# Interview with Spencer Smith

# Former FWS Director

Interviewed by Steve Chase

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**Spencer Smith:** Very fine evening we had with the opportunity to be with Lynn Greenwalt and Judy for dinner. Then John Connor joined us and a great review of many things that did happen and some things that didn't happen.

**Steve Chase:** Well, did you come over from California just for this?

**Spencer Smith:** Oh, yes.

**Steve Chase:** Oh, that's great, that's wonderful.

**Spencer Smith:** I guess Steve was the instigator, or someone was, I'm not sure.

**Steve Chase:** Well, a couple of us have been talking about it for a while, and you have been on our radar screen for over a year to try to get you to come and talk to us. So we are glad that you could. Where did you go to school to get your biology degree?

**Spencer Smith:** I did my college work at Oregon State University, came out of the Navy right after WWII. Was located in Corvallis, Oregon. An individual that I had been with for a number of years in the Navy, was the former Instructor of Wildlife at Purdue University. He rather introduced me into the fish and wildlife profession during those years of Navy time. In fact, he and I were stationed in Corvallis, Oregon, on our last segment of duty and so I chose Oregon State as my school. I am quite pleased that I did. As you know, back in those days there

were only four or five schools that offered degrees in fish and wildlife management.

**Steve Chase:** What do you recall? Were there any influential textbooks back then?

**Spencer Smith:** The lack of textbooks was a real problem. A couple of Ira Gabrielson books and quite frankly, I don't recall the name of them, but more of a philosophical concept of wildlife management. Al Day was a past graduate of the school, then the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, and he was out several times for seminars and so forth. So we did get an introduction not only to the fishery management aspects of our education, but equally important we had some good insight from leadership at both the State level and Federal level during the time that I was there.

**Steve Chase:** Interesting. When did you first join the Fish and Wildlife Service?

**Spencer Smith:** I joined the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1948. Interestingly enough, I graduated, got my Bachelors from Oregon State and received a teaching assistantship appointment at Texas A&M University. I went there to study under Leonard Wing who was an outstanding fisheries man of that day. By the time I arrived at A&M, he had just accepted a job at another school. After a bit of chatting with the new individual, I decided not to continue my education there. The individual that introduced me to the Fish and Wildlife field, Gordon Ferdeen, at that time was Regional Supervisor of River Basin Studies in Atlanta, Georgia. I joined him, at a salary of $2,900.00 per year, with an income of $101.00 every two weeks take home pay. After nine months, I starved out in Atlanta, and at about that time the State of Mississippi was looking for their first professional Fishery Biologist. As you know, the state of Mississippi has both a very large inland fishery, both commercial and sport, as well has the coastal fishery,

which at that time was quite an income for the state. The Governor of the state, looking around for trained scientists, learned that I was trained and that I was from Texas; I was raised on the Texas coast. So he asked me to come over and establish a Fisheries Commission for the State, and I did so, was there some five and a half years. Felt that I had pretty well accomplished what I set out to do, and then went back to work for the Fish and Wildlife Service, in Vicksburg, Mississippi.

Handling the lower Mississippi Valley project studies for the Corps of Engineers for the Fish and Wildlife Service, I worked there until I moved to Atlanta in, I don't know, '58, '57 or '58; 1957 or '58, as the Assistant Regional Supervisor of River Basins. A couple of years later I was made the Regional Supervisor of River Basins and then a couple years later I was named the Assistant Director of Operations for the Atlanta Region. Stayed there until I went to Washington on a six-month assignment to serve as the Assistant Director under John Gottschalk on a training type assignment; seven years later I left Washington. During my time in Washington, I was named the Deputy Director of the Service. At one point in my Washington period I served under the Assistant Secretary as his Special Assistant. Dr. Leslie Velasco, who was the Assistant Secretary under Secretary Hickel, was appointed Acting Director, I guess in '68 or…'69 it was.

We were in Washington as the Director for three years, and my wife became very ill with an allergy situation that we had no choice but to get to high and dry country, so we relocated in Denver, Colorado.

**Steve Chase:** Let's jump back to Vicksburg. Bottomland hardwood habitats were vanishing more and more during that time period. What was it like during your fist couple years working in that office? What

did you focus on and do you have any neat stories about back then?

