

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: **Susan Rieff** (SR)

INTERVIEWERS: David Todd (DT) and David Weisman (DW)

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(misc.)

DT: My name is David Todd. I'm here for the Conservation History Association of Texas and it is February 21, 2008. We are outside of Austin, Texas, rapidly becoming part of Austin. It's southwest of town in a place called the National Wildflower Center, Lady Bird Johnson National Wildflower Center. And we're—we have the great, good fortune of interviewing Susan Rieff who's the Executive Director here. And this is just one stop along a very long career that she's had with non-profit groups and with legislative and—and executive groups and agencies. She's worked with the National Wildli—Wild—Wildlife Federation and for Texas Parks and Wildlife and for the Texas Department of Agriculture and has also been active at the federal level of the Interior Department and also for Senator Bumper's office. So we—we just a—lots of experience here to—to learn by. I want to thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

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SR: Happy to be here.

DT: I thought we might start with your childhood and—and ask you if there was some sort of early experiences or maybe early friends or mentors, family members that might have gotten you interested in conservation of the outdoors?

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SR: A—a—absolutely and I think my story's probably like everybody else's. I grew up in a—everyone else who's in this—in this field—I grew up in a small town, it was a small town then in northwest Arkansas in the Ozarks and that's a beautiful part of the world. And as people talk a lot now about what's being called Nature Deficit Disorder and children not having an opportunity to be outside, I had kind of the ideal experience. Grew up mostly in the country. I was in 4-H clubs and—and—and had all that great opportunity to—to raise and show livestock. There were woods and creeks all around where I lived and

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that was—there's nothing exceptional. That's just how life was back then. But I think the turning point for me was when I was in junior high school and that was around 1970 and Earth Day had just happened and I was just sort of waking up to a larger world outside Rogers, Arkansas. And I had a biology teacher who had just graduated from college and was on fire about environmental issues. He was a—he was a new convert to environmental thinking and to the problems that had—were just surfacing around the country. And so most of that year we talked about the environment. And I will never forget there was also a

National Wildlife Federation publication that

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came out about that time. It was one of these very elementary kind of score cards about the state of the environment in the country. And it was alarming and it gave scores to, you know, clean water and air quality and—and hazardous waste and those kinds of things. And it's just—it just resonated with me. And from that point on, that was what I was most interested in. And that continued through high school and then when I graduated, I started looking for colleges and universities that had some kind of environmental sciences program and there weren't very many in 1974. I think it's astonishing to sort of—to—to realize that there were just a few. One was at Texas Christian

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University in Fort Worth. And so of all places, that's where I ended up. But my—my perspective then was very much science based and that's what I studied at TCU. But it all—it all did start, you know, kind of growing up in the country and just being in nature around animals, having a family that was very appreciative of that. We didn't camp; we didn't do much of that although I did some of that on my own. But it was just all around me.

DT: You mentioned going to—to TCU and getting an Environmental Sciences Degree and...

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SR: Right.

DT: And just getting a sort of a technical background...

SR: Right.

DT: Into how nature works. I understand you also later went to UT and—and learned through sort of the public policy aspects (inaudible)...

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SR: I did.

DT: (Inaudible) school. Could you (inaudible) go into that?

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SR: Yeah. I had a—I had a wonderful experience at TCU and got what was a very rigorous science education. But by the end of my time there, I had I guess gotten more political and decided that the urgency of some of the environmental problems that I was concerned about required, you know, engagement in public policy in—in—in government and—and I had had enough research experience then. That was a nice feature of going to TCU to think that my life probably was not going to be in a laboratory. And so I had a major professor there who had contacts with people at the LBJ school and even though I had been accepted to graduate programs in sciences that were very

00:06:49 - 2392 tempting, at the last minute I came down here and visited a wonderful professor, Gerry Rohlich, who was both in the engineering school, environmental engineering, and at the LBJ School. And we talked about how to merge those concerns to—to bring that science into the policy arena. And I was hooked and so I immediately shifted gears and came to Austin and graduated from the LBJ School in 1980.

DT: Okay. Did you by chance have—have any courses with Don Kennard when you were there?

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SR: I knew Don, I didn't have any courses with him but he was, of course, sort of legendary. I think he had done the studies there on roadless areas and parks right before I got there, so a little earlier in the seventies.

DT: Well and so this—this stop at the LBJ School was, I guess, a preparation to then going to Washington, D.C. Is that (inaudible)?

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SR: It was. I—I had wonderful opportunities at the LBJ School, did an internship at EPA in the summer between those two years. And then I was selected for something called the Presidential Management Internship Program which was something that President Carter started. And that allowed graduates of schools like the LBJ School to compete for a certain number of these internships in Washington. And the benefit of those is that you could go into an agency and then for two years be able to sort of skip around, be detailed to other places with a guaranteed appointment at the end of those two years. And so I did that and I went first very briefly to the Interior Department

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and that came about because of the woman I'd worked for at EPA had since gone to Interior. But after a few months, and this was in the—in the first few months of the Reagan Administration, I started looking for a place to—to detail myself to. And it worked out so well because I was able to get a—an assignment in Senator Bumper's office. And that was possible because he was then the ranking Democrat on the—it—what was it called? The Public Land Subcommittee in the Senate as well as the Interior Department's Appropriations Subcommittee. So I went up to work on a detail assignment for him for four months and at the end of that time he offered me a real job and so I took it.

DT: And you were his Environmental Aide? Is that (inaudible)...

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SR: I was his Legislative Aide for Environment and Natural Resources.

DT: So who—what sort of issues were being discussed then? This is the early eighties.

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SR: Early eighties. Well, it was a fascinating time, David, because this was, again, the first of the Reagan Administration. And you may remember a guy named Jim Watt who was Reagan's First Secretary of the Interior. And Dale Bumpers became sort of the chief critic and adversary of Jim Watt in the Senate. And those were the days when there was grey talk about selling off the western public lands, you know, ramping up energy production, selling off the parks, drilling in Alaska. Many of the same issues that we face today but that was really being promoted. It was—it was sort of radical thinking at the time. And Senator Bumpers had long been a critic of what he thought of as giveaways of federal property, of public property to these

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interests. And he was especially critical of things like the 70—the 1872 Mining Law which lets big mining companies essentially own, get ownership to public lands for dollars an acre, non-competitive bidding for federal oil and gas resources, non-competitive bidding for coal resources. And so I had a—an immersion course in those politics and those legislative issues working for Senator Bumpers and—and trying to beat off, fend off some of the initiatives that were coming from Jim Watt in the White House.

DT: So these initiatives from Mr. Watt were—were just rhetorical, I mean, they—they were in all earnestness (inaudible)...

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SR: Oh, absolutely. For example, coal leasing. He was trying to greyly open up western lands in the Powder River Basin and elsewhere for very low cost leases to coal companies. And it

was just a—it was a gold rush for these things. And there were allegations later I think affirmed that the department had been leaking the minimum bids to its friends in the industry. And we had a huge showdown over that and Senator Bumpers was able to finally get a vote to put a moratorium on future coal leasing for some time. But there were just a number of those kind of tactical battles. I could go on and on with the list but I've got cart—got cartoons in my office about many of

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those kinds of battles where they were highlighting Bumpers and Secretary Watt going at it. And—and they're both ideological issues but just a lot of—of just hard policy issues.

DT: Maybe you could give us one example. It seems like there's—with the—with all the energy debates currently...

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SR: Yeah.

DT: There's a lot of pressure to develop western oil and gas. Was that something that y'all discussed back then?

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SR: Oh, very much. Senator Bumpers was a—because of an experience that had happened in Arkansas where he realized that a lot of federal land had been leased without royalties and for very little—and with non-competitive bidding for—for oil and gas production. And he, having been a Governor and a local official, said this is wrong because the state's not getting its share of the revenues from this nor is the federal government. And so he became—even though he was not from a western state, he became expert on these western lands issues that had to do with how publicly owned resources, minerals, oil and gas, coal, timber, were made available to the private sector for development and what the fairness was there. And he strongly

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believed that the public should get fair market value for those public resources which put him at odds with the Reagan Administration, especially with Secretary Watt. So he worked very hard and finally was able to pass a bill to require competitive bids for federal oil and gas leases, which seems like only the logical and fair thing to do but that's not what was happening then.

DT: Well to—to—to get to... (misc.)

DT: I understand that—that when you were working for Senator Bumpers that the Senate had already gone to a Republican majority.

