

Maritime Studies Capstone Seminar Oral History Project

Sylvain De Guise Oral History

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Interviewer: AB – Antonio Bustamante

Transcriber: NCC

Antonio Bustamante: Okay. So, today is April 27th at 10:00 a.m.. I am here with Dr. Sylvain De Guise. I am Antonio Bustamante. Doctor, you have been a part of the Blue Plan, correct?

Sylvain De Guise: That is correct.

AB: For people who don't know about it, could you please give like a small overview of what the whole plan is and why it is necessary?

SDG: Yes. So, for anyone who's seen Long Island Sound or been working or recreating on Long Island Sound, you see that there's a lot of people, there's a lot of activities, and there's a lot of things that are taking place. In order to manage that appropriately, it is useful to document what is happening where, what natural resources are, where there's fish, where there's turtles, where there's seagrass, but then also where people do activities, for example, where people fish, where people boat, where there are ferries, where there are pipelines, so that we can understand and protect what we care about, like activities like raising shellfish that have been taking place for hundreds of years, but also making place for new activities. If there are new activities that are going to take place, those decisions should be informed by a good understanding of what's happening and where and what resources are where. So, the purpose of the Blue Plan was to talk to a lot of people to be able to map natural resources in Long Island Sound where there's fish, where there's shellfish, where there's seagrass, but also understand where people go for certain activities and then making that available to everybody so that we can make rules. We can say that if there are places where people go scuba diving, for example, that would probably not be a place to put other activities that would disturb where people go scuba diving. Or if there's going to be a new pipeline, the pipeline should not go where there are shellfish beds. So that the purpose of the Blue Plan is to document and protect what we care about, human uses and traditional human activities and natural resources, but also to make better decisions in the future and avoid conflicts. If everybody knows where everything is, then you can make the choice to place a new activity where it's going to be the least disturbing. Then the Blue Plan becomes a tool for people who have new ideas, new projects. But, also it becomes a tool for people who want to protect their existing activities. There are performance standards associated with those so that those who issue permits have something to base decisions on as opposed to making decisions sometimes like in a vacuum without appropriate information.

AB: Did you happen to come up with the idea of the Blue Plan on your own, or did someone perhaps come to you with the suggestion?

SDG: Yes. So, the Blue Plan is a marine spatial planning exercise. Marine spatial planning has taken place at different areas in the world at different times. Europe, about ten years ago, was a little bit more active trying to understand where they would place wind farms and where they have oil and gas exploration. They started that in Europe. In 2010, we heard about it. We flew an expert from France to come to talk to people around Long Island Sound. So, decision makers in Connecticut and New York, stakeholders, we had maybe 20, 25 people with a two-day workshop. When we left, people thought it was in general a good idea for Long Island Sound since there's a lot of people, and it's pretty busy. But we followed up with building an informal working group to try to gather some information. Then four years ago, a legislation was passed in Connecticut to support and mandate the development of the Blue Plan, marine spatial plan for

Long Island Sound. So, that became official. The work picked us team and went at a faster pace from then. But it was planting a good idea ten years ago and then started to talk to other people to generate a little bit of information in support of it. Then until the law passed. Then we began the official process.

AB: What would you say was your biggest hurdle getting all the parts to work in unison for this whole thing to just outright work?

SDG: Well, the biggest hurdle is the fear of the unknown. There's a lot of people who were concerned that, well, there's going to be something else that I have to deal with. There's going to be a new regulation that I have to follow. We don't need any more regulation. So, we needed to engage into a process that was very clear, open, and transparent, with very simple goals and something that we could communicate easily. We've talked to a lot of people that the Blue Plan process has engaged about 2,000 people in meetings with fishermen, meetings with shellfish sector, meetings with recreational fishermen, meeting with town officials to explain to people what it is, to explain to them that it's not something they have to be afraid of, but rather something that should support a better understanding and support materials and the same information that would be available for everybody. It's not something hard and scary, but it's something for them to use. They can benefit from that. If they're very good fishing grounds, for example, we want to understand that, so we can protect them so that we don't put a bridge there, for example.

AB: With that being said, would you presume that you have a majority support on the plan, or is there more opposition to it?

