



RISE DECLARATIONS

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

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“Look at conservation through a long-term lens”

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

After graduating from Oregon State University with an MS in Marine Resource Management, I started at NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries as a Knauss Sea Grant Marine Policy Fellow, working on new sanctuary designations. The Fellowship led to a full-time position in NOAA Sanctuaries. Over the course of the next 15 years, I worked on or led several new national marine sanctuary designations, management plan reviews of existing sanctuaries, and developed a constituent stakeholder engagement program. I also worked at the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary for year coordinating media relations, advisory councils and public engagement, and at Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument finalizing their management plan. Mid-career, I was accepted into NOAA's Leadership Competencies Development Program (LCDP), where I pursued several details, including spending time at NOAA Fisheries to assess how better to include NOAA Fisheries and councils in the consideration of no-take marine reserves. Next, I became the National Ocean Service representative to NOAA's Program Coordination Office (PCO), which serves to coordinate policy and serve as a liaison between NOAA's headquarters and line office leadership. Following this, I worked at NOAA's Office of Communications for 10 years coordinating media affairs for climate, oceans, and satellite issues. My desire to get back to place-based conservation led me back to NOAA Sanctuaries, where I led efforts to celebrate and raise awareness about the 50th anniversary of the National Marine Sanctuary System, and then finally, before leaving NOAA, led an effort to designate a proposed marine sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Islands.

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

One of my most important achievements of my career was leading the successful designation of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. This was a multi-year public engagement process co-led by NOAA and the State of Hawai'i. Though it was rooted in politics (congressional designation) and not fully a “bottom up” approach, the lengthy process provided many opportunities for the public; stakeholders; local, state, and federal agencies; and native Hawaiian groups to be involved, work together, and be heard. In the end, the sanctuary was designated, taking into consideration as much local and state concerns as possible. The sanctuary helped open the door for marine conservation discussions in the state as to the role of local vs state vs federal government in protecting marine and coastal resources. The site also brought in native Hawaiian voices and cultural practices in the management and operation of the site. The success of this sanctuary helped pave the way for larger federal-state conservation efforts, such as the designation of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (and Sanctuary).

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Another important achievement was leading the Joint Management Plan Review for three national marine sanctuaries in California – Monterey Bay, Greater Farallones, and Cordell Bank. This was the largest, most complicated management review in the history of NOAA Sanctuaries. It involved staff and advisory councils from three sites, as well as stakeholders and representatives from local, state, regional, and federal agencies, along hundreds of miles of the California Coast. Ultimately, the process added Davidson Seamount to Monterey, and made significant regulatory, permitting, and policy changes, striving for consistency across all three sites. Most importantly, this process brought our staff, advisory councils, and communities together to comprehensively think, act, and prioritize conservation across a large-scale land/seascape that factors in ongoing efforts and priorities from the local to the federal level. NOAA Sanctuaries learned many important lessons for future management plans reviews, including the need to better manage public involvement and participation over a shorter time frame to ensure there is substantive forward progress amidst shifting local, state, and national politics, and limited funds to both complete the planning effort and implement the various management plans. We also learned the importance of communications and managing public and agency expectations throughout the process, and being fully transparent with the public.

Finally, in my last sanctuary designation efforts in the Pacific Remote Islands, though the initiative was ultimately stopped during a political administration change, one important achievement was that we demonstrated how quickly NOAA Sanctuaries could actually get from scoping to the release of draft documents (within one and a half years). In this designation, since NOAA was directed to proceed under a presidential Executive Order, it became a high-priority initiative in the federal government (program line office, NOAA, Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior, Department of Defense, White House, etc). NOAA Sanctuaries also created an experienced core team to lead the planning efforts, and NOAA dedicated sufficient resources to fully staff the public planning process, and to contract certain aspects of document preparation and NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) analysis to outside the government, which greatly accelerated the planning process.

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 in designating new sites or reviewing management plans stemmed internally and externally. Internally, there is often high support early in the process. However, as a project extends over multiple years, new program priorities rise to the top and resources (for staff or contracts) are diverted elsewhere. This is the reality for every project. A lesson learned is that new designations and management plans review need to be done as quickly as possible to keep the momentum going and the public interest high. To do this, agencies need to resource accordingly, and if they don't have the internal experience or ability to do this quickly in-house, then there should be pre-approved contracting vehicles available that can be quickly exercised to get the products completed to support these agency-led efforts. With the gutting of most federal agencies, this will be more important than ever.

