



The Oral History of Frank C. Golet

July 23, 2018

Interview conducted by Bill Wilen
South Kingstown, Rhode Island

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Frank C. Golet

Date of Interview: July 23, 2018

Location of Interview: South Kingstown, Rhode Island

Interviewer: Bill Wilen

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: Approximately 41 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Professor at University of Rhode Island, Co-author for National Wetland Classification

Most Important Projects: Co-author of the Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States

Colleagues and Mentors: Dr. Virginia Carter, Dr. Lew Cowardin, Dr. Joe Larson, Dr. Dan Thomson

Brief Summary of Interview: Dr. Frank Golet discusses his early love for wildlife and his educational background in geology and wildlife biology. He then was brought on as a co-author for the Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States. He traveled cross-country to document and study the nature of wetland habitats in Alaska and other parts of the northern United States. He used these studies to help update the Classification as the years went on. He also worked as a professor at the University of Rhode Island, where he taught more than 800 students and used his real-world experiences to inspire them to help conserve wetlands throughout America.

INTERVIEW

Frank Golet: “Okay, Frank Golet. I grew up in East Haddam, Connecticut, and spent most of my childhood exploring the hayfields, forests and wetlands on my grandfather’s farm nearby. During that period, I developed a strong interest in wildlife, I watched birds, collected turtles, and had a pet crow that I took from a nest in a forested swamp. It followed me to school one day without my knowledge, flew in an open window, and snatched a ballpoint pen off a teacher’s desk. The Principal called me to her office over the school’s PA system, so everyone in the school was in on the event. My father was a guide for a fish and game club, and a commercial shad fisherman, so I also learned to hunt, fish and trap at an early age. There were only 36 kids in my high school class at graduation in 1963. Were it not for my recruitment by the Brown soccer coach, and a lot of financial support, I’m not sure that I would have made it to college.

I majored in geology at Brown, because it allowed me to get out into the field, and because wildlife biology was not an option there. On graduating, I had no interest in working for an oil company, which was the best option for a geologist at that time, so I pursued a master’s degree in wildlife biology at Cornell. My advisor, Dr. Dan Thompson was Leader of the New York Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. He had also been a student of Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin, and so I felt privileged to become a part of that heritage. After Cornell, Dr. Thompson became Editor of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Fort Collins, Colorado. My master’s research involved the ecology and management of green timber impoundments at the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in Seneca Falls, New York. Toward the end of my program in 1969, I was about to accept a wildlife biologist position in Vermont, when Dr. Joe Larson at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, called Dr. Thompson, looking for a possible PhD candidate for a new wetlands research project. Massachusetts passed the Nation’s first wetland protection laws for both coastal and inland wetlands in the mid 1960’s. Realizing that not all wetlands could or should be protected, Joe applied to the Department of Interior’s Office of Water Resources Research for a grant to develop wetland assessment models for inland wetlands in that state, with a focus on hydro-geologic functions, wildlife habitat, aesthetics and recreational values, and economics.

Although I never planned to go on for a Doctoral degree, Joe offered me an assistantship to develop the wildlife habitat assessment model. After two more phone calls, I accepted his offer and I’m glad that I did, although my mother, who was born in Poland, feared that I was never going to work for a living! Early in my research I realized that, before I could evaluate wetlands as wildlife habitat, I needed a system for describing their characteristics. After examining wetlands throughout the state and reviewing pertinent studies, Joe and I created the Classification of Freshwater Wetlands in the Glaciated Northeast, which was published in 1972 as Fish and Wildlife Service Resource Publication 116. One of our in-house editors for that classification was Dr. Bill Sheldon, Leader of the Massachusetts Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. Our Northeast classification system included wetland classes and subclasses based on the dominant form of vegetation and water regime. Most of the classes had already been developed by the Fish and Wildlife Service in 1953 and used in an early National Wetlands Inventory. Our classification also addressed the size of a wetland and its topographic and hydrologic position on the landscape, proportions of vegetation versus open water, interspersions of different life forms such as trees, shrubs, and marsh plants, surrounding habitat types, proximity of a wetland to other wetlands, and water chemistry.

