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A conversation with Robert L. Lippson and Alice Jane Lippson

Authors of *Life along the Inner Coast: A Naturalist's Guide to the Sounds, Inlets, Rivers, and Intracoastal Waterway from Norfolk to Key West*

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Q: Where is the Intracoastal Waterway located and how long is it?

A: The Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) is actually a series of rivers, bays, sounds, lagoons, and in some places, particularly in New England, there are stretches of open seas, including Massachusetts Bay, Buzzards Bay, Long Island Sound, and the open waters of the Atlantic along the New Jersey coast. There is a shallow inland passage behind the barrier islands of New Jersey, but few vessels of any size make the passage through those shallow waters. There is also an intracoastal waterway that traverses the edge of the Gulf of Mexico from the west coast of Florida to the Texas-Mexico border. But the Intracoastal Waterway that most are familiar with is the toll-free stretch of sinuous rivers, man-made canals, broad sounds, and lagoons that extends from the foot of Main Street in Norfolk, Virginia, to the azure waters of Key West, Florida—a distance of some 1,200 miles. This is the watery region that we call “The Inner Coast.”

In the early 1760s, a company called the Dismal Swamp Adventurers, owned by none other than George Washington and a few associates, dug the first canal to float cypress and juniper logs from the heart of the swamp to nearby saw mills. By 1805, a shallow draft canal was dug by slave labor that linked Deep Creek near Norfolk with the Pasquotank River that flowed by Elizabeth City, North Carolina, and into Albemarle Sound. About 50 years later, a competing group completed the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, which connected the lower Chesapeake Bay to Currituck and Albemarle sounds in North Carolina. The ICW is now maintained by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers and is used by thousands of pleasure boats, tugs and barges, shrimp boats, and small passenger vessels that carry approximately 100 passengers and call at the beautiful ports of Norfolk, Virginia; Beaufort, North Carolina; Charleston and Beaufort, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and down to Miami and Key West, Florida.

Q: What is special about the Intracoastal Waterway and its flora and fauna? How is it different from other bodies of water?

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A: The Intracoastal Waterway that runs from Norfolk, Virginia, to Key West, Florida is protected from the turbulent waters of the Atlantic Ocean by a broken ribbon of barrier islands. This great watery maze, bounded by salt and freshwater marshes, forms one of the world's largest and most productive estuaries. Inner Coast waters are an amalgam of high salinity waters pouring in from the ocean inlets that mix with brackish and fresh water rivers and embayments. This is the very essence of an estuary: a place where the rivers meet the sea to form a special mixture of waters that nurture larval fishes, shrimps, and crabs; a place where thousands of birds feed and nest; and a place where the rich plant life of marshes contributes to the immense productivity of this magnificent estuary and also provides critical habitat for hundreds of species.

Inner Coast waters also span and connect two geographical zones: the temperate and tropical zones. The temperate zone, a place of intermediate temperatures that bathes the Atlantic coast, flows from New England to Cape Canaveral, Florida, where it meets the northern edge of the tropical zone. No estuaries of the magnitude of the Inner Coast connect these two geographical zones. Their proximity provides a constant intermix of species, and nowhere is it more noticeable than in the Indian River Lagoon where northern species of fishes, for example, swim with tropical species that are usually found on coral reefs and seagrass meadows.

Q: How did you both become interested in marine science and estuarine ecology? What is it about these subjects that fascinates you?

A: We both love the water and its associated environments and, of course, the flora and fauna. That is what attracted us to marine and estuarine ecology; it is our life! And we also believe it is important to communicate with the public. *Life along the Inner Coast* is our way of sharing with society.

Both my wife and I are marine biologists and began our work as faculty members at the famed Chesapeake Biological Laboratory which is part of the University of Maryland. My wife's specialty early in her career was the study of early development of fishes of the Chesapeake Bay and the Mid-Atlantic. She was also trained as a medical illustrator at Johns Hopkins University and, throughout her career, has used her wonderful talent to illustrate the developmental stages of fish and egg larvae for a number of important scientific publications.

