



Transcript of Video Interview with Dorothy Green, recorded 2005

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Janet Bridgers (JB): Welcome to *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 all of us. And we're here today... I'm very honored to say that we're here today with Dorothy Green, the founding president of Heal the Bay.

Dorothy Green (DG): Thank you, Janet.

JB: Dorothy, you are the person who has grown what was a tiny organization into the one that everyone identifies with coastal water quality issues in the Los Angeles area. And the organization has just celebrated its 20th anniversary.

DG: Yes, it's been an incredible ride to come from zero to one of the biggest dinners we've ever had—1200 people attending our 20th birthday celebration in a great big huge tent next to the beach. So it was an amazing event.

JB: And what an accomplishment. And it wasn't just the party. It was all that represented in terms of energy and accomplishment.

DG: Of course, you know, we started from nothing 20 years ago. Just a few people in my living room who were involved with the Los Angeles League of Conservation Voters who decided they had to get involved in this issue of Los Angeles City sewage treatment plant wanting a waiver so they wouldn't have to fully treat the sewage before they discharged it to the ocean. And it was intolerable to let them get this waiver. It was greased to go through. And we said, "no, we've got to stop it." And there was nobody else out there to do it. So just a handful of people in my living room started it.

JB: I want to back up for the benefit of our viewers. You know this goes back to the creation of the Clean Water Act, right? In the 70s. That was established by federal law that you have to have a permit before you discharge into coastal waters.

DG: Well, more than just a permit. The Clean Water Act established the limits for how that water, especially waste water, has to be treated before it's discharged. There's such a thing as "primary treatment," which is essentially just a settling process. Maybe they add some chemicals to help all the solids in the waste water stream. We're talking about the water that comes from all of our bathrooms and kitchens and everywhere else. So primary treatment is essentially just settling out the solids and skimming them off.

Secondary treatment is a live bacteriological process where the bacteria gobbles up all the suspended organic material and helps to settle that all out as well. The Clean Water Act says that before you discharge into the ocean, you must do full, complete secondary treatment to that

waste water system. The City of Los Angeles, at that time, was doing maybe 25% secondary treatment.

JB: And that was...the impact on the environment was manifesting in terms of the fish, right?

DG: Oh my God! The fish out there had all kinds of tumors. There was a dead zone around the outfall, the pipe that took water from the sewage treatment plant out five miles out to the ocean. There was a huge dead zone where the only thing that would grow was a clam with an inside outside stomach that was feeding on the waste. Nothing else would live there. Of course, that is changing now. It's changed substantially. In fact, everybody has really been amazed at how quickly the ocean bottom has returned to normal, how that dead zone has broken up and been invaded by live organisms, and they're going to take it over now.

JB: That's really encouraging, isn't it? Not just the ocean, but a lot of other issues.

DG: But I'd like to continue this sewage treatment thing because I think people really need to understand there's a third process—tertiary treatment—that sewage has to go through before it can be discharged to rivers or streams or lakes. The ocean can assimilate a little bit more than what fresh water bodies can. And so this tertiary treatment is more filtration and maybe some oxidation or some other processes to help purify it some more.

JB: So back to 1985 again. And the City of Los Angeles was not only only treating about 25% of its waste, they were applying for a waiver...

DG: So they wouldn't have to go to full secondary treatment. Exactly.

JB: And that's about where you came into the picture.

DG: That's where we came in. We learned about this waiver application and it was greased to go through. There was nobody really protesting it except for a couple of people who knew but didn't know how to organize a protest movement or how to educate people, how to reach out and make it an issue that the City would have to deal with.

JB: And you did.

DG: That's what we were successful in doing.

JB: How did you happen to already know how to do that?

DG: Well, I'd been an environmental activist for many years before involved in a number of other issues, and so had honed some of my organizing skills in other ways.

JB: You just look like an elegant woman. How did you? But you had all the skills already.

DG: Well, I learned how to do by doing, actually. I wasn't born with it. Didn't learn it in school. I was a music major in college, for God's sake. That certainly didn't prepare me for a leadership

role in the environmental movement. You just see what needs to be done, you figure out how to do it and go do it.

JB: Just that simple.