**Spencer Smith:** Well, the interesting part of my Mississippi days was both at the State level then at the Fish and Wildlife Service level. Yes, at that point and time, major studies, Corps of Engineers studies, were going on for flood control of that total Delta region of Mississippi; a region some 220 miles long and 100 miles wide, that had formerly flooded by the Mississippi River almost every year. One of the most beautiful bottom land, hardwood, Oxbow Lake, southern type streams you could find. So I witnessed the destruction of a great deal of that by flood control projects. I also learned to be an environmentalist the hard way, in that in many instances when I would appear at a Corps of Engineers hearing either for the State or for the Service. In both capacities, when it came for me to present the Fish and Wildlife plan for the project, most of the audience would get up and walk out to show their distaste of Fish and Wildlife interference in their flood control. So I came up in the Service with a bit different background of seeing public reaction and seeing the attitudes of other interests as it related to Fish and Wildlife habitat. And probably from that, acquired a bit different look at the real role of the Fish and Wildlife Service than perhaps some of my earlier predecessors had looked at the Service. I came to the Directorship looking at the total role of the Fish and Wildlife resources, rather than looking at the structural division or the functional division of each of the things that the Fish and Wildlife Service did. An example here is refuges, over the several decades of building refuges in our organization, which was an appropriate thing to do. But we had reached the point that refuges were becoming an end unto themselves, and I felt my challenge was to try to make the Fish and Wildlife Service an agency responsive across the board to all

resources. So I set up a different management approach, which in substance looked at the role of the Service rather than the function of the Service. We left the functions in place, the columns in place, but then we cross-sectioned that with horizontal lines looking at major program areas. For example, Migratory Birds, Wetlands, or Habitat. Then you would take a migratory bird problem and see what part refuges played in that program; you'd look at what part Law Enforcement played in the program, what part Fisheries could play in this particular type of program, and this program was put into effect. It gained good support in the Congress. When I took over the leadership of the agency, our budget was $140 million, three years later we were well over $400. In Lynn Greenwalt's second year of office, which was my last budget cycle, we were well over $500 million. So I felt that the approach did demonstrate the proof of the puddin'.

**Steve Chase:** Were you discouraged when people would turn around and walk out of those meetings on you, or did it just make you more determined?

**Spencer Smith**: Oh yes, at first anybody would like to be liked, you like to be one of the guys. But after a while, you had to come to that hard decision, "What am I here for?" Then you begin to get aggravated, then your determination begins to grow, then you begin to protect yourself politically, because you are, in many cases, out there by yourself. I can recall, for example, one particular project that incorporated Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. Within a three-week period, I was instructed to appear at three Senators' offices and two Congressmen's offices so that they could inform me to get "my you know what" out of their project and if I didn't, that they would assure me that the Fish and Wildlife Service would dispense of my services in short order. That was a bit discouraging but

it didn't seem to interfere with what I felt I needed to do. Fortunately, we had good Washington support, so we kept our nose to the grindstone and I think we in the end became fairly successful. We were practicing ecology, and environment, and all of those things before many of the environmentalists of today were out of their cradles, and sort of doing it the hard way.

**Steve Chase:** Did you ever get discouraged?

**Spencer Smith:** No, probably not because I am not a person that discourages very easy. I guess, if anything, I have the name, "if you don't want me to do something don't tell me not to do it." I am sure that was to my benefit over the years, entering into an occupation as I did and more importantly entering at the time that I did. So it was such a delight to see the seventies arrive, and see that new movement of environmental awareness begin to grow. To see the Earth Day happenings in Washington, and I happened to be there when that occurred. I looked out the Department of Interior building windows, and I thought to myself "where have you been the last forty years, a bit late in coming."

**Steve Chase:** I was in New York on Earth Day in 1970, I was ten years old and my parents brought me there. There were people everywhere.

**Spencer Smith:** It was the same way in Washington as you well know.

**Steve Chase:** Let's talk a bit about your fisheries background, as far as how do you think the Service did with its fisheries programs back in the sixties and seventies? Do you think the fisheries were put in the right place in the Fish and Wildlife Service? I know that we moved the commercial fisheries over to Commerce at one point. How do you think the Federal Government has done with fisheries?

