VIRGINIA SANDERS WITH JASON HARRIS
AUDIO RECORDING
JUNE 16, 2015

[This interview was recorded at the home of Virginia Sanders in Longboat Key, Florida.]

[0:00 - 0:17]
MR. HARRIS: Today... today is June 16th, 2015, and I'm talking with Virginia Sanders at her beautiful home out on Longboat Key. And Virginia, I was interested in how did you become involved with Mote initially?

[0:17 - 1:12]
MS. SANDERS: Well, I have to go back a little bit further. I was lucky enough to find a second, wonderful person to marry. And we were both starting out together. My husband was a physician and he was going to, not just retire to Florida, but work here first. And he asked me - over the phone by the way - he was already in Florida and he called me on New Year's Eve, he said, "How would you like to live in Florida?" [I] said, "Never thought about it."

[1:12 - 1:16]
MR. HARRIS: Where were you living before that? Or before Florida?

[1:16 - 1:26]
MS. SANDERS: Illinois. It was in Illinois, full of snow and ice. More than the Arctic. So I said, "Sure."

[1:26 - 1:30]
MR. HARRIS: So he started... So he started up a...?

[1:30 - 3:41]
MS. SANDERS: Well, first I told him, "Wait and call me back tomorrow when you're sober." But anyway... Then I was thinking to myself, "What are we [going] to do in Florida with all those old people?" You know. So, first person I thought about was mentioned in the *Longboat Observer* and talked about a Turtle Watch, and people looking out to help bring up the numbers of sea turtles being born and surviving and all that kind of stuff, and if you're interested call this number. So I called that number immediately and met a lady who's no longer with us now, but she started the Turtle Watch with a half a dozen people and her own interest in trying to help out and do helpful things. And so I joined the group and we learned what turtles do; how they come up on the beach and the whole process. But no one was managing it. It was just reporting on what they found. So we flew by the seat of our pants and... did some good, and made other friends from different islands. And... so once Mote decided to have their own department on sea turtles and [help them]... we joined, we made our group part of their group.

[3:41 - 3:43]
MR. HARRIS: Okay. It became co-opted.

[3:43 - 3:49]
MS. SANDERS: Right. And it's been most successful. Still goes on.

[3:49 - 4:01]
MR. HARRIS: So you were down here working with the Sea Turtle Program before Mote even was established in Sarasota.

[4:01 - 4:11]
MS. SANDERS: Right. Exactly. Well, before Mote was established in sea turtle watching. The... Mote was an entity that Dr. [William H.] Taft... [Doorbell rings and an editor from the *Longboat Observer* joins the remainder of the session. The editor was on assignment to interview Virginia about her experiences living through World War II]

[4:11 - 5:41]
MS. SANDERS: I was first introduced to a... Dr. Taft from one of the Florida Universities, [he] was the head of Mote and he was retiring. And then... and they were looking for a substitute. They found one gentleman and [he] didn't work out, and they said, "Why don't we look amongst our scientists?" And... because I don't know how many people know that Kumar Mahadevan was first a research scientist at Mote and... with tremendous management ability. And, once he got started with the volunteers, they blossomed like those flowers [Virginia points to a bouquet of flowers on her coffee table]. Because one of the things he did in the over 25 years that he was the Head was he never missed a meeting of volunteer[s] and he always said, "Thank you." And he meant it. And we knew he meant it. So...

[5:41 - 5:49]
MR. HARRIS: So, when you came to Mote, were you... did you come as a volunteer originally?

[5:49 - 6:25]
MS. SANDERS: Yes, yes. I... so having been part of the Longboat Key Turtle Watch and writing columns for the *Observer* - you're all tied into one - I... when they were reorganizing with Kumar at the Head, I said, you know, "How can I help?" Because right then I was just with the Turtle Watch.

[6:25 - 6:26]
MR. HARRIS: Okay.

[6:26 - 7:00]
MS. SANDERS: I said, "I have certain talents and maybe you can use them at Mote. What I can do, I can write a little bit, and I can draw with pen and ink. That's my favorite. I drew a few little cartoon

aspects too... those drawings. Do you want me?" So they said, "Yeah. Sure." They didn't know what they were doing either.

[7:00 - 7:18]
MR. HARRIS: So after the... after coming to Mote for the turtle conservation or volunteering for the Turtle Program, you came on board as an editor and an illustrator for Mote and for the publication?

[7:18 - 8:12]
MS. SANDERS: Right. And we put out a newsletter for the volunteers. And the writer of the newsletter - you'll probably interview her too - and they would hand me the printed copy and I would add in the spaces that she left little pen and ink drawing[s]. And then they would run it off on the copier. And that, that was the... the volunteer newsletter then at that time. And it was good. But of course it became more professional. We got professional help. I mean, it just ballooned.

