

## Ben Masters and Mountain Lions! – S2E8

**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. I'm Sandra Rideout-Hanzak.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:16] And I'm Andrew Lowery. Howdy. Howdy.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:00:19] Hey, Andrew, what's up?

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:21] Oh, not too much today, Sandra. Just kind of hanging about. How are you?

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:00:26] I'm well. I'm well, I'm doing well. Everything is as it should be.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:31] Cooling off just a little bit, which is wonderful. It's been so hot this summer.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:00:36] Yeah, this was a crazy, hot summer. This is a crazy, hot summer.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:39] I can only imagine you were out there burning stuff.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:44] I'm kind of thankful to have missed out on this burn season. It was nice.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:00:47] The summer burning is brutal. It is brutal. Yeah. Yeah, it's it's hard. Yeah.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:00:55] Props to you for that. That's a another level of science.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:01:00] I don't know if its science or crazy. It's another level of craziness.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:01:06] All right. Well, what do you have for us that's wild and new?

**Andrew Lowery** [00:01:09] Well, we actually have something positive today, and I'm always talking negative news, but we got some cool stuff today. Are you a fan of Jurassic Park, Dr. Rideout?

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:01:19] I mean, I thought it was a fun movie. I don't know about the idea of it in real life, but it was a fun movie.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:01:26] Yeah, yeah. I kind of have the same thoughts. I mean, I would definitely work at Jurassic Park given the chance, but it might be a mistake.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:01:35] So, guys, with the news, let's take it back a little bit. The year 1936, the place, Tasmania the sun sets on a hot day is the last Thylacine or Tasmanian tiger an apex marsupial predator dies. Long thought to be the scourge to sheep, goats and livestock. These striped, dog-like creatures with jaws that could open nearly 90 degrees,

left this planet. But thanks to a recent scientific development, we may get to see these amazing creatures once again.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:02:03] Right. Okay. I think I heard something about this. It's sort of like the people who were trying to bring woolly mammoths back a while back. It seems like a mammoth task. Sorry.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:02:14] No, that's perfect. I had a pun, but that's even better.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:02:19] Bringing back the extinct species just seems huge. Yeah.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:02:23] No, I agree. It's a really, really ambitious project.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:02:27] Okay, how did they do this?

**Andrew Lowery** [00:02:30] Okay, it's kind of a complicated subject, and I do not fully understand all the working parts. From what I do understand. Colossal Laboratories and Bioscience is a Dallas based science company, it has multiple genome samples from preserved Tasmanian tigers with the genomes they plan to use CRISPR, a gene editing tool to splice in segments of Tasmanian tiger DNA into the eggs of closely related species like the Tasmanian devil or the fat tailed dunnart to create a hybrid animal with many of the same features as a Tasmanian tiger.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:03:00] Okay, I've never even heard of a dunnart before. But anyway, is this the first time they've attempted this with the Tasmanian tiger?

**Andrew Lowery** [00:03:07] So no, the project has been put forward before but we have not seen it occur yet. So fingers crossed.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:03:15] Well that's interesting. What does this Dallas based company think as far as a timeline.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:03:21] From what I've been reading, 3 to 5 years is kind of the estimated time frame. So pretty soon, actually.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:03:26] That's not too far off, really. Something to keep an eye out on. We'll have to update folks if it comes out soon. Yes. Okay. Well, I want to introduce our guest speaker for today. We have a wildlife and outdoor adventure filmmaker with us today. I'm really excited about this. His name is Ben Masters and he most recently or his most recent project, Deep in the Heart, which was produced by Katie Baldock and Jay Kleberg. And we are huge fans of Deep in the Heart Huge. I love it. He also produced Unbranded. That might have been one of his first big projects, and he was the director for The River and the Wall. And the River in the Wall won a South by Southwest Award in 2019. So also, just FYI, we also filmed this interview on Zoom. The full-length video of our conversation is on YouTube. So if you'd rather watch the interview, than listen to it head on over to YouTube. Science Teachers, the video might be really great to watch during class. Andrew, Can you tell them how to find it on YouTube?

**Andrew Lowery** [00:04:43] Yeah. So it's going to be on two different channels. We have an official talk on the Wild Side YouTube channel, and then I have my personal channel. If you follow us on social media, you can find the links throughout everything's cross-posted.

And if you can't just send one of us a message, we're more than happy to send you a direct link.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:04:59] Yeah, sure. Okay. Let's listen to our interview now. All right. We're here with Mr. Ben Masters today. Ben is a filmmaker and we're so excited to talk to him today. He recently worked on a film called *Deep in the Heart*, which is going to tell us more about later. So welcome to our podcast and videocast. Tell us a little bit about yourself. Introduce yourself.

**Ben Masters** [00:05:26] Oh, well, thanks for having me on. I'm from Amarillo originally, and I went to high school in San Angelo. I studied wildlife biology at Texas A&M University, actually spent a semester down in Kingsville, learned a lot about fishing in Baffin Bay. And then I kind of went through college. I took off summers and falls and managed a hunting operation, kind of due east of Laredo, about 20 miles or so near Miranda City, and then did pack trips up in the mountains and in the summertime. And then whenever I graduated, I kind of thought about going into research, going into land management, and then I was a part of a movie called *Unbranded* where myself and a couple other friends, we adopted some wild mustangs and rode in from Mexico to Canada. And we made a film about it; the director, Phil Baribeau, did. And I got to see kind of firsthand the power that a movie can have on people's perceptions about a particular topic. It's a great way to advocate for something, and it's a great way to. Take people to a different place and meet people and get hit with emotions and visuals and stories. So I started doing wildlife adventure and conservation films about nine years ago or so. I started doing those myself and I have a small film company. Others, about ten of us or so that kind of come in and out called *Fin and Fur* films that we make probably six or so short films a year and then one feature film every 2 to 3 years. And we just released *Deep in the Heart*, and it's the last three years of our lives. We gave it everything we had and are extremely proud of it and thanks for having me on the podcast. It's an honor to get to talk to you about the film.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:07:22] Yeah, we're just super excited. I saw the film on the big screen and it was, wow. Just wow.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:07:30] You know, that project is 100% something to be proud of because you guys really accomplished something significant there. Not only from, like a cinematography standpoint, but like being able to convey a story that doesn't involve people or really, you know, as much narrative as usually have in a film. But still to have that same impact as is something to be applauded.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:07:51] Yeah, definitely. I should have introduced Andrew before we got started. Andrew Lowery is our editor and he's going to be off camera today, but he might ask a few questions.

