be.

[Production comment]

[00:36:53] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Kristin, did you?

[00:36:54] **Kristin Sweeting:** Yeah. One, I find this super fascinating. Thank you for sharing all of this with us. Are there specific fisheries that it is like more common for that to affect? And then my second after that, and Tina, if I apologize if you were gonna jump into this, but I'd like to touch base on Red Tide and kind of your experiences as a young fisherman of what Red Tide was and then what your experiences in recent years have been.

[00:37:25] **Kristin Sweeting:** Okay. So you want to hit the, the end of the muddy water? You can do the fisheries one first.

[00:37:30] **John Banyas:** Yeah, I'm lost now. Sorry, which one was I going for?

[00:37:35] **Kristin Sweeting:** So the, if there are specific, like if it, the muddy water's affected well more.

[00:37:40] **John Banyas:** Okay. Right, right, right. Okay. . So the muddy water affecting fish in Cortez as a certain species, I can't really say the muddy water

affects one species more than the other, other than you can't find them and they don't get together.

[00:38:01] **John Banyas:** So I think it equally affects each species in the muddy water. And then the next question?

[00:38:10] **Kristin Sweeting:** So how, how was your experience as a young fisherman with the red tide? Red tide, versus your experience in recent years?

[00:38:21] **John Banyas:** The red tide outbreaks around Cortez is worse than it used to be. When I was growing up as a kid, it wasn't as often, but it was just as bad because there was more fish around, which killed more fish to make it look worse. But we didn't have red tides but every seven years was the cycle. Now we have a red tide every year, every year there's a red tide here, close to us, definitely on the west coast of Florida every year in numerous places.

[00:39:02] **John Banyas:** And you know, I tried catching fish in a certain red tide area, bait fish, not a food fish that we knew was gonna die that we couldn't catch legally because they were too close to shore. And I tried to, you know, argue the fact, let's harvest these fish before they die so we're not wasting our resource.

[00:39:29] **John Banyas:** And went to Tallahassee, had backers from Manatee County, Bradenton Beach, the city, our congressmen. Went to Tallahassee, they said, no, we can't do that. Somebody might sue us. It sounds good. Makes sense, but we can't do it. So there's another instance where, let's try to do something, right? We were in a 10 mile radius of the red tide area.

[00:39:56] **John Banyas:** We knew the fish were gonna die, but leave 'em alone, let 'em die and let 'em wash up on the beach. So it gets frustrating when you know, regulators don't want to let you help out or even value your opinion. So that's what we're dealt with. But the red tides are definitely every year, every year, every year.

[00:40:25] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So, and to what do you attribute that?

[00:40:30] **John Banyas:** We, I can, you know, I can, you can point fingers in a lot of different directions and so I think it's just a multitude of different, different avenues and different things coming together to contribute to it. I think everybody plays a part in what's happening and why it's happening.

[00:40:48] **John Banyas:** So, you know, it's water quality for sure, but what can we do about it with an exploding population in Florida?

[00:40:58] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Do, do you, I've heard that the water temperature has increased and that is partially a result of overpopulation or greater population, you know, and pollution coming into the, the Gulf and you know, maybe combined with climate changes or are these some of the elements that, that you think might go into it?

[00:41:27] **John Banyas:** A few of the elements that might contribute it to, it could be water temperatures. Some people say some. Some people say it's, you know, runoff, the sugar farmers, the, this, the that. But temperature of water in particularly like this year itself, the water temperatures seem to be where they're supposed to be for the month of March.

[00:41:52] **John Banyas:** The particular months, you know, every season's gonna change a couple, two, three weeks here or there, but right now to this day, the temperature seems to be what it should be. Mm-hmm, I don't think it's warmed. I don't think it's had a significant impact on the red tide.

[Production comments, John is asked to repeat red tide answer, cell phone break]

[00:43:43] **John Banyas:** Red tide here in Cortez has been a long term problem only getting worse, but I can't really say any one particular thing that I could pinpoint it to say, let's go after this creature. This is the reason. If we get rid of it, we're gonna fix the red tide.

