



Transcript of Video Interview with Naomi Schwartz, recorded 2006.

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Interview with Naomi Schwartz

JB: Hello and welcome to *Heroes of the Coast*. In a world where celebrity is often valued over substance, we bring you stories of real action heroes, the people who have dedicated their lives to saving the coast for the rest of us. I'm very pleased to have as my guest today, Naomi Schwartz, former chair of the California Coastal Commission. Naomi, thank you for driving in.

NS: Yes, you're welcome, Janet. It's a pleasure to be here.

JB: Thank you. I would like to know what inspired your participation in coastal activism.

NS: I guess I would say that as a young mother who had moved to California with my husband and children and I was in awe at the beauty of the California coast. The beach in Santa Barbara where I lived was my children's sand box. That was their playground. And frankly, when we came, we all just took it for granted. And then in 1969, we had the blowout in the Santa Barbara Channel which created an oil spill heard around the world. And going to that beach, seeing the tar that permeated the sand, seeing the ocean black, it was unbelievable. Dead sea mammals, decimated fishing and tourist industry was something that I and countless others knew we couldn't allow to happen again. At that point, we weren't sure what we could do about because the special and vested interests involved in oil production obviously were way beyond our little capabilities. They had political clout. They had corporate clout. They had financial clout. But it was a call to arms certainly. So I'd say, being a mother, and caring about the environment my children were growing up, as well as experiencing that oil spill, combined for me to set me on my journey.

JB: So then did you become involved personally in the effort that was called Prop. 20?

NS: Yes.

JB: How were you involved?

NS: Well, I joined the local group of citizens who were circulating petitions, gathering signatures. Fortunately we had a celebration that November in 1972, and the measure passed with 55% of the vote. We weren't at all sure what the outcome would be and many people worked very very hard to make that happen.

JB: And what happened next for you? Was there an interim before you became a member of the commission?

NS: Oh yeah, there was. What happened next for me was that I joined a community organization called Coast Watch, which we actually formed at the time, because when the commissions began their work, early in 1973, they had as some of their members appointees who had actively opposed Proposition 20. Ronald Reagan was governor at the time. He opposed the measure. He had appointments. We had regional commissions as well as the state commission. He appointed one third of all of those bodies and even other members of the legislature who had appointments to make would balance their appointments by appointing two people who were for the act, two people who were against. Here we had a law now that this group of people had to carry and some of the people who were appointed to that commission were opposed to the law. So we realized, actually citizens up and down the state, realized that our work wasn't over. It was just beginning. We needed to watchdog these commissions. We needed to make the people there accountable to the public.

So we started in Santa Barbara and expanded to the tri-counties—Ventura, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo—our coast watch organization. Now among all of us who were involved, I was the one who seemed to have the most time. My children were all in school and I wasn't working outside of the home. So I was asked to consider being the spokesperson for our organization and background to attending all the commission meetings, we decided to write a newsletter and publish a monthly newsletter where we had the voting records of all the commissioners on key measures that came before them. So that was my beginning really. I was on the other side of the podium from these very austere-looking, very official-looking individuals who were carrying out a law that to me was critical to do right for the people of California.

JB: And then you were appointed by...

NS: Well, what happened then was we had a vacancy a year later on our regional commission, and seat was an appointee by the Speaker of the Assembly, and because of my work with Coast Watch, he was really informed about me and knew about me and he appointed me to fill that seat.

JB: And that was who?

NS: That was Leo McCarthy. So my first official work, really, with the commission was as a member of the South Central Coast Regional Commission, and that was a tri-counties commission. What we did for the next two years, as all the other...there were six regional commissions in all, as we all did, was to have hearings up and down the state and develop what became the legislative blueprint for the Coastal Act. We developed, with the state commission, obviously that had the ultimate authority, the measure that was put before the legislature in 1976 that we asked them to enact to make the Coastal Commissions permanent.