**Ben Masters** [00:08:03] Alright. Go editors! We love editors; they never get any recognition

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:08:12] I know, right?

**Ben Masters** [00:08:13] Just for fair warning, I fully expect some honest criticism of the film and how we did not put any fire stories into the story. So don't hold it against me.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:08:25] It's all right. I will say I did notice that there was no fire footage, but I'm not going to criticize. It was really awesome. It's such a great film.

**Ben Masters** [00:08:36] I would love to make a movie about prescribed burns some time.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:08:38] Oh, let's do it.

**Ben Masters** [00:08:39] I can help you with that. I'd love to.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:08:41] I'm trying to burn tomorrow. We're getting a bunch of equipment ready today to go tomorrow. So super excited. Ben, for the listeners who haven't seen the film yet, can you kind of break down what the film is and what it's about?

**Ben Masters** [00:08:54] Sure. So Deep in the Heart is a feature length movie that's narrated by Matthew McConaughey. It's 100 minutes long and it's got 12 major species and stories that are in it that range from ocelots to black bears to an alligator gar, a blind catfish. And it showcases some of our most amazing animals and habitats in Texas, as well as a lot of the human involvement and stories that are happening across the state. So, you know, for example, one of the stories that we told is about how the bison across Texas were slaughtered in the late 1800s. And now one of our earliest conservationists, a lady by the name of Molly Goodnight and her husband, Charles, you know, they saved the species from extinction, or at least the southern plains bison herds from extinction. And then over time, they've slowly grown. And, you know, today we have our Texas bison herd running across the prairie up at Caprock Canyon State Park. It's got a recovery story on white tailed deer and bears and kind of follows a lot of the hydrology of the state from our headwaters all the way up to the Gulf of Mexico. So it's a love letter to Texas, and I guess a call to action, so to speak, of some of the big challenges that we face as a state in order to, you know, continue to have these big, wild spaces that are teeming with wildlife. There's a lot of wonderful things happening and there's a lot of big challenges that we have ahead.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:10:31] Definitely.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:10:33] So where did the idea for the film come from, Ben? And was this your idea or were other people involved from the get go or did they kind of get in as things progressed? Like how? What's the production story here?

**Ben Masters** [00:10:45] So this idea has been in my head, I think, since about 2013 or 2014. I've always just loved natural history, like the David Attenborough's the life on our planet, planet Earth, Blue Planet, just getting to be transported to these different parts of the world and getting to see their wildlife. That has always been something that ever since I was a little kid, I've loved. And, you know, Texas doesn't have that, or at least it didn't have that. We've never had our own Natural History Wildlife movie, which I think is a shame because Texas is, you know, one of the most biodiverse states, and it also has all these different eco regions. Plus, we have our own unique rivers. We have tons of into we got species found here that are found nowhere else. And then, you know, from a migratory standpoint, we have some of the most spectacular migrations on earth really, and, you know, critical wintering ground from across the continent. So Texas is so incredibly special. And, I guess over the last ten years or so, as I've been making a lot of these short films, I've kind of gotten to be exposed to a lot of these different stories, whether it's from, you know, the return of the Desert Bighorn or some of the recovery efforts around Pronghorn or, you know, about how people have spent decades improving their land and springs have come back to life. And in the year 2018, there was a series called Our Planet

that came out and it was silverback production narrated by David Attenborough. And that series for the first time really wove in. The human relationship with the natural world in a way that has never been done before with a wildlife movie. And especially because in Texas, you know, the impact of humankind is so great on our wildlife and on our ecosystems, both in a positive and negative manner. That really inspired me to create Deep in the Heart where our society's relationship with the natural world was the main character and the main throughline that takes you all the way from the late 1800s of current day to where, at the end of the film, we kind of look ahead at some of the challenges that our state faces with, you know, increasing population and increasing fragmentation and, you know, the importance that we need to place on recovering a lot of species and conserving the wild landscapes that we have.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:13:34] I love that you've woven the human dimensions into it, and I wasn't expecting that when I went to the theater. I thought it was just going to be all about the, you know, the wildlife and the wild places. And so I really love that you wove that thread the whole way through. One of the things that was really amazing to me and I grew up watching all those, all those shows too; total nerd about that. I'm older than you guys are, so I grew up watching Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. You know, that was my nature show that, you know, took you to places. I just age myself considerably. But, anyway, I've never seen footage like some of the footage that you guys got. And I've worked on those ranches, where the ranch is, where the ocelots live, where you got the ocelot footage. I know where you were. And I'm just like, how did they get in there? I mean, some of those places you can hardly crawl. You have to be ocelot-sized and way more agile than I am, you know, to crawl through those spaces. How did you get all those different angles?

