



Transcript of Video Interview with Marcia Hanscom, recorded 2005.

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.

Marcia Hanscom

Janet Bridgers: We're here today with Marcia Hanscom. Marcia, welcome.

Marcia Hanscom: Thank you.

Janet Bridgers: So let's tell everybody first why the Ballona Wetlands are so important.

Marcia Hanscom: Well, all of our wetlands are important they are often referred to as the cradles of life because a lot of the marine life from the sea starts out there, baby halibut shrimp crabs, that's where the nursery sort of start, a lot of the marine life. Coastal wetlands also help protect the shoreline from erosion, they filter water coming in to the coastline, so it helps cleanse pollutants and they're home to a lot of endangered and threatened species.

Janet Bridgers: And yet, the wetlands in California, the the, you know, the percentage is drastically reduced, right?

Marcia Hanscom: Absolutely, that's one reason why the Ballona Wetlands are so important. There are 95% of the our historical wetlands along the California coast...

Janet Bridgers: 95%?

Marcia Hanscom: The coasts are gone. Totally decimated. So, there, we don't have enough left to compromise any further with and so every little inch of wetlands that we can protect and the surrounding upland spaces as well, are crucial for us to maintain, not just those resources and values that I spoke about earlier but also to maintain the Pacific Flyway, where migratory bird species travel up and down the coastline every year as part of their life cycle.

Janet Bridgers: I had, was felt so educated by the movie Winged Migration, because then I understood how tired birds get, migrating and why they need a place to rest.

Marcia Hanscom: Right, a place to rest and to rejuvenate and when they're here, after they've flown all that way they have to store up as many calories as fast as possible before they have to leave again for their next journey.

Janet Bridgers: Their next journey I mean this is like day after day that they fly, right?

Marcia Hanscom: Right, right, well, some, like the Ballona Wetlands for instance, there are some bird species that actually nest there, like the California Least Tern is here right now, having its

babies, getting ready to go back after it does, back to Guatemala and Costa Rica, Mexico, and so they're here for the summer time, but a lot of the species, bird species have actually left, and gone to Idaho, Alaska, Washington state, Canada, to have their young in those places.

Marcia Hanscom: And then, for some, some of the birds that come here for the winter and stay for the winter but then some just use Ballona as sort of a motel sort of stopping place...

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: ...on the way to the their next journey.

Janet Bridgers: So there's just a lot of traffic in and out of that.

Marcia Hanscom: There is, so every month it's very different. It's always a different experience to walk in the wetlands at different times of the month.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh. Let's just remind everybody, you know, where the Ballona Wetlands are.

Marcia Hanscom: Sure, well, they're in southern California just between Marina del Rey and Los Angeles International Airport.

Janet Bridgers: It's a big open area.

Marcia Hanscom: Uh yes...

Janet Bridgers: The Hughes..

Marcia Hanscom: Right, Howard Hughes, we can thank him actually for keeping that open space there, otherwise it probably would have been developed like much of the rest of Los Angeles.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh, and how did you become involved in this effort, how and when did you become involved?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, in 1995 I moved back to Los Angeles County. I had been in Orange County and had been very involved with the Bolsa Chica Wetlands in Huntington Beach nearby where I lived and

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh, are you a native Californian?

Marcia Hanscom: Yes, I am, third generation.

Janet Bridgers: Oh, okay.

Marcia Hanscom: And uh, so when I moved back here I had already been very involved with the Bolsa Chica Wetlands. I knew that we had the ability to do things that a lot of folks had said we couldn't.

Janet Bridgers: Really?

Marcia Hanscom: That it would be difficult to acquire a coastal wetlands in southern California and it would be too expensive they told us, in Huntington Beach, but we went against that prevailing wisdom and were able to find some creative ways to acquire the wetlands there, so here I came into the Ballona Wetlands area, where we were actually much further behind and when I when I say that the activists who are here who invited me to get involved they pretty much were on their last stand, is what they had thought.

Janet Bridgers: So they'd been there, had already been an effort going on, for what, how many years?