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SR: That's right.

DT: And I'm curious how you get some of these initiatives through a body like that when you're in the minority? Can you give us an example (inaudible)?

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SR: Well it—it was playing defense all the time and it was very tactical and it was very difficult. When Senator Bumpers finally won a vote to put a moratorium on coal leasing, this was after failing I can't remember how many times, it was very hard. So there were not large, positive initiatives passed. It was really more a matter of trying to block bad initiatives and doing that through amendments and through the appropriations process. He was also on the Appropriations Subcommittee for Interior and so that provided another venue at times to try to—to affect policy. But it was—it was very much a defensive position

but I—at the beginning as I recall, the Democrats still held the majority in the House and so we had allies there. A lot of things were dealt with in conference committees. Mmm hmm.

DT: As—as I understand you—you were there for about three years?

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SR: I was there for about five years.

DT: Five years.

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SR: Five years. One other wonderful thing we did then that I got to work on was passing a Wilderness Bill for Arkansas. As you know every state typically, at least in those days, would try to pass a co—a comprehensive Wilderness Bill picking up those old areas that had been identified by the Forest Service through the RARE II process and things like that. And Arkansas has about 200—2.6 million acres of national forest land and we passed ultimately about 100,000 acre Wilderness Bill which doesn't sound like a lot but it was in about ten different pieces. And so all over the state are these—these incredibly nice wilderness areas, some of which connect to national parks. And that was a very heady experience for me. I got to learn a lot about

00:16:20 - 2392 the timber industry and learn a lot about the state, visit those places, take some nice hikes but that's a real legacy. And in fact, I was in Arkansas just a few months ago and went up and hiked up to the trail head for one of them and saw the plaque and it was a—it was a great moment.

DW: What would be—maybe this would be a good chance to talk a little bit about national forests and—and the sort of the peculiar setups that they have where they're—they have so many uses and many of the uses are competing. And—and you got the forestries then you got the recreational and then the habitat protection. Can you talk a little bit about some of the negotiations of trying to figure out what could be set aside as wilderness areas and how you, you know, had to interact with the forestry industry?

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SR: Well sure. I mean with the national parks, even though there are conflicts and controversies, they're established under a 1916 law that basically provides what they're supposed to—to be for, protect the resources and provide a visitation experience. But the rest of the public domain, the national—national forests and the public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, and Fish & Wildlife Refuges, it's not so clear. And it was only 1976 that Congress passed the Federal Land Management Policy Act which sort of created this notion of multiple use which again sounds like a—a good thing, that that should be the policy that these federal lands should be open for

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these multiple uses for the benefit of—of everyone. Of course, what that means is what is it—what—what is multiple use and what are those uses and—and which uses can—can dominate. And since then, I think it's been a struggle to figure out exactly what that means in specific situations. But it was very—it was a very interesting time after the passage of that act, the Bureau of Land Management and its 260 million acres of land had to start thinking about doing these land use plans. And it's just a—it was a wonderful step forward in at least recognizing a stewardship responsibility for all of that land in the west. And then of course, the national forests which are in the Agriculture Department as a—as another sort of situation and there the issue is almost always how much timber harvesting was sustainable? And the

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politics of all of this are—are, you know, indescribable. These are big economic interests with a lot of money at stake. And over time, with more pressure and more competition for those resources, they became all—you know, obviously more politicized. And so these are never clear issues of science, you know, debates over how much timber harvesting is appropriate. Everyone brings their experts to the table. And issues like endangered species protection became more important, watershed protection were becoming more important, water quality, more important. And so I think it's just continued to get tougher and more controversial in some respects since then. But it was—it was a—very interesting and informative time I think for federal land policy.

DT: And you mentioned that—that part of the—the tool I guess for understanding what lands could be set aside was the RARE [Roadless Area Review and Evaluation] process.

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SR: Mmm hmm. That was...

DT: Can you explain what that means?

DW: And what the acronym is for RARE.

SR: I'm sorry. (misc.)

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SR: I'll—I'll—I'll try to. I'm not as expert on that, I'm not that expert. But it was a process that the Forest Service went through to try to identify those pieces of land in the national forest system that were worthy of basically protection, of wilderness type protection and it was a long process, a lot of public comment was involved. And I believe the Forest Service finally sort of produced all of these maps. And the—the expectation was that from that, then the Congress would actually designate wilderness areas or protect them in some way, make decisions about what should happen to those lands. And I think there's still other people like Susan Peterson can probably speak more than I can right now of the status of that. But some of those debates are still going on.

DT: And you mentioned that—that when you were working for Senator Bumpers that one of the initiatives that you worked on was protecting some of these wilderness areas in Arkansas. Did—did you get involved in any land issues in Texas or other policy aspects that might have affected (inaudible)?

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SR: Not really in Texas then because Texas has so little public land. There were some national parks issues probably that would have affected Big Bend and the Guadalupe Mountains here but I, you know, I was then mostly working on public lands and parks and that didn't have a lot of relevance in Texas.

DT: Well this might be a good lead in to your return or to—to Texas. And—and I understand that in—in '85 you became chosen as the first Director of Natural Resource Protection at Texas Parks and Wildlife.

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SR: That's right.

DT: And I—I think it would be interesting, maybe before you talked about what—what you did while you were there but maybe talk about what it meant to have a Natural Resource Protection Director, to have that position?

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SR: To have that position?

DT: What does that mean?

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SR: Well the Parks and Wildlife Department then, in 1985, was going through Sunset review at the Texas legislature and a gentleman by the name of Ed Cox, Jr. was then the Chair of the Parks and Wildlife Commission. He had been appointed by Governor Mark White. And—and Ed Cox believed seriously that the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department which had always been the hunting and fishing and state parks department, had a role to play in a stronger a—as a stronger environmental advocate and protector for the state. And he saw these—that as being critically linked and inseparable from protecting habitat for fish and wildlife. And the department at that time had a

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very small staff that did things like looked at wetlands permits and—and investigated fish kills and things like that but it was not well funded and it was not enough people and—and not very effective. And so Ed Cox decided that as part of the Sunset review, this is the process by which agencies get reauthorized every several years, that there needed to be created within the department, an environmental protection division. And that was called the Resource Protection Division. And I'd become acquainted with Ed through Bob Armstrong who everybody listening to this much must know. And Ed recruited me to come back to Texas and head up this new fledgling part of that

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agency and so I did. I was ready to leave Washington like everybody else who lives in Austin; you want to come back to Austin. And so I came and it was really interesting because I had had no state government experience, certainly not in an agency like the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. And so it was—it was complete culture shock for me and—but it was—it was one of the most interesting three years I've spent because I was just immersed in this culture of the—and—and the politics of—of wildlife management in the state, fisheries management in the state, law enforcement through the game wardens, all of those issues. And the culture of the department at that time was not particularly friendly toward environmental protection. And I don't—that was not pervasive but it was not institutionally that

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receptive to it. And so it was difficult. But we hired another twenty-five staff pretty quickly and became, I think, a pretty strong voice for the department in those years. And it was really thanks to the support from people like Bob Armstrong who was on the commission at the time and—and Ed Cox and several other commissioners who—who were willing to sort of to buck tradition a little bit. But a lot of what we did was not popular with the legislature. And I'm sad to say that that division or that—that part of the department which was very effective, I think, for—for several years, way past time my time there, has now been abolished.

DT: Well what were some of the issues that ya'll dealt with while you were there? Can you give us some examples?

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SR: Well one of the first ones I remember was getting involved in a little controversy down on South Padre Island. Central Power and Light wanted to string a power line over the Lower Laguna Madre. And there were concerns that the brown pelican population, in particular, would really be harmed if that were true. It would sort of be, you know, peculiar

(laughs) if they ran into that big line. And as you can imagine CP & L fought very hard to do this. Environmentalists down there and the scientists at the Parks and Wildlife Department said there's a solution. That is to bury the line under the—under the Laguna. And I believe that's ultimately what was done. But that was sort of the first—first taste I got of—of how those conflicts get very real which is very different than working at a legislative and policy level in the Congress.

DT: What did the—a lot of the issues that you got involved in revolve around an endangered species like the brown pelican?

