RISE DECLARATIONS

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

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"I was able to build staff confidence and knowledge for Indigenous engagement"

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

I have always loved nature and I spent a lot of time outside as a child, exploring the woods and streams of suburban Philadelphia. My summer jobs as a teenager were with the Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory. At Smith College I studied Latin American Literature and Environmental Sciences.

After college I served in Nicaragua as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I learned how to work across cultures, teach, and manage projects. I won a grant for a school library and supported school gardens and reforestation efforts. After the Peace Corps, I moved to New York City, where I helped run a family literacy afterschool program.

In 2005, I returned to the field work I had loved in my teens, as an intern at a field station in northwestern Mexico. I gave estuary and tidepool tours, and worked as a field tech on several research efforts. One of the projects was to map previously undocumented breeding colonies of endangered California least terns. I completed my master's in 2008, at the University of Arizona, with a thesis focused on least tern colonies and tern reproductive investment globally. Following my master's degree, I worked at the USA National Phenology Network (USA-NPN) for 14 years, co-creating a national, federally funded citizen science program focused on the timing of plant and animal life cycle events. The US Geological Survey funded the network as it was established, with project funding from other agencies.

In 2014, the trajectory of my career was shifted by a workshop that brought me into a community guided by Indigenous Elders and climate scholars. Indigenous communities hold incredible phenological knowledge, and value it highly. There were (and are) fertile grounds for collaboration among Indigenous and Western-trained phenologists.

Over the years this community grew, staying rooted in relationships and belonging. In this context, I was challenged by friends and mentors to question the most invisible and deeply held parts of my worldview. Every conservationist I know who seeks to protect lands and waters does so from a place of love and reverence for nature. And yet, for many of us, because of our culture and unexamined history, we have blind spots. Most glaringly, we are led to think that Indigenous Peoples are no longer here. And, perhaps because of the treatment of nature in our economic system, we may assume that nature is better off without humans. To learn from Indigenous stewards is to glimpse the possibilities of deep, millennial knowledge of dynamic ecosystems and to start to see a healthy ecosystem as including humans in reciprocal relationships with plants and animals.

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I started focusing on building strong partnerships between non-Indigenous resource managers and Indigenous governments and knowledge-holders. In 2025, I started as a NOAA contractor, supporting Indigenous Engagement

What is a RISE Declaration? >>> https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62005

for Marine Protected Areas. I immediately felt the support of the dedicated NOAA team and built on an existing foundation for engagement. In the ten months before the contract was cut short, I uncovered land and water histories, built staff capacity and supported government-to-government consultation with Tribes and Nations.

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

I'm proud of the way our team at the USA National Phenology Network worked across boundaries. We developed trusting relationships and true partnerships among volunteer contributors, academic researchers, resource managers, and educators. As a result of these collaborations:

- Real-time maps of spring arrival are now routinely aired on national TV, shared on social media, and included as interactive features in major newspapers.
- Hundreds of publications on large-scale phenological patterns were produced.
- Resource managers are able to use new tools to understand the pace of seasonal change and to make tactical decisions, like when to treat for certain forest pests.
- We shared our lessons learned related to co-producing knowledge, serving as a boundary organization and developing an effective citizen science program.

At our best, I think the USA-NPN team engaged diverse audiences in building an understanding of seasonal changes and seeding a national conversation about seasonal response to climate.

Throughout my tenure at the USA-NPN, I routinely felt joyful and engaged with my full self. I think this a function of the network's brilliant and caring staff and partners. I also appreciated the technical challenges related to presenting new data types in compelling ways, as well as the challenges related to building strong teams and securing funding to support important work. Once a colleague told me that she no longer feared difficult conversations, as I had helped her see that so much good could come from talking openly and constructively about uncomfortable topics. I might be more proud of that feedback than of anything else in my career.

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I am particularly proud of the work I did between 2018 and 2023 with the USA-NPN to fund events and projects that centered Indigenous people and approaches. The same skills that had helped me bridge US and Nicaraguan culture and later research and resource management, enabled me to create spaces where Indigenous and European-descended scholars could meaningfully connect. A couple of examples of these efforts:

- "Indigenous Phenology: New Mindsets for Working Among Worldviews," a symposium at the Ecological Society of America's 2020 meeting, featuring Indigenous scholars (I co-organized the session).
- "Good Fire," a Chumash-led effort to restore Good Fire to Chumash homelands in southern California (I helped raised the initial funding).