**Ben Masters** [00:14:43] So I thought filming first off, got to give credit to the East Foundation for conserving, you know, the largest population of ocelots that we have in the United States, you know, they take stewardship of their wildlife is so important. It's like woven into the fabric of who they are. And that's where we filmed and super grateful for them to, you know, not just conserving all sorts, but to, you know, having us come out and film.

**Ben Masters** [00:15:16] Also the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute, you know. They've been filming ocelot, or not filming ocelots, but researching ocelots for over 30 years. And Dr. Michael Tewes, is the feline professor there. He really saw the potential that we had to film ocelots and kind of took us under his wing and spent a tremendous amount of time with me and my team teaching us about where they like to hang out, what kind of trees they like to be under, how they move from one patch of brush to the next. What we know a lot about, what we don't know, we discovered a lot of things, too, as we were filming them. But we went into it thinking that we would need to get about 10 to 15 different clips of ocelots to be able to tell the story. And that story would just be like, "Wow, Look how cool this cat is." And that's all that you could really hope for because to see, like, what's the chances of finding kittens?

And we just happened to come in and get all of our camera traps figured out and get into this area where they had been researching this female cat for a few years. She was 11 years old and we started filming her and she had a relatively small home range and she had a few pockets of brush that she really liked to hang out in and just kind of chill in the middle of the day, and hunt and kind of bed up and stuff. So we were able to put up the scouting cameras inside of there and figure out, you know, what trails she walked down, what trees she liked to climb. And as we were doing the scouting and as we got our

camera traps dialed in, she had kittens. And it was just this fortuitous meant to be moment where we got to not only get the first quality footage of our slaughter taken in the United States, but it was of a mom raising her kitten. And to get that that look was so incredibly special. One of the really greatest wildlife sequences I know that we'll ever get to film in our career. And we learned a tremendous amount about the ocelots from like a behavioral standpoint. You know, I think that's indicative of a lot of a lot of the sequences that we filmed in this, you know, without conservation minded land stewards, without research organizations or some scientists, there's we couldn't have gotten a lot of the shots that we did because it takes so much knowledge of those particular species to be able to get in and film them. So, you know, huge thanks to everyone involved that helped us with the research and Intel on getting these images.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:18:09] Yeah, that really is special. I mean, that footage of the mother and her kittens, and being able to show just how tough it is for a kitten, you know...

**Ben Masters** [00:18:19] When she loses one. Yeah.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:18:20] I wasn't going to give it away. But, yeah, one of them disappears. And I know you had people ask you if you know what happened to it.

**Ben Masters** [00:18:32] Yeah. We don't know what happened to the one that disappeared, but the one that survived. We followed through and she established a territory next to her mother. Yeah. And we actually film them for so long that the mother that we filmed had another kitten. Filmed that kitten as well. Then we have this cool shot where it's got mom, a two year, her two year old daughter, and then, like this little bitty, tiny kitten together. Wow. So you can kind of see that. Yeah. You know, that lineage, there is pretty neat. And she was a wonderful for the paparazzi. Like, she just would pee on the cameras and mark on them and hang off, it was all very cinematic.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:19:24] Yeah. I just the whole time I was watching, I'm in the theater and I'm, like, wanting to shout to everybody, "Do you know how crazy this footage is? You guys get how wild this footage is?" I mean, you know, we're just sitting there eating our popcorn, and my mind is blown by this footage.

**Ben Masters** [00:19:42] And that armadillo shot. You couldn't have scripted that, you know, an ocelot hunting armadillo.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:19:52] Right? I know.

**Ben Masters** [00:19:55] What else do you want me to get on film? Sasquatch?

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:19:57] Exactly. Yeah, but it's great. I mean, I just don't. I just can't praise that film enough. It was just awesome. Awesome work.

**Ben Masters** [00:20:07] Yeah. Thank you. And our team is getting better, and we're staying in this wildlife storytelling space. So, I mean, this will, we'll have more coming out in the future.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:20:18] That's great.

**Andrew Lowery** [00:20:19] Well, it's really awesome. We really need people making wildlife, especially wildlife science related media of any kind, whether it be audio or video, like just to get the spotlight on it. That's such an awesome thing. So speaking of that, Ben, what made you want to be a filmmaker? Did you always kind of have that growing up, or was there something that kind of spurred this passion for you?

**Ben Masters** [00:20:43] You know, film for me is not particularly my passion as much as it is storytelling for stuff that I really care deeply about and I like I've. You know, I care a lot about wildlife and wild habitat. And I think that really comes from growing up in a pretty rural background and spending a lot of time on ranches as a kid and seeing a lot of those wild landscapes that I grew up in as a kid, you know, be converted into wind energy. And then, you know, I've done Mexico to Canada horseback rides, which spend that much time on a saddle traveling through the wilderness, it's pretty impossible not to fall head over heels in love with the natural world. And for me, I think that a movie has the ability to. Allow people to see the world in a way that a magazine article or still photography or a science publication or a book can't convey. You know, you can see visuals, you can hear the birdsong, you can create characters, you can have information and graphs and data and really tell these stories that endear people to these animals or to the habitats that they that they live in. And I feel like our society is so removed from the natural world today. It's important to meet them where they're at, and that is on their screens. And that's a lot easier to show people videos of our sites and get them to be inspired about it than it is to bring them down into ocelot brush and have them see an ocelot. So that's why I make movies, because I think it's the most powerful way to share the stories of these wild animals.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:23:05] Yeah, you're absolutely right. I've never really heard it put that way before, that we need to meet them where they're at and they're on their screens. But definitely it's such a powerful medium. It really is. You know, so I'm a professor here in the range of wildlife department, and I've met a lot of students over the years who are, you know, studying range and wildlife, but they're more interested in what you're doing right now that is more artistic. You know, the science is there and it's showing the science, but maybe they want to be a photographer or a filmmaker or an artist. And it's really hard to advise those kind of students about what the career steps are, because I don't even know what the career steps are, to be honest with you. And I'm not sure that the steps are as clear as they are, say, if you wanted a career with Texas Parks and Wildlife or something like that. So I'm wondering if you could give advice to people who, you know, would like to sort of follow in your footsteps and do more of the art of wildlife science where you're, you know, bringing it to the people. What would you tell young people?

