

# UC San Diego

## Oceanography Program Publications

**Title**

An interview with Greg Woodell

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6hr9b3c0>

**Journal**

Shore & Beach, 82(2)

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

2014-04-01

**Data Availability**

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

## An interview with Greg Woodell

By

Reinhard Flick

*Greg Woodell won the ASBPA's highest award, the Murrough P. O'Brien Award, in 2005 after a long tenure with the national organization as well as its California chapter, the California Shore & Beach Preservation Association (CSBPA). Woodell started CSBPA and served as its first president from 1980 to 1987. Later he served as ASBPA president from 1994 to 2003. He shepherded the ASBPA through changing times, serving in numerous positions within the organization and often paying for his ASBPA involvement out of his own pocket. This is all the more spectacular when considering that he also worked full-time at the Los Angeles County Department of Beaches and Harbors.*

*Ron Flick, former editor of Shore & Beach and long-time colleague of Woodell, asked him for some thoughts on his tenure with the organization; the following is the result.*

In 1987, Morrough P. O'Brien called me and requested a meeting. Morrough said he was president of ASBPA and asked me to start a California chapter. Morrough was looking at my title as Beach Planner for the county of Los Angeles. I told him I would invite noted people from around the state to a formation meeting in San Francisco, and from there a president would be elected. The meeting was held at the building where the Corps housed the model for the San Francisco Bay. At meeting time, I was elected president — which was a shock to me since my credentials didn't come close to anyone sitting around the table that day. I remained the president of CSBPA from 1980 to 1987. It should be noted that I started this venture the same year I took the job as the beach planner.

While serving as CSBPA president the county supported my endeavors, allowing me to attend conferences around the state and the national ASBPA conference. This certainly helped in bringing my knowledge up to a point that people didn't generally know, because my back-



**Greg Woodell**

ground consisted of a BA degree in Sociology. I was always able to pull it off as I was surrounded by the best in the field of oceanography and coastal engineering who always helped me nicely when the press came around.

I recall a big conference in San Diego. Somehow, a reporter from the *Christian Science Monitor* (Washington, DC, office) managed to track me down at the hotel and they got me to a phone. She was doing a story of the storms hitting California, etc. and was asking me all these questions. She was not aware of what was going on at the place she finally tracked me down. I said, "This conference center is over-run with coastal engineers/scientists from all over the world, let me get one for you."

I think I managed to find George Domurat. I recall telling him not to use a lot of coastal jargon as she wouldn't get it. When the front-page article came out, she only mentioned me because I was explaining it in lay terms. I got a big kick out of that.

This incident should also bring to mind the short film I persuaded the county to fund called "Lost and Found." You [Ron Flick] were very much a part of that work and I was very proud of the product we turned out. I can still recall

sitting in front of you saying: "No, no, let's do that again and try and remember that you are talking to a group of seventh graders" — which was the group I was thinking would use the film. Boy, was I wrong. The film hit PBS and went international. For years after that, I received letters from schools requesting a copy of the tape to be used as a tool in their science classes. The big surprise was I also got letters from colleges and universities from all of the states, and Europe. At last count, I think I had sent out around 155 copies. The film received a couple of awards. Still have the original if you want to have ASBPA re-do it.

I always knew that lobbying was an important aspect of what we were trying to accomplish, and I started working on it during those early CSBPA days. In 1982-1983, during the El Niño storms, the state suffered more than \$15 million in damages to public facilities, mostly public beach facilities. Some \$5 million of the \$15 million was for damage in Los Angeles County. I took a crash course in letter campaigns, how to acquire grants and how to lobby Sacramento for help. After transferring all existing grants to emergency repairs along the coast, we were able to have all the facilities reconstructed and open by the summer of 1984. It was definitely one time in my career where everybody worked together. The reason I mention this is that it made me realize that the work we were in would require federal monies and therefore more help from our federal lobbyist. This is when I started pushing for ASBPA to acquire a lobbyist.

Getting back to the CSBPA conferences, when I became a member the conferences were smaller and I felt they were being held in warehouses. I changed that and we started meeting in hotels with proper facilities. We already had all the coastal engineers; what we needed were more local counties and city governments, elected politicians, as well as citizen participation. I think we

