

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Ronnie Luster

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:03] Well, good morning. I'm David Todd. And I have the great privilege of being here with Ronnie Luster.

David Todd [00:00:09] And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a web site for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the University of Texas at Austin at their Briscoe Center for American History.

David Todd [00:00:33] And I want to stress that he has all rights to use this recording as well. It's his.

David Todd [00:00:40] And I want to make sure that that's okay with Mr. Luster. What do you think?

Ronnie Luster [00:00:44] That's fine.

David Todd [00:00:45] Okay, great. I'm glad.

David Todd [00:00:47] Well, okay, let's get started. It is Monday, August 14th, 2023, and it is about 11:10 AM, Central Time. As I said, my name is David Todd. I'm representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin. And we are fortunate to be conducting an interview with Ronnie Luster. This is remote. He is based in the Houston area.

David Todd [00:01:15] And in his professional career, Mr. Lester has worked as a property and casualty insurance broker, specializing in the oil and gas industry. But in his free time, he has enjoyed hunting ducks and fishing for redfish and speckled trout, with years spent on Shoalwater Bay near Port O'Connor.

Ronnie Luster [00:01:36] And he is a founding member of the Gulf Coast Conservation Association, which has now grown to be a national organization known as the Coastal Conservation Association. And he has been particularly involved in removing the commercial crab traps that used to be abandoned along the Texas coast.

Ronnie Luster [00:01:58] So, today we'll talk about Mr. Lester's life and career to date and especially focus on what he has learned about the history and conservation of these Atlantic blue crabs and other aquatic life along the Texas coast.

David Todd [00:02:14] So, I thought we'd start this little interview with a question about your childhood and early years. I understand that you spent some time in Port O'Connor and in Mexico, and I was hoping that you could fill us in on any family or friends or experiences

that you had as a small person that might have gotten you interested in the outdoors and conservation.

Ronnie Luster [00:02:39] Well, I guess I left Port O'Connor when I was seven and a half to Mexico, but, prior to that time, my father, when he knew where fish were at the little jetties in Port O'Connor, would come take me out of school. And we would go out there and catch fish rather easily. So that was the start of my fishing career.

Ronnie Luster [00:03:09] And then in Mexico, I fished off of the rocks, throwing handlines. And that was pretty much right below our house in Mexico, that was very close to where La Quebrada divers dive.

Ronnie Luster [00:03:32] And then from there, I went to Austin to high school for my junior and senior years. And then I went from there to, and that was at St Edward's High School, which didn't exist eight years after I graduated. And then I spent my freshman year at St. Ed's University, and then I transferred to the University of Texas.

Ronnie Luster [00:03:58] And then during that time period, at least twice a year, with an old friend of my family's who had a place in Port O'Connor, I would go down and we would go fishing, primarily in the summertime.

Ronnie Luster [00:04:13] So that, I guess in addition to that, my other outdoor adventure that I've enjoyed so much over the years is dove hunting. And we have a place outside of basically, Bruni, Texas, which over the years has been very good for the dove hunting, but currently is gone really down, downhill.

Ronnie Luster [00:04:46] But so, my outdoor activities started again when I graduated from college and moved to Houston. And we rented a house in Port O'Connor and I started duck hunting almost every weekend. And I used to take off the first ten days of duck season, to duck hunt.

Ronnie Luster [00:05:14] And, of course, we had, we put in sunken blinds in Shoalwater Bay. And that's where initially noticed that there were no crab traps in Shoalwater, which is, it's about 11 or 12 miles long.

Ronnie Luster [00:05:29] It's actually the old Intracoastal Canal that was dredged back in the early 1900s. So the average depth of the water in that place at mean tide is probably two feet, low tide, probably a foot, high tide, three and a half feet. And so, and that goes back 50-plus years.

Ronnie Luster [00:06:02] And so when I started noticing the crabbers start to use it, mainly because all of the deep-bay crabbing territory was already utilized by other crabbers. So, people that were trying to get into the industry, they had no other place to go, but to these areas that historically had not been crabbed, because of the inability to have access to them at any time, because of the tide situation.

Ronnie Luster [00:06:39] So we went from none to the last count that I had, which kind of generated my interest in trying to do something about it, I counted 1800 in an airboat.

David Todd [00:06:54] That's amazing.

David Todd [00:06:57] Well, let's just maybe pause there for a moment, because there are a few things that I was hoping to learn more about. You had an interesting childhood that you had a dad that would take you out of high school, out of school, to go fishing. Sounds like he was kind of a partner in crime.

Ronnie Luster [00:07:19] He was a great outdoorsman. He fished all of Mexico and all of the Texas coast. And he was actually an outdoor photographer and a professional photographer, and also did several outdoor movies like "Sailfishing in Mexico". And that's where he developed his contacts in Mexico, and then that's why we moved there.

David Todd [00:07:54] Gotcha. Do you remember any particular outings with him that sort of have stuck with you all these years?

Ronnie Luster [00:08:03] The one that I mentioned earlier. Because he only took me out of school a couple of times. And it's when he found out where the fish were, and it was real close to the boat basin that he owned and operated in Port O'Connor, which was right next to the little jetties on the north side.

Ronnie Luster [00:08:24] And the one I mentioned, we went over there and parked the boat on one side of the jetties, and that's before the jetties had granite blocks on them. So it was just a metal intrusion that went all the way to the end of the jetty. And you just kind of dropped your rod with the live shrimp over it and you had a nice trout on it.

David Todd [00:08:55] So did you have any kids that you were sort of peers with who also were interested in fishing or being outdoors?

Ronnie Luster [00:09:08] No, not other than friends of my father. Yeah.

David Todd [00:09:12] Mm.

Ronnie Luster [00:09:14] I'm an only child, so I had no siblings.

David Todd [00:09:18] I see.

David Todd [00:09:21] And then in school, any classmates or teachers that might have encouraged or influenced your interest in being outside and enjoying hunting and fishing?

