Christopher Letts
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Tape One, Side One

MR. LETTS: -- they keep whatever they catch, and they eat whatever they keep. And a lot of times they'll cook it right on site.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

MR. LETTS: They're the most serious and most aggressive of the fishermen, and they're not necessarily imaginative.

INTERVIEWER: Mostly from Croton?

MR. LETTS: Well, no. They come up on the train, and you see them coming out into the park. Some of them drive, but you'll see many of them coming out into the park with shopping carts. You know, they've gotten off the train from the Bronx or wherever. So it's a long walk from Croton Station out to here, it's got to be 5 miles, and they've got these big quivers of surf rods, and if they catch 20 fish, they keep 20 fish, if they catch 5 fish, they keep 5 fish. It's a great place to hear every language that's spoken in the Hudson Valley all in one morning.

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

MR. LETTS: We were walking out here, we were down by the west seawall, and it was in May, it was during shad season, and they favor these huge surf rods, this was maybe a 10-foot stick. And I could see that the surf rod was bent over, and that the fish was big enough so that this young man couldn't even hold it up in the air. It was a family group, several young men, and then an older man, and some kids, and a couple of women. And they were running around, I mean, it was Latino for sure, the excitement was -- I mean, that was my take on it anyway. So we were 200 yards away, and I said, "Come on. I want to see this fish. I want to see this fish." So I went blasting down there, and there is some guy with a big landing net. Well, this poor schnook didn't know what a drag on a reel was for, and so he had it was probably a 15-pound fish, and he maybe had 12- or 15-pound test line, but he had that dragged just tightened right down so that the reel couldn't release any, and he had the rod pointed right at the fish. And I got down there and the fish came out of the water, and there was no place for it to go, I mean, there was no give at all in the system, and it surfed like that for about 20 feet, and then, pop, the line broke. What did the guy say? "Aye, carrumba!" He says, "Oh, grande. Oh, grande." It was great.

INTERVIEWER: Did you show him how the --

MR. LETTS: I gave him a 5-minute lesson, and they all listened. I showed him that you should be able to strip it with your hands, and if you can't strip it with your hands, there is no hope for the fish. Look at this parade.

INTERVIEWER: Wow.

MR. LETTS: This guy out here, I'm almost positive, is a fellow named Mitchy Tobe(?), a friend of Henry's.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, really?

MR. LETTS: And he's the only one that's out here in any kind of boat with any kind of tackle that makes this a sporting experience. All the rest of these people -- look at these goddam Winnebagos that these people are in. Every single one of those boats is -- whoa, did you see that?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I saw that.

MR. LETTS: That was a blue. That was maybe a 10- or 12-pound fish. I don't think anybody had it on. It was a long ways from the boats for it to have been hooked. This just seethes with life. Every time I look out here I see -- there are schools of spearing(?), and the young herring are starting to come down. And there are schools of snapper blues feeding on them. This is what's happening right here, the snapper blues are hurting the young herring right up against the shore, and of course when they get shallow -- now, when the big blues come along, the whole situation is reversed, and then the snapper blue fish come spraying out of the water. I was down here with Henry one day, we were up on top, he couldn't make this bank anymore, and it looked like somebody was throwing concrete blocks in the water. I mean, these were big fish, 10, 12, 15 pounds, and they had bait fish, probably bunker(?), herded right up against the rocks. And it was one of those times when I didn't have a fishing rod with me, but you couldn't have lost under those circumstances.

Henry spent a great deal of his fishing career right out here. This is what's called The Mud Hole, and there are still miles of bottom lines that are tucked down in there. And I fished out here one winter, in the year that Henry and Tucker went partners, and it was Henry's job to mend the nets, and provide the nets, and it was Tucker's job to provide the boat and motor, and the deal was that each one of them would provide one person to fish. And so it turned out to be a young fellow named Keith Bonay(?) and myself who were going out night after night to lift these nets. We were fishing for bass.

INTERVIEWER: This was when?

MR. LETTS: This was after the fishery had been closed, but long before I went to work for the Hudson River Foundation. As it turns out, it was a lifesaver for me in several ways because you can't fool a fisherman, they know who is doing what. And just the fact that I was out here catching -- and it only lasted for a month, it was during the month of April, and that was it, it lasted for a month. But it opened doors to me that had never been opened before, at Stony Point, with Gabrielson, all up and down the river, there wasn't anything that was a secret anymore because I was one of them, and they knew it. It also saved my life because I was fairly close to starving to death that winter, and I think I made maybe $2,000 or $3,000 in that month, and it was all nice. I had a stack of $50 bills 2 inches high in my sock and underwear drawer, and I used to just gloat over

that money. Oh, it was wonderful to have cash after a long period without it. But we fished out here in The Mud Hole.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the first season you had fished?

MR. LETTS: Oh, no. I had fished for years before that. This spring was the twentieth anniversary of getting involved with Ron Ingold, and I fished with Ronnie as a volunteer, I was the director of the Tenafly Nature Center down in New Jersey, and a fellow named Marvin Kirkland(?), who at that time was a professional scouter with Boy Scouts of America, started telling me about the Hudson fishery, and I had just come from Michigan. I thought the Hudson was a detestable body of water, I saw no use for it, I thought it was a conduit for sewage and nothing, a commercial highway. I couldn't believe that there was any life out here. This was in the early '70s, this was in '70 and '71. Marv Kirkland(?) changed my life one day, actually it was the spring of '71, so it's more than 20 years.

In the spring of 1971, Marv Kirkland(?) borrowed a boat and a motor, and took a day off from work in late April, and I forgot where we launched it, probably at the George Washington Bridge, and we went out and watched Ronnie Ingold and his crew pick the nets, and I was fish starved, I had lived in Jersey for a year, I had just come from Michigan, where fishing was always good, and then before that, I had been in the Navy and stationed in Cuba and Alaska, where fishing was always wonderful. And to look at this water, I mean, I just couldn't imagine that the stream that 5 million New York toilets flushed into could have anything that I would be interested in. And out here were these guys right in the shadow of the bridge throwing back striped bass that weighed 15 and 20 pounds, throwing back buck shad by the dozens. I remember that I talked Marvin into going over closer, and of course a lot of the fish were floating, and we picked up two or three striped bass and two or three shad and put them in the boat. Then he took me back and introduced me to Ron.

Now, I don't know how well he knew Ron, I don't think very well, but I hung around and asked some questions. They had some smoked shad for sale, I remember that, they had shad roe for sale. I had never had either one, but I spent all the money I had buying smoked shad and shad roe, and then I came back, I guess I knew enough not to ask them if I could go out with them, but for several days the nature center in that year and every year after that, the nature center just got neglected during April and May, I would schedule things for the lift period, I would schedule my programs for the lift period. And I made it a point to spend as much time down there as I could, and at first I was the guy that brought down the Rhinegold and the coffee in the morning.

And then by 1972, I bought a set of oilskins, and I was going out with them. I think in 1972 and 1973, I think I made every single lift, every night lift anyway. And they really came to count on me. As a matter of fact, I probably cost somebody a job the last couple of years because Charlie Smith, who was Ron's partner -- I mean, here I was, I had a master's degree, and I had the title of director of the nature center, and I didn't have to work, I didn't have to get my hands dirty, and I was really making more money then than at any other time of my life, in relative terms. It was a good job for a kid right out of school. I wasn't a kid either, I was 27 or so because I had been in the Navy. But all of a sudden here were these rivermen and there was a place in the boat for me, and it just made me feel just wonderful. I've still got a postcard from Charlie someplace that was addressed to me out in Michigan, after I left New Jersey and moved back to

Michigan. I had written to him asking him if needed crew for maybe the 1975 or '76 or '74 season, whatever, and the reply came back, "As long as I've got a boat on the river, there is a place in it for you." I mean, that was just very important for me to hear, that I could stand up in front of the Rotary Club and talk about environmental issues and be acclaimed, but then also I could go out on the river under the roughest, nastiest conditions and have people glad to see me, and know that I would pull my weight. So that's really where it started. The job at the nature center just got kind of old and tired after 3 years. I was ready for changes. I had a marriage that was in a lot of trouble. And so Michigan was the home state for both myself and my wife, and we went back, the marriage did come apart.

I took a very different course after that initial belonging to the Kiwanas Club, and having matching shirts and ties, and having more than one pair of low cut shoes. And I went from that to working with a series of old men -- old men still run my life, except they're not as much older than I am as they used to be -- but for the Bob Gabrielson, Everett Nack, Henry Gourdine influence in the Hudson Valley, there were counterparts in the Midwest. Basil Rogers(?), who was a fur trapper and a stone mason and a bait dealer. Clayton Miller(?), who was a farmer and a stone mason. Neither one of these men -- Ralph Wood(?), who ran a Bowsal(?) tree(?) sugar bush.

