



The Oral History of John Cooper

June 6, 2017

Interview conducted by Ralph Morgenweck

Pierre, South Dakota

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: John Cooper

Date of Interview: June 6, 2017

Location of Interview: Pierre, South Dakota

Interviewer: Ralph Morgenweck

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1973-1995, about 22 years

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Special Agent (SA) and Senior Resident Agent (SRA) in the Law Enforcement Division of Fish and Wildlife Service. Cabinet Secretary of South Dakota Department of Game, Fish & Parks

Most Important Projects: Helped design a protocol for conducting field investigations and documenting USFWS wetland easement violations and easement enforcement with Wetland Districts and Refuges. Worked on illegal commercial fur trading across the US/Canadian Border. Set up and instructed a nationwide training curriculum for Refuge Law Enforcement Officers to maintain local law enforcement policies. Developed a game code that could be adopted by Tribal Councils. Wrote articles on Native American Law/Resource Conservation.

Colleagues and Mentors: Jim Gritman, Terry Grosz, Harvey Nelson, Lloyd Jones, Don Perkuchin, Joel Scrafford, Tom Sechrist, Margo Zellen

Brief Summary of Interview: John Cooper talks about his early life growing up in San Bernardino, California on a citrus fruit farm, and how he joined the military after graduating from college. He served two tours in Vietnam with the In-Shore Undersea Warfare Group, US Navy. His major in college was Criminology and that led him to a Criminal Investigative job in the Navy after his Vietnam tours. After his time in the military, he applied for a special agent position with the Fish and Wildlife Service's Law Enforcement division. He was hired and went to work in North Dakota. There he worked with the Division of Enforcement on a variety of things ranging from illegal fur trade involving Canada lynx to polar bears along the US / Canadian border. He also helped train and coordinate law enforcement issues with local wardens, Tribal Officers and Refuge officers on the ways they could uphold their own law enforcement policies on the refuge without having to always call on the agents. He also helped train Tribal Officers and institute Game Codes enforced by the respective Tribes. As he continued his work, he became interested in Tribal and Native American Law related to wildlife resources and conducted a course at the USFWS Special Agent Law Enforcement School. John retired from the Fish and Wildlife Service in January 1995 to work for South Dakota Governor Janklow as the Secretary for Game, Fish and Parks. He served in that capacity for 12 years under two Governors and retired in 2007.

THE INTERVIEW

RALPH MORGENWECK: It's June 7th, 2017, in Pierre, South Dakota and I am interviewing John Cooper, John I'd like to ask you where you were born, how you got interested in Fish and Wildlife Resources, talk a little bit about your military background and how that led to Fish and Wildlife; just kind of tell us about that.

JOHN COOPER: Okay, I was born and raised in San Bernardino, California and my dad and mom, we had a citrus (oranges and lemons) ranch, 121 acres of lemons and about 95 acres of navel oranges. Then we grew specialty fruit, like nectarines and avocados and a variety of different fruit that we farmed in the area between Riverside, San Bernardino and Highland California. All the way through high school, I lived in San Bernardino and graduated from Pacific High school in 1962. Basically, I spent most of my life – my early life especially, in the outdoors and I got interested in things like birds and farming and growing things. So, after high school, when I went to San Bernardino Valley College. I was playing baseball at the time and I got a baseball scholarship to Long Beach State University. While I was at San Bernardino College, I became interested in criminology and criminalistics, the forensics side of criminology, and Long Beach State had a great Criminology and Criminalistics program and that's where my scholarship was. So, I played baseball for Long Beach State for 2 years and then the war in Vietnam became a reality. Of course, I think like everybody who plays baseball, they always have a dream of being a major league ball player. But I don't know if I could have hit the curve – the major league curve ball - to this day because Vietnam came along and we – those of us that weren't interested in student deferments, we enlisted, like I did, in the Navy.

