



**Transcript of Video Interview with Peter Douglas,
recorded 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: Hello, my name is Janet Bridgers, executive director of Earth Alert. We're here with the next in the series *Heroes of the Coast*, the program that brings you the personal stories of the people who have dedicated their lives to saving the California coast for the rest of us. And I'm very pleased today to have as our guest, Peter Douglas, executive director of the California Coastal Commission. Peter, thank you for coming.

PD: Thank you for having me, Janet.

JB: Peter, you've been executive director of the California Coastal Commission now for 20 years, correct? And were Deputy Director since...

PD: Since January 1977 and I've been the director since June of 1985.

JB: So you've spent most of your adult life involved in coastal activities, but for the sake of story, take us back to the point before you became involved. You had graduated from UCLA Law School, correct?

PD: I did.

JB: What year was that?

PD: That was 1969, from law school. And my then-wife and I traveled around Europe and Africa and looking for a place to live and decided we would come back to the States, California, if we didn't like what we saw. Then we could come back and fight for change, because this is one of the few places on the earth where you can really make a difference. So we decided to come back and get involved in some activist issues.

JB: So would you already call yourself an environmentalist at that time?

PD: An activist. I was very involved in a number of programs...civil rights issues, fair housing, draft counseling, Indian rights, civil rights for inmates in law school and I was the chair of a program there for two years, reaching out into the community, working with people who didn't have the means, to help them get justice and fairness in our system.

JB: That's a lot of issues.

PD: A lot of issues. Environment wasn't one of them at that point though.

JB: How did you happen to become part of Alan Sieroty's office?

PD: Alan came to speak at UCLA Law School. And I was very impressed with what he had to say.

JB: I guess we should tell everybody what Alan's position was.

PD: He was an Assemblyman at the time, a member of the State Assembly, from Beverly Hills/West L.A. and he was very involved in a whole lot of issues that I cared a lot, fighting the death penalty, equal treatment for immigrants, for consumer rights, prison reform and the environment. And when I came back from our trip abroad, I was looking for work. A friend of mine from law school who worked for Alan called me and said he's looking for someone to work on the Coastal Act. And he'd like to talk to you about it. So we got together for breakfast in Beverly Hills one day and I had determined to never go into politics or work in politics, but after a couple of hours with Alan, I really liked the guy and I thought this would be a wonderful person to work with. He's a humanist, smart, not arrogant, not pretentious and not really political. And because I would be given a primary task of drafting a bill to protect the California coast, I thought this is a job worth pursuing and I did. He hired me and I went to work for him in January...end of January 1971 and the first bill I got on my desk to work on was the Coastal Act.

JB: It's like getting started day one on...

PD: Day two, actually

JB: So there were several efforts after that to try to get legislation passed through the state legislature.

PD: That's right. We tried... As you know, the idea for this came from Ellen Stern Harris in 1968. There were several efforts in 1970, but the environmentalists were all over the field. So they got together in the fall or winter of '70 and they formed the California Coastal Alliance, under the leadership of Janet Adams. And the idea was that all of these environmental groups would work under this umbrella—Coastal Alliance—to put...to support one bill, which Alan Sieroty introduced in 1971, and we got it out of the Assembly, but we couldn't get it out of the Senate Committee.

So the next year, we came back and tried the same thing. We tried the bill both starting on the Senate side and the Assembly side and the Coastal Alliance made it clear that if these bills failed, they would go to the initiative process.

JB: That was already decided.

PD: That was decided at the beginning of the 1972 session that if we couldn't get a bill through this year, we would go to the people in the initiative process. So since we couldn't get a bill through...the Senate bill died, the Assembly bill made it over to the Senate, but we couldn't get it out there, and went to the initiative process and it was going very slow. And I remember calling the attorney for the Coastal Alliance, saying "what's going on here? I haven't seen any drafts of the Coastal Initiative." And he said, "well, we're not really doing much." "How 'bout

getting together this Saturday?" And so we did. We met at his law firm in San Francisco and wrote the initiative in one morning.

JB: You did?

PD: Yeah. We wrote it in one morning and I remember standing up after we'd finished looking out the window from the 34th floor of the high rise where his law firm was. "Ray, we haven't got enough in here for the people." He said, "well, what do you suggest?" I said, "we ought to talk about the coast being a precious irreplaceable resource belonging to all the people." He said, "we can't do that. Because if we do that, the court will say we're taking private property and it will be challenged and maybe thrown out." And I said, "no, it won't. They'll just say this is a statement of 'gee, we wish this was so.'"

