

BLAND SIMPSON, interviewed by Glenn Blackburn on October 22, 2012. Bland is Kenan Distinguished Professor of English and Creative Writing at UNC-Chapel Hill. He has written several books about the N. C. coast, including *Into the Sound Country: A Carolinian's Coastal Plain* and *The Inner Islands: A Carolinian's Sound Country Chronicle*. He, Don Dixon, and Jim Wann make up the Coastal Cohorts which has presented numerous benefit concerts for the Coastal Federation. He has been on the Federation's Board since 2001.

Bland said that he, Don Dixon, and Jim Wann have been collaborating on writing music since the 1970s. Sometime in 1984/85, they were asked to compose a beach musical for the Embers, but that did not work out. So, they decided to write an evening of beach music to perform themselves. That was the beginning of the Coastal Cohorts and their long-running "King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running." "King Mackerel" is an evening of songs and stories about the Carolina coast, an evening of singing as if in an old beach hotel. It includes a variety of types of songs and stories and is not designed for any particular group.

However, Bland pointed out, you never know what will happen when you put a piece of music out into the world. They had no idea that "King Mackerel" would last for 25 years.

Bland said he had heard of the Coastal Federation by 1985, but he met Todd Miller only in the spring of 1986. Todd got in touch with the Cohorts and asked them to do their show for the annual meeting of the Federation. This was their first show for the Federation, before an audience of about 150. They did another show for the Federation in 1987 and two more in 1988.

The Federation was at that time a small organization still out "on the fringe," still on the margins of influence on coastal issues, according to Bland. But, he said, their membership has grown slowly and steadily. The Federation has been doggedly persistent over the years and very intelligent in its work. Today, he stressed, the Federation is "at the center" of discussions and debate about all coastal matters.

The Cohorts were inactive for about six years after 1988, as both Don and Jim moved away from North Carolina. But by 1994 the Federation was involved in the Year of the Coast campaign, which was a major event in the history of the Federation. Todd began to prod the Cohorts to get back together and do a show for the campaign, and according to Bland his prodding led to a revival of "King Mackerel." The performance for the Federation opened up new possibilities, and the Cohorts soon did several weeks of shows in New York. And, in 1996 "King Mackerel" was presented at the Kennedy Center. The Cohorts continued to do benefits for the Federation in the 2000s, so the fortunes of the Cohorts were to some degree entwined with those of the Federation.

Bland emphasized that the underlying message of "King Mackerel" is that the beach is for all people, and people need to take care of the beach. He said that the Cohorts got the word "greedhead" from Hunter Thompson, who used the word during his campaign for mayor of Aspen. (He also mentioned that "Georgia Rose" was derived from a Lee Smith story.)

Bland joined the Federation's Board in 2001. He said that the purchase of North River Farms and the \$3 million capital campaign were two very big things that occurred during his early years on the Board. North River is the largest wetlands restoration project in the American East. The capital campaign was, he said, extraordinarily important for the Federation. The decision to go for \$3 million was a big moment for the organization. Bland noted that one of his roles in the campaign was to invite Bill Friday to be Co-Chair of the Honorary Committee. And, he added that his entire experience on the Board has been good. There are many rewards to working for the Federation, he said.

Bland is both a writer and a musician. When asked if the arts can help protect the coast, he said definitely "yes." Any group like the Federation that has a mission has a story to tell. The story needs to have healthy meaning and purpose, and it has to be clear enough that it can be told to a variety of audiences. The story and its meaning can be told through the arts. Musicians and writers tell the story. Painters and photographers show the story of the natural environment.

The arts can be a reflection of cultural identity, he said. For example, the decoy carvers on Harkers Island draw a lot of people to their annual show. People will try to protect what they care about, and they will care about it if they know about it. The arts and education are intimately tied together, according to Bland, so the Federation's education work is related to the arts. The Native Plant Sale has an artistic component – the art of gardening. Bland concluded that there are many ways to take inspiration from the natural environment. We can "praise" something in nature or be "alarmed" by something, and these can engender artistic responses.

Bland added that our love of the coast is connected to our fundamental respect and admiration for the natural world. Love is grounded in the view of the world that sees nature as a source of wonder and inspiration. For example, a "big water" – a large river or sound or the ocean – amazes us. It is awe-inspiring to go to the edge of a continent and see the waves coming in. The sheer power and force of the water inspires awe.

On the connection between people's religious beliefs and their environmental concerns, Bland said that it would make sense for churches to be in the vanguard of the environmental movement, but they usually are not. On a broader, more spiritual level, the feeling of awe a person has when confronting the Creation is clearly a religious attitude.

When asked if people in our urbanized society are disconnected from nature, Bland said that many students he knows at UNC-CH are very interested in environmental matters and very active in hiking and other ways of being out in the world. However, he noted that he has sometimes taken students to Nags Head for a canoe/kayak trip. The students know nothing of the natural areas in Nags Head Woods, even though some of them had vacationed at Nags Head. They weren't disconnected from the natural areas so much as simply unaware. Bland stressed that if people do not actually go to natural areas, then what the Federation talks about in protecting the coast will always be an "abstraction." He added that Federation field trips are very popular among Federation members.

Bland mentioned several issues/activities the Federation needs to emphasize in the near future. A.) Work to protect the health of the waterway. The waterway is a major asset for North Carolina, and

there are major problems with water quality and continued shoaling. B.) Maintaining healthy fisheries and working waterfronts should be a priority. C.) Protecting the river corridors as much as possible. Water has to be a big focus. Everything affects the waters. D.) LID is incredibly important. Getting involved with homebuilders on LID projects is one of the best things the Federation does. He noted that the Federation is going to be a lot better off if we can find ways to collaborate rather than going to court to block something. E.) Support the Stop Titan movement. The movement is a big and broad coalition, not just a band of environmental extremists. And, Titan is a big water issue; a Titan plant would affect coastal waters in a major way. F.) Finally, Bland said that in the future the Federation will be called on to comment on every large industrial or business development that comes to the coastal plain, an example being the wood pellet facility proposed for Morehead City. The Federation must repeatedly say that coastal waters cannot tolerate being abused by large industrial developments. LID must be brought to bear.

As for why so many people are reluctant to acknowledge sea level rise. Bland said that sea level rise in North Carolina has been about 10-12 inches a century since European contact. The reluctance to acknowledge greater sea level rise is mostly commercial. Many people's interests are involved. There is a lot of money to be made on property close to the water. People who own this property have a hard time hearing that there are limits to what can be built near the water. The reluctance to accept sea level rise is not because people are stupid. The reason is commercial. Furthermore, sea level rise creates a major social problem on the coast. Families that have been on the coast for years are losing the places they love, which is a very human problem as well as an economic issue.

Finally, commenting on the question of whether the Federation is best thought of as an environmental organization or a citizen-activist organization, Bland said that the education component of the Federation's work is as important as anything. When you get kids planting marsh grass or building a rain garden, that sticks with them forever. So, the Federation is both environmental and activist as in the Titan fight, and all of it is education.