THE WHIPRAY WAY

COMING OF AGE ON A BELIZE CAY

Words: Brian Irwin

《THIS PAGE》

Julius Cabral starts most days shuttling sticks to the family dock on Whipray Caye. He has plenty of chores, but it's the ones that involve boats and fishing he loves best. Photo: Brian Irwin

Julian Cabral is a hardass. The 45-year-old man has spoon-shaped fingernails, palms rough as 40-grit sandpaper and square teeth that look like old Chiclets. He's been guiding the flats off the coast of southeastern Belize for more than 20 years and doesn't make suggestions or give pointers to his clients. He's directive, foul-mouthed and bossy. I learned this quickly when I nailed a tailing permit in the head, launching it off the flat. "That cast was shit," he spat, rolling a damp cigarette between his yellow teeth. "You really screwed it up."

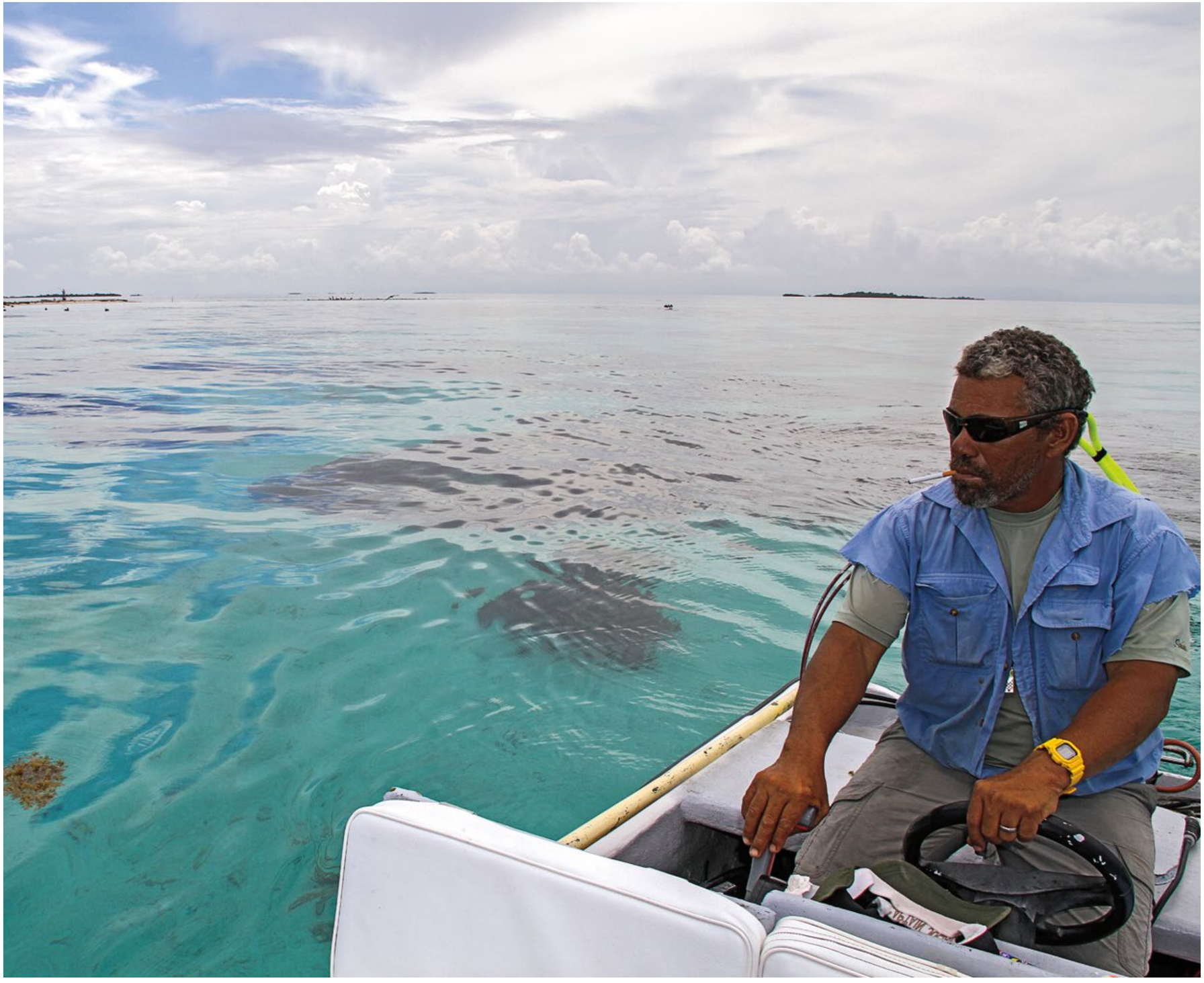
That's his style.