And so we kept that in, and sure enough. It went all the way to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court interpreted it the way I thought they would interpret it, that it was not an inoperative expropriation [not sure I have this phrase right, it's hard to make it out] of property, it was just a statement that the coast is something that all the people have a stake in.

Any way, we finished the initiative. I sent it out to about 20 people. Got about two comments back, minor comments, and that's how it was circulated and got on the ballot and passed. And once it passed...well, I was very involved in the campaign.

JB: How were you involved in the campaign?

PD: Well, Alan was great. He said it was important for me to be available to go and talk about the campaign and what it does and doesn't do, because there was a lot of misinformation out there. So I wasn't involved in the press. I wasn't involved in the actual rallies, things like that, but I was very involved in television appearances, radio appearances, explaining what it does, talking to Rotary Clubs, talking to editorial boards, about what the proposed initiative would do, how it would work. And that was the role that I played in the campaign. When we won by 54% of the vote, and I have in my office a headline...two headlines, one is "Nixon wins by a landslide over McGovern," and he won by 51%. And then, "Coastal initiative squeaks by." And we won by over 54%.

JB: Were you surprised by the result? Did you have polling that showed it would win?

PD: We had polling and we were way ahead until the last few weeks. And the opposition spent so much money. We were outspent 10...20 to one. And it just looked like they were making headway. And they were. Our numbers were going down. I felt good about it, but you never can tell. And it was tense until probably middle of the night and we realized it had passed.

JB: And then, what happened to your life?

PD: Then, I went back to Alan, after celebrating for a few days, and he said, "well, what should we do now that this initiative passed and the Coastal Commission is going to be established?" I said, "I think what we need is a select committee of the legislature that will help in the

implementation, in the establishment of the Commission. We need to have regulations. We need to have a budget drafted. We need to get people appointed, find office space for them. They have to start. And I think it's important that the legislature have a liaison, a committee to not only help with that, but also to monitor the implementation of the initiative so when the plan for permanent protection of the coast comes back in 1976, we'll have had this ongoing liaison with the Coastal Commission. And also to help them do their job during this interim temporary period.

So we went to the Speaker of the Assembly at that time, Bob Moretti, and said, "we really think a select committee would be a good idea," and he didn't hesitate. He said, "fine." We established a select committee. Alan was the chair. I became the consultant. And my job was to help implement the initiative. So the first thing that I did working with my counterpart on the Senate side, and with the Governor's staff... Governor Reagan, Ronald Reagan was the governor at the time, very opposed to the initiative, but once it passed, he said, "the people have spoken. We're going to make it work."

So the three of us, the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor's office, sponsored a conference, or a gathering, in Sacramento of all the new commissioners that had just been appointed by the end of the year. It passed November 7th and by the end of the year the new commissioners had been appointed and so we got them together in Sacramento and had prepared a whole outline of things they needed to do. They needed to organize, they needed to elect a Chair and a Vice Chair and they had to appoint...the regional commissions had to appoint somebody to the state commission. State commission had to adopt a budget, regulations...So all of that worked over two days in Sacramento. And they met, they caucused. And they actually decided when to meet. And so each commission, there were six regional commissions, they each set a date. They then met, selected their chair, and who was going to be on the state commission. The state commission set a date and met and my job at that point was to work with Joe Bodovitz, who was the executive director of the San Francisco Bay commission, who agreed to help. So he put together a draft...a proposed budget for the Coastal Commission. We worked on draft regulations. So we had all this prepared for this commission when it first met.

I remember they met, I believe it was in San Francisco, and it was a rainy day, but they met. They elected Mel Lane as the chair, Ellen Stern Harris as the vice chair, and they appointed Joe Bodovitz. They said, "gee, we need an executive director," and Joe was on loan, sitting at the table, acting as their on-loan executive director and they said, "gee, we need an executive director. Joe, would you be interested?" He said, "it just so happens I would." So they had a chair, a vice chair, an executive director, and then they adopted the budget that was proposed and the regulations. So they did all that in one meeting.

JB: That's amazing.

PD: It was an amazing story because there were those people like the realtors, developers, industry who had opposed the Coastal Commission who said, "this can never work. It will never function. It won't happen." Well, we proved them wrong. Not only did they hit the ground running, they were ready to start processing permits in February of 1973, which is when the permit requirements kicked in. And they had office space, and they had staff, and they were ready to go.

