

TRANSCRIPT:

INTERVIEWEE: David Sikes

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:00] Hmm. Hmm. All right. Well, good morning. I'm David Todd. And I have the great privilege of being here with David Sikes. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas. And for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press. And finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is based at the University of Texas here in Austin.

David Todd [00:00:37] And, I want to stress here that he would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit. It is his story.

David Todd [00:00:47] So, I want to make sure that is okay with you. Does that sound like a good arrangement?

David Sikes [00:00:51] Sure.

David Todd [00:00:52] Okay. Well, good. Well, thank you so much. And, let's, let's get started then.

David Todd [00:00:58] It is Monday, October 17th, 2022. It's about 10:20 a.m. Central Time. And my name is, as I said, is David Todd, and I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am based in Austin. We are conducting a remote interview with Mr. Sikes, who is based in the Corpus Christi area, towards the North Padre part of that region.

David Todd [00:01:30] And Mr. Sikes is a writer, a photographer and an outdoor columnist. He works the Corpus Christi Caller-Times as their outdoor columnist for almost 20 years, beginning in 1998 and moving through 2019. Before that, he wrote for the Killeen Daily Herald, the Pasadena Citizen. He interned at the Clear Lake Citizen, and he worked while he was a student at UT, at U of H, rather, at the Daily Cougar. And more recently, he has served as an editor and columnist for Saltwater Angler magazine.

David Todd [00:02:11] Through much of his career, he has been involved in study and interviews and stories about the Texas coast, focusing on hunting and youth fishing, and stories about freshwater inflows and seagrass protection and red snapper management. And from time to time, tales about the Atlantic tarpon, which are of particular interest for us today.

David Todd [00:02:38] So, today, we will talk about his life and career, to-date, and especially focus on his coverage of coastal natural resource and conservation issues, fishing and the Atlantic tarpon in particular. And if time allows, it'd be great to talk about red snapper questions as well.

David Todd [00:03:00] So, that's a little, very brief introduction to you and your background.

David Todd [00:03:07] And, I thought we might move on to just ask you about your childhood and early years, and whether there might have been some people or events in your life that influenced your interest in animals and fish in particular.

David Sikes [00:03:25] Well, like most Cajun boys, you know, you had an uncle, a father and a grandfather who probably fished and took you fishing and hunting, mostly bird hunting. Dad was not a deer hunter. So we, the bulk of our hunting was dove hunting. I wish we had the opportunity to hunt in South Texas because the dove hunting south is far greater than it was in Louisiana. But the fishing in Louisiana is truly a sportsman's paradise.

David Sikes [00:03:53] And, I grew up mostly freshwater fishing, and it was really a very, very pleasant childhood. I could really go fishing almost whenever I wanted, at the city park in New Iberia. Devil's Pond is probably the biggest part of my childhood memories, and all pleasant. But the Bayou Teche winded its way through Louisiana, southwest Louisiana, and it's really just a great place to be.

David Sikes [00:04:25] I thought of it as a like a Tom Sawyer existence, sort of.

David Todd [00:04:29] I think I had a pirogue at age ten or something like that. I didn't use it that much. But mostly, bank fished for brim, and there's nothing more proud that a little Cajun boy coming home with a stringer of brim for his mom to cook them for dinner - one of the things that started me off as a consumer in the outdoor world. I imagine my dad would think catch and release is a useless endeavor.

David Sikes [00:05:00] But the culture has changed so much that really a lot of people are made to feel really ashamed about killing trout, you know, which sounds a little absurd. I mean, I don't want people to think of us as their fish market, but I mean, it's certainly perfectly all right to take home fish.

David Sikes [00:05:22] But growing up in Louisiana, and I was there until I was about 15 or 16 or so, so I mean, that's pretty much your formative years. And most of the other time in Texas was spent trying to essentially use the skills and stuff I'd learned in Louisiana and apply them to Texas.

David Sikes [00:05:47] I wasn't really much of a saltwater fisherman till I came to Houston and then sort of certainly was embedded in saltwater fishing as a columnist at the Corpus Christi paper. Birding and fishing is, is, is the lifestyle down here. And the two cultures kind of overlap now, although at one time they didn't.

David Sikes [00:06:13] But New Iberia, Louisiana is always going to be that place where I learned, learned to bait a hook, learned to tie my fishing knots, and learned to, hopefully, shoot a little straighter than I did when I started. And I still enjoy dove hunting every, every September with friends that I went to high school with in Houston. We get together. It's kind of a reunion every year and I usually host that event. And we just had it a couple of weeks ago, a few weeks ago.

David Todd [00:06:43] You know, we should get to that - high school years.

David Todd [00:06:48] But, you know, one, one experience, I think you mentioned in some of the notes that you were nice to share with me is that aside from, I guess, being exposed to the

outdoors with your father and, and I, I believe that you were involved in scouting. And I know that can be a big avenue for young boys to to learn about the outdoors. Was that true for you?

David Sikes [00:07:13] It is. I mean, Troop 133 in New Iberia was the largest in that area. And we pretty much were dedicated to camping. And I don't remember how many camping trips we had a year, but it was substantial. And I mean, I was heavily involved. My brother, who's about 17 months older than I am, of course, got in first and I followed him. And to this day, by the way, he regrets only achieving the rank of Life where his little brother got Eagle. And I jab him that every now and then.

David Sikes [00:07:53] But he, he, he learned actually his profession at this Boy Scout camp that we both worked at for a couple of summers. He ran the trading post, which is really just the local store of the reservation. And today he owns a vending company business in Lake Jackson, and it has done quite well.

David Sikes [00:08:12] And, you know, I didn't know what I was going to do. And Dad told me I was never going to make a make a living by fishing. I regret that he died before I inherited the job of outdoor columnist at the paper, because I really would love to tell him I told you so. But I don't think anybody as a kid thinks that they're going to be that guy they read in Outdoor Life and Field and Stream. And, you know, those were certainly magazines that that I would read almost cover to cover. And later on, of course, reading Joe Doggett in The Houston Chronicle.

David Sikes [00:08:57] Okay. Did we lose our connection?

David Todd [00:09:01] No, I'm here. I'm here.

David Todd [00:09:03] You know, I was interested that when you were in in scouting and you were as I understand it, you were a counselor at the summer camp.

David Sikes [00:09:12] Camp counselor.

David Todd [00:09:13] You served as an Indian lore counselor and taught nature study and so on. Can you talk a little bit about that?

David Sikes [00:09:21] Yeah, it was quite an experience, those positions for staff members at Camp Avondale, out near Clinton, Louisiana. It was, it was a really coveted, highly competitive thing. And you would go to this, what they called, "conservation work camp", which was slave labor, essentially. They would get a bunch of Boy Scouts to apply for the positions. They would invite way more than they could hire to this conservation work camp. And we essentially set up the campsites for the whole summer, all within a week's time. We cleared brush, we set out tents. You know, all the tents had a wooden floorboard on them. You know, we just worked.

David Sikes [00:10:10] And, and usually in the evenings, they would kind of give us seminars on public speaking and, you know, just communications. And, you know, what, what they expected, in general, of the staff members, who were really just mentors to mostly 11, 12 and 13 year old scouts, because we were like in the 15 to 16 year age range.

David Sikes [00:10:36] And I did have a pretty good advocate in a fellow that had some pretty high Boy Scout, he was embedded in the system quite a bit. And we didn't, I would love to have done just reptile study and nature, stuff like that. But the people who had done it the

summer before were back again and it was pretty obvious they were going to get the job. So we just looked where the gap was and Indian Lore was it. And I mean, I had already had the Indian Lore merit badge and all that, so I would head and campaign for that and got it.

David Sikes [00:11:17] But really it was not really where my heart was. I would really rather be out fishing, and I think maybe there was maybe a time or two when I may have been a little late for my own class because I was hooked into a good bass bite on the lake.

David Todd [00:11:35] Well, you were, you were using your time profitably, it sounds like.

David Sikes [00:11:39] Yeah. I mean, everybody knew if there was a puddle, I would throw a lure into it, you know, so.

David Todd [00:11:45] Well, do you remember any of those early fishing trips, either as a child with your dad or maybe as, as a scout?

David Sikes [00:11:55] Yeah. Well, with Dad, we fished mostly for brim, and what y'all call crappie, what we call, "sac-a-lait", in Louisiana, which is a French term, means, "sack of milk", I think. And he was pretty intense at it. And I really just followed his lead and became every bit as intense as he was. My older brother, on the other hand, he didn't seem to be all that interested in fishing, but he went along with us, you know, and as a result, he didn't experience nearly the growth in fishing and hunting, as I did, through my youth.

David Sikes [00:12:37] But there's really no other feeling than being in a boat, or even on a bank, with my paternal grandfather, who I call Poppa. This guy was just was so, so focused on making sure that I had a good time and that, and that I learned the intricacies of fishing. And, you know, it's really nothing like having a ten year old boy sitting beside a, well, at the time, I guess he was in his fifties as, as just only focused on you, you know. There's no one else around. And that, that was something that I got to enjoy, probably for about six or eight summers, for a whole week.

David Sikes [00:13:24] My brother would go in a different week. I would go for another week. And my youngest sister would go for another week. And she spent most of her time with her grandmother.

David Sikes [00:13:37] And, you know, I don't know what it was about the stillness of a, of a freshwater lake, you know, at sun-up. But if there's Spanish moss reflecting on that lake, I got to tell you, there's goose bumps on my arms. It's one of those things that I don't see that often anymore, because I live on the coast, but occasionally I do. And it really brings back memories.

David Todd [00:14:08] Nice.

David Sikes [00:14:08] All fond.

David Todd [00:14:11] Well, did you ever get a chance to go do any saltwater fishing? I think that you mentioned something about going to Grand Isle, and...

David Sikes [00:14:22] We did. I think the family went at least two summers to Grand Isle, which back then was just a little sliver of sandbar, you know, off the coast of Louisiana. And since then, it's probably, I mean, I know it grew for a while.

David Sikes [00:14:40] But I latched on to this old man who was wade-fishing in the surf. I say, "old": he was probably in his forties, maybe. But, and he had a, he had a, you know, a straw hat on, and he was out there casting "Mr. Champ" spoons. If you're familiar, it's a chrome spoon, heavy, with a single treble hook. And he was catching a fish I had never seen before, and they were beautiful speckled trout. And he was keeping quite a few of them.

David Sikes [00:15:09] And so, I'm sure that I pestered him for a while, because it's, it's not proper etiquette to walk up to another angler, you know, when he's fishing. But he didn't seem to mind.

David Sikes [00:15:22] And, I remember one time, he, he must have been using bait, because he caught a stingray. And he brought it up to the surface. He took it off his straw hat and he swatted that, that stingray at the base of its tail to get the barb out. And then he put the hat back on his head, and released the stingray.

David Sikes [00:15:46] I was fascinated by this weird thing. I'd never seen a stingray before. But it was, I think, on that particular outing that I did catch my first speckled trout, and I guess Mom cooked for dinner. I'm not sure.

David Sikes [00:15:59] But, we did a lot of crabbing at Grand Isle, too, which was a favorite pastime, any time.

David Sikes [00:16:05] And, we also had a friend who had a camp at Sycamore Point, don't ask me to spell it, but I'm sure we can look it up. And it was a fish camp. I mean, that's what people called, you know, any kind of a cabin on the water. And I would fish for hours for hard heads on his back dock. Of course, most of us don't have any use for hard heads these days. But back then it was just fishing action for me, because you didn't eat them. And they might, they might sting you with their barbs, too. And that definitely put me out of commission more than once.

David Sikes [00:16:42] But, it was, it was an idyllic childhood for anyone who really is, gravitates toward hunting and fishing. Seafood was a part of our life, and all of it was caught by us.

David Todd [00:16:58] That's great. It sounds like fishing had lots of dimensions to it. I mean, one, being with your dad and your grandfather and your brother, and just that stillness and camaraderie and love and focus. But then also the drama of catching, you know, even a steelhead or a hard head, rather, and then to eat it, and maybe with your mother's cooking help.

David Sikes [00:17:28] Well, I never did, I never did present her a hard head, because we learned very early on that hard heads were not for eating.

