



Transcript of Video Interview with Dan Pearson,
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.

JB: Hello. I'm Janet Bridgers, executive director of Earth Alert. We're here today with the next in the series on *Heroes of the Coast*, the personal stories of people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the California coast. We're here today with Dan Pearson. Dan, thanks for coming.

DP: Thanks for having me, Janet.

JB: Dan, a lot of our discussion today is going to revolve around Ormond Beach, and for the benefit of people who are listening, let's tell them first where Ormond Beach is.

DP: It's on the coast. It's below the pier, Pt. Hueneme, right up against...I guess it ends at the base, Pt. Mugu Naval Air Station, right there. About 10 or 15 miles north of Malibu.

JB: Okay. And when did you first see Ormond Beach?

DP: When I got there, it was a long time ago—1954. I moved here when I was just a small child. My dad was in the Air Force. And I was seven years old. I think it was September. And I had never lived on the coast before. I was from Texas and this was just fantastic. And so every day after school, done with stuff, just go to the beach and wander up and down, and it was relatively uninhabited. It was pure wilderness at the time. It was 1954.

JB: And how did you find it to be? Describe what your experience of the beach in those days.

DP: Well, before that the only experience I'd had with wildlife was through television, and the only television that showed any wildlife regularly was the Walt Disney show. They had *Adventure Land* and this and that. So every once in a while, they had these wildlife shows like shows on the sea lions, shows on beavers and bears and stuff like that. And so that was my only experience with it.

And all of a sudden, here I am, seven years old, and walking down this beach and here's this place that looked just like these shows I saw on television. There were just tens of thousands of birds, nesting and flying and making noise and stuff like that.

JB: Literally that many birds?

DP: No it was absolutely covered. I was...I don't know how much you weigh when you're that age, but there were pelicans sleeping on the beach. You could cover a football field, all of them sleeping on one foot, with their heads and bills tucked back. And sea lions would sleep on the beach, which is something you rarely see anymore. And I would walk across it and the droppings from the pelicans and birds were so thick, it would crack under my feet. There were just literally thousands of birds. Those were just the pelicans. I didn't know what the other birds were. I

thought they were all like sand pipers or something, but they turned out to be snowy plovers and least terns that were nesting on the beach and literally tens of thousands, tens of thousands of birds, exhibiting the behaviors that I saw on the programs on TV, so I knew it was a really special place.

JB: So did you stay there throughout your childhood?

DP: Pretty much. Yeah, I grew up in Ventura County, so we moved to Ventura for a while, then back to Oxnard/Pt. Hueneme area and by that time, the area had undergone quite a bit of pressure. We were having these dragsters with special wheels on them for sand, and they would have drag strips up and down Ormond Beach with thousands of people coming, and vendors selling hot dogs...

JB: Right on the beach?

DP: Yeah, right on Ormond Beach. I'm not sure exactly what time of year it was. It might have been during the summer time. I don't know if it conflicted with the nesting season as we see it now from April to whenever...

And then the population grew. It was at maybe 30,000 in '54, now it's like over 100,000 and so the beach, and especially the remote areas show the pressure of litter and stuff like that. So, it's not tens of thousands of birds anymore.

JB: No. But it's still a special place, right?

DP: And it has the potential to become even more special, if just a little bit of care is taken, a little bit of consideration. The birds, the species there are just hanging on. They have good years and bad years. But every year is never like it was when I was a child.

JB: So when you go back to Ormond Beach now, what kind of feelings do you have?

DP: Well, it's still nice, like early in the morning, or you can...people walking there from Hueneme, down from the pier, watch the sunset and see the islands. It's quite nice. It's still very remote. I mean there's only one road that goes to it along the back gate of the Pt. Mugu Naval Air Station. There's a parking area there with a barrier to keep cars from going on. And I think the only other access is from Pt. Hueneme, by the pier, people going out and just walking all the way down. It's quite a stretch. I mean, probably a lot of people in Southern California, especially below Santa Monica, wouldn't believe what a huge, long remote, clean, uncluttered beach it is. You don't see that in other parts of Southern California.

JB: No you don't. Now you have a particular interest in marine mammals. How did that come about?

