



Transcript of Video Interview with Alan Sieroty,
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: Welcome, Viewers, I'm Janet Bridgers. This is Heroes of the Coast, the program that brings you the personal stories of people who have dedicated their lives to protecting the California coast for the rest of us. And I'm very pleased to have as my guest today former California State Senator Alan Sieroty. Alan, nice to have you with us.

AS: Nice to be here. Thank you.

JB: Alan, we're here to talk about a piece of legislation that later became known as the California Coastal Act, once it was enacted, and you had some pivotal roles in that legislation, correct?

AS: Well, yes, I did.

JB: But in order to tell people why we're talking about it, I've heard that this piece of legislation that has protected...to the extent that it has been protected...the California coast since its enactment is not only one of strongest pieces of environmental legislation in the United States, but also in the world.

AS: Yes, there are other countries who are looking at protecting their coast and it comes out of the California experience. Peter Douglas, our executive director, has been asked to go to China, to Israel and other countries as well to help them develop their programs for the protection of their coast, and I think that's very important.

JB: And what a tribute to you and everybody who has been involved in it that the effort protects not one coast, but many coasts.

AS: Yes, it's very nice.

JB: When did you enter public service?

AS: Well, actually I started in 1961. I worked for Lieutenant Governor Glenn Anderson (sp?) and part of my responsibilities were actually working in the Long Beach area with the State Lands Commission and I learned a little bit about coastal activities at that time. And then I worked for Governor Brown for a year, and I ran for the legislature in 1966.

JB: 1966? You ran for the State Senate the first time?

AS: No, I ran for the Assembly. I was in the Assembly for 10 years and in the Senate for six years.

JB: So you were in the Assembly at the time when this coastal legislation began to be discussed.

AS: Yes. I really want to pay tribute to Ed Zieberg who was then the chairman of the Natural Resources Committee of the Assembly and John Dunlap who was my partner in the development of this legislation. This goes back to about 1968 and that was an early time for environmental activity. The Santa Barbara coastal spill hadn't really happened quite yet when we started on this. It actually started in '68 with an issue in Northern Sonoma County where the developers of a beautiful... a beautiful residential tract cut off 10 miles of access off the freeway to the citizens of Sonoma County and everybody else. People could not get in to use the beach for 10 miles. And this disturbed people, some people of Sonoma County and they brought this to the attention of John Dunlap, Ed Zieberg and me and we began the activities to protect access to the coast, which was really the beginning of this effort.

JB: And then, I'm told, that somewhere in the late 60s, early 70s, Assemblyman... then- Assemblyman Pete Wilson brought forward a study bill. Do you remember anything about that?

AS: Well, Pete Wilson introduced a bill, too, about the same time we did. And we talked about it and he decided he was going to be running for the mayor of San Diego. He decided to drop his bill and support ours. That was about the same time as ours.

JB: That first bill you were involved in, did it pass?

AS: It took us three years of legislative effort to develop the bill that finally became the Coastal Initiative. When we couldn't get it through the Senate the third year, we went to the initiative process with the exact language that we had in the bill in the initiative.

JB: Don't race ahead because I want to talk about what happened when you were in the second phase. There was a bill that you authored with Knox, was that right?

AS: There were many co-authors of the bill in the Assembly particularly and the bill passed through the Assembly three years, but we could not get it through the State Senate.

JB: But in the process, you had hearings, correct? And you figured out who's who and what's what with the opposition and support of the bill?

AS: Well, the hearings were very important and I'm saying this now because of what we recently went through here in California in the initiative process. I think before you go to an initiative, you ought to go through hearings in the legislature, because the bills got changed. People had suggestions and we had to compromise a number of things. And over three years the bill was changed remarkably, so I think it's important for people to realize.

And when we went to the initiative, we had no paid signature gatherers. They were all volunteers, which is also extremely important aspect of the initiative process.

JB: That is a much better indicator of whether you actually have public support or not.

AS: That's right. That's right.

JB: You mentioned him once previously, but about this time you had, was it an aide? Is that correct?

AS: Yes

JB: By the name of Peter Douglas?

AS: That's correct.

JB: Tell us how Peter Douglas came to be part of your staff.

AS: Well, he had graduated from UCLA Law School and he was recommended by a staff member of mine who also had been at UCLA Law School. And we talked and he came aboard. And this was one of the first projects that I asked him to work on and he worked, I think, for three years on the development of this legislation. Now Peter, of course, is executive secretary [sic] of the Coastal Commission and has done a marvelous job.

JB: And a lifetime legacy there in terms of lifetime contribution. So he literally knows every word of that legislation.

AS: I would think he does.

JB: Now what's the process? Is it complex to change something when it's drafted as a bill to an initiative?

