BOEM DEEPWATER GULF OF MEXICO HISTORY PROJECT

Interviewee: Villere Reggio

Date: March 5, 2009

Place: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Interviewer: Dolly Jorgensen

Ethnographic preface: Villiers Reggio joined the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in 1976, where he aided in covering the leasing aspect of the offshore oil and gas program in the Gulf of Mexico. Reggio worked on National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) assessments, and was an early proponent of the rigs-to-reefs idea. In 1987, he published a small book that addressed the policy options for platform abandonment and reefing disposal, which would prove to be a foundational text for the rigs-to-reefs movement.

File 1

DJ: So I actually did my research in California in September, I went over there and talked to some folks, and looked through their, in their case, the legislative material, all the letters that got submitted, because their bill—they had a bill that started in ’99, I guess ’98, and it ended up in 2001 they actually passed a rigs-to-reefs bill, but the governor vetoed it.

VR: The state legislature.

DJ: Yeah, but the governor vetoed it.

VR: Okay.

DJ: And so I was looking through to try and investigate, well, why did that happen? What was the discussion?

VR: Did you talk to anybody at MMS when you were looking over there?

DJ: I did not talk to any MMS folks. I talked to the biologist people who've done the scientific work out there. And I talked to the environmental—

VR: Biologist with the state?

DJ: No, actually, the biologist with—well, I mean, they get a lot of funding actually through MMS and the state, but that have done all the work on the rockfishes and stuff out there. And I talked to the environmental organizations that protested against the bill, the leading person, if you will, on why that all happened, and then there I spent a lot of time really looking at the background documents. What were all the things that the committee—you know, the committee hearings, they had a lot of hearings about the bills. So who did they hear in testimony? What were the documents they got? I looked at the governor's files, you know, all of this kind of stuff, to see how it shaped up and came together. So it provides a really interesting contrast, how contested it is, if you will, versus the Gulf program, which—

VR: But it took a while.

DJ: Yes. Well, that's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about was about how it was that this program in general has been able to really get going with not the same kind of vocal opposition, at least.

VR: At the same time, definitely. But there was some opposition, mainly the commercial shrimpers, they had been promised that the oil industry wasn't going to affect them and they felt they were losing territory when they started to put special areas offshore that would be impacted much broader than just a single structure, you know. So they complained a bit about it, but I think basically what they were looking for is some compensation, but it all worked out in the long run with them. I'm going to be somewhat personal in this in that I'm telling you from the standpoint of how I was involved with it, not anybody else.

DJ: Absolutely. No, no, and that's why I'm talking to you.

VR: Okay. I came aboard with the New Orleans International office. It was the Bureau of Land Management at the time in 1976, and we were just responsible for the leasing aspect of the offshore program in the Gulf of Mexico, and I guess in

the Atlantic as well. No, the New York office handled the Atlantic. It was just the Gulf of Mexico. And we had a responsibility under the National Environmental Policy Act to write environmental impact statements, and they'd do it every time they had a lease sale, which was twice a year, basically, once off of Louisiana and then off of Texas, one in the spring, one in the fall. When I was hired, my job was to assess the impact of the program, basically, in each lease sale on outdoor recreation.

Being a native of New Orleans and Louisiana, even though when I was hired in '76 I was working in New Mexico, but I knew that the greatest thing to ever happen to fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, recreational fishing anyway, was oil and gas development. So once here, I started promoting the idea, ultimately, of trying to keep these structures, some of them, useful to the fishermen in the Gulf because these would not always be here. As time went on, they went further and further offshore and they kept saying, well, this is going to all come to an end some day. So the immediate need was to get information. So I got a lot of stuff I'm going to leave you with if you want it.

We worked initially with a group called the Offshore Operators Committee. You've heard of the National Ocean Industries Association? This is kind of a counterpart, only in the Gulf. It was a coalition of the oil companies and the service companies that deal with offshore operations in the Gulf of Mexico. I got them to agree to do a survey for me. I developed a survey for them, working basically with Texas A&M, who they have a group over there and a professor, Robert Ditton [phonetic].

DJ: Yes, I've read a lot of his things.

VR: His specialty is the human dimensions of recreation, and basically he had a strong focus in marine recreation. But I developed a form and got the offshore operators to voluntarily, those companies that wanted to participate, to take information on who came to fish around their structures offshore, who are they, when they came, what day of the week, whether they were commercial or recreational, all this was not through talking with them, but basically just looking at what they were doing and assessing it. It wasn't really scientific; it was just basically what I could get I would take. So that went on for a year and we ended up with, oh, thousands of reports, daily reports, and now we're stuck with trying make some—

DJ: Sense of it?

VR: Yes. So I went back to Bob Ditton and he agreed to take the project on, he and his students. And of course we gave them some money to do an analysis and write a report basically of all that information. Prior to that, we also gave some money to the National Marine Fisheries Service—they had a national recreational fishing survey ongoing; they still do that—and to ask that one extra question of

the people who fish in the Gulf of Mexico, do they fish around oil and gas structures. And they did do that, but I was not very pleased with the results. I never did get a report out of them, a published report, or anything else specific to the question that we answered. But I did get a report from Bob Ditton and that's what this is. So you can have that and read it at your leisure.

DJ: Great. That's terrific.

VR: If I'm going too fast—

DJ: No, no, no, you're perfect.

VR: Now, mind you, I'm just a rank-and-file staff person and that's all I was throughout my entire career.

DJ: That doesn't mean we don't have impacts and effects of what we do.

