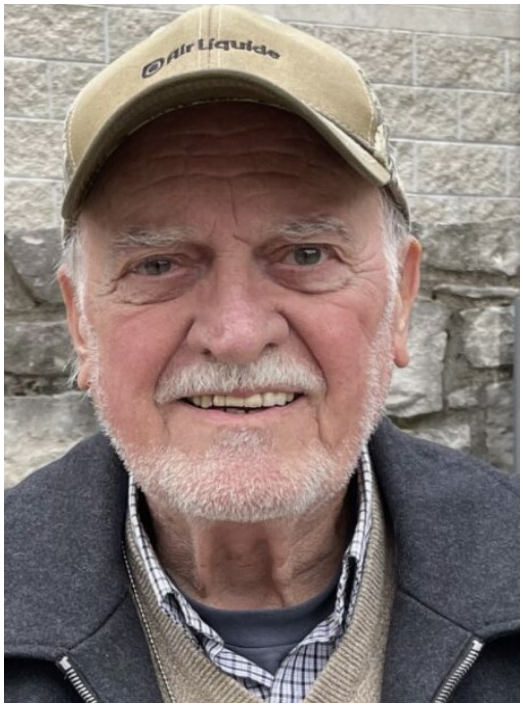
The Oral History of Bill Palmisano

November 29, 2023

Interview conducted by Vicki Finn

Shepherdstown, West Virginia (Retirees Reunion at NCTC)



Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Angelo (Bill) Palmisano
Date of Interview: November 29, 2023

Location of Interview: Retirees Reunion, NCTC, Shepherdstown, WV
Interviewer: Vicki Finn

Approximate years in Conservation: 45+ years. Retired in 2015.

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Cooperative Research Unit, Assistant Wildlife Unit leader, Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Office of Biological Services, Coastal Ecosystems Program Manager, Washington, DC; Alaska Regional Office, Director of Laboratory of Alaska Fish and Wildlife Research Center, Anchorage, Alaska; Director of Leetown National Fishery Research/USGS Leetown Science Center, Leetown, West Virginia.

Most Important Projects: Conservation program of the alligator; established National Coastal Ecosystems Team in Louisiana; wrote comprehensive plan ANILCA (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act); developed agreements with USSR for research on polar bears; created program in genetics; collaborated on joint program of cooperative research between Interior Department and the Department of Agriculture in building research center, Leetown, West Virginia.

Colleagues and Mentors: Steve Amstrup, Bruce Babbitt, Gennady Belchansky, Doug Buffington, Gene Hester, "Bull" Madden, Ted O'Neil, Robert Putz, Steve Russell, Dick Smith and Jim Watt.

Brief Summary of Interview: Bill was born and raised in the city of New Orleans. Formatively, he was interested in hunting, fishing and other wildlife experiences. He went to the University of New Orleans (LSU-NO) receiving his Bachelor's degree in 1965, Master's degree in wildlife management in 1967 and Ph.D. degree in 1970 in botany while part of the Louisiana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit eventually transferring to become Assistant Wildlife Unit Leader in Baton Rouge, LA. He enjoyed a short stint in Washington, DC in the newly formed Office of Biological Services in Washington, DC, a program as the manager for coastal ecosystems. He worked in Alaska in Region 8 and wrote the comprehensive plan for research of ANILCA. The research program in Alaska expanded and when the Alaska Fish and Wildlife Research Center was created, he was assigned Director of the Laboratory where he remained for 10 years. He transferred down to the lower 48 in preparation for retirement and was Director of Leetown National Fishery Research Center in Leetown, West Virginia, where he retired in 2015. In this oral history, Bill describes the eventual transfer of scientific research over to the USGS, talks about his personal mentors, valuable training he received over his career and relates a stimulating story of a polar bear expedition in the Arctic.

The Interview

VICKI FINN: Okay. Today is November 29th, 2023. I'm Vicki Finn. I'm here at the National Conservation Training Center to interview Bill Palmisano. We are gonna start his oral history. I'm so grateful, Bill, for your willingness to do this. You've had an amazing career and I'm really looking forward to capturing this for posterity. So, let's start off, Bill, just tell me more about your personal life, how you started off. And a little bit about where your career took you early on.

BILL PALMISANO: Yeah. Well, thank you, Vicki, I appreciate the invite. I was born in New Orleans on June the 14th, 1941. I grew up in New Orleans. I went to high school and grammar school in New Orleans, and I even went to the University of New Orleans, which at the time was called LSU-NO and now it's called the University of New Orleans. I [graduated in] 1965 and got a Bachelor's degree from LSU New Orleans.

I was married the same year, and I have three children, two girls and a boy. They live in Alaska, which is where they were raised, and we may get to some of that later in the interview. From LSU New Orleans, I transferred to LSU in Baton Rouge and went into wildlife management and got a Master's degree in wildlife management in 1967 and carried on my education into the Ph.D. degree in 1970. That degree is actually in botany, but my thesis was coastal ecosystems and ecology of coastal systems along the Gulf Coast.

Anyway, from then as part of my education, I was mentored through the Louisiana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, which was a very instrumental organization as far as hiring biologists into the federal career. And so, I transferred from the college, from the doctorate, into the Cooperative Research Unit as the Assistant Wildlife Unit Leader at the Unit in Baton Rouge [in 1972]. I served for two years as the Assistant Leader.

