OUR COASTAL HERITAGE:

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT THE N.C. COASTAL FEDERATION'S

COASTAL SUMMIT

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This may not be the kind of keynote address to which you are accustomed. I am a historian after all, a storyteller at heart, and you have to expect that I am going to tell some stories.

So I will warn you, I am going to show you a few family photographs, just to let you know a little about the part of North Carolina's coast where I grew up. And I am going to do a little Show and Tell, and I am also going to introduce you to a few of my friends of mine from the coast.

Once you have met my friends and know a little about where I come from, I am going to talk about our coastal history, and how we got here, and what we might learn from our past that might help guide us today.

But first, like I said, a few family pictures. These are from my grandmother's farm in Carteret County, where I spent much of my childhood and where my wife and I still spend much of our time.

My mother's family has deep roots there. When I am there, I sleep in the bedroom where my mother was born, and her father before her, and on and on back in time.

But when I was young, the old timers still called our place, which dates to before the Civil War, "the new house" because there is a much older house a half-mile down the road on my cousin Henry's farm where the family lived before our house was built.

I also thought that you might be interested in this old hand-drawn map. Created by one of the Quakers who settled our part of the North Carolina coast in the 1700s, the map charts is more than a little rough and painfully out of scale, but you can still make out the local landmarks around us.

The long north-south line in the central part of the map is the Harlowe Canal, which was dug by enslaved laborers in the early 1800s. My family's homeplace sits on the west bank of the canal roughly midway between its outlet on Clubfoot Creek and its outlet on Harlowe Creek.

Second, and this is my little Show and Tell, I know many of you work with protecting and building our state's oyster industry and I thought that you might like to see my Cousin Edsel's oyster knife.

Edsel passed away a few years ago, at the age of 94, and he carried this oyster knife in his pocket six months a year, all the years I knew him, because that's the kind of place where I grew up.

Before Edsel, this oyster knife belonged to his father, my great-uncle Armistead, who made his living as an oysterman back in the days when oysters were a staff of life for coastal people.

Edsel was one of favorite people in the world, and it meant a great deal to me that he left me his oyster knife.

Finally, these last photographs are people whom I have been close to back home on the North Carolina coast. All the portraits I have selected to share with you today, all 60-plus of them, are people that were especially important to me and whom I featured in my historical writing over the years.

I wish I had time to share their stories with you today, but I think that will have to wait for another time.

I just wanted them here with us today. I thought that they might spur me, as I speak with you, to draw as deeply as I can from the lessons about the North Carolina coast that they taught me.

So now, a little historical perspective.

When my mother was born, a New Bedford, Massachusetts, company was still trapping bottlenose dolphins by the hundreds and thousands and slaughtering them on the beach at Hatteras Island.

In the village of Hatteras, people used to shut their windows so they would not have to hear the cries of the dolphins on the beach at night. (The dolphins were often left alive overnight above the high tide line if the last haul finished after dark.)

When the dolphin hunters were old men and I would go and talk with them, they would say that they still had nightmares about what they had had to do on those beaches.

When my grandfather was a young man, New York millinery firms—the makers of ladies' hats—were still paying hunters at Cape Lookout to surround nesting colonies of sea birds and marsh birds.

The hunters would wait until a colony's eggs had begun to hatch, because that was when the birds were least like to flee. Then they would start shooting. In a single day, they would sometimes kill 10, 15, 20, 25,000 birds.

Great, vast colonies of royal terns. piping plovers, sanderlings, herons of all kinds, egrets and many other nesting birds were driven to the edge of extinction on our shores.

A century ago, the swans and snow geese did not come to Lake Mattamuskeet.

A century ago, our sea turtles were being shipped in tin cans to four-star restaurants in New York City, instead of drawing pilgrims from the four corners of the globe to our shores.

A century ago—well, closer to 85 years ago— a pulp mill, without breaking any laws, began dumping untreated sulphur dioxide into the Roanoke River at a site four miles upriver of Plymouth.

By the start of the Second World War, that mill's wastes had destroyed one of America's largest and oldest river herring fisheries, dating back at that site almost two centuries.

