

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service podcast

A Talk on the Wild Side – Episode 4: Community Connections

[Light music]

[Kayt Jonsson] People, by nature and necessity, are social beings. When we work together we achieve more than we could if we were on our own.

Today's episode is all about people coming together: From a community rallying to create a wildlife refuge in New Mexico, to the relationship between an interpretive ranger and a girl scout troop, to a species that links continents and people.

I'm Kayt Jonsson bringing you today's episode of a Talk on the Wild Side.

[Theme music]

[Jennifer Owen-White] I'm Jennifer Owen-White and I'm proud to be the refuge manager for the Valle de Oro National Wildlife refuge in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

[Kayt] Valle de Oro's name was chosen by the community and speaks to the location's history and heritage.

[Jennifer] Valle de Oro came from the dairy farm, which is what the refuge used to be. It really ties back to the dairy farm and the agricultural heritage of the land. Also the beautiful gold colors that the bosque or the riparian forest adjacent to the refuge turns in the fall time and it really is a gold valley.

[Kayt] Before it became a refuge, the people living in the community had been fighting for more than a decade to protect the land that used to be the dairy farm. They partnered with neighbors, the county, non-profits, and federal agencies to make the dream of a refuge a reality, culminating in the addition of Valle de Oro to the National Wildlife Refuge System in 2012. But Valle de Oro is serving more than just its nearby neighbors. It's what we refer to as an urban wildlife refuge.

[Jennifer] For us in New Mexico, Albuquerque is the biggest city. Valle de Oro is within a 30-90 minute drive of between 45-70% of our entire state's population. Technically, to be an urban wildlife refuge you need to be within 25 miles of a

population 250,000 people or more. We are the first urban refuge in the country being built under the Urban Wildlife Conservation Program and under the Urban Standards of Excellence.

[Kayt] The Urban Wildlife Conservation Program was created to better engage urban communities -- where people spend less time outdoors. Due to a lack of urban green space, or a lack of awareness of, or access to, natural areas outside of the city.

By creating and implementing the eight standards of excellence Jennifer mentioned, we're tailoring efforts to be flexible and unique to areas being served.

[Jennifer] Really getting down to it, urban refuges are about those eight standards of excellence -- it's about really knowing and relating to our community, and building partnerships, and being a community asset, and prioritizing equitable access, and making sure people feel safe and welcome, and you know, all the great things those standards of excellence set forth for us. It's not just about being close to people, but it's about working with those people to create something together.

[Jennifer] Having community members involved in the refuge from the beginning, from the land acquisition to the planning, now to the restoration work - we dreamed up what we wanted this refuge to be together, and now we're making it happen together. Knowing and relating to our community members is first and foremost the most important thing that we can do because they're the ones who basically got this refuge started. We like to think of it as a refuge that's built by our community and for our community.

[Kayt] Creating a refuge like Valle de Oro takes a lot of work - Jennifer jokes that the refuge is in its ugly duckling phase because the restoration process can be messy.

[Jennifer] We have to transform basically every inch of this property. So the refuge is 570 acres, which is small when it comes to a refuge, but big when it comes to the fact that we have to take these 570 acres that were actively farmed

for over 100 years growing grasses and alfalfa for hay, and restore every single inch of it back to native habitat types. We had a vision, we all had this idea what we want this refuge to be, and we're kind of in the process of using heavy equipment and tearing up the ground, and building our wetlands, and building a visitor center. We're not the cutest refuge right now, there's a lot going on out there, and to me and to a lot of the community members who have been part of it from the beginning, it's so exciting, but that's because we're really picturing what it's going to be. And so managing those expectations about how long it takes to get there and the growing pains we have to go through to get there is a big part of the challenge that we face right now, but again, as long as we're working hand in hand with our community members and we're completely transparent about what's going on, I think it becomes less of a challenge.

[Kayt] In the process of using heavy equipment to build and restore, there is an opportunity to provide for the community in big ways off the refuge too, meeting community needs greater than the 570 acres being reworked.

[Jennifer] For example our storm water drainage work that we're going to be going through which will protect our neighborhood from flooding, but also take that storm water to create habitat for wildlife and use our habitat to clean that storm water to put more clean water back into the river and into the bosque, into a very important area in Albuquerque. Valle de Oro is really a refuge for not only our wildlife, but for the people of our community and the people of the mountain view neighborhood, and the south valley and surrounding areas. It is the only green space in our industrial neighborhood, it is the only park and open space that people have access to.

