

The Grizzly Beat
Episode 11
Bethany Cotton
June, 2016

Grizzly Times: This is Louisa Willcox and you're listening to the Grizzly Beat. And we're here today with Bethany Cotton, who is Wildlife Program Director for Wild Earth Guardians and she lives in Missoula, MT. And her focus is protecting wildlife in the American West. Maybe Bethany, you could introduce yourself a bit by talking a little bit about your roots. You say that you grew up on a cabin that was part of your grandfather's horse-drawn logging operation. What was it like to grow up in a resource extraction tradition, but then find yourself moving away from that?

Bethany Cotton: Thanks so much for having me. It was really interesting. My grandfather passed away when my dad was quite young, so I never met him. But the legacy was there in the land, in the 1,680 acres where I grew up, and old equipment and the clear fact that this was not virgin forest, this was a place that had been used.

I think it's quite common actually in my generation in the conservation movement to have one or two generations before us having worked directly in resource extraction, and now many of us turning to resource conservation. It's a lovely thing to have that be accepted and championed by my family, and it sort of ended with my dad working in the mills and when he was home from college one summer and he was thinking, once he had his degree and then to have both me and my sister actually working in active conservation roles, I think a micro-cosmic example of a larger shift in our society -- recognizing that resources aren't unlimited -- that when we significantly impact our environment, that those consequences flow through the environment and impact all of us. And our health, and the functioning of the ecosystems on which we all depend. So I think it's a powerful story, and it's nice to see that legacy change as we move forward.

GT: Thank you. So, Bethany you described your first environment act being testifying at a hearing against a proposed gravel mine that was near where you lived. And you were 12 years old. Maybe you could share what that experience was like for you.

BC: Sure, So I grew up way up in the mountains outside of Ashland, Oregon. And it was this lovely winding drive to get up to the cabin, at this big hairpin turn, there was a proposal to turn that mountainside into a gravel pit mine. And my dad told me about it, and I was appalled as a precocious 12 year old. And my dad said, "Do you want to go testify?" And we did. We went to court and I have this vague memory of testifying before the court. And it was really interesting because the person who was proposing the mine had a granddaughter in my class. And so I think it really -- who I played volley ball with, cause it's a small town -- but I think it hit him pretty hard, and he actually withdrew the proposal.

And for me it's this lovely memory, whenever I go home, and when I do that drive or pass that spot that -- it's never been developed -- and it's just this beautiful hillside and in

wet years it's covered in purple vetch. And so it's a special thing to have that memory. And I think it's always nice to have a win early in your career as it were. To hearken back to.

Because in my work I often think about the Margaret Mead quote that "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world." It is the only thing that ever has. And it certainly has proven true. We don't win all the time, but we can.

GT: It's a lovely story. So you describe Robert Kennedy as an early inspiration leading you down the path to becoming an attorney. What did Robert Kennedy mean to you then and what does he mean to you today?

BC: Well, I actually remember one of those grocery store free magazines and it had an article about RK Jr. and that he was an environmental attorney and that he had Waterkeepers Alliance. I just didn't know that was a thing. I identified early as an environmentalist and wanted to work that way. And I was actually much more involved in theater at the time. And for me, the idea that I could be an environmental lawyer and sort of combine the public speaking skills or interest with advocacy, it was just clear that that was the right path. So I'm one of these freak people who figured that out quite early. And actually my 10th grade teacher had us write down goal statements and she buried them, and we dug them up when we all graduated from high school. And mine actually says that I want to be an environmental lawyer. So I figured that out early.

GT: So wolves are a lot for your work, a key part of your work that you do for Wild Earth Guardians, and you seem to have a special relationship with them. Maybe you can talk about that?

BC: Sure, as I mentioned I grew up in southern Oregon, and it wasn't until I was probably almost in my 30s that I understood that that is sort of habitat for wolves, and it wasn't until I visited Yellowstone several years ago now, for the first time that I saw wolves in the wild. And it was just this realization for me that even this place that for me felt wild and natural growing up, is broken, is missing some of the key species.