Julian has a sister named Pearl, who used to live in Placencia. Pearl gave birth to a son Bobby, who eventually married a woman named Mel. In 2001, they had a boy named Julius. The boy has had a rough life. His mom partied hard and Julius was left to roam free with few rules. His family unit was often in turmoil, in part because Mel's brothers hated his father.

In 2006, Julius' mother, Mel, was having an affair. Her brothers knew of the situation but turned a blind eye. One day they sought to enable their sister by taking Julius' father, Bobby, out to get drunk. He did, but became anxious and wanted to return home to see his wife, who was in their home with her lover. Against resistance, he crashed in on his wife tangled up with another man. The brothers, who had followed Bobby home, became enraged. A scuffle ensued and as tempers flared, the situation swung violently out of control. Mel's brothers brutally beat Julius' father's head in with a two by four, murdering him.

His dad dead and his life now decimated, Julius found even more trouble, more heartache. His mother bore a scarlet letter on the peninsula for her actions and his uncles were arrested, surprisingly serving only a few years in jail. They, and his mother, were essentially run out of town by the community, branded as evil people.

Julius began to steal and lie—his future looked bleak. After considering the advantages and disadvantages of a move, Julius' uncle, Julian Cabral, and his American wife Beverly decided to adopt Julius. On Oct. 10, 2011 they pulled him from the hell that had become his reality, away from everything he'd ever known, and brought him eight miles offshore to their home on the three-acre Whipray Caye, where they began the long, painful process of deprogramming and reprogramming this 11-year-old boy. They have no dishwasher. No sidewalks or skateboards. It's a remote environment which, save for the occasional Honduran that slides north to steal boats from the offshore cayes (Cabral has lost two), is free of crime.



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Julian Cabral cruises the shores of Moho Caye on lookout for the bones, silver kings and bad casts from his client. On this day, a number of bones were brought to hand, but the silvers did not cooperate. Photo: Brian Irwin

Julian Cabral is a good fishing guide and he knows these waters as well as anyone. He comes from a long generation of flats fisherman rooted in the tiny Placencia Peninsula. Local legend is that an infamous pirate named Cabral hid out in Placencia during the 1600s. The story goes that the Pirate Cabral is responsible for the large clan of Cabrals who live in Placencia today.

The flats of Belize lie offshore. Unlike the broad, white, sandy flats that ring the Bahamas' Out Islands, Belize flats are patchy. The floors are studded with turtle grass and rocks. Considering you're in the middle of the ocean, the wind is often prohibitive. But it is the habitat that makes this area one of the most productive permit fisheries in the world. Some mornings many tails are waving in the wind it looks like a grass field. Creamy lagoons hide in the bays of some offshore cayes, opening up opportunity for tarpon. Bonefish and snook fill in the gaps. This is one of the planet's most promising areas for a grand slam. Even though the fish are plentiful around Placencia, unlike other parts of Belize, pressure is light.

On a recent trip to Whipray, I waded the flats off the coast of Placencia with Cabral. The permit were scarce that day, which irritated him. Yet his eyes continuously scanned the surface, looking for tails, a sparkle of light or a puff of smoke in the sand. "They aren't feeding. And usually there are more. Where the hell are they?" he'd complain, reminding me to tighten my loop and to haul more than once. Late in the day we pulled into Moho Caye, an idyllic, yet sand-fly-infested island rimmed with coral heads amid shallow water. Tarpon patrolled the shoreline with bonefish in tow. It was a picturesque flyfishing aquarium.