**Ben Masters** [00:24:23] Well, I think that's a really good question. And I, I never got my master's or my Ph.D., so it's difficult for me to put myself in the shoes of, you know, research scientists that spend years of their life accumulating data and putting it into a journal for other people to read and to have insight off of what they discovered or did not discover. But I do think that I am the target demographic for that type of research. Like, I eat, breathe and love reading, you know, scientific publications and trying to see, you know, the unraveling of these mysteries in the natural world. And some of them even though I know the jargon, even though I studied it for four years, I find them difficult to stay engaged in and difficult to stay. Caring about because. They're written in a way that doesn't really. Tell a story or make it matter. Yeah. And I think recognizing that, you know, in science, it's also okay to have pretty pictures and it's also okay to put into the summary of why something is important so that you can tell that story to people who want to know

why your research is worth, you know, a \$100,000 grant and three years of somebody's life. So even if you're not going into film or into photography, I think that. Just having some good visualizations for different for different papers. This is. Important in in readership and getting people to look at it. But I also think and, you know, I'm not telling you something that... Is this accurate? Would you agree?

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:26:32] Oh, yeah. You're being very kind with your words. It's just boring sometimes. Okay? What we write and how we write it and how we communicate it; it's how we communicate with other scientists. But we generally don't communicate very well with the general public, and that's where we lack. So, yeah, you're being kind about it, but we need we need to do a better job at getting pretty pictures and making a meaningful story so people will give a damn about it, you know? Really?

**Ben Masters** [00:27:06] So I think it's important for everybody. But if you particularly want to specialize in the storytelling of, you know, whether it's NGOs or research or conservation organizations, I think it's important to recognize that you want to embark on a very, very difficult career. And there is no, um, predictable revenue streams. There is no path of career building. There's no one to hold your hand. There's no state or federal agency that is going to guarantee you a salary. There's no benefits. It is very hard and it's very competitive. And if you want to get into it, you need to commit hard because it's a saturated field. And not only does it have to be really beautiful and tell a story, but it also has to be factually accurate because and that's something that weighs heavily on me is, you know, we like for example, we're editing this Ocelot film right now that's 50 minutes long. That will likely be a defining piece of media for ocelots for the next ten or 20 years. And, you know, to go into something so important as ocelot conservation, kind of newly released, you might get some of your facts wrong or you might not share an opinion properly. So you need to take that storytelling job extremely seriously and then you just need to do it. There's not going to be anybody that is going to fund your first movie. There is not going to be anyone that is going to say, Oh, that's a great idea. Here's \$20,000, even though you've never done this before.

Yeah, make a short film. Borrow somebody's camera, borrow one of my cameras, borrow whatever you need, your IOUs, your social capital. There are so many wildlife stories that are out there. And if you can make a seven minute film that has a character and something happens in it and there is purpose behind that film, it doesn't need to be shot on a red. It doesn't need to have all sorts in it. That short film itself is going to indicate to, you know, people like myself that you really care and you know, how to make a story. And that is more powerful than a resume that has a filmmaking degree from U.T. or from any other university. It's, just make a movie and learn because that's what people want to see right there. And it'll be the best opportunity for you to understand how stories unfold, how editing works, the power of music. And yeah, that's my long winded answer to your question.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:30:19] You know, it's a great answer.

**Ben Masters** [00:30:21] And then after you make it, send it to me because we're hiring.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:30:26] So, Ben, recently you've been working as an advocate for a coalition called Texans for Mountain Lions. And the Deep in the Heart film introduces some issues concerning mountain lion trapping. What are the current concerns over the management of mountain lion trapping? And also, what does the Texans for Mountain Lions Coalition hope to accomplish?

**Ben Masters** [00:30:44] Sure. So let's dive into mountain lions here. This is one of my favorite topics. So before we get into the current day, let's take a look at what the mountain lion is. So mountain lions are one of our most widely or actually the most widely distributed cat on earth. And if we went back in time 200 years ago, we would have found them all over the East Coast, across the west, across North America, you know, up into Canada a little ways until it starts getting colder. Throughout Central America, throughout South America, all the way down into like the pompous of Patagonia and Argentina. At the more extreme latitudes, these cats can get to be around 200lbs or so. And then around the equator, as they get smaller, they're typically closer to like 90 to 110. Here in Texas, our mountain lions are mature cats can be between, you know, 90 lbs for a medium sized female, up to the 140 lbs or so for a big male, you know, if it's got a full belly, maybe a little bit bigger, the primarily eat there are somewhat of a generalist in fact that they'll eat a variety of different things wherever they occur in the range. Here in Texas, they eat deer. They are gleaners, they'll eat raccoons, they'll eat possums or coyotes, really whatever they can get their paws on. But their primary source of prey in most of their area is deer, either mule deer in West Texas or white tailed deer in South Texas.

