

Ivan J. Wirgau

Oral History Interview
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Carson G. Prichard
June 16, 2021
Ivan J. Wirgau's residence
Rogers City, MI

Project—Human dimensions of the Lake Huron salmon fishery crash: Using oral histories to assess the attitudes, values, and beliefs of anglers and non-angler stakeholders in Great Lakes coastal communities

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PRICHARD: Okay, my name is Carson Prichard and I'm here with Ivan Wirgau at his home in Rogers City. Today is Wednesday, June 16, 2021, and it's 10:19 a.m. So to start, Ivan, can you please just tell me a little bit about yourself?

WIRGAU: Yes. I grew up here in Rogers City, and graduated from Rogers City High School. And went to Lake Superior State University, and went there for two years and then I transferred to Michigan State University and finished up my biological science degree there. And then I went to work for a limestone quarry up—Stoneport. It's south of here. And I started out as an engineering tech in the quarry, and then I ended up being a lab tech, and then I was a chemist, and then I was a—then I was the chemist and the environmental engineer,¹ and then I was also a Wildlife Habitat Council overseer. Worked there for thirty-seven years; I'm retired now. Life's good.

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¹Wirgau clarification: supervisor, not engineer

PRICHARD: When we spoke last you said that you saw the first salmon and steelhead plants in Rogers City so I was wondering, what is your earliest memory regarding Chinook salmon in Rogers City and Lake Huron?

WIRGAU: Well I can remember when they first planted cohos back in the sixties. My dad took me out there [to Ocqueoc Falls]—my dad's name was Ivan Wirgau, as well. He introduced me to fishing, up here on Trout River where I live. And I was really young at that time. I was very impressionable and the first time²—the mystique of the Trout just cooked me, you know, some people get hooked on fishing, some don't. But anyway, he always made sure that I kept my interest in fishing but he really didn't have to because my interest was always there and still is—I'm passionate about it. But he took me to the Ocqueoc River up by the falls, and you could see the coho spawning there which was a big deal, I mean, that's the first time salmon were ever seen by people.³ It was in the paper, it was written by Harry Brege who was a⁴—he was a conservationist and he wrote an article in the daily advance here, *Presque Isle County [Advance]*. And he always did a week[ly] article about something, whether it was mushroom picking, or duck hunting, or deer hunting, or fishing. So, the salmon were in the Ocqueoc, so my dad took me there. I was impressed by the size of them and them spawning, that was a pretty big deal. That was back in⁵—when they first started fishing—or, started planting salmon. As far as first salmon that I can remember catching, that's a good question. I was a steelhead fisherman right around the same time. That was back in the sixties, and more than likely it was—we would be casting Daredevles, off shore, right here by Seagull Point. And I remember

²Wirgau clarification: The first time that I hooked a trout above the Sportsmen's Dam.

³Wirgau clarification: The first time that salmon were seen by people in this area.

⁴Wirgau clarification: Brege was a local outdoor writer.

⁵Wirgau clarification: Back in the sixties.

when we got hooked into some of the first salmon we couldn't believe how fast they were, and they would just scream the line out. And we were fishing light tackle, like eight pound test and whippy rods, spinning reels—and take all the line off your reel, strip your reel of line, so that was a big deal, to see that happen, it was exciting. But those were kind of the first memories, and the fish coming up on the river and spawning. And they allowed snagging the first year because they said, “Well the salmon come up and spawn,”⁶ so it really isn't a big deal if people snagged them.” Well they kind of put their foot in their mouth when they did that because they still fight the people and the snagging issues today. It's still going on, those big treble hooks and all that. And I was just thinking how—this just doesn't seem right.⁷ Why—? The rivers are full of the fish. You'd see steelhead and salmon coming up and people were snagging them. They didn't know anything about fishing, the people, they're just ripping fish out of the river. So, they retracted that the next year, but then they fought that battle all the time with people snagging them when they came in the river. But there were a lot of fish back then. We didn't get any big plants back then. And I was young, I was in my teens yet when I was first involved, so I didn't have a big boat. I wasn't out fishing them. I didn't even have a fourteen-foot boat or anything. I never got that until—probably into the early eighties is when I first started to do that kind of thing, where I was out in a boat. So most of it was fishing off the piers and stuff like that. And not a lot of it because there weren't a lot of salmon around. I mean they only planted *x* amount of salmon until Frank Krist got involved with it, and he got involved with the heavy salmon plants and then that all really took off. And then I was able to, as I was raising a family and getting better along in my

⁶Wirgau clarification: i.e., spawn, and subsequently die

⁷Wirgua clarification: What didn't seem right was that non-target fish got hooked by snaggers, too.

job I was able to purchase a boat. And I went from a fourteen-foot boat to a sixteen-foot boat to an eighteen-foot boat. That was kind of my progression over the years. But I caught a lot of salmon out of a fourteen-foot boat. I was only using one motor—fifteen-horsepower Chrysler motor. And caught a lot of salmon. You could go in Swan Bay, and I didn't care what you were using if it was spoons or body baits or whatever, you'd catch them. Cohos and Chinooks and you'd catch them. Go in the evening, put glow tape on your spoons. I mean it was exciting. You'd get them on, sun's going down in the evening. Or if it's midday, line's screaming off your reel. So that was a lot of fun, we caught some big fish over the years. Those were my first times. (Prichard: Okay.) I kind of was getting carried along through there.