And then a new program was created by the Fish and Wildlife Service called the Office of Biological Services. I transferred [in 1974] from the Co-op Unit program into Washington, DC, as the program manager for coastal ecosystems, which is one of about a dozen different programs within the Office of Biological Services. During the time in Washington, in the Office of Biological Services, I had a person under my supervision stationed in Alaska. So, I went up to examine the situation in Alaska and found that a major piece of lands legislation was about to pass and Refuges and National Parks and National Forests and so forth were gonna be created under this new legislation.

I came back and talked to my boss, Dick Smith, about the fact that there seemed to be no research associated with the initiative in Alaska.

So, he said, “Well, I'll tell you what. Let's go talk to Dr. Hester,” who was Dick's boss. “And we'll see what we can do about it.” Well, we talked to Hester, and before we left Dr. Hester's office, I was transferred to Alaska, which was fine.

So, I went up to Alaska in 1978, actually wound up there in ‘79, and began to establish a science presence associated with the lands legislation. And I wrote up a comprehensive plan for research to cover the needs associated with the new legislation. The legislation passed in 1980 and the funds for the implementation were included in the budget, including research. So that was a kickoff to a major research initiative in Alaska. And at the time…

VICKI: Do you want to give the name of the legislation?

BILL: The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. ANILCA is what it's called. At this time, I was part of Region 8, which was the research program within the Fish and Wildlife Service, separate from the other operational regions. In 1985, the research program in Alaska had expanded to the point where it warranted center status. And in 1985, the Alaska Fish and Wildlife Research Center was created, and I was assigned as the Director of the laboratory in 1985.

I was there for another ten years as Director and in 1995, interested in transferring from Alaska down to lower 48 in preparation for retirement, I was assigned the Director of the Leetown National Fishery Research Center at Leetown, West Virginia, which is just a 20-minute drive from the National Conservation Training Center here in Shepherdstown. And I retired as the Director of the Leetown Center in 2015.

VICKI: Excellent. Thank you so much for giving me that broad overview of your career. You accomplished a lot in a lot of different programs. And I would love to hear more about what you view as your career accomplishments in each of those or all of those assignments that you had in the agency.

BILL: Yes. I'd like to go over that. Actually, one of my early accomplishments was when I worked for the state of Louisiana. The state had been doing research on alligators for many years. And I worked along the coast and coastal ecosystems work including alligators. And in cooperation with other biologists for the state, had developed a tremendous database on the life history of alligators. It was time, we thought to implement a program to harvest the alligator commercially.

The season had been closed for many years. The alligator had been listed as endangered by the Fish and Wildlife Service. But the state figured that we could manage the process legally and benefit the alligator as well as the trappers and hunters in Louisiana. So, we set up the season, the dates and so forth, and it was a very successful program from the beginning. The research documented the status of the alligator. And we tracked the skins through commerce.

And today it's a multi-million-dollar program. To me, it's one of the most significant conservation programs ever implemented in the United States. And I consider that one of my real accomplishments because I could see the actual benefit, financial benefit and the benefit to the animals. So, that was one of my early accomplishments.

I mention the Office of Biological Services…as part of the program that I managed in Washington, each of the programs established a national team. That's the term that was used. Since I managed the Coastal

Ecosystem program, I established the National Coastal Ecosystems Team in Louisiana, which eventually became the National Wetlands Center in Lafayette, Louisiana. And so that, again, has grown into a very significant research program. And now, I guess it's part of the US Geological Survey. So that was one of my early accomplishments also.

And then transferring to Alaska and starting with very little in terms of resources and knowledge of the state, over a period of a year or two, I began to…I was stationed in the regional office. It was very helpful at the time because the regional people were very helpful in mentoring me, you might say in some of the issues that we faced in Alaska.

So, like I say, by 1985, the program had grown to about $9 or 10 million in research, which was fairly significant, and I consider that an accomplishment. That center eventually was transferred to the USGS along with the rest of Region 8 about 10 years later.

The next accomplishment that I thought was noteworthy was at Leetown. When I transferred from Alaska to the Leetown Fishery Center in West Virginia, I immediately, which I did in Alaska, was created an office or a program dealing with genetics. Genetics was in its infancy at that point as far as the DNA genetics we know today. But I could see the potential. So, at Leetown, there was no significant genetic capability at all.

I wound up hiring some people with DNA genetics and then with the support of Senator Byrd, who had a real interest in Leetown Science Center and fisheries program and that type of thing. He actually added some initial funding and built a major physical laboratory to house the genetic program, which at the time was I would say, one of the most significant genetic programs dealing with fisheries and wildlife in the United States. And so that was another one.

While I was at Leetown, I was approached by the USDA. The USDA was beginning to get into cold water aquaculture. And they were looking for a site to build a cold-water aquaculture laboratory. Leetown was famous at the time for fisheries research of all kinds, not just cold water, but fish diseases and fish culture and so forth. So, I was approached by USDA to determine whether or not we could collaborate on a joint program, cooperative research between the Interior Department and the Department of Agriculture.