[8:12 - 8:34]
MR. HARRIS: So you worked behind the scenes on the newsletter, and that was before the publications like *The Marine Scene*. And, so you didn't... you probably didn't work... other than the turtles you didn't work with any of the animals in the aquarium?

[8:34 - 9:23]
MS. SANDERS: No, the Sea Turtle Program was the one where I have had a direct connection and [was] always ready to help out [with] other stuff. But, then they said - at our monthly meetings - they said, you know, "We should have a program that enhances our knowledge. And we need someone to plan those programs. Do you think you could do that?" I said, "Sure!" In those days, you know, we could do anything. It was appreciated and wonderful.

[9:23 - 9:31]
MR. HARRIS: Did you go out to the public and promote Mote at all through those programs or...?

[9:31 - 9:58]
MS. SANDERS: I didn't do that, no. The programs that I planned were for the benefit of the volunteers so they expand their knowledge. And my job was to find something that would enhance their knowledge of what's going on in the, in the waters around... and spread the word.

[9:58 - 10:03]
MR. HARRIS: Okay. Did you ever get a chance to meet Dr. Clark?

[10:03 - 11:24]
MS. SANDERS: I never met her personally. I've been in big meetings where she is the star, of course. But never... [I] always felt I was just a kid by comparison with all these other people. Suddenly I wasn't a kid anymore. The woman that turned me on to turtles was Kit Fernald. And she was a grand person that lived on Longboat Key and had people to do all kinds of things that were good for the environment. But the turtles interested her and a few active people at that time. And, so we kind of

made our own rules. When we knew there was a nest about to hatch, we all sat there and we... all evening, all... sometimes in the rain, didn't matter, and watched.

[11:24 - 11:28]
MR. HARRIS: Now that was... yeah... that was before you...?

[11:28 - 11:40]
MS. SANDERS: All right. So I'll show you some pictures I have on the wall of baby turtles running to the sea. Running to the Gulf of Mexico here.

[11:40 - 11:56]
MR. HARRIS: Now when you were sitting and waiting for the turtles to hatch, was that part of the conservation? Or were you sitting to get a first peek at them for illustrating them, drawing them, and...?

[11:56 - 12:07]
MS. SANDERS: No, no, no. We were doing it to help out and chart how many and try to be professional.

[12:07 - 12:15]
MR. HARRIS: Okay. And what... that was in...

[12:15 - 13:01]
MS. SANDERS: And Kit became mayor, one of the best mayors of Longboat Key, and one of my best friends. I still... I correspond with her daughter who lives in Pennsylvania. And, her granddaughter published a book... a different kind of book that I did. And she became a publisher and published it. I did an ABC book for young children and all kinds of animals were drawn; lesser-known animals.

[13:01 - 13:13]
MR. HARRIS: Did you ever come across any new species or... whether turtles or something else on the beaches when...?

[13:13 - 13:20]
MS. SANDERS: No. But one time when Kit was going to be away... You can turn on that lamp if you like.

[13:20 - 13:22]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Oh, it's okay. It's not dark in here.

[13:22 - 13:23]
MS. SANDERS: Can you see?

[13:23 - 13:24]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Yeah.

[13:24 - 13:29]
MR. HARRIS: Kit... What was her name? Kit? Or the mayor?

[13:29 - 14:52]
MS. SANDERS: Oh, she was gone on vacation at one time and asked me if I would sit with a certain number of turtle nests, and tell the Police Department if a turtle was sighted laying a nest, "Would you please dial my number." And sure enough one evening, [the] police called me and said, "There's a big turtle on the beach, and it looks like she's digging a hole." I came right over. I never had seen that happen before. It's quite a process, if you've never seen it. Not many people do because they wait for the dark of night. You know. So that was a real thrill to watch this huge animal dig with her flippers that hole. And it goes about twelve inches [to] a foot deep. That's not easy. So you have to give the turtles credit.

[14:52 - 15:16]
MR. HARRIS: So... what were some of the things you were trying to find out factually or scientifically about turtles and their nesting behaviors? Was there anything specific that you were trying to find out when you were going out to the beaches back then? Anything that wasn't known that we know today about the species of sea turtle?

[15:16 - 16:34]
MS. SANDERS: I didn't feel that I was equipped to act as a scientific engineer of any kind. Or... but just to help out and learn about what they do. There's... we became acquainted with a feller named Archie Carr. And if you haven't heard about him... Yeah, he did a scholarly book on all of the turtles. But what I can do is show you a couple of pictures. When I first came here my big interest was in fitting my talents into - such as the little book, the article[s] I wrote for the *Observer* - and I was a schoolteacher and taught Mathematics. So there wasn't much science in that. Let me show you...

[16:34 - 16:51]
MS. SANDERS: Have you heard of - my memory's not the greatest at this point - but this is Clyde Butcher.