With the bugs biting, I cast to selective fish, only coming tight on one small bonefish that hit a streamer. I asked Julian about his new son, Julius.

"Did you ever think you'd be a dad?" I probed, thinking of my own son, who is close to Julius' age, and how the two are similar. Stubborn. Naïve. Hungry for direction. Eager to please those whom they respect.

"You never think you're going to be anything until you do it. But this boy is something. Really something."

"Did you grow up flyfishing? Think it'll stick for Julius?" I inquired.

"He's driven," Cabral said. "And smart. It just damn well may."

At the age of five, Cabral started fishing with his father and grandfather. Gasoline and engines are expensive in Belize, a luxury only recently made affordable to the less-than-rich. Cabral's family was poor. They were, and remain, salt-of-the-earth people. No glitzy embroidered shirts or bleach-white boat decks. They're fishermen, raw and unpolished, with a legacy of hand-lining and throwing nets. Many years ago, when Cabral was growing up, his family didn't own a boat engine. His father would string together a series of wood canoes and paddle, sometimes in rough water, and often in the dark, far offshore where the mainland faded to a barely visible strip of darkness on the horizon.

A tiny kid, Cabral would ride in the rearmost canoe helping his elders restock ice and salt to keep their catch. Sometimes they would paddle 20 miles offshore to the reef, fishing for weeks to gather fish. When they were done, they would often stay at their family island to recoup before returning to the mainland from their fishing excursions. Julian's father leased a tiny caye from the government of Belize for 40 years and used it as a family retreat, but also to facilitate their fishing. There were four girls and 10 boys in Cabral's family, and they'd often visit the island, which was later destroyed by a hurricane. The lease was transferred to a nearby island—a three-acre plot known as Whipray Caye, so named after the indigenous Whip Ray, a polka-dot doormat of a fish that used to thrive in these waters but, for unknown reasons, are hardly ever seen today.

When Cabral's family founded Whipray Caye it wasn't a plush getaway with sandy beaches, expansive homes or picturesque cabanas. It was and still is a tiny island, half of which is marshy. A simple, drafty wood shack with a tin roof was their dwelling. A cistern provided water and still does. The buildings weren't plumbed until later. Resources were scarce; it was like island camping with still-developing amenities.

Whipray hasn't changed much. It's still remote and rustic, but in 2006 Cabral bought the lease out from under the government and started to develop the caye as a fishing lodge. The area around Whipray had become more popular as a fishing destination when Cabral was in his teens, and he recognized that creating a fishing destination with lodging in this area was one of the few ways to make a living in this part of Central America. He built two simple cabanas and pulled a generator ashore to provide power in the evenings. There is some basic plumbing and a thatched-roof gathering area where guests can drink cool bottles of Belkin lager.

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In Belize, time passes at the speed of life. And here, life is slow. And chill. Even when you are home blowing smoke out the door of your living room. Photo: Brian Irwin

《RIGHT PAGE, BOTTOM》

Main Street in "downtown" Placencia, a destination synonymous with world-class saltwater fishing and some of the finest, most experienced guides in the Caribbean. Names such as Westby, Godfrey, Leslie and Cabral have put this small town on the world's fishing map. Photo: Jim Klug

Step by laborious step, Cabral built a fishing camp in the middle of the Caribbean.