I have a Ph.D. in the ecology of crustaceans and was responsible for research on the blue crab throughout Chesapeake Bay. I was also a marine fisheries scientist with the National Marine Fisheries Service and worked on studies of various species of fishes, sea scallops, and the interaction of wetlands with estuarine waters. My wife and I have collaborated on a number of publications, and I guess you have to be a marine biologist to understand our fascination with unraveling the mysteries of what fishes and crabs eat and what eats them and why they live where they do.

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Q: Robert, you and Alice used to lead tours of the Intracoastal Waterway. How did you go from giving tours to writing this book, and how long did it take to gather all the information?

A: While I was still working as the Assistant Regional Director of the National Marine Fisheries, I received a call from a colleague who told us that the Clipper Cruise Line was looking for speakers aboard their vessels. The Clipper Cruise Line, at the time, had two small ships that carried about 100 to 135 passengers on various cruises throughout the Atlantic coast, the Great Lakes, and the Caribbean islands. We used some vacation time to join the *Nantucket Clipper* for a cruise through the Intracoastal beginning at Alexandria, Virginia, and ending at Jacksonville, Florida. The passengers aboard the *Nantucket Clipper* and her sister ship, the *Yorktown Clipper*, were upscale and well educated, and they were interested in history and in the natural history of the area. We enjoyed speaking with the passengers because one of our professional and personal commitments is to communicate with the public.

A few years after we published our first book, *Life in the Chesapeake Bay* (1984), we began thinking about writing *Life along the Inner Coast*. In 1988, we began to seriously research the ICW on our first boat, *Sea Quill*. After I retired in 1991, we decided to start a business in St. Michaels Harbor called Chesapeake Bay Nature Cruises. Again, we were led by our desire to talk with laypeople about the Chesapeake Bay and show them the wonders of the Bay. In order to accommodate 20 or so passengers, we had a custom designed boat built that we called *Odyssey*. We ranged throughout the Chesapeake and even took several people down the Intracoastal Waterway to Charleston, always talking about the beauty of the area and the interesting marine creatures, birds, and plants that inhabit the Inner Coast. In 1995, we gave up our nature cruise business to concentrate on research aboard the *Odyssey* and to develop what became *Life along the Inner Coast*.

Q: What made *Odyssey* so well suited for research?

A: *Odyssey* was a 42' trawler that was built for us in New Orleans; we told the naval architect what we required in terms of layout, propulsion, and deck space. We further specified the steering stations (3) and a transom door to walk out on the swim platform. *Odyssey* was a shallow draft boat that allowed us to move into the shallows. She was very seaworthy and easy to handle, and there was plenty of deck space and compartments to store our collecting gear and to set up aquaria so that we could observe the behavior, shape, and color of the organisms.

Q: What ever happened to *Odyssey*?

A. We had *Odyssey* until 2000 when she was sold to a couple from Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. They used *Odyssey* to take passengers to nearby barrier island beaches where they spent the day and then were picked up and taken back to Wrightsville Beach. She was sold two or three years later and we saw an advertisement for her in Maine. . . . Believe me, I was tempted to buy her back!

Q: What were some of your most memorable observations aboard *Odyssey*?

A: There were many memorable observations: the sight of a shrimp boat coming down St. Catherine's Sound with its net booms trailing its nets and looking for all the world like a giant dragonfly, and the time that we sought shelter from an approaching hurricane in the lee of St. Catherine's Island. The air was still, as it often is before a hurricane nears, so we set out two anchors, prepared dinner, and as dusk began to fall, a flock of wood storks swept low over our boat and then climbed into the pines and settled in. The storm swerved off, and we spent a fitful but safe night. Another time, we watched a bottlenose dolphin near McClellanville, South Carolina, solemnly nudge a dead dolphin through the marshes of Cape Romain. We were deeply touched by the sight of that dolphin moving its mate out to sea.

Q: Can you describe a typical day of research that went into the making of this book?

A: There were no typical days. Some days we read a great deal on certain subjects or species and some days my wife spent a great deal of time designing the "look" of the book while I made long lists of species, plants, and animals that I felt should be included. Sometimes we got in our car and visited colleagues at their laboratories in North Carolina and other areas. We often went on photographic trips. Some of the photos were expressly for publication in the book or for the

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cover, and other photos were working photos for my wife's illustrations. For example, we photographed tree swallows and barn swallows on a dock line, the shearing effect of wind and sand on shrubs and trees in the maritime forest, and the soaring of a squadron of brown pelicans or scurrying ghost crabs on a beach.