David Sikes [00:17:37] We also learned that alligator gar fish were not for eating, which is kind of ironic because years later, I found out that they were great table fare. I have a Cajun friend here in Corpus, who I guess you showed me that about 20 years ago. And I was, like, what the heck, I was lied to all those years as a boy. I'm not sure why, but it just, we just never did, if we caught one, we just very delicately took it off the hook, because of all those teeth. But we never even considered putting it in the ice chest. So, I don't know. I don't think I've ever seen them at restaurants, but they would have to undergo a really big PR campaign for restaurant fare.

David Todd [00:18:31] Well, so you've told us a little bit about, I guess, your, your family upbringing and then also these scouting ventures you were involved in. Perhaps you can also tell us about being in school, and if there might have been a teachers or classmates that either taught you about the outdoors or inspired an interest in that. Any sort of connections there that you could tell us about?

David Sikes [00:19:00] Well, in elementary school, I should mention that that the Catholic school system really is where I really began, I think, the path to writing. The English and what we called, "phonics", back then was perhaps the best basis for a career in writing. And I certainly thank my parents for sending me. Cost a little more money to send us to a private school, but it was well worth it.

David Sikes [00:19:33] Later on, though, I think junior high was most partially in Baton Rouge and partially in Houston, and it was really just kind of survival and getting accustomed to the changes of those two new, larger cities to live in. But high school, I really blossomed.

David Sikes [00:19:55] And I should mention here that one of my classmates at Sharpstown High School was Doug Pike, who ended up being one of the outdoor writers at the Houston Chronicle, and now has a great radio show in Houston about the outdoors and golfing, I believe. He also features golf.

David Sikes [00:20:18] But we were in the graduating class of 1974 together, and we both, I think, had the same English teacher which, which really helped. Her name was Mrs. Katz, a little short Jewish lady, who just really knew how to teach young boys at that age about literature. And I didn't think much of it at the time, but I have to thank her after I got a career in writing, of course.

David Sikes [00:20:50] But the main influence at Sharpstown High School was Mr. Whisennand, and he was a, he was probably one of the youngest teachers there, and he taught biology. But, as I mentioned in conversation earlier to you, he said something to us about an ecology class. And there was no, nobody ever knew about ecology as a, as a curriculum, part of a curriculum in high school, I don't think. But we had to sign up at least I think it was ten or 12 students who would, who would, before they would even instate that particular course into the curriculum. And that was not, not a hard sell.

David Sikes [00:21:36] I mean, me and several of my friends who, you know, loved to fish and collect snakes and stuff like that, were eager to get in that class. And so my senior year, we took that class and we formed the Ecology Club. And I don't think any of us really understood the meaning of the word, "ecology", at the time, but I've since learned. But there was a great opportunity, and actually I think it helped us with our confidence, that we could ask for something and get it done. You know, we, it was probably the beginning of my activism career, which later blossomed as a columnist, which is the privilege of being a columnist as opposed to a straight news journalist. You can actually advocate for causes as a columnist. It's a privilege of the position. And many of us, of course, just took up the conservation flag and made sure that that was, that was part of what we imparted to our readers.

David Sikes [00:22:40] And the culture certainly changed in the 20 years that I was a columnist from a much more "catch and kill", "measure your enjoyment by the pound of your filets", to a "catch, photograph and release" kind of mentality in the culture.

David Todd [00:22:56] That's interesting. Gosh, how the, as you say, the culture has evolved.

David Todd [00:23:02] So, let's hear just a little bit more about these school years because I understand that there was, you know, Ms. Katz and Mr. Whisennand. But I'm also wondering about your classmates. I understood that there was, there was a lot of interest in keeping reptiles.

David Sikes [00:23:26] Yes. You know, this is going to be a segue that you're not going to expect. But, I think that Alice Cooper may have had some influence on us. You know, he famously had a boa on stage in his early rock and roll shows, and I was certainly into rock and roll. Houston is a great place for, for that. And the shows that came to town were big, you know, I mean - the Who and, you know, Jethro Tull and Alice Cooper and all that. And I don't think I got a haircut for nine years. But a friend of mine named Brian had, he had a rainbow boa, which I'd never heard of. It was a fairly small snake. I think he bought it at a pet shop. And he also had an iguana that was like, well, if you count that tail, I guess it was three feet long.

David Sikes [00:24:26] And, I think Mr. Whisennand, when we were seniors, got married. And I guess one of the, one of the things he had to agree to, from his wife, is that he get rid of the snakes. So, and he happened to live down the street from me on our block. And, so, I inherited the boa constrictor, and a little, little, tiny, like a 18-20 inch western diamondback rattlesnake, which I kept in a 15-gallon aquarium with a very tight-fitting lid.

David Sikes [00:25:08] It's to this day, I cannot believe my mother let me keep a rattlesnake in my bedroom. But she did.

David Sikes [00:25:18] And like I said, the, to the delight of all the neighborhood kids, I would buy mice for the rattlesnake, and rats for the, for the boa, because it was six and a half feet long, big. And it was kind of an entertainment for the neighborhood kids to watch them eat. But, eventually those things went away.

David Sikes [00:25:42] But then college came around, the University of Houston. I tell people - the University of Houston, after only spending a little bit of time in Houston before, you know, after living in New Iberia, was kind of like Jethro from The Beverly Hillbillies, you know, going to the big city. I mean, I went, I was going to a university that had as many students as the town I grew up in had, as a population.

David Sikes [00:26:14] So, it was quite a culture shock for me. And it didn't work out all that well the first couple of semesters, let me just say.

David Todd [00:26:24] It must have been an adjustment.

David Todd [00:26:26] So, you know, in the course of your schooling and early years, I guess some folks, and maybe this is the case with you, find a lot of their education and their understanding of the world through books and TV shows and movies, and sort of maybe its rock and roll, you know, Alice Cooper. who knows? But just sort of the culture that we're all swimming through. And, and I'm wondering if there was anything of that sort that there was an influence on you and your interest in the outdoors.

David Sikes [00:27:07] You know, I almost took a break, sort of, living in Houston. I mean, we still, we still had one foot in, because of the ecology class and the club. But, you know, even though we had, well, technically, they weren't wildlife in our bedrooms. Well, well, I would

argue that the rattlesnake never got tame. But, you know, I didn't fish and hunt nearly as much. I did it, I did it every now and then.

David Sikes [00:27:39] I know, I went hunting with Dad, dove hunting. Dad was an engineer at M.D. Anderson for about a decade. And he, and some of his work buddies, wanted to go to Rio Grande City for a dove and quail hunt. And I went with them, once or twice, but that was kind of a special occasion. It wasn't one of our routines.

David Sikes [00:28:03] And, I wasn't going fishing nearly as much as I would have liked. There was really not anywhere close to home in Houston to go.

David Sikes [00:28:14] But, you know, I didn't, I didn't lose sight of that.

David Sikes [00:28:20] I did kind of veer away, though, because it was a it was about a six-year stint that I, I moved to California, with the same guy who had the boa constrictor in his bedroom. And we both worked for Chili's restaurants at the time. He was a manager. I was a bartender. And so, you know, if you think Houston's crazy, we lived in a, you know, one of the suburb towns in southern California. It was a crazy, crazy time. And it was definitely a place for young people.

David Sikes [00:28:53] And, I got out of there after a few years and went back to University of Houston, and very quickly got down to studies. And that's really when everything became more linear, as far as my career path.

David Sikes [00:29:09] I can promise you, there is no one going to journalism school who aspires, well, at least not outwardly, to be an outdoor writer. I mean, there's only about six or eight of them in Texas at the time, who were full-time. And so, that's surely not a career, not a legitimate career path, for a young journalism student.

David Sikes [00:29:30] And, but I did write. I know, I remember once, for one of my later classes, I wrote about going on a party boat out of Galveston to go red snapper fishing. And once again, I had a professor say, you might want to get it, look into this. And then at the time, I of course, I was aware of outdoor writing, but not as a, not as a profession for me.

David Sikes [00:29:58] You know, like I said, the Houston Chronicle, back then, you know, Bob Brister and then, you know, the fellow I mentioned earlier. It's really not something that we aspire to do. But, I think I mentioned that a literature teacher also said that I wrote like a journalist, and as I mentioned, she did not mean this as a compliment. But I, I guess, I eventually took it to heart because I ended up becoming a journalism major almost immediately after reentering the university, and never looked back.

David Todd [00:30:40] Well, maybe this is a good time to to take a look at that career that you've spent decades in - journalism. And I understand that that you, you know, worked as a news editor at the Daily Cougar, the student newspaper at U of H, and got an internship at Clear Lake Citizen down near NASA, and later worked at Pasadena Citizen, and at the Killeen Daily Herald. Were there any sort of stops along that way that allowed you to write about the outdoors? Or were you doing pretty more sort of general stories?

David Sikes [00:31:24] Yeah, at the Killeen paper, which was my longest stint before the Caller-Times, I spent three years. And that was, that was like boot camp for journalism. Sometimes I would write five articles a day. Some of them were brief. But, you know, if you go

to a city council meeting, and there's two or three issues that kind of rise to the top, that editor expects you to have something on each one of those issues in a separate article the next day. And that's a sink-or-swim situation. And I, when I think back on that work load, I'm pretty sure that most every newsroom in the United States violates some employment codes.

David Sikes [00:32:14] But, you know, back then, I think eventually because I was writing so much, they put me on salary, whereas most of the newsroom people were, and to do that, they had to give me a middle management position. So there were two or three younger reporters (because I was ten years older than them, because I delayed graduation), I read their copy before they went to the copy editors. And so I, you know, was sort of a mentor / teacher to them, on top of my daily responsibilities.

David Sikes [00:32:49] I think back on it: it didn't seem like it was exhausting at the time, but, I mean, the volume of work that they made us do, you know? And I did it willingly. I was glad to do it. But I mean, sometimes it seemed a little daunting.

David Sikes [00:33:04] And, after about three years, it's generally the career path that journalism took back 20, 30 years ago, you just expected to use those smaller newspapers as stepping stones to a mid-sized daily and then a major daily. My first year or so at the Caller-Times, though, changed that, that career path.

David Sikes [00:33:32] I expected to spend three years or so at the Corpus Christi paper, and then go maybe to the San Antonio Express-News or someplace like that. Mom still lives in Bellaire, and I always tell her, I said, "I'm going to keep living in Texas as long as you're alive".

David Sikes [00:33:50] And, she's still alive, by the way. She's 91. I talked to her for 2 hours yesterday on the phone, which is a Sunday tradition.

David Sikes [00:33:58] But, when, when I went to the to the Corpus paper, I had, I had a pretty good, pretty good job with them, because I had such connections to those three small coastal towns that I got to cover. And by the way, the workload, because the newsroom with so much bigger than the Killeen paper, the workload was a little more divided among us, rather than me writing five articles a day.

David Sikes [00:34:25] But, I mean, you can't go to places like Port Aransas and Rockport, which are just beautiful little, little coastal towns with a real character and culture all their own. And fishing is really at the center of it. I used to tell people, it really didn't matter what you did bad in your life. If you could fish really well, you could get elected mayor in Rockport. Because I mean, you know, it was just such a, the pinnacle, sort of, you know. And I got to know these people, sort of, a little, at first.

David Sikes [00:35:05] And then that opportunity when Buddy Gough, the outdoor writer at the Caller-Times, decided to leave, I saw my shot and took it. And I'm so glad, because Chester Moore, who is an outdoor writer who had gotten a scholarship to the Texas Outdoor Writers Association earlier, was ... the outgoing outdoor writer for the Caller-Times picked him as his successor. But he said he didn't want to leave God's country in Beaumont / Port Arthur.

David Sikes [00:35:43] And golly, that was a great, great comeback, I thought, you know. And I still talk to Chester from time to time, and I thank him for that decision.

David Sikes [00:35:55] But mainly, I thank Larry Rose, the publisher of the Caller-Times. I mean, he had only known me for less than a year, probably. I mean, sure, he had had a hand in hiring me. But the decision to replace Buddy Gough was, I mean, it was, it was a lot bigger. I mean, I'm sure most, most of the time, they would have just advertised the position and, you know, found somebody with more experience.