Marcia Hanscom: Oh, for probably 15, 20 years.

Janet Bridgers: Really?

Marcia Hanscom: And a compromise development had been made between one environmental group and the developer, and a lot of people weren't happy with that. They felt that a lot more could be done and it was, it was a challenge to think about it because Steven Spielberg and Dreamworks had just signed up to build their studio here, and everybody in the political arena was for the project and Dreamworks is big contributors to the Democrat Party.

Marcia Hanscom: The Democrats in office here were all completely sold on this as an environmental project and now, ten years later, people are clear that it was not such an environmental project.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh. Something's happened just recently, right, that uh, would you like to tell us about that development?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, uh, actually it happened quite a while ago, Patricia McPherson, who is an activist who's been studying the natural gas issues there, has been working to try and get this information out for almost a decade herself, and a lot of us didn't understand the issue at first .

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: And now it's very very clear that there are serious problems underneath the Ballona Wetlands is a huge natural gas storage area where the Gas Company stores gas that they pump in from all over the country...

Janet Bridgers: Really? In a tank or what? Is it..

Marcia Hanscom: Yeah, well, it's sort of like an old oil field that the gas is..

Janet Bridgers: So they're like chambers, underground chambers...

Marcia Hanscom: Right. Right. Way below the surface but, and so they store that until it's time for people to...

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: Use it and they sell it, but it's, and when it was first, when this gas company facility was first put together, not too many people lived in the area. Now there's a lot of residential development in the area. There's not as much open space..

Janet Bridgers: Sure is.....

Marcia Hanscom: And so there's not as much area for the gas to dissipate, and it turns out it's one of the largest gas seeps anywhere in the country. And uh..

Janet Bridgers: Really?

Marcia Hanscom: And that they...

Janet Bridgers: You mean, are you talking about, right underneath all the apartments, condos, and everything that we see that's gone up in, really?

Marcia Hanscom: Right underneath...

Janet Bridgers: Under condos, everything that we see that's gone up in the, really..

Marcia Hanscom: Right, some of the largest gas seeps are directly under where they're building right now.

Janet Bridgers: What's gonna happen, do you..?

Marcia Hanscom: Well um, there's some pretty shocking things that finally some people in several of the agencies have been admitting about the seriousness of the problems and I think that it's going to be up to our new city council member to perhaps call some public hearings on the issue, because there's a lot of Playa Vista applied already which isn't very far from this and we smell gas occasionally sometimes in our apartment elevator there will be a warning sign saying "If you smell gas close the windows".

Marcia Hanscom: Uh, so that our off-gassing problems and a number of challenges with having this natural gas facility in our area, where so many people live.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: So we don't even know what it's doing to their wildlife.

Janet Bridgers: Right. Well, let's go back to, I mean, that's going to be a subject of ongoing concern and we really can't predict right now what they're going to figure out they have to do to protect the public safety, as well as wildlife, but back to this incredible, you know, long battle that you were involved in to save the wetlands, um, what were some of the points where the whole thing hung in the balance those moments where it could have gone either way and what stands out in your mind now?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, there are a number of things. First of all, when Dreamworks first came in this was a few months after I got involved. It was rather daunting and a lot of us could have given up at that point and said well, there's no way we can do anything more, it's a done deal, which every body told us it was, and a lot of us, that was the point where we decided to form a coalition and start looking for more support and building more support in the community and so that was a very important point.

Marcia Hanscom: There also was the point where when Dreamworks left the project about six years after they had decided to...

Janet Bridgers: That surprised everybody.

Marcia Hanscom: And it was shocking because..

Janet Bridgers: You, did you have any advance you know...

Marcia Hanscom: Well...

Janet Bridgers: Inklings on the, that..

Marcia Hanscom: Well, for about a year prior to their leaving there was a lot of conflict between the developers and Dreamworks, and there were a lot of egos involved and a lot of big money was at stake. Dreamworks was going to be a 1/3 owner of the development originally and get some of the profits to help build their studio.

