

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Bill Balboa

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:03] Well, good afternoon, David Todd here. And I have the good fortune to be with Bill Balboa. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, a non-profit here in the state, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is based at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:00:36] And I wanted to stress that Mr. Balboa would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit. It is his to figure out what to do with.

David Todd [00:00:48] So I wanted to make sure that's a good arrangement for you and that it's okay if we proceed.

Bill Balboa [00:00:54] Absolutely, yes.

David Todd [00:00:56] Okay. Well, then let's get started.

David Todd [00:00:59] It is Tuesday, September 20th, 2022. It is a little past 2:00 Central Time in the afternoon. And my name, as I said, is David Todd, and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. I am in Austin, and this is a remote interview with Mr. Balboa. He, when I last checked, was based in the Brazoria, Texas area.

David Todd [00:01:32] Currently, Mr. Balboa is the executive director of the Matagorda Bay Foundation, previously served at the Texas A&M AgriLife Sea Grant Texas program, and before that, worked for nearly a quarter of a century at Texas Parks and Wildlife in their Coastal Fisheries Division. So he's worked in a number of areas regarding coastal habitat and wildlife protection. Today, I think we're going to focus on his work in tarpon research and conservation.

David Todd [00:02:06] And so I thought we might start by just talking a little bit about your early childhood memories. I understood that, that when you were a young person, you went to Port Isabel with your father. And I was curious what happened.

Bill Balboa [00:02:24] Yeah. You know, in those days that actually my experiences there were in large part, you know, loaded, they motivated me to pursue a career in fisheries. But it was in the sixties, I would say probably 1965 or 1966. And my father was finishing up a graduate school program and his major professor lived in Port Isabel, on the water, and he would go down and visit with her. And I would always tag along so that I could fish in the bay in the Lower Laguna behind her house. And she was situated in an area that was near a channel, and I would frequently go down there when I was fishing and catching hard-headed catfish primarily.

Bill Balboa [00:03:13] But, I would see tarpon rolling and you know, you'd see their silver sides coming up to the surface as they would dive down. And, you know, I'd frequently tried to snag them with my little Zebco and, you know, tried everything I could possibly to get one to hook on. But I was never successful. But it was just a, it was a really amazing thing to see. It was just, you know, sometimes to be, you know, an hour they would be there out there rolling in the channel. And it was just an amazing thing to see.

Bill Balboa [00:03:42] And I I've only seen it once since and that was much later in life. So, it was a, it was a really good time.

Bill Balboa [00:03:51] And I understood that your dad had a little bit more success and actually managed to hook one of these tarpon.

Bill Balboa [00:04:00] Yeah, there was a, there is a place on the real Rio Grande River back in the day that's known as Tarpon Bend. And it's a, it's a, it's a really deep bend in the Rio Grande River, as it heads down towards the Gulf of Mexico. And it's just, I think, you know, maybe a mile or two from the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico there. And it was very well known for a large tarpon.

Bill Balboa [00:04:25] And we were fishing there once. And normally when my father took us fishing, he wasn't fishing seriously for himself. He was just taking us. And we saw some tarpon rolling and he got out a small spinning rig and started messing around and he hooked one and he got two jumps out of it. And the river was very narrow, so it was a really spectacular show seeing this thing jump out of the water. I think he was as shocked as we were when the thing hit his lure. So that was another amazing sight to see.

Bill Balboa [00:05:00] And like I said, you know, it was interesting that, you know, there would be people there specifically targeting tarpon in that area. And I don't believe that's the case anymore. I just don't think they're there.

David Todd [00:05:14] Yeah. It sounds like the times have changed.

David Todd [00:05:22] It sounds like there was a pretty active tarpon fishery, though, back in the day. And in fact, I think you told me that you have a mounted tarpon that you'd got from the old Tarpon Inn in Port Aransas and that it might have come from the 1930s. Tell us about this specimen you have.

Bill Balboa [00:05:46] Okay. Well, you know, like I said, I've been, I've been intrigued by fish and fishing since I was very, very small. And I've been to the Tarpon Inn in Port Aransas. And I've been to other places in Port Isabel back in the day. And oftentimes they would have pictures of people holding tarpon or displaying large catches of tarpon and things that they used to call the tarpon rodeos where they would catch and kill, you know, 30, 40, 50 large tarpon at a time.

Bill Balboa [00:06:19] And at the Tarpon Inn in Port Aransas, apparently back in 1937, in the spring of 1937, Franklin Delano Roosevelt went to Port Aransas to fish. And there are pictures online that you can see of some of the tarpon. He caught some smaller tarpon in the Gulf of Mexico, of Port Aransas. And one of those specimens was mounted and it hung on the wall of the Tarpon Inn in Port Aransas a while. And when the Tarpon Inn changed hands, there were some older Parks and Wildlife staff there who were friends with the original owners. And the

original owners donated some of the items from the restaurant to raffle off at a Parks and Wildlife staff meeting.