JB: So those permits did start coming...

PD: They started coming right away, yes they did.

JB: Big and small.

PD: Big and small and we still have some that we have to live with forever, bad decisions that fell through the cracks because the Commission was so brand new and didn't quite have its feet on the ground yet. But by and large, they were ready to go and they did what a lot of people thought wasn't possible, getting organized and getting functional and actually starting to protect the coast through this new law.

JB: There's a paragraph that I read that, for the sake of viewers who may not have been aware in the 60s, "along with an Army Corps of Engineers scheme to fill 60% of San Francisco Bay, the 60s saw plans to expand California's famous Pacific Coast Highway into a multi-lane freeway, to build hundreds of new homes on what is now Pt. Reyes National Seashore, construct Miami Beach style high rises along the state's south and central coast, drill for oil off Monterey and Big Sur and install a nuclear power plant on scenic Bodega Bay Headlands, north of San Francisco." This was all actually in the works when the coastal initiative was passed.

PD: Plans were being put together to develop the coast that way. Lots of new harbors, in fact, many nuclear power plants were being proposed, not just Bodega Bay. And it was all of these threats to the coast that really stimulated people to want to do something. And of course, we had the 1969 oil spill in Santa Barbara, which really catalyzed people. And then things happened like the Sea Ranch development on the Sonoma Coast, where the public all of a sudden lost access to 10 miles of the coast in the late 60s. You had high rise buildings go up in Coronado. You had single family homes in Redondo Beach replaced by humongous condominium projects. You had a number of...the Holiday Inn that went in at Monterey, at the crescent on the beach there. There were number of things that happened and people just looked around and said, "is this what the future of our coast holds?" And the public support for enacting a coastal law that would be protective long term of the coast was incredible. And it was maintained throughout the campaign.

We came out very late with the petitions for Prop. 20. It happened that we got them back from the printer on the day before the League of Women Voters held their convention. So we were able to drive literally thousands of these petitions to the convention. But we gathered the required hundreds of thousands of signatures within five weeks. I mean it was a short period of time. Nobody thought it could be done. But we got it done because people cared. And we qualified it in time for the November ballot, which was the goal. But it was a very tight time limit. The public cared. They looked at these plans and the filling of San Francisco Bay is what led to the San Francisco Bay Commission in 1965. So that was the stimulus for people to protect the Bay. I think the oil spill, the threat of a freeway along the coast, the nuclear plants, the filling in of wetlands, the loss of wetlands, the loss of public access. Those were all threats that galvanized the public into taking action themselves to save the coast.

JB: And we're going to share another half hour where we talk about some of the highlights of your experience with the Commission, but I'd kind of like to fast forward now into the future and talk now about where is coastal activism going and where is the Coastal Commission going? What kind of shape is the Coastal Commission in today?

PD: Well, the Coastal Commission is a unique entity. It's an independent commission, so it's not controlled by the Administration. It's appointing authority is divided between the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor, a division of authority that was just recently upheld by the California Supreme Court, actually strengthening the Coastal Commission in ways that had not existed before.

JB: Did it give you a sense of relief on...

PD: Not only a sense of relief, but it also led to fixed terms of appointment for the commissioners, so they're appointed now for four year terms, which is something we tried to get into the Coastal Act in 1976, but we couldn't because the governor at the time, Jerry Brown, and the Speaker, they wanted to have the flexibility to appoint and remove commissioners at any time.

JB: And that happened a lot.

PD: It did happen, too much. So the recent decision by the Supreme Court and the Legislature's reaction to the lawsuit and the lower court rulings, declaring the Commission unconstitutional, led to the enactment of a law that fixed the terms of the commissioners, which has tremendously strengthened the Commission. So I'm grateful to the Marine Forest Society for bringing the lawsuit and doing what the environmentalists couldn't do in the 30 years before. So that was an ironic, unintended consequence, I'm sure, but it certainly has strengthened the Commission.

I think the fact that the Commission continues to maintain such strong public support. California Public Policy Institute did a poll two years ago and the overwhelming majority of people thought that the Commission wasn't tough enough. We were allowing too much development. But by and large, through the Coastal Act, was doing a better job to protect the coast than local government or anyone else. So the public support is there. I think the biggest problem is the funding, the support, getting the resources to do the work. We have one biologist to work...

JB: One biologist?

