



Transcript of Video Interview with Charles Lester, recorded August 2012.

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.

Janet Bridgers (JB): Charles Lester, the executive director of the California Coastal Commission. Dr. Lester, thank you for joining us.

CL: Thank you for having me.

JB: First let's tell viewers a little bit about your background. Where are you from originally and where did you go to school?

CL: Well, originally I was born on the East Coast in New Haven, Connecticut, and spent some time as a young child in Rockville, Maryland, outside of D.C. Grew up in Boulder, Colorado. My parents went out there to the university and from there, made my way through New York City in college, and back to the West Coast—Berkeley—for graduate school and law school.

JB: So you've seen a lot of the country.

CL: Yeah, I'd say so, yeah.

JB: And what was your position before you came to the Coastal Commission? How did you come to the Coastal Commission?

CL: Well, I originally got interested in the Coastal Commission as a graduate student when I was at Berkeley and studied the commission and did some work with the commission as an intern and a young analyst, but then I went to the University of Colorado, back to Boulder, Colorado, to be a faculty member at the university there, in the political science department. So I was originally on an academic track doing environmental law and policy and political science and did that for about four years. And then an opening arose at the Coastal Commission. I knew people here, including Peter, Peter Douglas, the last executive director, and found my way back to the commission and have been here for the last 15-16 years.

JB: And that's maybe enough time...the Coastal Commission and coastal law is very complex and even studying it as a lay person and an activist, I'm many years into it. I'm glad you have many years of understanding it. You're the fourth executive director of the Coastal Commission, only the fourth in 40 years. How does that feel?

CL: Well, as I said almost a year ago when I was appointed, it's an honor and a privilege to be asked to take on that responsibility. You know, there have been only three executive directors, but Peter Douglas was the director for 25 years, so that's partly why there's only been three. Twenty-five of the forty years were held by him, but the program, as you know, has a tremendous legacy of achievement in California, so to be able to take on this role relative to the program is just an honor and a part of my commitment to public service that is very valuable to me.

JB: It's safe to say that he was a lion in his position and the way he went after it. And his retirement and subsequent death last spring is difficult. I'm making the analogy, kind of like Steve Jobs leaving Apple. How does that feel for you to try to fill that position?

CL: Well, I don't know much about the internal workings of Apple, so I don't know if there's an analogy there, but I do know the influence that Peter had on the organization and the program, and of course, anyone who is directing a program for 25 years is going to influence that program, but Peter was such a charismatic leader and had a lifelong commitment to the coast and coastal protection that he was even more than just charismatic. He lived and breathed the program. So obviously there was a strong influence there.

In terms of the organization, and the people who work here, my sense is that for the entire history of the program, there's always been a tremendous commitment on the part of the staff to the Coastal Act and the policies and objectives of that law, as well as a very strong commitment to professionalism and civil service, public service, and looking carefully at facts and evidence and applying the law, the Coastal Act, to those facts and evidence and making the best professional decisions and recommendations that they can, and I think that is a culture here that really transcends any of the directors, really, and is the heart of what the success of the program is built around.

JB: So what they refer to in the business world, the "corporate culture" is intact.

CL: Oh, I'd say very much so. I mean, obviously, it's hard for any organization to lose a director, particularly one who's been with the program for so long. I'm not saying it hasn't been challenging in the transition, but I think the commitment and the resolve of people who are interested in coastal protection with the agency is strong.

JB: Perhaps you've already answered this question, but what do you think the Coastal Commission, both the commissioners, the staff, the whole organization's greatest strength is?

CL: Well, it's always hard for me to pick one thing in questions like that, but I'd really focus on a number of things. One is the staff and the commitment, the professional commitment, the level of civil service that people who work for the commission have, and I think that is critical to any program's success. But I also think you can't discount the law in the case, the Coastal Act, as you know is broad and big picture, but it also elaborates some very specific objectives for California in terms of coastal protection, whether it's maintaining public access, or protecting rural visual scenic resources, or maximizing agriculture, there's just a wide range of objectives and the way the policy and the law is written has provided a context for taking care of the issues that need to be addressed, but also being able to provide a broad enough context that every community within California could work within those objectives well and still be generally arriving at the same place in terms of coastal protection.