VR: Definitely, definitely. And among the people I work with, both my peer group—not my peer group, they were all pretty much supportive, but my managerial group, they were very different. Some supported the idea and some didn't. In the Washington office, I had sometimes differences of opinion and I got in trouble actually for talking to people over other people's heads and stuff like that. Didn't really bother me much, because I got strong encouragement from some people who are considered people I wanted to work with and help.

Anyway, we came up with some objectives and I wrote them down and got the office to support that, so I felt on good footing with the things I did. So that's basically from way back near the beginning when we said this was what we were going to do, what I was going to try to do, and I took it from there, basically.

DJ: I saw that there was the 1980 meeting, the Gulf of Mexico Information Exchange meeting or something, and you have the whole session that was talking about—

VR: I had a session every year for several years. Those I did not bring you because you would have had to bring a pickup truck to bring all those books home. I focused on that for many years, having the session, and getting the movers and shakers or anybody I could, charter boat captains and real people and government people and all that to come, give their piece, and over time the idea grew and a lot of people supported it and I had some people that I worked closely with like in the oil industry, like Dana Larson—I think I gave you his name—who was tremendously supportive. In fact, he was the chairman of a committee with the National Ocean Industries Association called the Rigs-to-Reefs Committee, and that was his objective as well. So we worked together for many years on this.

Back in, let's see, this would be in '87, I guess, I published this little book, which basically it's a paper talking about the different options you would have, not that you had, but that you could have.

DJ: You could have if the regulations were such that—

VR: Right. How the structures could be used. Very simple. But it had a big impact, I think, this publication.

DJ: Oh yes, because people still cite it as the foundational work of what rigs-to-reef is.

VR: Really?

DJ: Yes, oh, yes.

VR: Good. Good.

DJ: See, you may not realize how many—I mean, I think every article that has come out since, in any kind of journal—

VR: References that?

DJ: References your works.

VR: Good. I don't know if it's even still available through MMS, but anyway.

DJ: I did get a copy, but it's actually nice to have this one because the only copy I could find was on microfilm, so it's the black with white text and it's really hard to read on the microfilm.

VR: Well, good. This is just some of the correspondence. This was for the State of Louisiana, telling me that they supported this idea and they wanted to do it and all that.

DJ: Oh, that's great.

VR: And then the ball was really beginning to roll then, and through these information transfer meetings, we got some big people involved, and actually with Bob Ditton we went to Washington and had a meeting with the Secretary of the Interior, giving him the results of the report that Bob Ditton did for us.

DJ: Oh, okay. That was [James] Watt [Interior Secretary], I guess.

VR: That was Jim Watt, exactly. He was very supportive. In fact, he was the one that I think got the ball rolling with MMS and coming up with this committee in

Washington called the National REEFS Committee, REEFS standing for Recreational Environmental Enhancement and Fishing in the Sea.

DJ: Yes, very good. A nice long acronym, you know.

VR: Right, exactly. And here's a little paper about that.

DJ: Oh, that's great, because I had seen that referenced somewhere, but I hadn't had any information about it—

VR: Here's some more.

DJ: —how that came to be or anything. Okay, great.

VR: So then we were really flying high when we had the people in Washington at that level were telling my people they were going to do this.

DJ: So basically, Ditton did your survey or he came up with his report and then you and he contacted the Secretary's office to say "We'd like to come talk to you about this," or did they contact you?

VR: I don't remember what the reason for the meeting was. It was when the issue really got hot and they were starting to organize all these committees and all that, and I guess he was interested. The people in Washington set it up for us from the MMS and he got involved.

DJ: Because I just actually got it while I was over at Baton Rouge, I saw that in 1981 there were a couple of bills that came before Congress and they actually had a hearing and Dana Larson gave some testimony for that, specifically about the rigs-to-reefs in '81, but the bill didn't go anywhere. Like so many bills in Congress, it just dies in committee, although the committee seemed really interested, I mean, reading the transcript.

VR: Yes, John Breaux was very much involved. He was our senator from Louisiana at the time. In fact, he invited me to give testimony, but they wouldn't let me do that, nor would they let me—I was invited to go to the State of Texas when they were thinking about legislation as well. Early on, I kind of developed a little flow chart of a sort, and I'm trying to say all of the different federal agencies that could be involved, and state agencies and private groups and all that, so that's a copy of that, and these are the people we contacted and worked with over time.

DJ: Wow. It shows you how complicated all the process it could be with so many people involved.

VR: There's also a group in the Gulf of Mexico, it's just basically a marine fisheries group, called the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, and I was, I guess, what would you say, I was a member at one time. They invited me as a member, not a voting member, but I don't know, a come-to-their-meeting member. And I actually drafted up a resolution for them, which they did pass, supporting all this.

I worked also with, like I said, many local groups here, but here's one that I also drafted up a resolution for. It's basically a citizens' conservation group, the Louisiana Wildlife Federation. They got that passed through the state legislature, I mean they sent that to the state legislature supporting the legislation at the state level to make a program go like this, you know. So all this was kind of happening simultaneously, and John Breaux got this passed. That's the National Fishing Enhancement Act. So that's what made it.

At the same time, this committee that the Department of the Interior had developed, REEFS Committee, was trying to get all these federal agencies that had a part out there, the Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Coast Guard, the MMS, ad infinitum, to come together on some kind of a memorandum to say that "We're going to all cooperate to make this happen." Well, you can imagine that would take ten years if it could ever be done, and then in the meantime, the legislation came out and said it can be done.