Ronnie Luster [00:09:32] None.

David Todd [00:09:38] So, some people, you know, pick up a lot of their interest because they've seen a movie, seen a TV show, read a book. Are you in that category or are you more somebody who experienced it and got hooked that way?

Ronnie Luster [00:09:57] I watched, I think, Liberty Mutual Insurance had a outdoor feature, one of the first ones on TV that I used to watch. But, and of course, quite a few books that I've read about fishing in different places, hunting in different places, particularly dove hunting in Argentina, which I've been there about seven times, I guess. But other than that, of course, in today's environment, you can watch the Discovery Channel or BBC and you can see things that you never thought you'd be able to video.

David Todd [00:10:46] It's amazing, isn't it? The photography - I'm sure your dad would be impressed. You have to be very patient to get those good shots, I bet - a lot of waiting.

Ronnie Luster [00:10:58] Yeah.

David Todd [00:11:01] So before I interrupted you, and took you back in time a little bit, you were starting to talk about the crab industry, and I was hoping that you could just introduce us to how crab traps are built and how they work, because I think a lot of people are probably not as familiar as you are.

Ronnie Luster [00:11:24] They're limited basically to a particular size, which is 18 cubic feet. But basically all of them are built the same, and where the crab holding area is, it's supposed to have two openings cut in the side of where the crabs could go in, and can be captured, but can escape if they're small. Okay?

Ronnie Luster [00:11:54] So those are 2 3/8-inch openings that are supposed to be totally open, or when they cut them out, the wire is supposed to be pointed outward, and not inward.

Ronnie Luster [00:12:11] The main thing, and the most important area, is they are supposed to have an escape. It's a rectangular area that's cut into the holding area, the same area where the openings are, that is supposed to degrade if the trap is abandoned.

Ronnie Luster [00:12:41] And it was either with a very thin wire that is not stainless, or with a biodegradable cord.

Ronnie Luster [00:12:54] And when we started, when we picked up our first 1600, 1700 traps before the closed season even existed, not a single one of those was biodegradable. They either had little stainless rings clamped to them so they wouldn't open up, which is one of the biggest violations because essentially you have a trap that is going to be a trap forever. And if it's out there for six weeks and it would have degraded, you're still catching crabs in there that die that other crabs and other things come in to go ahead and try to eat.

David Todd [00:13:51] That helps. Thank you.

David Todd [00:13:53] And then I think you were you're explaining and I hate to ask you to say this again, but how these traps are sited and maybe you can explain, you know, where the earlier traps were sited and then that Shoalwater Bay was maybe one of the later ones to be used. And why that would have been a delay.

Ronnie Luster [00:14:17] Because all of the other deepwater areas were already taken up by other crabbers that had entered the industry earlier. And there's spacings that Parks and Wildlife tries to enforce, whereby you can't have that many traps in an area that's, how would you say it, in an area that would create an issue from an enforcement standpoint of the traps, as far as their allocation and the numbers and how far apart they were.

David Todd [00:15:06] I see, so Parks and Wildlife tries to make sure they're not too densely packed together, there's some separation among these traps?

Ronnie Luster [00:15:15] Yes.

David Todd [00:15:15] I see. Okay.

David Todd [00:15:18] And then. It sounds like the depth is an issue for where these traps can be put, and that may have been an issue there at Shoalwater Bay. Is that right?

Ronnie Luster [00:15:33] Yes. And, I would say in the summertime there may be two or three days in a six-week period that the tide was high enough for the crabbers to get in there and run the traps. But remember, at the end there, it was taking one crabber two complete days to run the traps because there were so many in there, many of which were abandoned, many of which weren't his.

David Todd [00:16:14] So, I guess that would have led to many of these traps being left for another season or the next cycle of tides tied to be removed or checked?

Ronnie Luster [00:16:21] They were just never retrieved. Because there wasn't a closed season where you could go out and anybody could pick them up because they were obviously abandoned.

David Todd [00:16:35] Got you.

David Todd [00:16:36] So, you know, when I was reading up about you and your effort to remove traps, I was really struck about the size of the commercial crab industry, because I remember as a kid that was like something you did, you know, as a hobby. It wasn't a commercial-scale intensive kind of operation. I was wondering if you could talk about where this commercial trap industry came from, how it got started.

Ronnie Luster [00:17:06] It came at the closing of the Vietnam War, when we, the United States, moved a lot of Vietnamese into the coastal areas where they had been coastal fishermen in Vietnam.

Ronnie Luster [00:17:29] Growing up and being in Port O'Connor as long as I had, there was only one commercial crabber that worked the bay system at that time, before the influx of the new crabbers.

David Todd [00:17:52] So, a lot of these new people in the industry were Vietnamese who were immigrants after the war, and they settled along the Texas coast?

Ronnie Luster [00:18:03] Correct. A lot of them in Seadrift. A lot of them around the Galveston Bay. A lot of them in Louisiana.

Ronnie Luster [00:18:13] These people had no really prior occupation other than commercially fishing, either noncommercial for private use, or whatever it was. So, they needed to go ahead and place them where they could earn a living.

David Todd [00:18:34] And did these Vietnamese folks sort of understand the customs and traditions of, I don't know, trap regulation, or was this something really foreign to them?

Ronnie Luster [00:18:46] Uh, like I said, they would build a trap, but they would go ahead and tie in the biodegradable door that was supposed to biodegrade and let the crab that was trapped in there after a series of times to escape.

Ronnie Luster [00:19:10] And then, in most instances, the 2 3/8th inch openings that were cut in, instead of instead of pushing the wire out to the outside, they would push it in to the inside.

David Todd [00:19:29] So, if I'm understanding this, they kind of intentionally short-circuited these, you know, biodegradable releases and escape hatches.

Ronnie Luster [00:19:39] Correct.

Ronnie Luster [00:19:40] Yeah, correct.

David Todd [00:19:42] I see.