DP: Well, I've always been interested...I don't know how a little kid in Texas got interested in whales, but whales always fascinated me. I remember seeing movies, usually about whaling, but the creatures were just fascinating. And then here I was on the coast, and I started seeing a lot of

marine mammals. I didn't see whales, but I saw sea lions and harbor seals. Back then, I couldn't even tell the difference. But I was always interested in them, they live in such a hostile environments and they're so beautiful and their lives are interesting to me.

And when I came back from the army, I was going back to school at Ventura College, and I was going to pursue a degree in zoology and marine biology as it like the hip thing. Jacques Cousteau was on TV and ABC, *The Wonderful World of Jacques Cousteau*, and interest was high.

And I'd remembered before we used to go surfing, before I was in the army for high school, we used to go surfing at Pt. Mugu, and we'd always seals and sea lions hanging out on the beach and in the lagoon, and there was a facility there that was built there, a large pool, 50 ft. wide, eight feet deep, and they were doing some work there. And we'd walk over there. There was no fence around it or anything, just some trailers with some recording equipment. And we'd walk over there, nobody would be there on weekends. And there was a bunch of dolphins in this pool. And there's balls and stuff like that, so we'd throw the balls, and they'd toss the balls like they were training us, training us to toss the balls back. What is this? "I wonder what they're doing... very interesting," It was quite the thing. I went in the military, came back and I found out when I was looking for a job that that place was still there and it had grown quite a bit. So I tried to get a job there and met some really fabulous people, and didn't get the job.

And then I read in the paper that they had acquired, back in when people were getting orcas—killer whales—and they got two. And boy, I called the people up and said, "can I come out and look at them?" And it was like the day after they showed up, and everybody was just fascinated to see these creatures. And then a couple of weeks later, I got the job. So I started working there, as just a veterinarian's assistant. Actually I was pulling weeds for the first two weeks, in front of the lab, but it was really fun to be around the animals. They had all kinds of animals there. And when...that's when I started working with the animals, and working with the doctors and learning about marine mammal husbandry and a lot about trainers. They had people there from the circus that they hired who were good animal trainers, and a lot of people with Masters' degrees in marine mammalogy, so it was quite an exciting, interesting place...This was during the oil spill, the Santa Barbara '69, so we had all these birds being brought to us and the whole coast was just such a disaster area. It was quite exciting time.

JB: What an exciting job, too!

DP: Oh it was a wonder. They paid me for being out there. I practically lived out there. We had lockers and showers and we had wet suits, and in and out of the water. And I kept my surf board out there and after work, I'd go surfing.

JB: You should have been paying them. We have a couple of pictures to show you from your marine mammal experience. Tell us what those pictures are.

DP: That's Dinky, a California sea lion pup. And we got him...I think he was watching us do some deep dives. We had a Lark that would take animals out, or sometimes we'd have animals follow us in the boat out to this submarine channel from the lagoon and after you go out about a mile or two, you have several thousand feet underneath you. And you have this equipment where

the dolphins would dive down, hit a buzzer, come back up and they were trained to, before they hit the surface, to exhale into this funnel, so we would catch their exhale gases, and collect them in these syringes, and I would sometimes drive them up to UCSB. They had a gas chromatograph up there. And we would find out...we knew what gases were going in, what percentages, what partial pressures, and stuff, from the surface of the ocean, and then we would find out what gases were coming out on exhalation, so we could determine what gases would be used by the animal at certain depths.

A lot of hard work, but it was a great place to be because you could do two dives in a day. You go out in the morning, take the animals down, but when you were out there and the dolphins were diving down and coming up and getting their reward and breathing and collecting gas and stuff, here this little guy was. And he was so fascinated with us. And so he seemed like he might be a good candidate for some kind of a sea lion study we were doing, so somebody just grabbed him, brought him back and I was just training him to not bite people, which is the first thing you do with a sea lion—"don't bite!" And he turned out to be quite a good animal. All the animals were just fantastic. They all had names, and it was great.

JB: Why do you think people are so fascinated with marine mammals?

