



RISE DECLARATIONS

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

MATT BROOKHART

REGIONAL DIRECTOR, NOAA's OFFICE OF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES

“I was forever in a constant state of learning”

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

After earning Master's degrees in public policy and history, I began at NOAA as a paid intern. I was offered a full-time contract position after about three months, working on management effectiveness. After a year as a contractor, I was hired as a Federal employee working on policy analysis and long-term management planning. From there, I stepped into roles of increasing responsibility and higher grade levels within the same office, eventually landing a first supervisory position about ten years after first coming to NOAA. At about the 15-year mark, I moved into a senior leadership role, where I remained for another decade until retiring in 2025. The more advanced my position became, the more my role changed; I went from working primarily on applied management to overseeing large projects, supervising teams, and providing strategic leadership. While some may feel this kind of career change isn't super exciting, I found it to be both positively challenging and highly rewarding. One word that might summarize my career is 'diverse'; I was willing to do a lot of different things and as such, I served in a wide variety of roles, including one stint that required a cross-country move from Washington, DC, to the West Coast. I then returned to DC to take yet another role in the organization. All these different jobs enhanced my understanding of both the mission of the organization, but also what I knew about myself and my abilities. While I did short-term details to two other offices, my entire career within NOAA was spent within the same organization. I was very drawn to both the organization's mission and its people, and felt a sense of pride and responsibility in enacting that mission on behalf of the American public. Carrying out that mission had its challenges, but it always felt like a worthy and important cause; it was truly a role of civil service. My career trajectory was always influenced by this sense of service, and as I moved higher up in the leadership of the organization, my feelings of responsibility to the mission were amplified. I ultimately had no real desire to go anywhere or do anything else.

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

I think, first and foremost, the most important achievement of my career was helping to give voice to the American public in the long-term conservation of some of our nation's most iconic places. Although my role involved the establishment of Federally protected areas, I was mostly carrying out the will of the individuals and organizations who wanted these protections in the first place. It was always super gratifying to get a letter of support for a protected area off of New York from an engaged citizen as far away as Oklahoma or Hawaii. Reaching these citizens and raising their awareness of why these protected spaces matter was, without question, the most important part of my job. Another aspect of my career that I see as an achievement was finding ways to generate bipartisan interest for the establishment and long-term support of our protected areas. Federal designations of national parks, national marine sanctuaries, wildlife refuges, historic areas, and other protected spaces are inherently political actions that rely on both sides of our aisle to be successful. While outright support for the designation is often an important first

As I moved higher up in the leadership of the organization, my feelings of responsibility to the mission were amplified.

step, maintaining a steady funding source for the park's management is essential. As my career matured, I became more knowledgeable and accomplished at finding ways to bring representatives of both political parties into the conversation around why a protected area matters. One thing my career taught me was that no matter how many years of service I put in, I was forever in a constant state of learning; I think being open to new ideas and broad opinions was a key achievement of my career in working to meet the conservation goals of protected areas.

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?

In looking back on my career, I think identifying and overcoming challenges is something that evolved as much or more than anything else I experienced. I know now that many of the things I felt were challenging when I was early in my career do not seem so relevant and important today. I suppose that's a common realization that most people experience as part of the natural evolution of their career, but I do feel my perception of what was truly a challenge for me and my organization changed pretty dramatically over the years. Effects of climate change, for example, were not something I could fully process early in my career but were certainly among the most important and prioritized challenges towards the latter stages of my service. I'm not sure I ever "overcame" the challenges climate poses for protected areas; rather, I think (like many others) I came to see it as something that needed to be compartmentalized and broken down into manageable pieces. Because climate effects often felt so overwhelming and all consuming, taking a "what can we control in the moment" approach was not only practical, but a necessary approach to maintaining some semblance of hope. Funding, and lack thereof, was another pervasive challenge that was ever-present in my career. For

For reasons I will never fully understand, conservation of ocean and Great Lakes protected areas were always woefully behind terrestrial parks in terms of appropriated funding.

reasons I will never fully understand, conservation of ocean and Great Lakes protected areas were always woefully behind terrestrial parks in terms of appropriated funding; in fact, poor funding was our most pronounced challenge throughout the entirety of my career and something that felt like a constant existential threat to meeting both our legal requirements and mission on behalf of the American people. And while I'm not sure we ever overcame this challenge, I do think we evolved an entrepreneurial and innovative approach to doing our job that really was an exceptional example of government efficiency. While we tried to avoid speaking openly about "doing more with less" it had become our standard way of doing business, and a true reflection on the amazing sense of responsibility the staff assumed on behalf of the mission.

