



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

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW TIME (11:45)

OKALOOSA DARTER (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH STEVE SEIBER AND BILL TATE)

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. LEON: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in February of last year proposed reclassifying the Okaloosa darter from the status of endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act, saying that the small fish is making major strides in its fight for recovery.

Hello there, this is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I'm on the phone today with Steve Seiber of the Jackson Guard, the national resource specialist at Eglin Air Force Base in the Florida panhandle. An exceptional wildlife resource manager, Steve has been the recent recipient of the Service's Recovery Champions Award, and was named top natural resource manager by the Department of Defense in 2010. Hi, Steve. How are you today?

MR. SEIBER: Good morning, I am great.

MS. LEON: And also joining us is Bill Tate, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fish biologist who is permanently stationed at Eglin Air Force Base to work with the Okaloosa Darter, as well as other threatened and endangered species. Hi, Bill, how are you?

MR. TATE: I'm doing just fine, thank you.

MS. LEON: I'm hoping that you two can tell us a little about the Okaloosa Darter and its recovery today.

MR. TATE: Okay. Well, the Okaloosa Darter is a small darter, brown in color or sometimes green. It inhabits clear seepage fed streams in the Florida panhandle, where it tends to be associated with woody debris and aquatic vegetation. The range of the Okaloosa darter is confined to six coastal drainages here in the Florida panhandle that drain into Choctawhatchee Bay. Roughly 97 percent of all the darters in the world are on Eglin Air Force Base. The other 3 or so percent are in the urban areas of Niceville and Valparaiso between Eglin and the Choctawhatchee Bay.

So Eglin has had an opportunity to really get a handle on the species and get some incredible management done.

MR. SEIBER: We've been working with the darter for almost 17 years now. Our first habitat restoration project started in early 1994, and the objective was to begin to reduce the sediments that were entering into the darter streams that were actually smothering the aquatic vegetation destroying the darters' habitat.

MS. LEON: Well, can you tell us about some of the threats that the species faced on the base and how those were addressed?

MR. TATE: Well, originally, the biggest threat identified for the Okaloosa darter was in the form of excessive sediment entering the creeks from erosion. Here in the panhandle, we have very sandy soil, so they're highly erodible when they're disturbed. So things like roads and barrow pits and forestry operations or military missions in the form of test ranges or operations themselves disturb the soil. And during rain events, we have excessive sediments entering the creeks. What this does is it smothers the Okaloosa darter habitat. Remember I said that the fish tends to be found around woody debris and aquatic vegetation.

Well, excessive sedimentation smothers these two things, and the fish can either lose his cover for shelter or spawning sites. The other threats that we've had have been in the form of impoundments. The Okaloosa darter really prefers to be in flowing water, so we don't find it in impounded sections of creeks. And then the final thread is the urbanization.

MR. SEIBER: When we first started our restoration projects, we estimated that more than 69 thousand tons of sediment per year were entering the darter streams. Today, there's less than one thousand tons that are entering these streams. And some of the things that Eglin is proud of is the fact that there were over 345 sites covering about 508 acres that we have restored that were initially eroding into darter streams. We've had 152 sites that were existing stream crossings back in '94. We've actually eliminated 57 of those, and six recreational ponds have actually been removed from the darter streams.

So we have done a tremendous amount of work since 1994. And part of the population fragmentation that was coming from some of our culvers that were more perched and

did not have connectivity, we only have five of those that are left to be removed, and about 98 percent of our restoration projects have actually been completed. So we're almost done with the restoration work here on Eglin Air Force Base.

MS. LEON: In working with this species, were there any impacts to military training. If so, how were those addressed?

MR. SEIBER: Well, actually, no. The simple fact is I think that we are kind of proud of the way that we have created a partnership with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Our first shovel operationally for restoration, we went to the service and asked them the way or direction that we should go with this. The Air Force originally went through surveyed it and went worst first, and it was the Panama City field office of Fish and Wildlife Service that said no, we think you should do this by drainage. And that's actually what we have done. And this ongoing partnership has enabled Eglin to have no mission testing or training impacts.

And really, I think the Air Force leadership has taken a very proactive role in [threatened and endangered] species management. It is thanks to the Air Force commitment really that we have been able to accomplish as much of the habitat restoration as we've been able to do.