David Sikes [00:36:23] But, I don't know. I gave him, I think, I gave him, he asked me to give him some proposal column topics. You know, just give him a list of what I would write. And so I, I don't even remember what I put on that list, but I'm sure, you know, I gave it to him very quickly. And he talked to me for a while about my background in fishing and hunting. And I said, "Well, you know, I may not know the area that well yet, but I know fishing and hunting. So that's half the battle." And he agreed to give me a, give me a shot.

David Sikes [00:37:02] And I've talked to him and his successor as publisher of the paper. And both of them said that was one of the better decisions that they made.

David Todd [00:37:16] Well, that's really gratifying that both that that you found a niche it suited you, and that it sounds like you pleased the people who had hired you and passed on those opportunities.

David Todd [00:37:29] So one of the ways that I first learned about you, was through a wonderful article that you wrote back in 2011 call, "Catch Me If You Can", which is, as you might suspect, about tarpon. And I was hoping that you could talk about that as sort of the kind of writing that you've done over the years, you know, both for me to understand a little bit about how you work as a journalist, but also to learn more about the Atlantic tarpon that have been seen over the years on the Texas coast.

David Sikes [00:38:12] Yeah, that was a great experience. Texas Parks and Wildlife magazine - I had a relationship with them pretty much from the outset of my career, along with a couple of other magazines. Texas Fish and Game I wrote for. And I knew the editor of those magazines because I quickly joined the Texas Outdoor Writers Association, which I later led as president and chairman of the board and longtime board member.

David Sikes [00:38:40] But Larry Bosco was editor of Texas Fish and Game. And, the lady who was, who was editor of Texas Parks and Wildlife magazine, was kind enough to, you know, when she had a story that she needed from down here, instead of the normal process where you had to send in a query letter, and, you know, describe what you wanted to write and that would, you know, not appear in the magazine for another year, by the way. Those magazines generally work a year in advance. She would more or less tap me for a story, and say, "Would you be interested in doing it."

David Sikes [00:39:26] So, I did. And then in 2011, I think Susan was gone by then, but, the editor at the time, she did a little bit of that with me, which really is a privilege because, I mean, as an outdoor writer, especially as someone who's got a little more experience, I didn't want to audition to write a story. You know, if you want a story, just tell me what it is. And if I think I can do it, well, then I'll take it. But to have to almost sell yourself to a magazine, I got to skip that little process, part of the process, which was really a privilege of being an established, daily newspaper outdoor columnist.

David Sikes [00:40:12] And I, I think, I think they also paid a heck of a lot better. Parks and Wildlife had a budget that was much, much better than some of the other magazines.

David Sikes [00:40:23] So, I put a lot of effort into each of those articles I wrote for that magazine in particular, because I felt like it had, for one of things, I think it's got a readership of a million.

David Sikes [00:40:38] And it's just, it's just more substantial. I mean, a daily newspaper is forgotten the next day. But a monthly magazine stays with you.

David Sikes [00:40:50] So, I mean, you know, it gave me some creative license to, I mean, I could pretty much write in my own first person every column for the Caller-Times, because that's what the style is that you did as a columnist.

David Sikes [00:41:04] But you had to kind of step back for Texas Parks and Wildlife magazine. So I did a lot of research. And at that point, I'd never caught one, I don't think. I had seen them, and I had heard of them, and I knew how coveted they were as a game fish. I mean, I think most people think that tarpon and snook are probably two of the best sporting game fish in Texas.

David Sikes [00:41:31] Unfortunately, neither one of them are all that abundant in Texas. They're not available as much, as much. Galveston had a pretty good tarpon fishery. And ironically, one of my classmates at Sharpstown was one of the guides at Galveston who actually chartered, did charter tarpon trips just offshore of the beach. Jim Leavelle is his name.

David Sikes [00:41:58] And, it's funny that Sharpstown high school, here was a suburban high school, upper middle class neighborhood. And there's a pretty, pretty well-known fishing guide that came out of there in the 1970s, me and Doug Pike were career columnists, just about, for the newspapers. And Robert Sloane also was a columnist for one of the papers, I think, in Beaumont and still is writing for magazines. And he graduated the year after I did. So it's kind of odd for a suburban high school to produce that, that kind of, you know, outdoor graduating class.

David Todd [00:42:42] Yeah. Well, maybe it's one of those outings, those releases, those kind of refuges that appeals to kids that are growing up in the city in a, you know, pretty, pretty different kind of world.

David Sikes [00:42:56] Of course, back then, you had to have a college degree to get into a newsroom. Whereas nowadays, I mean, I don't think you have to have a high school diploma to write for a lot of magazines. Of course, they don't look at your background. They just look at what, you know, like I said, most of the outdoor writers now, which I really I don't like calling them the same thing as me have Doug and Shannon were called, because I thought we earned that title. Whereas, you know, an Instagram account now earns you that title.

David Sikes [00:43:32] And, I don't want to, let's don't get into that right now.

David Sikes [00:43:36] But the tarpon story. And it was it wasn't the last. I really was forced to do a lot of research. I interviewed Jerry Ault, out of University of Miami. And I haven't spoken to him in years, but he used to be kind of one of my regular interviews if I was writing about tarpon.

David Sikes [00:43:56] And I kind of got pulled into the Tarpon Tomorrow nonprofit, a friend of mine, local attorney Paul Swacina, started that. I don't think he's still affiliated with it. But I

mean, that was a angler-and-academia partnership that kind of, was a similar model would be Coastal Conservation Association, I guess, that kind of affiliates themselves with University of Texas Marine Science Institute was the one that that Paul and Tarpon Tomorrow, they had a, I think a one- or two-day seminar just on tarpon. And of course Jerry Ault was there doing his PowerPoint presentations. And that's where we learned about the migratory habits of tarpon, but, mainly, we learned about how little we knew about tarpon.

David Sikes [00:44:55] And that was the inception, I believe, Tarpon Tomorrow and later CCA, and later the Saltwater Enhancement, Saltwater Fisheries Enhancement Association, began funding the electronic digital tagging that Jerry pioneered. And later the University of Texas Marine Science was doing it, and then later the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies was tagging tarpon.

David Sikes [00:45:23] And so within the span of my career, we learned, well, the one question that Jerry posed years ago was, are their tarpon, our tarpon? Meaning are the tarpon that, that go to Mexico the same as the ones that go to Florida and onward.

David Sikes [00:45:44] And they discovered that, for some reason, right there in south Texas, at the tip of the southern tip of Texas, where that kind of converges, some of them go one way, some of them go the other way. And that's the question now, I think, that researchers are looking for: why and what determines which ones go and which ones don't? There's a slight genetic difference between the two populations, I understand. But apparently they can, they can kind of coexist and mingle.

David Sikes [00:46:16] And, you know, I think even Parks and Wildlife, at that time, was prompted to go to Veracruz to try to just look at some of the fishery over there. You may know that they do kill a lot of tarpon. And over there, I think it's mostly for for cat food. And they use some, what would be, by United States standards, some unethical methods for killing these fish. But I mean, mainly, I think they wanted to genetically test those fish down there, against the genetics of the other population.

David Sikes [00:46:55] And, you know, the Tarpon Tomorrow was kind of taken over by another attorney, I think, from Houston. And he started doing these tournaments solely, really, I mean, there was some glory involved in catching the tarpon in the tournament. But, the primary goal was to tag put, put those, you know, those, those digital tags on these tarpon.

David Sikes [00:47:19] And, they were, they were pop-up tags. So they would, they would stay on the tarpon for a period of time and then they would pop off, float to the surface. And then they'd have to go find them through, you know, the same kind of digital system that they use when they tag a bobwhite quail.

David Sikes [00:47:37] And, they recover them, and they find out everything. They find out the depth, the speed, the location and the migratory path that all these fish take that were tagged.

David Sikes [00:47:48] And so, really, just in the last two decades, we've gathered, probably, ten times more information about the tarpon, and that's probably a modest percentage, than we did 20 years ago.

David Todd [00:48:05] So there's a good deal of mystery about these fish, despite how storied and famous and coveted they are.

David Todd [00:48:16] You know, I'm curious what your, I guess, personal connection was with the tarpon. And then maybe we can talk about some of the things that that you have learned and heard about the tarpon.

David Sikes [00:48:32] Well, one of the things we learned was the tarpon are not endangered. They may be endangered in Texas, but I think Jerry answered the question. You know, everyone was asking the question, why aren't the tarpon here, like they were in the early 20th century? And, I mean, I, we really don't have any, any definitive answer, although since we know the habits now of tarpon, they spawn offshore, the tiny little larva drift in with the tide, come into the bays, go to the very back of the estuary systems and into the rivers, and that's where they grow up.

David Sikes [00:49:20] You know, I can show you a place right now in the Nueces River up near Labonte Park in northwest Corpus. I can show you two-foot, two-foot tarpon rolling in the river. I mean, that's, that's miles upstream.

David Sikes [00:49:36] So they still, to a lesser degree, you know, still take the same, you know, migratory and life, you know, cycle paths that they used to, but just not in the numbers that they used to. And Jerry Ault said that he thinks that probably the damming of all those rivers in the 1950s and sixties made those, those river mouths so much less nutritious for the tiny tarpon, you know, to grow up in that.

David Sikes [00:50:10] And then the bait fish that was, you know, like around the jetties and the passes and stuff like that were not nearly as abundant. And so the tarpon simply didn't go within sight of the beach anymore.

David Sikes [00:50:24] But they were still within five miles of the beach, probably. And I know I went with Jim Leavelle a couple, a few years ago, and we went out the Packer Channel jetties, and we went north and south and we found a pretty sizable group of tarpon in the 80- to 100-pound class that were surfacing and within, within sight of the beach.

David Sikes [00:50:52] We didn't catch one, but we sure tried. I mean, they're really one of the more finicky fishes, with the whole mystery surrounding them. It's, it's one of those kind of elusive targets: Tosh Brown writes about that so eloquently in his books.

David Sikes [00:51:13] And, I never reached the level of Tosh. Tosh could catch tarpon on a fly rod. I think I'm going keep to my bait caster for now before I graduate to fly fishing for a tarpon, which I know I'm going to lose. If I can't catch them well with a bait caster, then I'm sure I can't catch them with this fly rod. But I just don't get enough shots at them.

David Todd [00:51:35] Well, tell us about, I understand that you've managed to hook at least one, maybe more.

David Sikes [00:51:43] I probably hooked a dozen on the San Jose jetty near Port Aransas. And I mean, as any angler, you know, you see a tarpon, regardless of size, you know, surfacing and rolling, as we call them. You know, I see that that tell-tale thread dorsal, and you're going to throw at it. I mean, I mean, I don't care how light a tackle you're throwing, you're going to throw at it.

David Sikes [00:52:13] I mean, and I have caught, I've caught or not "caught", because they're really difficult to land on the jetty because of the rocks. You really can't get close enough to the fish when you bring them up, unless you have someone there who can actually crawl down on the rock, while you keep a tight line on the fish. But I didn't have that that luxury.

David Sikes [00:52:36] But, you know, hooking a tarpon of any size on the jetty usually has an audience. Either the people who are, you know, your fellow jetty rats on the rocks, or a lot of the anglers in skiffs, you know, just bouncing around on the waves outside of the jetties.

David Sikes [00:52:55] And that one story that I recounted in I know more than one column or article, was getting about three jumps out of one that was probably an 80 pounder or so. And when they're, when they're smaller, you know, they really can drop a lot more times. It's a little more difficult for a 150-pound fish to breach the surface repeatedly. But they managed to get up pretty high.

David Sikes [00:53:22] But this fish went berserk, which is what the tarpon are famous for doing. And I mean, when it went up in the air and it turned completely horizontal to the surface of the Gulf, and just was writhing in the sun, you know, and there's three, three or four boats out there all gasping and yelling and, you know, just watching, it's pretty exhilarating. And I mean, that's the thrill we all seek.

David Sikes [00:53:50] Well, beyond the research and all that academic, you know, stuff that I wrote about surrounding tarpon, the real attraction is just the thrill.

David Todd [00:54:02] And, I gather this thrill has appealed to people and attracted folks from a distance for years.

David Sikes [00:54:12] Yeah.

