

Bringing Back Baffin Bay

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:08] Hello. Welcome to a Talk on the Wild Side, your biweekly tour, of all things, wild in Texas. I'm your host, Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak.

Georgi Eccles [00:00:16] And I'm your co-host, Georgie Eccles.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:18] Hi, Georgie. How are you?

Georgi Eccles [00:00:20] I'm good. How are you?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:21] I'm well this morning. I'm super stoked because this morning I got up way before the sun. I drove out to Malachi Beach on Padre Island. And we got to see the hatchlings. The sea turtle hatchlings are released and crawl to the bay. And it was it was so cute and they were so low. They were just so tiny and everything. But it was really exciting. I've been here for 12 years and I've always wanted to see that and I never had before. So that was pretty fun.

Georgi Eccles [00:00:49] How did how did they, how did they do that? Is it like an organization that releases them?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:00:54] Yeah. And if you're interested in, you want more information. Way back, I don't know, probably 20 episodes ago or so, we interviewed Dr. Donna Shaver and Dr. Shaver and the people that she's worked with over the years, they have basically saved the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle from extinction. Long story. So go and listen to that episode. But yeah, so now what they do is when the turtles come up, when the females come up in the spring and they make a nest, you know, the Park Service folks are patrolling and looking for them and they snatch those eggs up right away and take them to, well, where they'll be safe. And then when they hatch and Dr. Shaver, I don't know how they do this, but somehow they kind of know. But they only get, you know, a day or two notice because once those guys hatch, they want to get them on the beach right away. And so they put them down on the beach and they let them crawl out the shore so that they get imprinted there on that beach so that those females, you know, whoever makes it to adulthood and comes back to lay eggs, this is where she'll come. So it was pretty exciting to see.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:02] That sounds like a marvel to behold.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:05] It was. It was.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:07] And fingers crossed a lot of these little guys survive, right?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:10] I know, right?

Georgi Eccles [00:02:11] Bet you saw so many of them, but not so many return.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:14] Yeah. Yeah.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:16] They are just low on the food chain.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:02:17] Yes. Well, you know, the very last one was just excruciating to watch. He just didn't have the energy that the other little guys had. And it

was taking a long time. And every time a wave would come, it would push it back up farther on the on the shore, and the whole crowd would just go, "oh." You know, it was just like disappointment. And, then we would be like, almost. I mean, people were like cheering it on because it's this last little one and we all had to stay. I mean, everybody stayed like 20 minutes. It was an excruciatingly long time to watch this little guy, but that little guy finally made it to the water and finally took off. So that was good to see.

Georgi Eccles [00:02:58] Oh, sounds awesome. I should definitely do that myself.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:01] Yeah, you should. Yeah, they post on their social media when they're going to do it, and they don't, you know, they don't often get but like one or two days notice. But yeah, look for that on social media. Okay, cool.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:14] I'm going to be heading out to Austin this weekend. A little bit of a different wildlife experience. I'm going to be hopefully seeing the marvel that is the Mexican free tailed bats that take their nightly flights from the Congress Avenue Bridge in Austin.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:29] That's nice.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:29] I've never been there before. I've seen the pictures. And I think while im in the city I've got to go and check that out. Have you have you seen them?

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:39] You know, I'm embarrassed to admit that I have never been there to see that. And I know that's something that I really need to do. How many is it that they say emerge? Do you know?

Georgi Eccles [00:03:48] Yeah, 1.5 million individuals.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:51] Crazy. Yeah. So it is an insane number.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:54] A sight to behold.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:03:55] Yeah. Yeah.

Georgi Eccles [00:03:57] Why don't we make a deal? I'll go and have your experience with the Turtles and you'll go and check out the bats.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:04:03] Let's do it. I think we'll both benefit. Sure. So, do you have anything wild and new for us to talk about?

Georgi Eccles [00:04:09] Yeah, I do have a little bit of news today. Parks and Wildlife here in Texas is putting out a strong message about stopping the spread of invasive plants in our rivers, lakes and other natural bodies of water. The giant salvinia can now be found in numerous lakes around Texas, coming into 23 lakes and East Texas alone. And so it's spreading state wide, which is becoming a problem because it's potentially out compete in our native plants. And so that's the bit of news today that we have to share with you.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:04:39] Yeah, the news isn't always good here. Sorry, sorry, folks, but it can't all be good news. So that's that is a big problem. Is there anything that our listeners can do to, you know, to help with that, the effort to stop the spread?