So the law is very important, but it's also important to recognize the role of citizens and activists and all of the stakeholders that are also engaged in coastal protection, and I think without that involvement going all the way back to the beginning, when Prop. 20 was passed with 55 percent

of the vote in California, that involvement of the public in our program has been critical to its success.

So it's really those three things, working together, and having this independent commission at the top of that decision process which has combined to make the program successful.

JB: Is your funding adequate at this time?

CL: Is our funding adequate? Well, no, I have to say, "no, it's not adequate." We have a...we're in the middle of a fiscal crisis, as you know, and so I believe many governmental programs are not being adequately funded at the moment, and for valid reasons, there's not a lot of resources out there right now, and it's a struggle, and it's hard to make a case for additional funding when basic human needs are not being met in many areas.

But the coastal program is level funded now. We aren't getting cut dramatically, which is a good thing. We are continuing to endure staff furloughs and general across-the-board reductions in budgeting in order to do our part in the state budget process. But the program also has a long history, in my opinion, under-funded, either cut or level-funded, so when you adjust for inflation over time, we are at a very...we are at 50 percent of our peak, in the early 80s, when we were doing a lot of the planning that we were doing. So I would say, in the big picture, the commission has significantly reduced budget relative to the past.

JB: We've heard the stories in the last few days of the cuts in the Deukmejian era and the effect that had on the staff. So how's your relationship with the current governor's office?

CL: I think it's good. You know I've only been in the job for a year, so I haven't had a lot of interactions with, not just the governor's office, but any number of persons and offices and organizations that are involved with the program. I've been spending a lot of time trying to reach out to each of those groups, including the governor's office, and spend time working with the resources agency—natural resources agency—which is under the governor, of course. And so I think right now we have a solid relationship.

JB: And the appointing process that was...the last court decision, you know, established that the appointees would serve for term and could not be removed at will. Has that remained stable now?

CL: Yeah, since the Marine Forest decision and the amendment by the legislature, that's been the same. We have eight commissioners that have fixed terms, and of course, the governor's appointments are not fixed, but serve at the pleasure of the governor.

JB: So, the Prop. 20 generation is aging. Many of them have passed away. And what do you envision as the way to re-engender a larger level of participation among younger people in support of the commission?

CL: Well, I mean that's a good question. It does seem like there's a lot of people who were involved early on that are moving on, or no longer able to stay involved the way they were. On

the other hand, I know that there a lot of...there are many more, perhaps, organizations now that are involved in not just coastal protection, but environmental preservation and conservation and all of these dimensions of protecting coastal resources than probably there were, at Prop. 20 time, just because things have gotten more complicated and complex and organizations have formed.

I was just doing some retrospective research and thinking about various LCPs and how they've contributed or not to managing growth along the coast. And you see this pattern of...this evolution where Prop. 20 happened, the Coastal Act happened, LCPs were being planned and developed and written, and permits were being discussed and issues and organizations were formed around these issues including open space and nonprofit organizations up and down the coast. So I think there are a lot of people involved, and a lot of people who have come to know and appreciate the issues that are of concern to California when it comes to the coast. And so I don't think there's going to be a deficit of people who are wanting to participate and stay engaged in that.

And a good example would be...I was invited to speak to a group in Sonoma County a couple months ago, and as you may know, Sonoma County was one of the Ground Zero's for coastal protection in California. When I went to this dinner, which was an organization—activist organization—grassroots organization at the county level, I was just amazed at how many people were there, but also not just the original people who were involved on Day One, or before Day One, but all of these other people who have come along and since joined, not necessarily the movement, but the process of wanting to engage in these kinds of issues. So it was a really wide variety of folks of all ages and including some that were much younger than me, who are centrally involved and wanting to go forward with things. So I think as long as there are organizations like that, new people are going to be joining and contributing and in California, with coast protection, I think that's...we're very lucky because of how important the coast is to Californians, and there's always going to be a lot of people who are interested in that.