David Todd [00:54:13] As I understand it, this tarpon fishery started in Texas maybe in the 1880s. Is that right?

David Sikes [00:54:19] Yeah. I mean, most of the people I've spoken with said that a lot of the workers who were not from Texas, who were constructing the jetties at Port Aransas, I guess they started seeing these tarpon. And they thought, "Well, I got the day off. Let me let me go try.".

David Sikes [00:54:40] So, they were bringing, you know, some pretty good equipment, fishing tackle, to the job site, I guess. And eventually, I guess word got out.

David Sikes [00:54:51] And, I mean, the famous story, which has been over-told, is, involves FDR, who came down, and with the help of Barney Farley, who, by the way, wrote a wonderful book about the Texas Gulf Coast from that time period. You know, President Roosevelt didn't catch the biggest tarpon, but, but he caught one. And, of course, everybody knew about it.

David Sikes [00:55:22] And, I think, I think Rob Sawyer would probably be best to address the topic of the contributions of the Tarpon Club, though, on San Jose Island. I read the book well before it was published because he wanted me to do some proofreading and editing help, and also write a little jacket blurb for him. And I've known Rob for many years, and I've read his duck hunting history books, and he is probably the most meticulous researcher. So I don't want to step on his toes when it comes to the Tarpon Club.

David Sikes [00:55:57] But, that club was a "who's who" of politicians and elites and wealthy people from around the United States. And, you know, the tarpon was the big draw. I mean, fishing in general was a big draw, and duck hunting certainly as well. But the tarpon was the star.

David Sikes [00:56:18] And there's a reason why they people call them the "Silver Kings". I mean, it's definitely the royalty of game fish. And everybody wanted to, you know, notch their belt with one, you know, and they had unlimited funds to do it with.

David Sikes [00:56:36] Unfortunately, the Tarpon Club was not, didn't last very long, but what a history it has. And, you know, the fact that Port Aransas was once named, "Tarpon" (probably more of a promotional ploy than anything). But I mean, you can't be that arrogant. I mean, if you call your town, "Tarpon", you better have some heart. And they certainly did.

David Sikes [00:57:05] You know, in pictures, you can see pictures, old postcards, of dead tarpon hanging, you know, 150-pound dead tarpon hanging on the docks in Port Aransas, you know, with proud fishermen and other, and women too, you know, standing beside it, and there, in usually a suit, their Sunday best clothes. Jim Maloney can show you those old, those old postcards. He's got a whole collection of them. And he and Rob Sawyer put together this book on the tarpon. And it was a fascinating history.

David Todd [00:57:43] You know, one thing that I think is really intriguing about the tarpon and is this whole community and industry that grew up around it. And, you know, you mentioned the Tarpon Club and I guess there's the Tarpon Inn as well. And then also, you know, Barney Farley I'm sorry, Mr. Farley, you know, and his role as an early guide on the coast and development of the boats. Can you talk at all about how, you know, this, this role that the tarpon had in getting game fishing, both the guides and the boats that were used, started?

David Sikes [00:58:25] Yeah, I don't think I don't think the Farley Boat Works would have evolved without the tarpon, because they needed a skiff that was small enough. And, you know, a lot of these guys, they were they were using oars and rowing out along the jetties to catch these fish. And, you know, they just needed a specialized boat, I guess. And the, the Farley, by the way, the Farley Boat Works Museum, is, is in the works right now: the building is already up and there'll be there'll be a lot, a lot to learn about the evolution.

David Sikes [00:59:02] But the Farley Boat Works was, you know, I don't know if he was the first to do a particular design or not, because I haven't read that much history about Farley Boat Works, but he definitely made his mark on fishing. If you go to Port Aransas right now, you'll see concrete replicas of some of the early Farley Boat Works skiffs at prominent places - you know, on street corners, or in front of buildings and stuff like that. They're only about six feet long. And a lot of people, like you see in other cities, will, they'll feature dolphin sculptures or something like that. And you could paint them whichever color you want, you know, but very prominently on each of these little, I mean, concrete replicas of Farley boats, the word "Farley Boat" is in, is in plain vision, you know. So everywhere you go, you see the word, "Farley", in Port Aransas still today.

David Todd [01:00:09] And, what makes it such a well-suited boat, at least at that time?

David Sikes [01:00:15] I don't know. It's, it's, I've seen photographs of some of these boats. And frankly, they didn't seem ideal to me, but I think the way that they fished them. Obviously the Gulf of Mexico, it can be pretty rough. And I wouldn't go in the Gulf of Mexico with some of those little boats unless it was a really calm day.

[01:00:42] But I think what they did was they needed a boat (and of course, eventually motorboats came into favor), but when they were rowing up and parallel to the jetties, and trolling a bait or two out to catch tarpon, I mean, I guess they needed to be somewhat maneuverable. But if you catch a 150, if you hook a 150-pound tarpon on a boat that's, I don't know, less than 20-feet long, that boat becomes part of your drag system, you know, because I don't think any sizable tarpon is going to stay close to shore. They had east into deeper offshore waters.

David Sikes [01:01:27] And I've heard stories about, you know, in fact, I wrote a story about a guy who's still alive who caught one in a small boat with his dad, and that tarpon took them out miles. Which could be kind of scary, I guess, depending on, you know, how rough seas are that day. But I would think that a president, especially a president who couldn't walk, probably wasn't going to go on a rough day.

David Sikes [01:02:05] But I don't know, but the Farley boats that I've seen, they look like flat-bottomed wooden boats, which are not, you know, really that that smooth-riding. Not sure what set them apart from all the others.

David Sikes [01:02:21] I'm sure, I'm sure that Rob has addressed some of that, though, in his research. I'll have to defer to him on that one.

David Todd [01:02:30] Okay. You know, I'd also read that some of the early tarpon fishermen introduced motorboats to fishing, maybe around 1900. That must have been quite a shift.

David Sikes [01:02:45] I would imagine so. I mean, although, it was known back then as a as a really a near-shore fish. I mean, not near-shore like the flats of Florida, where, you know, you see these guys fly-fishing in three feet of water.

David Sikes [01:03:00] But, you know, I mean, if you, if you need to get around in the Gulf, I mean, I would think that being at the mercy of the waves would be a real handicap, whereas, and so when the motor comes around, you actually have steerage. It's, you could be confident it will take you, the, let's say, "the road less bumpy".

David Sikes [01:03:30] But I don't know, really. I'll mean, back then, they probably didn't have big motors. And I think some of the early Farley boats may have had kind of inboard / outboard engines. I've never really seen a pictorial history of the evolution of the Farley boat, although I'm sure I will at the Farley Boat Museum in Port Aransas soon.

David Sikes [01:03:54] I just think that sport fishing in general, though, I mean, motors for boats probably revolutionized fishing in the same way, or similarly, to the automatic shotgun, you know, revolutionized bird hunting.

David Todd [01:04:13] Yeah. That's an interesting sort of analogy there, from fishing to hunting, and from one kind of technology to another, made things easier.

David Todd [01:04:26] So something else I was interested about tarpon is that it seemed like a pretty organized pursuit, and that there were these, these competitions - the Tarpon Rodeo, I guess later called the "Deep Sea Roundup", and that's just for the Texas coast. But I understand there were similar competitions in other parts of the Gulf. Can you tell us much about that, that part of the tarpon story?

David Sikes [01:04:57] Well, the one I'm most familiar with, obviously, is the granddaddy of all fishing tournaments in Texas, now called the Deep Sea Roundup out of Port Aransas, which is really a fundraiser for a multitude of charities and scholarship funds and things like that. The Port Aransas Boatmen Association, which runs that that tournament, of course, dropped the name Tarpon Rodeo years ago, but it did start in the 1930s and obviously tarpon were the focus.

David Sikes [01:05:32] I don't, like I said, I don't recall when they changed the name, but when I came around in 1998 and started writing on that tournament every year, I believe it was ten or 12, or more, years before anyone caught a tarpon. I mean, it, no one was no one would hardly target tarpon, because it was, it was kind of a fruitless endeavor.

David Sikes [01:05:59] But, some years ago, I remember the big story was someone caught and released, photographed, and I think you had to have a videotape, too, just like the billfish requirement for the Deep Sea Roundup. And that was kind of the headline for my article, was that, finally, somebody actually landed a tarpon. And, you know, that category had never been given an award in all of my career up to that point, you know.

David Sikes [01:06:34] And then, since then, I believe, I believe a couple of years ago, I think three tarpon were caught and submitted.

[01:06:43] Like I said, you can't, you can't bring them in. You can't bring in billfish either. It's, it's all, you know, videotape and all that. And you have to send in your videotape, at least with the billfish competition. You have to send in your videotape electronically or digitally to the mainland because it matters. Well, I guess nowadays with modern video, the time stamp goes with it. So, you know, if there's a tie for, you know, blue marlin, or something like that, it's whoever caught the first one or something like that. So I guess that's probably the same with tarpon, although that was never even considered until just recent years because I mean, one tarpon was, was big news. More than one was golly!

David Todd [01:07:34] Well, you know, it's interesting, this Tarpon Rodeo goes back, I guess, to 1932, and, like you said, in recent years there have been, I guess, some tarpon seen and caught and released. But it's, it's really kind of a shadow of what it was in the early part of the 20th century and before. Can you sort of dig into this a little bit more? I think you mentioned a couple of the factors that may have been responsible for, you know, the decline in seeing them, maybe not a decline in the overall population. But can you, can you help us understand the changes?

David Sikes [01:08:19] Yeah. It's hard, it's hard to know. I mean, I guess, I mean, they know enough now about the tarpon that they, you know, they, they can chart their path and all. But we're talking about a subtle difference here between, you know, maybe swimming parallel to the Texas coast, three miles off shore, rather than within a mile offshore.

David Sikes [01:08:41] And, I don't know of any research that's been done to measure the relative abundance of baitfish in the nearshore Texas waters. You know, obviously, tarpon

have to eat a lot, and they're on the move a lot. They're big fish and, you know, so they got to consume a lot on their migratory path. And they're just going to go, I guess, wherever the food is.

David Sikes [01:09:07] But I mean, you know, we're so short-sighted. You know, we think that just because I've been looking at this for 25 years, that I know anything. No, I don't, I don't know anything about what the bait fish abundance was that may have drawn the tarpon in.

David Sikes [01:09:26] But I do know that baitfish is a part of the food chain that is, is, is, ebbs and flows with the nutritional level that's incoming from fresh water in the, in the rivers. I mean, that's a biological fact that, you know, the lifeblood of any bay is the fresh water inflows. I mean, it's not just to balance the salinity. It's to pulse nutrients into that bay, which spark the beginnings of the food chain, which we, as, as fishermen, benefit from, a few notches up the food chain, obviously. And tarpon are pretty far up the food chain.

David Sikes [01:10:11] So I don't know. If you have poor recruitment of nutrients or baitfish because of the lack of nutrients, I mean, it's just a domino effect. I mean, it's cause and effect.

David Sikes [01:10:21] I don't know if anybody could truly prove that, though. That's a pretty esoteric subject for an ambitious grad student.

David Todd [01:10:31] Well, and why do you think the, these nutrient flows, the fresh water inflows might have changed since, well, you know, about a hundred years ago now, 90 years ago.

David Sikes [01:10:43] Well, it's all, it's all based on the damming of rivers.

David Sikes [01:10:45] You know, one of the, one of the main topics for the first ten years or so of my career was this debate, and, I mean, it was heated arguments about the freshwater inflows.

David Sikes [01:10:58] When Corpus Christi built the Choke Canyon Reservoir, which is the larger of the two reservoirs that we, the main sources of water for the City of Corpus and surrounding communities, they, they essentially signed an agreement, saying that if it rained in the watershed of Corpus Christi and Choke Canyon Reservoir, that we would, they would release a certain amount of that rainwater into the bays.

David Sikes [01:11:34] And the main argument, at least the way I framed it, was, if you don't think that God or nature intended rivers to flow into the sea, then we can't even talk about this subject. Because you've already lost the argument. I know that that's a fact. And I know that it wasn't an accident.

