Interview with Susan, May 11th, 2009. Susan is the director of a local museum, and lives in Harkers Island, North Carolina.

Q.1.: Connection to Down East

Nancy: How long have you or your family been living Down East?

Susan: We’ve been here at least two to three hundred years.

Nancy: What is it about this place that keeps you living here?

Susan: I lived away for nine years. I was in college and teaching. I really didn’t want to come back, because I knew when I came back I would never leave again, and I really love new adventures, and love going to new places. But I ended up coming back because I married back home and I know this is where I need to be. So there is a great satisfaction knowing that. I really love being here in my granny’s house that was her grandmother’s house. And I feel a real peace about being here. And I tell people every night when I close that old Montgomery door that I am very fortunate to be on a square of land that has been in the family for six generations and to have a family that appreciates that like my family does.

I hope that everybody who is here, whether they been here forever, or just got here, they realize the power of this place and the beauty of it. And the beauty is not just in the trees or the landscape, but in the people and in the stories of the past and they recognize that each one of them has a say so. That the decisions we make are going to determine the future and that this place is worth fighting for, it’s worth working for.

Nancy: How would you say that your community differs from others Down East?

Susan: They’re every one different. The Harkers Island that I knew and loved and still love is not necessarily the Harkers Island that is there now. I see its faults and its challenges and its blindsides, but the Harkers Island I grew up in in the 1960s and 70s was a beautiful place. The oak trees, when I see those oaks, I just tremble, because I know what they mean, I know how long they’ve been there, and how deep they run. So the oaks are very important to me. I think the sense of community - I think the amount of talent, natural born talent, whether it is building a boat or singing. There’s a great music tradition there. You find it in the churches. There is a great literary talent there. People there can write, they can talk. The brogue there, like in all of Down East is still intact, at least in part. I think all of those elements are identifying factors that separate Harkers Island from Atlanticers and Atlanticers from Mashallbergers – although I do have a strong influence from Marshallberg, that’s for sure. Some people call me an Islandberger.

Q.2.: Connection to Down East natural environment

Nancy: Are there things that you particularly value about the environment here?

Susan: I think the water is the mainstay. I had never really been conscious or involved in water quality issues until the last four or five years ‘cause I just took it for granted. I grew up overboard. It never crossed my mind that we would have water around us that may or may not be safe for my children to swim in or for me to eat out of. I think the water, because of our geography and the fact that everything uphill does run down hill. Our environment is totally based on the water. The impact of our decisions affects the health of our water resource.

Q.4.: Community and Environmental Change

Nancy: What are the main changes that you’ve seen during the time that you’ve lived Down East?

Susan: I think the landscape. The built structures are the physical part you see. The harder to see part is the changes to communities. Harkers Island certainly has felt it more than others. Used to, when you went to the post office, you never saw a stranger. Now, depending on what time of day you go you may not see anyone you know from Harkers Island. Those are the physical, the obvious, the visible things. What’s invisible is that people on Harkers Island feel they’ve lost their community. A lot of people have sold their land on Harkers Island and moved to the mainland. Because land is cheaper here. For instance, my husband and I bought Granny’s house in Marshallberg and we could not afford to buy my grandmother’s house on Harkers Island because it was on the water. The economics are totally different. A lot of people say, well it is not Harkers Island anymore. They don’t feel like they’ve left Harkers Island, Harkers Island has left them. Harkers Island has changed one family at a time.

Not all change is bad. There are some wonderful people who have moved to the island and become great assets. They have gotten involved in the church, or the school, or they volunteer at the museum, or the Park Service, or the Down East Library. So it’s not a total loss or a total gain. It is the pace of the change, which has slowed down because of the economy. Just the whole change of people’s perception of Harkers Island. It used to be that Harkers Island was connected to each other, and now it is diluted. I think one of the ways you can really tell the difference is at Christmas. Used to, Christmas, the lights on Harkers Island. People would drive from all over the county to come see the lights because everyone loved to decorate. Some was tacky-tacky and some was beautiful. But every night, as soon as it was dark, we got in the car to see it. And we knew what color every person’s house would be. Now when you ride around at Christmas you’ve got 4 dark houses and 2 lit houses because the summer people and part time residents don’t decorate their houses.

Nancy: Can you talk a little bit about if you think local fisheries have changed, and if so how they’ve changed?