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 think it's important to acknowledge this question relative to the mission requirements of my organization, which tasked me and my colleagues with managing both long-term conservation and public use of protected areas in the marine environment ... an often difficult balance to achieve. While I have no doubt that many of the projects and initiatives I worked on in my career served both the public and the environment, the degree to which that service was carried out will always be debatable. There are certainly a number of accomplishments my colleagues and I should be proud of, but I think each had its associated frustration — feelings we were not able to go far enough on the protection side of the mission, an inability to adequately fund a newly established park after years of collaborative designation, compromises made to appease political or jurisdictional pressures. At the end of the day, I do feel my career provided service to the American public and our natural environment, and that the organization's mission (despite its nearly impossible requirements) is of great benefit to the nation now and into the future.

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?

While I've seen lots of cool things implemented by government resource managers, one of my favorites is using crowd-sourced idea sharing to test and implement new technologies across various sectors of protected area management. Innovations in things like mitigating whale entanglements, catch-and-release fishing gear, non-invasive tracking of marine mammals and seabird migrations, propagation of corals and other critical ecosystem-forming species, climate monitoring, modernization of autonomous underwater vehicles, clean aquaculture and marine plant regrowth, and use of renewable and quiet energy sources for vessel propulsion are just of few examples of areas where academia, the private sector, and

Federal/State governments are pushing new technologies and smart growth. Many organizations are now purposefully bringing together like-minded ocean interests to amplify new thinking in managing rapidly changing ocean conditions. These collaborations represent not only a combined effort at growing and sharing the latest thinking in ocean tech, but also a combined effort at pooling and sharing limited resources towards a common goal. I would like to see more of this directed and purposeful collaboration on the use of marine technology happening across all sectors of ocean and Great Lakes management.

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?

First and foremost, I would advise my successors to stick with it. Protected area management can feel like a never-ending churn of obstacles, challenges, and “never seen that before,” especially as effects from climate change become more pronounced. But I do believe that long-term protection of our most important ecosystems, species, and sacred places is fundamental to human health, economic health, and the overall health of the planet. I would add that working in this field is not typically super lucrative; most of us that have taken up these career paths are not in it for the money! Committing to a deep-seated belief that protected places matter will be important for both sticking with it and managing a career within the limitations of a government system.

Second, I would advocate embracing four virtues in particular: patience, temperance, humility, and humor. Government careers in protected area and/or natural resource management are typically not associated with quick decision making or expedited planning, often because of public process requirements, budget limitations, the complexity of ocean research and science, and politics; I have learned (not without frustration) that patience is key to managing all of these realities. I would also highly recommend a strong dose of temperance, which like patience, is important in managing the messiness and often emotional world of protected area management.

So, my advice would be to firmly pull on your “I Heart Stoics” shirt and focus on the things you can control; the demand for your time across what will seem like an endless wave of needs is not sustainable and not ideal for achieving the highest mission priorities of your organization. Regarding humility, I’ll just say in over 25 years working on protected areas, one thing is certain: there are always people who know more than me about these places, and there’s no single “right” approach to managing them. Demonstrating humility in working with others on establishing and managing protected areas goes a million miles towards success, especially if you are coming into a community that is not your own. Finally, a sense of humor will go a million miles in keeping you healthy and (hopefully) happy in your protected areas life. In looking back on my career I am so thankful for all of the colleagues who could approach this work with a smile and light heart. My advice would be to gravitate towards those who can problem solve and do serious work with a sense of humor; without doubt, it sustained me for over two and half decades in this business.

A sense of humor will go a million miles in keeping you healthy and (hopefully) happy in your protected areas life.

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

[Left blank by respondent]