DJ: Right. The legislation said, "You shall. You are going to do this. We don't care if you understand each other or not."

VR: Right. So after that, Louisiana and Texas passed their own legislation. Here's a copy of Louisiana's. I don't have a copy of Texas'.

DJ: Oh, that's okay. I have a copy of it. Luckily, some things you can still, I mean you can get them online nowadays, some of the official things. So the Texas' is late enough that it's available.

VR: Good. And one of the things that the National Fisheries Enhancement Act was to dictate that the National Marine Fisheries Service would take the lead with the Corps of Engineers to develop a National Artificial Reef Plan. I was on the committee to develop that plan. It has been developed and that's just basically a reference to it.

And all else I have is different papers that I've given, and I can share those with you, which you probably have anyway, but this one I was very proud of. Let me give you this, with the American Fisheries Society meeting. I got the guy from Louisiana to co-author this with me, Rick Kasprzak ~~Kasperzak~~ [phonetic]. Unfortunately, he died a couple of years ago.

DJ: Yes, that's what I heard.

VR: In fact, a lot of the people, I've been retired going on eight years now, and a lot of the people that were really involved with this no longer are in the positions that I dealt with at the time.

DJ: Right, that's why I was happy to find you and talk to you because things, they change, you know. People move around and people retire, so it's really good to talk to folks that were in it at the beginning.

VR: This was just a paper. I was asked to go to Indonesia and give a paper on that, so I did that. So there was a little international involvement there.

And this is another thing I was very proud of. Every year, I think it is, or maybe it's every five years, there's an International Artificial Reef conference in—where was this? I think it was in Miami. Yes. In nineteen what? Eighty-seven. I was encouraged to have a session on rigs-to reefs, petroleum structures and rigs-to-reefs, so I developed a session, just like we had done through our annual information transfer meeting, but on a bigger scale and on a focused audience strictly on artificial reefs. So I did that and I actually, through MMS, did a proceedings strictly on that session, that one session that we did at the International Artificial Reef meeting in 1989. I got Dana Larson to co-sponsor that with me, co-chair that with me. So this is the proceedings from that conference.

DJ: Excellent, because I've seen references to this one as well.

VR: Have you? Good, good.

DJ: I mean, you really did a lot of the stuff people—I mean, they go to your stuff and talk about it. But getting a copy of some of these things, on the other hand, has proved a little—

VR: Well, you're hitting gold here. I had to steal a few of those things before I left the office.

DJ: Well, that was good for you.

VR: Another thing I was proud of is I got with the state and developed a recreational fishing map series focused strictly on the rigs-to-reefs. I did that with Alabama and I did that with Louisiana and got my agency to cost-share in it. I've just brought you two copies. This one's kind of an overview of the whole program in Louisiana. It's kind of hard to see because most of the reef sites are way offshore, but they have a couple kind of close to shore. That's what this is. That's a designated reef site through their planning process.

The oil companies basically—you know how it works? If they want to give a structure for a reef in Louisiana, their only option, basically, is to bring it to one of these sites. Of course, Louisiana in their planning process knew that the cheaper it was going to be for them to dispose of a structure as a reef, the more likely they were going to cooperate. So they developed their reef sites where a lot of the structures were already. Kind of that's what makes this program so great. This was not my idea. The State of Louisiana, working with Exxon and a couple of the other big oil companies, came out with a deal that the oil company would offer them half of their savings if they gave them the structure as a reef. And they save big bucks when they don't have to bring these things to shore and cut them up. It was a negative thing, even though they sold the steel for salvage. That was a pittance in comparison to what it was costing to get rid of these things.

So the project was born, I guess around 1987, '88, the end of the eighties. These maps were developed and you can have those too.

DJ: Okay, that's great. So you worked with them on "We should do this."

VR: I put a lot in developing this. I was hoping they would give them away or sell them for a dollar so that people wouldn't just take them and throw them away. I think they sell them now for twelve dollars. Alabama, they were real cheap over there. Even though Alabama doesn't have a rigs-to-reef program, they do have some structures off the river that go off Alabama, and Alabama fishermen do go and fish these structures.

This was an article that came out in Louisiana's *Conservation* magazine in '86, early on, actually. There was one oil company, it was Tenneco, and Mike Zagata, that really stuck their neck out and gave some structures to Florida and Louisiana to promote the idea as well. Anyway, this was Louisiana. I wrote that article for them with Virginia, who was the director, Virginia van Sickle [phonetic]. Or was it Rick? Who was the—

DJ: Actually Virginia and Chuck.

VR: Okay, Chuck. Chuck, he's with Sea Grain [phonetic].

DJ: Right, I talked to him, actually, a couple days ago.

VR: Did you really?

DJ: When I was up in Baton Rouge.

VR: He's still at LSU, right?

DJ: And he told me to tell you hi and to give you his best.

VR: He and I were great friends.

DJ: When I said, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to be talking to Villiere."

VR: I got him involved when he first came to Louisiana from South Carolina. They had a project to—they were promoting the idea of taking the structures, the old ones that were no longer used, and bringing them and using them for coastal restoration, to protect the coast by lining up the old structures along the coast as a barrier sort of. I wrote him a letter and told him, I said, "What do you want to do this for, when you can make artificial reefs out of these things?" Which, I thought would have a lot more support and be better for the state than pushing this idea that I don't think they would have ever gotten across. Well, whatever, they never did go forward with the other one, but Chuck took it upon himself to promote the idea of rigs-to-reefs in the state. He was kind of one of the leaders, getting to do all the planning in the state to get it going. Of course, he got a lot of money from MMS, too, to do a lot of studies and he and—what was his name? Stanley? I don't know if you came across his name. He's done a lot of the biological studies associated with the fish around the structures; how they orient themselves, how far they go from the structures, and all this sort of stuff, making the estimates of how many fish actually are around structures. They did a lot of this with the remote sensing and everything.

