Interview

With

SANDY SEMANS ROSS

In

Stumpy Point,

North Carolina

Interviewed by Susan West

On June 17, 2016

Transcribed by Mary Williford

For Carolina Coastal Voices

Track Time	Topic
0:00:09	Ross' early relationship with seafood; Ross' work history
0:01:07	Describing the mission of the Outer Banks Catch organization
0:01:50	Fact-checking fisheries-related press releases; The clout of special interest groups; The influence of the book *Tragedy of the Commons* during the Fisheries Reform Act process
0:04:28	An example of misinformation and miscommunications with the public involving a sea turtle kill; Another example involving releasing intentional misinformation about coral damage
0:07:52	Continued issues with the relationship between newspapers and special interest press releases; Difficulties in helping the public understand scientific data in press releases
0:10:25	Ross' communications work with the North Carolina Fisheries Association, *The Coast* magazine, and *TradeWinds* magazine
0:13:00	The factors that led the General Assembly to act on fisheries in the mid-1990s; Crab pot debates and increased licensing
0:15:14	How the entire fisheries management process expanded from regulating crab pots to managing other fisheries; Meeting with local fishing groups up and down the coast to hear their concerns
0:17:10	Fears that commercial fishermen communicated to Ross

0:18:39 Participants in the Moratorium Steering Committee meetings

0:20:00 Environmental, habitat, and water quality concerns expressed by fishermen and Ross' belief that the Fisheries Reform Act is unable to effectively address those concerns

0:22:23 Begin part two of interview, picking up where part one left off, discussing the lack of effective date for the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan

0:24:33 Specific ways that elements of the Coastal Habitat Protection Plans have been undermined or rolled back

0:26:38 Current water quality and habitat regulations as approaching the issue in a vacuum

0:27:38 Fish kills of the 1990s;
Holding a fish fry by the Neuse River to promote North Carolina seafood safety;
The Clean Water Trust Fund

0:30:18 A few key players in the Fisheries Reform Act process

0:32:02 Gaps in the Fisheries Reform Act and changes Ross would like to see to improve the legislation;
The necessity of developing an appeals process

0:35:02 Ross' issue with the perceived recreational-versus-commercial paradigm

0:37:11 Reducing the size of the Marine Fisheries Commission from seventeen to nine;
Assuring fair representation on the advisory committees

0:39:15 The necessity of "good" science in fisheries management

0:42:58 Ross' beliefs in how to move toward a better future for fisheries management;
The role of healthy coastal economies and commercial fishing in the equation

0:45:38 Defining public trust resources;

The state's responsibility to regulate and monitor these resources

SUSAN WEST: Today is June 17th, 2016. I'm in Stumpy Point, North Carolina talking with Sandy Semans Ross. Sandy, before we get started on talking about the Fisheries Reform Act, can you tell us a little bit about where you grew up, where you were born, when you came to North Carolina?

SANDY SEMANS ROSS: I was born in a coal mining town in West Virginia, and we didn't eat seafood there because the water was so polluted by DuPont and Monsanto and coal mines, that I didn't know what seafood was until I moved to the coast. My dad was in the Navy, so we always lived in coastal communities, near water, and that's where I began to love seafood!

SW: Do you work now, or, when you were at work, what kind of work did you do?

SSR: I'm a retired newspaper editor, and I do freelance work now for a number of publications, and I am the Executive Director of Outer Banks Catch.

SW: And for folks who aren't familiar with Outer Banks Catch, can you tell us a little bit about what that is?

SSR: Outer Banks Catch is a--we've applied for a 501(c)(3) status, we're an educational organization. One of the things that's been sorely lacking in fisheries management is information, and too often people are getting their information from the internet or from press releases put out by special interest groups where there's no fact-checking on them by newspapers and other media, and so we felt like we needed a vehicle to get solid information out to the public, and things that they can go back and check themselves if they doubt the validity of it.

SW: Can you tell me a little bit about your interest in fisheries management and fish politics, and how did you get involved in those sort of issues?

SSR: I got involved in the late [19]80s, I was a Bureau Chief for Freedom Communications and I had a bureau office in Havelock, North Carolina, and I was covering

military operations and environmental issues. One of the things that started concerning me is a lot of the stories that I saw coming out about fisheries were based on information that wasn't correct, because when I would do fact-checking of releases instead of just using those in my stories, I often found that there were confounders in there that weren't added in to explain and to put things into context. I became so interested in it that I paid more attention to fisheries management and whether it was achieving what it was supposed to, and I found out that often it wasn't, it was achieving special interest agendas, and that was for the commercial fishing industry and other groups, but not really looking at the issues and doing something proactive to make things better for the future.

