Peconic Estuary Interviews
Wayne Grothe Oral History
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Interviewer: NS – Nancy Solomon
Transcriber: NCC

Nancy Solomon: This is Nancy Solomon on May 15, 1997. I'm talking with –

Wayne Grothe: Wayne Grothe.

NS: Okay. We're talking about the Peconic Estuary and Wayne's knowledge about it. How long have you been working on the Bay?

WG: Twenty-three years.

NS: What parts of the Bay have you worked most extensively?

WG: I work both on the South Shore bays and in the Peconic Bay – in all the creeks on Peconic Bay that come off of town borders.

NS: When you say the South Shore bays, are there any particular names?

WG: Peconic Bay, Shinnecock Bay, Moriches Bay.

NS: You were talking about some of the things that you've seen happen over the years. The salinity –

WG: Well, the inlets have been widened. So, I would assume that the salinity levels have gone up. There's been an increase in predators and sand crabs and conchs, whelks. Predators that feast on immature shellfish.

NS: Yes. Like, starfish. What are the predators that are most common against the shellfish?

WG: There are mud crabs – when they're small, that's probably the number one predator. Blue crabs are predators also. Then we have sand crabs and conchs, whelks, horseshoe crabs. That's about it for all I know.

NS: Okay. Thank you. The inlets, which inlets were widened?

WG: Shinnecock was wide and stabilized.

NS: When did that happen?

WG: Well, I think it's been dredged off and on for the last twenty-five years. But just recently, there's a big project to stabilize the inlet. It's kind of like a two-edged sword. It may be beneficial to the water quality with increased flows in and out of the bays.

NS: Flushing activity.

WG: Yes. Flushing activity. But it may also raise the salinity levels so high that the survival of immature shellfish, it's not ideal conditions for that.

NS: Is that, in your mind, one of the key changes when they start doing that?

WG: It's a change. I don't think it's a key change. Out of East here, I think the development of the shorelines. We have many more homes on the shorelines than there were in the 1960s, for instance. Just off the shorelines, half a mile in and three quarters of a mile on the shores, there's a lot more developments, a lot more roads. So, we have a lot of road runoff going into the bays here or something like that. So, state, county roads all – well, the county's not too bad. But the state doesn't seem to be responsible for their road runoff. They just put pipes into the bay quite a bit.

NS: How many pipes are there along the shorelines?

WG: I couldn't even fathom a guess. But it's not only the – pipe is something that you can see, but almost every road here on the East End that runs north and south ends up at the end of the bay. It ends in the bay. The water just runs right down the bay. It picks up all the fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, and just byproducts of cars and everything else. Animal waste.

NS: Does this also happen with unpaved roads?

WG: Not as much because it seeps in and –

NS: Into the groundwater.

WG: Yes. Three years ago, around – no, this is four years ago now, our Baymen's Association proposed a program. The town ended up spending extra million dollars on catch basins throughout the town.

NS: Did that help?

WG: Yes. It's still going now.

NS: Do you know when they started first putting in more paved roads and when they started paving over existing roads?

WG: I couldn't really answer that.

NS: In the 1950s, 1960s.

WG: I'm not that old.

NS: It's been in your lifetime?

WG: Oh, yes. I'm sure it has. It's just the increased development. There were large stretches of wetlands that were untouched. Now, if there were any dredge spoils put on a wetland in 1955, we'll say for instance, they could take a core sample and say, "Well, this is a disturbed area," and they can build a home on it. It just happened recently in Shinnecock Bay that they were giving

up permits to build on a piece of property that actually floods over completely at high tide. They're going to put in a septic system. This happens quite often now.

NS: Was there a particular moment when you knew that this was affecting the shell fishing?

WG: I think that I noticed the decline of shellfish. But when you're doing it for a living, you [inaudible]. In 1986, when had the first outbreak of the brown tide, it killed most of the scallops, almost all of them. It was a shock. At East, we almost took it for granted that we would go scalloping every fall, and that just really changed our mindset.

NS: Was there a time before that that you started noticing that your catches weren't as large as they used to be?

