

TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:03] Well, good morning. I am David Todd. And I have the privilege of being here with Paul Swacina. And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and web site for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive for permanent and public preservation at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

David Todd [00:00:36] And I also wanted to just explain that that Mr. Swacina would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit. It's his.

David Todd [00:00:46] And I just wanted to make sure that that sounds like a good plan to you, and if you would bless this going forward.

Paul Swacina [00:00:53] Yes. It's a privilege to be here. You guys have set this up in a very, very professional way. And I hope that I'm prepared to be able to talk about some of these things with you in a coherent and educated way. But thanks for inviting me.

David Todd [00:01:11] Well, we're honored to have you. And thank you so much.

David Todd [00:01:16] So, well, let's, let's jump into it.

David Todd [00:01:18] It is Friday, December 16th, 2022. It's about 10:15 a.m., Central Time. My name is David Todd, as I said. And I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. And I am in Austin. And we are lucky to be conducting an interview, audio interview, a remote one, with Paul Swacina, who is based in the Corpus Christi area.

David Todd [00:01:46] Mr. Swacina is an attorney in private practice with long experience in the personal injury, trial advocacy and mediation fields. He has a slew of interests and hobbies in the outdoor world, ranging from scouting to boating, diving, hunting, nature study, anthropology, archeology, fishing and many other ventures.

David Todd [00:02:14] And of special interest here, he has played a key role in helping us understand, protect and restore the Atlantic tarpon through his work in the non-profit groups, Tarpon Tomorrow, Texas Tarpon Observation Network, Bonefish and Tarpon Trust, Coastal Conservation Association and more.

David Todd [00:02:35] So today we'll talk about his life and career to date and especially focus on his work with Atlantic tarpon.

David Todd [00:02:45] So following that just very brief introduction, I wanted to start with a question about your early years and if you might be able to tell us about your childhood, and if

there might have been some people or events in your life then that influenced your interest in animals and fish and maybe even tarpon in particular.

Paul Swacina [00:03:05] Well, I will say that I was lucky. I grew up in a, in a time when scouting was a big thing. And I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, in a small town called Berwyn. I was born there in 1960, and I lived there till 1976. And while there, my father had been born and raised in Wisconsin, and we would go to, we would leave the city, and go up to Wisconsin, pretty much every weekend in the summer between Memorial Day and Labor Day. And so that was our summers.

Paul Swacina [00:03:45] And, many times it was to visit family, but oftentimes it was to go to Boy Scout camp, or go to church camps, or do any of those things. And so, every one of my family - my two older brothers and my younger sister, as well as my parents - were active in camping and doing those weekend and longer trips to Wisconsin. But my dad also was a very, very well-read blue-collar machinist, and he would get three weeks off vacation and we would jump in the car.

Paul Swacina [00:04:22] And, I think the first long trip was in 1964. We went to Yellowstone and had the little bears crawl up on the hood of our 1955 Mercury and scratch up the car, and break the antenna. And my parents made a point of making sure that we would do these trips on a regular basis, and we would go mostly out west. The first time I came to Texas was in 1968 on one of these trips that we went to HemisFair, saw the President.

Paul Swacina [00:04:54] And, we would constantly stop and do a little bit of fishing. My dad really wasn't a fisherman, but I was, and I would always have a fishing rod with me. In these early trips, my older brother was, was a fisherman, and he took me under his wing, as did my grandfather. And I loved to fish. I loved to hike out.

Paul Swacina [00:05:14] My dad was very much a kind of guy that you, at the end of the day, you should have had some litter in your pocket that you picked up because you did go out on a hike. You didn't go anywhere. And I remember, in particular, we used to have what they call pop-tops, which was an aluminum can. There was a little circle that would pop off. And before they were attached permanently to the can, they used to be found everywhere, all the time. And they had cigarette butts and pop-tops were two of the things that we were always picking up wherever we went. And so my dad instilled that in all of us early, an appreciation for nature and appreciation for trying to be a conservation-minded person.

Paul Swacina [00:06:00] Of course, the scouting program emphasized that, and I took lots of training in scouts about conservation. And I do remember the old ad of the Indian crying over the, the pollution that was going on in the early sixties.

Paul Swacina [00:06:20] And so, it was a, it was a fertile time to see that conservation was an important thing and needed to be changed. And I think one of the best things about growing up during that time is you saw that changes could be made for the benefit.

Paul Swacina [00:06:41] You know, I remember what I was in environmental trading in the Boy Scouts at the northern Wisconsin National Canoe Base in the early seventies, that we were shown a picture, I mean, shown the actual nest of the last pair of breeding ospreys in the Midwest. I still have that picture. It was profound to me that we could have screwed things up so badly that such a majestic bird would be, you know, on the edge of extinction.

Paul Swacina [00:07:11] And everywhere I've gone in the world since, it always makes me feel glad to see the osprey because it's recovered. And, you know, it's one of the most widely ranging birds in the world. In almost every place that I've been there, where there's been fish and fishing, you know, it's going to be good if there's an osprey sitting there. I mean, it's just a wonderful omen, you know, from my childhood to be anywhere in the world and see those ospreys, because you know there's going to be fish. And, you know, the fishery is intact to some extent because the ospreys are able to survive there.

David Todd [00:07:52] This is great, really interesting. And, you know, one thing that I think I saw from what you sent me earlier, as a little text about some of your background, and then what you've told me just now is that your family, and then I think as you've grown up, have both had a lot of interest in travel, and in seeing the natural world. And I was wondering, is there any particular trips, like the one to Yellowstone to see the bears on the hood, that also stand out to you? Because it sounds like you did some, and have continue to do trips into the backcountry, really wild places. Are there any trips like that you can tell about?

Paul Swacina [00:08:34] Yeah, you know, we did canoe trips up in the Wisconsin area when I was a very small child. When we came down, we did hikes in Big Bend. And I can tell you that every time I go to Big Bend to this day, it smells special to me. There's a something in the, in the in the desert in Big Bend that has a unique smell that, that just reminds me of my childhood, of doing some of those hikes.

Paul Swacina [00:09:04] I wasn't very, very old. And so, I didn't get to do the Lost My Trail or any of those hikes. But I've been back with my son and we've done hikes there and we've floated the river.

Paul Swacina [00:09:17] We did some trips into Yellowstone multiple times. When we moved from Berwyn, Illinois, in 1976, my dad had a new job in Pocatello, Idaho, and in Pocatello is where I really began doing wilderness trips of my own. I had been on some scout high adventure trips in Wisconsin. I had done a very eye-opening canoe trip in the Boundary Waters area with my older brother and a bunch of his college friends, and learned that none of them knew much about canoeing. And I was, I had my canoeing merit badge, so I was the canoeing expert.

Paul Swacina [00:10:07] But, the problem was I was so small and all these, I couldn't carry the canoe on the portages. So my brother ended up having to carry that canoe, and I carried a couple of the backpacks. But when we moved to Idaho, Idaho was a wonderful place in that about 85% of it is public land. And so my dad had found a friend for me out there who was into backpacking and fishing and he and I (his name was Dan Newell), and Dan and I would take, I'd picked out a four wheel drive Blazer for us to have out there. We bought it in Chicago. I picked it out and my dad and I used that, and I still have it somewhere up in Missouri. But I still drive a Tahoe, which is the current configuration.

Paul Swacina [00:10:56] And, we would just take off on weekends with a backpack and go into the mountains as far as we could go. And we'd take a fishing rod and explore. And, you know, I still love Idaho. I still love going back into the mountains and exploring new areas and seeing those things.

Paul Swacina [00:11:20] And, of course, these days I do that mostly up in British Columbia, where I have a cabin that's about as remote as you can drive to in North America. It's about an hour by gravel road off the Cassiar Alaskan highway, and it's about 2 hours from Alaska. And

it's incredibly remote. Wonderful place to, to spend the month of September, which I have done the last ten years or so.

Paul Swacina [00:11:53] But, yeah, those early trips were the ones that I really think, like most activities, if you learned early to camp and be comfortable in the outdoors and be prepared. You know, I learned early not only to prepare for myself, but to prepare for my companions.

Paul Swacina [00:12:11] And, in preparation for this, I looked at some old pictures. I could see some pictures where I had friends of mine that didn't know what they were doing. And they're wearing my clothes. You know, I'm wearing the insulator on an old field jacket that my brother who was in the military had given me. But I'm wearing the liner, and the other guy is wearing the jacket. And I always had this tendency that I learned early from scouts to be prepared - that being prepared for me always meant bringing extra gear for everybody, because so many people didn't have that opportunity to learn to camp and to hike.

Paul Swacina [00:12:52] And, probably the best thing that happened to me was during the the ordeal process of the Order of the Arrow, they tap you out and they take you, essentially blindfolded, and you have to survive the night on your own. And I remember that experience well. And it's, it's helped me because there's been many times I've gotten lost or disoriented, and I've never, I've seen panic, but I've never panicked, you know. And so it's an important lesson in wilderness travel that, that you understand that, that panic is there and that you don't succumb to it. And so having those early experiences, and not being afraid of being out overnight on your own, or being lost, you know, it's, it's just, it's saved my life many times.

David Todd [00:13:49] Wow.

David Todd [00:13:51] Well, it sounds like a lot of your exposure and education about the natural world has maybe just been a hands-on, up-close, in-the-backwoods kind of education.

David Todd [00:14:02] But, I'm curious if you also might have had teachers or classmates in school who might have given you some sort of book learning about the natural world and conservation?

