

Interview with Barbara on February 19th, 2009 at her home in Bettie, North Carolina. Barbara writes cooking curriculum materials and does earth science environmental consulting work for soil scientists.

Q.1. Connection to Down East

Henry

Tell me about your personal and family history in Down East. How long have you or your family been living Down East full time or part time?

Barbara

My family moved here when I was two years old in 1969. My parents still live here. They live down in Gloucester. But I was raised in Beaufort, in town, and went to Beaufort Elementary and middle school and high school, then moved away for college. So I've lived here most of my life although I've moved away.

Henry

And you've lived Down East how long?

Barbara

Since '96. My husband and I bought this little cottage in '96.

Henry

And have you lived here full time since then or is it a part time – seasonal?

Barbara

It's part time. It was full time, but then in 2000 he got a job up North. And so since then we've been here on a very sporadic schedule. Sometimes full time but not always, because of my work down here – I was doing some environmental fieldwork down here that's kept me down here while he was up there.

Henry

I see. So – but you were not born in Carteret County, but you lived most of your life one way or the other there –

Barbara

Yeah. And I'm definitely not considered a local. Even though I feel kind of like a local.

Henry

So what attracted you to return to this area?

Barbara

At that time I thought I'd like to have kids and I wanted to raise them in a place that had this strong community that I enjoyed growing up. And I wanted him to see this particular area – I wanted him to see this. I've always thought it was some of the most beautiful beaches and just water anywhere. So I brought him back initially just to show him this area. And then he fell in love with it and we stayed.

Henry

With your familiarity with Down East and having lived here now for awhile, what is it about Down East that to you makes it unique or different from other places in your experience?

Barbara

I think it is just how distinct the different communities are because of the geographical isolation and that – all the different accents from Harkers Island compared to Cedar Island and Stacy and everything was so distinct. And I just find the language so colorful, the cadence and the phrases and just so much about the language and the culture.

Q.2. Connection to Down East natural environment

Henry

What do you value about the environment Down East?

Barbara

How close the people are to the cycles of the – to the environment, people intimate with the environment which I appreciate, the knowledge of the water and the weather.

I enjoy the weather. It's so nice and mild. And I like hot summers. I like hot, humid summer on the water. I think it's a beautiful environment and beautiful landscape. It's not dramatic. I also love the Utah deserts and California. But I like this subtle, sublime sort of beauty here – the environment here.

I particularly enjoy being out on the water Down East. And my – he's not really my uncle, but a friend who I call an uncle – I just help him set his flounder nets and things like that. He does fishing, commercial fishing, but actually he's not commercial, just for his own freezer. And he knows everything about the water and just living off of the land – the seafood here.

Q.3. Professional perspective on Down East

Henry

So how did you end up doing the work that you do? I'm particularly interested in – since this is an interview focused on sort of environmental issues, the work that you do in relationship to the environment and natural resources, how did you end up doing that kind of work?

Barbara

I got a degree in geology. When I came back here with my husband, I had done plenty of field mapping and working with GIS, and so I got a job with a soil scientist here who helps people try to get septic permits – and environmental field assessments, watershed mapping, wetland delineation.

Henry

What kind of insight has that given you into the area, given your particular professional angle?

Barbara

Well, the one thing is that it's very low. The land is so low and the water table is so high. And it's tough for people to get septic permits. As environmental standards have gotten more stringent, some local people that have inherited land are finding that they can't get a permit, or they have but they have to install a very, very expensive pretreatment system, which is too much to pay for. And so I've seen it be a challenge for local people who are trying to stay where they grew up. And so that's a big limiting factor right now for development, which is okay. But it's interesting. Sometimes it's tough when people can't build the house on their land that they inherited or can't do anything with their land, but I understand the limitations also. It's critical to maintain the water quality.

There are people who have even purchased land that they were told could get a system or thought could get a system or just sort of in an unofficial way looks like it. There are options and there are hard luck sort of considerations that the county tries to help people. But it's a balance between helping people who have these hardship situations and protecting the environment. And that's difficult as the person on the ground telling the landowner, "Sorry," and especially when it's not a developer. It's just a young couple or something.

Henry

So do you think that that's the major sort of limiting factor, environmental factor impacting development in Down East?