**Spencer Smith:** Now you are speaking of fisheries total, both commercial and sport. Yes, there were those years that we were one Agency, the old Fish and Wildlife Service, then came the years of having us as two bureaus, Bureau of Commercial Fishers and Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. And then the decision to abolish the commissioner and send the Commercial Fisheries over to NOAA, or to Commerce. I feel that was a good decision. I feel that the Commercial Fisheries, because of the commerce aspects of it, and as we were really getting into a worldwide fisheries consideration, that this was a good move. I thought it was a better move after the decision was made to place them under NOAA. Because it seemed to fit so well with those things that that particular assignment was dedicated to. Looking at the Fisheries within the Service, and I look back first at basically the hatchery years. Then you look at those years of the early fishery services, in which we provided technical service to military installations, we provided technical service to, in some instances, the Forest Service, other Federal entities, and fisheries services too, to individual groups. I think we did an outstanding job of bringing an awareness of fisheries, an understanding of fisheries into focus through that select group of people within the Fish and Wildlife Service. As I recall, I think John Gottschalk was the father of that concept, and that it did add a great deal to the fishery understanding and fishery interest, in this nation. Where we will go in the future with fisheries I'm not sure. I look at hatcheries, at times you wonder will hatcheries go the way that whale hatcheries did. I doubt that they will. I think that some part of the hatchery program probably will. As we learn more about the total environment, and we can appreciate better how to have natural fishery production, and as we are now seeing some real resentment on the part of some of the

fishing interest groups, on this matter of certain types of hatchery production, particularly on the West Coast. I think that there are going to have to be some new concepts brought into play as we look at the future of the hatchery operation within the Service. Yes, there will be certain levels of mitigation that you are producing fish for replacement purposes. But I'm not sure where it will go, and I think that it is incumbent upon the Service, right at this time, to begin to decide the best route. As I understand, that is now being done within the Service, which I think is their most appropriate step.

**Steve Chase:** Rick said last night that you guys were talking about an airplane in Alaska. Can you tell us that story?

**Spencer Smith:** Yes I can, I am not sure if this should become part of the public record but yes, we should tell this story. In the days of Lynn Greenwalt as Director, we had a Commissioner by the name of Clarence Passkey, who was a Washington State individual. I had been the Director of Fisheries for the State of Washington for a long number of years. Quite a good Commissioner. He was a close friend to the then, Madame Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee for Interior in the House. Her name was Julie Butler Hanson, and she loved to take trips to Alaska, and every time we would take her up on the old amphibious Goose aircraft that we were using, we had a number of them. There was no way she could get out of that aircraft without bumping her head. And she was quite a salty gal, and could use those words quite eloquently, and one day she made the comment, "I will not come back to Alaska until you come up with a different type of airplane." Our response was "If you have the money, we got the time." So we started with a Grumman Goose, a two-engine radio, amphib job, with a short body and we put a center section in it, extended

the center of the aircraft. We put a couple of General Electric turbines on it, and we made it an almost fail-safe working platform. After a while we began to call it the "Golden Goose" because of the price of, the cost, of converting the thing. After we completed all of the rebuilding, then of course, we had to take it through the total certification process. Because it was a completely new airplane, it was not an X airplane, not an experimental, it was an airplane that was developed for our use. And we could really not fly it without a great deal of liability unless we went through the complete process of wing stress, all of the flotation stress on it. So we took it everywhere in the United States getting all of these tests done. And I think when Lynn came in as Director he then renamed it the Platinum Goose! Interestingly enough, John Turner was telling me last night that on his last trip to Alaska, he flew the airplane, and every trip that he went up he flew the airplane, and what a great working platform that it still is. During the days of the refurbishing and the rebuilding of it, we began to run into those normal problems of excessive cost on real small items. Like all of the control knobs up above the wind shield on the thing, and they had installed a lot of additional navigational gear; the little knobs ya know, cost over a hundred dollars apiece if you bought them from an aircraft production company. And one of our well-intentioned and intelligent aircraft mechanics said, "Ya know, I drink a wine that the tops on those bottles look just like those knobs. Let's drill them and put pins in them." When I first saw the airplane and I assume they are still in there all of the upper control section, all of the control knobs were off the top of wine bottles and they worked perfectly. So there was a great deal of innovation, but as you know in Alaska, you have to have a safe working platform, and the only feasible working platform in Alaska is an aircraft. And this airplane has been

well worth its money. Because it has provided our people and many other people with the ability to move about the state and do it in a safe manner. The airplane was equipped navigationally and fuel-wise in the event of a fog out in the northern part of the state, that the aircraft could either fly to the Hawaiian Islands or it could fly to Seattle, and it had the best radio communication, instrument landing and so forth in it. So it proved out to be a good investment.

