

Natalie Springuel: So, I am Natalie Springuel. I am from Maine Sea Grant. This is Ela Keegan from the College of the Atlantic in Maine. We are at the National Working Waterfronts and Waterways Symposium here in Grand Rapids. Today is May 16, 2018. So, why do we not start with having you stating your name and, actually, if you would not mind spelling it? That would be great.

Russell Brohl: Russell Brohl, and that's R-U-S-S-E-L-L, B-R-O-H-L. I can spell it phonetically, too, if you want.

NS: [laughter] So, where are you from?

RB: Well, presently, I live at South Bass Island, formerly known as Put-In-Bay, Ohio. I've lived on Lake Erie my whole life.

NS: What brings you to the Working Waterfronts and Waterways Symposium?

RB: Because we had the Great Lakes Islands – I guess we called it a symposium last year. They reached out to us and wanted to have somebody from our island come to this.

NS: So, there was an islands' panel this morning that I missed?

RB: Well, no, no. This happened last year. And actually, Matt Preisser from – it's not the Michigan Sea Grant. What's it called? I don't know. I don't know the proper name. Anyhow, he took us from the islands in Maine that they did this working group. So, he had money and funding. He came over to our islands and said, "We want people to get together and talk about issues. Because we find that you have many of the same issues and different but the same issues." So, we all met last year from all the inhabited Great Lakes Islands, for the most part, in Canada and the U.S. So, I was available because we're getting into our tourist season. There are not a lot of people that can get out of town right now. So, am I the best spokesman? I'm not sure. But here I am.

NS: Tell me the name of your island again.

RB: Well, it's South Bass Island. South Bass Island, Sierra, Oscar – no, no, no. South Bass Island, but it's more formally known as Put-In-Bay, which is the incorporated village. That's what more people know it as. We have a chain of islands called North Bass, South Bass, and Middle Bass, which are all inhabited. I lived on Middle Bass as a seasonal resident for quite a few years until I became a permanent resident at Middle Bass Island in the early [19]80s. Then we moved to Put-In-Bay because the one-room schoolhouse at Middle Bass had closed. We didn't want our kids to ride a school bus to school to South Bass. But in the wintertime, they have to fly in. We're not putting little kids on an airplane every day in questionable weather. So, we moved to South Bass, the big island, the big tourist island.

NS: Can you characterize your islands for us in terms of size, how remote they are, and the number of inhabitants and that sort of thing?

RB: Well, we'd only use South Bass because that's where Preisser lives. We're three miles from the mainland. That's where the ferry runs. We have about – the winter population is – well, we really haven't taken a census because – roughly 300, 250, 300. Summer residents are probably about 2,000 because of all the seasonal property owners. But we've known that on a busy weekend, we'll have 15,000 people come visit the island on a weekend.

NS: Where are they coming from? How far of a ferry ride is it?

RB: Three miles. But we draw from so many large metropolises, Columbus, Ohio, Cleveland, Ohio, Toledo, Ohio, Detroit, all within an hour or two drive. So, we're an easy day drive for people to visit. Our tourism kind of grew out of having a national monument built there, signifying – it really was for the Battle of Lake Erie. Now, it's an international peace memorial. It's a 358-foot column that you can ride an elevator right up in. But it's an international peace memorial now. It kind of signifies our lasting peace with Canada. I don't even think they're putting a wall up yet. Customs guys don't laugh about that when you tell them that. No sense of humor. I said, "You're going to be out of a job when they put that wall."

NS: [laughter] What do people do for a living out there?

RB: Well, we're all service-oriented – a service-driven economy now. Other than the government services, the township workers, and the schoolteachers, we have a couple of full-time people working for the National Park Service. We have a state park, which has really only one year-round employer. Other than that, they all work in the tourist industry. That's that.

NS: What is the nature of your tourism industry? So, people, accommodations, what kind of activities do they do?