Ronnie Luster [00:19:45] It was a matter of how many crab you could catch and keep.

David Todd [00:19:50] That was the bottom line.

Ronnie Luster [00:19:51] Yep.

David Todd [00:19:52] Okay.

David Todd [00:19:54] So, I guess these traps were their livelihood. And I'm curious how they got abandoned or lost. It would seem that these would be very valuable to the fishermen.

Ronnie Luster [00:20:10] Uh. One of the main reasons was in the open bays it's pretty tough, hard work. And if you weren't placing your traps in the areas where the crab were known to congregate, then it was hard to make a living out of it. And so, the last thing you did, if you decided to abandon the crab industry, then you just didn't go out to pick up your crab traps. You just left them there.

Ronnie Luster [00:20:47] And the same thing happened in Shoalwater, but even to a greater degree. Because anyone putting traps in there that couldn't readily access them almost every day, then they were limited to when they could run the traps and collect the live crabs. And so after a while they said, you know, "I'm not making much money. It's a big pain in the rear. And so I'm leaving the industry."

Ronnie Luster [00:21:21] But those crab traps stay in there.

David Todd [00:21:25] That's interesting. So, they were not only abandoning their individual traps, they were abandoning the whole business.

Ronnie Luster [00:21:31] Correct.

David Todd [00:21:34] Gotcha.

David Todd [00:21:36] So, let's talk a little bit about what happens if there's a trap that is abandoned. It's not monitored. It's not picked up and checked. Well, what is this? I've heard the term, "ghost-fishing", but I don't really maybe understand the scale of it and what it means.

Ronnie Luster [00:21:58] Well, ghost fishing is when a trap is abandoned, and even though it may not have a buoy on it, it's still trapping crabs and fish because it's in the water.

Ronnie Luster [00:22:14] And whatever goes in there, sooner or later dies, and it creates an opportunity for other crab and fish to go in. And that's what the ghost trap is.

David Todd [00:22:33] And I gather that some of the crabs that are in there, caught in these traps, actually become bait for additional crabs to come in. Is that how it works?

Ronnie Luster [00:22:48] Yeah. I mean, it's just, it's a living and dying cycle. It's not like a deer feeder that you put corn or protein in, and when the corn protein runs out, nobody else comes to it.

Ronnie Luster [00:23:08] These things, they're constantly in the water, and there's constantly bait in there of some type of the other for crabs to go into.

Ronnie Luster [00:23:18] You know, we've picked up redfish in there. We picked up flounder in there. We picked up sheepsheads in there. I mean, it's just a perennial baited trap.

David Todd [00:23:39] Can you give us sort of an idea of the scale of what a trap might capture in a bad situation, you know, the kind of I think you mentioned the variety, but maybe you can talk about the whole span of different creatures and how many might be found in a typical ghost-fishing trap.

Ronnie Luster [00:24:01] Well, I think if you read Shannon's article, he addresses that where Parks Wildlife has come up with estimates of how many crabs are killed in an abandoned trap.

David Todd [00:24:20] And it's not just crabs, it sounds like, what did you mention? Flounder and speckled trout.

Ronnie Luster [00:24:27] The majority of what's in there are crabs.

David Todd [00:24:31] Okay?

Ronnie Luster [00:24:36] But I remember one of my sons picking up one of 146 traps in Powderhorn Lake. This is, I want to believe, in the first closed season where anybody could go out and pick up abandoned traps.

Ronnie Luster [00:24:55] And there was a sheepshead in a trap that was three times the size of the opening that he got into.

David Todd [00:25:11] So, it had been in there so long that it had grown.

Ronnie Luster [00:25:14] Right.

David Todd [00:25:14] Hmm.

Ronnie Luster [00:25:23] And, I guess, in one of the initial ones before the closed season, we did find a trap on Matagorda Island in one of the lakes that had a diamondback turtle in it. And we also found, and it was alive because the trap was not totally submerged. There was enough

room for him to come up and breathe. But we also found another trap that had two diamondback turtles that was totally submerged, and both of them were dead.

David Todd [00:26:01] So, this is clearly a problem for protecting fisheries along the coast. Can you help us understand the challenges that existed to regulating and removing these crab traps? It sounds like this is a puzzle that took some time to figure out.

Ronnie Luster [00:26:24] The challenges were that the crab traps: there was no closed season.

Ronnie Luster [00:26:31] And the crab traps were considered personal property of the crabbers.

Ronnie Luster [00:26:37] So, the only way that you could go out and check traps, and remove them, is that you had a game warden on the boat with you declaring the trap illegal when you picked it up and looked at it.

Ronnie Luster [00:26:52] And then, then we had to take those traps and place them someplace. And initially, I had a close friend that had a ranch real close to salt water, and he allowed us to go ahead and take all of those traps over there and stack them up. And then, Parks and Wildlife had to put a notice in the paper that these traps had been collected and where they were, and if anyone wanted to go ahead and retrieve them, to go over there and retrieve. And of course, no one ever did.

David Todd [00:27:33] So, I guess this continued for a number of years. And then my understanding is that in the early 2000s, the Legislature passed a law creating a brief closed season and I think declaring some of these traps as a kind of litter and...

Ronnie Luster [00:27:55] Correct.

David Todd [00:27:57] How does that happen? I know these things are ... it's very difficult to get anything through the Legislature. So what happened there?

Ronnie Luster [00:28:06] I want to say that the Shannon addresses that also in his article.

Ronnie Luster [00:28:09] I think Buster Brown, a representative from, I think Brazoria, introduced a bill that was backed by CCA to go ahead and create a closed season, which they did.

David Todd [00:28:27] And the purpose of the closed season was what?

Ronnie Luster [00:28:32] The what?

David Todd [00:28:33] So, the idea behind the close season was to, I guess, give access to these traps when you knew they weren't supposed to be in there?