Georgi Eccles [00:04:54] Yeah. So if you are into boating, fishing or swimming or are you in any bodies of water. So it's. Any time around bodies of water in Texas. You should just be cautious about removing any excess water plants and debris that you take out of that body of water from a lake, for example, and just making sure that you're just removing anything that might potentially be transferred to another body of water and start establishing itself there. And this includes shoes on waders. There can be a big problem to just lie on for transferring things. So yeah, it can be a little bit of a nuisance to be checking your clothing and so on regularly when you're just about to leave somewhere. But it really does help. Just doing those little bit, little tasks does help a lot. So I'll really encourage you to do that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:05:45] Yeah. And I guess this is why we're always told to, you know, wash down the boat either, you know, after we get it out of one body of water or before we put it in the other, we definitely need to wash everything down. Exactly. That's cool. Well, you know, it's good to know that we aren't completely helpless. There are some things that we can do to do our part.

Georgi Eccles [00:06:03] Absolutely. There is something about the open water of the ocean that carries wonder and mystery from listening to the sound of waves cascading and gently dashing into itself with alluring grace, exfoliating your feet in the warm water, basking in the sun's rays and feeling the cool ocean breeze, brushing your skin, building sandcastles with the kids, searching for animal and plant life on the beach and in the dunes, too bustling with your catch of the day. There are such a variety of recreational and therapeutic activities these wonderful environments provide to us. For some, there is a deep connection to being close to the ocean and the kaleidoscope of life that it nature. Bay habitats are inlets of the sea, where the land curves inwards, usually with a beach base, provide vitally important habitats for wildlife, for example, bay plants helpful to water to provide healthy breeding areas and nurseries for many species. With this being said, bear health, particularly water quality, is of critical importance to support healthy plant and animal communities. If we delve into this a little bit more, we can think about better water quality acting as a domino or a ripple effect. Healthy water quality means healthy and abundant plant communities. Healthy plant communities foster healthy and plentiful fish communities. Healthy fish communities provide food resources for all the marine animals that rely on fish to survive. So water quality is a domino effect because it impacts every organism on each level of the food chain. Not only does better water quality impact animal communities, the directly impacts us too, as recreational bay uses the surrounding communities and also the economy itself. There are people that dedicate their lives to protecting water quality of bass. Today, we will be speaking to our guests about Baffin Bay. Baffin Bay is an inlet of the larger Laguna madre found in south Texas. We have discussed the Blue Gruner madre in previous episodes, and today we will be talking about Baffin Bay, its water quality, and how research is in collaboration with multiple groups. Organizations and landowners are working together on a large scale watershed restoration project. A watershed is a body of land that drains into the same location or body of water. We can think of a watershed as a funnel. Collecting all the water in a specific area and drilling it into one body of water. In this case, Baffin Bay. Today, we will learn about the Bringing Back Baffin Initiative and how we as individuals and communities can come together in improving our water's quality that can be enjoyed for generations to come. So let's get to it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:08:28] But we're here with Kiersten Stanzel, who is the director of partnerships for the Coastal Bend Basin Estuary Program, and Dr. Michael Wetz, who's the Heart Research Institute Chair for Coastal Ecosystems Processes at

Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi. Welcome both to our podcast. First, I want you to just tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:08:53] After you Kirtsen.