Bill Balboa [00:07:07] One of those items was a tarpon mount that's about 37, 38 inches long. And at the time it was broken in the middle and it was yellow because of all the cigarette smoke from, you know, days gone by. And for some reason, that fish intrigued me. There was really no ... the history behind the fish wasn't really well known at that point during the raffle. And so, I bought some raffle tickets.

Bill Balboa [00:07:33] And I never win anything. But for some reason, I won that fish. And on the back, there's a little wooden plaque on the back of this fish where you hang it and it says FDR 3/37. And I, I was contacted and somebody told a man in Corpus Christi, a taxidermist, that I'd won this fish in a raffle. And he contacted me and he said, "You know, that's Franklin Roosevelt's fish, and it would be my honor to repair the mount and restore it." And he said he'd do it for free if he could hang it in his showroom for a few months. So I paid \$6 for the raffle ticket, so I said, "Absolutely!" And so that's kind of the story behind the fish.

Bill Balboa [00:08:17] I you know, I've had a few offers to take it from the Farley family down in Port Aransas. I believe it was one of their, I think it was their grandfather, great grandfather, that actually built the boat and was the guy for Franklin Roosevelt when he went fishing. But, you know, I've just had it, I've just kept it here, holding on to it. And it's just a really neat piece of history and relates to my love of fishing. So I thought it was a really cool, a cool acquisition.

David Todd [00:08:50] That's wonderful. And it's so interesting, not just the mount, but all the people's hands that it went through from, you know, FDR, to the original taxidermist, to the folks who ran the Inn, to the, you know, you, and then to the new taxidermist. It's an amazing story. That's great.

David Todd [00:09:15] Well, and it sounds like it's also kind of an artifact of tarpon-related tourism and recreation that really put that part of Texas on the map, so to speak. You know, there were, even I've heard of stories about the Tarpon Club and Tarpon Rodeo and Deep Sea Roundup and the Farleys, these wonderful guides and the boats they built.

David Todd [00:09:44] Can you sort of reel back to that time and tell us anything you might know about tarpon in the early days?

Bill Balboa [00:09:53] Well, you know, the one thing that stands out is they were much more abundant than they are now. And I'm not sure, you know, so much has changed in terms of, you know, the geography of Texas, the hydrology, the river flows and things like that, development. But there used to be so many more tarpon and, and, you know, for me to see them in the bay as a kid, the way I saw them. You know, I spent years with Texas Parks and Wildlife, as you said, almost a quarter of a century, and I rarely spotted tarpon in the water in the wild. There were certain areas where you could see them if you went there.

Bill Balboa [00:10:35] But I used to fish the Rio Grande. I worked for Parks and Wildlife for some time in the Valley and I used to go back to Tarpon Bend looking for them, you know, and I'd go back to that area in Port Isabel and they were just not there anymore.

Bill Balboa [00:10:47] And I think, you know, the tarpon heyday was in the '60s and maybe in the early '70s. And for whatever reason, whether it was overfishing, or environment, or

whatever, you know, I just thought the landings started to decline. And maybe it was just a change of philosophy. You know, I think many people nowadays, especially believe that, you know, it's better to have the experience or release it alive than to take it somewhere and showed it off dead. And so, you know, maybe that was part of it, too.

Bill Balboa [00:11:24] But I think that's the biggest thing about change is from back in the days with the Rodeo and the Deep Sea Round-up and stuff. And as a kid, you know, I was fascinated by pictures in the newspaper, going to restaurants, seeing all the pictures of the tarpon lined up and hanging, you know. And, you know, it was, it was a dream of mine to catch one, but I have not. But it was a, it was a dream at the time to catch tarpon.

David Todd [00:11:54] Yeah. And it sounds like a dream that got fulfilled a good deal, I guess, up into the early '70s.

David Todd [00:12:02] Do you, do you know much about any of the fishing tournaments and other events that drew people down?

Bill Balboa [00:12:11] That were specifically tarpon-related, you mean?

David Todd [00:12:13] Yeah. Mmmhmm.

Bill Balboa [00:12:15] No, I know that there were some, there were some, you know, some bigger fish tournaments is all I can recall as a child. And they drew in a very special game-fishing type of crowd. You know, they weren't, they weren't necessarily folks out there fishing for something to put into the freezer for the family. These were, these were specialized fishermen, you know. And tarpon has always been considered, you know, a game fish, very, especially in Texas. You know, in Florida, they're much more abundant. But here they've always been considered, you know, a real prize as a large game fish. And, and so, you know, I just, you know, as young as I was, I just don't really have that much recollection of a lot of the tournaments that were down there, other than the images I'd see of the fish hanging on the, at the weight stations and stuff.

