Tom Horton: I'm Tom Horton. I live in Salsbury, Maryland. I was born June 25th, 1945. I work at Salsbury University as a part-time professor and write environmental columns for the Bay Journal, and anything else I can get paid for.

Eve Austin: Town Creek is just as their sun is setting, and they won't be giving funding any more to environmental organizations, they want to collect kind of the living history of the memories, experiences, challenges, lessons learned for future environmental leaders, new environmental leaders coming up and anyone else interested to be able to go and listen to. Maybe we could start with, if you want kind of just kind of give a nice summary of your life's work and your environmental work.

Tom Horton: I guess I sometimes compartmentalize my life so far by I spent my first 20 years or so just enjoying the Chesapeake Bay and the Maryland environment. Grew up an Eastern Shore kid, fishing and hunting, and mucking around the marshes, and just having a good time outdoors. Then after some military service, I got hired by The Baltimore Sun and spent the next 40 some years kind of going back reworking all of that territory from the standpoint of an environmental journalist, kind of looking what was at the time beginning to go wrong with all those systems that had afforded me so much pleasure and enjoyment, and which I probably did my part to abuse a little bit, so sort of two different ways of looking at the same territory. Of course, my views over 40 some years, I hope they have evolved a little bit.

Of course, I still have a good time out there. I tell my students I teach, "If you're going to get into any of these save the world professions whether it's environment, or social work, or whatever," you're going to lose more than you win. Some days you're going to think the world isn't even terribly grateful, so you got to build some fun into it. I have always been pretty mindful to that. Otherwise, you just burn out because there's too much wrong with the world, and you can't fix it. It might happen on your watch, and it might happen 50 years after you're dead, who knows? Yeah, that's longer answer than you needed, I think.

Eve Austin: No, that's great. One thing you said, I'm curious about. Excuse me for continuing to mess with my recorder.

Tom Horton: Sure.

Eve Austin: You said you thought you probably did your share of abusing the Bay yourself. What did you mean by that?

Tom Horton: I grew up in the 50s and early 60s, really, and that was a time on the Chesapeake, and not just the Chesapeake, when there weren't many limits on how many ducks you shot and how many rock fish you caught. There should have been, there weren't. We didn't think much about it. There were plenty of them. We caught way more than we needed. We always ate them, but still. Yeah, the conservation ethic was not as strong

back then, nor did we worry about how much gas we burned up. I didn't grow up throwing my trash in the water, but really, until the late 60s, early 70s, it just seemed like the Chesapeake was fine. We couldn't screw it up, and we didn't think too much about how much we took, how much we used, didn't have to.

Eve Austin: [crosstalk 00:07:51]

Tom Horton: Yeah.

Eve Austin: Just kind of a general way of living that everyone had and just took it for granted, didn't think about it.

Tom Horton: You did. It was a little ironic. Everyone kind of thinks that I'm going to tell them this story of paradise that all went to hell, but it's more complicated than that. Just to give you an example, the river I grew up on, the [Marsh 00:08:19] Creek, which drains into the Chesapeake. When I was growing up, the town put raw sewage into it. My dad's chicken plant put feathers, and guts, and heads, and feet in it. The local canneries put all their tomato peels and watermelon rinds in it, so visibly ... The local sand and gravel company washed its gravel in there. All that would be illegal today, and we don't do any of that. The river really could look like hell, and yet the river back then had a ton of fish, and ducks, and crabs, and oysters. I often hear people my age who aren't clued into environment, say, "Tom, you know, the river looks cleaner now than it ever did." It does, visibly. You don't see plumes of iron oxide going out of Bethlehem Steel any more. We're polluting in different ways, less visible ways, in arguably, worse ways. It's kind of a complicated story when you go back and pick at it.

Eve Austin: I guess I'm an environmentalist, but I'm not an environmental activist. It's no my profession, so I don't know.

Tom Horton: Sure.