So if you look at the history of mountain lions here in the United States prior to the 1950s or the 1970s, lions were extirpated east of the Mississippi, with the exception of a couple dozen individuals in the swamps in Florida, which became the critically endangered Florida panther, which is the mountain lion, people call them panthers. Out west mountain lions were drastically reduced in the 1800s, early 1900s, to where really they only survived. In a lot of the, you know, really remote canyons and mountain ranges where they're truly difficult to trap or poison or kill off. So in the 1970s, we had a large conservation and environmental change in psyche swept across the country that resulted in some really important. Conservation landmarks in our history, such as the Clean Air Clean Water Act, such as the Endangered Species Act, and mountain lions in all of the states where they existed in were made into a game animal, or at least either at that point in time or over the next few decades it became a game animal. And as a game animal, they were managed with data by the state wildlife management agency. The same way that we do, you know, deer or elk or quail or wherever, where you get seasons, you get bag limits, and you've got some science based management that ensures a harvestable surplus to that animal, but also to where it has a healthy future. In the 1970s those proposals were happening in Texas, but they didn't come to fruition. And the can was kind of kicked down the road. And then in the 1990s, there is also an effort to make the mountain lion a game animal. By the way, making an outline a game animal takes a legislative action. And I think that our legislature right now is really in a situation where they do that. Nor do I think it's good for wildlife to become a political thing. I think that our state wildlife agencies are much better suited to manage that animal than to, you know, have a lot of politicians who, quite frankly, often don't know where their water comes from.

Right now in Texas, mountain lions are a non-game animal, so they don't have any seasons, they don't have any harvest limits and they don't have any trapping limits and or trap check regulations. And what I mean by that is that there is standard trapping ethics within trapping pretty much nationwide that have a mandatory trap time, check trap regulations. So most of the time it's 36 or 48 hours. And the purpose of that is so that those animals that get trapped don't die from dehydration or exposure over the course of, you know, 5 to 10 days. It's, you know, respecting to the life and death of that animal, is the intention of those trapped regulations.

And mountain lions in Texas are specifically excluded from those trap check regulations. So, you know, you can lay out traps and just leave them and then not land steps in it. And, you know, it may take them multiple days or over a week to just sit there and die, which I take issue with. You know, I hunt and come from an agricultural family. You know, providing a respectful death to an animal is something that we should all strive to do. So, you know, this coalition that I'm involved in, Texans for Mountain Lions, we're encouraging Texas Parks and Wildlife Department to uphold that same 36 hour trap check for mountain lions, to recognize that there is a legitimate need for agricultural producers, for wildlife managers to target mountain lions like mountain lions, eat stuff that that is something. But we shouldn't just let them die over the course of days.

And then, you know, another thing that we're that we're asking Texas Parks and Wildlife to do is to start having some harvest reporting of those cats so that we can see, you know, is there a hundred cats a year that are being harvested? Is there 200 cats? Is there 25? And that number will over time, show us a trend of, you know, how cats are doing, because if there's 100 cats that are being harvested for the next ten years, then that is going to indicate that, you know, they're doing well. There is no reason for concern. But if that number plummets to like three or four and then it's, you know, verified by other additional data that the mountain lion is suffering, then, you know, that is reason for alarm. And one thing that I've definitely seen with the Ocelot issue and with other issues in the United States is that it's so much better to have constant health care with wildlife animals or with different species and management policies, rather than waiting to go into the emergency room. Because by the time it's an emergency, by the time you know, the numbers dip so low where you've got like the feds that want to get involved or where it becomes super controversial, that's the worst case scenario. We should definitely manage to where that doesn't happen. And right now, there's enough things, there's enough data that has been collected on mountain lions and there's enough concerning trends that I think we really need to put in some safeguards to monitor the cat and if necessary, to begin managing the cat so that it ensures, you know, a healthy future.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:38:37] Have you seen any positive movements or any movement towards positive changes for mountain lions?

**Ben Masters** [00:38:44] Yeah. So we've seen a tremendous amount of response of support for protections for mountain lions as of right now. You know, there's been 1800 people that have signed their name to support some of the proposals that we have. That has resulted in 14,000 emails being sent out to different policymakers. And I think that we've been successful at reaching out to a lot of different stakeholders, you know, cattle raisers, sheep and goats, Texas Wildlife Association, all of these different folks that are going to be impacted by mountain lions and let them know, like, hey, this is a this is an issue here. We don't know how many cats are we don't know if the population is as viable. We have no management plan. We have no safeguards. We need to be able to monitor and to manage these cats. So we came up with these proposals, which we hope are very realistic and things that different people can come around. So as we discussed earlier, we had the 36 hour trap check and then we had the harvest reporting so we can get some baseline data on mountain lions. Another thing is for Texas Parks and Wildlife to do a lot more research to figure out where are the cats, what is the density, what are some, you know, some of these basic questions that we have are surrounding mountain lions? And then also right now with mountain lions, it's perfectly legal to go out and catch a mountain lion in a live trap, hold it and then release it. And then, you know, somebody, whether they know it or not, could get hunted and think that they're engaging in a legitimate hunt. So kid hunting is completely legal for mountain lions in Texas, which that is not a common thing

that is happening. Like to make that very clear that that is not common. But I have heard multiple reports that happening. Other people have heard of multiple reports of that happening. And it's wrong. It's something that's very prevalent. And Africa can't lie in hunting. That's something that we. That's a can of worms we just don't want to have happen in Texas. It's wrong. Another thing we're suggesting to Texas Parks and Wildlife is to put together like an actual advisory group that has, you know, livestock producers as farmers, that has people that are going to be impacted by lions, able to, you know, voice their concerns over different management strategies so that we can make some implementation or submit to make some regulations and some concerns that takes all these different stakeholders in mind.