I went to the O.C.S. program, where I graduated from the US Naval Officer Candidate School in April 1967 after finishing my college degree in 1966. I earned a bachelor's science degree in Criminalistics. I served with the US Navy in the Mekong Delta primarily with the In-Shore Undersea Warfare Group One. We were the "brown water navy", which consisted of SEAL Team 1 and the Mobile River Marine Special Forces that delivered SEAL teams and Special Recon Teams under Task Forces 115 and 116. We operated primarily up in the Mekong Delta. In 1971-1972, after my service in the Delta, I was asked if I would be interested in going to work as a criminal investigator officer with the Naval Investigative Service. I extended my original 5-year commitment to a total of 6 years. I worked at the San Diego Naval Station and at Miramar Naval Air Station doing criminal investigations with the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI). While I was doing that, I ran into a USFWS Special Agent who was stationed at that time in Los Angeles. He had an investigation going that involved some sailors who got into the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge and shot a bunch of Caspian Terns and other shore birds. He requested assistance locating a boat that these sailors had rented from the Navy through the special services program, and so I traced that down and worked with him. He said, "You know, if you're interested in being in the outdoors and if you're interested in wildlife and if you're interested primarily in biological science, but don't know if you'd want to go do the lab work, you should consider looking at the Fish and Wildlife Service Division of Law Enforcement because we are just at the start of changing over from a division of conservation management and enforcement

over to a Division of Enforcement only and so they're looking for people who are involved with Law Enforcement who like conservation Law Enforcement, and who have that kind of talent." I was real interested in that because frankly, Vietnam had kind of changed my life in regard to me sitting in a lab. I didn't really know if I wanted to stay in a lab all the time, and I kind of made up my mind, if I could get out of Vietnam with all my fingers and toes, that I'd do something that I wanted to do, that I specifically enjoyed doing, which would be outside.

So, I applied to USFWS, went up to Denver, Colorado and had an interview with Harry Styles who was then the Special Agent in charge for the Mountain Plains Region, and ended up being hired to go to Minot, North Dakota in late 1973. I actually didn't physically get to Minot till early spring of '74 because there was a significant flood on the Souris River and you couldn't get into the town, so I ended up basically kind of being in Bismarck a little bit until we got to the point where I could rent a place up in Minot, after the flooding subsided. Actually, my first duties with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were helping the people of Minot, North Dakota sandbag the banks of the Souris River, and that was true of all the USFWS people that were in the Realty division, the Refuge division, [and] the fisheries people! I mean all of us basically volunteered to work a 10- and 12-hour day down there, helping where we could. I could run a skid-steer loader so my job was to get down there and run a skid-steer loader and place/move sandbags. That was my first duty station and I really loved Minot and the people there. Tom Sechrist was our Special Agent at Devil's Lake, North Dakota. We didn't have our Senior Resident Agent until a little later in '74, and that was Terry Grosz. Terry came in early fall of '74 and he had been through training for his promotion to SRA. I worked with Terry and Joel Scrafford and Tom Sechrist and did a lot of work with the local State folks.

But probably the most interesting thing, and one I'm very proud of, is the first person I met from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service other than who I interviewed with, was Jim Gritman. Jim, who was then the North Dakota Area Office Manager, and Lyle Schoonover was his assistant. I was privileged to know and work with those two guys! We law enforcement guys spent a huge amount of our time as Special Agents working with ALL facets of the USFWS, including on the ground management. One of the most important jobs we could undertake would be the big issue of USFWS wetland easement enforcement in the prairie states. We were tasked with designing, documenting and then enforcing a brand-new policy that was untested and untried and had to be approved by both the Agency and the Federal prosecution system. We had to talk with the U.S. Attorney's offices to make sure that we were doing the investigations the way that they wanted those presented in Federal Court and we had to work with our Department of Interior Solicitor's Office. Our assigned Solicitor was Margo Zellen at the time. We primarily worked over the years to design the protocol for doing the investigations and for documenting the easement violations. We also worked alongside the Refuge personnel and the Real Estate Divisions to extract legal data. It was a team effort made to do easement and easement work, and we basically put together the right protocol, and did the right training to make sure that we got the illegal drainage stopped. It was a true Fish and Wildlife Service collaborative effort - one I'm very proud of. did a lot of work to put the protocol together that is still used today! It's been changed and modified to keep it up with the times, but bottom line is – IT WAS TOUGH WORK!!!