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SR: One of them did but some of them didn't. The—the issue that probably became the biggest one in my tenure there were—had to do with plans to expand and enlarge the Houston Ship Channel. And that was an issue that engaged a lot of environmentalists and others around the state. There was a push in the late 80's to build deep water ports, to build more deep water ports around the world. And of course, Texas wanted to do this and the Port of Houston especially wanted to do this, as did the Port of Galveston, as did Texas City. But the Port of Houston came out with the proposal to the Army Corps of Engineers to dramatically expand the depth and the width of the Houston Ship Channel. The problem with doing that is it would have

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so changed the solidity regime in Galveston Bay that our projections were that—that the ecosystem would have been tremendously damaged. It would have been very bad for—for shrimp populations, for all shell fish production, fin fish production, that the bay could not withstand that kind of alteration. And it was a huge battle. Lawsuits were filed, it really hinged on—on the Corps of Engineers' assessment of those damages. And like a lot of environmental battles, and you know this David, it went on for a long time, you know. No clear

00:28:41 - 2392 winners and losers although I'm happy to say that project at wa—as it was planned did not go forward. I think some other improvements to the channel, I mean, depending on how—what you think is an improvement, were made but that plan e—evaporated. So—but that—that involved many people around the state. The Fish and Wildlife Service, the Federal Fish and Wildlife Service was a strong opponent of the plan. Fisheries' interests and—and sporting—sport fishing interests got involved. There was a lot at stake there.

DT: While you're talking about fisheries—while you were working on some of these coastal aspects of the ship channel, did—did you start to—to get involved in discussions over the (?) and shrimping and the regulation of (?)?

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SR: You know not—I didn't so much. What I did get involved in or—or I—I came to—to appreciate was the influence of and the tensions between the sport fishing interests and the commercial fishing interests. And—and how the state was trying to respect both of those and balance both of those and—and the equity issues involved there. It's—it's one thing to try to—try to contain fishing pressure, harvesting pressure but you have to look at what that means to who's doing that. If it—if it's subsistence fishing or if it is commercial fishing, you know, there—there are real policy issues to be struck and the science is not always clear enough to—to make those choices clear.

DT: Well, could you talk a little bit about the red drum, redfish issue?

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SR: You know, I—I really can't very well. That was really more handled by the fisheries people and I was not deeply involved in that, so...

DT: Maybe another topic that would be good to talk about while you were at Parks and Wildlife, did you get at all involved in the red cockaded woodpecker and clear cutting discussions in east Texas?

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SR: Not a lot. I'm trying to recall—I'm sure that we probably provided some kind of biological com—comment on those things, biological opinions, but I don't think in terms of being really aggressive we did very much. And there were—there were limits on what the department was willing to do.

DT: Limits in what sense? What would be the—the difficulty in studying that?

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SR: Well the—the legislature, of course, for lots of reasons was always very engaged in whatever Parks and Wildlife was doing. And it was a quite a shock I think for a lot of those members to see that Texas Parks and Wildlife might be opposing something that some, you know, industry or business wanted to do, you know. They'd basically been there to, you know, set hunting seasons and fishing restrictions and run the parks and accommodate people. And this was a new voice really in state government advocating for fish and wildlife from an environmental standpoint. And that was not—that was a surprise and not a welcomed surprise to a lot of people in the legislature. So there was a lot of pressure on the department to back off on things.

DT: How would the pressure get expressed? Would it be a threat at—at—at the appropriations?

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SR: I think there was some of that. I think mostly it was expressed, you know, quietly, privately, not always, but there was a lot of pressure on the executive director, I think, and on the commissioners. But to their credit, from my standpoint, they were very tough. They were very tough.

DT: Something else that I think was going on during that time, maybe this is off a little bit, was that there was starting to be studies of estuarine inflow needs. Was that something that happened during your tenure?

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SR: It was. Larry McKinney wha—who remains at the department to this day, he and his staff were part of initial efforts to do these bay and estuary studies really to determine what kind of freshwater inflows were needed to maintain those healthy estuarine places. And a lot of research was started back then. A lot of work was being done with the Water Development Board, the Texas Water Development Board then. But that really was starting then and the idea was that—that information was necessary in order to then sort of back up the river basins and determine what kind of water, you know, in—in permitting decisions. What kind of water needed to—to reach the coast, to keep those systems healthy? And that debate is continuing here twenty

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years later. I mean bay and estuary studies in Texas seem to be forever and probably will be because they have real potential impact on daily decisions about who gets scarce water in the state.

DT: Was there some discussion at the time about putting conditions on new dams?

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SR: Yeah, we...

DT: I think the (inaudible) to the legislature.

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SR: Absolutely. I mean mitigation for new water projects was another area that we got very involved in. That was a particular function of the Resource Protection team at the department was to look at these permits for new water projects like that and assess the damage and basically decide how much either new habitat or restored habitat or—or management adjustments needed to be made to—to make up for that or mitigate that damage. And there was always pressure on the department to minimize those recommendations. And we struggled a lot and—and had to—to work very hard sometimes to make those mitigation recommendations survive. And—and even that, you know,

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I'm not sure how effective that was because it's one thing to put some mitigation requirement in a permit. It's quite another thing to have that actually enforced. But we—we at least got on record on a lot of things. Yeah.

DT: Something else that occurs to me it was—I think happening at the time, as I remember they—there was a lot of—of discussion about hunting with dogs, chasing deer in east Texas.

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SR: I avoided all those issues.

DT: You did?

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SR: Yeah. I did. There was a lot of discussion about that and I was happy to let the wildlife guys deal with that. Yeah. I'd forgotten that one.

DT: I guess another thing that would be interesting to talk about is that I think you were a little bit before the time of the Take Back Texas movement. But did you see stirrings of that while you were at Parks and Wildlife?

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SR: A little bit. It came up with regard to these water projects and mitigation requirements. But that really didn't—and there was always a recognition of the strong, private property, you know, ethic in Texas. But that didn't really—at—at least I—I didn't really see it until later when the Endangered Species Act issues kind of came to a head in Texas. And that, for me, was when I was working for Governor Richards. And it was in that time that the Barton Springs salamander was listed I think as an endangered species. And then we had the bird issues here with the black capped vireo and the golden cheeked warbler. And—and decisions about—made by the U.S. Fish and

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Wildlife service about whether those species would be listed and if so, what that meant. And all that kind of came to a head when the newspaper published a map of what critical habitat might look like in central Texas for the golden cheeked warbler. And it came out in the San Antonio Newspaper and all hell broke loose because there were thirty-three counties listed on this map and the spin was that it would sh—shut—basically development would be shut down in those thirty-three counties and people's lands would be taken away. And that sort of launched the Take Back Texas private property wars. Yeah,

there—there were—I'm sure groups before that but that's when it became so
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public and so strident and so difficult. And it—it sort of—I'm trying to sort of piece this together in my mind certainly with regard to the bird species and the cave beetles. Fish and Wildlife service made those assessments published in the Federal Register that these were endangered species and—or to comment on that. And suddenly every politician in the state was embroiled in this because of the private property rights reaction to it. And in—for some of those people I believe it provided sort of this great opportunity to push that movement and get lots of attention. I think it had less to do with protecting birds than about sort of having this—this sudden sort of softball to swing at. And even in the Governor's office, it was—it was

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brutal. It really was. And we found ourselves trying to work with—again I'm in the Governor's office now trying to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service to just meet the needs of the federal law without completely squashing, I guess, local development and just—just to sort of keep the parties, I don't know, in the same room. But it was very controversial. It became a campaign issue. Anyone who was here I think probably has a different—different memory of it but it was very tough. The outcome of it though, I think, is—is good because the—Austin became one of the first cities to do a regional habitat conservation plan, the BCP, Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. And—and now that almost 30,000 acres is the green space in central Texas.

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And the birds are still with us. I hope they survive forever but certainly that green space is there that everybody gets to enjoy. The war is over. The Barton Springs salamander have tended to be a little bit more local but those all came about because of—of pressure from the Endangered Species Act. So Austin was a national—was a—was the—the focus of nation attention for what the Endangered Species Act was meaning in these developing, urban areas. And there was a lot of national attention focused here to see how the Fish and Wildlife service would actually interpret these things, to see how the courts would interpret some of these conflicts and questions that were being raised

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by the Take Back Texas people. The Secretary of Interior was down here personally engaging in some of these negotiations. And the Austin experience became one that was ultimately sort of touted around the country as an example of—of how you can both protect the species and allow development to go forward. It was very messy. It was very hard. It certainly wasn't perfect. And I'm not sure people in Austin even realized the significance of what was going on here from a national policy perspective. But there are now regional habitat conservation plans around the country and in development and—and have—and more in this part of Texas, too. So it was a—Austin was a—was a—a great and important experiment in that and, you know, jury—jury's out, I guess, but all in all it's worked pretty well.