And, then the last thing is to manage by region. Right now we have West Texas mountain lions and South Texas lions. And if you go pretty much along the Devil's River, due west in west Texas, you find mountain lions. And then in South Texas, if you make triangle from approximately Del Rio to Freer to Laredo, a lot of the, you know, hilly, broken South Texas brush country is mountain lion habitat. So in in West Texas, there is considerable migration of mountain lions from both Mexico, where mountain lions are protected and also from New Mexico, where mountain lions are managed. So there's always going to be new cats coming into West Texas. So the concern of the West Texas population crashing is not, you know, something to be extremely concerned about. The South Texas population, on the other hand, is where most of the concern is looking at, because, quite frankly, we don't know if there's 25 mountain lions in South Texas or if there's 250 mountain lions in South Texas. South Texas is also undergoing a lot of habitat fragmentation, especially that country just south of Uvalde. There's a couple of big ranches that are phenomenal land stewards along the Rio Grande, but there's a trend of South Texas landscapes of going from, you know, 10,000 acre pastures to 1,000 to 320. And as more and more roads come in, as more and more people are utilizing that landscape, you know, that's going to make it more and more difficult for cats to continue to have a viable population in South Texas.

So, another thing, you know, it's something that that hasn't happened right now. But something that is worth mentioning is. It's very possible that with the mortality rates that have been recorded in South Texas, that the South Texas population is reliant upon cats coming out of Mexico and bringing both genetics and dispersal cats to kind of bolster our South Texas numbers. And, you know, the previous administration was very adamant about putting up a wall or a physical structure along the US-Mexico border. And, you know, right now between Laredo and Del Rio, where those cats are coming across, probably 20% of that country has a wall or a fence that's, you know, 12 feet high with concertina wire on top. That is going to be stopping wildlife migration coming into South Texas in that stretch. So that's not a concern right now. But so that fence is completed in the next ten years or in the next 20 years, which is certainly possible. And if we don't take the South Texas population, if we're not concerned about that population or if we don't have any baseline data for that population, we could find ourselves in a situation where all of a sudden, you know, we don't have enough cats for them to stay viable. And right now, we're extremely vulnerable to that because we don't have harvest reporting. We don't have the information that's necessary to have any safeguards to ensure their future. And to me, I just find that incredibly irresponsible and something that needs to change. And that's why, you know, I put my name on the coalition. I've spent many years of my life outside of Laredo going deer hunts and quill hunts and then, you know, tons of time setting up camera traps across South Texas. For probably eight years of my life, I've had camera traps running in South Texas, and I have never gotten them out lying on camera trap. And you can't tell me that I don't know how to camera trap. And that same sentiment or that same lack of seeing cats has been seen by a variety of people. Friends that I have in

Dilley haven't seen one. Some friends that I have, you know, down by closer to Raymondville, they're running cameras every day and haven't seen any. In other areas you have conflicting reports. Like, I've got a buddy in Eagle Pass who manages a big ranch and he's seen more mountain lions in the past ten years. He thinks they're doing extremely well and they have more now than they did historically, but nobody knows.

And that's what our coalition is requesting Texas Parks and Wildlife to do, is, you know, let's start monitoring these cats. Let's start doing some research on these cats. Let's do harvest reporting. Let's ban canned hunts. Those things that are things that should be done. Then let's put these safeguards in place so that we never get to a situation where we do have to, you know, not have trapping or not have any hunting. It's so much better to be proactive about wildlife management than reactive whenever that population crashes.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:46:49] I mean, you just hit the nail on the head right there at the end. So often we're coming in at the tail end trying to save a population. And that just doesn't always work. It usually doesn't work. It's, you know, really difficult. So let's be proactive. I love that you're taking up this cause and bringing it to the public so that the people understand what's going on. I just want to go back to something. There might be people watching or listening who aren't hunters and they might be confused about, you know, you've guided hunts, you're pro hunting... We're not saying anything, you know, we're not saying that hunting is bad, but canned hunting is different. Could you tell folks how canned hunting is different and how it's, you know, not exactly a sporting thing to do? Could you just, I don't know, spend a few minutes on that?

**Ben Masters** [00:47:49] Yeah, I can. And we're kind of getting into some gray area of ethics and what some people believe is ethical and what some people believe is unethical. And everybody is different. You know, there's some people that take issues with feeding corn for deer to attract them in. Personally, I like to have deer 75 yards away and broadside whenever I pull the trigger so that I can ensure a clean kill and I use corn to get them there. So, you know, everybody's different in how they. How they perceive different ethics. But for the most part, pretty much everybody in the hunting community would condemn and say that it is unethical to capture a live mountain lion from the wild, keep it in a trap. And then if you had a hunter who wanted to go on a mountain lion hunt, who would assume that they are hunting a wild mountain lion to purchase that hunt. Come out, run dogs. And then when the mountain lion goes up the tree, they get shot. And the hunter assumes that it's a wild cat but has been duped because it's a canned hunt. And that's you know, that's wrong. And I'm not saying that that happens all the time. It's very rare, but it's perfectly legal to do that right now. And it's also, in my opinion, wrong if that Hunter knowingly went out and ran dogs and hunted a cat that he knew came from a cage. So I think that, you know, that's something. Again, it's not common, but money talks. And sometimes these mountain lion hunts for, you know, legitimate hunters are going out and expecting a fair chase. They're going to pay like 10 to \$15,000 for a good hunt. And that's a big incentive for somebody to, you know, possibly go into that ethical spot of, you know, hard times came across them. They could potentially capture a live cat and, you know, secure that hunt. And it's not it's not illegal. And that to me is one of the things that is bothersome is, you know, our laws theoretically should be a reflection of the ethics that, you know, we have. And as a hunter that hunts in Texas and in Colorado and New Mexico and Montana and as you know, been across the globe, whenever you look at a state's policies for hunting, you make the assumption that if you're there and hunting that animal, that it is a sustainable population. And that's not the case in Texas right now. We have absolutely no idea if our current mountain lion population in South Texas is sustainable or not. And I feel like hunters are almost kind of let down right now because, you know, the

regulation is open season, regardless of the fact that all the research that has been conducted has shown, you know, or alarmingly high mortality rates. And, you know, the textbooks and wildlife considers it a, I think, a vulnerable animal. So they recognize they're not super abundant. And think sometimes about how big of a shame it would be if in South Texas, you know, we just got to one year where mountain lions were not seen over time. They're just gone. Like what a shame that would be to knowingly allow that to happen. I think it's just best prevented.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [00:51:49] Definitely. In the movie, in the Deep in the Heart film, is that where I saw that...? One reason why we don't have any, we have no baseline data. We don't know how many cats there are in Texas or the densities in different places. Was it in the film where I saw that of a study that was ongoing all of them except one were killed during the study? So you can't get an idea of, you know, are they reproducing or what?