Marcia Hanscom: So there was quite a lot of question, but everybody thought Dreamworks would stay if anyone stayed...

Janet Bridgers: Right...

Marcia Hanscom: And it was quite a big surprise although we boycotted their films we went to all of their premieres and we had people protesting, children all over the city wrote letters to Steven Spielberg ...

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: There was quite a lot of pressure put on them and we were just very grateful

that they finally decided to go, for whatever reason. There also was a moment when we actually won a federal law suit in federal district court.

Janet Bridgers: What year was that?

Marcia Hanscom: I'm sorry?

Janet Bridgers: What year was that?

Marcia Hanscom: That was 1998, and we were very excited about it because it was strong opinion that said that the federal agencies had not done a full environmental impact statement and they should have and we you know, we what the question at that point was what was going to happen and Playa Vista did a little calculated move decided to after three days of the bulldozers sitting they finally decided, "we better move forward even though they won we're going to appeal this and we don't care..."

Janet Bridgers: Really.

Marcia Hanscom: And they just started full speed ahead and that was a moment where they made a decision that I think ultimately affected them being able to continue to go forward.

Janet Bridgers: In what sense?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, they eventually ended up getting our opinion overturned in the 9th circuit Court of Appeals..

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: One of the judges was a very good friend of our former mayor Richard Riordan, after she had, she had actually performed his wedding ceremony so we were distressed at the overturning of that opinion, certainly, but because Playa Vista had kept going forward they sort of showed this momentum that made people think, well, everything is still okay.

Marcia Hanscom: Even though we knew that it really wasn't. There, another pivotal moment was when Gray Davis was being recalled and that was the moment where we realized that while we weren't getting everything we wanted to get, we still had several hundred acres of land we're trying to protect and intent on doing so, um, but it, at that moment we knew we couldn't get it all but we had to get as much as possible, and the developers were willing to sell several hundred acres of land more than they had originally made a deal for, so Trusts for Public Land came in and that was a very important moment because it made people realize we could actually acquire the land.

Janet Bridgers: Davis was, put a lot of, created a lot of pressure, he was trying to create a legacy at that point. Right?

Marcia Hanscom: Right.

Janet Bridgers: Going out of office ...

Marcia Hanscom: Right, and actually before that if Antonio Villaraigosa who is now our Mayor Elect here in LA, if he had not he really took a big risk when he put Proposition 12 on the ballot, he did something no one else had ever done, he put \$25,000,000 in that Bond Measure for piece of property that had no willing seller yet. Almost always they require that they have willing sellers to put anything in these bond measures and he knew we didn't have one yet, but he had hoped it would create the emergence of a willing seller, which it did.

Marcia Hanscom: And that was a very key moment, because up until then everyone said, there's not enough money where you gonna get the money, it's unrealistic ...

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh, so that is just one of the projects you know, kind of a recap of one of your major battles, and I know you're involved in several others have been continue to be, so what's on the top of your list these days?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, still, the Ballona Wetlands there's a lot to do in the Ballona Valley and a number of parcels of land we want to protect now that it's in public ownership we have to make sure that it's restored with genuine restoration. That, that's sort of hard to come by these days, because restoration science is still rather new.

Marcia Hanscom: And sometimes they just think coming in with bulldozers and wiping the slate clean and starting over is...(jumbled comments) restore things. Well, that's what the Coastal Conservancy is actually doing in a number of places up and down the coast.

Janet Bridgers: Really.

Marcia Hanscom: So we're trying to make sure they get on the right track, um, we also are working on a number of other areas Malibu Lagoon where a similar restoration effort is under way. We've been involved with wetland projects up and down the coast as well as other coastal resources. There's a property where there's a very important coastal prairie terrace area south of Half Moon Bay.

Marcia Hanscom: We're working to make sure that environmentally sensitive habitat area is protected, and keeping the Coastal Commission honest.

Janet Bridgers: That takes a lot of work.

