



## Transcript of Video Interview with Phyllis Faber, recorded August 2012.

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Janet Bridgers (JB): We're happy to have as our guest today, Phyllis Faber. Phyllis Faber is a wildlife wetlands biologist from Marin County. Phyllis, thank you for joining us.

PF: Nice to be here.

JB: So Phyllis, where are you from originally?

PF: Well, I grew up in New York City, was educated on the East Coast, but I've lived out here for the last 60 years and my father grew up here, was a native of California, so he always wanted to come back to the Bay Area. So he did come back when he retired, and all of us ended up here in Mill Valley. So my parents had grandparents and aunts and uncles and it was wonderful.

JB: Where did you study?

PF: I studied at Mount Holyoke in Massachusetts and then I got a Masters, partly from San Francisco State and partly from Yale. Finished up there.

JB: And what caused you to become interested in wetlands ecology?

PF: Well, I've always been a biologist, ever since I went to college, that was always what I liked and was interested in, and so when my children were old enough, I went back to school and I took field courses at San Francisco State, which just utterly charmed me. It was just wonderful to be out in the field and seeing things all in place. So I was attracted to that. And then a woman from Australia is the one that really nailed me to wetland biology back in the ... when was that? In the mid-60s, I guess. So I've been a wetland biologist ever since and I love the wetlands and find them to be very interesting and have really learned a lot about them.

JB: Oh, I also wanted to ask you, where does your interest and training and background in writing and editing come from?

PF: Oh, I think that probably comes from necessity. You do what you have to do and a lot of what I've had to do has to do with writing, so you just get to be better at it because if you read what you've written, it sort of irritates you to the point where you get better at it, I think.

JB: You are, in essence, saying that some scientists don't read what they write because many scientists are not writers who the general public can digest easily.

PF: Yeah, I think that's right, but if you really want the general public to read and understand what you're writing, which is a passion of mine. I mean, I really feel very strongly that if people

don't know what the plants and animals in California particularly, they will never care enough to protect them. And California is a really remarkable state. It's an extraordinarily diverse state, both geologically, climate-wise, and certainly the plant and animal life is very diverse and it is so important to preserve this because it's unique in the world. So I do care that the public can understand what I'm writing.

JB: I guess we better backtrack a bit here for our viewers because you have written or edited many, many books. Any idea, just off hand, how many there are?

PF: Well, I edited the California Native Plant Society journal *Fremontia* for, I guess, 17 or 18 years and that was a wonderful experience. And part of the job was finding people, finding what was interesting and going on in California, and talking them into writing, so I guess I always had my strong arm out, trying to grab people and then making what they wrote the best that we could make it, so I've had a lot of practice at that.

JB: Certainly have, but there have been field guides, too.

PF: I've written a number of field guides, and the real reason for doing that was that I understood...as a person trying to identify plants, I understood the value of having a 1 to 1 image, where if you laid the plant beside the image, you could recognize the plant. And so, my husband worked for Xerox for many years, so I really understood what xerography could do and so xerigraph images of the plants are really wonderful. They're better than drawings, because you get a lot of the *gestalt* of the plant that you don't get in a drawing. So when I published those two field guides, I wanted everything to be 1 to 1, so people could see exactly what they had out in the field and compare it to what was in the book, and then they'd have it nailed. So it's easy, easy-to-use.

JB: But you were also editor for *Coast & Ocean* for many years, right?

PF: No, I wasn't. I was a contributor on occasion, but I was maybe a contributing editor. I'm not sure. I can't remember what my role was. I guess I did have some role.

JB: So now, going back again, were you involved in the Proposition 20 campaign?

PF: Very involved. I was indeed. We had just moved out here once again. We had lived here in Mill Valley before and then we moved back to Connecticut for four years and then we came back out to California and I had been very involved in trying to get Connecticut to pass the most stringent wetland legislation. That was back in the days where the states were trying to enact...protect their wetlands and so I knew a lot about wetlands at that point and so I became involved with Janet Adams and the group that was trying to get legislation passed. So when Alan Sieroty's....Alan Sieroty had tried to get two different bills passed. And when his second, I think it was AB 1475, or some number like that, when that failed, Janet Adams was all ready with an initiative, with a proposition.