**Ben Masters** [00:52:19] Yeah. So thanks for asking that. There has been a tremendous amount of research that has been conducted in Texas on Mount Minds. And whenever I say we don't know how many there are in Texas, that is accurate, but that does not mean that there hasn't been a tremendous effort and years worth of research that has gone into mountain lions. In the 1990s, whenever there was an effort to make mountain lions a game animal in Texas, there was this this observation that we didn't have data and at that time we did not have data. So it's Texas Parks and Wildlife and different organizations put together these extremely robust research projects to analyze the ecology and mortality and survival of mountain lions, both in West Texas and in South Texas. In West Texas. They did that study on Big Bend Ranch State Park. And in that study, I think it lasted like four or five years. They were able to collar 16 cats in that particular study. Of those 16 cats, 15 of them walked outside of the state park lions and were captured in a leg-hold trap and most likely took several days to die under the sun. And that the last cat did actually approach somebody on one of the put in canoe spots down there on the river. And he saw it and it was acting weird, so he shot it, which is completely understandable. So yeah, you had 100% human-induced mortality out of that particular study.

Another study in the Davis Mountains from 2012 to 2020, they had, I think, 25 cats that were collared, and they experienced a nearly 50% mortality rate for those cats. 50% annual mortality rate. So, you know, each year they had half a chance of making it through that next year. Again, all the mortality was due to the leg hold traps. In South Texas, they did a study and what they found there was the primary cause of mortality was hunter opportunity. In the fall, you know, somebody sitting in a deer blind, they see a mountain lion walk out. And I mean, what an opportunity that is to harvest this beautiful cat? So, like, I completely understand that sentiment. And, you know, there was also some cats that died from snares in South Texas. It's a lot of times underneath high fences. You'll see snares on some of the game trails as well as some of the goat fences. So those were the two reasons of mortality there. So there is fairly robust data of different populations in Texas, but there's still a lot of unknowns. And, you know, had we done harvest reporting beginning in the nineties up to current day, we would have a much better understanding of the distribution of mountain lions in Texas. We would have a much better understanding of the health of the population, and we wouldn't have all of these question marks that we have right now. And you know, as you look at the projections of this state and we're seeing, you know, the population of humans go from 30 million to 50 million people and the demands on landscapes and on water increasing and our land prices just skyrocketing to where it's more and more difficult for these ranches to stay intact. There we're seeing just the slow subdivision of our landscapes. The guarantee that these cats are just going to

continue to exist ten, 20, 30, 40, 50 years down the road. I think it's incredibly irresponsible to just assume that's going to happen, especially with the data that we have collected right now that is indicating, you know, very serious concerns.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:56:26]** Yeah, yeah. Well, thank you for leading the charge on that. And I hope that we'll be able to come back to you in the future so you can update us on developments as that as that story develops, because I do hope that story develops into some positive change for the state.

**Ben Masters [00:56:45]** Yeah, me too. And, you know, one of the things about predator management is it's always controversial and it's always polarizing. And the people that are most impacted by large carnivores often live furthest away from the cities in which those decisions are made. And, you know, our coalition recognizes that. And feel free to reach out to us. And, you know, the website has a lot of resources on it. And, you know, hopefully the proposals that we're suggesting are realistic steps that a lot of people can get behind. So this doesn't have to become like an ugly, controversial issue, and it's one that we can be proactive about rather than reactive.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:57:31]** Yeah. So the website is Texans for Mountain Lions.

**Ben Masters [00:57:35]** Yeah. Texans for Mountain Lions. Come on! See what our proposals are! Would love to sign your name in support of these proposals. And, you know, Texas Parks and Wildlife is listening to the proposals, as well as the commissioner. Fingers crossed it's going to lead somewhere.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [00:57:51]** Let's change the subject to something a little lighter. We have a favorite question that we like to ask folks about a biology blunder. And I can only imagine trying to get this type of footage and do the work that you've been doing in the past few years that you might have had a blunder or two over the years. So I'm wondering if you could share a fun story with us.

**Ben Masters [00:58:14]** Yeah. Oh, man. I could write a whole book about this. So I am a very terrestrial animal. Water is scary to me. Saltwater is very scary because it's salty and the ocean is huge. So, you know, I don't mind doing these small dives close to shoreline where there's, like perfect visibility. And if you get in a bind, you can just turn over to the shore and it's no big deal. But whenever we were putting together our deep in the heart wish list of sequences to shoot we had on there Texas's coral reef, the flower gardens coral reef, which is about a hundred miles off the coast. Just kind of straight east out of Galveston. And the way to reach it is you book a spot on the Gigglin' Marlin, which is the boat out of Houston. And they take out ten, 15, 20 folks at a time. You motor out there to the Flower Gardens Banks National Marine Sanctuary. It's a marine sanctuary that we have. And they anchor up and you drop in. And it is just this Caribbean blue, 70 foot visibility, beautiful coral reef right off shore in Texas. And I stuck my head underwater. I was just like, oh, my God. My family in Amarillo is not going to believe me. And I'm not a super experienced diver, but my diving partner was not nearly as experienced as I was. Now, his name is Jay Kleberg. He was the producer of the film. So whenever we went out to film the coral spawn, it happens on the eighth day after the full moon in August, right after sunset.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak [01:00:16]** Wow. That's super specific.