Since Leetown had a large land base, 500 acres, mainly to protect the watershed at Leetown, there was ample room to locate another research center at Leetown. And we shared the facilities as far as the water and that type of things and the scientific knowledge. And that is now a very viable research center as part of the Department of Agriculture.

So those are some of the highlights, I guess, in my career as far as accomplishments are concerned.

VICKI: Those are some amazing accomplishments. And if I do the math, your career was about 45 years in length with the federal government. Is that correct?

BILL: That's correct. I also have to talk again about the co-op unit. I was with the co-op unit as a student in a co-op unit for five years. And the unit program was great because it allowed graduate students interested in wildlife or fisheries to interact with professionals with the state and federal agencies. And during the five years that I was a student, I had contacts with both the state and federal level. By the time I was ready to graduate, those agencies and those staff knew me, and I knew them. And I think that was a major benefit in my career. It launched me into a career path that involved both the State of Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, as well as the Fish and Wildlife Service.

So, I'd add that to the 45 years.

VICKI: So even more.

BILL: It rounded out to 50.

VICKI: That's impressive. That's definitely impressive. So, backing up just a little bit. What made you get into the Fish and Wildlife arena in general? Was there something in your childhood that called you or something else? How did you get into this field?

BILL: Well, that's a good question because I was born and raised in New Orleans, in a city right in the city. The only wildlife area we had was City Park. We'd go and camp in City Park and go fishing and so forth.

The person who helped me the most as a youth was my grandfather on my mother's side. He was an avid fisherman, and he liked to hunt too. So, at an early age, he took me and my two brothers fishing and hunting and kind of got me interested in fishing and hunting.

And so, Louisiana is known as a sportsman state. There's so much opportunity for fishing and hunting. It took very little effort to find high quality fishing, hunting and other wildlife experiences.

But when I was in high school, I liked physics. And so, when I went to first year in college, I went into physics because people were going into space, and we had astronauts and so forth. And it didn't take me long to realize physics was not for me. I remember one of the lectures was on Lorentzian contraction in physics, where an object, as it approaches the speed of light, has infinite mass and zero length. I said, I'm out of here.

Since I enjoyed wildlife and biology, I transferred into biology. And the rest of my bachelor's degree was in biology.

I had a man as an undergraduate named Steve Russell. And Steve Russell was a professor at the University of New Orleans and was a real naturalist, a zoologist. And I took several classes with him, and we went on field trips, and one summer he got a grant. He had done research on the birds of British Honduras at the time, that's now Belize, and he needed a field assistant. So, he had me assist him for three months doing studies of birds and mammals and reptiles in the jungles of Central America. And when I

got back from that endeavor, I was kind of hooked on biology as a career and I would attribute that to Steve Russell.

Then when I worked with the state, a man named Ted O'Neil was my boss. He was an old timer with the state and a really well-known ecologist along the coast and knew the coastal ecosystems very well and kind of mentored me in that particular area. And when I went to work for him with the state for two years with the alligator program, he was very helpful in bringing a lot of the work to reality.

I think that's one of the problems we have. We can become rather esoteric in some of our endeavors without putting your finger on the real consequences and benefits. And that's one reason I mention the alligator as a highlight of my accomplishments, is because I could see the benefit of the work and Ted O'Neil gave me that perspective.

And then when I joined the Fish and Wildlife Service, I had a mentor there too, Dick Smith, who was the Regional Director for Region 8. And eventually became the Deputy Director for the Fish and Wildlife Service. And Dick supported me all through my career and he gave me advice and direction. And I owe a lot to Dick as far as my professional career is concerned.

Those are some of the people and some of the highlights as far as where I was and how I got to where I eventually wound up.

VICKI: So, you've used a couple of entities names like the Office of Biological [Services] that I'm not that familiar with. And also in your career, a lot of what you mentioned ended up being transferred over to USGS when the science program in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service went away. So, do you want to talk a little bit about what OBS was and a little bit more about all those transitions that happened in your 45-year career in the agency?

BILL: Yeah, I've seen a lot of changes. I think one of the things that struck me looking back was when I entered the Fish and Wildlife Service, it was a fish and wildlife agency. When I left the Fish and Wildlife Service, it was an ecosystems or an ecological agency. It was all driven by the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Protection Act and other legislation, Marine Mammals Protection Act. So, this was in the 70s when a lot of these areas of focus came in and the Fish and Wildlife Service was adapting to those changes.

And like I say, prior to that, it was primarily an agency dealing with the fish and wildlife resources and habitat. So that was a big biological change. I mean, a big change in the program of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Office of Biological Services was created in 1974. At that time, we were waiting in gas lines because of OPEC embargo on gas and a strong emphasis on project independence. Energy independence was taking place at the time.

One of the problems was permitting and environmental protection and trying to expedite the permitting process to allow energy development to proceed in an environmentally acceptable manner. OBS was designed specifically to do that, this small organization and it was commodity driven more or less.

It was, I think, if I recall, Gene Hester was probably the mover and shaker for the OBS, and each of the programs was commodity oriented. There was coal, there was oil and gas, hydropower and other energy related focuses. My area was oil and gas in coastal systems. At the same time, there was a coastal ecosystems initiative that was mounted in the United States and some funding came from that. So, it was added to the oil and gas program of OBS. The idea was to try to create information that would expedite the development and review of permits. That was the key to OBS, and it was all, like I said, commodity oriented.