And so, there was enough support for that that she could get that to fly as a proposition. There was support down in San Diego. And so it got onto the ballot, and then I worked night and

day...street corners...the children had to learn to cook because I never was there, just trying to get it passed. And I had been working with some high school students that year, and they made a marvelous film. I think it was three slide projectors, maybe four projectors and a movie film, and they put it all together on this great big screen and we showed it everywhere. These kids were just phenomenal. And we even took it up to Sacramento and Peter Behr arranged for us to show it to some of the legislative staffers. It was a wonderful show and what it really talked about was preserving the coast and preserving the biota that lived along the coast. So that was fun.

So anyway, when Prop. 20 passed, Peter Behr asked me if I'd like to be on the commission, which was pretty overwhelming to me. I mean, I was just a biology teacher. I didn't have any political aspirations at all. It was an incredible learning experience to be on the commission. It was wonderful.

JB: Going back to Janet Adams. We're looking for verbal portraits of this woman. So tell us about her, what did she look like, how did she act, how would you describe her?

PF: She was quite a wonderful woman in many ways. She was ferocious. She knew what she wanted and she was outspoken. So you didn't mess around with Janet Adams. She looked...she was probably in her 50s or 60s then, and normal looking, black hair. She dressed sort of simply and she knew a lot of people and she knew exactly what she wanted. And she knew what political support she needed. So she was skillful at what she did, and she cared enormously about the coast, so her passion really drove the mission. So it was exciting for me to be a part of the group because she knew a lot of people in the state and she knew how to get this done, which she did. It was wonderful for me. It was a great learning experience for me.

JB: She was obviously one of the key people.

PF: She was essential. She was essential. Absolutely.

JB: So trying to get a little larger picture of, like, her home, and her ...that terrible word "lifestyle," because I'm told she lived in a cabin on Skyline Drive.

PF: I never was at her house. We always met somewhere. I think I never was at her house. So I don't have any recollections of that. I do know that she was very simple and she was very direct and she didn't take any nonsense from anybody. I do remember that. I remember thinking, "just be careful when you're talking to Janet Adams."

JB: So then you became a commissioner on the North Central...

PF: Pretty amazed to be there. I think it was...I think I had a real place on the commission, though, because there were more politicians on it than any expertise, so my being a biologist, I think, was useful. We as a commission decided early on...we had no idea what we were protecting, so we actually hired somebody named Peter Connors to do a literature search of what existed along the shores of Marin, Sonoma and San Francisco Counties, which he did. And I think we might have been the only commission that did that. And so I think we really tried to

have an understanding of what we were protecting, what was so valuable of this three-county area in California.

JB: So you felt your opinion was respected as a scientist?

PF: Oh, very much so. I really felt good about that. I really felt good that I could direct us toward having an understanding. It was all so new to us. There were a lot of politicians, so there were a lot of other agendas up there.

JB: Certainly there were. And between the public access issues, and the real estate development issues, wildlife and flora and fauna often has not...But tell us about your experience as a commissioner and the impact you felt you had saving wetlands or protecting species.

PF: Well, so much of Marin County is federal park that it really never was a big issue in Marin County. For Sonoma, it was a much bigger issue. Because there was a Coastal Conservancy...oh no, that was later. That was in 1976. No, I think that in '73, when the commission started, everyone was trying to understand what it was that we were supposed to do and the brilliant thing that Joe Bodovich guided the commissions toward having...and I think it was Jack Schoop that came up with the idea, they created a framework. There were 10 aspects to the Coastal Plan that were to be investigated...things like marine resources, Highway One. There was a design and review element, energy siting. There were 10 aspects to the plan and every regional commission, of which there were six, and the state commission all did the planning for those 10 elements, so that at the end of the three-year period, everyone had the same package and they could all be put together effectively. So I think that was a brilliant stroke that was brought to the work of the commission.