WG: Well, there's always a fluctuation from year to year in what you catch. Some years may have really good set of scallops and then the scallops were gone. I guess, prior to 1986, scallop season started [inaudible] to scallop September, all the way through March. Then you caught hard clams or soft clams. But now, everything is restricted down because of closed areas and areas that are just barren. But everybody's fighting over a half a piece of (barb?).

NS: The areas that are barren now, were they barren when you first started working the bay?

WG: No. No.

NS: What are those areas that are now barren?

WG: Quantic Bay, for instance.

NS: Is does it tend to be near the shorelines or in the deeper water?

WG: They're completely surrounded by homes. Yes.

NS: But the areas –

WG: More flushing, of course.

NS: – where the shellfish was, was that close to the shoreline or the deeper waters?

WG: When I first started shell fishing, they were from the shallow waters right out to as deep as you can go. There was just about solid shellfish.

NS: What about the vegetation?

WG: There were all different types of grass. There was eelgrass. There was cabbage, walls, ground wall. Now, there is very little of things like that.

NS: Why do you think there is so little vegetation?

WG: Well, I think the number one cause is the brown tide. We've had it off and on since 1986. I think we've only had three years that we didn't have it. The second reason is water quality is definitely being degraded every year. Some of these animals and plants can't survive in that water.

NS: What were some of the other areas that were very productive that are now barren?

WG: Cow Yard, Flanders Bay was a good area for scallops.

NS: What part of Peconic Bay was –

WG: That's the Western end. Sag Harbor was always a good scallop area.

NS: The shell fishing areas, they tend to – were there particular parts of these bays that had names that were known that you used to –

WG: Yes. Well, like Northwest Harbor and Sag Harbor, or like I mentioned, the Cow Yard.

NS: Where in Northwest Harbor, for instance?

WG: Oh, it was the whole entire area.

NS: Really? Okay.

WG: Yes. There were many scallops there. You could work in September through March. You'd catch scallops all year. Sometimes, you limit it to all year.

NS: You were talking before about the sewage treatment preferences among the home builders. What were some of the mechanisms that they used for private homes?

WG: Well, since 1976, Suffolk County requires a septic tank or solid or trap and then cesspools where the liquids are piped in there. That's a lot better than the cesspools where it was just basically an open system. In certain areas, I'm sure it works fine. But near the bays, I think we have bog that's below where the cesspools are a lot of times. In fact, it sits on top of it. So, there's only one way for the sewage and the liquid to flow, and that's towards the bay. It doesn't go down and just filters because there's no filter mechanism there. A lot of bay men, they always scream that's that sewage treatment plants. My way of thinking is that I would rather see a sewage treatment plant than two thousand cesspools around that. At least, if the plants run correctly and they can be [inaudible] by the plant. New Jersey, for instance, I was reading the other day, New Jersey, most of the shellfish waters, fifteen years ago in New Jersey [inaudible]. They hooked up almost every home to sewage treatment. Plus, they tackled the storm water basin problems. They had storm water basin for a while. Now, it's eighty-seven percent of the water [inaudible]. That's kind of shocking to hear and I think New Jersey has cleaner water in New York State and Long Island, which it does now.

NS: Oh, wow. Were there other things that were happening along the shorelines that have affected the water quality and the runoff that you've seen in the last thirty years?

WG: Yes.

NS: What some other things have you seen?

WG: Like I said, the construction and development along the shorelines. People have –

NS: About how many homes? Do you have any – or where I could find some statistics on how many homes have been built or just on observations?

WG: Yes. You could find that. I mean, that's in town hall in Southampton. I'm sure they have everything there.

NS: For instance, when you think about developments, what are some of the ones that spring to your mind having had a definite impact?

WG: I would like to see some up [inaudible], of course. But I think there's other things that they can start doing that would really help. Number one –

NS: Well, what is one of the worst development projects that really hurt the shell fishing?

WG: What really hurts?

NS: Yes. Is there one housing development project that had a direct impact?

WG: No. I think over the years, it's been like –

NS: Or is it all just the accumulation?

WG: – this won't hurt you. This one little thing won't be too bad, or this won't be too bad. I mean, just add them up and it's just the total effect of all the little things that went on and all the houses that were built. Then in Southampton Town or Peconic Bay, there's only one or two creeks from Flanders to Sag Harbor that are open to some kind of shell fishing. All the rest are closed now. Moriches Bay, there's places there that the California bacteria counts are so high that if sub–County Health Department tested the waters, you wouldn't be allowed to swim there.

