

SAM BLAND, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on October 2, 2013. Sam grew up in Aurora, NC, graduated from East Carolina University, and then completed a 30-year career as a park ranger and park superintendent with the N. C. Division of Parks and Recreation. He spent most of his career at Hammocks Beach State Park near Swansboro. He has received the Coastal Federation's Lifetime Achievement Award and the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, the state's highest civilian honor. Sam is a certified environmental educator, and upon his retirement from the park service he began to work part-time for the Federation. Today he helps develop programs for the Federation's education center on Jones Island in the White Oak River. He is also a skilled nature photographer and produces articles and photographs about his nature walks for *Coastal Review Online*.

When asked what pulls people to our coastal waters, what "lights up" people about water, Sam said that for him it is the dynamism you see on the coast. The water and everything else are constantly changing. A beach landscape can look very different from one week to the next. Estuaries change every day. The points of barrier islands at inlets change every day. And the ocean displays a sense of power and energy. The ocean is much like a big wilderness, he said. The wildness and remoteness of the ocean draws us to it.

Another part of the answer is that we are drawn to the water because it is our origins. Sam said that it is fascinating to him that so much of the earth is water. And our scientists aren't even sure where the water came from originally.

Sam drew on his experience at Hammocks Beach State Park to talk further about the appeal of the coast. Bear Island is part of Hammocks Beach, and he said that for the general public the lure of Bear Island is the beauty of an undeveloped island with its big dunes and wilderness atmosphere. People can see what the barrier islands were like before development. North Carolina is fortunate, he said, to have so many islands preserved as state parks and national seashores.

He agreed with Todd that people in North Carolina are more connected to the natural coast than those in urban coastal areas. Sam said that people are drawn to undeveloped islands, to the natural coast. North Carolina still has a lot of natural beaches. He stressed that people really appreciate a natural beach after they have been on vacation on a built-up beach. He noted that we do have to make sure that we don't over-use undeveloped islands, that we don't love them to death. He pointed out that in today's world of instant gratification there is a tendency for people to see a state or national park as "entertainment," something to see before moving on.

Turning to his work as a nature photographer, Sam said that for him natural areas on the coast are always beautiful. He is particularly interested in plant and animal life in their natural setting. He grew up on the natural coast (around Aurora), and he said that he has always felt that plants and animals in their natural setting are beautiful.

According to Sam, the arts strike people differently. People see different things as beautiful. But the arts do help inspire people to donate to and volunteer with the Federation. The arts can bring to

people a representation of what is there in nature, a representation of a natural area that they may not know about. That can arouse curiosity, and then it is possible to explain the cycle of life to them. People from inland areas can begin to understand how everything in nature is connected. They begin to understand how nature works. He said that this message was the essence of many of his talks to visitors at Hammocks Beach State Park.

Sam said that Hammocks Beach attracts many visitors, particularly vacationers from Emerald Isle. The state ferry transports about 40,000 people to Bear Island every summer, but many more come to the island on private boats. He estimated that 60,000-70,000 people visit the island every year. The Park includes a mainland area and also Huggins Island, but Bear Island is the most popular part of the Park.

As for his work with the Federation today, Sam said that Jones Island is the biggest part of his job. He helps Lexia with restoration projects and Sarah with education projects. During the school year, most of the workers on these projects are school-age kids, but during the summers entire families often volunteer for the projects. He noted that people often want to do something for the coast while they are here vacationing.

In evaluating the Federation's work on Jones Island, Sam said that this is education for the long term. It may be 15-20 years before you see how Jones Island projects affect people. The value of Jones Island is that it is an educational laboratory that is less formal than the schools. The coast comes to life for people when they are out in it.

The Coastal Federation has accomplished a lot over the years, according to Sam. A really major accomplishment is the total number of acres the organization has protected or preserved. This is land that has been purchased and conserved or restored and in some cases land that has been given to a state agency.

Another major accomplishment in Sam's view is that the Federation has become an environmental organization that does it all – advocacy, preservation, restoration, and education. This is unusual; most environmental organizations focus on one thing. Furthermore, Sam said that many environmental groups have become very laid back and less aggressive. They do very little advocacy. Advocacy is hard work, and there are still some big fights going on in North Carolina – Titan, the groin bill, and a newly-introduced bill that would make it easier to eliminate environmental regulations.

A real strength of the Federation in Sam's opinion is the passion of the staff. The staff is made up of people who really care about what they do. On the other hand, an important weakness is that the Federation is too modest. It does not create enough publicity about its big accomplishments and so does not get credit for them. For example, many people who swim or fish are benefiting from the Federation's work on water quality, but they don't know what the organization has done to protect that quality.

The biggest threat to the coastal environment today is "apathy," according to Sam. There is a big disconnect today between the natural environment and the way most people live their lives in urban

settings with all their modern technologies. Many people today don't care about the natural world, because they don't think about it much. However, Sam noted, if you can get them outside, they can learn to care about the world. People are not out in the world today like many were fifty years ago, but getting them to the coast makes it possible to engage them. Getting people out in nature can change their outlook, their perspective. Every summer the Federation gets people out in nature when it takes hundreds of people on marsh cruises.

Sam also noted that the big environmental battles today are about things that affect people directly. The big battles are often not about wetlands or some other distant issue, but about things like clean air and clean water that affect people.

Finally, on the connection between people's religious beliefs and their environmental concerns, Sam said that he never heard any comment about religion from any of the people who visited Hammocks Beach. But, he added that many people clearly feel a definite spiritual connection to the coastal environment. The ocean can alter the spirit of people. He pointed out that most religions have some kind of teaching that says we should protect the world, but there are also teachings that say we have "dominion" over the earth. He believes that religion does have real potential to encourage people to protect our resources, to teach that we must care for the creation. The fundamental teaching in his view should be that we don't "own" anything; we are just "borrowing" things for temporary use.