DT: Well I—I guess we—we jumped right into your—your work with Governor Richards and some of the little flashpoints of that experience. So you started there in '88?

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SR: '91.

DT: '91, I'm sorry.

SR: Mmm hmm.

DT: And you were there until...

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SR: Until the last—the last file was removed, until '90 it—well for four years, yeah.

DT: And what—what drew you out of the Parks and Wildlife agency and over to the sort of executive branch?

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SR: Well, there was a little—another stop in there. From Parks and Wildlife, I went over to the Ag Department and worked for Commissioner Hightower...

DT: Right.

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SR: For a couple of years.

DT: Well let's go back and talk a little about that. It must have been an exciting time. You—you were involved with pesticides there?

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SR: Yeah, I was the Assistant Commis—Commissioner for, I forget what it was called, basic—basically pesticide regulation, farm worker protection. We were very engaged in—in trying to implement a Farm Worker Right to Know Program. We were promoting integrated pest management and other kinds of non-toxic approaches to agriculture. It was the start of trying to push some kind of Organic Food Certification. So there were a lot of really creative things going on there. And that was another kind of immersion project for me. But Rick Lowerre had been there and Rick was returning to private practice. And so Rick really recruited me to go over to—to agriculture. But I worked with some great people there and I spent a lot of time in

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South Texas on the border. We were interested in colonias; we were very interested in sort of the impacts of production agriculture on the workers and on the land and water quality. And it was—it was really some of my first exposure to—to that part of the state and that part of the world.

DT: And—and so you were, I guess, looking at crops that would include produce and maybe cotton? Is—is that right?

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SR: Mmm hmm. Mmm hmm. And citrus.

DT: Yeah. And—and taking it really sort of from a public health approach where you'd, I guess come from a lands and wildlife background. (Inaudible).

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SR: A little bit, uh huh, very much. And then also the—the—the Integrated Pest Management that were trying to promote, I mean, taking a more holistic, more environmental sort of approach to controlling pests and disease in plant crops and ornamentals.

DT: Can you give an example of what IPM, Integrated Pest Management might mean?

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SR: Oh, like using—using insects, native insects like aphids to control some diseases, using Bt [*Bacillus thuringiensis*] which I cannot tell you the name of but it's the—it's a—it's a natural sort of pesticide, using good bugs to fight bad bugs basically, no till agriculture, less disturbance to the land, fewer weeds to need to control. We were very concerned about

some of the efforts then being—this really kind of started I think by some of the pesticide companies like Monsanto to—to put more herbicides into their products. So they were—it was—there were lots of interesting issues. But what I remember most was the work on organics. Commissioner Hightower was—was very interested in promoting an Organic Certification Program. He was kind of ahead of his time and I

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think we did one of the first state programs here. And—and then just trying to improve efficiencies in the department. If anything that experience for me was—was really interesting because it was so regulatory, you know. Pesticide applicators had to get licenses. Pesticides had to get registered. We reviewed new pesticides that needed registrations for new uses. The right-to-know information that had to be available to farm workers. It was just a lot of real concrete, tangible things. So that was a different kind of experience for me, more—more running really a regulatory department.

DT: And maybe you could talk a little bit about the interacting with a farmer who's, you know, trying to struggle with controlling pests, controlling costs, taking care of his workers, I don't know, getting clean water. How—how do you sort of balance all those issues?

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SR: Well it was very difficult because there were a lot of pretty entrenched interests advocating for—for different things, you know. Hightower's sympathies were—were very much with the farm workers. And—and so mostly we were kind of advocating for their health and safety and trying to work not always successfully with the industry there. And I can't say that I recall working much with individual farmers. It was really more at—at that policy level. But I think we did realize that there—there is sort of no—no free lunch if you will. That—that taking care of some of the problems we saw was going to require changes in practices and changes in economics and—and there would be some—some friction in the system. But I think we made great

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strides in—in terms of improving some condition for farm workers. And we also spent, even though it was probably exactly within our jurisdiction, spent time looking at the problems of the colonias in South Texas which twenty years later is still a problem.

DT: And—and the problems in the colonias were sort of basic ones of poverty or were they ones of—of poor waste water treatment and—and, you know (inaudible)?

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SR: Well the colonias are sort of areas where people have been—have bought land and have put up houses, often land obtained from sort of developers that were not paying attention or were disregarding any building codes that might exist. But typically, these had no infrastructure, no running water. And so they created, as you can imagine, water quality problems, other problems. The—the real issue there was trying to work with the local authorities to get services extended to these communities. But the state has invested a lot of money in trying to do that, provide water, and waste water services down there. And it's a very complicated or has been a very complicated political problem, financial problem, environmental problem. A lot of people spent a lot of years trying to address those things.

DT: And some of these—the folks who are living in the colonias were—were working in the field and—and were being exposed to pesticides, herbicides...

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SR: Exactly.

DT: (?). What—would, I guess, malathion would be one of them? What were some of the—the problems that you identified when you were working for TDA?

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SR: Oh, you're probably pushing my memory too far David (laughs). There was a range of—of problems commonly attributed to pesticide exposure and part of our enforcement program was making sure that pesticides were applied in compliance with the label. And labels on individual pesticides specify how much and under what conditions and so forth you can do that. And so we were enforcing against applicators that were, you know, putting their workers at risk and putting consumers at risk by not—by not ab—abiding by those rules. We, you know, we had to train applicators and so that was part of the—of the focus to get—to apply pesticides you have to have an applicator license and so that training was important. But really it was the enforcement and—and in many cases, enforcement was non-

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existent. And so the big challenge for our people then was how aggressive can we be, you know? How—how far can we take this? And—and what do you do if—if been through some enforcement action, your is—you could put some people out of work. You either be, you know, do you shut down an operation or not? It's very—it's very difficult and it was very difficult in that part of the state. But that was really the tool that we had.

DT: Well while we're talking about in health problems I think this is the—that period of time when some of the—the babies were born without brains and spinal cords and so on. Was that related more to the Machiladoras or was it more to maybe pesticide use?

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SR: I think I recall that now.

DT: It was pretty common (inaudible).

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SR: Wasn't there a—it was. As I recall that was—they found—they decided that was related maybe to lack of folic acid in the—in the diets of the mothers. I—it's—I, you know, I'm having trouble with that. But I—I don't recall any—certainly I don't—I was not involved in it. But I th—I think I remember that time and I think it had something to do with—ultimately they thought with diet rather than pesticide exposure. (Inaudible) I'm sure wasn't ever conclusively decided.

DT: You—you mentioned that you were always hesitant about how hard you could push on these regulatory programs for pesticides. Can you talk a little bit about how this might have related to—to Hightower being—losing that election and—and I guess the Commissioner Perry coming in and later, you know...

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SR: Oh, well, I (laughs)...

DT: (Inaudible) the attitude there (inaudible). You see so Hightower was a—was kind of—is an anomaly in the...

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SR: Oh, very much so, yeah.

DT: General trend of the TDA [Texas Department of Agriculture].

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SR: Oh, he was a complete anomaly and, you know, he had worked for Ralph Nader—with Ralph Nader and he's a consumer advocate, environmental advocate. And I was not paying

attention really to how he was elected but he was very popular and made radical change in the department, much to the unhappiness of a lot of those interests. I mean the Farm Bureau of Texas vehemently opposed him, vehemently opposed almost every initiative that—that came out of his Ag Department. There was tension between the Farm Bureau and the—the smaller farmers group in Texas. There was opposition from—at different times from the nursery owners because of—of disputes over what's an invasive species. Again, chemicals that can be applied to

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those products. You know, he was interested in organic food rather than wheat production. He just didn't fit the mold at all of an Agriculture Commissioner in Texas. He had a different following, he had a different constituency and the rest is history, I guess. I think he was an anomaly. But he, you know, he made a lot of change in those four years that he was there and—and some things are—have—have a—have been sustained. I think it—it—there was—out of that part of his legacy was the concern about farm workers in the valley, concern about pesticide protection, Organic Food Certification. There's a fellow named Keith Jones who was on his staff then who first was pushing organics and how to come up with the certification program. Keith is

00:55:17 - 2392 now, I think, the director of the organics efforts at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington. He sort of carried that forward. But, yeah, he was an anomaly.

DT: Well we—we're bouncing around a little bit. I think that after you were at TDA, you—you moved to Governor Richard's office.