**Steve Chase:** Did you see that sense of innovation in Service people everywhere you went, when you were Director?

**Spencer Smith:** Fish and Wildlife Service people are people that can get anything done even with a piece of baling wire, pair of pliers, and a screwdriver. They can make things happen. But now let me add to that, and let me put it this way so I hope it will not be misunderstood. You know at times an agency can be shoulder deep in people that know how to do things, and not have enough capability in people that know what to do. That is a real distinction as you begin to look at leadership of an agency. I think that we have seen some very good changes in the last couple of decades in bringing people into the organization that know what to do. That is where the real decision process has to occur within an agency. Now I probably should not have added that last little comment with regard to the question you asked me. But I think it is so important that you balance your organization with people that know how to get things done but equally important that you have those individuals that know what should be done. Because in so many instances agencies will get off on a tangent that involves how you do things and not what the real issue is, and what the real resource need is.

**Steve Chase:** What did you most enjoy about being Director?

**Spencer Smith:** The day when I had to advise them I would no longer be a Director!

No, I am kidding. Because of my back ground of looking at the total biology, looking at the resource programming rather than the functional programming it was a pleasure to have come into leadership at the time that the new environmental movement was starting up, was taking place. Because this gave the opportunity to fulfill some of those things that I had felt so deeply in those early years when, ya know, I was standing up before a crowd and most of them was leaving the room. And to have the type of support and assistance that I was given by the then-Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton, and the then-Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior Nat, Nathaniel Reed, Nat Reed. Two people who both had a real interest both in the harvest side as well as the protection side. But more importantly, they had a conservation ethic. And both men that knew their way around, Secretary Morton was the first Eastern Secretary in I do not know how many decades, maybe since the beginning of Interior. So he had a different view point toward hunting and fishing, than many of the Western Secretaries had had, and he was a world-wide hunter and fisherman. So he came to the agency saying, "I want my Fish and my Wildlife Service to be something new and different. I want to see the real national leadership for the protection and the use of the resource." Most Secretaries don't come into the Interior with that much focus on Fish and Wildlife.

**Steve Chase:** Spencer, you mentioned the close working relationship you had with Secretary Morton, and how a lot of the focus on Fish and Wildlife Service came into being during that era, and under his leadership. Can you tell us some of the issues that really resonated in the administration or with the Secretary where he really got involved in working with you on Fish and Wildlife Service?

**Spencer Smith:** The first and perhaps the most important issue and to a degree it is initiative, in one of one of my first meetings with him and Nathaniel Reed, and I think in this particular meeting Russell Train was there at that point as the Under Secretary, and as I recall, and I would have to go back to my notes to check this but I think George Bush was there. At that time, George Bush was a Congressman from Texas; George Bush and Russ Train were very close friends, tennis partners and so forth. Nat Reed and George Bush became very close friends. We had a, I guess you would call it just a get together chat one afternoon, late one afternoon, up in the Secretary's office, and he looked at me and he said, "One thing I would like to see happen during my tenure of office would be the development of a biological service." He said, "I want an activity that is non-advocate that undertakes the understanding of biology and environment, the way geological surveys understand water issues and geology issues and so forth." So that was the beginning, my immediate response was, you know, "write the check and we are on our way," of which he did. We had several chats with regard to law enforcement. In those days,

law enforcement was primarily an on-site type of enforcement capability, done primarily with regard, or in harmony with states. There was some thought, and I think very good thought, that perhaps a great deal of illegal products were coming into this nation that we should be monitoring, that it was our duty to get into that area of enforcement. Within a couple of years we had revamped our law enforcement set-up, we had changed the entire concept toward enforcement, and began to get into the undercover and even some of the foreign undercover activities that resulted in some of the major, major cases. Another area that he showed a real interest in and was most helpful in, perhaps we could not have done

it without his really getting in and saying, “I will go with you.” It was this matter of converting to steel shot; we came to the decision within the Service that lead shot just could not be tolerated, we just could not accept that as a position. We chatted a bit with two of the major manufacturers, and, of course, as you can imagine, we got, “It can’t be done, no way you could package a load.” I had the uncomfortable duty of going to St. Louis, sitting down in Mr. John Olin's office, who was owner and president of Olin Industries, and Winchester Arms. And saying to Mr. Olin, “Mr. Olin, we are simply going to have to produce a steel shot." Had Secretary Morton not been in real support of this we probably would have not made it because as you can imagine Remington, Standard, and Winchester, both came back with the answer it can’t be done. Secretary Morton said, “Then we will go to Europe and find a way to do it.” And he stood his ground along with Nat Reed, and within a year we had the first steel shot being produced in a very limited way, and we went through a good year of testing, in harmony and in company with the ammunition companies to make sure the shot that was developed was satisfactory. Soa very good example of how the Secretary and the Assistant Secretary became actively involved in getting things done through the Fish and Wildlife Service.