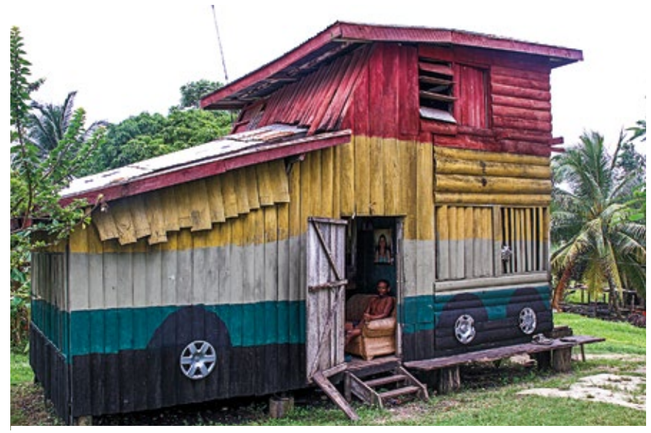
To understand the development of fishing off the coast of Placencia you must understand its inhabitants. The native population is diverse but consists largely of Garifuna people. Garifunas are blends of Carib and Arawak Indians (still a politically correct term in Central America) and West Africans who were brought to the area as slaves. There are also many Belizean Creoles, whose roots date back to Western European settlers and, again, West Africans. Cabral describes himself as Creole, but denies any slave component to his heritage, saying he's essentially Carib. "I'm as native as it gets around here," he growls.

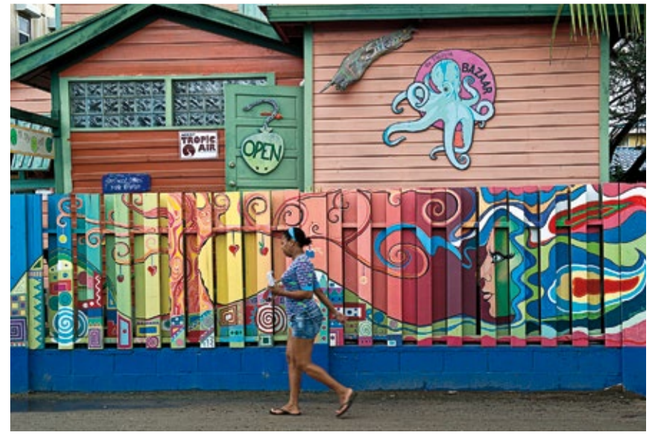
Placencia Peninsula is a pleasant place to visit. It's quiet and safe by Central American standards. Petty theft constitutes most of the crime as it continues to develop as a tourist area. The peninsula is strung with a series of small villages: Maya Beach, Seine Bight, Placencia proper. It's a compelling vortex of beachside cabanas and hammocks swinging from the palms, a place recently discovered by expatriates as a cheap spot to buy land and retire. Two hundred feet of oceanfront and a 4,000-square-foot house go for less than $300,000 if you shop around. It's blooming as a community, with a new casino going up on the northern tip of the peninsula. Next door, a patch of pretentious, largely unoccupied mansions stand amid a labyrinth of manmade canals that allow boat access to the lagoon on the peninsula's western side. But in Seine Bight, in the middle of the peninsula, or in the back streets of Placencia Village, old Belize still lives. And it's not that old.

Despite the development, Belize is still a poor country. It only has three major roads, all unnumbered. The road that courses down the center of the peninsula wasn't paved until 1991. That year, while I was in 10th grade, fishing the freestone streams of Western Maryland and learning how to drive and date girls, life on the peninsula changed forever. After the road was paved, the telephone company strung lines. Prior to that development, this entire stretch of shoreline, more than 20 miles long, had no phone, no power, no cable and no running water. It was a fishing locale, functioning quite like it had for a hundred years. Almost no one worked, because no one needed much money. Other than some building supplies, flour and a supply of oil for the hurricane lamp that hung in every home, there wasn't anything to buy. Everyone fished and everyone bartered. Crime was almost nonexistent. It was in this culture that Cabral and his siblings were raised; simple and steady.

When the phone lines came in, most homes took advantage of the new technology. Friendly streetside chats between neighbors morphed into a humming of electrified voices as calls bounced between rustic shacks. And then the bill came.

With no money, most families had to evolve to retain their new tool of communication. Stores and restaurants began to pop up; tourist lodging began to emerge and, within a short time, electricity, cable and water flowed into almost every home. The hurricane lamp became extinct. The peninsula was forever changed.