DP: Well, I can't speak for other people. I mean, in circuses, they balance balls. And they bark and they do the horn thing, play music and stuff. They're shiny and wet. I'm impressed with them from a zoological point of view because they're so well adapted to an extremely hostile environment. And from the time that I started working with them in the late '60s, early '70s, people up at UC Santa Cruz and stuff have been working with them. Bud Antonelis has been working in the Pribilofs with the fur seals and stuff. The star sea lion situation which is quite controversial right now, the starvation has been mentioned, size has been mentioned and everything else... They're so perfectly suited to an extremely hostile environment. We just found out not long ago that elephant seals nap at about a thousand meters down, or a thousand feet down, and they dive on exhalation. They exhale and they'll dive, looking for fish at these depths, or something. But they stay down there and sleep. They can sleep down there.

JB: How long?

DP: An hour or so.

JB: Amazing.

DP: They're safe down there, hundreds of miles from the beach, but certainly other predators aren't going to go down that deep to bother them, and they rest and stuff. And they're out there for months at a time, and then they come back to shore to breed and fight and do what they do. And that's why I'm impressed with them. I think they're just incredibly capable animals.

JB: What I noticed, though, is any time there's a whale beaching, or something, it's the top of the news. Everybody is always interested in what goes on with whales, and yet then, when there's a die-off of seals, the agency people go to these great lengths to diminish it and discount it, and it

doesn't seem like there's really a great effort on the part of agency people to defend marine mammals. Would you care to comment on that?

DP: Well, that's where you get the population biologists in, with their numbers. And reading the number of pups, mortality and stuff like that. Marine mammals, quite frankly, are seen in a lot of different parts of the ocean as being in competition with man for food stocks, fish stocks, and things like that.

JB: Do you think they really are?

DP: No, no. I think a lot of mistakes have been made, especially recently I've learned about the mistakes being made in trying to help establish the sea lions, the really big sea lions up in Alaska area, and they're at San Miguel Island, too, so they show up at San Miguel Island. But thinking that they're going to prevent fishermen from bringing in a certain kind of fish, only to find out later that that wasn't the fish that was replenishing or keeping the population of Steller sea lions vigorous and vital. It was another fish that continued to be harvested. So they've got to reorganize their research and reorganize their laws and try to help and stuff. I don't know. I understand they seem to be a bit cavalier about...so, okay, a bunch of sea lions are starving, it's part of the cycle of life and stuff. It probably wouldn't bother me so much if there wasn't so much human pressure on them in addition to the natural pressures that they've been successfully dealing with for millions of years. I'm sure there have been die-offs before, starvation before, disease before, something that has ravished their populations, but they've always bounced back and found their niche and came back to a sustainable...I don't really like that word "sustainable," but that type of a number. But now they have to do that and be in competition with man, because the work that I've been doing, I see sea lions and harbor seals with bullet wounds.

JB: Who would do that?

DP: Well, fishermen don't want near the nets. Sometimes they're giving these flash bang things to scare them away from the nets, and they're permitted to do that because they're in business, but you see an awful lot of animals that get shot, animals that are cut up...boat strikes, which is just an effect of the number of people, recreational use, propeller blades, like the manatees in Florida.

JB: So they don't know how to stay away from...

DP: They can't get away. Some of these boats are traveling at a high rate of speed. Even grey whales get hit by the big tankers, the big cargo ships going up and down the coast, so additional pressures are known to be...I mean, it seems like not enough concern is being shown. It's a controversial question of...you know, you want to save an animal. You want to save every animal. You have compassion for these creatures that you see are starving or diseased and could use some help that is available. Other people say, "no, you're interfering with nature," or "it's not part of...."

And I don't really think that if you're picking an animal up off the beach that's been shot by somebody that you're interfering with nature. You're not going to alter the gene pool or anything like that.

JB: Let's go to another subject. The military bases in Southern California have become...are some of the few areas left in Southern California where there is enough open beach space for some of these endangered bird species to nest.

DP: Birds and marine mammals on San Nicholas Island. They have signs posted on the beach in San Nicholas Island to leave the animals strictly alone.

JB: From your experience of being both part of the military and being a wildlife advocate, what happens that you can comment about within a military base with regard...Do they like the animals? Do they wish they'd go away? Do they wish they could get rid of them?

