



Transcript of Video Interview with Alan Sanders, recorded 2006.

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.

Alan Sanders Interview re Roma Armbrust & Cynthia Leake

JB: Welcome, viewers, to *Heroes of the Coast*. This is the program that brings you stories of people who have a difference in protecting the California coast for the rest of us. My guest today is Alan Sanders. Nice to have you, Alan.

AS: Thank you.

JB: Alan is the conservation chair for the Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club. And what is the Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club?

AS: Well, that's one of the entities in the state of California, but more importantly, I'm here today representing Ormond Beach Observers, which was an organization formed in 1990 by two of our friends and colleagues, and one is Cynthia Leake, and the other is person we're here to speak to, Roma Armbrust.

JB: I want to give everyone who's watching a kind of a time capsule view of why what we're talking about is important. Let's pretend for a moment that it's 50 or 100 years in the future. Why would what we're going to talk about today be important 50 or 100 years in the future? And then we'll get back in our time capsule and come back to our present time.

AS: Well, our organization is directed at helping protect a certain area of the coast and that's very important, but for people in Ventura County, Roma was much larger than that. She was really a role model for how people should participate in our democratic process and be involved in civic affairs. She was involved in many, many issues and really gave all her time to those issues.

But Ormond Beach was something very near and dear to her heart. I believe that she found it was an area that was being abused and there really weren't any advocates at the time that she and others started.

JB: Let's back up again for the viewers. What is Ormond Beach? Where is it? Why is it important?

AS: Well, Ormond Beach is a stretch of beach that lies between Hueneme Beach to the west and Mugu Beach to the east. And one of the pieces of information we're trying to get across to people is that really that whole stretch is one ecological system. And it all needs to be treated as such. And that's where Roma comes into the picture.

JB: Now there's some very special things about this particular two-mile stretch of beach, though. It's not just any stretch of beach in California. Why is it special?

AS: Well, it is relatively undeveloped, for one. And it's mostly south facing so it has some benefits that other beaches don't have. And it's also very shallow and so it's a good place to get out and

swim. There are a lot of Pismo clams and there's a lot of wildlife and that's one of the things and the rest of us are interested in.

JB: How much wildlife is there?

AS: Well, there are a number of species. There are a couple hundred species that you can find there, some seasonally, and some there all year, but we also have quite a few endangered species that call Ormond home and I think that brings a lot of incentive to try to protect the habitat there.

JB: So back, going back 15 years, you were already involved in coastal issues when you first met Roma Armbrust?

AS: I was already involved and everything regarding Ormond I believe at that time was pretty uncoordinated, and so the void that was filled by forming this organization to work exclusively on Ormond issues was quite important to a number of people who were working on their own up to that time.

JB: But she was not... What do you know about her background before that? How did she get to that point?

AS: Well, I know for example that she was... one of her many colleagues was to work with League of Women Voters and at one time the League became interested in the possible siting of an LNG facility at Ormond and...

JB: LNG facility?

AS: Liquefied natural gas.

JB: This was how many years ago?

AS: I believe the process started in the early 70s, and was kept alive for a number of years and it was a definite threat. It was something that people were afraid of. And the League tries to play a role of information gathering, so they had a meeting where they were talking about someone going down to Ormond and finding out what was going on down there. Roma, I guess, became delegated to do that, but at that time, she didn't even know how to access Ormond Beach, and that's where the relationship with Cynthia Leake came in. Cynthia and her husband, Charlie, liked to go surf fishing down at the end of Arnold Road and they were familiar with what a jewel Ormond was.

And so, Cynthia volunteered to take Roma down and this organization followed.

JB: So this became the first organization that was dedicated to the preservation of this rather isolated, but wonderfully rich in wildlife place on the beach.

AS: That's right.

JB: Now what happened? Describe the structure of the Ormond Beach Observers and why was that important to what continued in the future there?

AS: Well, from the start, it was an attempt to pull together a number of environmental groups who had participated in various parts of projects and other problems that were facing Ormond. So they wanted someone from Sierra Club and Audubon...

JB: Are you then becoming involved?

AS: Yes, I became the Sierra Club representative on Ormond Beach Observers.

JB: And so, would you say it was like a coalition?

AS: Yes, exactly.

JB: And how many groups were involved?

AS: There were 10 groups and we all tried to work together on those issues.

JB: Now what actually was happening in those days? What were the actual threats or what did the organization do?

AS: Well, I think there was a transition from the time when the LNG project kind of diminished as a real prospect and, of course, that opened the door to developers and industries and others who felt like, "well, if we don't have that danger facing us, maybe this would be a good place for a marina and hotels." And there were plans for approximately 7500 homes and shopping centers.

JB: 7500 homes in a two-mile stretch of beach? That's pretty dense.

