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Roger Bass

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Interviewee: Arthur Bednar and Dr. Charles Closmann

Interviewer: Roger Bass

Location: University of North Florida

November 19, 2010

- Bednar: Morning, this is Arthur Bednar at the University of North Florida conducting an interview with Roger Bass. Today is November 19, 9:00 a.m. Morning Roger, how are you doing?
- Bass: Hey I am doing great.
- Closmann: Perfect. Hi Roger this is Charles Closmann. I am the professor that is teaching the environmental history class that Arthur is a part of.
- Bass: Great. Good to be with you.
- Closmann: Anyways thanks for sharing your time with us.
- Bass: That's no problem. I am sitting here with nothing else to do at the moment.
- Closmann: Ok.
- Bednar: Ok. So we are going to talk a little about the St. Johns Riverkeeper which you were a foundering member of. When did you get the idea for the St. Johns Riverkeeper?
- Bass: Well, over twenty years ago there was only one Riverkeeper, the original one, the Hudson Riverkeeper. And there was an article in Wooden Boat Magazine that was covering the building and LAUNCHING of a wooden boat for that organization, for the Hudson Riverkeeper. And it was really an interesting boat and it detail the plans of the boat, how it was built and it also had about a page on a day on the water with John Cronin, the original Hudson Riverkeeper. And that was the first I heard of Riverkeeper movement, an organization. So I read it, and I was just captivated both by the boat itself and by the concept of what they were doing
- And so I kept the article, kept it for a number of years, and every now and then I would go back and see it and think about. And so a number of years later I got involved with a couple of different river advocacy organizations in North Florida. And after several years of being involved with them, I decided that a little different type of advocacy with the, it was called for to be more productive; more aligned the model of the Hudson Riverkeeper. And by that point there were other Riverkeepers, and so I PRESENT this concept of the Riverkeeper, St. Johns Riverkeeper to these two different

organizations at different times probably about a year apart I guess. And they both discuss a little bit that NEITHER organization was really interested in it.

So more time went along and my vocation was the Marine Surveyor. I am retired at this point, but I was a Marine Surveyor inspecting boats. So I spent a lifetime ON THE water, a lifetime on boats, a lifetime in meeting interesting people and that led me to river advocacy work. So one day I surveyed the boat and the captain was there and I was talking to him while I was inspecting the boat, I asked him is this Teddy Turner happen to be the Ted Turner from ATLANTA? And he said well no, it's his son and his son is now moved to PALM Valley and that kind of click in my head, and I said, well do you think he might be interested in an idea for getting a Riverkeeper association on the St. Johns similar to the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper in Atlanta. And the captain said, well he might be, he could get involved in environmental activities, and so he definitely could be, . So I finished my inspection of the boat, and I had to prepare a report which I then sent to Teddy Turner and in with that I put a letter pitching this idea for a St. Johns Riverkeeper. And I didn't know it at the time that they were two other things happening pretty much currently: one was that Teddy Turner's wife, Leslie Turner, her thing was her brother-in-law was the long-term Chair of the Chattahoochee Keeper. And her brother-in-law had this organization and she came along for something similar down here in their new home in Palm Valley, so she had contacted Robert Kennedy Jr. who was the head of Riverkeeper Alliance which was at that point the name of the PARENT organization's name changed to Waterkeeper Alliance, but at that point it was the Riverkeeper Alliance. So she had opened dialogue with Robert Kennedy Jr. about a Riverkeeper on the St. Johns. And at the same time, there was a guy in Jacksonville that I been involved with IN these other advocacy organizations, Steve Milhalovits who was the high TECH professional, and he put together a very, at that point we're talking was twenty years ago, a very innovATIVE and comprehensive web page on the St. Johns River. And the aim of that was to influenced an appointment of the St. John's River as an American Heritage river which was one of Mihalovits's initiatives which had a lot of opposition but support also so it was a big issue at the time, and he had this big web page kind of rallying the support for the American Heritage River Designation which was seem to be a long shot at that point it was ultimately successful. So Steve Milhalovits was contacted by the Riverkeeper Alliance So there were three different activities going at which the idea is the St. Johns River Keeper. So then Steve put together a meeting, invited 25 to 30 different people representing the number of organizations which MET AT Marine Land in St. Augustine and the purpose of that meeting was to determine if THERE was a need for a St. Johns Riverkeeper. And so that was how the idea came about.