Eve Austin: It looked worse, it looked terrible. It sounds gross, but the river was, the water was still alive, and now.

Tom Horton: The water was alive. There weren't nearly as many people, maybe half the number of people on earth then, about half the number of people in Maryland and around the Chesapeake then. The numbers sort of track the world population in Chesapeake, so not as many people. We didn't have the technology to over-fish like we do. We were not paving nearly as much for development, which causes all sorts of environmental problems. Farmers were actually farming more land, but they didn't use nearly as much fertilizer, nearly as many pesticides. All of that stuff would get quite a bit worse even as we cleaned up the visible sources, the stuff coming out of the needs of pipes and made the smokestacks appear clean. Of course, CO2, that was not even in our

vocabulary back then. We knew what carbon dioxide was, but climate change, global warming, we had no clue about that then, most of us.

In some ways, things have gotten quite a bit better, but we are actually having a great deal of impact, and there are just a lot more of us. I actually think, this may be getting a little ahead of it, one of the thing I would do as The Baltimore Sun's environmental reporter is just kind of a mental exercise every several months, or year, or two. I would sort of say, "What are all the pieces of the puzzle, if we want a healthy Bay from over-fishing to over-development, to just over-pollution, sewage, air, storm water? What are we recognizing? What are we controlling?" Over the decades, we began to pay attention to more, and more, and more.

I would say in the last couple decades, I think, we at least acknowledge and are largely working on all of the pieces of the puzzle with one huge exception, which has actually become more difficult to speak about now than it was when I was a young reporter, and that is population. No one wants to talk about it. Everyone says we've got to work on our per capita environmental impact or ecological footprint because it's so gross. That's true, but duh, you work on all pieces of the puzzle. You can reduce your footprint by half. If you double population, what have you done? We just saw in The New York Times showed that emissions from automobiles are going up. Why? Because we're driving more miles in cleaner cars.

I think that's become a growing frustration of mine, that it's very hard to get anyone to focus on that part of the puzzle, which is huge whether it's climate change or airborne emissions, or over-fishing, or whatever. It's the numbers of people multiplied by what people do. You can reduce what people do to an extent, but not enough to offset growing numbers. The problem in the US, is the main driver of growing numbers, is what has become. It was hard enough to talk about it before Trump, but as immigration is the main driver of population increase in the US right now. It wasn't when I was a kid, it was births over death. I'd like to think you can have conversations about most anything, but I'm not so sure any more. Half of my friends think I'm racist if I even talk about there might be a number of how many immigrants we want to take.

Town Creek, actually, I think of it as one of Town Creek's Don Quixote moments. They actually gave me a substantial sum of money to put on a really good international conference on growth in the Chesapeake Bay. It was quite an interesting exercise before it was through. It was a damn good conference, but nobody covered it, nobody. I have to say it was a waste of their money. Who knows? Maybe it educated some people, but I give them a lot of credit for funding.

Eve Austin: When was that, approximately?

Tom Horton: We held it at Hood College about five years ago, I think.

Eve Austin: When you say nobody covered it, you mean there was no press about it? Is that what you mean?

Tom Horton: Yeah, the Sun and the Post, I think, maybe gave it a paragraph each. Nobody came. The Bay Journal, which is a monthly paper that I work for and worked for them, we did a whole special issue on it. It's all there, all the tapes are available, the transcripts from the Bay Journal. It was a really good conference. I predict its time will come, I just don't know when. That's, timing is everything with so many things.

Eve Austin: After being a part of that conference, putting it all one, listening to all the speakers, what was your takeaway of ...?

Tom Horton: I think the thrust of the conference was to try and convince people that you could not just work one side of the equation, our per capita environmental impact, that you also have to pay attention to how many people there are. The other thing was to critique our current economics, which especially since the 60s and 70s has made never-ending growth kind of the prime directive of government. If you look at economics textbooks, I was an e-comm major in college, from the 30s, 40s, 50s, they don't really talk much about the need for constant economic growth. Now grow or die is the philosophy. I the economy is not expanding, then we're in trouble. When you start to talk about sustainability, and you try to pair it with eternal growth, that pretty quickly gets into oxymoron territory.