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PRICHARD: Well, from some of my conversations with other people, it sounds like even before the major plants, which started in 1983, the salmon fishing out of Rogers City was really pretty good—

WIRGAU: It was. (Prichard: Yeah.) It was. It was good, considering the small plants they were making. I don't know if those were fish coming from somewhere else. I never really thought about it much then because I wasn't a boat fisherman then. (Prichard: Okay.) So, not until I got into the early eighties-late seventies, when I first got a fourteen-foot boat and I started doing that kind of thing. But I started out with lake trout, and then I would fish salmon and lake trout together. That's how I would do it, you know? But the lake trout back then were smaller because of the thiamine issue in the alewife. But, yeah eighties, bigger salmon plants, better fishing. Better technology. Better instrumentation.

More written on it, you know? It was just, people started to get on the track. And then as the computer and the internet and all that got going there was just gobs of information open to everybody and you could research anything you wanted to. But, usually it was word of mouth. What are they biting on today? Well this is what they're catching on, you know, word of mouth in the area, that's how you'd know what to fish with, and it worked out pretty good.

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PRICHARD: How did the fishery—can you describe how the fishery really changed once they started planting 900,000 to 1,000,000 a year?

WIRGAU: Yeah, you could go out there anytime, go out there anytime, and a lot of people fished early—salmon of course are really active early in the morning before sunup and then last light of the day, that's a very active time for salmon. But there were so many salmon out here I would go in the middle of the day and catch them. People were coming off when I was going—I'd be going out there eleven o'clock in the morning. People were coming off from fishing because they were tired. I'd catch my fish and I'd be coming back in at three and they'd be going back out. (laughs) It was great because there were hardly any boats around me. But back in those days there were boats everywhere, you had to watch where your, you know, where you're trolling, so you're not getting in front of somebody. And people didn't always know the rules of the roads. There could be some heated moments at times with people cutting across in front of you, so you pick and choose your times. You go when there's less people it's better. But, there's always—and a lot of times you would see—and you'd look around you and

everyone's fighting fish in the boats. Everybody's fighting fish. Go in the bay early in the morning, catch fish. Then come out, after the sun comes up. And I was—I still am a true believer in water temperature, so I'd go out and find a water break where the temperature break was at and then I'd go and fish for the salmon in the water break. The ones that were in the bay were getting ready to spawn so water temp was not an issue with them. But your fresher, more silver fish were out deeper, so you fish the temperature and the thermocline, you're going to catch nice fresh fish, you know? And that's what I did. I mean, catch ten salmon you couldn't even hardly lift the cooler. They always said, "Well I got three in the box. Five in the box." Well I had a box. I actually made it out of particle board and painted it and caulked it and it was a box. Everyone else they had coolers, but I had a box. I had the true box. (Prichard laughs) People would say, "Well I have four in the box." Well, when I would say, "I have five in the box," I had them in a box, not in a cooler. (laughs) So that was kind of unique.

Salmon tournaments I'd been in, different issues—I made a—one time we had a fish on, this was towards the end of a salmon tournament and it was right off of Calcite port, and got it on—there was a big snarl in the line. It was a big salmon, he got under the boat. And I said, "We're not going to get it in, so let's cut the line and I'll tie a blood knot. And if it goes, it goes. We let it go. We just let go of the line and if it's going to start tearing off—" Tied a blood knot, clipped the ends and just as I did my line, the line, the fish left under the boat and started taking off—it was a twenty-three-and-a-half-pounder. Caught like that. I've done that a few times, (Prichard: Really?) tie blood knots on the fly, clipped off the ends and (whistles). (Prichard laughs) Unique. (Prichard: Yeah.) Yeah.

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PRICHARD: When did the crew come together for the first—

WIRGAU: Salmon tournament?

PRICHARD: —salmon tournament? How did that all begin?

WIRGAU: Well, we were all steelhead fishermen, (Prichard: Okay.) and we knew each other through that. And lake trout, and then salmon, too. Jeff Heward was part of that crew. But the Partyka brothers—and Partyka brothers always used to go and fish in the bay all the time. They found these Grizzly plugs. They're really small, they're like, maybe a third the size of a J-Plug, and they were using them a lot on the west side of the State [of Michigan], so they were using those. And I always remember, whether it would be if we were out socializing at the bar, Chuck would always go, "Well, I'm going fishing tomorrow, so I've got to go home." Never paid a lot of attention to it. Well they locked onto the deal, when you had some rough weather, you'd get in there the next day when the lake's calming down and get in there with those Grizzlys and they just beat the heck out of those fish. But they were looking to put together a salmon crew. So, of course, Chuck and Ken were brothers and they'd fished a lot using that technique, for long-lining them in the bay. And they knew Jeff Heward, because we were all part of that same—and they asked me if I wanted to, if—[would you] be interested in getting in on this with me? I said, "Yeah, sure. That's cool." So, we drew straws. I remember the tournament we drew straws to see who's going to catch the first fish. Well it was calm that day in the morning. Glass, just like glass, offshore wind. We got into Swan Bay, and I had drew the first straw so I'm catching the first fish, and I don't know it was like a twelve-, fourteen-pounder. Nice silver fish. Okay, got it. So I don't remember who was

