



The Oral History of Dennis Peters

October 3, 2016

Interview conducted by John Cornely

USFWS Retirees Reunion in Memphis, Tennessee

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Dennis Peters

Date of Interview: October 3, 2016

Location of Interview: Retirees Reunion in Memphis, Tennessee

Interviewer: John Cornely

Approximate years in Conservation: 30 (1971-2001)

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Regional Wetland Coordinator (Region 1).

Most Important Projects: Elevate awareness, identification and classification of wetland resources

Colleagues and Mentors: Virginia Carter, Lewis Cowardin, Ron Erickson, Frank Golet, Warren Hagenbuck, John Hefner, Ted LaRoe, John Montanari, Porter "Buck" Reed and Bill Wilen. Mentor-Jim Teeter.

Brief Summary of Interview: Dennis was born in California. He is a Veteran including four years in the Air Force and serving time in Vietnam. His postsecondary education initially took him from Sacramento City College to receiving his master's degree from Humboldt State as a fisheries major. He started with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento and later moved to Minneapolis. After 4 years with the USFWS, he wanted to move back to the West and took a job with the Corps of Engineers in Portland, Oregon. In an early part of his career with the Corps of Engineers, he went to a pivotal conference put on by the EPA in Corvallis, Oregon. A new program of Wetlands Inventory was being rolled out for the USFWS and was seeking applicants. This meeting led to his decision to accept a position in 1977 with the USFWS working for the Wetlands Inventory. Mr. Peters worked as the Region 1 wetlands coordinator by helping create awareness in bringing this new classification of wetlands resources to become a national standard. He propelled this system forward in working with state, local and federal agencies until his retirement in 2001.

INTERVIEW

JOHN: And what I forgot to do on the previous one, I'll remedy this time. This is John Cornely with the US Fish and Wildlife Service Heritage Committee, and it's the 3rd of October 2016. I'm here with Dennis Peters. He's going to tell us about his life and his career with the Fish and Wildlife Service, again, with some emphasis on the National Wetlands Inventory. So, Dennis, go...

Unknown Voice: Here in Memphis, Tennessee.

JOHN: Oh, Memphis, Tennessee.

DENNIS: Thank you.

JOHN: Thank you, thank you very much.

DENNIS: I'm Dennis Peters. I was the Regional Wetland Coordinator for Region 1, which included Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, California, Washington and the Pacific Islands. A brief history, out of high school, I went to a junior college as a pre-dental major. Two years with a 2.1 GPA on probation, two out of four semesters... That wasn't gonna get me to dental school. I joined the military, went in the Air Force, spent four years in the Air Force, a year in Vietnam.

While in Vietnam, I found out there were natural resources out there other than what I was familiar with, with California. So, I got interested and ended up after the Air Force going back to Humboldt State as a fisheries major. Got my master's through Humboldt State and got on with the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1971.

JOHN: What year did you finish your master's at Humboldt?

DENNIS: 1971, I graduated from Humboldt. Got on with the Ecological Services field office in Sacramento. Two years there and then to Minnesota, where all of a sudden there was something other than salmon habitat. Gosh, there were wetlands, there were duck habitats. So, two years in Minnesota, but wanted to go back west. And so, I took a position with the Corps of Engineers in their Environmental Resources Branch.

While there, got involved more with the wetlands. And this is kind of a precursor, if you will, to the Wetlands Inventory. There was a meeting in EPA that John Montanari, who had just started this Wetlands Inventory, came out. EPA hosted a meeting, and it was to talk about wetlands and this new program, the Wetlands Inventory. I asked the Corps, the district engineer, if I could attend, got approval and put together a little presentation because we had the Corps of Engineers just with the permit program, had a question on the Columbia River, what was a wetland in this particular site. It was dominated by reed canary grass, which is a plant that occurs both wet and dry. Our branch in the Corps thought it was wet. The district engineer didn't think it was. The implication was pretty serious whether or not a permit would be required.

So anyway, went to this thing with EPA, and that was a question that was raised. And John Montanari talked about what was going on. And the question seemed to surface again, even though you were doing this. Where was that line? Where was this delineation?

