

Narrator: Jonathan Foret
Interviewer: Darcy Wilkons
Transcriber: Joshua Coen

14th November, 2013

DARCY WILKONS: My name is Darcy Wilkons. I'm interviewing Johnathan Foret about his memories and experiences concerning the Louisiana coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at 11:00 AM on November 14th, 2013. The interview is being conducted at the Bayou Terrebonne Water Life Museum in Houma. Do you understand that portions of this taped interview or pictures taken during the interview may be used in publications?

JONATHAN FORET: Yes.

WILKONS: Okay. Thank you for speaking with me today! Now that we have gone over the consent forms, I'd like to get some basic information for the taped interview. Would you please state your full name?

FORET: [00:52] Johnathan Foret.

WILKONS: Okay. What is your birth date and where were you born?

FORET: Um, my birth date is May 6, 1977 and I was born in Houma, Louisiana.

WILKONS: Have you lived there your whole life?

FORET: Um, no. I mean, I've um traveled around a bit and worked overseas in different places, joined the Peace Corps, things like that.

WILKONS: Where'd you serve in the Peace Corps?

FORET: Uh the Kingdom of Tonga in the South Pacific. Yeah, it was pretty great. I lived in New York City for a while as well. In Brooklyn and in Manhattan. Um, lived in Bangladesh for a while. But I always ended up back over here.

WILKONS: When did you move back to Houma officially?

FORET: [01:33] Um, The last time? Um. I, um, I was working for the United Nations for a while and when that contract finished I decided to get my Master's degree in Public Administration from the University of New Orleans, so I worked for the Louisiana State Museum as their grant writer, uh, for about two years while I finished my masters. After I graduated, um, I moved back to Houma and took a job with, um, the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center and that was, um, a little over two years ago.

WILKONS: Okay, awesome. Um, so, can you tell me...I mean, Houma seems like it's very important to you. Can you tell me a childhood memory that has connected you to the Louisiana wetlands?

FORET: [02:26] Sure. One of the things growing up, because I did grow up in Chauvin, so when I saw I was born in Houma that's because the hospital was there. But I grew up, um most of my child...well all of my childhood in Chauvin. And I participated in a lot of things that most, uh, young boys living on the bayou would do, uh, went trawling with my dad for shrimp. Uh, would go fishing all of the time, hunting, all of those things. One of my favorite past times was playing in the ditch. So, in front of our house was this really large ditch which was used for drainage but there were wonderful crazy little critters that would live there and so I remember having a minnow trap, which was sort of my favorite thing that I owned that I would go put in the ditch with pieces of bread and then you'd catch all kinds of different fish and snakes and things like that. My mom probably would rather that I hadn't played in the ditch, but it was sort of like my research lab, I guess. You know? You were able to see little tadpoles turn to frogs and sort of see, you know, the fish that lived in the ditch were mostly live borers so seeing the little baby minnows and things like that, and crawfish. And it was also interesting for the hurricanes for storms. They would bring in a whole different genre of animal life in the ditches, things that you wouldn't typically see. So, I don't think I realized how much I was learning about the environment by playing in the ditch, and seeing what would be in there seasonally and you know different storms would bring different little creatures in there so I think,

you know, childhood memories connected to the wetlands – that would be the thing that I most enjoyed as a kid, was playing in the ditch.

WILKONS: Yeah, that's awesome. Would you say after hurricanes there were more saltwater?

FORET: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, there were like little saltwater catfish in there. There were really crazy looking crawfish, I remember, of different colors. You know, things that I had not typically seen before. And snakes, lots of snakes, would come out. You know, hanging out in the trees when it would flood. You know, they were all looking for higher ground. So yeah, there were more saltwater species for sure whenever it would flood.

WILKONS: Wow, okay. How have the wetlands changed over your lifetime? Have they?

FORET: [05:11] Yeah, uh I mean, there is a location in Boudreaux Canal when you're headed down toward Cocodrie that as a young boy, we would go down to Cocodrie to fish and that was pretty much solid land when I was a kid. And now it's open water, like complete open water. I've been told stories of that area that there were cattle that used to graze there and now it's open water. So, yeah, it's changed dramatically and it's changed very quickly. Um, I'm 36, you know. I'm not 80. So, those changes have happened over a very short period of time.

WILKONS: That's amazing. Um okay, so how did you get involved in coastal restoration?

FORET: [06:08] You know, I had... after I got my Masters in public administrations, I had all intentions of going back to work overseas. But then there was a board member for the Wetlands Discovery Center who approached me who said "Why would I go overseas to try to fix other peoples problems when we have so many problems we need to fix here within our own community?" And that sort of resonated with me in a way that it hadn't before. It's not something that I really thought about. And so I did some research into the organization and found that it was, it was good and I decided that this would now be the cause that I would put my weight behind.

WILKONS: Okay, so Louisiana's wetlands are obviously important to you. Are they important to our nation as a whole?

FORET: [07:00] Oh yeah, sure. You know, and there's a lot, um, there's a lot of information on that, just about, you know, the energy infrastructure, what the wetlands do to protect, um, the oil pipelines and things like that. Um, the seafood industry as well, you know without this there would be, um, a lot less seafood dinners on people's tables and in restaurants.

So, um yeah, definitely. I mean, of course there is a huge economic implication, um, with the wetlands. Yeah.

WILKONS: And, I mean, it's a buffer zone right? Like, when that's gone someone else will be the buffer zone.

