Dr. Andrew Sansom

Interviewed by Jen Brown
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San Marcos, Texas

Transcribed by Alyssa Lucas

[Andrew Sansom]: Does this sound okay?

[Jen Brown]: Yes, it does.

[Sansom]: Okay.

[Brown]: Thank you. So, it is September 12, 2022, and this is Jen Brown. I'm in San Marcos, Texas, at the Meadows Center for Water and the Environment, and I'm here to do an oral history with Dr. Andrew Sansom. So, to begin, do I have your permission to record?

[Sansom]: Yes.

[Brown]: All right, thanks. Um, since this is an oral history, we like to start off, um, can you tell me more about your background and early life?

[Sansom]: Well, I grew up on the coast in Lake Jackson, which is at the mouth of the Brazos River, so I—and at the time, it was almost rural in the sense that there was very little development around it, and I spent a good part of my childhood in a boat on the creek behind my house and walking in the woods and, you know, across the creek, so I basically grew up in the outdoors. I was a lifeguard. I began working and earning money as a lifeguard probably when I was fourteen, and that led me to consider a career in sort of parks and recreation, and I graduated from Texas Tech ultimately with a degree in Park Administration, and at the time, I was, um, this was basically in the middle of the Vietnam War, and I was about to be drafted, but I was offered an internship with an organization called the National Recreation and Park Association in Washington, and the draft board considered that an extension of my education and thus gave me a one-year deferment. And so my wife and I moved to Washington in 1969, and I went to work for NRPA, ultimately became—I had been writing all of my life, and President Nixon's second appointment to the Interior Department was a man named Rogers Morton who was a congressman from Maryland, and Mr. Morton read some of my writing, and I'm not really sure where, but his office called me. Now, bear in mind at the time I was probably twenty-one or twenty-two, I mean, very young, and so I was actually terrified to go see a cabinet officer but, you know, he asked me to come see him, so I went to see him, and he and I had a pretty spirited conversation about my views and his on the environment and much of which we agreed, some we didn't, and he all of a sudden said, "I have to give a commencement address at Washington College in Maryland tomorrow night, would you write the speech?" And I had never written a speech, but I said, "Well, I'll try," so I called my wife and I said, "Honey, I

can't come home because the Secretary has asked me to write his speech for tomorrow," and I stayed up at the Interior Department and wrote it, went home, and took a shower in the morning and came back and handed it to him. He marked it up, and I went back upstairs and typed up a clean copy. He made this commencement address that evening, and I went to work as his speech writer on Monday morning.

[Brown]: (laughs) Really?

[Sansom]: So, that's how I ended up in the Interior Department.

[Brown]: So, can you talk about how your, you mentioned your views on the environment, can you talk about how those evolved and the influences on those views?

[Sansom]: Well, you know, once again, if you put yourself—and as a historian, I'm sure you can imagine that the two big issues that were driving American youth at that time were the Vietnam War and the environmental movement, and that's probably more than anything else spurred from Rachel Carson, the oil spills that had begun to occur off California, and so the environment was an issue that was very, very passionate, you know, among young people across the United States, and that alone had a major influence on me. I was involved for almost a full year with an effort called the White House Conference on Youth and one of the topics that that conference considered was the environment, and so I spent almost a year traveling all over the United States with this committee that I was the executive director of, getting youth attitudes and opinions and feelings about the environment and so, you know, that was a major, major influence on me and caused me to—allowed me to really learn considerably more about the issue. The other thing you have to remember is that the primary environmental legislation that has been passed by Congress all took place during the Nixon administration, and so it was a topic in Congress as well, big topic. When you think of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the establishment of the National Environmental Policy Act, all that occurred while I was in Washington, so it was a major part of the issues of the day.

[Brown]: What year did you start with the Interior Department?

[Sansom]: '70, probably '71.

[Brown]: Okay, and can you tell me more about what you did there and the types of issues you worked on (both talking at once)?

[Sansom]: Well, I didn't, you know, I didn't last very long as his speech writer because I was always trying to insert my own views into his speeches (Brown laughs), which didn't always coincide with those of the administration, and so we became extremely close. I mean, I was close to him even after I was later fired until the end of his life, and so we never lost—in fact, I stayed up in contact with his wife until she died at age ninety, which was, you know, I'd already come to Texas State, so it was many years, but the speech writing deal was not a right fit, and so what he did was—I became a Special Assistant to the Secretary, and he would assign me

projects. Like, I worked on the restoration of the old hotel at Mount McKinley National Park in Alaska, now called Denali, worked on wolves up there, I worked on the Big Thicket, which was a topic in Congress at the time. I specialized in projects related to Puerto Rico, particularly the Outer Islands, and so he would assign me to issues of, you know, that were topical.

[Brown]: Um-hm. Um, can you talk about your work on Matagorda Island?