[16:51 - 16:52]
MR. HARRIS: Uh-huh?

[16:52 - 16:53]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Oh wow.

[16:53 - 16:55]
MR. HARRIS: No, I haven't.

[16:55 - 16:57]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: He's a... isn't he a Longboat...?

[16:57 - 16:58]
MS. SANDERS: Have you seen his work?

[16:58 - 17:01]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Yeah. He's a Longboater, isn't he? He lives on Longboat too, I think.

[17:01 - 17:02]
MS. SANDERS: Yeah.

[17:02 - 17:05]
MR. HARRIS: This is his photography?

[17:05 - 17:07]
MS. SANDERS: Yes. He has black and white.

[17:07 - 17:10]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Does he live on Longboat?

[17:10 - 17:11]
MS. SANDERS: What's that?

[17:11 - 17:13]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Doesn't he live on Longboat?

[17:13 - 17:14]
MS. SANDERS: Say again?

[17:14 - 17:16]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: He lives here on Longboat?

[17:16 - 18:00]
MS. SANDERS: He lives... no, not on Longboat. No. No. He lives next to the Everglades. So he does... he'll take a little boat that his wife runs for him, and they both wear hip boots. And... it's really something to see. But they're black and white photography that he does. He could fill those whole space with his pictures, they're so perfect. That's one I bought. That's all I could afford. Over there.

[18:00 - 18:20]
MR. HARRIS: Beautiful. So these are kind of broad questions and they're going to be probably hard to rack your brain and come up with a single example, but... how many, how many years were you volunteering at Mote? Was it a long time or...?

[18:20 - 18:21]
MS. SANDERS: It's over thirty.

[18:21 - 18:39]
MR. HARRIS: Over thirty. Okay. So it would be, probably would be difficult then to try and comb through thirty years and come up with one memory that you would say would be your fondest during your time at Mote. Right?

[18:39 - 18:40]
MS. SANDERS: Well...

[18:40 - 18:48]
MR. HARRIS: They all run together. There's probably a lot of interesting memories.

[18:48 - 19:53]
MS. SANDERS: I've been planning the programs for the Volunteer meeting for the last ten years I guess. And [it's] been very, very enlightening because I reach out to - from the Everglades, Clyde Butcher - wonderful people. Very talented people in the area in general. And they come and lend their expertise to spreading the word that we have to be more respectful of all the wildlife that lives in the waters. By the way... do you know who Snooty is?

[19:53 - 19:54]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Mhm.

[19:54 - 19:55]
MR. HARRIS: No. Haven't...

[19:55 - 19:59]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: The manatee, Snooty? I'm not even a Floridian and I know Snooty.

[19:59 - 20:05]
MR. HARRIS: Oh!... Well I've only been down a few weeks. Is she at... is that a manatee at Mote right now?

[20:05 - 20:11]
MS. SANDERS: Yeah. Been there for years. A permanent resident.

[20:11 - 20:14]
MR. HARRIS: Okay. What is their life... what is their...?

[20:14 - 20:18]
MS. SANDERS: Snooty. I think it's his 64th... is it his 65th birthday?

[20:18 - 20:19]
MR. HARRIS: Wow.

[20:19 - 20:25]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: I think he's at the... I think he's at the Bradenton... maybe it's not Snooty, but...

[20:25 - 20:47]
MR. HARRIS: Oh, here's a good one to ask you, Virginia. What do you think other institutions or the scientific community at large could learn from Mote? Probably something along the lines of bringing in volunteers and having them have an instrumental part.

[20:47 - 21:42]
MS. SANDERS: Probably... yes. They have a roster of more volunteers, I would say, than any other institution. When you talk to them from someplace, some other entity, they [say], "How many volunteers do you have?" And we tell them, their jaw drops because nobody else can rival that. And a lot of the credit to people there in general. But Kumar Mahadevan was topmost. He's always reachable; his door was always open; and he [answers] questions. Just walk right in.

[21:42 - 21:54]
MR. HARRIS: So you've seen, I mean, you've been at Mote and have seen it grow for, you know, the whole time. It's whole life span...

[21:54 - 22:40]
MS. SANDERS: The aquarium was just a little... almost laughable when you think about it now, you know. But Mr. Mote himself... we would have a project that needed to make some money to make it happen. And then they would say, "Well, we've reached half of our goal. And [an] anonymous benefactor did the other half." Well, that anonymous benefactor was more than likely... Mr. Mote.

[22:40 - 22:56]
MR. HARRIS: Mr. Mote. Yep... So did... has Mote exceeded your expectations in the way it's grown and how many volunteers it's taken on over the years? Did you ever think it would become what it is today?

[Unexplained audio skipping for rest of interview]

[22:56 - 23:33]
MS. SANDERS: I never thought it would become world-renowned. And that's the truth. I'm not saying that because I want to say nice things. [It's] world-renowned. It gets featured in... the National Geographic book. [When] Eugenie Clark died, she went on some of those trips... those animals. But everywhere we go we've touched a foot, we've touched a...