And these men generally either had a great tolerance for young people, and a desire to pass on information about the way they had made their living, generally they didn't have young men that were of their blood, that were interested in taking over, and so they became avuncular and even parental in their influence on me. And so while I trapped and learned how to lay stone, and heated the little house I lived in with wood, I also came back out to fish with Ron and with Charlie. I always fished in Charlie's boat. I did that in '74 and '75. Until then, I really believed what the papers printed every year, that Ron Ingold was the last fisherman on the Hudson River. Westchester seemed like the far northern country to me, I just didn't know much about it. But toward the end of that fishing season, the Clearwater pulled in to pick up some shad. Actually I had called Pete Seeger, I had written a letter to Pete Seeger in 1972, inquiring about getting the use of the Clearwater for the Tenafly school children, and that did happen, and also telling him about Ron Ingold, and this fishing that was going on. And that brought Pete and Ron and the Clearwater and the fishermen together, and a series of shad bakes started, and that was the beginning of that. So the Clearwater pulled in, in the spring of '75, and I already knew that it was time for me to get out of Michigan again, it was time to go back to teaching, I felt so much stronger and so much more complete, and I knew I had to go back. It was like the batteries had been recharged, and all the boredom and all the annoyance and fatigue that I felt when I left Tenafly were gone, and I was recharged, and I had a new message, and a need to get back into the environmental education field.

Now comes Clearwater telling me that the position of the onboard education was going to open up, and was I interested? And so I had an interview and I was offered the job. And in the middle of the summer of 1975, I pulled up stakes again, said goodbye to my old men friends, and came back out here. So then the Clearwater was my life for 3 years, but even while I was on the Clearwater, I was trying to work as closely as I could with the commercial fishermen. There is an ancient film around someplace of myself and Ron and Pete Seeger all down at Fulton(?) Market with camera crews filming away like mad, Pete having a long talk with a guy who I knew only as John the Boner, he was a great shad boner, and he's since retired. Ronnie, all of our voices and all of our faces kind of in there, all of us much, much younger, it was 20 years ago, and all of us very

hopeful because the river was getting cleaner, and the fish were coming back, and it looked like maybe, as old Turk Degroat used to say, maybe we're going to be able to make it off the river again. And so Clearwater went on for 3 years.

INTERVIEWER: And were you getting to know the other fishermen on the river at that point?

MR. LETTS: No. Well, a little bit. I had just met Bob Gabrielson. Because I was in other ports up and down the river, I was getting to know other names. The river from the Westchester line north wasn't a mystery to me anymore, I had sailed it, and I had seen the jugs out there, and I talked to fishermen in the bars, but I really didn't know people. As far as I was concerned, commercial fishing was still done in Edgewater, New Jersey, and no place else. But after I left the Clearwater, again I embarked on a several year period of just sort of wandering. I bicycled across Canada, and I starved, I worked for another younger stone mason, but I still kept coming back in the spring to fish. And then I fished, I guess perhaps it was at that time that I fished with -- Cronin and I built our boat, that was immediately post-Clearwater.

INTERVIEWER: Now, how did you meet Cronin?

MR. LETTS: Oh, I know. One year I fished with Texas Instruments. They were contracted to help ConEd cover up all of their nefarious sins, and provide that screen of obfuscation that would hold off the necessity to build these $300 million cooling towers. And that was a real eye-opener.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about that.

MR. LETTS: Oh, boy. It was awful. If you want to get Henry Gourdine gobbling like a turkey sometime -- here is a gull with a (inaudible) -- you want to get Henry gobbling like a turkey sometime, ask him what he thinks about fishing by computer, because that's the way they did it, they let a computer tell them when and where to set their nets. They were modeling, you know. Well, I simplified it a lot, I don't choose to explain to Henry Gourdine what a computer model is. But I went to work for them as I guess a fisheries technician, and again it only lasted for a couple of months, it was from March until May of '79, but it was revealing because in that short time I worked as many hours as I could, and I worked on a trawler, and I worked on a haul seine crew, but mostly I worked on a gill net crew, that worked at night, and I chose night because I liked the river at night more than any other thing, and maybe they paid us a few cents more an hour, I can't remember exactly.

But I also ended up working in what they called "the pits," and I don't know if goes on anymore, but ConEd was required to keep a count of how many fish were impinged on those vast screens. Now, I don't know if you know this, but they suck in something on the order of a million of gallons of water a minute when those plants are operating, it's a huge volume. And that's why they're sitting there on that gorgeous piece of real estate, they need that cooling water. When they suck this water in, obviously small fish and sometimes even larger ones can't swim against that kind of flow. By their own admission, they gobble up 15 to 20 percent of the striped bass profit of the river every year, just spin it through their turbines and spew it out. They say it's not all dead.

I know I wouldn't want to make book on any organism's opportunity to live through that treatment. But it was required that the screens be washed once a day and that the body count be made. And for several days I had the unenviable job, unenviable in May, when things were heating up, of standing in a concrete pit that's maybe the size of the average living room, and maybe 10 feet high, and they would raise these huge screens out of the river and backflush them, and this torrent of dead fish and dead other things, and river refuse, anything that had been jammed up against the screen, would come plunging down on us, and there was a barrier there waist high that we stood behind, and the water flowed through it, and our job was to net the dead fish out of the water, and any other organisms that were there, and to record what we found. And then later on these fish were aged, and sometimes stomach samples were taken, and they were checked for fin clips. God, I mean, those were nightmare days, working in un-air-conditioned trailers in the heat of the spring sun, and thawing out bag after gallon bag of dead fish, and going through these reeking things and checking for --

INTERVIEWER: Do you have nightmares of that, of them coming at you?

MR. LETTS: Yeah. I mean, talk about working in the pits, talk about the pits. I mean, it makes all the sense in the world. I had forgotten just exactly how many days I had worked there, it certainly wasn't more than a week. The reason they got me was because I had a high security clearance when I was in the Navy, so I could be trusted inside an atomic power plant. So because I had a security clearance, I had a job. Well, as I recall, if they reached 10,000 dead fish and sustained that level for 4 days or more, they had to reduce their water intake by 50 percent. These are approximate, this is what my memory throws back to me. It was just an absolute miracle because we had 4 days of 11,000, 12,000 fish, 13,000 fish, and on the morning of the fifth day I came into two brand-new experiences. I walked around drinking my cup of coffee before descending into my particular circle of hell for the morning, and I noticed something I hadn't seen before, and that was that there were maybe 200 to 300 gulls out there on a feeding rampage. And I walked down to the water and looked, and here was this -- it was the miracle of the fishes, there were thousands upon thousands of little 1- and 2-year-old striped bass and white perch floating around, and the gulls were gorging on them. And then the next miracle was revealed an hour later when they washed the screens, and we only had 200 or 300 dead fish. Just in the nick of time the river gods provided this respite for ConEd. I told that to Bob Boyle a few years later, and he said -- this was during some of the ConEd hearings, and it was during some of the resolution of this whole thing, this whole cooling tower thing that's resulted in the Hudson River Foundation. "Well," he said, "can I use your name?" I said, "It's up to you. If it's necessary, do it, but I might want to get back in there sometime. I might want to work for them again." And so I'm on record as the voice of "Deep Trout." That was shortly after the porn movie, "Deep Throat," the porn classic "Deep Throat" was out.

So then a tenure for the Westchester County Young Bureau began, that lasted 3 years. I ran something called the Young Adult Conservation Corps, but I was still on the river, I was still interested in the river. By that time Henry and I were friends.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me how you met Henry.

MR. LETTS: Henry? I used to live right around the corner from him. There is a beautiful three-story mansard roof house right on the corner where you turn to go up Independence Place, and I lived on the third floor of that for quite a number of years, but even before that, when I was on the Clearwater, one of Bill Dovel's captains -- Bill Dovel himself gave me for use on the Clearwater, he said, "If I can trawl on this houseboat, you guys can trawl on the Clearwater." He said, "It will change your life," and it did, it did. And he gave me an old try net, shrimp try net, I think a 16-foot rope, and not surprisingly we loved it, not surprisingly we hung it down. And Bill had given me Henry's name, and I called Henry and went down with the net and met him sometime around 1977, and he mended the net. And I was in awe of this man, I mean, he was legend. I didn't see a lot of him until 1979, when I moved in right around the corner, and then he and I became better acquainted, and now I like to think friends. So in 1981 or '82, this sort of 3-year cycle that my life seems to have hung on all these years was due for another flipover, and just about that time Ronnie Reagan pulled the plug on a lot of these work programs and training programs, and the county said, "Well, we can keep you on," with their policy of getting rid of the indians first and keeping as many chiefs as possible. And I said, "No, it's time for a change." Well, I had been talking with Cronin, and Cronin had been talking to me.

