



Transcript of Video Interview with Alan Sanders, 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.

Interview with Alan Sanders re efforts to preserve Ormond Beach in Oxnard, CA

JB: Hello and welcome to *Heroes of the Coast*, the program that brings you the personal stories of people who have dedicated their lives to saving the California coast for the rest of us. I'm Janet Bridgers with Earth Alert, and my guest today is Alan Sanders. Alan...

AS: Thanks for having me again, Janet.

JB: Alan is conservation chair of the Los Padres Sierra Club and president of Ormond Beach Observers. Correct?

AS: That's correct.

JB: Alan, first of all, let's give the viewers a very quick description of where Ormond Beach is and why it's so important, before we move into the story of the battle *royale*.

AS: Well, Ormond is north and west of Los Angeles, so it's up the coast, and you can find it by going up PCH or going up the 101 to Ventura County and then taking Hueneme Road down to Ormond Beach.

JB: Okay, and it's a wetland.

AS: Well, there are a lot of different habitat types at Ormond. There are wetlands and lagoons and coastal estuaries, so there are a lot of very sensitive habitat types that are very endangered in California now.

JB: And you have been involved for a very long time in keeping it as a wetland, as a habitat.

AS: Well, unfortunately yes.

JB: Fortunately for the rest of us. What was this are like in the 50s. We're going to give a very brief review.

AS: It was mostly agricultural. It was really on the outskirts of the city of Oxnard and Pt. Hueneme, so a lot of agriculture. Because it was very wet, there was an attempt to drain water out of the area. So a lot of the activity was to channelize what had been native waterways and to try to move the water out of the area so it could be converted to industrial uses.

JB: But it was still, in the 50s, very rich biologically.

AS: Oh yeah. There were a lot of wildlife in the area, gigantic flocks of birds that were still inhabiting the wetlands as we started into the 50s.

JB: What happened in the 60s?

AS: In the 60s, the area became the focus of industrial use. There was a large recycling facility called Halaco Engineering that was placed there. Southern California Edison placed an electrical generating station at Ormond Beach as well.

JB: And then...well, energy, in general, has been a very important factor in what has been happening at Ormond Beach. So we had first the creation of the Edison plant in the middle of a wetlands, which is kind of disconcerting. It doesn't look like it belongs there, at all, never has. But also then there was the threat of...the first time that the word liquefied natural gas came up.

AS: That was in the early 70s and shortly after the power plant was built. There were plans that were developed by Southern California Edison to convert, really, what was remaining of the wetlands to an LNG facility. And so that was one of the first real big environmental battles of Ventura County, as people saw the environmental impact report, which was one of the first done after the California Environmental Quality Act was passed. And it identified that should there be a problem, there was a safety hazard that could result in harm and possibly death to thousands of residents in Pt. Hueneme and Oxnard.

JB: That was no exaggeration, correct?

AS: Well, that was in their paperwork, so they identified that as a risk themselves because the plant would be in the vicinity of residential neighborhoods.

JB: Just for the sake of people who may not be familiar, how does liquid natural gas come to a place like California and what is it exactly?

AS: Well, the liquefied natural gas is gas that's been cooled down to the point where its converted from a gas to a liquid and the plan is to transport this gas from foreign shores where gas is plentiful, putting it in a ship that has large containers that can keep this under pressure, and it's transported to our coast where it's then allowed to reheat and regassify. That was the first of many proposals that has been aimed right at Ormond Beach and the City of Oxnard.

JB: Now then, but it is a highly volatile substance. I think that why I want people to know this because it will keep coming up again in the news and if you don't know what LNG is, it's liquid natural gas. It's very volatile. And so the issues related to it are safety hazards, but also environmental issues besides cataclysmic explosion?

AS: Well, it depends on whether they are putting the plant...there is obviously a safety risk, but as regards Ormond, the plan was to locate the facility right in the heart of a coastal wetlands that's within the coastal zone. So the impacts of an industrial facility like that were fairly well known, as they are now. There are proposals now onshore in Long Beach and offshore in Ventura County, there are two proposals.

JB: Then next, you became very involved in...the City of Pt. Hueneme decided to put an RV park right on the beach and you went into action on that.

AS: Well, the City of Port Hueneme and the City of Oxnard at that time were essentially in a race to see who could first develop the last remaining sections of wetlands at Ormond. Because I spent a lot of time in that area, I was aware of the biological resources, it was evident that should any of these projects move forward, it would really be the end of the attempt by citizens to have some type of restoration project in the area to protect biological resources.

JB: Give us the names of some of the major players in this battle because some of them played other roles.

AS: Well, at that time, we were just ending the threat of liquefied natural gas by Southern California Edison and there was a large builder called Baldwin Brothers that were trying to develop a large section of Ormond Beach. They had plans for over 10,000 homes and that usually goes with that...an offshore marina, hotels, etc.

JB: Very dense.