Marcia Hanscom: It does take a lot of work. But, it's all connected, as John Muir would say, and if we, for instance, one project where we worked on was up in Oxnard where there was this previously thought extinct plant, the Ventura Marsh Vetch and we were not doing well in a lawsuit there and so we were able to get settlement that actually helped put aside some funding so that we could plant that plant again, back in some of its historical range.

Marcia Hanscom: And Bolsa Chica Wetlands and Ballona Wetlands and Malibu Lagoon are

three of the areas where it used to be so they are all kind of connected and it's sort of like, if you know what's happening in one place it can...

Janet Bridgers: Very similar..

Marcia Hanscom: It can help you do your work in other places, as well.

Gyour own spirits up, I think that, and I and I want this as encouragement for other people who are involved, not just on environmental issues, because, you know determination and stick-to-itiveness and how do you manage to uh..

Marcia Hanscom: Well there are a couple things you hit on one, one of my mentors in this Gordon Labettes who started Surfrider Foundation, he used to use a phrase that I keep up by my desk all the time, "Constant pressure endlessly applied." Which is something that is necessary to continue the work, he just can't let go at any moment.

Janet Bridgers: What do eat for breakfast? (laughter)

Marcia Hanscom: Oatmeal, organic oatmeal. (laughter)

Janet Bridgers: Gives you what it takes in the morning, huh?

Marcia Hanscom: It also for me, where I get my energy is actually being out in nature. I can't sit behind a computer and fax machine all day long,.. Or I really won't have energy to do the work. Fortunately I'm a partner with a biologist who has to be out of doors all the time so he's always grabbing me and taking me out to for a walk and making sure that I'm communing with nature, which is really where I get my inspiration to do the work.

Janet Bridgers: The California coastline is so such a remarkable, I don't have to tell you that stretch of land and so many people who live in California say the coast is important to them. And, uh.., and yet there's so few people who are really involved in coastal activism, so few people who you know, would you care to comment on that? And, uh..

Marcia Hanscom: Well it's good and makes you feel good to know that so many people care about it but it is very distressing ion the other hand because it's true, very few people come to the Commission hearings um, unfortunately they're during the day sometimes in places far away from where items are heard, and think that there's really a sense among most of the public that the coast is protected, because we passed Proposition 20 in 1992.

Marcia Hanscom: It's all already protected, we hear things about one good thing that's done, it gets covered in the newspaper and very rarely do you do you actually find out about all of the bad things that are happening. Every single month numerous coastal development permits are approved and my friend at the CR Club often calls it "death by a thousand cuts", and that's really what's happening to our coast, and it's really going to take a lot more people getting involved.

Marcia Hanscom: And we need to get the next generation while they're young because it's as

Peter Douglas the executive Director of the Coastal Commission often says the coast is constantly being protected, every time you think you've done something to protect something and put it in to full protection there's another threat of some sort.

Marcia Hanscom: And so it's a regular on going stewardship.

Janet Bridgers: Do you see any models out there in the world of environmentalism maybe the large world for effectively nurturing and developing young activists?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, there's one thing the Sierra Club is doing that's working a little bit although not as much as it needs to, and that is they have a Cr, a student coalition that, but they're focused only on a few things and I'd like to see us really work more closely with some of the colleges and high schools in the area. You know, the kids today go to field trips out in nature, whereas we didn't do that so there really is much more educated youth that just needs to know that we need their help.

Marcia Hanscom: That we love their energy, and be involved to me the most effective thing that is happening for the environment is people starting to really care about it in their own communities. I see for instance, where I'm living, people who never thought about it before becoming activists, getting involved because all of a sudden their little sand dune area that they always like to go watch sunsets from, is being threatened with a big development.

Marcia Hanscom: And so now, people are coming out of the woodworks to become activists and they never thought they would do that, but they care about their own community. And I think that's where we have to focus.

Janet Bridgers: So that's radiate out towards the larger environment people become involved with a neighborhood issue, a local issue.

Marcia Hanscom: And all ages have gotten involved in that particular. It's the Toesby Dune area and I've been amazed we have lots of young kids going around on skates in the community passing out flyers ...