In my case, what we entered into was a series of ecosystem characterizations where we, like the Gulf Coast of Louisiana or the Atlantic Coast, we would gather as much information as we could through contractors. And then make that information available to the Ecological Services officers who would be using the information to review permits and comment on permits. So that that's what OBS was.

It was not part of Region 8 per se. It was a separate entity. And it lasted from about 1974 to 1980, when it was dispersed, and the people were scattered through other components of the Fish and Wildlife Service. So, I think it was a part of the Fish and Wildlife Services' history, very short lived. And not very many people were aware of the OBS and what its real job was.

The other entity that's no longer part of the Fish and Wildlife Service is Region 8. I think Region 8 was created around 1975, as I recall, about the time that I was entering new in the Fish and Wildlife Service. We had a meeting one time at Gaithersburg, when Region 8 was created. And I don't think the agency has had one like it since then. It was how the Fish and Wildlife Service does business. It was a Region 8 initiative. And people like myself who came in as fairly high-grade people from colleges were not familiar with the procedures of personnel and financial and other operations of the Service. We met at Gaithersburg. There were about 50 people, as I recall. And it was a Region 8 initiative to train us or to expose us to how the Fish and Wildlife Service does business.

It was very beneficial to me in two ways. One, I learned how to get things done. And two, I met people who I worked with for the rest of my career in Region 8 primarily. So, Region 8, like I said, was transferred to the USGS. I think it was 1994 when that occurred. And so that was kind of the termination of the program as far as research is concerned.

It was an interesting…this would be a kind of a side note. In retrospect, if I was in charge, I think I would have done things a little differently. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. Region 8 reported to Headquarters, Dick Smith or whoever the Regional Director was, Doug Buffington after him. And was not part of the regional structure of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The reason it was transferred to [USGS] was Bruce Babbitt was the Secretary of Interior. Bruce had a lot of ideas about what he thought the Endangered Species Act should do and how it should work. And it

didn't sit well with a lot of conservatives who were afraid of the Endangered Species Act as being too powerful. And didn't want any more strength added to the Endangered Species Act than it already had.

When the [National Biological Survey] was created, it was tied to research. And they said, well, they're gonna go and look under every rock, find endangered species and block development and we need to neutralize that potential. And so, by transferring the Fish and Wildlife Service and Region 8 research and what was left of OBS to USGS, it basically neutralized the concern that these people had.

The problem was that Region 8 had no political base. We had people who thought the research was great, but if we had been tied to the regions, we might have had a stronger political base. And could've mustered enough political force to stay within the Fish and Wildlife Service. We didn't have that and since we weren't part of the regions anyway said, well, fine. And I couldn't believe what had happened. I couldn't believe how no one objected really, not significantly anyway. I remember Dick Smith objecting, but not very much. But the regional directors seemed like they couldn't care less. So, if we had been part of the regional structure, I don't think we would have been transferred out, but you never know.

Anyway, that was a little commentary on Region 8, so.

VICKI: I'd like to just dig into that for a little bit because there's the OBS and then there's the NBS. The National Biological Survey was what Bruce Babbitt created, correct? And prior to that was the Office of Biological Services, which was Service generated. Correct me if I'm wrong.

BILL: No, that's correct. Yeah. Yeah.

VICKI: Do you have anything you want to mention about the differences between the two of those in any way, in terms of the nuance of that? I mean both of them ended up going away I guess in the sense of the research leaving the Fish and Wildlife Service. Which I as someone who was there at the time, people were very concerned about what that meant. But they were also hopeful that maybe this new entity could deliver something else too. So, I don't know if you want to just comment a little bit more about that.

BILL: Yeah, I can comment on NBS. I probably should have added that to the mix. NBS was Region 8 on steroids. What Bruce Babbitt's NBS did was pull [biological] research from all of the Interior bureaus and put them into one unit called NBS. Which made it easy to move out based on the comment I just made. So, Park Service, BLM and other [Interior bureaus] that had what was considered a bona fide research program were transferred to NBS. And NBS then was the entity that was transferred to USGS, and it was broken, disarticulated, as it was formed and then unformed.

So, yeah. Like I said, the whole thing was based on the politics of Bruce Babbitt. And Bruce Babbitt, from what I could understand, was kind of a rising star in the Democratic party. And I think his enemies, you might say, the political enemies didn't want him to succeed in anything that he attempted to do, including NBS. So, yeah. It was actually NBS that was transferred and Region 8 was the biggest component of NBS. The Park Service and BLM and others didn't have a real significant science program that transferred.

VICKI: Yeah. Did Bureau of Reclamation have any science that went to NBS?

BILL: I'm sure it did, I don't know. Yeah, I don't I don't recall for sure, but people were hiding their research including the Fish and Wildlife Service to some extent because there was some research being conducted by the regions that was identified and transferred out and aggravated some of the regional directors. But I don't know about the Bureau of Reclamation. BLM had research.

Anyway, so that's what happened and it's an interesting component of the history of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

VICKI: So, when you moved to Leetown, that was not something that transferred to USGS. That was in the fisheries program. It sounds like fisheries kept some of their research.