[00:44:03] **John Banyas:** It's a multitude of problems coming together, you know, to that makes up the problem. We just have to take smaller steps in order to try to clean it up, to try to prevent it, in order to make some ground to prevent it. So it's a complex problem. We just have to work harder at fixing it.

[Production crew interjects]

[00:44:43] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Okay. Was there one particular incident that sort of brought it home to you that maybe things had changed out in the Gulf? I mean, when, I mean, from something that particularly happened or maybe you just saw, you know, things declining over a period, but it's kind of good if you have a particular memory to share with people

[00:45:06] **John Banyas:** Pertaining to Red tide?

[00:45:08] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Red tide or, or long term changes in the Gulf.

[Production crew gives an example of a story]

[00:45:24] **John Banyas:** Yet it's such a subtle change that you just wouldn't see it in a particular day. So, the red tide question in southwest Florida, was there any, one particular thing I think that actually set it off was a no-brainer question that it's definitely related to would be runoff, phosphate spills.

[00:45:53] **John Banyas:** It's all directly tied to heavy pollution coming out of industrial factories. The municipalities treated wastewater. Is it more of a direct line to what I think the problem is? You know, and, and population growth. On top of it, municipalities can't, you know, clean up the water enough. They've gotta discharge it somewhere.

[00:46:22] **John Banyas:** Phosphate plants are growing, but I really see a direction to, to point it at as major water quality issues is definitely your bigger corporations or bigger industries or bigger municipalities, you know, linked to, to growth of the population.

[00:46:52] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So, and, and this sort of leads to another top related topic, which is the future of the industry. And we've talked about some of the problems and, and maybe you can see what the future is of the industry without solving the problems and what the future is of the if there are any solutions to some of the problems.

[00:47:19] **John Banyas:** Solutions to overpopulation, water, clarity water you know, water purity is hard. I would have to think on that one. I don't know how we're going to fix it offhand other than trying to get a control on the runoff and the, and the quality of water going into the bay as runoff. I've always thought every 36-inch drain pipe at the end of every street should have a filter on it, a sock filter. I don't know. We have Mote Marine working on this. We have people thinking about it, but myself is, you know, you have to filter the water that's going in the bay to maybe get a start on cleaning the bay up at some point. You know, aerators in certain areas of the bay that start to get the first sign, a red tide, figure out where they start the most, at the most frequent places.

[00:48:28] **John Banyas:** Filtration system, cleaning up the runoff would be a good place to start for the future to try to get something started. It's hard, I know, but where are we gonna be with it? I'm not sure. Pick something and try it. See if it works. Go from there. Throw everybody's best idea at it and see what we can do.

[00:48:53] **Tina Bucuvalas:** It sounds to me like you're suggesting, and it sounds like a great idea, it's more, more constant the more attention needs to be paid to the problem and then a more concerted effort with everyone kind of organized together towards it.

[00:49:09] **John Banyas:** Correct. Yeah. I think the state is definitely concerned. They have lot of people wanting to clean up and do things. They just don't know a direction to go with the politics that are involved with everything that's gotta be done.

[00:49:32] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Are you, do you feel that the people involved in the fishing industry are, have adequate organizations to, to help affect these changes with government regulations? Through government regulations?

[00:49:51] **John Banyas:** The fishing industry's always been under the thumb to survive. So it's hard for the fishing industry to tackle such a big thing as the red tide, the water quality. We have conservation groups out there, but they're mainly concerned about who's gonna catch the fish and who gets the percentage of that fish.

[00:50:16] **John Banyas:** If we have a conservation groups out there, why aren't they saying, we want to protect these fish. It's about the fish. Let's do this. But they're aim more at knocking the commercial fishermen down like it's their fault, but they're the ones with the money. They're the ones doing the construction. They're the ones, you know, selling, building in the businesses for not the commercial fishermen.

[00:50:46] **John Banyas:** So behind their conservation front, I don't believe they're stepping enough for the actual conservation of the water. We've got big groups, we've got the phosphate companies backing these conservation groups, but what are they, what are we doing? What are they doing to actually conserve the water or clean the water or the actual conservation itself other than, you know, promoting a fishing tournament or backing a building or something like that.