up next for whatever reason. It was slow, we weren't catching much, and we got behind in the leaderboard, and we weren't doing much. We stayed out there and the weather got really bad. [Wind] started coming out of the north, northeast, and waves got really high. There was six- to eight-foot waves out there. So we were in the bay, and we didn't want to make the trek to go across, in front of Calcite to go back to the bay⁸ because we'd be going right into the teeth of the waves. So we decided to put the boat in Calcite. And we tied it up there near the old BT [Bradley Transportation] building where they used to do winter work on the boats when they owned their own fleet here at Calcite. And we got out, we got picked up there, and we had the boat tied off on the dock. Well, we told the tournament that's what we were going to do, we weren't going to make the trek across. Okay. So we were just going to call it quits, and we weren't even on the board. And, it came in the afternoon where Chuck called, and Ken, and said, "Well we're going to go back out at three." Well I called Jeff, and he lived down the river from here, and he said, "No, I think I'm just going to sleep in. I don't think it's worth it, it's too rough out there." The waves were still rough. It was building, actually, even more yet. So I said, "I'll go with you." So, we put in the boat and we thought, well our deal was to troll around in the bay where we were protected from the wind, on the backside of the breakwall. So we're trolling around in there. Their dad was a captain of the boats, and he was down there—he had access in back of Calcite, he could go down there by Swan Bay. And he was parked there down at the bay, by the river mouth, and he said, "Paul Durecki just made two passes in front of the river and he hooked two fish." We picked up our lines and we headed for there.⁹ And there were a lot of waves and we came out of that breakwall and we had to time it to get into the waves, follow the waves in there. And it was rough. I

⁸Wirgau clarification: boat harbor, not bay

⁹Wirgau clarification: "there" being the mouth of Swan River

mean, there were waves splashing right up in the boat. And you had to time your turn. And you really had to watch so you didn't get thrown out of the boat, because the *Salmon Slayer* was like a big cedar log floating in the water, it didn't have real high sides on it. So you had to kind of be careful you didn't get knocked out of the boat. It was a big, steady boat. And it was a self-bailing bilge on it. Water'd come in and wash right out the back. So, we made a pass in there and we nailed two fish, right off the gate, you know? One time, that guy that was in there came up on a wave and when he came down he bottomed out right on the—

PRICHARD: Really?

WIRGAU: Oh, yeah. It was bad. Those waves were huge. There were waves big as this ceiling in here. (laughs) Big waves *crashing* in there. So it was really crazy. But we made I don't remember how many passes. I don't remember if we had five or six fish. I don't remember what it was off the top of my head. And then we made the long trek to go—because we had to weigh those fish in, so we had to go back to the harbor. We couldn't stay and then carry our fish over there. So it was kind of an interesting ride back going over those waves. But we got back there and then all of a sudden we take the leader. Now we're head of the game. We got the first-place fish. We're in first-place in the boat tournament. Well everyone took off, got off the lake, see.¹⁰ So the next day, the lake was coming down. It was still riled up out there, but the winds were starting to subside some. So everybody goes, everyone's going out there. They didn't come out right away, but close to it. We got in there and every time we made a pass we had doubleheaders. Right in—we were only in, I don't know, probably eight to ten feet of water. But we were long-

¹⁰Wirgau clarification: Everyone got off the lake because of the weather.

lining with those Grizzly plugs. Sometimes we had three lines out. What we would do was go parallel to Swan Bay near where the river mouth is, and pull all our lines up, turn around 180, and then just let all the lines out and go back the other way. And every time we'd do that, "tt-tt". So we caught a pile of fish. And we went back and we did well. So that's how that all evolved, that particular first trip. They knew the bay because they'd been fishing it for years, Chuck and Ken. Nobody was really in there doing much of that stuff. But, that all changed. (laughs; Prichard: Yeah.) Yeah. Everyone got the idea, then, that maybe that's a pretty good time to be going in there after these storms, and going after these fish. It was insane. It was just, the fishing was fabulous. Nice fish. Fighters. Screamers. Lot of fun.