And then there were the wonderful days aboard the *Odyssey* observing the antics of roseate spoonbills feeding in the shallows and the graceful flying of black skimmers as they plowed their tactile bills through the water. We bent over floating piers with our head down to watch the feeding of barnacles and the creeping amphipods and isopods. Often, we would ease off the swim platform of *Odyssey* and snorkel over grass beds and coral reef patches, photographing and collecting specimens as we moved along. We stopped at almost all of the major marine laboratories from Virginia to Key West and beyond to talk with colleagues and to use their libraries.

When we had gathered all the field information, we set to writing the book, and those days were the most typical of days. My wife and I have a large office/studio in our home and two of everything: computers, printers, scanners, and a large, comprehensive reference library. Most every day we went "to work" and spent most of the day writing, discussing, and drawing until one day the manuscript was finished, and it was time to send it on to the wonderful people at UNC Press for their critique, comments, and suggestions.

Q: Why did you choose to organize the book by habitat instead of by region? What are the different habitats you include?

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A: When we wrote our first book, *Life in the Chesapeake Bay*, we organized it by habitat rather than classification of plants and animals from the simplest to the most complex forms. Other than specialists, most people do not think that way, but they do recognize habitats if they are well described. There were very few books that were organized by habitat when we wrote *Life in the Chesapeake Bay*, and it was an immediate success. Not only the layperson but also students and experts found it easy to use. Nowadays, it is quite usual to see a book organized by habitats. The [more]

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habitats that we include in *Life along the Inner Coast* are Forested Wetlands, Wooded Shorelines, and Swamps; Marshes and Mangrove Swamps; Beaches; Intertidal Flats; Places to Settle: Pilings, Floating Docks, Rubble Structures, and Mangrove Prop Roots; The Shallows; Weed Beds and Seagrass Meadows; and Live Bottoms: Oyster Reefs, Patch Reefs, and Worm Rocks.

Q: Alice, how did you create your beautiful, detailed drawings of the flora and fauna of the Intracoastal Waterway?

A: I always initially do a detailed pencil drawing based in most instances on sketches I have done in the field. At other times, I have to rely on photographs. When the pencil drawing is finalized, I place transparent film over the sketch and do the final pen and ink rendering.

Q: What advice do you have for those interested in experiencing the Intracoastal Waterway for themselves?

A: The Inner Coast is a place of beauty from the Outer Banks to the Florida Keys. *Life along the Inner Coast* will assist any visitor to the area, answering questions which will surely come up: What is that large white bird along the marsh? We caught an unusual fish the other day; what is it? We have noticed some black leathery lumps growing on the seawall; what are they? Are Inner Coast waters salty or fresh? What are those beautiful hibiscus-looking flowers growing in the marshes? I think I saw an alligator the other day; do alligators live in South Carolina? etc.

Q: In your preface you mention the growing populations and thriving development in the areas surrounding the Waterway. What effects have these had on the area?

A: Wetlands have been encroached on and water quality has been degraded by runoff from ever increasing paved surfaces.

Q: How have global warming, pollution, and environmental issues changed the Waterway and its plants and animals?

A: There is not enough information on the effects of global warming to make a determination. Other environmental issues usually are created by increased human populations that cause water quality and habitat degradation.

Q: How do you anticipate this book being used?

A: *Life along the Inner Coast* is the only book ever published that covers seaweeds, herbaceous plants and trees, marine invertebrates, insects, fishes, birds, snakes, turtles, and terrestrial and aquatic mammals along a coastal stretch of some 1,200 miles. This book will be of value to the casual layperson who may visit the Inner Coast or who lives nearby; to students from high school [more]

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to graduate school who will use it as an important reference; to boaters cruising Inner Coast waters; and to professional biologists, planners, and decision makers who will undoubtedly consult it as an important source book.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Robert L. Lippson and Alice Jane Lippson, authors of *Life along the Inner Coast: A Naturalist's Guide to the Sounds, Inlets, Rivers, and Intracoastal Waterway from Norfolk to Key West* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2009). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/lippson/.

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