INTERVIEWER: And tell me how you met Cronin.

MR. LETTS: Actually he and I had met when we were both working for Clearwater. So that means that we met in 1975. We met only a month before the PCB thing broke. I remember the New York Times, August 4, 1975, hope and optimism took a nosedive. Of course, Bob Boyle was on the case right away. It changed our lives immediately, but not nearly as much as we thought, because I remember even in the fall of '75, and into 1976, I was customarily settling catfish lines on the railings of Clearwater at night, and we had a boatswain's mate who made great hushpuppies, and once a week during the summer of '76 and into '77, when we were in the river we would have catfish and hushpuppies. And then finally it was the Texas Instruments team that told me that the catfish were testing out at about 10 to 12 parts per million. Well, we were using skinned filets, but we were deep frying them. Who knows? I don't think it caused any real harm to anybody. But I maintained a relationship with Cronin through those years. I think it was always pretty apparent that I cared more about the river, and he cared more about river issues. You know, given a chance, I would always be on a boat or in a marsh; given a chance, he would always be in a courtroom or a board room. And I don't think that's changed very much, if you just look at where we are and what we do. But I think we complemented each other nicely in a lot of ways during our time at Clearwater. And we didn't lose touch. There was a time when he iced fished with me for a couple of winters.

INTERVIEWER: Who taught you how to ice fish?

MR. LETTS: Who taught me?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

MR. LETTS: I taught myself.

INTERVIEWER: You did?

MR. LETTS: I taught myself. I had a lot of miserable experiences on the ice when I was a teenager. My father didn't know how to ice fish. All I knew was you go out there and drill a hole and wait for the fish to bite, and that's not all there is to ice fishing. But anyway, that's another story. That came from my Michigan past.

But John wanted to build a boat, and he wanted to fish out of it. And he had fished at Stony Point for a couple of years, knew those fellows, and they were willing to let us fish there. I didn't even know them at that time. And so over that winter, the winter of I guess '81, '82, the boat was built in John's garage. The truth to tell, Henry built the boat, we were just step-and-fetch, cut here, pound there, hold this block, and really and truly Henry built that boat. We wouldn't have had a prayer, we wouldn't have known what to do. I have virtually no carpentry skills; John does, but he doesn't know anything about boat building.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been amazing to watch Henry build a boat.

MR. LETTS: It was amazing. It was amazing, then the goddam thing wouldn't float.

INTERVIEWER: Why? What happened?

MR. LETTS: Well, I'm not sure exactly, I never really did get it figured out. We wanted a big boat, so we went for something about 22 feet along, Henry's standard boat, I think, was between 19 and 20. So we used basically the same materials, same gauge and width and thicknesses and that sort of thing. We used the same fastenings. I don't know if it's because we didn't caulk the bottom planks, or if the wood did something Henry didn't expect it to, or it's because we increased the size of the boat by whatever it comes out to, an extra 2 feet, 30 or 40 percent overall, I just don't know. Anyway, I do remember that the day we launched it, we had to take it from John's waterfront, there wasn't even a dock there then, we had to take it from John's waterfront to his neighbor's dock, which couldn't have been more than a couple hundred yards up the river, and this thing was making water at the rate of maybe 40, 50 gallons a minute, and a 20-foot boat just won't sustain that. John wanted a photographer to come out with us, he said, "We've got to wait. We've got to wait," and this guy was taking his time getting out of his car. I'm watching the water do this in the bottom of the boat, and bailing with a 5-gallon bucket wasn't getting it. I said, "John, we've got to go right now, we're going to lose this boat." He said, "Well, I've got an idea, let's panic," and I said, "If you think panic doesn't go along with losing a brand-new boat on the first day you put her in the water, you and I better have a long talk." Anyway, it took all that that engine could do, a borrowed engine from Bob Gabrielson, an old 30-horse Evinrude, it took all that engine could do to push us up river. And fortunately, this guy worked for ConEd, and he had a basement full of pumps, and this, and that, and the other thing, and I think this particular pump was shooting a stream an inch and a half of water, and I remember it took something like 45 minutes to empty that boat. And then the good fellow that he was, he went out all night long and pumped that boat for us. Well, eventually we tried all sorts of home remedies, getting good hardwood sawdust, and getting down under the boat, and trying to feed sawdust into the cracks so it would get sucked up in there. But she always made water. I don't think she ever took up enough.

INTERVIEWER: Where is she now?

MR. LETTS: Well, she's probably in Cronin's backyard, although I'm not sure. I know that Cronin arranged to have the boat sold to the Hudson River Fisherman's Association. I don't think --

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they could really do something with it?

MR. LETTS: I don't think she gets much use. Our paths have diverged. And he said, "Hey, use it anytime you want to," but I never did. I don't think it gets much use. For all I know, it could be upside down in his backyard, and it may have been that way for 5 years. Henry and I don't talk about it anymore, it got to be a little bit of a sore subject.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

MR. LETTS: Henry didn't build very many boats after that, and I'm not sure if he did build any more boats after that.

INTERVIEWER: Was he upset that it hadn't worked out?

MR. LETTS: Well, it was just better not to talk very much about it. There were things that really are more Henry's business than mine. It's just as well some of these things don't get reintroduced, I guess.

INTERVIEWER: So that was going to be your boat for the season, but it wasn't going to work.

MR. LETTS: Well, we did, we fished it.

INTERVIEWER: You did?

MR. LETTS: It finally took up enough, and I don't know if we caulked it, or what the hell we did, but we managed to sail it over to Stony Point -- it was a bad year -- we got there late, there had been a good start to the shad season, good weather, high prices, we missed that. And then we were fishing right over here on the other side of the river, and we hadn't even started fishing and a tug went through us one morning, and the weights hadn't fully settled yet, and the cox(?) skewed our lines all the way around, the bottom lines. Do you know the way the Degroats fish, the (inaudible) famous diamond? "Well, I was thinking about it one day, and I started drawing these diagrams, and out she came, and that's the way we've been doing it ever since. Fuck those poles." You must have heard the story, in one guise or another. So we were fishing diamonds, and we were fishing bottom line. Bottom line? Am I telling you the truth? I can't remember now. Were we fishing bottom line or top line? Yeah, we were fishing bottom line, definitely fishing bottom line. Anyway, one thing after another, after another, but I was having fun. I mean, I loved it.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so what happened when the boat went through?

MR. LETTS: Well, we chased it, and John spent $50 and a whole morning on the telephone calling the Coast Guard, and trying to get these guys shot, and if he couldn't get them shot, he was going to get them arrested. And what came out of it was nothing, for all our efforts nothing came of it. I mean, we had flags on the nets, the tugboater didn't care. If he saw the nets, he went through them on purpose; if he didn't see them, it didn't make any difference to him, it didn't change his life one way or the other. But it certainly did screw up our fishing.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of the diamond approach?

MR. LETTS: Well, I know, and I don't think anybody can test, that the pole fishing, as practiced by Ron and Henry, is definitely the most effective way to fish. One foot of that is worth 3 foot of anything else. And everybody knows that the diamond approach, those nets flop over in the current, and a flopped over net is not going to fish tight and clean. It might work very well for sturgeon, it may be one of the more effective ways to get a sturgeon. If it flops over and you can get a cup in it, you just might get that fish to roll up in there. But at that point there were so many shad, who cared? If a net caught 4 tons of fish and then flopped over and wouldn't catch anymore because of the weight of the fish, that was a blessing, you can only handle so many, you can only sell so many, you can only pick so many on a tide. So that was really a blessing. And we never thought we would see the day when people might be talking about putting sticks back in again. I don't think Ronnie will ever fish like that again, it was just labor intensive, it was really -- even Bobby, when he was putting poles in, it took a tremendous amount of work for him to set poles, and he wasn't really a pole fisherman, he didn't have the current for it to make it work properly. He never fished like Ron did. He called himself a stake net fisherman, but maybe he was a stake net fisherman, but he wasn't a pole fisherman, and he knows that too.

So we caught fish. The problem was that the price was doing what it always does, it was going down. I don't know that we ever had a payday that season. I still had a couple of paychecks coming in from Westchester County, and yet I was determined to have a good time, and I did have a good time, I loved being out on the river. And if we had a bunch of obstacles, well, by the end of the season we would work them out. You always feel better at the end of a fishing season, you feel stronger and cleaner, sort of like going off to (inaudible), it takes all the mean out of you. You might not make money, but if you can make your peace with that -- but that spoiled it for John, spoiled it to the extent that he didn't want to hear me whistle in the boat, he didn't want to talk pleasantries. He was scheming about where the next few bucks were coming from.

