Climate Close-ups – Nancy Pau audio transcription

# Cold open

**Nancy Pau**: The Great Marsh, you know, both on the refuge and off the refuge, is such – like, it’s a part of the identity of the people that live here and the towns that surround it. They already know, if we were to lose it, they would lose a big part of not just nature, but a part of themselves.

# Intro

**Olivia**: This is climate-closeups: an audio series that brings you the voices of those working against the tide of global climate change through their daily work here at the Service. It’s an opportunity to take a look at the individuals behind the work and what drives them. But, as you’ll soon hear, for Nancy Pau, there’s no such thing as an individual in this work.

**Mason**: We asked her questions about her role, her background, her motivations, and she was quick to highlight her community in all of those things. As you’ll hear, she speaks in terms of “we”, not “I”.

**Olivia**: And even in her local context of Parker River, Pau embraces these words, crossing the borders of ownership and management to work in solidarity with partners all across the Great Marsh. I’m Olivia Gieger.

**Mason**: And I’m Mason Wheatley.

**Olivia**: Join us as we get close up with climate.

Nancy, hi! Thanks so much for joining us today. We just wanted to start off by having you tell us a little bit about who you are, what your role is with the service, and how that’s being affected by climate change.

**Nancy:** So my name is Nancy Pau, I’m the wildlife biologist at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, which is a barrier island system, so it’s got salt marshes and beaches and dunes, and it’s at the end of a bunch of rivers that flow into it. So, um, when we started thinking about climate change, obviously as a coastal refuge, we’re impacted by sea level rise and storms – you know, more-frequent storms – from the ocean side. But we’re also impacted by everything that happens upstream, so all the land uses, what people do and what towns do upstream flows to Parker River Refuge. So we’re kind of, you know, impacted on both sides.

So when we were thinking about climate change, I don’t think we had to convince anyone when we realized that things were changing really fast on the marsh. I just remember this one meeting we had, probably in 2015. You know, we were all individually in the marsh and we were seeing, like, these really alarming signs: plants dying, pools forming, banks collapsing, like these things were like, “Oh, this is not good!” In that meeting when we realized the scale of the problem – that it wasn’t just on our land, it was everywhere in the great marsh – that meeting brought the urgency of having to do something.

**Mason:** Um, so in addition to climate change, we also know that salt marshes are struggling because of historic alterations, right? So how are you seeing those affect the marsh as it relates to climate change and resilience?

**Nancy:** Yes, there was wholesale hydrological alterations that were done in the salt marsh, both with mosquito control and with salt marsh haying in the 17-1800s that is still there and is affecting the ability of the marsh to keep up with sea level rise.

**Olivia:** So what are some of the strategies and techniques that you’ve been using to resist these combined changes?

**Nancy:** I feel like I’ve had this incredible opportunity to work with a really great team locally made up of other FWS colleagues, but a lot of conservation partners, a lot of researchers, academia, to really develop nature-based solutions, nature-based restoration techniques – you know, creating creeks, healing ditches – basically working to restore hydrology to the marsh so that it will be able to keep up with sea level rise.

We’re about six to eight years in and we’re finally to the point where we feel like we’ve done all the pilot work and we’ve established the relationships with the regulators where they’re feeling comfortable with what we’re doing, and now we’re scaling up. so as of today, I’m pretty excited. We have – with the partners – we have about 3000 acres of salt marsh in restoration planning right now, and we’re planning on doing probably another 8-10,000 in the next five to eight years.

So I think that that’s the most exciting thing to me was that not only were we able to develop these techniques that we feel good about, but we had all the support of the land owners, the town, you know, the regulators, to scale up very quickly without us having to do too much effort.

**Mason**: And so can you tell us a little bit about what engaging those partners looks like? Like what is that process?

**Nancy**: You know, we’re using the same playbook. We are actually planning projects together. Now when we plan projects, we don’t even look at ownership boundaries, you know. We look at watersheds and whatever makes sense for the restoration.

**Olivia**: Yeah, so on that idea of starting projects and mapping projects, what work do you have left to do? What do you think the future holds for you guys?

**Nancy**: I do think we have more work to do. We’ve addressed, like from a restoration side, we’ve kind of addressed the initial tools to keep what we currently have – to fix the hydrology so that our marshes won’t disappear. With climate change and sea level rise, especially if we want to preserve species like the saltmarsh sparrow that nests in the highest part of the marsh, we need to think about new tools to try to create or preserve habitat for those species.

**Mason**: So Nancy, what do you see is the future of the public side of the work you’re doing?  
  
**Nancy**: The majority of the work will probably be part of that communications/public engagement aspect of it, because as we move forward, the public will have so much mitigation that they will need to do with climate impacts. And what they choose – you know, whether they choose like a hard structure vs. a nature-based solution – is gonna be so important to whether the entire system is resilient.

**Olivia**: I’m curious, can you tell us more about how that community, communication piece has worked so far?

**Nancy**: We’ve made some great starts. I’ve been lucky enough to work with some incredible local youth that have been the voices, and they speak about climate change and all these issues on a whole other emotional level. And that has been wonderful to see. So, I see a lot more of working with those kinds of partners and empowering the local youth to be out there having those conversations and getting people inspired and empowered.

**Mason**: Nice, that’s great. And so just, I guess, beyond youth, what’s been your general experience in engaging the community ad getting them to care about the work that you’re doing on the marsh?

**Nancy**: For us locally, the Great Marsh, you know, both on the refuge and off the refuge, is such – like, it’s a part of the identity of the people that live here and the towns that surround it. So, we’ve already kind of half won the battle because I feel like the people that surround the refuge and the visitors that come here, they already know the marsh needs to be here, and if we were to lose it, they would lose a big part of not just nature, but a part of themselves. Um, so there is a vested interest to preserve that.

You know, it’s wonderful as a scientist to work for years and, like, have the results I have from the restoration side. But I have to say, working with the public, it’s so nice that when you’re talking to people at one of these climate cafes that local high students lead, and you just – there’s that moment where you see people switch. Where you see their eyes tear up, or they are connecting emotionally, and you’re like “oh.” That is like instant reward. I love that feeling. That’s a feeling that I think we all need more of to stay positive and to keep working. (laughs)

**Outro**

**Olivia:** We hope that listening can give you a bit more of that feeling too. Thanks for joining us for this week’s episode of climate close-ups, and thank you especially to Nancy Pau for joining us in this conversation. This audio story’s editing and production was done by Mason Wheatley, and the interviews were done by me, Olivia Gieger, and Mason Wheatley. See you next time!