[Sansom]: Yeah. Um, when I got to Washington, the environmental movement as we know it today was not a particularly high priority in Texas, and at the time when *Texas Monthly* was first came out as a publication, you didn't subscribe to it, it was on the stands at first. And so I would go down to the newsstand at the Treasury Department every single month and get, the day that they put it on the stand because I was so starved for news from home, and I discovered that a man had been elected as the head of the General Land Office named Bob Armstrong, and Armstrong was an environmentalist, and I couldn't believe it, you know, that an environmentalist had been elected to statewide office in Texas, and so I called him, and he took my call, and I said, "Commissioner, I'm thrilled that you've been elected, and I'll do whatever I can to, you know, if you ever need anything up here, just let me know." Well, he came to see me, and that started really a lifelong relationship until his death, and I can tell you a lot about that, but he was very interested in coastal issues and got me to at least understand—one of the biggest issues that we faced during the early seventies in Texas was an oil spill in Mexico called Ixtoc, and the oil was on Mustang Island and Padre Island and Matagorda Island, and so that's how I first heard about it and so when the state of Texas began to lease offshore oil tracts off Matagorda, the Pentagon became very upset because they contended that the oil drilling would conflict with the operations of the Strategic Air Command, which at that time occupied two-thirds of the island. Um, the Audubon Society, at the same time, was freaking out because the Matagorda was one of the largest wintering areas of whooping cranes, and so I was sent by the Secretary, he called me in and he said, "You know anything about this place?" Well, because of my conversations with Armstrong, I knew enough to sound intelligent. The island was completely, at least northern two-thirds of it, completely off limits. I mean, you couldn't go there, and so all I knew was what Armstrong had told me and various things, but it was enough to have him send me down there to try to figure out whether or not in fact there was a conflict with the whoopers. So, the day I arrived on the island in 1972, there was a plane load of generals who flew in from Vietnam to hunt quail and deer, and it became apparent to me, I stayed there about three days, that the primary purpose of the island by that time was a military recreation area. They still were doing some military training, but not much, and nothing that really conflicted with the whoopers although we—and at the time, I had probably the top whooping crane scientist with the department with me. His comment was that if the military were not there, the whoopers would expand their territory, which was a big issue, as the population increased, they needed more room. So at least we concluded that the presence of the military was inhibiting the opportunity of the whoopers to expand their territory, and so I wrote a report, recommended that the base be closed and become a National Wildlife Refuge. The Secretary agreed with me, and I delivered a letter to the Secretary of Defense, who at the time was a man named James Schlesinger, who was a bird watcher, and so we figured, you know, he would be amenable to this, or sympathetic, and I delivered the letter to the Pentagon

the Wednesday before Thanksgiving in 1972. By Christmas, the Pentagon had not responded at all, and so I had sort of made a deal with Audubon that if they just laid low, that we would share our information with them if we didn't get any response from the Pentagon, and they agreed. They understood that if these two cabinet officers could work this out then that would be wonderful. Well, it didn't happen, and so I gave the report to Audubon prior to Christmas holidays in '72, was almost immediately contacted by *Sixty Minutes*. They did a story on it over the holidays, which I, by this time, I was frightened for my own survival because I knew this was treacherous water, and so I declined to be interviewed, but they did the story and then after the Christmas holidays, the *Washington Post* ran a full page, front page story on the issue and widely quoting my report, and so I lasted about two months after that and was fired (Brown laughs). But thankfully, a member of the U.S. Senate from Wisconsin whose name was William Proxmire launched a congressional investigation based on my work, and they concluded, they reached the same conclusion. And so in, probably October, November of 1973, the base was closed and ultimately became a National Wildlife Refuge. The wonderful irony for me was that about a decade later, I was serving as the CEO of The Nature Conservancy in Texas, and I had the opportunity to purchase the last 13,000 acres, which was a private ranch on the southern end of the island, so now the entire island is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

[Brown]: Wow, what a neat story (Sansom laughs). Um, so, you released this report. What's going on in your head? Like, you know it's treacherous water—

[Sansom]: —Well—

[Brown]: —why did you do it?

[Sansom]: I think the best way to describe that to you was when I opened the *Washington Post* and saw the story, on the one hand I was thrilled, but on the other hand it was like I'm doomed, and so there was a, in answer to your question, I had a mixed feeling about it from the time the report was finished because I knew that I was, by this time I was incredibly passionate about it. I mean, I was determined to see it protected, and I was thrilled when that seemed more and more likely but at the same time I was frightened for my own survival, and in fact with good reason.

[Brown]: Yeah. So what happened after you were fired?

[Sansom]: Well, I couldn't go back to work in the Nixon administration at all, and so that was like February or March of '73, and so I had become acquainted with a number of environmental issues in Puerto Rico, and so I was offered some consulting work involving the Island of Mona, which is between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic by the, essentially the secretary of interior of Puerto Rico. His name was Cruz Matos, so during, you know, during most of '73, I worked in Puerto Rico on Mona Island. When Ford became president, I was able to go back to work, and I became the head of what, at the time, was called Conservation Education in the Federal Energy Administration because at that time the other big thing that characterized that period was the Arab oil embargo, and so what is now the Department of Energy was created

because of the Arab oil embargo, and we had a major effort to get people to conserve energy across the country and involving television ads and all kinds of other media that encouraged people to conserve energy. The slogan was, “Don’t be fuelish.”

[Brown]: (laughs) Did you come up with that?

[Sansom]: No.

[Brown]: Oh.

[Sansom]: No, it already existed when I got there, but I directed the program.

[Brown]: Okay.

[Sansom]: And then when Carter became president, I had the opportunity to come home, and so I went to work at the University of Houston in ‘78, something like that.

[Brown]: Okay, um—

[Sansom]: I’d always wanted to come home. When I first went to Washington, I didn’t plan to stay there more than a year, but I ended up staying eight years.

[Brown]: What drew you to the University of Houston?

[Sansom]: The energy stuff because I was made essentially the Chief Operating Officer of an entity called the Energy Institute and what we focused on mainly was solar energy conservation. I became interested in passive solar architecture, which is a building theory, which causes buildings not to use excessive amounts of energy.

[Brown]: What was the driving push for all of this kind of renewable energy stuff at the institute at that time?