I happened to visit with John over lunch. I'd never met him before. And I said, you know, we just kind of talked. And it was interesting. Well, within a couple of weeks, here came this announcement looking for a position with the Fish and Wildlife Service, this Wetlands Inventory. And I thought, well, I want to get back with Fish and Wildlife Service. Unfortunately, it was a two-year position. I'm a permanent federal employee, but I thought, okay, so I applied for it. Happened to get it. People I knew from the Fish and Wildlife Service said, why are you taking a two-year position? My response was, if you're talking about the wetland resources, it's gonna take more than two years. And if I can't make this position important and invaluable, I shouldn't have it. Well, I got the position so that's the way I got back to the Wetlands Inventory. And that was in 1977.

JOHN: Okay. Can I have you go back just and fill in a couple of things? Place you were born and the date you were born.

DENNIS: I was born in Yreka, California in 1944.

JOHN: Okay.

DENNIS: That was an unfair question by the way.

JOHN: I won't respond to that. Also, you probably don't want to answer this either, but you said you started out in a two-year program. What school was that?

DENNIS: That was Sacramento City College.

JOHN: Okay. All right. Sorry to interrupt you.

DENNIS: That's fine. So, anyway, I got on with the Fish and Wildlife Service with this Wetlands Inventory thing. Immediately, I spent five weeks in Saint Petersburg, Florida.

JOHN: Okay.

DENNIS: And the idea was to get us up and running as to what was a wetland. How do we use aerial photography? How do we get this thing accomplished?

JOHN: And talk about...I guess we called it...maybe we called it the Wetland Inventory Center or something. But talk about...you are all gonna mention Saint Petersburg I know, so just tell a little bit about what was there and what they were doing in Saint Petersburg.

DENNIS: Saint Petersburg was our national headquarters, if you will, the center. John Montanari, how he got into Saint Petersburg, I don't know. But coming from the Pacific Northwest, I was glad I'd never been to Florida before, but they had a cadre of people there, brought in a person from the Soil Conservation Service, from the Corps of Engineers. And then they had several Fish and Wildlife Service people. Some worked on classification systems, some working on a plant list.

Bill Wilen was the assistant project leader who basically was managing us. John was kind of the overseer, if you will, coming from private corporation or satellite, as I recall. And so, we had this group of people there. Plus, we had the contractors that were doing the actual mapping and how we worked with them and so forth. So, my tenure there was five weeks to learn about this very thing. One of the highlights in Saint Petersburg was I got hired, and literally within the next week I was in Saint Petersburg.

The coordinator from Region 3, Ron Erickson, was there at the same time. And so, John was bringing in all of the coordinators. John Hefner from Region 4 Atlanta came a couple weeks later. But John read a memo from Region 2, Warren Hagenbuck was a coordinator Region 2. And this stuck with me and I thought maybe I had the wrong approach. And I think I did. This memo from Region 2 said, the coordinator, something to the effect and if I'm wrong, Warren can correct me. But something to the effect of and it came from the regional director...I'm not sending the coordinator there till he learns about the wetland resources in Region 2. I have to have him understand what we're dealing with, working with the field office, etc., and then we'll come down and get trained from a national perspective. That kind of stuck with me. I thought, okay, even though it's national, there are things that you have to understand within your Region dealing with the field office, etc. Which way is best, I don't know. I look back and I say, I think Region 2 had the right approach at that stage. It works either way or did work either way.

The thing that hit me in Saint Petersburg was they were doing something different than I was familiar with and that was using aerial photography. My experience, even with the Corps and in Minnesota and in Sacramento, I stomped and splashed. All of a sudden, we're looking through this stereoscope and looking at aerial photography. And we're trying to draw lines on this thing, and it was very foreign to me. A couple of things that kind of hit me, I guess I did that for three or four weeks, and then we took a field trip out to Coos Bay to then look at the delineations we had made.

And an interesting story, standing in the field with Buck Reed, who was heading up our plant list. I'm standing in the field looking out over there, and I'm trying to figure out what's going on and where are we gonna draw this line. And Buck's looking at the aerial photography with his little hand lens, and he's saying, you do this and do that. And finally, I said, "Buck, pay attention. Look on the ground." He said, "well, I can see a lot from this photograph." And so, I grabbed the photo on the loupe, and I put it up there and I thought, holy sh.., holy crap, you can see a lot.

And that's where it kind of set with me that while you still are stomping and splashing, you can see a whole lot from aerial photography. And so, that kind of set me saying, okay, this is gonna be kind of cool. This is all right.