I think the issues in the three different counties were hugely different. Sonoma County wasn't nearly as set aside as Marin. San Francisco was entirely developed, so a lot of the issues we dealt with during that period were sort of... not what we should have been thinking about, like if a house was going to be built that would shade somebody's garden that became an issue for San Francisco. That's silly for more rural counties.

In Sonoma, the issues were more...the harbor in Bodega was always a big issue and we had a commissioner that really supported the fishermen up there, so there were some very good things, like there was a whole facility for the fishermen created during the early days of the Coastal Commission and it was implemented when the Coastal Act was passed. So the issues in the three counties were very different.

I think that it was interesting to see how the public responded. The public was very involved and some of our meetings would go on to 2:00 in the morning. I mean they were just huge. When it came to the meeting where we were setting the boundaries, we had a meeting up in Bodega, and we were told when we went to the meeting that...to be careful because there people that were coming to the meeting that were carrying guns. And so we were extremely careful what we said at that meeting.

So there was a lot of temper. There were a lot of people that just couldn't stand having a state government telling them what they could and couldn't do. So it was hard. Then there were a lot of people, the conservation types of people, they would stand there by the hour and tell us what we had to do, or what we could or could not do. They were very possessive of it. It was lovely. And a lot of it was not doable.

Anyway, it was an extremely interesting experience, interesting also to see the different interests that were on the commission itself, so how that played in our decision-making process. And how the staff interacted, and how they presented their ideas to us. It was just an extremely interesting time for the coast of California.

JB: How long were you on the commission?

PF: I was on for, I guess, eight years. I was on after the Coastal Act passed. Eight or nine years I was on the commission that was then... When I was appointed to the state commission, Barry Kean had become our state senator, he knocked me off, because I had not supported him during an election. And during Peter Behr's tenure, I had no idea that my slot was a political slot. I just thought I was there because I was a biologist and just was really kind of naïve about the politics of it. So I had supported Gary Giacomini for supervisor or for state assemblyman, that's what it was, state assemblyman, and he lost to Barry Kean, so once I got appointed to the state commission, Barry Kean said "enough, out of here." So that was the end. But in the meantime I had become chairman of the regional commission before that. At any rate, it was an extremely interesting time for me and I learned a lot about the coast, and I learned about the importance of coastal zone planning. That was the big win for me.

JB: So there's two directions I want to pursue and we can only do one at a time. How did your interest... what you learned from the commission influence what you did later in Marin County with the agricultural trust?

So first let's say you are a founder of the

PF: of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust. I am. Ellen Strauss and I did form that trust and we came to it in an interesting way. We were both extremely upset at the amount of land that was going out of agriculture and being converted to housing. The Pt. Reyes Seashore had been formed and all up and down the edge of Tomales Bay were "For Sale" signs because the farmers were getting out of business because people were buying their land to build motels and hotels that looked across at the seashore. So there were "For Sale" signs everywhere and we were just sick about it. So we... Ellen had joined a little environmental organization that I teach in and we had gone... we'd formed a little course and we went out every week and talked to different ranchers and asked them what was going in their world, and one of them, Boyd Stuart (sp?), who was an old ranching family, "well, my family doesn't have to worry anymore because the government, the federal government owns our land, so we are secure." So that resonated with Ellen and me, and we thought securing the land is the way to keep people in farming forever and ever.

So we went to a friend, Peter Seligman, who we both knew who has since...he worked for Nature Conservancy and he has since gone on to be the head of Conservation International. And we said, "we have an idea that we'd really like to do this. We really want to save agriculture." And he said, "well, you should go see the Trust for Public Land, because that's the kind of thing they do." So we did and they said, "good idea, and we'll help you." So we organized a meeting of our supervisor and the head of the planning commission, a man named Ralph Grossi, who is head of the Farm Bureau, Land Use Committee. So those three people came to a meeting and we told them of our idea. Trust for Public Land was with us. And they said, "well, that's an interesting idea. Give us some numbers and we'll think about it some more."

