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

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW (Time 6:21)

LAKE ERIE WATERSNAKE (HOST ANN HAAS WITH MEGAN SEYMOUR)

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: This is Ann Haas with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and we are talking today with Megan Seymour, Ecological Service Biologist with the Columbus Ohio office. Megan, are you there?

MS. SEYMOUR: I am hello.

MS. HAAS: Good. We would love to talk today about the Lake Erie water snake and since you have been intimately involved in its recovery get us started will you? When we say that thanks to conservation measures Lake Erie water snake no longer needs the protection of the endangered species act what is our message?

MS. SEYMOUR: Our message is primarily that we have been able to work with a number of different partners and the Island landowners within the Western Lake Erie basin to increase the numbers of this rare water snake species and to protect habitat that is critical to its recovery. All of the information that we have to date indicates the population has been increasing substantially. That the water snake has found a plentiful food source and they seem to be doing extremely well at the time of listing. So, we believe that the population is secure. There is plentiful habitat, plentiful food sources and the threat for this species has been reduced pretty substantially.

So, we believe that it does not warrant the threatened status anymore and that the snake has recovered.

MS. HAAS: What has caused this species to decline to the point that it needed federal protection?

MS. SEYMOUR: There are actually a couple of main reasons. One of those was habitat lost and modification. The Lake Erie Islands are located in the Western Lake Erie region and they have been subject to multiple different forms of human usage over the past two hundred years or so. When they were first settled they were utilized primarily for timber harvest and agricultural purposes. They grew grapes out there for many, many years and local wineries were established so a lot of the natural island habitat was converted from primarily forest to agricultural uses and then over the years islands have become a tourist destination.

Another primary factor contributing to their decline was human persecution. They are fairly large snakes, not overly friendly by any means and they are a little bit intimidating when you see them along the shoreline. Snakes were being killed because I think people were afraid of them.

MS. HAAS: So how did you reach out to people to protect habitat and discourage them from killing the snake?

MS. SEYMOUR: We took lots of different approaches to reach out to Island residents and visitors. We put up save our snakes signs; we made those available to anyone on the Island who wanted them. We gave out over two hundred individual signs and people posted them along the shoreline or on their yard. It was a nice picture of the water snake with a simple message. Save our snakes, the snakes are harmless and they are part of the natural island environment. We published bi-annual newsletters that included stories about what was going on with the water snakes.

Why the snakes are part of the natural environment, but the key thing that we managed to get done was hire students to do research on the snakes but also be our outreach coordinator and that is Kristin Stanford from Northern Illinois University. She is a very outgoing person and she has been I think one of the main reasons that the snake has recovered. The Islanders know her as the Island Snake Lady, they see her around on a daily basis doing snake research, but also just talking with people about water snakes, and why they are interesting and why they are important to the environment and just getting people familiar with the snake.

She will grab handful of snakes. She will hold them so you can touch them or if you just want to look at them. She is just our number one outreach mechanism.

MS. HAAS: You mentioned building marinas. How can people save snakes while they are building marinas?

MS. SEYMOUR: One of the conceptions that people have about the endangered species act is that if there is an endangered species on their property or in the area that they will not be able to do anything with their property. That is not the case especially with the Lake Erie water snake. One of our measures for conservation for construction projects is no excavation during the hibernation period. In the wintertime, they are

hibernating so if you dig them up in the wintertime they will die. But, if you do need to excavate you can do some limited excavation during the time when they are active. Another thing that we recommend is, when you are doing shoreline projects such as marinas or erosion control structures, that you avoid creating vertical walls, because the snakes cannot access tall vertical structures. However if you want to build a dock or you want to build a marina you can use rock crib docks or riprap shoreline areas and that incorporates limestone which is the native rock of the Island and create inner special places where the snakes can hide in or they could use the rocks to climb on to get access to the upper levels.

MS. HAAS: Have you had unusual snake experience during this recovery period?

MS. SEYMOUR: It has been a real interesting experience working with the Lake Erie water snake. I have always been interested in snakes but it is not your first idea to run out and grab a giant snake or multiple giant snakes coiled up along the shoreline. That is what we have to do during the annual census where we are trying to catch as many snakes as we can for a mark and then recapture population survey. So working with Kristin and her advisor, Rich King and Northern Illinois University for two weeks during the late spring and early summer we would go out and catch as many snakes as we possibly can and it is always a treat to grab a whole bunch of Lake Erie water snakes.

Again, they are not overly friendly, they will bite when you try to pick them up and they will spray musk on you, which extremely bad smell. There is one time when we were trying to catch snakes and there was an old metal pipe right along the shoreline. Kristin stuck her hand in there and pulled out handful after handful after handful of snakes out of this giant iron pipe for an amazing amount of time and we got pillowcases full of snakes that day. That was pretty impressive. Not something I probably would have done.

MS. HAAS: Thank you so much, Megan Seymour.

MS. SEYMOUR: You’re welcome.

MS. HAAS: This is Ann Haas for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.