JB: That's very encouraging. I'm really glad to hear you say that, and it's true. I know just from the studies we've done, and what I've seen personally, that the way, for example, the Santa Barbara oil spill sparked dozens of organizations, and then the Santa Monica Bay clean-up created new organizations, so I have seen personally how the people involved is increasing in that way.

JB: Some aspects of the hearing process can be very difficult for activists, though, because, since the regional commissions went away, and that's now a long time ago, activists have to travel to where the item is being heard in order to testify, and that can be a long way away, and they don't have the expense accounts that the project proponents have. Do you see any change in that or any ways to mitigate that for participation?

CL: That's a good question. Public participation has always been a really important part of the coastal program in California. In fact, it's called out specifically in the Coastal Act that public participation shall be maximized and the role of that is highlighted throughout the law in the regulations in terms of involvements with LCPs and with public hearings on permit items. So it is really important, and it's important that we do everything we can to try to maximize that.

You're right, with the regional commissions going out of existence, and that was 30 years ago now, that was that first phase of coastal protection involved six regional commissions, so there was much more geographically located activity and the meetings were much more regular, even as frequently as once a week when the commission was doing that huge volume of permitting in the early days. So that has an effect of reducing the ability of the public to engage, I think.

At the same time, people have been able to maintain their involvement at a fairly high level, although it is challenging, I would agree, to make it to any particular hearing. And one of the "cons" of the commission's trying to maximize access by going up and down the coast with its meetings monthly is that sometimes you aren't able to hear an item in as local a place as you would like to, because you're trying to be in another place. So that is difficult.

I think that's something we're going to have to look at, including perhaps innovative ways to use social media in order to reach out and make connections easier. I don't know what that means right now. Those sorts of things require thinking through an investment in resources and so hopefully we'll be able to continue that tradition that we have and do right by the public part of the process.

JB: Certainly there are electronic options that haven't been used in the past. Skype is what comes to mind for me, you know, people get Skyped in for their three minutes.

CL: Yeah, well, that's something that... I definitely think it's worth looking at. You know, I used to be one of those people who was on the cutting edge of technology and now I actually see myself... well, my nine-year-old is doing some things that I don't know how to do now. But I do think that we need to look at all kinds of mechanisms. There's always tradeoffs with participation and mechanisms and three minutes is never enough. Three minutes can be too long sometimes. And so you need to figure out how to strike that balance in a way that enables the work to get done, but also provides that opportunity.

JB: What is your ability to assess the pressure, the public pressure, on the appointing authorities, and whether... meaning the Senate and Assembly people who appoint commissioners. Are you able to tell what kind of... do you get any feedback what they're hearing, like we want more pro-coast or you've got too many pro-coast people on that commission? Do you get any of that feedback?

CL: You know, generally I don't have yet a lot of experience with that aspect of the program, having been in this position less than a year. But I think it's always important for people to express what they think about, not just coastal policy, but any policy area to their representatives, and so it would be important for people to, if they have a strong feeling about how the Coastal Act ought to be interpreted and implemented, or what's happening, or not, that needs to be addressed, that that should be expressed to the people who may be able to influence who gets appointed to the Coastal Commission.

JB: Let's talk about, at least in brief, some of the bigger challenges that are going to be coming up for California and the coast, and the one that is at the top of the list is rising sea level. The

state is struggling to balance the budget and the potential incredible expenses in terms of moving roads, and moving airports, is tremendous. What do you envision?

CL: That's a hard one. I think climate change and the effects of climate change, particularly global sea level rise, are going to be some of the most challenging things we deal with over the next 40 years.

We have studies that have come out now that are projecting ranges of sea level rise in California, and it depends on where you are and what's going on geophysically, but significant changes in the level of sea level rise—4 ½ feet, for example, over 100 years, but in the next 40 years, you'll see significant changes which will have an impact on coastal resources.

