



RISE DECLARATIONS

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

MARINE CONSERVATIONIST ANONYMOUS RISE DECLARATION

“I feel that I could have done so much more”

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

I was traditionally trained as an ecologist and followed a pretty standard academic career path, undergrad to PhD. Towards the end of my PhD in marine science I began to feel a bit burned out of academia so I applied for and received the Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship. This gave me the opportunity to work in DC for a year at the intersection of climate change and marine conservation. While I had initially intended to return to academia, I loved the work so much, the ability to put my scientific expertise to work on conservation at a national and global scale, that I decided to stay. I was fortunate to secure a contracting position to continue to support the integration of climate change science and adaptation into marine conservation. After two years as a contractor, I was hired as a full-time federal employee and spent the next three years working to advance the climate-informed management of marine resources and protected areas in the US and globally until I left federal service in May 2025.

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

As nebulous as it sounds, I think the most important achievement of my career was changing the culture of the office I worked in. When I began my fellowship in the office, I was often met by an opinion that can best be summarized as “we know climate change is important, but it is too big for us to really do anything about in our management.” That is not to say that good work was not being done, some programs had robust and mature climate change adaptation programs, but the work was disparate, with a few programs working to address climate impacts and no system-wide direction. Over the course of my six years working for the office, I helped to raise awareness of climate impacts, the role ocean conservation could play in addressing those impacts, and the ability of natural resource managers to play an active and effective role in managing those impacts. This took time, required partnerships within and outside of the agency, and necessitated building relationships and trust backed by scientific evidence and results. It would have been impossible without my immediate supervisor, who acted as a champion within office leadership, and partners, particularly a cadre of climate-focused champions within the office that helped to lead the push for the first office-wide Climate Resilience Plan. This plan provided a system-wide direction for assessing and addressing climate change impacts and led to the formation of a focused, system-wide climate team to drive that effort.

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It also took a bit of luck. While we were already drafting the Climate Resilience Plan before the 2020 presidential election, the climate focus of the Biden administration allowed for an acceleration of our ability to advance climate adaptation in the office.

By the time I left federal service, I had helped to develop two Climate Resilience Plans, a method for conducting Climate Vulnerability Assessments, countless other documents and resources, and, most importantly, a cadre of people across the office and agency who had the knowledge and skills to continue to guide climate adaptive conservation and management into the future. These accomplishments, as well as the partnerships built within and outside of the agency, positioned the office as a national leader in climate-informed conservation and firmly established a culture of considering climate change in the management of the areas and resources under our purview. Even though I am now gone, I believe that this impact will persist and change the way that our special ocean places are managed in perpetuity, and for the better.

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 largest challenge I faced was always politics and the willingness, or lack thereof, of leadership to continue to focus on climate change despite those pressures. The unfortunate politicization of climate change was a challenge from the very beginning of my work, when I had to be careful how I wrote and spoke about the ocean changes, their causes, and how we could address their impacts. In my first years with the agency, this actually made me a better scientist and communicator. I was forced to ensure that my language was tight and that the things I said and wrote were thoroughly supported by science. Overcoming this early challenge served me well throughout my career, and continues to do so.

However, this challenge became insurmountable in the beginning of 2025. The pressure from above, and the inability of agency and office leadership to effectively provide support against that pressure, began to make it impossible for me to effectively do my job. Resources and tools I had spent six years creating and contributing to were pulled from the internet. I was directed to change the way I spoke about climate change and adaptive management in such a manner that twisted the meaning of my words and made it impossible to communicate effectively. I tried to push through and hold out, hoping and thinking it would get better, but it just didn't. It became clear that I would no longer be able to do the job that I was hired for. In the end, I did not overcome the challenge. As much as it sometimes shames me that I did not continue to hold the torch for climate science and adaptation at an agency and office I truly loved, I left rather than contribute to an environment that would continue to damage my scientific credibility and force me to work against my personal and professional ethic.

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?

I feel my career served the public by helping to ensure that marine resources and protected areas are adaptive and resilient to change now and into the future. There is still much work to do, but I feel I helped nudge the management of ocean resources in a positive direction;

produced knowledge, resources, and tools that will help others; and helped to lay the foundation for truly adaptive and resilient ocean management. I am proud of what I was able to accomplish as a federal employee, and I always will be. But it would be a lie to say I am not also incredibly frustrated and not a little sad. I

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feel that I could have done so much more. I fully intended to stay in federal service for the rest of my career, to spend the next 30–40 years working to ensure that our ocean resources were able to not only persist but thrive in a changing future for the benefit of all. That career will no longer be. While I may return to federal service in the future, there will never be a substitute for the time lost or the work I could have done.

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 have seen government do for place-based conservation is to make it more accessible to the public throughout the process of designation, design, and management. Too often, we fall into the paradigm of keeping people out of protected areas. While there is important space for wilderness areas where people are not permitted, it is critical to ensure that the public is able to access, experience, and love the areas we protect. As Baba Dioum's famous quote says, "In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, and we

will understand only what we are taught.” Experiencing is another way of understanding and by allowing those who most care about our conserved resources to access them and help guide their management, while also allowing others to experience them for the first time, we enhance our management effectiveness and ensure a desire among all people to love and conserve the natural world. During my time in federal service, federal agencies made important steps towards better integrating the knowledge of those who love and experience our conserved areas into their management. This needs to continue. It is not easy. It takes more time and we, as managers, need to set our egos aside. But in the end, the outcomes are better for nature and people.

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?

The advice I would give to successors in the federal position I held is to never underestimate partnerships and relationships. Partnerships, both internal and external to my agency, and the relationships developed and maintained through them, not only made my job more enjoyable, but led to projects and accomplishments that would have been impossible otherwise. Relatedly, I would

advise anyone in any position to be open to new experiences and ideas. That means trying new things, attending that meeting that sounds interesting but maybe a bit weird. You don’t have to commit to continuing down the path, but so many of the most interesting and

rewarding things I worked on came from lifting my head out of my primary work for a 30-minute meeting or seminar about something I had never heard of but sounded vaguely interesting. Too often we get in the groove of showing up to the office, putting our heads down, doing our job, and leaving day in and day out. While there is value in focusing on the key aspects of your job, we often forget that to innovate, to do our work better, we need to learn and do new things.

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The advice I would give to young people contemplating a career in public service is to be open-minded and to make the most of opportunities as they come. Getting into public service in conservation, at any level, can be difficult. But you never know what an opportunity might lead to, so take them as they come. A job may not seem like the perfect fit but if it is adjacent to what you want to do, give it a go, be open to new experiences, and who knows where it will lead in the end. But above all else, keep trying. If you want to do good and do good work, you will be able to find your niche.

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

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