



**Transcript of Video Interview with Howard Bennett,
recorded approx. 2006.**

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit www.earthalert.org.

JB: Hi, I'm Janet Bridgers, executive director of Earth Alert. We're here today with a person who proved that one person can make a difference. My guest today is Howard Bennett, coastal activist extraordinaire. Howard, it's great to have you.

HB: It's my pleasure.

JB: Howard, start telling us this whole story by what you were doing 21 years ago, 1984. What was your life like? What was happening.

HB: Well, I was very lucky. We live at the beach in Playa del Rey, where the sewage meets the sea. (laughs). I shouldn't say that. And I'm an ocean swimmer. I have been swimming in the ocean for 40 years.

JB: 40 years!

HB: Well now it's going on 50 years, every day of the year.

JB: Every day.

HB: Every day. Rain or shine. And 20 some odd years ago, I noticed that the clarity of the water was changing. I wear goggles to protect my eyes from salt and I used to be able to see clear to the bottom. I couldn't see to the end of my arm.

JB: Really? And this had come on gradually.

HB: Gradually.

JB: But suddenly you noticed it.

HB: Suddenly I noticed it. And so it really bothered me. So I went home to my wife and she's a wonderful person. We just celebrated our 51st wedding anniversary.

JB: Congratulations!

HB: Oh, thank you. I don't know where the time has gone, but anyway, she is from Denmark and she was in the Underground during the war, fought the Nazis. She's a socially active person. So when I came home and complained about the ocean, she said, "don't complain to me. Do something about it."

JB: And then what happened?

HB: And then what happened. Well. I decided to actually get the media involved. And so I went out and rented the Los Angeles Press Club, the L.A. Press Club.

JB: Now how did you know about the issue? I mean other than your personal experience in the water, how did you know about the issue?

HB: Okay, there was a fisherman, an elderly gentleman who used to fish early in the morning. He'd sit on a three-cornered stool. It was still dark because I had to swim before I went to school. I was a school teacher. I had to be at school at 8:00 and this gentleman was fishing when I went swimming, which was sometimes before 6:00. I thought he was crazy. He probably thought I was crazy. And so...but we never said anything to each other. We'd wave and that was it. So this one day, just before I went in swimming, he yelled at me, "water's poison, water's poison, don't go in the water."

Well, of course, I went in the water and swam. And he waved a newspaper at me and when I got out, I just stopped by him and he said it was something in the L.A. Times, something about problems with the water. And so I felt I had to find more about this whole thing. I had a friend. He was a marine biologist, Dr. Rimmon Fay.

JB: So you already knew the legendary Rim Fay. How did you know Dr. Fay?

HB: Oh, I knew him as a lifeguard on the beach.

JB: Ah ha!

HB: And I knew that he had a marine laboratory in Marina del Rey. And so I called him up. And he told me that they just had a hearing.

JB: What was the hearing about?

HB: The hearing was about the City of Los Angeles applying for a 301(h) waiver, or in plain English, they wanted to get out doing secondary treatment for all of the sewage that was being dumped into the bay from Hyperion sewage plant.

JB? We're going to roll now with three minutes of video that is going to, I hope, bring all of you in the audience a little more up-to-speed on what we're talking about. And then we'll come back.

Voice track from the video: [that of a news segment by TV news reporter Bill Press] Santa Monica Bay. It is today a jewel in the crown of Southern California, our most visible, our most precious resource. Then and now, Santa Monica Bay, a place to lie in the sun, take a swim, go for a sail, go fishing, dig for clams. Even then a place to stroll on the boardwalk, fight for a parking place and admire local bathing beauties. Yes, then and now, a great meeting place of sand, sun, and sewage. Every day, from every flush in the basin, every day from Glendale, from Downey, from Silverlake, sewage flows in a vast underground river to the Los Angeles Hyperion Treatment Plant where it is treated once and poured into the bay five miles out. Every day from

the city, 410 million gallons of treated sewage. Every day from the county, another 360 million gallons, making Los Angeles sewage, the 10th largest river in the state. Every day, three times the full capacity of Lake Casitas poured into Santa Monica Bay. The sewage, as unpleasant as it is, can still be treated and purified to the point where the ocean and even fish can absorb it without any serious public health effects. That's not true of toxics, industrial waste, DDT or PCBs and they're also getting into the bay. In fact, 15% of all the waste flowing from Los Angeles everyday into Santa Monica Bay are toxic. And that's on top of 40 years of using Santa Monica Bay as a toxic dump.

From 1947 to 1972, over 10,000 tons of toxic waste were dumped into the bay off Santa Catalina Island. For 20 years, the Montrose Chemical Plant in Torrance poured DDT into the bay. Scientists have pinpointed 13 other ocean dump sites, collectively making southern waters what one scientist called, "the worst case of coastal pollution in the world."

Does some of that sewage and all of that toxic waste make any difference in the quality of the bay? You bet. It has to and it has.