[Sansom]: The Arab oil embargo. I mean, it really woke everybody up that we were, you know, using energy without consideration of the fact that it was a finite resource and made particularly vulnerable by the fact that we imported so much of it.

[Brown]: Mm-hm. And then you had mentioned you were working at The Nature Conservancy?

[Sansom]: The issue for me at U of H was mainly that I had gotten away from the things that I was really passionate about which is the outdoors. and nature conservation. When I worked on the Big Thicket in Washington, I met the president of The Nature Conservancy and worked directly with him on activities preserving the Big Thicket and so when the job of the Executive Director came open in Texas, he recommended that they talk to me, and so that’s how the connection was made. I wasn’t even aware that the job was open, but they contacted me, and

it was a dream come true at the time. It was scary because the organization was located above a pornography shop on Sixth Street (Brown laughs). It was three and half million dollars in debt. It had probably thirty people that gave it a hundred dollars or more, and so it was teetering on literally bankruptcy in Texas, and so I didn't even move my family to Austin. I came to Austin on Mondays and went backs on Fridays because we just were not sure that it would even last, but that's how I ended up going to work for them.

[Brown]: What did you do with all of that mess?

[Sansom]: Well, the big—the big source of the debt was an absolutely sensational piece of property near Guadalupe River State Park, which is just north of San Antonio called Honey Creek, and Honey Creek was acquired by The Nature Conservancy because it encompasses an entire tributary the Guadalupe spring fed, and it's a natural area. At the time, most state parks were recreational in nature and Honey Creek was a preserve, but it had cost the organization nearly five million dollars, and they did it, went ahead and did it because Exxon gave them a million, which is probably the biggest gift they ever received, but they still had almost four million to raise, and they just had no capability of doing that. Well, at the time the Parks and Wildlife Department was under extreme pressure because it established a Duck Stamp, in other words, for the purpose of protecting waterfowl habitat in Texas, and it hadn't protected an acre, and so the pressure was really on the Parks and Wildlife Department to buy, get some wetlands, and I, I think again through those national connections of The Nature Conservancy began discussions with a consortium of oil companies that were going to build a superport for importing petroleum at the mouth of the Brazos, and it turned out it was a huge wetland, about twelve thousand acres of wetland, and thankfully they had abandoned it, not for any other reason than they just determined that it wasn't economical to do it, and so all of a sudden these major oil companies had this twelve-thousand-acre marsh that they didn't know what to do with, so what I did was I negotiated the acquisition of that marsh under what's called a bargain sale where let's say it was worth ten million dollars, you know, we paid them three and then they donated the seven and it was like that, so I got them under contract, and I went to the Parks and Wildlife Department, and I said, "Okay, we will convey this wetland to you if you'll take Honey Creek," and so by that time, also, the other thing that—I've always been fortunate to be more lucky than good (Brown laughs), and the market had expanded incredibly, so the amount of money that these, in both Honey Creek and what became the Peach Point Wildlife Management Area, was about a third of what it was now worth, so I was basically able to go to the state and say, you know, I'll be able to provide you with twelve million dollars' worth of land for four or whatever that number was, and they did it, and so that got us out of debt. The other thing I did was because the other real problem with the organization was the operating budget, and so I moved The Nature Conservancy to San Antonio. The Sixth Street location was really bad, and I had a board member that owned the building immediately facing the Alamo, called the Crockett Block, and basically he provided us with office space looking right into the front door of the Alamo, and so what I did for probably three years, was had parties in that office during the parades, and we'd charge people, you know, three or four hundred dollars to make a donation to come to the party, and by that devise, we began to work ourselves into a situation where we had sustainable operating

income.

[Brown]: Hm. Um, what sort of issues did you want to focus on and what was driving your planning for conservation?

[Sansom]: At that time, primarily land conservation. Um, there was always a water connection, like Honey Creek was there because of the springs. The marshes were there because, I mean, the wildlife management areas were there because there were marshes, wetlands, but mainly it was the land deals. I would—I finally had to start reading mystery novels like James Patterson because I would go to bed at night, and I would dream about my deals (Brown laughs). I was that consumed with these transactions, and I probably, was probably in a way one of the greatest periods of my life because I—during, between, both when I was at The Nature Conservancy and then subsequently I went to work at Parks and Wildlife as the land guy, I probably bought well over a half million acres in the eighties, and I just was exhilarated by it, but once again, it was lucky because I captured the—by this time, the market had gone like this, and so there was a period of time in the late 1980s when virtually every ranch in the state was for sale because people were going broke.

[Brown]: Hm.

[Sansom]: So, I would never have been able to acquire that much land had that not been the case.

[Brown]: Wow (laughs), what timing and context. So, what became of all that land?

[Sansom]: Most of it is in state parks, national parks, national wildlife refuges. Some of it is still held by The Nature Conservancy as private preserves.

[Brown]: Um-hm.