DP: I'm trying to think if I've heard a discouraging word. No, not among the rank and file. I don't talk to that many admirals. I'll tell you though the thing that I know, the stuff that comes across my desk and the efforts that are being made, like say on the East Coast, in Florida, when they're running an operation or an exercise for the training that the military has to do, when they're coming through an area where they know whales are, with calves and stuff like that, they double the watch.

JB: They do?

DP: Yes, they double the watch, and they have instead of one guy looking and stuff, two guys are looking, and when the weather gets bad, they slow down, if they're returning to port after doing the exercise.

JB: So you think there's a genuine conscientiousness about it?

DP: Yes, and they're held accountable. And it's part of...I mean you can see. It's written down. I've seen this.

JB: That's really very encouraging. Here's another kind of tough question. How do you feel personally about balancing human recreational needs against the needs of wildlife for habitat?

DP: Well, we can talk about Ormond Beach, because that's an area of conflict right now, where several different activities are coming together. I don't have a problem with people enjoying the beach, but it's a seasonal thing. Like when the birds show up, and they've been showing who knows how, I mean how many ice ages they've been doing this, they were doing pretty good up until 1954, when I was a little boy. It didn't seem like they were having very many problems, simply because I think the population density and the impact. Here I was, a small child walking through this area, causing quite a ruckus, with the birds overhead and noise and buzzing me and what not, but I was trying to be careful to not step on any eggs, these tiny little eggs.

But since then, you've got motorcycles, you've got cars on the beach. I mean I've called the police with cars on the beach at 2:00 to 3:00 in the morning, doing stuff, running around. But they need this beach, from April to whenever, until they leave, and when they leave, just go ahead and sunbathe or barbeque, or whatever. You want to walk, what have you. No vehicles, of course. But I don't think that's a real problem. But it seems to be a real problem for some people. Some people they just ignore the signs, or they tear the signs down, or they go out at 2:00 to 3:00 in the morning and run through the area, or they unloose their dogs on the area. All of this stuff puts a tremendous amount of pressure on some birds who don't build nests in trees. They're right there on the ground. And I don't know. I think there's plenty of room seasonally for people to enjoy the beach and for a few months out of the year, certain areas are set aside. I don't see what the problem is, but apparently there seems to be a problem. Some people just don't get it.

JB: So do you think it's just a handful of people?

DP: Well, it's a handful of people but that doesn't mean...I don't mean to give it *carte blanche*, it's a handful of people but all it takes is one or two people to ruin a nesting season for an entire species for that beach. So that means, maybe theoretically, 120 birds show up. Their nesting season is ruined, they'd be lucky to get six or seven chicks out. So they have to wait another season to go where they go, and then they come back, but last year they only got six more. And who knows how many die of old age, or get picked off by...I don't know that they replenish themselves with six chicks. And their survivability once they leave the beach is an open question. I think it should be a very high priority. I mean absolutely don't disturb them. The pedestrians don't disturb them, the unleashed dogs. Certainly no vehicles, and now we have another aspect, the paragliders coming, representing another...yet one more. There's a tipping point phenomenon. Maybe they can put up with a pedestrian, or let the dog walk by or something, but then the vehicles and the motorcycles and the four-wheel things and the paragliders, and then they're gone. That's just too much. That's the problem.

JB: So we really kind of need some policing effort, right?

DP: Everyone of the nesting sites requires it, because sometimes people don't know, or maybe the signs get blown down by the wind, or something like that. But I mean, how many people will be walking down the beach with a beautiful sunset and they want to do this or that, and then they see a sign that says, oh, they can't walk over here. Well, I don't have a problem with that. Do you?

JB: No.

DP: But some people kick the sign down, then walk and disturb, or go look or something like that and that's all it takes. It doesn't take much. I mean, they have their own natural pressures. You know there's foxes, sometimes cats, I hope not too many cats, because there's not a lot of housing close to Ormond Beach, but gulls, and kestrels, I think American kestrels put pressure on them, which they've sustained in the past. Everything...wildebeests sustain lions, crocodiles. They all do okay. But that, on top of the human pressures seems to be just too much. That's the tipping point.

JB: So there's good news and there's bad news about Ormond Beach, this place that you grew up and that was such a ...

