The Oral History of Barry Christenson

September 5, 2019

Interview conducted by Tom Worthington
Bowen Lodge, Deer River, MN

Oral History Cover Sheet

Name: Barry Christenson
Date of Interview: September 5, 2019
Location of Interview: Deer River, MN
Interviewer: Tom Worthington

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 31

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held:

Chesapeake Bay ESFO, MD, Fish and Wildlife Biologist

Great Meadows NWR, MA, Asst. Refuge Manager

Seedskadee NWR, WY, Asst. Refuge Manager

Montezuma NWR, NY, Asst. Refuge Manager

Union Slough NWR, IA. Refuge Manager

Litchfield WMD, MN. District Manager

Twin Cities RO, MN. Refuge Supervisor

Midway NWR, HI. Refuge Manager

Sacramento RO, CA. Chief Refuge Operations

Windom WMD, District Manager

Most Important Projects: Union Slough NWR CMP/CCP; Refuge Expansion Authorization. Midway NWR CCP, public access project; hosting First Lady Laura Bush,

Colleagues and Mentors: Dr. Stan Harris (Humboldt State), Dr. Jim Sherburn (U. Maine), Glen Kinser (FWS), Matt Kerschbaum (FWS), Nita Fuller (FWS) , Tom Magnuson and Mike Marxen(FWS), Jim Connaughton (CEQ)

Brief Summary of Interview:

Barry was born in Minneapolis in 1951, most childhood in California. Graduated with B.S. in Wildlife from Humbolt State U. in 1974. Worked with the Peace Corps in Upper Volta (west Africa) 1974-1976. Worked for Smithsonian Institution 1976-1978. Graduated from U. Maine with M.S. Wildlife 1980. First position with the USFS was working on water quality projects at

the Chesapeake Bay ESFO. Worked as assistant refuge manager at Great Meadows NWR, Seedskadee NWR, and Montezuma NWR. Became Refuge Manager at Union Slough NWR in Minnesota – authored first Comprehensive Management Plan and oversaw refuge expansion authorization documentation. Became Manager of Litchfield WMD where he acquired waterfowl production areas, constructed Refuge Headquarters Office. Worked in the Twin Cities Regional Office as a Refuge Supervisor overseeing refuges in four states. Became Refuge Manager of Midway NWR, assisted with the planning of the Papahanaumokuakea Marine Monument, hosted VIPs including First Lady Laura Bush. Worked briefly in Sacramento Regional Office and finished his career at Windom Wetland Management District in Minnesota in December 2011.

WORTHINGTON: I'm going to start the recording. And so this is Tom Worthington. And with me is Barry Christenson. And today is September 5th. We are at Bowen Resort on the shores of Lake Winneboshish in Deer River, Minnesota. And I'm conducting an oral history interview with Barry.

And so, you know, part of the purpose of doing the oral history is just to help fill the gaps between what people might find in the research. Personal stories from different periods of the Fish and Wildlife Service or refuge system history. So they've collected several hundred of them and there's a backlog on the transcripts. But when the transcript does get done, the interviewee gets a chance to look at it and, you know, correct spellings or those sorts of things.

So I've got some questions that I'll be asking.

Everyone gets pretty much the same questions. I've highlighted the ones that I am interested in and sometimes we dig deeper with a follow up question. Should take about an hour. All right. Thank you for doing this. So when were you born and where did you grow up?

CHRISTENSON: I was born in May of 1951, in Minneapolis. Minneapolis. And we lived in Minnesota. My earliest memories are in a small community west of Minneapolis called Fairfax in Renville County, a small farming community out in what used to be prairie. At that time there was a lot of sugar beets and corn; soybeans weren't a big deal back in the late 50s early 60s.

They came in later, I guess. I don't know. But I went to elementary school there and when I was 12 and a half, my parents moved us to Southern California. Which was Anaheim, which at that time was, I don't know, over 100,000 people, maybe. Compared to Fairfax, Minnesota. It was really big.

WORTHINGTON: So it would have been like 62 or 63 or?

CHRISTENSON: It was April of 1963. I did a month or two of elementary school there, and then I did junior high school, high school, college, that kind of stuff in California.

WORTHINGTON: Did you have much time in the out-of-doors growing up in western Minnesota, in Renville County, or much exposure to hunting or fishing?

CHRISTENSON: My family was big in deer hunting and pheasant hunting. And as you progressed up in age, you went from playing the role of a bird dog to carrying a BB gun to carrying a .410. To being an active part of the hunting party. But we moved when I was 12.

WORTHINGTON: So how far did you get?

CHRISTENSON: Bird dog. Late bird dog stage. And you know, back then, corn harvest was very different. They had the old corn pickers and used to leave a lot of the stocks. We used to walk cornfields. I mean, there were pheasants everywhere. I mean, there were a lot of pheasant hunting, but a lot of it was in cornfields. There wasn't a lot of good habitat even then, not around Fairfax. I remember hunting drainage ditches and cornfields and the cornfields, you know, there was a lot of debris.

So that's where the birds were. So you always posted somebody at one end and then the bird dog kids pushed the pheasants through the field, and they flushed and then they shot them. Oh, and I guess I did remember carrying a BB gun sometimes. And you pretended you could shoot at them.

I was the bird dog. So I always got invited along because we only had one dog and it was a big field. Even then they were, you know, so. And then when we moved to California, bird hunting stopped, but my father still went deer hunting. He went to Utah to go deer hunting and eventually elk hunting in Colorado. So I come from a hunting family, but I don't know if you'd asked me about an elementary school, what I wanted to do. I would have told you I wanted to be a forest ranger. But that's just what I thought. Was the title that fit where my interests were. And I would have told you that all the way up through my beginning year in college. Okay. And then I started looking at college course books. I went to a community college. So it didn't matter what you were majoring in. You were taking all the basics.

But when I wanted to transfer. I started looking at, actually looking at what constituted a degree. And I looked at forestry and I said, man, this is like growing trees for profit. You grow them up, cut them down. And I said, that isn't for me. And I started flipping through the book and I came across wildlife management; I read about upland game management, wetland management, game birds, wildlife ecology, animal diseases. I said, that's what I'm going to do. So that was it.

WORTHINGTON. So you discovered this when you're in junior college or community college, and where did you end up going to college then?

CHRISTENSON: Humboldt State in northern California, 730 miles north of Anaheim.

WORTHINGTON. And that's well known for its wildlife program, isn't it?

CHRISTENSON. Yes, very much so. In the western half of the US, it's one of the larger programs.

WORTHINGTON. So what year did you graduate from Humboldt State?

CHRISTENSON. Well, it took me. It took me a little bit more than four years of college because I missed some of the classes, sometimes if you don't get a class here, you know. So I had to go back for an extra quarter and then I had nothing to do. So I stayed another quarter. So I actually graduated in the spring of 74, 1974.

WORTHINGTON. Do you remember some of the more most influential professors or instructors?

CHRISTENSON. Absolutely.

Dr. Stan Harris. Okay, Fantastic Person. He taught wetland management. Waterfowl management.

Those are the two subjects I remember off the top of my head. But he also I also did my senior thesis under him. And the other guy was a doctor, Chuck Yoakum, who taught upland game birds and upland management. There was a Rick Beltzer who taught wildlife diseases. And another one, Craig Kitchen, came along and taught wildlife techniques.

And oh, and then there was Archie Mossman. Who taught the mammalian side of things more. He had worked in Africa. I don't remember taking a lot of classes from him. He must have been gone on sabbatical a lot when I was there. I think the first year I got there he was in Africa or something like that.

WORTHINGTON. And your major was Wildlife management.

CHRISTENSON. Wildlife management.

WORTHINGTON. How many students had that major do you remember, in your graduating class?

CHRISTENSON. Well, we never really focused on graduating classes because everybody graduated at different times. Okay. But well over 100. I mean, not 500 but a pretty good sized group of people.

WORTHINGTON. What was your senior thesis topic?

CHRISTENSON. I walked a mile of beach on Mad River Beach and I picked up and recorded every dead bird that washed in on that beach for a long period of time. Many months I would walk the beach. Weekly, I believe, for, I don't know, a long time. I've walked that beach a lot. It was really cool beach and it was interesting. I walked it enough where you could tell the change of seasons by the species that were washed up and you'd get a lot of common murres. Okay. And then when a waterfall season came along, you would start to pick up more waterfall species washing in.

WORTHINGTON. Was this an estuary river that flowed into the Pacific?

CHRISTENSON. Well, the beach was just open beach, but the mouth of Mad River was nearby.

It's very pretty. Big sand dunes and whatnot. And it was very nice. Very wild.

WORTHINGTON. Was there a thesis to the study?

CHRISTENSON. Well, I don't think it was more than ten, 12, 15 pages long. You know, I did the usual methods and protocols and results. It was nothing complicated, I think eventually Dr. Harris took many, many, many, many of those students and compiled the whole thing into sort of an article for some publication. I don't know. I never saw it, but I'm pretty sure he did. Years later, you know.

WORTHINGTON. When you graduated then did you know you wanted to work for a resource agency?

CHRISTENSON. Oh, yes. But I didn't know very much about any of the agencies.

So my first job was with California Fish and Game. That was in April right when, I just got lucky and right when I graduated. Since I was available before the rush of summer students. I got a job working on the Napa Marsh on east San Francisco Bay. And so I worked. There was a kind of a regional office in Yountville, California. Right in the wine country and Napa Valley. Really, really nice. The office was at the California Veterans Home at that time. I don't think it's still there, but my boss had talked to somebody there and they got me a room in one of the employees dormitory kind of situation where I had my own room and there was a common kitchen. 25 bucks a month. Which even then was really cheap. I was the first person starting what became a long-term study of Napa marsh. And I would go out in the marsh. They'd just say, Here's a boat, here's a car. Just go out there. What do you want me to do? Well, go look around and I went “what?”, and I did, I just motored up and it was kind of cool. I learned a lot about motoring in tidal estuaries because you've got to be really careful. You get stranded in the mudflats all the time.

So that was cool. But mostly I was trying to find Clapper rails and I did. I found nesting clapper rails. And the first time I found one they said, “Oh really? Are you sure?” and I said, well, yeah. And he came with me and I took him right to the nest. He was, “Yeah, you're right.” That was a clapper rail. I know it was. I did go to school, so. Yeah. So anyway, that was kind of cool. But then at the same time I had previously applied to Peace Corps, and I got a phone call.

WORTHINGTON. So how did that work?

CHRISTENSON. I don't remember how. I don't know how they found me. They must have called my home. And my parents must have said, Well, he's there. And then they called there, and my boss came in and says, you got a phone call from Peace Corps? So I called them back and they said, “are you interested in going to Upper Volta?” I asked “Where's that?” I had never heard of it. And he said, It's in West Africa. I said, yeah, sure, I'll go because in my Peace Corps application, I had said I wanted to go to Nepal, Fiji or Africa. Generic Africa. Africa. Thinking, Kenya, Tanzania. Serengeti Plains. And then they say Upper Volta. I'm not sure. So I did. As a wildlife biologist as a wildlife biologist at an International Park. And you know Tom Larson?