David Sikes [01:11:55] And wasting water by releasing river water from, you know, that would have gone into the Nueces Bay, in this case, or at least in that way, is not what you call what some people call a "waste" of water. The "waste" of water comes into play when people take 30-minute showers or plant a non-native grass such as St. Augustine and water it three times a week to create an artificial lawn. Those are the main wastes of water.

David Sikes [01:12:28] You probably know that in the culture of water conservation, most golf courses now use greywater to fertilize their greens. That's not nearly as harmful, obviously.

David Sikes [01:12:42] And, I mean, I have some really close friends, and some of them were in high political positions locally, who we just couldn't talk about this subject because, I mean, they didn't, they said, "Well, I still catch trout in Nueces Bay. What's the problem?" And I said, "if you think that the smoking gun of this biological disaster is going to manifest itself in you catching fewer trout, then you don't understand anything about the biology of an estuary."

David Sikes [01:13:16] And, it's pretty fundamental. And the people who, who argued against the, what we call the "freshwater inflows", or the "Agreed Order", which was that term was in the agreement, they just felt like they needed to find all sorts of ways of not abiding by the Agreed Order.

David Sikes [01:13:40] And, you know, when you live and die by tourism and fishing and, you know, and specifically fishing, as a community, why would you kill the golden goose, which is your bays?

David Sikes [01:13:54] And it's not going to happen overnight. It's going to be a progressive thing. But, you know, choking the nutrients, the nutritional inputs that the inflows provide for our bays may not manifest itself, you know, in obviously negative ways until the people who are arguing that we don't need that are dead.

David Sikes [01:14:15] But, I mean, fresh water was meant to flow into the sea. That's really the only argument you really need to believe in.

David Todd [01:14:26] It's interesting. So these patterns, I guess, are so. I don't know, stochastic or they're just so difficult to track that maybe you won't see those impacts until decades. You know, to make it really statistically clear that, yeah, it's because these dams were built and the flows reduced, and so the tarpon in turn, you know, go elsewhere or die, decline. Is that kind of what you're saying?

David Sikes [01:14:59] But it really goes further than the tarpon obviously. You know, you see it going on in California right now with the Colorado River: that, that we know about that 20 years ago.

David Sikes [01:15:10] They, you know, the people who are arguing that we should keep as much water as possible in our reservoirs, for one thing, they didn't know what they were talking about, because in the summer there was more water that evaporates from Choke Canyon Reservoir and Lake Corpus Christi than is used by the communities that those reservoirs serve.

David Sikes [01:15:35] So, keeping water in a reservoir is not really saving water. It's just, especially at Corpus Christi. Lake Corpus Christi probably should have never been built. It's a big, shallow lake that evaporates at a tremendous rate. At least Choke Canyon reservoir is much deeper. And so there's less surface volume evaporation from there.

David Sikes [01:16:05] And, people think, "Well, I keep on seeing this water being released from Wesley Seale dam", which is the dam at Lake Corpus Christi. "What are they doing? We're in a drought!" And I go, "Well, I mean, part of the part of the reason they're releasing the

water from the dam is that some of the communities and surrounding areas use the river as kind of their pipeline for water that they bought from the reservoir from Corpus Christi."

David Sikes [01:16:33] There's a lot of, there's a lot of straws in this lake. And, and some of them are deemed essential, and some of them are deemed luxury or wasteful.

David Sikes [01:16:43] And, I think that the, I know Larry McKinney, he used to be the director of Coastal Fisheries for Texas Parks Wildlife, who became the Harte Research Institute director, who lives in my neighborhood. You know, he tried to tell people, you know, that, that, I don't know, that this argument has been hashed and rehashed so many times, that if we keep water in Lake Corpus Christi, that doesn't help anybody except for the fishermen who like catch bass out of Lake Corpus Christi.

David Sikes [01:17:20] So I had a fishing friend, a fishing guide friend that lived on Lake Corpus Christi, who used to say that I was anti-lake. I didn't even know what that means. But what he was saying was, "You're killing our bass to keep your shrimp alive".

David Sikes [01:17:37] And as long as there are people out there who reduce the argument to that level, you know, I don't know when the culture is going to change.

David Sikes [01:17:48] It's hard to tell people, though, who paid for water for their lawn. You know, I know a lot of people say, well, I bought that water. I go, "Yeah, but conservation, it's not about how much water you can buy and use". I said, "You know, if you don't think of this as a, you know, as a community kind of resource, then, I mean, it sounds kind of anti-community to me to be wasting water that can be used to benefit the economy of Corpus Christi".

David Sikes [01:18:20] I mean, eventually your lawn is going to dry up, you know, and the fish are going to die. And what do you have then?

David Todd [01:18:30] Yeah. And it's, I guess the complication to all of this is that it's sort of a sunk cost. I mean, the reservoirs are built and the commitments were made. And it's it's hard to, I guess, move on from those, those earlier pledges and contracts.

David Sikes [01:18:48] Well, and they, they have adjusted that Agreed Order several times where like they, they, they get credit for rain that falls below the reservoirs in the river's watershed that's between Mathis, Texas and Corpus Christi. And so we know that that water goes into the river and eventually makes it into Nueces Bay. So we subtract those amounts, in some complicated math formula, I'm sure, from the Agreed Order amount. So it's not a mandatory water release. It's a, it's a "if it rains in the watershed", then we will release what would have reached the bays, you know, under natural conditions, without the dam in place.

David Sikes [01:19:37] And so, it's a hard thing for people to take because our tax money paid for those dams and paid to maintain those reservoirs. And, you know, it's, it's seen as a right, rather than, I don't know, an obligation to be ecologically minded about this.

David Sikes [01:19:59] I mean, if you don't think cause and effect, if you think cause and effect is the best argument you have, you have to first convince people that there is a cause and effect here. And since the effect is not immediate, you're telling people what might happen 20 years from now. And that's a really hard sell to people who are entrenched in this, you know, water rights thing.

David Todd [01:20:23] Yeah, it's all pretty contingent for some folks that are thinking about tomorrow or next week.

David Sikes [01:20:32] Yeah, it all seems so short-sighted.

David Todd [01:20:33] Well, tell me something else: I, like you, I'm sure, you've heard these things much more than I have, but I've heard speculation that, that part of the factor behind the tarpon's, I don't know, decline, scarcity...

David Sikes [01:20:50] Yeah, yeah.

David Todd [01:20:51] At least from the Texas perspective, is the construction of jetties. Do you think that that's a factor, or not?

David Sikes [01:21:00] I haven't heard that argument really fleshed out. I mean, obviously, you know, if you look back, you know, very, very briefly in history, the jetties is a magnet for baitfish. And so that's why, that's why the tarpon were there. And I still see them, you know, they patrol up and down the jetties and, you know, they're just eating all the mullet and whatever else is out there.

David Sikes [01:21:26] At the same time, we know, because of coastal geologists, the jetties are not the best for, for beach erosion. And, you know, if you if you block the flow of sand from the South with, with a jetty, it's going to, it's going to build up along that jetty to the point where then it's going to silt into the channel, and the other side is going to be starved of sand. So then you're going to have to artificially build up the beach to create the same width of beach that you had before.

David Sikes [01:22:02] I mean, it's a never-ending job. And we know it. I mean, we can see it. I mean, I can see it just from flying over the jetties. And I've done that several times, and it's so obvious.

David Sikes [01:22:14] And, several coast geologists became regular sources of my columns. And, you know, again, when you're arguing with tourist people about selling our jetties to more and more visitors, and we're, some coastal geologist from academia is telling you that you're ruining our beaches, you know, by whatever practices I just outlined. I mean, it's, it's a tough argument. Academia against economics is going to lose every time.

David Sikes [01:22:48] And, what would the effect be from jetty construction on tarpon. And I mean, it seems kind of, they appear to be there and they're following the mullet, and, you know, the bait fish, but.

David Sikes [01:23:07] No, I mean, I can't imagine, I mean, a tarpon is an extremely mobile fish. I can't imagine that the jetty would pose a barrier to their usual routes. I mean, I think that the north jetty at Port Aransas, you know, it's a pretty long jetty, and it has to be, to do its job.

David Todd [01:23:30] But I mean, tarpon can just swim around. We see them at the end of the jetties all the time. You know, so I don't know. It's not intuitive to me that, and I'd have to hear some biologist or coastal geologist tell me why that would even have an impact. I guess

probably Jerry Ault has looked into it. I I'm not, I'm not privy to all that right now, and I haven't been writing about tarpon for a while now.

David Todd [01:23:55] So, you know. Okay. Well, I'm sure there are a lot of causes involved.

David Todd [01:24:02] One of the other ones that I had heard speculated about is, and I think you touched on this earlier, is some of the fishing activities, the seining activities down in Mexico. Is that something that you think might have had an impact?

David Sikes [01:24:17] That argument had a very loud voice in the beginning, 25 years ago, because, you know, anytime there's an environmental problem, we like to point fingers at somebody else is doing this to avoid culpability and to avoid solving the problem.

David Sikes [01:24:34] We have no jurisdiction over Mexico, although Tarpon Tomorrow and other organizations have forged bonds with biologists in Mexico. And I think Harte Research and Larry McKinney was a pioneer in that. And so there's a kind of a "One Gulf" mentality now that's, that's taken over.

David Sikes [01:24:58] But, you know, pointing the finger at Veracruz and the tarpon fishery over there, I mean, I remember the, the numbers were staggering. And I couldn't verify any of that. I mean, I knew that there was a tarpon fishery, and that somebody said part of it went to cat food, or pet food, and maybe livestock food.

David Sikes [01:25:21] And some of it, I mean, I've, I've been to Mexico fishing many times and I have seen a tarpon on the, on the cleaning table. So, I think somebody is eating them too.

David Sikes [01:25:33] But I've never tasted a tarpon. I don't know if it was the sportsmen or maybe the Native Americans who first discovered that tarpon weren't that great a table fare, but I'm going to take their word for it. They're much more, they're much more valuable to me as a sport fish than a food fish.

David Sikes [01:25:58] But that's part of the reason that they were ignored for so long, too, is Texas Parks and Wildlife and many, many of the established government bodies who regulate fisheries, were really more involved with commercial fishing and sustainability and stuff like that.

David Sikes [01:26:17] Whereas, the recreational fishery is a relatively new phenomena. I mean, Parks and Wildlife has been pretty proactive in it. But, you know, for years we kind of ignored it. I mean, when I first moved here, you could keep ten, ten red, no, ten trout. Well you can still kept three redfish. And that's the same. But now it's three, three trout. And so, you know, highly regulated. I mean, it's not a food fish anymore.

David Sikes [01:26:49] CCA made sure that they were outlawed from gill netting back in the eighties. And that's because CCA had to stand up and recognize the value, the economic value of the sport fishery, rather than the commercial fishing.

David Sikes [01:27:08] I don't like outlawing a whole profession, but they still have black drum and flounder to catch to keep the fish markets and restaurants supplied.

David Todd [01:27:19] Got you.

David Todd [01:27:19] Well, you know, this might be a good bridge to talk about two things that I'm curious about, and maybe you can help us understand more, is just the role of nonprofits in tarpon conservation. You know, we've talked about Tarpon Tomorrow and the Coast Conservation Association. I think there's also the Texas Tarpon Collaborative. And then there's this Gulf-wide Bonefish and Tarpon Trust. And I, I wonder if you could just help us understand how some of those non-profits have, kind of, helped nudge work on Tarpon in the right direction or pace?

David Sikes [01:27:58] Well, mainly two ways. One thing they had the ear of sport fishermen. And sport fishermen, at least on that level, is a fairly affluent part of the culture.

David Sikes [01:28:15] So, as word of mouth spread and more people started taking notice, I mean, years ago, you know, growing up in Louisiana, you know, if you threw a fish back, it's like, "What are you doing?" You know?

David Sikes [01:28:31] Whereas, you know, if people start hearing more about catch and release, and catch and photograph and release, and stuff like that, it does capture kind of a different population. You know, every now and then, you know, we all enjoy a good what we call a, "meat haul" to go fishing. And, you know, you want, you're trying to stock up the freezer, you know. And I'm sure some of that is still going on, but most of it's not done with, with trout.