FORET: [07:40] Yeah, exactly. And it's gonna'...I mean right now we're seeing that in our bayou communities. They are taking a bit of a harder hit with all of these storms that come through. Once that land is gone, then you know the city of Houma will face a much larger challenge in terms of um, you know, the storm surge that comes through. And you know the parish is doing some very important things to prepare for that. A lot of the infrastructure of Terrebonne Parish is now being built to the northern part of the parish. Um, you know there is a sports complex that, um, they are looking to build in next couple of years. That's in the northern part of the parish. You see a lot of the big um larger companies are building training facilities and it's all in the northern part of the parish. So, people kind of see the writing on the wall. Um, there are schools that are closing in the southern part of the parish because a lot of the families are um moving from down there, so...um...it's sort of a bit of a diaspora I guess if that's the right word to us for some of the communities that are down there that...that just you know those people...it becomes more and more difficult to bounce back from these storms so it just makes a little bit more sense if they can move north to do so. Um, but it'll be interesting to see what happens to the culture, um, of those areas and see how that affects it.

WILKONS: So let's talk about CWPPRA. Is it important? Why?

FORET: Oh, absolutely. All of the projects that are funded through CWPPRA are so important to the survival of the communities that are here. It takes a whole lot of money to be able to make this happen, you know, restoring the coast. We don't have nearly the amount of money that we need to really make meaningful gains in land but this is the one thing that we do have, this program. So, without it, I couldn't imagine the challenges that we would face if we didn't have at least that. We need more, but at least we have CWPPRA.

WILKONS: Gotcha. Um okay, so if you could go back, what would you tell previous generations about wetlands?

FORET: [10:21] I think that this whole restoration effort should have begun in the 70's or 60's. I think that...um...The thing I'm worried about is that it's too far gone to make meaningful gains. Um, I'm, well I can't even say that I'm hopeful, I would...because I'm trying to be realistic in it. I don't know. Like, I'm looking forward to seeing what happens and if people are able to come together and make collective decisions for the good of the state. Um, and you know what, some of those things will not be easy decisions to make and people will lose. Some people will lose by making choices that benefit the greater good, but those are decisions that will have to be made and if they aren't then, you know, adaptation is key. One of the things, there are, I guess there are few different schools of thought. I work with middle school and high school

students and the thing that I push for the most with them is innovative problem solving, adaptation. I want these kids to know that if nothing is done, then their reality will be very different than what they see today and they will need a very specific skill set to survive in the landscape that they will have, which will be a lot more water, a lot less land, stronger storms, higher water levels. So, they can continue to live here and they can continue to enjoy their culture, enjoy their heritage, but it's going to be in a different way. I'm not talking about the next generation, but I think within two to three more generations their way of life is going to be much different and our responsibility is to help them develop the skills that they need to survive in that environment, you know? So, I'm relying on CWPPRA and all of these other agencies to do the restoration work, right: to restore the land, to build land. But if they don't, If they are unable to do that for whatever reason, then the kids are still going to survive because they will have those survival skills. Because that's where I see the (SLWD) Discovery Center fitting in to this. That's our role. We're going to teach you how to survive in a worst case scenario. Hopefully you don't have to be there, but if you do, you're going to be okay, you know?

WILKONS: That's pretty awesome.

FORET: [13:23] I hope so. Let's hope it all works out, right?

WILKONS: Okay so we just have one more question.

FORET: Sure.

WILKONS: Basically just to sum up your views, what's the message you want viewers to take away from... Why wetlands are important, this whole discussion. Do you have, like, a summary?

FORET: [13:47] Again, and this fits into what I was just saying, I really do believe that adaptation is key. Um, I think that, I mean I'm tired of being resilient. Resiliency is exhausting. You know? There was, um, Dr. Gary LaFleur who gave a wonderful presentation about adaptation and forgive me for not quoting him exactly because he did a great, great job with saying this. Um, he was talking about the species that live in brackish water and he said that you have tons of different species that live in salt water and tons of different species that live in fresh water. But then you have a very limited number of species that live in the brackish water because the salinity levels are constantly in flux. So you have to have a species that is able to endure very fresh salt water and very salty salt water, um, and he likened the people of the bayou communities to these species that live in this very stressful environment, because there is a lot more stress with those fluctuations so the animals have to be able to adapt, they have to be able to be resilient. But these particular...and there was one particular minnow that he talked about. This particular little minnow does not grow very large and it's typically very stressed and it has a hard life, but it's the only species that can survive there. And so, in that discussion, it made all of the kids that were listening to it very proud to be that little minnow, you know? They were proud because they understood that they live in a place that...they live in a very stressful environment.

But they are some of the only species that can live there, because when you grow up dealing with hurricanes, when you grow up dealing with land loss, it's just something that you're used to. I remember being in the Peace Corps in the kingdom of Tonga and there were earthquakes there, a lot. It's the South Pacific. And it freaked me out. I couldn't handle it. Earthquakes made me just lose it because it was something that shouldn't happen. Because we are from southern Louisiana and there are no earthquakes. I mean there might be earthquakes but you don't feel it because of the alluvial soil, right? But a hurricane, I'm fine with that. And there were hurricanes in Tonga. That, I had no problem with. And it just goes to show again that when we're raised with those things we just become used to dealing with those situations and I guess that builds in this idea of resilience. So yeah, so I think, and all of the students really want to live here. They want to stay here. A lot of the kids... I mean, some of them want to move and explore, just like I did, but eventually a lot of us come back. You know? So yeah, adaptation is key...um...and I'm tired of being resilient.

WILKONS: Well thank you so much for being here today. You've been an invaluable subject to interview so on behalf of CWPPRA and the T Harry Williams center or oral history, I would like to end this interview.

FORET: Thank you

[Tape Ends 17:22]