AS: Very dense. And the City of Pt. Hueneme was trying to act as a developer themselves and though their project was smaller, the footprint of the project was on the last section of their city that had any biological resources, and there were endangered birds that were using the area, and people use the area. I think part of what was happening at that time was people were more or less awakening to the issue of coastal access and the fact that we do have the Coastal Act, and if people want to have areas protected, they have to come forward and interact with their government bodies and to insist that something be left for ourselves and those who are going to come later.

JB: Let's cut to the chase on this. You enlisted the homeowners' association. They hired a person who is very prominent now on the Coastal Commission—Sara Wan. But there are a lot of details on that and we're going to skip that. So you get right to the end of this battle at the Coastal Commission hearing about the issue and what happened?

AS: Well, we actually lost on that project. The Coastal Commission was going to give the City of Pt. Hueneme everything that they asked for, with the small exception. "We're going to pare down the project, which had a number of parking spots for RVs." So they were going to lose a few and I think that the plan was the city could come back the next year and in a minor action, they would get those spots added back, and so they'd be well on their way. But the City of Pt. Hueneme, which was lead by a then-Coastal Commissioner Dorill Wright insisted that they wanted to have it all or none. And so they snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory as the case would have it, and that bought us some time and we got new people elected to the Pt. Hueneme City Council and that project never went forward.

JB: The gods of coastal protection were shining on you that day. That doesn't happen very often.

AS: It doesn't happen very often but I think it's a model for people who are contemplating fighting City Hall and think that the deck is stacked against them and it's impossible. And in that case, citizens were able to come together. Local homeowners joined with environmentalists and worked together to try to protect a really valuable area of the coast. It was a very important event at the time and I think was really the first [audio drops out for a few seconds] ...I give a lot of credit to David Kanter, president of the homeowners' association at that time, who was threatened by the city. They threatened to sue him, take his home away from him and it quite serious.

JB: You received death threats yourself.

AS: It was a very serious event. People were at odds.

JB: Now what, in the meantime, happened with the Baldwin Brothers and their plan to build 10,000 homes in the area that's right above the wetlands.

AS: They did continue for some time...

JB: How long?

AS: Until about '96.

JB: So they were active over a period of how many years?

AS: About nine years.

JB: And you were fighting them the whole time?

AS: The whole time.

JB: The whole time. And what happened?

AS: Well, we got lucky again. There was a housing slump that occurred in the early '90s and so some of these grandiose plans started being reduced in size. The Baldwin Company divided the property and tried to get a small part of what they envisioned passed by the Oxnard City Council, I think with the idea that that would be a toehold and they would proceed from there. And they weren't successful. The Sierra Club, which I'm involved in, was the party that came forward and filed an appeal with the City of Oxnard and rallied citizens. It was another one of these battles that looked like it was impossible and we weren't going to get anywhere. But we were able to stop that project and because the markets had turned, the Baldwin Company eventually went bankrupt and sold their property in the City of Oxnard, and Metropolitan Water District eventually bought the largest part of property that they owned at Ormond Beach, and so the property was available to be bought recently by the California Coastal Conservancy.

JB: So then, in the meantime, So. Cal. Edison also sold some of their land and that...so they did, right?

AS: Yes.

JB: But they missed the opportunity to sell that to the California Coastal Conservancy?

AS: Well, that property was actually sold a couple times. Southern California Edison tried to sell 650 acres, I believe, to the Coastal Conservancy in the year 2000 and the deal fell through on the last possible day. So we still don't know all the stories behind that. But it was removed from escrow and eventually broken up and sold for a lot more, and some of it never has been purchased, and is held by private owners, so a lot going on there.

JB: Meanwhile, over in the last several years, so we're now at the 2000, within the last five years, and there still is this constant, practically, effort by people to try to develop this land. So there was a proposal for a "film factory," there, is that correct?

AS: There was a proposal for a "film factory," and that was divisive. We actually had people who are identified as being leading environmentalists in our community who came out and supported that, but most of the people who are sincere in their desire to protect Ormond Beach insisted that that would not really comply with what had been decided by the Ormond Beach Task Force. They came up with a land use recommendation that's called the Consensus Plan, and the Consensus Plan says that we should have restoration of the ecological system, and try to make a viable ecological system at Ormond Beach.

JB: In 2002, this LNG comes up again. Now what happened this time?

AS: Occidental Petroleum wanted to build an LNG site and that came up very quickly and happened in such a way that it looked like they would be able to buy part of this parcel that the Coastal Conservancy had tried to buy previously, before the Conservancy could act. Because they're a government agency, it takes time to get approvals to move. Again, we were lucky, because an environmental group that was founded David Brower, called Earth Corps, which is now chaired by an equally credible environmentalist, Don May, was able to move fast enough to put money down on the property, so that other agencies could move later and complete the deal. So thanks to Earth Corps, and thanks to David Brower.

JB: So that was the first piece of land at Ormond Beach that entered public ownership?

AS: Well, it was the first big chunk. The Coastal Conservancy had, in the 80s, bought some smaller parcels, some of them are actually underwater. But they bought these small pieces, one by one. That's important that that work was done at that time, too.