[23:33 - 23:40]
MR. HARRIS: Right, right. Very hands on. Very interested in getting people to learn.

[23:40 - 24:09]
MS. SANDERS: Exactly. And that's how Dwight Davis came by. He had a program - used to be side program - but he takes planned-out programs and talks about them to various organizations.

[24:09 - 24:23]
MR. HARRIS: Those are programs that he takes out into the community and gets the word out about Mote? That's what Dwight does?

[24:23 - 25:27]
MS. SANDERS: Yeah. And he... you can go further too. Because people that are interested in marine life are interested in bird life as well. So we work in harmony with a lot of Audobon people. One of the things... well, this has nothing to do with Mote, but if you look across outside there... the boats go by. That's the Intracoastal. On the other side of the Intracoastal is a set of islands called Sister Keys. And a number of years ago, Sister Keys [sold]... and they were going to put an airport there and have... and you could reach it only by boat.

[25:27 - 25:28]
MR. HARRIS: Really.

[25:28 - 26:12]
MS. SANDERS: And... [they'd] build I guess some condos there. Well, once we got word that that was up for sale, we set up a program to raise money so the town of Longboat Key, in three years, between the town and the volunteers. We made enough money to buy those islands. And the Audubon promised to be the watchdog so that no one will ever build on those islands. They'll remain...

[26:12 - 26:13]
MR. HARRIS: Cool.

[26:13 - 26:20]
MS. SANDERS: A feller named Rusty Chinnis - do you know the name? - Rusty Chinnis. Do you know Rusty?

[26:20 - 26:23]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: Wait, what's his last name? Rusty what?

[26:23 - 27:00]
MS. SANDERS: Rusty Chinnis. He was a building contractor and his hobby was photography. And he's the head of scallops. The scallop brigade is his. He keeps that clean and has people come out. That's how it all works here. If you're interested in something, there will be a group there that will help.

[27:00 - 27:10]
MR. HARRIS: Right. Is there access out there by road or is that just boat access to Sister Islands? How… is there access to Sister Islands?

[27:10 - 27:12]
MS. SANDERS: Only by boat. Only by boat.

[27:12 - 27:14]
MR. HARRIS: Only by boat. Okay. And that's right across the way?

[27:14 - 27:35]
MS. SANDERS: Yeah. And… so their mission: keep it that way. Keep it clean. You know, used to be... I guess about twice a year they do that. Volunteers come out and fill bags with...

[27:35 - 27:39]
MR. HARRIS: Junk. Yep. That drifts out.

[27:39 - 27:42]
MS. SANDERS: I'm going to turn a light on because…

[27:42 - 27:48]
MR. HARRIS: Okay. Well, I don't want to keep you all afternoon. Or you all afternoon.

[27:48 - 27:49]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: It's all right.

[27:49 - 27:55]
MS. SANDERS: Oh, there's the sunshine. Thank you. I don't have to put the light on now.

[27:55 - 27:57]
MR. HARRIS: Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?

[27:57 - 28:10]
MS. SANDERS: Well, the little rinky-dink aquarium once [it] existed, of course, got rebuilt, bigger, better, twice.

[28:10 - 28:19]
MR. HARRIS: Right. I remember… We were talking, I was talking with Dave Bowman yesterday and the main attraction was…

[28:19 - 28:53]
MS. SANDERS: … works hand-in-hand with the scientists there. A lot of them form the programs that I

plan out for the volunteers now. Well, some of our own people tune into more things than we know about now. So... I just had a... you were at the program. Were you at the program?

[28:53 - 28:56]
MR. HARRIS: At the auditorium? Or the brown...

[28:56 - 29:02]
MS. SANDERS: The last volunteer meeting talking about the conch and the...

[29:02 - 29:06]
MR. HARRIS: No, I missed that unfortunately. Yep. I missed that one.

[29:06 - 29:15]
MS. SANDERS: Now, she does... Martha's Vineyard, but she came...

[29:15 - 29:23]
MR. HARRIS: Do you normally go to the programs? How often are there...?

[29:23 - 29:40]
MS. SANDERS: We do a program once a month, then we have a couple of party events, and then we take off. We're off now from July, August, and September.

[29:40 - 29:46]
MR. HARRIS: Oh, great. So I'm not going to have the opportunity to get to one.

[29:46 - 29:47]
MS. SANDERS: I'm sorry.

[29:47 - 29:52]
MR. HARRIS: So this would be what you call offseason then, right?

[29:52 - 29:57]
***Longboat Observer* Editor**: It's pretty, it's pretty quiet here in the summertime.

[29:57 - 30:02]
MR. HARRIS: Yeah. People go north.