So off they went and I kept calling Ellen and saying, "What are they doing, why is it taking them so long?" Weeks, months went by and nothing and so then, they finally said, "we've got enough numbers." And farmers don't like to give numbers. They don't like anybody to know how little money they make. So they didn't get numbers easily. So we finally went back to the same group and presented their information.

In the meantime, the Coastal Zone Coastal Act had passed and the county was facing their local coastal program planning. Now the Coastal Commission was urging counties to downzone to A160 or A240, and Marin County had, in the 10 years previous, had downzoned to A60, so for them to downzone further, to A120 or 240 was extraordinarily painful to think about even.

JB: What do those designations mean?

PF: It means A60 is one house per 60 acres. So if you owned a farm of 300 acres, you could have five house if there's A60 zoning. So if it was A120 zoning, with A120 you could have only two houses for the 300 acres. So the county was really nervous and upset about this. And so, at the meeting that we were presenting our numbers, Ralph Grossi said that maybe this would be an alternative to downzoning. So they said, "let's try it." So that's how it happened. That's how we got county support for this. It was really an alternative to the kind of coastal zone planning that was being required of us as a county. So it was a good idea, and it's turned out to be a good idea, but it was ushered in in a very meaningful way by Coastal Zone Planning.

JB: And it's established in perpetuity?

PF: Yes, each of these easements is in perpetuity, forever.

JB: And have any of the potential heirs squawked about this?

PF: No, it's a happy story. It started very slowly because the farmers thought that if you sell easements to MALT (Marin Agricultural Land Trust), it shows that you're a failed farmer. The first one we did business with used money to pay his feed bill. It wasn't until one of our board members did a project where he did a complicated thing in putting easements on his own property so that he could buy the next property. It was complicated, but it was very effective. Then the rest of the ranchers said, "oh wow, if Willie LaFrankie is doing this, maybe MALT is an okay thing." So now it's very mainstream and successful program.

JB: So they receive money for establishing these easements on their land.

PF: They get paid... Basically what we do is to pay them for their development rights. That's all we do. We say, "you no longer, if you own 300 acres, you no longer can build five houses. You can only build one house. You can build your own house or you can build one for your farm workers and that's it." And it's worked. I think we've now added a little bit to the easement program and have said, "you must stay in agriculture." And we pay them a little bit more for that part of the easement.

JB: Where does the funding come to pay for the easement?

PF: Well, a lot of it comes from the state, from the federal government. We raise... we work very hard at raising money so we've been pretty successful at raising money. We had one family leave us their house and their estate. I mean it was really... I think we got \$6 million from that. We were very lucky. One of the propositions that passed, we got \$15 million from that, back in the 80s. But we're looking forward to bleaker days, I'm afraid.

JB: So now to the wetlands in San Francisco Bay. So you've been very involved in restoring wetlands in San Francisco Bay.

PF: Right. I wrote the EIR for the Muzzy Marsh, which was used as a mitigation for the Larkspur Ferry Terminal. And they had to dredge a couple of acres of wetland, of mud flat, in order to let the ferries go in and out of the little harbor there, the little creek there. So they needed someplace to put the spoils from that dredging. And they also needed to get past the whole EIR process.

So I wrote that EIR and the Muzzy ...  
[interview interrupted by a phone ringing]

JB: Phyllis, you became very involved also in wetlands preservation and restoration in San Francisco Bay. So tell us how that came about.