[00:51:23] **John Banyas:** They're not actually pushing it to the conservation. I don't see their big money going conservation, which is what they're basically hiding behind to get more fishing regulations to improve their fisheries, not the commercial fishing industry.

[00:51:42] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Hmm. Yeah. Yeah. What, what, how do you see the future of your business particularly, and do you have a son in the industry or anything?

[00:51:53] **John Banyas:** So the future of Cortez Bait and Seafood is strong right now. I do have three kids Lily, Silas, Cole. They are, my oldest son is fishing, one of the boats and stone crabbing one of the boats, my daughter's managing the restaurant. And my youngest son is, we're currently building a sight-seeing boat to kick in with some tourism, do some sight-seeing sunset cruises.

[00:52:22] **John Banyas:** So they definitely have a future for their, you know, their lifetime. We'll see what they can do after that, but the future looks good for now because we're being able to adapt to what's happening. And, you know, some of the smaller fishing towns, they can't adapt as well because they're solely surviving on fishing.

[00:52:48] **John Banyas:** So it's, it's being regulated down to, well, we'll regulate 'em down until they're vanished. And then they're gone.

[00:52:48] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. Well, you know, then there's always Cedar, which was

[00:53:02] **Production crew question:** Yeah. Did you want any of that last question to have to do with climate change? Like do, how do you see the future of your business?

[Production conversation]

[00:53:34] **John Banyas:** Climate change in the future is definitely gonna have an impact on something at some point in time, how it's going to affect it. I'm not sure. I've always got so much going to adapt to what we gotta do to survive at the time. But the global warming, the climate change is a factor. Where's the glaciers going? How much the rate is diminishing from the glaciers. But I'm not seeing a quick developing tie to global warming or any global changes right now. Focused more on survival.

[00:54:24] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Okay. And you know you know, I was just thinking about Cedar Key, you know, and the net ban, you know did that have an effect and does it have an ongoing effect on what you do at all?

[00:54:43] **John Banyas:** As far as the climate changing? No, no, no.

[00:54:45] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Or the, this is just the, this is just a regulatory, the regulatory issue. You know? You know how, basically because of the, the changes in the state, in state regulations of, of the nets. This was back, was it, what was it, 20 years ago or something?

[00:55:01] **John Banyas:** In 95 is when they banned the nets.

[00:55:03] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. Yeah. And so essentially Cedar key went from being a fishing town to a clam town, you know?

[00:55:11] **John Banyas:** Right, right, right.

[00:55:12] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So did that have any effect on you? I mean, this is just another topic, but as far as the net changes

[00:55:20] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yes. The net ban and changes in the way that you were fishing.

[00:55:29] **John Banyas:** Right. So in 95 when they banned all the gill nets in the state of Florida, which was. In my opinion, bought out by the sport fishing group because they had to get signatures and they had to get the vote, but they were showing pictures of manufacturing ships killing dolphins in China. They were showing pictures anywhere around the world where there was decimation of, of anything happening to a commercial industry and brainwashing the Florida voter to, you know, to vote in their favor when actually at that particular time, our biologists were regulating the fishery properly, like they do in Alaska and a lot of other places.

[00:56:23] **John Banyas:** They regulate it. They, they manage their fishery in a proper way to where it's fair. We just, we, the Florida voter just got brainwashed into thinking they're killing everything. They're gonna decimate everything. But look at right now, we haven't had the gill nets since what 95, 1995. But the fishery is in worse shape now than it was in 95.

[00:56:57] **John Banyas:** We had regulation gill, net mesh sizes, links of gill net, quota. We had everything regulated to manage the fishery properly, but we just got bought out. The voter got bought out by bad, bad stories of things happening all around the world, like I was saying. And the money went further than what we could, we could do at the time to prove to the, to the voter that that wasn't true.

[00:57:29] **John Banyas:** But we had things, very well managed in that fishery with biologists on our side saying, this is what it is, this is how it should be, and this is what we're doing. But nobody listened. And now we could have told them this is what's happening with the water quality. We could have told them this is what's happening with the population.

