

Wild Caught
Michael Voiland Oral History
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Matthew Barr: Let's just back up a little bit. Why don't we just start off and take us back? Because I have footage from that meeting in New Bern a year ago. In a way, that was one of the first meetings that led to focusing on these issues. Why don't we just start off with the kind of old throughline of, you know, how the study group all came about. Why don't we start there?

Michael Voiland: Okay. Stemming from a meeting that Sea Grant co-sponsored with some other groups that was held in New Bern in June of 2006, more and more public interest, and of course, elected official interest, arose in terms of the waterfront access issue, particularly for working waterfronts and recreational public access. That meeting really brought together many people. I think there were close to two hundred attendees. It really galvanized the communities along the ocean shore of North Carolina and in the estuary areas about the loss of this heritage and of the loss of an industry that's been with the state for many years. That quickly led to a bill being introduced in the North Carolina General Assembly that was meant to address it, not directly, but to form a study committee. The bill passed, and I was made chair in the legislation as being the director of North Carolina Sea Grant. There were 21 members from all walks of life, from state agencies to communities to the industrial sector, the commercial fishing, recreational fishing, and so on. We were given a very short window. We had to report back by April of 2007, literally seven months, eight months to work on it. We were charged with addressing either management tools that is planning or zoning tools that might be used, or taxation tools that might be used. Of course, there's also the third tool of just the state budget. What kind of resources does the state want to invest in and focus in on this issue? We met several times. By law, we had to conduct three public hearings along the Lakeshore, which we did. The committee itself met four times, and there was a lot of interaction through mail, email, and so on. We met our deadline. We reported to the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture on April 13th, of 2007. Then there was a wait, a wait for that to simmer with the public and with elected officials. Just about the time when the legislative adjournment appeared to be looming, there was great action by the General Assembly. They basically addressed it in several meaningful ways, addressing a few of the recommendations of our committee.

MB: Excellent.

MV: Take a breath [laughter].

MB: Can we back up a little bit? Can you talk about some of the recommendations that your committee came up with?

MV: Sure. Yes. Among the 27 recommendations that the Waterfront Access Study Committee put forth one of the main ones was to create a fund, call it what you will, a waterfront trust fund, a set aside, but some kind of fund whereas the state could devote resources to help communities and to help its state agencies to procure, buy, develop waterfront property for the purpose of helping working waterfronts and increasing public access to the coastal waters of North Carolina. That was one of our main recommendations. I think that was the first. Second one was to help the working waterfronts by way of some kind of tax break. Our recommendation was to extend what they call present-use value taxation to working waterfronts. In a nutshell, farmers and foresters in North Carolina are not taxed at the best, highest possible use on their many acres of

land. They're taxed on the basis that it is agricultural or horticultural land. So, they pay less taxes than if all that land was devoted to, say, residential housing. That's been in effect for a long time. We asked the General Assembly to consider extending that to working waterfronts, so that these waterfronts would not be taxed out of their locations. Another thing we did was recognize that the state has several programs related to boating and fishing access that do exist that actually work pretty well. They're just underfunded. So, we encouraged the state to address that with a budget increase. And lastly, there are some things that seem like no-brainers. There's -- the North Carolina Department of Transportation has many, many miles of roadways, rights-of-way, and bridges. We would like to see them address public access in their planning and their designs for those particular roadways or rights-of-way. So, those were among their recommendations. We had some others involving how the state can address things educationally, through educating communities on what options they have to increase access on waterfront development. We also spoke a bit about the state perhaps looking into the use of state lands, submerged state lands, for private use and private gains, see if there's a better way to track that and to, in fact, charge a fee to use that money. So, those were the general areas that we asked the state to address.

MB: Can you talk a little bit about what happened just a couple weeks ago that Senator Basnight was instrumental in getting the money?

MV: I'm not going to say that. Okay?

MS: I understand. Yes.

[laughter]

MV: Before the General Assembly adjourned, there was a rush for some action on this issue. You can look at it two ways. The first thing they did was in the state budget bill, they established and created a \$20 million fund called the Waterfront Access and Marine Industry Fund, by which the state can now make investments in waterfront properties that will enhance commercial fisheries-related waterfront access and also public access to the shoreline. That program will be administered by the Division of Marine Fisheries, and I understand they'll have an advisory group to help them out there. But I understand also that they're going to move very quickly on making those state investments. Anything they spend will need to be approved by the Joint Legislative Commission on Seafood and Aquaculture. So, they established the fund that the Waterfront Access Committee had recommended. But then there was a separate piece of legislation that did several things. It did extend the present-use value taxation of the working waterfronts, which will take effect in 2009. It did increase funding through increased boater registrations for existing boater -- boating facility development projects in North Carolina. It did direct the Department of Transportation to look at how they can better design roadways and bridges for public access development. So, it took a number of steps along the lines of what the committee had asked for. So, in total -- and I've spoken to many members of the committee -- they feel that this is a great start for North Carolina to start to address some of the working waterfront and access issues that exist.