Bednar: Ok. That's an interesting story. When everything got together then, this was 1998 or 1999, around then by the time you meet together with Steve and other groups with the other Stewards and the Watershed Action Volunteers were those two organizations you're speaking about previously?

Bass: Yes.

Bednar: Prior to that did you have any involvement with Ken Longnecker in the late 80s who was trying to get a grass-root Riverkeeper program going? Were you involved in that in anyway?

Bass: Well, I told you that I had the article from the Wooden Boat Magazine back when there was only one Riverkeeper organization, and then probably five years later, I saw the article in the Times Union of Jacksonville's newspaper about Longnecker, and a Riverkeeper being form on the St. John's River. And I was NOT involved in these other organizations; I don't think it existed at that time, so I kept two articles out of the paper about Longnecker because that I still have in the back of my mind from the Wooden Boat Magazine, and I was intrigued by it and this was a reaction to hey, this is great, someone is doing it, this is fantastic. And he got a boat donated by one of the boat dealers supposedly and later found out a little more about that. So I thought that's a great deal here was going to happen, and so I had absolutely had no contact with Longnecker, never met the gentleman.

So he made a little bit of the splash, a positive splash, no opposition that I thought that point. There were a couple pictures of I believe in the paper him and the mayor (Tommy Hazouri), taking that trip on the river in his boat, St. Johns Riverkeeper on the side of it which I cut out and kept the copy over the years, and when went into my folder that had the Wooden Boat Magazine article in it. And after about those few articles and maybe a public meeting or two which I didn't attend, I was not involved at that point, it disappeared totally, and when we met for an number of years later met for the St. Johns Riverkeeper. The second effort that is just about completely fallen out of the public memory expect for a few people that took me to the side and said were you involved in, did you know about, and I found a little more of the back story totally absolved of that.

Bednar: So in the late 90s when you were organizing everything, I read that the Watershed Action Volunteers and the Stewards of the St. Johns were a little apprehensive to joining together with the idea of the Riverkeeper. Could you explain maybe why that was?

Bass: Well, the Watershed Action Volunteers at that point was a brand new organization formed by the St. Johns Water Management District which is a quasi public funding so with a state appointed board member of it. So it kind of, I don't know how much you know about that organization but they do a lot of environmental permitting, and I think they had several different faces on how they appeared to the environmental groups in North Florida at different times depending on who their executive director was, what was their board made up of, and how their actions actually being perceive, so they formed this new educational arm called the Way Program. And Bill Watson was giving charge of developing this with a very vague idea of what it will become and really took off and was kind of open to what it was going to be, and onetime Bill Watson turned to the group to which the original members were Steve Mihalovits and me and said you all can kind of form it how you want to form it, and that was when I floated the Riverkeeper organization to it. And I actually got kind of excited about and then we're thinking well you know if we really taking an advisory position on something that the Board is actually doing that might be not pretty. And it came obvious very quickly that was a pretty wise thought.

Bass: So there was a WAV Program involved along the lines of the way you expect a government issued environmental agency based public out-reach program should be, which they are scared to death to touch anything controversial. So that in my opinion pretty much explain why we also didn't really want to touch it.

Bednar: Gotcha.

Bass: Although originally they were very opened to it. This was before they really got their identity and figured out what they want to do, and probably thought it through a little bit better. So that leads the second half of your question which is the Stewarts and that is a much more complicated situation because the original meeting there was the Chair of the Stewarts. I was on the Board of the Stewarts, and there were at least two more members of the Board of the Stewarts at that meeting and continued the meeting for a good while. So they were original very opened to the idea. The issues came up a little further down the road.