JB: And what I had known before I talked to Peter Douglas about it was that bill then eliminated those regional commissions.

NS: I think there was always the idea that the regional commissions would phase out, and it was a cumbersome process for applicants, because they had to first go through local government approvals, then go through a regional government process, and then, if their approval was

appealed, or if they had a certain category e development, go to the state commission. And it really was more onerous than many of us felt it had to be. So as long as we had a law that had all the provisions in it that would, in fact, protect the coast, we didn't feel we needed all those levels of bureaucracy.

JB: Okay. But when you were appointed chair...

NS: Well, first I was appointed in 1976 to the newly reconstituted state commission, and I was appointed there by Jerry Brown who was governor at the time. And it was, as you can imagine, an exciting transitional period because the regional commissions were transitioning out. We had a new law to form the basis for our decision-making. And we as one body, the state commission, had to really hear from people up and down the coast with the phase-out of the regional commissions, we had quite a road show.

JB: You spoke to me a couple of days ago about some of the major issues that you felt came before the commission while you were chair. One was public access. What do you particularly remember about that.

NS: Well public access obviously at the heart of the Coastal Act. If you read the law, there is a preamble to it. The preamble is language which explains why this law is necessary and relevant. And it is like a constitution of the coast and it declares that the Coastal Zone of California belongs to all the people. This is really remarkable and anyone who hasn't read that law, I would say, "do it," because it tells the public what their right is and the paramount right under the Coastal Act is to be able to get to the beach. The reason for that is that the impetus for Prop. 20 originally was the fact that the coast was being walled off by development. By the California Constitution, the navigable waters belong to the people of the state, but if you can't get to them, it's really pretty meaningless. So public access was a lynch pin for the commission. And you know I drove down here today to Santa Monica from Santa Barbara down the Pacific Coast Highway, and I would say to anyone who has access to that road now, you do that you notice all those brown signs that say, "Coastal Access," and realize that everyone of those spaces was a battleground. Not quite like Gettysburg, but believe lots of blood was spilled...

JB: Geffenburg.

NS: in order to secure the public's right to get to the coast.

JB: You also mentioned the regulation of coastal agriculture, which I think is...I have just recently driven from here to San Francisco and there is so much beautiful coastal agricultural land. What is the role of the commission in helping to protect it?

NS: Well, again, the initial role is to write into the Coastal Act an acknowledgement that coastal agriculture is special, that the natural features that combine along California's 1100 miles of coastal zone makes a unique climate and environment for various crops to grow, for various soils to continue to be productive and giving that stature to coastal agriculture through the law makes it more difficult to convert agriculture to other uses within the Coastal Zone. Now a lot of local governments since then, in the 30 years that have ensued, have incorporated agricultural

protection policies into their own general plans and certainly into their local coastal plans. And so, in that way, that protection has been increased I think significantly.

JB: That's great. Now there's another area, the area of housing along the coast that has not turned out so successfully.

NS: In the early days of the commission, we realized that California's coast was quickly gentrifying and it was going to be impossible for people other than the wealthy to live here in the future. And again, with the mandate of providing access for all, not only to the beaches, but to the Coastal Zone, in the early days, the commission actually did have within the law policies for housing, requiring affordable housing and a range of housing within the Coastal Zone. However, the legislature had a lot of pressure to remove that and it was ultimately amended out by legislative action.

JB: It was, by the legislature. Was there a court case following it?

NS: Well, I think there were court cases challenging the commission in just about every area, and I'm not familiar with the details of that, but you know that legislative act is...probably trumps a court case which is asking for definition of the law. In this case, it was very clear.

JB: Wetlands preservation. Coastal wetlands preservation was another area that you did a lot of work in.