[the news segment then goes to a clip of Howard Bennett]

H B: I taste things in the water and I used to think, "well, it's something I ate. And now I find out it's something somebody else ate."

Bill Press: Tomorrow [unclear] one or two people who work out or work in the bay. They see the difference everyday. I'm Bill Press.

JB: Howard, so you entered the story right as the City of Los Angeles was trying to get this waiver to continue business as usual, what they had been doing, which was only partially treating the sewage, with the effect that the bay had become very, very polluted.

HB: Right, right.

JB: And how did...what was the tool you used?

HB: Well, I used the media.

JB: You called a couple press conferences.

HB: I called a couple press conferences because years ago, about a thousand years ago, I worked for a paper. I don't know if you ever heard of it. It's called the *Wall Street Journal*. I was just a copy boy delivering sandwiches and coffee and I got to know the fellows. This was back east. And I got to know how they thought, and their frame of mind. And so, I just put myself in the media's place. And this was "had to be told." I mean, it turned out that the Santa Monica Bay, according to the EPA, was the most polluted body of water in the world.

JB: Really?

HB: Yeah.

JB: And everybody was swimming in it.

HB: Oh yeah. I mean icky poo.

JB: No kidding. So, I want to give...go back, roll back for the benefit of people who are watching. There are a couple of important things that people need to know about this story and one of those is the Clean Water Act. The Clean Water Act that was enacted in 1972. And by the terms of the Clean Water Act, they should not have been allowed to do simply the minimal treatment that they were doing in the City of Los Angeles.

HB: Right, and the thing is when I found out about it, it was already a done deal. They had tried to get this...tried and succeeded in a non-publicized public hearing to get this waiver, which allowed them not to do the secondary treatment. And it was all over, as far as many people were concerned. Who even knew about the hearing? And...

JB: You didn't let that be "good enough" for you.

HB: Well, I guess, my wife says I'm stubborn. And what does she know after 51 years. No, I didn't want them to get away with it because...And really in a way, it was a selfish thing. I was swimming in the ocean. I love the ocean. And you know, when I thought about it, they were pumping this...I don't want to say it...effluent, that's the fancy word.

JB: But you made it clear enough for everybody. What was the effluent really?

HB: Well, the effluent was actually raw sewage. Funny thing is, not funny, but odd, at days there would be brown foam out there and sometimes I would taste things in the water.

JB: Yuck!

HB: And yeah, and I thought gee, maybe something I ate, and then later I learned it was something somebody else ate.

JB: So you started calling news conferences. And you formed an organization, right?

HB: Right.

JB: What was it?

HB: Well, I couldn't think of a fancy swinging name so I called it the Coalition to Stop Dumping Raw Sewage Into the Ocean, and made a big letterhead on the press releases and I began to contact different organizations.

JB: So you were enlisting organizations. You had a number of press conferences, not just one or two.

HB: Yeah.

JB: And this was over... But the second one I remember, and you did something particularly visual down at City Hall. What was that one?

HB: Yeah, Los Angeles, the City of, had several pipes... 7-mile, 5-mile, 3-mile and 1-mile pipe going out into the ocean, just dumping this stuff. So I thought it would be fair play, turn-about is fair play, to go down to the City Hall of Los Angeles and put a one-mile symbolic sewer pipe... It turned out to be one mile if you took it and with ribbon and we had it colored brown for obvious reasons. And I was a teacher at Culver City High School at the time and my students were more than happy to help and get petitions. We got thousands and thousands of petitions and this one particular day, we attached the petitions to this long ribbon sewer pipe and we just walked around City Hall and ended up right in the front.

JB: Managed to get a few TV cameras there?

HB: Well, somehow they heard about it and the newspapers heard about it and it was quite a sensation.

JB: Now there was a second news conference was even a little naughtier.

HB: Well, put it this way... I know what you're thinking of. The City of Los Angeles unfortunately had been using the Santa Monica Bay almost like a toilet bowl. They'd been dumping this crap in there for donkey's [that's what the seems to say] years. So I thought, well, okay...

I had a friend of mine who owned a very large plumbing supply corporation and I went to him. I said, "Lou, could I have a brand new toilet?" "What are you going to do with it, Howard?" "Well, I'm going to put it on TV." "You're going to what?" "Yeah, I'm going to put it on TV, and what I'll do, I'll have effigies made of the mayor of Los Angeles, and every member of the City Hall and on television, we will symbolically put them into the toilet bowl, but it will be a dry toilet bowl. And at the same time, on television, we will give them an award, the Dirty Toilet Award.

So we had this artist, really gifted person, draw up these scroll-like things, "To Mayor Bradley, the recipient of the Dirty Toilet Award." And every member of the City Council. And that press conference...

JB: A lot of publicity at that one, too?

HB: Oh yeah. I tell you...

JB: You were definitely the master of street theatre on this issue, Howard.

HB: Well, you know, there's a thin line between...what's the word I'm looking for...theatre and being icky poo and vulgar, you know, and we managed to be right on that line, and oh, they all got the publicity they richly deserved.