INTERVIEWER: Because he didn't have checks coming in from anywhere.

MR. LETTS: I guess not, I guess not. I didn't give a damn about the money. There are real basic differences between Letts and Cronin.

INTERVIEWER: So you decided not to fish another season.

MR. LETTS: Well, we didn't. As a matter of fact, he may have made it real easy because I think then he took a legislative aide job, if my memory serves, and the boat was on the bank. And it was nice, Tim Degroat came to me at the end of the season and said, "We would be glad to have you come back and fish with us again," and that meant just as much to me as that postcard from Charlie Smith.

And I can't remember what I said. I said, "I'll be fishing someplace, and I'll talk with you about it." By that time, I knew Bob Gabrielson, and all of us were involved in trying to get some sort of a fishermen's co-op formed.

INTERVIEWER: This was what year?

MR. LETTS: This would have been probably the spring of '82. So I had been in enough meetings with these fellows, we were starting to get to know each other. And Bob Gabrielson said he could use a man, and I started thinking about it, and I thought a couple of things. One is that it's an easier to commute to go down across the Tappan Zee Bridge. I was living in Ossining at the time, right around the corner from Henry. But that was an easier commute. But even more important than that, I hadn't done that kind of fishing, I hadn't fished in that location. And I was always aware that even if I wasn't getting a paycheck -- I was taking a post-grad course on the Hudson River -- and the truth is that all the things I've done up and down the river have really just made it possible for me to be a teacher here on Croton Point and other places. So I fished for 2 years with Bob, I fished for two springs with him, I enjoyed that tremendously. I liked his crew, I liked his style. Did you ever meet George Walters, a fellow from Long Island?

INTERVIEWER: No.

MR. LETTS: A real commercial fisherman. I don't know what he's doing now, he's probably handlining tuna fish, or potting blowfish, or maybe lobstering or crabbing, or who knows.

There is an osprey. No.

Anyway, I was in the boat with George Walters, and those were in the years when there were some young and crazy guys, Pauly and Phillip, and there was a real frantic, desperate kind of overtone to some of those years. Both Robert and Ricky were fishing. God, they couldn't get along. They couldn't get along. It's much easier now. They know that if Ricky fishes crabs, and Robert fishes shad, that's about as far as you can take family, you know. So they keep the old man on the water. But Pauly and Phillip were just taking drugs like there was never going to be another chance to do it. I used to talk about Tom Wake(?) about some of this, it wasn't anything at all to see them have fish fights out there in the boats. I think they were doing crack, among other things. It was a steady diet of illicit or excessive stimulants the whole bloody time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you catch fish?

MR. LETTS: We caught fish, yeah. Captain Bob -- I mean, there as a profit motive, and those were the good old, bad old days. I saw three boats out there working for 3 or 4 hours on a morning or an evening, lifting nets and catching fish. It seemed like they would have the whole bridge set up, maybe a mile of nets. And I've seen tractor trailer trucks, 18-wheelers, from Maryland roll out of there with 50,000 pounds on board, 2 days' catch, one weekend's catch. And those were the days when Bob would say, "I make it on volume. I make it on volume." And he did make it on volume, he could make money at 40 or 45 cents a pound, made it on volume. Boy, things have changed. That was before the intercept fishery got going, and whatever is happening upstream, if there is something happening. It was before Ian Burliuk and John Powell, and some of the other guys, who, to say it politely, are very aggressive fishermen.

INTERVIEWER: Explain that to me.

MR. LETTS: Well, just bottom line, their impact didn't exist up until half a dozen years ago, something like that. I'm not sure exactly when they started. At that time I think maybe Everett Nack was the only person who was actually fishing among the spawning grounds. Tom Lake and I talk about this a lot. Down here, Bobby Gabrielson takes his nets out of the water on Friday morning, whatever fish go by are past him, no problem. When he puts his nets back in, he's closing the gate again. But up there they fish bank-to-bank, and when they take their nets out on Friday morning, those fish are still there because they're on the spawning grounds, they're at their destination. And when they put their nets in bank-to-bank on Saturday night, they're fishing the same fish that they missed on Friday, there is no respite. And it's the same with the sturgeon, they're on the spawning grounds, there is no respite. And the sturgeon out here, and this is a big river, I don't care what kind of gear you've got, I don't care how good you are at reading your LORAN or setting up your marks, it's still a huge river, the river just north of Croton Point is more than 3 miles wide, it's big water out there. When you get up to where those guys are, you know if there are two rocks like that laying in the bottom, you know there is a little eddy behind them, and then on the 12th of June last there were four sturgeon laying in that hole. Also, it may well be that by the time they get up there the males and the females are starting to travel together, with a number of males gathering around a big female. And so Tom wasn't surprised this year when Everett caught a 200-and-something pound female, and in the 2 days following he took 11 males out of the same hole. So those influences weren't there, those impacts weren't there in those days. And there were a lot of shad --

INTERVIEWER: Do you mean because it was just Everett?

MR. LETTS: There was just Everett up there, and I don't even know if he was fishing sturgeon. If he was, he wasn't doing it very aggressively, and he wasn't doing it very successfully. I think they learned everything they could from us, and then they took all the tricks that Ian Burliuk could come up with, and they put them all together, and what they got up there now, as far as I'm concerned, is a floor-sweeping fishery. In those years, we had sturgeon coming out of our ears, not big sturgeon, every now and then you would find a big hole. Every now and then somebody would get one 4 or 5 feet long, and Bobby would put a tail rope on it and call the Norwalk Aquarium. Every now and then somebody -- once a year somebody would buy a keg of beer, and George Walters would take 15 or 20 sturgeon, and he and Bobby would spend all day Saturday smoking them, and we would spend all day Sunday drinking beer and eating smoked sturgeon. But it was not a big deal. When I was fishing for Texas Instruments in '81, I remember one time we set a net just a little too far out in the channel, we got off the shelf. It was right out here, we just went over the edge just a few feet. And I remember the crew chief was in fear of his job because he had not done what the computer told him to do, and instead of being in 18 feet of water, or 16 feet of water, we were in 35 feet of water, and as I recall, we had 205 sturgeon in a 250-foot net, and they were all the so-called the pelicans, the young ones. Now, that's the kind of catch that we used to experience. Henry, I remember just so clearly, Henry now says, "I'm afraid to put my net out there," and you know what he's afraid of, striped bass. But 10 years ago he wasn't as afraid of striped bass as he was with loading

up with sturgeon. I remember him clearly, him talking about it. And Gabrielson, the Degroats, when Turk was alive, a couple of times a season Turk would say, "All right, everybody, save their sturgeon for the next couple of days, pop wants to smoke a batch." And we would bring in sturgeon until we got 40 or 50 fish, and Turk would smoke a batch of sturgeon, and then there would be another smoked sturgeon orgy. Boy, would I give a lot just to go back to one of those, I would love to sit down with those guys. I can't believe that only half the Degroats are left, and the rest don't give a damn.

INTERVIEWER: Why did a commercial fishery not emerge given that kind of volume of sturgeon?

MR. LETTS: Well, you have to look at world affairs too, Iraq, Iran. The sturgeon supply and the caviar supply coming from European countries, also the rise of yuppie consumerism and the glorification of certain kinds of seafood. I think there was a strong feeling that American caviar was of secondary or tertiary quality, and that's not true anymore. The fresh sturgeon caviar that I've eaten this spring, and last spring, and the spring before that, is as good as any caviar I've ever eaten. And even the frozen is good quality, it's certainly good, worth eating. And all of it, the worst caviar, the worst sturgeon caviar, I've ever had would leave you never wanting to eat whitefish or lumpfish caviar. I don't know why would anybody would even bother with that stuff, I mean, you can't really call it caviar, it's fish eggs. So those are the reasons, I think. It was a tradition that had passed from existence. And you have to remember that it was only a century ago that Albany Beef was being shipped up the river, that free caviar was being served in New York and New Jersey bars on the free lunch table. Give a guy enough caviar and he'll buy another beer. And they fished those fish, they fished them right down. They never caught them all, but they fished them right down with their linen nets and their crude methods of fishing, they fished them right on down. And in my mind, I just see the fish coming back over the decades of the 20th century, getting stronger, especially --

Christopher Letts
Croton Point, New York
July 31, 1993

Tape One, Side Two

MR. LETTS: A lot of the big fish that are being caught now were young fish that went out to sea during those post-war years, in the '50s and in the '60s. And it's a great line, "If you will not learn from history, you're doomed to repeat it," and I think we're just plunging headlong into repeating this with the sturgeon.