WORTHINGTON. I know Tom.

CHRISTENSON. I actually met Tom Larson. At a wildlife conference in Ibadan, Niger. In 1975. Now, the funny thing is decades later I'm working with Tom Larson on the Tallgrass Prairie CCP.

WORTHINGTON. When was this?

CHRISTENSON. The late 1990s. And he said I was looking through some old pictures the other night, and I swear I saw a picture of you. I go, Wow. Where? He goes out at a wildlife conference in Ibadan. Yeah, I was there. Isn't that funny? Isn't that funny, though?

WORTHINGTON. But you hadn't connected that time?

CHRISTENSON. No, no. No, not at all. Funny. We weren’t in the same country he was in. I don't know. One or the other. He was in Niger, maybe. Wherever he was. Yeah. It was not where I was. All right. So, anyway, so that was sort of funny. Okay. Small world kind of funny.

WORTHINGTON. Yeah, that is funny. So you gave up the state job?

CHRISTENSON. Well, it was just. It wasn't a permanent job. It was a summer hire thing. Now, if I had stayed there. I probably could have worked that into a master's thesis. Given enough time and thought as to what I would be studying. But that's fine.

WORTHINGTON. So the Peace Corps experience, can you describe a little bit about what that was? What were your major duties?

CHRISTENSON. Well, remember my description about “there's Napa Marsh, go do something.” It was a little bit like that. There's a national park down there. Go do something. Okay. But there was also a UN Park development program. But even with them there, it was still pretty much. There's a park down there. Go find something to do and like, okay. So I went around a lot just looking at wildlife, trying to figure stuff out. So we did large mammal censusing, which the previous volunteers had done. Okay, so that was a continuation. But eventually what I ended up focusing on was a small study looking at, I wouldn't call it the food habits of elephants, although it certainly relates to that. It was more of the impact of the

elephants on the trees of the park. I did a lot of plots looking at now, mind you, with hindsight, I didn't do it in a totally statistically valid manner. I should have done it differently. But statistics and I were never really closely associated. Okay, that's my worst class in college. I can't believe I passed.

But at any rate, they can have a significant impact on certain tree species to the point of almost eliminating them from the park. And what I'm thinking about particularly is Baobab. You know, the upside-down tree because they're very slow to reproduce. They're very long lived. Slow to reproduce. And the elephants will tusk into the tree and take the bark and maybe the inner layers and almost chew it like a chewing gum. And then you'll see it's kind of spit it out.

But I think they take the juices and nutrients out of it and, but they'll keep doing that. And over the many years they'll just, you could take a tree that's ten feet around and they can just open it way up. And if a fire comes through, the fire can kill the tree and the smaller trees, they can actually just I've seen Baobabs that were only small ones, like 3 or 4ft across where they'd actually done it. And it looked like a gigantic beaver and had cut the tree down.

And it's all from elephants. So you don't think about that kind of stuff. And I was just looking at it. I had a large learning curve to learn the tree species and the grass species. And I worked with the Voltaic park rangers to know. So if they didn't know the proper name, neither did I. I called it what they called it, and I had some books to try to cross-reference stuff, but it was, you know, if they said it was ABC. I went, Yeah, I can't even think of some of the more common generic names of these trees because you're talking a really long time ago. 45 years ago. I can picture them in my mind. I can see it. I can close my eyes right now and envision the savanna and the different tree species. But I can't, the names will not come right now. So, at any rate. So that's what I did, and helped other volunteers.

There were three other volunteers working as wildlife volunteers as well. And so I would go to that other park and help them. And that's what I did. And, you know, and I made a really nice collection of grasses and sent it to Humboldt State. And I made sure there were no insects in it and all that kind of stuff.

WORTHINGTON. You did some pressings, grass pressings?

CHRISTENSON. Yeah. Yeah. Grass pressing. Yeah. Oh, I made a herbarium for the park. With the hopefully correct names. I had a collection of elephant skulls and antelope skulls on the walls around my house, but all that stayed behind. You know, I actually had ivory and I just left it all there. I didn't try to bring any home, which would have been illegal even if I didn't know it at the time.

It just didn't seem right. And they weren't big. West African elephants do not have these tusks that are ten feet long like you see in Kenya. Okay. A big one would be maybe three feet. And most of them are significantly smaller than that. So the tusks I had, the part that would have protruded out of the jaw would have probably only been a foot. They were not that big in diameter. But they were cool.

WORTHINGTON. When your term of service was nearing conclusion with the Peace Corps, did you look ahead to what your next job would be?

CHRISTENSON. No, I wanted to go to graduate school. And I had applied for graduate schools as a volunteer. But I had no way to take the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) while in West Africa And so I didn't get accepted anywhere except back at Humboldt because they knew me. Dr. Harris accepted me as a graduate student back at Humboldt. So I went back to California in late summer, and that fall I went

back to Humboldt. Now I had no money. I mean, it wasn't a funded research assistantship or anything else. He took me as a student, but I had to find money or find a way to do something on my own.

But that didn't last very long because, I think school started in September and by November I was gone. I had learned about a job. I was contacted by a person I had met in Upper Volta who was there visiting Peace Corps and representing the Smithsonian Peace Corps environmental program. And they were branching out. They were located, of course, in DC at the Smithsonian. He worked under contract to the Peace Corps, and they were doing a new program where they were going to instead of just helping to recruit, they were going to help to train Peace Corps volunteers, and I got hired to do that part of it.

Which I tried to the best of my ability. And sometimes I succeeded and other times I failed.

WORTHINGTON. So was that a federal position?

CHRISTENSON. No. The Smithsonian is both federal and what they call independent service. So I was not a federal employee, okay? I was independent service, but I was a GS 7. So there was a lot of similarities. I had some kind of health insurance as a 20 something year old health insurance. Who cares? You know, I never made a claim. I paid. You know, it's different when you get older.

So, I'm in Washington DC. At the Smithsonian. Our first office was in the Arts and Industries building. It was awesome. You know where the carousel is? Is it still there? The carousel?

WORTHINGTON. Yes.

CHRISTENSON. Okay. If you're at the carousel looking at Arts and Industries, you look in the upper right corner of the Arts and Industries building, you can see there's kind of a block of office.

WORTHINGTON. Is this the Castle you are talking about?.

CHRISTENSON. No, no. The Arts and Industry is next to the Castle. That's where our office was. And to get into there, you had to go up a spiral staircase. It was awesome. It was the coolest offices in the world and that's where we were for a year and a half. Until somebody with more clout within Smithsonian decided they wanted that office. So we got moved to the Castle, which sounds better, but was not okay. So our office was right above the front entrance, basically at the base of the tower. Okay.

And it was bland and boring, with one exception within those offices, the was the door that controlled access to that tower. Which you were not supposed to go into.

Well, once we did. Okay. The way I remember it, I wonder if somehow memory enhances reality. My memory says we went up there to watch the 4th of July fireworks, and that might have been true. Or I might just think that's what we wanted to do. But we did go up there at some point in time and it was pretty cool.

WORTHINGTON. You job was to train volunteers before they went off to give them some pre-service training?

CHRISTENSON. And the most successful ones were with the National Park Service. We had a good partnership with the National Park Service, and we would send people if their job was to be like an interpreter or a naturalist or park ranger in a park. We would send them out to Great Smokies or, oh, we

sent those some of those volunteers on the vacation of their lives that they're probably still thinking. I can't believe that they did that. I mean, they went everywhere, everywhere, to some really cool places and had Park Service people talk with them about their jobs and how they did them and things like that. And I think it was pretty good. The one program that even to this day I cringe and just shake my head at was we were sending some volunteers to Nepal to work on soil erosion.

Well, what group is better to work on with that than the Soil Conservation Service? Theoretically, when you don't know anything about the Soil Conservation Service, you think that would be a good fit? And I had some contacts there and I ended up sending this poor group of volunteers. Oh, I even hate to mention it, to Fort Worth, Texas. Yeah, for I don't know. God help us. Only one week. But my memory says two weeks of probably the most boring period of their entire lives when I can't imagine that they learned anything relevant to working in Nepal.

And to this day, I just cringe when I think of that. I mean, it was well-intentioned and I thought I was doing the right thing. But not everything works out in life, and that had to be the worst-case scenario. Yeah. Oh, God. Fort Worth flat as a pancake.

WORTHINGTON. Where did you live in DC?

CHRISTENSON. Do you remember Old Town Alexandria? Nice. Beautiful. I had a one-bedroom apartment for $175 a month. I mean, I walked to the bus line or I rode my bike. Even then, they had a bike path and I was there when they put in the Metro, the trains, the subway thing that opened when I was there. That was pretty cool. Kind of futuristic. Yeah. And in the summertime, I'd ride my bike. I think it was not all that far from Old Town.

I'd pass the airport over to the 14th Street Bridge onto the mall and turn right. Yeah, and that was good. And, you know, otherwise I rode the bus.

WORTHINGTON. So how come you're still not working there?

CHRISTENSON. Well, several things happened. One, I quit to go to college. Remember I was wanting to get a graduate degree. Well, my boss there was named Jim Sherburn. He was the one I'd met in Africa. And Jim Sherburn was from Maine. And part of what we did was recruitment for Peace Corps volunteers. So a staff member would, a few times a year make trips to colleges to talk about Peace Corps and the environmental program.

And he asked me to do a trip to New England. And my first stop was the University of Maine at Orono. And I went there and gave a talk and had 30 or 40 students in the audience. It was good. And then I went on to University of New Hampshire.

And I think Yale was the only other one. I remember Yale very clearly because they were a very highly regarded school of forestry. They didn't seem as interested, but there were there were people there. I doubt if I recruited anybody in the Peace Corps from that group.

But then because of that trip, you know, and talking to Jim, I applied to graduate school at Maine, and that's where I ended up going.

But then after I left for Maine, President Carter's administration shifted the focus within Peace Corps away from some of the science programs or certainly away from spending extra money on science

through the Smithsonian. Maybe they wanted to redistribute their available funds to more meet the president's directives, basic human needs. And somebody studying elephants probably didn't qualify.

I was gone by then, but the program got shut down. It was a contract and it ended. The funny thing is, though, that at the same time in Maine, where I was now a brand-new student and my boss that I had left in August. Was subsequently hired as the unit leader at the Co-op Research Unit in Orono. So once again, I'm working for Jim Sherburn. At that point in time I was working with Dr. Terry May and trying to, you know, trying to come up with a project. Jim Sherburn eventually got some money to study loons. And I, I'll simplify this and just say I switched to be his student. And I did my thesis on reproductive ecology and response to disturbance by common loons in Maine. And I did that, but I never published it, which is one of my main regrets in life from a sort of a professional perspective,

I can make up all kinds of excuses why I didn't, but I didn't and I and I really wish I had, but I didn't. Not that it was earth shattering research. It wasn't, but it still it would have helped my advisor. Because as a unit leader, he had responsibilities for getting graduate work published and I didn't help him. And that is why I feel bad and also to a limited degree as well because it made it harder for people to access my research by not having it published. Now bring it forward to modern day. Last week I went to a talk in Brainerd about the proposed National Loon Center in Cross Lake (MN) and there was a volunteer talking about current loon research.

