

Narrator: Kerry St. Pé

Interviewer: Susan Testroet- Bergeron

Transcriber: Taylor Suir

26 April 2012

SUSAN TESTROET-BERGERON: My name is Susan Testroet-Bergeron and I am interview Mr. Kerry Ste. Pe about his memories and experiences concerning Louisiana's coastal wetlands. The interview is being conducted at 7:20 am on April 26, 2012. The interview is being conducted at Mr. Dean Blanchard's camp on Lake Verret commonly known as the Tumble Down. Thank you for signing your consent forms. Do you understand that portions of this taped interview and pictures taken during the interview may be used in government publications?

KERRY ST. PÉ: I do.

BERGERON: Ok, very good. Thank you for speaking with me today. We have gone over the consent forms and I'd like to get some basic information on tape and then we'll go on to the interview. Would you please state your full name?

ST. PÉ: [0:47] My name is Kerry Michael St. Pé.

BERGERON: And what is your date of birth and where were you born?

ST. PÉ: I was born, actually, in New Orleans and then I quickly moved back to Port Sulphur, Louisiana in Plaquemines Parish.

BERGERON: And what's your birthday?

ST. PÉ: June 15, 1950.

BERGERON: Tell me a little bit about a childhood memory that connects you to the Louisiana wetlands.

ST. PÉ: [1:20] Well, that would be my times camping out on the ridges that came from the Mississippi River and intertwined with the wetlands in Plaquemines Parish in Port Sulphur, Louisiana. These were great forests that followed ridges of living live oaks and I camped out on those very often with my friends.

BERGERON: So, who were you camping out with?

ST. PÉ: With my good friends growing up: Corky Cairns, Leighton Buras, Mike Olivier. We'd camp out there. We had an 8 foot aluminum flat boat powered with a three and a half

horsepower Evinrude and we go out and spend all day getting out to the places and we'd camp out.

BERGERON: So when you were on a camp-out, what were some of the things that y'all would do that were fun or interesting?

ST. PÉ: [2:25] We'd swim. We'd fish. These places became mystical. They were places that took a long time to get to probably because we were in an 8 foot boat with a three and a half power Evinrude but we'd pile up all our gear in the boat and travel what seemed like hours way out deep in the marshes and we'd get on these mystical ridges covered with living live oaks and draped with moss and populated with palmettos and we'd actually pray that there would be a summer storm that would coming up that would force us to build a little lean-to that we liked and we'd weather the storm and then we'd just explore after that.

BERGERON: If you had to say how these experiences affected your decisions as an adult, how would you describe the transition from some of those childhood memories towards your adulthood?

ST. PÉ: Well, I think that growing up where I grew up gave me an appreciation for the environment that surrounded me. And there's no question that environment influenced me to become a biologist. From as far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a biologist and I

wanted to work in a field where I could protect what was around me. I ended up working exactly in that job, my dream job, the job I wanted. I worked for Water Pollution and Control division. It was under Wildlife and Fisheries at first and eventually became what is called DEQ (Department of Environmental Quality). That job gave me exactly what I wanted to do.

BERGERON: So what happened, some of your interactions while you were working in Water Pollution Control? If you had to say.... About what year was that?

ST. PÉ: Well, I started in 1974.

BERGERON: You started in '74. Kind of talk about the climate of that time and your job.

ST. PÉ: [5:10] Well, it was wide open. We all got very little training, given basic equipment and basically told to go out and stop water pollution. The area that was assigned to me was the region around Houma, the area that later became the Barataria- Terrebonne National Estuary. Water pollution was very common back then, industrial discharges, discharges that were causing serious environmental damage. But, being new to the field and not having anybody to train me, we didn't know where to look for the water pollution. We were very busy. We had people... We'd respond to citizen's complaints but we didn't know where to look for the water pollution. For instance, we'd travel in bayous and streams and see oil and gas facilities all freshly

painted, the tanks were painted, and we didn't realize that what you had to do was get out on that spoil bank to see all the damage that was caused behind. That opened up a whole world to me and I became very vigilant with damage in our oil fields.

BERGERON: How did the local people feel about the work that you were doing?
Because I know you had a lot of interaction with the public throughout your whole career.