[Kayt] When you hear the refuge is the only green space available to the community, it's easy to understand why people rallied together to create it. What's more, this area in Albuquerque has a lot of mixed-use land right next to where people live. Jennifer explains how something called environmental justice - the idea that all people deserve fair treatment no matter their situation in respect to environmental issues - came into play at the refuge.

[Jennifer] For us environmental justice came about for a couple of reasons. One, Valle de Oro is located in a highly industrial neighborhood. There's a bunch of mixed used zoning so you have houses, next to agricultural fields, next to light

industry, next to heavy industry. And we've got multiple superfund sites, which are highly contaminated sites undergoing remediation. We've got 30+ facilities that are regulated by the EPA because of their emissions, all mixed in with as I said, houses, and an elementary school, and the refuge, and the community center. Those polluting industries and polluting properties, and things that happen that are detrimental to the environmental and community health are disproportionately located in communities of color and communities that have lower incomes. For that reason, our neighborhood, our area in the south valley, Albuquerque and even New Mexico have been in leadership in the Environmental Justice movement nationally, and so for us, Environmental Justice starts in our neighborhood, and it's about fighting for people who have often lost the opportunity or not even been given the opportunity to voice their opinion on decisions that impact their lives.

[Kayt] Even though a lot of the work being done at Valle de Oro won't be fully realized for some time, the changes being made now will make a big difference for future generations. It's a project that has brought a community together for a common goal.

[Jennifer] It is the most amazing project and I just pinch myself every day that I get to work on this and with all these great partners and community members.

[Lisa Cox] So my name is Lisa Cox, I'm a Visitor Services Park Ranger with the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service over at the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge complex.

I was lucky enough to grow up in a house which was designed and built by my dad, that was just completely surrounded by trees - like oak trees, pine trees, eucalyptus trees, and I got to play outside a lot. I didn't know it at the time, but what I was experiencing was free play and when I learned about this later on in my life, is that having that free and unstructured play is crucial for kids to learn problem solving skills and be connected with nature, and so I feel very lucky I was able to have that.

My father actually passed away when I was three years old, and so my mom she had to raise us as a single mom; it was really tough. She found comfort in nature and she introduced nature to us in that way and made us feel comfortable being in nature, and one thing that always grounded her and grounded us was hitting the beach.

[Kayt] Lisa's family would pile in the car and drive 30 minutes down a winding canyon road to Malibu, where they could enjoy the beach and do some exploring.

[Lisa] I really connected with the ocean in that way, and she showed us the tide pools and the trails and I developed a very strong connection like that so much to the point that I felt like whenever I was there, I felt like I was home. I'm really glad that those parks were there for us for free, because my mom couldn't really afford to take us to Disneyland and stuff like that

[Kayt] Because of Lisa's connection to the beach, she found herself working there in high school during beach season, and to fill the off-season, she started volunteering for state parks. That's where Lisa found her dream job.

[Lisa] I learned what an interpretive ranger was, and once I found out what that job title was, it was like full speed ahead, like I had to have that job. I did everything I could to put myself in that position to have a job that I loved where I got to educate other people about nature and share with them my love for that local nature too. I even based my senior college capstone project on the tide pools of Leo Carrillo State Beach.

[Kayt] During one of her volunteering gigs, Lisa met someone from the Service's Ventura Fish and Wildlife office. On a hike looking for herps - that would be reptiles and amphibians - they started talking about Lisa's interests.

[Lisa] He said, you know I think I know of a job you might be interested in and you might be good at. And the rest is history.

[Kayt] Lisa made her way to the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Complex, and one of the things she did soon after she arrived was find ways to connect with the community.

[Lisa] I knew that this girl scout troop was trying to get involved with the Tijuana Estuary, so I took the opportunity to meet the troop and I found out that troop 5912 led by Irene Barajas actually had 60 girls in her troop. I was a girl scout myself and I was a girl scout for a very long time. There's a lot of challenges with being a girl scout and one of them being that people kind of discourage you the older you get and you get a lot of things competing for your time. But I wanted to

show them that being a girl scout pays off. Because I was a girl scout I have to say is probably the only reason I have this job, because it taught me how to stick your neck out and ask how you can get involved and cold call people and just show leadership and do something for your community because you should. I didn't know it at the time but I was about to have this really amazing, deep relationship with Irene her girls.

