



After the Fact | [What Is the Blue Economy?](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Patty Zurbrick, commercial fisher: And this is our boat.

Dan LeDuc, host: Oh great.

Dan LeDuc: OK. What do you got in here?

Patty Zurbrick: Nothing.

Dan LeDuc: No, I mean, in terms of engines, what do you got?

Patty Zurbrick: *[Laughs]*

Jim Zurbrick, commercial fisher: Oh, I got 692 Detroits.

Dan LeDuc: OK.

Jim Zurbrick: I could show one to you.

Dan LeDuc: Let's see.

[Boat engine starts up.]

Jim Zurbrick: What a day.

Patty Zurbrick: It's hot.

Dan LeDuc: Oh, it's a great setup.

Patty Zurbrick: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: We traveled to Florida to meet Jim and Patty Zurbrick. They make their living fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Like many who do that, they know the economic value of a healthy ocean.



Dan LeDuc: Thank you. Yeah, how long have you had this boat?

Patty Zurbrick: Oh, we've had this boat for 20 years.

Jim Zurbrick: But this is the boat I go out and make a living on—red snapper, primarily.

Dan LeDuc: Is that right?

Jim Zurbrick: Yeah, for me. Because I'm older and I want the easiest fish I can catch.

Dan LeDuc: *[Laughs]*

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Welcome to "After the Fact" from The Pew Charitable Trusts. I'm Dan LeDuc. Florida's population is growing and tourists, of course, have always loved it. One big reason is the water; the state is surrounded on three sides by it. The value of the water here and around the world is gaining a new name—the blue economy. Tom Dillon, who oversees Pew's international environment programs, explained more in a conversation we had after our visit to Florida.

The data point for this episode is 2.5 trillion. And let's make the point that it's 2.5 trillion *dollars*. That's a lot of money. And that's the value of the economic benefits that the ocean generates each year in the world. So how do you even arrive at that number? How do you figure that out?

Tom Dillon, vice president, The Pew Charitable Trusts: That number is astoundingly large.

Dan LeDuc: It is. It's huge, yeah.

Tom Dillon: And it would be—if it were its own national economy, it would be the seventh largest in the world.

Dan LeDuc: Wow.

Tom Dillon: And that doesn't even include all the benefits from the ocean. Those are just the direct economic benefits, and so—

Dan LeDuc: Tick off some of that stuff so that we know what we're talking about here.



Tom Dillon: There are—the ones that you would think of first are, of course, fisheries. Fisheries are worth about \$300 billion a year. So that's only a little more than 10 percent of it. The rest comes from tourism—which is the fastest-growing economic sector in the world—is a large proportion of this. That also includes the benefit of shipping. Those are the three biggest areas: tourism, shipping, and fisheries.

There are lots of other economic benefits that come from the ocean, too. If we were to try and quantify and monetize some of the other benefits, I think the number would be astounding. It would be by far the largest in the world. If we were able, for instance, to quantify what it means that half the oxygen we breathe comes from the ocean.

Dan LeDuc: Right. And that's a good point that people may not realize, right? We think of trees and helping us with carbon dioxide, but it's the ocean that plays the biggest role globally.

Tom Dillon: That's right. The ocean drives much of the weather patterns on the planet, much of the precipitation. It also holds in the heat from the planet and the carbon dioxide. And so, something like 80 percent of the world's carbon gets sequestered into the ocean. Otherwise it would be out there causing more pollution.

We are more connected to the ocean than we know. The ocean provides every other breath we take by producing oxygen. And of course, it produces massive amounts of food. So our food security, our own health, depends on the ocean. One billion people are dependent upon the protein that comes from fish, from fish from the ocean. So that's a large percentage of the world's primary protein needs that actually come from the oceans.

But we don't usually think of the economic value. We think of this existence value. But the economic value is astounding, and it's really important to realize that so that we know that our economies actually are dependent. The health of our economies are dependent on the health of the ocean.

Dan LeDuc: So this is called “the blue economy” now, right? I mean this is a new phrase that people who do what you do are starting to employ. Why is it important to talk about it that way now?

Tom Dillon: The term “the sustainable blue economy” has only existed for about six years. And the importance of talking about it and framing the ocean in these terms is to show people that the value is not only phenomenally large, but that if we don't maintain that value it will erode. And it erodes our lives and our own economies. And that hasn't really been the paradigm. That hasn't been what we thought. That hasn't been what either decision-makers or the public have given attention to until very recently.