AS: No, it isn't complicated there. But what we did, we proposed a four-year period of time whereby a commission would be responsible for developing the long term bill. And they had also the experience during the four years, that commission had the experience of dealing with permits which were asked for by developers and problems of access, which are the two elements of this plan. And so dealing with these issues helped them develop a plan for the future and that plan was adopted by the legislature four years after we passed the initiative.

JB: And the initiative, of course, passed with a strong majority of the vote.

AS: Yes.

JB: I think it's a tribute to...this could never be called the effort of a special interest group, because of the way it was presented, campaigned and passed. So now often environmentalism is called a special...environmentalists are called a special interest group.

AS: Well, I don't think it's a special interest because protection of the coastal areas is really in the long term interest, not only of this generation, but also of future generations. And you think even in the 20+ years that this bill has been in existence, the population of the state has increased tremendously. And the pressures on the coast are increasing. And they will in the future as well. You look at Northern California as being fairly desolate, but over the years, it's increased in

population and the pressure upon those coastal areas are also increasing. So it was a very important piece of legislation.

JB: Now since then, nothing is static, of course, and we've seen changes to the bill that have been the result of various governors. The one I'm thinking about specifically was Deukmejian was the one that took the first whack at the bill when he changed it from the regional structure to the...

AS: Well, there was a budgetary problem and the Coastal Commission had to take a good deal of the cuts that a lot of agencies took. And it was damaging to the Commission, but I think the commission has really done its responsibilities quite well.

JB: It has made it harder for activists to travel to be at Coastal Commission meetings because previously you could go to a meeting in your own area.

AS: That's right.

JB: I know there have been battles. Peter Douglas has survived numerous battles. I'm told there was an effort by Speaker Willie Brown to have him removed. Do you remember that one?

AS: Actually, I don't.

JB: Well, we'll have to get that story from Peter at a later date. Gray Davis, a Democrat... we all thought as a Democrat, he would be a strong proponent for coastal and then showed a strong correlation between campaign contributions to Gray Davis from people who had permits or issues before the commission. I don't think the commission acquiesced to those requests just because of campaign contributions, but we've seen several times.... But would like to hear your comments about what happened with the Supreme Court recently, the not-too-distant past, that whole process.

AS: Well, one of the issues is the fact that we established a different position for the governor in this legislation. And the governor appoints one third of the total number of commissioners. And the Assembly appoints one third and the Senate appoints one third. And that's unusual. So that was attacked in the courts and the legislature still had two thirds of the commissioners, but their terms now are fixed. They cannot be removed by the Senate Pro Tem or the Speaker of the Assembly, so that they have now terms for four years.

JB: That really succeeds in strengthening the Coastal Commission a great deal.

AS: Yes, I think it's a good idea and I'm glad that legislation passed.

JB: Now tell us have you remained involved in coastal protection after...

AS: No, I really didn't, though I meet with Peter Douglas occasionally. We're good friends and he tells me what's going on. So I am interested. But I haven't really participated in the commission's activities in all these years.

JB: And now what were the other things that you regard as the hallmarks of your legislative career?

AS: Well, over the period of 16 years, you pass a number of bills. I don't know how many hundreds of bills I passed. So you can't really remember all of them. But I was at a dinner the other night, but it reminded me that I was responsible helping the physically handicapped in their ability to enter buildings, and go to meetings and theatres and so forth. And this is now federal law that was during the Reagan years as well, but we were the first state to do it. And this was back in the late 60s, too. So you do a number of things and you forget about 'em until somebody reminds you that you were responsible for doing something like that.

JB: It's very good karma, to have helped so many people.

AS: It really is. It makes you feel good.

JB: You were a legislator, at a time when, I believe, there was a lot more public involvement. Do you think that is true?

AS: Well there was certainly with the Coastal Act. Janet Adams, I have to pay tribute to her. She ran the campaign for Proposition 20. She got thousands of people to help and participate in that campaign. And I think that really was the key to winning that initiative. A number of persons who were concerned... Sierra Club and all the environmental organizations throughout the state and other people who just cared about the coast. It really made a big difference in our ability to handle that.

JB: I recently had a discussion with Dorothy Green, the founder of Heal the Bay, about the success that they've had in growing a strong organization to protect Santa Monica Bay. And she said, "Oh, it hasn't been so hard, because people do, in fact, have such emotional attachment to the ocean." And so I think that's very interesting. I wish that it generalized to other environmental issues a little more closely.

AS: That's correct. I think it's easier for people to appreciate the coastal areas, although many people appreciate Yosemite and the heavier forested areas and so forth. That's very important in our environment as well. But let me just take a moment to tell you that when I started this, and this goes back into the late 60s, we had no idea we were going to affect the entire coast. This started just because of the Sonoma Coast area. And it really was Ellen Stern Harris who suggested we ought to do something for the entire coast. And I thought, "well, gee, that makes sense."

We looked at the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which was just for San Francisco Bay. And we saw the problems they were having just in that area, but now to try to do something for the entire coast was really quite an assignment. So we refocused on that effort and I'm very happy that we did, but just to let you know that at the beginning we didn't go out to do the entire coast. It was just that little part of Sonoma that had been cut off for access for the public.