MB: What are some of the other recommendations that you're looking for to try to get

implemented over the next number of years?

MV: Sure. One of the definitions that the new law uses for what is a working waterfront, it's clearly focused on commercial fisheries. Our committee had a broader purview. We looked at working waterfronts as being beyond just commercial fishery-related enterprises, such as a marina, which is on the waterfront, and it serves a public access function. So, in the future, we hope that all working waterfronts will be able to benefit from the extension of present-use value taxation. So, that's one thing down the line that we hope can be addressed. The committee also had recommendations, as I mentioned earlier, on educational approaches on the use of submerged lands that belong to the state by private interests. Is the state being recompensed for that use? Also, we encourage – strongly encourage communities to take a more active role in more innovative types of zoning, such as conditional zoning. It's a specific technique used by planners and zoners to encourage certain types of land use. So, those are the kinds of things that were left unaddressed in the legislation, but we hope the General Assembly will get to it sometime soon.

MB: Can I ask you this? Could some of the money be utilized, for example, to buy a fish house? Is it possible under this law, what's just been done?

MV: My understanding is that the \$20 million set-aside fund can be used for such purposes. It would have to be done in conjunction with the state, as a public entity, and with communities, but it's something that I believe can be done, as long as it enhances commercial fisheries access to the resource. I believe it can be done.

MB: Yes. Because I understand, since 2000, about a third of them are shut down now around the state. Like in Sneads Ferry, half of them are for sale. One of them has been sold. So, that's becoming a crucial factor for – problem for where fishermen can then, you know, offload and get ice and work out of.

MV: Correct. Yes, the loss of fish houses has been an issue, and it's one that is not just anecdotal. Sea Grants supported a research project that documented, over the last five years, as of 2006. There's been about a loss of about a third of those fish houses along the shore of North Carolina waters. That's not a good thing for the commercial fishing interest. If they have no place to offload their catch, how is North Carolina going to have a profitable and productive commercial fishery?

MB: Well, it certainly is a positive, very wonderful development that's happened here. You know, it's a great thing that I'm sure there'll be more money, hopefully, in the years to come. You've got to start somewhere, though.

MV: Yes [laughter]. As I said, it looks like it's a great start. What it clearly says is North Carolina as a state, values its commercial fisheries, working waterfronts, and wants to do something to maintain, retain those kinds of enterprises and that diversity of land use along the shore. It sounds and looks like the state of North Carolina does not want the shoreline of North Carolina to become exclusive that is filled with nothing, with certain kinds of land uses, such as residential or retail, but in fact, wants to do something to maintain an industry and maintain a

heritage.

MB: So well put. I mean, that heritage, of course, as we all know, is extremely important and is fragile too.

MV: Very.

MB: You know, it's kind of ironic going to the Shrimp Festival this last weekend in Sneads Ferry. It's their 37th Annual Shrimp Festival. They had shrimp peeling contests. The fishermen had a booth set up. They had a troll net set up where kids could play on it, go through the turtle shooter, and all that kind of good stuff. Of course, they served huge amounts of fried shrimp and all that kind of thing. People love it. It's such an important part of our culture all. Yet right at the same time, the fishermen are saying that – this is a whole different issue -- they're paying 2.80 for diesel fuel, and they're getting \$1.60 for the shrimp.

MV: Yes.

MB: Put those two together, and you've got a problem.

MV: Yes. The commercial fishing culture, in this state in particular, is fragile. They have regulations to deal with. They have high costs, both for fuel and other things. Plus, in many cases, sons and daughters of commercial fishermen don't look towards the future as that being a profitable and productive way of life. So, they're having that loss. But as many people have said, that heritage is truly part of coastal North Carolina. It is something that many people want to see continued and to have some relevance as we move into the future.

MB: Yes. That's absolutely true. Getting back to this legislation that just passed – because I remember going to that conference in New Bern and reading about these issues – so, now, North Carolina is joining some other states, like Maine, for example, that are trying to change – to maintain this culture.

MV: The issue which has really come to the fore in the last three years of working waterfronts and waterfront access, for those kinds of businesses, and for the public in general, up until recently, you could point to two states in terms of addressing that directly. One was the state of Maine, and the other was the state of Florida, coming from slightly different directions, Maine being a strong commercial fishing stronghold for all of its existence and Florida trying to simply make sure that there's more of a public access available to their citizens. Now, I think you can add the state of North Carolina as a state that has taken a stand and has made a direct effort to try and address the very same issue. Each of these states is in a different time, is in a different era, and their development has a different looking shoreline. But I think you can now point to the three states as examples of state government trying to address this matter.