NS: Which are the two creeks that are open during the summer?

WG: They're Cold Spring Pond, Red Creek, and parts of Sag Harbor Cove are open. We may be getting a little tiny opening in Noyack Creek. But Flanders Bay and East Bay is closed summer months. (West Creek?), Sebonac, Mill Creek, parts of North Sea.

NS: Those are all closed?

WG: They're all closed.

NS: During the summer months.

WG: During the summer months.

NS: What happens if it rains during the regular season?

WG: In winter?

NS: Yes. Do they also close them?

WG: Yes, in winter, we have –

NS: Conditionals?

WG: Yes, conditional shellfish areas. In our town, a quarter of an inch of rain – oh no, I'm sorry. A fifth of an inch 0. 20.

NS: That'll close it?

WG: That closes it for seven days. At one time, the state used to run summer conditional programs. So, some areas were opened in the summer if it didn't rain. They no longer run those.

NS: What are the main kinds of shell fishing activities that you're involved with?

WG: Hard clams, scallops, and oysters.

NS: Do you have particular spots that used to be very good for you that now are not?

WG: Yes. I mentioned Quantic Bay earlier. It was one of the main areas that I worked in.

NS: Was that good for all three shellfish?

WG: Well, no. Just for hard clams mainly and soft clams. Eastern Shinnecock Bay is one of the last areas left where there's really any amount of hard clams at all. It's not very good, but at least you can make a living there still. But that was –

NS: What about for oysters? Where would you go for oysters that is no longer –

WG: There are a few oysters in Sag Harbor. I happen to grow oysters myself in cages in the bay. I culture oysters.

NS: Were there particular oyster beds that used to be productive that aren't?

WG: Well, before I started working on the water, I was talking to somebody over at Flanders

Bay and other parts of Sag Harbor. In parts of Sag Harbor, there were large oyster beds. Especially in Flanders Bay, they caught a lot of oyster there. Then town waters where – I don't know if you're familiar with Mecox Bay?

NS: Yes.

WG: That was really productive oyster.

NS: What parts of Flanders Bay?

WG: The west end banks. It's the west end.

NS: Towards Riverhead or south of Riverhead?

WG: It's like southeast of Riverhead.

NS: Okay. Right near where there's a small inlet there, I think from the Nissequogue River. Does that sound right?

WG: That's Peconic River.

NS: Peconic River. Okay. I didn't know which river that was.

WG: No, this is probably five or six miles to the east of that. I think it's a place called Red Cedar Point. It's a big area there. It was pretty productive for oysters.

NS: What part of Mecox Bay was –

WG: Mecox, the whole entire bay was productive. This past year, we finally got Mecox reopened. It was closed for about seven or eight years.

NS: Were there a lot of homes built in Mecox as well?

WG: Yes. Another problem there really is that Mecox doesn't have a natural outlet to the ocean. It was regulated by these town trustees.

NS: Is this Southampton River?

WG: Yes, Southampton. Mecox is to the east of [inaudible]. They were managing the inlet in a way just to let the water out because there was a lot of haul. That's why they flood their basements when the Mecox Bay got too high. But they weren't digging the inlet deep enough to allow salt water to come in and flush the bay out. I guess around 3 or $4 million worth of oysters died [inaudible]. A few years ago –

NS: How had the bay flushed itself before it was done.

WG: It was because the inlet was opened deep enough so that at the right times, it has to do with the moon and everything else, the tides.

NS: Yes.

WG: Not only would the water come out of them, when the tide came back up, then the ocean would rush back in. Salt water would rush in and flush the bay.

NS: That was stopped when? When did all the government start working around that?

WG: I think that was about – I can't remember because I actually had a – they hired – you know Chris (Pickler?)?

NS: I know the name.

WG: Yes. He works for Cornell. So, they hired Chris to do a study on the oyster populations there. Soon, the level of fresh water was zero. He said that the inlet is now [inaudible] and the oysters would die and went back and forth and back and forth. I think at that time, Fred Thiele was the county legislator. We finally got a county dredge in there to open it, but it was too late now. All the shellfish died. But right now –

NS: When you say that there came a time – I'm trying to piece this together. There came a time when the inlet was not flushing itself out.