I've heard a lot of my lefty Liberal comrades praise Greta Thunberg, her talk at the UN, but I don't think many of them, certainly no one running for President would embrace what she actually said. She said, "You have got to give up this fairy tale of never-ending, eternal growth." I don't think they understood what that girl said. They just listened to the climate change, and she's a cool 16-year-old. She's right. She would have been clapping at my growth conference, but I guarantee you from Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders on down, they wouldn't touch any alternative to perennial growth.

Eve Austin: What do you think it is that she is saying? What is the action?

Tom Horton: What she's saying is fairly easy for her because in Sweden and a couple other Scandinavian countries, they have a more acceptance of ecological economics, which is, I say it's a subset of mainstream economics. It's actually in direct opposition to it. Ecological economics says that the finite resources of the planet, ultimately, put a limit on human economic growth. Mainstream economics, and I'm really not making this up, says there is no limit. They don't say it that overtly, but that's what they assume.

A friend of mine who was sort of a founder of ecological economics back in the 60s and 70s, Herman Daly, he recalls when he was the chief economist for the World Bank. He was doing their annual report, and he put in a simple little graph where there was a circle, the human economy and around it is natural resources. They rejected it through six drafts because they said, "Herman, you are implying there is a limit to human development and growth." He said, "There's not a limit. We can always become more educated, more civilized, more leisure, so forth, but growth, physical growth, yeah, there's a limit."

Anyway, that's getting off the topic. That was sort of the other co-equal theme of my growth conference, that you just can't grow forever and talk about sustainability. We had a lot of world class people there saying this. I wish we'd had an audience of thousands. We had an audience of hundreds. The audience wasn't bad. We filled the hall, but it was all the usual suspects. That's kind of a problem, preaching to the choir. That's good, the choir needs some preaching, but we do too much of that, I'm afraid, and how to reach some people. I don't know how you'd reach them, but any way.

Eve Austin: Interesting.

Tom Horton: I guess it's probably inevitable when you have been saving the world for your whole career that as you get along in it you begin to get more focused on these bigger picture things because you've spent 20, 30, 40 years seeing a lot of the kind of more nitty gritty stuff. It's all good stuff, everything. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation and most of the things the state do, they're good. They're real problems that need real work, but they are leaving some big pieces out. I guess this probably happens to people in other areas. I should find some to commiserate with.

Eve Austin: One of the things that the Town Creek Foundation is asking for your insight on is, you've alluded to some of it, but when you think of younger environmental leaders coming up and think about the challenges that they're going to be facing, what do you predict the challenges that they'll be facing, and do you have any thoughts, advice, lessons learned for the new crop of people coming up now in this world of [crosstalk 00:22:11]?

Tom Horton: I guess one that I've referred to is have some fun at it, or you'll burn out. Make common cause with other people. I think another one that we've ignored too much ... When I started working for the Sun just two years after the first Earth Day, which certainly wasn't the first time people worried about the environment, but it was sort of the coming of age of environmentalism as a discipline and comprehensive way of looking at what we need to do to coexist with the rest of nature. I guess at the time it seemed like we were casting an almost impossibly broad net. We were trying to look at the air, the water, the land, all of the interactions humans with those. In fact, looking back, I think the environmental movement in and of itself has always been too narrow to really succeed. The other thing, and remind me to get back to this, is

we kind of made a bet around Earth Day that we could get to a saved Bay, a saved environment, a saved earth by working through the existing corporate capitalist system. I'm not sure that was a good bet, but any way, nobody thought that back then.