RB: Well, in the spring and the fall, we're trying to push the shoulders. Well, we have a lot of – we have fifty-four bars on the island. Unfortunately, we seem to think that we draw on weekends. It's like a college spring break atmosphere, not good, not good for families. We're trying to reestablish this family thing where we're trying to expand our natural resources. My wife started a land conservancy. It's really acquired a lot of property. So, we have access to the water because otherwise, the property values are so high. It's all being bought up privately. People don't want you going in their front yard because they own it. We've started a water trail, which went through many entities from the national park to state parks, to the Sea Grant, and the local township. It took forever to work with us. But now we have a water trail that you can paddle all the islands and also on the mainland side, which we'll see how that should start to grow. But we do have a lot of bars. We have a lot of restaurants. We have gift shops. We have caves on the island, natural caves that you can go into. We have one family-owned winery that's been in business for over 110 years. On Middle Bass Island, there used to be a winery, but it closed. The state has bought that. They put in a state-of-the-art marina, the Middle Bass State Park Marina. They also bought the winery that was there. But they've put millions of dollars into this winery to make it into a tourist attraction. But they want to get a concession there and haven't been able to do that yet. So, they threw millions of dollars into it, but they have no operating funds, which is unfortunate.

NS: What do you love about the island?

RB: I like the wintertime. I like it when the ferries don't run, when we have that isolated splinter, as they say, to quote somebody. We have great ice fishing. Of course, in Lake Erie, we have 10 percent of the Great Lakes water, but we have 90 percent of the fisheries. So, we have phenomenal fishing. So, I was starting earlier to talk about our shoulder seasons, where right now we have – as soon as the ferries start running in April, we get all these people from South Dakota, North Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, to come down for walleye fishing. Then later, like now, later May, we get all these people from down in the southern states that love the smallmouth bass fishing. We have an incredible yellow perch fishing. The past generation had commercial fishing, but the state of Ohio outlawed commercial fishing, gillnetting back in the late [19]70s. Now, if you go across the Canadian border because we're only a couple of miles from the Canadian border, they still gillnet. They're more than happy to sell us all the walleye and pickerel that we want to buy. But we also have to share the lake with the State of Pennsylvania, the state of New York, and the state of Michigan, and Canada. So, when you're regulating fisheries, that comes into us. But sports fishing and the fishing industry are a huge part of our...

NS: It is mostly sportfishing and some commercial?

RB: They have a limited season for trap netting out of the mainland. But if you go to all the islands, there are all old net houses where they did commercial fishing. They grew grapes, and they commercial-fished. Then we still do have some grape vineyards that we want to try to protect because they're mostly native grapes that they grow, the Catawba's, the Concorde, the Delaware grapes, which are a very hearty variety. But they're not worth a lot of money. They make great jelly, but they do make wines out of them, sweet wines. But we need to preserve that heritage because these people get older, they're not going to raise these grapes anymore. So, if we can somehow have an easement or if you sell it to the conservancy but you grant them that you won't do anything with it. You get a tax deduction.

NS: Conservation.

RB: Conservation, thank you very much, which is what they're doing up in Michigan, protect the agriculture up there and the cherries and such. Because it was all farming, we have – because the water temperature stays so warm late in the fall, we got a late growing season, and also protects them from an early frost. We used to grow a lot of peaches and, of course, grapes and apples and things like that.

NS: Switching back to the fish for a minute, what is the infrastructure on the island that supports the anglers and the small commercial fishery?

RB: These people bring their trailers over on the ferry boat. They rent, particularly, like I say, the shoulder seasons, which we need – it's pretty slow. They don't usually go out, late-night parties, but they do eat at the restaurants. They frequent Carriada, I suppose, so they can keep their liquid levels up while they're fishing. They're good tourists because they're not the parties

that we tend to get in the summertime. Then we have a couple of charter fishermen that fish out of the island. Fortunately, we had a really good fish hatch here three years ago. The fishing's really come back. It's always kind of cyclonic.