WG: Right.

NS: When did that happen?

WG: I guess in the [19]70s, late [19]70s, around there.

NS: That's when the town stopped digging, opening the inlet?

WG: Well, no, they were opening the inlet, but in such a way that the water is overflowing out. At that time, they didn't really take salinity readings. If they were to take salinity readings, they wouldn't know the salinity was three and two where it should have been sixteen to twenty-three, we'll say, something like that.

NS: How were they doing it that they dropped that fast?

WG: What? The salinity?

NS: Yes. That they weren't opening up the inlet properly.

WG: Well, what happened was, it was a combination of things. One is that it costs a lot to have it open. So, they'd only open it when it got to the point where it was affecting the homeowners. They were managing it [inaudible] pay for the homeowners and little regard to what the products

are.

NS: Right. Okay. So, before they really changed the philosophy, how often would they open it?

WG: Before, probably six times a year or seven times a year. Okay. They still opened it maybe four or five times a year after. But in all fairness, I'd say that there was a buildup of sand from northeast storms and everything else that washed into the bay at times. That made it difficult for them because this is right where they cut the inlet – where they opened it. It made it very difficult. It would've been very expensive. Then that's for a deal that the dredge in there and they kind of did a halfway job.

NS: When was that? Roughly what time? [19]70s?

WG: I think it was [19]79.

NS: [19]79?

WG: I think. I'm not entirely sure. I can tell you it was [inaudible].

NS: Okay. How often would they open up the inlet after they had cut back?

WG: Well, they kind of gauge it on the water level. If the water gets too high, they would open it. We tried to get them – the payment association, we tried to get them to open more on salinity levels instead –

NS: Of the water levels.

WG: Yes. Okay. If the salinity was going way down if they opened it, that's fine.

NS: What was their criteria when they say – what water level did they wanted to reach before they would do this?

WG: Where it would affect the people living around the bay. I mean, if the –

NS: Is it like seven feet or eight feet?

WG: No, it wasn't that. It was probably about four or five feet high. I don't know if you're familiar with Mecox, but it's in an area where everything drains down to it. It's kind of like this and there's Mecox Bay down here. So, it gets fresh water from all areas. At one time, it was all surrounded by farm fields and most of those sold off.

NS: When did the farms disappear?

WG: The property splits money probably in the [19]70s, [19]60s.

NS: Kind of family selling it off so they could retire, that kind of thing?

WG: Yes. Farming, I guess, is very difficult. Selling a little building lot for $200,000 on Mecox Bay, that's better than farming.

NS: Yes. So, it sounds like that was a very significant –

WG: It was at one time.

NS: – change that really affected it. Can you think of other places where that might have been the situation where they weren't opening up the inlets as much?

WG: No. That's a pretty unique situation really. I think East Hampton town, there's a place called Oyster Pond. That's like a salt pond. They call them salt ponds. They're not really a bay. It's a pond. But I don't know if they open or close.

NS: Was Georgica Pond ever used for shell fishing by baymen? Georgica pond?

WG: No. No, it was not.

NS: Okay. I was wondering about that.

WG: They haven't been any baymen going there. There's a pipe there. That's how it's closed water [inaudible].

NS: Had it ever been a productive shell fishing area?

WG: Not that I know of. I know guys picked little shiners and minnows and stuff like that.

NS: [laughter]

WG: Stuff like that for the bait.

NS: Yes, for the bait fishing. Have you worked in Flanders? I know that there are a number of – all it seems like industrial operations close to the shoreline. I don't know what they are. I just see them driving around in different buildings.

WG: Yes. Flanders comes kind of like this. This is the East Bay and then comes around. Then this is the Peconic River, and this is where the bridge is that goes over right. Then the layout here is – Red Cedar Point is on the north side. This is south here and this is north.

NS: Okay.

WG: I guess up in – there's a lot of little creeks here; Meeting House Creek and other creeks. But these are all in turn the river East Creek. There's a lot of Marina. There's a lot of – I think there's a duck processing plant.