SDG: Yes. So, we had a number of steps to make sure that it was very inclusive. When people had questions, we worked with them to answer those questions. We worked with them to modify the wording that was worrisome for some people or for some sectors. We have developed some additional tools. For example, we worked on developing a user's guide to be a companion document to the Blue Plan, and so that people can understand how they work through it, how they access maps, how they deal with those things. We had several public meetings. The Blue Plan legislation required that we had three public hearings. The last one was before the final draft of the Blue Plan was turned out to the Connecticut Legislature. It was presented to the Environment Committee. The Environment Committee convened a hearing. There was nothing but support. There's no one who showed up at the public hearing of the Environment Committee with opposition. But that's because we work really hard to be inclusive and to talk to individuals or to groups. If they had concerns, we work through those concerns with them ahead of time. So, right now, there seems to be no significant opposition to the Blue Plan.

AB: If wish came to wish though, what would you fear would happen if the Blue Plan didn't do what you had hoped it to do?

SDG: Well, there's a clause in the legislation that says that the Blue Plan is to be revised at least every five years. There's a broad Blue Plan advisory committee that will continue to meet every year. Every year, the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection is to report to the advisory committee on how the Blue Plan is working. If there are things that are not

working well, there's always room for understanding what's not working well and for fixing it. That the legislation says that we have to revise at least every five years. But if something is not working like we thought it would be, there's nothing that says we cannot fix it before five years.

AB: As you said, you can go back and fix it.

SDG: Right.

AB: How many times thus far have you gone back to the drawing board to fix this and that? Has anything stood out mostly to be in your way while going back?

SDG: Well, the Blue Plan is over five hundred-page long. We've worked with people, like I said, to have an ongoing review process, to understand people's concerns. Several times, we went out, and we discussed the issues with people, why they were concerned. We changed the language so that it would be better understood, better understandable, and it would address people's concerns. One of the things that was the hardest to understand was that the Blue Plan is essentially meant to apply to parts of Long Island Sound that are 10-foot deep or deeper. While it sounds pretty simple, people started asking, is it 10-foot at high tide, or is it 10-foot at low tide, or is it somewhere in between? There's some technicalities that said that it's a line somewhere. We work at defining that line somewhere. Sometimes that line curves into areas that become shallower. Then it becomes deeper again. Or what if you have a marina and it's 9 feet deep? Then you have to dredge for bigger boats. It becomes 11 feet deep. What happens then? We clarified the language so that you cannot dig yourself into the Blue Plan region. We worked on understanding the line, putting that on a map for everybody to see, and adjusting it at times when needed. So that the mouth of a river does not become part of the Blue Plan going inland. So, we work with people to understand their concerns. We worked together towards a solution. That became the final wording that was in the Blue Plan final version.

AB: In a review from a public hearing in March of 2019, your outreach coordinator, one Christian Fox, was quoted saying, "The plan will help reduce conflicts." Now, I know you're not him who said it. But would you happen to be able to elaborate on what types of conflicts it would reduce?

SDG: Yes. So, like I said before, for example, there's a number of cables that go across Long Island Sound. When you go across the sound, you can find areas that are less busy than others. But when it comes time to get to shore, it can be complicated to find a place that is not too busy. Right now, all the shellfish beds are mapped. It's one layer into a map viewer. So, if you try to land a cable across the sound, for example, to transport energy, you know where the shellfish beds are. So, if you're smart enough, you will find a place where there's no shellfish bed so that you don't write a proposal that goes right through a shellfish bed and then get into a fight with the shellfish sector, get into a fight with state and town shellfish leases. There's not going to be lawsuits afterwards. So, the Blue Plan is a tool so that you can find a place where there's no shellfish bed or other important uses so that you make a better proposal that is less disturbing, with everybody having the same information as opposed to having lawsuits later and then people digging pieces of information that someone else didn't have. So, that's the whole entire purpose of the Blue Plan is to make all the information that we can find, available to everybody so that

people can make better decisions.

AB: Well, that was very informative. I believe that is all the questions I have. I thank you for your time, Doctor.

SDG: All right. Thank you.

[end of transcript]