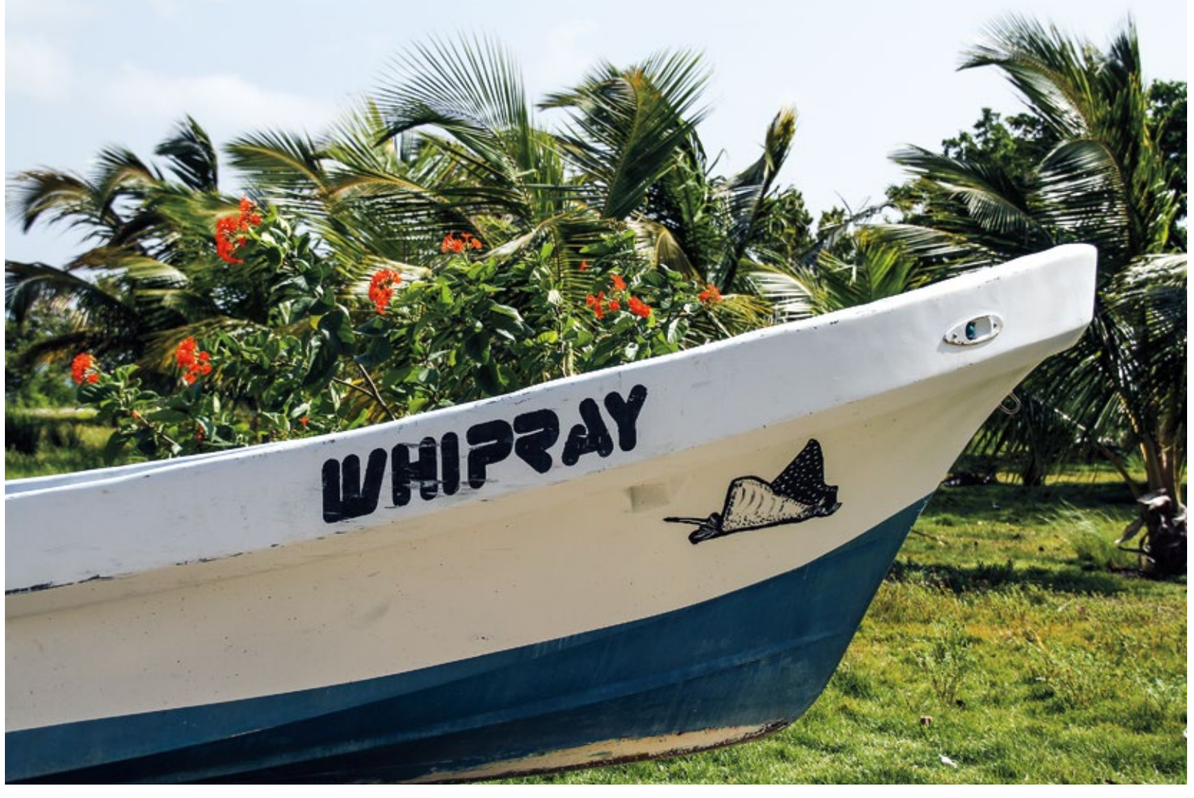




Each day begins early on Whipray. Cabral and Julius prepare the boat in the predawn light to take advantage of the early low tide. Julius is a hard working boy, a handsome kid with wiry hair and a broad smile. He's learning the ropes, literally, as he tends to Cabral's skiff or the large, 32-foot twin diesel the family uses to shuttle supplies and themselves to the mainland. If the family has clients, Cabral leaves early to stalk the flats. If they do not, Julius is typically put to work on the island's projects or helping Cabral dive for lobster, which the family uses to augment their income.