Kiersten Stanzel [00:08:55] Thanks. Well, first off, thank you all for having us. I am Kiersten Stanzel. I am the Director of Partnerships for the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program. In my role with the estuary program is really to go out and try to develop partnerships that further our mission of protecting the bays and estuary. I do this by seeking funding and just overall support for our programs. I have a background in marine science. I actually went to the University of Texas Marine Science Institute in Port Aransas and studied there, and after finishing I decided to stay in the Coastal Bend region and work on resource conservation issues. So I've been doing conservation work in this area for almost 20 years now and just have a passion for preserving the resources of the Texas coast.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:09:45] No, that's great. That sounds like exciting work.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:09:48] I guess I'll go ahead. Next. Yeah. All right. I'm Mike Wetz, and I'm the chair for Coastal Ecosystem Processes at the Heart Research Institute. And I'm also a professor of life sciences at A&M Corpus Christi. I've been working in Baffin Bay for close to ten years now, trying to address water quality issues that started to come to the forefront of people's concerns down there when they started seeing things happening in the bay. So my lab, that's what we do. We study water quality. We study issues with harmful algal blooms and things like that.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:10:21] Nice, very interesting work. We've had the most interesting guests and I just keep using that word over and over again. But it's really true. So we love Baffin Bay, but there might be a lot of folks out there who don't know much about it. So could you just tell us about Baffin Bay? Where is it? Why is it important? Why do we care about it?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:10:41] Yeah, Baffin Bay is just a short ship east of Kingsville, and it's just this really special, iconic bay on the Texas coast. It's been known for supporting these incredible fish populations, trophy trout. You know, a lot of record game fish have come out of Baffin Bay. So it holds a lot of memories, a lot of special memories for people in this area. And it's also a really critical contributor to the economy around here.

Georgi Eccles [00:11:12] Yeah, I agree. I fish out there regularly. It's one of my favorite spots to fish just because of the different areas that you can fish are and all the different groups of people that show up and fish. And you can meet a lot of different people from all walks of life. And so it's really enjoyable and peaceful out there, too.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:11:30] I didn't know you fish. Oh, yeah. That's cool. Yeah.

Georgi Eccles [00:11:34] So, Mike, the there's been a lot of changes that have been happening over recent decades at Baffin Bay, and there's some concerns about the health of the bay itself. Could you give us some info and an overview about the kind of changes and the concerns that we're talking about here?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:11:52] Yeah. So there are changes that have happened that we can actually measure and quantify. But then there are other changes that, you know, long time anglers have observed, but we don't necessarily have the data to show. So the biggest issue in Baffin seems to be the water quality. There are real clear data trends showing that the water quality has deteriorated over the past 30, 40 years. So we're seeing too much nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus going into the bay, triggering algal blooms and a cascade of other issues in the bay. And what that does when you have poor water quality, it just makes it harder for the system to support the fisheries and things we care about. So also when you get these algal blooms that we've had in Baffin Bay, it prevents light from going to the bottom. So we lose the seagrass beds. And that's one of the common threads that we've heard talking to some of the long time anglers is that the bottom habitat has changed. Used to have nice seagrass beds in parts of the bay, and now they're just gone. Mm hmm. So, you know, there have been other changes that have been observed in this bay related to the changes in fish populations. Shrimp declines, crab declines. Um, just a lot of indicators that the bay in general is not as healthy as it used to be. And probably one of the most telling things that I've heard from the old folks down here who've been there a long time is that, you know, they they've commented that when it used to rain, you get this fresh, clean water coming in from the creeks and it would kind of flush the bay. Out. Eventually life would flourish again. But now, because that water in the creeks going into the bay is not good quality anymore. Now, when it rains, it actually has a detrimental effect on the bay and on life in the bay. So that's what we're trying to figure out.

Georgi Eccles [00:13:42] Yeah. So would you say that currently the water quality is poor? In Baffin Bay, is there kind of a rating that you could put on the current quality of of the water on the bay. Or is that too much to ask?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:13:56] Yeah, it's definitely not ideal. When you have situations like we do with persistent algal blooms and fish kills, you know, low oxygen events, that that all kind of comes together to tell you that the health of the bay is just not great. Right. In that regard.

Georgi Eccles [00:14:11] That's really concerning, for sure.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:13] Yeah.