David Todd [00:13:12] Sure, sure.

David Todd [00:13:16] Well, you when you were a biologist at Texas Parks and Wildlife, I understood that you got involved in some of the tasks related to tarpon. And then at one point you captured tarpon, helped capture tarpon, for the Corpus Christi Aquarium. And I was curious, you know, how you did it in the first place. They seemed very difficult to catch. And then what was the, what was the purpose?

Bill Balboa [00:13:45] Sure. So it was, this was the second time in my life where I was able to see both, it was, it initiated a period of a few years there in Galveston area when I was able to see lots of tarpon in the water. And it was, it was an interesting thing. The Corpus Christi State Aquarium wanted to capture a tarpon to put into their aquarium in Corpus, obviously.

Bill Balboa [00:14:13] And I was asked to be part of a crew on one of the sport boats. They had three or four sport boats. Most of them were part of a tarpon guide outfit named, "Tarpon Adventures", run by Jim Lovell. And, and they wanted a Parks and Wildlife representative out there on the water in one of the boats, and I was that person. And I'd never fished for tarpon up to that point, other than my childhood attempts.

Bill Balboa [00:14:47] And what I found was, you know, there's a fish that lives on the upper Texas coast. It's very abundant in the Gulf off of Sabine Lake. It is called the menhaden. It's a very oily fish. It's a filter feeder. And it's food for other game fish, basically predators. And, you know, the adults are about, you know, 7 to 8 inches long. They're very silvery.

Bill Balboa [00:15:10] And apparently tarpon on the upper Texas coast. They feed on those in the summer. And so, the bait that they used (and they used natural bait) was these large menhaden. And they, they free-lined them off the back of the boat or they had balloons tied to the lines to sort of float the bait in water, and they would have two or three lines out each as they did it.

David Todd [00:15:39] And we were fortunate enough to be the boat that hooked the tarpon. And we chased the fish with the boat because tarpon don't have a lot of hemoglobin. And if they burn up all their glycogen stores, their energy stores, they will die very quickly. And so you can't fight them down to submission. You have to basically capture them when they're, quote unquote, green, or still lively.

Bill Balboa [00:16:11] And so we did that. We took them up to the aquarium boat, and unfortunately, they didn't have the storage tank ready. And so we weren't able to send that one off to the aquarium.

Bill Balboa [00:16:22] But the process of being there with the guide and asking questions throughout the day as we waited for the fish to turn on, I learned a lot. And I learned that there was a cycle of early morning, the tarpon would come in from off-shore Gulf into 3 to 4 miles of the beach, and they would feed on large schools of menhaden.

Bill Balboa [00:16:46] And then in the afternoon, as the water warmed up, they would move back offshore.

Bill Balboa [00:16:50] And as they move, they would move in large groups, and they would cause something that looks very similar to a boat wake. And for years, collecting samples of the Gulf of Mexico off of Galveston, we would be out there on very calm days and I would see just a random, what looked, what appeared to me to be a boat wake moving across the Gulf. And I always thought to myself, "Where's the boat?"

Bill Balboa [00:17:18] Well, it turns out, in the summer, it was tarpon rolling and moving. And once I became aware of that, we started chasing them to look at them, when we would see these boat wakes. And so we had the opportunity to try several times to catch some for some genetic studies and life history studies that were going on. But we were never successful. But we got a lot of real up-close visits with tarpon as they were, as they were rolling and moving back out into the deeper water. And we would see them between Sabine Lake and the north jetty at Galveston was where they were most predominant.

David Todd [00:18:00] Gosh. So close.

Bill Balboa [00:18:02] Yeah, it was, it was amazing.

David Todd [00:18:06] Well. So I understood that, you did manage to get some, and maybe this is incorrect, but you got some genetic information and scales from the fish that you caught that I gather died.

Bill Balboa [00:18:21] Yeah. Uh huh.

David Todd [00:18:22] So what did you learn from that?

Bill Balboa [00:18:25] You know, I the information was passed on to our life history and genetics office down in in Palacios, the Perry R. Bass marine fisheries research station. And I think what they discovered was, you know, that, I'm not sure about the genetic makeup of the stock, but I know that what they found was the scales were not a very effective way to age the fish. And they were trying to collect little bony structures of the head called "otoliths", which they age things like spotted sea trout and red drum with these days.

Bill Balboa [00:19:03] But I honestly, I, you know, I'm not really sure, but I don't think they collected a whole lot of information from it. I don't think the effort was really, really successful. First, because collecting the samples was very difficult. You know, trying to get a tarpon close to the boat to pull a scale out was difficult. And we didn't want to sacrifice fish. If somebody ... one of the fish, one of the only fish that we had as a specimen that came in whole was a fish that was illegally caught off of the Galveston pier. And it was probably a six-foot tarpon. It would have been in his state record, if the man would have, if the man would have had in his possession the \$100 tarpon permit. But he did not buy the permit until he landed and killed the tarpon, which is illegal. So he left the fish in a freezer at a bait camp in Galveston, and we went and picked it up.