Susan: Commercial fishing is totally – culturally, historically, and economically was the backbone of Down East. And on Harkers Island there was 7 or 8 fish houses and probably the same number of scallop houses. The whole front of the island, which is the south side, along the channel is where they moored their big boats, and up close is their skiffs. The whole dynamic was along that shore because everyone depended on the water at least part time. A lot of people went to work at Cherry Point in the 50s and 60s. That’s where my daddy went. But they were still fishermen. If there was a lot of fish that fall they’d quit Cherry Point for two or three months and go fish and then they’d go back in January. So they wanted to be fishermen whether they were or not. And it was the same way in Atlantic…

Because of water quality issues and because of regulations – most fishermen would tell you that regulation is what is really killing them – but that’s not really apart from environmental regulations. A lot of the fish stocks are down… There is also the import issue. I wish it was against the law for, specifically Carteret County, Dare County, these coastal counties to buy imported seafood. That’s almost sacrilegious. But I know the economics of it. Restaurants need to stay in business. It’s a cheaper product and the public doesn’t know the difference. So hopefully with projects like Carteret Catch, Brunswick Catch, and Dare County is doing a project. A lot of it is education. And I think when people know the difference and they realize that their decisions are impacting local communities and local families they will make the right decisions.…

But when I see a trawler heading out on Sunday afternoon it’s like seeing a flowerpot on the front porch, it’s part of what you’re used to. I know a couple of years ago, the year before last, in the fall, that was the summer that was so dry and we had a big rain… There was a lot of fresh water that started filtering down into the Neuse River… It caused the shrimp to migrate up river. And when the rain came, it washed the shrimp down. And they were big nice shrimp because it was late in the season. And the whole world turned to shrimp. I mean they were catching 200 boxes a night and it was like it used to be. It was like it used to be in shrimp season, or scallop season, or fish season when everyone was working it. I have a friend who just moved to Harkers Island and she said, I’ve never seen anything like it. I bet there were 40 lights out there catching shrimp because people came out of retirement to get in on that shrimp run. I have a friend who was at Ocracoke and she said that fish house was just a hub. It really makes you realize how different and how small the fishery is compared to what it used to be.

Q.5.: Vision for the future of Down East

Nancy: What is your vision for the future of Down East? What would you like to see for your children or grandchildren?

Susan: I really would love to see Down East people realize the true value of who they are and where they are and the fact that we do not have to change to survive. We have to adapt, but we do not have to change. Because there are people out there who want to live in places like we have and there are visitors who want to come to places like we have and we can be who we are and we can accommodate those who want to move here and those who want to visit here and still keep it a place where local people recognize it as who we are and where we are. And some of it is already going on Down East, but to really put it all together in an organized effort with a long term plan with some guidelines and mechanisms that we can protect ourselves from ourselves. Because the reality is that nobody is going to come in and do anything unless we sell. At Harkers Island, specifically now so much of the land has been sold that the people who bought it are selling it. And what I’ve observed is that the people that buy it from the local people have a different perspective from the people who bought it two or three sales later. So just keeping that sense of place consciousness is vital.

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

Nancy: What do you see as some of the obstacles or opportunities for achieving this solution?

Susan: The opportunities are that we are at a time and place where we can make a difference for the future. I think it is urgent even in a slower economy. Several years ago it was going full blast. The reality is that those plans are still at the court house. Those three hundred and some residential lots on Harkers Island, those nine hundred and some residential lots for Otway. All these projects are still there and they will still happen because they got in before any rules could change. What we could do even in that scenario is raise the consciousness of doing it right and doing it in keeping with the landscape, encourage developers and builders to have a greater sensitivity to water quality and community landscape. I always have hope. I think our greatest challenge is the local people.

The architecture of the new stuff coming in. The fewer businesses. There is less business on Harkers Island than I’ve ever known it. There is no bank. There are three restaurants. At one time there were seven. I think we’re also very concerned about the school because less than half the children actually live on Harkers Island. The rest are misplaced islanders that are living in Gloucester, Straits and Otway and they carry their children themselves over to the school. And thanks to the school board for allowing those children to come out of their district. But we really worry about the fact that Harkers Island students could easily be bused to Smyrna. And that would be the final blow to Harkers Island. I read an article out of Maine that the difference between a resort and a community is a school. And I think that’s true.