Basically, you're dealing with folks up in the Dakotas – extremely conservative in many cases, apprehensive about federal law enforcement people and distrusting of Government in general – I came to the northern prairies during the “Wetland Wars”, and joined the “Duck Mafia”, and was involved directly with some of the best people I could have ever been associated with for those five and half years that I was stationed in North Dakota before I moved to take over the Senior Resident Agent position in Pierre, South Dakota in 1978. Both my wife, Vera, and I agree, those first years produced some of the best friends and accomplishments we could have ever experienced! It was a true kindred spirit, kind of binding together and working toward conservation together; great to be a part of a bigger effort. In addition, we also did a lot of things on our personal time with barbecues, picnics, volleyball and all that stuff. It was a great bunch of friends and we still treasure many of them today.

When I left North Dakota, I inherited more administrative work as a Senior Resident Agent. When I moved to Pierre in 1978, I had North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska in my SRA district. That was a lot of work. It required a lot of travel and because those three States really have a diversified bunch of enforcement activities happening, there always seemed to be some reason to travel to them! We had illegal airborne hunting going on associated with the high price of coyote and fox furs; they are all in the Central flyway and waterfowl hunting is a very big deal in all three States. From the Rainwater Basin going north, clear up into the north end of the United States affiliation with the Canadian prairies and the Canadian wetlands. And so, we did a lot of migratory bird work. We also did a lot of undercover work on places that were lodges and clubs, that basically, you know the idea was, you shoot until you run out of shells and limits didn't seem to bother anybody. So, we did a lot of migratory bird hunting enforcement. However, we did a heck of a lot of work on things that people wouldn't quite be so familiar with, such as oil sludge pits on hundreds of oil stripper wells that trap and kill migratory birds of all species, if they are not maintained or cleaned up properly. We also had situations where farmers and ranchers were draining polluted water or sludge directly onto our wildlife refuge areas. So, my agents and I witnessed a real variety of law enforcement activities in those three States.

RALPH: Did you have wildlife inspectors at that time working the border?

JOHN: We did, but we just had them for a short period of time because I think – you know the Wildlife Inspection program during the early '70s was trying to get its feet on the ground, trying to figure out where their priorities ought to be placed. Certainly, a lot of people are familiar with the inspectors in places like Miami, New York and L.A. Those ports of entry are places where normally people are bringing in wildlife or protected products from other countries, including snakes and birds and all that kind of stuff. Our USFWS Wildlife Inspectors up on the Canadian border were busy as heck with the fur trade, and there was a lot of illegal activities – typically, when prices for a basic product rise to high levels, then illegal activity also rises. That is certainly the way it is in the fur markets. When red fox were \$60 apiece and raccoons were \$25 and bobcats were \$400, there was a lot of illegal fur buying, trading and swapping, going on and violation of State Laws were common. Then, the violations of the State laws turn into Lacey Act violations when illegally taken or possessed pelts are transported either across State lines or across the border. We had Pembina, ND and Portal, ND and 9 other minor/different US border crossings going into Canada from North Dakota so we had a variety of wildlife items involved in