[Sansom]: The bulk of it is held by Parks and Wildlife. Remember I told you, and I'm sorry to be getting off the subject—

[Brown]: —That's okay—

[Sansom]: —but I told you about meeting a commissioner, Bob Armstrong. When he came to see me in Washington, he had begun efforts to preserve a property in the Big Bend region called the Big Bend Ranch, which was owned by Robert O. Anderson, the founder of Atlantic Richfield, and he came in my office, and he—this ranch has thirty-seven miles of frontage on the Rio Grande, it has an entire intact volcanic crater on it, it has two of the three highest waterfalls in Texas, but all he could talk about was the stars, the night sky in Big Bend. He was just totally enraptured when expressing to me what the night sky was like out there, and so, fast forward, when I got to The Nature Conservancy, Bob had left the Land Office, and he was on the board at TNC, and so I began efforts in the early eighties to acquire Big Bend Ranch

because he had never been successful in doing so because the legislature always fought him on it because being anti-public land acquisition, so he wasn't able to get it done, and so I went to work with the Anderson family in probably '83 and was unsuccessful, but was later hired by Parks and Wildlife to be the land acquisition person, and the department was harshly criticized by the legislature in the mid-1980s for not acquiring enough natural areas, and so there again, I landed in the right place at the right time, and I began negotiations with the Anderson family. By this time, Armstrong is now in the Parks and Wildlife Commission having been appointed by Governor Mark White. Well, we had pretty much given up because we just couldn't make a deal with them, I mean, we just, we were just pennies away it seemed like, but we just couldn't make it work, and so we had pretty much told them we were no longer interested, although I was heartbroken, and the senior member of the Anderson family called me over the Christmas holidays in '87 and told me that he thought they were ready to come to the table, so I went in to see my boss who was the CEO of Parks and Wildlife at the time. His name was Dicky Travis. He was a very shrewd operative, and I told him, "I thought we could make a deal," and he said, "Well, you can talk to him, but it must be secret," and the reason was, we had been acquiring so much land that the political opposition had built up again, and so he was wise enough to realize that if the word got out, that they could kill it again, and so I had some appointments in Amarillo to talk to landowners about Playa Lakes in the Panhandle, and I flew up there, I cancelled all the appointments, and I drove over to Roswell, which is where the Andersons lived, and made the deal, but we didn't tell a soul until we had them under contract.

[Brown]: Hm.

[Sansom]: And so, it was about three hundred and twenty thousand acres under fence, maybe all but probably forty thousand of that were owned by the Andersons, so it was by far the largest land acquisition the state has ever done, and it's the third largest state park in the United States.

[Brown]: How did it make you feel to successfully get that land?

[Sansom]: Well, twenty years after we made the deal, we celebrated the acquisition at the ranch in 2008, and by that time I was working here, and it was a big enough part of my life that I arranged to have all of my family there, and at the time, my son and his wife and only grandchild lived in the New York suburbs. My grandson was five, and so they came. For two days we're in the midst of this wonderful celebration out on the ranch, and they had cowboys and buffalo soldiers, and I've got pictures of my grandchild, you know, sitting on the lap of a buffalo soldier and playing with horseshoes, and he seemed to have a good time, but we really couldn't tell what kind of an impact it had on him. Well, he was in kindergarten, and so when he goes back to New Jersey that spring, the teacher assigned them to select an animal that migrates, draw a picture of it, and tell where it would migrate to and why, and she gave him in what my school days we called a mimeograph sheet. It was some sort of a form, and he selected an eagle, and the 'e' is this big and the 'g' is upside down. I mean, it's a five-year-old, and you could not tell from the drawing what it was, you had to be told, but he says that he would migrate to Texas, so he could go out to Big Bend and see the stars.

[Brown]: Hm, wow. So you have one son or how many children do you have (both talking at once)?

[Sansom]: I have a son and daughter. My son is now an architect in Boston, and my grandson, that child, is enrolled in Rice this semester as a freshman. My daughter is the CEO of Bamberger Ranch, and I don't know whether you've heard of Bamberger Ranch, but she is now the CEO of Bamberger Ranch and has sort of found the job of her dreams I would say.

[Brown]: Oh, wow.

[Sansom]: She has a PhD in Conservation.

[Brown]: Oh, interesting, runs in the family.

[Sansom]: Right.

[Brown]: (laughs) Um, what else—the other thing that strikes me about that is Bob Armstrong and then thinking back in the seventies about preserving like the night sky, um, and that scape. It seems like ahead of its time—

[Sansom]: —Oh yeah—

[Brown]: —that idea.

[Sansom]: Way ahead of its time, but, I mean, I don't know how much time you, if at any, you've spent out there—

[Brown]: —Yeah, I love that place (laughs)—

[Sansom]: —But it is unbelievable and now, you know, one of the few places left where that is the case, where you can experience the night sky that way. I acquired, by gift from Mr. [Ed] Harte, a ranch called the North Rosillos, which is, if you're driving south from Marathon through Panther Junction, which is the northern entrance to the park, the Rosillos Mountains are off to the right, and Mr. Harte and his brother decided that they wanted that ranch added to the national park. Well, the problem with adding land to the national parks is you have to have a statute, Congress has to approve it, which is unbelievable, I mean, that isn't true with any other federal agency, but once again, it probably dates back to opposition, and so they needed to make their gift in '83, but it was clearly going to take several years before the bill was passed if at all, so we acquired the property as an interim owner, and I managed that ranch for three years while the bill worked its way through Congress. Well, I used to take my family out there, usually over the long Labor Day weekend, and there was a little cabin out there where we stayed, and we would finish our dinner and wash the dishes and then we would go out and sit in the desert and just watch the sky, and one evening, interestingly at a time when I was

considering what to do about my job because I had been offered another job, and so I had this job thing hanging over me, we're sitting out in the desert watching the sky, and my daughter is way down at the end of the line and all of a sudden she gasped (gasps), like that, and a meteor came up and went entirely across the sky horizontally and then fragmented right in front of us, and my family was pretty active but no one spoke. We just got up and went in and went to bed. So you're right, but the difference is that at the time that I first met Bob Armstrong, there were lots of places in Texas where you could experience the night sky, but now, you know, it's one of the last, and so in that sense, he clearly was ahead of his time. It's often occurred to me that my grandson who lived right across the Hudson River from New York City had never seen stars in living in that kind of environment.