Bill Balboa [00:20:03] So, we pulled scales and we delivered the fish whole down to Perry R. Bass. And apparently those bony structures in the head of a tarpon are very, very small. And they had, I don't think they located them. I think they had a very difficult time trying to find them.

Bill Balboa [00:20:18] So the tarpon is still one of those, at least in Texas, you know, to my knowledge, it's still one of those sort of mysterious fish that people are still trying to understand life history, parts of the life history, and where they go, and where they come from, where they spawn and those kinds of things.

David Todd [00:20:37] Well, so I guess it's somewhat of a mystery, but is there any sort of outline that you could give of what is known about the life history and the ecological niche?

Bill Balboa [00:20:49] Well, so I know that I know that we have caught very small juvenile tarpon in borrow ditches that have very low water quality. Tarpon can gulp air. And so I believe, you know, I mean, in a lot of the places, you know, people will, people go trying to catch finger mullet or other bait fish to fish in salt water. And they will go to these small coastal canals that connect to bays. And oftentimes those canals, they're shallow and the dissolved oxygen varies from, you know, very, very low to moderate, at best.

Bill Balboa [00:21:29] And it's in those areas, in some of the backwater, fresher, bad water quality areas, that people were catching small tarpon. And by small, I would say, less than 12 inches. And so those tarpon, as larvae, move from offshore. My understanding is they spawn far offshore, and the larvae move into the Gulf and apparently seek out these freshwater, sort of marsh areas, or ditches, to mature. And they have a larvae that's very similar to a lady fish and to bonefish, I believe. And so it's a very odd-looking fish larvae.

Bill Balboa [00:22:15] And so we know that they, that they spend some of their juvenile time in that fresher water area. Once they grow a little bit bigger, they start to move out in the bays.

Our, the Texas Parks and Wildlife sampling data that I was part of, and from what I've heard lately, is they're actually, they actually seem to be catching more tarpon in the 24- to 36-inch range in gill nets, like, say, up in the upper end of bays where rivers flow into the bay.

Bill Balboa [00:22:43] From that point on, to when they get to the very large size, there's a big knowledge gap.

Bill Balboa [00:22:51] I would like to say, though, that one of the other experiences I had in terms of trying to get tarpon was Parks and Wildlife wanted to try to spawn tarpon at one point. And we made two concerted efforts to get these tarpon. And one was at the Dow Chemical in Freeport. And Dow Chemical has circulated saltwater through their facility. And because of their processes and things like that, the water is always warm.

Bill Balboa [00:23:25] And so a lot of their canals would be filled with smaller tarpon, three, four feet long, lots of them. You know, that's, that's another one of those mysteries. You know, obviously, they're coming in through the Brazos River or something and then they're getting impinged into these and entrained into these canals and growing. Once again, we weren't successful in getting a tarpon, but we saw a lot of them in there.

Bill Balboa [00:23:49] And what happens, sometimes, also, is during very severe freezes, when Dow will discharge some of the canal water into the Brazos River, people will call in and report cold-stunned tarpon, those 36- to maybe 40-inch tarpon right sort of at the outfall of their discharge, because the warm water comes out, the tarp on hit the cold water and they get cold-stunned and die.

Bill Balboa [00:24:14] And so the tarpon are there, they have been there for quite a while, and the, and another effort was trying to get a tarpon down in Port O'Connor. That also resulted in a mortality because they're just, they're a very difficult fish to handle. And this one was called off of the Port O'Connor jetties.

Bill Balboa [00:24:36] But, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to break off into other stories that were different from the question but that just popped into my head.

David Todd [00:24:44] No, this is so interesting. So I think you kind of laid out this history where they seem to spawn off-shore. Then they come in and they like these, I guess, low dissolved oxygen, maybe fresher water in these borrow ditches. And then they, I guess, they grow to 24, 36 inches. And then there's this gap between that sort of teenage size, I suppose, and when they might be a large mature fish?

Bill Balboa [00:25:17] Yeah.

David Todd [00:25:17] Is that what you're saying?

Bill Balboa [00:25:19] Yeah, because I, I mean, I have seen, we have caught small tarpon, you know, 36 inches long in nets, in our gillnets. I have had people bring me the very small ones that they caught in cast nets.

Bill Balboa [00:25:30] And you know, interestingly enough, you know, there's another species that, you know, also in Florida is quite a bit more abundant than in Texas, which is the common snook. And the snook and the tarpon have sort of parallel lives, I believe, because

these people who would cast net for bait and bring me these specimens would often bring me snook and tarpon at the same time, juvenile snook and juvenile tarpon.