This is just the current *Recreational Fishing* magazine for the regulations that the state gives away every year, and in there they have a list of the artificial reefs, talking about the artificial reef program. So each one of these is a structure that was put under the artificial reef program. So as you can see, there's lots of them. Of course, it gives a little information so these people can find them.

DJ: Right, on their GPS, when they're out.

VR: There's about 120 in that program and of the 120, over 100 of them are oil and gas structures. They did get some surplus military equipment, old tanks and vehicles and things like that, that they also put on some of reef sites offshore. Then they have a few, I think a few, close by in some of the lakes along the coast where they also build reefs with structured materials. They buy reef balls and stuff like that. So I think those are listed here, too.

But the crux of that program, and really a major funding source for the department, is the rigs-to-reefs program. I don't know how much money they have, but I know they get literally hundreds of thousands of dollars every time they turn one of these things over. Supposedly they were going to not touch the principal and only use the interest from that source of money. I don't know what's happened there, but I know they're real pleased with what they've got.

DJ: I talked to the head of that program now. He took over after—

VR: Who did?

DJ: What's his name?

VR: I don't even know.

DJ: Doug[las] Peter. He was from Texas, and he'd worked in the Texas program for twelve years, I guess. It was like three or four years after Texas got started, he started working there, so in '92 or '93 or something like that. And so he came to take over after Rick was no longer around to lead the program. He said as of right now they continue to do just the interest, but with today's financial stuff, there's been discussion. But he's still trying to, I guess, say, "No, we should do just the interest."

VR: I think that might be—it might not be somebody saying, "I want to take the money." I think there might be some legal restrictions on it.

DJ: Yeah, but of course, you can pass something in the legislature to say, "Oh, we could change the law." Right. That's the approach.

VR: And I think Texas has a similar situation. Did you talk to somebody in Texas?

DJ: I talked to him since he just left the program there a year and a half ago, I guess.

VR: Right. I made you a list of a few people which you can take. The guy that I dealt with in Texas who was the most knowledgeable and supportive was a guy named Hal Osburn.

DJ: Yes, I've seen his name.

VR: And I don't know if he's there anymore or not. When I left, he was the director of Marine Fisheries with Texas Parks and Wildlife. So you can keep those contacts.

DJ: Okay, great.

VR: I think I've told you about Maurine Borno [phonetic]. She was tremendously helpful. She worked in the Secretary of the Interior's office, when we first got started with this, as a kind of a secretary and she was great, just great. So she knows all the history and things about what they were doing in Washington. At the Washington level on this, she was kind of Jim Watt's person to get this done. You can keep that.

DJ: Yes, put it under here. I don't want anything to blow away, that's for sure.

VR: And this is my last thing I'm going to give you here, was when I got a little notoriety. This was 150th anniversary Department of the Interior publication. [unclear]. I don't even know if they do this publication anymore. But I was getting close to retirement and they knew I was going to retire, so I guess I was lucky and they did a piece on—

DJ: Oh, look at that. Nice. With your picture and everything. And they're big, a big issue.

VR: The used literary license. It says something in there about I walked on the shore and I looked out offshore, like the idea just popped into my head. It didn't happen that way.

DJ: "Then a thought occurred to him."

VR: [laughs] But anyway.

DJ: You know, that's how these people are when they have a magazine kind of thing. My husband found the same thing. He's working on a project looking at second homes in Norway that people have, like little cabins where they go for vacation and stuff. And they were writing an article that they interviewed him for, a similar kind of thing, a two-page thingy about his research, and he said he read the text and it's a little bit like, "Oh, and he loves to go outdoors and be at the cabin," and blah, blah, blah. And I think that he's been to the cabin one time in the last two years, three years.

VR: Yeah, they make the most out of it.

DJ: And it's like, well, okay, I guess if it sells your magazine or whatever.

VR: So that's kind of my story. So in the North Sea, though, they don't recreationally fish offshore, do they?

DJ: No, and that's been one of the differences in, I guess, approach. But what's interesting is the scientists, particularly a whole group of scientists out of Scotland, were really interested in the rigs-to-reefs programs.

VR: Yes, I actually had at some of the meetings that I had some people from Scotland. I think I may have even a presentation from the people in Scotland that were very supportive of the idea. And they've done studies there, from Aberdeen University.

DJ: Right. Exactly. That's where most of them are, and they were very interested in the concept to increase fish stocks, because the North Sea has some major issues with declining fish populations. Because in the North Sea it's interesting because the cod fishermen don't catch their quotas in the North Sea because there aren't enough cod to catch. So they were very interested in the concept of artificial reefs, using the structures as artificial reefs to help the—

VR: The biology of the fish, right. I don't know how it affects breeding and things of that nature. The idea was floated around here and I liked the concept of actually setting up refuge areas offshore in areas where certain structures are, but the recreational fishermen don't like that at all. [laughs]

DJ: Well, I guess the one place where you kind of have that happen is if something's so far out that the recreational fisherman don't—

VR: Believe me, if they're going to catch a fish of a certain size and type and they want it, they'll go there. That's another thing, the economic implications of this, these people are buying bigger and better boats. Of course, there's always a safety issue, but the Gulf is a somewhat placid body of water, even though we had, what, three people drown here just last week. Do you remember the football player?