JB: Were you involved in the initiative campaign?

AS: Oh yeah. John Dunlap and I went up and down the coast and we were very heavily involved, of course.

JB: You represented Beverly Hills.

AS: Well, I represented a larger area than Beverly Hills. We represented Venice on the coast and I went all the way to West Hollywood. Sure.

JB: Not that that's that far from the coast. When you think of the activities of that time. Again, I'm trying to bring correlations to our present time, I have a great concern that not enough people are involved in issues. I think it's to their loss, because I think it gives life great meaning, but have you seen any other great models, that in your experience where people became involved in issues to successfully campaign in more recent years?

AS: I really can't think of it right now. I think the war... the anti-war effort today is bringing people back into political life and I think it's very necessary that more people get involved in that effort, but other than that, I don't really know where people in large numbers have become involved.

JB: This is a question about the State Assembly and the State Senate. Do you feel that you have an impact from the State House on national issues and if so, how?

AS: No, I didn't feel we had an impact on national issues. Maybe there are certain cases where it happens. It happened because, in the case of the handicapped legislation that I passed, it happened because one of Reagan's supporters' sons was a handicapped person and he pushed this particular legislation on a national level, but that's an unusual thing. But I really can't think of...

JB: So it happens indirectly level. Whereas at the next level. You proceed on one level. It has its impact, then it's taken to the next level, as with the coastal legislation.

AS: That's true. The coastal legislation, though...we did receive federal money for the Coastal Act, but it had to be done by each state. And many states in the United States have now coastal legislation. As I mentioned earlier, countries are now interested in this as well, throughout the world.

JB: Has it been modeled on the Coastal Act?

AS: Somewhat. Somewhat. Of course, every country is different. They have their own issues and I can't say it's a model for all legislation, or even any of those.

JB: So do you know if they use the same kind of planning commission?

AS: I don't know.

JB: Because that really is a very complex...

AS: There are really two issues. The planning and access. Those are the two issues that we were concerned about.

JB: And then water quality becomes the jurisdiction of the federal government through the Clean Water Act.

AS: Well, that's also a state issue.

JB: Is it? Is that part of the Coastal Act?

AS: No, it's not.

JB: Is it part of the Water Quality Control Boards, for example?

AS: That's one of the agencies, yes.

JB: So we're seeing the interplay here. And I wonder about how you would comment... We're seeing right now a threat to states' rights, a big threat, on the issue of siting of liquid natural gas terminals offshore.

AS: Well, the oil industry was a big threat for many years to the coastal issues of California and to some extent, it still is, although the governor now in California has declared his concern about that as well. Now the natural gas is another issue which is now relevant to the Long Beach area, particularly, and people are rising against having the facilities impact their areas, so we don't know exactly what's going to happen there.

JB: We certainly don't. And I think it's... we all share the burden as consumers of natural resources to be amenable on some way to the process of bringing us the comfort and convenience that these natural resources provide. And yet, at the same time, to see our coast destroyed...deteriorate... over such issues, is not exactly fair either.

AS: Well, I think it's a matter of planning and the companies that are bringing in this natural gas have to work with the state planners to develop areas that are more susceptible for this kind of activity. They can't bring it into heavily populated areas. It has to go into other areas where it's more atoned to the environmental issues.

JB: But there is somebody in every area that doesn't want it there?

AS: Yes, but once in a while, you have to show some leadership and that's hopefully what will happen here.

JB: Well, what I'm thinking of specifically is Ventura County and the proposal now to build a floating liquid natural gas terminal that would be 14 miles off of Malibu and 20 miles off of Oxnard. And by comparison, of course, to other areas, this is not densely populated, but the people in Oxnard don't consider themselves irrelevant or unimportant.

AS: But this is something that I haven't been involved with and I really can't comment about it. I'm not a good person to ask this question to.

JB: Well, it's an ongoing issue and I know that the Long Beach proposal also is very controversial because that definitely is a much more populated area by comparison to, again, Ventura County. But it seems like we should find some spot that there really are...unfortunately if there really no people in the area, it would probably be someplace like Monterey, some truly gorgeous place, where we'd have another set of reasons why we don't want these.

AS: Well there are people in Monterey, too. So I don't think there's any place in Southern California or even Northern California that doesn't have people now. But it's a difficult issue and I hope that people will think carefully about where these facilities should be placed.

JB: We're approaching the end of the half hour and I want to very much thank you for being our guest today and I very much thank you for your service to the state and to the entire planet through your work on coastal legislation.

AS: That's very nice. Thank you very much.

JB: Viewers, you can find out more about Earth Alert at our website—www.earthalert.org. And if you're interested in coastal issues, just go to Google and type in "California Coastal Commission" and you'll be presented with all sorts of information about how to participate.

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