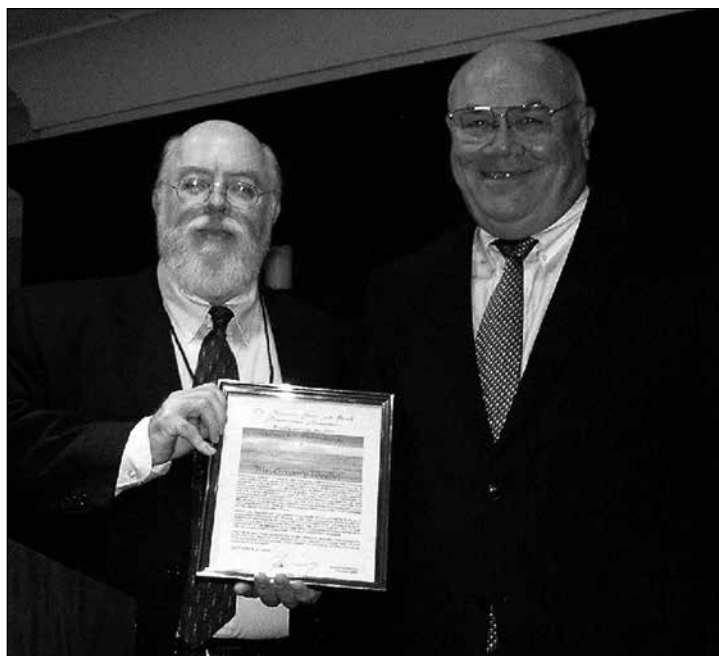
accomplished a small part of this, but it needs a lot more work so you guys can do your work. I think it was also at this time that I started bringing in political guest speakers from Sacramento and Washington. I remember one in San Jose with Senator Mello. That was also the meeting when I had invited President Ronald Reagan to stop by if he was at the ranch. No one was more surprised than me when a telegraph arrived in the middle of the conference that I read to our members sent by the President of the United States, congratulating us on the work we were doing and the importance of our coastlines to our people.

The best part of my years with CSBPA was helping to raise the information level of what it takes to replenish your beach, costs, and so on. Many local governments can now run their own programs (i.e. BEACON) with the assistance of the Corps. whereas they didn't have a clue before.

The most exciting project was, of course, the renourishment of Dockweiler Beach. I don't know how many people really know the whole story. Hyperion was going to move 1.5 million cubic yards of sand inland and bury it in a hole to avoid the Coastal Commission. I had made numerous calls attempting to get the sand from the city of Los Angeles when I was told by my supervisors to close the file and stop the calls. It was just too hot politically.

So, I managed to meet secretly with 26 different agencies while getting their informal approvals. I then presented the approvals to the director of my department. At that point they had to move on it. If they had found out what I was doing and who I was meeting with, I probably would have been fired. This is why I am naming my book about those years, "Fools Run In where Angels Fear to Tread." This brought not only the sand, but also a 500-car parking lot, restrooms, concession stand, and a hang gliding center, all at no cost to the county.

The really funny part was I had a few too many drinks at one of our conferences. This lady started asking me all kinds of questions and I was telling her about the secret meetings and how I more or less threatened to take this to the newspapers if the county didn't get the sand. Well, what I didn't know was she was Cornelia Dean, a reporter for *The*



**Greg Woodell (right) receiving the Murrough P. O'Brien Award at the 2005 ASBPA National Coastal Conference from ASBPA President Harry Simmons.**

*New York Times*, writing a book on "The Battle for America's Beaches." I found that out when the book came out in 1999. God, was I floored. Luckily, all the people I had mentioned were dead or wouldn't read the book. Even so, in 1991, CSBPA gave me their Man of the Year Award for Outstanding Beach Preservation.

By the way, in 1989, I was also able to get the city of Los Angeles to transport another 200,000 cubic yards of material down to Cabrillo Beach at no cost to the county. It's amazing what you can do when you know that the local councilwoman of the Cabrillo Beach District was also the chair of the Public Works Commission for the city of L.A. Those guys at the Hyperion Treatment Plant really hated me. Now the reason I mention this here is that during all of the secret meetings I was introducing myself as the president of CSBPA. So it was really CSBPA that pulled this off.

The county set up their coastal program in the 1930s. Over the years, it slowly died due to retirements, attrition, and budget cuts. I was able to scrape some funds together and get it back online before I left. Unfortunately it's fading again. You know government, they will wait until there is another El Niño and pay six times what they would have had to. Hell, it only took them 15 years to do a five-year study — yeah.

That's all that comes to mind on CSBPA except for all the great times we had together — wonderful people to work with. One more thing -- I have never been

any good remembering names. So when I heard some people call M.P. O'Brien Dean and some call him Mike, I assumed his name was Michael Dean O'Brien. It wasn't until I was in the Berkeley area and called the *Shore & Beach* offices to see if I could come in for a few minutes and get some work done. No problem. As I walked up to O'Brien Hall, I thought, it must be nice working in a building that has your name on it. Then I opened the door and found myself standing in front of an eight-foot-high oil painting of the chair of the Department of Hydrology sitting in the chair. At that point I am sure I said, "Oh my God, his name isn't Dean, he IS the Dean." Dean O'Brien was such a special person. I am glad I got a chance to tell him about this story before he passed. He got a real charge out of it as I turned red in the face yet one more time.