Georgi Eccles [00:14:13] It is a beautiful place out there.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:14:15] Mm hmm. It is. And very important to the economy, too, like you said. Is there any way to put a number on the impact to the economy? Do you have any idea?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:14:28] Oh, boy. That's one of the things we're going to be working on actually over the coming years and the conservation wranglers helping us with that. But, you know, there was a study done back in the early nineties to quantify the impact just on the fisheries in the in the Upper Laguna Madre, including Baffin Bay. And I think it was on the order of many tens to hundreds of millions. It was a significant chunk because, you know, you're talking about the price of the fish, but also just people coming down and staying in hotel rooms, eating and. Yeah. So it's definitely a big contributor.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:00] Yeah. So I mean, it sounds like the birding industry, all this all the money that comes in to the Corpus Christi region. Because. Because it's so birdy.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:15:11] Yeah. Well, I'm glad you mentioned birds, because that's actually one of the other changes that we've heard about. And, you know, and I just want to give you some context I've been doing working with a historian at A&M, Corpus Christi, Jennifer Brown, to record oral histories from some of the folks who've been in Baffin for 50, 60 years. And, you know, they've talked a lot about the water changes and the bottom habitat and the fish. But they've also mentioned changes in some of the bird populations, especially ducks, because the ducks, some of them apparently rely on the seagrass beds that are no longer there. So it seems like there's the water changes that have had these cascading effects on other things that people care about.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:15:48] Yeah, sure. I love oral histories. They're so enlightening to be able to think about an area and what it was like 50 years ago or whatever it is yet. So yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:16:00] I'm excited. Jennifer has done a great job so far. And listen, it's going to be cool when that information comes.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:16:05] Out, I'll bet a bet. So. Kiersten, I understand that there's a Baffin Bay Stakeholders group. What does what does the Stakeholders group do?

Kiersten Stanzel [00:16:17] Well, we you know, I think that Mike really painted a good picture of what's been going on and he and a number of volunteers were integral in collecting the data that showed us what was causing these water quality issues, pointing to the nutrients. And so I think once we had that important information there was that there's just such a strong desire to protect the system and to improve the water quality and try to really bring it back to the what it has been in the past and what it's really known for. And so there's been a number of, you know, stakeholders from all kinds of different organizations and representing all kinds of different groups, whether and just public citizens as well, who just wanted to get involved and do something to really address the issue, you know. So once we knew that that water quality was where we needed to focus. And in particular on this nutrient issue, we tried to really kind of formalize that group of people more and provide a forum for them to all get involved and collaboratively work together to try to come up with solutions, know what can we do in the watershed, in particular where the access of nutrients is coming from? What can we do to try and address that issue? You know, and I think what's been interesting is that we've really you know, you can't point your finger necessarily at one source. There's all kinds of different things going on within the system. You know, there's agricultural runoff, there's faulty wastewater treatment plant, there's septic systems that may be malfunctioning. And then there's just things like, you know, atmospheric deposition of nitrogen. So there's all kinds of different sources. And but some of these we can go in and try to try to do something about it, you know. And so that was really that the idea behind the group was to try to get as many stakeholders involved as possible and coming up with solutions. And once we had a better idea of what the problem was, how can we all work together to really address that? And so we've been active since about 2018 and there have been quite a lot of progress made. But there's still a. You see a lot of work to be done.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:18:29] Okay. Yeah, that's terrific because I know a lot of times those stakeholder groups, you know, when you get everybody together where they have one voice that can be really powerful and they can do so much more.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:18:41] Yeah, I think I think Kiersten mentioned, you know, some of the entities involved, but it's been a real nice cross-section of the community of businesses, landowners, county and city government representatives, state and federal folks, NGOs. I mean, it's really across the board. So the group has really coalesced, and I think we're starting to see some successes.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:19:05] That's terrific. So, Kiersten, one thing you mentioned, you said something about, you know, the watershed really is the issue. And so things are happening far away from Baffin Bay that have a huge effect. Are there any efforts to do any restoration in the watershed?