Bednar: Ok, and as from what I read I guess the main issue was over or the Rodman Dam. Is that correct?

Bass: Well, you ought to back up and discuss the very first meeting in Marine Land, and there were several kind of key groups that were there. There was the Stewarts of the St. Johns who probably had five representatives at that meeting. There was the Sierra Club who probably had very

overlapping relationships here probably everybody on the Stewarts was also members of the Sierra Club. The Gator Club was represented there, and then the Florida Defenders of the Environment which rose out of Gainesville, but it was a state-wide organization was there. And one their big issues was tearing down the water reservoir Rodman Dam and restoring the Ocklawaha River to a free flowing river. And Steve Mihalovits invited every state holder you can identify to the group meeting, and so there was at least three, four, maybe five members of the sport's fishing community including the president of a sport fishing, a Bass fishing organization based out of Palatka, pretty much based almost down, you can say out of the Rodman Dam Reservoir. And their biggest issue was being that the Rodman Dam was not torn down. So you have two groups that this original meeting wants our biggest goal to tear down the dam. One of whose biggest goal to see that the dam was not tore down, and then one group, the Stewarts who kind of in the middle, they were, didn't take a strong position on that. They were a little more pragmatic you might say. So it made some interesting dynamics in that original meeting, and then the second meeting I believed somewhere between the first and third meeting four of the five Bass fishermen representatives walked out and never to be seen again.

Bednar: Wow!

Bass: So that left the Florida Defenders of the Environment who wanted a very very strong environmentally based Riverkeeper that was going to pushed a relatively private view of leading the fight to tearing down the dam, and the Stewarts' view which was a little more middle of the road of, a little more widely vague, was trying to be inclusive of the many of the Bass fishermen as we can, and let's don't fight over this one issue, let's fight for the overall health of the river so that kind of issue was then splitting the Stewart environmental organizations. So then there were various meetings over a long period of time that were fighting for the future of this organization, and what were their position was going to be on the Rodman Dam.

Baynard: So that continue that way, and what I read I guess probably the other founders who were trying to get it started with you, one being Steve. Did he not like the direction that he felt the Riverkeeper was going then?

Bass: Well, most of the Stewards pick-up their toys and walked away right at the same time that Mihalovits pick-up his toy and ran away. And there you can take that in several different ways, but Steve was one of the guys that got a lot done, was very productive, but he saw things very black and white, and you were either with him or against him, and he was polarizing. And he painted himself into a corner just becoming more more strident. This before this happen he actually moved away, and I think he is living in

West Palm Beach, but kind of getting more and more strident, and record level of meetings were getting higher. And then he did a couple of things that, I am sure LOOKED differently depending on where you sat around the circle of the table, but awful lot of people, well some of the people it look like a breach of trust. And that much at that point that blew up in his face, and was pretty much irreparable no matter what he did or didn't want to do. He had set up, he being the IT professional, set it up at that time, talking twenty years ago or so, he is very-well not that quite long-but awhile ago very innovated for this time. Six years email chat service where we could all talk have a log of all of our conversations and it was securely limited to us and this is going on for about six months, so there was issues that were being talked about that people freely discuss because of whether they secured meeting communications. So he got ticked off and give Ron Littlepage at the password to this thing.

Bednar: Oh.

Bass: And it had the entire history of all the very email messages and other things that people had made under the guise of being totally secured only along us in the group. And he didn't guess what would have occurred after that happen.

Bednar: Wow!

Bass: One, Ron Littlepage wrote a very juicy column in the Time's Union, and two, there were people ready to lynched Steve Mihalovits. Fortunately, he wasn't in town, so they didn't actually; physically get their hands around his neck, so they can only do it by email.

Bednar: Wow! Yeah, I read a couple of those articles by Littlepage. There are quite reveling. I guess one of them dealing with, I think it was titled The Riverkeeper on the Rocks or Program on the Rocks, and it had some interesting quotes from how this in there.