JB: There was another thing going on that...there was some collusion here. And what I'm talking about is there was an organization at the time called Southern California Coastal Water Research Project (SCCWRP) was the acronym. What did SCCWRP do, as you recall?

HB: Well, what it was...it was an organization that was, its function was to say that all that sewage that was being dumped into the ocean not only didn't hurt the bay, the fish, the living organisms, the kelp or anything, but even go so far as to say it was good for it. It cost...They were given \$1 million/year, a million dollars a year to come up with these false reports.

JB: And so this was all part of the campaign. It wasn't just street theatre. There was an effort to expose the reports that SCCWRP presented.

HB: And interestingly enough, and to his credit, one of the scientists...they were real scientists who were getting the data, and the data was legitimate, but the head of it...His name was Willard Bascom. And he was a silver-tongued person who could sell ice to the Eskimos. He would change the data and make these false statements. Well, one of the scientists just couldn't take it anymore and he went to the media.

JB: So he became a whistleblower.

HB: He became a whistleblower. And, oh, more power to him. It just blew the whole thing apart.

JB: And there was a third thing that happened, almost simultaneously, and you're going to have to tell me how that fit in exactly. There was a particular spot down near Playa del Rey where would regularly be overflows of raw sewage right into the creek. How did that play into the rest of what was going on?

HB: Oh yes. A citizen found that on this flood control channel called Ballona Creek, which went from the interior of the city, from Culver City and all of that all the way out to the ocean, in one spot the City of Los Angeles had built an overflow valve. And this thing had been there for 30+ years. And the City knew about it, because you see, in times of heavy flows, in times of big rains and things like that, the sewage system was often...and the pipes that were coming to Los Angeles like a number of arteries, they were almost ready to burst from overflowing. Well, this particular valve was a safety valve and it just brought the raw sewage up and dumped it into the creek and it was taken into the ocean, straight to the ocean. And this wasn't sewage that had gone through any treatment at all. They hadn't separated...

JB: And this was like a lot?

HB: Oh, a lot. Millions and millions of gallons over the years.

JB: So what happened related to that specific part of it.

HB: Finally the thing was made public because a citizen, I wonder who that was [HB's eye movements made it clear that it was him].

JB: Do you know? Oh never mind.

HB: All I have to do is look in the mirror. I was told, because I was a teacher in Culver City, and my wife and I went there, to that particular thing and the smell...the poor people who lived around there, the smell could make you blind. It was, it was...I can't tell you. And so, yeah, we publicized that. We went to one of the politicians at the time and gave him something to talk about and, yeah, the City was actually fined a bunch a money because of that. And served 'em right.

JB: Now one more piece of the puzzle you have to fill in for me. So what happened with the waiver. The City had been granted the waiver and then you got a lot of publicity, you got more hearings and what happened then?

HB: What happened, for the first time in the history of the United States, of the EPA, they made an about-face, the EPA did, and rescinded the waiver. Yes, Los Angeles had to do secondary treatment. That was the first time in the history. Wow!

JB: And the state...there was the regional and the State Water Quality Control Boards. What was their role in all of this?

HB: Well, their role was to tell the City and the County of Los Angeles, hey, this couldn't go on. You have to do at least secondary treatment for all of that stuff that you're putting in the ocean, because to be frank with you, it was almost as though you and I had diarrhea, and we'd swim in something like that. Yeah.

JB: So we are able now to see that your work had a tremendous effect. In a short period of time, what you did really had an impact. Now you were not the only person involved in the issue, but tell us what happened since then.

HB: Oh well, they called it the Nine Month Miracle. I'd been... I was teaching at the same time. We had two children. And I was working 50 hours a week, 9 days a week. I had telephone bills of over \$1000. And frankly it was tearing us apart as a family. And so I had find somebody to head this organization and it wasn't easy. I spoke to a number of people who were involved in various environmental projects and they were all so busy, they couldn't handle another thing. But I was lucky enough to get this lady, who was involved with the League of Conservation Voters, a lady named Dorothy Green. And she had a wonderful husband, Jack Green, who has since passed away. And she took the whole thing on. And she's done a bang-up job.

JB She certainly has. And what's the name of the organization...

HB: She renamed it, and called it Heal the Bay.

JB: What a wonderful conclusion to our story. We have one minute, one minute left, Howard. Now I want you to tell us what's the good news about the water quality from an ocean swimmer.

HB: Oh, it's so much better. I can now see to the end of my arm. The sand crabs have come back. I still swim. Everybody...

JB: Amazing.

HB: It's made a world of difference.

JB: Congratulations on your work. Viewers, thank you for joining us for another episode of *Heroes of the Coast*. For more information about Earth Alert, visit our website www.earthalert.org. And for more information about the history of the Santa Monica Bay, you can visit healthebay.org. We welcome your comments. We're glad to have you with us. Howard, thank you again. Thank you, visitors.

[end of interview]