relation to the international fur trade. Also, at that time related to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which was passed in 1972, there had been quite a few polar bears that had been legally hunted/ killed up in the north Arctic Zone and up in the North Queen Maud Gulf. Then, it became illegal to import those polar bears into the US for a period of time until they could be checked on up in Canada and there could a CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) Document provided to legally transport the hide of a legally taken polar bear and export it. CITES hadn't completely been instituted in some Provinces, so the situation was confusing, to say the least. We had some of the darndest things happen. We had polar bear cases. One of them I remember involved a college hockey team who had been playing hockey up in Manitoba and came back with all their hockey gear in the big crates and the cargo boxes and lo and behold, somebody had paid a couple of these college kids some big money to bring a rolled up polar bear hide, hidden in hockey gear, into the US. We got the tip that was happening and we worked with our inspectors to quarantine all their gear and we had to go through and search. Yup! We found two rolled up bear hides, which we seized and later returned after some of the CITES issues and permits were straightened out on both sides of the Canada border!

We witnessed a unique bunch of things that we worked on! That is probably what made that job as – for me any way – so enjoyable because it was never the same, a day to day!

RALPH: Well, it sounds like you were developing a lot of that stuff as you went along. You were talking about the wetlands and everything, inspectors - all of it being in development.

JOHN: Well, it was, keep in mind you know, the Agents before me, before our Agent class, they were primarily involved in assignments for management coupled with law enforcement. They did things like dove banding and dove counting and they went to Canada every late spring and banded ducks. They were assigned a significant load of waterfowl enforcement up and down the respective Flyways working on migratory birds during hunting seasons and they would follow the birds up and down, and work with the State officers. That was probably their biggest law enforcement focus. When USFWS changed over into the Division of Law Enforcement (1972), we assumed an awful lot of responsibility for the “new laws” that came in on the books. Some examples include the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972); Endangered Species Act (1973); The Airborne Hunting Act (1972); The National Wildlife Refuge Protection Act Amendments (1976); and a string of Congressional changes every year related to enforcement of federal wildlife, wildlife products and habitat regulations related to wildlife. Add to that the wide scope and increased priority of the Lacey Act which helps the USFWS Agents assist our state conservation law enforcement partners. We basically were assigned a huge job with the age-old problem of NOT ENOUGH RESOURCES...!! Consequently, choices had to be made on funding and staffing and then prioritizing work.

For instance, due to these changes in Congressional statutes and regulations, there was now a whole pile of work that now had to be done on the field aspects of handling illegal importation/exportation of wildlife products and parts. Consequently, USFWS and Customs started to work closer together and share resources at many of the various major ports across the Nation. Basically, we had to shift manpower and resources to address the priorities.

Same is true with the Division of Refuges. We agents obviously weren't going to be able to be at every refuge's beck and call so the Division of Refuges and the Division of LE worked together to identify the enforcement issues that Refuge LE folks were most concerned with and wanted to maintain a high rate of law enforcement response. Then, in Region 6, as an example, we undertook a Region-approved training program and our Regional Special Agents went around the countryside in the Region and trained our Refuge officers. We did that three summers in a row, teaching our 4-day training course twice per summer in North and South Dakota. We talked and demonstrated to them about THEIR enforcement challenges and then provided them with the needed training for those issues. We also devoted a lot of time training Native American Tribal Officers. I coordinated a training course and drafted a "boiler plate" Tribal Game Code, that could be adopted by the respective Tribal Councils in North and South Dakota. Then we sat down with several Tribal Attorneys, Council Members and Wildlife Directors and talked about what was needed to put a workable game code in place and help them get the training they needed. So, my class of Agents witnessed a LOT of changes in the law enforcement priorities after the early 1970's.

RALPH: Well as the years went by, you became known as a specialist on law related to Native Americans and wildlife, etc. Was that part of what you were doing in North Dakota or did you develop that more when you were in South Dakota?

JOHN: Well, both. Because what was happening at that time is that there was a variety of lawsuits being filed in Federal Court to determine jurisdictions at the State, Tribal and Federal levels. As an example, North Dakota, South Dakota and Nebraska are bisected by the Missouri River. There are major Sioux Reservations and a couple of other Tribal Reservations that have historically claimed title to both lands and waters on or adjoining those locations. Consequently, hunting, fishing, gathering and trespass rights are invariably mixed in to law enforcement activities at all levels, but especially at the State and Federal levels.