David Sikes [01:29:00] And the alternative, of course, is black drum, which, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife, is a way underutilized fishery, and yet they're still have a viable commercial fishery in it with black drum.

David Sikes [01:29:15] But the Saltwater Fishery Enhancement Association and CCA and the Tarpon Tomorrow and all those people, they all raised money to fund academia. And academia and nonprofits like that, the partnership, it really had boosted awareness and funding. I mean, that's pretty much it in a couple of words.

David Todd [01:29:38] Okay. I can see how that would help. Money and ink.

David Sikes [01:29:44] Yeah.

David Todd [01:29:44] There's nothing wrong with that.

David Todd [01:29:48] And I think that, you know, part of what they were funding and supporting was tagging work. And I, I think you mentioned this when we first started speaking about these pop-off tags. And can you help us understand more about this, these tagging programs and what they've taught us about the migrations of tarpon?

David Sikes [01:30:13] Well, it's pretty basic. I think early on in the conversation, we talked about Jerry asking the question of whether their tarpon were our tarpon, because if we're going to point the finger at Veracruz, Mexico, as the culprit as to the shortage of tarpon in Texas or Florida or anywhere, we better know the migratory habits of these fish.

David Sikes [01:30:37] And when Jerry put this big PowerPoint up on the screen and showed these populations with arrows going from, you know, from the Yucatan and Florida and how they kind of meet at the at the tip of Texas and Mexico and then go separate ways. I don't

know, I mean, he, he realized through tagging that some of those populations intermingle. And so, in some cases, they are our tarpon.

David Sikes [01:31:13] And I think that's the basic information gathering of any fishery research, I guess, is to just learn, "Okay, what do we have here? What, what are the habits, what's the life?" I mean, they already kind of knew the, the, you know, life history of tarpon. It's hard to believe that a tarpon that grows 200 pounds or more, you know, floats on the tide in a little vessel that's smaller than a tadpole, you know, and finally grows up in the rivers and all that. So they know those things and I guess they can measure.

David Sikes [01:31:51] I think Parks and Wildlife had a program that was headed by a fellow named Art Morris, who retired a few years ago. He, he got a network of anglers in Texas to tell him, to join an online group and to tell him every time they caught or saw a tarpon in Texas waters. I'm not sure if the program really took off that well, because, I mean, not very many people catch tarpon in the first place. And so many people who catch tarpon catch them incidentally. I mean, I even heard about some people catching them and not knowing what they were. Or, catching them, maybe the smaller ones, in a cast net and not knowing what to do with them. I guess they probably use them as bait.

David Sikes [01:32:40] But they didn't know about the program as, you know, the people who knew about it through outdoor writers like me and Shannon and Doug Pike and people like that, you know. We knew about them, but I didn't catch that many tarpon, so... I'm pretty sure Shannon didn't catch many tarpon. So, but I mean, if our readership did, I never did follow up when Art retired to find out how many actual data points you got from that program. But it was an effort that was more or less prompted by the movement, you know, that had gained momentum through the channels that we discussed earlier.

David Todd [01:33:20] Okay. Well, and I guess one of the first ways to conserve a resource is to just understand it, and I guess these tags and then the reporting programs that Art Morris was involved with must have helped there.

David Todd [01:33:38] The other aspect of this, which I think has been interesting, is, is the effort to you know, change from, you know, unlimited regulation to only being able to catch fish that that were quite large and then they're released.

David Sikes [01:34:01] Yeah, that was pretty controversial. I don't remember the exact timeline, but I remember at first when all these things were taking place that we just talked about, Parks and Wildlife, and I believe at the time Larry McKinney was in charge of coastal fisheries, and he was pretty, pretty conservative. And they just decided to make tarpon a catch-and-release, you know, only. And there was some pushback, but a few years later, I guess they did kind of give in halfway, but it really didn't make a difference. I mean, if you're not going to, if you're not going to, if you're not allowed to kill a tarpon that's less than 85 inches, I think was the measure which would give it a chance to beat the state record you know, I mean, I think only one person ever did, to up the record a little bit.

David Sikes [01:34:56] But I mean, most people in sophisticated fishing cultures, they're not going to keep a tarpon, they are not going to keep a trout that's 30 inches probably. And they're not going to keep a snook. In Florida, they might. But even in Florida, they don't. In Florida, you can't even lift a tarpon out of the water to photograph it. So they're always kind of on the cutting edge of conservation. Texas follows.

David Todd [01:35:30] You know, something else that you mentioned kind of in passing is that there's this, there's a kind of competition, I guess, maybe one way to put it, between commercial fishing and recreational fishing. And tarpon, I guess, falls pretty squarely in the recreational fishery, such it's not really very edible. And that the two industries have sort of fought for funding and attention and regulatory efforts over the years. Can you talk about the tarpon in that light?

David Sikes [01:36:07] Yeah, it's kind of hard to. Like you said, it didn't really become an issue with commercial guys. I don't, I don't remember ever hearing too much feedback from people about not being able to keep a tarpon. I mean, if you want to beat your chest over a big fish and oh, gosh, who doesn't, you can still do that in Texas.

David Sikes [01:36:37] But, I believe most people, when they see photographs from those old postcards from Port Aransas of, you know, a dozen dead tarpon of 100 pounds, plus, hanging on nails at Woody's marina or whatever, the feeling is not, is not good. You know, it's kind of, I mean, maybe I played a role in making people ashamed or that kind of senseless slaughter. But, you know, before that, they also used to kill dolphin, and with harpoons in Port Aransas.

David Sikes [01:37:17] And, I mean, I don't think I don't think tarpon are ever going to reach the lovable nature of dolphin. But, you know, I mean, we did some pretty atrocious things back then that nowadays are completely taboo.

David Sikes [01:37:34] But I don't know, I mean, the commercial / recreational divide really showed itself in two areas, the shrimping and that really touched also on the sea turtle fight. But the red snapper was really contentious for, I mean, I wrote about that and I, I kind of sided with Ocean Conservancy or the Nature Conservancy and groups like that, that really gave a nod to the commercial fishermen because for a while there, commercial fishing for red snapper, it was limited.

David Sikes [01:38:12] But what it or was limited to was all the boats could go out on the first of the month and try to catch as many red snapper as they could. And then the U.S. Fish Wildlife Service or the National Marine Fisheries Service made a determination of when they reached their quota as, as a fleet.

David Sikes [01:38:36] And which meant that it would be a hurricane in the Gulf the first three days of that season, you know, and nobody would, nobody in their right mind would or should go out in the Gulf, but they did because they had to make a living. And what the commercials agreed to do was essentially make individual fishing quotas their mantra.

David Sikes [01:38:59] And so each boat captain or boat outfitter or company or whatever that fished for red snapper would submit their catch, historical catches over the past several years or whatever. And then they would be issued, "Okay, you can catch this many pounds of snapper this season and you can do it whenever you want. We're not going to tell you have to go out in five-foot seas. You know, you can go out when the market price is good and the seas are safe."

David Sikes [01:39:32] And, that was revolutionary. And it really threw the recreational anglers, particularly CCA, for a loop because they thought that the commercial fishermen were killing all our red snapper, and giving the recreational guys the leftovers. When, in fact, the commercial fishing effort in Texas was a fraction of the recreational effort in Texas.

David Sikes [01:40:02] And CCA used to always say, "We're not going to kill the population by rod and reel." Well, when you multiply those rods and reels by millions, yes, you will. Yes, you can.

David Sikes [01:40:16] And especially since Texas had a year-round season in state waters, which is nine and a half miles offshore, and nobody believes that a year-round fishery for red snapper in state waters is being honored by the fishermen who go out past state waters to catch them and just tell everybody they caught him in state waters.

David Sikes [01:40:36] So, I mean, I'm not going to vilify an entire, you know, commercial, I mean, recreational sector of fishermen. But I mean, it's kind of a "wink and a nod" kind of thing. When you come in with snapper that weigh 12, 15 pounds, and you tell people you caught them off of this little reef that's eight miles off shore, nobody believes you. But they can't prove it.

David Sikes [01:40:59] So, that was a divide there.

David Sikes [01:41:01] And, I think finally, you know, of course, ultimately, Texas got its way. They still have a year-round fishery for red snapper and they still get to regulate their own snapper seasons and they get to decide when they reach their quota. And if they, the feds, find out that they misrepresented what they caught, they're subtracting that from the following season.

David Sikes [01:41:27] You know, so I guess it's pretty much died down. But I think the one thing that I realized in all that, is you can't always side with the perceived villain, which in this case would have been the commercial fishermen, who really bent over backwards to essentially count their fish.

David Sikes [01:41:49] It was the only fishery who was doing that. I mean, there was no measuring system for how many red snapper recreational fishermen caught in Texas. Virtually none. I mean, there was that iSnapper app on your phone that Greg Stunz of the Harte Research Institute here in town instituted. And it was modestly popular. I don't know. It was voluntary for one thing, which, as we all know, is, you know, a good way to fail a system.

David Sikes [01:42:20] But it was a good idea. I mean, if people were buying into that. You know, if you, if you have to enter on this phone app, where and when and how many and whatever - measure the fish - you know, all those data points, right after you catch them then, I mean, I guess, technically, if you do it within state waters, then I guess you're fine.

David Sikes [01:42:45] But, if you catch them in federal waters and then don't enter the data until you're in state waters, so your GPS makes it look like you caught your fish in state waters, you know, there's just all sorts of ways around these things, I guess.

David Sikes [01:43:00] But, I mean, I think it did change the culture slightly. And we'll see. I'm not sure what the status of the red snapper population is, but it's far greater than it was when I first started writing about it. I mean, you couldn't hardly catch what was called a, "sow snapper", which was a fish that was usually, you didn't reach that status until it was close to 20 pounds.

David Sikes [01:43:26] Well, you could tell on these party boats and these charter boats that when they were catching a 12- to 15-pound fish, they were labeling those as sow snapper. And so the standard changed.

David Sikes [01:43:39] And a lot of these boat captains were telling me, they couldn't, they couldn't catch the numbers and the size of fish they were catching just ten years ago in the usual oil rigs in the Gulf.

David Sikes [01:43:53] And so, I mean, it was obvious to the people who were on the water what was happening.

David Todd [01:44:01] Well, you know, you've had such an interesting perch to, to watch all these changes in the fishery as a outdoor columnist, and then as you work led you to be involved in the Texas Outdoor Writers Association. And I was hoping that you could just talk about that perspective that you've had as a, as a columnist, as you look at your colleagues, at the other newspapers, and you look at the fishermen that you cover, and the Parks and Wildlife regulators that you were paying attention to as well. What are your kind of views from the history of the last 20, 30 years of being in that business?

David Sikes [01:44:52] It was a, it was a position that everybody wanted and hardly anybody could get. So if you got it, of course, you obviously wanted to keep it. But I mean, what other profession would allow you to go fishing with a different A-list fishing guide each week, so you can write about it in the Sunday paper?

David Sikes [01:45:18] I had fishing guides who were famous, beyond Texas, calling me if they were on a really good trout bite. I mean, one of them was Cliff Webb, who is famous in these parts. He would be fishing down in the Upper Laguna Madre one day with clients, and he would call me on his cell phone, and I was sitting at my newsroom desk. And he would say, "Can you make me at marker 37 in 30 minutes? We're on them."

David Sikes [01:45:51] And, he would get in his boat, motor back to marker 37, which is on the Island. I would always have my waders and my rods in my truck, and I would meet him there, and we would go out, and I would catch several 8-pound trout and have a story for the next week.

David Sikes [01:46:10] I mean, he got some glory out of it. You know, certainly I did. You know, that's part of the deal. You know, they, I didn't pay them and they didn't pay me, you know. But, there was an exchange that was beneficial to both of us.

David Sikes [01:46:28] So, you know, if you get to do that, and you get to do the same thing hunting, you know ... I mean, heck, the Caller-Times paid for my shotgun shells! It paid for my fishing and hunting licenses. You know, I got, I got essentially a stipend, you know, for what they call, "consumables". So, I mean, if I needed to do a story on natural bait fishing, you know, the Caller-Times picked up the bait tab. And, you know, if I needed some lures for the next trip, they paid for that, you know.

David Sikes [01:47:00] So, oh, you should see my garage!