Here's an example. An acquaintance of mine, Gus Speth who's a legendary environmentalist, he's been around even longer than I have, wrote recently we would probably gain more for the environment by working with groups like Common Cause and other progressive groups to get the money out of politics than by trying to fine tune the Clean Air and Clean Water Act. In other words, he argues, and I quite agree with him, that environmentalism cast its net too narrowly, that probably nothing short of a green politics, and we've got green parties now that are pretty nerdy and pretty small, and they don't get many votes. I'm not even energized much by them although ...

We've got to make more cause with a variety of groups. Environmentalists have always had a problem appealing to labor unions who are too easily split from us by, hey, they're going to kill your jobs. Need to do more work there. I think my advice for young environmental leaders would be if you're going to have real success, you're going to have to do your own job. You need to be making common cause with groups that work on immigration, on labor, on environmental justice, and an array of things, and it's not easy.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, they've got a powerful brand. Do they want to submerge that in a big coalition? For fundraising purposes, maybe not. These are not easy things to do, but I think I would tell them to think broader than just environment even though that may be kind of mind-bogglingly broad. Maybe you could get more bang for the buck out of working on some things like getting the money out of politics, repealing Citizens United than you could out of that stormwater legislation you've been trying to pass. Again, it's not easy to tell your membership, "Hey, you signed up to fight stormwater, and I want to talk about the Supreme Court. The fact is I don't think the environmental movement is a failed movement, but it's a movement that has never come close to achieving what a lot of us thought it would achieve or should achieve.

It certainly hasn't reached the point it should in education, and that's getting better too. Maryland recently became the first state to mandate environmental literacy, environment taught in everything from pre-K through 12, but the first states or about the other 49, and the rest of the Chesapeake watershed, and on, and on. I don't know. What else would I tell them? Not too much, or they'll think I'm an old scold and curmudgeon. That would be good.

Tom Horton: I'd want them all to read an essay that Wendell Berry, one of my heroes wrote. He's a poet, and farmer, and philosopher. He's not really an environmental writer, but he

cares about the environment. He wrote a really good essay on not joining any more movements. He said these movements are too narrow, save the whales, save the Amazon, save the whatever. They're good causes, but they're too narrow. He said, "They won't succeed. I'm not going to join any of them." He said tongue and cheek before long, everyone is going to be so impressed by me that they want me to start a movement to not join any movements. He said, 'Okay, I'll start a movement," and let's see if I can remember these.

He had three conditions, if you want to join his movement to not join any narrow movements. One was you basically got to walk the talk. If you're telling everyone to do this, you've got to do it yourself. Another was that you do not embrace any narrow, single focus. The third, which really impressed me was this movement must content itself to be poor. Once you get into the fundraising game, that's what Town Creek was part of, of course, and we love them for it, once you get to be more wedded to existing power structures and status quo than you wish to be. Again, this was a pretty radical thing he said, much like Greta Thunberg.

I feel like I understand as a writer I have the luxury of saying whatever I want, and the chips don't fall on me for the most part. Politicians might envy that, but I think sometimes environmentalists are scared to be radical. They want to make environmentalism acceptable, and to an extent, sure. You don't go around saying wild-eyed things like we all have to wear hair shirts and live in a cave, but they're afraid to say what really needs to be done. Maybe you have to be 16 like Greta to say those things.

Eve Austin: 16, or 70-ish.

Tom Horton: Yeah, 70-ish, I don't know. I've been saying them off and on in my columns although I ... It's very interesting. When you're a columnist, you pretty much write anything you want, but in things like writing about growth, if you're the only one saying it, there's a limit on how much you can say it before you just become a crank. You may be right. Maybe you're the only person in the world who's right, but it doesn't matter. You can't write about something over and over unless some other people agree and are carrying water, so there are limits unless you just don't care at all. I always wanted people to read what I wrote, not for an ego thing, because I'm trying to tell them what I think is a good thing for them to hear.

Eve Austin: Did you find yourself in that position a lot where you were the lone voice of things and so you didn't continue to write about them after a while because you weren't getting [crosstalk 00:31:06]?