Ronnie Luster [00:28:44] It was for the general public to have the ability to remove any trap that was out there doing that closed season, period, that before they couldn't unless they had a game warden with them, and he declared the trap illegal.

David Todd [00:29:03] I see. So the day before the close season would open (that doesn't quite make sense); before the close season, these crab trappers would need to go and collect all their traps and pull them out of the water. And so anything that was remaining was declared pretty much fair game for removal.

David Todd [00:29:28] Is that okay?

Ronnie Luster [00:29:28] Correct. Correct.

David Todd [00:29:31] Gotcha.

David Todd [00:29:35] So, how did this solution get arrived at? I mean, how did people decide this was the way to move forward?

Ronnie Luster [00:29:44] I'd been working on this with Parks and Wildlife through our connections with CCA for about two years prior to this, trying to figure out a way to get around the traps, especially the ones that were abandoned, in Shoalwater Bay in the shallow water.

Ronnie Luster [00:30:08] And it was just not going anyplace.

Ronnie Luster [00:30:15] They still considered it private property. They still did not have any restrictions on where they placed the trap. So under normal conditions, there wouldn't have been 1800 traps in Shoalwater Bay, but there were.

Ronnie Luster [00:30:33] And so, from that point on, I got together with the Texas Parks and Wildlife captain, game warden Rex Mays, from Victoria. And he was just absolutely, tremendously helpful.

Ronnie Luster [00:30:52] And that's when we had the two crab trap events before the closed season, where we had about 15 boats with probably about 15 game wardens in the boat and went out and we collected almost 1600 traps in two different occasions, about a month apart.

Ronnie Luster [00:31:23] And once that occurred, I think it drew attention to the issues. And that's when the Legislature went ahead and passed the closed season legislation.

David Todd [00:31:36] So this was sort of an example to Parks and Wildlife and to the legislators that this was really burdensome to have 15 game wardens and all those boats out there to support volunteers to remove these traps?

Ronnie Luster [00:31:52] Well, most of these traps in Shoalwater Bay were picked up in airboats because it's normally too shallow for the bigger Parks and Wildlife boats to get into. So, that was almost 15, I think there were 18. The first volunteers were 18 boats, of which the Parks and Wildlife airboat had a hard time getting started. But we also had about eight other private citizen airboats, including mine, there that assisted them.

Ronnie Luster [00:32:33] And I will tell you that on the initial day in Shoalwater, there were some traps in there that could not be pulled in to the airboat. They had been there so long, they were basically a small oyster reef. And the only way we were able to get them out is two people hanging on to them while I put-putted to the shoreline. And then we were able to go ahead and wrestle it up on to the bank where the sun would kill everything.

Ronnie Luster [00:33:11] And those were also the ones that were hazardous to your outboard propellers too.

David Todd [00:33:18] Yes.

David Todd [00:33:19] So, that's an interesting issue. I guess these crab traps, especially in really shallow water, would be something that boats could run aground on or props could get fouled on?

Ronnie Luster [00:33:32] Well, I mean, I had one occasion, years ago, not in Shoalwater, but running the shoreline in Matagorda Bay when I had an aluminum prop. And all of a sudden the water was pretty clear. I could see the trap. I couldn't dodge it. And it basically just pulled back the aluminum prop blades.

Ronnie Luster [00:34:02] Fortunately, in those days, running aluminum props, I always had a spare in the boat.

David Todd [00:34:11] Wow.

Ronnie Luster [00:34:13] And remember, a lot of these abandoned traps don't have floats on them. So, if the tide is high enough where the trap is not exposed above the water, and it's early in the morning or late in the afternoon, they're going to be hard to spot until you hit them.

David Todd [00:34:38] I see. So, they're both a hazard to the fish and the crabs, and the boaters that were passing through?

Ronnie Luster [00:34:47] Especially in the shallow water. In the deeper water, if you lost a float, then it wasn't a big deal.

David Todd [00:35:00] So it sounds like in 2001, the legislature passes this bill creating a short, closed season, designating those traps that are abandoned as litter that can be picked up. And by the next year, 2002, Parks and Wildlife has got this program going. Tell us about those first efforts to pull out these traps, I mean, you explain what happened when you had to go out in the old style with the wardens and it was sort of cumbersome. But then this second round, how did that go?

Ronnie Luster [00:35:45] We went across Espiritu Santo Bay on to the island, which also was full of shallow lakes. And that's where we pulled out almost all of the traps, except we spent about two or three hours in the lower part of Shoalwater Bay, as you get closer to Seadrift.

Ronnie Luster [00:36:11] There was no, we didn't address in those first two prior to closing events. We didn't address any of the deep water threats. We were just trying to get the ones in shallow water, which shouldn't have been there.

David Todd [00:36:30] And it sounds like most of the effort at that first instance, back in 2002, was in Shoalwater Bay, Espiritu Santo. It wasn't coast-wide. Is that right?

Ronnie Luster [00:36:44] No, it was not.

David Todd [00:36:50] So, how many people did you have out there in some of those early years when you were trying to collect these traps?

Ronnie Luster [00:37:02] I never did sit down and count them. I was more concerned about boats. But normally, if you got the boat, you had volunteers that would get on the boat itself.

Ronnie Luster [00:37:14] But remember, initially, the vessels that were needed were airboats to get back into these really shallow areas and retrieve the traps. But, and I would say that Shannon's, I guess, on the initial opening, the first one, he addresses that a little bit.

Ronnie Luster [00:37:45] But I will say I wrote thank-you letters to all of the people that participated on the first one, when it was not the closed season. And I want to say they were probably 35 to 38 letters that I sent out. And that would be to people who were driving the boats, working from the boats to retrieve the traps, and the people working at the collection dumpsters.

David Todd [00:38:24] So, I'm always interested by people who do things just because they feel like it's the right thing to do. They're not being paid. This is just altruistic. How did you manage to recruit these people to remove the traps and then put them in the dumpsters and, you know, do the whole process of getting them out of the bays?