Dan LeDuc: So the focus has been on some of these other indicators that we've been tracking for a while, that are just sort of more than a little troubling by themselves.

Tom Dillon: Well, amazingly, fisheries are in more trouble than people even know. Ninety percent of the world's fisheries are overfished already. And so—

Dan LeDuc: That means virtually all of them.

Tom Dillon: That means—yeah. One of the countries that has done the best to take control over fisheries and make them more sustainable is the United States, actually. We have now one of the most responsible and sustainable fisheries in the world. It can still improve. But the situation globally is pretty bad. A lot of that is driven by illegal fishing.

Dan LeDuc: Hmm.

Tom Dillon: One of the most unfortunate statistics is that under current trends, there will be as much plastic in the ocean, by weight, as fish. Can you imagine that? And that's because of both all the waste going into the ocean—much of it plastic—and because of all the massive overfishing that is being driven by propped up economies.

Dan LeDuc: So we're adding to one, subtracting from the other, and the net effect is we could have as much plastic in the ocean as we do fish.

Tom Dillon: Yeah. Considering that the ocean is two-thirds of the planet, it is so vast, can you imagine that we could have that much impact? I don't think most of us are aware that humans can have that level of impact on our planet.

Dan LeDuc: What are the other signs that the oceans are in trouble beyond fisheries?

Tom Dillon: One of the big issues is rising seas. And that has a direct impact on human communities. We are seeing more frequent storms and the intensity of storms is growing and the frequency of storms. And when you combine that with the fact that sea level is rising, there is a major impact on coastal cities and on coastal communities.

Protecting natural habitats along the coast is the best way you can prevent this impact. And so it is things like coral reefs, and that—healthy coral reefs can break the impact of waves, right? But as they die, they actually subside.

Dan LeDuc: And there's nothing to stop those waves.



Tom Dillon: There's nothing to stop the waves. Mangroves, which exist in the tropics in places like Florida, are a great natural barrier to protect coastal communities from rising sea levels and more frequent storms. What we need to do is restore more of this coastal habitat and protect what we have. Just imagine the benefit this is for insurance, in that insurance payouts can be smaller if there is more natural protection, natural infrastructure, rather than trying to put in hard infrastructure like seawalls which ultimately break down and don't work anyway.

Dan LeDuc: So with all this to be done and with all of the sort of concerns about the state of things as they've been going, are you able to be optimistic?

Tom Dillon: I think we all have to be optimistic. Our very existence depends on it. And I think there are good signs for optimism as well. In that, while only 4 percent of the ocean is under conservation protection, it is growing very quickly. The trajectory is steep, and there is increasing understanding and support around the world for efforts like that. Just in the past year we've seen some of the largest marine protected areas in the world created.

On plastics. It is now—the word is out. We are seeing action on plastics all over the place, from companies deciding to change their products to schools deciding not to use straws any longer. I mean, ranging from smaller efforts to really big efforts—looking at new ways to recycle, new types of chemicals that can be used in plastics, big efforts to increase waste management in the developing world. So, we are seeing action, but it needs to accelerate beyond where it is.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: From their quiet home in Steinhatchee, Florida, Jim and Patty Zurbrick have seen plenty of action during their four decades on Florida's Gulf Coast. They know more needs to be done to bolster the blue economy, which after all, is their economy. As part of the fishing industry, they contribute to this state's \$30 billion marine economy which, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, ranks second in the country and contributes 3.4 percent of the nation's GDP. We sat down with them on a dock overlooking their fishing boat, the Jolly Roger II.

[River sounds]

Patty Zurbrick: Steinhatchee River, we call it paradise.

Jim Zurbrick: Well, we sum it up this way, our nearest traffic light is almost 30 miles away. Except for a blinking light. We don't call that a traffic light.



Dan LeDuc: That doesn't count.

Jim Zurbrick: And our nearest Walmart is either Chiefland or Perry. That's 45 miles. And our nearest Home Depot is over 80 miles. So we are very remote. And this is one of the largest counties in the state with the least amount of population.

Jim Zurbrick: So we're blessed here. Sixty-two miles of coastline and we are—there's only two towns like this on it for 62 miles.