Paul Swacina [00:14:16] Yes. You know what I went to, when we moved to Idaho, there was a biology teacher at our high school that Dan and I were good friends with. He was a hunting companion. He was a birder extraordinaire, and his name was Mr. Jeppson is what we called him. I think he may have had a Ph.D., but he didn't, he didn't use it. And he was also a wonderful taxidermist.

Paul Swacina [00:14:42] And so, we did multiple conservation projects with the high school club, you know, replanting after brush fires. He had been contracted to find the booming grounds of the sage grouse out in the Arco desert. And he would, you know, take us out on expeditions there. And he and Dan, when I went away to college in Texas, they made me feel bad because they would send me pictures of mountain sheep hunting. You know, they both, I guess my freshman year, they went up and they both, on a, on a self-guided trip, they'd drawn tags and both gone up into the, into the Big Lost River Range in Idaho, where we had enjoyed backpacking. And they both killed legal rams, and at Christmas time that year, we, we had wild sheep for a meal at their house and it was great, it was great experience.

Paul Swacina [00:15:49] And, scouting was a, was a, yup, I had a wonderful scoutmaster named Mr. Nelson, Monty Nelson. And he believed specifically in the scouting method, which was empower the boys to lead themselves, and be in charge. And so he was one of the early people that I met that saw something in me, and I was picked out by him to be the patrol leader for his son and a group of scouts that he was kind of grooming.

Paul Swacina [00:16:25] I was the first one to earn an Eagle Scout at that troop in 20 or 30 years. My brothers had tried, but they just did not have the support of someone like Mr. Nelson. And so I was the first Eagle Scout in the oldest troop west of the Ohio River, that was one year less than scouting. And unfortunately, I moved right about the time that, that I earned the Eagle Scout. But almost all of those guys that I had helped trained, earned their Eagle as well. And, they went to Philmont.

Paul Swacina [00:16:58] I missed the trip, but Philmont was a, I'd gone back with my son, and Philmont is a wonderful high-adventure place for, for the scout training. The best, probably the best thing I learned about from Scouts is I tried a bunch of things I would have never tried otherwise, especially in the outdoors. There was a time when I had, I was camping, in Scouts, in the Chicago area, you know, 50 nights a week, sixty nights a week, not a week, a year. And, you know, almost every weekend we'd have two-night overnights.

Paul Swacina [00:17:33] And Mr. Nelson taught me that you never learned a skill until you could teach it to somebody. And so the, you know, the leaders, boy-leaders of the troop would learn various skills from the adults. And then it was our job to teach the rest of the kids those skills, whether it was orienteering, use of a map and compass, or fire-building or lashing and knot work. You know, all of those things you learned to do, so you could teach that skill to somebody else. And, by learning the skill well enough to teach it, you really mastered it. And that was an important thing that I still ... you know, I'm learning, I'm trying to learn how to surf cast right now.

Paul Swacina [00:18:28] And, it's a frustrating process. But I'm not afraid to try, you know, new things and fail, and continue to learn until I get good at something. And it just takes patience and it takes persistence. But, but it'll come, if you, if you stick with it.

David Todd [00:18:46] Well, it's wonderful to hear about Mr. Nelson and Mr. Jeppson and, you know, the folks that helped teach you these things that you could teach others.

David Todd [00:18:55] I am curious also: some of the people we talked to had a lot of exposure to the outside world, not, not through the kind of hands on experience that you had, but through reading about it, seeing it on TV, seeing it in movies. Was that true for you?

Paul Swacina [00:19:15] Yes. Yes. I was a big fan of Ernest Hemingway as a child. I enjoyed his books. In fact, I went to the International Hemingway conference this summer because it was it in Wyoming and Montana, and it was a good opportunity and it was on the way up to British Columbia. So I have an enduring love of the outdoors, and Hemingway in particular.

David Todd [00:19:39] Were these like the early, the Nick Adams, stories?

Paul Swacina [00:19:43] Oh, yes, Big Two-Hearted River, it's still my favorite story that Hemingway wrote. He could have just written that story, and he would still have an incredible place, I think, in sporting and American literature. It's just such a perfect story. And it encompasses, you know, for example, the Big Two-Hearted River, a lot of people don't catch it,

but, but he is describing a very effective, you know, catch-and-release technique. You know, he wets his hands before he handles the fish. And just like all of Hemingway, he doesn't make a big deal out of it. There's no signposting or highlighting of the catch-and-release ethic.

Paul Swacina [00:20:28] But most people don't think of Hemingway as a sportsman in that way. But, you know, he was the founder of the International Game Fish Association. He was a conservationist from the beginning. And I have a connection to him because my grandmother was a patient of his father in Oak Park, Illinois. And so, we always felt, you know, that we knew the Hemingways even though, and they lived 40 blocks away. I'd never met them until this recent conference, anybody in the family.

Paul Swacina [00:20:59] But Jack Hemingway, Ernest's son, who was a spectacular angler - many, many of my friends have fished with him over the years, and were, were deeply touched by him.

Paul Swacina [00:21:13] And, I have to say, when we moved to Idaho, I didn't, I hadn't caught a trout. And we went up to Sun Valley, and there's a little park dedicated to Ernest Hemingway. And in that park, when I was 16 years old, I caught my first rainbow trout on a fly right there at the Ernest Hemingway Park. And many of my travels over the years, I have been, I don't want to say in imitation of Hemingway's travels, but they definitely, his traveling and his wandering around the world, so to speak, and enjoying adventures certainly influenced me and my reading.

Paul Swacina [00:21:54] And I do think that, you know, I didn't, I don't hunt as much as he did, but I certainly fish as much or more than he did. And in some ways, his son Jack is more of an inspiration because he was so influential in Idaho, being the commissioner of the Idaho Fish and Game for years, setting aside wonderful parks and preserves. So the Hemingway legacy, you know, I still feel very indebted to.

Paul Swacina [00:22:21] But I also you know, I was a huge reader. I loved books. I thought I was going to be a theoretical physicist at one point because I loved Albert Einstein. Yet at another point I wanted to be Socrates, and I did end up going to graduate school in philosophy. And I still think that Socrates is one of the most fascinating characters, you know, that has ever existed, especially in Western literature.

Paul Swacina [00:22:50] But I love novels, I love non-fiction. I was a big, big reader. Somehow, I don't remember who of my parents' friends, found out I liked the outdoors. And so, I have, I had stacks of "Outdoor Life" and "Field and Stream", and I would, you know, love all those adventures that they describe in there, especially the one-page story of the real-life guy or gal who is on some death-defying bear attack that they survive or whatever. I find those to be quite entertaining.

Paul Swacina [00:23:25] And, then, as a family, we would gather around the TV and watch Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. We would watch Jacques Cousteau's deep sea adventures, and I remember those vividly as a child and enjoyed them thoroughly.

Paul Swacina [00:23:43] We went to zoos and aquariums as well as the national parks. Chicago was blessed with a whole series of, especially the Brookfield Zoo. I used to go to it at least once or twice a month. They had a day that was free and we could get on our bicycles and go over there, and spend the day at the Zoo. And, you know, that was a great zoo. It had, you know, both marine mammals and penguins and all kinds of Plains game. And I was mostly

interested in American mammals, was my first love, and then birds. But that was a great place to explore, and I've gone back there a few times. It's a world-class zoo.

Paul Swacina [00:24:30] And so, yes, there was a bunch of things as a child that I enjoyed and even continue to this day. I, I go back to the zoos. And I understand that people have concerns about it. But for example, our, our local aquarium, I was a volunteer diver and I've had shark experiences in the tanks when I was diving. You know, you look up, and the shark doesn't seem happy, you know, and you've got to figure out, okay, well, now might be time to exit the tank now, because the sand tiger shark is circling you and she's got the pelvic fins down. It doesn't, looks like it's, it's not that right time of the month to be in this tank. She's, she's not happy that you're here. So, you kind of sneak up the wall and crawl out.

Paul Swacina [00:25:22] So yeah, I think all of those experiences, you know, that I did with my son as well, we went to zoos and parks and museums and, and they're wonderful learning opportunities.

David Todd [00:25:35] Well, it sounds like you have the curiosity and the stamina to do all this. It's great.

David Todd [00:25:45] Well, so the next question I thought I might ask is, is just to get into your career, you know, you've worked as an attorney. Do you find that there's any overlap between your day job and then all these hobbies and curiosities that you've got. Or are those two very separate lives?

Paul Swacina [00:26:07] No. You know, the great thing about Corpus Christi is we have a very active group. I mean, I don't think people come to Corpus if they're not interested in the outdoors. I originally came here to be the sailing instructor at the Corpus Christi Yacht Club, and I did that for two summers. And I met a whole crew of sailors and fishermen and had an immediate entree into the town when I moved here after law school in 1985.

Paul Swacina [00:26:40] And, many of those folks, like Bob Wallace and Robert Corrigan, were active in the Coastal Conservation Association. It was called GCCA back then, the Gulf Coast Conservation Association, and Ducks Unlimited, and, you know, the hunting and fishing organizations. They had big banquets, said I was on the boards. I didn't particularly enjoy the banquets that much, other than the, you know, I didn't like the auctions particularly, but I knew they were necessary to raise funds. But I enjoyed, you know, the camaraderie and the connections and would buy or donate trips in several of those banquets.