This brings to mind another incident that I didn't understand when it happened. I was approached by a young man who I believe was the ASBPA secretary in the early days of the organization. I had just been talking with Dean O'Brien and Joe Johnson and I was standing between the two of them. This young man, whose name escapes me at the moment, said to me, "You know, that's why you do so well in this position. As I was watching you talk with them, it was like Moses was on one side of you and Elijah was on the other." At the time, I really didn't understand why he would say such a thing. Years later, as I was looking at the portrait in the lobby of O'Brien Hall, I understood. Brings to mind again the



Left: Woodell (right) with State Sen. Henry Melo at the 1984 CSBPA conference. Below: Woodell (right) with Col. Dittman.



Top left: Cruising in the waters offshore of Santa Cruz. Top right: Woodell with California Sen. Dianne Feinstein during a DC visit. Above left: The ASBPA contingent on a Washington lobbying visit, in the Indian Treaty Room in the Old Senate Building. Above right: Woodell with Barbara Guild.

phrase, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

I think this might sum up my tenure as president of CSBPA. There is no doubt that my colleagues in CSBPA and ASBPA were instrumental in teaching me the things that I needed to know to become a successful beach planner for Los Angeles County. At the same time, getting Los Angeles County to join ASBPA served to strengthen the overall organization. While I was focusing my main attention on building the newest chapter of ASBPA, I was to learn that it was not the newest, but the rebirth of a chapter that was actually started in the 1930s in Los Angeles County. As I looked through historical records I was able to find many interesting facts. Unfortunately, in reading the newspaper article from 1930, I also got the impression that ASBPA had lost its way through the years. I had a feeling of what the ASBPA organization had become and what it was when it was started in 1926. With this knowledge in hand, when I was chosen to follow Orville Magoon as president of ASBPA in 1994, I had an idea of where we had fallen away from the original philosophy and how to get it back on track.

No one was more surprised that I when I was asked to follow Orville as president of ASBPA. I think one of the reasons I was chosen was that I made so many comments about the administrative side of the organization. I started by taking scrupulous notes at the board meetings so that there was a paper trail. I also made sure the budgets were audited and copies were sent to all members of the board after the meetings and prior to the following board meetings. I also worked at balancing the board so that the ASBPA board of directors represented the shorelines of the Great Lakes, the Gulf of

Mexico, as well as the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. We also brought on some of the first women in the many years since the organization was founded.

Once I felt some of these administrative items were in place, I next wanted to expand the chapters by getting the locals involved and providing them with start-up money after they had hosted their first conference. This was attempted in Texas, Hawaii, and the Great Lakes. Unfortunately, I can't tell you if it worked. This would also go hand-in-hand with moving the conferences from coast to coast and also touching on the rivers and lakes at different intervals. I felt it was true to the original purpose of the organization which was to protect the shorelines of our oceans, lakes, and rivers. It was obvious that over the years, the rivers and lakes had been pushed to the back of the agenda, and yet they had become so very important to the overall message. This is why I was very pleased to have opened again a new area of study when we looked at Lake Michigan during the Chicago conference, and at the rivers when we held our annual conference in Portland. I was also pleased to have brought the ASBPA conference to one of our islands, Hawaii, but was unable to fulfill the other dream of having a conference in Puerto Rico.

From my early days as president of ASBPA, I felt the organization was missing many opportunities by not being involved in lobbying. It seemed the common thread of thought among the older members of ASBPA was that the peer-reviewed journal should be the main point of the organization and that hiring a lobbyist would put the scientific element of the journal in jeopardy. I could see that although I felt I was correct in the

need for a lobbyist, I would be fighting an uphill battle that could not be won.

While on a plane to a California Marine Navigation Conference, I was sitting next to a Washington, DC, lobbyist by the name of Howard Marlowe. I told Marlowe about the ASBPA organization and what I felt it needed and where it needed to go. Marlowe showed an interest and we began to work together with the idea that one day ASBPA could bring his firm onto its board. In the meantime, Howard and I worked together towards one day bringing his firm on full-time. We did this for a number of years with ASBPA covering costs and Howard's time was pro bono. We then worked out a plan that involved Howard creating a separate organization to be called the American Coastal Coalition (ACC). The thinking behind this was, at some time in the future, the two organizations would merge, allowing Howard to take a seat on the ASBPA board. There is a very important age-old lesson here: The plan literally came together, but it came together quicker than planned.

*The plan, once set into motion, came together even faster than Woodell imagined. The result is the ASBPA we have today, with the California chapter joined by chapters in the Northeast, the Great Lakes, Texas, and the Central East Coast, and student chapters at Stevens Institute and Florida Institute of Technology.*

*It may be Greg wants to use “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread” as the subtitle for his coastal career; those who know Greg know he is no angel — but he is no fool either. But the rushing-in part is quite true, and ASBPA owes a debt of gratitude for his rushing into the organization and for his many accomplishments with CSPBA and ASBPA.*

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