NS: That's what I'm looking at.

WG: It's in Meeting House Creek. The water here from this point here over to somewhere over in here, this is all closed water now. From here, kind of an odd way. From here to here, right in here is a conditional winter area. This is town of Southampton. It's called Moriches Bay. This is Red Cedar Point. This is all open water. All this area here is Suffolk County Park lands.

NS: Okay. That's Sears Bellows Park.

WG: Sears Bellows and a lot more. So, at one time, they opened up, about here across to here, [inaudible] was opened in the summer months also, but that was about fifteen years ago. I'm sure it'll never be opened again.

NS: Why did they close it?

WG: The water quality is kind of [inaudible]. There's been some changes in the federal regulations on testing. They have to test now in extreme conditions, in hasty rain. You can't just test in dry periods.

NS: Now, you mentioned like there's a duck processing plant. When was that opened?

WG: I think it's been here forever. As far as I know, it's been here for a long time.

NS: Do you ever remember it getting worse at any particular time? Any of the waste that they were disposing of?

WG: No, not really.

NS: Can you think of anything else in terms of men's activities on those shores besides the homes?

WG: Well, you have increased boat traffic. I don't believe Peconic bays are now discharge zone yet, which that would be a step in the right direction, of course. But to have that, you have to have a certain number of pump-out stations, which probably aren't available right now, that aren't in place. I don't know how they would – if Suffolk County would go about applying for that, but that would be a help.

NS: What about dredging? Have there been various dredging projects that you've seen end up worse for the shell fishing?

WG: Well, what happens with dredging is you have a depression – with dredging, its benefits – and it has its arm to the bag. The benefits are that you have flushing action and you need that. Because now, with all the development on the shoreline and all the runoff and everything else, we didn't have a halfway decent flow of water in all the areas you could flush. But then on the other side of the coin is when you dredge a depression, it usually fills up with rotting organic matter, seaweed, and other things. Because it's a depression and they just kind of fall in there.

It's unsuitable for shellfish and I think most fish [inaudible] because of the kind of like –

NS: What would happen with the dredge spoils? Where would they dump those?

WG: Well, there's specific sites now that –

NS: Back in the old days,

WG: Yes, and they use those sites still. Now, they'll just put it along the beach or something like that.

NS: Did they ever dump it anywhere in the bay?

WG: Well, it's funny you ask that question. About two years ago – when was it? Was it last year? A year ago, they were dredging a middle pond in Shinnecock Bay. They've always dumped the dredge spoils over, I guess to the northwest, along this one shoreline. Well, what the county did is they dumped them over the top of shellfish grounds –

NS: That's what I was wondering.

WG: – and the back in the water, they dumped them.

NS: This is in Northwest Harbor, they did this. This happened in Northwest Harbor?

WG: No, no, no. This happened in Shinnecock Bay. Shinnecock Bay, they usually dump the spoils to the northwest along the shoreline. But this time, they dumped it to the east along an area that was never a spoiled site. I have to find fault with both the county and with the town because the town never really reviewed the permit. The town, at least in the Southampton town, all trustees have the control of the bottom line. So, I think it's kind of their duty to – because on the permit, they said they were going to dump to the east. To the east, there may have been used as spoil site maybe fifty years or forty years ago, but it hasn't ever been used since then. Instead of dumping them on the shore, like I said, they actually put the spoils back in the water over the ground with shellfish.

NS: This is right by Shinnecock Inlet they did this?

WG: Just across the way. Do you know where the Suffolk College is?

NS: Yes.

WG: Okay. Instead of making that left like to go to the train station, sounds like you make a right. If you go all the way down to the end of the road, you'll see that area there.

NS: That used to be a clam bed?

WG: Yes, it was a clam bed. I think that the damage was kind of minimal because it was

stopped within a couple of days, but it shouldn't have happened at all.

NS: Can you think of other places where that might have happened, either intentionally or accidentally?

WG: Well, I'm sure it has, but –

NS: Go back in the course of your life.

WG: Yes. I can remember at North Sea, they dredge this little creek because the homeowners wanted to put in larger boats, and the creek was four feet deep. It was just absolutely millions and millions of immature shellfish just all – put the spoils right on the bank. They were just all over the banks, just –

NS: Clams, oysters, scallops.