PD: One biologist to work projects having habitat impacts along the entire 1100 miles of California coast. That's ridiculous. We don't have the resources to hire another one. Our enforcement program... We had two people up until the Davis Administration running an enforcement program for the entire state. The technical expertise that we need and the resources we need to do our work simply isn't adequate. So to me, the single most important thing we can do to ensure long term protection of the coast and ocean is to find a permanent, stable adequate source of funding. We failed to get that into the Coastal Act of 1976 and that was probably one of our biggest failings at the time.

I think the Commission right now is one of the best Commissions we've had. We've got a terrific chair. We've got good membership. We have people who believe in the law and who do their homework and we continue to have that factor that really has made it work, and that is public support. One of the hallmarks of the Coastal Act was public participation, public involvement. I think when you talk to people who are involved with other state agencies or federal agencies or even local government, I think you'll find agreement that the Coastal Commission is the most accessible, and the most open and the most encouraging of public involvement. And when people ask me what are some of the major accomplishments of the Coastal Commission, I point to the empowerment of citizens to become actively involved in the future of their communities, their region, their state by getting involved in some form of coastal conservation or environmental stewardship. And staying involved. And that they can make a difference. And people who have come to the Coastal Commission who weren't listened to or shut off at the local government level, or some other state agency, have gone away from the Coastal Commission saying, "boy, they listened to us. We made a difference." And that energized them to form active groups in their communities and to get involved and stay involved.

Activism, public involvement, is key. That's what made the Coastal Act happen. That's why I call it the People's Law. And it's what has sustained it. Anytime there's been a challenge or an attack on it, it's the public that's stepped forward to defend it. So public activism and involvement is a key and right now, that's still at a high level, but it needs to be higher. Unfortunately, it costs money to be involved. We meet up and down the state. It takes resources to understand the complexity of the issues. It's hard to sustain that level of involvement that really is necessary, but we do get it, in specific areas. I just think it's one of the most important elements of coastal protection because the coast is never saved. It's always being saved. And when you think you've finished and saved a particular reach of the coast, by making a park out of it, for example, the next thing you know there's a proposal to have off-highway vehicles running around on it. Or put roads in areas that are highly sensitive or campgrounds into habitat, sensitive habitat. So there has to be constant vigilance and constant involvement. That's why public activism is the key to the future of any reach of environment that is coveted by developers and those who would use it for profit, private profit.

JB: You have...this has become, the Coastal Act has become a model for bills in other countries, as well.

PD: Yes, it has, and I've been to other countries as an invitee to help them shape a coastal protection program for themselves. I've been to Chile. We worked with the Navy there and the government to try to put together a protection program for them. They have a coast very much similar to California's. I've been to China. I've worked with people delegations from Viet Nam, from Sri Lanka, from Europe, different coastal European countries, and Australia, who want to protect their coast and have looked to the California Coastal Act as a model that they can either emulate, or at least take some parts from that might serve them well. I know that when we were in China, our counterparts, after reading the Act, asked me, "what is this about public participation?" I said, "well, we have these public hearings..." They said, "no, no, no. We don't need that. And what is this commission?" So I explained that to them. They said, "no, no, no. We make the decisions. We don't need a commission."

JB: They're still a little ways behind us.

PD: There's a ways to go, but...

JB: We're in the last couple minutes of the program. There is a phrase I read that you described yourself with and if you could give us a little more insight into it. You called yourself an optimistic pessimist.

PD: An optimistic pessimist? Did I?

JB: Uh huh.

PD: I thought you were going to use the phrase "radical pagan heretic."

JB: Well, if you prefer, tell us about that one.

PD: That's what I call myself because "radical" refers to getting to the root of issues and "pagan" refers to those who have a reverence for nature and that which we don't understand in the universe, and I certainly consider myself as someone who has that sort of reverence. And then "heretic," it means "to choose." And I think "choose" is one of the greatest gifts we have, the ability to choose...what we do, what we don't do, where we get involved and where we don't. And that comes from Constantine deciding in 333 that Catholicism would be the religion of the empire and that those who chose not to follow that path were heretics. They choose poorly. Well, I think choosing is a gift that we have, so I don't mind being called a heretic.

JB: Peter, it's been wonderful to have you and thank you for all of your work, for all of these years. Visitors, thank you for joining us. We hope you'll stayed tuned...come back to see the next episode of "Heroes of the Coast."

[end of interview]