



RISE DECLARATIONS

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

POLICY AND PROGRAM ANALYST

NOAA GREATER FARALLONES AND CORDELL BANK NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES

“The greatest challenge for me was always questioning if we were doing enough”

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

After undergrad at Clemson University, during which I was fortunate to study abroad in the Galapagos, I decided to pursue marine science. I attended graduate school at Moss Landing Marine Labs, received my MS in Marine Science with a focus on phycology, and then received a Sea Grant fellowship to work with Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary for a year. I loved working for Sanctuaries, and was able to stay on with Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary as their advisory council coordinator. This was a part-time position, which after a few months I was able to augment with a part-time position at Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary as their Ocean Climate Initiative Specialist. Eventually, I moved solely to GFNMS to build my career there in climate change research and adaptation — first, leading the Sanctuary system’s first Climate Vulnerability Assessment, then developing the first Climate Adaptation Plan. As I developed my career at GFNMS, I was able to work with other Sanctuary sites across the system to encourage and advise them on climate-informed planning and management. This blossomed into international work as well, with years of collaboration with the Commission for Environmental Collaboration as well as the group EcoAdapt — all to advance the inclusion of climate science and information into protected areas management through the development of training courses, guidance documents, and tools. During this time I continued to also inform research and management at GFNMS. All told, I was employed with Sanctuaries as a NOAA affiliate for 13 years, before I was offered a federal position as Policy and Program Analyst at GFNMS in October 2024.

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

I am most proud of how I advanced conversations around climate change within marine protected area management, especially in Sanctuaries. It was an uphill battle, with a lot of resistance from within Sanctuaries to even focus on climate change and its impacts. Many folks just assumed that the ocean was less vulnerable than terrestrial ecosystems, or they felt too overwhelmed by the prospect to even address it. What we were able to do during the 12 years of climate program development at GFNMS was to pilot new processes, take some risks, and demonstrate to others that addressing climate change doesn’t have to be burdensome and can actually greatly improve planning and management. In my final few years, I pursued the assessment of carbon sequestration processes within ocean ecosystems, and found that field to be so incredibly rewarding. There was so much interest from the general public as well as managers to better understand and account for carbon uptake services, and I loved becoming the Sanctuary expert in that field. Finally, if I had to boil my career with Sanctuaries down to a singular moment that will stay with me — it would be when I facilitated a session at the UNFCCC COP (Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2020, introducing Dr. Rick Spinrad among other incredible global leaders,

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and presenting about the role of kelp restoration in climate mitigation. It was an incredible experience to be on the global stage like that, and I am so proud of that experience.

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 challenge for me was always questioning if we were doing enough, or if what we were doing was being done well enough, to make a difference. The specter of existential global climate change is always hanging over your head — and you don't actually know if what you are doing will make any real difference in the end. Really the only way to overcome that was to press on and take it step by step, day by day. Realizing that in our setting and with our resources, we would only be able to do

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so much. I often reminded myself that just getting people to think about and talk about these issues was probably enough to make it all worth it. I also always had this feeling that we were often just talking and planning, and not doing a whole lot of doing. Looking back, I realize that's partially because of how government works. It's achingly slow. I did deal with some disillusionment within Sanctuaries — feeling like most of what we do is talk about how great Sanctuaries are (often overstating their impacts) and that we could and should be doing so much more to physically protect these ecosystems.

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?

This one is tough — some days I feel cynical, especially now that all this climate work has essentially ground to a halt. I look back and wonder, was there any lasting impact of those years of work? All those conversations, and well-made plans, and trainings and reports and toolkits? Did any of it matter to the American people, or make any sort of difference in preserving our heritage and our home? I'm not really sure how to answer those questions, or if it's even possible. I still feel very proud of my, and more broadly, my colleagues', accomplishments and work. We were all very committed and inspired to make a difference. I'm just not totally convinced that we did. Partially that's because of the enormity of climate change and trying to effect change in a political and cultural system that doesn't want to actually make any sort of change. Maybe hindsight will bring clarity, eventually.

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?

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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?

I would say, keep in mind that you are playing the long game. Administrations come and go, agency priorities shift, and any real change that occurs is more often than not quite slow. To counter that narrative, though, I would also inspire young people to enter into public service with gusto, passion, and commitment to pushing agencies forward. We need young energy and fresh ideas. We need folks both within and outside government to fight against the status quo, to be radical and brave, and to take risks. And most of all to work across silos and divisions to find the common cause that is worth fighting for.

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

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