WG: Mostly clams, hard clams and soft clams. But that's never been dredged since. But a few baymen and environmentalists were outraged over it.

NS: When did they dredge that?

WG: That was probably about seventeen years ago or sixteen years ago or something like that.

NS: How did you get into this?

WG: Working on the water?

NS: Yes.

WG: Well, I grew up out here. I lived right near the water. I was working at a job that I hated.

NS: [laughter]

WG: My friend was doing this. I said, "Well, let me try it." Back when I started, it was good. Bought a house in one year. I mean, that's how good it was.

NS: What were the methods that worked best for you?

WG: Oh, the methods? They're just basically the same. But our equipment was tremendously – I mean, the rakes and everything else.

NS: Did you go tonging?

WG: No. I raked mostly. There's not many tongers left. Clams aren't thick enough for them. The rakes are so good. You can rake in any type of bottom with a specific type of rake. If the bottoms real hard, you use a certain type of rake. Where people used the tong before, twenty-

five years ago, they couldn't rake the bottom because there was like one type of rake with these great [inaudible] teeth on them. If you tried to rake hard bottom, you'd just anchor the boat.

NS: Were these hand rakes that you used, or did you also have the kind attached to the –

WG: Yes, yes. They're attached to big scoping poles. No. In New York state, you're not allowed to harvest hard clams.

NS: To dredge clams anymore.

WG: No.

NS: Did you ever go treading? Was that ever a commercial technique?

WG: Yes. Yes. There was a lot of people that worked overboard with rakes overboard. When I first started, most of the – well, I wouldn't say most, but about two-thirds probably of the guys that worked on the water worked in the water in Southampton. I remember one morning, at Moriches Bay, I was just counting the guys over and over. I counted 147 guys that were full-timers.

NS: You know all those Brookhaven Baymen?

WG: I know them.

NS: I know all of them too [laughter]. South Shore Estuary, that's the other thing I'm involved with [laughter].

WG: I know a lot of them.

NS: Yes. Danny King and Steve –

WG: Danny King's from –

NS: – and Sharkey and King King. Yes. It was whole networking some of them. Vinny.

WG: Vinny?

NS: Yes, I don't even know his last name.

WG: (Rockanelli?).

NS: Yes.

WG: His brother, Jamie. I clammed in Florida with them.

NS: Oh, [laughter].

WG: Vinny works for the town now.

NS: I love Vinny. He's got balls [laughter] than a lot of the guys on that.

WG: Vinny was on a relay team together down in Florida. Relay and hard clams out there. Vinny was in shore and he went crazy.

NS: [laughter] He does that.

WG: Yes. He broke up his seed rack, and then he had a screwdriver and he was stabbing the console of the boat.

NS: [laughter]

WG: He came in that day. The price was 20 cents. Vinny had 3,400 necks. He made $680 that day. Probably the next highest guy in our team had about 2200, 2300 clams somewhere around there.

NS: It was a good trip.

WG: Yes, it was. Yes, I asked. I said, "Vinny, this is like the best day you've had in about a month or so. Why? Why did you do that?" He says, "I should have had this, this day earlier." Or something like that. So, it was a big joke in Florida that Vinny Rockanelli had a stabable console. If he ever bought a boat, he had to be able to stab it with a screwdriver.

NS: [laughter] Did any of the guys ever go just with their feet looking for clams?

WG: Yes.

NS: Would they pick them by hand, dig them?

WG: Well, some of them –

NS: Some of them had the rakes, yes.

WG: – pick it up and some guys raked. It depended on when there was a lot of grass. In the summertime, a lot of guys shredded. I know up west, they shredded also. They put a lot of money. Peconic Bay is not a shredders area. It's on the bottom.

NS: What would be the methods of the Peconic?

WG: The Peconic would be – well, we call scratch rakes. They're rakes and then you have like a belt around you with a chain that goes through it, and you pull it and it sits on your shoulder. That type of a thing. Or you could tong. In Peconic, there used to be tongers [inaudible].

NS: When did the tongers die out?

WG: About the time [inaudible].

NS: About ten years ago?