But it was really interesting because some of the stuff he was talking about, about loon ecology was like, wow, they have really learned a lot since 1981. So somebody has been studying loons and making a lot of progress. So it was pretty cool to see what they've learned because I've been totally divorced from the world of loons. I know much more about albatross now than I know about loons or ducks or whatever, you know? So that was cool.

WORTHINGTON. When you were in grad school at Maine, did you then think about a career path to where you would go afterwards?

CHRISTENSON. Well. Yes and no.

Here's what happened.

Jim Sherburn was trying to establish a cooperative education program between the Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of Maine. And this had nothing to do with me. I didn't know anything about it. But as it turned out, Jim would say, I want to have this cooperative education program.

And they would say, well, you don't have a student.

And he would say, I don't have a student because I don't have a program.

And they'd say, you don't have a student.

And he says, yes, I do. So he called me and he said, sign this form. I go what is this? He goes, don't worry, you'll get a job. And he signed me up as the first cooperative education student at the University of Maine. I had no clue. Okay. Just dumb and happy. Just doing my thing with loons. I said, okay, fine. Because I was already on federal money.

The research funding that Jim had gotten to migratory birds he brought into the university. But he made me a GS 5 part time something. I don't even remember what it was anymore. So I was technically a

federal, part time, seasonal, whatever employee. So he already had somebody. He says you're it. Yes, I do have a student. Here he is right here. Now let's do this. And so they did it. And all of a sudden, I had a career path I didn't know I was going to have. So when I graduated, I was working with some people in Newton Corner, Mass.

WORTHINGTON. Was this the FWS Regional Office when it used to be in Newton Corner?

CHRISTENSON. Right, and there was a woman in personnel helping me, trying to find a job.

And I remember once I was there and they said, somebody from Endangered Species wants to interview. I didn't know what the heck endangered species was. Okay, fine. Well, I didn't really realize it, but I blew that interview completely. I mean, absolutely. Just I mean, I was completely ignorant of the program. I didn't know enough to even ask the right kind of questions about the program. And whatever I said did not impress him.

So I never heard from them again. So I could have ended up in the Endangered Species program by simply saying 1 or 2 words differently than I did. But I didn't.

WORTHINGTON. So but backing up a little bit, as a co-op student, did you know that a career, a job, would be offered to you upon graduation?

CHRISTENSON. What I knew was that it was a possibility. It's never a guaranteed, but highly likely. I didn't know much about Fish and Wildlife Service. I knew there were refuges. I'd been on refuges, I'd been to Blackwater, I'd been to Sacramento Refuge. I'd been to Sand Lake Refuge. I've been to different refuges.

So I knew refuges existed. I didn't know much about what the jobs would be like. But what college kid does or, you know.

WORTHINGTON. You blew the endangered species option completely.

CHRISTENSON. Blew it. Yeah. His name was Paul Nichols or Nicholson or something like that. And I think he was a very nice person, but I just completely off and that was that. He probably walked out of there. Oh, God, forget that guy. But anyway, I was offered a job at the Ecological Services Field office, two jobs, one on Long Island, one in Annapolis. Now, remember, I had already lived in the Chesapeake Bay area.

And so I was familiar with that area, and I didn't have anything positive to think about Long Island. So I said, okay, I'll go to Annapolis. That's, that's it. So I worked there for three years.

WORTHINGTON. Who was the field supervisor?

CHRISTENSON. Glenn Kinser. Bob Volker was the assistant manager or assistant supervisor.
At that time the office was co-located with the Annapolis Area Office. And, you know, and I remember talking with the Refuge Area Manager, so I started thinking positive things about refuges and talking with him about his job and stuff.

And I was doing interesting stuff. But here's the problem. I was hired initially, to do water quality. I didn't know this. Of course, no one ever asked me how much water quality background do you have?

Nothing. None of that happened. But again, Kinser had been given money to hire a water quality specialist and he hired me.

I'm not sure I could spell water quality, so they had me doing EIS reviews of sewage treatment plants and things like this. And I was like, well, this is not really great. What did I know? And so it was tough. Kinser got chewed out at a regional project leader meeting for ES by his boss. I think his name is Dave Riley or something like that, I'm not sure. But Kinser was always doing stuff to get in trouble.

And his boss says, I gave you money. This is in front of everybody. This is in a meeting with all his peers. He says, I gave you money to hire a water quality expert. And what did you get? You got a loon major with an elephant minor. And so here's the funny part of that story. Some months later. I'm in my office in the morning.

And we didn't wear our uniforms all the time. In fact, rarely. So mine was hanging there and Kinser comes in and says, put on your uniform, grab that loon decoy, I had a loon decoy for some reason, and come with me. I went. We got in his car, we drove downtown. The circus was in Annapolis. We walked over to where the elephants were staked out in the open field by the Naval Academy. He says, stand right there. He puts the elephant right behind me and he says, hold the loon decoy. And he takes a picture and sends it to his boss! True story. No wonder he was in trouble all the time.

WORTHINGTON. Do you ever see the picture?

CHRISTENSON. Yeah. Yeah, I don't have a copy of it, but I saw the picture. Yeah, it was a good picture. I mean, these were Asian elephants, not African elephants.

But still, the point was very clear. That's funny. Loon decoy, elephants, this is your guy. Nothing to do with water quality. So, yeah, that was funny.

And I eventually started switching to do 404 permits on Chesapeake Bay and did a lot of neat stuff. Uh, looking at submerged aquatic vegetation growth wasn't a study, but more of a learn your environment where you're working kind of stuff. SAV, submerged aquatic vegetation was a big thing. The Chesapeake was losing its aquatic biota, which affected canvasbacks and everything else. And so we were really looking for that. And I got to spend a lot of time out boating on the Chesapeake and going up these rivers looking for aquatics, and then also did 404 permits, which is really a good job.

But what I started to see was that, well, the 404 people, you do this to learn the system and then you move on into projects where you work. Highways or airports or whatever. Dredging. And I looked at the people. George did dredging. George was the expert of the 15 foot channel up Chesapeake Bay and. You know, these peopled worked on these things for years. Just imagine, just go into the office and just bash your head against the wall for eight hours and then go home and the next day to come back in and do it again. And that's how much impact you really had on some of these projects. But that was their job and they were really great people and they tried to the best of their being. I'm sure they made some small gains here and there. But I said, you know what? I don't think that's what I want to do, not for 30 some years. So I started exploring refuges.

So I. I had met the manager out of Blackwater. Oh, Paul Schmidt? You know Paul Schmidt?

WORTHINGTON. Sure.

CHRISTENSON. Paul Schmidt was the ORP (Outdoor Recreation Planner) at Blackwater. And so I worked with him and I became a volunteer at Blackwater. And I would go out there on occasional Saturdays and run the visitor center. And I think it was while I was there that Paul Schmidt left and took a job in DC and never looked back. But that's. That's how I first started learning about refuges.

So I started applying for refuge jobs.

And I think I applied for over 40 refuges.

WORTHINGTON. Were you a GS 7 or 9 at this point, do you think?

CHRISTENSON. Seven? Seven. And then during that time, I think I became a nine. I mean, it took a while. I applied for jobs in North Dakota and New Mexico. I applied for a job with Nita Fuller at Sevilleta refuge in New Mexico.

WORTHINGTON. So you were looking at the green sheet that would come?

CHRISTENSON. Yeah, the old green sheets, right? I didn't even get interviewed for 99.9% of them. Okay. Maybe 100% of them. You know, I just wasn't making the list, you know, master's degree in loons or not. No, no, no, no. Refuge experience. I'm in ES which is a big red mark, but. Eventually. I applied for a refuge that didn't have as much interest from current refuge people because of location and I must have been at that point in time probably applying for GS 9 jobs.

Okay. And I applied for GS 9 assistant manager at Great Meadows Refuge, Massachusetts.

WORTHINGTON. In Massachusetts, near Boston.

CHRISTENSON. Right. And the advantage there was that the people in Newton Corner (MA). Put in a good word for me. Mike Bartlett is the one name that comes to mind, and I got that job. Now, do you ever hear the name Dave Beale? He left there right at the time I moved there.

I worked for him for one month and he transferred to Brigantine. Okay. In New Jersey. And I think he spent the rest of his career there or most of it. And I became within one month of actually working on a refuge that became acting manager. And Tom McAndrews was a refuge supervisor at Great Meadows, and Tom McAndrews was a supervisor and Paul O'Neill was the assistant or the refuge assistant supervisor or whatever they call them. And so there was that. I started out there.

They were Newton Corner. And of course, I was in Sudbury, which is only like 15 miles away.

WORTHINGTON. The area office must have closed.

CHRISTENSON. The area offices had already phased out at that point in time. Yeah, I don't know exactly in my memory when they kind of closed it, but while I was at Annapolis. Sometime 82, 83 ish, weren't they, phased out? I think so because I remember the area manager from Annapolis leaving and moving to Utah. Okay. Or someplace out west. So yeah, maybe I was still in Annapolis when they closed down. Yes. In fact, that was now that I think about it, because I remember all of a sudden we had more office space.

WORTHINGTON. All right, so there you are. Acting refuge manager.

CHRISTENSON. Yeah. So and eventually Lloyd Culp from Okefenokee came up. You might have known him.

WORTHINGTON. I knew Lloyd, yes, he was an Assistant Manager when I was at Okefenokee.

CHRISTENSON. Well, Lloyd was the manager that replaced Dave Beale. And so I worked for Lloyd Culp, and I was there from 84 to 86, the exact months. I don't remember. It's about three years though. Okay. And when I went to the Refuge Academy in Blair, Nebraska, in 1986, I met Marv Plenart. And a group of us were talking to Marv Plenart, and the common complaint was, it's so hard to get a job out West. You know, if you if you're back east and you applied for a job out west, you don't have a chance. There's bias.

WORTHINGTON. And Marv was the regional director of Region 1?

CHRISTENSON. No, he was Deputy ARD of Refuges in Region 6.

He was only a deputy at that point in time. So he says, well, he says. We've got some jobs coming up. Send me an application, what we call those back then?

WORTHINGTON. The SF 171.

CHRISTENSON. Yeah. SF 171. Right. Send me an SF 171 he said. So, so of the guys that were in that group, the one only one of those four, five who were talking to him, the only one that sent him an SF 171 was me.