Basically, there were all these issues, and so I went to our U.S. Attorneys in both North and South Dakota and I said, "Do you have somebody who specializes in Native American Law as it refers to the Treaty Rights and what Federal Laws would apply, or which may not apply to their cultural Aboriginal rights to hunt, fish and capture, etc.?" The broad answer to that was NO they didn't have anybody. So, because I was interested in it, I bought a copy of Cohan's Handbook on Indian Law, which is a reference book that a lot of people utilize at the Federal level. I then expanded by going to sit down with some Tribal Attorneys that I knew and I also sat down with a couple of U.S. Attorneys and I tried to come up with something that would be of use to Agents and Officers who were dealing with Native Americans when it came to hunt, fish, trap, and gathering. A basic reference as to what was legal, what was illegal, what happened when they built the dams on the Missouri River, what constitutes the COE [Corps of Engineers] take line, who has jurisdiction over the Take lands that were picked up as a result of the Corps of Engineers condemning or buying those Missouri River properties. So, from my standpoint it was one of the – I was just immersed in it, and I'm glad that I was. I wrote several articles. I got some awards. One of the articles that I wrote was called *Indian Rights, Indian Wrongs*. It is basically a primer for fishermen that were fishing on/in contested waters. The article was published in *Fisherman Magazine* and then it was re-published in *Field and Stream Magazine*. Doug Stange,

who was the editor for *Fisherman*, and I won an award for that article at the Outdoor Writer's Association in 1982. So, from my perspective, it just gave me a much better understanding of what to do and how to operate when you are tasked with enforcing wildlife laws on or adjoining Native American tribal lands and waters.

I was a managing Case Agent on the USA vs Dion eagle cases prosecuted in North and South Dakota. I taught several courses and lectured at the Special Agents Basic Training Classes on the issues related to working investigations involving Native Americans and/or their reservations. Of the eight Dion eagle cases which went to the Eighth circuit court, ALL were upheld. One of them went to the Supreme Court of the United States and was upheld in favor of the Government. So, I got a chance to do a lot of things as a Special Agent; I got a chance to go listen to one day of the US Supreme Court testimony. A lot of people never get the chance to see or do that.

RALPH: Which served you well later on in life too, when you left the Fish and Wildlife Service and was Secretary of South Dakota Game & Fish.

JOHN: Yeah, what an opportunity! I didn't know exactly what to do. Both Vera and I knew I didn't want to go back to Washington D.C. and I had pretty much gotten to the point in my Fish and Wildlife Service career, that I was going to get pressure to go back to D.C. to finish up my last years. Then, kind of "out of the blue," I got a phone call from former Lieutenant Governor Lowell Hansen. He advised that he had heard that I may be moving to Washington, D.C. and then asked me if I had ever thought about maybe retiring from the USFWS and going to work as the Secretary for South Dakota's Game, Fish, & Parks? I answered that I had not thought about doing that. Lowell advised that he was making this call at the request of Bill Janklow, who had just been re-elected to Governor. Lowell advised that I should call Governor Janklow directly at his desk phone and set up a meeting to discuss the possibility of going to work for him.'

So, I sat and talked with my wife and we talked about it for several hours. I called him up the next day and he said, "Well come over to the mansion and let's sit down and talk." Now he's kind of a gruff straight forward conservative guy and I wondered *well geez, here I am, I'm more progressive when it comes to things like wildlife and the environment and etc. so I don't know how*. But we hit it off. It was primarily probably because both of us were veterans at that time. There was only like 5 years difference in our ages. I remember telling [him], "If you want somebody in this job that's just going to "yes man" you and all that, I won't do that. But I'll sure as hell be honest with you and bring the right stuff in here to you so that you don't get in trouble!" That led to a great working relationship and a strong friendship over the years. Not everything was roses, but we worked through a lot of policy issues. I worked for him for 8 years. It was a tumultuous 8 years because the guy could be difficult at times – but you know I loved him and I really enjoyed working for him. So, we got a lot done, and I'm proud to say that during that period of time, we purchased some significant critical resource properties, and we got Title 6 passed, which provided for wildlife management opportunities for Federal, Tribal and State Agencies and improved the fisheries and wildlife management of the Missouri River corridor.

