



Transcript of Video Interview with John Dunlap,
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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.

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JB: Hi, I'm Janet Bridgers with Earth Alert. Welcome to another episode of Heroes of the Coast, the program that brings you the personal stories of the people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the California coast for the rest of us. And I'm very pleased to say that our guest today is John Dunlap, former legislator who was very involved in an important campaign—Prop. 20. John, thanks for joining us. So what was the path that brought you into the state house in Sacramento?

JD: Oh, just a personal interest in politics. A long time ago, before 1952, I sort of felt that I was better than both political parties and maybe I was sort of a pseudo intellectual and I thought I was better than either one. And Adlai Stevenson came along and inspired me, not that his predecessors weren't good, but they didn't hit me right at the time. And I became active in his campaign and many others and it probably, somewhere along the line, though I didn't admit it to myself, I wanted to become a legislator and be personally involved. I just sort of worked my way into it, had the opportunity in 1966, with a vacant Assembly seat in what was then the 4th District. I lived in Napa County and from there on, the opportunity arose, so I went with it, and was elected and thought that gave me a start.

JB: And it's pretty obvious you were a Democrat?

JD: Yeah, I'm a Democrat. You're darn right. And I still am.

JB: And what year were you elected?

JD: I was elected in 1966.

JB: And then along came a couple of things. What do you remember about your initial contact on the issue of Sea Ranch? Who was it and how did it come about?

JD: That was going to a Democratic meeting. I did not represent Sonoma County, where the Sea Ranch was. Napa County is right next door. But we're all in the 1st Congressional District and I attended a Democratic caucus and Bill Kortum was there and he told me about the Sea Ranch and the fact that 10+ miles of the northern Sonoma Coast were going to be subdivided without letting the public in, from Highway 1 to the coast. And this we thought was wrong and I agreed with him and I told him I'd try to do something about it, and that's how it was started.

JB: And then you brought that information back to Alan Sieroty?

JD: No, not exactly. Indirectly I did. I introduced a bill in the legislature to require when coastal property was divided, public access be included within the plan of subdivision and dedication and so forth. And Alan met with me on this and he was the co-author of my bill. Alan, at the time, happened to be the chairman of a subcommittee of the Natural Resources Planning Public

Works Committee, which dealt with the coast, not just access, but the whole coast. And he agreed and was interested. Actually we held a subcommittee hearing in Santa Rosa on the subject and hoped by that to influence the way things might happen, including a discussion of my proposed legislation.

It didn't work. They went ahead and handled the subdivision without providing access. I'm not sure the dates—this is a long time ago—but I think probably I introduced the bill originally in 1968. It was defeated. I introduced it again in '69 and that year we got through the Assembly, but it was defeated in the Senate. Third year—this is often true of many changes in the law, many good things that happen, people that oppose it, landowners, cattlemen and all sorts of California real estate associations opposed it and we had to fight them. Finally, in 1970, we got the bill through both through the Assembly and the Senate and signed by Governor Reagan.

I might mention that part of the good fortune in getting it through and getting support and getting Governor Reagan to sign it resulted from his director of Parks and Recreation, a guy from the East Bay, his name was William Penn Mott (Knott sp?) and he supported the bill, believed in public recreation and public opportunity.

After all, the California people own the coast from the mean high tide on down is ours. And when we go from our own highway across...it seems that we should have the right to get to our own coast from our own highway, which we own to our coast which we own and access is important.

JB: And it's not that way in all other states.

JD: No, and it wasn't that way in California at that time. We did not succeed in getting our bill through before the Sea Ranch was approved. However, it is my understanding that when the Sea Ranch sought to amend its plan, they were required and there are, I think, four points of public access now and there didn't used to be any. Something was accomplished, and of course, the whole principle applied up and down the whole coast of California.

JB: Tell me what was your impression of the reaction generally to the '69 Santa Barbara oil blowout?

JD: Generally, among the people that I saw it was one of shock. And certainly, the idea that "clean it up at any cost and whatever to the extent possible and do whatever you can do so it doesn't happen again."

JB: That helped fuel...

JD: The people that I spent time with and talked with, I'm not apologizing, felt that it was wrong and shouldn't have happened.

JB: Alan Sieroty is a very self-effacing man, but how would you describe his role in the legislature and his role with regard to the legislation that the two of you worked on?