In my NOAA contract position, I was able to build staff confidence and knowledge for Indigenous engagement. I researched land and water histories to complete the background information included in the designation packages for new marine protected areas. These histories (including treaty histories, reserved rights, and traditional homelands) are fundamental for enabling program staff to engage with a good contextual understanding and understand dynamics among states, Tribes and the federal government. The principle of federal trust and treaty responsibility to Tribes and Nations has not changed, and NOAA staff and partners see the potential of Indigenous stewardship and the power honoring history and treaty. And yet, without continued staff support, it is unclear how this work will continue in the coming years.

3. What were the greatest challenges you faced? How did you overcome them, or not? If you weren't able to overcome them, why not?
For the USA-NPN to realize its vision, data need to be collected in the same way over decades. Phenology in many species is quite variable year-to-year, and climate-induced change requires multi-decadal data to detect. It is difficult generally, and it was difficult for us, to sustain long-term monitoring in the face of changing federal priorities. Even within one administration, we would be told to focus, for example, exclusively on monarchs and milkweed. Within a year, that priority would have shifted to ecological drought. We met this challenge by communicating to our federal sponsors about the outcomes of existing monarch- or drought-related projects, while continuing to build an infrastructure that was functional across many priority issues and species.

Of course, the larger examples of priority whiplash are between administrations. I experienced a strong focus on climate change during the Obama years, followed by a congressional inquiry into our climate-related work early in Trump I. I experienced the wind in my sails with regard to Indigenous-centered conservation work during the Biden administration and a lack of clarity and stalled momentum during Trump II.

I do think a better approach would be to address the root causes of shifting priorities. The top-down approach would be to secure long-term mandated appropriations for priority monitoring and engagement programs. The bottom-up approach would be to work so inclusively and collaboratively to address a cross-section of taxpayer priorities, such that the funding for priority programs is unassailable.

I also faced personal challenges. I worked on the USA-NPN as research staff at the University of Arizona for many years. As a woman, and with a master's rather than a PhD, I experienced barriers to growth and recognition. This came to a head for me in 2022–23, when the university's policy changed such that only people with a PhD could be named as principal investigator (or co-investigator) on grants. At that point I had raised and successfully managed over 7 million dollars of grant funding (at times I had been properly credited, at times not). The expectation seemed to be that I would continue to raise my own salary, and others' salaries, while the PhD level staff on our team would be converted to tenure-track faculty. The grants I won anonymously would be counted towards their advancement.

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My first approach to this challenge was to raise my case, with my supervisor's support, with HR, the VP of Research, the Grants Office and the Ombuds Office. The reason for the policy seemed to have to do with liability, and perhaps an isolated case of a person without a PhD mismanaging funds. I didn't make any progress changing the policy or securing an exemption.

I found that the structural issues in academia, including archaic status norms and publication and funding incentives, were having too great an influence on my career. For me, the best solution was to withdraw my labor. While I resigned for more than one reason, I do feel empowered by my choice to work in environments where my labor is valued and credited appropriately.

4. What are your views on how your career served the public, the environment, our cultural heritage, or the greater good, as applicable? Do you feel proud of what you accomplished, or frustrated, or both?
I would say that my career served the public good in the relatively straightforward ways described above. I collaboratively built the infrastructure for a better understanding of seasonal cycles under climate change. As a result of my efforts, changes in the arrival of spring are better understood, and managers are able to more effectively time restoration and monitoring efforts. Forest managers are able to target treatment during certain insect life stages, for increased efficacy. Many people have spent time closely watching plants and animals—connecting with nature and seeing changes in their backyards and neighborhoods.

I think I have also been part of a shift in our field towards deeper listening and relationship-building with Indigenous stewards, scholars, and community members. I have reckoned with colonial patterns in my work and family history, and I have supported others in this work. I believe we are creating a foundation for healing in Indigenous and colonizer-descendent communities. I see that many of us persevere in efforts for preservation, interpretation, and sovereignty for multiple cultural heritages and knowledge systems.

At this moment, I feel both proud and "on the hook." I know what my continued responsibilities are, in terms of working to heal our relationships with each other and the lands and waters. I aim to work steadily forward, without burning myself out, or working out of guilt or shame. I aspire to take the next right step towards a just, Indigenous-centered mode of conservation.

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I am so fortunate to have been mentored by Native Hawai'ian culture bearer, M. Kalani Souza. Roughly seven years ago, I went to him in turmoil—I had started to see the scope of the misalignment in our relationship to land and to knowledge, deriving from colonial exploitation. I felt the ongoing the pain it caused. I felt the need to change big patterns, urgently. Kalani said, essentially, "Oh my dear, you are on the breakfast crew. You probably thought you were the dinner crew. After we have achieved our visions, you saw yourself drying dishes and relaxing around the campfire. But, you are part of the generation who makes breakfast. That is the time you get to be here, and so all you can do is set everyone else up for a great day by showing up with your head in the breakfast game."