And, and I ended up, he called me up one day. He says, I've got a couple of jobs out here. One at Seedskadee and one was someplace else. He says, I think you'd be a good fit for Seedskadee. Are you still interested? I said, well, where is it? That sound familiar? Where is it? Well, it's in western Wyoming. Yeah, sounds great to me. He says, well, the only thing standing between doing this and not it's just me. He says, I think I'll just do that. So he called up the refuge Manager Dick Gilbert and said, I just hired your assistant.

Like, I'm not sure that's, you know, I should have given him a choice there, but it worked out. So there we go. We moved to Seedskadee in October of 1986.

WORTHINGTON. And that's just a lateral reassignment?

CHRISTENSON. It was a nine. So I went from GS 9 at Great Meadows, to GS 9 at Seedskadee. They don't do that kind of lateral stuff anymore. I was going sideways so much I felt like a I don't know what some sort of a dance move. But at any rate, you know, building some experience because I still had pretty limited experience, not enough to get an 11, although what happened is every time I left someplace, a job was always upgraded. And that continued to happen forever.

Anyway, so I went out there. It was fantastic. We absolutely loved it. I mean, it was an amazing place with incredible wildlife.

WORTHINGTON. How many years were you there and what, three years?

CHRISTENSON. I seem to be on a three-year rotation thing going on. It was, it's always generally it was three years, three and a half, but not four.

WORTHINGTON. So were you the primary assistant?

CHRISTENSON. I was the only assistant. It was a small staff. The manager at that time was an 11. I was a nine. I don't know if it's probably been upgraded, probably a 14 now. I don't know. But at any rate.

WORTHINGTON. So. So what were some of your major duties then assistant?

CHRISTENSON. Well? I supervise the seasonal staff. Did the hiring of the seasonal staff supervised the maintenance men. Well, you know, wrote the different plans, whether, you know, I remember, you know, some of these odd plans you get. What was that one? There was this one plan we had to write. It's like, why are we writing this plan? It was kind of an obscure thing.

WORTHINGTON. The crowd control plan?

CHRISTENSON. Oh, God. It was better than that. But it was. And nobody wanted to do it. So I was one of the first one in the region that actually wrote one. Everybody in the region called me and asked for a copy. And I think every refuge in that region, whatever that plan was, oh, God, it wasn't a biological thing. It was I just can't remember. So maybe some kind of safety plan? I don't even know. But it was not something that we'd ever done before. And it was a new requirement. And I did the I think every refuge in that region ended up with some version of my plan, the word Seedskadee, probably still in it, hopefully taken out.

But yeah, so that was kind of funny. So Barney Frank even called me up and said you did a good job on that plan. It's like, okay, so that was good. Barney Frank was the Refuge supervisor and supervisor.

WORTHINGTON. Do you remember if you had email then?

CHRISTENSON. No email first started to come in when my next job at Montezuma. Okay. And I was at Montezuma from late 86 to 92. No, that's not right. 89. Another three-year thing, 89 to 92. So it was still no, 89 to 92.

WORTHINGTON. Still phone calls, maybe fax forms.

CHRISTENSON. No, didn't even have faxes yet. Regular, regular mail, phone calls or mail. Okay. Because I remember I left Seedskadee for an 11 at Montezuma. You know, I was thinking, okay, I've been a nine now for seven years. You know, I need to move up. I got a family here. And so I had met Gene Houcut when I was working at Great Meadows. He came for a refuge evaluation there. And so he had his primary assistant position open and I applied for and got it. I was really reluctant to leave Region six, but I did.

And when I got to Montezuma at first, I absolutely hated it. I just hated it. There was nothing wrong with Montezuma at all. Okay. And I ended up growing to like it and the Finger Lakes area. But the first year was really hard. We loved Wyoming so much.

WORTHINGTON. Were you in refuge housing at Seedskadee?

CHRISTENSON. Yes, you were right. And then I ended up in refuge housing at Montezuma, although it wasn't initially offered, but that's because they thought they were going to use it as state offices, but they didn't. So we ended up in refuge housing at Montezuma, New York State. The Finger Lakes area is between Rochester and Syracuse. A very pretty area. It just wasn't the high desert of Wyoming and took a while to get past that. But I did. So we spent three years there. Three years.

It was a larger refuge. More staff got involved with ascertainment planning for land acquisition. This was a new thing because Seedskadee was a mitigation refuge for dams on the Green River. So there wasn't, there was no additional land acquisition. You're building fences to keep out cattle, riding horseback, to chase trespass cattle. That's pretty cool place, I'll tell you, you know, things like that.

WORTHINGTON. Did you have your own horse?

CHRISTENSON. No, no, no, no, no. The first manager didn't believe in horses. The second one, he came in, brought in a couple of horses. So the refuge had two horses. I think it was okay. And eventually that they didn't stay either. But while I was there, they had two horses. But we had a good cooperating Wyoming Game and fish facility next door that had horses. So we would ride their horses and chase these cattle.

WORTHINGTON. Did you have any special horse training?

CHRISTENSON. Nope. Just get on the horse and ride. No safety, no horse safety training, No horse certification. Nothing. Just get your hat on, get your boots on. Get on the horse and ride and don't fall off, okay? It worked. Nobody died. No horses were injured.

WORTHINGTON. Did you have any law enforcement training at that time?

CHRISTENSON. I had gotten my law enforcement when I was at Great Meadows in 1985. 9 PT 505.

WORTHINGTON. So it was a nine-week program in Glencoe, Georgia.

WORTHINGTON. What was the nature of the law enforcement and hunting and fishing checks or?

CHRISTENSON. Hunting and fishing and refuge trespass. We had trespass, camping, trespass, cattle, trespass, ATV use, that kind of stuff. I wrote a fair number of tickets. I didn't have any trouble. I remember this one time I was. I don't think I was writing anybody a ticket, but I was talking to some deer hunters, and this one guy was quite proud of his knife. I remember that. And I'm thinking kind of watching him, you know, keeping a good, safe distance between me and his knife. And it was fine. But, you know, that was the only time I remember thinking this guy was a total whack job. Or why does he have that 12-inch knife out there anyway? But I didn't shoot him and he didn't kill me. So it all ended well.

But yeah, and that's where I first met Don Hultman. A lot of people from Region six were sent on a, I think about a weeklong detail with special agents and state agencies to do a complete wildlife roadblock on Interstate 80.

Every single vehicle traveling west out of Wyoming on Interstate 80 was pulled over and checked every single vehicle for a week.

By the way, refuge officers were the lowest on the totem pole at this thing. So I was the flunky to pick up the dead animals and carry them out of the car. I wasn't interviewing, I wasn't writing tickets. I was just muscle. That's it. Yeah. So but it was still interesting. I mean, the first vehicle I went into to check had seven illegal antelope in it. Wow. I mean, that was like one of one. This is going to be quite the week they ended up filling, I don't know, more than half a dozen freezer semis full of confiscated meat.

That's a lot of wildlife.

WORTHINGTON. I wonder if they did that again.

CHRISTENSON. I think it happened one other time, but I wasn't there then. Okay. And they did it in other locations. I think they did it in eastern Wyoming as well.

So that was that was a lot of well, it was a lot of being the hired, you know, the flunky. But yeah, it was interesting. In fact, what's his name? Quite a famous special agent, great big guy from Region six. He went to Humboldt as well. Good friends of Professor Harris and he's now an author and I can't think of his name. He writes a lot about his time as a special agent. [Worthington: Possibly Terry Grosz]

Anyway, he's he was probably one of the most well known nationally special agents in the service. It's okay. And I remember it was quite cold because this is what, October, November. And he was he'd be out there with a vest on in a short sleeve shirt and it would be in the 30 and he'd do it all day long. He was a very large person that didn't get cold or anything funny. Um. Yeah.

WORTHINGTON. When you were at Montezuma, what were some of the main activities happening on the refuge that you were involved in?

CHRISTENSON. Well, invasive species control was a very big issue with purple loosestrife. We were the world's epicenter of purple loosestrife invasion, and we had a very high public use program. We had a visitor center with an ORP and a lot of school programs, just a lot of general visitors. So it was a, you know, a lot of maintenance. We had we had a large we had one of the first North American Wetland Conservation grants. We had the first NAWCA grant in Region five, something like half a million or maybe $350 thousand.

WORTHINGTON. Land Acquisition?

CHRISTENSON. No, habitat restoration in the project. And that was something, that project was my responsibility and what it was, of course with engineering and everybody else. But we built a new canal to bring water from Cayuga Lake into our main pool. The pools at Montezuma were extremely large, thousands of acres, really, really big. And so we dug a canal to gravity flow water into our pools.

And that was the biggest. So the NAWCA grant thing was brand new then, and that was I must I probably wrote the grant. I don't remember. I must have, somebody had to write it and that wouldn't the manager. I can tell you that. So I must have written it. So that was a big one. And then of course, we did a lot of different things trying to eradicate purple loosestrife. We had these machines that are like a floating barge with heads on the front that chewed stuff up and we would try to chew up the purple loosestrife and then bring in higher water with our new canal and try to flood it out.

I think what really worked, after this was right at the time, they were first talking about bringing in beetles. And I think what really worked more than all that, was bringing in those beetles. And now I

haven't been there in many, many years, but I understand it's very different now. The beetles really did the thing on the purple loosestrife. So that's cool. That was.

WORTHINGTON. Did you go to any regional conferences or regional gatherings? Do you remember at that time?

CHRISTENSON. Well, the one I remember is, it was down somewhere in Maryland. Maybe. Okay. Somewhere in the Eastern shore. And the reason I remember it is not the topics, but the fact that we left early. Because Gene got a phone call from one of the aides to our congressman, whose name, of course, I don't remember. And they said, we want you to come for a meeting on whatever the topic was. I don't even remember anymore. Oh, I bet it was land acquisition because we were we were doing a ascertainment project with a young ascertainment biologist named Paul Casey, who became a refuge manager and for the northern Montezuma Marshes.

Oh, yeah, I've forgotten about that. Yeah, that was another big thing. Yeah. And the manager did play an active role in that. Um, there was a lot going on there. Yeah. And I think they wanted to talk to us, so we left whatever. That meeting was early and went to DC and had a meeting at the congressman's office with. I don't think we even told anybody we were going. Which doesn't sound right to me. He might have gotten yelled at about that... I think there's protocol on talking with Congress.

WORTHINGTON. Well, there is now.

CHRISTENSON. Yeah. Maybe not back then. So. Yeah. So I was just along for the ride. We rode in the same vehicle, you know, otherwise I'm sure we would have left me behind. Yeah. So that was the one. But with the meeting we were there for, who knows? I mean, I can't even begin to remember the meetings and trainings I went to. I mean, beyond. They all blur out, hundreds. I don't know. Not hundreds. Many. A lot.

So after three years at Montezuma, well, I was at that point. Don Frickey, Area Supervisor. Area supervisor Don Frickey says they're looking for somebody out at Union Slough Refuge. I thought maybe you'd be interested. And so I ended up applying for the job at Union Slough in Iowa. And I got it. So all of a sudden I was a GS 12 project leader. So that brought me to Region three.