[Kayt] What started as just trying to connect with the community and share her love and knowledge of nature blossomed into a now 10-year relationship with troop 5912 and their leader Irene. They work together on projects on the refuge and around the community.

[Lisa] Most of these girls are first generation Mexican girls, most are born in Tijuana, they're constantly overcoming barriers in their lives. I'm so proud of those girls and how far they've come in getting their knowledge of nature and their outdoor areas, and she's proud to have a ranger be so close with her girls.

[Kayt] One of the girls, Maitte, connected with Lisa, and with conservation on a deeper level, and asked Lisa, much like Lisa had done years earlier, if she could volunteer and help out at the refuge.

[Lisa] That was about two years ago, last year she approached me, and she was going to be working on her Gold Award, and for those of you who don't know, the Gold Award is the highest award you can earn in girl scouting - it's not very well known but it is the equivalent to an Eagle Scout award, and I've gotten my Gold Award too. The fact that Maitte wanted to work with me on that, I jumped at the opportunity, I was like "Of Course!"

[Kayt] The gold award is a really big deal, every year fewer than 6% of Girl Scouts will receive it, and their projects can take up to two years to complete.

[Lisa] And so she asked me to be her project advisor and she wanted to do her project on pollinators because she had learned about the importance of pollinators with us. The project is going to be situated around native pollinators and endangered pollinators that we have here on the San Diego wildlife refuges. I just feel honored that I get to guide her in this part of her life when she's formulating how she sees herself in the world. This is going to help her become a leader in her community; it's going to help her get scholarships. I want her to be

proud of herself for just being herself. And I can't wait to celebrate with her when she walks on the stage and gets her award. It's really rewarding that I get to do that, you know, 15 years later after I earned mine. Total Full circle moment, this one really takes the cake because it's beyond work, it's beyond my professional life, like this is what I'm supposed to do, inspire youth to care about nature, teach them to never give up, ever. I'm so grateful that I get to work with girls like Maitte, because it gives me purpose.

[Earl Possardt] I'm Earl Possardt, and I've been working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 43 years, really. And about 25 of those years I've been working for sea turtle conservation both domestically and internationally.

[Kayt] Earl's love for all things reptilian as a boy led him to his degree in wildlife biology and conservation. With every job he's had, he's tried to find a way to incorporate herpetology. When he was offered a job in Jacksonville as a manatee coordinator with a part-time focus on sea turtles, he jumped. Soon after, Earl persuaded his office to have a full time sea turtle coordinator position.

[Earl] And that grew into just working with incredible people in the southeast and starting to make contacts with people in the international sea turtle conservation community. And in this capacity as the Southeastern Sea Turtle Coordinator, I was working with Dr. Llew Ehrhart at the University of Central Florida who was doing surveys on the central east coast of Florida. And their data was showing that that was the highest density population for loggerheads in the southeast, which is part of the largest loggerhead population in the world, so we started to collaborate and try to figure out how we could ensure that this 20-mile long stretch of beach could be protected in the long term.

[Kayt] The stretch of beach Earl is talking about is on the east coast of Florida about an hour south of Kennedy Space Center.

[Earl] We got the Service interested, developed a proposal to establish a refuge for that stretch of beach for the areas that weren't developed, and it became known, eventually, as Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge.

[Kayt] Archie Carr was a professor at the university of Florida and is known as the father of sea turtle research. The refuge was established in 1991. Its 900 acres protects loggerhead and green sea turtles.

[Earl] And that was, I look back as one of my shining achievements for sea turtle conservation in the southeastern US and I had a small part in helping that happen.

[Earl] In 1998 I started working with the International Sea Turtle Program; it was bankrupt; there were 3 or 4 projects just limping along on minimal funding. Some of us realized that we needed to really institutionalize the marine turtle program in the U.S.

[Kayt] Sea turtles are a unique challenge for conservationists. They transcend international boundaries and spend most of their lives in water, but depend on beaches to lay eggs. And not just any beaches. They almost always return to the same beaches to nest where they were born. -- something called natal homing. Cross-continent partnerships and projects are vital to their survival. That's where the Marine Turtle Conservation Act comes in.