Tom Horton: Mostly on the growth, and especially on the immigration stuff. The immigration stuff just got too damn ... It was hard enough to write about it without being tabbed a

racist in green clothing before Trump. Since Trump, holy cow. He just made it a toxic brew.

Eve Austin: You feel like you're being misconstrued because of the politics of the day.

Tom Horton: You have groups that I have given money to and generally like, like the Southern Poverty Law Center, basically writing big articles that if you hear someone talking about limiting immigration in the name of environment, you're looking at a racist. That's not true, I don't think. When you write about population you definitely get some fan letters from people you really don't want to be your fans, but that can be said of a lot of things. Right on, Mr. Horton. It's about time we took this nation back. Okay. Yeah, it's been very difficult. With that, journalists love to see themselves as iconoclast, but I think by and large people, I have lots of friends at The Time and The Post, and people at what's left of the Sun and around. We're pretty middle class, card-carrying Americans. We're not all that wild-eyed and crazy, but every now and then.

I have always thought that environmentalism, if you took it seriously, really to create a sustainable planet, not just for humans, but for humans and the whole diversity of the rest of nature, that's a pretty radical prospect. I don't think enough environmentalists appreciate just how radical that would be given the status quo of corporations or citizens to, people to grow and die. Again, you think more about this toward the end of your career, I guess, than when you're in it. I'd say the great majority of columns I've written, and I've written thousands or a few thousand, have been about we're over-fishing oysters, we need to pass that new air act or ratchet down nitrogen oxides 12.5%, just stuff which is useful and of interest. It's not like I've been some grand, radical philosopher of the movement. Of course, I'm not finished yet.

Eve Austin: Good. We don't have to go back to this, but you asked me to, so I just jotted it down, about you made a bet around Earth Day you could save it via [crosstalk 00:34:16].

Tom Horton: I think that pretty much goes to looking at the terribly flawed state of our current economics. This whole notion of progress in Western economic thought, that each generation would be better off than their parents, that really only started 400 years ago. It's not something hard-wired into the genome. Even more recently since jerks like Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics people in the 50s, 60s, 70s, this notion of eternal economic expansion. That, again, there's a whole lot of ways to run an economy. You can do it that way, and it makes a lot of billionaires, but does that make the earth a better place? I don't know. Maybe if I were a billionaire, I'd say, "Yeah," but I don't think it does. I don't think all the billionaires think it does.

Yeah, and that goes back to environmentalism is really a much more radical prospect if you're serious about it, but it may just be that we will content ourselves doing things that are good, making things less bad, not better, and go down the road. You

can go a good ways down the road that way. I don't know how far you can get. Climate change may be writing an answer to that, we'll see. For all the frustration of that, gosh, I can't think of anything I'd rather have done. I started out raising chickens. I'm pretty sure I'm glad I didn't keep at that even though I was pretty good at it, but yeah. What a good deal to roam around Chesapeake Bay and go to the Amazon and the Great Barrier Reef and get paid for it. Shit, that's better than most people get.

Eve Austin: It's a nice career.

Tom Horton: It's a good career. Journalism was just a lot of fun. You thought you were a much bigger deal than you really were, but it was fun.

Eve Austin: That's great.

Tom Horton: I imagine you'll get quite a diversity of viewpoints. Are you interviewing Will later today? He's got an interview today.

Eve Austin: Yes.

Tom Horton: Yeah, that'll be interesting because Will, he's devoted his whole life to the Bay Foundation, just had an extraordinary career and built something pretty extraordinary. I don't talk with him as much as I used to. I expect he's having some later in life thoughts too. It'd be interesting to see.

Tom Horton: I did a book for Will that was last published in 2003. He was very nervous about me wanting to include a chapter on growth, so we compromised. He said, "You can write it. I reserve the right to kill that chapter out of the book, and you promised me you won't go write a nasty column in the Baltimore Sun about me killing your chapter." I said, "Okay," and he put the chapter in the book. I don't think it's his favorite chapter, but it's in the book.