SW: And what should've been the real issues, or real goal of fisheries management? You said it was driven by special agendas?

SSR: Right. One of the things was this allocation, and at the time, there was a lot of talk about the book *Tragedy of the Commons*, and the environmental groups were really pushing that, and the theme behind it was that once the common people in England were allowed to hunt, the populations went down, and so that it should be a selected few who have access. And I had a huge problem with that because fisheries is a public trust resource, and everyone owns it. Then, some of the environmental groups were putting out press releases, but they weren't looking at fisheries management as a whole, and neither was the Division of Marine Fisheries. When we have a water quality problem and there's fish kills, and if fish populations go down, the response was always to add more restriction on the fishermen rather than finding out the source of the problem and attacking it. So--one instance in particular that really sticks with me, there was like sixty sea turtles that washed up in Carolla [North Carolina] years ago, and the National Marine Fisheries Service was brought in to check 'em out and see what it was, and there was a fishing

boat offshore. So their statement to the press was that it was probably interaction with the fishing boat. What seemed inconceivable to me is that one fishing boat could kill sixty turtles, so I talked to the woman in charge of the program and she said she was sending some to the [N.C.] State [University] vet school for necropsy. So I waited a few weeks, I called up there, and I said, 'What did you find?' I said, 'Was it commercial fishing interaction?' And he said no. He said there was one that had interaction with a boat, maybe, 'cause it looks like a propeller hit it; he said most of them had wasting disease and were rotting from the inside out, and the ones that showed any type of interaction were ones that had hook and line wrapped around them and they were unable to eat. So I called National Marine Fisheries Service back and I said, 'Why haven't you reported this?' And she said, 'Oh, you know most of it is from recreational fishing,' she said, 'but it's from pier fishermen,' she said, 'they're putting all this bait in the water and it draws the turtles, they catch the turtle and then the turtles are so heavy they can't lift 'em up to release the line, so they cut the line.' She said that they can't help it. And I said, 'But you didn't report that.' And she said, 'Well, we don't want everybody mad at pier fishermen!' And so it was left hanging out there that it was the commercial fishing issue, and those kind of things just really, really troubled me.

SW: And why is that so troubling? Why--why does any of this even matter?

SSR: I think it's troubling, number one, because it shows that the press is not doing their job, which has always bothered me because I'm a really avid Journalist in the public's right to know and doing the best I can to get facts out, and not taking the easy road. And it was troubling because this is a public trust resource and we're not serving it well if we're not addressing all the issues. In the early [19]90s, I was asked to sit on a committee of the South Atlantic Council that was going to do the publicity on the work that was being done on marine sanctuaries, and I was

so appalled at the conversations at the table that I went to three meetings and quit. They would sit there and go over statistics about where the damage to, like, coral reefs were coming from. Well, it wasn't the commercial industry, they're not stupid enough to try to drag through coral reefs 'cause it would tear up their gear, most of it was divers and recreational fishermen and getting the hook and lines caught in it, the jerking off course it breaks off the coral, and I said, 'Okay, so we're gonna address this, right?' And they said, 'Well, no, there's too many of them.' I said, 'What do you mean, there's too many of them?' And they said, 'Well, you know, we have to look at this politically.' Well, no we don't have to look at this politically, we have to look at this truthfully. So I quit that group.

SW: And going back to Freedom Communications, they have newspapers here in North Carolina? Are they still an organization, a business?

SSR: Newspapers?

SW: Yeah.

SSR: We have newspapers all over the state and they get most of their information from press releases that are sent to 'em by special interest groups, and they never question them. They pick up the things that are said in them as fact, and so it just perpetrates everything. I had a conversation with a reporter yesterday and, during the conversation, she said, 'You know, Sandy, in the last fifteen years, the landing numbers have gone down in North Carolina.' Well, I knew exactly where she got that: the C.C.A. [Coastal Conservation Association] has run two opinion pieces in there in the past month, and that's something that they keep saying, but she never asked what the confounders were. And the confounders in science are things that, if you look at just the data you can come up with one opinion, but if you look at the things that affect that data, then it's a totally different picture. And one of the things that she didn't look at was the fact that, fifteen

years ago, we had Beaufort Fisheries that was bringing in menhaden, that's gone. And that was like five or six million pounds a year. We have the scallop trawl boats that are all going into Hampton Roads [Virginia] 'cause that's where the processing plant is now. We've had more restrictions on gear, which has reduced catch. We've had situations with the inlets, where a lot of boats, last winter, had to land southern flounder in Virginia rather than in North Carolina, which carries a double whammy because not only was that not counted here, that's deducted from the next year's quota. So they'll be allowed to catch less. But, see, she didn't take the time to ask those questions.