WG: Devastating, yes. I mean, it was really devastating for the [inaudible]. The only two places that we really have any shellfish left, very close to Shinnecock Inlet and very close to Moriches Inlet. Because you get a flow of water and it's somewhat clean in the summer months. In between, there's not much. We have some stuff on the north side. Quantic Bay – and I keep coming back to Quantic Bay because I live right next to it. But I believe it's had brown tide every single – and you can check with the Southampton County Health Department. Every single year since 1986.

NS: How do you describe brown tide? Because the newspaper definitions where they don't tell you anything than they're scientific. I'm looking for something that is an everyday –

WG: Well, you can see it's visible. The water is actually brown, that first year in 1986 stuff. I'm used to the color of the water now. We've had it, but at 1986, it was so shocking. The water in Peconic Bay was like that color right there. It was that color. People would not swim.

NS: It was obviously not from the bay bottom.

WG: No.

NS: It was the color of the water.

WG: It was just the algae blooms.

NS: Okay. Had you ever seen them before?

WG: I've seen algae blooms. There are different algae blooms; green algae, yellow, there's green. You've got those white colored stuff sometimes in the spring, but never – algae blooms have been for the last – heavy ones just for a little while.

NS: Do you think there's a relationship between the shell fishing populations and the vegetation?

WG: Oh, yes. Yes. There is.

NS: What is that relationship?

WG: I think the one I spoke earlier about why there is shellfish when there are larvae. When they're swimming around, they need something to attach to so this little pair to be up in a water column. That's the sea grasses because they were hatching.

NS: It was the eelgrass primarily?

WG: Yes, eel grass.

NS: Was there any other kind of grass? Cabbage?

WG: Yes. It was the cabbage, sputnik, brown (wolf?). I don't know the scientific names. But all those types of grass. It protected the shellfish from the predators. Plus, the fact that, I think the absence of grass, that really shows you that there's not a healthy environment. The bays aren't [inaudible].

NS: What do you think happened to the grass and the vegetation?

WG: Well, with the brown tide, they have to grasp the sunlight. The water –

NS: Oh, okay. So, it smothered it?

WG: – it smothered it. They were doing a test with a white disc. A few years ago, I took a guy up to a brown tide [inaudible]. I took a guy out from CBS News or something like that, put a show. We took a white bucket or something, put it like six inches under the water. We couldn't see it. It was not seen, a white something. I can't remember what it was. It came out.

NS: So, what eventually happened? The grass just disappeared?

WG: It died. It died, floated up to the top. On the shorelines that weren't bulkhead, it was piled up this much. Just black colored eel just on the river, everywhere.

NS: Was there a lot of bulkheading going on with the new homes being built?

WG: Well, there were very many pieces of property left [inaudible]. Just about everything was built.

NS: Are most of the properties, when they build, they always have bulkheading.

WG: Bulkheads, yes.

NS: What would they bulkhead with? I'm just curious to see.

WG: CCA. There has been a –

NS: Is that like a pressure treated lumber? What is CCA?

WG: Treated lumber, yes. Once again, there's enough of an outcry against it that the bulkheading has been limited somewhat. Not like in East Hampton, I don't believe you're allowed to bulkhead unless there's a real danger of losing your property.

NS: Or in Sag Harbor.

WG: Or in Sag Harbor. Yes. But that's part of East Hampton.

NS: Had they bulkheaded with other materials over the years?

WG: No, they haven't really. They have these rock, the riebeck type situations, I would imagine.

NS: So, natural materials?

WG: Yes. Big rocks.

NS: Do you think that may have had an effect in the shell fishing?

WG: I'm sure does. Yes, I'm sure it does because well, when you put the bulkhead there, of course you put the lawn there and the green grass. You take away the native plants and just kind of come around it. With the road run off and now with the runoff and the lawns. When everything's bulkheaded, I just spoke a little about how the eelgrass washed up. There's no place for the eelgrass to wash up. So, then that dies. I've seen that die in the bay with big marsh. It was just a rot on the bottom and it kills everything.

NS: Has there been bulkheading for as long as you can remember?

WG: Yes, as long as I can remember.

NS: What about some of the old timers? I'm trying to get a sense of when it really became routine, bulkheading.