PF: That really came along with me to California from Connecticut where a wonderful woman from Australia had demanded that I get involved in wetland at a school where I was teaching. So we really entertained the legislators and we talked to people on train platforms and we, in the end, did get them to pass the most stringent wetland protection there. So when I came to California, I was ready to roll with wetlands and was... have been involved in teaching about wetlands and writing EIRs... formed a little firm with two other women. And so the Muzzy Marsh... the Muzzy Marsh, the EIR for the Larkspur Ferry Terminal was the first EIR I wrote and it was to enable the ferry to be built on the edge of the marsh. And the mitigation was to purchase the Muzzy area to use as a dredge spoil disposal site partly, and partly as mitigation for the loss of an acre or two of mudflat in the channel for the ferries to go in and out. So it was a successful project. The site was about 200 acres and, I think, 70 acres was saved for depositing the dredge spoils and then the rest of it, the dikes were open and it became a wetland. It was the first wetland in the Bay, the first wetland project that had had no plantings done. This was new and very unknown, whether a marsh could and would come back if you did nothing but reintroduce tidal water to the site.

So that's what happened at the Muzzy. There wasn't enough money to do any planting, so they just opened the dikes in four places and held their breath. And it was within a year or two, the next year, we could see that it was going to work, so for the next 30 years, I've monitored that marsh. And so a lot of the lessons learned for doing marsh restoration have been learned from that site. We have learned so much from it. We've learned that some of the elevations from these dredge spoil overflows were allowed to get to be too high, so the back part of the marsh has never been as successful as the lower elevations. We learned a lot about that. We learned a lot about how the meanders are formed and what you need to do to have better meanders forming. We learned how long it takes to have different species of plants become established. We learned that they all will establish eventually on their own. So the Coastal Conservancy got us to write up a lot of this information, which we did, which is called... anyway, it is a handbook, really, to do wetland restoration. And if you answer the questions that are in this guidebook to doing marsh restoration, if you can answer all the questions that are posed in this work, you're pretty apt to have a successful mitigation project. I mean, wetlands do restore themselves, but it's important that they're at the right elevation and that they get a certain kind of tidal exchange.

JB: Okay, there are a couple of questions we're going to answer, just for people who are less informed. What's an EIR, what are the benefits of wetlands to the world at large and what's a "meander."

PF: A mitigation?

JB: No you called something a....

PF: A meander.

JB: A meander.

PF: Okay, so we'll start with what's an EIR. An environmental impact report and back in 1970, the state had passed its first Environmental Quality Act and that required any project to have an EIR, an environmental impact statement, which examines all of the impacts that are likely to occur, whether they're beneficial or detrimental, and then if there are impacts, you create a mitigation project to reduce the impact of those impacts. So that's what was done for the Muzzy, the Larkspur Ferry Terminal.

JB: What are the general benefits of wetlands?

PF: Why do we have wetlands?

JB: Why do we need them? To protect them?

PF: California doesn't have a lot of wetlands. As a state, it has, I think it has something like 10 percent of what the East Coast and three percent of what the Gulf Coasts have. Very small because it's an uplifting coast, so there are only wetlands up in Humboldt Bay and a tiny little bit

in Bodega. Most of them are in San Francisco, like about 90 percent of California's wetlands have once been in San Francisco Bay, so there aren't a lot of them left.

They are of tremendous value for food supply. It's the base of the food chain. So the wetland plants grow during the summer months and then they decay and die. And so if you think of a little particle of pickleweed or salt grass, then it becomes coated with bacteria as it decays. So think of hundreds of little decaying particles coated with bacteria. That's pretty rich fare for these small tiny little organisms that will ingest them and then they are ingested by the next size organism, and so it goes. That's the food chain.

So the marshes are the base of the food chain for bay and ocean organisms and so they're extremely important. They are also habitat for organisms to live that live in these, because they're secluded, they're safe. They can get down in the channels and be safe, birds can. And there are a lot of other kinds of animals, fox and so on, that visit them for food. So they're an important source of the richness of the wildlife.