[Brown]: Hm, interesting. Seems like Texas has changed quite a bit since you grew up.

[Sansom]: Yeah, I mean, like I say, I grew up on a creek, and I could cross the creek in my boat and walk for probably two days without even seeing another house, and now that's all developed.

[Brown]: Mm-hm.

[Sansom]: I was on a boat in Lady Bird Lake last night to watch the bats, and we were floating, you know, up, down, down the lake in twilight and the changes taking place in Austin in my lifetime or actually since I've lived there is almost hard to imagine. Look, all you need to do is drive out west of here towards the hill country to Dripping Springs and that area and you—the entire Highway 290 between Austin and Dripping Springs is now developed. It's shopping centers and subdivisions and the ranch where I lived, which is at Stonewall, you know, when we first began to go out there thirty years ago, you never saw another light. Now, there's a ring of lights all around it, not on the property, but on the adjacent properties every night, so it's a different place.

[Brown]: Um, so you were working on land acquisition, how did you get into water issues?

[Sansom]: Well, you know, if you are interested in nature, you're always led back to water. I mean, it's the one thing that no plant or animal including human beings can live without, and so you can't get into this business at all without eventually understanding the significance of water to biodiversity and outdoor recreation and all the other things that we love about being outside without understanding both the significance of water to biodiversity but also the threats that we face because of the way we manage water and when I became the CEO of Parks and Wildlife, the department had a division, which is like the State Parks or Wildlife or Fisheries called Resource Protection and, ironically, the director of that division at the time was Larry McKinney who later became the head of HRI [Harte Research Institute], and the division once again was set up because the legislature was critical of the department for not being aggressive enough, now this is in the eighties, not being aggressive enough in protecting the environment. I mean, the department did a great job of managing white-tailed deer or running state parks, but in terms of being actively involved in environmental protection, we were not, and if you

look back at the period of time during the mid-1980s, the legislature was much more environmentally inclined than any time since. It was just the right—there was some leaders that had reached very powerful positions who were environmentalists, and that's never happened again, but because of that, the Resource Protection Division was set up, and its primary purpose was it was statutorily required to participate in decisions, say of what later became the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, so if somebody went to apply for a big water right on the Guadalupe, then the department was a party to that discussion, and so that is what the Resource Protection Division was set up for, and of course it was controversial because every one of those transactions was controversial (coughs). But that's what really led me to understand the meaning of things like environmental flows, freshwater inflows, and instream flows because that's largely what we were doing, was going, appearing before the TCEQ to protect those flows, and so that probably was where I had the most significant epiphany as to the significance of water to almost everything else I was involved in, from protection of biodiversity to opportunities for outdoor recreation including hunting and fishing and paddling and all the other things you can do, scuba diving. Particularly related in my mind, although not exclusively, but particularly related to the bays and estuaries, it became apparent to me during the 1990s that Texas has probably the most intact system of bays and estuaries of any state, just ironically, but they're entirely dependent on the continued flow of freshwater down to those wetlands and estuaries, and we still don't do any—do a whole lot to protect it.

[Brown]: So, what's going on in the nineties that's shaping your kind of views of bays and estuaries?

[Sansom]: Probably as much as anything else, the beginnings of the incredible growth in the state that we've seen since and so the more the state began to develop and grow, the greater the incidents of these kinds of conflicts. Between entities that want to use water for industrial or agricultural or human consumption and interests that want to protect some amount of that water solely for environmental purposes.

[Brown]: So, what was your strategy to deal with environmental flows at the time?

[Sansom]: Science, you know, people like Paul Montagna and there was a study that you probably found by a man named Warren Pulich, who I guess lives in Port Aransas today, on the significance of freshwater inflows to Texas bays and estuaries, Warren is a colleague of Montagna. I believe their children are married. So Pulich was a major figure in my own education, but most of what we did was intervening in public proceedings before the TCEQ and increasing our scientific understanding of the implications of the lack of environmental flows or lack of protection, and the defining moment was after I left Parks and Wildlife and came here. Um, the president of the university [Texas State University] at the time was named Jerry Supple, and he was a true visionary, and he and I had worked together actually on the acquisition of this spring. I mean, there's no university in the world that has a resource like this in the middle of its campus, and he did it, and he was harshly criticized for it because the community thought that Aquarena was their major economic driver and people like the Board of Regents and members of the legislature couldn't understand why a university would buy a