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SR: Right.

DT: And tell us about that transition and why you decided to—to work for her and what were some of the things that you got involved with there?

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SR: Well, Hightower lost his election—reelection to Rick Perry so I needed a job. That was pretty simple. Yes, Gov—Governor Elect Richards called me a few days after the election and asked me to come to work for her and I said, sure. And I didn't know her well. I knew a lot of her—the people closest to her well. And we immediately went into kind of transition mode. But I had never worked in the Texas legislature very much. I had been—I—some, you know, in my other state government jobs but not a lot. And we had very little time to—to prepare. I mean, this is always the case. But what I can tell you about that is from the afternoon that she was sworn in, which was I guess the early January to the last day of her signing off on bills which is usually June 20th or so, I had two days off.

DT: This is the spring of '91.

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SR: Spring of '91. And we all worked just about all the time. It was really heady, it was really interesting. It was really hard. But she had had a pretty ambitious environmental plan during her campaign and that was kind of the blueprint for what we tried to do. And she was personally an environmentalist. She cared a lot about the state. She cared a lot about the parks. She cared a lot about public health. And during the campaign, she had become very sensitive to concerns that people were raising in the Houston area about new hazardous waste dumps in incinerators. And there were several proposed at that time down there. One in Channel View and I can't remember the names of them but another one that—the Hunter Facility which would have been

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a huge injection well basically drilled into salt domes that would have been the recipient from haz—for hazardous waste from all over the country. And these were huge projects that had been proposed, lots and lots of money at stake. And the feeling was that these neighborhoods, these communities were being sort of, you know, run over in the haste to permit these things. And she had sided essentially with the communities on this. And the argument was that Texas was so lax that it was becoming the national dumping ground for hazardous waste. And, in fact, there were people in the industry that were saying—who, you know, stood to make a lot of money from that and didn't see really what was wrong with that. The other argument on the other side was that Texas was also a producer of all this and

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had to put it some place and if it weren't there, it would be more dangerous or more—more toxic. She introduced a bill which would have put restrictions on construction and siting of these new, big hazardous waste facilities. And that was a—a real battle to get to the legislature. And it was amended and changed and resulted in a—a moratorium on new facilities' production. It was—it was a battle but ultimately that bill passed, you know, of—of—not as strong a version of it but it passed. And—and possibly, you know, an equal benefit of it was another piece that was attached to it which was a waste reduction

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piece. One, we want to control where these things are sited but two; we need to see what we can do to reduce all of that waste in the first place. And John Hall was her appointee as Head of what was then the—the Water Commission. And John started some of the programs in Texas, some of which I think are still in place, to persuade companies to do better, to reduce their waste, to recycle more, to reuse more. So that was really a landmark achievement. Another one, and—and people I think don't appreciate this one as much, the federal government had then just passed a new—up—updates to the Federal Clean Air Act. And Ann Richards appointed Kirk Watson to chair the Air Control Board here. And under Kirk's leadership, Texas became the first state to pass the law and pass the rules needed to

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comply with that Federal Clean Air Act. The likelihood that Texas would be first to jump on what was needed to clean up the air is—is pretty astonishing if you think about it now. But it happened and so rather than resisting it, Texas got ahead of the game in a way. So that was pretty significant. And I—I think neither she nor—nor Kirk sometimes get enough credit for that. They started the process for merging the agencies to create one central environmental agency. More money was—was dedicated to the colonias to try to address those water quality issues. The list goes on and on. But those were very busy days for four years. It was a great experience. (misc.)

[End of Reel 2392]

(misc.)

DT: I think earlier you mentioned that one of Governor Richards' proud accomplishments was to try to merge these disparate agencies that were taking care of different aspects of the pollution problems in Texas and—could you talk a little bit about the merger and what—what that meant (inaudible)?

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SR: Mmm hmm, I—I ca—I can and—and I need to say, too, this—this idea was also

promoted by Lieutenant Governor Bullock—Lieutenant Governor Bullock at the time. There had been this infusion of proposals and pressures to build and to accept more hazardous waste facilities in Texas. And it had come from—from in-state producers of waste, it had come from out-of-state companies that wanted to build facilities here and bring in different kinds of hazardous waste from around the country. One of the things that became a huge controversy was when a New York firm actually on a train moved sludge from New York City all the way out to West Texas to dispose of this in far West Texas. It was the Merco Project. And suddenly there

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was this feeling that Texas was in—at risk of becoming sort of the dumping ground for the country because of our lax laws, our lax regulation. And Governor Richards had had sort of campaigned on that issue a little bit because she was sympathetic to the concerns that had been raised again by neighborhood groups opposing some of these in more urban areas. The Merco Project sort of came out of nowhere, was approved probably without adequate attention and stirred up just all—all kinds of controversy in Texas. Those things were—were dealt with one, through this Hazardous Waste Bill that she was—that she was behind and then ultimately passed. But it also, I think, sensitized everyone to the fact that in Texas, environmental

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protection responsibilities really were spread across a number of state agencies. Solid Waste Management was in the old health department and water issues were in the Texas Water Commission and air quality issues were dealt with by the Texas Air Control Board. And other kinds of pollution issues were at the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. And then water project permitting was at the Texas Water Development Board. And pesticides were at the Agriculture Department. This made it hard to—to—to—to make sure that all aspects of a problem were studied. It—there was very little coordination really between the agencies. They all had different mandates; they all had different constituencies in the legislature. And it put Texas really in a different category than most other states because by then, all states were moving in the direction of having a central environmental agency, sort of state Environmental

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Protection Agencies modeling the federal agency. So we began the process here and I'll never forget the first meeting. We had this huge meeting with all the people from different agencies who weren't necessarily keen on this idea because, of course, they had their own structures and their own levels of authority and their own budgets. But nonetheless, we started working toward what—what would be the best way for Texas to start pulling that together. And so we really started with the proposal to just bring the Air Control Board, the Water Commission and the solid waste functions from the health department together. And that was finally achieved. And the worst of it was the acronym that came out of it because the first thing it was called was the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission. And the reason

00:05:43 – 2393 for that was that the Texas legislature doesn't like the word—word—didn't like the word environment and they didn't like EPA. So they weren't going to call it Texas, you know, EPA. So it was Texas train wreck for many years and that was probably not a bad moniker for it. But I don't know, not too long ago it was changed and now it's the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which still isn't environmental protection but

it's a step forward. So now Texas, like most states, has a central agency who can—who can at least in theory look at some of those problems more holistically.

DT: Maybe you can talk a little bit about specific examples of how the environmental regulatory apparatus would gin up for different issues. I mean, there were a number going on back then. I mean, you mentioned Hunter and the Merco Poo Poo Choo Choo [municipal sludge train] and then the...

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SR: (Laughs) Yeah, I couldn't think of what that was called.

DT: I think there's (?) had problems as well (inaudible).

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SR: Yeah, I—I won't be able to recall them but these—these...

DT: What—what has really got the Governor's attention?

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SR: Well these projects were—were highly controversial; probably Hunter is the one that was most controversial. And the way these were handled is that the agencies would—if—if there was a protest, the agencies would hold administrative hearings on the premise and these were to allow all the parties to present their information, their data and from that, the agency would make a recommendation to the commission. The agency staff would make a recommendation to the commission. Well that whole process of these citizen hearings, citizen participation through these hearings became controversial. And that, I think, was—was a—a theme throughout those years and probably remained so. To what extent do citizens and citizen groups get to be

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part of the decision making about these kinds of—of questions? And, you know, our—in the Governor's office in those days, our perspective was yes, they—they need to be—that needs—that process needs to continue. Parties on the other side for the most part argued that, you know, that was heretical and that those people didn't know what they were doing and it—it—and it took too much time and it was going to hurt business, and hurt jobs in Texas. So a lot of the—the politics actually took place in and around those hearings. And those are quasi-judicial hearings and there are all kinds of rules about ex parte communication and—and, you know, who can say what and when. But nonetheless, you know, there were tremendous pressures applied throughout that. And probably the—the hearing on the Hunter permit

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for the salt dome injection well was the—the most contested, the most expensive, the longest of those things. But ultimately that permit was rejected. So there were—and—and—there were hearings I think on the—the Channel View Hazardous Waste Facility, on some radioactive waste facilities. It was just—it was—there was a lot going on in those days. And—but I think it really—it—it—it forced attention on an issue in Texas which maybe hadn't been so clear before and that is how these decisions are going to get made and does the public have an opportunity to be in that process and to sort of raise those issues in a public venue. And that was all to the good, I believe.