DJ: Yeah.

VR: They went thirty miles offshore, I think, but that's in Florida where they don't like [unclear].

DJ: That's right. They don't want anything in their water.

VR: So in the North Sea, I think it'd be treacherous to go out there.

DJ: Yeah, so they never thought of it as a recreational fishing thing other than—the Scotland people had interest in two things. One was to have the platforms out in the areas where the platforms are now, as a rigs-to-reefs for increasing fish stock. But the second thing was, instead of actually bringing the platform all the way to shore for recycling, was to put them in the bays, if you will, as near-shore reefs, specifically for some recreational fishing and some commercial fishing, increasing the catches there.

VR: Commercial fishing goes on around these countries and also on the reef sites, I'm sure.

DJ: Yeah, so they were very, very interested in that. They tried to get funding from E.U. and from U.K., to put in some—they actually wanted like some pilot projects, five-year monitoring and big scientific studies. They could never get

enough people to put the funding together to actually make it work. And then what you had was in '95, when Shell was going to dispose of the Brent Spar facility in deep water, Greenpeace protested and had a big hoopla in all of Europe.

VR: Protested the Brent Spar, you mean?

DJ: Well, no, that's what was interesting is that was just a deepwater disposal. They were just going to take this old facility, but it was the first one in the North Sea, and throw it away in a deepwater trench.

VR: Well, there's international agreements against that.

DJ: Right, well, so that's the thing. It's all those international agreements, basically, many of those got their start with that protest. So what happened is that they got all that banned where you can't do that, but the environmental groups made a connection between that and reefing, and so when they would talk about things, they would say, "Well, we've made it where the oil companies can't dispose of the facilities in deep water, but what we think they're going to do is they're going to try to call them a reef and really dispose of them anyway." So all this idea that the Aberdeen people had about wanting pilot programs and all this got wrapped up in the politics of—

VR: That always happens.

DJ: And so they never were able to get anything going. So that's kind of where it's been. But in my research what I found out is that in the last five years there have been some things that may open some opportunity to re-discuss this, to rethink about it, because one of the things was, not a lot of people used artificial reefs in general in the North Sea. Okay, there were a lot of biological questions, does it increase fish or not. Well, in the last five years, a number of projects have gotten going in Norway and the U.K., which is the people that have oil platforms, where they've been installing the things like reef balls, those kind of structures, and they've been very successful.

VR: Have they? Great.

DJ: And so basically there may be some opportunity now to say, "Hey, wait a second. Now people actually are using artificial reefs up here in the cold North Sea and it's working. Why are we going to throw away all these really good structures?" And the other issue, of course, is the cold-water coral now. They've done all these studies and found out there's actually coral reefs up in the North Sea.

VR: Really?

DJ: Yeah, so they're this whole specific kind of coral that grow up there and they're growing on platforms too.

VR: Oh yeah, they grow on platforms all over the Gulf. In fact, I should have thought to bring you, they have a poster showing an oil structure. I've got to ask MMS for one of those posters. It's kind of neat. [unclear] could get you one of those. Ask him to send you one of those posters of the oil structure.

The big thing now in the Gulf, the current issue is offshore commercial fishing, whether they're going to make cages and nets, to grow fish. I think the Department of Commerce has endorsed the idea. A lot of the environmental groups are against it, and even some of the commercial fishermen, of course, are against it. So they haven't made a connection in the controversy, that I've heard, having to do with how the oil and gas structures are going to interrelate with this, but if they're getting to the point where they're going to go into an industrial operation offshore, I can't see how they wouldn't try to make use of an old platform to support their projects.

DJ: Right. You would think so. I mean, if you were thinking, "Okay, well, I'm going to be here out in the middle of the sea. Well, let's use a thing that's already here."

VR: The thing is, though, if somebody assumes the responsibility for a structure that's sticking up out of the water, ultimately they're going to have to be responsible as well, to get rid of it, and that's not cheap. So that will make your project unfeasible real quick. Now, maybe they can work out some deal where for so many years they would take responsibility, or the oil company would give them a certain amount of money that they could put aside in escrow or something, to ultimately use for the disposal. I don't know how they would work that. The thing about the rigs-to-reefs is that's not a problem because—well, it's a problem for the state, they do accept the liability, but they don't have to spend money on it until something happens.

DJ: Right, right, right, exactly. Well, as far as right now, I mean, the states have made money off of it.

VR: Oh, gosh, gobs of money.

DJ: So in their case, you really see why people have always categorized it as win-win.

VR: Right, and they've just scratched the surface in Louisiana. I mean there's 5,000 structures out there, and they've got maybe 100, 110.

DJ: Yeah, it's a very small portion, actually. And that's the other thing, I guess, in the North Sea, the complaint that, well, the oil companies would simply use this as an excuse to get around the rules, I mean, if that was the case—

VR: But see, here, the oil companies are not making the decision. The state is.

DJ: Well, exactly, and that would be the same case there too.

VR: But you wonder whether the state's doing it in the interest of the fishermen more so than in the interest of the financial gain that the state is getting. I don't want to try to answer that question. I think I would have built my sites closer to shore. Of course, the closer you get to shore, the shallower the water is and the more the liability is of concern. But you know, I think I asked somebody one time, how many structures could you put in the three-square-mile. That's what our lease blocks were. And you could put almost all of them in the Gulf of Mexico in that one three-square-miles. You know, put them side by side. You could get 4,000 in one little three-mile-square. So from the standpoint of space use, you wouldn't have to take up much space to keep this program going.