MB: Well, that's interesting. So, that's very good for North Carolina to be an elite company, it seems to me. I mean, California, for example, you know, all those states, Oregon, on and on and on, these issues obviously affect all the – however you want to call it – the maritime states. Looking at California –

MV: Right.

MB: They've had similar issues for years about, you know, say, condos pushing out the fishermen or whatever.

MV: Yes. I understand that the steps taken here in terms of a commission or a study committee in North Carolina has already started to influence other states. The state of Maryland created such a commission around the time that we were submitting our report. The particular elected officials there knew of our effort and studied what North Carolina had done with a study committee approach and put this committee together in their state. So, it's a good thing, starting to catch the ears and eyes of others.

MB: Excellent. Well, I think that pretty much wraps it up.

Male Speaker: Did you want to get anything about the wild-caught branding?

MV: Not for me [laughter].

MB: I think we'll be able to use that. I know you support it [laughter].

MV: We stay out of it.

MB: (Southern Triple Alliances?).

MV: Yes. I understand what it's all about. Right.

MB: We're getting some of their ad material to –

MV: Okay.

MB: – try to show how they are trying to brand it all Angus beef.

MV: Well, this whole concept of niche marketing your product is very, very important. We see some of that going on now in Carteret County, where they have this program called Carteret Catch, which is simply trying to get restaurants and commercial fishermen to buy into the fact that you might want to have something on that menu for the tourist who wants to have a local fresh-caught catch. Probably the most common question restaurants, particularly the seafood ones along North Carolina shore, get, is, is this locally caught fresh seafood? This Carteret Catch program is to try to encourage that, to encourage restaurants to promote it, to have locally caught seafood on the menu and special items that can be ordered off the menu, and to have some kind of network where they are being supplied by local commercial fishermen.

MB: Now, is that the one that Dr Susan Andreatta is involved with?

MV: Correct.

MB: Two grants from Sea Grant, right?

MV: Yes. Well, actually, she's gotten two grants from the North Carolina Fisheries Resource Grant Program, which we administer, although it's the state's money. We have had a researcher studying niche marketing and community-based marketing, which is something that's come to the fore in agriculture, and we're trying to apply it here to fisheries in North Carolina.

MB: Well, it makes a lot of sense. I think, as we all know, the slow food movement and sustainable –

MV: Correct.

MB: There's a huge amount of interest, these books by Barbara Kingsolver, about how to grow your own food, you know, all this enormous amount of interest in food. Then also, the issues, as we've heard about, the tainted imports of seafood –

MV: Tainted imports.

MB: – and other foods from overseas that we don't even know what –

MV: Correct.

MB: – components are going into a food or toothpaste or whatever, for that matter. Since we're on this area and being an expert in all this –

MV: [negative]

[laughter]

MB: I know this is a different issue, but we are going to put this in a little bit. If the FDA, in mid-July, took measures to – as I understand, it wasn't outright ban on Chinese seafood, but it's come close to them requiring rigorous testing of shrimp from China, tilapia, and some other seafoods for these antibiotics that are banned. Could you talk about that?

MV: I'm really on the outside looking in on that. All I can say is that effort by the FDA as a federal agency is certainly understandable when one looks at the different kinds of contaminant issues or episodes that have occurred in the food supply. If anyone is sensitive about food supplies, it's the United States because of what happened in 2001. So, there's great concern about the safety to the consumer of food supplies. When the United States is now importing more and more of its food, you can understand how an agency like FDA will try and do more testing and have more regulation in terms of imports than they've had before.

MB: Okay. Good.

MV: That's all I can say [laughter].

MB: Right. I've got you. Well, now, just the last thing, take a shot – I know we're not doing Screen Actors Guild here, although it's beginning to appear like it – but if you could just say a recent positive change in this landscape has been the passage of this bill.

MV: Okay. In North Carolina, we've seen some very recent changes that may really benefit the commercial fishing industry in North Carolina, with regard to having adequate working waterfront. One of them has been the creation of a \$20 million fund that the state will administer to make sure and ensure that there is adequate public access, public land, public facilities to help and assist the commercial fishery. The other one was a bill that included increases for boating infrastructure and extended some form of tax relief to commercial fisheries-related enterprises along the shore.

MB: Perfect.

MV: Okay?

MB: Great. All right. We got it.

MV: Okay, good.

MB: Thank you, sir.

MV: You're welcome.

MB: All right.

MV: Not a breath [laughter].

[end of transcript]