Bill Balboa [00:25:58] And so, you know, as a fisheries biologist in Texas, you know, when you see something like that, it's a, it's a very exciting moment. And, you know, all of that is documented somewhere in Parks and Wildlife data.

Bill Balboa [00:26:10] There was there was a study done by a biologist in Port O'Connor. His name is Steve Moritz, I think back in the early '80s, maybe the late '70s, where he reported catching many juvenile tarpon in a borrow ditch around Port O'Connor. So it's something that happens fairly, fairly commonly.

Bill Balboa [00:26:30] But yeah, so they appear to like sort of stagnant fresh water, the sort of that would be associated with marshes, you know, where the waters move slowly. As you said, they grow and then they move into the Gulf. And there's that, there's a large gap of, oh, where, where are they when they're growing up?

Bill Balboa [00:26:50] Because I have, the tarpon that I've seen in the Gulf are, are much larger than 36 or 40 inches. And so they're spending some time somewhere growing up. I just haven't heard where that might be.

David Todd [00:27:08] Huh. It's odd. So there's a gap there that just can't be quite pinned down. Is there suspicion that some of them move across the Gulf? Is that right? I heard that there was some story that maybe the Florida strains were seen in Texas and vice versa.

Bill Balboa [00:27:31] Yeah, I've heard that theory, that they move or that there's some seasonality to the occurrence of the tarpon here in the summertime in Galveston. And the reason that they're only here during the summer is, you know, there's some theory that they may be moving around the Gulf Coast, right? Migrating around and then back, you know.

Bill Balboa [00:27:50] And I don't, I don't, you know, I don't, I've been out of the business for a little while, and I'm not sure if anybody's ever documented that. I think the last scientific publication I read was there were some, there was a theory that tarpon were spawning far off-shore, over the continental shelf. And there were a few people that were trying to dispute that theory. But that was the only large-scale study that I can recall that was done regarding trying to locate tarpon spawning grounds.

Bill Balboa [00:28:18] But I also, I agree, I have heard the theory that, that they could migrate back and forth across the Gulf.

Bill Balboa [00:28:25] I mean, people thought that about snapper though at some point. And I don't think that's the case. I think they believe there's an Eastern and a Western population. So, you know, there's a lot more snapper caught than there are tarpon, so you can do the genetics much easier, much more easily. And so I think, you know, if we were able to get those samples from tarpon, well, we might actually be able to do something like that, if it hasn't already been done. But yeah, I've heard the theory.

David Todd [00:28:51] Okay. Well, so that helps us to understand a little bit more about the life history of the fish. What do you think the niche is, the ecological role, that tarpon might fill?

Bill Balboa [00:29:06] That's a really hard question. You know, it's just, it's just an apex predator, you know? And I know. You know, down in Mexico. You know, my dad was from Mexico. We talked to people and, you know, some people would claim to have eaten the fish back in the day when they were, when there were a lot of them. Other ones just used them for fertilizer, you know, which was very odd to me for such a magnificent fish.

Bill Balboa [00:29:34] But I think tarpon, they're an apex predator, you know, and that's kind of the niche they fill out there in the ecosystem.

Bill Balboa [00:29:46] I say it's a difficult question, because, to me, there's many questions out there that are, that are sort of, at least to me, still unanswerable, mysterious sort of situations, you know, that either I haven't read about or I have yet to fathom myself. So.

David Todd [00:30:04] Well, I think you mentioned that, you know, these fish were caught and used for fertilizer in Mexico and I guess eaten as well and then used for, you know, as game fish, trophy fish. I understand that the fish were for some reason declining, though. And, you know, maybe those are some of the factors, but maybe there are others. What do you think the reasons might have been behind the declines that we're seeing since the heyday that you mentioned in the '60s and '70s?

Bill Balboa [00:30:52] Well, there's a lot of possible, possible reasons. Like I mentioned before, determining causality out there for many other organisms that live in the bay, say, take flounder, for instance, which is a very common species. It's very difficult to put a finger on exactly what it is that's causing the decline and how can we reverse it.

Bill Balboa [00:31:15] You know, for tarpon, I know a lot of people have looked at reduced fresh water flows to the bays. You know at one point, the Rio Grande River stopped flowing into the Gulf of Mexico, you know. And so, you've lost tarpon habitat there, you know, because obviously at some point they used the Rio Grande River so much that, you know, the place inherited a name because they were there in such abundance.

Bill Balboa [00:31:42] I think maybe catch and kill tactics since they're so large when they spawn and that may have some effect on the spawning population in the Gulf of Mexico.

Bill Balboa [00:31:56] You know, it's possible that water quality issues and development along the Texas coast have limited their nursery habitat as well, habitat as well.