JB: Now there's another pressure on Ormond Beach and that comes from the port—Port Hueneme, which is immediately adjacent to Ormond Beach. Port Hueneme is the only deep water port between Long Beach and San Francisco. Correct?

AS: That's right.

JB: And there are a couple of well-known and important products that come in through there a lot. Those are?

AS: Those are bananas and automobiles. They unload thousands of new cars from all over the world.

JB: Well, the bananas leave on trucks very rapidly, but what happens with the cars?

AS: Well, the cars need to be cleaned up. They have a process that they go through, and in order to do that, they all need to be parked, and that has created a conflict with the idea of protecting Ormond Beach, because they want to park their cars.

JB: [unintelligible]

AS: Well, there are processing facilities and shippers that... Wallenius is the largest one operating out of the port, but there are others that have already located. I think they're fairly stable. BMW is there. Pacific Vehicle Processors is a subsidiary of Wallenius and they operate there as well.

JB: So there was an effort on their part to take a key piece of land at Ormond Beach. Correct?

AS: Yes.

JB: And, again, it looked like they were going to win.

AS: Well, it always seems like the deck is stacked against citizens who want to have an alternative land use. And we refer to that project as the PVP project, for Pacific Vehicle Processors, and citizens, again, had to rally to try to stop that from occurring. And again we were successful.

JB: Well, this is a great stream of victories. So then, in the fall of 2003, something happened that was very sad and has impacted Ormond Beach, the death of one of the most important community activists.

AS: Well, yes, in 1990, Roma Armbrust, who actually resided in Ventura, formed an organization called Ormond Beach Observers. Even though she didn't live in that community, she was exploring Ormond Beach to find out what was down there. She had heard about it during the time the LNG fight was going on, and once she discovered Ormond Beach, she really dedicated her life to spreading the word and trying to protect that area. So Roma helped form Ormond Beach Observers, she was one of several people who helped form the Ormond Beach Task Force and was really great leader, community activist.

JB: And immediately following her death in the fall of 2003, what happened?

AS: Well, it took a while for us to reform ourselves, but in the fall of 2003, the Ormond Beach Task Force actually revised the Consensus Plan which we had worked on in 1998, so we had a

land use recommendation for the City of Oxnard that called for restoration of about 1500 acres within the City of Oxnard, to have wetlands, and coastal lagoons and estuaries.

JB: And in the time since then, there's been a second parcel of land purchased, correct?

AS: Yes, a second parcel that once was owned by the Baldwin Company and Metropolitan Water District has recently been purchased and turned over to the Nature Conservancy.

JB: So this makes how much land that is secure under public ownership?

AS: Well, it's about 500. We've got a long way to go and that's one of our missions, at this point in time, to persuade the responsible agencies that we're really far short of where we need to go. We are operating off a model that was developed by Dr. Wayne Ferren from UCSB that some of think is one of the preeminent wetlands biologists in Southern California, and Dr. Rim Fay. Our model is to try to protect 1500 acres of land in Oxnard.

JB: And there's another threat, correct? Another housing project has been proposed?

AS: There are a number of proposals that endanger Ormond. There's yet another housing proposal on the site was where we had the battle over PVP and previously was Village West, and there is an attempt to do a specific plan for the Ormond Beach area that would allow for massive amounts of industrial use and possibly houses as well. And that's part of the revision of Oxnard's General Plan.

JB: Are you optimistic?

AS: Guardedly. There are a lot of citizens now who know a lot more about Ormond than in 1990, and a lot of them have been pretty effective in trying to communicate with decision-makers. They let them know there are other places to build industrial complexes. There are other places to build residential development. It would really be a shame to take a special place like Ormond Beach and allow it to be used for these purposes that aren't really linked to the coast, don't really have to happen there, and there are other places for it to happen. And we've tried to show them that the Ormond Beach Task Force are really reasonable people who would like to work constructively with the City of Oxnard and others and find good solutions for these problems.

JB: Now we're in the last couple minutes of the show. Meanwhile, there are new LNG threats, correct?

AS: There's the third LNG threat for Ormond Beach which is Cabrillo Port, BHP Billeton is the company that wants to bring large pipelines onshore at Ormond. They identified a gasification plant, an odorizing plant, I should say, and large pipelines that would really interfere with the hydrology of the area. So once again we have another threat by a large international conglomerate that has picked on Ormond Beach as the site to have their industrial facility.

JB: Well, Alan, I'm glad to hear that there's someone with your capability involved in heading these efforts to prevent further industrialization of the Ormond Beach area. All of you out there, I

suggest that if you want to really experience what the California beach was like in the 50s and before that time, to see a very special place in Southern California, that you head up the coast, turn left on Hueneme Road, go near the end and watch for the signs that say “Ormond Beach.” Thank you very much for joining us. Alan, thank you for joining us. Come back to visit us another time to hear more stories of *Heroes of the Coast*.

[end of interview]