WG: I don't know. I would probably say in the late [19]60s, when the property values started to really go up. At one time, there were a lot of the local people that had houses on water, and you could see a little boat there. Then the $25,000 house was worth $400,000. So, they sold and [inaudible] bigger houses with the bulkheads filling wetlands.

NS: I'm just thinking like, I know the answer to this, but I want to ask it anyway. You know how today we always have like these public hearings on different kinds of improvements, whatever.

WG: Right.

NS: Did anybody ever discuss what bulkheading may or may not be doing?

WG: No, not a long time ago. I mean, people I think looked at the water a different way. They looked at the water as kind of a place to get rid of the storm water. You couldn't hurt the bay because the water came from the ocean and everything else. But I think, now, we know that that's not true with many things. Even with the [inaudible] and sewage treatment plants that do not [inaudible]. I mean, there's so many different things that everybody took for granted that

they were harmless. Now, we know differently. I mean, how can you blame the [inaudible] roads back in the – some of the roads in the [19]20s and the [19]30s and even in the [19]60s, the new roads, there was no concern over what was going into the water from the road. I mean, there was no connection. But now, there is. So, now, there should be – you're going to have to take some kind of actions to mitigate some of the problems that we've caused.

NS: One of the things that I was talking with somebody else about, they mentioned that right around the time that – some of the sports fishermen were very upset about the commercial fishermen in the striped bass. Being able to use the nuts and whatnot. He mentioned that, you felt that there were some areas of the estuary of the bays where there may have been some sabotage efforts to prevent shell fishing or fishing in general.

WG: Oh, I'll tell you, you're always going to have arguments about striped bass –

NS: Well, he was talking about physical activities. He wasn't talking about arguments. Like, dumping of garbage, dumping of trees.

WG: Well, I really hope that wouldn't happen, but it may have. Not that I know of.

NS: Had you seen anything along those lines?

WG: No. I mean, things like conflicts with pots, for instance, it's just people –

NS: Would steal your pots.

WG: Yes, steal your pots and things like that. The striped bass thing, that's a political – it's recreation –

NS: Have you seen any just careless garbage dumping in the bays with the shell fishing?

WG: At one time –

NS: Because again, back in those days, nobody even thought about it [laughter].

WG: No. It wasn't thought about. Really. It was like a perfect place to get rid of the waste. You know the Hudson River with the PCPs?

NS: Yes.

WG: There was another one down in the James River in Virginia. One of the chemical companies, Kepone.

NS: Well, have you seen anything like that around the Peconic Estuary?

WG: Not that I know of.

NS: Any chemical? Any accidents?

WG: There are so many accidents on island I don't know. But – [laughter]

NS: [laughter] I know. You know, animal waste.

WG: Yes. That's going to be the next [inaudible]. One of the problems we have here, multiple waters are very close. It's not a good flow. For instance, what I understand about the Peconic Bay, the water in Riverhead takes fifty-four days to reach [inaudible]. So, it flushed the bay.

NS: Wow. Very, very slow moving.

WG: So, whatever goes into that bay impacts it for a long time. It's not like, it's just like extra Shinnecock Inlet and our tides going out and you throw something over and it goes out to the ocean, right? It's not that. We're finding out now that the ocean shouldn't be receptacle for our trash and our sewage because things are happening out there and all over the world. But I just think that one, over the years, we did all these things so detrimental to the bay, and it's going to cost a lot of money to improve it. I mean, with the sewage treatment plants and [inaudible] based programs and education for people who live on the water. Maybe some changes in zoning. I would like to see a shift away from sod lawns next to the water. At least get some kind of buffer zone with natural plants and stuff that doesn't need to be fertilized or sprayed with pesticides and herbicides.

NS: Is that a very popular type of lawns, the sod lawn?

WG: Yes.

NS: I see the sod farms up on the North Fork and I didn't know if people around here used that.

WG: Yes, they do. Yes. I mean, there's nothing really wrong with it, but to keep it looking nice and green, you have to –

NS: That green, you've got to put in tons of –

WG: – put these chemicals on them. If you're right on water, they're going to end up – some kind of a buffer zone with some natural vegetation or something like that. But –

[end of transcript]