In addition to picking up blowdown and fallen coconuts, repairing the cistern or patching the roof, Julius attends his home classroom every day, taught by Beverly. She's a thin, soft-spoken woman with a giant heart, which she describes as "terribly soft, especially for Julius." Each day, when the chores are done, the two work on his schooling. Julius has an affinity for math, but his home curriculum is broader. When Cabral is ashore, it's the school of hard knocks, but when Julius is alone with Beverly, her tender way coaches him through academics, arguably with more efficacy and certainly more love.

Home schooling eight miles offshore has its challenges. While the family doesn't have giant, flat-screen televisions or air conditioning, they recognize technology can benefit Julius' education and help to keep the guiding business running smoothly. Julius has an iPad. Outlets like YouTube and streamed videos help supplement the boy's armament of books and other educational materials, allowing him to keep up with, and even outpace students on the mainland. This year, Julius achieved a 91 percent average, meeting and exceeding all of the standards set by Belize's public school system. Clearly a bright child with high aptitude, one day Julius hopes to put his smarts to work on the skinny water around Whipray. It seems with the support and intelligence he has, he could do anything with his life. When asked about his future, Julius is clear: He wants to be a fishing guide.



《BELOW》

Just don't call it a boat. Julian Cabral's panga rests on the shore of Whipray Caye. Aside from his eyes, this is his most important tool. Photo: Brian Irwin

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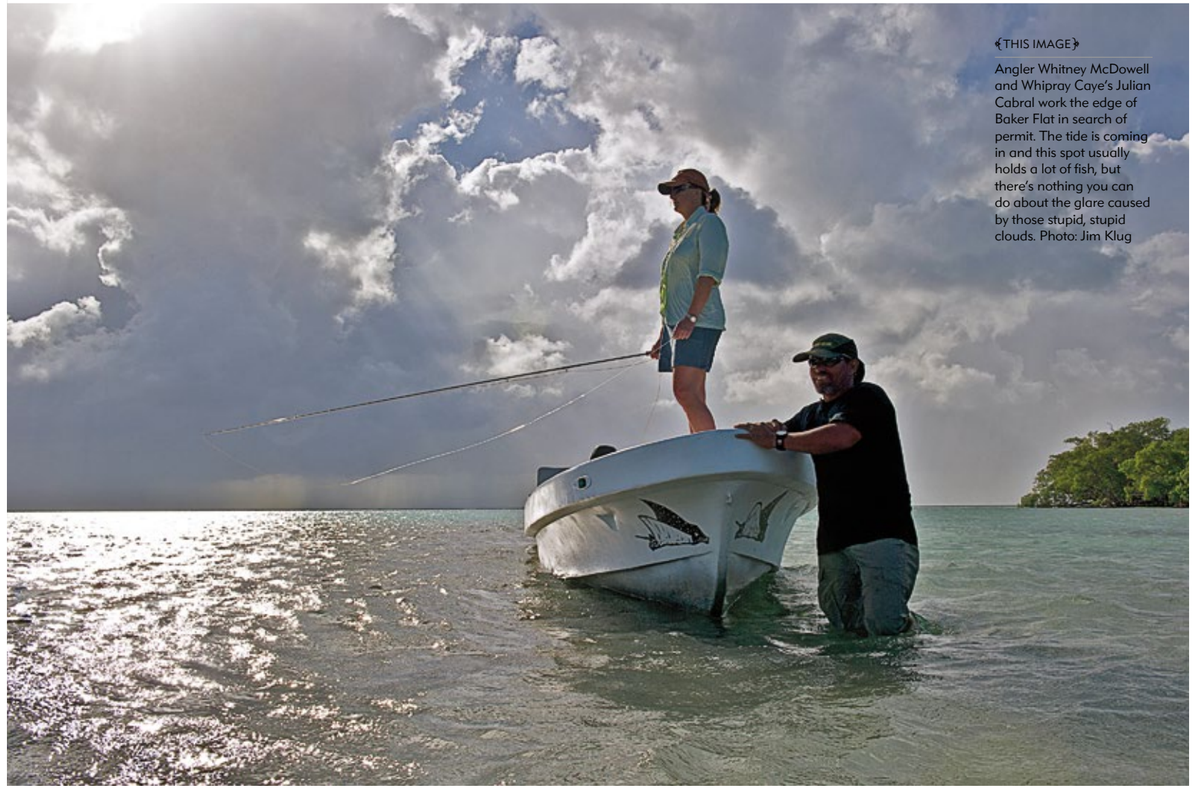
Crab patterns rigged and ready for another day on the flats. Bauer crabs and small spawning shrimp are the go-to patterns around Whipray Caye and throughout southern Belize. Photo: Jim Klug



