

LYNNE AND ERNIE FOSTER, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on June 21-22, 2011. Lynne and Ernie own the *Albatross* fleet – *Albatross*, *Albatross II*, and *Albatross III*, a charter fishing business in Hatteras Village. Ernie's father, Ernal, started the charter fishing industry in Hatteras in 1937 with the original *Albatross*. Ernie grew up in Hatteras and has spent most of his life there. He graduated from N. C. State University and in the past taught at several high schools, including Manteo. He has served on the Federation's Board since 2004, as well as on several important committees including North Carolina's Waterfront Access Study Committee. He is an articulate spokesman for charter and commercial fishermen and an active member of North Carolina Watermen United. Lynne has worked in the past as a business executive in New York and London. In Hatteras, she among other things initiated Day at the Docks, a celebration of fishing culture held every September in Hatteras Village. She also serves on the Federation's Advisory Committee for the northeast region. An excellent book on the Fosters and the fishing culture in Hatteras is Tom Carlson, *Hatteras Blues: A Story from the Edge of America* (UNC Press, 2005).

Hatteras Village is, according to Lynne and Ernie, a working fishing town, one of the few left in North Carolina. It is a center of both charter and commercial fishing. In the last 10-15 years, the Village has attracted a lot of high-priced real estate development. The area around the ferry dock and both the ocean and sound beaches have a number of huge houses and tourist shops and looks more like Florida than the Outer Banks, according to Lynne. Most of the houses are owned by investors for weekly rental purposes. The result is that, particularly in the summer, there are two very distinct groups of people in Hatteras Village – the weekly tourist visitors with little vested interest in the community or its environs and the permanent residents who are mainly working class.

When asked why Hatteras Village is a special, unique place, Ernie responded with several points. A.) Most important, he said, is that we as a society need to have unusual, unique places to live and visit, so that we do not become one big homogeneous mass. Coastal communities are unique, and that uniqueness is very appealing. (Ernie noted as an aside that he was not referring to the planned retirement communities built on the coast in recent years. They are not particularly unique.) B.) Another related point in Ernie's view is that it is important to have places where it is obvious that nature is the dominant force, so that we are reminded of our place in the order of things. Knowing that natural forces have a lot of control over your life is very interesting and invigorating. C.) A third point, according to Ernie, is that living in a village like Hatteras teaches us a good lesson, that we are all dependent on each other. In large urban areas people are often disconnected from each other, and a lot of our political discourse today ignores our inter-connectedness. D.) Finally, Ernie said that tourism matters and the return on investment (for roads, ferries, etc.) in a place like Hatteras is very positive.

Lynne pointed out that geographical location is one of the things that makes Hatteras unique. The waters off Hatteras are where the cold water of the Labrador Current meets the warm water of the Gulf Stream. The result is a great variety of species of fish. Consequently, commercial fishermen in Hatteras are very skilled at many different kinds of fishing. Hatteras today has the second largest landing of

commercial fish in North Carolina (Wanchese being first), making good water quality and marsh preservation necessary for survival of the fisheries and the community.

But, commercial fishermen face many problems today. One is the importing of low-priced fish from other countries. Another is that fishermen feel over-controlled by fisheries regulators. A third is the threat that fishermen could be driven out of Hatteras by high living and working costs. Ernie pointed out that before the recession real estate prices in Hatteras had gone so high that many people couldn't get a job that paid enough for them to live in Hatteras. Also, marinas were being privatized so fast that working fishermen couldn't afford a boat slip. But, the recession has cut real estate prices by half in Hatteras, Ernie said. The recession hurt the construction industry in Hatteras, but it helped commercial fishermen by forcing real estate prices down.

Still another threat to commercial fishing, according to Lynne and Ernie, comes from the sport/recreational fishermen. Recreational fishermen are well-organized, wealthy people accustomed to getting their way. Many would like to drive the commercial fishermen out of business; they would like to have it all, according to Ernie. His response to them is that a healthy society needs a diversified economy, so the commercial fishermen should have a place on the coast.