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PRICHARD: Yeah. When I talked with Ken, it sounded like he stopped fishing the tournaments because he—at least to some degree he felt like they were changing the rules to make it—

WIRGAU: For the bigger boats. (Prichard: Yeah.) Well, I mean people go up and fish up in the Straits [of Mackinac] now, (Prichard: Oh, really?) for the tournaments they have here. Yeah. And they didn't fish all the tournaments so I didn't have a real big boat so it was to the advantage of the bigger boats. There's no doubt about it. Bigger seas, people are going to stay out in those bigger seas with the bigger boats. Small boat, you know I'm not going to stay out there, so I kind of got out of it myself, too. It wasn't as fun anymore. But I was in a few tournaments. And I was in it with [my] father-in-law, and I had the region head wildlife biologist with me, Bob Strong. He was the region one wildlife

biologist out of the UP [Upper Peninsula of Michigan]. And then we had a fire marshal that worked for the DNR [Department of Natural Resources] out of Gaylord. Father-in-law was a forester. So they were all in it with me. And they were really hardcore older gentlemen. We had a lake turnover this one tournament and it was all fog. Right to the shore, pure fog. And I said, “Well I’m not going to be out in that.” People coming and going, you don’t know, someone could cut you right in half with their boat. Well, they’re pacing like a bunch of coyotes around a trap, on shore. Well, you know, it’s going to get—it’s going to cut—you know, the weather’s going to break, and the sun’s going to come out. And it started to, some, but that wall of fog wasn’t very far off shore, I can tell you that. Okay, let’s go. I said, “Well I’m staying fairly close so I can see shore.” So we got over by the breakwall and I—it was fifty degrees on the surface; that’s how cold it was. I said, “Well, salmon can be right on the surface so let’s just run long-lines.” We ran them out there by the breakwall over there and we were nailing them. There was nobody around us. Fish were there to have. There were times in those tournaments where some family members were down here by Seagull Point and those big clouds of alewives would be coming in nearshore and the salmon were right on shore slashing into them. Just crazy. There was a lot of fish around. You had the alewives and that’s what they wanted. They’re tearing into them babies. And my wife, she caught big fish; twenty-eight-pounders, twenty-seven-pounders. There were some years that were better than others for whatever reason. I mean, they tried the Super Salmon, but that never really did anything. I mean all it was was more of a ploy to get people [to] come for the gold rush, (Prichard: Yeah.) trying to find the Easter egg with the gold in it, (laughs) which may never have existed. (Prichard: Right.) Sure there were some triploid salmon out there, but

what are the odds that you were going to catch one of those things when you look at the odds of fish just surviving after a spawning event?

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PRICHARD: Yeah. So did you continue to salmon fish through the—

WIRGAU: Oh yeah.

PRICHARD: —like, all through the nineties?

WIRGAU: Oh, oh yeah. (Prichard: Yeah.) Yeah I fished all the time. (Prichard: Okay.)

Yeah, I fished the lake trout and salmon. I fished—I'd go catch lake trout first, a limit of lake trout, and then I'd go fish salmon, into the evening. Or I'd go—or you get into August when the salmon fishing's really starting to cruise. Get out there and fish salmon. It was good. Morning was good. It didn't have to be before first light. You could be out there, sun coming up or whatever but the salmon were around, they were biting good. They were there to have.

PRICHARD: Did you keep a boat in the harbor—?

WIRGAU: No.

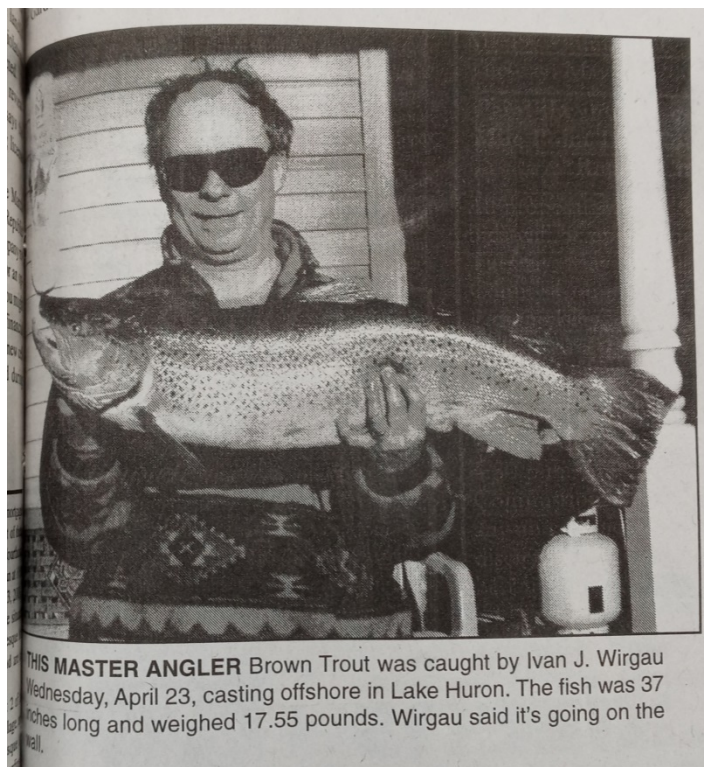
PRICHARD: —or just trailer?

WIRGAU: No. I own an eighteen-foot boat. (Prichard: Okay.) I had a fourteen, a sixteen, and an eighteen. Let's see if I got some pictures to show you.

|00:21:03| *Wirgau flips through a photo album and remarks on some photos that show various salmon catches and his boat. He flips past some newspaper clippings regarding the 1986 Rogers City Salmon Tournament and says, "You must have seen a lot of these pictures." Prichard describes that he went through all the Presque Isle County Advance back issues from that time period, and points to a mounted brown trout on Wirgau's wall and says, "I think I might have seen that brown trout, too." Wirgau describes that he caught that brown trout casting a Krocodile from the breakwall.¹¹ A total of six minutes and five seconds was removed from the original recording.*

PRICHARD: What do you remember noticing in the mid-2000s when the salmon fishery started to decline, then?

