



RISE DECLARATIONS

Sharing the experience & insights of Recent Involuntarily Separated Employees working in place-based conservation

ANDREW G. GUDE REFUGE MANAGER, LOWER SUWANNEE AND CEDAR KEYS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES
“I thrived in situations where there were contentious conservation issues”

1. Describe your career trajectory from your education to your last position held.

1983. BS Fairleigh Dickinson University; biology, marine biology, chemistry.

1994. MS Portland State University; geography–natural resource management.

1983–1984. Bering Sea, Alaska. Foreign Fisheries Observer.

1984–1985. St. Croix, USVI. NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) / West Indies Hydrolab Support Diver, Divemaster, Mate, Commercial Fisherman.

1985–1988. Caribbean/Florida Keys. Dive Instructor, Captain, Commercial Freediving Fisherman, Environmental Educator.

1989–1993. Portland, Oregon. Environmental Consultant.

1993–1994. Amsterdam, Netherlands. House Husband. Ghost wrote for *High Times* magazine. Delivered sailboats across Indian Ocean.

1994–1999. Turks & Caicos Islands; Lecturer, Program Director, Director, School for Field Studies. Commercially freedived/fished in my off time.

2000–2004. Florida Keys. US Army Corps of Engineers, Project Manager; US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), Project Planning Biologist; USFWS Florida Keys National Wildlife Refuges, Marine Biologist.

2004–2011. Washington DC. Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Fish, Wildlife & Parks (Department of the Interior), USFWS Coastal & Marine Program.

2011–2025. Florida. Refuge Manager, Lower Suwannee/Cedar Keys National Wildlife Refuges (2011–2025) and Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge Complex (2013–2015).

2. What do you consider to be the most important achievements of your career (including through partnerships across and outside government)? Why?

My memorable achievements are crafting lasting, productive, and trusting conservation partnerships, quelling issues, resolving issues, developing conservation efforts, and resolving conflicts before they became a problem.

This was done with communities, individuals, friends groups, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), interest groups, businesses, hunters, anglers, commercial refuge users, and often opponents to the USFWS Ecological Services Project Planning Program, the US Army Corps of Engineers, National Wildlife Refuges in the Florida Keys, Cedar Key, and Crystal River, Florida.

While in Washington DC I developed similar partnerships with sister federal agencies, Tribes, states, and territories. I built quality relationships with congressional and Senate staff as well as national lobbying groups and NGOs.

All my relationships were geared towards addressing my agency's and program's missions as best I could while supporting the public, private, and NGO communities and their initiatives.

My memorable achievements are crafting lasting, productive, and trusting conservation partnerships.

I was on a small Department of the Interior team that supported the Council on Environmental Quality to help President George W. Bush establish 305 million acres of marine monuments in the Remote Pacific, Marianas Trench, American Samoa, and Hawaiian waters.

My time as a supervisor was spent supporting my staff and colleagues and assisting them to become what they sought professionally. I loved building and developing highly functional and cohesive teams that were very productive.

I thrived in situations where there were contentious conservation issues and conflicts as I was able to bridge the issues by creating trust and partnerships in the face of conflict and stagnation.

3. What were the greatest challenges you faced? How did you overcome them, or not? If you weren't able to overcome them, why not?

The greatest challenges I faced were twofold.

First was building teams focused on our mandated missions. This usually involved addressing fellow staff members' and colleagues' unhappiness, discontentment, malaise, and resentment to certain situations that developed before I came on board. If the team was successful and functional, I worked to enhance that even more. My aim was to collaboratively direct and focus a team on the tasks at hand, guiding policies, protocol, directives, and mission. Ultimately, it was to make the staff a team that functioned cohesively, working toward the same goals and outcomes and setting aside any non-mission related issues that often clouded a situation. Finally, it was to develop them in their professional goals and aspirations and to achieve what they personally wanted.

My hallmark was to make every effort to allow the public to have immediate access to me via my cell phone; "call/text me any time and I'll get right back with you."

My second challenge was to develop partnerships that achieved common conservation successes. This came through building trust, common values toward shared outcomes, and developing and fostering effective partnerships to achieve conservation successes.

I liked developing trusting partner relations with contentious sister agencies in non-productive relationships as well as with private parties, individuals, congressional staff, political appointees, and various interest groups. I simply went out of my way to understand them and what they wanted/needed and what they didn't understand about the situation at hand.

Always, I felt most comfortable going into contentious situations rather than some happy, comfy situation. I loved making peace and understanding.

4. What are your views on how your career served the public, the environment, our cultural heritage, or the greater good, as applicable? Do you feel proud of what you accomplished, or frustrated, or both?

Serving in the U.S. civil service was the best. I loved dealing with the public on conservation issues for the greater good of all.

My hallmark was to make every effort to allow the public to have immediate access to me via my cell phone; "call/text me any time and I'll get right back with you." The worst thing civil servants that interface with the public can do is to not be accessible or responsive.