David Sikes [01:47:05] But, you know, it was, it was a great opportunity.

David Sikes [01:47:10] And as one of my friends who established a well-known and very popular website called, "CorpusFishing.com", some years ago, he he claims that, that we were the rock stars. I never embraced that label.

David Sikes [01:47:27] But, you know, I couldn't go to an Academy outdoor store and just pick up a couple of items and get out of there within an hour. Because you were very recognizable. Your picture was in the paper twice a week. For a five-year stint, I was on TV, on one of the local NBC stations, every week. And so, you know, if people ... they felt like they knew you.

David Sikes [01:47:55] And, if they saw you with a particular lure in your hand, they wanted to know if that was the lure they needed to buy it. And where, where were the fish biting was always the question. I'd go, "Oh, I don't know. I always go with the guides, you know, I don't know where the fish are biting until they take me there."

David Sikes [01:48:12] But it was really such a privilege, and, you know, it was a responsibility that you had to take very seriously. Otherwise, you would lose sight of, you know, that these people who rely on your stories, and mostly I wrote about people. I mean, I tried to, to divide my Sunday column with an adventure story of whatever I had done that week. And the Thursday column was almost always a science-based or regulatory-based story.

David Sikes [01:48:43] I mean, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Regulations and state regulations could keep a person busy year-round. I mean, there's always changes and proposals. And, you know, people who don't like them, or do like them, you know. So, you try to make sure to sort those kinds of regulatory issues out in the most basic terms, you know, in very journalistic, ethical terms, though.

David Sikes [01:49:09] So, you know, you didn't want to embrace one too, too much. First, you wanted to give them the objective view of the regulations, and what the biologists said, whatever problems that we're trying to solve could be solved by the computer modeling that they did.

David Sikes [01:49:24] You know, just a heck of a lot of people didn't even understand the basic tools that Texas Parks and Wildlife has been using for almost 40 years, and that's the spring and fall gillnet surveys. They set hundreds of gillnets twice a year, and this is mainly only really to determine the relative abundance of some of the more popular game fish species, mostly redfish, trout, flounder and things like that.

David Sikes [01:49:55] And, you know, they had to kill some fish to find out what the relative abundance was. And of course, most people didn't understand why they had to kill fish, to regulate that fish. You know, "Why didn't they just let us kill more fish by upping the bag limit?" And, you know, you'd go, "Well, then we wouldn't know whether the trend of fish populations in the bays was going up or down or flatlining or, you know, whatever."

David Sikes [01:50:26] When you have that much data at your disposal, I mean, you can make decisions on gain, on size limits and bag limits and things like that.

David Sikes [01:50:36] And, I can't tell you how many times someone would tell me, "Well, I could tell them where to put those gillnets to catch more trout." And I'd go, "You don't understand the scientific process. We're not trying to catch more trout in the gillnets. We're

trying to establish whether the overall trout population is rising or falling. So it would, it would skew the data if we knew where to catch the fish and put the gillnets there every time."

David Sikes [01:51:06] I think we learned something about the cod fishery up in the New England area many years ago, when the commercial fishermen got so much better at finding and catching the fish, that if you looked at the catch data from year to year, it was staying the same because the fishermen were so good at finding the fish through technology, but the population was cratering.

David Sikes [01:51:30] And, it was unbeknownst to the biologists and the regulators, because it was not, it was not a reliable, science-based, you know, system of data collection.

David Sikes [01:51:40] And, you know, that's a hard sell when they open up the newspaper on Thursday, and want to find out where they should go fishing Sunday or Saturday.

David Todd [01:51:52] So speaking of your Thursday article, what were some of the big conservation themes that you felt were important to return to from week to week?

David Sikes [01:52:05] Well, we touched on two of them. The freshwater inflow theme was a, was a, it was a mainstay for a while, because, partially because the regulations were changing, and partially because we had to undo a lot of ignorance to really get the people on board, you know, with that.

David Sikes [01:52:22] And, you know, the people who were against it, in some cases, they held, they held the power, politically, sometimes. I mean, you couldn't reverse essentially an agreement that the City signed. But as I told you earlier, you could tweak it a little bit in our favor, you know, not in favor of the resource sometimes, by the way.

David Sikes [01:52:43] So, I felt like I needed to keep my finger on that issue so that it didn't fade away.

David Sikes [01:52:51] The red snapper issue was a perennial one for me, too. And I, obviously, I, I got to see both sides of that. I mean, I had, I had CCA people giving me hell sometimes. And there was one particular CCA board member, Texas board member: every time I wrote a column supporting my position on red snapper regulations, he would submit a guest column. And to the paper's credit, they allowed those guest columns to run soon after my column would run.

David Sikes [01:53:26] And, he essentially just blasted me. He didn't altogether make, address my arguments, by the way. He just thought that my bias was awfully, awfully, just, just wrong-minded, you know, that I should be siding with the recreational side on this one.

David Sikes [01:53:46] And, you know, if you read my column and if he wants to debate it, point for point, I still think I would have won. But, you know, he, he did an emotional appeal, and believe me, it affected me emotionally too, because nobody likes to be name-called, and called out in your own newspaper.

David Sikes [01:54:06] But, I don't know, I, I may not, I may not really ever think about that gentleman the same way. But, you know, he, he was, he was entrenched in the CCA hierarchy, and I shouldn't have expected anything different from him.

David Sikes [01:54:25] The trout regulation was really big for a while. Before Larry McKinney came to Parks and Wildlife, there was a fellow named Hal Osborne. And they were, we were trying to, we were toying with the idea of maybe reducing the regulations, the bag limits or size limits on trout. So Hal convened a trout committee, which was a bunch of anglers, a few guides, and as an outdoor writer, me and several of the others would attend these meetings too. And they were all over the coastal state, parts of the state.

David Sikes [01:55:01] And, it was contentious. It truly was. And there were some people out there who thought that the trophy trout rule, which came into effect after those talks, was, was just atrocious. You know, you could only keep one fish over 25. At the time, even if a guide took out four clients, that boat could return to the dock with 50 trout, because the guide was allowed to catch and keep his limit too. And the daily limit for individuals was ten fish.

David Sikes [01:55:41] The mantra in many of the coastal states or cities around here was, "I got my 40". Which meant he had three clients that day, and the box was filled. And guides would bring big ice chests, you know, big offshore-sized ice chests full of 25- to 30-inch trout to the, to the boat shows and put it in their booth, to advertise their success rate. They actually brought dead trophy trout in an ice chest to their booth.

David Sikes [01:56:17] I mean, you're never going to see that anymore. I mean, not because of the regulations, but because of the attitude, the culture. But ultimately, the guides gave up. I say, they think they gave it up. The state regulated them out of the picture, by not allowing them to keep their ten trout.

David Sikes [01:56:39] And, the trophy trout deal, with one 25-inch trout, per day, per angler, there was some abuse of that, because if you caught a, if you caught a 25-inch trout, and you wanted to keep it, you threw it in the ice chest, and then you caught a 28-inch trout, you're, you're faced with a dilemma. And I've never been on a boat that threw back a dead 25-inch trout to keep a 28-inch trout. But I know that what they would do, was the guy who didn't catch a big trout that day, that 25-inch trout now became his.

David Sikes [01:57:18] And so, I can keep my 28-inch trout, you know, and you get a 25, and we both win. So that was the work, you know, the work-around on that.

David Sikes [01:57:27] But, you know, after this freeze, you know, and then, then, then the five-trout rule came about, and that was contentious as hell, too.

David Sikes [01:57:36] The five-trout rule was pervasive throughout the Texas coast, except for Galveston. And I was at that Texas Parks Wildlife Commission meeting when somebody in the audience said, "What biological evidence do you all have for not making this a statewide regulation?" And I'm telling you, David, they, they really did not even offer an explanation.

David Sikes [01:58:01] It was obvious that the Houston-based commissioners, I guess, the Galveston fishing guides, and the Galveston fishing community, had their ear. And so they just carved out part of that, and said, "Okay, everything south of Sargent, can only keep five trout now, but Galveston can still keep ten."

David Sikes [01:58:25] I mean, that was one of those times when you just had to roll your eyes and go. The system's not working right.

David Sikes [01:58:32] And, that's the kind of thing that outdoor writers blasted them for.

David Todd [01:58:36] Well, I guess a lot of this is so political. And I imagine that for years the, the ranks of the outdoor columnists were the ones who kept the Commission honest, and filled those seats at the Commission hearings.

David Todd [01:58:53] So, how do you think things have changed as many newspapers have let their outdoor columnists go?

David Sikes [01:59:02] Well, if you're not paying somebody a full-time salary to go to ... I'd have to drive to Austin. The meetings were always a two-day affair, because they would have a preliminary kind of a hearing the day before, and that's when people talk more freely. So if you were an outdoor writer, you know, you needed to take notes then, and then go to the next meeting, which was a more formal affair, where they actually voted on those issues.

David Sikes [01:59:29] And, most of the time, I had to spend the night, of course, in Austin, so the paper had to pay for a hotel if I didn't have a friend to stay with.

David Sikes [01:59:38] And, you know, I know Shannon went to a lot of them. Mike Leggett, who worked for the Austin American-Statesman for 30-plus years, since he was the local outdoor writer, he had a seat in that meeting, every one of them.

David Sikes [01:59:53] I usually only came when it was a really contentious coastal issue, or that rare time when there was a quail issue that really got the attention of outdoor writers.

David Sikes [02:00:05] The Parks and Wildlife Department was trying to pass a ... it was the funniest kind of rule. They wanted to allow some of the big, you know, high-fenced type ranches, many of which had connections to TP&W Commissioners, they wanted to allow them to do a pilot program that allowed them to shoot quail year-round. And it was it was deemed a research or pilot project, you know, but they were going to take bobwhite quail from Texas state parks and Texas state Wildlife Management Areas and plant them on these, in some cases, Commissioners' ranches and then allow them to hunt quail without any seasons.

David Sikes [02:00:55] And, I mean, I had to go to that meeting, and it did not pass, by the way, mainly because of the writings of people like me and Mike Leggett and Shannon Tomkins, who were just, I mean, they would just pull the curtain back and said, "Look at this, guys. It's not a pilot program. It's a, it's a favor program."

David Sikes [02:01:20] And, one of the problems with Texas Parks and Wildlife over the years was they didn't usually get appointed by the governor of places where, in other words, these people didn't have a coastal fishing connection. They had more of a deer and quail connection, because these are rich, you know, political contributors to governor campaigns. And so this was their payback. I guess there's a certain level of prestige to be a Texas Parks and Wildlife commissioner. I don't think the job pays, but, you know.

David Sikes [02:01:53] There was a few of them who would call me when a proposal was on the table, and ask me what I was hearing about it, what my views were. And one of those guys was, ironically, he wasn't even from the coast. He was from East Texas. But he realized that he didn't know enough about coastal fishing to, you know, lend much of an opinion, you know, to the debate. I mean, he, he more or less would be deferring with wherever the rest of the Commission went.

David Sikes [02:02:23] So he would come to the table with, with a, you know, a mind full of, of input from those of us who had studied the issue, and had lived the issue.

David Sikes [02:02:34] And you're never going to get that again. Actually, after he died, I never got it again anyway.

David Sikes [02:02:40] But I imagine there's still maybe a freelancer or two. David Sams has Lone Star Outdoor News. And he, he does a good job. It's a, it's a monthly magazine, a monthly newspaper, I believe. And I still get it. He sends it to my house. And he may have a representative at those Commission meetings when he thinks it's a, it's a big deal on the table. And maybe some of the older guard guys who still write for magazines, if the issue rises to a level that they think their readership should be interested, then they may sit there.

David Sikes [02:03:24] But, I know the last couple of times that I heard from people at Commission meetings, they showed, you know, they send you a photo of, because we had the, we had the first row of chairs at the Commission meetings that were reserved for the media. And I think all the seats were empty. So, you know, they didn't have anybody to looking right at them when they made decisions.

David Todd [02:03:50] You know, you are unusual, I think, in that you're, you're good with words and phrases and sentences and paragraphs, but you also take photographs. And I think you've been an outdoor photographer for a number of years, and you've served as the board secretary for Wildlife in Focus there.