A century ago, one of North America's great wetlands, covering hundreds of thousands of acres north and west of the Pungo River, vanished without a trace.

That great wetland was clearcut, drained, and its waters channeled into our estuaries, where the freshwater run-off doomed the oyster beds of the upper Pamlico.

Its ancient white cedar forests and cypress glades all disappeared, largely in the decades between 1880 and 1930. I have spent many an hour trying to find a

single acre of that great wilderness that might have survived, but I have not yet found one.

I am afraid I could go on and on— and on. But I am sure that you get the idea.

I am here to tell you that everything we love about the North Carolina coast today has come about because we recognized that we could not keep going on that way.

We learned the hard way that the strength of our coastal communities, the strength of our coastal families, and the strength of our coastal economy are as entwined as anything can be with the health of our coastal waters, our wetlands, our fields and forests.

We learned, too, that our coastal heritage also hinges on their vitality: our traditions of fishing, of boatbuilding, of living off the land, of oyster roasts and shrimp boils, and of annual pilgrimages to the shore to restore our souls.

All those things that matter so much to us depend on our taking care of our coastal waters and wetlands.

Perhaps above all, we learned that we have to work together if we want to keep the North Carolina coast the kind of place that our children and grandchildren will hold as tightly in their hearts as we hold it in our hearts.

I know, and I know you know, that we have much left to do. I do not mean to say that history tell us that, "Things got bad, much was lost, we saw how bad things got, and we fixed everything and now everything is OK."

And I certainly do not mean to say, well, we passed some environmental laws. We required some public hearings. We set aside a few national seashores and wildlife refuges, a state park or two, and a bit of national forest, and that is all we needed.

You know that is not true, and that is not what I am saying. But I do hope that you, all of you who cared enough to be here today, will not forget that you are continuing a proud tradition of people who have worked heart and soul to protect the North Carolina coast and its people.

I am thinking of individuals such as Rachel Carson, environmental justice activists such as Gary Grant and Donna Chavis, my old friend Lena Ritter down on Stump Sound, and the Coastal Federation's founder, Todd Miller, among many, many others.

Speaking as a historian, I want to remind you that we have made progress that would have been unimaginable a century ago—while we also remember that, in a lot of ways, we have just got started.

And I know—when we see what is going on in the country right now— that things look bleak for so much of what draws us and people from around the world to our shores.

I know too that much of the extraordinary work that you are doing to make our coast a better place may be in danger now.

And I know that there are people in high office now who act is if . . ., well, act as if they've never walked down the Kure Beach Fishing Pier on a Friday night in the autumn.

They act as if they've never seen the excitement of a bluefish run, or the joy in the children's faces, and how nobody on the pier is a stranger, and how much it means to all our state's citizens to be close to the sea.

They act too as if they've never walked the shores of Cape Lookout, when the sea is phosphorescent, and the dolphins are playing out in the waves, and the fish are biting.

And they act as if they've never strolled along the edge of Currituck Sound and felt the beauty of the marshes stir their soul. Or stood out in a field like we do

back home and slowly roast oysters over hot coals, while the old people tell stories and little children dance around the fire.

The shackling of the EPA alone foreshadows a breathtaking descent back into the worst days of our coastal past—when our estuaries, our beaches, our fisheries, and the sources of our drinking water were a free-for-all, open to plunder, pillaging and poisoning.

I wish I had more words of comfort for you, but there is no point to sugar coating the challenges we face.

We all know the road ahead will not be easy. And the importance of the North Carolina Coastal Federation and its partners—in business, government, academia, and at the coastal grassroots-- will never, ever be greater than it is at this moment in our history.

Let me leave you with a story.

I believe that I was invited to speak with you today primarily because of my historical work on the North Carolina coast. However, I also happen to have a long history with the North Carolina Coastal Federation.

In fact, according to the Coastal Federation's founder, Todd Miller, I was the organization's first volunteer. That was something I did not know until recently.

But a couple years ago, I had the great honor of receiving one of the Federation's Pelican Awards, along with my brother Richard.