The other aspect that hit me, I guess, when we were down in Saint Petersburg, and it started...here was a new classification system that the Service had developed. In my dealings, I had used Circular 39, which was published in early 50s, mid 50s, whatever, identified 20 wetland types, and I was familiar with that. I was comfortable with that. Well, all of a sudden, here's this classification system that went through all these different scenarios. And once you got into that and saw it, you said, this is a good piece of work, and they worked hard at doing it.

It truly did become a neat standard for us in the Wetlands Inventory to use. Difficult, I guess when you try to look at aerial photography and where you drew the line. And there were things that I guess I thought was lacking. You could see open water on the aerial photography, but yet Lew Cowardin and the author said, we don't want that as a class kind of thing. And so, through work, we developed the thing called Open Water/Unknown Bottom. And so, we had to explain we aren't saying it's "Open Water" as much as we're saying we don't know what the bottom is, but we can tell you something that we see on the photography.

I think back also, and I guess from day one, the wetland concept was fairly new at this time, if you will, from the Clean Water Act, etc. And it seemed like every single one of the coordinators dealt with both state, local, federal agencies, private entities. We were really early on saying, hey, we've got something here. Here's something we can do to help you. Here's how we can work with you. And I think back from the work with the Soil Conservation Service, with the National Park Service, with the state agencies, we really did I think one very good job of elevating the awareness of the wetland resources. We were early on in doing it. We had something concrete that they could use, beneficial to the field offices in particular for the Fish and Wildlife Service. It just got us to where this was really cool.

Obviously, I didn't retire till 2001, so obviously it lasted longer than two years when I took this position.

So, we went through all these different gyrations.

JOHN: So, all of you were really pioneering some partnerships before we started talking about partnerships all the time because of all your interaction with these other agencies and private lands. And I don't think a lot of people know today even about the Wetlands Inventory and all the work. And that's one of the reasons it's important for us to get these interviews down and be able to share that with people. Some of our history is so much combat biology and as Warren said, and I think all of you experienced situations where people disagreed and didn't care for what you were doing. But still I think it helped a lot of people find out about the Fish and Wildlife Service. And some of the things that the Fish and Wildlife Service could do to help other agencies and private entities.

BILL: I'd like to make one comment. We, the founders, really, we changed wetland from a concept to a reality. A classification is now a national standard since 1990. The mapping conventions are a national standard for mapping of wetlands since '99. So, we really did lay the founding work for what is a wetland.

JOHN: That again was Bill Wilen on the audio and video. Go ahead Dennis.

DENNIS: And you raised the concept of cooperation, if you will. And I guess coming down to Saint Petersburg to have a Soil Conservation Service, like Blake Parker there, to have a Corps of Engineers person, Rudy Nyk, who I was always in an adversarial role with, the Corps of Engineers. SCS, I just simply didn't have any dealings with. I'm sure there were adversarial roles throughout the prairie potholes throughout Region 2, wherever with SCS. But we began to work together under the common goal to let's figure out where this resource is, so we can work together.

I think back to...as we evolved when we got into this riparian mapping, and Warren Hagenbuck out of Region 2 started this thing in cooperation with, I think, the Forest Service, but I'm not sure, one of the other entities. And all of a sudden, we're working with them to expand this important resource delineation, if you will.

Ducks Unlimited, when we did a Status and Trends for the Central Valley of California, they actually paid for the publication and printing of that particular report.

Kind of a neat story, I guess, if you will... We did a lot of traveling, but there was a series of five weeks where I went from Portland down to California to work for a couple of three days with the California Waterfowl Association. They had an annual meeting, so I was down and talked about the Wetlands Inventory. We went out into the field. I left them...that was in Sacramento. I flew out of San Francisco and went to Hawaii and spent then seven or eight days in Hawaii and Guam and Tinian and Saipan. I came back home, and I was home for the weekend, and then I went to the Ruby Lake area in Nevada, to do some of the field checking of the draft maps and aerial photography. Where I'm going with this is over a period of a couple of weeks, I went from the Central Valley of California to the Pacific Islands to Nevada.

It was an unbelievable experience, an unbelievable career to go to these different areas and just see the different resources and how they function then...so different.