DG: Yeah. And so we would do demonstrations on the beach. Actually it was kind of fun because August was just after the Olympics had been held in Los Angeles and one of my kids has served in the opening and closing ceremony staff for the Olympic games and he had liberated an electronic bullhorn. After the Olympics were over, what are you going to do with all this stuff? So he brought it home, and there we were out on the beach with this bullhorn now that could really carry, getting people interested and excited, getting a crowd together, getting some politicians to come and talk about how important is the beach, having a clean beach and a clean ocean is, talking about how the economy of the area is so totally tied into tourism and having clean beaches and clean ocean water.

We also found it really interesting to organize people because so many people have a spiritual tie to the ocean, have a connection to it that is kind of primordial. They feel like going out into the ocean and swimming with the dolphins are kind of like touching the basic life force that's in the Earth. So it was really easy to involve people and really set up tables at Venice Beach where we could sign people up and sign petitions and join the organization. And pretty soon, we had a bunch of volunteers who really wanted to go to work and help and make it all happen.

JB: And some of the steps, I remember, along the way were that Hyperion, it still had that name then, right?

DG: It still is. The really big sewage treatment plant just south of the airport, LAX. That's the primary sewage treatment plant, the biggest in the world, and now they're at full secondary treatment. They've rebuilt the whole plant. It's architecturally magnificent. They're even making energy out of some of the waste.

JB: Really?

DG: To send next door there's the Scattergood Power Plant and they're doing it to make electricity.

JB: Interesting recycling.

DG: Fueling their own processes internally at the sewage treatment plant and shipping some of it next door to Hyperion.

JB: So you were involved in the bond issue that created the sewage treatment plant, and that, and does it have plenty of capacity? Is this going to be good for X number of years into the future?

DG: Well, that kind of depends on how we use our water resources, which is another great big interest of mine, because as we learn to conserve our water resources and use much less indoors,

there will be less water to process at Hyperion. So we save money doubly. We save money on paying for water supply and by having to pay for sewage treatment.

JB: When I visited the Heal the Bay website, getting ready for the show, there were so many things that you've done that popped up, but the one that I think probably a lot of people are aware of is the beach report cards.

DG: That has been a wonderful thing that we've been doing, and it is available on our website. It's updated every Friday. It's based on... We don't do the basic studies. We take the reports from the County Health Department, which monitors ocean water quality or from whatever the other government agencies that do that monitoring, because the outcome is the whole coast of California. It's no longer just Santa Monica Bay. We've extended it to include the whole coast of California.

So we take all of those public reports, the public agencies that actually do monitor ocean water quality at the beaches, and analyze them and give them a letter grade depending on how good that water is. And as I say, it's updated every Friday on our website.

JB: And have you also done... I was not aware of this, over the years, publicity and throughout the... people all over the state are aware of your organization.

DG: Well, I don't know how much publicity has gone out. I guess a lot of it has, because we do, just about Labor Day weekend, we do a big beach report card, which lays out which are the beaches that are in trouble, which are the beaches that are terrific and kind of give an overall report for the year. And that report always gets good press coverage, in fact, nationwide.

JB: Nationwide. And, in fact, just today, I was telling you, there was a story in the *Daily Breeze* that Cabrillo Beach is working to get their score up because they've been having chronic problems down there.

DG: They don't have good water circulation at Cabrillo Beach. They have a breakwater which keeps the water from circulating, so the contaminated water that's discharged doesn't get circulated out, doesn't get diluted with cleaner water.

JB: It's unfortunate that a lot of those beaches that they think of, you know, "kiddies' beaches"...

DG: Mother's Beach in the Marina is the same thing. It's inside the Marina and it doesn't get good circulation and so the water quality is dreadful, but parents like to take their little kids there because there are no waves, because the water is still. But when you have still water, you have pollution problems.

JB: And do you feel confident that ocean water quality, now coastal water quality is significantly better, so for the lifeguards who are spending a long time, or surfers... not just people who are going a couple times a year, but every weekend.

DG: No question about it, because we see the see the difference in the report cards, how that has grown. We also have been very active in working with local government to make sure that the worst storm drains... Well, first of all, both the City and the County... the County also had a big sewage treatment plant that was at full secondary treatment. And we sued them as well. And they are now in compliance with the Clean Water Act as well, so and any of the inland sewage treatment plants have to be tertiary to discharge to streams, so that source of contamination has been cleaned up.