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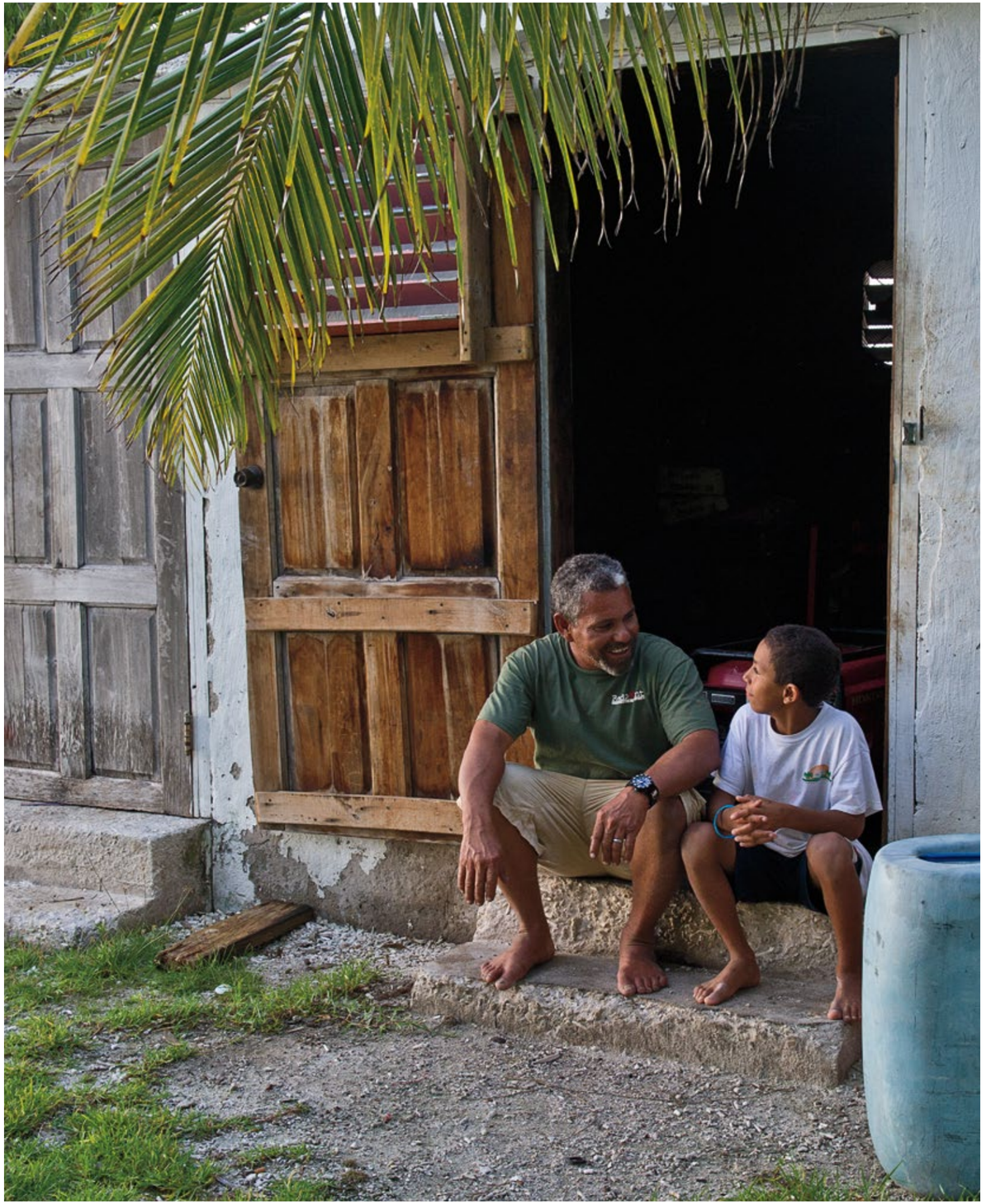
Angler Whitney McDowell and Whipray Caye's Julian Cabral work the edge of Baker Flat in search of permit. The tide is coming in and this spot usually holds a lot of fish, but there's nothing you can do about the glare caused by those stupid, stupid clouds. Photo: Jim Klug