Barbara

Well it's a major one. Water quality in general and— I don't know all of the issues related to larger scale development, but yeah I think that a lot of the easy land that can be approved easily has already been developed. It's very low. And sea level rises. And so I think that that problem is only gonna get worse.

Q.4. Community and Environmental Change

Henry

Talk about changes that you've seen in this area.

Barbara

The biggest change that I'm aware of is the sense – I think that now there's the sense the commercial fishing as a livelihood is dying as a viable option. And I know – I think that that is a change since 30 years or 35 years ago. I don't remember that being sort of this sense of doom. For me that's the most profound. That's a huge thing that I think is very sad. And that has to do with – that's such a complex situation -- the water quality and also the overharvesting and tearing up of the bottom – all these different things that are factors.

Imported seafood is so much cheaper. And the little sea-side restaurants around here don't sell local shrimp on their shrimp burgers. The fancy restaurants have local seafood. Even if the stocks are fine, it's that you can't make a living spending backbreaking work getting paid – earning nothing, very little.

Henry

Yeah. So it's a combination of environmental factors and market forces?

Barbara

Or pressure on water quality and market forces. And then also the complicated relationship between the methods of trawling or methods that destroy habitat– just several factors. A lot of fishermen work on dredges and they go off to other jobs. It might be there would be less and less seafood for us. The fish houses have largely closed; there used to be quite a few more fish houses and places to sell the seafood that you would catch.

Henry

And what's contributed to the water quality issues? What's caused that problem?

Barbara

The biggest factor in my understanding is stormwater runoff. We don't have a lot of – considering the amount of wetlands we have and the amount of land – we don't have a lot of

impervious surfaces Down East. I think Down East is still in pretty good shape, as opposed to other parts of the county which are much more developed. I mean, there's agricultural runoff and septic system failures, but the largest thing in my understanding that affects the water quality is stormwater runoff. And that is as bigger developments and more dense developments – that would become more of a problem.

Henry

Are there changes that you've observed to the landscape of the area?

Barbara

Just so much clear-cutting. It has stopped lately, but a lot of time if somebody wants to make some land ready to sell, they just cut everything – clear-cut everything. Suddenly, it's supposed to be a more marketable piece of property, which I don't agree with. So loss of habitat for small, like the red foxes and lots of other animals. But there's a tremendous amount of loss of habitat from just all this clearing of land. And when there was a lot it going on, you would see foxes just hit in the road a lot because they didn't – they were just displaced. And they were just getting hit left and right.

Q.5. Vision for the future of Down East

Henry

What is your vision of how you would like Down East to be in the future?

Barbara

Maintaining the water quality and environmental protection is critical. And because this is an un-zoned place, right now, there's some concern that development happen in a way that still protects the environment water quality. Hopefully development is gonna start to become low-impact development as just a matter of course because it's appealing and there aren't really that many downsides to it. And there's a big upside to it. And I would hope that we could find a way to keep commercial fishing viable because I really think it has to do with also our local food security sort of. We have access to all of this abundance and the people know how to gather the food from the waters here. And then increasing the opportunities for locally grown produce – local diverse offerings. We have some and Bettie has one of the major farms here that produces – that has a produce stand.

I would like to see us use our natural renewable resources here in a way that will keep the local community – maximize the resiliency of the local community. Which means developing solar here and also I think with the wind, finding a way to have decentralized power generating systems so that when the grid goes down, which it does a lot down here, we can have these homegrown renewable resources that can keep the community going.

Q.6. Barriers to and opportunities for achieving your vision

Henry

What do you see as the opportunities for achieving the vision you've described, or obstacles that might get in the way?

Barbara

There's so much opportunity to make wise choices in planning for the future. In the long-term future I don't know if this whole place might be uninhabitable because of sea level rise. So we might all have to be relocated inland in the longer term. But if that didn't happen or until that happened, I would like to see some planning, like comprehensive planning. I think planning is a good thing. This whole area is un-zoned right now. And I think there's a lot to be gained from planning or just like having a vision.

Obstacles that get in the way I think are, we have an interesting relationship here with whether we want to be zoned or un-zoned. Down East has traditionally had very much resistance to zoning because there is this independent spirit. Not having any zoning makes it really hard to do any really comprehensive planning, laying out overall planning.