[Earl] When the Marine Turtle Conservation Act came before congress, it had to go before the Senate Environment Public Works Committee in 2004. The Chairman of the Committee was Senator Inhofe. In his younger years, he did an internship with an NGO called Sea Turtle Inc. and he became impassioned about the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle, and it really affected him, and he remembered that experience and he became a staunch advocate for the Marine Turtle Conservation Act - still is - and it was because of his personal experience working with an NGO that was working with communities, and then here you are this one individual some decades later was in a position to make a profound contribution to global sea turtle conservation. You just never know whose heart you're touching, and how that will come back in the universe in a very meaningful and impactful way.

[Kayt] The Act established the Marine Turtle Conservation Program, which supports and funds projects in foreign countries that promote the conservation of marine turtles. The Marine Turtle Conservation Act and its fund support between 45 and 50 projects in over 30 countries a year.

[Kayt] Some people may question why it's so important that we put energy into conservation efforts for sea turtles in other countries.

[Earl] We also are protecting our own sea turtle resources in the U.S. when we're doing international work, and there's direct linkages. One of those most direct linkages is the loggerhead nesting population in the southeastern US. Those

hatchlings swim out to the gulf stream, which is off the East Coast, they then drift passively along the gulf stream that goes along the North Atlantic and spins these little hatchlings 8 or 9 months later off into the eastern Atlantic and some of them go into the western Mediterranean, but they continue to grow for 8 to 15 years before they return back to the southeastern US coastal waters as large immatures. Some of the important foraging habitat for them is off the Azores, which are Portuguese. There's a lot of issues outside the U.S. that are impacting on U.S. nesting populations. For examples fisheries, many industrial and artisanal fisheries accidentally catch sea turtles around the world, and they don't want to catch sea turtles they want to catch fish.

[Kayt] Unfortunately, they catch a lot of loggerheads. One of the organizations the Fish and Wildlife Service works with helps train these fisheries on safe handling and release techniques when a turtle is caught. They also worked to change the types of hooks being used - from very damaging "J" hooks to a safer circle hook design. Other groups do outreach and education about how to reduce by-catch.

[Earl] So it is all about communities, it can be communities of commercial fishermen, and it can be communities of NGOs, it's often thought about as the local village communities that are near the nesting beaches. We don't just go in an area and say we've got to save sea turtles and we need your help. We go in to communities and we say, these are the issues with sea turtles, we need your help in protecting them, and we want to know how we can work with your community to help you too, with your needs.

[Kayt] While the projects can't be large scale, like those USAID may provide, they have supported building a small meeting place and wells for fresh water.

[Earl] So they know we care about them too - we don't just care about sea turtles, and it works - and it should be that way. We should care about the people that are next to the nesting beaches and we should work together and if it's going to be sustainable, it's the only way it's going to work. It's really a global responsibility.

[Kayt] Earl's work has taken him around the globe, talking to lots of different people about sea turtle conservation. He shared a favorite memory of a classroom visit, and it's what we'd like to leave you with today.

[Earl] I get to work in some awesome countries with incredible people, and I was asked to talk to a class in Turkey of science students. And I had asked them at the end of my talk, I wanted to know why we should even bother saving sea turtles. Some of the young men were saying, well yeah, everything's connected. If you lose one part of the ecosystem it affects the rest of the ecosystem and it's ability. They're good barometers of the health of the ocean, and so goes sea turtles, so goes the oceans, which we are also dependent on. And then a young lady said, well, you know I don't know if we can save sea turtles or not, I hope we can, but in trying to save sea turtles we're all becoming better human beings. And I thought wow, after all my years, I really learned something. I never thought about it that way, I've seen all the incredible human beings that are working hard for sea turtles, but she put it in a language of the heart that I've never forgotten, and it's true. Whenever we help, we become better human beings.

[Kayt] Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of A Talk on the Wild Side. Special thanks to Jennifer Owen-White, Lisa Cox, and Earl Possardt for sharing their stories. To learn more about Valle de Oro, the urban standards of excellence, environmental justice, volunteering and careers with the Fish and Wildlife Service, and sea turtles, or for notes and a transcript of today's show, visit www.fws.gov/openspaces.

Music in this episode was from audioblocks. Our theme music is Settling In by Dexter Britain.

Until next time.