Dan LeDuc: You're describing the blue economy as central to where you live.

Patty Zurbrick: It is.

Jim Zurbrick: If you're a Floridian, and you're a recreational fisherman, which I was all through my childhood, it just seemed like normal—to gravitate towards something I could make some money at doing it. So I got into the charter business. That was the first thing. It was the easiest thing to get into. And then the commercial fishing. Commercial fishing is when a limited number of guys are out to make money off the fish they catch. Because on a charter, you can't sell your catch, but on a commercial fishing trip—licensed commercial trip—you can sell your fish.

Dan LeDuc: And I would guess in the terms of the scheme of things, that's the commercial part of a big business. I mean, that's where fishing, you can make it a true, good living.

Patty Zurbrick: Absolutely.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah. So, in the Gulf of Mexico 40 years ago, there was lots of fish.

Jim Zurbrick: There were many more fish. The stories that people talk about—so many that you could take a snatch hook and just throw it out and snatch fish—is absolutely correct. I saw it.

Jim Zurbrick: Today because our fish stocks have been depleted, we've settled on a lower amount of sustainability. We're sustainable with so many of our stocks, but they're still not of the stocks of 100 years ago.

Patty Zurbrick: I guess you really don't even stop to think about it because it's so plentiful at the time. But as the years go on, you see different stocks not so popular and not so available. And then, things started dwindling. Red snapper, of course, which is the poster child of the Gulf—the IFQ [individual fishing quota] system coming back. It's



just, it's a remarkable story there. But that was one of the very first fish that was almost extinct, wouldn't you say, Jim?

Jim Zurbrick: Yeah. That's what we—well, it was the most plentiful at one time. Ninety percent of every fish sold in the Gulf of Mexico was a red snapper.

Dan LeDuc: When did you start to see the depletion?

Jim Zurbrick: I would say that it really reared its ugly head in the early '90s. That's when awareness, you know, the feds started getting involved. Because prior to 1989, there wasn't even a federal permit required for fishing. But, my catches were down, my charter—it was tougher to go out and get customers their fish.

Patty Zurbrick: Well then, you see the decline of the species. You become actively involved in the rule-making process. You know, education is a wonderful thing.

Jim Zurbrick: Ninety-eight was finally the time where I said, "Wow there's not going to be any of this. I'm not going to be able to make a living—nor are other people."

Dan LeDuc: You thought it was over.

Jim Zurbrick: Yeah, I mean, everybody did. And that's what worked us towards a catch share or quota system. The individual fishing quota, which is the catch share program, we all have our own individual quota. So, I could go catch it all in the first six months of the year, last six months of the year, or I can blend it over 12 months. That's what we do. Nothing's worse than a farmer—and that's what we are, basically, is farmers—everybody bringing their corn in at one time. So that's why you try to stagger crops and things. And different states mature their crops differently just like us. Everybody goes out and comes back. That's why we went to the IFQ.

Dan LeDuc: IFQ stands for individual fishing quota, a kind of catch share system that regulates how many fish are taken from the water.

Jim Zurbrick: Since the IFQ system 2010 for grouper, we're enjoying a 300 percent increase in prices. I write down every fish that comes on that boat that goes in that box. I had 690 red snapper on my last trip. Six hundred ninety individual fish and not one throwback. Because our size limit is 13 inches, and I get paid the same for that 13-inch fish—that 13-inch red snapper, as I do a 23-inch fish. So there's no incentive to throw one back because he's too small. We're in 100 and some feet of water—200 feet, 250 sometimes. He's not going to make it. So when you throw him back, you know that. And that's what—you've got to have something inside of you that says, that's just wrong.



[River sounds]

Dan LeDuc: Gulf red snapper are a popular fish in Florida and a mainstay of restaurant menus across the state. With fishing quotas like those Jim mentioned, their numbers are recovering. Jim and Patty have seen up close the value of these catch limits and have encouraged lawmakers and others in the industry to look to science to guide fisheries management.

Jim Zurbrick: Keep in mind—1998—let me just go back there. Forget about even earlier. I was an obvious minority, and folks like me, that were attending the meetings, coming out of the recreational ranks. Conservation wasn't part of it in those '90s. It really wasn't. There was some movement, you know, what we needed to do. But it wasn't until we saw things get ugly in the early 2000s. We had a lot of storms. We had pollution. We had a lot of red tides. All those little things maybe pushed a lot more folks towards sustainability—and especially, accountability.