The State of Louisiana, as far as I know, has not spent any money. It's not done much research on the use of these sites. I don't know. I'm not aware of it if they are.

DJ: Actually like post-placement studies, if you will.

VR: Sure, how many people are using it; which ones are they using; how often they go there; what it means for the state economically. All these types of things I think I would be interested in, and I think they ought to have the money to do these types of studies. And now they do. They put a buoy on each one of these reef sites, and those things are hard to keep in the water. I'm sure they do investigations and studies of how to make that better, but you'd think they would be surveying the fishermen to find out if they use them, what they could do better to help use them. Most of the fishermen, though, they just go out there and find a structure. They don't go to a site. Unless you can find the buoy, you know, you've got to have remote sensing electronic gear on your boats with which you can find a reef. They can find a structure that's sticking out of the water, which is probably a better place to fish than the underwater reef is, because you've got the underwater reef, but you've got the whole water [unclear] as far as how it affects the fishery, and that, I think the shade factor and everything else, keeps the fish there. They actually have, in the sporting goods stores, you can buy equipment, what they call a rig hook, it's like a giant question mark that they can put over the structure and then tie a rope off of that to your boat, stuff like that.

DJ: But yeah, that only works if the structure's sticking out of the water, not eighty-five feet below.

VR: So, otherwise, you've got to bring, what, 600, 700 feet of rope to put an anchor down because they don't want you to tie off on their buoys when you fish these

reef sites. So I don't know how much bottom fishing takes place on these reef sites. I know there is a good bit of trawling, catch pelagic fish like mackerel and stuff. But they do bottom fish. I've had people come to these information transfer meetings; these [unclear] charter boat captains, to say how they did it. It was very successful.

DJ: Yeah, I noticed yesterday I guess it was at the library, I saw the *Louisiana: Fishermen's Paradise* little guidebook or whatever that they have of all the places to fish in Louisiana, and so I wanted to see how they talked about the rigs, and what was really interesting was it's like—

VR: Not much, huh

DJ: —two sentences about the whole thing, and yet I get the impression that it's really common to fish the rigs, and yet they don't talk about it.

VR: It is common. It's common by the upper-class fishermen, I mean the people who've got money. Because you've got to have a big boat and spend a lot of money to make a trip offshore. When you figure the gas you consume and the boats you have and everything, it's big time.

So that's kind of my story. If you've got any specific questions, I'll try to answer them.

DJ: If I can not cough too much to—I tell you. So when you look back, you say, okay, so why did you get involved, it was really just a personal experience of fishing rigs before and saying—

VR: Well, knowing that that was the situation here in Louisiana, and to me there was just an opportunity waiting to happen. When you work with the government, some people try to make a difference sometimes, and I never went anywhere as far as moving up the ladder, but I felt I made a difference. And I think I did. I think it was recognized. In fact, one year I got the Professional Conservationist of the Year Award from the Louisiana Wildlife Federation. That was quite an honor.

DJ: Yeah. Well, like I said, your stuff is always cited there as the foundational "This is what the programs are about. This is what they're supposed to be.

VR: The future's unlimited; they've just scratched the surface. I've never been in on the negotiations. I don't know whether the state just accepts what the oil company gives them or they try to dicker with them as to how much money they should get.

DJ: Well, according to Mr. Peter yesterday, they do an evaluation of every structure, at least since he's been involved in it in the last two years.

VR: The state does?

DJ: Uh-huh, but he actually turns down a fair amount of structures right now.

VR: Does he?

DJ: He said that the problem of course is all these hurricanes.

VR: Well, that makes a lot more structures available to him.

DJ: Yeah. The problem, though, is that in a lot of the cases of these hurricanes, of course, they're damaged structures, structures that have been partially toppled, and the oil companies would like to leave them where they are—

VR: Well, yeah, that's definitely a cheaper alternative than paying the state to take them.

DJ: —instead of moving them to the reef site. And so their problem is, of course, that they don't want to assume that the place where it is is actually a good place to leave it, I mean their whole concept of planning sites and grouping things. And the shrimpers don't want more land taken up. So he said they currently are not acting on those requests, if you will. They've put a hold on—

VR: The MMS?

DJ: No, the Fish and Wildlife, on the requests for these "leave in place" special ones.

VR: Oh, are those the within the reef site "leave in place," or are those the outside?

DJ: No, those are outside.

VR: They would have to make a new site.

DJ: So that's where it's gotten a bit complicated, he said, is because they'd have to make a new site.

VR: And they have to go through a process to do that, I know that.

DJ: Yeah. And he said they had, he's right now—what did he say? On his desk he has ninety-something applications.

VR: Really? Wow.

DJ: And a fair number of them are special sites that are outside of the planning areas because of hurricane damage and stuff. So he said that's making a bit of a mess, if you will.

VR: Kind of the way it works is the oil companies, when they start planning to dispose of a structure, they hire a firm, which is an engineering firm that specializes in disposal. Of course, the engineering firm, I think, one of the options they always consider is to sell to the oil company to get the job is, "We can maybe save you a lot of money by making it a reef." And they're the ones that I think come up with the dollars, and I think the states work with them as much as they do with the company itself. But I don't know, I'm guessing, because I've never been in on a negotiation.