The big source of contamination to the ocean now is our storm drain system.

JB: And I know that is a whole huge, an enormous issue.

DG: We understood that it was an enormous issue from the very beginning. That first summer that we organized, we already had a storm drain task force. But figuring out how to deal with it has been much more complicated because you don't have a plant, a factory, with a part with an end pipe that discharges, so you can easily put regulations on it. We're talking about urban runoff. We're talking about all of us. Everything that's in our streets. When we overwater our gardens and the herbicides and pesticides wash off into the streets into the storm drain system. When people don't know what to do with their used motor oil, when they change the oil in their cars, and they dump it and it goes into the storm drain system. Animal droppings, rotting vegetation, small industries that really don't want to have to pay the price for discharging of their toxic materials appropriately sometimes have been caught dumping into the storm drain system. So what you've got in the storm drains is clearly... I like to call it a "witch's brew." That's what it really is, because you add all these things together and my God, the synergism between them really makes you wonder how anything can be done about it, but that witch's brew goes right onto the beach and out into the ocean. No treatment, but we have been successful now in getting a bunch of the worst storm drains, the ones that have the most highly contaminated, now diverted to Hyperion.

JB: Really?

DG: That's right, so it does get treatment. That's one of our big major successes of the last few years, getting those storm drains diverted to Hyperion.

JB: And they have enough... I remember whenever the big sewage spills would happen, it would happen when there was a big storm, so something was happening. There would be too much water and it would overflow...

DG: Now the problem there is that the pipes that carry the sewage to Hyperion or to the other treatment plants were built many years ago and there's openings. When the groundwater gets saturated, that water infiltrates into the sewage pipeline system and overflows it.

JB: But that's all solved?

DG: Well, that's not solved. That still is an issue. Occasionally they still do have some sewage spills locally where the local pipeline can't hold it and it spills out onto the street.

JB: But it's better.

DG: Oh, the ocean is so much better, it's unbelievably better.

JB: Tell us about the whole watershed issue that you're working on now.

DG: Okay. Storm drains start at the top of the watershed. A watershed is the whole area that water drains from down to a river, stream or out into the ocean. And Heal the Bay, from day one, has talked about the need to go at least to the 405 [freeway], up into the watersheds, up into the San Fernando Valley, which is the watershed, a big chunk of the watershed, for the Los Angeles River. Ballona Creek watershed goes way up, almost to downtown, up into Griffith Park. We have to go to where the problems start, because especially with storm water, there's no real pipe at the end that you can put treatment on.

Oh, but I must say, there is one that has...the City of Santa Monica has put a treatment system on their nastiest stormdrain, the Pico Kenter drain, and the one under the Santa Monica Pier. They've built a facility called the SMURF, the Santa Monica Urban Runoff Facility, which is just inland from the Santa Monica Pier and they take water from these two major storm drains and give it primary treatment, sufficient so that that water can be used for irrigation. And they ship it out to water the freeway landscaping and maybe some other landscaping in the vicinity. And that...the SMURF was built so that people can walk through it and learn about the process and learn about the whole...so it's an educational facility as well as a primary treatment plant. So that's really good.

But getting back to the watersheds, yeah, as founding president of Heal the Bay, I moved on to found a watershed council to restore the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers which are really one big double watershed and interrelated to groundwaters, interrelated are those two rivers historically have moved back and forth across the coastal plain. Because, if you look at how water is managed on a more holistic and comprehensive way, there are ways of really getting multiple bang for our buck, of accomplishing many goals, many public purpose goals, all at one time.

For example, if we're ever going to be able to take any concrete out of the river, which I doubt that we'll ever get there, but some of tributaries of the L.A. River, we might be able to take concrete out of. We've got to deal with the stormwater in another way, because right now the storm drain system was built by engineers with just one thing on their minds—how do we get rid of the storm water as quickly as possible, and so you put it into a concrete channel so it goes 50 mph out to the ocean.

Well, that storm water is really an asset. It's, hum... We're very water short in the Greater L.A. area. We bring water, we import water from hundreds of miles away to satisfy our drinking water needs. And yet, we're throwing away all the stormwater.

JB: So do we create a dam?