Then I created a method for numerically estimating the ability of an individual wetland to support a diversity and abundance of wildlife, once it had been classified. Our classification and assessment models were used throughout the Northeast and other parts of the United States. In some states the habitat evaluation method was incorporated into wetland rules and regulations, to assist agencies in their regulatory decisions. That was exactly what Joe Larson had in mind when he submitted his original grant proposal back in 1969. In the fall of 1972, I was hired as an Assistant Professor by the Department of Wildlife Forest and Management at the University of Rhode Island. One year later I began teaching the Nation's first wetland ecology course. Later I added a course on wetlands and land use, and another on wetland habitat evaluation. In the fall of 1974, the Fish and Wildlife Service invited me and Joe, along with several other wetland scientists and managers from different parts of the country to a meeting held at the NASA Space Center in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

Shortly before the meeting, the Fish and Wildlife Service had announced its intent to conduct a new National Wetlands Inventory, and they had asked Dr. Lew Cowardin of the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center and Dr. Virginia Carter of the U.S. Geological Survey to prepare a draft classification for use with the inventory. Attendees at the meeting critiqued the draft and summarized wetland classification efforts in their own regions. I met Lew and Virginia there. One night at dinner, they thanked me for my detailed critique of their draft classification and said in unison, "If you're going to put this much effort into tearing our draft apart, the least you can do is help us write the next one." And so, yup, I became the third author of what would become the Classification of Wetlands and Deepwater Habitats of the United States. It was a huge milestone in my career, and even better, it came at the very beginning. Helping to write the classification was a great honor. At the same time, it was incredibly challenging in terms of time and energy.

There were many fierce battles among the authors, often late at night in motel rooms in various parts of the country. Lew and I were definitely the most stubborn, but eventually either compromises were made, or Virginia and I would just give in to the "Great White Father," as we used to call Lew, and we moved on. Lew was usually right though. All joking aside, helping on the classification taught me an incredible amount about wetlands outside the Northeast. It took us four years to complete the job, which included literature review, writing, critiquing, rewriting, being hammered by hundreds of Federal and State employees at National meetings that were designed to get feedback on our multiple drafts, and then rewriting again. But the job also included field meetings in northern Minnesota fens and bogs, North Dakota prairie potholes, North Carolina pocosins, the Okefenokee Swamp of Georgia, the Florida Everglades, and dry washes in the desert Southwest.

So, it wasn't all bad. In 1985, six years after publication of the Classification, my wife Susan, my stepson Rob, and I drove from Rhode Island to Alaska where I spent 3 months studying, describing and photographing the wetlands of that unique state while I was on sabbatical from URI. I had the pleasure of driving across Alaska from Anchorage to the Arctic North Slope with Jon Hall, one of my former students who was then Coordinator of the National Wetlands Inventory in Alaska, and his assistant, Dave Dall. Unfortunately, we did suffer a cracked windshield and took a stone through the radiator of a new Federal van when a semi coming back from the oil fields kicked up gravel as it blew by us on the Haul Road. Working from a helicopter and on the ground, I had an exceptional opportunity to study and photograph the wetlands that dominate the North Slope, and we had a chance to discuss those wetlands that often did not neatly fit into our Classification.