Ronnie Luster [00:38:49] It was such an obvious problem. I mean, you had to be blind not to see the problem. And especially if you ever fished in Shoalwater Bay or some of the island lakes on Matagorda Island. I mean, these things ... and Matagorda Island was even a bigger issue because there were very narrow channels going from the bay system back to the back lake whereby if they placed and that's where they placed the traps a lot. So if you were running a boat in there in that narrow channel, you were going to have a more difficult problem missing the trap.

Ronnie Luster [00:39:38] But the other answer is that, again, it was such an obvious visual problem. You didn't have to be a marine biologist to figure out the damage to the crabs that were being done and to other finfish that entered the trap and got trapped.

Ronnie Luster [00:40:05] And it was such a wonderful, I can't tell you the feeling that you got initially, especially in the and Shoalwater and Matagorda Island lakes, is you went in there early in the morning, and you left late in the afternoon, and there wasn't a single trap in sight.

Ronnie Luster [00:40:30] That was the benefit. And it's a benefit to everyone who ever gets involved in an abandoned trap issue. All you have to do is pick up a trap that's been in the water and it's going to have something dead and alive in it.

Ronnie Luster [00:40:45] A lot of the traps that are being picked up in the program now are on land. They've blown up, either by high winds and waves moving them up on the bank, so they're not creating as much death to crabs and finfish.

Ronnie Luster [00:41:09] But the ones that have been picked up over the last 15 or 20 years, 15, 16 years now, a lot of them, most of them, came from being in the water themselves.

David Todd [00:41:30] So this project started in, I guess, around Port O'Connor, Shoalwater Bay. But as I understand it, it's moved to many other bays, not just in Texas, but all up and

down the Eastern seaboard and along the Gulf. Can you talk about how this sort of grew legs and managed to catch on?

Ronnie Luster [00:41:59] Well, because the Texas program was such a success. And people like Shannon Tompkins wrote great articles about the program each year before it started. And the other states had the same problem we did. A lot of the commercial crabbers in Louisiana and Alabama and the rest of them came from the same location, ... from the same country, that the ones that established themselves in Seadrift, in Palacios, Galveston Bay, etc., and Rockport, as far as that goes.

Ronnie Luster [00:42:58] They were looking for a way to try to do something like Texas, but like I attended some meetings over there and most of their programs, initially, they were paying the crabbers to bring the traps in. So it wasn't a volunteer issue like Texas. And I think most of the states have kind of gotten away from that now.

David Todd [00:43:34] You know, it's interesting to me, it reminds me of some of the tension with the Vietnamese shrimpers and how contentious that became. And I was wondering if you saw a similar problem where, you know, locals who had visited and enjoyed the bays for years without these crab traps out there resented these folks who were spreading traps and being sort of, I don't know, irresponsible about them. Did you see any of that?

Ronnie Luster [00:44:08] The shrimping industry has had some issues all along. And I'm sure there was a carryover to that industry also because of, I guess, the attitude in their mother country about conservation and resources and the laws that govern their commercial industry.

Ronnie Luster [00:44:40] But I guess you've seen the use of plucked seagulls.

David Todd [00:44:49] I'm not aware of that.

Ronnie Luster [00:44:51] Yeah.

Ronnie Luster [00:44:54] But anyway, I think that industry has come a long way and probably is as good as anybody else out there crabbing or shrimping now simply because you've probably got this second or third generation of shrimpers and the new generation is...

David Todd [00:45:23] So we were just talking about this sort of tension that, you know, inevitably comes up between people who are competing over the same shared resource, you know, this bay that they all use and love. And I'm just curious if, you know, you ever saw this boil over where the people who've been using the bay for many years see, you know, newcomers arrive and they've got a whole different attitude about it.

Ronnie Luster [00:45:54] Oh, do you ever watch Lone Star Law?

David Todd [00:45:57] I have not.

Ronnie Luster [00:45:59] You probably need to start watching.

David Todd [00:46:02] I'll write a note to myself.

Ronnie Luster [00:46:04] Yeah, it's a great program. And I think I've seen about all of them, but at least in about each hourly segment they have, there are two or three coastal encounters, some with violations, some without, but most with. But it not only deals with the crab industry, but the oyster industry, which is another issue. And just people, individuals, fishing.

David Todd [00:46:42] Well, I guess, you know, some folks need to be reminded of what they're supposed to do and other people seem to have maybe a better internal compass.

Ronnie Luster [00:47:01] Go ahead.

David Todd [00:47:02] No, I was just saying that I guess some people are maybe better self-managers, as they say, and others need to be reminded by law enforcement that, don't do that.

David Todd [00:47:14] But it's intriguing to me that, you know, this is not just individuals, but it was a whole community. These Vietnamese folks come over here and they just seems like culturally have a different attitude. And I didn't know if you saw...

Ronnie Luster [00:47:29] And culturally and they were trying to survive and feed their families and make a living. I don't have a problem with that.

Ronnie Luster [00:47:37] But just as a matter of fact, I went to two crab trap fabrication meetings in Seadrift, Texas. And this is right after the closed season started. And many of the old Vietnamese crabbers had to have the younger generation translate for them.

David Todd [00:48:13] That's interesting. So they may just not have been aware. They probably didn't understand English to the extent that their younger offspring may have already learned English and maybe got more familiar with what's expected.

Ronnie Luster [00:48:40] Whatever the reason was, it wasn't helping their own industry that much.

David Todd [00:48:50] Got you. All right.

David Todd [00:48:54] Well, and when you take a look back at it, gosh, it's been just over 20 years since this law was passed. And of course, going further back when you were working with the wardens more closely, can you give me an idea of the sort of spread of this project and the number of traps that have been pulled out over the years?

Ronnie Luster [00:49:21] I want to say you may refer to that Shannon Tompkins article, but I'm going to say the first truly closed season results, statewide, were close to 8000 traps. And I want to say after last year's results, and I'm talking about Texas' results, you're probably up to a little over 40,000 traps.