Bill Balboa [00:32:08] But once again, you know, I don't, I don't know that anyone has been able to say this is why the tarpon are declining, in much of the same way, sort of with flounder.

Bill Balboa [00:32:18] You know, one of the things that may be attributed to seeing more tarpon in our Parks and Wildlife nets lately is, up until recently, we hadn't had any real killing freezes since '89-'90. And then we had the week-long freeze up here when, a couple of years ago, you know. So that was the first really big freeze.

Bill Balboa [00:32:39] And for years before that, before '89-'90, the Texas coast experienced freeze somewhere every 7 to 10 or 11 years, I think. And those freezes would push tropical fishes or fishes that were, that preferred warmer water temperatures, it would keep their populations south. And so, you know, as we get to the end of a period of, between freezes, you'd start to see snook, you'd start to see more tarpon, and then it would go back.

Bill Balboa [00:33:09] So, it's possible that, you know, as the waters warm, you know, the tarpon may be more successful.

Bill Balboa [00:33:18] But there's a lot of factors. You know, there's, there's so many, many factors that are, that can be attributed to the decline of the fishery. You know, I don't think it's any one particular reason. I think it's many in concert that have resulted in that decline.

David Todd [00:33:41] Well, you know, before we started recording today, you had some really interesting comments about just how complex the coastal environment is, and how difficult it is to sort of see some kind of mechanistic relationship between a single cause and a definite result. And can you talk a little bit about that? Just, you know, as somebody who has thought about the coast, thought about the fishery a lot, and maybe has come to see it as kind of an unknowable place and environment.

Bill Balboa [00:34:20] Sure. You know, one of the things that I've learned is that, after my time, after my time with Parks and Wildlife and everything, is there's a there's a lot we don't know. And that that was very evident during water planning processes in the late '90s when we had some of the, the best brains in Texas working on trying to understand the relationship between freshwater and bay and estuarine fisheries productivity.

Bill Balboa [00:34:51] And while intuitively we know that's the case, because we can see it displayed in front of us. We see large-scale oyster production and shrimping, you know, from, say, Aransas Bay to the north, where they experience freshwater inflows. Down south, there's no real oyster population to harvest in the lower Laguna upper lagoons where it's very salty. You know, up North, there's also the menhaden, which is the fish I mentioned that tarpon like to eat. They're harvested for oil and as fertilizer because there's so many of them, a tremendous abundance of those; white shrimp, blue crabs all along the upper coast. And we know that freshwater contributes to productivity.

Bill Balboa [00:35:35] But what we started looking at, trying to identify the relationship, to try to find the recipe for how much freshwater and how much salt water equals a good year, we couldn't find that match.

Bill Balboa [00:35:48] And so there's many answers out there, there's many things out there, that we can't answer. You know, as much as we've studied, and as much as we know, and as many questions we have answered, there's a lot of things that we can answer.

Bill Balboa [00:35:59] And I think also the thing to consider also is, as time changes, you know, and conditions in the world change, you know, there's a lot of things that just can't be reversed and repaired. So I think, you know, we're in for looking at a lot of changes because we really don't understand what's going to drive those changes yet. And we're just going to have to sit back and sort of watch them happen because these are very chaotic systems.

Bill Balboa [00:36:27] And when you look at a bay, it deals with drought some years. It deals with floods. So the salinities can go from very high to very low in the course of a day. There are hurricanes. You know, it's very, very, very chaotic systems, and yet they're very productive. And so what causes that, I think, in large part is still a mystery to many marine biologists.

Bill Balboa [00:36:53] So, I don't know. Did I capture that well enough?

David Todd [00:36:57] Yeah. There's I love that there's this mystery to it. It's a little disturbing that, you know, you point out that some of these changes may be irreversible. And you, not only do you not understand it, but you can't really restore it. Is that where you're going with that?

Bill Balboa [00:37:23] Yeah, I am. And well, you know, for instance, say, in Matagorda Bay, you know, the majority of our fresh water historically came down the Colorado River into the bay. The river, because it was flooding areas upstream back in the early 1900s, was channeled out into the Gulf of Mexico. So the bay lost flow. And then it was diverted back in, in the late '90s, back into the bay to try to increase productivity, you know. And at the same time Austin started this explosive growth and the need for water in Austin grew and grew, so that the flows down to the bay were reduced.

Bill Balboa [00:38:09] And a lot of people have looked at data and tried to look at, you know, what levels of flow do we need here? You know, what is happening in Matagorda Bay? But because of all the changes, because of everything that has happened, there is no way to sort of establish a baseline and say, "This is what it once was, and this is where we are now."

Bill Balboa [00:38:34] So the best that we can do now, I think, is look at what we have now and move forward in trying to sustain, you know, and protect critical areas so that we can maintain the Texas coast.