WORTHINGTON. And you were the project leader at Union Slough from...?

CHRISTENSON. The fall of 1992 until March of 2000. So around eight years.

WORTHINGTON. And what were some of the big activities, you know, changes that were taking place on the refuge?

CHRISTENSON. Union Slough is a very small refuge. I don't think anything of significance had happened at Union Slough in 50 years. Not really. It was known for its wood duck program, which is odd, it's in a prairie pothole area. It's not really a wood duck area, but it was known for its wood ducks. The maintenance man had come up with this way of building wood duck houses out of used freon canisters and refuge had hundreds of these things.

We raised more wood ducks than most wood duck refuges in artificial houses. Yeah, very successfully. We were the wood duck kings. That's like, well if it works, you know, but out there on the prairie, raising wood ducks by the thousands. But we didn't have much upland habitat. The refuge was established in the

30s. I can't remember. 38 comes to mind, but I don't remember exactly. But you know, land use is different then. So there were more, less row crop and more pasture and they were buying what they could get. Nobody wanted this wet ground. So we had the wetland with only maybe a quarter mile to 20ft of buffer off the wetland.

So whatever happened in the upland was really affecting us. So I don't know how long after I first got there, but they. Matt Kirschbaum [Refuge Supervisor] said we need to do a plan to do land acquisition and I'm going to have you work with Jean Holler and developing a plan to expand the refuge.

WORTHINGTON. And Matt Kirschbaum was the area supervisor in Minneapolis, right?

CHRISTENSON. And Gene Holler was in planning, ascertainment and planning. And so we started working together and I don't think we worked together for a year. And she left maybe to Sherburne I'm not sure where she but she took another job. Yeah. And so then I started working with Tom Magnuson and Tom and I proceeded we had some low-level public meetings with neighbors, and we did a lot of a lot of looking into what was needed. We really, I thought we did a really good job of looking into the justification for why we needed more land.

And we did. We did studies on sedimentation rates, we did water quality, I did a water quality studies with the ES Office and Rock Island. Mike Coffey [Contaminants Biologist] came out. We did a lot of water quality stuff. It clearly showed we had water quality problems, they had severe sedimentation problems and we had low reproductive rates, you know, just all these things going on. We needed a little buffer between us and agriculture. There was no buffer, none.

I do remember one particular episode one year. It was in the area where we had the least amount of upland buffer bordering the wetlands. There was about 50ft of reed canary grass which included our tour route. And then soybeans and the farmer had tilled the field. I think for weed control it was because it was in the growing season and we had a tremendous, tremendous rainstorm. And that entire, oh, I bet it was close to half a mile. Entire section of that very narrow boundary was covered with a foot to a foot and a half of his best topsoil. It was on our road and out in that wetland. I mean, he came in and he was devastated. This, as it happens, was one of our better neighbors. He sold us that entire field, including his house. It was his home farm. I mean, it was very hilly ground, not mountains, but very hilly, a lot of short, steep slopes.

But all this was happening. It's hard for me to piece together now that whether that happened, where in the ascertainment process. But the actual purchasing probably happened down the road, but the flooding happened in time for us to incorporate it into our justifications. Yeah. And then Tom and I were almost done with whatever we were calling the ascertainment plan, the refuge protection plan, when a new thing came along called Conservation Management Plans. Yeah. And so Nita called me, and you were probably there. I don't remember, but you probably were. And she said, well, you really need to do a Conservation Management Plan, and we think you should be the first one in the region because you've got all this background work. And I went, oh, what?

And so we started all over again. Not completely, though, but with better public outreach and giving us also more time to build in more justification, which eventually led then to us having the first CMP in the region. I don't remember the year. 1995 or 96. At this point, Tom Magnuson, who worked in Ascertainment, was replaced by Mike Marxen from Planning to be the RO Lead.

As the first CMP in the Region, there was very little guidance on what should be included. As a result, it did not include as inclusive content as later CMPs Our final plan was about a third of an inch thick. Compare it to most CCPs recently, they're like two inches thick. Three inches thick or multiple volumes. At the time we did it there was no real guidelines on how you do one. And with hindsight, we left out pretty important topics. A lot of things, some things that became an issue for the refuge in the future after I left weren't addressed at all. Not because we didn't want to address them. We never even thought of it. Like what about trees on the refuge? We didn't even think about it. You know, there were probably other things as well.

WORTHINGTON. Was the wood duck box program kind of over by then?

CHRISTENSON. No, it was still there. But I think the decision had made that as they fall down and aren't in use, we're just not going to replace them. And it's going to just slowly sort of diminish.

Really technically it wasn't even wood duck habitat. If you looked at a distributional map of wood ducks, it wouldn't have been the prairie of Iowa. But we had a lot of them. And it's hard to argue with success. We banded more wood, ducks and almost anybody in the region. I mean, really, we banded a lot of wood ducks and that was fun. I mean, you got to keep some fun. I mean, criminy, if you spent your whole life meeting with angry neighbors and doing bullshit paperwork, that's not much of a job. So you have to look for what's fun in life and what did everybody go to school to do? I'd say handle Ducks is one of them, along with other things. Warm and fuzzy. You know, it wasn't doing some sort of plan.

I don't specifically remember the wood duck thing. What our plan focused on was land acquisition and justification for why we need it and the wood duck was neither for or against that had nothing to do with it. So what all the public meetings were talking about the need for more upland buffering, for nesting and for water quality. A lot of it was water quality based. Okay. 50% of it. Well, I might be exaggerating there, but a lot of it. A lot of it because we had the data because the whole process had gone so slow, had been revised a couple of times. It gave us time to build our database and work with Mike Coffey.

We had good numbers and felt comfortable with our data and justification when we got to the final public meetings. I had a person come to the meeting specifically and threaten to kill me and my family if I messed with him in his land. He says, I know where you live and I have a shotgun and I will find you and your family if you mess with me or my land.

Oh, well, okay. Nice to see you, too. Please have a seat.

We're going to have a program. So, you know, that was like a bummer start to the whole deal. Bad deal. That's a bad start. You could ask Mike Marxen.

They all sat there very quietly and listen to me talk for 45 minutes on why this needs to happen and why it's, you know, here's how it's going to happen. And basically, the only comment that I can remember after I was done with the presentation was something about trees.

Trees. Keep that in mind. That problem came back later. Yeah, but the guy was complaining about deer eating trees or something like that. I don't remember exactly, but he was upset. And this was a neighbor with whom I'd sat in his kitchen and eaten pie while talking about refuge issues. He was very opinionated, sometimes grumpy, sometimes very nice person. But he never spoke to me again after that meeting, and I was there for another 3 or 4 years. He would never speak to me, but that's fine. You know,

we had people that this one guy that threatened to kill me ...2 or 3 years after I was gone, he walked into the refuge office and wanted to sell us land.

There was one guy at the north end named Tom Anton. Tom Anton's father sold us land at the north end of the refuge. And Tom Anton, he was a real loudmouth person. And I remember him ranting and raving about us taking the land from his father and not paying enough money and doing this or condemning it or whatever it was. And I looked it up in the records and none of what he said was true.

None of it, you know. But you wonder if people, to make themselves look better to people, would say that the government forced me into selling. So they don't look like they cooperated with the government. Who knows? It was a long time ago. But the facts are not supported. I mean his, his claims are not supported by our administrative paperwork, the record that we have. And if there was a condemnation, it would have been in there and there was nothing, nobody condemned or if there was, it was a friendly condemnation to clear a title.

And so anyway. What I told these people at this meeting was I said, well, how did I phrase it? I said nothing is going to happen right away. This is a very slow process. I said, judge us by what we do. Watch what we do. You will see that we will do things in accordance to what we're planning here. Something like that. You know, and I said, no, there's no condemnation. We'll keep working with you as a neighbor. You know, we know your rights. See, one of the things I had done years before that one of the biggest issue in Iowa is drainage.

So I set up a meeting with the county commissioners. So I went down to their office and they sent out a notice to all of the neighbors of the Slough, saying we're going to have a meeting about drainage at the Slough. So I went in there and I explained compatibility and I explained our process for working with them, how I perceived their drainage rights. I explained what our rights are. Nobody in the history of the refuge had ever done that, and we developed a really, really good relationship with the county and with most but not not all of the neighbors .

So that was a good thing to do. And then one year we had a refuge neighbor, what do we call it? We had a kind of a special get together with a picnic. Called it Neighbor Appreciation Day or something like that. And invited all the neighbors. Every single one of them got a written invitation, and most of them showed up. Even the guy that hated us showed up.

You know, whatever. You know, he wanted to be there to complain. And so he did. We did a lot of stuff. I mean, we had a lot of meetings. We were trying to expand the refuge by, oh, my God, ten times. I don't remember the math.

WORTHINGTON. About 15,000 acres?

CHRISTENSON. Yeah, something like that. It was a huge expansion. I mean, it encompassed lots of land.

Basically without any without any serious opposition at all. You know, I had a representative of Iowa Farm Bureau come and tour the refuge with me. And in fact, it wasn't too long after that flood I was talking about that, not the flood, that storm. And I drove him over all that mud area. He goes, man, you really got a problem, don't you?

I never got the Farm Bureau to give me a written letter of support, but they stayed absolutely silent on a project that expanded a refuge by a magnitude of ten or more. Not a not a peep. It's just it's just that's probably the best you could get from the Iowa Farm Bureau. Yeah, I mean, they were yeah, they were supportive, but they wouldn't put it in writing. Yeah. So that was pretty good I thought.

WORTHINGTON. And you supervisor was Matt Kirschbaum for these years?

CHRISTENSON. No. Well, Matt was Matt Kirschbaum. And then we went into that whole debacle of with whatever they called it. GARDS and PARDs and all that stuff. And refuge supervisors disappeared there for a number of years, and it became a blurry time. It was a blurry time. It seemed kind of muddy at the time even. I mean, even at the time, it was like, who are you?

That must have been weird in the regional office at that point in time.

WORTHINGTON. The PARDs controlled policy and budget and the GARDs supervised the managers.

CHRISTENSON. That was bizarre, you know?

WORTHINGTON. So after Union Slough where was next? Where did you go next?

CHRISTENSON. Litchfield. There were two openings in Minnesota, Detroit Lakes WMD and Litchfield WMD. And you'd have to ask Hultman why he selected Mark Chase for Detroit Lakes and me for Litchfield. Or maybe he flipped a coin. Or maybe there was a reason. I have no idea what it was, but Don Hultman selected me for Litchfield, and I was there it was a very, very quiet period. We were doing routine acquisitions and routine everything. I was there for about three years. My major accomplishment was building an office, which is actually a really major accomplishment.

But that's, you know, everything else we did was very routine. Good stuff, but very routine.

WORTHINGTON. The Litchfield Wetland Management District in Litchfield Minnesota was in rented office space in a shopping center.

CHRISTENSON. Yeah, right. We rented office in a shopping center. It was absolutely horrible. Just horrendous office space. People were jammed in there like sardines. And it was just no place to have a refuge office. And, you know, Nita did not have money to build a big fancy office.