David Todd [00:49:58] That's extraordinary.

Ronnie Luster [00:50:00] That's a lot of traps.

David Todd [00:50:02] Do you find that there are fewer traps being abandoned and/or fewer traps being collected now because of the sort of education that this project might have had?

Ronnie Luster [00:50:15] The crabbing industry is doing a much better job of pulling the traps and not leaving them out there, mainly because, when you really think about it, and they think about it, each trap costs anywhere from 35 to 50 bucks to fabricate. And if you go to buy a trap, it's even more expensive than that. Most of the traps that are built today are built by the individual crabber.

Ronnie Luster [00:50:48] So, and then there are also now some individuals that have the crabbing license that don't crab themselves, that basically they have subcontractors to go out and use their license. And they provide the traps.

David Todd [00:51:16] And I gather that if you own the traps and sublet your license, you're probably more interested in getting those traps in a working condition and back.

Ronnie Luster [00:51:28] Yes. Correct.

Ronnie Luster [00:51:29] And that was just a program that started a couple of years ago when they identified that some of this was going on and they went back to the guy that was providing the traps and said, "Hey, why don't you encourage your guys to pick traps up and bring them back so you don't have to go in and provide new traps?".

Ronnie Luster [00:52:03] But I want to say that's on a small scale.

David Todd [00:52:10] So, one of the things that I think is really interesting about this whole crab trap removal project is, you know, your role with the Gulf Coast Conservation Association, later, of course, CCA. And I was hoping that you might be able to tell us a little bit more about how that Association got started and became such an effective group.

Ronnie Luster [00:52:39] Well, it started in Port O'Connor, Texas, where several of the Hook 'n Bull original founding members had houses and fished. And they saw what was happening, and the adverse contributions by the commercial netting industry.

Ronnie Luster [00:53:12] And the main one there was Walter Fondren, the third. Another one was David Cummings. Another one was John Roberts. I entered in the first meeting that they ever had in Houston, Texas, is where my formal start in the program. And that was a meeting in which we voted the name of the organization, and we decided to name it the Gulf Coast Conservation Association. And Earl Smith was another founding influential member.

Ronnie Luster [00:53:52] And so, you know, Walter had the contacts and the high interest to get this thing moving. And this is, what, almost 47 years ago now. And it was, it's been a great pleasure to see the organization grow now to nationally, probably 150,000 members. Texas is like 75,000 of those.

Ronnie Luster [00:54:33] But because of the success that other states have witnessed that we've been able to do. We're now in every coastal state on both sides, east and west, and the Gulf.

David Todd [00:54:52] So, GCCA, and then I guess CCA, have been involved in lots of coastal fishery projects. And I think that there are a few that I've heard of and maybe you can give us some examples of things they have focused on. I think there's been red drum restocking, oyster restoration, seagrass protection, artificial reefs for red snapper. Could you give us a little color on on each of those?

Ronnie Luster [00:55:30] Well, I guess the main one was getting gill-netting eliminated for redfish and trout. That's where it all started.

Ronnie Luster [00:55:48] And now the state has such a good grasp because of their long-time efforts to analyze the stockings in the bay systems each year, both by stationary nets and also shrimp trawls. They can evaluate what needs to be done and how to scientifically try to regulate each species, which that's essentially everything we've done in the fisheries end of it has been based on science forever.

Ronnie Luster [00:56:30] The reef situation: it's not only, all of the reefs are placed in coastal waters. And some of the reefs are close to inshore. And they've been very successful.

Ronnie Luster [00:56:50] There's a lot of moving parts to one of those projects: getting the material, hopefully donated, getting the money resources to have it moved, transported, put on barges and then taken out. And that's, I would say, a process that sometimes can take two or three years.

Ronnie Luster [00:57:18] The one that we've probably put a lot of interest in in the last three years has been the oyster issue. Whereby the commercial oyster industry has been basically really over-harvesting reefs that needed to be not harvested much.

Ronnie Luster [00:57:45] And so that is where a lot of our efforts are going in now. We just got four different bay systems closed essentially forever that have recently been over-harvested to the point where they weren't before because it were enough oysters in Galveston Bay, Matagorda Bay, East Matagorda Bay, and San Antonio Bay and around Rockport and Aransas Pass that it was enough for the commercial industry to harvest, and not have to move around.

Ronnie Luster [00:58:34] And what's happened the last several years is, especially after Ike, and Galveston Bay being the biggest producer of oysters by far. Then when the bay systems would open, all of a sudden the state would monitor the harvest and all of a sudden they'd close an area and then everyone would move to the next open area.

Ronnie Luster [00:58:58] Where you might have 40 or 50 oyster boats oystering on one reef, which... Anyway, those oyster reefs are much more important than the created reefs because they filter water, they provide areas for little fish, crabs, everything, to survive when they're young. They're just a marvelous environmental impact to the bay systems.

David Todd [00:59:36] So I gather CCA has been involved in in not only closing some of the natural reefs, but also trying to seed these new artificial reefs. Is that correct?

Ronnie Luster [00:59:50] And that's a program that's being started, but probably, the state, until two years ago, Texas was the only state on the Pacific, Atlantic or Gulf Coast that didn't have an oyster aquaculture program. And that was because we were the only remaining state that had oyster reefs that the commercial industry could harvest. I'm talking about Texas reefs. I'm not talking about, there are probably about 2000 acres in Galveston Bay that's leased out for aquaculture. But I mean, it's a little bit different now.

Ronnie Luster [01:00:42] Now those, the ability to go ahead and lease an area approved by Parks and Wildlife and start your own aquaculture oyster program is now available. And there

are several that are already in operation, and there are several that have been permitted that will be in operation in the very near future.

Ronnie Luster [01:01:14] And there will also be the ability for individuals to go ahead and lease an area where there's been an oyster reef before, but it no longer exists, to go ahead and try to rehabilitate that reef and get it going again.

