



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

**TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW (Time 6:04)**

**LAKE ERIE WATERSNAKE (HOST ANN HAAS WITH CAROLYN CALDWELL)**

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

**P R O C E E D I N G S**

(Music plays.)

MS. HAAS: Hi, this is Ann Haas with the Fish and Wildlife Service talking with Carolyn Caldwell of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife. Carolyn, are you there?

MS. CALDWELL: Yes I am.

MS. HAAS: We are interested in talking with you today about the Lake Erie water snake and how it has bounced back. Tell us how we got where we are and so fast.

MS. CALDWELL: Well as many folks may know, the Lake Erie water snake only occurs on the Island in the Great Lakes and on limited locations on the mainland of Canada. In the early 1900s we saw significant declines in the Lake Erie water snake population, due to development of the Island, and in addition to that human disturbance, habitat destruction and use of the shoreline for human related activities were added threats to the species. With that said, the population declined to significantly low numbers in the 1990s.

At that time, it was deemed necessary to add the species to both the Federal list of threatened species in the state endangered, to provide it some additional protection until we were able to determine what some of the threats were to the species and how we can minimize those. So as a result of public outreach, informing and educating Islanders, and Island visitors about the snake, and why it was important for it to be conserved, partnership for habitat conservation through land acquisition, conservation easements and outright purchase of properties, and then long term conservation efforts on behalf of the species I think that is how we got to where we are today.

MS. HAAS: Tell us a little about the outreach. How did you go about engaging people in understanding our water snake needs to be a part of their environment?

MS. CALDWELL: Well initially at the point when the species was added there was some information to suggest that people were just outright afraid of the snakes. It is a fairly aggressive species. It defends itself and so we had to both through information and education show people that these were not venomous snakes and that if left alone the snake will leave them alone as well. So, with a very dynamic personality, Christian Stanford, both a researcher and our primary public outreach person, she was living on the Island, conducting surveys and doing public programming just to suggest that it's okay that the snakes here, it's part of our heritage. It is unique to the Island and if we can avoid killing them and let them persist and live there, it would be a benefit all around.

MS. HAAS: That was no small hurdle.

MS. CALDWELL: No, not at all.

MS. HAAS: And then what about going a step further. How have you engaged landowners in preserving habitat for this species?

MS. CALDWELL: Almost the entire Island is highly sought after in terms of summer cottages, the tourist industry, so we knew that if we wanted to conserve Lake Erie water snake habitat in and around the shoreline, we had to be able to address some of the concerns that the private landowners had. What we were able to do was show them that the snakes utilize the shoreline closest to the water by providing appropriate construction of docks and by maintaining brushy areas, we can provide habitat for the snakes and still allow them the use of the property.

So trying to provide non-lethal mechanisms for people to remove snakes from their high use areas like on top of their docks. How to keep them out of their boats. We were able to offset some of those concerns that the private property owners had and showed them that with just a little bit of space and habitat the snakes could persist and they can also use their property.

MS. HAAS: Tell us about some of the highlights of your work will you?

MS. CALDWELL: I think from the standpoint of this species, it has been a wonderful opportunity to see, in a fairly short timeframe, less than ten or eleven years from the time that the snake was federally listed; To see everything come together in a way that was beneficial to the species as well as to the folks that are utilizing the Islands. We have seen a higher recognition of the snake's value as part of our natural heritage on the Islands by the private landowners and the public.

MS. HAAS: You mentioned partnerships earlier; tell us about those will you?

MS. CALDWELL: Well the Division of Wildlife has worked in partnership on conservation easements on the Island. Purchasing Lake Erie Island property can be very, very expensive. So working in partnership with the Black Swamp Conservancy Lake Erie Island chapter, we have been able to offer landowners conservation easement alternatives, which allow them to recoup a tax incentive for setting aside in permanent conservation easements portions of the shoreline habitat.

MS. HAAS: And that habitat has benefits a range of species.

MS. CALDWELL: Exactly. Conservation easements afford a wide variety of species whether it is migratory birds just stopping on the Islands or things that persist year round like the Lake Erie water snake. Those habitats benefit a wide variety of species.

MS. HAAS: And tell us when the D listing is final will let end conservation initiatives for the Lake Erie water snake?

MS. CALDWELL: Conservation of any native wildlife species in Ohio does not start or end when it's added to or removed from a list. Our role as the Division of Wildlife is to ensure that the native wildlife populations exist for Ohioans to enjoy for perpetuity. So, we will continue to do conservation efforts on behalf of the Lake Erie water snake as well as other native species to ensure that everybody has a chance to enjoy them.

MS. HAAS: So you will be out there.

MS. CALDWELL: Yes, we will.

MS. HAAS: Carolyn Caldwell, thank you so much for talking with us today about the Lake Erie water snake.

MS. CALDWELL: You are very welcome.

MS. HAAS: This is Ann Haas for the Fish and Wildlife service.