INTERVIEWER: So you think having those -- Burliuk, Powell, and Everett -- up there could wipe it out?

MR. LETTS: Have you gotten the results of the 1993 sturgeon catch? I don't have all the figures committed to memory, but Tom Lake kept me apprised over the summer, and he's got a pretty good handle on it, and I think they exceeded the New York catch by something like fourfold, not just the river, but the guys outside too.

Now, here is something else, as I understand it, up until just a few years ago a sturgeon was shack money. Do you know the phrase? "Shack" is when you get lucky. If you catch a 20-pound lobster, and the boss doesn't expect it on the dock, and you can sell it, it's shack money, the crew splits the money, it's a by-catch, it's found money in a sense. So a sturgeon was shack, it was a by-catch, it was an opportunistic thing. But now they're targeted, and now everybody has got LORAN. You know, it used to be when only Captain Wooden Peg could line up the north stack with the big pine tree and the dynamite scar over here on the cliff, and find out where that honey hole was. Now any bozo that can run a LORAN-C can punch these numbers in, and anybody that can read a fishfinder graph can pinpoint. And now they've got side-scanners, for God's sake. I mean, you don't even have to be over the fish now, they scan out to the side for as much as a quarter of a mile.

There are no secrets. There are no secrets, it's like taking all the bedroom blinds off and leaving the lights on, everybody knows what's going on down there. So out at sea the same kind of intercept effort that's gone into -- well, let's just deal with the Hudson River -- it's gone into taking our striped bass, although that hasn't played a huge part yet because there is a real limit to how many bass you can put on the market. But the same effort that's gone into finding our shad and pinpointing them has gone into finding our sturgeon and pinpointing them. And no effort has been made -- they've made it with Salmonids, they made the effort to protect the fish until they get back to the river of origin, but there is no serious effort made with shad yet and with sturgeon. Shad, I think the guys in Delaware and New Jersey and Maryland and Virginia would say, "If you take us off shad, we're going to be out of business." And so there is a huge financial and political motivation for not doing anything with that. Sturgeon, it's just worth too goddam much money. A $5,000 fish? I don't believe for one minute that Ian Burliuk quit fishing when the seasoned closed. I don't believe it for a minute. Like, what did Tom say? It was cute in one of his letters. Ian must have worked hard because when the season closed he disappeared for 4 whole days, he must have taken a break. You know what he's saying. I don't believe for a single

minute that these guys haven't figured out a way to keep fish that don't fit in the slot size, I really don't. I love Ev, I mean, he's a friend, I really feel like I'm with family up there, but I'm distressed by what he's doing.

INTERVIEWER: Have you talked with him about it?

MR. LETTS: We've tried. It's so close to the bone, sometimes it's better not to talk about things. He knows exactly where Tom and I stand because we sat on the sturgeon subcommittee. We know where he stands, he sits on that sturgeon subcommittee. There are no secrets there. There are no secrets that the downriver guys -- and I really give them credit, Tim Degroat, "Shut them down , it's over." Tuck Crawford, "Shut them down." Jimmy Bleakley, "Shut them down." Cal Greenberg, "Shut them down." Or Jimmy saying, "I would be happy with half a dozen fish a year."

INTERVIEWER: Well, that's what they catch. It's not the volume down here.

MR. LETTS: That's right. Of course, they do target the spawners, I mean, that's what they're after, that's where the money is. I'll tell you, I took Bobby Gabrielson, Tom and I took Bobby up there, maybe it was 2 years ago. Or was it a year ago? And we went up for overnight. What I really wanted Bob to see was that haul seine fishery. And you don't see it every time you're up there, but I have a memory that I will never lose, it will never fade, of standing there with my chest waders on, looking over the cork line, and the water was clear, as it is not always, and here was this school of shad going around and around and around inside the net, I had never seen anything like that. I suppose millions of shad have gone past my boat, and under my boat, and tens of thousands have come up in my net, and you see them doing this, but you never see them swimming. God, they were beautiful. I wanted Bobby to see that. And instead, what we came away with was the sight of Steve and Everett dragging two 150-pound fish that had just been caught through the dirt and gravel up the path, throwing them in the back of a truck, and the gills still going on these things. I've put thousands of live shad in the boat, and you know, you can't find one flopping when you get back in, it's almost as though death is swift, death is instantaneous, death is clean. Stripers, it's almost a different story because you know that right up to the last minute if you want to, you can throw the thing overboard, or one fast rap on the snout and it's over. I don't know. Catfish, you look at them, and eels, and they're still alive 2 hours later, even if they're laying in the hot sun, and if you put them back, they'll swim away, and you'll say, "God, they're tough." But there is something about a sturgeon that's as old as I am, and as big as I am, and to see him dragged face down through the dirt with muck and stones in their eyes, and not even a billy club to whap them on the head and get it over with. It just bothered the hell out of me.

INTERVIEWER: Four hours to die.

MR. LETTS: Sturgeon. I'm not surprised. I don't know how long they would live, if you decided to put them back after you've had them out of the water for an hour or two, I just don't know. I know also, I've been told anyway, that when you process these fish for the eggs, big roe fish, that they're supposed to be alive right up until the time that --

INTERVIEWER: You cut the tail and drain the blood that way.

MR. LETTS: Yeah. Well, it happens with sharks, and it happens with swords, and it happens with tuna. I can't believe you can't accomplish the same thing by cutting the head off. They're going to bleed out that way too.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about the state regulation this season, one month fishery?

MR. LETTS: The subcommittee recommended that the sturgeon fishery be closed completely in New York waters, or at least Hudson River waters, but I guess that's what we were recommending for, until we had more information. Now, if the old men, who may only fish another 1 or 2 or 3 years, are willing to go for that, why can't the young men? I mean, what do we know about a fishery? All these fish that Degroat used to smoke, and Gabrielson used to smoke, and George Walters used to take back, when he went back on the weekends he would take a truckload of 2-and 3- and 4-foot sturgeon back with him, and smoke them at home and give them away. Bobby, I think, saw half a dozen baby sturgeon last year. Now, I heard someplace last night that somebody saw a whole bunch of small sturgeon, and that was good news, and et cetera, et cetera, but I haven't seen them. And I can gauge it by what Ron used to see and by what Degroat used to see because I fished there, I fished there. And what Gabrielson used to fish. I fished in those places, and I know what you can expect to see. And if the baby fish aren't there, doesn't that tell you something? It tells me something. It would make me nervous as hell. I have no fondness at all for Ian Burliuk anymore, and there was a time when I really thought that he represented -- that he was a good example of a new breed of fishermen, and I encouraged him.

INTERVIEWER: Why did that change?

MR. LETTS: I think if he knew that there were only 500 more big fish to come back to the Hudson River, that he would give himself 2 more years to fish, hoping that he could get 150 of them, and knowing that it wouldn't be worth his effort after that. A guy down in the Chesapeake said once, he said, "Some of these fellows," he said, "try to live on the land like the Indians did." He said, "There are others of them that would catch the last crab, catch the last oyster, and when the last angel flew over they would take a shot at it." And I think that Ian Burliuk would shoot the last angel, I really do. I don't think there is any room in him for -- I've never seen anything that approached warmth and tolerance. I don't see any particular fondness for the river, I just see a real working animal. You know, he's got it all right down. He's a good fish handler. I'm sure his boat doesn't stink, and I'm sure he's never shipped crappy fish because that's not good business, that's not good business. But I don't think he gives a damn for the river and the creatures of the river. I don't think he gives a damn for the history and traditions of the river, or for what's to come next. I don't think he cares. I don't think he cares. I don't think John Paul(?) does either, to be honest with you. John Paul(?), we're all nice guys, I would have a beer with any of them, I would, we're all nice guys, but I've known car thieves that were nice guess, and wife beaters that were nice guys, and on and on and on. So nice guy doesn't cut it, it's responsible citizen that cuts it when you're talking about resource management.

There is no reason to find that this is surprising, it's the history of New York, it's the history --

INTERVIEWER: It's the history of America.