Paul Swacina [00:27:21] And, I got fairly involved in CCA, and then there was a bit of a falling out locally. And I got involved with the Coastal Bend Bays Foundation and was on the board, and president of that. And then we started the Coastal Bend Land Trust. And I also was a life member of Trout Unlimited.

Paul Swacina [00:27:46] And, all of those organizations have a legal component, and my legal skills were often used either formally or informally. I'd never filed a lawsuit on behalf of any of those organizations. But I did, for example, work on the minimum flow committee for Trout Unlimited to negotiate the relicensing of the Canyon Dam, and to try to establish minimum flows below the dam to maintain the trout fishery there.

Paul Swacina [00:28:19] And, I worked with Bob Wallace on the freshwater inflows into the Nueces Bay and did a lot of work in the land trust area. I wrote a little landowner's manual,

kind of an introduction of what a land trust, what a donation to the land trust, an easement, how to value it, and what the tax benefits would be.

Paul Swacina [00:28:51] And so, yeah, I think that, that first of all, many of the lawyers I know in town are sportsmen. And so we, there's a bond there that, that transcends, you know, fighting in the courtroom. And many of them have worked on a lot of these projects.

Paul Swacina [00:29:10] And, there's seems to inevitably be things that overlap, you know, where your legal skills come in handy to gather land conservation easements, and to work with landowners, and to work with governmental entities to, to help with greenbelt issues.

Paul Swacina [00:29:33] And so, yeah, I found that I wasn't actively involved in litigation on behalf of conservation organizations, but I did do a lot of work on projects in which the legal training came in handy.

David Todd [00:29:50] Gotcha. Okay.

David Todd [00:29:52] Well, I think there's a theme of curiosity about all kind of aspects of the natural world. And I believe you too long ago became a Master Naturalist. I was wondering how you might have gotten involved in that and why.

Paul Swacina [00:30:08] Yeah, you know, I ran into a few Master Naturalists when I was working with the Coastal Bend Bays Foundation, and it was clear to me ... You know, I had been in graduate school and it was clear to me that the Master Naturalist program was like getting a master's degree in nature, which is why, you know, they call you a master naturalist. And there's a correlation there to me. You take 40 hours of training and you commit to several hours of volunteer work.

Paul Swacina [00:30:46] And, I struggled because the Corpus Christi area, the program, was not very welcoming. They didn't have the class very often. There's an introductory class that you have to sign up for, and you have to complete, and then you have to complete a certain number of volunteer hours. And they were, they had the class very infrequently in Corpus.

Paul Swacina [00:31:11] And, when I moved to Victoria in 2011, I had already contacted that chapter about doing their class because it was not very far away, over at Rockport, but the class was always full and they wouldn't take me because I wasn't living in the area. So I think one of the reasons I decided to move to Victoria is I knew that I might be able to get into that class. It was also to take a good job.

Paul Swacina [00:31:41] But, but I did struggle even there to get in on the class. Because I, the first time I contracted them, it was full. I asked them to put me on the waiting list. A year went by and I called them up and said, "Hey, I haven't heard from you guys." They said, "Oh, sorry, we we've already filled the class." So it took me three years before I finally got in. I think it was around 2014 that I completed the training and it was just eye-opening - a wonderful experience, strongly recommended.

Paul Swacina [00:32:10] My sister did it and ended up with a husband out of it. And one of her instructors, her birding instructor, they ended up falling in love and getting married.

Paul Swacina [00:32:20] And, it is a wonderful thing. And I wish people of all ages would do it, but especially those that are approaching retirement age, because essentially what it teaches you is the intricacies of all of the local volunteer opportunities.

Paul Swacina [00:32:41] And, by that I mean, for example, the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, we had a, oh, I'm blanking on his name, but, but the guy that wrote the book on the Refuge. Oh, Dr. McAllister, Dr. McAllister is the one that taught us. You know, we spent a half a day in class learning about the history of the Refuge, and the animals and plants. And then he took us on a field trip of the Refuge itself. And then later on we took a boat trip over to Matagorda Island with him, and did hands-on conservation work.

Paul Swacina [00:33:17] And then, once you did that, you were you were eligible to then work as volunteer staff at the refuge. And, you know, I used to do the bus tours. I would drive the bus and give the lecture. You know, they had a course where you went and learned how to take the people that were visitors on the bus through various stops at the refuge. And at several of the different area conservation locations, you know - the state park, the Welder Wildlife Refuge, the UTMSI - all of them have a day where you do a half-day of class and a half-day of field work, and then you become eligible to be a volunteer there.

Paul Swacina [00:34:07] And, as a matter of fact, I'm still, next week I'm doing the Christmas bird count at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. I was in my training, I think in 2014, I'd never been to a Christmas bird count, and I found out that they weren't going to have one. First time in 60 years, that they weren't going to have a bird count, and so I volunteered to do it, and I've been stuck with it ever since.

Paul Swacina [00:34:31] But, you know, that count started in the 1930s. I mean, Connie Hager used to be the compiler for it, and nobody would do it. They were frustrated with, you know, working with the Refuge. It does take a lot of patience, but it's, you know, we're going to have access to 48,000 non-public acres, you know, to do the bird count on next Thursday. And it's just a wonderful opportunity for people to get out and bird in an area that's just as remote and wild as you're going to find in Texas.

David Todd [00:35:07] That's great. Wow.

David Todd [00:35:08] Well, it sounds like you've had your finger in many, many pots and pies.

David Todd [00:35:15] And, one last thing I thought I might ask you before we get into talking about the tarpon is that it's interesting how you have kind of participate in every way you can interact with the outdoors, from hunting to fishing to birding, and I was wondering, you know, what kind of meaning that brings to you. Why you do this? It's often not, you know, local or easy to do, and you got to have all the gear and be prepared, as you pointed out. But so, it must be important to you.

Paul Swacina [00:35:51] Yeah, it really is. I can say, for example, today, you know, I got up early and I like to walk on the seawall and watch the sunrise. To me, nature is just incredibly gorgeous. There's not a sunrise or sunset that is disappointing to me. I mean, there are some that are not very spectacular because it's cloudy, or there is some other issues. But, but being able to enjoy every day, and being able to be observant of the sunrises and the sunsets and the moonrises. And also this morning, I was getting ready. You know, I'd done a surf-casting

lesson on Wednesday. There's another one tomorrow. I have tried to cast practice yesterday and I screwed up the gear.

Paul Swacina [00:36:37] And so, to me there's a problem-solving part of it as well. And I find that those activities are, you know, I'm not, I love music, but I don't play an instrument very well. And I've tried for many years, but I have found that I do feel like that my hunting and fishing and birdwatching and hiking, that those are ways for me to express myself in the natural environment, which I find to be almost like art. I mean, I, I view life as a way to express yourself and to be artful.

Paul Swacina [00:37:16] And, the great thing about those skills are they're, they're old, and they're practical. Learning how to catch a fish, learning how to, how to get something to eat, whether it's by fishing or hunting, is, it just connects you to the outdoors in ways that just looking doesn't.

Paul Swacina [00:37:37] And I enjoy cooking and so, last weekend, I caught some pompano. You know, I was eating fresh pompano. And, you know, for every meal, you know, I made pompano omelets, I made pompano tacos, and I made baked pompano for dinner. And there's, to me, there's just something special about harvesting something wild from nature, doing it in a respectful way, and then eating it and having it, a part of it, sustaining you. That's what we've done as a species back as far as we go.

David Todd [00:38:18] That's a, that's a really wonderful insight that there is this sort of age-old connection between our life and the wildlife that surrounds us.

David Todd [00:38:28] And, you know, one of the creatures that I was hoping to talk to you about is this Atlantic tarpon, which is, is a very ancient species, I think, as you pointed out. And, you know, there's a lot of history to it. And I was hoping that you might be able to give us a quick introduction to the, to the fish's life history and then this special ecological niche that it fills.

Paul Swacina [00:38:56] Yeah, absolutely. You know, the tarpon are the glamour species of, for fishermen, I believe. I've never met anyone that caught a tarpon that won't probably bore you with, with the story of its first contact. And so I don't think we really catch tarpon; I think tarpon catch us. They're just such a spectacular sport fish.

Paul Swacina [00:39:22] And, I, I was inspired by the first tarp that we caught. And I actually, I, we had two that hooked up, and I didn't, we didn't realize they were tarpon. And I handed it off to one of my good friends, and he actually landed the first tarpon I was involved with catching, and, you know, I pulled him into the boat.

Paul Swacina [00:39:44] And, back then, we could keep up and it was a big one. It was a 90-pounder. We'd accidentally caught it. And we took several pictures on the back of the boat. And I was hooked.

Paul Swacina [00:39:55] And, tarpon, to me, they're a fascinating species. You know, they're hundreds of million years old. I tell fishing guides, when we're getting frustrated, you know, you have to understand that this species was avoiding Megalodon, you know, back 100 million years ago. These, us running around in a boat, casting a fly at them, is not particularly something that's even on their radar. They're aware we're here, but, but they don't really care. I mean, they go so far back in time, it's like catching a dinosaur. It's just so interesting.

Paul Swacina [00:40:36] And, they're so mysterious. You know, anything that that we deal with that's migratory, you know, to me inspires ... you know, I'm migratory. I go spend summers in Canada, the winters in south Texas. And so that migratory impulse, I think it's in my family. My grandparents did it: they went from Chicago to Brownsville.