And so, we do need to begin projecting that out in particular places in asking what we need to do to respond to it. And a lot of the issues that we're going to have to deal with are not new in the sense that the Coastal Commission has always struggled with coastal erosion, for example, and how to address the tension between what the ocean wants to do—erode bluffs and move inland—and the fact that we've developed in a lot of those locations and we can't move that development and so we end up building sea walls, and then sea walls have negative impacts on beaches. That whole dynamic is not a new dynamic, but it's going to become much more exacerbated and critical and so I think we're going to be struggling, as we already are, in certain places to protect our beaches and our recreational resources in urban areas where we aren't able to retreat. You know, if there wasn't any development there, the beach is naturally going to move back as the sea level rises, but if you can't move back, if there's a sea wall, the beaches are the place that's going to get squeezed.

And so, I think we need to begin planning again, reinvest in our planning with projections of sea level rise in mind and ask how are going to save some of these recreational beach resources that we value so highly, because we're not going to stop the sea from rising. It's...that horse is out of the barn. And there isn't much we can do to change that in our lifetime and in our kids' kids' lifetimes, I think. So what we need to do is figure out how to adapt and we have a mechanism in place. We have a great law. We have a great process that allows local governments to develop plans and work with the commission to make sure those plans are addressing our statewide interests in coastal protection, but those plans need to be updated to address this kind of thing. And that goes back to your budget question. That's not going to happen on its own. Both the commission and local governments are overwhelmed with the need for planning resources and there isn't enough. So we need to figure out how to get that reinvestment to do that planning.

JB: Is there a provision in the Act for local coastal plans to be revised?

LC: You know, there isn't a mandatory update provision. There is a provision that says that LCPs should be reviewed periodically, every five years, and gives the commission the ability to do that review and then make recommendations as to how to update an LCP to assure that new circumstances or implementation issues are being addressed in order to meet the goals of the Coastal Act. But there's no requirement there, and the ultimate mechanism is a letter to the legislature that the commission can write to say, "this LCP needs to be updated in the following ways," and then that's it. But there's no requirement.

So that's been a topic of concern over the years, that we really have a mechanism to update the plans. On the other hand, local governments themselves have been realizing that their plans are in need of update, not just in the Coastal Zone, but their general plans. And it's pretty typical for local communities to say, or to see that they need to update their plans to stay current with new demographic and environmental trends, and just changes in the profession, like the desire to have more mixed use, smart growth, and change the plans around to make communities work better. So there's a built-in need and interest in updating plans and I think if we had the resources to invest in updated planning, and in particular to provide us the capacity to do that planning...if you don't have enough resources to do the planning, people get frustrated because planning is very intensive in terms of participation. If you have those resources, I think there's a mutual interest among many in doing LCP updates, particularly to deal with things like climate change. So that's one of the things that I'm interested in finding the resources and support for is investing in LCP updates around issues like climate change, and other planning issues generally.

So I don't think we need to look for some kind of change in the Coastal Act necessarily, as opposed to a new commitment to that process that we already laid out as being the way to do this—invest in state-local collaboration on this issue.

JB: So we're very close to the end of the half hour, and it always goes so swiftly that I'm surprised. But you mentioned that you feel that recreational need will be a primary objective of planning in the future. Does that mean more public access might be available?

CL: I think we're going to have to keep looking for more and enhanced access. Population projections are 60 million people, I think, in California 40 years from now. So if you look at the next 40 years, population is not going down. There's going to be demand to use the shoreline and beach resources. At a certain point, there's only a finite amount of coast and that's why this issue of what's going to happen to our beaches is really important. And you're going to have ongoing issue between the public's desire to get to the beach and the residential areas along the shoreline, just the capacity of our roadway systems and the ability to park, those are all going to continue, we're going to have to find a way to do it.

JB: Dr. Lester, this has been a great privilege and a fascinating half hour. Thank you for joining us.

CL: You're welcome. Thank you.

JB: Viewers, thank you for joining us and spending a half hour with Heroes of the Coast.

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