But we had a WPA outside of Litchfield that had a building on it.. It was built as a garage. But at some time previously, they had gone in and modified one end of it into like a little conference room. So there was already a bathroom, and a heater.

So I got together with Rob Bruesewitz (Litchfield Assistant Manager) and Doug Johnson (Regional Office Facilities Coordinator), and we came up with a plan to convert that building into an office space, and we took it into Nita. We had we drew everything up on a one piece of paper. Just an outline of this office space. And she said, okay, fine, do it.

And that piece of paper, I'm not exaggerating, was the only plan ever written for what became a really very good office. And I worked for, oh, God, a long period of time. That's what I did. I worked with engineering, no, not engineering, they had nothing to do with it. I worked with Doug Johnson in refuges.

And contracting. I worked with contracting because even though the, the district staff did most of the work, our staff framed the building, shingled the building, painted the building. We had to bring in contractors. We had to get plumbers, electricians, roof trusses, concrete foundation – the basic of putting up a building.

And I did all of that working with contracting. The refuge staff, and we brought in cement guy to do the slab, that kind of stuff. But it was all done right through contractor. We had no, no monkey business contracting in the dark at night, none of that stuff. It was all above-board. And the office came out okay. At the time we were doing this, we were co housed with Realty and Tom Sampson was a Realty, whatever they call them, supervisor.

And we went to Tom and we said, We're going to build a new office. Do you want to be part of this? And he said, no, I don't want anything to do with it.

So we went about our business designing it just for the district staff. Yeah. When it was finally done some period of time later and all the furniture is in, we had, like a little opening party. Tom Samson comes out, he goes, well, you didn't tell me it was going to be this nice. I said, why did you think we were going to do? And then. He was kicking himself for not being part of it. Oh, yeah. Because he didn't have that big a staff, right? And so they ended up having to rent space for years. Many years more.

Uh, have you been to the Litchfield office?

WORTHINGTON. Yes. Its very nice.

CHRISTENSON. Okay, well, years, years later, I was wherever the hell I was. I get a phone call from. Scott Glup, current manager who replaced me. Still there? He says, how in the world did you build this building? I said, well, what do you mean? He says, I'm trying to build an addition. I can't make it happen. How did you do that? Well, I don't know.

It wasn't easy, but I had a lot of help. You know, you have to have good relationships with contracting, and you have to have a good relationship with somebody else that can just in the regional office. So you're never going to get anywhere unless you break every rule in the book and then you're going to get in trouble.

It isn't a case of do it and ask for forgiveness. Not when you're spending a lot of money. Yeah, that doesn't work. The small stuff fine, you know, but not spending. But thing is, we built that building. $175,000. Try to build it today. Yeah, it'd be seven. $800,000. $ 900,000. I don't know what it would be for sure.

And that included all the furniture. And we didn't have to pay the rent any longer. No, no rent. And it is even to this day, you walk. In that office, it looks brand new. It is really nice. Yeah. And I worked with.

I don't know, different people to, you know, it was just a really good cooperative project. Anyway, Scott figured out he made the building bigger by a couple offices. Somehow he got it to work.

WORTHINGTON. So. Litchfield, what years?

CHRISTENSON. I was at Litchfield from 2000 to 2003. March of 2003. And the reason I left then was because Nita kind of sweet talked me into applying for Refuge supervisor job.

And so I moved in to work with you, which was a really, really good job. A refuge supervisor is a really good job.

WORTHINGTON. Which states did you supervise during that period?

CHRISTENSON. Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Indiana. There wasn't much in Ohio, just Ottawa, nor in Indiana. There wasn't much down there either. Yeah, but Michigan and Wisconsin. It was like 12 or 13 refuges, if I remember right. Nice area. I liked it. Good people.

WORTHINGTON. Do you remember any of the big issues that were happening at that time?

CHRISTENSON. No, not really. I think everything was sort of routine. My first few weeks on the job included the Refuge Centennial Celebrations which was a real highlight. I went to a couple of events for the Centennial including Detroit River and Ottawa. Those were good years.

There's always something, but I don't remember any long term, big burning issue. Not there wasn't one refuge that had a massive acquisition firestorm. I mean, there were some personnel things.

But they don't dominate my memory of that time. They were serious, very serious for the people involved, resulting in being fired and actual prison time. But I mean. That's very unusual. And it doesn't it's not what I remember of being a refuge supervisor.

WORTHINGTON. Did you have an assistant supervisor?

CHRISTENSON. There were two of them that were shared by the other supervisors. There were three refuge supervisors and two assistants, Nick Palaia and Suzanne Baird. Now, both Suzanne and Nick are now back in the regional office. Nick, for many years worked at Litchfield, where I was, and Suzanne worked. And a couple of different refuges on the East Coast. Blackwater, I think being one. I'm not sure where else she went.

Maybe Dismal Swamp, I'm not sure. But anyway, so they're both back now. Suzanne being the Deputy Refuge Chief. She got your job?

WORTHINGTON. Yeah.

CHRISTENSON. Oh, well, there you go. And Nick is in Federal Assistance.

WORTHINGTON. The assistant supervisors that you shared with the other area supervisor, who was the other supervisors?

CHRISTENSON. There were two other Supervisors, John Kauffeld and Jim Leach. And Jim Leach is here with us this week. As you know.

John Kauffeld has disappeared. Disappeared among the mist. I think he's in Montana or something like that. Yeah. Never Neverland.

WORTHINGTON. I think he served some kind of a kind of a senior Peace Corps stint or something equivalent to senior peace corps. Well, that's not the right name, but it was some kind of international

assistance program that he volunteered for a year or more. And I don't even remember exactly where. I have no idea.

When you left the supervisor position, where did you go?

CHRISTENSON. Well, this is where my life gets a little bit rocky. I went to the best place I've ever been in my entire life. But I'll start that story by talking about Nick Palaia. Okay. Before working in Region three, Nick Palaia worked in Hawaii. And a very he worked out of Honolulu, but he was one of these guys that was sent everywhere to offer help to stations or places that needed help. So he worked from Baker Island to Howard Island to Tern island to Laysan Island to Midway Atoll.

And so he had many years of work. 3 or 4 years of working in Hawaii. And so when I was working in the regional office, I had a very, very long drive to work because my wife, for very understandable reasons, simply did not want to move again. And so I was driving 75 miles each way to work.

Which was let's just say it was hard. It was not sustainable. So I would carpool with Nick for the last 30 miles. As you go through the slowest part of the trip through the city traffic. And he would always tell these stories about Hawaii and Midway. And he stayed in touch with the people out there. And so one day he comes to me and he says, you know, the refuge manager position at Midway is open.

I went, really? Now that is a place I never, ever would have thought of applying to. But for reasons that we won't go into here. It seemed like a pretty good thing to do. So I applied for and got the Refuge manager's job at Midway. Which completely flabbergasted almost everyone that I knew. I had people walk up to me and they said. My God, you're my hero. I wish I could do something like that. I said I can't believe you're just, like, going out to the middle of nowhere and doing that! And so I did.

There's a good thing. There's a good part and a bad part to many things that we do in life. And that's the same when it comes to places we go to work. Midway overall was the most amazing place I have ever, not only ever worked at but ever been to, period.

Now, there are many people in the service that when you mention Midway, their reaction is extremely and vocally negative. And the reason for that is. It is perceived as a giant sucking money hole in the Pacific. Well, that is true. It is a giant sucking money hole in the Pacific. But what they don't know and what they don't see are Midway and its resources both wildlife resources and historical resources. Much more the wildlife than historical. But both are worth every penny, and a whole lot more.

Let me give you a quote from Franz Lanting. Franz Lanting is a renowned National Geographic photographer.

Midway is a type of place that attracts a lot of people, even though. Midway is for anybody that doesn't know. It's 1200 miles past Honolulu. Heading towards Japan is extremely remote. Extremely hard to get to. And very few people get there.

Franz Lanting came out there with a small crew for National Geographic. They were doing a National Geographic article on albatross.

And I was spending some time with them. They were there during the fledging season. Which would be Mid-summer. Okay. June, July, most of August. And we had people. Oh, at the same time. Congressman Abercrombie from Hawaii. And the Coast Guard Admiral were visiting at the same time period. And

they were all in my house, which had a name. It was called Midway House. It was the old Navy Base Commanders House. Midway used to be a Naval station for many decades prior to World War Two. It was a naval facility, and I lived in the Refuge manager's house, which is called Midway House, and we were all there for a little reception.

And I was talking with Frans Lanting and with Carl Safina - you ever heard of Carl Safina, famous, very famous ocean advocate writer? Excellent. You must get the book Eye of the Albatross by Carl Safina. Safina. Okay. You will really like it. At least I hope you would.

They were in my house. And I said. I said, how does Midway compare with other refuges? Franz has filmed a lot of refuges. I said, how does Midway compare to the other refuges, where you've done a lot of filming?

And he says he says, you have to understand. He says, I'm not sure you people realize what you have here. He says Midway is one of the top ten wildlife spectacles in the world. Not the refuge system. Top ten wildlife spectacles in the entire world.

Now, this is a National Geographic photographer who has traveled worldwide. For him to say that you have to stop and you just have to think and you go maybe I should pay more attention to this. What a wonderful place I'm in here.

WORTHINGTON. Because of the albatross?

CHRISTENSON. It's mostly the albatross. Midway is the largest albatross colony in the world. Okay. It's the largest Laysan albatross colony in the world. Midway has Laysan albatross and black footed albatross. But we have a small number of short-tailed albatross, which is a highly endangered species. Less than a thousand in the world. I mean thousand total individuals. But we've had successful nesting now 2 or 3 times.

WORTHINGTON. So what would be the total numbers of birds?

CHRISTENSON. Millions, more birds than you can possibly imagine. Everywhere you look, you. Walk out your door in whatever building you are in, in Midway and everywhere during albatross season, which is a long part of the year. And you cannot look in any direction without seeing almost hundreds of birds…in my yard and in that small piece of grass right outside that window there would probably be 15 or more albatross nests. Not to mention, many, many hundreds of thousands of Bonin petrels.

And there's 18 species of seabirds on Midway. Plus the marine life, endangered monk seals, endangered Laysan Ducks, threatened green sea turtles. I mean it. You saw more endangered species in 20 minutes on midway than you see other places in forever. I mean it's just phenomenal.

WORTHINGTON. You'd have this dinner with the admiral and the congressman.

CHRISTENSON. And oh, that was very common. I had more admirals visiting in one year. In one 12 month period at Midway. I had siting in my house at Midway, I had the first lady Laura Bush, Laura Bush, I had the Secretary of Interior, the Deputy Secretary of Commerce. Some high-level NOAA muckety muck, the Chief of CEQ (Counsel on Env Quality) He came out a lot. He was like he and I were like, good buddies. He was there all the time. So he was the main push on making Midway part of the Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument - that was done by CEQ.