Kiersten Stanzel [00:19:26] Yeah, there definitely is. And I think that it's a real, a very neat point, I think in the process of trying to restore and bring Baffin Bay back, you know, we're really at kind of this interesting phase where we're moving in to trying to do that more active work in the watershed to try to address these issues. And so some examples have been working with wastewater treatment facilities. This is a fairly rural watershed with relatively small communities that maybe don't have the funding or that, you know, the infrastructure they need in order to properly treat their wastewater and things like that. So we're trying to work with them to identify ways that we could help support that process, whether that, you know, just providing them with training or helping them seek funds to make improvements or even in some cases, some of our partners are working on taking over the operation of some of these facilities to try to make sure that they're operating in the capacity that they can. And so that's one example. We also have some more traditional, what I would call it, a watershed restoration project where we're trying to go in and take some of the, you know, the land that's been farmed for years and years and years and convert that back into wetlands where we can treat the water as it comes off the landscape, pull out some of those nutrients before the water goes into the creek. And so there's all these things are kind of ongoing. And I mean, you know, one of the things that's happened, I think, and part of it is due to the stakeholder group, you know, bringing awareness to this issue is that there is going to be some bigger pots of money focusing on that watershed and some of these aspects that we're talking about right now, these activities. And so it's going to I think there's going to be there's a lot of really neat things that are going to happen here in the in the very near future. But it's going to take a lot of resources and a lot of willpower in order to really do that. But the level of restoration and management that we need in order to make a difference, you know, it's a big a big watershed with unfortunately a big problem. But I think we've got the willpower to do it. We just need to that kind of cool are not all together, pull it all together and go after the resources that we need. But definitely some neat things coming down the pipe in the next few years as far as restoration and management. And I will say we're actually also I have we're working on a proposal today actually to start to address another issue related to septic tanks and trying to get some funding available for people that maybe need to and assistance in going in and retrofitting or repairing and maybe even replacing some malfunctioning septic systems that are going to be big contributors of nutrients as well.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:22:24] Yeah, I was just wanted to follow up Kiersten was a little modest on one of these, the Natural Resources Damage Assessment Program which came out of the Deepwater Horizon spill settlement. Um, they're proposing to put about \$4.8 million towards restoration in the Baffin Bay watershed. One of them was the project Kiersten talked about converting some of the old agricultural land into wetlands where you could treat the water. So I think that the stakeholder group has positioned Baffin to be competitive for these big pots of restoration money. Now, there's another project, just briefly, that that CBPP was able to get funding for to clean up illegal dumping in Petunia

Creek. We had a project going on over the past year where we go out to Petunia Creek and collect water samples. And it was really amazing. Some of those sites located near bridges, just incredible amounts of garbage and household waste. And unfortunately, I feel like that's just kind of indicative of, you know, a mindset. Among, you know, certain segments of the population, maybe where, you know, that's just how we can treat our natural resources. So what they've been able to do is get funding to actually help alleviate some of that sort of just maybe that that inclination to dump just out in nature, but instead do it where it's controlled. So.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:23:48] Wow, I mean, that illegal dumping is just huge in my mind, just in itself to try to tackle that, because it's almost I hate to say this because I love Texas, but it's almost a little bit part of our culture. Sorry, don't hate me Texans, but little bit part of our culture in places at least. And so that's something I mean, we literally need to clean that up. But, what an ambitious project to take on a watershed and to try to restore a watershed.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:24:20] A million and a half acre watershed.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:24:22] That's I mean, that's crazy. Kiersten, how do you even wrap your mind around that?

Kiersten Stanzel [00:24:27] Well, it is. I think sometimes it is a little daunting. And I always I always joke with people that I feel like it's always Baffin Bay. There's so many things going on. But oftentimes it is hard to get everything to kind of line up. Right. You know, and we're getting closer to doing that, I think. And I think we're going to talk about it here in a little bit. But one of the projects that we think is really going to help bring all these pieces together. Is this bringing back and back initiative that we're starting? And, you know, and I think it's Mike actually used the term, you know, I mean, this is really kind of for us. And I think even in Texas, this is the first attempt to really kind of do an ecosystem level restoration project. And it is it takes commitment from all kinds of different groups, groups and stakeholders and as well as funding and resources, you know. So we're hoping that that this this new initiative that we're kicking off here will really highlight that and kind of start to bring all those pieces together. And we've tried to kind of lay it out in phases, if you will, that maybe make it a little bit easier to see how we plan to go about it. Know and Mike may want to talk about this a little bit more, but, you know, essentially the first phase was like what we've been doing already, collecting the data, trying to pinpoint the problem. And then the next phase is really just focusing on what we were just talking about, taking that data, using it to make management and restoration decisions and focus on actually implementing those types of activities in the watershed. And then finally, it's actually going back into the bay looking at what we've lost as far as habitat. You know, Mike mentioned the I think I said earlier, you know what? What have we lost over the years? And hopefully down the road will be at a point where water quality will be better and we can go back in and we can potentially focus on restoring those habitats that we've lost in the bay. So we're kind of trying to do it in phases to make it a little bit less daunting, if you will. But, you know, it is it's a big deal. And so it's going to take a lot of it's a long term thing. We're not expecting that to happen, obviously, overnight or even in the next five years. You know, it's going to take a long time and a lot of effort. But it's great to have opportunities like this to talk about it, spread the word and get more and more people aware of what's going on and committed to helping solve the problem.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:26:55] Sure. Yeah. I mean, ambitious was the only word I could, only adjective I could come up with. And so you said daunting. And I was like, yeah, that that works, too.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:27:03] What we've done is basically modeled this after efforts that went on in Tampa Bay over in Florida, they had very similar problems to what we have in Baffin Bay back in the seventies and eighties. And so what they did is they put together a team and they ended up completing something like 800 different restoration activities in the watershed, some very small sort of landowner scale, some much larger, but all of those cumulatively added up to really reducing the nutrients going into the bay. And now they have clean water and they have seagrass beds again. So and that's about a four and a half million acre watershed. So we're only a third of that size. Wow. And I say if they can do it, we can do it.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:27:47] Absolutely. That's fantastic to hear, too, that there are successes, for sure.