A developing major threat to both charter and commercial fishing that greatly concerns Ernie is the idea of "catch shares." According to the catch shares idea, fishermen would have to purchase a share of a fisheries catch. Whoever owns a share would have the right to catch a certain percentage of the total allowable catch of a particular species of fish. The effect in Ernie's view would be to privatize the ocean and corporatize the fishing industry. Buying a share of a catch would become a Wall Street investment opportunity. The local fisherman, particularly the young person trying to get started, wouldn't be able to afford a share and would be forced out. There are a lot of powerful people supporting the catch shares proposal, Ernie said, and he is afraid that the little guy is going to be driven out of the fishing business. (See Ernie Foster, "Here comes catch shares: How NOAA and the Environmental Defense Fund plan to destroy North Carolina's working watermen." [www.ncwu.net](http://www.ncwu.net) )

Lynne pointed out that Hatteras fishermen need to find ways to combat all those forces opposed to commercial fishing. One way is Day at the Docks, which Lynne initiated in 2004. Day at the Docks is held every September. It is both a celebration and an educational experience about commercial fishing and the fishing culture. Activities include net tying races, survival-suit swims, a fishing contest for kids, and a chowder cook-off. Lynne said that the event has been very successful; attendance keeps growing. She noted that an underlying reason for the success is that there is a strong sense of community among permanent residents. The charter and commercial fishermen get along well, which is not always true in other places.

With regard to the Coastal Federation in Hatteras, Lynne and Ernie said that the Federation is fairly well known around the area, but there are not a lot of members. An early Federation project at Hatteras was opposing a developer who was destroying wetlands. Today, the Federation is working on a shoreline restoration project across from Oden's Dock. Sara works with the local seventh graders, teaching them about how to do restoration and why planting marsh grasses is important. These

students and local volunteers are helping with the project. The Federation, Lynne noted, is generally respected, due to both the work they are doing and the fact that Jan used to live on the island and is highly regarded as someone who understands the islanders. She is also esteemed for her writing. Her book, *Hatteras Journal*, sits on just about every bookshelf on Hatteras Island.

There is little interest in Hatteras in the issue of sea level rise, according to Ernie. One reason is a simple lack of concern; another is a general belief that we can't do much about it.

As for the Manteo office of the Federation, Lynne said that in the first years when Jan was the only NCCF employee in the Northeast region, there was a lot of animosity toward the Federation. Because Jan was doing mainly coastkeeper work, she was often rightly opposing the damage that many developers were doing to the environment during an unprecedented development boom and was perceived by them as a purely oppositional force. Her efforts (and her results) were commendable, but she was nearly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of work and it was difficult for Jan to do much else.

Today, Lynne said, the educational and restoration work being done by Sara and Erin counterbalances to some extent the sometimes controversial advocacy work and makes the Federation appear more reasonable in the eyes of many people.

The Federation has been perceived by some as just another environmental organization like the national organizations, but the staff along with devoted volunteers is doing an impressive job of gaining trust. It is no easy job when most people here feel the island is under assault from several large and powerful environmental groups.

Ernie added that combative environmentalists who come at issues harshly set the cause back, because ordinary people will not listen to them. If you tell people that everything is going to hell, you lose your audience.

Ernie noted that Todd is very good at bringing people along, at not being confrontational. He knows how to use teachable moments and is very patient. He understands more clearly than most that it takes a while to change people's attitudes. Sometimes the national environmental organizations make Todd's job more difficult, because they sound so blunt and arrogant at times. He added that Todd is unusual in that there aren't many people like him who genuinely believe in what they are doing and have no ulterior ambitious motives.

Ernie said that in his view the Federation should be described as a "citizen environmental" organization. It reaches out to ordinary citizens to help them understand how to protect the environment. "This is no small task," he added. When asked what have been the greatest successes of the Federation, Ernie replied that no one particular thing, no one dramatic moment stands out to him. The great achievement of the Federation in his view is that it has greatly enhanced our understanding of the value of the coast. For example, it has educated a lot of people about the value of wetlands. And, in the North Carolina legislature, the Federation has in Ernie's opinion the highest level of credibility among environmental organizations. The Federation's reputation is that it will take care of money and do things right.

With regard to his work on the Waterfront Access Study Committee, Ernie said that the Committee had some positive effect. It shined a spotlight on the problem of working waterfronts disappearing and brought some public attention to the problem. The idea that independent watermen should continue to be a vibrant part of the coastal economy is appealing to many people. But, what really helped the working waterfronts was the recession. By pushing real estate prices down, the recession slowed down the drive of investors and developers to buy up the land that working waterfronts are on.

Finally, on the relationship between people's religious beliefs and their environmental concerns, Ernie said that maybe religion and environment should not be directly mixed, because religion is so often used to justify anti-environmental attitudes. Maybe, religion needs to be kept personal. But, he said that in his case he was never taught that he had a right to make the world a worse place. The objective is to make the world a better place, and you don't kill the goose that lays the golden egg. You can't destroy the environment and make the world a better place. He added that his religious training was that you are always supposed to do the right thing. Fishermen know that you have to leave something for tomorrow. This is the concept of stewardship.