Paul Swacina [00:40:57] The tarpon do it. And it's, it's so fascinating because we know so little about them. And here they are. You know, we share the planet with them. And millions of sportsmen, you know, are in love with them.

Paul Swacina [00:41:15] And yet we don't really know, so far as I know, at this point, there has not been a scientifically described fertilized tarpon egg. We can't grow them in hatcheries. We don't understand their spawning behavior. We know that they do spawning aggregations along the coast in Texas off of Port O'Connor, that they are laid up in Espiritu Santo Bay. Big females come up in the spring and then are joined in the migration by males later on, and they begin pre-spawning activities and then they disappear off-shore.

Paul Swacina [00:41:59] And, we have no clue, even with the satellite tags, exactly where it's going, or what's going on, or where it happens, because we just don't have the resources or time to go out and chase the ball down.

David Todd [00:42:25] [I think I'm losing your connection. Are you close to your computer still?]

Paul Swacina [00:42:34] They're, definitely, I think what, what happens is, and this is what the research seems to indicate, is that they thrive on storm events. The, the fertilized eggs and the leptocephalus, and the fingerling tarpon in storm surges get washed into these freshwater estuaries and mangrove areas and grow up there and thrive. And they don't, not, unlike a lot of fish. They don't have a regular spawning cycle where you have the same number of fish surviving to adulthood.

Paul Swacina [00:43:16] They're, they're extremely long-lived, into the eighties and nineties, perhaps, in the wild. And they don't need to have a successful spawn every year. They could have successful spawns, you know, on these particular events it seems, and still have a thriving population, if they're left alone.

Paul Swacina [00:43:38] But they're a fascinating species. And the best thing about them is, is that they're capable of being caught, you know, on flies and light tackle, that they jump spectacularly. And if you, if you've ever hooked to a tarpon and listened to it jump, it's the only species of fish I know of that when they jump, their scales rattle and make a very distinctive, exciting sound, you know, that this is just not anything normal.

Paul Swacina [00:44:07] It's, it's like to be it's the same sound as a, or it has the same effect as when an elk bugles and I've got a bow and I'm chasing an elk around in the black timber, and I know they're there and I can smell them, but then they bugle and it just raises the hair on the back of your neck.

Paul Swacina [00:44:26] When you hook in to a tarpon and then it explodes on the fly, jumps, and it rattles its scales, you just go, "Oh man, I know I got a tarpon", and you know, there's no confusion with some other species. And, you know, you've got the silver king, which just is, it's, I think it's the greatest light tackle sport fish that we know of.

David Todd [00:44:47] Wow. High praise.

David Todd [00:44:50] Well, so you told us a little bit about their life history, and I was wondering if you could sort of help us pin down its, the niche that it fills in in its ecosystem. What do you think its role is?

Paul Swacina [00:45:05] You know, that's an interesting thing because, you know, my approach to tarpon was not really as a scientist because I'm not a scientist. My approach to tarpon was, you know, from a human perspective, and the niche that it played for Texas and sportsmen in Texas.

Paul Swacina [00:45:30] And, I remember in the nineties becoming very frustrated that there had been no effort to really find out why the tarpon fishery collapsed in the 1960s. And why is it that I can't go out and catch a tarpon, you know, every day off the jetties in Port Aransas, just like they did a hundred plus years ago?

Paul Swacina [00:45:55] And so, I wasn't so interested in the niche that it played in nature, because in many ways, that niche has changed, and the fish has remained the same because it's so old. I mean, it does what it does. And, but it's not, you know, an apex predator. It's a, it's a mid-level predator.

Paul Swacina [00:46:22] It has a migratory behavior, you know, and it lets us know that migration was a strategy that existed for millions and millions of years, presumably.

Paul Swacina [00:46:35] The great thing that the satellite tagging indicated to me was that when you looked at all the data, there was one element of the data that remained near-constant, and that was the temperature. Tarpon hang in a temperature range between 78 at 82 degrees, and everything else from salinity to depth to location, all of that changes. But the tarpon itself stays in that temperature zone, almost always.

Paul Swacina [00:47:14] And so, I don't think anyone's really explained why. The theory is that that's the perfect temperature for its own metabolism, being cold-blooded. You know, that's the optimal range for it.

Paul Swacina [00:47:28] Of course, it could also be that that's the optimal range for its prey species. And it, like other, you know, predators, is dependent on following the prey species. And the reason why it migrates is because its prey migrates.

Paul Swacina [00:47:44] And so, that's a fascinating part of the tarpon life history and biology, is it, is it adapted to a particular environment, or is it adapted to pursuing particular prey species, and that is what has driven its niche, so to speak? It is because it eats dusky anchovies, it eats a variety of small baitfish. It has adopted their lifestyle, because that's the most successful way for it to fill that niche.

Paul Swacina [00:48:21] So, that's a fascinating question that I don't know that we have clear answers on yet, but my perspective on it was I wanted to find out why I could go out and catch tarpon, a bunch of tarpon, and why, what happened in Port Aransas, and what could we do to make Port Aransas a world class tarpon fishery again? Not, you know, from an economic standpoint, but from, could we identify the factors that caused the collapse and have those

factors been changed and can they be changed? And so to me, the best way to do that is, you know, look and see what's been done as far as scientific research.

Paul Swacina [00:49:04] And unfortunately, at the time that I came up with the idea and started Tarpon Tomorrow I realized that there was very little tarpon research that had been done, almost all of it by Roy Crabtree.

Paul Swacina [00:49:20] There was less than ten published scientific papers. The ones of most interest were those four or five or six that were done by Roy Crabtree in Florida. There'd been nothing done for the scientific standpoint in Texas.

Paul Swacina [00:49:36] And, and I didn't realize that trying to figure out what happened in Port Aransas just really isn't that much of a scientific question, because it's a historical question. Scientists don't really have the tools to go back in history and test, you know, the different theories and see what, what comes up. It's more, you know, moving forward with research. And so we never were able to get a good handle that we could prove was the cause of the decline. But we'll see.

David Todd [00:50:10] Let's talk about the, before we talk about the decline, I think it would be interesting, I think you mentioned earlier that you were, of course, knowledgeable about the ecological niche that the fish held. But, but that you were interested in the niche that it sort of held in the fishing culture, the angler culture, community. And maybe you can talk just briefly about, about the sort of glory days of the tarpon fishery in the early to mid-part of the 20th century. That might be a good introduction before we start talking about its decline.

Paul Swacina [00:50:48] Sure.

David Todd [00:50:49] Would that be OK?

Paul Swacina [00:50:50] Absolutely. You know, as I indicated to you earlier, it's a little before my time. So I don't have first-hand knowledge of the tarpon fishery at the turn of the previous century, in the 1880s and 19 tens. I've read, you know, the accounts. And it's fascinating to me that that in the 19 tens and twenties and thirties that, I mean, Port Aransas, this was called Tarpon, Texas. The Deep Sea Roundup was the Tarpon Roundup. You know, presidents came to Port Aransas to tarpon fish.

Paul Swacina [00:51:29] There was a great set of photos. Doc McGregor is a, is a kind of a legendary figure in Corpus. He was an old chiropractor that had a shop that they had re-made at the local museum. And he had a series of cameras that he would rent out cameras, and he had a little photo development place there at his chiropractor shop. And he took literally millions of photos of Corpus Christi in the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties.

Paul Swacina [00:52:03] And, several of those photos are of tarpon fishermen. You know there were people catching tarpon off the L-Head and the T-Head in downtown Corpus Christi. There were people staying at the Tarpon Inn, going out, being towed out by a motorized craft in long chains of rowboats. And then their guide would throw them around and they would catch tarpon around the Port Aransas jetties.

Paul Swacina [00:52:36] And, you know, it was a destination fishery. It was a big deal to the people at the time. And what the reason why there is a fishery in Port Aransas, was for the tarpon, which is amazing, because it even then, it was, it was only a sport fish. It's pretty much

inedible and they were killed at the time for taking pictures. But early on, they were the subject of catch and release. And most of the people, except for those that wanted to take pictures, you know, caught them and released them. You know, nobody ate them.

Paul Swacina [00:53:16] And so, it's, it's kind of the definition of a sport fish, and that is, you know, you catch it for the sport, rather than to eat. And the clubs and the guides and the history that developed in Port Aransas is, is fascinating. I'm not an expert on it, but it certainly is in the shadows of Port Aransas, even to this day.

Paul Swacina [00:53:42] There are, you know, when the tarpon are in, and there are still a small amount of tarpon that come around the jetties and are in the surf. You know, there's, there's nothing in the fishing community that attracts more excitement than when the tarpon are in, and when people are catching them. But these days, there are some folks to target them out of Port Aransas, but most of the tarpon fishing in Texas is has moved on to either Port O'Connor or to Port Isabel.

Paul Swacina [00:54:11] And, there's a few guys I know that still do serious , you know, directed fishing for tarpon in Port Aransas, but really not anymore. But, you can still go to the Tarpon Inn, and you can engage in a conversation at any of the tackle shops, and they'll have old pictures of the tarpon, and the people in the shops will talk about the tarpon. And most of them, if they've, if they're a generation or two in Port Aransas, they will have had some connection, you know, to a grandfather or a great uncle who, you know, was a tarpon guide or was involved in taking people tarpon fishing.

Paul Swacina [00:54:54] So, it was a central part of the community. And I mean if we had caves in Port Aransas, there'd be, there would be pictures from the twenties and thirties of tarpon in the caves. You know, they were, they were that important to the lifeblood of the community.