Jim Zurbrick: If we don't know what we're taking—they put a target on how many fish, an annual target, or a catch limit. Well, we've got to accurately know whether we hit it or not. And the folks who were doing the monitoring—it's not precise. It is precise for the commercial sector now because we're so highly regulated, with satellite tracking and reporting and enforcement. But the recreational guy who actually catches 65 to 70 percent of all the fish in the Gulf—the lion's share of the gag grouper, the lion's share of the amberjack, triggerfish, all the trout, all the red fish, the snook, the majority of the sheep head—all those fish—I just started seeing the end. I wasn't comfortable. I want to leave it better than I had it.

Dan LeDuc: What does sustainable fishing mean to you guys as commercial fishermen?

Patty Zurbrick: It means taking care of a resource so it continues to populate and grow itself. So if we're not sustainable, we wouldn't have that fish to catch in the future. We wouldn't be able to be commercial fishermen because we couldn't support ourselves financially.

Jim Zurbrick: Sustainability is kind of an abstract word. It's just—it's an amount of fish that's set, but it's not as much as it used to be. And hopefully, it'll be more in the future. But it's an amount where you can take a qualified catch, you can take 100 fish, but you've got to count those 100 fish. That's the only way sustainability works—is by counting accurately what you're taking.

Patty Zurbrick: And that's the science—the science of counting the fish, setting those catch limits to where we can still have a sustainable yield fish.



Dan LeDuc: You clearly love this life. When you talk about other people needing it, and wanting it for them, what is it about this life that is so appealing?

Patty Zurbrick: It's wonderful to be out there. And it's all about Mother Nature. I mean, this is a God-given resource. And when you're out there on the water, you're so dependent on nature. The storms pick up, depends what you catch, the moon. I mean, you have no phone service. It's just—it's a wonderful thing to do.

Jim Zurbrick: When you're out there on the water, even if it's with five guys on a charter trip, you have this camaraderie. You get a chance to spend some time talking, and the experience of delivering something that the average guy is never going to experience.

Dan LeDuc: If the new regulations hadn't been put in place over these last couple of decades, if that hadn't happened, would you be here today?

Jim Zurbrick: I could still be here today, but would I be making a living? And would there be anybody new coming in to replace me? Because our resource would have been dwindled down to such a small amount that I don't think it is possible to have kept fishing going.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: How long you been here?

Martin Pierce, owner, Good Times Motel and Marina: Six and a half years, now.

Dan LeDuc: How long has this place been here?

Martin Pierce: It was a crab house. It was built in the '60s, and stuff changes. And it turned into a motel in the '90s.

Dan LeDuc: I look around and I see a lot of new construction here. There's a lot of folks coming here.

Martin Pierce: It's picking back up.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah.

Dan LeDuc: Just off the dock from the Jolly Roger II is the Good Times Motel and Marina. Its owner, Martin Pierce, also depends on the blue economy.

[River sounds]



I'm seeing boats going by. Every one of those boats is a potential customer for you.

Martin Pierce: Absolutely. Scallop season is very busy. This time of year, scallop season's 40 percent of our bar and grill business and 50 percent of motel business in two and a half months.

Dan LeDuc: Wow. You're talking half your business in the year happens in two months.

Martin Pierce: Yes, sir. Our community is a fishing village. We do not have beaches. We're blue-collar folks going out in either the woods and/or in the water. That's what we have. I'm originally from central Florida, born in Daytona. This is much nicer, much better.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, it's very low key here. I like it.

Martin Pierce: Yeah, it's much easier.

Dan LeDuc: But you know on my drive here, I passed boat repair yards. I passed all sorts of businesses that exist to service the folks coming here.

Martin Pierce: Oh, yes.

Dan LeDuc: And if those folks aren't coming here?

Martin Pierce: We don't have anything to do. If we don't have a good season out there, it affects us all.

[Music]

Dan LeDuc: Our thanks to Jim and Patty Zurbrick for letting us spend a day with them in Florida. They continue to speak for its fish, and to steward the fragile recovery of Gulf Coast red snapper.

Learn more about the blue economy at our website, pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is "After the Fact."