DT: I think that we had talked about this a little bit off camera about the role that Ann Richards as a woman had maybe moving environmental protection ahead in the state, certainly a lot of the environmental leaders in the state are female and that's—I'm curious if you could speculate about whether it was something unique to her or something that's

believed more broadly among women and that—that, you know, this needs to be an issue (inaudible).

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SR: Mmm hmm. Well, Ann was certainly an environmentalist at heart and she loved Big Bend, she loved being outdoors. She had a really authentic, you know, affinity and sense of stewardship, I think, about—about nature. So that part just came naturally for her. She also was very sympathetic and empathetic toward families that were concerned about their kids' health. And so when she was down in the Houston Ship Channel and hearing from these people about how they were afraid their kids were getting sick because of industrial pollution and they were afraid that these new hazardous waste dumps would endanger their kids, she was totally moved by that. And—and she was smart enough, too, I think, to see through some of the arguments about, you know, the economy of Houston will crash if we don't have

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these two new, you know, facilities here or something. She—she was pretty jud—you know, pretty shrewd that way. But she was very, I don't know, very empathetic. She would go down to the—to south Texas and—and tour the colonias and would come back with a stack of notes for me to respond to and—and take—and things to take care of because she really understood what those people were living with, the conditions under which they were living, and the lack of clean water, the—the—the lack of basic sanitation. And I think even if you look around the country at a lot of activist groups that have—that have sprung up in opposition to a particular project or a policy or something, often it's women leading them and often it is because of what they think is an impact to their children. And if you think about

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Love Canal you—you know, and—and lots of those things. The Channel View Group that fought that project, they were women at the head of them. And I—I don't know why I think it's a—I think maybe it's that sense of empathy. I think—I think children are a powerful motivator for a lot of women who care about the environment and care about what—where their children will live and what their experience will be like. I think maybe it is a—a refusal to except that econor—economic arguments always should trump these decisions. I—I have observed, too, that sometimes the leaders that emerge from these—from these environmental controversies find themselves being good at that, you know. They end up being good speakers, they end up being

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good organizers, good fund raisers, good advocates, and that's empowering to people. I'm trying to think of the Formosa—Diane Wilson is another one who's a shrimper and became such an effective opponent of the Formosa Plastics Company down there on the coast. So I think for some women it's a—it's an opportunity to sort of be effective and—and—and—and sort of exercise some power that maybe they'd not had previously.

DT: I—I have a political question I guess as well. You—you've served in a Democratic senator's office, Democratic Agriculture Commissioner's office, a Democratic Governor and it would seem that—that environmental issues are something that touch all of us no matter what our political persuasions are. But it's become a partisan thing and I was curious if you could A, comment on what happened to Texas politics that, you know, Hightower was the last Democratic Ag Commissioner and it's been quite a while. And Ann Richards is the last

Democratic Governor here. What happened...

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SR: Right.

DT: (Inaudible) could move from a Democratic regime to Republican and secondly why the environmental initiative didn't carry over into the Republican column so well?

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SR: Well, I—I'm probably—let me go back for a minute, David, to my earlier experience in the U.S. Senate. And even in the early eighties when the Senate had—had become Republican and Ronald Reagan was in the White House, there were still then a lot of moderate Republicans mostly from the Northeast, not totally, Midwest, that we worked with on environmental issues very well, people like Robert Stafford and John Chafee and Senator Percy from Illinois, Howard Baker, others like that. And they were very progressive in their environmental thinking and—and legislating and it did not seem as

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polarized, at least immediately then. As you know over time, there are fewer of those people and the national politics have—have become more polarized. In Texas, I don't know that I can add anything to that except the business lobby is so powerful and—and I—I think there are a few things maybe that—par—particular to this state. One is the fundamental lack of public lands here. It's very much a private property way of thinking and a kind of an exclusive way of thinking. And so to argue that you need environmental policies that protect the common good which, you know, most effective environmental strategies have—are—are trying to do that in some way, that's a difficult argument to make here, I think. And it's—I think it's because of just the Texas mythology that there's unlimited land and unlimited space

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and—and if you want to be outside, go to your own ranch. And in this, you know, what we have in reality is a very urban state with a lot of typical big city pollution problems. But we don't really have the political culture I think to—to deal with that. Good example is just the pressure for more park land, more open space, more urban parks, trying—it's taken a long time through the efforts of people like George Bristol and Bob Armstrong and many others to—to try to gain some political consensus that that's a worthy thing for the state to invest in, necessary thing for the state to invest in. So I think it's—it's—it's a long history in Texas that way. It has seemed that most of the environmental support for environmental causes and issues in the state legislature has come from more urban members of that body

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and yet the leadership has been dominated by rural interests. That may be changing but that's historically been the case. And so it's been tough to make progress on things like agricultural practices that may cause environmental problems, restrictions on land that may be necessary to protect endangered species. Those things kind of run counter to—Texas culture. That's my—that's my observation as a—someone who did not grow up in Texas.

DT: Well maybe we can leave Texas for just a little bit as you did. And—and I understand that you—you had—a time in Washington again when you went back to work for...

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SR: I did.

DT: The Department of Interior again (inaudible).

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SR: I did. I did another term of duty.

DT: What were some of the issues that were high on the list while you were there? And particularly are there any that might have that—concerns here in Texas?

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SR: Well, I—I did go back up and worked for three years in the Clinton Administration as Deputy Chief of Staff in the Interior Department to Secretary Babbitt. And the immediate connection here was again the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve. And I feel like I have been involved in that project my entire life because it got started, I think, or somebody—it started kind of filtering up and I was at Parks and Wildlife and then when I was in the Governor's office, when it all sort of, you know, exploded around that. I worked on it with people from Babbitt's office and then when I got up there, I kept working on it. So that was—that was one—that was interesting kind of being—being part of that from that stage instead of from here. I was kind of—I was really lucky because I was sort of a utility player up there and so I got

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to be involved in lots of things but again, I—I focused mostly on western lands. And the Clinton Administration was trying to again sort of correct the excesses of the previous administration on things like how public energy resources, especially, could—were—were being sold or leased to private interests. And so we were working a lot on coal leasing and mineral leasing standards, worked a lot on something that I guess will be with us forever and that is the 1872 Mining Law. I've worked on that with Senator Bumpers, I worked on that some when I was back in Washington and it still remains today this abomination of—of law—of law. It's just ridiculous. But the most fun I had, the most interesting thing I did was that I was asked to really implement

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the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. This was a—a big statement that the White House had made. President Clinton named this wonderful area in southern Utah as a national monument. And following that, he named several others. He named, I think, 50 million acres as national monuments but this was the first one. And it was a big surprise. I was not very involved in everything that led up to it but it's a fantastic area in southern Utah. It's in the area that's around Arches National Park and Canyonlands and Zion that really—that red rock country that's so spectacular. And when the President made the announcement, of course environmentalists around the country thought this was great, and everybody in Utah thought it was the worst thing that could possibly have happened. And the private

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property rights groups and interests were just on fire and the local officials were un—I mean everybody was unhappy in Utah. And so my job was to make this work. So I ended up spending the better part of a year and a half—a lot of it in southern Utah in small towns. And it was fascinating because of the history of that area, relationships between people living there, people working in the agencies and—and that relationship back to Salt Lake City. Fortunately, Mike Leavitt was Governor at the time in Utah and Governor Leavitt saw the value in this even as he didn't like the way it had happened. And Utah has a funny tradition, not a funny tradition, interesting tradition of land use planning. And it goes back to the Mormon settlement of the state. And he had already launched some interesting

planning activities and

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so we worked a lot with his office. But I got to be immersed in the culture of southern Utah. And this place is big. The—the monument is almost the size of Yellowstone National Park. And so we were doing assessments out there trying to really see what was there. I mean no one had paid any attention to this piece of land. And archeologically, culturally, biologically, geologically it was just a—a masterpiece of nature, really, really was and is. And that was a—a great opportunity also to see how something that's really a stroke of the pen decision by a president translates on the ground to the lives of people living in and around a place like this. These are all small towns. They were often opposed to it vehemently, just ideologically and at the same time saw

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tourism benefits, you know, saw some recognition for their area, you know. How—how could we sort of let everybody hold their ideological positions but—but get practical about how to make this work? So that was, you know, that was a great and very interesting time and it opened the door to more of these designations and I—I—I feel strongly that anytime you get a chance to preserve land, do it. You won't get a second chance.