WIRGAU: Just weren't catching them. Weren't marking much. The bay was almost useless. You get a few big boats in there when they ran all their planer boards in there



¹¹ *Presque Isle County Advance*, May 1, 2003.

and all their Yellow Birds and—. The fishing wasn't all that great. You would have to hit it and really watch. But during the summer months, not as good, it just kept declining. I mean, the fish would be, in the summertime, if you hit the winds right and that out there by 40 Mile Point, up here north of town, they'd catch salmon up there. And I fished up there some, but most of my fishing was out here. Adams Point, excellent fishing—just look how much structure all over the place in there, that's good fishing in there, and it's good right off town here, too, surprisingly, and right over here, right off Seagull Point's very good. But a lot of people went up that-a-way because you have a lot of sharp drops and structure there, too. And it seemed like the salmon, when they migrated around they were concentrated more that way as they came closer. As you got closer to spawning time they came in closer this way, it seems like.

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PRICHARD: Was it, kind of just like, all of a sudden—well—

WIRGAU: Oh, you mean as far what you caught and that? Yeah, I mean, it was getting to the point where it's getting hard to catch salmon. You can still catch them out here, but you've got to stay—you've got to be totally a salmon fisherman and you've got to really focus on it. Now they're using meat rigs out here. I don't know—how necessary is that? I just kind of, myself, I kind of got more away from the salmon fishing because there's such long periods of time in between fish when you're fishing, and just wanted to get off the lake. I don't want to sit around and troll for hours and maybe get a salmon. But if you focus for them, like I say, the bay is good. That's a good place to go, in August when the lake overturns. A lot of people are going to lead core, copper, all that stuff. Planer boards,

and how many colors of lead core. It's a lot of tackle and a lot of messing around. I mean, if you really—like the charter boat captains use a lot of that stuff. But it's just more stuff to handle. And I'm just not into all that. I don't think I could ever be a charter captain, because I'd just be getting—I do it for fun. And I think it would take the fun out of it, the excitement out of fishing, if you were a charter captain. And I know people that were charter captains here and they did well in the time when it was booming. But that's—they may do two trips a day. They're up at five, four in the morning getting things ready. They go out, fish until noon or whatever, clean fish then take another charter out, then come back and wrap up eleven, twelve o'clock and night and then they're right back at it four or five hours later. They used to pray for rough weather so they didn't have to go out so they could sleep in. (Prichard: Yeah.) It just got to be too much. But it was successful for them at the time, you know?

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PRICHARD: But you were okay transitioning, switching to just focusing on lake trout?

WIRGAU: Oh yeah. (Prichard: Yeah.) Yeah, I mean what else are you going to do? I mean if you're going to fish out there, I've got the equipment to do it, and these lake trout taste better, I think, since they went to the gobies. (Prichard: Yeah.) They're not as fat. The alewives provide a lot more energy for a forage base, but they provide a lot more fat, too. And I think that—and the growth rate's so much faster with the alewives. These gobies, they're not growing as fast, but I think the quality of the flesh is so much better. They taste really good. I mean, grilled lake trout's nice. Salmon, yeah it's nice to catch them, if you can catch them, if you're going to focus on catching them. It's like Ken

Partyka, that's what they do, they're focused on a little window of time at the end of the season and then they go get what they want for canning and that's enough. But some years they do well and other years they don't do so well. It's all about timing. And then if you go look at the weir down there where they collect them, where the State collects them, it looks like a lot of fish in the river but it really isn't that many fish when you go and scatter them out here in Lake Huron. (Prichard: Right.) It's just not that many.

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PRICHARD: If you think back to the eighties when the major plants started in Rogers City and the fishing, even in Harrisville, Oscoda, the rest of Lake Huron was really good, do you remember thinking anything about those times, like, How good is this going to get? Or, wondering about how sustainable it was?

WIRGAU: More about sustainability. You're putting all those fish out there chomping, between the lake trout and the salmon chomping on the forage base, how long can you sustain something like that? And then you're planting millions of salmon every year, every year, every year, how can that sustain itself? But I think the real—I think the sustainability thing was—well, they had the *Steelheader*, that boat, that research vessel that goes, I think out of Alpena [ed. note: the Michigan DNR has a boat called the *RV Steelhead* in Charlevoix, and used to have a boat called the *RV Chinook* in Alpena; presumably Wirgau was referring to the *RV Chinook*]. They've been doing it since the fifties, late sixties. I would have thought they would have seen something like this coming, the crash coming, because they were researching it all the time out there, (Prichard: Yeah.) every year.

PRICHARD: I did do an interview with Jim Johnson—

WIRGAU: That's what I was going to say, Jim Johnson, yeah.