David Todd [00:55:12] I love that - the paintings in the cave, sort of like Altamira or Lascaux.

Paul Swacina [00:55:17] Absolutely.

David Todd [00:55:17] These absolutely ancient fish with ancient fishermen. That's a, that's a wonderful analogy.

David Todd [00:55:23] Well, and I guess there would have been pictures of some of these ancient fishing guides. I'm really intrigued by the stories that you've, I think you've mentioned about Barney Farley, and some of the other early guides and the boats that they designed and built. Can you tell us anything about that?

Paul Swacina [00:55:43] Yeah. You know, we were lucky that once I got Tarpon Tomorrow up and running, I, I wanted to know more about it myself. So one of the focuses of the first Tarpon, International Tarpon Symposium that we had in Port Aransas, Texas, was to honor Barney Farley and the Farley family for the contributions that they had made.

Paul Swacina [00:56:06] And, there was a guy named Florida Roberts who, who there's an interesting book about. He came over from Florida, which is why he was called Florida Roberts. There was another Roberts family, but he was the Florida Roberts. And so they were honored, the families were. And several of them are still affiliated with Port Aransas. And

Florida Roberts grandson is a fishing guide, a wonderful guide there in Florida. And he came over.

Paul Swacina [00:56:34] And so, there was a lot of discussion, you know, of those early days, and of those early anglers. And, you know, back then, you know, most of those guys were able to take people out and they, you know, developed a series of wooden boats. When I started tarpon fishing and fishing off shore, fiberglass had replaced the wooden boats. But there were still some wooden Farleys around. I had some friends that bought one, and tried to get it, you know, to function, but it had not been kept up. And it was a, it struggled.

Paul Swacina [00:57:17] But the, you know, the sadly, those boats at the time that they were developed were, you know, the best thing going. But, wooden boats have to be maintained and they're are a lot of work.

Paul Swacina [00:57:35] And, in the early sixties, fiberglass replaced wooden boats. Fiberglass boats became the norm. That's what I bought was a fiberglass boat. And they were much easier to maintain. And, you know, the boat I had was built in the seventies and I kept it until the late aughts. And everything on it had been replaced. But the hull was solid. It was overbuilt, and it was a great boat.

Paul Swacina [00:58:05] The old wooden boats, unfortunately, there's just not many craftsmen that can maintain them, and they are subject to the elements and they deteriorate over time and they rot, and screws rust, and all of the problems that sea water especially when it's involving wood and motors.

Paul Swacina [00:58:35] It seems like wooden sailboats have survived better than wooden offshore boats in particular, because they just they don't go through the same problems that a motor creates for the boat.

Paul Swacina [00:58:48] But, those old Farley boats, they were beloved. You know, there are several at local museums. There's even still a Farley Boat Works. I don't know if it's connected to the family. I know of folks that have gone over there and built small wooden fishing skiffs that they put tiller drive motors on.

Paul Swacina [00:59:09] And so, the art of boat building has been preserved. The Farley name kind of lives on in the small skiffs, which are much easier to maintain and much less costly. But, but there was a type of boat that developed in Port Aransas for the tarpon fishery. And, surprisingly, these older skiffs that have continued to be built by hobbyists under the, you know, the Farley workshop name, are really more throwbacks to the old rowboats that they were to the Farley offshore boats.

Paul Swacina [00:59:50] But, but, they're, they're beautiful. And, they're, to me, they're more like sculptures. Same thing with the river drift boats. The wooden dories are just phenomenal. The ones I've been in, I've truly enjoyed. They're, they're wonderful to row. They're wonderful to ride in. But they're a lot of work.

Paul Swacina [01:00:11] And, and so, the day as a practical fishing tool that a wooden boat once occupied has just kind of passed.

David Todd [01:00:21] Yeah, well, I guess it's a, it's a rough and corrosive world out there for a wooden boat.

Paul Swacina [01:00:31] Well, I can tell you, I can't tell you, just as a side note, when I was a eight year old, my brother decided he was going to build a boat. So he and my dad built a wooden, marine plywood boat that they fiberglassed. And it had to be, we had to remove windows to get it out of the basement. And we used that boat for 40 years. And my brother finally sold it, you know, ten years ago or so.

Paul Swacina [01:00:56] But, it was complete. You know, the wood formed the core of what was essentially a fiberglass boat. And so that's why it was able to last so long. It was, you know, it was guys building a wooden boat but then they fiberglassed it. And so it had, it had the nice form of a wooden boat, but it didn't have the maintenance issues. So there is a way to kind of preserve that wooden boat tradition, which so many people love. But it's, it usually involves coating it in fiberglass.

David Todd [01:01:29] Yeah, well, I guess sort of a hybrid.

Paul Swacina [01:01:32] Right.

David Todd [01:01:33] So, speaking of traditions, there has been a a long, deep legacy of fishing tournaments off the Coastal Bend, Corpus Christi / Port Aransas area, that goes back, you said, I think, to some of these early tournaments that were about tarpon fishing - the Roundups. Can you tell me anything about what you know about those competitions?

Paul Swacina [01:02:02] Yeah. You know, I've participated in a lot of them over the years. You know, the good side of tarpon, of tournament fishing, you know, the tarpon tournaments, is they're often used as fundraisers for scholarship funds.

Paul Swacina [01:02:18] I know, for example, the, what's called the Roundup, Deep Sea Roundup, in Port Aransas, used to be the Tarpon Rodeo. It's put on by what's called the Boatmen's Association. And the Boatmen's Association is a group of professional captains that are organized, hopefully, you know, for the betterment of the community. And I think it does make them treat each other as peers rather than competitors.

Paul Swacina [01:02:50] And so, they host and participate in the Roundup. And the Roundup's purpose is to raise money, I think originally for scholarships for the members, but now I think it goes into a broader scholarship fund.

Paul Swacina [01:03:06] And, you know, I have used in tournaments and participated in tournaments that were emphasizing the conservation role. One tournament that I really liked where we did some tarpon fishing was the Boy Scout Backbone tournament. It was an invitational tournament in Florida. And I got to meet Curt Gowdy and all of these legendary fishing people. But, the great thing about the fishing community, especially tournaments, is it tends to attract, you know, a wide group of people. And as long as the money isn't too big and the competition too cutthroat, it can be a great social experience to me.

Paul Swacina [01:03:52] You know, one of my frustrations is as a, as a avid catch-and-release fisherman, except if I'm going to eat something, I do think that there are certain species that should not be killed, even for a tournament. And unfortunately, the tournament anglers have a difficult time balancing that sometimes.

Paul Swacina [01:04:14] And so, in Texas, we have, I would consider the Deep Sea Roundup to be a fun tournament. You know, there's no real prize money involved. There's, you know, you get recognition, you know, for being the best fisherman or the biggest fish, you know, for those couple of days.

Paul Swacina [01:04:33] But, many of the tournaments in Texas have, have grown into, I think, what you would call super-sized bass tournaments, where there's professional crews, professional boats. They've got hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions of dollars, at stake in prize money. And it gets pretty crazy at times.

Paul Swacina [01:04:53] And, you know, those are tournaments that I have participated in, but, but really don't anymore. They have a difficult time figuring out how to do a catch-and-release format without an observer on board. And so it can be relatively expensive to participate in that game. And usually, you know, requires, you know, big boats and professional crews.

Paul Swacina [01:05:22] And, and like I say, they can have a positive impact. There is a ongoing tarpon tournament, by invitation only, in the Port Aransas area, that David Alford put on originally during the Tarpon Tomorrow banner. But now I think he's changed the name a little bit.

Paul Swacina [01:05:44] And, the purpose of that tournament - it was catch-and-release. Scott Holt would come from UT Marine Science Institute with some satellite tags, and they would satellite, you know, everyone was kind of working together. When somebody found tarpon, they would radio everybody, and everybody would kind of go over and try to catch some more. And Scott would be there in a boat and you would pass the tarpon over to Scott, and he would surgically implant the satellite tag.

Paul Swacina [01:06:14] And these days, I think they, they've run out of satellite tags, or don't have the money for them and they're using more traditional what we call, "spaghetti tags".

Paul Swacina [01:06:24] But still, the idea of the tournament is to have fun, catch fish, release them, and get some scientific data on them. Either harvest the tag or plant the tag, and get length and girth and all of those things.

David Todd [01:06:39] Well, that's really interesting. Kind of a nice combination of sport and camaraderie and also some science.

David Todd [01:06:49] So, you know, from those heydays of the tarpon fishery, you know, back in the, I think you said the thirties, through maybe the early sixties, things have really declined, from what I understand. And there's some mystery about it. And I was wondering if you could talk to us about that, that, I guess, some people have termed it even a collapse of the tarpon fishery. Why do you think that happened? And what was the period of time that it was occurring?

Paul Swacina [01:07:20] Yeah. Let me let me make a quick correction. I said David Alfred. It's Scott Alford. I misspoke.

Paul Swacina [01:07:26] But yeah, that was my primary focus, in my tarpon work, was that historical problem of what caused the tarpon collapse in what appears to be the 1960s frame?

And I kind of posed that as the question for the initial Tarpon Symposium out in Port Aransas, that Tarpon Tomorrow did. We invited Roy Crabtree to come. And my goal of that Symposium was to double the published information, scientific information, on tarpon. And we did.