DT: This might be a segue into your work with, I guess, your next step.

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SR: Yeah.

DT: A long, illustrious career. You went back to—you have—to non-profit world...

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SR: I did, I did.

DT: And—and the National Wildlife Federation doing lands stewardship work there. What—what did that entail?

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SR: Well, I had—I'd decided that, you know, like everybody else who lives in Austin, I wanted to come back home. I never intended to stay long in Washington the second time. And I had an opportunity with National Wildlife Federation to take a job that would allow me to live here and—and I thought that was worth trying to do. And so I came here first to set up a regional office in Texas that would be a multi-state office. And then was able to hire someone to run that and I became a Regional Vice President. And then a little bit later became the Director of Lands Programs for the federation nationally. What was great is that I'd worked with National Wildlife Federation forever, knew a lot of the people, had an appreciation for their ki—kind of history and close association with hunting and fishing groups. And I

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understood that in part, having been at Parks and Wildlife, and so that was not a reach for me. I mean they're different from a lot of environmental groups in Washington in that way. So that kind of interested me. And—and I wanted to come back here and I'd never really been in a non-profit organization. So I had a great six years learning that business. And NWF had—goes back to the thirties. It's got this wonderful, wonderful history, and has really been able to claim some great legislative victories over the years. But it's—it—it—at the time it was kind of struggling, I think, to figure out where it fit be—in the sort of whole universe of environmental groups. And it—it was kind of interesting in that way in that you now have so many groups especially in Washington and I think there's a sort of sorting

that's going out. But NWF I think has its—has its—a strong position as still

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representing that kind of Teddy Roosevelt type of conservation. So I learned a lot there. It also let me kind of get back to my interests in public lands so I spent time and we dealt with lots of endangered species issues in the west, prairie dogs and wolves re—reintroduction and—and really kind of looking at issues from a wildlife standpoint, which usually takes you back to habitat, which usually takes you back to how are you managing the landscape.

DT: What you—you mentioned wolves and their reintroduction I guess in—in

Yellowstone? Is that (inaudible)?

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SR: Yellowstone? Mmm hmm.

DT: Can you talk about some of the—the political controversies and some of the ecological aspects of it as well?

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SR: Mmm hmm. Yellowstone's a fascinating story and I can't begin—to do it justice. But wolves had long been removed from—from the Yellowstone, Greater Yellowstone Basin, Greaterstone—Yellowstone ecosystem. And they are the top predator in that system. And for a long time, biologists had wanted to reintroduce wolves there because they knew, they believed that with the right kind of wolf population, you'd see a balance reestablished in the bison population and the elk population. You know, if you go to Yellowstone now, or at least the last time I was there a couple of years ago, you can't get through the parking lot for the elk standing around in it. Well there's been no

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predation really. So the—the wolf was on the endangered or threatened list I can't recall and after a lot of negotiations and dec—and analysis, Secretary Babbitt decided to reintroduce the wolf into that ecosystem. And literally went out there with wolves in cages, you know, and—and took them out and let them go. And it's been a great success in terms of bringing down the—the bison herds which were getting too large and certainly the elk herds. I mean there really is this kind of ecological balance that seems to be tilting back as it should be. But the other side of this is the wolves, and this was the concern always of the ranchers, the wolves don't stay in the park necessarily. And there's great fear that they would, you know, just savage the local ranchers cattle and—and sheep herds, and that's just an

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inevitable tension. I don't think that has been as serious as was feared but there certainly have been incidents and I think there are programs in place to actually reimburse ranchers who lose livestock to the wolves. Similar situations come up with bison getting outside the park boundaries. And that's been especially difficult. Everybody loves buffalo, there are lots of them out there and they contract brucellosis which is a disease that's fatal to cattle. And when the bison herd would start to veer outside the park boundaries as they often do, especially during the winter looking for food, the ranchers want to shoot them because they fear that the bison will transmit that disease to the cattle. Well, long story short, I mean here's the bison herd which is just iconic in America, you know, everybody loves buffalo and

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as soon as they cross the park boundary had ranchers shooting them like, you know, like

any other kind of game. And they have rights to do that on private property and even the state of Montana was authorizing that. So that's a continuing issue and the science there doesn't—is not persuasive. There's no evidence, for example, that—that that disease actually can be transmitted from buffalo to cattle but that makes no difference in a political, you know, an emotionally charged kind of world. So how we bring—it's really a—the, you know, the—the pilot or not the pilot project but the best example of how trying to bring back these wildlife populations and—and restore ecosystems really doesn't work. I mean the political boundaries don't line up with the ecosystem boundaries or with the watershed

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boundaries or with the management boundaries. You can't—it's not a perfectly clean situation. And those human-animal conflicts are—are hard to deal with.

DT: Let me ask you a—a question about National Wildlife Federation that—that maybe a little—a little closer to—to Texas. If I remember, National Wildlife Federation was part of a consortium of groups here in Texas. Sierra Club, Environmental Defense and Texas Center for Policy Studies that worked on something called the Living Waters Initiative. And I think that that started during your tenure there. Is that right?

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SR: Right.

DT: Can you talk about what the source of that was and what sort of accomplishments (inaudible)?

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SR: I can—I can talk about the origins of it and some of the accomplishments but the real accomplishments have come after I've left. It's a great project. What happened was that about the time I got down here and—and even before I came back, Texas had passed statewide legislation setting up these planning districts to look at water needs around the state. So, I forget what they were called but the—the planning areas for the different watersheds. And there's a lot of fear, well placed fear in the state about water supplies being inadequate and the need to have some kind of systematic way to think about allocating those resources and building new projects. And the Water Development Board was empowered to set up these—these

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different committees, looking at these different areas and charge them with coming up with the plan. And people were appointed to the committees mostly representing development interests and local officials to come up with plans. Well there's a lot of competition between the plans, first of all, who would get the limited water. But what was clear to us in National Wildlife and throughout the environmental community is that there wasn't enough water to satisfy what everybody wanted and that nobody was going to be speaking for fish and wildlife or environmental needs both in the rivers and also in the bays and estuaries that were at great risk of not getting any water. The hoses would run dry before they even got to the coast.

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And so we at National Wildlife started talking about what this would take. And we teamed up with Environmental Defense and Texas Center for Policy Studies and Sierra Club and TCONR and lots of people and just sort of crystallized the thinking, I think, that—that we—all of this could happen and we would end up with dead rivers, dead rivers and dead estuaries. And that there had to be recognition by the state that water was important also

for the environment and that that needed to part of this legal allocation process for those—for those limited supplies. And what's followed has been this expansion of a project that I think has really forced the legislature to pay attention to that, to make some acknowledgement of it, it's far from perfect yet as I understand it. But it has changed the dialogue, I—I think, about how—about the need to—to—to be stewards of some of that available

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water. And it has energized people on the coast to sort of speak up and say we have to make sure a certain amount of water gets here, too. It's been—it's very difficult and it's—it's the issue of the century, truly is.

DT: In what sense? Why do I need to rank it so high?

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SR: I think the population growth in Texas is—is tremendous. It's been a while since I've looked at projections but there's—it's going to be very hard without some changes in behavior conservation, in finding other ways to do things to satisfy just the demands, urban demands for water, industrial demands for water the way we have in the past. And one remnant, for example, is the law of capture for ground water. That's another antiquated policy in Texas and it is—I think most water experts would say it's—it—it's not workable, it's not, you know, we can't we—we can't continue to do that and yet there's great resistance to changing it. So I'm really grateful and happy that the Living Waters Project has continued so well. I think it's just—it's critically important and they're doing great.

DT: This might be a chance to—to move on to a—a—a last or most recent segment in your career.

(misc.)

DT: Susan when we left off you were at the National Wildlife Federation but in 2004 you came to your current job at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

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SR: I did.

DT: And it's—the—the name is certainly true that you all have taught people to love wildflowers. You've also, I think, educated people in a lot of research and the virtues of—of native landscape more generally. I was hoping that you might be able to talk about a couple of the programs here that you're most excited about. You—I think you—you'd mentioned earlier the lead certification program for commercial landscapers of this building. It's just such a great example of sustainable building. But you're thinking more now about the—the landscape that might surround a sustainably built (inaudible).