Janet Bridgers: How great!

Marcia Hanscom: Yeah, it really is, you know, they have their, and they have their own ideas about how to get people involved and it's real refreshing to have that energy there.

Janet Bridgers: Tell me about your favorite spots in California. You've probably seen a lot of the coast and if you could plan to go for a vacation next week, where would you go?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, my very favorite spots on the California coast is the Point Reyes National Seashore. I used to go there for meditation weeks occasionally. There are some great little retreats there, and it's just a beautiful place and we're so so fortunate people like David Brown and others helped work to save that area and make sure it was protected.

Marcia Hanscom: I love the Monterey area where the wonderful Sea Otters are I also really like

the Moss Landing area, _____ Loop so I kinda like the cooler weather, so those are the places I would go.

Marcia Hanscom: But I also love my area right where I am in the Ballona Wetlands, the Malibu Lagoon area.

Janet Bridgers: Did you grow up in Southern California?

Marcia Hanscom: I did, I grew up in south Pasadena.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh, but not exactly right on the shore, huh?

Marcia Hanscom: No, but my grandmother lived in Redondo Beach and we went there every weekend and most of the pictures when I was little was me playing in the sand at the beach.

Janet Bridgers: Uh huh.

Marcia Hanscom: So I got my start on the coast.

Janet Bridgers: So we really, that took hold.

Marcia Hanscom: Yes, it did.

Janet Bridgers: Uh, when you think about the other people that you've worked with who are, have made the greatest contributions to to to the protection of the shore, who comes up on your list, your short list of great activists?

Marcia Hanscom: Flossie Horgan, who is the founder of the Bolsa Chica Land Trust. She stood up in a room and said, "Why do we have to have any houses there at the Bolsa Chica?" And people said, "Oh!", you know, they hadn't even really thought of that idea.

Marcia Hanscom: And she really rallied an amazing effort in Huntington Beach and just didn't believe the nay sayers and was able to do some remarkable work there at the Bolsa Chica Wetlands.

Janet Bridgers: Would you say that she's one of your mentors?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, we actually we were working together around the same time I, she's someone I really look up to for inspiration. Yes, and Ellen Stern Harris, of course, who helped start the Coastal Act. She, when we had absolutely no credible Marcia Hanscoms or supporters at the Ballona Wetlands and all the political forces, except for Tom Hayden were against our efforts, she spoke up and was one of the people who really said, "Well, you should have saved that place a long time ago."

Marcia Hanscom: So she's really great inspiration and mentor as well.

Janet Bridgers: Okay, well let's give men equal time, who's your favorite uh, uh, maybe not favorite, but who among the men do you admire?

Marcia Hanscom: Well, I would say, I really do look up to David Brower, he's no longer with us, but his words and his actions and his ability to see the bigger picture have always been something that has inspired me. I watched him on the Sierra Club Board of Directors and he always brought everything back to what was really important and so I try to do my work with that same similar focus that he did.

Janet Bridgers: You believe in in mentoring the whole process of uh, of a...

Marcia Hanscom: It's absolutely crucial, one of the things that Gordon Labettes, one of my mentors, did teach me was you're, you always should be working to replace yourself, so in whatever job you're doing right now, in whatever issue the the mentoring other people to replace yourself in a year or two and then do something else as part of your work.

Marcia Hanscom: Because otherwise you'll get burned out and it's been one of the best pieces of advice that I've gotten.

Janet Bridgers: I think that's a great place to begin to wind up this program Marcia because I think that what we want our viewers to remember is that activists are made, not born. None of us start out to be activists and we we, but without activists you know, from, you know, you go back 200 years you know, to the formation of this country, this country would not be what it is without people who are willing to dedicate their lives.

Marcia Hanscom: That's right.

Janet Bridgers: Thank you so much for joining us today, and viewers thank you for joining us on Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast series. And when that inkling occurs to you to get involved in a local issue, a national issue, do it! Do it! Because you know the world needs all of us working to make this a better place.

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