Georgi Eccles [00:27:52] And you were recently chosen as a conservation wrangler in The Texan by Nature. So how do you expect becoming a conservation wrangler will help your efforts in Bringing Baffin Back initiative? Oh, that's a that's a kind of a tongue twister.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:28:07] Well, you know, it's funny. I'm going to go off topic here. There was a news article today done on this initiative a little bit, and they called it the Bringing Back the Bath Initiative. So it is a tongue twister. But that was a little bit absurd. Anyway.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:28:28] So what is bringing Baffin back?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:28:30] And it's basically a commitment to restoring the health of the bay and the surrounding communities.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:28:36] Okay. So is that like the formal name for this restoration that we're talking about? Gotcha.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:28:42] And Kiersten mentioned the different phases, but basically the idea is we're going to get a handle on the water quality going into the bay and in the bay itself. And then once we do that, we're going to go in and look at what habitat so we lost in the bay and can we bring those habitats back. So the idea is to just make this bay as healthy as it can be again. And the other part of this that we really want to focus on, too, is fostering that that stewardship for the next generation of folks. You know, we've had incredible support from some of the longtime anglers and community members down here. But for this to really work over the long term, we need younger folks stepping up as well, whether it's, you know, college, college age people or even younger than that. And I would just say, you know, I've been amazed. And we did some work with the local high school down here many years ago. They started an aquatic science class. And it was amazing to me how many of those kids live within a few miles of this bay and had never been on it. So I think we've got work to do there to, you know, make sure we have that next generation of stewards as well.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:29:56] Yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:29:57] Yeah.

Kiersten Stanzel [00:29:57] You know, one of the things that we hope that the conservation Wrangler program can help us do it is expand our reach outside of our local watershed and even beyond the Coastal Bend region. Now, there's a lot of people in Texas who know about Baffin Bay, have fish there at some point in their life or visited there for birding or hunting, whatever it is, you know, and have a have a passion for it. And so the idea is we you know, we not only need to spread the word locally, but we need to let other people in the state know what's going on and try to reach out to a broader audience for support for this initiative in these next phases that need to happen. So the more people we can make aware, the more the more likely we are to succeed. So I think that's one of our increasing those partnerships and awareness throughout the state is important as well.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:30:57] Yeah.

Georgi Eccles [00:30:58] I was curious to know if there's any resources that you guys have for our listeners where they could check you out on.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:31:05] Online or.