resource like this when you couldn't build a dorm on it or a football stadium or something, and so he took a lot of shots because he did it, but he came to me in the twelfth year of my service at Parks and Wildlife. One of the things I've learned as the head of a state agency was that you do the hard things first, and the reason for that is, in that job, I made a decision, at least one every day that made somebody happy and somebody mad, and it's the mad ones that accumulate so that by having been there more than eleven years, I had barnacles. I mean, at the beginning, I was a fair-haired boy, but eleven years later, I'd go up to the legislature, and they would just hammer me. I was in an appropriation hearing in 2001, and they just beat me up, and Dr. Supple was in the back because he was up that afternoon, and he wanted to kind of judge their temperature, and so I staggered out of this hearing, and he followed me out in the hall, and he said, "You know, if you ever get tired of this, you come down to Southwest Texas," and I didn't really give that much thought. I was flattered by it, but I didn't really give it much thought, but later on that year after the legislative session was over, I called him, and we set up an entity here called the International Institute for Water Resources, Sustainable Water Resources, and because Dr. Supple understood the significance of water to the state, and so this entity was from the very beginning designed and created to both engage in but also do scientific research in water, primarily environmental water. So, I end up being down here, and probably two, I don't know, three years or so after I came here, the San Marcos River Foundation filed for a water right. Oh, by the way, this building was restored from its original use as a hotel by Texas Parks and Wildlife under a partnership that Supple and I had created, to create an entity here that would educate people about environmental water, so that was the idea even in the mid-nineties, but my successors at Parks and Wildlife when I left cancelled the deal, but that left a real problem because the department had invested three or four million dollars in this building and all of a sudden had nothing to show for it, and so by this time, I'm working here, and so we went to the department and said that we would dedicate forty thousand acre feet of water annually from our water rights to environmental flows in the San Marcos and Guadalupe as payment for the restoration of the building, so that transaction resulted in the largest commitment of water to environmental flows that's ever been made, and it's because of the restoration of this building, which is something that people don't know. So, from the very beginning here, the environmental flow issue was a huge thing for me. Then, all of a sudden, the River Foundation files for this permit to put more water in the river to protect it, and the reaction to that was harsh, I mean, it was harsh and immediate and there were bills filed in the senate that would have prohibited any use of water rights for environmental flows. I mean, the needle swung way this direction. Well, at the time the Lieutenant Governor was a man named David Dewhurst, and Dewhurst and I had worked together on various transactions because he had been the Land Commissioner before he became Lieutenant Governor, and so I was able to just simply because of that personal relationship to get to see him, and I went to see him, and I said "Governor, we don't want to pass a bill that prohibits using water rights for environmental flows, and you don't want to be responsible for that," and it kind of dawned on him that that was extreme, so what he agreed to do was to set up a commission, which included both members of Congress, people from river authorities, environmental groups to study the issue of environmental flows and recommend to the legislature what to do, and I served on that committee, and we negotiated with the river authorities primarily a bill that would theoretically protect environmental flows, and I'm sure

you're aware that it called for stakeholder groups in each basin and science advisory groups, and I served on the first one for the Colorado. To my knowledge, and you many correct me if I'm wrong, but to my knowledge, the TCEQ to date has never adopted the full recommendations of any of those committees. I'm not aware of a single one where TCEQ did what the committees, both science and stakeholder recommended, so the implementation of Senate Bill 3 [2007], in my judgement, has been very, very disappointing. And then the second issue that is probably even more appalling to me was that the legislature at some point after I left took the Parks and Wildlife Department out of the ability to engage in processes before entities like the Corp of Engineers or the TCEQ, and that division was abolished, and that's how, really what caused Larry to end up at HRI, was that he was assigned another job at Parks and Wildlife, and it was a great job. He was the head of Coastal Fisheries, but it wasn't what he really was brought there to do, and when his baby then, Resource Protection Division, was abolished then that ultimately led to his retirement and going down to HRI, which I was involved in. I was on the advisory board of HRI at the time when we hired Larry, and I just couldn't have been more proud of what he's accomplished there.

[Brown]: Hm. Can we go back to the passage of Senate Bill 3? So, what were some of the controversies and arguments in developing this legislation on environmental flows?

[Sansom]: I think the main issue that we overcame was the, um, was inclusiveness as to how these decisions will be made, and that's where the stakeholder process was derived, that the big, biggest fears that the water development community had was not having an inclusive process. The other thing that, you know, that characterized that period of time is that you had some folks in the water development community that were enlightened. I mean, Joe Beal was the head of LCRA [Lower Colorado River Authority], which is a huge influencer in water and Joe understood that we needed to do something, and so he was from the very beginning very protective of the LCRA and entities like that position, but he also understood that this was something that needed to be done, and so I think the big breakthrough was finding a way to create a process that was inclusive.

[Brown]: Hm. You know, you mentioned some issues with implementation and, you know, I've read in your book also about some of the other issues with that bill. Um, how would you evaluate it? All right, if you were, like, looking back as a historian, um, how would you describe Senate Bill 3 to people?

[Sansom]: Well, on the one hand, I would say that it was groundbreaking, that it was and is a model of legislation to try to accomplish this purpose, but I would also observe that it obviously did not have sufficient teeth to bring the kind of results that all of us had hoped would occur. Um, so its implementation has been disappointing, and my perception is that the politics in the state continue to get worse in that regard. I mean, it's funny, you know, in the last several years, issues like the funding for state parks have had almost universal support. We passed a constitutional amendment to dedicate the sporting good sales tax to state parks after the last legislative session, but yet at the same time, the support for, you know, sort of classic environmental protection has appeared to me to decline. Just look at the appointments, you

know, to the various boards and commissions and the actions that they've taken, and it's not a pretty picture at least in my view.

[Brown]: You know, Texas isn't really known as a state that has a lot of environmental background, so it's interesting to see what was going on in the eighties and then the passage of all these water bills in the nineties and 2000s. Um, do you think that that categorization of Texas as un-environmentally friendly fits?