BILL: It did. It transferred to USGS. Yes.

VICKI: So, you were a USGS employee then at the end of your career?

BILL: Right. That's correct.

VICKI: Do you want to talk about the differences between the two programs or the two agencies, I should say?

BILL: Yeah. I regret the whole thing had occurred. My impression of USGS is that they have really competent scientists. Some are results oriented. Some are not necessarily results oriented. They all needed a Ted O'Neil to ground their work to make it relevant.

But my sense of the USGS in general is that they were doing science for the sake of science. And the application of that in many cases wasn't that rigorous. You have earthquakes and that type of thing in geology. But I was not really satisfied at all. And the other thing was, is that we had components of USGS, like I said in biology and other areas. Water, for instance, was added to USGS who felt like we didn't belong. The leadership of USGS was a geologist. The head policies were based on geology. Biology and water were kind of afterthoughts and oh yeah by the way so. I didn't feel part of an organization that was contributing much to the mission, because I didn't really know what the mission of the USGS was.

I can remember my kids when they were little, you know, what does your daddy do? Well, he takes care of ducks or whatever…you go to [US]GS you don't know what the objective of the agency was, so.

But when I came to Leetown, I was in the USGS at the time, and there was an entity called the Fisheries Academy and it was a component of the Leetown Center. And what it did was brought in fishery biologists from all over the world and trained them in fisheries research, primarily fish diseases, but other components too.

That academy was, oh I guess you'd say promoted by a man named Robert Putz, Bob Putz. Bob Putz was also a Center Director at Leetown and a Regional Director in Alaska and a good friend of mine. I remember one day talking to Bob Putz, about the NCTC as a concept. And what he was saying, we have a Fishery Academy that's doing a good job of training fishery scientists. We need a national center not just for fish, but for conservation in general. And that was the genesis of the NCTC growing basically in concept from the Fishery Academy at Leetown eventually to the center here at NCTC.

And Bob again went to Senator Byrd and Byrd, what is it, $170 million or whatever it was eventually. I couldn't believe it. And I said, "are you sure that's gonna work, Bob?" He said, "I don't know." Look, it's been a major success. But anyway, the contribution that Bob Putz made to NCTC was significant. He could see the vision and not many people could, but he had the horsepower with Senator Byrd. The vision without the horsepower wouldn't have gotten anywhere.

So anyway, I don't necessarily see Putz as a mentor, as a major factor in my career. But I watched him, and he was an operative. Anyway…

VICKI: So back to the fisheries time, when you were at Leetown working on fisheries, we also had in the US Fish and Wildlife Service Technology Centers that were part of fisheries, like Abernethy Technology Center. Did you work with them at all? Was that a connection there?

BILL: Well, it wasn't as strong a connection as I would have assumed. They would often come to Leetown on a specific matter, this fish kill, something like that. But I didn't see a lot of collaborative work on a day-to-day basis. Just an event-by-event kind of situation. I think the Wildlife Health Lab in Madison, Wisconsin was like that. You got a dead eagle; you bring it to Madison. So now I guess there's the Forensics Lab that would handle a lot of those things. Research handled a lot of the things that the Forensics Lab has now, but it was on a case-by-case basis without a lot of more significant in-depth collaboration.

VICKI: Well, thank you for sharing that. As someone who was on the periphery of that change, for me it seemed like a win that we kept the Technology Centers, that the Forensics Center was there, that Madison was still there. And those were viewed as wins as time went on and we realized, the challenges of working with USGS. And I'll just say from my perspective now, we're trying to continue to bridge that connection with USGS. And we now have the Science Applications program within our own agency, which is what I would call a renaissance of what was there in your Region 8 at the time.

As someone who's interviewing you, I'm not supposed to talk that much, but I will just say that it seems like we've gone on a roller coaster with research in general and science in general in our agency. I'm not sure where it's all gonna end because, as you and I were talking earlier, our budgets are not looking good in FY24 for the science program. And so, anyway, it seems like it's a perennial problem on how we deal with research.

BILL: Yeah. Well, like I say the only program that I felt very, very comfortable with was the alligator program where the research and the objectives of the program were very clear. And when you got up in

the morning, you knew exactly what you had to do, and you knew why you had to do it. And the result was gonna be something you were looking forward to and planning for. That was the last time in my career that I saw something like that.

Although we did a lot of, you might say ambulance chasing. Things like the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. We had excellent biologists, fishery biologists, marine birds, marine mammals. We were right on top of that oil spill. There was money associated with looking at the impacts of the spill for instance. But again, the problem with scientists in general is that they become advocates and the objectivity gets skewed. So, we were cleaning sea otters, catching sea otters and cleaning them and letting them go. And the press would be interviewing and the strong advocacy role kind of turns off other parts of the public. Everybody loves sea otters. But we cleaned [a lot of] sea otters and put radios and tracked them and [most of them] died, couldn't say that. So, I think the point I'm trying to make, like you may not be getting it, but the point I'm trying to make is that the advocacy component of research and the reality part make it difficult for people to accept research.