Eve Austin: I think I don't fully grasp, maybe because I'm not in this world, what's the fear of talking about it, writing about it.

Tom Horton: Like I say, part of the problem is that Trump, he's not the only one, but some conservatives have come at the notion of ... I think most people would agree with immigration, that open borders don't work. It's a nice concept, one world, free transit, but for the time being I think we need borders and enforcement of some sort. Probably a few people would say, "Let everyone who wants to come to America, come now." Probably equally few would argue seriously that we should not take more people. That's part of what America is about. At that point, it's just a number you want to settle on. Yeah, that shouldn't be as controversial as it is, but it is. It is. We, historically, don't argue with the numbers. I think part of it is it gets into racial politics.

The other thing, and I'm still dealing with this. I teach really good, little environmental studies department down at Salisbury University. I'm getting to know some of the younger profs are coming from what's a developing field of environmental justice. Environmental justice is something in my career, we ignored that aspect too much. I should have written a lot more stories about why are landfills always located where people are? We would do some of that, but we didn't really rigorously look at it. Environmental justice is a field whose development is long overdue, but man, the other side of that is some of my young colleagues just come from, they get their racist lens on real quick if you start talking about numbers of immigrants and stuff. We have some, kind of, I wouldn't say love, hate because we don't hate each other at all, but it's something I'm kind of feeling pretty old and fossilized sometimes when I hear them give talks. They're probably looking at some of the stuff I write and thinking, "I know he's a good guy, but geez."

Eve Austin: He's an old white man.

Tom Horton: Boy, he's an old white guy, which is true. It's, times change.

Eve Austin: That's interesting.

Tom Horton: Yeah, it is. I'm still kind of working on all that. You couldn't put environmental justice back in the box, and you shouldn't, but I do feel that sometimes people, they just avoid the numbers thing and talk about immigration is a good thing. Of course, it's a good thing. Now do people have a right to immigrate wherever they want? I don't know. That sounds good. I hear more and more people say that. I'm not sure how that would actually play out. Yeah, a lot to learn. You never get the answer and do it, so I don't know.

Eve Austin: What you just talked about is great, but is there any last thing that you wanted to say before we end for today?

Tom Horton: Not really. I suppose the other thing that happens after writing about nature for a career is I think more and more it's not that the nitty gritty issues over nitrogen oxides and nutrients in the water and dead zones aren't important. They're quite important, but I think what I am more and more intrigued by and left with when you strip it all away is the stuff I'm proudest of is in writing about the beauty and the art of nature. Just when you get down to the essentials, that seems to me what's important and inspiring. How many people get off on reducing dissolved oxygen from 0.5 to 0.42, or something? I guess you've got to tap that beauty and inspiration to motivate people. You can motivate a few nerds including many of my friends with reduced nutrients from agricultural runoff. We need to do that, but I think tap into that art and beauty of nature, is something I always try to do that. I just didn't do it enough.

The Baltimore Sun, they wanted hard news reporting where I think I wrote my first book because I started to think there's just a lot of stuff I'm never going to get in The Baltimore Sun. It might be more important about the Bay than the stuff I'm putting in the Sun. They were pretty, not conservative, but just like if it's not news, what do you do? That's not news. I said, "No, but it's important." Yeah, but it's not news, so probably forced me into a book.

Tom Horton: I miss The Baltimore Sun. I wish it were still as big as it was when I was working there. Lots of other papers. It's kind of sad.

Eve Austin: It is.

Tom Horton: I just went down and visited the few people I still know there. Damn, it's just so little.

Eve Austin: So again, it's October 21st, 2019. This is Even Austin. I'm speaking with Tom Horton today. We are talking in my Baltimore therapy office in Charles Village of Baltimore, Maryland. Signing off.