

BENNY BUNTING, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on January 13, 2010. Benny lives in Oak City, N. C. and is an advocate for family farmers. He works through the Rural Advancement Foundation International-USA (RAFI), an organization which supports family farms and has its North Carolina office in Pittsboro. His role as an advocate includes working up financial plans and projections for small farmers who are having trouble making payments on production loans. He then helps the farmers with appeals or mediation negotiations with banks, federal agencies, etc. This is a rough time for small farmers, so he is very busy. He was himself a farmer for many years. In the 1980s, he was on the Board of the Coastal Federation.

Benny was very active around 1984 in the Federation's campaign against peat mining and corporate farms in the Albemarle-Pamlico peninsula. He said that at that time there was a significant number of small farmers in the peninsula (but very few black farmers), and there still are some. The farmers, he said, did not realize all the problems that would be caused by the drainage being done so that the peat mining operators could get at the peat. Even before the peat mining, according to Benny, the large corporate farms were hurting the small farmers, in part because when it was necessary to apply for disaster payments the large farms got most of the money and left little for the small farmers.

Benny said that he came to know Todd Miller and the Coastal Federation in the early 1980s through Betty Bailey, the head of RAFI at that time, and Bob Hall, at that time the head of the Institute for Southern Studies and a member of the Federation's Board. Todd knew both Betty and Bob. Benny believes that Betty or Bob (perhaps both) recommended to Todd that Benny would be a good person to work with the farmers in the Albemarle-Pamlico peninsula during the campaign against peat mining.

A \$10,000 grant to the Federation enabled Benny to spend several months contacting the small farmers and educating them about the dangers of the peat mining operations to them. He was talking to farmers at about the same time that Todd, David Cecelski, and Greg Zeph were talking to fishers. Benny said that his goal was to get the farmers to understand that the peat mining operation would destroy their way of life.

Benny noted that many of the small farmers were sympathetic to what he and the Federation were saying about the peat mining, because they already thought of the large farms as an enemy. The peat miners and the corporate farms were hurting both the fishers and the small farmers, so there was some common cause among the fishers and farmers.

The Federation, Benny said, was consciously trying to defend the little guys against the large corporate interests. This was part of the Federation's goal of preserving the coastal way of life. Furthermore, the fishers and small farmers are in a sense natural environmentalists, because they try to preserve the natural resources that give them a livelihood. And, they want to pass on the natural resources to the next generation. The large corporate operations pay little attention to environmental problems.

In Benny's opinion, the campaign against the peat miners and the corporate farms was a big success, one reason being that the campaign included several "prongs" that worked together effectively. In addition to all the work getting the support of local fishers and farmers, there was another prong that involved arguments and negotiations in the state permitting process and still another legal prong being carried out by people like Derb Carter and John Runkle.

Benny also pointed out that in the early to mid 1980s, the Coastal Federation was often perceived as a "radical" organization, because it was in the forefront of some controversial issues. The Federation was not viewed as favorably then as it is now.

When asked whether the Federation has had much success in helping sustain traditional coastal ways of life, Benny said that it is hard to evaluate the level of success the Federation has had on this point. At a minimum, he pointed out, the Federation has at least slowed down the process by which the wealthy and powerful take over the coast.

As for why family farming has declined so much across the country, Benny said that corporate farms (examples in North Carolina being the hog farms and poultry farms) have driven a lot of small farmers out simply because of the size of their operations. The corporate farms can keep costs per unit to a minimum, so they can undersell the small farmers. Also, the corporations have a huge impact on public policy; for example, they lobby for cheap grains, the result being that small grain producers are driven out. Furthermore, large farms (as distinct from corporate farms) drive out the smaller ones, because the smaller ones cannot compete financially. At present, you have to enlarge to survive.

A major problem with this process of the large driving out the small is, according to Benny, that the big guys are much less protective of the natural environment. Big farms have to use a lot of chemicals that are sources of pollution. He said that if we are going to resolve the environmental crisis, one of the things that will have to happen is that farms will have to get smaller so that the farmers can and will take care of the land.

On the question of what the Coastal Federation has accomplished since 1982, Benny said that the biggest achievement is making people aware of the costs of the prosperity that has come to the coast in recent decades. Prosperity and development has real costs, and the Federation has been good at making people understand this and acknowledge that there have been big costs. The Federation is now considered to be mainstream; it is not that they have become conservative but that they have pushed the public closer to their position. Educational efforts have moved the mainstream closer to where the Federation is.

As for what issues the Federation ought to stress in the near future, Benny stressed that above all they need to "stay the course." The human impact on the coast is getting worse because of the population expansion on the coast and the increasing wealth of this population. The situation is getting worse, despite the fact that the Federation has been very successful. The big needs are still there, so the Federation should not let up.

On the question of why people love and will work to protect the coast, Benny said that people appreciate the relaxation and peace they find on the coast. People will work to protect the coast, in part because they want the next generation to enjoy the same things they did. But, Benny cautioned that this desire to protect is being undermined by the fact that access to the beach is being lost. Ordinary people are finding it harder and harder to be able to get to the beach. The coast is becoming more and more a place for the rich.

An underlying difficulty, Benny said, is that in our increasingly urbanized/suburbanized society people are increasingly separated from nature. We may need to increase our conservation efforts so as to preserve some of nature. We may have to encourage the government to buy up more land.

Finally, on the question of the connection between people's religious beliefs and their environmental concerns, Benny said that a lot of people think of nature as being a divine creation, but very few of them make an effort to protect the divine creation. The present generation is so separated from nature that they don't realize what they are missing. They have little awareness of the Creation.