And a lot of this happened because of that. But he was out there and I'm not even oh, I had the Assistant Secretary of Interior, the Deputy Secretary. Let me get the names right. I'm not getting it. I had everybody anybody that was anybody was there. Yeah. I mean, a regional director is like a nobody in Midway.

WORTHINGTON. So when you had these people there, would you cook dinner for them?

CHRISTENSON. No, no, I had a cafeteria. Well more like a restaurant. Restaurant. Although it was a little bit like a cafeteria in that there was a more like a buffet. But they don't ever use the word cafeteria because the food was much too good. We had Thai cooks every meal, even breakfast, had Thai food and American food. There was a lot of repetition, but it was damn good.

WORTHINGTON. Is that where everyone would gather for meals who worked?

CHRISTENSON. Well, most of the people on Midway are actually contractors. Midway is really complex. When I was there, there was anywhere from 40 to 80 people on the island probably. Or sometimes a lot more if there's a shipwreck, a lot happens at Midway. Yeah, I mean, there's just a lot happens there. It's extremely busy place. Basically, you work seven days a week. With I mean, you work part of every day at Midway. There's just no way around it. The refuge manager is like a mayor.

You think of a mayor of a town. Midway is like a town in that it has a water department. It is an airport, it has a harbor, there's a sewage facility. It has stores, it has fuel. Power company. Power company, power distribution, water, water distribution. It has a hotel. It has a restaurant. It has a barber shop. It has bowling alley. It has a bar. How many refuges have a bar, let alone a barber shop? I mean, how many refuge managers have ever written a compatibility determination for beach volleyball?

Now you want to do some creative writing. Right? A compatibility determination for beach volleyball. I did it. And it's signed. And it's approved. That's a collector's edition right there. So anyway, it's hard to explain Midway because it is so incredibly complex and so much happens. But it is worth every ounce of effort you could ever put into it because it is so amazingly spectacular. The wildlife is beyond belief.

But there's also what opened my eyes and I really gained really enjoyed learning about it, was the historical aspect. Frankly, I probably know more about the Battle of Midway than 99.9% of the people who could even spell Midway. I have read every book that I could find, and those are books from 20 pages to a thousand pages about the Battle of Midway. Written by Japanese people, American authors, anybody in between.

The Battle of Midway. I'm sorry. And of course, we are trusted with. And in 2000. It was designated the Battle of Midway National Memorial, which was a lot of responsibility and requirements without one additional penny to support it. And so that leads to a lot of controversy for the Service.

There are a few people out there who don't like the Fish and Wildlife Service because of the way they perceive our management. They don't feel we're meeting our obligation to the Memorial by not maintaining the buildings. Which are neat but not unique in the world either. The old naval stuff. There's a lot of built. I mean, when the naval base was closed down, they tore down 85%, I'm making that up. A vast majority of buildings were removed. But the ones that were left, they left too many. And trying to maintain those at any kind of acceptable standard is far in excess of our ability. Not just money, but ability.

The marine environment is extremely difficult, and buildings have an end point in their life and those buildings are pas it, they're way past it. And so trying to maintain them is really difficult.

Now, also, the biggest controversy. If there is one right now, is the fact that public has no way to visit the refuge right now. There's no public transit of any kind. There's none. Back, way back when there used to be Aloha Airlines flight to Midway. That went away. When I got there, we were flying on a 1962 Gulfstream 1, a turboprop. Slow and loud, but it got us there. That was the plane we used the whole time I worked there three and a half years. But eventually it was replaced by jets.

But the point of the story is when I was there, Midway also went through the CCP process. Remember that from Union Slough we did it again, except it was part of a marine national monument. And so you remember my comment about the CCP being a third of an inch thick. The document for the Marine National Monument is either 3 or 4 volumes, each volume being an inch to an inch and a half thick.

It took a lot of effort. My part was on public use, compatibility, I mean, there was just it was a tremendous amount of work. But what we did, though, is that we reopened Midway to visitation. So in the last few months that I was there, we brought visitors back to Midway.

And after I left, it ran for I don't know exactly. I can't recall two, three, four years maybe at the most. And it hit into the time period when we were really suffering steep budget cuts.

The visitor services program was costing more than we expected. Some of the people that were bringing visitors I can't explain the whole program to you, but some of these groups that were bringing visitors out there weren't meeting their obligations and they were bringing groups out that didn't fill the plane. And so the plane cost what the plane cost it flying to Midway. When I first got there, it was about $18,000 a flight.

Now it's in the range of $45,000 a flight. Each flight. And so they don't at most, they have two flights a month. You go to Midway, you're must be prepared to stay. There's no going home tomorrow. It doesn't happen. So it just. It just. It wasn't sustainable. And so it was closed down. And there are very large group of people, most of them associated with Midway Phoenix, which we haven't even talked about. They were a group that ran the visitor program for a while in the late 1990s, early 2000s.

And then that program ended for a variety of reasons. But those people who were mostly were employees of Midway Phoenix are kind of, well, every day on Facebook they complain about Fish and Wildlife Service not allowing public access to the refuge. They don't like what we're doing to their island.

Well, yeah, I think what we're doing to their island is wonderful. We have done an amazing job. Beyond what one could hope for in terms of meeting our obligations. Are we falling short? Absolutely. We're falling short. But you know, there's what you want in life, and there's what you can do within the political and fiscal realities.

And Midway is a giant sucking hole in the Pacific when it comes to money there's no way around that.

But Congress has mandated that we keep the Midway Airport open for commercial aviation safety for planes flying across the Pacific. Those new twin-engine jets, by law, well, maybe it's by regulation or whatever have to have an emergency airport within so many miles of wherever they fly. And Midway is that airport.

And every couple of years, some big jetliner comes in the Midway because of an emergency. It didn't happen when I was there. It happened right before I got there, and it happened right after I left.

WORTHINGTON. I think what happened maybe a year and a half ago?

CHRISTENSON: Yes, there's been several. There have been quite a few and more than you know, because they don't all make the news. Just those big jetliners make the news. I think it was American Airlines that was flying from Hawaii to Japan, and all of a sudden their front windshield cracked. At, what 36,000ft?

Where did they land? Midway. So anyway, it's. To keep that open, you need all that infrastructure. And those people. And so it's hard. It's a but it is an amazing place.

I would sooner go to Midway, even though I have been there for three and a half years, I would go to Midway tomorrow instead of going to the Galapagos where I've never been because that's how amazing it is.

I have friends. People that know Midway very well. And have retired Fish and wildlife friend who just recently went to the Galapagos. And she went there with her father. And she couldn't help but think while she was there that, you know, this is really cool. But Midway is way better.

The species are different. But the experience. The uniqueness of it is as unique as Galapagos is. It's overrun with tourists and stuff. Its just her experience is just very different.

And I know I probably could spend I could talk Midway for days, not hours.

WORTHINGTON. Let me ask you, though, you hosted the first lady there?

CHRISTENSON. It was probably the highlight of my three and a half years.

WORTHINGTON. Can you just take a minute or two and tell the story? When did you learn that was going to happen? What did you do to get ready for it? And then the actual hosting itself?

CHRISTENSON. I'll try to keep it short. Previous to that, you know, after President Bush had created the Monument, there was a desire within his administration, probably led by Jim Connaughton who was at CEQ, that they wanted the President to visit the monument. And the only place you can go within the monument is Midway. You know, that's it. The rest are totally remote islands. Midway is like New York City compared to Laysan. Literally.

But at any rate. And so the President was going somewhere in Asia for a one of the G8 or one of those big summits that he does. And his staff had gone there in advance to plan the trip. On their way back I got a call from Jim Connaughton. He says we're setting this up next week. You're going to have the president's Chief of staff. You're going to have this and such. You're going to have that and such, and you're going to have all these different people. They're going to come to Midway for a day.

I want you to show them around. Connaughton had already been out here. So, you know. I want you to do this, this and the other thing. And we're going to try to plan a visit for the for the President. So they came, we gave them the tour. Gave them the reception at the house. Had them hold the terns.

Check all the stuff. They fell in love with the place. I mean, Tom, you've never been anywhere like this. I'm sure you have done a lot of amazing things with wildlife. I can 100% tell you that you've never seen anything like Midway. I can't begin. To tell you it is a place totally dominated by wildlife. But there is a community of people right in the middle of all this. Wildlife and the wildlife just ignore you. It completely ignores you. And it's there everywhere. Everywhere you go, all the time.

It's unbelievable. The birds don't fly away. They fly towards you. The terns come and flutter around your head and you go like they put your hand out. They land on it. I mean, it's just unbelievable. So I gave them the tour. And for reasons I can't remember, I ended up flying off with them because I had to.

I was supposed to go to someplace and I had to change my plans or something, whatever it was, a meeting of some sort. And I said, well, I'll stay here and do this tour, but can I fly with you when you go to Tacoma, Washington, on your plane? So I did. So they're flying some, you know 737, and I flew with them from Midway to Tacoma. And the whole time on that plane. And my wife Elise had prepared a big box of chocolate chip cookies. And I walked around sharing cookies with everybody and I played videos on the screen about Midway. They'd all had a great time, whoever they all were. They had a lot of people. I don't know who they all were, but I was talking with just the 3 or 4 head people.

And we sat there and tried to plan a visit. And so after they got back and I got back I started fielding 100 or so phone calls from a White House and the Air Force about the trip. They wanted us to house something like 300 people for the President's visit overnight on his way back from Asia.

It just couldn't be done. It just fell apart because of the complexity of what they needed. We have a hotel with 24 rooms. You know, it's a lot more than most refuges.

You know, they talked about bringing in military tents, and, you know, it's like, this is impossible. So they came up with another plan. Let's send the first lady.

So then you know time passed, months. But eventually, in March of 2007. The visit started with her staff and some Secret Service people coming out. And they were there for a week before the first lady got there. And we planned, we gave them all everything, you know, and then we planned the visit. And I when I say planned, I mean, we planned every minute, every single minute. And there's a document.

I still have the book. I could show you the book in my house. You turn to page 1207 First Lady Laura Bush leaves Midway House. Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. You know. This is the schedule, and I was the person assigned to keep us on schedule. And it worked out fine. So that was great. I mean, they were fantastic people.

The Secret Service and her staff, they were wonderful. And so the time came, and the first lady arrived and she had head of CEQ Jim Connaughton was there again. Secretary Kempthorne was there. Probably somebody from Commerce. I don't remember. A bunch of reporters. A whole bunch. Maybe she had a 757 and I got a tour of the plane. It had a bedroom and towards the front, some first-class seating and then a bunch of regular seats. And the plane was full. I mean, 40, 50 people.

And they arrived at two in the morning. And we met them at the airport. And we did some brief introductions and my wife was assigned to be the primary contact for Secretary Kempthorne and his guide. And of course, I was for the first lady. And we got in our golf carts, and we took her, I took her. She stayed at my house at Midway House, and she insisted that Elise and I stay there as well.