And the closest thing to a griz in southern Oregon is my high school mascot -- but the bears aren't there and the wolves are just recently are. And so for me its incredibly hopeful story that Journey, that famed wolf in Oregon who made a place in California looking for a lady and settled -- and the national forest which is quite close to where I grew up and where my grandfather had a cabin -- and I think their pack name is after the national forest, but I think that being the Rogue pack is quite apt for being family.

And for me it's this incredible story of resilience, that despite all the damage, and everything that humans have done to target these species, that if we leave them alone, and we let them come home, that they will re-establish themselves. And they will bring balance back to the damaged ecosystem. Then it helps me be hopeful about the future, and about restoration, and re-wilding in the West, and around the world.

GT: Speaking of the Journey wolf and some of these wolves dispersing again to Oregon, maybe you could talk a little more about your current work on dispersing wildlife -- wolves, grizzly bears, and lynx. Maybe you can talk about what your current work is about, why it's important, and perhaps a little bit about the implications of removing federal protections on grizzly bears and their possible ability to disperse.

BC: Well I think that the key threat to that kind of re-wilding and recovery for these species is us. It's humans with guns, mostly. Sometimes with poison. Sometimes cars. But we have seen these stories like Journey and Echo, the Grand Canyon wolf that made it all the way down to the North Rim last year. We're familiar with some of the stories, but they're actually dozens more, and unfortunately most of them end in real tragedy -- which is true of the Grand Canyon wolf. She was shot by a coyote hunter even though she was 50 lbs heavier than the largest coyote anybody's ever seen, and was wearing a bright orange radio collar and she was shot anyways.

And the person who shot her is not going to be held accountable under the McKittrick policy, which is a department policy where the government doesn't prosecute folks who kill protected species unless they can prove that that person was trying to target that protected animal specifically. So it's sort of this "get out of jail free" card where you can say: "Oops, I thought I was shooting a different animal," then you are not held accountable. So it's a real problem.

It's again, tenants of North American hunting ethics. You're supposed to know what you're shooting at before you shoot. But the government's allowing these folks to get away with killing protected species. And it happens for grizzly bears, and if folks say they thought it was a black bear then they often get away with it. And so it's a really serious problem.

We are challenging the McKittrick policy in court in the context of Mexican wolves, because so many of the most critically imperiled grey wolves in the world have been killed by folks who claimed mistake. And that one area where we were working to try to ensure that these dispersing animals have protections, and that those protections mean something on the ground and that they serve as a deterrent to carelessness at best, and targeted poaching at worst.

We're trying also to remove other barriers to dispersing animals. So in Montana and Wyoming, we've challenged the states' failure to adequately regulate trapping bobcats, to protect imperiled lynx -- and we reached a settlement in Montana that's significantly increased restrictions on trapping in the parts of the state where lynx are present. And in Idaho, we just won that case and are working to put in new restrictions to protect the snow cats. And so we're always looking at ways to protect these dispersing animals.

And in the context of grizzlies, the proposed delisting, removal of the endangered species act protections in Yellowstone, is incredibly concerning because while griz are beginning to recover and they're certainly in better shape than they were in the 70s when they were an original species on the endangered species list, they exist in islands and it's really like

the concept of island biogeography. You have strongholds in Glacier National Park and strongholds in Yellowstone and Grand Teton, but if those populations don't interbreed, don't exchange genetic diversity, they will eventually have very serious problems and you'll never see recovery in other areas like the Bitterroots and the Cabinet Yaak and the Selkirks, which are all very important pieces of habitat, let alone historic range like Colorado or Oregon or Northern California.

If we allow those protections to be removed and for the states of Idaho and Wyoming and Montana to open trophy hunting season as they are all chomping at the bit to do, we see that the only place where bears are safe is literally within the bounds of the national parks. And that the moment the animals step out of the park they will be at very serious risk because of dying. And we just saw a prime example of that just announced recently is that last fall, Yellowstone's arguably most famous bear, Scarface, was killed by the Park even though he still has federal protections.