PRICHARD: Yeah. And I learned a lot of interesting things talking with him. You know, in the—I think as early as 1990 he was wondering about the balance between predators and prey out there. But he was also trying to improve the survival of stocked fish. And so over time even as you were stocking similar amounts of fish, the survival of the fish they were stocking was increasing so you were effectively stocking more. (Wirgau: Yep.) And then when he got around to doing the study where they were looking at the proportion of wild versus hatchery, and the proportion of stocked fish compared to wild fish was very small. And so they kind of lost control that they would have had (Wirgau: Right.) by reducing stocking. (Wirgau: Exactly.) But then, he talked about how long it took for them to see the impact of the zebra and then the quagga mussels, but then, probably the major story or component of the story as it has played out now has been the impacts of the zebra and quagga mussels on the lower food web. So that was kind of the wildcard that ended up being, in his eyes and the other biologists' eyes probably the major driver. So then I asked him, "Well if that's the case, how can—," you know, the management approach that they're taking on Lake Michigan right now is very carefully trying to balance the number of fish they stock with the amount of alewives, and I said, "Well what's the feasibility or likelihood of that strategy working in Lake Michigan?" And we talked about the differences between the limnology and morphology of the lakes Huron and Michigan. But, yeah I just wanted—wondered your perspective on—because it seems to me that not a lot of people, or a relatively small proportion of people in the eighties and

nineties were wondering about the sustainability of it. It was more like, How can we keep continuing to grow this thing?

WIRGAU: Yeah, everybody was like, They can't have our salmon, we want our salmon. We're not going to give quarter of a million salmon over to Lake Michigan, we want them all for ourselves. But they were only looking this far. (Prichard: Yeah.; laughs) How can you—?¹² It just—common sense tells you that you can't keep doing something like that. It's kind of like, a parallel to that would be like when they had landfills, and they were dumping everything under the sun in landfills. How long are you going to keep that up for before something happens? It's kind of the same thing, in a way. You had to do something with it to manage it. You couldn't just go throw anything anywhere you wanted. (Prichard: Yeah.) So, it's like the fish. You can't just keep throwing fish at a forage base. And then as the invasives come in, you don't know what they're going to do. You don't know how they're going to affect that lake. The gobies, by chance have really done well for the fishery out here. You know, that's a sustainable forage base right now. But I remember when those zebra mussels were cleaning it up out here. You'd go out in thirty-forty feet of water you'd see right to the bottom, you could see the lake trout swimming down there while you were trolling for them. It was unbelievable. You don't see that now. The zebra mussels are not around here like they were. (Prichard: Okay.) Not even close. (Prichard: Really? Okay.) No, the gobies ate them. (Prichard: Yeah. Yep.) Yeah. Yeah, when I used to snorkel out here—I still do some—you don't see the zebra mussels on the rocks anymore. You'll see gobies, scooting around by the rocks, that's what you see. The quaggas are out deep. (Prichard: Right.) And you'll see them

¹²Wirgau clarification: I.e., how can you keep planting large numbers of predators without affecting the forage base? There is not an endless supply.

washed up on shore but not even a lot of them. You'd see them, (Prichard: Okay.) but the zebra mussel used to be everywhere. No, the gobies took care of them. So that was a good thing. (Prichard: Yeah.) And there was just an article the other day by Jim Bedford, he's a toxicologist out of [the] Lansing area, I believe.

PRICHARD: Okay. I just know him as the guy that spinner fishes for steelhead.

WIRGAU: He spinner fishes for steelhead, yeah, but he's a PhD of toxicology. (Prichard: Okay.) He thinks that eventually—it's only common sense—well eventually those salmon are going to find those gobies and they're going to start focusing on them more, and it'll balance out. It'll never be the fishery it was but it will be a sustainable fishery. Because people have always thought—and I don't know, maybe the research and more awareness brought to their attention that the fish always fed in the pelagic zone, you know, those salmon. And they were starting to find salmon out in the ocean that had scratches on their gill plates, well they were chasing this certain kind of a forage base down on the bottom and scratching them on the rocks. So they can adapt. (Prichard: Yeah.) So, you know, I believe that. And you get a certain—and those gobies, they die. You know, their life cycle's—they got like three or four times where they're spawning and dying. And I got to believe by chance salmon are getting some of those dead ones that are rolling into the upper parts of the wave action and currents, because they're out there to have. These lake trout are full of them. Full of gobies. Just full of them. And I know some people have caught salmon with the gobies in them. Caught some lake trout last time I was out that had salmon in them like this. [Wirgau clarification: salmon about three inches long] That was a couple weeks ago. Couple different lake trout had like four or five of those salmon like that in them. I don't know if that was a recent plant. I looked

in the database but I didn't see anything that had been planted, (Prichard: Yeah.) but they don't always catch up on (Prichard: Right.) updating that stuff. Yeah, not sustainable, and they just kept planting them. Then when they backed off it was already too late. They crashed. And I don't know if you'll ever see the alewives back here again. As long as you've got those quagga mussels out there. You need something that's going to get them. (laughs) That's what you're going to need. I know they were talking about planting, what, cisco—

PRICHARD: Yeah, they had stocked—

WIRGAU: —down in Swan—or the Saginaw Bay.

PRICHARD: Saginaw, yeah. They have done that. I don't know—

WIRGAU: What the success or anything—

PRICHARD: —anything about—yeah.