Georgi Eccles [00:31:06] If there's anything that they can do on an individual level or a local level that can help you guys out. An awareness is one of those things. Outreach, of course. Yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:31:16] The first thing that we always encourage people to do is sign up to the Baffin Bay Stakeholder Group. Okay. And so if you go to the if you type in Baffin Bay stakeholder group, it'll take you to the coastal burn bays and estuaries page. And there's contact information there. The stakeholder groups kind of, you know, it's where all the information kind of flows to and then flows from. So we'll get you on an email list and you can go to upcoming meetings that we have where we'll talk about opportunities to get involved, whether it's volunteering or, you know, landowners want to get involved and do things on their property. That's where they can find out how to do that. Great. So that's first thing. There's also the Bringing Baffin Back Web page, which is associated with the Heart Research Institutes Home page. So if you just bringing Baffin back and it has a lot of great information there and other contact information as well if people want to reach out.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:32:11] That's very cool. So we mentioned this, but I want to spend a little more time on the Texan by Nature program, because I want to give their conservation Wrangler program a shout out. What can you can you describe what is Texan by Nature and what's their Conservation Wrangler program for people who aren't aware? Right.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:32:30] It's a fantastic program. It was is a foundation that was started by First Lady Laura Bush years ago and then conservation wranglers, one of their programs. And basically what they do, what conservation wrangler does is provide each entity that's been selected with about 18 months of tailored support. So we've just started working with them and they just have an incredible range of different expertize. And so in our case, what they're going to be helping us do is more of the reaching new populations that we've maybe not reached yet. So we're trying to increase our connections with landowners in the watershed. But also, like Kiersten mentioned, we're trying to reach folks who have fish and bath and who love Baffin, but maybe don't live here locally so we can get them involved and keep them aware of what's going on. So the outreach is. Part of it. They're going to help us develop partnerships that will help with bringing new expertize to

this issue or bringing funding so we can resolve these challenges. And just in general, I think helping us to spread the word about Bath. And so we're really excited. I mean, they've again, we've only worked with them for a short amount of time so far, but they're incredible to work with.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:33:51] They're really going to be that amplifier that that kind of gets bringing bath and back off the ground.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:33:56] And I hope you're right because yeah, they have partnered with some really awesome projects over the years, like Long Leaf Initiative and things like that. And I know all of their projects are just really impressive. If you're not familiar with tech, some by nature though, Google that too, while you're at it, while you're looking for ways to help out and, you know, just fun places to get more information you can check out Texan by Nature, it's a really it's a really terrific organization, like you said, founded by First Lady Laura Bush.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:34:28] We were we were ecstatic to find out. Yeah, I almost fell out of my chair when we were getting selected, so.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:34:34] That's very cool. Yeah, that's very cool. So speaking of falling off your chair, one of our favorite questions here, and we're going to pics now that we've talked about some serious things that need work, we always like to ask about a biology blunder.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:34:52] So, oh, man.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:34:53] I know, you got to it's part of our program. But we love to ask about biology blunders, just where things might have gone awry and odd things happened in the field. Yeah, we think.