AS: Yes. Well, Ormond would have really been lost as a habitat area and largely lost as public access, which it also serves as right now.

JB: So what happened?

AS: Well...

JB: Short version.

AS: Short version is we've managed to keep the wolf at the door all these many years.

JB: When you say "at the door," you mean you didn't scare him away from the door?

AS: No, unfortunately not.

JB: He didn't come through the door.

AS: He didn't come through the door and we have managed to...with the California Coastal Conservancy, the City of Oxnard and other agencies that have had good will to acquire approximately 600 acres. We think we need to acquire a lot more.

JB: But you're jumping ahead. That's the good news. That's why we're all here today talking about Roma Armbrust. But what happened in the middle there? So you fought one big battle that had to do with 7500 homes, and then what was the next? What was her particular role in all of this?

AS: Well, Roma really was a peace maker that kept us all together. She's greatly revered in Ventura County and we disagree frequently and she was the person that was able to...

JB: When you say "we," who do you mean?

AS: Well, all the organizations that were a party to this process and eventually we formed another organization called the Ormond Beach Task Force where we brought in stakeholders who aren't environmentalists and had another process with even a larger group and actually managed to find consensus among this broad group of stakeholders and that was a real trick, because there were large businesses, and a power plant, and a sod farmer and other interests, and Roma was the person was able to have us all sit down, treat each other civilly and try to find a plan, and we did. Hardly anyone can find consensus about anything in the world today, and Roma helped us to do that. That's really a marvelous thing. So we have cooperation with the City of Oxnard, Ventura County and others that we need cooperation from.

JB: What was her specific gift, though, that gave her that ability to be the peacemaker? Blessed are the peacemakers.

AS: Indeed. That's really hard to put in a can.

JB: Take a stab at it.

AS: Well, I just think it's her heart. She was a special person who took great pains to try to hear everybody out and really tried to avoid conflict as much as possible. And she was trusted. She was widely trusted, and so she played an amazing role. As I said she is very much revered.

JB: Now the other woman that you have mentioned today, Cynthia Leake, she had some particular gifts as well. What were Cynthia's particular gifts?

AS: Well, first of all, as I mentioned, she was the person who more or less introduced other people to Ormond, but she also served as newsletter editor for three or four different environmental groups at the same time. She used to go to the Board of Supervisors' hearings and was one of these people everywhere you went you would see Cynthia there performing either as a representative of the Native Plant Society or Ventura County's Environmental Coalition or the Sierra Club or Ormond Beach Observers. Quite an amazing lady as well.

JB: For the sake of viewers who maybe have only a tiny inkling why we're talking about all this as important, if you drive west on Highway 101, and you go up the grade, into the valley, through Thousand Oaks and up over the rise and then down into the valley and you see that Ventura County is still largely agricultural. It's a lot of open space. It's very different from the Los Angeles Basin.

AS: You're talking about the Conejo Pass down into the Oxnard Plain.

JB: Conejo, right. And so part of our point here today is that that is not by accident that Ventura County is dramatically different in terms of its character, its pace, than Los Angeles, and in fact, it's a great place to visit for the weekend. You only have to drive for an hour and there are all sorts of great things to do in Ventura County—the Channel Islands Harbor, the Marine Sanctuary, Ormond Beach, among other things.

But this climate... The preservation of land in Ventura County is not accidental. There are battles that have been fought year after year. And one is the battle for Ormond Beach. And so these two women have had primary roles in preserving Ormond Beach. So, we got to the point where the Ormond Beach Task Force was formed. Now what really was the role of the Ormond Beach Task Force in the process? And wasn't there another battle you left out?

AS: The role of the Ormond Beach Task Force was to really take the concept that had been started by Ormond Beach Observers and bring in the other agencies and the City and the County, so that rather than doing battle with all those entities that we might have some accord, which we did reach. And early on, the City of Oxnard, which holds rein over a large part of Ormond Beach, invited the group to try to come up with a recommendation on a land use plan for this whole area and challenge us to see if we could find accord. I don't think they ever anticipated that we would, but we surprised them, we surprised ourselves by coming up with what's called the Ormond Beach Consensus Plan, which really calls for protection and preservation for most of the area.

JB: When you say “the area,” what is the area?

AS: Well, it's an area that extends from what is called the J Street Canal, which is the border between Oxnard and Port Hueneme on the west, and extending east to the Pt. Mugu Naval Base and from the ocean out north to Hueneme Road.

JB: How much acreage?

AS: Oh, there's probably at least 1500 acres in that section, but as I mentioned our real goal is to treat all of that area in conjunction with management that's being done at Pt. Mugu Navy Base, and also there's some additional lands to the east of Arnold Road.

JB: Now there's a particular scientist who has called this area the most important wetland in Southern California. And who is he and what does that mean? What is all that about?