WIRGAU: Right. Exactly. And, is it good to try and get the alewife back? Then you'll mess the lake trout back up again. So it's a, (Prichard: Right.) it's a balancing act. I don't know. The quagga mussels, I think that's what's keeping that at bay. Unless some invasive gets in here and does something to them, or something in that whole system changes to affect them I think it's going to stay the way it is. (Prichard: Yeah.) You know the salmon eat emerald shiners, some smelt. You don't see the clouds of smelt you used to see out here, though. I mean it'd just be black right from the top to the bottom on your screen [when] you'd be going through them. (Prichard: Yeah.) You'd see your downriggers quivering—the lines—(Prichard: Really?) from going through those

baitfish. Oh yeah. Unbelievable. Just don't see that anymore out there. You'll see little pods of [forage] fish here and there. Not as much, though, the forage. (Prichard: Yeah.) Yep. And some of the lake trout were longer and leaner this year—some of them, not a lot of them. Salmon were starting to do that towards—at one point here they were getting—they just didn't have the food. Real long skinny salmon.¹³

PRICHARD: Like 2004 and five? Yeah.

WIRGAU: Mm-hm. Yeah. That was weird. Just weird to see that. They're there but nothing to eat. (Prichard: Yeah.)

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PRICHARD: Well when we last spoke on the phone, and then through speaking with you today, the ecological understanding that you've talked about essentially reflects what I've heard the biologists say. So I was curious your opinion on a couple things. Among other people you know that recreationally fish out of Rogers City, to what degree is their acceptance of or support for the fisheries management strategies that affected—how in line with other people that you know that fish is how you feel and your understanding compared with the other anglers you know that fish out of here?

WIRGAU: You get the old school people that don't follow any of the science, and it's always about, Well, the DNR's screwing up. You know, Let them have it and they'll mess the fishery up. (laughs) It's always that chatter and talk, you'll hear that talk. I don't always know all the strategies of other people, to what they think, but the few that I've

¹³Wirgau clarification: At one point, Chinook salmon were starting to show the results of the declining forage base in that they were long and skinny.

talked with, that are willing to talk, some are in line with me—of course like Frank [Krist] and some of the other fishermen here, they're in line with my thoughts about it. But I think that's more because people aren't educated on what's going on out there. They don't follow the science of it, and they maybe don't understand the big picture of it, or they don't want to just because people get set in their ways and they don't change the way they think about things. It always was this way before, it has to be that way now. Somebody screwed it all up, and it's probably DNR screwed it up, they (laughs) screw everything up. This is what you get. I've heard that whining and complaining before.¹⁴

Other people, you know they've adapted to the lake trout and they're still fishing out here, but you don't see the numbers of fishermen out here anymore. I mean, half a dozen trailers, eight trailers and boats out there. Of course there's people that dock their boats in the harbor, but some are getting out of it because it's just not practical for them. Have a boat in the harbor and go out half a dozen or a dozen times a year, and spend all that money to have the boat there, pay out all the gas for the bigger motors and the bigger boats and all that. And the fishery's just not there to support any kind of an acceptance to keep on doing it. And it comes down to an economic thing, too, economically. People adjust and they go—change is inevitable in life, and in everything you do. So people adapt and change. Maybe this is what I want, maybe I want to go walleye fishing. Maybe I want to go do more [inland] lake fishing, or more stream fishing. I'm a hardcore stream

¹⁴Wirgau clarification (referring to the entire paragraph): While it is always easy to play Monday morning quarterback, I believe that because the salmon plants were bringing in tourism and boosting the local economy, the constant battle for who was going to get the biggest salmon plants, Lake Huron or Lake Michigan, was ultimately detrimental to the Lake Huron fishery. In defense of the people involved with those decisions, one can never predict what happens to a fishery when invasives are introduced. The quagga and zebra mussels and large fish plants ultimately set up the perfect storm for the alewife collapse. There were three basic schools of thought from people I know: The DNR doesn't know what they are doing and should leave things alone; keep giving us our salmon plants and don't reduce stocking efforts in Lake Huron; and, too many fish and not enough forage.

fisherman. That's where my passion is in the streams. I mean I like the lakes, they're fun and all that, but I love to be out in the nature. Yeah.

PRICHARD: Me too.

WIRGAU: That's where it's at. (Prichard: Yeah.) That's where it's happening. Right?

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PRICHARD: What are your information sources, like, regarding the ecology of Lake Huron? Do you go to the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee meetings?

WIRGAU: I get emails from Frank Krist (Prichard: Okay.) about what's going on, and I watch that. Any articles that I see on it. Or if I see anything on YouTube, I'll go and listen to it, watch it. There's a variety of places. Anything that's got an article on something like that I'll research, and if I want to know more then I'll look it up on the internet. So there's vast areas to find that information. Whereas before, when I was growing up I used to get all the castoff *Outdoor Life* books and *Field & Stream* from the neighbors' dads. I grew up in a big family so we didn't have any of that stuff, but they knew I liked to read that stuff so they'd give me a big box full of those magazines and I'd read them. And that's how I learned stuff. And I just have an interest in the biology and sciences because I like the outdoors and that was where my interests laid. So I just have a thirst for that kind of knowledge, and what makes things happen the way they are. I'm aware of my surroundings and I want to know. So, that's that. (Prichard: Yeah.)