So we're certainly opposing the delisting and doing work to protect the corridors, the habitat corridors between these populations, and remove obstacles like domestic sheep grazing, and fences and roads that provide serious threats or pose serious threats to dispersing animals.

If we can allow them that space and let them be, there is the real possibility of natural recolonization of places and humans don't have to be quite so involved. We don't have to reintroduce animals, like I said, we can just let them figure it out. And the thing that's so refreshing is they do. They find the best habitat. They're not going to settle in residential areas. They're going to find wild places that have good food sources and are secure. And we're seeing that bears are. But it would be incredibly premature to remove protections at this point.

GT: Agreed. So Bethany, while you worked in the American West and on conservation for many many years, not too long ago you moved to Missoula to intensify your work here in the Northern Rockies. What were some of the big surprises that you found when you moved up here and intensified your work here?

BC: I think -- I love that this is a place where people are used to living in what John Muir said, there's still the species here. Right? It's one of the only places in the world where you can go and see species that were here 200 years ago are still here. They're not nearly as many of them. We don't have the wolverines and the lynx and the griz and the wolves in the numbers that we historically did. But they're still on the ground, and I find that refreshing to run into folks who are excited when they see those animals, and get a glimpse of them. So spending time in the parks and spending time watching them on the wild landscape is, again, is just reinvigorating for me.

And the flip side of that is, of course, I encounter uninformed and dangerous anti-carnivore rhetoric and very heightened statements that come out of very deep-seated fear-based myths. And it's clear there's an enormous amount of work to do to deconstruct that

mythology, and further educate people about the importance of these animals on the landscape. And the things we can do to reduce conflict.

And that it's time to put an end to trapping everywhere. That that practice is antiquated and cruel, and it's time for us to evolve beyond it and put an end to poisoning animals, especially indiscriminately, and to aerial gunning -- that these are species that naturally regulate their populations if you leave them alone. But when you start to mess with that by killing them, you really upset the balance. And you actually create way more problems than you solve arguably. You don't solve anything except for a few things an uninformed minority interest.

So it's really interesting. I think that things are looking up, but there is still a lot of work to do. And we looked at examples like some of these ranches that are instigating all of the non-lethal management techniques and using dogs, and range riders, and fladry, and solar powered electric fences, and calving barns -- and really putting into place these more modern technologies to live on this landscape in the company of bears and wolves and other carnivores. And I think that is the way of the future. We're just going to have to keep pushing it.

GT: Touching in again a bit more on experiences with animals, you had an experience with a tiger. That seems to have been a turning point for you. Maybe you could talk about that?

BC: I actually have this wonderful opportunity with a friend who is from India, she's native Tamil, and she actually came and got her LL.M. her master's of law and she worked in wildlife conservation as well. And she was getting married and she invited some of her American and British friends to come to the wedding. And it was just this incredible opportunity to get to go, and culturally amazing, and the food was amazing of course.

But I wasn't going to go to India without going to see elephants in the wild. And that was my real motivation, was I really I've always felt this connection with elephants. And they're such incredible gentle intelligent animals. And I had never see an elephant in the wild. So I went to, I had planned to go to this place for elephants, and then my friend's family said "well why don't you go to Bandipur (?)" which is actually a tiger preserve in southern India, not looking for tigers, but because you have a really good likelihood of seeing elephants.

And so I went out by myself and couple hours outside of Mysore in Southern India in the Bangalore region. And they very much control access to the reserves, so there's a morning safari and there's an evening safari, and then the rest of the day the park is entirely closed to people. The sign up, and I went up in the morning, and had this amazing experience seeing elephants. And they were actually covered in flower blossoms. They were walking through these flowering bushes, and I'm not a big crier but it definitely brought tears to my eyes to see the mama elephant and her teenager and her babe covered in these flower petals. And so that was amazing, and I immediately signed up for the evening safari as well. And we really didn't, or I'm actually switching it, it was

evening and the next morning. And we went out, and we really didn't see anything, we didn't see any elephants.