MR. LETTS: I call it the Euro-fucking of the -- it's the western man concept applied to a brand-new continent. And in what, 300 years, 400 years? Well, if you read Farley Mowat, it goes back 500 years, when they were first ripping the fur and ripping the hides, the leather, off the land. And so in half a millennia we've taken a continent that for thousands of years had been in a state of relative balance, and relative health, environmental health, and we have what we have. We have what we have. I don't know. It grieves me. I mean, it makes a mockery of my life. I've been in this Hudson Valley since 1970. I've been concerned about the Hudson River, and trying to learn about the Hudson River, and preaching about the Hudson River since 19 -- I think it was the annual meeting at Green Brook(?) Nature Center, I was the guest speaker in 1973, and by that time I had been in Ronnie Ingold's boat enough, and I had seen enough marvels -- Ronnie is a good teacher. He feels the river, he feels the river. He's going to make the river work for him, but he wouldn't shoot the last angel, or catch the last sturgeon either. I had to talk for 2 years before he would let me take a sturgeon home, and I was desperate to taste a sturgeon. And it wasn't until we got one that was -- I think it was dead -- that he finally said, "Okay, you can have this one." So for 20 years now, even though my travels have taken me elsewhere, I've been a Hudson River champion, and a champion of estuaries. I feel like I've been slapped in the face because although some things have gotten better, not only have we not answered the big questions, we're not even prepared to hear them, the real questions. We're not even prepared to hear them.

INTERVIEWER: Like what?

MR. LETTS: Well, I mean, here is a poser. Just try this simple little statement. Even Bill Clinton talks about growth. How can you have unlimited growth in a sphere with finite space and resources? And you can't, of course. You know, we talk about what's right and what's just. Well, everybody says that life isn't just, but justice is an important part of our concept of society, and society reigns over everything we see. Well, so we lose a few rounds, Hurricane Andrew, the floods, the droughts, and things like that. We just don't choose to see that if nature doesn't have justice in the sense that we understand it, she does have a system of checks and balances, and she has a way of evening things out. We choose not to accept that or to deal with it. God, I should have known better, I opened up an issue of Environmental Magazine, this morning, E?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, E Magazine.

MR. LETTS: E. And it's a terrible thing to do to Nancy, but I said, "Gosh, Nancy, in 1991 and 1992, the federal government killed 22,000 laughing gulls in the air space at JFK because they were a threat to planes." "Don't tell me that," she said. And so I went on and dropped a couple of bombs on her, and probably spoiled her hour, if not her day. I'm sure she had to.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you see happening to the Hudson long term?

MR. LETTS: Well, I'll tell you, the late great recession was a truly wonderful thing for the environment, and for proponents of environmental quality. It's really an evil situation because when we lose a round, everybody loses, and most of the time they lose forever. And when we win a round, even the villains that have argued against us win too, they win just as big, and maybe even bigger, they and their kids and their grandkids. I don't know, I'm not enough of a saint and I'm not enough of a philosopher to really be able to balance all this out. The Hudson, what's going to happen? Well, the biggest marina on the river is right over there in Haverstraw, that's going to get bigger. There are going to be more and more of these boats. There are going to be fewer and fewer of the dinghies because it won't be safe. Nancy and I got dumped in a canoe out here. These things throw a hell of a wake. You don't understand it, you don't really realize it, until you run into six or eight waves about 3 feet tall and about 3 feet apart, and the canoe goes over. And it was 2 years ago, 2 years ago, just about today, and it took us half the morning to drag the canoe in. There is a camera and a pair of binoculars down on the river someplace. Well, some of that is our fault, we should have had stuff in waterproof bags and that sort of thing, but this wake came out of nowhere, just out of nowhere. So there is going to be more of this. These people are still for the most part dumping their heads at sea, and they really don't have too much of a choice, there are not very many pumpouts along the river, and most people don't want their nasty stuff sloshing around inside their nice toy anyway. The ones who carry portable units put chemicals in it to keep the smell down, while they're out there on Saturday and Sunday, but they're not going to put that thing in their BMW and take it home, so it gets dumped at 8:00 on Sunday night, going into the marina. I think there is going to be more and more stresses, more and more stresses. We've got a big, big problem that nobody seems to want to talk about, there is a hole in the ozone layer over our heads, and nobody seems to want to admit that there is a problem with that. I think we're just going to keep on -- it's going to be nickels and dimes, and nickels and dimes, a nick here and a nibble there.

INTERVIEWER: And what will happen to the fisheries?

MR. LETTS: Oh, lord, I don't know, I don't know. The best thing that ever happened to the striped bass fishery was that they became contaminated, but the bass didn't know it. But the market was affected, and we've got bass coming out our ears now. When we walked this morning there wasn't even a breath of air, and I just had this tremendous feeling of weight on my shoulders. Granted, I just spent 6 weeks up in Lake Superior country, and a month from now I'll be in Maine for a couple of weeks, but there was no charge to the air, there wasn't any positive sense. And I remember what a Chesapeake waterman said a few years ago, when the problems with the Chesapeake were just becoming apparently insurmountable, he said, "I can't put my finger on it, I can't define what it is, but the water just looks tired." And I looked around and I thought, Westchester looks tired, the land looks tired. It's not spring, I give you that, and it doesn't have the Christmas fall, but it doesn't feel like this up in the northern lake states, and it doesn't feel like this in the bog and fen country of Maine either, and it doesn't feel like this, by God, in South Jersey, in the pine barrens, it doesn't. But here, where the European influence has combined with the worst of the industrial age, 400 years of this has just taken the polish off. I worry about trees, I worry a lot about trees, we're losing our ash trees, there is this ash die-back. People say the dogwood blight is over, but I don't believe that because I see more dead

dogwoods than live ones, and the live ones I see are just barely making it, half the crown is dead. The wooliadelgid(?) is taking out all of our glorious hemlocks, and they're turning brown and dying, huge trees, trees that are 75, 85 feet tall, and a couple of hundred years old are dying right in front of our eyes. Many of these blights are things that we've brought, intentionally or otherwise. There are zebra mussels out here, there is enough to shingle your house within a stone's throw of where we are right now, come back in 5 years and you'll have to sit back from the water's edge. They figure it's going to take a couple more years before they really take off. I don't know. I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: What happens to the river when it loses its fishermen, when it loses its connection like that?

MR. LETTS: You should spend some time down on the Chesapeake. One of the reasons I felt so damn good at Stony Point, and even when I was looking over my shoulder fishing with Tuck Crawford, even when I was skulking around like an owl hoot, and when I was working with Bobby, I had a reason for being there, I was professionally involved, it was my life, it was part of my life, it was not just work, the threads intertwined, I was part of the fabric, and it part of mine. And that's important for people. You can't just be a tourist. One of the hardest things I do every summer is these sick kids up into Lake Superior country because it's 8 hours a day of hard work, with a Pulaski(?), or a pick, or a shovel, but it's 5 or 6 more hours a day of driving them, driving them to get up on time, get to work on time, to work safe, to keep their clothes clean, to keep the kitchen clean, air the sleeping bags, and that sort of thing. And it really takes it out of me. And I realize every year that I don't have to do this. When I see some guy go down the trail early in the morning, he says, "Hi. Have a nice day." I've already got blisters on my hands, I'm thinking, "I can do that." The money hasn't been a factor for years, it's a ridiculously small amount, and I know people up there, and I've got my own canoe, and my own pack, and my own stove, and my own water filter, I could come up here for a month, I could come by myself, I could come with a succession of friends, I could do it.

But I wouldn't belong, I would just be a tourist. And I own a little bit more of that island now, and it owns me a little bit more, because I left some pieces of flesh and blood, and a whole lot of sweat there, and I brought a whole lot of that dirt home in my boots and socks, and ground into the -- the calluses are starting to peel now, I hate to see that happen. So there is this thing about being of it and not just on it. A tremendous diminishment is going to take part. Because we shouldn't have to go to Henry's house, you shouldn't have to call me up for a Saturday morning appointment. Our young people, whether they're the children of fishermen or not, should be able to go down to the dock and listen to the salts talk. It isn't right. Down on the Chesapeake, it's a 15-year tradition for me now, and I guess Nancy has been going with me for maybe 5 or 6 years, or 7 years. We go down there and we start somewhere below the Bay Bridge, and work our way down, and there are a couple of funky old hotels, and there are some fishermen restaurants, and there are some deadend roads, and we eat off the land, whatever we catch, whatever we buy, whatever we steal, we eat off the land. And the whole process takes about 5 days, and we end up at Chincoteague, watching that last glorious late fall sunrise, and then slowly turning around and going up to catch the ferry over to Cape May, and then home. As the years have gone by, there have been fewer and fewer deadend roads, there have been fewer and fewer places where you can meet a boat coming in and buy a bushel of oysters, fewer

old salts to talk to, and fewer restaurants to hear them in, more condominiums, more big fancy marinas, more and more K-Marts and Wal-Marts, and more and more big, glitzy, cut-rate liquor stores, more and more 7-Elevens.