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PRICHARD: I've just got kind of one final question or topic, and I'm trying to get at this among a lot of the interviews that I'm doing is, what has been the legacy of the Chinook salmon fishery on, kind of, the culture of Rogers City? Maybe extending beyond the people that actually did the fishing themselves, how much did the salmon fishery in Rogers City mean for the city as a whole? And then, how did it affect, in your perspective or opinion, how did it affect Rogers City economically or socioculturally, would you say?

WIRGAU: Well initially it came in and you started seeing, when the salmon started booming you'd see bait and tackle shops show up. I can think of three or four of them that aren't even operating anymore, they're closed. They were selling anything in the line of big lake fishing. Of course the restaurants, and the motels, they all depended on it, they got to depend on it. All summer long it would be just loaded down here with cars and trailers, people coming in for the salmon because we were the Salmon Capital of Michigan. That's what Rogers City put out there through the chamber of commerce, and so that's who we were, Salmon Capital of Michigan, so the people would come from all over, even the other side of the State, they'd come from out of state as well. I got a guy from Texas that comes up every year and he always wants me to take him out. We don't catch fish like that down there. And even now [Wirgau addition: with less fish to catch], he still is on me to take him out there fishing. And he's caught some salmon, I've taken him out. But, yeah, people were running charter services out of here. I know a lot of people that don't anymore, that were heavy into it. They depended on it, extra money, they could buy the bigger boats, and get all the gear they wanted. But now, you just don't have it anymore. So now Rogers City is the City of Parks and Trails. They try to bring people in—well even up here they've got a conservation area up here, Herman Vogler

[Conservation] Area, where they've got a pond and a river that comes through here, Trout River, and people hike around it. So they're constantly trying to find ways to bring people into the area, but it certainly isn't the salmon fishery that's bringing the people here. Everybody's on the other side of the State: Ludington, Petoskey, Manistee, all those areas. That's where the people go—even from here. I know people that go and stay over there, they go over there and they stay over there and they fish, just like it used to be over here. But that's all changed now. So you don't hear much about salmon. Or, you'll hear people say, "Well, are there any salmon left in the lake? Did you catch salmon this year?" (laughs) That's what you hear. So it's flip-flopped. (door opens) And like I said, I don't know if that'll ever come back. But I see it everywhere. You watch YouTube, fishing in Lake Michigan or here, you see more lake trout caught than you see anything. You'll see some salmon caught, like over on the Wisconsin side. Green Bay. You'll see the salmon reports going out of there, where people are catching them. But not so much around here. I've got friends that live over in the Petoskey-Harbor Springs area—they don't get the salmon over there they used to. That's declined over there. (Prichard: Yeah.) Up until just a few years ago they were doing quite well over there. You just don't see it now. So I'm sure it's affecting them, too. But the salmon legacy, well, it was a big experiment by [Wayne] Tody and [Howard] Tanner, those two doctors. I know they were thinking about planting stripers. (Prichard: Yeah.) That was what they were initially thinking of planting out here. But then they went with salmon and that was a big thing. Everybody took advantage of it, you saw it on all the outdoor programs, that was always a big thing. Now it's food plots, and catfish, catfish fishing, (laughs) turkey hunting and all this. So I think that it was a—to answer both questions and sum it up, it was a big boon to the area here,

and a lot of people took advantage of it economically and recreationally, and it brought people from all over, but now that's all kind of waned, you know you get the waxing and waning going on. And now it's, to catch salmon out there, it's not predictable as it used to be, and the numbers aren't there. So you don't get the people here, coming and bringing charters here to go after them as much, not like it was. There were people that chartered—they motored their boats over here and chartered out of here, that weren't even from the area. (Prichard: Right.) Yeah, a lot of those people were here, too. But walleye, you know, that's a fishery too, out here, that people aren't really taking the big advantage of it yet. They're here to have. They're around here. They travel, they're nomadic as heck. (Prichard: Yeah.) Walleye, lake trout, steelhead, those are the three biggies. They stopped the brown trout stocking. Atlantic salmon—they're trying to really push that program, but it isn't taking hold yet, I don't think. That's such a sensitive fishery, and it's a very timely fishery. You have to be on top of that whole thing and watching it close. Because when they're around you've got to be after them and all of a sudden they're gone. They're up at the Soo, the International Bridge and the rapids in there. (Prichard: Yeah.; laughs) It's a weird thing, the whole scenario. But they are scrappers, they are fighters. Oh yeah, Atlantics are.

PRICHARD: Alright. Well that kind of covers everything I had thought to go over with you. So I really appreciate you taking the time—

WIRGAU: I don't know if I gave you enough information or what you wanted to hear, but—

PRICHARD: Well no, just, yeah, your—

WIRGAU: It is whatever I said, and you just take it at face value. Yeah.

PRICHARD: Mm-hm. It's your story.

WIRGAU: It's my story.

PRICHARD: Yeah. Alright, I'll turn this off now.

end of interview