SW: So you're saying, basically, you can't look at information in a vacuum, you have to look--

SSR: Yes.

SW: --look at the larger picture and other factors?

SSR: Right. Looking at landings as an indication of how many fish are out there is like looking at occupancy taxes collected and trying to gear it towards how many people are here. There's too many things that affect it and you need to look at all of them.

SW: And tell me a little bit about, at one time, you were Communications Director for North Carolina Fisheries Association?

SSR: Yes.

SW: And I know you put out a publication; did you serve in any other capacity when you worked for the Fisheries Association?

SSR: I was the Vice President of Communications, and I dealt more with the fishing groups, the small groups that are up and down the coast, and did all of our communications work. I had actually comeback here to--I had been in Louisville [Kentucky] for a couple years

working for American City Business Journals. A job opened up back here for one year with Governor [James B.] Hunt's office, publicizing a year of *The Coast*. And so I came back to do that, and the one thing they didn't tell me was that, like, if they had meetings all over the state and I would write stories about them, what people had to say and the input and stuff, they didn't explain to me that seven different government agencies had to proof and approve everything that I wrote. And the final straw--I lasted two months, it's the only job I've ever just said 'I can't do this anymore, thank you very much'--but I was with Debbie Crane, who used to work for the state, and we're standing in the hallway and she hands me a story back that's gone through this process, and I said, 'This is nowhere close to being accurate!' And she said, 'But it's our story.' And I said, 'Well, I don't think I can do this!' [Laughs] And so I was doing some freelance writing and filing in at the *Sun-Journal* in New Bern [North Carolina] and Jerry Schill asked me if I would go in and start *TradeWinds*, and initially, that was a newspaper. It--it's still a publication now, but it was different than what it is now. This was about the same time that net bans started being brought up and, during that time period, Florida instituted their net bans and we had a huge influx of Florida fishermen here so that they could work, and the moratorium, in preparation for the Fisheries Reform Act work--.

SW: So we're talking about 1993, '94?

SSR: Right, yes. Massive fish kills because of pollution; there was a lot going on.

SW: Do you have any sense of why the General Assembly felt compelled, in 1994, to put the moratorium on commercial fishing license, appoint the steering committee to look at fisheries management--what were the driving issues behind that?

SSR: Well, ironically, the simplest answer to that is it was crab pots, and the proliferation of crab pots. But by the time fisheries reform was finished, the only thing not regulated was crab

pots! That and fishermen beginning to come in here from other states, I think, was really causing concern. And one of the things--putting the moratorium on there--I think that there was a time frame. I think they announced the moratorium in advance, and there was a time frame that people knew that there was going to be a cap, and that there would be value to those fishing licenses. So the very people who were advocating a complete net ban in North Carolina were buying up fishing licenses as investments! And fishing families were buying them for every child they had and maybe five in the future. And so there was an explosion of fishing licenses at first.

SW: So it spiked?

SSR: Yes. Uh huh. But they were people that really had no intentions of fishing.

SW: What was the problem with crab pots: why did the General Assembly or folks in the state feel like something needed to be done with crab pots?

SSR: Because there were people that were setting like 4,000 crab pots at a time, I mean, there were huge bodies of water that you really had to be careful navigating, there was so many pots. And more than they could reasonably check themselves. Some of them were using a lot of migrant help and sending them out to do it, and at the time, they didn't have to be licensed; they were working under somebody else's license. And so there was a feeling that that fishery could collapse.

SW: Okay.

SSR: If it wasn't put under control.

SW: And do you have any idea how that came to be, sort of, expanded from just looking at crab pots to looking at all fisheries in the state?

SSR: I think part of it--and I was kind of on the outside of that conversation--but I think part of it was there was a feeling that, with the threat of net bans, that if they would be proactive

and go ahead and get a regulatory process in place, that they could avoid that issue coming up on the table. And I think that that was even promised by some of the groups, which didn't hold true at all.