NS: Another key lynch pin of the Coastal Act, because we'd lost the vast majority, even 90% of our coastal wetlands in California. Now, why are they important? Some of these just look like marshes. Well they're important because they're nursery grounds for birds, for fishes, for the cycle of life that becomes our marine life and our coastal wildlife, and so they are almost irreplaceable. We have tried in place to create new wetlands and they are never as successful. So we realized...the Coastal Act realizes that the best shot we have at maintaining what we have left in California is to preserve the wetlands that we have today. And we have some great examples of that. We have Bolsa Chica, off of Huntington Beach, and we have Playa del Rey. In Santa Barbara County, we have the Carpenteria Salt Marsh. We have the Goleta Slough. And we can go all the way up to Northern San Francisco. These are all areas that without the Coastal Act would probably be filled in, would be housing, or some them might even have industrial uses going on there.

JB: Well, we know that very well from Ventura County with Ormond Beach, which...we've made progress but there's still a lot of protection needed, but one of the things that mentioned about this is the characteristic of the action of the Coastal Commission doesn't always exactly save an area immediately, but that it buys time.

NS: Well, you know, I want to quote Peter Douglas here, who has said repeatedly over the years when the issue of saving the coast comes up. "We will never save the coast, but hopefully we will always be in the process of saving the coast." And I think we have to all remember that. That work is never going to be done. So we can't say we've saved this area, because we look back and we see now, 30 years later, there are continued threats in some cases. We thought we

had protected California's offshore...against offshore oil drilling, against liquefied natural gas terminals. We find out today that's not the case. We have LNG proposals right now in Southern California. We have offshore oil development again, expanding development proposed for Santa Barbara County.

JB: Do you know any of the particulars of those oil lease threats?

NS: Yes, I do. In Santa Barbara County, actually, there are some newly reconstituted oil companies. You know the majors really aren't players right now there. But these are companies are looking to favorable local government, principally the Board of Supervisors, they hope, who will approve projects that they have in two ways. Most of them do require extended reach drilling technology, either from onshore to offshore, or from existing platforms to new reservoirs. In all cases, they would begin a new generation of extraction. And in some of the leases that they're talking about, those leases are really not actively on the market, but through the extended reach drilling, hope to be able to get at the crude oil that's there. Now all of those facilities need pipelines to shore. They need refinery capacity. In some cases, they might need tankering. And so the cumulative impact of offshore oil drilling is something that we know cannot be minimized. It's here again.

JB: And Murphy's law has not been repealed.

NS: That's right, exactly. Repeat performance.

JB: Well, what the mood, do you think, within the county? Is it as intense as it was?

NS: Well, mostly because in Santa Barbara County, I served for 12 years on the Board of Supervisors in Santa Barbara and I have just done...this is my second year of retirement from that position. So I would say the jury's still out. In Santa Barbara County a few years ago, we, on a three-two vote, turned down one of these major extended reach proposals. They're back now. They're back because they feel they have a shot with a new board and so this matter has not squarely been before the Board of Supervisors yet in Santa Barbara, but it will be within the next few months, so we'll see what the outcome is.

JB: This is the example of what you're saying...

NS: It's not saved.

JB: It's not saved. And do you remember...Oh I wanted to talk to you about the local coastal plans. That's something else that you have been involved in.

NS: Good, I'm really glad you're mentioning that because not everyone is aware of that, but one of the other key features of the Coastal Act was to require local governments to do their own coastal plans, and as they do that, and as those plans get certified, by the state commission, they really become their own bosses, and their own approvals, for the most part, in most categories, are final, because they make findings that their approval is consistent with their local coastal plan.

So it's really a great concept. Local governments throughout the state do local coastal plans, which are certified by the commission as being in conformance with the state law. And then they have their autonomy, for the most part. There are some exceptions...energy projects, for example, major development is one of those exceptions. But, now, not many local governments have not done their coastal plans, but some have not.

JB: It is 30 years.

NS: It's been over 30 years now and Malibu is a case in point. Coastal activity in Malibu has been so contentious for so long that...

JB: Shall we cite a few examples?