RALPH: But don't you think also that having the experience with the Fish and Wildlife Service, then going to the State, that you were able to explain to the politicians in South Dakota, kind of

why the Feds may act or why they're taking a certain position in a way that probably was new to them?

JOHN: Absolutely and you know, there's the one thing I think where I could be of help to him and to the other members of the Cabinet was because I understood the hierarchy of how decisions were made and the issues in regard to federal process. There's a lot of regulations and process that the Federal Government and the Fish and Wildlife Service had to go through in order to get to an end decision. In the State, that's usually quite short, and it depends on what kind of budget you have to do the work, and in fact, whether or not you could get the FTE's to get the program going. The rest of it is get the legislature and the governor on board to push through it and it's quite a bit quicker than what happens with the Federal and Tribal process. Ralph, you were the [Regional] Director for Region 6 at the time when I went to work for Governor Janklow April of 1995. At that time, South Dakota was experiencing an unbelievable wet period up in the Northeast part of the State and it was flooding. Lakes and streams, and other areas up there had not seen that kind of water for a long time, and we still, to this day, are still dealing with that high water. The USFWS operates wildlife refuges and wetland easements up there, and those easements are strictly enforced. The concern that the Governor had was, 'Will the Fish and Wildlife Service stop us from doing Farm to Market road rebuilding and maintenance on these roads and section lines that are under easement?' I said, "You know, if we put together a working document, something with South Dakota DOT [Department of Transportation] as the lead, and we made sure that the overall contract provisions of those USFWS easements were maintained and/or restored as we worked to repair roads, we could make this work for all parties and prevent a big blow up.!

Consequently, we (Feds and State) collectively worked out an emergency protocol, involving USFWS and the SD Departments of DOT, Environment and Natural Resources, and Game, Fish & Parks to address the road and infrastructure repair issues caused by severe flooding. You were Regional Director at that time and your actions to address this flooding issue was acknowledged and appreciated by Governor Janklow and his entire DOT staff. It basically took the heat and the pressure off the Governor but it also took a lot of heat and pressure off the Fish and Wildlife Service from the standpoint of the field personnel who live and work locally up there. So, yes, it helped a lot for me being a Service employee and having my years of experience of working in the field. Because I was with the Service, I knew what the Refuge Act says, and the provisions under the Refuge Act that you can have some opportunity to do some things, but there are certain things in the Refuge Act that you're not going to change that unless you re-open the Act and nobody wants that.

Of all the things that I got from the Fish and Wildlife Service, I feel like my overall education was the most important! I got to work with people involved in research, politics, staffing, field operations and administration – so many great and accomplished people who believed strongly in their work and the application of that work. Harvey Nelson was at the Research Center in Jamestown, and all those guys took me under their wing and I had the opportunity to understand a whole lot more about some of the background information related to conservation decisions involving the Service - so I really, really appreciated that.

I look back on it – somebody asked me here the other day, “Well is there anything in your career that you would change?” I said to them, “Man, I can’t think of one thing.” From the time that I went to work for the Service, till the time that I fully retired as being a Commissioner with South Dakota Game, Fish & Parks, I loved it all and wouldn’t change a thing – it’s all been awesome.

RALPH: You’ve seen a lot of change in the world of wildlife, wildlife management, environment, etc. There are a lot of young people who have an interest in this. If you could give them a couple pieces of advice, what kinds of things would you tell them?