Bill Balboa [00:38:48] You know, an example of some of the change that's very bizarre, is there used to be a type of jellyfish on the Texas coast called, "the cabbagehead". And it occurred in Matagorda Bay in tremendous abundance. And it's basically gone now. And, you know, people don't really take much note of it because it's not a charismatic species, it's not a giant silver fish that people pursue. But there's a reason why these jellyfish are going away. You know, and, you know, from my perspective, you know, as a biologist and, you know, a lover of all things natural, particularly in Texas, I think it's really important that we try to understand what are these changes that are happening, what's driving them, and look a little bit more closer to try to find some of those answers, because all these changes are important, whether it occurs with tarpon or with, you know, the lowly jellyfish, you know, because all of them are indicators of something.

Bill Balboa [00:39:47] And so, yeah, to answer your question directly, there is no going back. You know, what has been lost has been lost more than likely. And what we have to do now is sustain what we have, protect critical areas. And I think what's most important is everybody in Texas needs to realize we're all connected, primarily by rivers and water, and it's something, it's a resource we have to share to maintain not only livelihoods, but the green places in Texas so that we can, we can all leave the city and go explore, you know, in, in some healthy environs. So anyway, that's my soapbox.

David Todd [00:40:25] No, this is, this is very, very helpful. Thank you.

David Todd [00:40:32] So, I think you talked about trying to sustain some of these special places that do still seem vital and to keep those connections alive.

David Todd [00:40:45] What are some of the promising, as you see them, efforts to restore the tarpon, either through just understanding more about it, or actually trying to intervene in ways to bring it back?

Bill Balboa [00:41:01] Well, you know, I know a lot of people, you know, their first reaction is spawn them and put them in the water. Right? To restore them. I don't, I don't think that's going. I don't think that's the answer. You know, I don't know. I know that there's been, there's been people who have tried to spawn them. I think Parks and Wildlife tried spawning tarpon at one point at Sea Center Texas. They had some tarpon in some of their large circular tanks and they were trying to figure out the secret on what makes a tarpon spawn. And I don't think they were successful.

Bill Balboa [00:41:40] But, because once again, there's just too many variables. You know, if the tarpon does spawn offshore, you know, is it in deep water? Is it in mid-water column somewhere, way out in the water? And what is the water pressure? What is the light? What is the temperature at the time of spawning, la, la, la? Because all of that has a factor.

Bill Balboa [00:41:59] I think if we're going to do something about tarpon, I think, you know, Parks and Wildlife is doing really well by severely restricting the take of those fish. I think that's, I think that's key.

Bill Balboa [00:42:10] And I think we also need to consider, once again, you know, maintaining, you know, some level of freshwater down to these areas, you know, followed up with or actually preceded by some really, really in-depth study of what those fish need.

Bill Balboa [00:42:28] You know, I think at one point, you know, there was a lot of tourism, an economy around tarpon. I don't know that I see that so much anymore. It almost seems like, you know, as a game fish, you know, people sort of talk about it, you know, as a thing in the past, you know, and there's only a handful of folks, at least in my circle, that, you know, that would actually go out and pursue a tarpon now. You know, I think people feel like there's just not that many of them.

Bill Balboa [00:43:00] So I think, you know, another, another thing that needs to happen is people need to, there needs to be more interest in protecting and preserving the species so that the funding and all the resources are made available to get a better understanding and identify areas that are critical in their life history.

David Todd [00:43:25] You know, it seems like a kind of perverse thing that as the fish has gotten rarer, there are fewer people fishing for it, so there's maybe less interest in restoring it so that it can again be a popular game fish. But, you know, the fish in that situation probably needs more help and needs more research and intervention.

Bill Balboa [00:43:49] In Texas in particular ... You know, I believe Florida has a, I think the tarpon in Florida are doing pretty well. But I think, you know, you know, this is just speculation on my part, but they have the Everglades, you know. And if you want to talk about a nursery area that has the water quality in a marsh that, you know, I would think that those little those juvenile tarpon would like, it's the Everglades. You know, if you've ever been back up in there, that water is very dark brown, you know, tannic water, with very low oxygen, you know, and that seems to be what they like. And so I think that's why in Florida, some of those species that like that kind of habitat are doing so much better.

Bill Balboa [00:44:30] But yeah, it is a, it's kind of a sad tale to see, you know, not going to boat out there anymore. We're not going to catch them. And I mean, you know, it's, it's just a,

it's a progression of black and white photos that you see of people landing giant grouper on the Texas coast, at jetties and things. And those are no longer there either.

Bill Balboa [00:44:54] So, you know, over time, change has happened and, you know, people's habits have changed along with them.

David Todd [00:45:03] Mm hmm.