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Externally (at least to the agency initiating the action), politics can be the Achilles heel for conservation projects. What is high priority to one administration (or agency) is not likely to transfer to the next. This can happen at the local, state, and federal level. Also, there are issues with competing high-level priorities, which make resolution at a local level hard. Resolving such priorities is often very messy and time consuming, and usually done at high levels of an Administration. In the future, if priorities and directives are “issued from the top” then the White House or other senior agency staff need to be involved from the very beginning and have the authority to make decisions or get issues resolved as quickly as possible. It’s important to remember that conservation projects are about timing and keeping momentum going – the more time it takes, the more vulnerable the project will be to succumbing to outside forces, such as changing politics, priorities, and budgets, and misinformation campaigns.

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?

As a federal employee for >31 years, I strongly feel my career greatly served the public good by preserving these

protected areas for future enjoyment and helping to ensure the ecological integrity of these important coastal, marine, and heritage resources. In looking at a map of sanctuary locations, I'm amazed that I have worked at all the sites – some more than others – but in each helped to conserve those natural and cultural resources or helped to directly engage and inform the public about these incredible resources and need to protect them for future generations. I also know that in my role at NOAA Communications, I served as a liaison with local, regional, national, and international media to help explain the science and services NOAA brought to the public, and in the case of climate change, to bring facts and real science to the forefront. Overall, I'm very proud of what I was able to accomplish over these three decades, but am still frustrated that so much more could have been accomplished if agencies could better focus and commit to priorities and resourcing, and if politics didn't stall or complicate efforts at so many points along the way.

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?

In 1999, passage of the California's Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) required the state (California Department of Fish and Wildlife) to reevaluate all existing MPAs and potentially design new MPAs that together form a statewide network. Through a scientific and public process, MPAs were developed on a regional basis with MLPA- and MPA-specific goals in mind and were to be evaluated over time to assess their effectiveness in meeting these goals. A concurrent effort was done in federal waters adjacent to national marine sanctuaries and other areas. Since its inception in 2012, the 124-site (MPA) Network continues to support marine biodiversity across California. The Network covers every geographic and ecological region of state waters and is a hub for collaborative marine science. To help ensure the network planning process would continue, the state was able to get NGO and academic support to help fund the initiative and ongoing monitoring and assessment activities. This should serve as a model for other states that could be scaled up or down depending on the state and other resources. It would be easier to replicate or modify in states that generally support conservation, and having it state led would mitigate some of negativity towards the federal government. External funding and expertise would be needed to successfully implement the effort in most states.

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Another good example is when Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority undertook an intensive effort to develop a zoning plan in 2003, which would become a primary planning tool for the conservation and management of the park. Developed with significant scientific and stakeholder knowledge, GIS planning tools, and thorough a broad stakeholder process, the plan sought to protect and conserve biodiversity of the Great Barrier Reef within a network of highly protected zones, while at the same time proving opportunities for sustainable use and access to the park. Such a zoning effort should be made at other large or small parks – whether on land, the coast, or at sea. The tools available today to conduct such efforts are well beyond what they were back in 2003, though it may be necessary to procure the expertise and tools to implement at local scales.

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 to successors, particularly the younger generation, is to look at conservation through a long-term lens. Most conservation gains and successes are hard to come by, and are usually incremental. Celebrate the wins, no matter how big or small, and keep moving forward. Keep your focus on the ultimate goal and don't give up or be brought down by ephemeral or whipsaw politics. Learn to navigate obstacles, and at every step in the process take the time to assess what is working well or what could be improved upon. Those projects that are well-conceived and meet well-defined goals and needs for the environment and local communities, will gain traction. Those done for political purposes will likely face headwinds, particularly during times of political transition. Also, success depends upon learning to be a good communicator – all projects require constant dialogue and the conveyance of factual, trusted information – with leadership, colleagues, partners, stakeholders, legislators, media, and the public.

I still believe that public service (i.e., government) is an incredible place to work and an ideal place for eager scientists, conservationists, and communicators to make a career. Most agencies have amazing missions, have dedicated staff, and work closely with partners to make real conservation and protection happen. I have always found a can-do spirit among the many brilliant, creative, and dedicated public servants delivering services to the American public and helping make this world a better place. More than ever, the government needs smart, creative, visionary and well-intentioned people who can navigate bureaucracies and forge partnerships to make conservation a reality.

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

It is important for everyone to keep the state of our planet and humanity at the forefront and think of the long term not the short term. Our world is changing in response to climate change and an increasing human population. In the coming years, Earth's natural ecosystems will be challenged to keep providing sufficient levels of food, shelter, clean water and air, and a stable climate to sustain life as we know it. Yet, humans know what the problems are and with rapid advances in science and engineering, aided by more sophisticated tools, such modelling and Artificial Intelligence, humanity will need to more purposefully and urgently move towards developing and implementing workable solutions that benefits us all. Collectively we need to look past short-term political whims and create innovative solutions that helps sustain us all in the long term. A healthy environment sustains a healthy economies and communities – they are intertwined.