A week or so later, we spent three days on the Yukon–Kuskokwim Delta along the Bering Sea, checking aerial photo classifications of wetlands against ground conditions. As I told my students later, when I showed them slides of the Delta, looking out from a helicopter at more than 100 miles of continuous wetland was like dying and going to heaven! And I'll never forget an Eskimo gentleman from Chevak, where we stayed, telling me as he looked out over the Delta with my spotting scope one evening, "That's what I needed when I hunted the fox.", meaning the Arctic fox. Of course, in the winter the Delta is covered with snow and the fox is white. In September, with the snow starting to appear on the mountains, snow that was locally known as "termination dust" because it signaled the end of the outdoor working season for folks from states to the south, Susan and I reluctantly left Alaska for Rhode Island. Rob had returned earlier by plane to begin his third year at UMass. On the way to Alaska and back, I took photos of wetlands that we had not illustrated in the first printing of the Classification. Also, on the way back, we stopped at the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Jamestown, North Dakota, where we met with Lew, Virginia, and our editor for the next printing, Hank Sather. We discussed what I had learned about classification problems in Alaska and selected certain photos for the upcoming printing. There was a symbiotic relationship between my work on the Classification and my teaching at URI, each fed into the other.

My field trips to wetlands in various parts of the country, coupled with writing about those wetlands, provided abundant, new material for my lectures. My knowledge had broadened dramatically, and I was able to pass that knowledge on to my students. At the same time, in teaching the Classification and its field application, I began to see omissions, contradictions and other weaknesses in our system. Students sometimes came to me with questions that revealed those shortcomings, so I created a file for those issues, and it came in handy when Bill Wilen and I revised the National Wetland Classification Standard between 2011 and 2013, after I had retired from URI. Re-writing the Standard was also a unique experience, because our original work on the classification had occurred almost 40 years before. Seldom does an author have the opportunity to develop and refine such a methodology multiple times over that long a period. The most rewarding part of my career was the opportunity to acquaint my students with the nature, wonders, functions, and values of wetlands, and then provide them with the skills to apply that knowledge for the benefit of wildlife and humans. After several years of teaching, I realized that, by training students and helping them find professional employment in the wetlands field, together we could advance the cause of conservation far beyond what I could ever do alone.

So, I encouraged my students to stay in touch after graduation and let me know what kinds of work they were into. I'm proud to say that, out of 863 students that I taught between 1973 and 2010, at least 267 have held jobs involving wetlands work in 23 states. Here's a quick breakdown: 46 former students have worked for Federal agencies including Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, National Park Service, Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Of the 19 students at the Fish and Wildlife Service, 11 of them have worked on the National Wetlands Inventory. 73 former students have worked for State agencies in 8 states, 7 worked for regional or municipal agencies in 5 states, 13 worked for non-profit conservation organizations in 6 states, 11 have done research on wetlands in academic institutions in 8 states, and 117 have worked for private environmental consulting firms, including 68 different firms in 16 states. I should note that, in a majority of those cases, these employment statistics only represent the first wetlands job of each student, so the actual number of employers and states where my former students have worked is even higher.

I always told my students that it's important to have well trained wetland professionals both protecting wetland values in public agencies and also advising land developers on the best ways to minimize impacts to wetlands during their projects. I like to think that my former students have made that wish a reality. The Fish and Wildlife Service should be proud of the roles that the Classification and NWI have played in the education, and ultimately the professional accomplishments, of not only my students, but many other people across the United States and elsewhere. I'd like to thank Bill Wilen for the opportunities that he gave to me, and many of my former students, and to congratulate him on his outstanding leadership as Coordinator of the National Wetlands Inventory.

Bill and I both received Doctoral degrees from the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at UMass-Amherst. Although we were enrolled at the same time, we didn't really know each other that well. Lew Cowardin received his master's at U Mass before Bill, and I had arrived there. Lew completed his PhD at Cornell before I got there, and Virginia had grown up in South Kingstown, Rhode Island where I spent 38 years at URI. However, before my family and I arrived, her career had taken her to Reston, Virginia, where she worked as a biologist for USGS. So, you might say that, as a group, we had a series of near misses. What we all had in common though was experience with wetlands and, under the direction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we joined to work on the National Wetland Classification and Inventory. It would be difficult to build stronger, more lasting friendships, and we're grateful to the Fish and Wildlife's for bringing us together"

Bill Wilen: "That's the end of the Oral History from Dr. Frank Golet. Bill Wilen is the interviewer."