JOHN: Well, one of the things I think that’s hopefully served me well over the years is that I try to maintain my passion! I have a huge sense of passion about all this work. I had and I have kept a big time devotion to wildlife in general, but the environment and all the other issues related to how we live on this planet can get mired down in politics, greed and misinformation. We should expect that and find ways to fight it off – not an easy thing to do! I would say maintain the passion, but you’ve got to have a sense of humor on this, and you have to have some perspective and not get so personally involved that at some point in time you get so despondent that you quit the process. I’m 77 years old as we speak and I just got through writing a couple of articles for Dakota Country Magazine. The articles are basically the politics of wildlife management. It’s three installments and a couple of the main things I tried to point out are: 1) we know that politics are going to come into play and politics for the most part has not been a friend of wildlife; 2) capitalism is generally hard on wildlife; 3) the bottom line is there’ll be money spent to extract oil from the Bakken Formation in North Dakota; 4) that extraction will impact important wildlife and environmental resources; 5) you (we) together must have an impact that brings the environmental issues along with the development. Trying to get that message across and have that effort suitably funded is WORK – don’t be afraid to WORK...!!

RALPH: Sometimes I think that people have become more and more disconnected from the natural environment. More people live in urban situations, a lot of kids never get out in nature, never go fishing, never get to hunt, never see birds, whatever it is – hiking, whatever. How do you see that – and do you see that as something we ought to be as a society concerned about - losing the connection with nature?

JOHN: I do see that and it worries me! I’ve got grandkids now and when I’m talking - maybe I’m out fishing with them or I’m doing something, I’m hunting turkeys or we’re doing some scouting or we’re walking, training dogs or whatever, and I look over and they got that cell phone in their hand and they’re tap-tap-tapping on that thing. It bothers me that the new technology has invaded my concepts of what I would really like to see our kids do, our grandkids do. My own best memories were with my grandparents and with my mom and dad camping and fishing. We were always outside! I remember very few things about painting the walls in the house or watching TV, but I remember a ton of stuff about us going outside, even working with my dad. The working aspect of it was a teaching experience, and repairing the irrigation pump, or working on the tractor or whatever. I wish to hell these kids did still have that kind of opportunity. Vera and I have always taken our grandkids on outside trips.

However, I still worry about the fact that kids of today seem to disengage from work and simple chores around the house. I’ll tell you a funny story about my recent experience with that sort of

thing. My oldest grandson is 16. He's got a side-kick buddy, her name is Bailey and she's a real hoot, but I got into a discussion with those two because I'm an old grandpa and I got the right! I said to them, "If you had a flat tire tomorrow, out in the middle of the prairie out here, could you guys get the spare tire out and take that flat tire off and put that spare on and get home?" They both looked at me and shrugged their shoulders. I said, "So you can't, can you? So, here's what I'm going to do -Bailey you have the responsibility to get three girls out of your class and Nate, you have the responsibility to get three boys out of your class. ALL of you drive your cars up to my boat shed at 9:00 AM next Saturday. I'm going to teach all of you how to check the oil, what to do with anti-freeze, how to check air pressure and change a tire, and how to check your windshield wipers. Then we're going to have a team event, and I'm going to see how fast you team of girls and team of boys can change a tire, and I'm not going to tell you which vehicle it's going to be. I will take the winning team to dinner and the losing team goes home and cries in a towel. There's no participation trophies in this contest!" So we did that, it was awesome and, believe it or not, the girls won the dinner and the boys went home and cried in a towel, but my point being is, it was like 4 hours total time, no cell phones allowed and taught them how to change their tires, all that kind of stuff, how to get the jack out, how to assemble the jack, how to drop the spare tire, where to go – all that. So, when it was all done, then there was this sense of accomplishment that they had, because they did it all themselves and they did it with their own hands without Google!! I critiqued them and I mixed my brand of support and comment and I beat them up verbally, but it was fun and I loved them and we had a great time and we laughed at dinner and it was cool. And, then the boys showed up at the dinner, wanting to know if they could participate in dessert. *[Laughter]*

So, I guess where this is all going, Ralph, is those lessons that were learned when I was growing up provided my social being as being centered around outside. It's not like that today and it's a loss for us and it's going to hurt us. In my view, I think it's a bad deal for us, our generation coming up – and the other big deal is they're missing it. They're missing a great opportunity to go out and be outside and hopefully they'll get the inter-relationship of it all.