ST. PÉ: [7:12] A lot of interaction with the public. We'd rely on the public to call us and to alert us to water pollution and problems. I became very close to people. I met a lot of people. I interacted with people a lot. Some of the elderly, some of them young, some of them middle age, but I was always partial to the elderly people because they had problems that they were seeing. They knew the problem. They didn't understand what that problem was. They just knew that it was a problem. They would call me and almost apologize for bothering me to alert me to a problem. I was always partial to elderly people. It was an honor to help them out. I'd investigate the issue or the problem, then report on it, then request enforcement action.

BERGERON: You've kind of changed your focus over the years. It's not just Water Pollution Control anymore. Tell us sort of why you've changed your focus and how that's different.

ST. PÉ: Well, I don't think I did change my focus that much. I was always protective of the environment. I was always working to correct some issue. I gained a lot of experience and a lot of awareness as to what those problems were. I could point to a direct cause of land loss, of marsh loss, acres and acres of marsh loss due to produced water or oil field brine discharges. Later in my career I became aware of a bigger land loss issue. All the marshes were disappearing before my eyes and I could see it and I knew it was happening but I didn't know that it was so vast. I didn't know it was such a serious issue until about 1980 or so. **[10:10]** It's the wetlands that make our people what they are. It's really all about the people. It's the wetlands that are responsible for foraging the culture that we have. We're all bayou people. We're all marsh people. We're all wetlands people. The people here in Southeast Louisiana are referred to as a unique culture. It's unique because most of our people can point to our first ancestor who came in this region generations ago. And no matter what the culture you come from, your ancestor came here and they stayed and you stayed. **[11:02]** We have this rich mixture of cultures intertwined and that's the thing that makes this place unique. It's because of the wetlands. That's why people like to come here and that's why people like to stay. So it's all about the wetlands. The wetlands are us and we are the wetlands and that's why it's so important to save.

BERGERON: So, how did you get involved in pushing coastal restoration? Because I know that you are a big coastal restoration advocate for our state. How did you get involved in that?

ST. PÉ: [11:41] Well, I feel like I pushed for coastal restoration all my life. But I became involved with the estuary program. I was appointed to be on the scientific technical committee as a member and at the first meeting I was elected chairman, against my will by the way. It's not that I didn't think it was important, I did, but I was very, very busy in the Water Pollution job but I was elected chairman and we went through a five year planning process. The first five years I was driven by science so I became very, very involved with the estuary program. I became very good friends with the first director, Steve Mathies. Richard DeMay was the first scientific technical committee staffer. He was a program employee. And we all became very close. After the five year planning period we entered our implementation period. Steve Mathies' five years as a director are winding down and he was going to move on to his next job and he was encouraging me to become director. And although I thought the job was important, I didn't want this job because I know if I was made director and left my water pollution job, or left the regional corner of the job that my office would be killed. And it was. I became director of the estuary. The water pollution job was killed as a regional office. So when I became director there was an interim period where I didn't want to be director and yet there had to be a director. Steve Mathies was leaving and there was an interim director appointed while DEQ (Department of Environmental Quality) was searching for a permanent director. And that director ended up being Karen Geauteaux who worked for the governor's office at the time. She worked for Governor Mike Foster. And working for the Governor she was very busy, of course, and she couldn't come down here to be in the main office at the estuary program. Anyway, the program pretty much died, the staff, and by that time, about a year and a half later, I was appointed director, there was one person left. So I came into an office that was staffed by one person, so we had to rebuild the

office and it's pretty strong now I have to say. We've got a very good staff. We have a staff of 10 and we're extremely busy all the time.

BERGERON: That's a for sure. You, at the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program, spend a lot of time representing the people. Maybe people who don't necessarily get their voice heard in restoration, for one reason or another they have trouble getting their voice heard, how do you feel about representing that audience?

ST. PÉ: [16:05] I think it's my mission, my job. It's what I do. I mean, these people need to be represented. These are people are going to be affected by different restoration techniques and these restoration techniques have to be done in accordance with some level of agreement. There's a thousand different ways to restore coastal wetlands. You have to pick the ways, the methods that are compatible with the uses; the ways that are compatible with the ways that people use the estuary. Like I said, it's all about the people. This is not a place that can be restored in the absence of people. We can't all move to Kansas in ten thousand years and after its restored move back. There would be no reason to restore it without the people. It's not a place where people travel to like some foreign land or some pristine environment where no one lives. There's people living here now . And we use the system as it is now, not as it was created. It was created over seven thousand years with water from the Mississippi River, with sediments from the Mississippi River. Things have changed. Those sediments aren't in the water column anymore; we no longer have the sediments suspended in the water column anymore. The sediments are on the bottom but they are not in the water column so we cannot rely on massive

quantities of freshwater to restore us. It won't restore us in the time we need it. Diversions are important but they will not restore the area in the time we need it and we need it now.