DJ: So how did you see, I guess, the beginning as you're thinking "This is a really good opportunity for us," and you start from the perspective of your job is with the MMS, but obviously, from all this correspondence, you start working pretty closely with Louisiana organizations, with Texas organizations. That crossover between the federal and state jurisdiction, if you will, of all this, did you find that it—I mean obviously you got the programs running, so it must have worked.

VR: We did; not me.

DJ: Exactly. So were there some particular challenges with—

VR: Well, sure. In fact, there was a guy with the State of Louisiana who was in charge of marine fisheries early on, a guy name Lyle Sanimar [phonetic], who was very supportive of oil and gas development. But I met with him and he said, "Over my dead body will the State of Louisiana ever take responsibility for any of these structures." Well, that's just what happened. He died, and the State of Louisiana kind of got on the bandwagon after that because they figured out a way to make money. [laughs] I don't know if our governor who's in jail ever got any of that money, but he might have.

DJ: Yeah, because I mean, that's one thing when you look at your charts and stuff, I mean, there's so many agencies, so many entities that have their hands in it, that it really is, in a sense, amazing that programs were able to get going at all.

VR: Well, like when you have the Secretary of the Interior and the President of the United States, actually Ronald Reagan was tremendously supportive of this idea.

DJ: Yeah, that will make a big difference.

VR: But I guess he couldn't get it going in his home state, in California. I don't know.

DJ: Yeah, you know, there's a whole interesting story in California.

VR: Well, they do have commercial operations for fisheries enhancement on structures in California. A guy named—he's also dead now—Bob Meeks [phonetic] had a business growing clams on structures in California, for commercial use, and he proved that they were bigger and cleaner than the clams that are not grown on oil and gas structures. He was quite a guy. I had him at several of my meetings.

DJ: Oh, yeah, he was making some money off that.

VR: Doing a good thing. The oil companies supported him, gave him transportation and whatever he needed and he did it. That's one of the things in the publication that they did with me, one of the things I asked on the survey is if the oil company ever had cause to give any direct assistance to these people. We documented several cases where people's boats wouldn't start back up or something, a lot of people got hurt, got a fishhook in them or something, and they provided first aid. Or something's as bad as what happened last week when somebody's boat's turns over or something, or they have a fire, and they rescue them and take them back to the hospital, the oil companies do, on their helicopters and stuff. So it's a problem for the oil company, but they know that they need public support and they put up with it.

DJ: Well, I mean that's the one thing you see as the difference, say, between the Gulf and California is that the fishermen regularly go to these rigs here in the Gulf. They see it. They live it, if you will, at the rigs, and have a good relationship, at least for the most part, with the oil people.

VR: And that was one of the factors that we used in these maps, was to try to get them to cooperate more with the industry; encouraging them to call the industry when they're coming next to a platform and tell them they're coming and ask them if they're doing any operations which might cause a hazard either to them as fishermen or to the industry who's trying to get access or something like that. And generally when people do the right thing, they have no problems. Of course, some fishermen get indignant when they pull up and park under a structure and they shoot something off the structure, some kind of liquid or something back into the water and it gets all over the fishermen and the fishing boat.

DJ: But they're in business to do certain things. But it's a whole different kind of daily relationship with them that in California you don't have.

VR: I went to California on a couple of trips and saw what they did over there, and it amazed me. They had about twenty-six structures, total, offshore, and they all had a first name, Hilda, Hazel, and this thing, so you knew them all personally. [laughs] Nothing like that in Louisiana. They call them all rigs, and none of them are rigs; they're platforms.

DJ: That's a good way to put it. Yeah, it's quite a difference. Instead of West Cameron 186 or whatever. [laughs] Although in a sense you would think, then, okay, well, they do have first names; they're discrete entities; there's only twenty-six of them; but maybe people might have said, "Oh, well, we should keep those habitats." But, in essence, they've done exactly the opposite thing, which is, "Get them the heck out of here," is the standard reply from the majority of the—well, from many people who are vocal about opposing it.

VR: They blow them up and kill all the fish in the process. Of course, they do when they make reefs too, although some they have just pulled over, I know.

DJ: Yeah, and it sounded like, you know, that's much more common, too, in Texas, now to do the cutting and just take the top half section.

VR: They don't cut with explosives, or they do cut with explosives?

DJ: No, they're using metal cutting.

VR: Texas is ahead of Louisiana as far as being more concerned about the fisheries aspects than the financial aspects, I think, of the program. But that's personal opinion.

DJ: Right. I kind of got that impression, too, from my talk yesterday with Mr. Peter, that moving over from the Texas program, having been in the Texas program for so many years and now moving over to the Louisiana program, and he's a marine biologist and he was involved in the Texas program, started from an intern diving the rigs to count fish, so he's very concerned about only taking structures that are actually beneficial to fish populations and not just anything to make money.

VR: Well, that's good. He might help Louisiana to do a better job, then. That's great.

DJ: So it sounded like he'd been trying, anyway.

VR: I'm sure almost any structure will work, but there's bound to be some better than others.

DJ: Exactly. I mean, that was his thing, was, well, the more piles you have, obviously, the more area it is, and so if all they want to give you is a little caisson sticking up, that that's just not very useful, really, and so, okay, they can donate it, but the savings, too, is not going to be a whole lot. You're not going to get a whole lot of money off of it. He says you just don't have that much. You swim around one little pipe. What you want is a complexity of the structure for habitat.