SW: And this is at a time when you're working for N.C.F.A. [North Carolina Fisheries Association]?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Did you attend Moratorium Steering Committee meetings?

SSR: I attended most of them, but a good bit of my time was going out to all the small fishing groups and talking to them, and fisheries varies so much from the Virginia line to South Carolina line that each one has unique problems and situations, and sometimes gear differences. So I would go out and talk to them and explain what they could do in a rational, reasonable, proactive way to affect fisheries reform and I would ask them what their top three priorities were, what things they could live with and what things was just gonna do them in. and there was only one common denominator from north to south, and that is no matter what they do, if they don't take care of habitat and water quality, we will have no fisheries. So that was a major thing that we pushed.

SW: And you found that was the common sentiment from Virginia line to South Carolina line?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Do you remember what was particularly, were fishermen frightened, fearful of this review of fisheries management?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Were there some of the issues that created fear?

SSR: They were afraid that, if--there was already discussion on putting a cap on the number of licenses, which is what would've put value on them as far as selling your license to someone else. They were afraid that their children would be shut out of the fisheries, that they wouldn't be able to get in there. The older men who were only fishing part-time or wanted to feel like they could start fishing again at any time if they got out were concerned about keeping their licenses, if they had to show a certain amount of poundage a year. There were concerns about gear limitations and whether just removing some of the gear was going to shut them out of fisheries. And then, of course, the talk about turtle excluder devices and things like that.

SW: So it was, is it fair to say, it was fairly controversial?

SSR: Well, it was, because some of these decisions that could be made might help the northern part of the state but might be a killer for the southern part, and so all of that had to be balanced out.

SW: Do you remember, um, who the key players were in that whole Moratorium Steering Committee process? I mean, there was a large panel that was appointed; do you remember if regular fishermen usually attended their meetings, the Steering Committee meetings?

SSR: I think--my memory is that they did, if they felt that it was something that was going to directly impact them. And it depended on where the meeting was, because the meetings were held all over the place and it's hard for a fisherman to come off the water to drive 200 miles for a fishing meeting. The environmental groups were always represented; the Fisheries Association was always represented; the C.C.A. [Coastal Conservation Association] was always represented; and a lot of the scientists from National Marine Fisheries Service and from the state were usually there. Bob Lucas, who chaired it, was not well-regarded by the fishing community. They felt that he had an agenda, and I think that's probably true, and I think he tried to stay

center but it bled through every now and then, and so there wasn't a whole lot of trust there.

SW: After the Moratorium Steering Committee issued their report and the Fisheries Reform Act was being developed, or was developed, you had mentioned a little bit ago that, in meetings and discussions with fishermen, environmental issues seemed to be, the importance of those seemed to be a common denominator. Did the Fisheries Reform Act address that concern?

SSR: Only lip service. When the idea of habitat and water quality protection plans was brought up, everybody at the table agreed with it. It was just a no-brainer. In fact, it's probably the only point that everyone agreed on, and by the time the bill got to [Senator] Marc [Basnight] up in the General Assembly--and that's when the final version's been written and all the stakeholders are brought in to review it for the language before it's actually filed--by that time, Jerry Schill, who was head of the Fisheries Association, thought everything was nailed down. I had done tons of communications on it so I was very familiar with it, and so he sent me to mark-up instead of going himself. The only other person from the commercial community there was Twyla Nelson from Carteret County, who didn't have a seat at the table but she sat along the wall and listened. And when we--at the table was every major environmental group in the state, and the C.C.A. [Coastal Conservation Association] who was there with three lobbyists, and when we got to the part about the habitat and water quality protection plans, that they were to be developed and implemented, there was no effective date. And I said, 'Wait a minute,' I said, 'this doesn't have a hammer, there's nothing in here to make this happen, it just says There Shall Be. It could be 200 years from now.' And there was absolute silence at that table; no one would speak up and say anything. And Bill Holman, who later became head of the Clean Water Trust Fund, was representing one of the environmental groups and he was sitting directly across the table from me, and I'll never forget the look on his face and how sad he looked, and he looked up

and he said, ‘You’re right.’ And I said, ‘So they’re not gonna get done.’ And he said, ‘You’re right.’