JD: I can't say anything but that he was "above average." Alan and I worked on the coastal bill, and we were very successful eventually through Prop. 20, but we also worked on other things together. We worked on tax reform, most of which was, unfortunately, unsuccessful, but we worked on it together and it was Sieroty/Dunlap when it looked like it was good for Alan's constituency, and it was Dunlap/Sieroty when it looked like it was good for my constituency.

It's unusual to see someone as selfless as Alan who would avoid taking the credit and make sure that someone else got it. Mostly you don't see two legislators who cooperated in something like because they both have egos that make it hard to give to the other guy. It does take a bit of an ego to get to the legislature in the first place, and to be there, and you're still self-sacrificing is remarkable. And I'm just lucky to have known and been with him.

JB: He's a remarkable man, and I also remember that he did a lot of work on disability barriers, what became later at the federal level, the Americans with Disability Act.

JD: Many things.

JB: I'm very anxious to know about Janet Adams because she's no longer with us. What do you know about Janet Adams? How would you describe her as a person?

JD: Let's first just say that I don't know that Prop. 20 would have made it without her. I did not know her before Prop. 20, but she was a warm person in the first place and she cared about what she did. But she was also organized and pulled all sorts of strings, and I don't mean strings in the bad sense of the word, but putting things together, an organizer, of, for instance, when the campaign was going on, I remember that at one time she called me on the phone and said could I go on a little trip with Mel Lane. Mel Lane was one of the publishers of Sunset Magazine and he was strongly in support of Prop. 20. I said "sure." And the next day, he arrives in his small airplane at the Sacramento Airport and I go with him and we fly to Chico and Red Bluff and then on to Redding for press conferences in both of these areas.

Mel, as I recall, was more of a Republican than I was, by a long shot, but he was 100 percent for Prop. 20. And between the two of us, we approached it in a different way, and I think Janet was pretty smart in putting the two of us together to hit the press and hit the people in the Sacramento Valley. And I know I felt good about having done that.

JB: Well, there still was, obviously with all the environmental legislation passed in the late 60s and early 70s bipartisan support, maybe not across the board, but at least enough to get things passed.

JD: Yes, it was very definitely...when my original access bill passed the Senate, it had a tough time and was defeated when it first came up on the floor vote in the Senate, and then after reconsideration, came up again and passed with 22 votes, that's two more than necessary.

And I had a Republican, John Negley, from Contra Costa County, managed the bill for me on the floor, so that's an example of what you're saying.

JB: I've read an account that Janet Adams wrote in '73 about the campaign and she said that the opposition was not willing to give an inch in terms of... so though there may have been a few Republicans who were willing to be part...but the ones who were opposed to it, the commercial interests, were not willing to give in at all.

JD: You're right, and they weren't all Republicans either. There were a few of what I would call scallywag Democrats, but it wasn't a synch by any means, and we were pleased with the results. We were never over confident.

JB: Okay, so you weren't, but they didn't believe in the potential for an initiative to succeed, right? So that carrot and the stick with them, you offer them compromises with the threat of an initiative, and they were not...

JD: It's unfortunate that we couldn't get it through the legislature, but sometimes the initiative process works, and in this case, it has. Well, we're well off today compared to where we might have been.

JB: Well, that's another question I've asked many people. Do you think it's possible for such an initiative to succeed today?

JD: Maybe. It would be harder. The initiative process, in my opinion, was intended to be an opportunity for the people to speak and speak up when causes were neglected. And this was a case where that was true. To some large extent, it sometimes has now been taken over by monied interests. Well, that's another issue that we could talk about a long time.

JB: Certainly is. And how long did you stay in the legislature?

JD: 1966 I was elected. I used to joke about that, because of course I was a strong Democrat and that's when Reagan was elected governor and I used to kid people and say I came in on the Reagan landslide, which was not exactly accurate, of course. And I was defeated in 1978. So I served 12 years, eight in the Assembly and four in the Senate.

JB: And the legislature is a fulltime legislature here in California?

JD: Yes, starting when I was elected.

JB: And so do they pay you enough to live on that money?