Aldo Leopold said, "I would not want to be young again without a young country to live in and grow up in." I feel the same way. That's what's going to kill Henry Gourdine, when he can't do what he wants to do anymore, when he's just tired of it, when he's just tired of the change. That's something else, I'm careful about what I say around Henry because a couple of times I've taken him out for a ride and asked him about what it was like 75, 80 years ago, and if he's in the mood and gets going on it -- obviously he cares deeply about what isn't here anymore. I think he remembers the cows and the chickens and the pigs, he remembers the farms, he remembers when most people were of the land, and when you had a day off you earned it, and, by God, you enjoyed it too. Well, he's been through all the stages of a fisherman, all of them. I'm not sure how close he ever came to being at the right place at the right time and getting rich stage, but that would be interesting to know.

INTERVIEWER: What do you have to be careful about when you talk.

MR. LETTS: Oh, it upsets him. It upsets him to talk about the way things used to be, and to dwell on the fact that the green Earth that he knew is now covered with shopping centers and parking lots and that sort of thing. Actually, that was a long time ago, it was when I was living in Ossining, maybe 10 or 12 years ago. He lives in a pretty well-guarded world now. I mean, his family takes care of him, and he's got half a dozen or more good staunch friends, and there is always somebody that is going to run a boat for him. I think if he had his way, he would still be up in a deer stand a few days every year, and I think he would still be out there on the river fishing, but I think his family's insistence on guarding him came a few years too early, but it was his decision not to drive anymore, I believe. And I'm not sure he would want to take a boat out, go to the trouble of pulling a boat in and getting the motor on and putting the oars in it, and that sort of thing, although, the Lord knows, it was only a couple of years ago that he did it.

Well, we've lost important links. The grandparents, the older generation tends not to live with the youngest generation anymore, and so we're afraid of age -- I'm not saying we're uncomfortable with it, I'm saying we're terrified of it, we're terrified of wrinkles, and we're terrified of flatulism, body odors, loose teeth, and hair falling out, and God knows, the smell of death. Nobody knows about dying gracefully and helping people die. I mean, I just don't think that's part of our culture, we're all young and we're going to stay that way forever. We're all strong and we're going to stay that way forever. Some poor bugger has a bit of bad luck and gets sick and dies, but, hey, it was him and not me. And so we don't learn the wisdom and we don't learn the tolerance, and we don't learn the fury either, that's important too, the kind of anger that Henry has for some things, and the kind of contempt he has for kinds of behavior, and that's too bad too. Tradition, call it tradition, I guess. Values. It was wonderful during that last campaign to hear all these people talking about values, they didn't know where their grandparents were, their kids were all going to private schools. "What? Family values?"

So what will happen to the river? I don't know. Nothing good is going to happen, for sure, until the fish species that we have left can be caught and sold, nothing good is going to happen. If a miracle occurred right now and all of a sudden we found out that once again people could go out and trout line cats, pot

eels, harvest these wedge clams that are out here by the zillions, and sell them, if once again people could catch carp and herring and striped bass, and sell them, if the sturgeon population somehow could be managed, and the shad population somehow restored, so that you could -- well, I'll tell you what my dream for the river is, you could have a Fish of the Month Club. You know, sign up, every month during the year we'll have a treat for you, and we'll start with a tomcod fry on the 1st of January, and then we're going to have wedge clam chowder on the 1st of February, and just go right on through from there, you know, sell season tickets. And then you would see people start coming back to the river. Bob does it because he loves it, so do the Degroats. But for somebody who has to put a boat in the water and get an engine ready, for what, a month of shad fishing? It's not worth it.

If you go from a month of shad fishing to a month of sturgeon fishing to 2 months of crabbing, and then there is the fall bass, and then there is the tomcod, now it's worth it. And on weekends you clean the boat up and take your family out. But is it worth it to maintain a big expensive boat? Is it worth it to maintain dock rights? Is it worth to have one half of your basement or two-thirds of your garage given over to keeping your gear? Probably not. Everett said to me when I made those tapes, however long ago that was, "If nobody fishes like I fish in the next few years" -- I forget what he said, next 15 years -- "nobody will know how to do it. They'll have to reinvent it." Then he went on to talk of arcane matters like something he called trap line fishing. What's that? "Trap line fishing? Oh, you do that for round-nosed sturgeon. You just take a line and you put a whole bunch of little treble hooks on it, and just snake it across the bottom, and they rub in the mud and they just bite these empty hooks, you don't have to bait it or anything." And he went to talk about -- Tim Degroat used to talk about fishing tees and nets that swing with the current so they're always facing the right way to fish. These guys go on and on and on, and much of it is gone. Some of the really good old stories are gone for sure, and it hasn't been very long really since Hudson Valley fishermen either couldn't buy ready-made nets or couldn't afford to buy them. And I met a grade school teacher who was close to retirement a few years ago, and she talked about going to parties when she was a girl, and I suppose that must have been in the '30s, and seeing fishermen's families come, and everybody else would be dancing and playing games and that sort of thing, and these people would be socializing too, but they would have big balls of twine, and they would be knitting nets, and not mending nets, but knitting nets on the backs of the kitchen chairs as they socialized and enjoyed this party. I asked Henry about that, and he said, well, he wasn't sure about that. But this was a firsthand recollection that this woman had, so it was probably some of the pointers, somebody from up that way, 20 years behind times, as usual

I don't know what's going on. I had a lot of hope for Gabrielson, and he'll tell you that the reason he keeps fishing is for his grandkids. But Tim Degroat's children and grandchildren don't want to have anything to do with it. Turk took me out one time, I was asking about drift net fishing, I had never been drift net fishing. And God bless Turk, he dug around and got out a drift net and patched it up, and got it rigged, and he took me and one of his grandsons out, and it was a hot still day and nobody brought anything to drink, especially didn't bring any beer, and it was a Sunday afternoon, and there were a lot of boats out there. And we were guarding this little patchy 200-foot net, and I was in heaven because Turk was doing it for me, there was no other -- maybe he just had it in him that he wanted to do it one more time too. His grandson was pissed off and bored to death, he didn't even want to be there. All he could do was grouse, "This is no

damn way to catch fish. This is no damn way to make money." Well, in fact, we ended up catching about 15 shad, Turk said, "Well, boys, I don't know how we're going to pay the rent." I was a having a good time and so was Turk, but as far as I know, that was the last time that Turk drift netted, and as far as I know, that could easily have been the last time any of the younger generation of Degroats(?) was out in a fishing boat.

INTERVIEWER: Look at all the boats out there.

MR. LETTS: Isn't this wonderful? I just love this. It's the parade, all the boats, Saturday, all the boats that are down at the 79th Street Basin, that can still move, or in Jersey, or Tarrytown, these guys are all headed out now. Now, see, most of them are going north.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

MR. LETTS: Toward afternoon the northward parade will slow and the southern parade will increase, and that means that all the northern boats are tied up or anchored in some scenic place up there where they're going to stay tonight, and they'll eat at somebody else's yacht club, and all these people will come down and they'll do the same thing here. And later in the evening there is an east-west traffic, as all the folks who couldn't get away go from Ossining to Haverstraw for dinner, or from Nyack to Tarrytown for dinner. Tomorrow the flow will be reversed. Walk out to the middle of the Bear Mountain Bridge and look down in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, it looks like -- when I was in the Navy they used to call it a Chinese boat drill, "All hands forward lay aft, all hands aft lay forward, all hands at midship stand by to direct traffic." Nobody knows where the hell they're going or what they're doing, they're just out there burning gas.

INTERVIEWER: How long were you in the Navy?

MR. LETTS: Four years, a little more than four. Four entertaining years. Four alternately entertaining and dreadfully boring years. Alaska and Cuba were great, I loved them.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you in Alaska?

MR. LETTS: Kodiak.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, God.

MR. LETTS: Yeah, that was super. And Guantanamo was phenomenal too. I could learn to love Cuba. Hey, I'll tell you, when you're 19, 20, 21 years old, it's hard to waste your time, there is almost always something that you can profit from. I think Michner said something like that, if you can avoid the injurious vices, it's impossible to waste your time until you're 40 years old, after that you're responsible, you should be a formed human being.

INTERVIEWER: That's right. Be responsible for your face, your looks after 40 because you've shaped your face.

MR. LETTS: Who said that?

INTERVIEWER: I don't know, I was just reading that.

MR. LETTS: It's the same thought, that you should be a completed person.

INTERVIEWER: And if your face is boring after 40, it's your own fault.

MR. LETTS: There you go. This is great. Henry has got good stories -- he used to blast -- took him out and they used to blast all along the Palisades over here, and apparently for some reason, I don't know, maybe because they let the men off at noon for lunch, but they would fire what he calls the noon shot, and under the right circumstances, I suppose especially when the wind was from the west, a huge cloud of dust would rise in the air, a huge concussive wave would roll across and break windows and knock plates off the shelves in Croton and Ossining. Noon shot. I'll have to ask him about that again. It's worth hearing all of those stories more than once.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see Henry often?