VR: Right, right. They have one off of Louisiana which was pretty close to shore, and I was real pleased when the state decided to make a reef out of it. It's only seven miles off the coast of Grand Isle. But it was a sulfur plant, it produced sulfur, not oil and gas, and it was a mile long. And that structure all [unclear].

DJ: And that's the kind of thing that you get a lot of benefit from.

VR: Right. It's accessible and it's so big and fishermen were used to using it, and they made a reef out of it. I was really pleased with that. That was actually in state waters; that wasn't in federal waters. But the Freeport gave them a big bunch of money, not having to take that apart and bring it to shore.

DJ: Right. You know, the jurisdiction thing gets a little fuzzy, I guess, in this whole state water versus federal water and—

VR: Yeah, well, it's three miles off of Louisiana.

DJ: Which means all your reef sites are really—I mean, they're all in federal waters other than a handful of exceptions.

VR: Right, right. Well, the state didn't make any reef sites except for the one I was just telling you about in state waters. They made most of them in federal waters. Texas, that's a long way, ten miles to get to federal waters. Florida does have a few oil structures over there as reefs.

DJ: Yeah, that they towed over.

VR: Yeah. And also the military had put two platforms out there for some reason, that they ended up giving over to the state for fisheries use. Florida's big on building artificial reefs and using ships and other stuff like that, military equipment. Alabama took a lot of military equipment. Alabama would take oil and gas structures if the oil companies would bring them over there.

DJ: Right, would tow them that far.

VR: But then that would cost them so much money, they don't want to do it. They'd rather give them to Louisiana. It's cheaper.

DJ: Right. So, thinking of the military platforms, military equipment, I saw that at the beginning there was the whole DOD concerns about, oh these reefs as hiding places for enemy subs—

VR: Yeah, I've heard that too, for submarines.

DJ: —and all this stuff. It was like, I don't know. It seemed a little *Hunt for Red October*. [laughs]

VR: We heard a couple of months ago, a British sub ran into a Russian sub or something like that.

DJ: Yeah. What are people doing down there? There's not that many things down there. But I guess they got over that, anyway, as a concern. I guess the other thing that came up, though, was after the World Trade Center stuff, there was talk about not letting fishermen in Louisiana tie up to working platforms to fish.

VR: Because they were afraid they would be terrorists or something?

DJ: And then the fishermen objected so strongly to setting up regulations that they not be allowed to do that, that they didn't.

VR: They didn't pursue it, huh?

DJ: No. I think that the fishermen were really not happy at all. It sounded like they had a couple public meetings or something and they actually turned out en masse to say, "Nuh-uh. We always fish platforms." But yeah, there were some concerns there for a while.

But, yeah, that's great. I'll work through your stuff here and the contacts that you gave me and talk to some of these folks to get their impressions and starts and where they were coming from on being involved.

VR: Sure. Feel free to contact any of them. I can't promise those are current.

DJ: But it's a place to start, you know.

VR: I think through most of them are. Through those numbers you'll be able to get somebody to get you to them.

DJ: That's the key, you know, because as much as things like the Internet, you can get a lot of information and get started, but it always helps to have from a person, somebody to actually talk to.

VR: Feel free to call me anytime.

DJ: I shall.

VR: You have my number.

DJ: Yes. I appreciate this, you taking the time to come down here.

VR: Oh, it's nothing. When you're retired, you've got all the time in the world.

DJ: [laughs] Yeah, I look forward to that someday. I've got a ways left to go, but.

VR: I worked for the government for thirty-three years.

DJ: Because you started with, you said—

VR: Well, I started with the offshore program, in '76—

DJ: With BLM, yeah.

VR: With BLM. But I worked for another Interior agency for about seven years called the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, which doesn't exist anymore. Jim Watt was the director of that agency at one time and he was the one that got rid of it. That was basically when they created the Land and Water Conservation Fund, they created that Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and they administered the fund through the states as to—

DJ: As to where to spend the money.

VR: They required states to develop a recreation plan, a comprehensive plan, and they administered the projects and made sure they followed all the rules and regulations of the federal government.

DJ: So you already had a lot of work in the recreational industry.

VR: Yeah, it wasn't focused on the offshore, though.

DJ: No. A whole different stuff. But then when you came to be administering the impact statements, you were involved in the NEPA statements.

VR: That was the total of my job when I got here. In fact, the whole career, that was it. And everything I did was interrelated with that.

DJ: That's what's interesting, because a lot of times, I think at the beginning, particularly, though, what you saw is it was always focused on the bad things that the industry was going to do.

VR: They shouldn't have been. They should be at that change, what's going to happen.

DJ: Right, right. Exactly. So I think that's what's interesting about your work is you were very interested in making sure that the, if you will, that the positive effects that the industry had had remained, rather than always.

VR: Would be recognized. It really wasn't our job to try to make them remain, but I did take it upon myself to do that.

DJ: But yeah, that it's not always a negative effect, but what you have seen is that I think a lot of people have approached the whole NEPA process, a lot of people have approached my field, environmental history, if you will, as a field about figuring out what all the bad things are that people are doing.

VR: Well, you know, we're supposed to be responsive to the public, and of course, most of the public concerns are on the negative consequences of these actions, not the positive. And then what's positive for one person can be a negative to another. So it's a good idea then just to look at it as, well, what we're trying to do is catalog the net change. What did you have? What are you going to have? And then somebody has to decide if that's good or bad. It's not just a given that this is good, this is bad. But it is personal value, social value.

VR: So are you going to develop a paper or something on all this?

DJ: Yeah.

[End of interview]