

BILL HOLMAN, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on July 10, 2009. From 1979 to 1997, Bill was an environmental lobbyist representing the Sierra Club, the Conservation Council of NC, and others. During that period, he was the only full-time environmental lobbyist in North Carolina. After the 1997 legislative session, he worked briefly with the Nature Conservancy. Governor Jim Hunt appointed him Assistant Secretary for the Environment of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in January 1998 and Secretary of the Department in September 1999. He served as Executive Director of the Clean Water Management Trust Fund from 2001 to 2006. He is now Director of State Policy at the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions of Duke University. He is a long-time member of the Coastal Federation.

When asked how the Coastal Federation fits into the broader environmental movement in North Carolina, Bill said that the rest of the environmental community looks to the Federation for leadership on coastal issues. The Federation has done a good job of finding its niche in the North Carolina environmental movement. In particular, the Federation has a good working relationship with the Southern Environmental Law Center.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Federation did not directly lobby the legislature very much. It tended to leave the lobbying to others. Jim Stephenson was the Federation's first real lobbyist, and he was good at it.

On a related matter, Bill disagreed with the notion that the South as a whole does not care about the natural environment. He said that in many ways the South is more "green" than the Plains states, though not as green as the Western states or New England.

With regard to when "environment" first became a significant public issue in North Carolina, Bill said there was a wave of interest in the environment after the first Earth Day. Among other things, there were some volunteers who lobbied the legislature on environmental issues in the mid-1970s.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration was not interested in environmental matters, so little was done on the federal level. But, in North Carolina there were some big environmental issues on the state and local levels, examples being toxic wastes and peat mining in the Pamlico peninsula. So, there was a lot of interest in environmental issues on local levels, and this made it possible for environmental organizations to build coalitions with local people. One of the Coastal Federation's strong points was that it was "community-based" when it began. A problem today is that many of the traditional local communities on the coast are disappearing.

A major environmental issue in North Carolina politics in the 1980s was the Hardison amendments. Senator Harold Hardison, (D-Lenoir), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and a powerful figure in the legislature, got several anti-environmental amendments approved in the late 1970s. One amendment had to do with hazardous wastes, another with water quality, and a third with air quality. Each amendment

stipulated that state regulations could not be stricter than federal regulations, the effect being to limit the state's ability to control pollution. It took several years of hard lobbying to get these amendments removed. The Coastal Federation played a role in getting the amendment on water defeated. The removal of the amendments was a turning point, for there was a new, more positive attitude toward environmental problems after their defeat. In effect, North Carolina was saying that it would adopt its own environmental regulations and not rely solely on the federal E.P.A. And, North Carolina has adopted some regulations that are stricter than those on the federal level, notably on protecting wetlands and on control of stormwater on the coast.

Bill said that since the 1980s public attitudes have changed somewhat on things like water quality and stormwater runoff. People are more alert to water quality issues, but on the other hand water quality problems are greater because of so much development on the coast. There is also some increased public understanding of the stormwater issue.

With regard to the Coastal Federation's emphasis on citizen activism, Bill said that it's a challenge to get people to turn out for meetings or hearings today, because there is so much competition for people's time. But, citizen activism is one of the strengths of the Federation. It is good at reaching people in their communities. This activism is important, but the problem for the Federation is that many of the traditional fishing communities are disappearing, driven out by pressures from development, higher property values, higher taxes, etc. So, in the future citizen activism on the coast will have to involve new types of people – retirees, second-home owners, etc.

Asked if the American population is becoming more or less aware of environmental issues, Bill said that they are more aware but in our increasingly urbanized society they are also more removed from nature. This, he said, is a major challenge for the environmental movement.

The strength of the Coastal Federation is that so many people love the coast. People volunteer with the Federation because they feel they are making a difference, and the Federation is good at involving people. A major source of the Federation's public support is its strong advocacy for public access to beaches. (Bill said in passing that for him and many others the coast is special because of good memories of family trips to the coast.)

In speaking about the accomplishments of the Federation since 1982, Bill said that the Federation is interesting in part because of the breadth of its programs – advocacy, litigation, education, conservation and land trusts, etc. North River Farms is an “incredible” project because of its size.

A notable accomplishment by the Federation and others is that CAMA has survived. It was challenged several times in the 1980s, but the Federation helped keep it in place. Another major accomplishment is the Federation's successfully defending the ban on hardened structures on oceanfront. A third is that we now have stricter rules on protecting wetlands, and the Federation had some impact on this.

As for weaknesses, Bill that we still have big stormwater problems, but this is not solely the responsibility of the Federation. Furthermore, we have not been very successful at managing development on the coast. The Federation needs a larger presence on the coast, larger than just Ocean, Manteo, and Wilmington. They need someone, for example, in Jacksonville and in Brunswick County.

In Bill's view, issues that the Federation ought to emphasize in the future include safeguarding public access to beaches. As coastal property becomes more valuable, there will be a tendency for wealthy beach homeowners to try to block off the public from the beach. This has already happened in much of California and Florida. Another continuing issue is the need for clean water, important for both fishers and swimmers. We need to value clean water more. A third continuing issue is trying to protect local fishing communities and local cultures.

Global warming and sea level rise are clearly major issues now and in the future. Global warming is one of the biggest challenges facing our society. One of the underlying difficulties of the global warming issue is that people don't react to problems until they are directly affected and at this point the effects of global warming are subtle.

On the coast, sea level rise will get the public's attention when the rise threatens vacation spots. The Coastal Federation may be able to identify some things that people can do to respond to sea level rise. The Federation is good at identifying specific things to do.

The Federation is basically an environmental organization, but an environmental organization has to have citizen activism. The strength of the Federation is being community-based. It is one of the most effective coastal organizations in the country.

On the question of the connection between people's religious beliefs and their concern for the environment, Bill said that we in the environmental movement have not been successful at reaching religious people. The staffs of environmental organizations tend to be secular, and we have not found a way to appeal to religious people. We have not had a real spiritual leader who can reach conservative believers with an environmental message. Our culture is religious, and the environmental movement has to learn how to respond to that. We need to develop a stewardship ethic.

Finally, a significant point according to Bill is that there are a lot of deeply conservative people in North Carolina who are interested in conservation. He says that he has met a lot of such people in his travels around the state.