One of the great trips, I think, again, because Lew Cowardin and the authors for the classification system, you're dealing with this thing nationally. And so, we're looking at trying to say, okay, how does it work? Lew's from the prairie potholes, Virginia Carter's from the East Coast, Ted LaRoe was from oceanographic NOAA and then Frank Golet from Massachusetts.

So, Warren in Region 2 set up one of our meetings and a field trip into Arizona. Yeah, it was Arizona or New Mexico, one of them, and brought Lew out. So, he could see what we were dealing with in the arid West. How do playas work? How do the intermittent streams work? Where do they fit into this classification system? How does it work? And those kinds of things are nationally when we'd have our annual meetings, whether they were Saint Petersburg or whether they were in Portland or Massachusetts or Albuquerque or Atlanta, we got out in the field. And I think most of us a day in the office trying to figure out what we were doing. Okay, but let's get in the field, stomp and splash again, if you will.

JOHN: Yes.

DENNIS: So anyway, that's just a couple of little nit things.

As we got more into it, all of a sudden, we were talking about cutting edge and bringing the concept of wetlands into reality, if you will. All of a sudden, there's a Farm Bill out that included the Swampbuster provision. And so, there needed to be a coordinator in the region. Over Bill Wilen's objection or anger or whatnot, I was appointed as the Farm Bill coordinator in Region 1. And so, we're working with this whole new concept.

Then came out the Corps of Engineers with their Wetlands Delineation Manual, and all of a sudden, the coordinators from the National Wetlands Inventory are dealing with that. All of a sudden, we're an important entity on how does this stuff work? And I could go on and on, I guess. But I'll tell you a couple of things that really hit me. We truly were a neat group, fun group of people and are. And we'd get together for coordinators meetings and we worked hard, but we also had a really good time.

We had a good time for...oh gosh, there were times we'd sit in a room like this, and we would...Maybe I shouldn't say this, but we would have scotch and whiskey and beer and cigars and cigarettes. And we'd sit around in a room like this till however time. And a neat thing along those lines, if you look at some of those things that happened and there was a mid-course correction and there was discussions about how much this would cost.

John Montanari brought a lot to the Wetlands Inventory, but he once made a comment and Ron Erickson from Region 3, he brought it up and said, that bothers me. John at one time when the figure came out, and don't hold me to the exact figure, but it was like \$40 million dollars. And John Montanari, who's heading up a wetland program, said "I don't think the wetlands resources are worth that." Ron Erickson, he was beside himself. He says, "I have a problem when the project leader doesn't think anyway." That's Ron's story. John did good work. He brought a whole new concept to us. He was the ultimate optimist. It was gonna get done in a year. It was gonna get done for a million dollar, etc. So, you can take exception to maybe his approach, but he brought, I think, something that was needed at that time of looking at this new technology kind of thing.

Finally, just as...and then we'll wrap this up because I've talked enough. My concept when I was in Region 1, my personal philosophy was I worked for the field office. I did not work for the regional office. I did not work for Washington, DC and don't tell Bill Wilen I said that, but...My concept was I wanted to do something that the field offices could use. And so, I kept trying to get to that point.

One of the absolute highlights at my retirement, which was in 2001, I had three field offices come to my retirement and plaques, etc., that doesn't matter. But to have them come to my retirement and recognize what I did for the field office truly was the ultimate compliment. And so that's pretty much my story, if you will.

JOHN: Okay. Anything else comes to mind?

DENNIS: Well, I wrote my notes.

JOHN: Yeah. Take a look.

DENNIS: Now. Oh, just the other one...A new program, Coastal Barrier Resources Act, came out whenever. And again, from whatever experience and they were trying to do stuff aerial wise to look and see what was there. I was appointed as the Coastal Barrier Resources Coordinator when that got started to figure out where we had the coastal barriers on the West Coast and in the Pacific Islands.

JOHN: Okay.

DENNIS: And so that was just another example of how we were working beyond just the Wetlands Inventory. We were truly evolved into a whole realm of things.

JOHN: Okay. Well, again, Dennis, thank you very much for sharing that. It's very interesting and informative and we greatly appreciate it. I'm sure that folks that learn from this will as well.

DENNIS: Thank you.

Key words: aerial photography, aquatic environments, aquatic plants, coastal environments, estuarine environments, farms and farming, geospatial, mapping, maps, meetings, military, partnerships, presentation, riparian environments, sampling, surveying, wetlands