DG: Well, no. Dams are nasty business. There are all kinds of...they're called "best management practices" to be able to capture storm water and get it into the ground, get it into our groundwater resources. We already use our groundwater as a drinking water supply. The City of Los Angeles, for example, has a whole series of wells just below the San Fernando Valley in the narrows between Griffith Park and Glendale, there's a bunch of dams in there because all that water goes down gradient. If we can capture the water that falls in the valley, get into the ground, get it into the aquifer, it can be part of our drinking water supply.

Now some of the best management practices that can be used to capture that water and get it into the ground and there are all sorts of mechanical things that capture rain water and get it into a big pipe underground that has holes into it, so it will percolate into the ground. But an idea that I like a lot more is constructing wetlands and habitat, restoring riparian habitat where it already exists. Then you'll get habitat to clean up that water, which can be pretty useful, as we've already talked about, as well as act as a place where the water can soak down through the ground once it's been cleaned up by all these natural processes, it can soak down into the ground and become part of drinking water supply.

JB: And, of course, wetlands foster so much wildlife.

DG: Wildlife, and contact with nature in the middle of the city. Really, we've destroyed, every connection with the natural world in our rush to build this city. I mean Griffith Park, and just the neighborhood parks, but the neighborhood parks have no natural habitat and they're designed for recreation and other purposes. So Griffith Park, really, now the Santa Monica Mountains, for this region, are pretty much the only natural habitat where you can see native plants that grow naturally in California, and birds and other wildlife, and so we're very anxious to take this multiple approach to dealing with our stormwater because down the line we can have wetlands and restored habitat and our drinking water supply, and clean up our urban runoff, and increased property values as a result, because homes that are near public places like wetlands, or riparian habitat, increase in value.

JB: Is this going to be a very expensive process? For example, is it as expensive as it has been to clean up the bay?

DG: Well, it's not going to be cheap, it's not going to be cheap, but there are multiple benefits that are worth money, too. Our water supply is worth a lot of money. And the watershed council is now working with the Bureau of Reclamation to try to quantify, put economic values on that water that can be saved, so then we can then go back to government and say, "see these are the benefits. This is how we're going to pay for it."

JB: You said that there are five agencies that are in charge of...

DG: That manage our water resources.

JB: And they never talk to each other?

DG: No. That's one of the real kind of horror stories of how government manages to defeat itself. If we've got a problem, Congress, or the state will set up a law, an agency, to deal with that problem, but five different kinds of water agencies, water supply agencies—the stormwater management agencies, the groundwater management agencies, water quality management agencies, and what's the fifth? Hmm...

JB: It's okay.

DG: Wastewater, which we've talked about already, and nowhere in the law that establishes these five different kinds of agencies does it say they have to talk to each other.

JB: So they mainly don't.

DG: Exactly, they don't. And that, again, was the major impetus behind starting my watershed council. It was designed specifically to get the government agencies together around the table, together with community groups and environmental organizations, and some of the engineering companies that provide services, to talk about what are the real solution, how can we cooperate and get multiple bangs for our buck, and not be out there, each one on their own, spending taxpayers' dollars in ways that are...that could be spent more effectively and more efficiently.

JB: We're very close to out of time. It's gone very quickly, and I know we could have talked for hours, Dorothy. You've created such an example with Heal the Bay about what is possible. When you...A little word of advice for us, you know, going forward on some of those...How have you managed to recruit so many volunteers, for example? How have you managed to fundraise and...

DG: Well, Heal the Bay has been a very special kind of an organization. Going back to what I said earlier, so many people do have this kind of innate contact with the ocean, spiritual connections. I mean, talk to people who say that floating out in the ocean, they can talk to their dead parents. Floating out, going to swim with the dolphins, they feel this primordial connection with the Earth and everything that's on it. And so finding volunteers for Heal the Bay and raising money for Heal the Bay has never been a really big problem.

JB: Really?

DG: It's not perceived as a problem either, but the issues that I'm working on now are problems and are very difficult to raise money for because there is not that natural kind of constituency where people just automatically understand what the issue is and what needs to be done, and when you explain it, they say, "yeah, sure!"

JB: We have to...I'm sorry we have to leave that discussion now, but I wanted to thank you so sincerely for making time to join us. Please join us next time for another *Heroes of the Coast*. If you'd like more information about Heal the Bay, it's www.healbay.org. Earth Alert is www.earthalert.org. Thanks!

[end of interview