Bass: Yeah.

Bednar: But I guess getting back to another side of this starting, so the Turner Foundation did they supply the initial seed money to get the Riverkeeper going?

Bass: Yes they did.

Bednar: Ok. And how involved were they, was the Turner Foundation part of the reason between the ideological split between different sides because of Leslie Turner's environmental advocacy?

- Bass: That's an interesting question. What lead to you ask that question?
- Bednar: Just what I had read that she sided more along the lines with the FDE, and it you know Mihalovits was quoted as saying that, "He didn't like the direction that the Riverkeeper was going", and quoted, "Yeah another negative elitist organization that demonizes their opposition, until they been tempered." So I wasn't sure if that wasn't regards to the Turner Foundation or just internal issues in general.
- Bass: I am trying to, you are taking me the long way back. Leslie had some type of relationship. I think she was a college friend, maybe even a sorority sister of the executive director of FDE. I am not sure that's kind of coming back to me, so that made her a suspect. And she was kind of pushing the FDE side of it.
- Bednar: Gotcha
- Bass: And then you have look at Steve's viewpoint if either you are for me or you are against me. So you can see how Steve would clearly paint things, and a certain ideological format that might not be necessarily be totally based in TRUTH or maybe partly based in TRUTH. I am not sure of that. I don't think that the Turner Foundation was seen as anyway inputting things. I am mean we were all awfully glad to get any money we can get by any type of activity, so there were never any issues there, and Leslie went on to be a founding board member and served for, I am not sure it was more than one term, but it was very, it had a lot of impact on the organizations. So Steve was a lucky person; take this out of glasses at this point I think because I'm not sure how clear they made it then.
- Bednar: Ok. And this far as the other, I guess at that point, the other original members that helped along the way had Quinton White from JU, one of the marine biologist there, and also Ben Williams and was he the only commercial fisherman that stuck around after the issues over the Rodman Dam?
- Bass: Well, I would broaden that a little bit and drop the word commercial fisherman. Ben is related to the commercial fishing business. He is one time was a commercial fisherman but at this point he has a fish business where is buying fish from commercial fishermen. And he is an ardent sports fisherman that frequently gets his name and/or his picture in paper for winning tournaments. So I would say that he represented at the time had representing both the commercial and sports fishing by the fishing games.
- Bednar: Ok.

- Bass: And yeah he definitely ended up being the only one that stayed with us to represent that.
- Bednar: After getting approved from what I seen in the late 80s when Ken Longnecker had the idea of trying to get small grass-roots Riverkeeper going, he had a hard time getting his IRS 501C3 designation which the Riverkeeper that you founded achieved in early 2000. Was that a problem or was it just a lack of infrastructure that he might possible did not had at the time that you were able to acquire?
- Bass: My understanding of Longnecker had a couple of, excuse me while I take a drink of water here
- Bednar: That's ok.
- Bass: I had a couple of head wins that he faced. One was at that point there was no formal way of becoming a Riverkeeper. There was no national organization; there was no life to being a Riverkeeper you basically just pop up as a Riverkeeper. And that was probably pretty irritating to the Hudson Riverkeeper, but nothing was going to replace you, so that also meant that there was no infrastructure there you can get guidance on or lean on or abetted by. And so he evidently was and I never met the guy, but I understand he was salesman of some type. He had gone out and approached a local boat dealer, got them to loan him a boat with a promise of funding the cut, got the name on the side of the boat AND BEGAN running the boat. Was approaching people for money in which he could had gotten funding from individuals and others again my understanding, but he forgot to get his 501C3 or didn't understand probably what was involved in getting a 501C3, and how long that might take, so he couldn't get funds from people, but yet he already had a boat and quit his job and was out trying to function as the Riverkeeper but without that ability to even accept funds, but he got ahead of himself which was just a failed business model. So it's not to which his fault of what he was trying to do. I think he had a good idea, but he just didn't getting line up at the right way of funding didn't catch up with him, and he gotten himself quickly into a position where he had to go get a job. That was my understanding.
- Bednar: Ok. Were there any complications on your side when it came time for getting everything incorporated and getting your designation in the late 90s and early 2000?
- Bass: Once when we got serious about forming the Riverkeeper, we got a couple of attorneys to volunteer with us, and so they were able to make an application for a 501C3 and do it in a proper manner so it was very quickly provisionally approved. I don't know how much you know about 501C3, but we were able to make it happen fairly quickly and it's really