AS: Well, I think you're talking about Dr. Wayne Ferren. Mr. Ferren, who is an expert in plants and wetland ecology, who may be the premier biologist for Southern California wetlands, was early in the process an advisor to Ormond Beach Observers and later to the Ormond Beach Task Force. So in large part, the theories that we're trying to promote about protection of this area and connecting the various parts is due to his participation in the process.

JB: Again, for the benefit of people who don't understand what a wetland means. What is a wetland? Why is a wetland important?

AS: Well, in Southern California wetlands are more rare than they are in the eastern part of the country where they have a lot more rain and they tend to serve as a breeding grounds for all kinds of species. And one of the things that Wayne Ferren taught us is that we really need to concentrate on

protecting the wetlands, but that we also need to concentrate on protecting the associated uplands, and transitional area that's sometimes wetland and sometimes dry. So we've all been going to school on how all of this works and we actually have a process now where people are trying to review various models of how to treat this land in the future. We've managed to acquire a substantial amount, but there are a number of models that can be employed, and so I think we'll do some debate on that...all started by Wayne. And that's something that we'll have to pursue in the future.

JB: Pacific Flyway. What is the Pacific Flyway and why is Ormond Beach important to the Pacific Flyway?

AS: Well, the Pacific Flyway was historically one of the great avenues of migration by a multitude of bird species, and unfortunately, in recent times, the Pacific Flyway is on very hard times. It's so fragmented that it does not function as it once was, and in some regards, can't be looked upon as some of the corridors in the Midwest. But we have people trying to protect these islands of habitat so that species have some way of moving from south to north and back, and have a place to stopover. These are the places where animals, they're migrating, can stop and rest, get something to eat and go on their way.

JB: So to answer my question from earlier, 50 years, or 100 years from now, if there are birds that still migrate on the Pacific Flyway, can you say that in some respects, their ability to do so, to survive as a species or to continue that behavior as that species, will come down to a few people like Roma Armbrust?

AS: Well, certainly. But it will come down to everybody else out there who has an opportunity to take what people like Roma have done and try to move forward. I don't think Roma would have said that anything that we're doing right now is the answer. We're just trying to keep alive the viability of habitat so that generations to come have an opportunity to do anything that's meaningful. And in that we rely on what another one of our colleagues has said, Dr. Rimmon Fay, is that our management should be to preserve ecological systems, as opposed to having landscape projects, which have just small elements and a few birds here and a few there, but don't function as they need to function to provide for the diversity of species that have historically resided here in Southern California.

JB: Well, it's...I know that you're talking about what...we could devote weeks and years of study to...how to preserve these ecological systems, as opposed to just having landscaping projects, but if you were to give us your shorthand version of it, what does it come down to, what does it take, do you think from your work, to protect ecology, to protect habitat?

AS: It takes community support. That seems to be the most important factor. If a community will support acquisitions like this, and the type of restoration that's needed, usually the politicians will fall in line, and of course, the people in the resource agencies will usually express opinions that "that's a good thing to do," but it's community involvement and I would bet that most people out there have some environmental ethic. They would like to see places for wildlife to exist and they would like to have places where they themselves can go and either recreate or just enjoy being in a wild place for some portion of their lives, but this isn't happening by itself. These places only get protected when people come forward, as did Roma Armbrust, and give of themselves to try to make it happen. That's something she did really to the last hours of her life.

JB: You may have guessed from the tone in which we're speaking that Roma is no longer with us. Roma passed away almost two years ago, a little more than two years ago, and Cynthia, who is the other woman we're speaking about, passed away...when was that?

AS: Just a couple weeks ago.

JB: And this is our effort to create a small tribute to them and to encourage other people to know that what...your involvement does matter. It matters a great deal. Ormond Beach was not the only thing that Roma was involved in in her life. She did have a life of service. Do you remember what she did before she retired?

AS: Oh, it's a gigantic list. I mentioned League of Women Voters, and in Ventura County, we have something called the SOAR initiative, which is Save Our Agricultural Resources, and open space. That was something the people voted on and passed. She was quite involved in that. And she was involved in a lot of social issues, so...

JB: Like?

AS: Like health care for children. She started off as a teacher, so she was always interested in bringing children into what we were doing. And sometimes we get too busy fighting the dragon, so to speak, to involve ourselves in that, but that was something to make sure that the generations that follow would be educated early as to what should be done.

JB: Well, Alan, thank you very much for joining me today to talk about another Hero of the Coast, well, two, Roma Armbrust and Cynthia Leake. For more information about Earth Alert, please visit our website, which is www.earthalert.org. Are there any websites you'd like to mention?

AS: No, but I'd like to say I'm so flattered to be able to speak about my two good friends.

JB: And please join us again next time for another episode of *Heroes of the Coast*.

[end of interview]