RALPH: And you know there's actually some science behind the value of outdoor experiences for young people, that it actually helps autistic children, it helps people cope with stresses in their life and it – so it has practical benefits to one's health and well-being, in addition to all the things that you learn and the self-reliance that you learn when you accomplish something like – whether it's changing your tire or planting a garden or -"

JOHN: Putting up a tent.

RALPH: Putting up a tent, or whatever it is.

JOHN: Building a fire, all that stuff you learn how to do. You know I think my dad was still back in those days where he talked about how hard their parents had it, but my dad was a hard, hard worker. All those people that went through the depression were hard-working people and my Dad's point was, if you could learn how to do a lot of this hands on stuff, it just builds your confidence to be able to take on anything. You may not be completely capable at the one level of doing it right away, but if you're strong enough and tough enough, you get a way to figure out and do it. You'll write, you'll read about it, you'll study it, then you'll take on your own task and

get the thing built. I really believe that. But I don't want to bad mouth the younger generation, but what I worry about is, do they care enough about our wildlife resources to really WORK for it? I read things like, "well you know, it sure makes good sense business sense to turn over our federal parks and lands to the State so that the State could trade or swap it to private enterprise and make more tax dollars!" Boy, I can't believe that we would ever consider doing something like that given how many people get their outdoor education from those Federal properties, and or State properties. We happen to have Custer State Park in South Dakota, one of the most visited State Parks in the United States, and people don't come to that to go look at a McDonald's! They go to look at bison and to look at antelope and they get the interpretive people to talk to them about the Indian cultural history that is involved in western South Dakota and the establishment of the bison ranges and elk herds and watch prairie dogs. Wild places are where we gain our education for resource conservation.

RALPH: Yes, I agree. Is there anything else that had occurred to you that you'd like to add?

JOHN: My journey in this life would not have been possible without my wife, Vera. She is the main thing that carried me through this 45-year career! I'm married to a special lady and she is the kind of person that took care of business at home as a partner and allowed me to go out and do the kind of work that I wanted to do, which required a lot of time away from home. And she was so tough and so independent and so smart about how to do it, that over these last few years I've come to realize just how valued she is to me! So, if you could get a partner that knows and feels and has the same kind of passion for being outside and knows what you're doing is critically important, that's big deal! The Special Agents of the Fish and Wildlife Service have a pretty high divorce rate and most of it is because they just can't communicate very well, in my opinion, and so if you could get home and stay home for a while and have that crucial comradery and communication, it makes the job seem like it's worth a whole lot more.

In other words, the job's not the enemy, You have to fit the job into your lifestyle, and she helped me do that. But you know, I can't really think of a lot more - just to close this thing by saying that the Fish and Wildlife Service gave me an unbelievable opportunity to do what I had only dreamed about doing. I mean, we'd be up in those damn rivers during the Vietnam War and you start to think about *well, I sure don't want to do this all my life!* I just assumed that my "dream job" just doesn't exist! Then, in 1973, I ran into the USFWS Special Agent from L.A. The Good Lord smiled on me and set the course for my next 45 year. I feel really Blessed!

RALPH: Well, good. Anything else, John?

JOHN: Nope, that's good.

RALPH: Alright. Well.

JOHN: I think we nailed it.

RALPH: I think so. Thank you very much.

JOHN: You're welcome.

End of Interview

Key words: collaboration, farms and farming, game management, hunting, law enforcement, partnerships, tribal lands conservation, tutorial, wetlands, wildlife refuges, writing