[Sansom]: Um, well, it often—it often seems to me that although since I became an adult, you know, there have been major strides in environmental protection and conservation, that I don't recall any time in my working career when I felt like there was less support at the top politically and then when you combine that with this specter of climate change particularly than you worry about the future generations even given the tremendous progress that we've made. I mean, I'm anxious about my grandchildren. The corollary, or the parallel, to that is the, and perhaps even greater concern in the years ahead, is how we manage groundwater because we're even worse when you consider the linkage between groundwater and surface water and the fact that we treat them as totally different substances when in fact it's the same. You know, you can go out here, if you follow the Blanco from its source in Kendall County, before it flows southeastward toward Hays County, which is where we are and before it gets to the Hays County line most of the flow goes back into the aquifer. It flows underground until it arrives at a couple of places, one of which is called Jacob's Well, which is the headwaters of Cyprus Creek. The water comes back up out of the ground at Jacob's Well, it flows down Cyprus Creek through Wimberley, and back into the Blanco. If you tried to get a permit to take significant water out of the Blanco today, you couldn't get it because it's overcommitted, but if you go up above Jacob's Well and drill a hole in the ground, you can drill just about as much of it as your man or women enough to pump with hardly any protection, and it's the same water, and that's completely unsustainable, and we've been—I think you're going to see in this upcoming session some movement toward better groundwater management (train whistle blows), and mainly because the rural communities in the state have become frightened that groundwater will be increasingly taken from them and transported to the metropolitan areas, and so many of our legislative leaders in the legislature are very conservative, but they're also rural, and so they are listening to those rural constituents who are frightened about their water.

[Brown]: Yeah, that's interesting. So, can you talk about when the Meadow Center was created, of some of the initiatives you tried to take in terms of groundwater and surface water?

[Sansom]: Well, you know, I guess the thing that characterizes the Meadow Center as I mentioned in the beginning, is that it's not only a research entity, but it's also an engagement entity, and that engagement takes various forms. I mean, we manage the—what's called the Texas Stream Team, which is—we've trained probably two thousand volunteer citizen scientists to measure water quality across the state every week, and that's an early warning system for water quality statewide, and it's at very low cost to the state. Um, we have helped communities with watershed protection in various ways, particularly in the Hill Country, so we're actually out there on the ground, you know, helping these things to come to pass while also we have a

traditional academic role as well. The man who succeeded me, Robert Mace, was the assistant administration of the Water Development Board before he came here, and he, in my judgment, he is the foremost expert on groundwater in the state. I mean, he is Mr. Groundwater, so he's just completed a study on one of the big issues that is cropped up again, is Comanche Springs, which is in Fort Stockton, and Robert has done the definitive work on implications for restoring the springs, which the people out there would really like to see.

[Brown]: I've heard that. Um, we've been going for about an hour, do you need a break?

[Sansom]: No, I'm okay.

[Brown]: Okay, just checking.

[Sansom]: Thank you.

[Brown]: Here, um, let's see. I have some more questions here specifically on water. Uh, your book, that was published in 2008, right?

[Sansom]: Yeah.

[Brown]: So, looking back, now it's 2022, what would you change or add to the book?

[Sansom]: Well, it's interesting that you should ask that question because I feel like a good bit of it is probably out of date simply because it's been, what, fifteen years, but UT [University of Texas] has declined to, you know, consider a revision, and that's shame because the issue is evolving so rapidly that it would be hard for me to point to any one deal. It just needs to be updated.

[Brown]: It seems like a lot has happened since then—

[Sansom]: —Yeah—

[Brown]: —in Texas.

[Sansom]: Yeah. Well, a couple of examples. I mean, the one that most immediately comes to mind is Vista Ridge, you know about Vista Ridge? Well, I mean, that's going to be—those people's wells are going down over there. I mean, there are people going up to the legislature every day saying, "I'm losing my groundwater. I've had to lower my well three times in the last five years," and so it's happening, and I think that that is going to end up being an epiphany for legislative leaders that in fact these cries of alarm are not without a basis.

[Brown]: And what do you see to solutions to address climate change and the water planning process or to better implement legislation like Senate Bill 3?

[Sansom]: Well (coughs), I mean, it's not really rocket science to start with by saying that we're still not, on a statewide basis, sufficiently committed to greater levels of efficiency. Cities of San Antonio and El Paso have lowered their water consumption by forty percent per capita and still prospered economically, not increased their gross consumption of water. Whereas in the metroplex, you know, up until recently the consumption per capita was still growing, so we clearly need a more, um, meaningful commitment to greater levels of efficiency. I'm working with the community of Dallas right now, and I'm still having a hard time having them understand that water conservation has got to be part of their solution, and so there are communities where—in fact, I've heard in the legislature over the last three or four years, I've heard members in committee hearings say things like, the last drop of water that goes over the last dam into the Gulf of Mexico is wasted. I mean, that is still a belief among some members of the legislature.

[Brown]: And you—I don't know (both laugh). It's kind of shocking that those ideas still exist (both talking at once).

[Sansom]: When I was sitting in a hearing a while back, and I heard a member say that I just, it absolutely—and that wasn't an exact quote, but basically—in fact, on this Comanche Springs deal, there was a couple of quotes from citizen leaders out there but also a major water developer that, "Why should we restore those springs? Because that water is going to flow down the creek and we're not going to have any use of it," and that's happening today.

[Brown]: What do you think is driving those viewpoints, that it still continues to today?

[Sansom]: Um, well, it's probably a combination of factors. One, in some cases is greed. Um, I think there's still a body of thought out there, which is outdated, you know, because if you look at the, and I'm sure you have, you know, the water history of the state after the drought of record, we built two hundred reservoirs or something, and I think there are people that are still stuck in that mindset, is that that's what you do. I mean, Dallas is still trying to build Marvin Nichols, which they've been trying to build for thirty years, and it's never going to get done and they just don't seem to be able to turn loose of it and try to find an alternative.

[Brown]: Did you get a lot of backlash in the nineties and 2000s, um, in working on water issues?