SW: Today is June 30th, 2016. My name’s Susan West, I’m in Stumpy Point, North Carolina talking with Sandy Semans Ross. I’m continuing an interview that was started last week. Sandy, before I had equipment failure with my recorder last week, you were telling us a story about the mark-up of the Fisheries Reform Act and the stakeholders’ meeting where folks were there to review it and discuss it, and you mentioned that you raised the objection that there wasn’t an effective date for the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan in the Act. You said there was little response when you raised that objection and that, later on, you found out why. What was the background there; why didn’t people say, ‘Woah, wait a minute, we need an effective date!’

SSR: Well, the constituency represented at the table could’ve gotten anything they wanted because you had every environmental group in the state, you had the Fisheries Association representing all the commercial fishermen, you had the C.C.A. there with their crowd, but apparently they had been offered a deal to eliminate the effective date in exchange for something they wanted in another bill, and they thought that they could come back at a later date and get that effective date placed in the legislation. Well, that never happened. And so it took ten years for the plans to be accomplished, to be developed, and to go through all the three commissions for approval, and now we’re twenty years from mark-up and they’ve never been fully implemented but, not only that, the, a lot of the legislation going through now is actually diminishing the work that’s already been done. So the one thing that the fishing community really wanted is going backwards.

SW: So, would it be fair to say that probably the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan, the goals and objectives are being rolled back?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Okay. Has it been effective at all in protecting fisheries?

SSR: I think the implementation has only been incrementally over the past ten years, and I think that there have been some improvements, but now we're gonna see those improvements go away. There's less water quality testing, there's less restrictions on storm water runoff, there's less protection of marshlands and wetlands when it comes to building and developing, and those were all things that were critical to the Habitat Protection Plans. In this latest session, there was a stipulation that they had to report periodically to one of the committees in the legislature, and now they have changed that to 'they can report if there's any change.' So there won't be regular updates to the General Assembly anymore on the progression of those plans.

SW: And why is the Coastal Habitat Protection Plan even important?

SSR: If you don't have good water quality and good habitat for fisheries, they don't spawn. If you don't have those things in place to keep pollution out of the water, they don't live. And so what happens is that species decline, and when species decline, the ones regulated are not the polluters, they're the fishermen. And a lot of the fisheries regulation that have gone into place in the last twenty years are directly a result of pollution and habitat degradation rather than fisheries actions. You can't keep mitigating loss of environmental things needed by clamping down on the fishermen.

SW: So, the Marine Fisheries Commission gets, say, this stock assessment for a type of fish and it shows a decline, so the Commission can take steps to regulate fishing, but their hands are pretty much tied as far as a dressing other impacts on stock declines?

SSR: They can, they don't have the authority to implement restrictions on water quality and habitat. However, they do have the authority to go to the General Assembly and say, 'This is

a problem, we're regulating fisheries and we have to look at it as a whole, not just the effort of one group of fishers.' I think that's been a problem in many areas of fisheries over the years; we've looked at one little thing and we haven't looked at all the confounders that affect it.

SW: And last time I was here and you were talking, you mentioned the massive fish kills in the 1990s. Tell me a little bit about that. What was going on? Did they ever identify the reason for those fish kills?

SSR: Um, there was a lot of pollutants going in the water, including phosphates and nitrogen, and it sparked algae blooms. So it was a combination of things, and there was some hysteria involved at the time that made things even worse, because there were scientists saying that the algae could kill people and have long-term health effects and things like that, which turned out really not to be the case. But in the meantime, we were having these massive fish kills, particularly on the Neuse River, and Fulton Fish Market in New York and the Baltimore market refused to accept North Carolina seafood because it got such national attention. To try and offset that, Beverly Perdue, the former Governor who was the Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee at the time, and Jerry Schill, who was the Director of North Carolina Fisheries Association, and some other people, and I, went out besides the Neuse River and had a fish fry to show that we weren't afraid to eat fish out of that river. And it was really bizarre because it was 11:30 in the morning, it was hot, we had four cooks and I guess none of them knew that the other one had salted the fish, and so it was so salty when we tasted it that we were all hiding our heads from the camera and drinking water trying to get it down! But it had nothing to do with the quality of the fish; it was just over-seasoned!

SW: Was that effective, then, in sort of stemming some of that hysteria?