Paul Swacina [01:08:05] I think that at the time there was eight or nine, maybe ten, scientific papers that had been published, and we published ten as a part of that symposium. You know, but, but the science of that is, is such that it's, you know, it's a, it's broadly used because a lot of what we were doing was documenting what had happened. And I suppose that's scientific, but it's not really using the scientific method.

Paul Swacina [01:08:32] We went and, for example, around that time, I think as a result of that first Symposium, Joan Holt, at UT Marine Science Institute, did an analysis of the scales that had been removed by the sport fishermen who had stayed at the Tarpon Inn in Port Aransas. And in the lobby of the hotel, there's all these scales that were nailed on the wall and they had the weight and year that the fish was caught. And Joan arranged for a graduate student to catalog all of the scales, and the information on them.

Paul Swacina [01:09:15] And, what we suspected, because of the anecdotal evidence, that the collapse occurred in the mid sixties.

Paul Swacina [01:09:27] And, it's very difficult because there were so many changes going on in the mid-sixties, from the lack of freshwater inflow with the new dam on the Nueces River, to the increase in the shrimp fishery and its bycatch, to the oil and gas activity in Nueces Bay and the saltwater discharge that was, or brine discharge as it was called, and the hurricane that occurred in 1963 - hurricane Beulah - that wiped out a bunch of the, of the, of the old structures on the island itself.

Paul Swacina [01:10:06] And so, it was, it was, I don't think we ever got to a point where we figured out exactly which factors played what role.

Paul Swacina [01:10:14] But, what Joan was able to determine from an analysis of the scale samples, and the data that they contained, was that it didn't occur in one year. It occurred over a period of time. And what appears from the scale samples is that in the twenties, thirties, forties, and even into the fifties, there was a whole variety of sized fish, you know, fish that weighed fifty pounds, and fish that weighed 150 pounds, fish that weigh twenty pounds, and, you know, triple digits.

Paul Swacina [01:10:50] But, as the fishery moved into the 1960s, those smaller fish disappeared, and all that was being caught were the large female fish. And that's a classic sign of a collapse of a nursery area, and, and that the, there's not enough recruitment going into the, the brood stock to maintain the population.

Paul Swacina [01:11:16] And that's the classic example of where things collapse, when those spawning females die off, the whole fishery collapses because there's nobody there to replace it.

Paul Swacina [01:11:28] So, once she determined that, we decided that Ivonne Blandon, who was doing the genetic work for Texas Parks and Wildlife, had connections, as did Wes Tunnell at Corpus Christi, through the Coastal Studies Program down at Veracruz, Mexico. And we knew that Veracruz, Mexico, at least anecdotally, had this history in the Panuco River and in

the other rivers that flowed into the Gulf down in Veracruz, that there had been a net fishery that was capturing all size tarpon and killing them, and using them for fertilizer.

Paul Swacina [01:12:16] And, that had been the story that I was given, you know, in the eighties about what had caused the collapse in the sixties was they got netted out in Mexico.

Paul Swacina [01:12:27] So, we decided to not only investigate that, but to also encourage that, if it still was going on, to end. And so, we set up a Tarpon Symposium in Veracruz and went down there and, you know, confirmed that, that there had been activity like that in the sixties, and also confirmed that tarpon were now given a sport fish status. They were not being netted. They were occasionally being killed in tournaments. And we encouraged that to end.

Paul Swacina [01:13:08] One of the most interesting things that I thought that, from a conservation standpoint, that I learned from the Symposium was there was a couple of guys from Ascension Bay on the Yucatan Peninsula and they had been commercial fishermen.

Paul Swacina [01:13:25] And, there is a program where the Nature Conservancy went down and trained these guys to be fly-fishing guides, and they converted from a commercial fisherman to a fly-fishing guide in the Yucatan Peninsula in this Sian Ka'an biosphere. And they, on their own dime, had bought bus tickets and rode to Veracruz, because they wanted to speak at the Symposium and talk to the guys in Veracruz and tell them, "Look, you make a whole lot more money taking rich gringos out fly-fishing than you ever will as a commercial fisherman".

Paul Swacina [01:14:05] And, they explained to me through a translator, because I don't speak Spanish, that it was life-changing for them. You know, their kids ended up in college, whereas they barely could feed their family. They end up going into the middle class, and which there isn't much of a middle class in Mexico. But fly-fishing guides in Mexico are middle class guys. And they were so enamored of it, that they came up to the Symposium and did a presentation, you know, on their own dime, on the bus.

Paul Swacina [01:14:36] You know, it was great.

Paul Swacina [01:14:38] So, the, the collapse, I think, was multiple factors. I think clearly the netting in Mexico played a strong role, we think because the fish that we have in Texas are migratory. They're only here in the summer when the water's between 78, 82 degrees, basically. This time of year, they're pretty much gone. You might find a few juveniles trapped up in, you know, freshwater areas. But for the most part, all the migratory fish are back in the Veracruz area and the satellite tagging has confirmed all that.

Paul Swacina [01:15:14] And, we were able to do a lot of satellite tagging in Veracruz because that's, you want to put these tags on, you know, in the area where you think the nursery is.

David Todd [01:15:27] Okay.

David Todd [01:15:28] Well, we should talk about some of the science and technology that you all were applying later.

David Todd [01:15:37] I did want to just visit with you a little bit while we're talking about Tarpon Tomorrow and the Symposia to find out, you know, if there's anything more you want

to say about Tarpon Tomorrow, but then also to discuss some of these other non-profits that I think have, you know, sort of taken up the banner of a lot of the concerns and interests that Tarpon Tomorrow had. I think you've been involved with Texas Tarpon Collaborative and others. So maybe we can discuss that.

Paul Swacina [01:16:09] Yeah, absolutely. Tarpon Tomorrow was essentially my idea. And I went to the IGFA where I had some contacts through the Nature Conservancy and other things that I'd done. And when we had our symposium about six months later, what's now called BTT, but then was called the Bone Fish and Tarpon Foundation, BTF, they, they had symposiums at the IGF world headquarters and museum. And, you know, I was actively involved in angling in Florida. I had a buddy that lived there and I would go there a couple of times a year and I would go to the museum. And several of the folks were friends of mine from Texas. And so we decided early on that it was, it was not necessary to, to have a Texas effort and a Florida effort. We needed to do an international effort. And so we tried to coordinate that as best we could, primarily through the IGFA there in Florida.

Paul Swacina [01:17:21] And, as we did that, we found out that the folks in Texas were not inclined to raise money and give it to a bunch of folks in Florida. So there, there is a sense that, you know, if it goes to Florida, it stays in Florida. And part of that goes back to the history of conservation groups overall. You know, there, early on, there was a, you know, the banquets that we would have, for example, for CCA, you know, we would raise a half a million dollars in one night and we would send it to Houston, where the home office was, so to speak. And very little of that money came back to Corpus Christi.

Paul Swacina [01:18:09] So, in the, I think, the late nineties, many of the guys that were very active in that banquet and raising the money, decided to have a local group, and that became SCA, and they would raise \$500,000 or more at a banquet, and it would stay here and be done on projects here rather than going to Houston and Houston deciding what, if any, of that money would come back.

Paul Swacina [01:18:35] Well, the same thing kind of happened with Tarpon Tomorrow. I originally wanted to just, you know, have one organization under the auspices of the International Game Fish Association and, and they wanted to do that, too. And so they put me on the board of the Bonefish and Tarpon Foundation, what's, what's become the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust. And so I was on the original board of directors for them, but I realized I really couldn't just roll this into the IGFA because there was a strong interest in the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries program and in CCA and others to have a Texas-oriented program to buy our own tags, to place them in Texas, and to piggyback, to some extent, on the research going on in Florida, but to have a Texas focus that allowed us to raise money in Texas and keep it in Texas.

Paul Swacina [01:19:40] And so, I kept Tarpon Tomorrow going, and it became kind of the Texas branch of BTT. And eventually Scott Alfred got a hold of me to do the tournament to raise money and put satellite tags in. And we were having to share tags with Florida. And those guys would bring tags over for us at times. And so it was it was complicated primarily by regional politics, I guess you would say.

Paul Swacina [01:20:14] Eventually, I rolled the Tarpon Tomorrow activities in Texas into the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries program, which had been the primary funder of the effort in Texas, and then Scott put together kind of a different name for the tournament. And then there's been other people that organized tarpon efforts focused on what it is they wanted to

raise money for and to concentrate on. And so there's been several of those, and many of those reached out to me and I've been supportive of them because it's an easy fish to raise money for, and it's an easy fish to get people's attention because it's a glamour species.

David Todd [01:21:04] Okay. Well, that is really interesting. And it's, it's you know, the fish is one thing, but organizations are a whole 'nother kettle of fish, so to speak. And I admire you for your persistence and patience with the whole, you know, non-profit world. It can be really complicated, I'm sure.

Paul Swacina [01:21:25] Well, I'm sure that you're speaking from experience. I'm almost certain that the bureaucracy of your project, and almost any project from the heart like you're doing with this one, is, is laced by layers of complications.

David Todd [01:21:45] Yeah, well, there are turf wars everywhere.

Paul Swacina [01:21:49] Yes.

David Todd [01:21:49] And, I'm impressed by how much you've gotten done, you know, with lots of different organizations. And one of the things that I thought was intriguing is that there's just been this long emphasis for you in the sort of science of tarpon and understanding more about its life. I was really curious if you could talk to us a little bit about the tagging. I mean, you mentioned Scott Holt's work with you. Can you sort of dive into that a little bit more so we understand what it was you were trying to learn and what you found out?