David Todd [01:01:39] And do you think that these new, privately-run aquaculture reefs may take some pressure off of the natural reefs that have been here for many years?

Ronnie Luster [01:01:54] That is the ultimate hope. It's just going to take some time.

Ronnie Luster [01:02:04] I also went to an oyster-tasting party about three months ago where I actually tasted a oyster-aquaculture oyster from Galveston Bay. It's like the first one in the state to be operational.

David Todd [01:02:33] Well, that's heartening. So, this is already underway and producing oysters that hungry people can eat. That's great.

Ronnie Luster [01:02:43] Well, they're just a little more expensive. But when you and it's ... Other states, like the state of Washington, has had a shellfish aquaculture industry for over 40 years. And again, the reason, the real reason, why Texas never really got into that arena was because we still had more thousands of Texas bay reefs than any other state combined.

David Todd [01:03:31] Well, I guess it's costly to put together one of these aquaculture programs and cheaper to use an existing native reef.

Ronnie Luster [01:03:40] Not when you can pay five or \$600 for an oyster license and go out and dredge the oysters from Texas reefs.

Ronnie Luster [01:03:55] And from what I've seen, these aquaculture oyster farms, you know, they don't sell the oysters by the bushel or by the pint: they sell them by the individual oyster. And from what I've seen, the price usually ranges from one and a half to three times more what a normal harvested Texas oyster reef would cost when you go to eat one.

David Todd [01:04:27] Well, maybe this will be a sustainable thing then: people can earn a living and at the same time create some more reefs in the bays. That's great.

Ronnie Luster [01:04:39] Yeah.

David Todd [01:04:40] So one of the real hallmark efforts, I think, that at least I associate with GCCA and CCA, is this effort to not only cut back on the gill fishing, but actually to get more redfish into Texas bays. And are you familiar much with how that program got started and became so effective?

Ronnie Luster [01:05:06] Yes. There was a CCA member, who's still alive, whose foundation donated \$1,000,000 to create the Flower Bluff hatchery in Corpus. And then CCA has contributed a lot of money to the hatchery that's down there around Freeport. And we also contribute a lot of funding to the maintenance of these hatcheries, the equipment that they need, relining the holding areas that are on the surface of the ground. I want to say that over

the years, I had something that I threw away that had how much we had contributed to the hatchery program.

Ronnie Luster [01:06:09] But it's, that was, besides eliminating the gill-netting, which was the real culprit, especially in the wintertime. It was a means of trying to help Mother Nature out in reproducing new offspring. And especially it's important when you have these reefs.

Ronnie Luster [01:06:43] So one of the problems for these red snappers was just environmental, that you'd have a cold snap and the snappers would die. I also had heard that there was sort of a real popularity boom for red snapper maybe back in the eighties.

Ronnie Luster [01:07:06] Well, the red snapper are not going to get hurt by a freeze.

David Todd [01:07:10] I'm sorry. I meant redfish. I apologize. I apologize. Yeah, I'm thinking more about the red drum and redfish.

Ronnie Luster [01:07:19] The red drum actually do better in the freezes than the trout do. They're a little more hardy.

Ronnie Luster [01:07:31] Normally during the freezes the, you know, I'm just saying, on the average, that's the case. And in this last freeze, the trout got hit a lot harder than the redfish and people that I talk to are catching more redfish right now than, than ... they can only keep three. Yeah.

David Todd [01:08:01] But, well, was there a kind of pressure, though, on these red fish years ago that was from the commercial fishermen. I had just heard that there was this, you know, Chef Prudhomme, who, you know, invented this blackened red fish. And people were very excited about that. And the market really boomed. Is that just a rumor or is there some truth to that?

Ronnie Luster [01:08:30] That was kind of a craze that kind of started in Louisiana and then it kind of migrated to Texas. But, that's when we got involved, CCA did, and got them the netting eliminated in the Gulf. But these were basically fish that had grown up in the bay system and then they migrate out, and form huge schools. But they never come back in. And it was kind of a continuation of trying to protect the redfish from, you know, clearly successful efforts of eliminating the commercial gillnetting of them.

David Todd [01:09:27] Okay. So one other thing I wanted to ask you about, as far as CCA is concerned, I think Texas has been a leader in this Rigs to Reefs program. And I was curious if the Association was part of the impetus to recycling some of these offshore oil rigs and making them into reefs that might be home to red snapper and other aquatic life.

Ronnie Luster [01:09:58] CCA has been a great proponent of that. Unfortunately, so many of the reefs have been decommissioned already that there's...

David Todd [01:10:11] So, some of them had already been dismantled before they could be used as reefs.

Ronnie Luster [01:10:17] What's that?

David Todd [01:10:18] I think, were you saying that that before GCCA could get involved, a lot of these rigs had already been dismantled?

Ronnie Luster [01:10:26] No, we've been involved from pretty much day one on that issue, it's just that the federal government controls all those reefs in federal waters. And when they're decommissioned, you know, the timeline for basically eliminating the rig, or the wellhead, or whatever it is that's above the bottom.

David Todd [01:11:03] I see. So, the rigs to reefs program is more effective in state waters where Texas Parks and Wildlife has more of a say in how those rigs are recycled.

Ronnie Luster [01:11:17] The feds still have authority there also. But, you know, the rigs to reef, if you look at it, sooner or later, that reef is not going to be there even if you leave the structures standing. But it'll help along the time when it is there.

David Todd [01:11:52] So, these rigs eventually corrode and they just can't act as a skeleton for the reef?

Ronnie Luster [01:11:59] Well, mainly storms and hurricanes get them.

David Todd [01:12:02] Okay.

Ronnie Luster [01:12:04] And then you have a navigation hazard.

David Todd [01:12:13] So, one last round of questions, if you can tolerate me for a little bit longer.