kind of funny because the Stewarts cannot have an attorney involved it basically was a long-term organization and they just had just getting their 501C3 approved because they just couldn't figure out to do it. Just took them several years to do it. For years, people were saying among ourselves well I can have these guys really need us because they can use our 501C3, and they can run all of this through us, and they think they are going to get a 501C3, and they can't do it that quick. We know, it takes years to get a 501C3. And then the group that was doing this needed to, you know this, but three months they got the 501C3 up and running. And the Stewards were just sitting there deflate and "oh my God, how can they did they do this?"

Bednar: Hahaha!

Bass: And it was funny to observed just one of those humorous little side moments from all of this drama.

Bednar: Wow! So...

Bass: And let me throw this in the pot. Part of this Stewart's position was this Riverkeeper, they are a great organization. A great idea, we love it, but the Stewarts spent years building our presence as the VOICE of the St. Johns River, and we have a mailing list, we have a relationship with the politicians in North Florida, and we have relations with the media, and blah and blah. And we have a 501C3 which you guys are going to need one, and they are hard to get. So you going have to just, you know, Riverkeeper can reform under our 501C3, and so that was kind of where they were trying to be angled, they were trying to work because they, and I was in the Stewards at the same time, so I am part of them, but anyways that was part of the minor little politic that was going behind all of this.

Bednar: Ok. So being...

Bass: And let me just finished that thought. The FDE side which I have to say included Leslie at this point was like: well one, we know we can get a 501C3 at the drop of the hat, and two there is some baggie that goes with the Stewarts, and they haven't been that effective. And three, their basically a Jacksonville based organization. We want to be a river-wide base organization. And those rivers are 310 miles long. Jacksonville is merely restricted to one little small county, even if it's the largest city in the world or in outer space. So there was a little tactical war going back and forth is to, whether this 501C3 we going sit under the Stewarts' existing 501C3 or whether there was going to be a brand-new entity.

Bednar: Ok. Yeah, I think I remember reading at one point. There was discussion on whether or not to call the Riverkeeper the Lower St. John's

Riverkeeper. I guess that would have been if the Riverkeeper as we know it would have remained under the Stewards?

Bass: No, that was not really a part of that thought. It was just, well ok; I will go ahead and just put this on the table. What really motivated that, and I hope I don't burn in Hades for admitting that, but if you look at the St. Johns River Water Management District DIVIDED the river up into 310 mile long river of three BASINS, THE UPPER BASIN, middle BASIN, and lower BASIN and the diving line of the lower and middle BASINS is just above the Ocklawaha. So if we made our name, the lower St. Johns Riverkeeper, then we wouldn't be, wouldn't have the Ocklawaha under our jurisdiction, and so then there be no point fighting over the Ocklawaha Dam.

Bednar: Oh, Ok.

Bass: That was probably the very transparent ploy that is the reason it got nowhere.

Bednar: I didn't think about that. That makes perfect sense now that you said it. What other if just in your opinion, you know that seeing the Riverkeeper that you helped found in the late 90s and being the original the Hudson Riverkeeper was founded, well started in the 60s but really got its feet wet there in the early 70s. What would say maybe be a reason or a couple of reasons why people don't feel that the St. Johns being such an important resource to this area, why you would feel, why it didn't have a Riverkeeper of its own until you came along and the others came along and helped put one together?