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The sounds of science. Julian Cabral shares a moment with his nephew Julius. It's up to Julian's wife, Bev, to teach Julius the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. It's Julian's task to teach him the fundamentals of permit. Photo: Jim Klug

A BOAT PULLS TO THE DOCK on Whipray's western shore. Cabral waves and Julius comes running, tying up the flats boat and helping two clients walk ashore. The tide is rising and the productive flat just minutes from Whipray known as Permit City is underwater; mud and tails have washed away in the morning sun. It's lunchtime and Beverly brings out some fish and rice. In the open, thatched-roof *palapa* Julius sets the table, placing utensils on the placemats woven from *jippi jappa*, a local reed. Cabral's feet, thick with callouses, tap against the floor as he leaves the *palapa* and strolls across the sharp crabgrass. He picks up two fallen coconuts, and with a razor-sharp machete, lops off the top, pours the coconut water into two glasses and serves it to his clients.

Julius seems to love lunchtime. Cabral doesn't return to the caye for lunch every day, but when he does, he puts the boy to work and Julius seems to crave the direction. It's tough love for this boy who's becoming a man, learning to fix the water and pumping systems after school and bathing and feeding Max, the family's Rottweiler. Julius is not a blank slate—residual scars leak through his docile demeanor in the evenings when he goes to bed. Tears run on occasion, as he can't forget the hell he endured, but that hell has drifted out to sea, and every day he lives on Whipray, he becomes happier, stronger and more motivated to be Cabral's protégé.

Julius is a slight figure, strong for his age, but with arms like lead pipes, straight and narrow. He's about one third the height of a typical 10-weight rod, the standard for lagoon-resident tarpon. After the chores are done, it's Julius' time to shine as Cabral takes him to the dock, or on the bow of his flats boat, teaching him what may just someday pay his electric bill and feed his family.

Julius has had an extraordinary journey, but his core is that of an ordinary 11-year-old. He loves the show *Battlestar Galactica,* which Julius watched on the family's satellite TV until the dish took a direct lightning strike last month. He has friends whom he visits when Cabral takes him to the mainland. And he is impatient. It's a maladaptive trait for a flats fisherman. But Cabral is a pirate at *his* core and pirates don't like to be disobeyed. So he perseveres. "Snap your wrist, snap your forearm, but not too hard," Cabral would order Julius during casting lessons on the family dock. "You need to learn to do this right, right now," he would mandate. Julius' eyes would roll, yet he would listen.

The dialogue between the wandering mind of a young boy and a salty-mouthed sportsman is raucous. Orders followed, orders disobeyed, direction given to the misdirected and wandering yet hopeful eyes of a little boy ping-pong back and forth between the two as Julius learns how to strip line, load the spine and fire the cord to the tail that all too often waves in the shallows off the family's dock, but gets away.

That tail won't escape this child forever. The coin-sized scales of tarpon occasionally shimmer just under the surface as they roll adjacent the family's boat or a stone's throw from Julius' bedroom. From there, he can see the sparking swords of permit tails waving in the rays of the rising sun. Someday, he dreams, these will dive deep and run long, pulling tight the end of his line. Years from now, made a hunter and an angler by fate or focus, Julius may just walk the flats of the family compound, ground to which he worked so hard and paid such a steep price to earn access.

Now, it's all up to him.

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