BERGERON: In your opinion, what do we stand to lose without costal restoration projects? You know, CWPPRA's coming to the end of its life as it's currently authorized, what do we stand to lose if we don't have coastal restoration projects in the near future?

ST. PÉ: Well, [18:36] there's a long list of things we could use if we weren't restored, a long list of fisheries, products, oysters, crabs, shrimp. But most importantly we'd lose the culture. There's no culture like Southeast Louisiana. People like to come here for a reason. It's different ecologically. We live at the end of one of the world's great rivers so it would follow that we would be different ecologically but we're different culturally also. And that's what I'd fear most, we lose this culture. We're losing parts of it now as we get hurricanes, as we're more susceptible to hurricane impacts because of land loss. People are moving out from low lying areas, so were losing a lot now, we have lost a lot. But we still retain a lot too. [19:58] So, we need to restore it for the culture, for the people.

BERGERON: If you could go back in time and listen to your grandparents and they would have a message to tell you, what do you think they would have been telling you about the ecology, about the habitat, the people, the culture, or maybe you can remember something that kind of affected your environmental decisions, your career decisions, your life.

ST. PÉ: [20:35] Well, my grandfather was an interesting man. He was a market hunter. He hunted ducks for a living. He worked in the environment all his life. He was also a tree topper. My dad used to tell me that, "Grandpa was a tree topper." I didn't understand the significance of that but he'd climb up cypress trees and cut off the tops before it was sawed and fell and it was a dangerous job. He was a market hunter. He hunted ducks for a living in Lake Arthur and he lived in Hahnville and he had 10 kids. My mom's family had ten kids so I have a lot of cousins. They were both the youngest in their families or second to youngest so I have cousins that are as old as my parents who have kids so I have tons of cousins. But my first ancestor that came to Louisiana came in 1760 and settled in Barataria, Louisiana and built a plantation called Grande Coquille. He was a big landowner. He owned most of the land in the Barataria Basin, from Barataria, Louisiana down to Grand Terre. In fact, the last French Governor was over the Louisiana Purchase, what became the Louisiana Purchase, he wrote about Pierre St. Pé in his memoires. And Pierre St. Pé, at the time the French Governor met him, he was working in his fields building levees. These were small levees, nothing like we have now but he was working in canals in fields and he was working with the water. So that just shows that living with the times, that shows that people back then lived with the river, without the levees but people down here eventually had to build levees because people upstream from us in upper watershed built levees and they lived in the flood plains and no longer did the river spread out, it was confined to those channels so we had to build higher and higher levees down here, otherwise, we couldn't live here. So, there's been a lot of changes since Pierre St. Pé. The population is a lot different than it was back then, there's a lot more people. There's a lot more people that would be flooded with water from the river. So, there's been changes, a lot of changes. When we come to restore it do

we want to revert back to two-hundred years ago? No, we cannot revert back to 200 years ago. Number one, we couldn't if we tried because the land loss is really sort of occurring within the last seventy-five years. We've destroyed in seventy-five years what it took the Mississippi River seven thousand years to build. And the river has changed a lot, drastically; it's no longer the river it was when it built this place. It doesn't have the sediments in it. So, we need to harvest those sediments from where they are in the river, the bottom. There on the bottom of the river. The sediments are on the bottom of the river, that's where they are. We can harvest those sediments with dredges and pump them out into the wetlands, pump them out into places where they were in the first place. We wouldn't want to recreate nature because I don't believe humans are smart enough to recreate nature but [25:37] we have a template, we have a recipe, we know what structures were where, we know where they were, we can build ridges back where there were ridges, we can build marshes back where there were marshes, we can build barrier islands where there were barrier islands. This is entirely doable and we can do it and this is what the estuary program is pushing because it's compatible with the people; with the way we use the system now we can still restore Southeast Louisiana with these dredges and pump sediments and we'd have to sustain it with diversions.

BERGERON: You kind of lead me right where I want to go. We've talked about actually doing some rebuilding of these wetlands and making it really happen. We're both grandparents, so we look forward into the next generations and so what do we tell the next generations about what to do, how to do it, and why do it?