And a meander is a tidal channel. And the reason they're called meanders is that for some reason that isn't clear, rivers...moving bodies of water eventually will form meanders, sort of S-like curves. And they don't know exactly why they do it, or where they will start to make the S-curve. It might be a rock. It might be something that changes the water course in some small degree and so then the next water that comes down will go that way, and so on, and so those meanders get formed and you see that in rivers. You see that in channels and in very ancient salt marshes, you see incredibly coiled meanders that are back there, so that's what a meander is.

JB: What do you think about the potential for sea level rise to affect the restored marshes and wetlands?

PF: It already is. I mean we already are having sea level rise.

JB: Do they have room to migrate?

PF: No, they really don't. That's a huge concern because almost all of them have dikes around the landward side of them. I don't think I know hardly any natural marshes where the marshes can migrate. So that is a real worry. I think that's one thing we are really concerned about for sea level rise—how do we nourish those marshes?

The other thing that's happening at the same time...in the gold mining days, they dumped so much sediment into the river systems that came down through the Bay, so we've had what are called "excreting marshes," growing marshes, for many many years and now that slug of mud from the Gold Rush days is gone. It's gone out to the ocean. And so now the marshes are being eroded rather than excreting.

JB: That's interesting to see a problem that goes back to the beginning of the State of California that now has a very different...not a problem, but a situation that is now changing dramatically.

PF: Well, I think that in those cases you say, “well, if we’d only known then what we know now, we’d have done things differently.” So what do we know now and I’m not sure. And it’s a tremendous concern about San Francisco Bay.

JB: And I know we could probably talk another about the Delta and the effect that all that is having.

PF: That’s a tremendous worry because with these storms, these violent storms that seem to be occurring with greater frequency, the likelihood of one of the dikes up in the Delta giving way is increased. When that happens, there will be a huge surge of salt water that will go up. It will get sucked up into the Delta, to fill in...those islands that are up there have the soil that was in the middle of those islands is very...it’s a kind of soil that kind of disappears and is very organic, very rich in organics and even today, when you drive along the dikes in the Delta, you can have whole pear orchards where the car is at the level of the top of the pear trees. They have subsided so hugely. So if you think of one of those dikes breaking, the amount of salt water that would get sucked into where that pear orchard is, it will affect the salinity levels of the water that Contra Costa County is drinking now, or that might end up getting sent down to the farms in the Central Valley, and it could be very serious for those farms. And, of course, salt water is not what the Los Angeles people want to drink either.

So I think that the state is in a crisis mode and I think Governor Brown recognizes that. I think he’s really trying to do something major because what we have is that we know it’s not tenable.

JB: I’m trying to...part of this process is to create messages for young people about the future of coastal activism. Tell me what the great joys of being a wetlands biologist and also is it possible to make a living? How do these things work for you as a biologist?

PF: Well, I think young people absolutely should care about their coast. If they could have seen what we were facing in the 60s, with the kinds of development, with the sand dredges, with the hotels, motels, just wiping out the coast, wiping out coastal access. Well, if you go to any state of the East Coast, you can see that coastal access is a very valued item. They don’t have it there. It’s really hard to get to the beach on the East Coast anywhere. There are fences that go right out into the water and you can’t walk along the beach. So I think caring about the beach is important, caring about the character of the coast in this beautiful state is important and young people really need to do that. And I think many of them do. I think that’s a given.

And I can’t remember what your other question was.

JB: And if a young person has a scientific bent toward biology, why would wetlands biology be of special interest and how would they make a living as a wetlands biologist?

PF: Well, there are many projects that involve wetlands. In Southern California, all of those lagoons—Bolsa Chica, Batiquitos—all of those coastal lagoons down in Southern California are now up for huge development with the widening of Route 5, there are going to be a lot of biologists involved in that.

There are biologists in demand all the time, so if a person likes biology, likes wetlands, I think it's an interesting way to earn a living. And people do, I mean it really is possible to do that well. They're paid well and they live in interesting times, so I would say "go for it."

JB: Well, thank you, Phyllis, for your message for the future, future wetlands biologists, and thank you viewers for watching this episode of Heroes of the Coast.

[end of interview]