JD: Well, yes, we could have lived, but not terribly well. I think \$16,000 was the initial salary. I was a lawyer and a member of a law firm. Although I did not practice much law, I as a partner continued to benefit from that. Maybe my presence in the legislature helped the firm a little. I don't know. But \$16,000 seems like nothing today, but it was a living wage compared to \$100/month, which was what they had previously received.

JB: Did you go back to practicing law?

JD: No. Jerry Brown was governor and he appointed me as a member of the Workers Compensation Appeals Board, where I served for five years. That's a quasi-judicial board. Five of the seven members have to be lawyers, and they hear appeals from workers' compensation judges and trials. It was a good job and I was pleased to have it.

JB: And then what did you do after that?

JD: My wife and I moved from Napa to Mendocino County. We owned an old house in the city of Mendocino. It was over 100 years old and I, of course, felt guilty because I wasn't working and I was only 61 years old and I undertook to work with my hands instead of my mouth and my brain, and worked on the house and rebuilt it, painted it, and we enjoyed life there for a year and a half before coming back to Napa, where I still live.

JB: But one more thing that I want to ask you about the legislation. Alan is generous, Alan Sieroty, generously credits someone else with the idea of protecting the entire coast. He has said several times that that was the idea of his childhood friend, Ellen Stern Harris. Now do you remember when the idea first came in terms of its being suggested to you, "oh, let's not just provide public access in Sonoma County, let's save the whole coast instead." And do you remember what you thought and felt about that?

JD: Oh, I think the idea between me and anybody else came from Alan and was pleased to work with him. I remember when we first introduced the bill. We knew we were going to have trouble, and we held press conferences San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Francisco and then a lunch ending up in Santa Rosa, which Alan, and I think his administrative assistant at the time, Ethan Wagner, helped put together. So certainly articulated to me that Alan's the one.

I immediately saw the benefit of it because in the process of working on the access bill, and other things, we saw a situation where developers would come into one area, one county or city jurisdiction and propose something through land which they had under their control, and if the city or county didn't want to go along with what they want, they said, "well, alright. We'll go to the next county. We'll go here, we'll go there if you don't do what we want." And that was one way we saw that it's vitally important to have a state jurisdiction.

JB: And you and he campaigned during the Prop. 20 campaign?

JD: Yes.

JB: What do you remember about the energy of the campaign?

JD: It was great. On the other hand, we were surrounded by friends. We weren't out there where it was controversial. We, of course, dealt with things that came in, but basically we felt good about it. I just remember it as something I'm glad now that I was part of it.

JB: And one of our goals here is to communicate with young people about the extraordinary level of involvement in this campaign, people up and down the state. Did you have contact with

volunteers and the campaign office and the effort to get the signatures? Do you remember anything about that that you could communicate?

JD: I don't remember personally being involved in that.

JB: What else would you like to tell us about your experience of the Coastal Act and the Prop. 20 initially and then later the passage of the Coastal Act?

JD: Well, the same thing that I said before really, that I'm glad to have been part of it. That's really about it. I think in terms of having as a legislator started something, or having been part of starting it. But that's something that legislators generally do. They start something and leave it to somebody else to handle. And I'm just very glad that we had Peter Douglas to carry on the spirit of it, and make it, I think, probably as successful as it possibly could have been.

JB: Tell me what you remember about this young man, Peter Douglas, coming onboard?

JD: Well, I don't really remember a great deal about him coming onboard with the commission. I remember spots. I remember, of course, when he worked for Alan before that and getting to know him, liked him, admired him. I remember sometime maybe 15 or 20 years ago, I think, Pete Wilson was governor at the time and there was a move to replace Peter. I remember Alan and I went down to a Coastal Commission meeting, I think in Huntington Beach and spoke before the commission, letting them know how important Peter was. And I, of course, remember the event in San Francisco honoring Peter and it was good also to see that there were people there on the other side who had opposed him and still spoke well of him as a guy of integrity. That, I think, he was dedicated and he cared. He had integrity.

JB: I consider it an honor to have been able to meet him myself and had the statement yesterday from Michael Fischer, the second executive director, felt that he worked for the commission and his job was to interface with the commission and represent the commissioners and the commission. But he said that Peter Douglas felt that he worked for the people of California. It's a big difference.

JD: Yes.

JB: So Mr. Dunlap, I appreciate your making your way here to join us for this interview and viewers, I appreciate your time also. Thank you for watching this episode of Heroes of the Coast.

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