Bass: Well, that is a complex question to answer, and I'm not in any way qualified to answer that question, but I can say at least one, maybe one component of it as I see and that is North Florida along with probably Northwest Florida in my opinion is probably the most conservative part of Florida. And if you want to find any liberal politics in Florida, you're going have to just go to Orlando or Miami. You are not generally going find them in north or northwest Florida. And Northwest Florida is politically, inculturally, very conservative, and I will go ahead to stick it further I guess. And my opinion most of Florida has been driven at the earliest years of estate by the real estate development complex. And that goes all the way back to the 1920s when the easiest way to make money in Florida and probably the only way to make money in Florida was to subdivide swampland that were underwater and sell it to Yankees by mail that they never saw. And from that at point to the day that the development industry pretty much controlled the political process, and that is still been continuing today if you look at the Water Management District, and look at half as many of the board of governors that entity are

appointed or from the development industry or the agricultural industry. So that would be my answer that would probably make me persona non grata in a lot parts of North Florida.

Bednar: Hahaha! Well that's Ok. One last...

Bass: That's ok is never going to be heard anywhere again expect of the headline of Ron Littlepage's next column right?

Bednar: No! Hahaha! No. No. He will not get a hold of this I promise. No slipping to the media.

Bass: Ron is a good guy. As long as he is not biting your tail or my tail he's a great guy.

Bednar: So when everything got going, would you say that the main goal of the Riverkeeper was to be more of an advocate for the crack interpellation of the environmental laws already on the books or do you see the organization's goal as maybe more of a source of environmental education for the community, maybe more outreach or was it honestly both? Meaning I guess did you...

Bass: I would say the latter, but I can only speak for myself. And my main goal was advocacy, but I always felt and this came with my time with the Way Program, and the Stewarts and that the reason that the other organizations that had been working on river advocacy were not as effective as they didn't have enough broad base public support. And to build the broad base public support you needed public education and outreach. So, my number one goal was enforcing environmental regulations, but I knew that we needed education and outreach to do it.

Bednar: Gotcha, gotcha. You are not an officially affiliated with the Riverkeeper anymore, is that correct?

Bass: I am a member.

Bednar: You still a member, but are you still on the board?

Bass: No.

Bednar: Ok, alright. I assume you were still there when you hired Mike Hollingsworth was the first Riverkeeper. Would you be the one that brought him on board?

Bass: You got to correct your question; Mike Hollingsworth was the second Riverkeeper.

- Bednar: Oh, he was the second Riverkeeper. I always under the impression he was the first Riverkeeper. Who was the first Riverkeeper?
- Bass: I don't remember her name, but we hired a woman, signed an employment agreement with the woman, and have a series of situations that developed at least six to nine months where by her starting date kept changing, and then she was actually driving down from southern Georgia, was driving down from Georgia to start work. The next morning, had another delay and had to turn and couldn't come. And kind of in an emergency decision we told her don't worry about it, don't show up. So she never actually showed up. She never received a paycheck, but she did have a signed employment agreement as the St. Johns Riverkeeper.
- Bednar: Ok. And then Mike Hollingsworth was...
- Bass: Mike Hollingsworth was the first person that actually worked as the St. Johns Riverkeeper.
- Bednar: Ok. How do you feel his tenure was with the Riverkeeper? You think that...I guess maybe comparing him to Neil Armingeon, the current Riverkeeper?
- Bass: I wouldn't do that.
- Bednar: Ok. No problem. Well, I think that'll do it, and thank you so much for taking the time to give this interview.
- Bass: Well, I enjoyed it. There were exciting times, and I enjoyed the opportunity to relive them. I hope you have good luck with your project, and it turns out real well and to be beneficial in the future.
- Bednar: Thank you, thank you so much, and I have enjoyed, I spoke with Jimmy Orth over there and Neil Armingeon as well. Great organization, and it's come a long ways and you should be proud of what you did to get it started. It's doing a lot of great things here in Jacksonville and the whole Northeast Florida area.
- Bass: Ok. Thanks