Kiersten Stanzel [00:35:10] Oh, man, I don't know if it's a blunder. I guess one thing I was thinking of. So I am used to after I finished graduate school, I worked actually for the Mission Aransas National Marine Research Reserve for a while and I would go out and we would do we had to set up some monitoring transects and part of that was actually putting in some equipment to monitor the elevations of the surface and try to kind of keep track of whether the marsh was fighting and sinking down or whether it was actually accreting and getting kind of essentially taller. And so I, you know, being a kind of a novice at that, I picked some fights and I didn't realize that we were going to have to carry like £40 bags of concrete out the marsh and put these geodetic markers in the ground. And so, you know, and literally, you jackhammer these steel rods down into the ground. And then, you know, you kind of cover the top with a little bit of concrete, keep it in place. And we're not conquering the marsh. I don't wanna make it sound like that little, little, tiny bit, but it was a lot of it, you know. So we had to I feel like I that was like comical to watch us try to carry all this equipment. I'm literally carrying a jackhammer through the marsh and at 40 to £40 bag of concrete and steel rods. I mean, it was the most exhausting thing I've ever done in my whole life. And now looking back on, I'm like, why did I not take a thought that was, you know, crude or, you know, could have been access a little bit easier. So I learned my lesson quickly on that. And we had to do this at a bunch of different places. And the next time I was like, okay, we're going out, we're going to be a little more efficient about this because it was exhausting work and but important. And I'm glad and I think those sites are still are still there and are still being monitored by people that have taken over after me. But they probably they're still trekking through the marsh, trying to get out there.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:37:04] So it's funny. It's so funny because working in conservation fields, we so often have these amazing ideas when we're sitting in the office and then we get out there and we're like, Oh my gosh, who's a stupid idea? What's this? Why am I trying to do this? You know, and yeah, that's I've put myself in positions like that many times, so I feel you. Yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:37:28] Well, I don't know if I have a blunder. I mean, I've done don't get me wrong, I've done plenty of stupid stuff in my life, but I guess that probably I don't know if this is even funny or not, but I was on a research cruise off the Oregon coast one time and I was getting in the shower and all of a sudden I noticed that the toilet was overflowing and I was like, oh, crap, literally. Yeah, no, no pun intended. And so I ran out of there and I was trying to get out of the bathroom. And it turns out that on the research vessels, when the door is locked, you actually have to turn that lock the opposite direction as we normally do. So I'm sitting there like trying to get the door open and there's, you know, waste flowing around me. And I was, you know, hammering on the door. And finally I realized, oh, dummy, turn it the other way. So I got out, I grabbed a pair of jeans and I ran upstairs and it was in the middle of the night, and only one lady was on shift. And I ran up to her as. Margaret, what's going? What do I do? What's happening? The first thing she said was, you know, she didn't say, oh, this is a problem, we got to fix it. She said, Mike, your fly's open.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:35] Oh.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:38:38] Yeah, I don't know. I mean, you know, this is one of those things. Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:41] I'm sure there's.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:38:42] Plenty of other stupid stuff that I've done, but that's the one that comes to mind where I was just like, Oh, this is just a disaster.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:47] Yeah, my fly's open. And if you didn't notice from the waist down, I'm kind of, you know, covered in waves. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:38:54] Yeah.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:38:54] Anyway, yeah, there's more to it than that, Janet. Whatever our name was, so.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:39:02] Yeah, yeah. One of those things that's funny.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:39:05] Oh, guys, you guys, thank you so much for talking with us today about Baffin Bay. Like I said, it's one of our favorite places because it is such a special place. And thank you for sharing with, you know, with our listeners about your upcoming projects. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us today?

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:39:25] Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to just give a shout out to some of the entities that have supported us so far.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:39:31] Mm hmm.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:39:31] We've been really fortunate. We've had great support for the Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Program from the Celanese Corporation up there in Bishop. They've been a contributor for almost eight years now. The Coastal Conservation Association has been a big supporter as well. Saltwater Fisheries Enhancement Association, the General Land Office, TCU, and also Texas Sea Grant. They all kind of contributed. Mm hmm. So it's been it's been nice so far. It's great to see all these entities kind of stepping up and helping us get to where we are. And I think just in closing, what Kiersten and I are probably most excited about is just the thinking that, you know, what people don't realize is that a lot of the things that we're trying to accomplish here by fixing things on the land, you know, that's kind of a co benefit to everybody living in the community. We're fixing the wastewater plants, trying to bring expertise to help fix those plants, you know, helping people with their land management. So I just I'm so excited because I think this will benefit this community in so many ways that we don't even know about yet.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:40:38] Definitely. We all depend on the health of the watersheds, so. Absolutely. Yeah. What about you, Kiersten? Anything you would like to add?

Kiersten Stanzel [00:40:46] I just would like to add, you know, I think we touched on this a little bit earlier, but just for people, if they're interested at all in this, you know, to reach out and get involved, you know. We already provided them the websites and some places you can go to try to kind of get in the loop on this and join our stakeholder group that, you know. It's like I said, it's got a lot of members and it's going strong that, you know, we just in order to do what we really need to do, this ecosystem level restoration, that's going to require a lot of support. So please, if you have if you're interested, reach out and get involved and would love to hear your thoughts and figure out ways that people can help.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:41:27] Great advice. Yeah. Well, thank you both for being here. I'm really looking forward to following your successes over the coming years.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:41:35] We're excited.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:41:36] Yeah.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:41:37] Thank you. Conservation wrangler. We're on a good...

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:41:40] You're on your way. Yeah. Yeah. All right. Thanks.

Dr. Michael Wetz [00:41:42] Thank you.

Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:41:43] A Talk on the Wild Side is a production of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute of Texas A&M University Kingsville. Funding for this project is provided by the Harvey Weil Sportsman Conservationist Award by the Rotary Club of Corpus Christi. Editing was completed by the talented Gaby Olivas, Andrew Lowery and Tre' Kendall. We thank the TAMUK Distance Learning Lab for all their help and cooperation.