[00:57:55] **John Banyas:** This is the muddy bottom that used to be grass. This is happening over here. But the money talked and the politicians voted and brainwash the public into their behalf to better, you know, the growth of Florida. And the fishermen just took the brunt of what's really happening on the water.

[00:58:20] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. So do you, but you see fishing, ultimately, I think it will continue. I mean, you seem to think it will continue too. It, it's had, I know it's had so many setbacks, you know, but..

[00:58:34] **John Banyas:** Commercial fishing in the state of Florida I think will continue for years if we can, you know, help our water quality out, deal with the regulators to continue to let us fish, value our input for what we're saying.

[00:58:54] **John Banyas:** And you know, if we can, if we can do that, I think the fishery will continue to, you know, grow even and be able to stay in business and stay fishing.

[00:59:09] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Yeah. I'm kind of at the end of where I think we should have gone or should be going. What about you guys? I have a couple. Yeah. Okay. All right. Let's go.

[00:59:25] **Tina Bucuvalas:** So this kind of builds on what you were just talking about, but I was wondering if you had any additional hopes for Cortez for commercial fishing.

[00:59:35] **John Banyas:** Okay. So Cortez is on the National Board of Historic Places. So historically I think Cortez is going to thrive in the future because of our historic background and historic registry. So we can't build anything out of the conforming contrast of Cortez.

[Phone call interruption]

[01:00:46] **John Banyas:** So Cortez on the Historic National Register, so we have no non-conforming building applications coming through. So I think

that'll, you know, save Cortez and everybody likes Cortez the way it is, so I know nobody in Cortez from Cortez wants to change it.

[01:01:10] **John Banyas:** Other than being what it used to be. So the future of Cortez should be strong. If we can keep major developers out and keep Cortez the way it used to be.

[01:01:24] **Kristin Sweeting:** You said you had something. I do have other ones, but All right. Go for it. This is kind of a little bit out of the direction we had been going, but I was wondering if you could talk to us about your favorite fishing memory.

[Production comment]

[01:01:46] **John Banyas:** Memories or most impactful. Most impactful. Most favorite.

[Break, interview goes different direction]

[01:02:44] **John Banyas:** So the younger fishermen in Cortez wanting to go fishing as there's not as many young kids around in the fishing industry, are kids of fishermen be, you know, kids in the families of fishermen, cuz there's less fishermen, less kids, but they would like to go fishing, but there's too many regulations, so they have it's, it is gonna be a felony. If they go out there with over two meshes in their cast net or something, they're gonna be a convicted felon because they're gonna go try to catch a mullet. So, they don't want to get in trouble. They don't wanna have to deal with all the regulations and they don't wanna be a felon.

[01:03:32] **John Banyas:** So, I can't hardly blame 'em, but they don't wanna be a felon to go try to catch a fish so they get into something else. And, you know, the die hards will try it and do what they can do, but it's not a thriving job description like it used to be. I know growing up I got into fishing. I was making as much as my dad was doing hard construction, so, you know, I enjoyed fishing, made money at it, and kept rolling my revenue back into building a business that it worked.

[01:04:04] **John Banyas:** But it's so hard for a younger fisherman to be able to do that. It's just not as lucrative. It's five times harder and you got a chance of committing a felony for chasing a fish around.

[01:04:21] **Tina Bucuvalas:** I know in Tarpon, cuz I, I work a lot with this, with people in the sponge industry, there's also issues of some of the younger people don't wanna be away from their cell phones working, you know, they don't want to be out for, you know, weeks at a time, you know, without coming back in and morning to night, you know, working really, really physically hard. Does any of that come to bare here?

[01:04:46] **John Banyas:** Here, there's all the physical, actual physical labor, younger kids don't wanna work as hard as I did when I was growing up. And that goes to any any field out there. I mean, plumbers, construction, framers, concrete electricians. It's, it's hard work. As kids these days would rather be on their phone trying to make that easy buck? Possibly. But there are a few out there. They're just not as many around as there used to be.

[01:05:22] **Tina Bucuvalas:** Okay. Yeah. Thank you so much.