**Steve Chase:** Well, let’s look at it from a different perspective. What one issue did you feel strongly or passionately about that you went up the chain of command and successfully lobbied the Secretary or the Administration on? What one issue did you really put on their agenda?

**Spencer Smith:** The major issue that I took to them, and took a bit of selling for their complete acceptance and full support which I would not have attempted without it, was to convert the Service from a functional administration system to a program

administration system. We called it management by objectives. We changed the entire system of programming, the entire system of making that decision of what you do; and as you are well aware, we received a great deal of opposition from within the turf protectors of the functional activities within the Service. Which we knew that we would receive. So I knew that it would not be possible to bring that type of management in without the full support of both the Assistant Secretary and the Secretary, as well as the people on the hill. So we did our selling job to bring the program in prior to bringing it in and it survived well for a number of years. I am sure most of it is now changed. But it was the key to well, to getting those dollars that we needed as an agency to do appropriate management. We had some close to 100 million acres of refuge land at that time. Our average layout for refuges was somewhat less than 25 cents per acre per year for operations. You can't do justice to the public trust and to the public resource with that kind of dollars. So we needed a way to gain an understanding: first within the Administration and then within the Congress. To begin to look at Fish and Wildlife as a total program, and get away from "well, we need another refuge or we need another hatchery or we need another Law Enforcement capability here or there." That we have responsibilities, for example, in the National Waterfowl program or the Migratory Bird Program, and here are the things that we need to do. We tried to instill within the agency that a refuge is not the end product; one hundred acres of corn on a refuge was not a measure of success. In many instances that hundred acres could be doing more harm than it could be doing good because there might be the need to move those birds on down the flyway at an earlier date. So we went into the activity knowing that the turf reaction was going to be tough and it was.

**Steve Chase:** Well, I think we can wrap up. Wrap it up with this last question: the purpose of this tape is for archival purposes so that people that come to the NCTC can learn from your experience; so do you have anything that you would like to say to future Fish and Wildlife employees that might view this tape in twenty years.

**Spencer Smith:** It's most difficult to look twenty years, ten years, thirty years down the road. If I had to come up with a scenario of what I would feel would likely be those things that would be happening thirty years from now, I would look to there being a Federal Land Management activity, in which perhaps all federal lands would be managed for the good of the public. You probably will not have refuges as such, you probably will not have park services as such. You will have those lands that are there for all purposes, including forest service, and BLM lands. I think as you go to other nations and you look at evolution of governments that that is a way that we should suspect that this nation will go as we look at federal land use. You know, right now the only difference between a National Park and a National Wildlife Refuge, is that on a National Wildlife Refuge in most instances, you can have some hunting. You take that out of a Refuge and you essentially have the same thing as a National Park. Now this I'm sure would not be well received by Fish and Wildlife Service people as what the future might be, but I think if you take a hard look at where we may be going in the direction of Federal Land Administration at the federal level, I think that is a very likely way that the public will take us. I feel that if you try to say, what will the Fish and Wildlife Service be thirty years from now, we may be called Biological Services, that's what we started off as. If you remove such thing as refuges, and you put the Service back into a resource managing agency, and I should not infer that it is not now a resource managing

agency, but you make that their primary goal, then perhaps we will go back more to a biological services concept. Rather than a functional management concept, for such things as hatcheries, refuges and so forth. Because I think that the environmental movement of this country, the environmental awareness, as it grows, it's going to look to someone to say these are the facts, these are the real understandings of all of those biological questions that still have to be answered, and we want an agency we want to put those kind of things under a public trust situation that perhaps to some degree is similar to Geological Survey. In that they are so called non-advocate agencies and they attempt to provide the best scientific data on our water resources of the country. So perhaps not a bright prediction but I would suggest that there is a need to look at where we are now and where we may be thirty years from now, and don't overlook that particular scenario in trying to look to the future.

**Steve Chase:** Thanks, thank you.