SSR: It helped a little bit, and then some of the steps that were taken right after that

helped more. One of them was the creation of the Clean Water Trust Fund, which [Senator] Marc Basnight put all of his weight behind, and so did Beverly Perdue. That addressed a lot of the pollution problems by routing money to different projects that would cut down on storm runoff and failing septic systems and things like that, so that was really a good purpose there and that's still--I don't think it's funded at the same level, but that's still a good instrument to use for those things, when the money isn't sidelined for pet projects for other things.

SW: So that helps communities and towns address some of the issues?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Back in the Moratorium Steering Committee days and the period when the Fisheries Reform Act was developed and came to pass, who do you remember as being key players in that whole process?

SSR: Well, certainly one of them was Bob Lucas, who was, I think he was the Chairman of the [Marine Fisheries] Commission at the time--of the Moratorium Steering Committee. Um, B.J. Copeland was very instrumental in that and, ironically, B.J. Copeland was fired from [North Carolina] Sea Grant because of the hysteria over this algae, and he said it was bunk, and because of it, he lost his job. And he was absolutely right and he had been there for years.

SW: And was he Director of Sea Grant?

SSR: Yes, and had been for a long time. There were a lot of people who lost grant funding and things like that if they spoke up; it was a very strange political situation, but the--overall, I think the balance of conversation, there was give and take. I think by the time they finished, they were on the right track. I think that there were some things, looking back now, that probably should've been foreseen and weren't. but it's not too late to address those things. So it was a good process. I thought, the ironic thing was that it all started with questions about crab pots, but

by the time we finished with Fisheries Reform, the only thing not addressed were the proliferation of crab pots. [Laughs]

SW: What--you mentioned that probably, there were some things that could've been fine-tuned or written differently: what were those things? What comes to mind?

SSR: I think one of the most recent events that kind of emphasizes that is the [Marine Fisheries] Commission's action on flounder and not following the process set out in the legislation, and not using peer-reviewed science to make their determination. One of the problems is that there's no appeals process, and so when something like that happens, you have a choice: you can either live with it, or you can try to sue them. Well, suing is a very expensive thing and most people don't know how to do that, and by the time you get through the courts, whatever the situation is, it's either push people out of fishing or everybody's just thrown up their hands. We should've had an appeals process in there, and perhaps it could've been as easy as sending it to the Attorney General's office for an opinion, because the attorneys that work for those boards, although they come out of the Attorney General's office, their job is not to protect the public.

SW: What is their job?

SSR: Their job is to protect the board. It's just like with a County Attorney; that County Attorney is not the attorney for the public, he is the attorney for the corporation, which is the county. And so that can make a tremendous difference. So we need an appeals process, something that's fair, that doesn't make people go to court to try and get things done correctly.

SW: Any other suggestions for tweaks to the Fisheries Reform Act?

SSR: I think that [sigh] the least-equipped people to make the appointments to the Marine Fisheries Commission are the Legislators. Because when they make appointments, they're doing

it because they were lobbied by a group, and rarely are they made because someone has a unique understanding and experience with the fisheries, and I think that's something we're sorely missing. And some of the things I've seen on there, particularly in the last several years, have been based on rhetoric and what one group might be saying, rather than sound science and what's best for the people of North Carolina, who own that resource.

SW: So who should make the appointments?

SSR: I think it should be done by the various groups involved; I think that we need a scientific panel and they can decide who the representative is on there; we can have a commercial fisheries panel and they can decide who's gonna represent them; and the same thing with recreational. There's really--if you watch the Marine Fisheries Commission, the way it operates, somehow things always come up as though it's recreational versus commercial, and that's not true. What it is, is groups that are making money off, like, the recreational groups, and they don't get donations and things unless they can create a crisis and convince people that they're working for them, and so it becomes based on rhetoric and fundraising rather than the health of the fisheries and the accessibility of the public trust resource by the public.

SW: So are you saying, if you could eliminate some of that rhetoric and some of that, say, folks, groups using fisheries issues sort of to draw attention and to gain support from the public--if you could eliminate that, do you think that commercial and recreational fishermen could actually sit down and be much closer on solutions for issues?

SSR: Absolutely. Most recreational fishermen, they just wanna fish. And most commercial fishermen are also recreational fishermen, and it gets down to the health and the allocation of the resource, and the allocation, I think that there are times that, again, when they put restrictions on fishing because of loss of habitat and pollution, well that's something that the

commercial and recreational fishermen can come together on and say, 'Wait a minute, we want you to take care of these things so that we all have access.' The commercial fishing industry is the only access that many people have to what's a public trust resource, you know, if they want seafood.