NS: So, people take a ferry over. They bring their boat. Then they launch their boat.

RB: Then they'll get a rental for a week. They'll rent cabins or whatever. Then they rent for the week.

NS: What have been some of the successes that you guys have had in terms of protecting the heritage that you are talking about?

RB: Well, I guess, I'm not directly answering that question, but we do have some older islanders that are trying to protect that heritage here. We have a local museum, the Lake Erie Islands Historical Society. We have the land conservancy, I guess, which we're promoting hiking and wildlife that the island has, particularly, with the spring and fall bird migratory because we are right on the migratory route. Because they're stopping over places for birds to rest. As of right now, we have birding groups coming up, the Road Scholars and birders. The fastest-growing recreational sport is birding. So, that's been a big draw, if you're a warbler fan. So, we bring in some expert birders. It's a big draw. But protecting the heritage, we're not doing enough. The money seems always trump the – excuse me, I'm not using that term. But it's always about the money. It used to be all island people owning the businesses. But when the profits started climbing, a lot of people from the mainland came in. Basically, they'd come. They'd just build a hotel, build a swim-up pool, and a bar pool. Then they take their money and leave. They don't raise their children on the island. They don't give back to the community. Obviously, having a national park there, they preserve the Battle of Lake Erie and what that signified for the islands and basically for how the United States was United States and Canada became Canada.

NS: What are some of the challenges that you guys face on the island in terms of being remote and the challenges for the year-round population, schools?

RB: The kids can go – so Middle Bass and North Bass, they had a one-room schoolhouse. Well, actually, the last one-room schoolhouse closed at North Bass Island here about eight years ago. I was on the Middle Bass school board at one time. We will pay room and board to send them to any public school in the state of Ohio to do that. The challenges, well, obviously, you're on an island, and everything's got to come over on a ferry boat. It's not always cost-effective to live on an island because everything gets marked up to pay for the freight costs. Just being on an island, if you want to go someplace, you want to go see a show or a concert, you've got to pay the ferry fare, or you've got to fly in the wintertime. Then you've got to find lodging on the mainland because you can't come back at night unless you take your own boat over. That's a bit of an inconvenience, but that's what we choose to do. It's not like it's a hindrance. Gas prices are expensive, but people have to make a living, too, on the island. Of course, having Amazon, that was brought up at the other session, that changed a lot. Because now you don't have to go to the mainland or have it sent over on the ferry boat. Amazon sends it. You don't have to pay the freight and blah, blah, blah. So, that's been a huge convenience. But in the wintertime, our grocery store, we don't have any fresh produce and having fresh meats and things like that, just

not available. So, you have to put food by – you're buying bulk in the fall. There's not a lot of inconveniences, I don't think.

NS: You have been here now for, I do not know, a day or two at this symposium. What have been some of the conversations that you have been having with folks? What are things that have been either revealing to you about your connections to other islands or to other working waterfronts?

RB: We came to be in the roundtable discussion with the other islands, people that came here, sharing our thoughts. We didn't get a lot of solutions, but we certainly had a lot of lake problems. I'm in the Put-In-Bay Port Authority. So, I was asked to come here for that. A lot of these issues that this waterfront thing is happening doesn't pertain to us necessarily, because our waterfront is already pretty much developed. It's not going to change. It's not going to grow much. There's only so much room on an island to grow. Once you're there, you're there. We've already screwed it up, or we try to improve on it.

NS: What is your waterfront like? Describe it.