MR. TATE: That's right. I think Steve is exactly right there. I mean, this partnership and the willingness to work and be part of the partnership on both the Fish and Wildlife Service and Eglin, as well as a variety of other agencies and the state and nongovernmental organizations, we've really been able to get ahead of mission impact so that Eglin has not had to hold up missions on account of the Okaloosa darter. It really is a testament to the strength of our partnership.

MS. LEON: Earlier you mentioned connecting potential habitat as one of the challenges to recovery, and I understand that there's an interesting story concerning the involvement of a golf course? Can you tell us a bit about this project?

MR. TATE: Eglin's golf course was built prior to the Endangered Species Act. So during construction, there weren't considerations taken for the creek that flows through the golf course. Its name is Mill Creek. The fairways were constructed perpendicular to the stream, and so the flood plain was filled, impoundments were created. And so Mill Creek had become a series of impoundments connected by culverts. And so several years ago, the Fish and Wildlife Service and Jackson Guard got together and started developing this project.

In 2007, we were able to begin construction as a partnership with Eglin, the Jackson Guard, and the golf course itself, as well as the state Fish and Wildlife Conversation Commission. We had come together to restore Mill Creek through the section of the golf course. So in all, we constructed about 3 km of stream, and this included one instance where we were unable to build stream across a fairway, so we actually had to put

the stream in a culvert under the fairway. But in order to get light to the stream, we utilized skylights so we could get light into the creek to encourage fish passage.

This approach, to our knowledge, has not really been done on this scale in other restorations. So it's something new, and it's something kind of novel for the golf course because as you play through that particular hole, you come across Lexan and Plexiglas skylights in the fairway.

MR. SEIBER: And really, one of the other things to really credit the Eglin Golf Course and their management, they were looking at having to do some work on those culverts anyway, and we found out about that. We approached them and said look, we would like to restore some of this habitat. We would like to work with you on your playability, reduce some of your pond structures, and explained to them what we wanted to do. They were very conservation minded, and they were all for it. And we worked out the playability where it really has increased the playability of and the esthetics really of that golf course as a result of the work done by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the design.

MS. LEON: Okay. Well, it's because of the efforts of Eglin Air Force Base staff, and partner organizations, that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been able to propose reclassifying the fish from endangered to threatened status. And the darter's recovery certainly is a tremendous success story. But I understand that there is actually a lot more being accomplished at the Eglin Air Force Base than darter conservation. Can you briefly describe the other endangered species recovery actions that are going on at the base?

MR. TATE: Yes. At any given time, Eglin has up to 14 federally threatened or endangered species, so there's a lot of recovery work ongoing year-round on Eglin. Some of these are sea turtles on the coast, others are the Okaloosa darter, and the red-cockaded woodpecker. Eglin is home to roughly half of the newly described reticulated flatwoods salamander habitat. We also work with the Gulf of Mexico sturgeon and soon to be federally listed mussel species in the Yellow River.

MR. SEIBER: We're extremely proud of the work that we've done with the red-cockaded woodpecker. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service set a recovery goal of 350 potential breeding groups. We have exceeded that now on Eglin. We are at 392 potential breeding groups. By this coming August, we expect to be over 400. So to us, it is a tremendous success story that not only talks about the reaching our recovery goals set by the Fish and Wildlife Service, but it's also part of restoring the only pine ecosystem across the Eglin Air Force Base. I think the other thing is our monitoring of the Gulf sturgeon.

We place transponders in sturgeon before they leave the rivers. We've installed buoys along our shoreline at the Gulf of Mexico to monitor travel patterns of the sturgeon. And I believe that we are kind of on the leading edge of science in determining Gulf sturgeon migration patterns. Where they migrate was previously unknown to science before we really started this research, and this, again, is a partnership that we have had with U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service and work they were already doing in the tagging of Gulf Sturgeon. So this is just another partnership that shows how well we work together.

MS. LEON: Well, thank you so much, Steve and Bill. It was a real pleasure having both of you on today. And perhaps we can talk soon in more detail about these different threatened and endangered species that you're working with.

MR. SEIBER: We would be glad to discuss them with you.

MS. LEON: For the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, this is Sarah Leon. Thanks for listening.