She didn't want to kick us out of the house. So she had one guest bedroom and she had a friend with her whose name was Reagan. That's her first name. Reagan something. And she stayed in the other guest room. And then she had an aide who stayed in what used to be the like the captain's aides' room, which had a separate bedroom and bathroom, back off the kitchen.

This is a one, two, three, four bedrooms. 4 to 5 bedroom house.

And so we had done a lot of work, tremendous amount of work, getting ready, trying to make everything from making every bathroom spotless, every street corner, cleaned up all the bird shit washed away, you know, really. A lot. I mean, everybody worked for many days in preparation and so she spent the night in our house, and was, you know, we could lay there and we could hear her coughing. And it was, you know, she was really, really nice.

And so I'm still laying in bed early on that next morning. And all of a sudden, she actually had they had a separate a special phone installed that would ring right to the first lady's room from the White House. And I said, my God, that phone is ringing. And Elise says, no, that's not the phone. That's the smoke alarm. I mean. Smoke alarm!

And so I rush out in the hallway, and it turns out I think the first lady had showered. And when she had opened the door, the steam from the shower had hit the smoke detector, and it was going off. So I'm standing there. I'm pretty short. I couldn't reach it. So I grabbed a chair and I'm standing there in my pajamas trying to reach this thing. And I'm thinking, don't open the door. Don't open the door. And I finally got the smoke detector turned off. Now here's the funny part. Nobody, including the Secret Service, who were right there supposedly guarding the First Lady ever, said a word. Nobody ever mentioned the smoke detector. How can you not hear the smoke detectors? Was like, well, okay.

So I served her breakfast at my house. That was the highlight of my entire visit.

Serving her breakfast. I just I gave her oatmeal. Oatmeal with fresh fruit and I don't remember what else. Really good oatmeal. I have a great recipe for oatmeal.

And then we went off and started the day and she was interviewed by CNN. And they were asking her questions about Iraq and Iran and all this stuff and everything else. And eventually we did a lot of touring. We went over to Eastern Island. The cameras came along with us. We toured Eastern and we talked ecology. We talked restoration of habitat. What really caught her attention is the problem of plastics in the ocean.

Now, if you read her autobiography. Which I have a copy of what's really amazing to me is that, that less than 24 hours on Midway because she arrived at two in the morning. And left the next day. Well, that would be the same night at about 9:00 at night. Even though she spent less than 24 hours on Midway it's probably got 5or 6 pages in her book. In her life's book, less than 24 hours has 5 to 6 pages in her book.

It made that sort of impression. That's what Midway does.

And she thought she really got caught up in the issue of plastics because the albatross feed plastic from the ocean to their young, their young regurgitated it or die. If they don't regurgitate it, they die.

And there's plastic all over the place. Just everywhere you go, there's plastic, all over the place. Little bits of plastic it's impossible to pick it up. You just can't, it's everywhere. So. And plus, what's washing up on the beach? I mean, she, it was not the best weather. It was rather cool and a little bit windy.

But it was okay. It wasn't raining. And my family in California saw me on CNN. Yeah, and that's something.

WORTHINGTON. So do you remember what the day and you may have said it already, but what day was this?

CHRISTENSON. Well, it was March. Which day of the week? I don't remember. A Tuesday comes. To mind, but I don't know. March 2007. The easy way to figure that if you kind of look at she went to she left Midway and she went to Honolulu next for the formal naming of the monument ceremony.

And we and we took a little break from all the touring at around 2 or 230 in the afternoon. And she took a short nap upstairs and she came down and we were sitting in our little kind of lanai, you might want to call it not. And it was more like a porch. It wasn't outside, Elise had made some fresh cookies. We're having coffee and cookies with her, with her friend Reagan, and she came down and joined us and we were just talking and she talked a little bit about her ranch in Texas.

And then you know, and she was the one that taught me, the first lady. Can you believe this? The first lady is the one that taught me how to properly say the name of the monument Papahanaumokuakea. And so we're sitting in this on these chair sofas. It was really cool. It's a really one of the highlights of my entire career.

Okay. What's really fun about that is that her. Her staff says they were leaving, they said, well, you know, if you're ever in Washington, look us up, we'll give you a tour of the White House.

Well, don't invite me unless you plan to open the door.

Because it was that next Thanksgiving, I was on home leave and my wife and I went to visit her parents who live in Virginia. So I got a hold of her staff and said, remember me?

And they set it up and they said, be at the East gate at 9:00 in the morning on Wednesday or Tuesday. Whatever day it was. And we went into the White House and they said, well, we want you to wait right in here. And it turned out to be the China room. Not named after the country, but that's where they had all the China. And they were in there decorating Christmas stuff. And we waited there. And then they opened the door and said, please come out.

And we walked out and there's the President and the First Lady. We were the only ones in the room.

Well, over there someplace was the Secret Service. And their daughter was over there.

And I come out, I had my wife, one of my daughters, my father-in-law, and my daughter's at that time, boyfriend. Who I had never met until that day.

And they did the greeting line of hi sir, I'm so-and-so. And he and I'll have to tell you, in all honesty, he wasn't too impressed with me, he was just saying, well, you know, shook my hand and moved on. But

here's the cool part. When he got to my daughter he says, and she was a grad. student at MIT at that time and then she then she met her boyfriend. He was a PhD student at Harvard.

He goes, oh, Laura, come over here. We got a couple of smart ones over here, Laura. And he started talking with them and he talked. Ten, fifteen minutes. I'm standing here, you know, and it was fascinating.

It was so great and then we took a bunch of pictures and then he started to walk away and she says, George, come back here. I want more pictures. I want pictures with just Elise and Barry you and I.

So then we took more pictures and then. They were getting ready to go out. And it got a little confusing here because I thought they said, please go ahead. So I went out this door and I walk out the door. And holy mackerel, there's hundreds, hundreds of people out there waiting for the President to get on the helicopter to fly to Camp David for Thanksgiving. And they were all waiting for the President when we were chit chatting about whatnot. And then I was and the president in the first day came out and they got on the helicopter, they flew away. And I spent the rest of the day touring the White House. And then I went off to Washington and came back that night with one of my people I knew from CEQ. And he gave us the tour of the West Wing. And that was a pretty remarkable day for a lowly refuge manager.

WORTHINGTON. My son gave me the tour of the West Wing too by the way.

CHRISTENSON. What was he doing now?

WORTHINGTON. He worked in the in the Office of Science and Technology Management, his office was at the Old Executive Office Building.

CHRISTENSON. We got a tour of that, too. Yeah. What was that? A lot of time. Yeah, it was amazing. It's amazing day.

WORTHINGTON. Have you recorded? Have you written down the details of that visit?

CHRISTENSON. Well, not completely. I actually wrote an article, an article for Fish and Wildlife News about her visit. That was relatively recently, after her visit, somebody in Washington got ahold of me, and I wrote an article, I think it was called Fish and Wildlife News. And there was an article in there about the visit. That's the only thing written down. All the rest that like fire alarm no, no, no.

I guess this is it right here.

WORTHINGTON. All right, well, soon you'll have a copy of it.

CHRISTENSON. And then after Midway, Midway is a very, very tough place to work and your retirement is viewed differently. We're way over limit here, but Midway, what was the proper terminology, kind of a never-never land bureaucratically.

It was not like Hawaii. It was not like Alaska with its own thing. But you got a COLA but it was taxed.

Not and the COLA doesn't count towards retirement. So you really don't want to retire from there. It doesn't count as towards the high three salaries. The base salary. Yes. So you really don't want to retire from there. Well, you can, but it's going to cost you a lot of money. So I, moved to Sacramento.

I probably should have waited for something a little different than that. But I worked ended up working in Sacramento for a year with really, really good people. I mean just superb people. But Sacramento was not a good fit for me. I had no idea that my allergies could be so bad as they were. I mean they have so many things there that I must have been allergic to. I mean.

I had vertigo. I, I had amazing allergy problems that I had never had anywhere else in my life. And it just I house was broken into. Just a lot of negative things happen. I just it just. My job was. I was Chief of Refuge Operations for Region eight, which no one had ever done that.

So here again, remember my comment about Peace Corps? There's a park. Go do something. Here was your title of refuge operations. Go do something. It's like it takes a while to figure out what that is. And so and here's the real problem anywhere. I doubt if there are 1 or 2 refuges in the system where you could go after being at Midway and not suffer severe letdown.

And I can tell you with certainty that Sacramento Regional Office is not one of those, okay? And neither is probably any refuge in Region Three, with the possible exception maybe of Minnesota Valley. But I don't even think that would match it. Not because there's not a lot of workload, but what that workload is. I mean, the variety of things that happen at Midway and what they are in the fact. That they are completely unique, like shipwrecks. All kinds of things happen at Midway plane land.

Things that you just don't even imagine happening. They happen at Midway and so you know, Minnesota Valley can't match shipwrecks, for example. Or, having the Secretary of Interior visit twice in six months. Well, some places might get that, but you know what I'm saying.

So it's hard to adjust to come crash landing down at the you want to you can't sustain that level of work forever you're probably suffer a severe mental breakdown. But at the same time going away from it there's a sense of withdrawal.

And so that was hard. And so I ended up leaving Sacramento. And for personal reasons, I wanted to come back to Region Three where I worked as the District Manager at Windom Wetland Management District in southwest Minnesota. I thought I would work for another 3 to 5 years. It turns out I was wrong about that for a variety of reasons I won't go into here. I ended up retiring after only being back in Region. Three for two years, which was not what I intended.

And now here I am nine years later, and I think it probably was the right decision at the time.

I can't say that about everything I've ever done, but I'm a little disappointed that my career ended short of when I thought it would. And for quite a while I felt really kind of guilty that I was not contributing anymore to what I see as an incredibly important mission for our country and one that for me as a person, with some exceptions here and there, that was extremely fulfilling.

And looking back on my career I would have to say that Union Slough, that little sleepy refuge of nothing in Iowa was one of the best things that I probably did. That's it. Not everything that I did lasted, but it was all positive at the time.

And working at Midway, I did a lot of good work there. And most of that. Well, the visitor program that I restarted that crashed and burned. But the groundwork that we laid is there.

I've had a chance to go back to Midway four times since I left. Once for a month-long period they asked me to do were very short staffed. They asked me to come back as a volunteer and help. And while I was there, I wrote an environmental assessment that they subsequently used a year later for clearing a large area of trees, invasive trees, invasive trees that are used by birds. So, you know I find ways to try to continue. I still volunteer periodically at Refuges in Hawaii. But still there is a sense of a letdown.

After leaving your career that, you know, like, shouldn't I still be doing something? I know people that are older than me that are still working. You know, like Charlie Blair, the old dog. You know, every person's life is different. And so you just do the best you can. And you move on. You know.

I don't know what else to say.

WORTHINGTON. You've been some amazing places, Barry. This was such a really good talk, thank you so much for your career and your time today. I will turn this recorder off now.