NS: Local government hasn't wanted to touch it. It's been a hot potato. First of all, the City of Malibu didn't incorporate until the commission had been operating for several years. But now there is a city of Malibu and even the City Council there, I think, continues to have more controversy over coastal issues. They are among the last bastions of local jurisdictions to do a coastal plan to be certified by the state commission. And one of the awful outcomes of that is that individual houses have to go to the state commission for approval. And that is not really how state commissioners should be spending their time. It's not what the Coastal Act envisioned. It envisioned a shared responsibility with local government and with state. Having said that, I hope I haven't offended anyone in Malibu. I hope they step up to the plate and have an orderly process of doing that.

JB: Wanted to talk to you in some of the time that we have left about the future of the coast, coastal activism. We've established that the coast is always in need of being saved, but what do you think are the best ways that you see for encouraging activism.

NS: Well, first of all of course there's awareness. We have a whole generation now that's grown up since the oil spill and since the Coastal Act and these are Californians who take a lot for granted, that generation knows that things were hard fought. When we began, we didn't have the Clean Water Act, we didn't have the Clean Air Act, we didn't have the National Environmental Protection Act, we didn't have CEQA—the California Environmental Quality Act. These are all stepping stones, building blocks to what people take for granted today in terms of safeguards for our coastline. We know, again, that there's not such thing as ever being final, so I would say that the first step is awareness, doing what you're doing to inform and educate this whole new generation that's come up.

And secondly, be sure that people continue to be empowered. When I was with Coast Watch, a very nervous community representative, people on the Coastal Commission, both staff and commissioners themselves, gave us access both to them and to the process. Eventually they said to us, you have an important voice. Elected officials (decision makers) have to keep being pressured to acknowledge the public's voice, and acknowledge the importance of public participation. The Coastal Act again, with its many wonderful provisions, gives prominence to public participation. And we have to get that language out of the closet, out of the door, and back

on the front burner, and again remind Californians up and down the coast that the power really lies with them.

JB But it's a big job, too, to take on coastal activism, as you know yourself. Although it's a start for someone just to say, on one issue, to go before their local city council, to step up to the next level, or several levels up, where you really follow the issues on a consistent basis can be part...it really becomes a difficulty...if the person is not doing it fulltime, it's very difficult for...

NS: I'm glad you brought that up. Personally, coalition building up and down this state which has been wonderful in enabling people who have come forward from one local issue to see the broader importance of coastal activism and have their voice heard by many many people.

But we do need to have support for organizations where people can work fulltime when they can meet with the representatives of the voice of the public. There's no question about that. And whether that comes from public philanthropy, or whether it comes from environmental organizations which sometimes it can, but we need to continue to build that, because you have to have financial resources behind the people that do the work.

JB: I remember that Peter Douglas said that he felt that one of the biggest shortcomings of what they had done so far with the commission is to find a permanent method of funding the commission itself.

NS: Yes, that's right. The commission is at the whim of the legislature and the governor. And there have been many punitive years in the past. Many when the commission was threatened with having its budget just zero based, eliminated. There have been years when Coastal Commission's budget has been starved. It's not hard to figure out, if you don't have the staff to do the job, you won't do the job, you can't do the job. And that was where at some points in the past, we had the environmental leverage in the public sector challenged, from the legislature and the commission itself had an inability to carry out the law. So that is too bad. It's always harder to go back and put in something that was left out. I will tell you at the time, which was 1976, we felt that we were asking for as much as we could reasonably get out of the legislature and out of the governor for coastal protection.

JB: Well, we're in the last minute and I want to thank you for all the work that you have done on behalf of the coast.

NS: Well, no thanks are needed. If I can inspire other people to get involved, that's really my thanks right there.

JB: And viewers, thank you for tuning in. If you want more information for coastal activities, google California Coastal Commission and you'll find when the commission will be meeting in your area. Attend meetings, get involved, because the coast needs all of us to stay protected. Thanks for joining us.