RB: Well, we have a naturally protected bay that's protected by a barrier island, which is owned by Ohio State University. They have a summer campus there. The realty was owned by Jay Cooke. He was a financier of the Civil War. He had a big name in the Midwest. Anyhow, he had to cancel. He willed it to the Ohio State. But anyhow, this island makes up a natural barrier for a protected harbor, for the most part. So, we have marinas. We have public marinas. We have private marinas. We have our ferries keep their ferry boats in the winter downtown, the downtown dock. We have a small state park access on part of the islands. Then Ohio State University has taken over two old fish hatcheries that they have. They also have an aquatics center which is free to the public, for people to go in and talk about Lake Erie fisheries and this and that. That's part of the rest of the island. There are some residents along the water. But it's mostly – our waterfront is all public access. We have a big downtown park, which is very nice. It was willed to us from Jose de Rivera, who was one of the original owners of the island. Just going back, he made sure that the island had it, preserved it, and set up a trust.

NS: What are the changes that you have observed over the years?

RB: Somebody started a late-night ferry service. It was a fast ferry. It replaced a ferry that normally took an hour and twenty minutes. Now, this ferry runs 25 minutes, and they run late-night. So, now we started getting more hotels being built, bringing in a late-night crowd. When people go out at night, they usually indulge in large sums of alcohol. So, that's really changed it a lot. Some people say we had an old building that had burned down called the Colonial, a beautiful old wood structure. It kind of goes back to the pre-nineteen hundreds. But it had, unfortunately, burned down, and they rebuilt that. We always have this conversation. What has changed?" But I would guess more money coming off the island, people that aren't so community-oriented, just pretty much self-centered on their own personal profits.

NS: What do you see as the future of the island?

RB: I think there's an effort now because we really don't want to get that label as a party island. Because it's eventually going to drive people away, I think. The people with the nice yachts and the big money people, they don't want to deal with that. The locals don't want to deal with that. We don't have the police force to handle these kinds of crowds. Occasionally, it could get dangerous. We're going to have too many people, and we can't control a situation from that. We're trying to promote our natural resources. Thanks to a few people, we are trying to promote more family-oriented things. Because we have this huge amusement park called Cedar Point. It's a really, really beautiful amusement park. They've got like thirty roller coasters. So, people go to that, and they bring their families over to Put-In-Bay. They come over. They're like, "Well, there's nothing to do here unless you go to a bar." We have a lot of live entertainment, this, and that. We have some nice restaurants. We have this weird thing that we want to be the Key West of the North. This is how they market us. So, we have plastic, lit-up palm trees. Why do we have to mark ourselves the Key West North? We have the boardwalk which serves seafood. They're lobster bisque. I don't know why we can't promote who we are. Why do we have to market ourselves as something different than that? I think the future is going to be driven by the money. The property values are so high now. We don't have affordable living for people that work there. The wages aren't livable wages, and they're seasonal workers. So, we need to bring a lot of people from the mainland. We bring in a lot of foreign workers and students, which is becoming a little harder this year.

NS: Because of the visa issues.

RB: Yes. We got trumped.

NS: In the true sense of the word. [laughter]

RB: Yes, in the true sense of that word. So, finding the labor force is a problem.

NS: Our time is winding down. So, is there anything else that you would like to say so that we capture your story?

RB: I think we're fresh water. We don't have salt. We don't have sharks. People living in Ohio don't know there are islands. They're not even aware of the lake. Our biggest concern is the algal blooms. Because if we get this algae bloom – because the lake is very shallow, it's almost like a big river where it flushes every seven years compared to the other Great Lakes. But that and invasive species that come in from saltwater ships that come in, and they dump their ballast water. We're not sure how it'll affect the fish ecology. Algae are huge because if we can't control the nitrogen-to-nitrogen coming from the farm fields and it gets warm and if temperatures keep increasing like they are, it's just going to get worse. Once the algae come, the fish scatter. The people don't want to go bring their private boats over here. Because we have a lot of yachts. Because we're so close to so many marinas. You only have to run 3 miles of open water and then you're in protected water. So, it's a huge draw. I should have mentioned pleasure boats were a huge part of our economy until they started building the hotels and such. A lot to say, I'm sure I forgot something.

NS: Well, thanks so much.

RB: You're welcome.

NS: It was great to hear your story.

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