I loved addressing hostile, angry, or frustrated individuals or groups on issues important to them. This I did through active listening, compassion, tolerance, understanding, and engagement until the unresolved issues no longer existed.

Explaining federal agency policies, procedures, missions, directives, and such to outside parties was often very time consuming as nearly all people do not understand how this all works. Taking the time and having patience to do this was critical. It paid off every time.

I loved the success, once this trust or understanding was achieved, so we could advance on an issue or situation. I am sure I changed many people's perceptions of government bureaucrats, as I was often told that I had a sense of humor, and a balanced perspective, that I helped solve their problem, and importantly, that I helped them fully understand how this worked from our angle and how we could work with them and what their rights and responsibilities were.

Often, I explained our civil service ethical standards and professional expectations. This was very enlightening to many people. Providing customer service to resolve their concerns was a true highlight.

I knew I hit a grand slam when people told me that I was a very atypical government employee: "I've never met/imagined anyone in government like you."

5. What's the coolest thing that you've seen a government (local, state, federal, or another country) do for place-based conservation that you'd want to replicate or expand? What would make it easy to implement? How hard would it be to achieve?

The coolest thing I've seen government do for place-based conservation is to embrace local communities in long-term conversations to understand and develop common values that lead to conservation success that supports local community's cultural heritage, lifestyles, and natural resource-based economies.

This takes incredible dedication, patience, resolve, and commitment. Often once the communities take up the task, government changes or steps aside. Only then when it's a locally driven, ground-up effort does it take hold and has a momentum and life of its own.

But the truly coolest thing is for the government employees is to have their leadership's support to fully engage with the local communities. This often allows governments to follow and let the communities lead. This is what you want!

6. What advice would you give to successors in positions you've held? What perspectives have been important to you in your career, and which can be passed on to young people contemplating a career in public service or academia?

My advice is to my successors:

Know and understand your guiding policies, procedures, and ethical principles and be able to articulate them to anyone—especially to your own leadership—and why your situation is supported by them.

Find leadership that supports your passion. Too often government leaders don't want anyone to do anything outside the bare minimum. This never worked for me. Find creative ways to work around such lame-ass leadership attitudes. Often this involves making your ideas other people's ideas. Then other people present them as their ideas. If you can make your ideas your leadership's ideas, even better.

Rarely ever say "no" right off the bat, give yourself time to cogitate a situation. Say "no" only if the item is clearly unethical or outside of policy.

Love and embrace your ethical guidelines and stay within them. There are few gray areas, mostly it's black and white. Don't ever compromise these guidelines. Don't be afraid to ask for an ethics review of your own situation. Same goes for policies and procedures. You'd be shocked to learn how often leadership does not abide by official guidelines.

Rarely ever say "no" right off the bat, give yourself time to cogitate a situation. Say "no" only if the item is clearly unethical or outside of policy.

Never make a final decision without taking all the time you need because, sometimes, you find things out in the 11th hour that totally changes the game.

Never get emotional about something. Back off and revisit it. Insist on having more space and time to develop your position.

Our jobs rarely require an immediate decision.

Keep an amazing administrative record of all conversations. Put nearly everything in writing. Follow up phone or verbal conversations with an email to the involved parties. You'd be surprised at how legally important it is to keep a consistent admin record of nearly everything. It has saved me and sunk others in contentious situations. If you are told to not write anything down you should be concerned.

Most importantly make yourself fully available to the public if your job involves them. Put your cell phone out there and be very responsive to the public. The public hates unreachable, unresponsive, or unknown public employees when they have concerns.

Keep an amazing administrative record of all conversations. Put nearly everything in writing.

Take advantage of all the opportunities and entitlements available to you. This often requires research and asking more experienced people, as some supervisors don't know, don't care, or are too busy to be of help.

A robust and shameless sense of humor pays off. When dealing with the public, colleagues, supervisors, or leadership, I made a point of not taking anything too seriously. Routinely, I joked around with everyone. I told or made up stories, inserted humor into publicly published materials (Swamp Ape hunting ban in the NWR hunt brochure), and defused tense exchanges by making fun of myself, imagined government service "rules," and anything else that would get people's attention, laugh out loud, or have them get a hold of me because they couldn't believe what they read or heard. Not once did this come back to haunt me.

7. Please share anything else you think would be of value to fellow RISEs or to the general public.

Find creative ways to achieve your goals within your agency's mission and policies.

Develop relations with EVERYONE. You'd be shocked at the doors of opportunity that open up.

Never give up on a good idea. Find ways around obstacles.

Be open, forthright, honest, and proactive in communication with the public, leadership, and colleagues. Don't be afraid of not knowing or disagreeing with a decision but instead frame it in the perspective that applies to it and be clear that it is within your agency's purview or mandate.