David Sikes [02:04:10] Still do.

David Todd [02:04:12] Perhaps you can tell us about what you think the impact is of, and the role of landscape photography, wildlife photography in conservation.

David Sikes [02:04:23] Well first I should tell you that I was forced into that role. My very first outdoor column was about flounder fishing with rod and reel, and the newspaper actually sent a photographer with me. He had his waders on, and he was going to wade right beside me with the guide. And, he took some great pictures and I got a good column out of it and everything, as my debut column, sort of.

David Sikes [02:04:51] And, at the newspaper, when I got back with the photographer at the end of our day, the editor, the city editor said, "That's the last time you're getting a photographer. Here's your camera. We can't afford to leave, give a photographer for you, to you, all day, you know." They said, "He's got other things to do."

David Sikes [02:05:14] And so, you know, they gave me a camera that was worth more than anything, any fishing equipment I had. But, I always had nice equipment, you know. I think in all my years, I only ruined one, one SLR camera. And it was okay, because I was, I got the hand-me-down cameras from the photographer staff, after they got new cameras. So, I usually had five or six to choose from, you know, and they're all kind of obsolete to the photographers. So if I if I broke one, you know, they'd just get you another one.

David Sikes [02:05:46] But outdoor photography was really just, you know, golly, it's a lot easier to take pictures of people holding up fish in a boat, or taking a picture of deer from a blind, than it is to actually capture wildlife at the level that I do now.

David Sikes [02:06:05] Wildlife in Focus opened my eyes to real wildlife photography, the way it's done in most published works. I mean, I used to think that wildlife photographers simply wandered around the woods with a camera around their neck. Nothing could be further from the truth.

David Sikes [02:06:22] Wildlife photography has become such a, such an art form, and it's become such a way of getting the shot, in the perfect light, with the perfect conditions. And all of these things are created by the photographer.

David Sikes [02:06:40] And, that was one of the things that attracted me to Wildlife in Focus. When I tagged along on some of these wildlife photography excursions, they would show me an area where they had placed a really pretty log, you know, with water in the area. And this was their morning site for photographs. And they would smear peanut butter on the back of their log, so, you know, the birds would come in.

David Sikes [02:07:06] And then they would dig a kind of a miniature pond, and then put, plant native grasses around it, and then put strobes next to it for nighttime photography of bobcats and raccoons, drinking from this pond that they had created.

David Sikes [02:07:22] And, you can't argue with the results. But, essentially they were conditioning the wildlife, without touching them, to be more photogenic than they would under more natural, uncontrolled conditions.

David Sikes [02:07:37] And, I don't do much of that, by the way, anymore. I really mostly just chase birds in their natural habitat.

David Sikes [02:07:43] But I do hang around with some people who bring a really pretty stick above a water drip at a, at a particular photography site, and make sure that that bird is going to perch on that pretty stick before he goes to the water. And he gets a much better photograph than I do of that bird.

David Sikes [02:08:01] But outdoor photography has really, I think, opened the eye, especially digital, obviously. I was the last photographer at the Caller-Times to use film. And consequently, I was the last one to use a dark room. But in the last couple of years I think I was getting my film developed at H-E-B, or Walmart, and would get them to put it on a digital disc, so I didn't have to do the darkroom thing.

David Sikes [02:08:26] But digital photography is, it just makes it so much ... I mean you have unlimited, you know, volume of photographs. I mean, I might fill a 64-gig card, you know, in one good day of spring migration.

David Sikes [02:08:42] But Wildlife in Focus, as I mentioned to you earlier in a conversation, we sort of started as a, as a conservation group that was kind of in sync with the land conservation movement. You know, where you can have a conservation easement, which was a legal agreement between the state and the landowner, that that land would never be developed. And this was an agreement in perpetuity: that even after the landowner who signed the agreement died, the agreement lived on, so that his grandkids, who didn't give a damn about wildlife or nature, weren't going to sell that piece of property to be developed as a neighborhood or shopping center. And I thought that was a really worthy cause.

David Sikes [02:09:29] Are we still we still have, you know, part of our mission is steeped in that. But the evolution of Wildlife in Focus has kind of moved more into the area of getting this curriculum, through our photos, into classrooms. And we're in about 400 classrooms now. And we like giving them mostly to middle school science classrooms. And the teachers really like it. It's a digital curriculum, and they can, they can usually get it donated by some benefactor. And we give them a set of books still, I believe, but mainly it's the digital curriculum that they get.

David Sikes [02:10:07] And, you know, a kid, a kid in inner city Houston who has no idea of what a bobcat is, or that we have them in Texas, you know, and see one in the clearest digital-quality photographs, you know. And I, I got to think, thinking back to the eyes of a ten year old like me, that's got to hold their interest. And it's got to generate some fascination.

David Sikes [02:10:33] Once they know what's at stake, I think that the next generation of conservationists should be, I mean, at least a little better than it was without that kind of input. Anyway.

David Todd [02:10:45] Well, you talk about a ten year old, and what he or she sees, and I guess that's a little bit like getting a window into the future. And I was curious if, if you might tell us what you foresee, both for the tarpon and for conservation in general in Texas.

David Sikes [02:11:07] I'm not sure where the trajectory is on tarpon, since I've been out of the loop. I can imagine, though, that the disciples of Jerry Ault are carrying the torch. I believe that that the tarpon tagging is still on-going, because you never can get enough data points on that kind of thing.

David Sikes [02:11:31] I don't know anything about the regulations. But, you know, regulations was never really the hallmark of that movement. I mean, you can't, you can't really kill hardly any tarpon in the United States anymore, so, can't even lift them up in Florida, you know? So, that's good. I think that's going to stay with us. So it might buy us some time.

David Sikes [02:11:57] I mean, like I said earlier, the tarpon, as a worldwide species, is not in jeopardy. It's very hardy. I, I don't know. I mean, I suppose that it would be nice to convince Veracruz that that fish is worth a lot more to them in restaurant, you know, and hotel fees, and just guide fees, as a recreational sport fish than it is as a food fish. I believe that, I mean, it's going to float so many more boats, you know, in the economies that desperately need it in some of those areas.

David Sikes [02:12:38] I'm not sure how that campaign is going. I'm sure it's not as easy as sell, because they're fighting against years of tradition.

David Sikes [02:12:49] But it certainly has taken a foothold in the United States, at least, you know, in Texas and Florida. And, I don't believe Louisiana has any tarpon tournaments anymore. They, they found other, you know, other species to target. There may be still be a catch-and-release on the Grand Isle, which is fine. I think that brings a lot of light to the issue.

David Sikes [02:13:18] I mean, the more people who know of and are excited about tarpon, whether it just be as a magnificent species, or a potential target species that they might catch someday, you know, the better for the tarpon. I mean, you know, awareness is where it starts. So maybe we don't need any regulatory changes when it comes to that.

David Sikes [02:13:40] I don't know what the next benchmark piece of knowledge is that we're going to learn about tarpon, but it would be nice maybe to find out what happened definitively to drive them off of the Texas coast, although then I could probably find some tarpon out there. September and October are pretty good months for tarpon, and I'm pretty sure I hooked one a couple of weeks ago in the surf. Safe to say, I did not see it, but it was a it was a bigger explosion on a top-water lure than I've seen from a trout, which is what we were fishing for. But, you know...

David Todd [02:14:24] I like, I like what you said, that awareness is where it starts. And I hope you know that with your writing, and then with your photography, work through Wildlife in Focus, I'm sure, you know, have helped people understand a lot about the fisheries, and tarpon, and just conservation in general. So thank you very much.

David Todd [02:14:50] Is there anything you'd like to add that we might not have really touched on earlier?

David Sikes [02:14:56] Well, the next chapter in my life as a conservationist has, has become a partnership with Chuck Naiser and Flatsworthy. We started, and I started campaigning and promoting this organization, when I was still at the paper. It was, it was essentially an organization of like-minded anglers, of all different stripes, to agree that we needed to return civility to the bays and the boating behavior that had evolved into some pretty childish behaviors. And we wanted to attach a really negative stigma onto the kinds of behaviors that were selfish, in the first place, and detrimental to the recruitment of new anglers, who were on the, on the negative side of these kinds of behaviors.

David Sikes [02:15:52] And a lot of this had to do with not, you know, ripping an outboard motor through a shallow seagrass flat, just because you're trying to reach a different area, and that's a shortcut to get to it. You have no idea how many fishermen plan to actually fish that flat that you essentially just ruined for the next several hours, maybe day, the whole day.

David Sikes [02:16:14] And, it's evolved, though, into way more of a conservation thing. Hurricane Harvey had, played a role in that shift in focus, because we started noticing the more dramatic erosion issues in a series of oyster reefs in the Mesquite / Ayres / Carlos Bay area, which is just north of Rockport. And long-time fly fishing guide, Chuck Naiser, has the historical perspective and the command of the culture, and he's got the authoritative voice to be the leader in this group. And he's done a really great job of coalescing people together and garnering, you know, grants and things like that.

David Sikes [02:16:58] We, we now have, within the next couple of weeks, we're going to have a second shot at a Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission meeting. And I may attend that one, by the way, it's just kind of a tradition, a return, where the Coastal Fisheries Division of the Department has proposed to declare five reefs in those three bays as sanctuary reefs, off-limits to commercial oyster harvesting.

David Sikes [02:17:27] I've been seeing, because readers would send me photographs of oyster dredgers, which, if you're not familiar, are essentially dragging a metal net, with claws sort of, over oyster reefs, in hopes of capturing enough oysters with at least a three-inch length, because you can't keep them if they're under three inches.

David Sikes [02:17:52] And, you'll see 50 boats out there dredging in circles around the same oyster reefs over, and over, and over.

David Sikes [02:18:01] And aerial footage, thanks to drone technology, shows just the dredging havoc that it wreaks on the habitat.

David Sikes [02:18:13] For one thing, it muddies the water for as long, until, until they stop. And when that kind of discoloration of the water, and scraping the oyster reefs to a lower level from the bay floor, it just, essentially, if you're not familiar with the benefits of an oyster - they're the filters of our bay system, and they need the water to flow over them, and so they can filter the water, all the impurities and stuff and sediments out of the water.

David Sikes [02:18:45] And we think that we probably have the votes now to get that sanctuary reef proposal passed. And that's, so, I mean, you know, as long as I have a conservation goal and somebody to partner with, I'll keep doing it.

David Sikes [02:19:02] You know, and the videos have been pretty successful. The only real telling thing about whether they're successful or not is if we reach the Texas Parks Wildlife Commissioners this time, because they tabled the issue last time. And, I think everybody knows that it's because the major oystermen, mainly in the Galveston area, have their ear.

David Sikes [02:19:28] And, you know many of these oystermen who dredge these Texas oyster reefs are from Louisiana. And so they don't have a stake in the resource. When they ruin it, they're just going to go to the next one in Mississippi or wherever. So to declare these, they already have sanctuary bays in Texas, and they're off-limits to shrimping. But those same sanctuary bays that outlaw shrimping allow dredging of oysters. So it's, it's kind of doesn't jive.

David Sikes [02:20:04] So anyway, wish me luck on that one.

David Todd [02:20:07] I will. I will.

David Todd [02:20:08] Thanks for carrying on. And thanks for telling us about your work and thoughts over the years. Really appreciate it.

David Todd [02:20:17] Well, I will, I guess, say maybe we will call it a day. I know that with the rain stopping, maybe you'll want to go out and see the the early fall migrations.

David Sikes [02:20:30] And hopefully the temperature drops too.

David Todd [02:20:33] Good. Well, enjoy the outdoors. That's what it's all about. And thanks again for your time today.

David Sikes [02:20:39] All right. Yeah. Get everybody to log on to Facebook through the Flatsworthy, you know, the website and all that, and try to show your support. Texas Parks and Wildlife has a portal open online to submit your public comments, and they can't ignore them once they're posted in writing.

David Todd [02:21:00] Okay. Good to know about that.

David Todd [02:21:02] Well, thank you, Mr. Sikes. Always good to talk to you. Really learned a lot. Appreciate it.

David Sikes [02:21:08] It was a pleasure.

David Todd [02:21:09] Okay. Hope our paths cross soon.