**Ben Masters** [01:00:19] It's super specific. You know, it's going to happen. It's just the way that the reef has evolved to maximize its reproductive chances. And they just have this huge spawning event where everything spawns, just overwhelms the predators. And that's just how that reef system works. So we knew when this spawn was going to happen and we got on the boat. We go out there, you know. It gets dark. We dove off. We're just out there in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico with these little headlamps dropping down to 80 feet. And then you get to these big, beautiful coral reefs, and we look down and there is just this... It looks like a snowstorm where you just see these little, tiny little packages, these little white balls of eggs that the coral reef has released. And they're going to float across the Gulf and try to find a substrate and make a new coral somewhere else. And there's just, we're just like floating through this fairytale land of this coral spawn snowstorm. And I get down and I find the perfect brain coral and I, you know, let all my air out of the BCD. So I'm plunked down on the ground like a rock, and I've got this 100 millimeter macro. And I'm trying to film in slow motion the actual little reproductive package coming out of the polyp and being released into the water. So I'm sitting there and this is, you know, very fine tuned focusing. And my light starts to start flicking around and, I'm like, "what in the world?" And I look up at my dove partner who's supposed to be holding the big light above me. And there is a shark that is circling him. We're talking like a 12 foot sandbar shark. A big shark, at nighttime. Two divers who have no experience diving in the middle of the ocean.

I'm not professional underwater cameraman, and this is a very special moment of the coral spawn because it only happens for, like, an hour. And I'm looking at the shark, and then I'm analyzing in my head like, what is the risk of losing this shot opportunity versus what is the risk of losing my dive partner to the shark? And it dawned on me, like, nobody's died from sharks in Texas history, so he really needs to stop messing around and like bring my light over (imitates sound of putting air in BCD)... Put some air in my BCD, I float up like 15 feet. And Jay is just, you know, spinning left and right, trying to look for this shark in the dark. And I got up and I put my goggles next to him. And I was like glug glug glug glug glug glug and pointed him back down and his eyes were just like, "Oh, my God, what have I gotten into?" So, he goes down and I sit down on a coral reef and shine the light. I got our shots. Probably had 10 minutes of good filming before we both ran out of air, went up to the surface, got out and we got it. We got everything that we needed. But our shooting was very skimpy. We used every single good shot from the coral spawn in that sequence, and it almost got spoiled by that by that big sandbar shark.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:04:02] Wow.

**Ben Masters** [01:04:04] But, yeah, so we got up, we changed tanks went back down, and it was it was gone. The spawn was, was finished. So we hit our moment, got super lucky and were able to get enough for that sequence. And you know it's not shot perfectly, but who cares? It's the first time anybody's ever seen coral spawn.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:04:25] I was pretty impressed!

**Ben Masters** [01:04:29] Yeah. You don't see that. You don't see that one coming when you sit down to watch the Texas Wildlife Movie.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:04:33] No, no, you don't. Well, yeah, I would have totally freaked out. I'm comfortable in water, probably more comfortable in water than on land because there's nothing to trip over. But at night, that's a whole different story. And then you add in, the one thing that you're thinking about... is really there.

**Ben Masters** [01:04:54] Oh, yeah, yeah. Like that doesn't matter. Like, the statistics of being bitten by a shark are so astronomically low, there is nothing to be worried about. But on the flip side of that, whenever you're down there in the water and there's a shark, you're like, "Oh my God, there hasn't been a shark kill in human history. I'm obviously going to be the first."

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:05:18] Yeah. Statistics really don't matter if that guy really is circling around you. That's a great story. It is a great story.

**Ben Masters** [01:05:29] If you meet Jay you got to ask him about it. It was a wild moment.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:05:34] I will. Well, thank you so much for spending time with us today. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners or viewers?

**Ben Masters** [01:05:44] I just want to say thanks for having me on. You know, I think you guys are doing wonderful things with this podcast and allowing these conversations in a really, you know, conversational mode about really important topics that are happening in Texas. Like, I've just listened to the one with John Tomeček on pigs.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:06:04] Oh, he did such a great job, right?

**Ben Masters** [01:06:06] Oh, yeah. It's just so insightful to people that want to learn about this type of stuff, so. Yeah. Keep up the great work, and thanks for having me on.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:06:14] Very kind of you. Very kind of you to say so. We appreciate that. Well, thank you so much. I guess we'll see you soon, hopefully. And hopefully see your next project soon as well.

**Ben Masters** [01:06:29] We're working on one. We'll have an Ocelot movie out this fall. The full 50 minute film just about the Ocelot.

**Georgie Eccles** [01:06:35] Remember, you better not feed the Wildlife.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:06:41] 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. Podcast artwork is created by the talented Gaby Olivas. Tre' Kendall contributes with his creative talent as well, and editing is conducted by Andrew Lowery.

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:07:07] For you hardcore fans. We're now putting bloopers at the end. So hang on.

**Andrew Lowery** [01:07:15] \*humms the Pirates of the Caribbean main theme.

**Rebecca Zerlin** [01:07:20] Pirates on the brain?

**Andrew Lowery** [01:07:20] \*Pirating continues\*

**Rebecca Zerlin** [01:07:20] Were you able to get the link and log in?

**Dr. Sandra Rideout-Hanzak** [01:07:22] Absolutely.