When Todd presented our awards, he mentioned that I had been the Federation's first volunteer many years ago. And while I had never really thought about it, I guess it is true: more than 40 years ago, Todd inspired me to move to Swan Quarter and spread the word about a massive strip-mining project.

A large, extremely well-connected group of wealthy investors was planning to strip mine a vast swath of the North Carolina coast to extract the peat and use it as a fuel.

The project would have devastated hundreds of thousands of acres of coastal wetlands across Dare, Hyde, Tyrrell, Beaufort, and Washington counties.

Yet when I got to Swan Quarter, I rarely met anyone who even knew what was happening. The strip-mining project had been presented to them as something that was a done deal and need not concern them.

On the few occasions when I did encounter a local individual who had some knowledge of the strip-mining project, and who realized that it would leave their home a wasteland and devastate the region's oyster beds and fishing grounds, they had little hope of doing anything about it.

Their past experience, they told me, had led them to conclude that nobody in Raleigh or Washington, DC cared what they had to say, that they had nobody on

their side, and there was no point making a fuss now because nothing would come of it.

I lived there on the shores of Lake Mattamuskeet most of that year.

At the time, the Coastal Federation was brand new and had very little money, so local families took care of me and gave me a place to stay. Commercial fishing families fed me, carried me into the cranberry bogs at Christmas, and made sure I never missed a church supper.

Above all, they taught me a great deal about what it means to be bound so deeply to our coastal waters and wetlands.

My job—the job Todd gave me because he didn't have anybody else—was only a very small part of the puzzle, and it was very simple: I was just supposed to let people know what was happening and help their voices be heard.

So I hung out at the docks. Visited fish houses. Talked to people in their homes if they invited me to do so. Went to a lot of church services. Talked with people everywhere from pool halls to duck blinds.

Another fellow, Greg Zeph, was also working with me, and before long local people—a woman crabber in Pamlico Beach, a pair of fishermen in Stumpy Point, a farmer in Rose Bay, and many others— were spreading the word much better than we ever could.

At that moment, I would not have bet five bucks on the chance of our success. Everything—money, power, time—was against us. But little by little people—of every background, every political party, and in every little village—began to speak up.

Hope flickered. People began to come together. The more they came together, the more they believed that they could make a difference. And in the end—it seems like a miracle when I think about it now— we—the people of the North Carolina coast— prevailed.

Over that winter, I got a good look at Todd Miller and this new group called the North Carolina Coastal Federation. The peat-mining campaign was the Federation's first big challenge, and at that time Todd was not even able to pay himself a full-time salary yet.

Yet from the very first, I could already see the ingredients that would make the Federation so important to us all in the coming years.

I still remember how deeply impressed I was by the way the way Todd worked so closely and respectfully with the Federation's just-emerging partners—other environmental groups, elected officials, local fishermen and women, the scientific community, and many others.

More than anything, I was struck at how Todd just thought that everybody deserved to have their voice heard. Commercial fishermen and recreational

fishermen, farmers and small businesspeople, Democrats and Republicans, corporate leaders, elected officials, scientists, marine educators, local, state, and federal officials— he believed that they all had a vital role to play in caring for the North Carolina coast.

I was very young then—I was nowhere close to being a historian yet— but that experience taught me that, even when things look bleak, and even when everything seems against you, if we do not give up hope, if we hold onto one another, if we look past our differences to what we hold in common, good things will happen—and sometimes even a miracle or two.

I know that I am a terribly old-fashioned person. (I mean, I still salt and dry mullet roe the way the old people back home did when I was a child!)

I know I am out of step with much of modern times. I still believe, for example, in the Golden Rule, that we should treat other people the way that we would want them to treat us.

I still believe what I was taught in Sunday school, that we are called to be good stewards of God's creation and good caretakers of our lands and waters and the creatures thereof.

I still believe, and I will always believe, what I learned growing up on the North Carolina coast, that a neighbor is a neighbor is a neighbor, and that we are all in this together.

And I believe with all my heart that there some things worth fighting for, and I believe that the North Carolina coast is one of them.