Paul Swacina [01:22:26] Yeah. You know, I had been influenced ... The Craighead brothers were the guys that originally started radio tagging, and they used it in the grizzly bear studies in Yellowstone. And I had researched it, and was familiar with that effort in the late sixties and early seventies. Eventually, the battery technology and the satellites and the miniaturization, the digitization of these devices was such that they were basically the size of a cigar.

Paul Swacina [01:23:05] And, by the, by the early aughts, you could, for about \$5,000, you could get one of these devices and you could implant it on a, the original ones you paid about \$5,000, you could implant it, usually using a very, very minor surgery because it was such an expensive piece of equipment. And it would be a pop-off tag, they called it. It would stay on the fish for six months. It was unable to broadcast data, but it would collect data and be re-programmed. But you didn't want to do it too often because you didn't want to wear out the battery.

Paul Swacina [01:23:56] So, so the whole endeavor was limited to, you know, the data-gathering, was limited by how much battery capacity you had and how much data capacity you could store.

Paul Swacina [01:24:08] And, you would put this \$5,000 tag on the fish. And it had to be a pretty good-sized fish because it's dragging around a cigar-sized piece of equipment. It would pop off it. Then you it would send out a homing signal for a while. And when it popped off, it went to the surface and started to send a homing signal. You could collect an abbreviated, if you actually could go and retrieve the tag, you could collect a great deal more data when you downloaded the device.

Paul Swacina [01:24:42] And then, these early tags, you could replace the battery, clear the the data storage, and use them again. And it would only cost about \$2,000 to refurbish them and use them again.

Paul Swacina [01:24:57] So, most of our early, we decided based on that first tarpon symposium, that what we really needed to do was get data and that satellite tagging was the way to do it. And we focused our fundraising efforts and our, most of our, scientific efforts at getting tags in fish, recovering the tags, and then analyzing the data.

Paul Swacina [01:25:21] And, Jon Shenker at the University of Miami. No, Jon wasn't at, Jon was at Florida Tech, I think. Jerry Ault was at University of Miami. Jerry and Jon kind of took the lead on this and they would even come over to Texas when we did our tarpon-tagging tournaments to help put on the tags and do all those things.

Paul Swacina [01:25:48] And, and so, there weren't very many tags initially because there just wasn't much of a manufacturing capacity, and they were expensive and you didn't always find them.

Paul Swacina [01:26:02] Later on, there became archival tags which would continuously broadcast, you know, from the tag itself. And so there's been multiple generations of tags.

Paul Swacina [01:26:14] Quite honestly, I don't I don't know where we're at on the current generation, but, but the early generations of tags allowed us to get a lot of data, but it was still limited. I mean, you couldn't follow the tag, you know, to a spawning ground.

Paul Swacina [01:26:30] I think now there's technology that you could probably do that, but back then there wasn't.

Paul Swacina [01:26:35] And so from a sport fisherman standpoint, you know, our efforts were focused on either fundraising for tags, or providing opportunities for placement of tags on fish that were more than 100 pounds, because that was kind of the size minimum that we wanted. And so there were sport fishermen used to collect, not really collect, to capture the tarpon large enough to put a tag on.

Paul Swacina [01:27:11] And then, sport fishing boats were used to try to recover the tags. You know, I would get a call once in a while: a tag has popped-off. Looks like it's washed ashore, Padre Island National Seashore. You know, can you get somebody down there to go look for it? Because we'd rather have the full tag than not. And we could maybe refurbish it.

Paul Swacina [01:27:30] So, the early tagging program provided a great deal of data.

David Todd [01:27:35] So, I'm curious, it seems like there was this phase of tagging and then later on there was a volunteer thing that I think came out of Parks and Wildlife called the Tarpon Observation Network. And I don't know if that's...

Paul Swacina [01:27:51] Correct.

David Todd [01:27:51] Something that you're engaged in or not, but it would be interesting to hear what that involved.

Paul Swacina [01:27:57] I was engaged as an observer and it was a fairly straightforward program. You know, if you keep up with Parks and Wildlife, they did some advertising and they had people signed up to be observers. And, the idea being that you provide information, you know, tarpon location and behavior, and I did provide some entries, as I recall.

Paul Swacina [01:28:25] But also my boat partner, the fishing guide, Kevin Townsend, got kind of frustrated with me because tarpon anglers don't want real-time data going out on tarpon locations. They're like a lot of fishermen. They're pretty protective. If they find a pod of tarpon, the last thing in the world they want somebody to do is get on-line and provide Texas Parks and Wildlife the information so that the next fishing report comes out saying, "Port O'Connor has got 150 tarpon swimming in 30 feet of water off of Pass Cavallo".

Paul Swacina [01:29:06] So, I ended up, to keep him happy. I was putting in my observations six months late, or, you know, well after the fact, after the tarpon had left, so that I was at least getting the data in. But, I was also not getting him frustrated that, that we were providing real-time observation about the fishery, because it's a, it's just one of those things among anglers that you very many anglers take very seriously, keeping their honey holes, so to speak, private.

Paul Swacina [01:29:44] You know, there's no better way to lose a friendship, or not get invited back, or to piss off a guide, than to go to some secret spot and learn where it's at, and then two weeks later, the person comes back and you're there fishing. And so there's kind of an unspoken tradition that if you are, want to get invited back, or you want to go to the best places, you either, either actually say it, or it's implied that you never come back to this place without that person, if he's the one that showed it to you or she's the one that showed it to you.

Paul Swacina [01:30:23] So, the TARP and Observation Network, I haven't really kept up with too much. I thought it was a great idea.

Paul Swacina [01:30:30] And, and Parks and Wildlife has had a, you know, I don't want to be overly critical of them, but they are a bureaucracy and they actually kind of shut down the tagging program, because they had put a bunch of restrictions on tarpon. And they decided that our efforts to put tags on tarpon were unnecessarily handling the fish, and we didn't have a permit to do that from Parks and Wildlife, and they made the permit a pain in the ass to get it.

Paul Swacina [01:31:02] And so, I love Parks Wildlife. They've done a lot of great work, but they've also gummed things up a little bit, I would say, you know, on some things that I think they meant well. But, clearly, if you have Dr. Holt applying tarpon tags, you know, that's not the same situation as some guy just going out there and manhandling tarpon and not releasing them properly. So, you know that that was a frustrating aspect.

Paul Swacina [01:31:37] And so, Parks and Wildlife, I know Andy Sansom, when he was the executive director, was a huge supporter of tarpon and tarpon research. And I like the current guy a lot, but I think some of the biological part of the staff got jealous that there was turf wars.

David Todd [01:32:01] I guess that's, that's inevitable.

Paul Swacina [01:32:04] Yeah.

David Todd [01:32:04] So, while we're talking about Parks and Wildlife and I would be curious about two things that maybe you can tell us about. I mean, one is about the the efforts to try to lower pressure on the tarpon, I guess, bag and length limits. And then also I've heard some critique that that there's more agency support for fish that have some sort of a commercial value versus a fish like the tarpon, which is more recreational, sport-oriented. And if you can maybe address those two questions, that'd be great.

Paul Swacina [01:32:44] Yeah, I think it's traditional that the commercial, commercially viable species, dominate the budget of these organizations, Parks and Wildlife included.

Paul Swacina [01:33:00] You know, one of the things that CCA did that, that because of my wider-ranging experience, than just angling in Texas, I became aware, early on, that hatcheries were a problem in many, many fisheries, and that there were certain things that needed to be done to be careful about hatcheries. And hatcheries are a big expense and a big moneymaker for Parks and Wildlife and other, you know, state fish and game agencies.

Paul Swacina [01:33:36] And, you know, one of the problems for tarpon was they tried for years and years and years, but they've never been able to get tarpon to spawn in a hatchery. And many of us were, breathed a sigh of relief, because if Parks and Wildlife could have raised and bred a bunch of tarpon in a hatchery, they would have done it and dumped them into the bays and it would have potentially messed up the species, because it genetically alters, you know, it just, just like, you know, Darwin's theory, fish become adapted to the hatchery rather than to the wild.

Paul Swacina [01:34:10] And, I was continuously concerned and raised questions with Parks and Wildlife, and they never provided me any answers. I still have concerns.

Paul Swacina [01:34:20] You know, we manage the redfish and trout fishery as a put-and-take fishery, which is an old model and not sustainable. And most importantly, it has a very negative consequence to wild fisheries. Every fishery these days should be monitored as a wild, sustainable fishery.

Paul Swacina [01:34:42] Tarpon, you know, the length limits and the other limits are fine. That's a traditional tool. In my opinion, tarpon should not be harvested at all. They should be a non-take species at this point.

Paul Swacina [01:34:58] Take a picture. Let it go. The taxidermist does a better job using a fiberglass model based on your measurements than a skin mount. Skin mounts are passé, and you might as well release every single tarpon.

Paul Swacina [01:35:14] There's no reason to keep them, except for tournament purposes. And so tarpon and marlin and swordfish and all those fish that are, you know, suffering massive declines. They should be, you know, non-keepable. You should have to release all of them.

Paul Swacina [01:35:36] That gets difficult. And I like to eat fish myself and I like to eat sport fish. And so I do, you know, I kept a 26-inch redfish last week. I released an under-sized redfish that was injured. And quite frankly, I would have rather kept the under-sized, injured redfish and released the big one who was healthy. But that's not what the rules allow you to do.