David Todd [01:12:19] You have chaired the CCA's Texas Parks and Wildlife Committee. And I think that through that committee funneled over \$1,000,000 to the department. And I was hoping you could give us some examples of the kind of projects that you've been able to support.

Ronnie Luster [01:12:41] Oh, this goes back a long time. I will tell you the most recent one that the Parks and Wildlife Committee approved and recommended to the Texas Management Committee, which met on the eighth of this month. I was zooming in on it. We just, and now, the management committee approved it, and it's going toward the executive board which meets on the 22nd, is \$82,850 to fund the building of a brand new houseboat to be placed back in Baffin Bay, where Hanna, the little hurricane that came through there two or three years ago, totally destroyed it, and another one that we had donated and built to that was in the upper end of the lower lagoon.

Ronnie Luster [01:14:00] So, that's, that's the most recent one.

Ronnie Luster [01:14:04] But I can go ahead and I had that list with me and I just put it in the trash yesterday. Let me get a list and I'll send that to you.

David Todd [01:14:16] Well, I would love to see that.

David Todd [01:14:18] And just to make sure I understand, the houseboat in Baffin Bay, and Lower Laguna madre. What was the purpose of that?

Ronnie Luster [01:14:33] From an enforcement standpoint. It is, from the nearest launching place to where that houseboat was, which is at the headwaters of Baffin Bay, it's 22 miles. And there's no place to stay down there. Okay? You have to go back up to Corpus.

Ronnie Luster [01:15:03] So, the purpose of that was to aid the wardens, where they could spend more time on the water trying to enforce the rules and regulations, and have them a place to spend the night, and cook their own food, and do whatever they need to do, to do night enforcement, which they can't do currently. There's just, there is no facility for them to have to keep, to go back and forth, 44 miles plus the miles that they put in in enforcement time.

Ronnie Luster [01:15:47] So, it's a, if you've ever been down there, I think you will understand the issue, because this is the second floater that we've totally funded for two new ones. But we also, the one that was there previously, we spent about thirty or forty thousand dollars rehabilitating one that had been there for several years.

David Todd [01:16:27] And just to sort of fill out the picture, in these really remote parts of Baffin Bay and Lower Laguna Madre, what's the typical work for a game warden down there? What would keep him or her engaged down there?

Ronnie Luster [01:16:43] It will be enforcing the fishing rules and regulations.

David Todd [01:16:49] So, redfish, speckled trout?

Ronnie Luster [01:16:52] Redfish, speckled trout, flounder, even though the Lower Laguna is not known for a big flounder enterprise. It's just doing the same thing that they would be doing in Matagorda Bay or Galveston Bay, except there's no place for them to stay.

David Todd [01:17:18] Gotcha. That sounds like a really pragmatic thing to do. That's really neat.

David Todd [01:17:23] Well, good. Well, you've done a wonderful job of explaining everything from crab trap removal to Baffin Bay houseboats. I imagine that we're just skimming the surface and have missed some things that you've been engaged with. And I'm curious if there's any other conservation work that you'd like to mention. I know that you've been recognized by Field & Stream as a hero of conservation, and those prizes don't come to everybody. So is there anything you'd like to add?

Ronnie Luster [01:18:09] I guess the thing I'm most proud of is, not myself, but how GCCA, CCA, has grown to the efficiency that it has over the almost 47 years. It's been wonderful to be involved, starting with most of the volunteers on our two initial abandoned trap retrievals that were done before the closed season. Just about every one of those person was a CCA member.

Ronnie Luster [01:18:57] So, and from a, you know, from the last three banquet years, even when COVID came along, have exceeded every year prior to them except the one year on COVID. So we have wonderful public support for our banquets, fundraisers, etc., because I think everyone can really appreciate what we've done over the years to try to help the fisheries itself, but also try to help people catch fish or eat oysters.

David Todd [01:19:50] Sounds good.

Ronnie Luster [01:19:53] Huh?

David Todd [01:19:53] Sounds good. Sounds tasty. Who can object to that?

Ronnie Luster [01:19:58] But anyway, it's been a great pleasure and a lot of satisfaction, even though in the early years, sometimes we were kind of wondering where the next paycheck was going to come from. It's been a ... so many states, other states, have seen the progress that we've been able to make legislatively, assisting the states, etc., and our members. It's here to stay, long after me.

David Todd [01:20:37] That's a great legacy.

David Todd [01:20:40] Well, I imagine you have other things planned for today. And your dog probably wants to get released. So maybe I should let you be. But I wanted to just make it clear how much I appreciate your time today.

Ronnie Luster [01:20:58] Do you want me to lay my hands on our historic contribution list, by item?

David Todd [01:21:05] I would love to see that. Yes. That I would value a lot.

David Todd [01:21:10] Of course, the best thing you've done is just to talk to us. So thank you for that.

Ronnie Luster [01:21:15] Yeah. I'll tell you. Why don't you do this? You can access the CCA website. And they have that on there.

David Todd [01:21:24] Oh, that's even easier. Then I won't have to trouble you with it. I'll do that.

Ronnie Luster [01:21:29] And just let me know if you can't locate it, because I just read the recent Currents mailout, and I believe it had it in there, but also on the website, I think they have a list of our historic contributions.

David Todd [01:21:50] Okay. Well, there are a lot of contributions, so that that may be a good thing to sort of fill in any gaps we might have. But you've given us a lot. So, thank you very much. I hope our paths cross, but thank you again for your time today.

Ronnie Luster [01:22:07] Well, thankfully, it's a... Well, the crab trap deal was a good program, took off, and it's still around. The CCA is a wonderful organization from a conservation standpoint when it comes to salt water.

David Todd [01:22:38] Good deal. Well, thanks for your role in all that and for sharing some of the stories about it.

Ronnie Luster [01:22:43] Okay.

David Todd [01:22:44] All right. You have a good day.

Ronnie Luster [01:22:46] Thank you, David.

David Todd [01:22:47] All right. Bye now.