I think climate change is a good example. I think everybody agrees that the climate is changing and to some extent the humans might be making a contribution to the change. Now whether or not we can do anything about it or not, I don't know. But scientists are gonna jump on that as a potential bandwagon just like we jumped on the oil spill. So, the scientists are gonna say, well, we need more research no matter what. We've got to have more research because we really don't understand this, and we don't understand that. Finally, the public just gets fuzzy in the public's eye. And it's hard to get sustained funding for programs when you're chasing ambulances type of thing so. And that was one of the things that USGS did too.

Anyway. I don't know, I don't really have an answer to the question about what we need to do in terms of the scientific basis for the Fish and Wildlife Services program.

VICKI: Yeah.

BILL: It was clearer when we were working with Fish and Wildlife. It's not clear now.

VICKI: Yeah. So going back a little bit in time, your career had…you were part of a huge transition of a lot of things in the Fish and Wildlife Service, over 45 years. What type of awards did you get, and training did you get to try to help manage through that change?

BILL: I didn't get many awards because I was kind of a troublemaker. I'd go to meetings, and I'd ask uncomfortable questions and challenge. I got a letter from Dick Smith that he sent me and said you were the most challenging person I ever supervised, because I'd be right on him. The levels above that didn't necessarily appreciate the criticism. So, forget about awards. I didn't get any awards.

I got an award every two weeks when I got my check. Other than that, I didn't get any meritorious service awards or distinguished service awards or anything else. But that's okay.

But as far as training, I went to a lot of different training programs, and one of them stuck out in my mind and I never really forgot. I think it was at the Federal Executive Institute in Virginia. The training had to do with value systems. And there was a man named Massey out of Colorado State University did this video. Now, this is 40 years ago, 35 years ago. The premise of that training session was how people establish the value systems that they have. And his view is as a child, your family has certain values. And having a family unit, you get values that are kind of instilled in you as a child. And then you go to school, and you get values in school. You may have religious components that add values. And then as you get older in your teens, you have peers who then become a major influence in your value systems. Massey says hey, at 14 years old, your values are locked in. And those values unless there's a significant emotional event in your life, those values stay with you the rest of your life, either overtly or subliminally. And the value to that…This was a major presentation, and I'm summarizing it. And he had examples and so forth.

But then I got to thinking about that. That if you're supervising a person or being supervised by a person, the most important thing you need to know is their value system in order to interact effectively with that person. And if a person was raised on a farm in Iowa, or a person was raised in the inner city of Chicago, they're gonna have two different value systems period. And you can't use your value system to evaluate their value system. It's gonna be different. So, you can say, well, if I was raised on a farm and he was my value system for relate, but he was raised in the inner city of Chicago, so I have a hard time dealing with those value systems.

That's the basis for the trouble we have now with racism, I think, is that it's not really race as much as it is a difference in values. And because they have such different values, we can't really get along. Could be religious differences. Now we're looking at the Jews and the Israelis with the problems in Gaza. It's a value system problem.

So, when I got that training, whenever I was interacting with someone in a substantive way, I kept trying to think, where was that person when they were 14? And anyway, so that that training is…I use it all the time, even today. I talk to people like that, and again I say, look, this is a value system problem. Anyway, I had lots of other training, but like I said that one kind of stands out in my mind the most.

Most training to me in the Fish and Wildlife Service is an opportunity to interact with other people. And you build friendships, and you see different points of view of things. And so, the formal coursework might be handy, like value system training, but most of it has to do with interacting with other people, making lifelong friends and so forth.

VICKI: Yes, yes. Well, the Fish and Wildlife Service is undergoing a values exercise right now led by the Directorate in general to establish what the Fish and Wildlife Service values are. It's still a work in progress but stay tuned. We'll have a final list on that.

So, as we think some more about the future, what type of advice do you want to leave to the next generation for today's workers and the next generation workers?

BILL: Well, I think a couple of things stand out in that regard. The Peter principle, for instance, is something that I think about, even now. But very important aspect of my career as I was advancing up through the Fish and Wildlife, up through the ranks, Peter principle basically saying that people tend to rise to their level of incompetence. The higher you advance in say an organization, the bigger the challenge is, and you may be overdriving your headlights. You may not have the interest, the capability or the drive to sustain that kind of a job.

I had that experience myself. I joined the Fish and Wildlife Service as a GS-12, quickly advanced to a 15 and stayed as a 15 for my entire career. I was nominated for the Senior Executive Service by Dick Smith and told him I wasn't interested in that because I was very comfortable where I was. I spent five years in Washington and my career in Alaska was in the Regional Office. We were actually stationed in the Regional Office. I was a member of the Regional Directorate, but I wasn't supervised by the Regional Director. So, I could see what kind of responsibilities people had at the Regional Directorate level or the Senior Scientist level. That didn't interest me. I stayed as relevant a level as I could within the organization dealing with the fish and wildlife and very comfortable with it.

So, I would advise anybody to keep an eye on your interest and your abilities as you progress in your career and think hard before you take the next step. Is this something you really want to do?

And if you ever walk in a marsh in Louisiana eaten up by muskrats, you can find yourself up to your waist in muck. So don't pick up your back foot until you know your front foot is gonna hold you. And I would say that as a career, if you want to try it out, have a backup, have a plan that allows you to fall back to a job you would prefer. And not get caught up in the advances that you just made. Go back if you're not happy with what you got. So that's one thing I would suggest.