DP: 51% bad news, 49% good news.

JB: So let's give everybody the good news. What's the good news?

DP: The good news is there are dedicated people that are trying to help these guys. You talk about man hours of physically putting these signs up that have to come down at the end of the season. People have to stop what they're doing and go do this, and we find people like that.

JB: And you're one of them, too.

DP: Well, I've helped a little bit. But I've got other things I'm trying to do with the Pt. Mugu Wildlife Center, trying to establish a place for whales and dolphins. There's nothing really in all of Southern California for cetaceans in that are sick. You certainly don't want to put them in SeaWorld where they have their show animals, because some of these diseases are communicable. But I have my count, and there are some people, you know, if you ask them, like the blue heron situation at Channel Islands Harbor. Beautiful birds! And they want to build this thing and cut down these trees and do this and that. You know, that really brings people out, but not consistently to keep pressure on and stuff like that. And it seems like sometimes, the development forces and the financial end of it, their pressure is more consistent, it's constant, and then people kind of move away, or this and that.

JB: Well, they've just finished purchasing a second big parcel at Ormond Beach. Are you encouraged by that?

DP: I'm glad they did, but I wish they purchased another parcel. I wish they'd purchased a parcel that was more critical to the nesting of the birds. I'm talking about the snowy plovers and the least terns. They're the most endangered right now. I'd like them to buy all of it, you know. If I had it, I'd write a check.

JB: You think that Ormond will come back as a wildlife area or do you think it's going to be what Rim Fay called a landscaping project?

DP: Oh, gosh, it could go almost either way. There's so much pressure in California right now with the population and development, and stuff like that. It gets to the point where people start resenting ... "Well, we don't have any place to go." Or people that want to go say Labor Day weekend, or Memorial Day weekend, they want to the beach with a motorhome and relax and have a barbeque and stuff and they have to get a reservations way in advance, and there's no room and the parks are full and stuff like that. Pretty soon, they're not going to be very well disposed to hearing about this area being set aside for wildlife. It's just almost inevitable. But they deserve to be here, too. They are life forms on this planet spinning through space and they have a right to have a place where they can have their babies and raise them to fledgling flight status and get on with it.

JB: Lot of really do think that, and so it does unfortunately come down to a few individuals who assert their own right over that. But in the time we have left, tell us about your vision in Ventura County for helping to protect wildlife.

DP: Well, if there's enough land purchased, and I'm talking about the wetlands. As far as I know from speaking with friends who are way more informed on this than I am, and then we have an area around the wetlands, which is critical also. You can't just have the wetlands and a fence right up there, and a condo or whatever. You have to have the wetlands and an outer area, a buffer zone, kind of. With the proper amount of diligence and community support, and what not, it could bounce back. Probably not in my lifetime, the way I saw it as a child, but it could happen and it's worth the effort to make that happen. I don't have a vision for that. That would be the birds. The marine mammals, we're still trying to establish a place that can take care of them. They're under pressure, too, just like the birds are on the beach, the mammals are under pressure out in the ocean, so I would think...I'm trying to remain optimistic. A lot of times, when I see what goes on, the lengths that people go to just be destructive, I get kind of...and friends will tell you that I get a little negative, a little cynical, I guess, but the goal is so important. These life forms are so deserving of a place on this planet, it's worth the effort, despite the litter and over-fishing and the harvesting and the scofflaws and the people you have to deal with, it's worth the effort. Sometimes you get down, and you kind of have to have friends bring you back up again. And then you get back into it and start putting the signs and try to nice to people and say, "look, please read the sign and give them a few more weeks and they'll be out of here and then you can do what you want, practically, but you know what I'm saying. Just give them a little consideration." But my vision is that it could happen, it could come back.

JB: Dan, thank you for joining us.

DP: That's it? This has been fun. Thank you for having me, Janet.

JB: You've been a hero of the coast in terms of your efforts to protect wildlife and those of us who don't have that skill. I really thank you for that. Listeners, thank you for joining us for this episode of *Heroes of the Coast*. We ask you when you go to the beach to be considerate of the other life forms, but go out and enjoy it as often as possible, because the beach certainly is what makes California special.

[end of interview]