David Todd [00:45:07] You know, you mentioned a little bit about Texas Parks and Wildlife and some of their efforts, and the Corpus Christi Aquarium. And I was curious if any other organizations come to mind that have been working on tarpon. I think there's the Tarpon Tomorrow group that was formed about 20 years ago. I don't know how active it is now, but then I guess, CCA. Are there any that that seem to be doing some promising work on the tarpon?

Bill Balboa [00:45:40] Well, I think CCA, you know, CCA has always been, you know, really, really important in terms of, you know, the conservation of any fish species, especially game fish like that. So, yeah, I think, you know, they, they provide funding, they provide information and education and stuff for that.

Bill Balboa [00:46:04] And I don't know, I think, you know, I mean, I knew someone in Tarpon Tomorrow, Art Morris, who was a Parks and Wildlife biologist from down in the Upper Laguna Madre area. But I don't know that they are very active anymore. You know, I just, I don't know. And I'm not sure what they actually, I'm not sure, I know they were trying to raise awareness and, you know, try to collaborate to get more money into academia to do research. But I'm not sure how successful they were at doing that.

Bill Balboa [00:46:45] I know that organizations like the Harte Research Institute, they've done a lot of studies on, on a variety of game fish. I don't know if they've, they've done tarpon yet, but they would definitely be a candidate for someone to do that.

David Todd [00:47:06] Well, considering where things have been and where things are now, what do you foresee for the tarpon in the coming years?

Bill Balboa [00:47:16] Well, that's another hard question. You know, if we can, we can maintain things sort of as they are now, and maintain our levels of productivity in terms of like their forage fish, the menhaden and stuff off of Galveston and stuff, you know, I feel pretty confident that today, you know, that I could I could possibly go out, launch a boat at Galveston and go out the Bolivar jetties, turn to the left in the early summer and over a period of a few days, maybe weeks, find the tarpon, the schools of tarpon that were coming in and maybe catch one. I think, I think if we can, if we can sustain those things that I just previously mentioned, that I think we'll be able to maintain the tarpon population, at least at its current levels.

Bill Balboa [00:48:08] You know, once again, you know, it is a very mysterious fish and there isn't a whole lot, you know, that I'm aware of, that's known about it. And so, you know, I would hope that we'd be able to sustain at least the populations that we have now for the next couple of decades, because for anyone who fishes, and who is a really diehard fishermen who or who have read, you know, Hemingway or Zane Gray or any of those other folks in there, their fishing experiences, you know, for tarpon on fly, or with the Heddon Lucky 13, that's a fish

that you really have to see in the wild to really appreciate it. I think that would be a tremendous loss to our population to lose those fish.

Bill Balboa [00:48:59] So hopefully, hopefully in 20 years they'll still be around.

Bill Balboa [00:49:03] I know that's not the answer that, probably not the answer you were looking for, but that's the best I can do.

David Todd [00:49:10] Oh, this is helpful. And I got to think that a fish with as much sort of acrobatic ability is one that a lot of people would want to see back, and having those stories from Hemingway or Zane Gray are so, you know, so evocative and even the, you know, that mounted fish that you've got from the '30s, I think it just is something a lot of people would want to see back again, swimming in the sea.

David Todd [00:49:44] Was there anything you'd like to add before we wrap up?

Bill Balboa [00:49:50] No, I think we've pretty much covered it. I think one of the other things that I think is really important, though, as far as conserving anything out there on the coast, is, you know, we have to get, you know, people out there to actually see these things, you know, get them out of the house and onto the water.

Bill Balboa [00:50:12] You know, that was me as a child. You know, if I would have been stuck inside all the time, I never would have been able to experience that and get excited. But, you know, it's that excitement that carries you on, you know, and motivates you to do these things into the future. And that's one of the things that I think is really, really critical that we do, to introduce youth into these kinds of things so that they can carry the banner forward, you know, as those as us old timers fall away. Right? You know, because somebody's going to have to carry the banner. And we need to make sure that we're raising those kinds of youth, you know, that will jump up or down and scream when they see a tarpon jump. And I think that that's real critical as well. So that's all.

David Todd [00:51:01] Okay. No, I can see the excitement and just got to put the kids with the tarpon.

Bill Balboa [00:51:10] Or anything outside, right?

David Todd [00:51:12] Anything? Yes. Yes. Get them out on the water. I, I totally hear you.

David Todd [00:51:17] Well, Bill, as always, it is so great to talk to you. And thank you for sharing your insights about the tarpon today and taking a little time to do that.

Bill Balboa [00:51:27] Not a problem. Not a problem.

David Todd [00:51:29] All right. Well, you have a good day. Hope we see each other soon.

Bill Balboa [00:51:33] All right. Take care. Thank you so much.

David Todd [00:51:34] All right. Bye, Bill.