[Sansom]: Well, I can tell you that Larry McKinney used to come in my office, and he would tell you this, that he used to come in my office and almost every day, the two of us would check to see which one, if one of us had been fired (laughs). He tells that story, and he does it much better than I, but that's how difficult those kind of things have been in Texas, is we were always, always on the edge, by standing up.

[Brown]: How did you negotiate that?

[Sansom]: With inclusiveness and understanding of the, you know, making sure they always

had all parties at the table, and yet at the same time, never being willing to abandon your principles.

[Brown]: What do you think is in store for Texas water?

[Sansom]: Well, I am personally experiencing this drought. I live on a ranch, and it's sad right now, but I think a blessing that could potentially come out of it was that in my perception in working with the legislature for, in some instances, at least forty years, that they don't do anything hard outside of a crisis, and so it may be that this drought will ultimately convince legislative leaders that more needs to be done. I mean, the reservoir construction came out of the drought of the fifties, the Swift Funding came out of the drought of 2011, the Texas Water Plan calls for thirty percent of the water in the future to come from efficiency and conservation, but all of that has occurred in the teeth of hard times in terms of drought.

[Brown]: Hm. Um, I think that addresses a lot of my questions, but you've had a pretty long career in water. What did I forget or what do you want to talk about?

[Sansom]: You know, when we were talking about the Jacob's Well thing, I thought of another point that I should be making and at the moment it's sort of flown out of my head, but I'm not sure. If you'll permit me, I might even send you other thoughts as they come to me.

[Brown]: Sure, yeah.

[Sansom]: But at the moment, you know, I never thought that I would end up, of course, my life has been tumultuous in many ways anyway, but it's interesting to me that I ended up with a major focus on water, which is not the way I started, but I feel like—I was driving in here this morning, and I used to walk into here every day and just pinch myself, you know, that I've been able to work here at this site, and I don't think there's any—to me, there's three fundamental environmental issues that we should focus on. The first is the continued fragmentation of the landscape in Texas, which relates directly to water. As we develop our watersheds and recharge areas, we lose rural and agricultural land faster than any other state, and that's primarily because it's predominately owned by private citizens. The second is the fact that increasingly our children are growing up in urban areas and not being exposed to the outdoors as we were when I was a child but thirdly and probably the most alarming is that we're going to have twice as many people in Texas in the next fifty years and yet we've already given permission for more water to be withdrawn from many of our rivers than is actually in them, and that is alarming. Yeah, the other point I think that I wanted to make was the—my perception is, and Larry would be a much better source, but my perception is that up until the mid-1980s, since we were a colony in Spain, we managed surface water as if it were infinite. I mean, there was never any determination as to whether or not there was enough water in the future to grant a water right. We just assumed that it would always be there, and it wasn't until the mid- to late-1980s that we even started thinking about the availability of water in our rivers and streams prior to considering issuing further water rights. The same is true in groundwater today. There's, and there's a couple of exceptions, the Edwards Aquifer Authority being the main one, but in most

cases, the closest you come to a concept of availability in groundwater is what's called a desired future condition where the groundwater district is given the authority and the directive to determine what the desired future condition of that aquifer is going to be and then grant permits against that goal. Well, there's no teeth in it, the science is not good, I mean, even the water modelers will tell you that our—the science that we have before us to make those kinds of determinations is not great, so we're on the path of repeating almost the exact same syndrome in groundwater as we practice in surface water for a hundred years, several hundred years, and that is assuming that there's always going to be enough, and that we can just grant more permits.

[Brown]: Why do you think Texas has looked at the two so differently?

[Sansom]: Because it would be very difficult, and I would never want to be quoted as not acknowledging the fact that landowners have an interest in their groundwater. It's different in Nevada or Colorado or somewhere where most of the land is public land, but if you go up in the Hill Country and observe a family that's been dependent on a spring on their property for all of their water use for generations, and yet the neighbors going to drill a well and dry up their spring, then it's hard to argue that the landowner does not have an interest in their groundwater, but at the same time, to manage it as if it was not connected to the spring flows or environmental flows or downstream users is just, um, irresponsible.

[Brown]: Hm.

[Sansom]: If I were a dictator, what I would do is establish caps within the jurisdiction of the groundwater districts like on the Edwards. First and foremost, that allows for our market to take place. I mean, right now there's potential funding for purchases of groundwater to protect that resource, but why would anyone do it when across the property line the neighbor can drill a well and just pump it dry anyway, so there's no marketplace there for that reason, and that's a huge issue I think, and I think we'll find, hopefully, we'll find some greater movement toward kind of a cap so that organizations like The Nature Conservancy can do deals to protect water in a market, in a free market.

[Brown]: Do you think in that incentive market system, though, that the urban users and development would be (clears throat) more powerful?

[Sansom]: Yes, but that could have a good end. I mean, the San Antonio water system buys forbearance agricultural users to protect the aquifer recharge, and it's working, so the answer to your question is yeah, but it can also have a beneficial effect if the metropolitan areas are purchasing because usually the way that takes place is that it's replacing some other use.

[Brown]: Okay. What else?

[Sansom]: That's all (both laugh).

[Brown]: Are you optimistic about the future of Texas water (both talking at once)?

[Sansom]: Always. I used to—oftentimes, um, after a speech that I would make on water, one of the first questions would be, you know, with all of those dire predictions you've made, you know, how can you be optimistic? And I would have to just say that's my way. I mean, why would I put on my clothes and come in here every day unless I had the belief that our best days are ahead, and I do, but it's a scary time.

[Brown]: That's a great place to stop (both laugh), so I'll turn the recorder off.

(end of recording)