There was just not much of anything and I kind of met up with a little girl... Indian children are largely very precocious and curious, and she came right up to me and introduced herself, and asked where I was from. And she ended up in one of the other vehicles, and we crossed paths with them towards the end of the time period, it's very limited, which is great from a conservation perspective, not so great if you're desperate to see animals. And she hopped out of her vehicle and she said, "Bethany we saw a tiger!" and I said "yeah right." I mean I didn't say that to her, but in my mind I said "uh huh." Just incredibly rare.

There's only about 2,000 tigers left in India, they're almost all in the north, maybe 100 in southern India, so the likelihood of seeing one is incredibly low. But there was clearly some indication that maybe that was true -- because our driver took off kind of like a bat out of hell and then stopped a little bit. And we looked at the dirt and there were tiger tracks in the dirt. And we drove around, and I looked at my watch and there were five minutes left in the safari.

And I did the very woo woo thing and closed my eyes and just talked to the tiger and I just said "I would really love to meet you and I hope you'll come say hello." And we came around this corner, and this tiger was laying there 100 yards away. And she was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I mean, you can see a picture of those animals, but in real life and in the wild, they are incredibly beautiful animals. And she was facing us, and her tail was sort of wagging. And we just froze. And all of us just sat there watching her. And the driver immediately turned off the engine. And then I could tell he was getting a little nervous, because we were technically violating the time that we were supposed to be in the park. And so he turned on the engine after about 15 minutes to go.

And she immediately stood up and started walking toward us. So he turned it right back off again. And she just walked right toward us until she was about 25 feet away and then turned and walked into this bush, and then turned around and sat down. So she was laying there with her head crowned in this flowering bush. And I'll never forget that picture in my mind, and it was a good lesson for me because my camera failed, so I don't actually have a photograph of it, which makes me sad. But it was a good reminder that sometimes when you've got your camera and you're too busy taking pictures to really experience what's happening in front of you. So I just experienced what was happening.

And for me it was a sign. I was doing climate advocacy work and I just said, "I think I need to go back to working directly on wildlife conservation," and I came home and applied for this job and this week will be my 3rd anniversary working for Guardians protecting carnivore species here in the states. So I have an enormous amount of gratitude for that tiger.

GT: That's wonderful. As a woman who's been successful in conservation and conservation law and who's followed her dreams. What advice would you give to someone maybe a young woman who's just starting out?

BC: I just think it's so important to know that there's just no limits on your dreams. And if you're clear on what you want to do, you should go for it. And sometimes you have to clear out the universe to understand how things go in this economy, and that it's likely you'll have several jobs. And I'm eight years out of law school and in my 4th or 5th position in the conservation community. But it's a supportive place and I work with a lot of other powerful women.

And it's interesting, I was just talking to a young native American man yesterday and he said, "I don't care who you vote for, but especially if you are a woman or a person of color, you have an obligation to vote because so many people fought for your right to do so." And I think there is a piece of that that's if I had lived 100 years ago, I wouldn't have had the right to vote, certainly wouldn't have right to go to law school, to work and do what I'm doing now. So in some ways there's a lot of reason why I can do that more than 15 percent of people going to law school are women now.

And I'm going to go out and vote in the Montana primary in a couple days. And I think it's important to speak your truth and to speak truth is a power. It's the way things change.

And so I do feel an obligation to help folks early in their career. And we just had our crop of summer interns start. And it's just always fun to have new folks who are in school and starting out in the world. And they, I think that that is part of our responsibility, as good advocates, is to work with the next generation, and have them feel empowered and supported, and help them stay resilient. Because this work is hard, and we have victories and we also have losses, and those losses are hard. Because it means animals are dying and it might mean something as extreme and serious as extinction. So that's heavy, so it's important to figure out how to hold that weight.

And so the way I described it is my motivation is love and outreach. Love for the animals and the places, and outreach at the way our species has treated and have used them and a responsibility to undo as much of that damage as I possibly can.

GT: That's really nicely put. Thank you, Bethany. You're listening to Bethany Cotton with Wild Earth Guardians, and this is the Grizzly Beat. Thank you very much.