ST. PÉ: [26:48] Well, we need to... we can't wait for the next generation to start. There's going to be a time where we reach the point of no return and we're close to that time now, I believe. We need something to build on. The longer we wait, the more expensive it becomes, the more sediments we need so we need to set all the infrastructure in place for the next generation. We need to start pumping sediments, start making land, and this will continue on into the next generation. But, we need to start now we cannot wait until the next generation to start building land. We are building land in places, but this needs to be a much bigger strategy. We cannot fund these small, single projects at a time. We need to prepare the infrastructure to pump a lot of sediments; pump sediments until the pipes run out rather than pumping, laying pipe, pumping sediments, then removing the pipe. That's not an efficient way to do it; the cost per cubic yard becomes very expensive. We need to lay the pipe and pump sediments until we wear out the pipe. You know, finding different funding sources to pump through the same pipe and that way the cost per cubic yard goes way down, much lower than where it is now. We can do this.

BERGERON: I'm glad to hear you say, "We can do this." I think that's a message that people need to know. Our nation is looking at us as we talk about global climate change and sea level rise and what's going on down here. Why do we want to help the other people in the nation understand that we need to this or maybe how do we help those people?

ST. PÉ: It's critical that people around the nation understand our situation because we are going to depend on the people from around the nation to help us pay for this. Louisiana can't afford this alone. Louisiana didn't get in this shape alone. Sure, there's things that we did that we

could have done better. [29:48] We could have explored for oil and gas in a more environmentally compatible way, but you can point to things people have done all over the country that are not in accordance with a safe environmental practices. I think that it is critical that the rest of the United States understands our situation and I don't think they do understand our situation. I'm constantly talking to other people, everybody talks to people from around the country, it's very, very apparent that they do not understand what our issues are and our problems. I hear all the time that we shouldn't live where we live because we're sinking. Well, the truth is we've been sinking for ten thousand years. It's just in later years when we were forced to build levees that sinking has overtaken, overcome the land building so all we're left with now is the sinking. It's important to know that we can restore us. I'm very frustrated at times about the differences and opinions that get out to the rest of the nation. The rest of the nation believes... well they know that the Mississippi River built us and that it laid down all these marshes so they're easily swayed into believing that diversions are going to sink us but it's a different river. The river doesn't have the sediments it had when it built us. We cannot rely on masses of diversions to rebuild us back. There's people living here. This mass of diversions would more than likely, most probably flood people, we cannot flood people, flood our communities in the name of restoration. Who are you restoring it for, if not for the people? You cannot run the people out in the name of restoration. You have to find a compatible way to restore it and we can restore it. This is entirely doable, over years with harvesting sediment from the bottom. And we are experiencing global sea level rise and if the sea level is rising the one thing we're going to need is sediments. We've got that elevation to build up. I'm not talking about dredging from the river, the Mississippi and the Atchafalaya, you know, one or two times a year, I'm talking about a continuous program of harvesting sediments and constructing wetlands

with those sediments. I'm talking about a continuous project. This is what we're going to have to do if South Louisiana is going to survive. It's cheaper to do it, to restore it, than it is to move everybody out. It's cheaper to build us back.

BERGERON: I think you've given us a lot to think about today. Before we get to the very end of the interview, you've picked a very interesting place for us to be. Tell me why you picked Lake Verret for your interview today.

ST. PÉ: [34:05] Well, I've done a lot of work in Lake Verret. I think it's beautiful. When people think of South Louisiana they think of this stream; they think of cypress trees with moss draping from it. In 1974 when I started working, I think Lake Verret is the first place I came to, so it has a special meaning. It's the place I think of when I think of Southeast Louisiana.

BERGERON: I want to thank you today for taking time out of your very busy schedule to let people know why coastal Louisiana is so important, not just to you but all the people you represent. I am honored that you would give me this time and share this with our viewers. Is there anything you would like to tell them before we come to the end of our interview? Is there something that I might have missed that you want to tell them?

ST. PÉ: I think you've done a great job Susan and I just want people to know that...[35:22] Don't lose hope. There is a way to restore this and St. Pé isn't going to do this

alone; the estuary program is not a by yourself type of program, it's everybody. [35:40] We need the support of the people. If pipeline sediment transport is going to be successful it's going to be successful because everybody wants it and everybody is making their voice known and saying that we need to restore Louisiana by piping sediment so I'd invite the public to join in the estuary program, in the estuary program's voice asking for the transport of sediments because that's the future of Southeast Louisiana.

BERGERON: Thank you. I appreciate everything you shared with us Kerry.

ST PE: Thank you.

Tape Ends [36:28]