

Interview with Thomas, on June 4th, 2009, in Harkers Island, North Carolina. Thomas is a soil scientist working at an environmental consulting firm.

Q.1. Connection to Down East

Henry:

What is your connection to Down East, how did you come to be here?

Thomas:

I am not a Down Easter by generation by any sense. I am a dingbatter. That is what I am. But it is a beautiful area to live. I chose to live here. We've lived down here for about six or seven years now. A lot of people look at you strangely when you say you want to move to a remote area. But to me, there's a lot of beauty in that, of being remote. To me it's not that bad. I can't imagine why anyone would want to leave to tell you the truth. I can understand why Down Easterns like living here, it's in their blood. And it might be in mine too to some extent. The main thing, besides the water and the beauty of the areas, is the people. I like the personalities and the character of these people. They are independent, they are self-starters, they are hard workers. They will make it regardless of any recession. They are that kind of people. They are good people that live Down East. And that's probably the big attribute that this area has got.

Q.2. Connection to Down East natural environment

Henry:

What appeals to you about the area? And what, as you've gotten to know the area, do you see as unique about Down East?

Thomas:

The beauty of the area is the main attraction. I like the remoteness of the area. I like that it's low density. And fishing. I love to flounder gig. That's probably my biggest passion in my life. Nothing commercial. It's just a good place I thought to put roots down and finish up my working years and retire.

Q.4. Community and Environmental Change

Henry:

Since moving here, what changes have you seen?

Thomas:

Since the late 90's this area has really experienced a boom. It's a changing area. There's a lot of people moving to the area. There are a lot of military people, is a part of it. But this area has been found, there is no question about it. Especially growth on the mainland—in the 1990s, we had 5 or 6 hurricanes in six years. People started getting tired of getting beat-up on the beach. This was when this area, the true Down East area, started getting pressured as far as development.

Henry:

Do you think this development is changing the community?

Thomas:

It's probably not conventional in keeping with Down East. But the type of development that was coming in was coming fast and furious. People were looking for pieces of land. This was hot as far as real estate. Values were going up. We had properties that people heard was going on the market. They didn't even list it. There was one tract that was like seven people bidding on the property and it was going up week by week. There was that kind of pressure. Everything was just getting built up without thinking about the consequences.

Henry:

What consequences?

Thomas:

Well, stormwater runoff is a big one. Water quality impacts from development.

Henry:

Are there ways to reduce the impacts of development?

Thomas:

I think there is a lot that can be done with low impact development practices to reduce the impacts of storm water runoff. But nobody is looking at this as far as environmental rules, innovative low impact development type concepts. If you try to do that type of work, you'll never get it approved because it's not allowed by the building codes, mainly because of the public health and safety reasons.

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?

Thomas:

I think there need to be some decent jobs here, to keep people here. Again, talking macro, the big economics, people are going to sell their land and unless there is a stable job base here. Boat building, I hope the waterman's way of life comes back to where it used to be. There are too many rules and regulations and imports, I don't that that's going to happen, but I hope that it does. You've got to have jobs.

Also, give localities some flexibility, especially the people that have generations down here, give them a voice as far as local planning and zoning. The best thing would be good local planning and zoning. But it is very difficult.

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

Henry:

What do you see as barriers to or opportunities for achieving your vision?

Thomas:

I think that people want to be able to live and work in their own place, their own community. But until we get good jobs that can keep people here, that's conducive to these people's talents, and their backgrounds. Think about ecotourism. I go over to Shackleford Banks, I still use the ferries because those guys know how to get over there and it's a delightful trip. But, there needs to be a balance. I mean, it can't all be ecotourism type stuff. It's got to be good stable jobs that aren't ecotourism, too.