Paul Swacina [01:36:02] And so, it's a, it's a conundrum that is affected by the sport fishery.

Paul Swacina [01:36:09] But, but I do think that, maybe just to get on a high horse for a second, the fact that we don't know what the release of these hatchery redfish and trout is doing to the bay system is a real point of concern for me and we don't know because we don't mark them.

Paul Swacina [01:36:28] So, when we release them into the bay, we know they're out-competing the wild fish that are smaller than them, but we don't know whether they actually participate in the recruitment offshore.

Paul Swacina [01:36:40] In some ways, I hope they don't, because that means they're degrading the gene pool of those wild fish. In some ways I hope they do, because there's probably a collapse looming in the wild fishery, because the inshore fishery on redfish is being managed basically as a put-and-take. They put in 5 million fingerlings and they harvest 3 million. And, you know, they don't really check and see if they're wild or not.

Paul Swacina [01:37:10] They could mark the fish where you knew it was a wild fish and that fish had to be released. So you could only keep hatchery fish. But it's too expensive. They don't want to clip a fin. That means you have to handle each of the fingerlings before you release them and that increases the labor cost. So they won't do it.

Paul Swacina [01:37:30] And, they don't genetically tag them in any way, or put a, you know, a scan tag like you can on a pet to, to tell us what impact the hatchery fish are having on the wild fish.

Paul Swacina [01:37:42] But, with climate change and with other environmental problems, you want that adaptability that a wild population gives you. If tarpon had died out, we would not be able to replace them with hatchery fish.

Paul Swacina [01:37:57] If whooping cranes ...The best thing that ever happened with whooping cranes is that we didn't combine the captive-bred population with the wild population because the original biologist, Robert Porter Allen, told us, you'll never have a wild whooping crane if they're all captive-bred, because they won't, they don't know how to be wild unless their parents teach them. And so we've been very, very fortunate that the parents stayed around long enough to teach. And so we have a recovered population that's still wild.

Paul Swacina [01:38:31] But, that isn't true for Attwater's prairie chickens. Those, that's gone as a wild species, because they're not sustaining themselves, you know, through wild production.

Paul Swacina [01:38:42] Same thing could happen to tarpon or redfish or any of these species. If, if you think that it's okay to wait until they're on the brink and then supplement them with hatchery production.

Paul Swacina [01:38:54] So, that's always been a sore spot for me, and that's because it's so evident in the salmon studies in populations, that you can't sustain wild fisheries with hatchery fish. It just doesn't work.

David Todd [01:39:10] This is, these are powerful insights because it does seem like the, the kind of dominant model is to do these, you know, big hatchery releases and to manage it as an almost sort of industrial chain of production and consumption.

David Todd [01:39:31] Well, thank you for sharing that.

Paul Swacina [01:39:33] Yeah, except that you're using our, our, our bays and estuaries and impacting our wild fish without any measure or way to measure. And, you know, we're going to have to be accountable for this somewhere down the line. People, it's going to snap that, you know, CCA and Parks and Wildlife, you know, have taken this model to generate membership and to sell fishing licenses when they should be managing the resource based on its sustainability.

Paul Swacina [01:40:02] I mean, at some point in time, you know, the lesson of sustainability is going to be applied to a lot of this stuff that should have applied years and years ago. When they made it a sport fish, they should have handled it on a sustainable basis, not a hatchery put-and-take basis. It's been a mistake. And I'm hopeful that it isn't, you know, it doesn't collapse the fishery at some point. But it certainly has changed it, irrevocably, forever.

David Todd [01:40:33] Well, this this might be a good place to sort of close out with some insights about conservation in general, because, you know, just in talking about, you know, the put-and-catch, you've mentioned so many different creatures that are affected, whether it's redfish or trout or salmon.

David Todd [01:40:56] And, I'm just curious if you have any sort of, you know, other broad-ranging insights about conservation and the future in Texas?

Paul Swacina [01:41:07] Well, I certainly think that the essence of conservation is being a naturalist. And by that, I mean studying and learning how nature works, and doing those things to sustain the habitat so that the way nature works can continue to work, you know, the way it was, I don't want to say necessarily intended, but the way that it works. And you can't understand that if you if you don't study it.

Paul Swacina [01:41:37] And so, all of these questions that we have confronted need to be looked at in ways that are sustainable, to me, is the easiest way of saying it. You know, we know that there are changes coming. There's always changes. And we know that the creatures that we have, have learned to adapt.

Paul Swacina [01:41:59] And, all we really need to learn is how to minimize human impact on those systems. If we get out of the way, those systems will sustain themselves so long as they, you know, don't reach a breaking point.

Paul Swacina [01:42:14] But, most of that, in my mind, has to do with maintaining habitat and not messing up the adaptability of a particular species by, you know, degrading it with hatchery replacements. We need to, you know, if there's, if there's not enough naturally produced redfish for people to keep two, then they should only keep one wild fish. And you should be able to tell, if you're going to do a hatchery, you shouldn't release things into nature unless you can keep track of them, and see if they're helping or hurting. And if they're hurting, stop doing it. And if they're helping, make sure that they're helping in the long term as well as the short term, because a lot of the tinkering that we think we're going to do and solve things, we've changed the species inevitably because we didn't do it earlier.

Paul Swacina [01:43:16] To me, a great example is whooping cranes. The whooping cranes, they're, you know, the wild population, you know, how they migrate, how they become a whooping crane is completely determined by their parents. If you don't have an adult whooping crane to teach you how to be a whooping crane, you'll never be a wild, truly wild whooping crane. So you've got to learn to keep that population alive.

Paul Swacina [01:43:46] The, the attempt, for example, at condors, you know, the condor, when you brought them all into captivity, which you had to do because they were going to go extinct. There was, there was not a sustaining population in the wild. The mistake there was not doing things earlier to sustain that wild population. Even though we will have condors flying around, they don't really know how to be wild condors anymore. They're raised in a hatchery, you know, in a breeding area.

Paul Swacina [01:44:19] And, there, there is a possibility, and it's worth the effort, I think, that at some point in time they'll be sustaining, be able to sustain themselves and learn a new way to be a wild condor. But we've lost all of that, I hate to use the term, "cultural", when you're talking about an animal. But, but there is a life history that exists, that, in many species, is passed down from parents to offspring. And if you lose a species that requires that passage of knowledge, you'll never have that species as a wild, truly wild, animal again.

Paul Swacina [01:45:04] It will be, you know, a pet that got, that got released and is a feral animal. And it will adapt to the current circumstances. But it's not really what we had before. And it's a, it's a copout for not taking the responsibility and doing the things that need to be done to ensure sustainability.

David Todd [01:45:27] Well, this is a good reminder and a good warning.

David Todd [01:45:31] Is there anything else that you might want to add that we might have overlooked the time we've been able to visit?

Paul Swacina [01:45:38] Well, I just appreciate what you guys are doing here. I think that, for folks in the future, I think it would be, it's really helpful, to be able to have you guys take the time and effort to track down the folks that were involved. And I wish we had this from the thirties and forties, and fifties and sixties.

Paul Swacina [01:46:00] And, you know, one of the great things that I'm always encouraged about is that in many ways, you know, we're the first or second generation of what is going to be, you know, into the future, important about life in Texas. You know, we still have the opportunity because we still have the natural habitats, and I think we're becoming more and more aware that those need to be preserved, to be good stewards and be able to pass on to our children, who hopefully, and I'm pretty sure they do, have as good or better understanding about what's going on than we did.

Paul Swacina [01:46:45] But, I'm also very concerned for the future stewards of our environment, because so few children seem to be out in nature and get the opportunities that I had, and that I encouraged in my son. So many people, him in particular, I would have to, you know, grab him by the collar and say, okay, you can't sit in front of this computer anymore. We're going to go get you a skateboard, and you're going down to the skateboard park and actually learn how to skateboard in real life.

Paul Swacina [01:47:17] Or, you know, you're coming with me, we're going to go for a hike. You're going to, you know, he loves to beachcomb. He doesn't really like to fish very much. But I've taken him on lots and lots of fishing trips. But what he likes to do is get out and beachcomb and then walk around in nature. And he's become very much attuned to nature.

Paul Swacina [01:47:36] But, many in his generation, I fear, are not. You know, scouting has kind of fallen away for multiple reasons, some good and some bad. And I just don't feel like people have the connection to nature that they need to have to be good stewards.

Paul Swacina [01:47:52] I think they're good folks. I think they mean well. I think they understand problems better than, than my generation did, when it comes to to race and religion and, and a lot of things. But I do think that we don't encourage people to experience nature, to appreciate it and to understand that we're a part of it, and that, you know, there's a certain beauty in the concept of Mother Nature that we are that related. We are a child of nature, and we need to make sure we don't lose those connections to understand, you know, what it is that's the best in us, and nature brings that out.

David Todd [01:48:40] Can't say it any better than that.

David Todd [01:48:43] Well, thank you, Paul. It's, it's really been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for doing this.

Paul Swacina [01:48:52] Well, thank you.

David Todd [01:48:54] Well, let's call it a day. And again, thank you. I hope our paths cross in the future. But again, we're just really grateful for your time today.

Paul Swacina [01:49:04] Thank you. I appreciate it.

David Todd [01:49:06] Okay. Well, I'll put a stop to this, and you take care. Have a good day.

Paul Swacina [01:49:13] You, too. You too, my friend. Thanks.

David Todd [01:49:15] All right. Bye.