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SR: Very much, you know, people think of us as—as the wildflower place and we are and we—we've—by having these display gardens and being a botanic garden, we try to, you know, show people what's possible with native plants and get them to appreciate native plants. But the mission's really a lot bigger than that and one of the things I did when I came was I went and read a lot of what Lady Bird Johnson had said in speeches and books. And she was really a far-sighted, wise person. She was talking about sustainability twenty years ago. She was talking about global warming twenty years ago, thirty years ago. And so what we've done with the wildflower center is try to sort of capture that larger vision. So while we have the regional botanic

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garden here, we're doing research, we're doing land restoration. We are reaching a national audience because of—through this database that we're doing. We do consulting work. But let me talk about some of the spec—specifics. You mentioned the—the landscaping standards. Especially in Austin but in cities all over, you know, the voluntary lead standards for—for green building have become very well known and very widely accepted and in places like Austin, in certain areas you can't even get a permit for building unless it's going to meet certain green standards. The irony of this is that in—in many cases, you can walk outside those buildings and the landscaping is environmentally disastrous, too water consuming, using heavy pesticides, lots of, you know, power generated equipment needed for maintenance, those

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kinds of things. So what we are doing is working with the U.S. Botanic Garden and the American Society of Landscape Architects to develop a set of standards and guidelines for landscaping for this kind of large scale landscaping that is like the green building standards. So it will provide the same kind of incentives and help in measurements for people to incorporate that kind of green thinking into the whole site, not just the building but the whole site. And it would apply very well to things like parks and college campuses and corporate campuses and roadsides, any place where there's a substantial amount of this kind of planned landscaping. So it's just an example of how we're trying to demonstrate and encourage not just appreciation for native

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wildflowers but for the role of vegetation in maintaining a more sustainable environment. We do that through research that's letting us help people restore degraded landscapes like we find a lot of in Hill Country, you know. We are finding through our research that some of the ways that ranchers around here have historically tried to get rid of cedar and bring back native grasses, in fact, don't work very well. There's some of this sort of, you know, folk lore about how to do that isn't really the best way to do it. And we have places here where people can come and actually see for themselves what works best and what doesn't. We're looking at green roofs using at—using native plants because we think that that is another way to address energy problems and water problems and global climate change by putting

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vegetative material on rooftops. Steve Windhager on our staff likes to say what we're trying to do is use native plant to solve environmental problems, not just because they're pretty, not just because they have cultural value, but also because they have ecological value that we need to take advantage of. So that's the broader message really that we're involved in now. And it's very exciting. And I think it is the fullest expression probably of what Mrs. Johnson was thinking of twenty-five years ago when she founded this place. At the same time, we really understand the need to create the next generation of people that you'll be interviewing sometime. You know, we do that through (laughs) through a variety of education programs. We're about to build a new children's garden which is very exciting. We reached however through our internet website and databases more than 6,000

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people a day trying to access information from us. So we have a—a national presence as well. Again, promoting the idea that—that the vegetation around us everywhere we are, we should not be blind to, that it's critically important. It is a portal, as Mrs. Johnson would say,

into the full array of environmental stewardship needs and that it's inherently regional. And what is of interest and local to us is not the same if you live in Connecticut or Florida or California and our database and information we can put forth is trying to get that same kind of enthusiasm for native plants and what is—what are their native plants created in those places. So we have a pretty broad spectrum of things that we're doing.

DT: I—I think it's interesting that—that—that maybe what a lot of us see when we're driving through the state and city where we live seems to be usual and common but may not be native. And I was wondering if you can give an example of some of these exotics in places that have become part of the landscape that we may assume or—are something that fits but maybe it's been shuffled from some other part of the globe and doesn't really fit.

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SR: Oh, there—there are lots of them. And one story I—I recall hearing was that when Mrs. Johnson was first promoting beautification in native plants and native wildflowers that several states got on board and started planting flowers along their highways. And Georgia, for example, was very enthusiastic and planted California Poppies all over its roadsides which were beautiful but were not native to—to—to Georgia. The ones around Austin that are of most concern are things like ligustrum. Many people buy plant ligustrum because they are fast-growing shrubs. They become big invasive trees if not controlled. Bamboo is one that a lot of people are familiar with. And I remember Molly Ivan saying (?) to two pieces of advice and of course the first

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one I'm not going to remember but the second was never plant bamboo. Chinese tallow, chinaberry, these are kinds of examples. Of course the ones that—that are becoming critical in Texas are things like kudzu which is a terrible problem and almost a freakish problem in large parts of the south. Crepe myrtles, they're widely used in landscaping here, they're not—there's nothing wrong with crepe myrtles, they're not invasive like ligustrum but we encourage people to think about and—and experiment with native alternatives like Texas persimmon which has a lot of the same features of crepe myrtles. So what we do know is that invasive species are the cause of a—a b—a large part of the cause of extermination or—or eradication of native

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plants. And while in a limited space, they might not be a problem but the continued sort of importation of those and propagation of those really does put the native plant by diversity at risk.

DT: You—you had said earlier that—that one of the roles that the Wildflower Center plays is to educate people. And you mentioned the website and certainly a lot of people come to the center itself. If—if you had your druthers, what is the message that you'd like to give these people? Maybe not so focused on wildflowers or natives but more broadly about the environmental challenges and—and opportunities that—that we all face.

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SR: It's, you know, it's always a hard thing to sort of distill that. I think we look for a unique way to make people think about environmental stewardship through the lens of plants. Other groups do that by appealing to peoples' love for wildlife, you know. Other groups do it by appealing to great scenery, you think of Sierra Club calendars. And all of those are—are—are wonderful. Our particular portal is plants and particularly native plants. And it's very much tied for the Wildflower Center to this idea of a sense of place, that the plants

around you, whether you're paying attention or not, they—they often define those spaces. Texans have a, wherever they're from in

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Texas, will have a notion of what that—what that world looks like around them and that is very much drawn by the plants around them, by the trees, by the shrubs, by the wildflowers. If we can do that, we sensitize people to the role of plants in a healthy ecosystem and through that to this broader sense of stewardship for the natural world. So, you know, some people care about whales, and some people care about, you know, protecting the wilderness, some people are concerned about hazardous waste dumps. I mean in my career, I've been concerned about all of those things. Our—our piece of this is through plants and it's a—it's a harder sell sometimes certainly than whales and koala bears but I think as people are getting more knowledgeable about science and thinking about things like climate change and—and—and water scarcity, it's becoming a message that's

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more important, especially as we can show that there are ways using native plants to address some of these issues. For example, we're doing research now on the ability of native grasses to sequester carbon especially in urban areas. And there's evidence that they're—that grasses may be able to do that better than trees. It—you know, I'm not saying that this will solve the problem of climate change but it is our—our part of that—of that problem to study, I think, the same with green roofs using native plants. We're approaching this in lots of different ways but that—that is our piece, that's our contribution, I think, to an environmental ethic and we do that every way we can think of.

DT: One last question.

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SR: Okay.

DT: You had said that—that you're interested in trying to bestow this idea of place. What—what makes one spot unique and special? Is there a place that you like to visit?

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SR: Oh, yeah.

DT: You know, maybe, I don't know, that gives you some sort of spiritual connection (inaudible)?

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SR: Yeah, and I have this theory.

DT: What's important?

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SR: I have this theory that people just like ducks are imprinted by the place where they grow up. And so if you grew up in—in Hill Country, that probably looks like the right landscape to you. And I've heard people who grew up where there are lots and lots of mountains and trees maybe or denser spaces like in New England and they move to Texas and they say they feel so exposed, you know. And I grew up in the Ozarks with tall, you know, hardwood trees and beautiful falls and lots of grass and more rain. And when I moved to Texas I thought it's still Hill country. But this is—the trees grow sideways and everything here sticks you, you know. Over time I've grown to love it but I—I think people kind of inherently have that affinity for—if not for where they grew up for where they have spent time and—and loved it. And I

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think I still feel most at home in those Ozark kinds of—kinds of forests, those sort of Appalachian kind of ecosystems although I've been all over the country and I, you know, I love the west coast, I love the redwoods. But it's that kind of pastoral, rolling hills area that speaks to me. I bet it's different for you.

DT: Oh, well thanks...

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SR: Yeah.

DT: For speaking to us about—is there anything you'd like to add? I guess we're going to start wrapping up.

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SR: Mmm mmm.

DT: Well, thank you very much for your time then.

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SR: Thank you.

DT: It's been a pleasure.

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SR: Thanks David.

[End of Reel 2393]

[End of Interview with Susan Rieff]