



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

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW (Time 8:27)

LAKE ERIE WATERSNAKE (HOST ANN HAAS WITH KRISTIN STANFORD)

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 Hass with the Fish and Wildlife Service talking with Kristin Stanford, the Island Snake Lady. Kristin, are you there?

MS. STANFORD: I'm here.

MS. HAAS: Well we thought we would start out with something that has gotten a lot of people's attention and that is the episode of the Dirty Jobs with the Lake Erie water snake. Tell us about that will you?

MS. STANFORD: Yes, Dirty Jobs. Well it has been four years now and to be honest it just has not really slowed down. We get visitors every year that specifically will show up wanting to know, you know, does the Snake Lady work here, is this where the Dirty Job thing was filmed? So, it's just seriously on a day-to-day basis. It doesn't ever stop surprising me, the amount of publicity that we have gotten from doing that Dirty Job thing. The year after we filmed, they did an on-line poll, kind of a viewer's choice of the most favorite episode. Up until that point and surprisingly to me anyway because, hey I do this every day, but the snake episode was voted as one of the top ten viewer choices episodes.

We were flown out to San Francisco to film the Dirty Job, the 150th episode and even beyond that, they use the snake episode in what they call repacks. There is a section called creepy, slimy, and just plain weird that has been on. There have been jobs that bite. To be honest with you I can't even keep track of them. I was estimating that about ten million people have been exposed to our conservation program through Dirty Jobs, but I easily say that it's double that now. No question about it that there has been

twenty million people that have been kind of informed of what we are doing out here and I just think that is absolutely amazing. Just absolutely ridiculous in fact.

MS. HAAS: Well now, has that helped the buy in from the part of neighbors for this species?

MS. STANFORD: I think so. You know there was a level of excitement that all of a sudden locals realized that, hey what they are doing on the Island's is cool enough for Discovery Channel to come out and film it. It's like wow I guess I never really realized that this was happening in my backyard.

MS. HAAS: Tell us how you got involved in this.

MS. STANFORD: Well to be honest it was completely by accident. In fact, I entered into graduate school thinking that I was going to study small mammals. I started working with Dr. Rich King on a Plains Garter Snake project on campus at Northern Illinois and Rich kind of talked to me and was like I have this large-scale radio telemetry project that we are going to be starting up this year in Lake Erie. He is like, you could go out, and help so I told Rich yeah, I will switch to the snake lab. I will come out, so from then on I would do two and a half weeks out in Ohio on the radio telemetry project and then two and a half weeks back in Illinois doing my Garter Snake project.

In the summer of 2002, I finished my master's degree and by that time we had realized what a huge asset having somebody who is onsite was. You know I basically became known to the Islanders, as oh you are that Snake Lady. You are the one that is researching water snakes. I knew people; I was the one that was in their backyards. I was the one that was sitting there talking to them so they kind of came to know who I was and what I was all about. That was, for me, a real eye opening time within the project because, yes our goal was to get out there and get data.

But, if I didn't put down the radio telemetry gear and talk to these people whose properties these snakes were living on or hibernating on, it didn't matter how good of a job I did with reporting this data back and recording it. If these people were not on board with what we were doing it was just basically all for not. By then I made it a point, every time I went out that if I could reach out to these people and just talk to them and show them and let them know what we were doing out there that that really was the more important part of me being out there.

So then, it was that next year that I conveyed to them this information to our partners that Division of Wildlife, Fish, Wildlife Service, and I said hey, these people need somebody to talk to here. They have questions, they have concerns, and they have problems. They listened, and we made it possible for me to stay out here full time. So, January 2003, I started as the recovery plan coordinator for the Lake Erie Water Snake and here we are ten years later.

MS. HAAS: Well, tell us about the recovery of the Lake Erie Water Snake.

MS. STANFORD: Well they are doing fantastic. Basically less than three to four water snake generations, we have seen a tenfold increase. The original listing we had estimated between fifteen hundred and two thousand snakes and now today we are easily over fifteen thousand, which is just incredible.

MS. HAAS: How have you done that?

MS. STANFORD: This was a listing that hit the ground running. We knew the questions that we still had to answer, like how much habitat the snakes were using, where they were hibernating so that we would have a better idea of how we protect habitat for these animals. Some hard work obviously, but also a little bit of luck. We had the invasive round goby that came into Lake Erie in the mid 1990s and just a few years later we had the first recorded goby that was found in water snake diet samples. A few years after that we decided to do a full re-examination of the water snake diet because we just started seeing more and more of these snakes bringing in gobies.

What we found was that water snakes had had a complete diet shift. Just three snake generations before that they had been eating almost exclusively native bottom dwelling fishes. Well now, they were eating over ninety percent of these invasive round gobies. Since eating round gobies, these water snakes now grow bigger. They are able to grow faster. They have increased their reproductive output and they have also been able to increase their survival rate. So overall, when you add all those things together, what you get biologically is a population explosion and that is exactly what has happened here on the Lake Erie Island.

MS. HAAS: We have seen pictures of children. Are you especially reaching out to them too?

MS. STANFORD: Oh yes, absolutely. I found that if you can get the kids excited, get them on board with your conservation program and what your goals are, they are the ones that are going to be coming up right behind you. In fact, I have several Island children that tell me all the time that they are going to take over my job one day, which is – I think that's great. I tell them: "That's awesome!"

But one of the other things that I saw was when I took the time and allowed some of these kids to get involved with the program that the kids take that information home and they act as this ambassador of this live and let live. You know that was the other important aspect at least for me, was not that I wanted to create mass droves of snake lovers. That's completely unrealistic. First of all we are talking about a snake that is very aggressive, not the most loving, cute and fuzzy animal here and it occurs in extremely high densities so if you are not a snake lover and you walk out in your backyard and you are seeing fifty, sixty snakes on your dock how on earth can I possibly think that I am going to walk into your house and suddenly make you into snake lovers.

It's not going to happen but what I did try to do is instill a message of respect. Respect that that animal has been here since before you got here, since before your grandparents got here, since before the earliest settlers had come to these Islands, so to instill that message of respect that these animals have been here long before you have was an important thing and I think we did that pretty well. Like I said, it's not a matter of you feeling all gooey, cushy, oh I love the snakes, which some people do and that's fine.

But, you don't have to love them let us just respect them and let's find ways for snakes and people to coexist in a peaceful, respectful manner and that's what we do. That is what we will continue to do even after the snake is removed from the list.

MS. HAAS: Thank you so much, Kristin Stanford. This is Ann Haas with the Fish and Wildlife Service.