SW: If they don't fish themselves.

SSR: If they don't' fish themselves.

SW: Do you think that the Marine Fisheries Commission, when the Fisheries Reform Act reduced that from seventeen to nine members, was that a good move? Did that make sense?

SSR: Um [pause] I don't know that it was a good move; I think that fishing, whether it's recreational or commercial, is different all along the coast, and certainly people inland also have an interest in those things, so I don't have a problem with people from inland being appointed to it, but they should be people that really have an interest and an experience with it, and so if you're gonna get all the different gear types and the different user groups represented, then seventeen--it's kind of unwieldy, but I don't think it's that bad. But you could also do that with nine if you were actually looking to fill designated seats rather than political interests.

SW: And do the Advisory Committees that were set up by the Fisheries Reform Act, did they help fill that gap in knowledge, from, you know, different gear users or regional differences? Have they been effective.

SSR: I think that they could be effective. I don't think that they're as effective as they were intended to be. But again, it depends on who's sitting on them and who appoints those, what kind of criteria is used. I think it's a pretty loud statement when you have scientists resigning from the Marine Fisheries Commission because there's decisions being made without science.

SW: Is that a problem? What--I mean--you know, the public perception is that science will provide answers, chart the course, we need to take these steps. It's--what is the state of our knowledge of marine stocks?

SSR: Um, it's lacking in a lot of areas. And one of the problems is that, like with vermillion snapper and snowy grouper, about twenty years ago, they were trying to justify huge marine sanctuaries offshore, and one of the ways that they wanted to do that was to show those two species in decline--which they weren't. One of the stock assessments was done in Bethesda, Maryland, the other one was done in Miami, they were done by different scientists, one of them took it upon his own to change the model to make it look as though they were in decline, the other one changed some things at the insistence of her boss. They were both National Marine Fisheries Scientists, so certainly politics had won out in that case. So everything built on those models since then is wrong. You would have to go back twenty years and straighten that out and then build on it to know where you really are, and those are just two cases that I absolutely know about, and I'm sure that there've been many others of those. Another thing that really hurt was when, in the federal legislation, they switched over to 'decision could be made on best available science' but that has been interpreted to mean that, if there's no science, just make a guess! Well, we shouldn't be guessing about these things.

SW: So, the Fisheries Management Plans are built on science, and if we don't have that good, strong foundation [sigh] I guess, we can put in all the fishing regulations in the world and still not get the results that we want.

SSR: Absolutely. That's like with the decision on flounder and using science that we knew did not pass peer review because they're migrating and they didn't consider anything out of our own waters, and the Division [of Marine Fisheries] was quite honest about that, but they

still acted on it. And that had nothing to do with protecting that fishery; that was simply a matter of politics. And we've got to find a way to--there's always gonna be a certain amount of that, but we've gotta find a way to reduce that. Another thing that needs to be taken into consideration now, and it's being kind of talked about in the corners, is migration patterns are obviously changing, and they're gonna continue to change with rising sea levels and with climate change and the changes in temperature, and because a fish is not in front of your house doesn't mean it doesn't exist somewhere; it just might've moved. And a lot of these follow salinities and water temperature and things like that, and we need to start incorporating that into all these Fisheries Management Plans so that we can better adapt to it.

SW: And are we doing that, or are we behind the curve on that?

SSR: No. We're way behind the curve on that. But when you have a state that says there's not climate change, it's hard to make a case to incorporate that into the science.

SW: Do you think the Fisheries Reform Act is capable of leading us into the future, um, you mentioned some changes, appeals process, the larger issue of poor science, in some cases. How are we gonna ensure healthy fisheries in the future?

SSR: The only way we can do it is if we put, pull in all the confounders, all the different issues, and look at it holistically rather than trying to narrow it down to just the efforts of some fishermen. And so it gets back to whether this is about protecting the fisheries and having the best possible circumstance we can for them, so that it benefits everyone, or if it's more about wins for groups doing fundraising, you know, by spewing rhetoric.

SW: Are you confident that the Fisheries Reform Act will be able to help ensure healthy coastal communities, as far as having fish to catch and the associate benefits to the communities here in terms of preserving heritage, supporting the local economy?

SSR: It's not going to unless they go back in and make some changes to address changing circumstances.

SW: Do you think there'll be commercial fishermen in the future?