The other thing is…when I worked with the state on this alligator program, the Director was an automobile salesman who had been appointed. But he was a really good guy and a good wildlife man. He was the Director of the Wildlife and Fisheries, and we were in there, and he was trying to make a decision as to whether or not we were gonna hunt alligators. My particular job in that program was a tagging system and a system of tracking the alligator skins through commerce to make sure no illegal skins entered the legal traffic. And he went around the room and asked each one of us about our job because he was trying to decide what to do. He said he's got a stack of letters on his desk (this is the director of the agency) opposing the season. Little kids writing, please don't kill the alligator. He had one letter from a fur dealer or a hide dealer in France who wanted to buy the hides. As a politician, he said, “I got a problem with this.” So, he went around the room, and he asked each one of us law enforcement to biologists, me for the regulation process. He said, “your job is to make me look good, and if you make me look good, don't you worry about your job. But if you make me look bad, you're gonna have hell to pay.”

So, I guess that's my advice, is to the extent you can make your supervisor or your agency look good, there's a good chance that you're gonna be happy, they're gonna be happy, and your career is gonna advance to the level that you want it to. Even though I was a troublemaker, at times, I think people could look at me and say, well, some people are worth the trouble. Some people are not worth the trouble. I was hopefully anyway worth the trouble I was to the agency. So, make your supervisor look good.

VICKI: Good advice. Good advice. So, do you want to talk anything about some of your stories, good stories and bad stories you might have had in your career, obviously Alaska. That's the final frontier. Any stories from there, how your family was liking Alaska or not? Just anything left over in the potpourri, so to speak.

BILL: Yeah. Yeah. Well, my children were raised in Alaska. I think they were like, 5 to 6 years old, something like that when we moved to Alaska. So, Alaska is their home. They live in Alaska today. And so, then their children, my grandchildren are Alaskans. So that worked out really well for the family. And it's kind of odd because, I was the first person in my family to go to college and my kids had the advantage of that background.

My wife went to college and had a degree in library science and so forth. So, it all worked out really well. And they consider Alaska their home. And interestingly enough, my brothers and my wife's sisters live in New Orleans and live within a mile of where they were born and haven't experienced anything like that. So anyway, I was grateful for the opportunity.

There were some things happened over the course of my career that kind of stand out too. One of them…I saw in some of the questions about what was the most dangerous thing that ever happened to you or something like that? Well, it was tied to polar bear work. A man named Steve Amstrup was the polar bear scientist dealing with the Arctic Ocean. Steve Amstrup, the polar bear scientist worked for me at the Alaska Center. And his job was to capture polar bears and radio tag them and track them and so forth so.

One day he came into my office and said, “I'm going on a polar bear expedition this weekend catching some polar bears out of Barrow. Would you like to come?” I said, “man, I'd be glad to.” So, we flew into Barrow, Alaska. And we had a helicopter there in Barrow that was gonna take us out to capture the polar bears.

The procedure…we had a fresh snow. You look for a fresh snow. Not much, maybe four or five inches of snow. And you fly over with a helicopter, and you find a track, the polar bear track. And you know the bear is gonna be at the end of the track. And we were interested only in female bears because that's part of the key to the reproductive population. But also, because the males’ neck is so large they shed their collars. So, we put collars on males, and they would shed them.

So anyway, we flew out and picked up about 50 miles out on the Arctic Ocean, just ice. We picked up a track of a sow and two cubs. And so, Steve said, “we're gonna capture the female and mark her and put a satellite transmitter on her, but you can't come.” I said, “what do you mean?” He said, “there's too much fuel in the helicopter now to maneuver. So, what we're gonna do is we're gonna put you out on the ice, and we're gonna give you a shotgun and a sleeping bag, and we're gonna go catch the bear, process the bear, come back and get you.” I said, “okay.” So, he lets me off in the middle of nowhere. And I had a sleeping bag and a shotgun and that big heavy coat, gloves and things. And the helicopter flew out of sight over the horizon. And I just sat there for about an hour, maybe an hour and a half. And I kept listening.

Anyway, they obviously came back and got me. But after that, that was great. We had used enough fuel to where I could participate in the capture and program and so forth. So, I guess that was pretty dangerous you know?

But more so dangerous, we lost two of our polar bear biologists slightly I'd say about two or three years after my experience. What we would do we'd take a high-performance airplane, retractable gear and that type of thing and fly because they could fly fast. And we would track the bears with that. So, we would use the satellite transmitters and the conventional transmitters to pick the bears up. Then the plane would fly down, and this was looking for cubs to see what the cub situation, whether they had successfully bred or not. And so, this high-performance airplane was out checking the females that we had radio collared looking for the reproductive success, disappeared. Never saw it again. Two of the scientists from the center and the pilot vanished.

An interesting story there…One of the things I did when I was in Alaska was, I went to the Soviet Union [in 1988] on an exchange program to cooperate in various endeavors. Polar bears was one. They were interested in polar bears and obviously so were we. So, I had met with some people in the Soviet Union who were interested in that kind of work. And one of the men was an expert in ice radar. The Soviets had radar that could track ice movement, and we needed that. We didn't really have that capability in the United States. Gennady Belchansky was his name, a brilliant man with the Academy of Sciences in the Soviet Union.