MR. LETTS: I haven't seen him since I got back, and when I called him to say hello, he found out I had been back for 4 days, and he said, "You're pretty late checking in, aren't you?" I'll get down and see him. I'll get my hands on some crabs and go down and see him.

I don't have a lot of hope. I'm in such a wonderful position, because really the river is my playground, it's my school, but it's also my playground, and I get to pretend I'm a commercial fisherman several weeks every spring. Bobby says, "He lives on my dock," and I'm over there cutting up fish, pickling -- oh, I should have brought you some pickled fish. I'm over there cutting up fish and talking with the folks, and planking fish, and that sort of thing, and every year I never thought we would run out of shad, every year I think, "When is this going to happen again?" This year the last couple of shad bakes I had to go up and buy Connecticut River shad.

INTERVIEWER: Yo.

MR. LETTS: Yeah. And they're tiny. They're tiny. They're beautiful fish, I think they're prettier than our fish, they somehow hit me that way, but I think the biggest one I saw was about 4-1/2 pounds, they're tiny fish. And the fellow that I worked with up there told me that they get smaller every year. And we've experienced the same thing here.

INTERVIEWER: Ours are getting smaller?

MR. LETTS: Tim Degroat for years fished a large net, he fished 6- and even I think 7-inch mesh, and it was clever of him because you get paid by the pound, and you might as well handle up to a 10-pound fish or a 12-pound fish as a 3- or 4-pound fish, and he was selling them down in Jersey to a family of fish boners down there. And I haven't talked with Tim about it, but I've talked with several other people about it, and those fish are gone. It's just possible that he and his partners by themselves fished out either the older generation of fish, or that special large strain of fish that somehow just got to be bigger and heavier, because a 12-pound fish is not going to gill in a standard shad net. Ronnie used to curse about

it about all the time, all these guys know that if you miss the tide, you're going to lose fish because sometimes these fish can't even get their heads into the net, they just lay up against it, the current pulls them up against it, and when you start to lift the net they just roll out and slide down into the depths, if they're still alive, they swim away, if they're not, they die. And I remember fishing with Ronnie, that that tide was so important, if you could catch just the right amount of current and carry it all the way across, you hardly had to pick a fish out at all, you would bring in a big bundle of net and give it a shake, and the shad would pop right loose. But if you started to lose the tide, you would start to see these big fish, the money fish, the big roes, slide down off the bottom of the net, and that's when Ronnie would say, "Rope her in, rope her in," and you would have take the whole thing in with the fish just to catch up with the tide again or to try to salvage what you were losing. So Tim may have had a hand in that, just Tim and the guys that he was fishing with over there may have single-handedly wiped that big fish population out. And whether it was a subspecies or whether it was just the biggest and the best that had gotten to the point where they could avoid and evade the gill nets.

INTERVIEWER: What about the offshore fishery? Could that have had any role in that?

MR. LETTS: Could have. We don't know much about it. For one thing, not surprisingly, they're not talking much. It hasn't been easy to get information. People are looking into it, but I mean, they must know they're catching somebody's fish. When Nancy said something the other day about, "I wonder if anybody owns that land," that's such a wonderfully ingenuous statement. Of course somebody owns the land. Somebody owns everything, and there is no such thing as an unexploited fish dock out there, at least not in Atlantic Coast waters. They spawn someplace, there is somebody watching them. Ooh, God, there was another big bluefish that just came out, beautiful, maybe a 10-pound fish. "Skaploosh." Love it. A little breeze makes the river look better.

INTERVIEWER: Less tired?

MR. LETTS: Less tired. It rang such a bell, though, when that waterman said that. That's the way you look at the water in the harbor, especially in the summer, and it looks tired. And it is, it is. You've asked it to do too much, you've asked it to carry too much, and handle too much, and consume too much. When we get a good low tide here, and that would be here today -- I don't know if it's full moon today or tomorrow -- but I've been down here when there was a real low tide, and this reef curves out that way well over 100 yards, almost as far as that dinghy out there. And there have been a couple of times when I've taken my shoes off and waded out, the water is only this deep, almost out to where that fellow is. You can see, all the rocks are covered with blue and green and red and yellow paint, where people have ripped their hulls on them. This point sticks out a long way. Well, high tide you've got several feet of water over it and most of these boats can make it, but you get a real low tide and it doesn't work like that. And it's amazing. One day I had a bunch of kids down here, and I walked out as far as I could, and when I got out there they were clapping and yelling, and when I got back I said, "What was that about?" and they said, "We never knew you could walk on water," because I was only up to my ankles. I'm glad to see these people fishing out here. Every one of these folks is a proponent of -- I mean, they wouldn't be doing this if they didn't know there were fish here, and if they didn't

think they were worth catching, and if they weren't enjoying themselves. I sure as hell wish they were doing it in a fleet of rowboats.

INTERVIEWER: In the time that you've been fishing have you seen cycles of shad get this -- have you seen the population get this low? No? There hasn't been a cycle like this?

MR. LETTS: For one thing, I moved around enough and skipped a few years, and it would be hard to make any kind of a connected statement. I mean, what Ronnie sees with his method of fishing, and what we saw when we were fishing these lazy diamonds over here, and what I got when I was principally after striped bass, you couldn't really make a picture out of it. The data are there, the DEC has them. Then the question is: Can you trust the data? Fishermen are notorious for -- well, it depends on how they think it's going to work for them. It almost seems to be a ban on telling the truth, that's why they'll either overstate it and overstate it, and a lot of times they grossly understate it. Now, there's a little device that never should have been invented. I love to watch these folks, especially at the launch sites, after they've gone out there and ripped around in circles. That's the only trick he knows, speed it up, slow it down.

INTERVIEWER: What is that thing called?

MR. LETTS: It's a jetski. They ride them, it's like a snowmobile. So after he's gone around in circles about 50, 60 times, and runs through a whole tank of gas, he'll bring it back into 2 or 3 feet of water, and the craft will sink out from under him, and he'll swagger up on shore and grab himself a Budweiser, lean up against a tree like he just chopped three cords of wood before breakfast, like a real accomplishment, like he had done something. Well, it's hard to hear that because of the kind noise of waves, but when you've got 20 or 30 of those zipping around off Cold Spring, or off George's Island, it takes the fun right out of the bay.

INTERVIEWER: (Inaudible.)

MR. LETTS: Those fish are coming 3 feet out of the water. That was the biggest one I've seen yet. That fish came its full length out of the water, it was in the air 3 feet.

INTERVIEWER: Have you caught any blues?

MR. LETTS: I haven't even tried for bluefish for years. Henry insists that he's going to take Nancy out and help her catch a bluefish. They must be out here, or the guys wouldn't be fishing. I just tasted the water while I was waiting for you to come down, it's as salty as I've tasted it for quite a number of years. I would say it's maybe about one-third strength.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

MR. LETTS: Dry. The less fresh water that's coming down, the more the salt water pushes up. So it's salty. It's as salty as you would want your soup, and maybe saltier. I would say it's about 12 parts per 1,000. Seawater is about 32, 35 parts per thousand. I'll have to get out there.

Did you ever meet John, Henry's friend, John, the carpenter? He's around Henry's a lot, John Busque(?). He built a boat in Henry's backyard a couple of years ago, a duck boat, a pretty little craft. But a duck boat is really something that you sort of float around in more than anything else. John Busque(?) likes to come out here with his duck boat, just this little -- I don't think it's 10 feet long -- and two people, it's crowded with two people in it, and he's got a four-horse motor on it, and he's got a long whippy spinning rod with about 10-pound test line, or maybe 8-pound test line. Henry laughs at him, "Kid stuff. Kid stuff." And when John hooks a bluefish -- and he caught some that I guess were 15, 16 pounds, that fish will tow him for 15 or 20 minutes, half an hour. You know, he's down the river and up the river and across the river. He doesn't care, he's just having fun, I don't think he really cares if he catches them or not. If he catches them, he's got to give them to somebody.

INTERVIEWER: That's great.

MR. LETTS: He has fun with it. I'm inclined -- it almost looks like the guy in the dinghy has got a fish on. I can't tell for sure, but I just saw another one jump not too far from the front of the boat. Maybe not. They are out there, though. I remember that about 15 years ago, when we really hadn't seen bluefish in the Hudson -- snapper blues, yes, but not a lot of big ones -- they started showing up out here, and the guys were speculating, some people thought they were salmon, some people thought they were weakfish.