SSR: Yes.

SW: Why?

SSR: Because the consumer who doesn't fish is always gonna want their seafood. Legislators are always gonna want their seafood. There comes a problem in there when you completely leave someone out of that loop, because it is a public trust resource, everyone owns it. And a lot of that's gonna take education. People living inland really don't understand the situation on the coast, and there hasn't been a whole lot done to educate them, other than rhetoric. We just need to provide them with facts and how they can help, and get people off that [Marine Fisheries] Commission that have ties to groups with only one purpose, and that's to shut down commercial fishing.

SW: And several times you're mentioned 'public trust resource': for folks who might not know what that means, what does that mean? What is a public trust resource?

SSR: A public trust resource is any resource we have that is owned by the citizens of the state of North Carolina. And so everyone owns our beaches here, we don't have private beaches; everyone owns the fisheries; everyone owns the deer and the bear and all that kind of thing, that's why we can set limits and open seasons and things like that; and it's, I believe, there's a line or two in the North Carolina Constitution that guarantees that public trust resources stay that way.

SW: And finally, looking back twenty years, do you think the Moratorium Steering Committee process was a fair process? It was a lengthy process.

SSR: I think, overall, it was. I think that there was a lot of give and take, and even just a few months into it, everyone knew that there were gonna be some changes. One of the things that should be addressed, though, are things like what's the state's responsibility in funding things that help keep the fisheries open? And I'm thinking about the observer program; when the state refused to pay, I think it was close to a million dollars a year it cost for the observers to go out with the flounder fishermen, because the federal government said that if there weren't observers they were gonna close the fishery because of turtles, the state decided that they're no longer gonna pay that. And flounder is a big deal in North Carolina, for the consumer and for commercial fishermen, and so the fishermen voted to impose an increase on themselves for the fishing licenses in order to pay for that observer program. I think that's ludicrous. No other industry is expected to do that, and a million dollars in the state budget is small potatoes.

SW: So the fishermen actually said--?

SSR: They raised it.

SW: Okay, yeah. Raised their license fees.

SSR: I think it raised them by almost 200, was 187 or something like that, it was almost double. So they're paying double so that they can catch fish for the rest of the people in North Carolina.

SW: And for folks who aren't really aware, what does an observer do? Goes out on the boat with the fishermen?

SSR: He goes out on the boat with the fishermen to make sure that there's no interaction with turtles. And turtles rarely die in nets, and the interaction could be the turtle was at the net, but that can shut down that fishery until those turtles are out of the area. And that one, I certainly understand the need to protect all these things, but it has to be very confusing for fishermen

when, years ago, they were told, to protect they turtles, they had to put turtle excluder devices on their equipment. And they did that. Talking to people at the Coast Guard and other people who are on the water, there are more turtles now than anybody ever remembers seeing in their lifetime, and so now they're being penalized because there's turtles in the water. So we have a strong population now and I think the flounder fishery was closed almost as much as it was open last year, because it just takes one sighting and they close off huge areas.

SW: Sandy, is there anything else you'd like to share on, hopefully, the recorder this morning? [Laughs]

SSR: Only that I think that the state has a responsibility to do more, to put out accurate information, and to respond to some of the rhetoric put out there. I don't think that the commercial fishing industry should have to constantly be in a defensive mode. The fisheries--fishermen are environmentalists. Fishermen know that if you don't have a good environment, you're not gonna have a good fishery, and they could be advocates with these environmental groups. And some of them are. More and more environmental groups are partnering with fishermen to do projects and stuff, and--but that's not gonna happen as frequently as we need it, as long as there's not good information out there explaining to the public why commercial fishing is important. And along the coast, a lot of people don't understand it. In Dare County, commercial fishing industry brings in more money than just about anything you can think of other than real estate and tourism; it's a huge industry. People don't see it, though; it's a ghost industry because most of it are small fishermen, you know, with one or two to a boat. But when you start counting up the jobs it provides to the coast, and people come to the coast to eat fresh seafood, locally-caught seafood, and because those fishermen are here, even though many places are selling import--shame on them--they still have that perception. They drive to Wanchese and

so they see everything coming in there, or to Hatteras, and then they go to a restaurant and assume that's what's on their plate. And so they do a lot to lure tourism here, and the tourism industry and the real estate companies need to really get behind commercial fishing and support them on many of these issues.

[END OF INTERVIEW]