I called him. I said, "we have an aircraft that was headed to Russia, to the Soviet Union." And our radar, the military radar along the coast of Alaska was talking fuzzy about they didn't want to divulge information about the location of the aircraft. But we did have some points on it, and they finally got out of our radar range and apparently in a direct line headed towards the Soviet Union. Belchansky said, "I'll get back to you on that." Next thing you know, data started flying in from the Soviet Union on our radar data. They had more information. They gave us more information about our airplane than our military gave us. It was incredible. But it had never entered Soviet airspace. I mean, there was no record of it entering their radar system. So apparently it went down somewhere in the Arctic Ocean.

But it was pretty interesting…and Gennady had to kind of laugh when he gave us the data and I told him we couldn't get that from our military. Anyway, that was an unfortunate...And I noticed in the memorial here at NCTC, their names are on the memorial outside here.

VICKI: The Fallen Comrades.

BILL: Fallen, yes, right. A couple of other little things. When I was in Alaska, Dick Smith used to come up periodically and look at our program and was very interested in what we were doing. And once we went to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Brooks Range. The Brooks Mountain Range is a southern portion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. And it goes out to the coastal plain in the Arctic Ocean.

And we were flying over the Brooks Range, which was pretty desolate. I mean, it's just above timber, above tundra even, it's mostly rock and kind of jagged. And Dick Smith looked out the window after we'd been flying for half an hour over the Brooks Range. He says, “no wonder Jim Watt wants to give this place away.” And it was a reference to the Secretary who was interested in opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil and gas development. Dick, “no wonder he wants to give it away.”

And we had landed where we had a fishery program going there with the Park Service, just adjacent to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge on a Park Service, a national park area. And that evening, after we had eaten, it was quiet, beautiful. The sun was going down in the Brooks Range, in the background was kind of a pink color. And Dick was smoking a cigar, and he says, “Bill, take my picture in front of this pile of rocks.” He referred to the Brooks Range as a pile of rocks. So anyway, that was a kind of humorous thing.

And one other thing and I’ll probably wrap this thing up…was when OBS was formed and when it was melded into Region 8…Again our relationship with the Ecological Services people was a little strained because they thought those resources should go to their operation. And they weren't that happy with the way things were going with the OBS and research and so forth.

And we had a lot of Ph.D.’s and maybe considered to be the elite. I mean, that's how they perceived us anyway. When they were transferred to USGS (all of Region 8 and then OBS scientists and all were transferred to USGS), a friend of mine who had worked with me at LSU and also worked in OBS briefly for a few years went back to LSU as a professor. He called me up and he said, “I hear that they've taken all the research out of the Fish and Wildlife Service, transferred it to the USGS.” I said, “yeah, that's what's happening.” He says, “what about the people in Ecological Services, who's gonna read to them? Anyway, you had to be there.

So, that's what I was hoping to accomplish. I think you may have some other things that you want to…

VICKI: Yeah. Well, as someone who worked in Ecological Services, did you guys still have beers together or…?

BILL: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Some of those guys…I think there was a guy named “Bull” Madden. “Bull” Madden was famous as “Save the Dirt.” That was his motto, “Save the Dirt.” And he was in Ecological Services in Region 4 out of Atlanta. And he and I were good buddies. We'd go out in the evening and lay on a few. And he was also one of the biggest critics. “Ah, you guys, I don't know what the hell you’re doing.” Anyway, “y'all kill a lot more than you create.” Anyway, we got along okay, but there was that philosophical tension, I guess. Not real tension, but philosophical tension.

VICKI: Yeah. Well, I feel like you have given the Service an amazing career and amazing accomplishments. And I congratulate you on such a career of transition and change. And now you're passing it on to the next generation in terms of understanding our history is so important. So, thank you. Thank you for taking that time. Any last words?

BILL: Well, it's been quite a career. I can't believe I got paid to do what I did. I mean, if I could have afforded it, I'd have done it for nothing. But yeah, it was a major opportunity, and I wouldn't change

anything that I could think of anywhere along the line. It all worked out well for me and my family was real happy and we did really well. And I'm retired here in Shepherdstown, not far from the NCTC on a 60-acre tract of land. And enjoying my retirement. So, it's been a great career and a great life.

VICKI: Well, thank you for your service. And thank you for this interview. And with that, I think we'll close it out. It's…Let me look at the clock here. What it's a little after, about 3:15. Is that right?

BILL: 3:10.

VICKI: 3:10 yes at NCTC. And I thank you very much for this conversation. And wishing you all the best and look forward to seeing you tomorrow too at the reunion, because we're here at the NCTC and the Retirees Reunion. And this has been our opportunity to capture this oral history. So, thank you for making that effort.

BILL: Yeah, I look forward to meeting with some of my former colleagues tomorrow. We're gonna get our picture taken at 11:45. So they'll all be there. They're scattered right now and hard to find. Yeah, I look forward to that. Thanks for the interview, appreciate that.

VICKI: Thank you. Thank you. We're gonna close it out now.

Key Words: Aircraft, Aquaculture, climate change, city environments, coastal environments, diseases, economic benefits, energy, fishes, oil production, oil spill, polar, research, scientific personnel (USFWS)