5. What's the coolest thing that you've seen a government (local, state, federal, or another country) do for place-based conservation that you'd want to replicate or expand? What would make it easy to implement? How hard would it be to achieve?

The examples of place-based conservation that most inspire me are the ones that put human and more-than-human thriving at the center. I admire the Menominee Tribal Enterprises (MTE; an arm of the Menominee Tribe), for their award-winning sustainable forestry management program. Grounded in their cultural values, the program mimics natural forests processes and sustains rich and varied habitats.

> "It is said of the Menominee that the sacredness of the land is their very body, the values of the culture are their very soul, the water is their very blood. It is obvious, then, that the forest and its living creatures can be viewed as food for their existence." (Marshall Pecore MTE Forest Manager, *Journal of Forestry*, July 1992, from MTE History Website)

I also admire the Sonora Desert Conservation Plan, which arose from contentious conservation-versus-development fights in the Tucson Basin in the 1990s. County government leaders created a highly inclusive process, where values (cultural, natural and economic) were fully recognized and many voices were heard. This extensive and inclusive public process resulted in a blueprint for the county and partners to make informed and values-based decisions about where to build and where to conserve land.

I can envision a world where a local, state or federal government's first move is to reach out to Tribal partners (with whom, in this vision, they already have ongoing relationships), to discuss and better understand a particular place (a biodiverse part of the ocean, for instance) or particular threat (warming stream temperatures, for instance). Depending on so many factors, a Tribal government, intertribal organization, or new Indigenous advisory body might bring a foundational, millennial approach to the place or issue. Indigenous approaches tend to be inclusive of the well-being of all plants, animals, and people in a place. We might have inclusive, value-centered approaches like the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, under Indigenous guidance.

Rather than thinking of the easy or difficult parts of realizing this vision, I like to think of Kalani telling me that I am on the breakfast crew. It is up to those of us who are alive right now to take the next step in the right direction. I challenge us all to think about that next step towards thriving, towards being in good relationship with our

colleagues, partners, constituents, and the living systems where we live and work. What would it take to shape the funding and policy structures in the federal and academic spaces to prioritize the thriving of all life? What role are you drawn to playing in this moment? Every time of chaos is also an opportunity for something new to emerge. I'm inspired by the Berkana Two Loops model of systems change.

6. What advice would you give to successors in positions you've held? What perspectives have been important to you in your career, and which can be passed on to young people contemplating a career in public service or academia?

I'll offer six maxims that have been true in my experience:

Win hearts. If you meet people as a full, authentic human, and show your real passion, you are more likely to bring people with you. Listening deeply to who they are and where they are coming from is mutually affirming and helpful for a lasting partnership. I have found that life-giving spaces (for example, a meeting where there is real connection and trust, lively disagreement, and people feel access to meaning and optimism coming out of it) are pretty rare. I have tried to cultivate this kind of space regardless of my official role. When it worked, I saw myself and others opting in to working together and bringing our full capacities.

Simple is better than perfect. I have often been on teams of smart, capable, idealistic people—which has been amazing. One downside is that we could always think of ways to slightly improve (and complicate) our solutions. Someone (sometimes me!) would think of an edge case that would complicate a simple solution. Academic culture, and maybe culture more broadly, rewards inching towards perfection, rejecting all flaws. But, simpler solutions can often meet most use cases—and they are easier to maintain and easier to pass on.

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Work top down and bottom up. For example, in cultivating a strategic partnership between the USA-NPN and the National Park Service, we worked with park staff to base our partnership in the reality on the ground, and to be able to demonstrate the applicability of phenological information for interpreters and resource managers in a day-to-day way. At the same time we met with national leaders in the Inventory and Monitoring, Climate Change Response and Interpretation offices to build a partnership that met their interests as well. Leaders were then supportive with funding or influence when a project emerged from the field.

Follow the money. Knowing who is paying for a program and what their aspirations are lends clarity to any situation. Learning how money is being appropriated congressionally, and disbursed by program managers or via competitive grants, is incredibly powerful. So much of successful fundraising is meeting with the right person at the right moment in the budget cycle.

80% of conflict is caused by role confusion. If everyone on a team knows what role they are playing and has had some say in what that role is, things tend to run smoothly. Time after time conflict has arisen from hidden or implicit expectations. I tend to spend more time on project set-up and roles, which pays off in the long run.

Frame the problem, put the tech in a supporting role. We love tools! When a cool new tool comes out, people look around for use cases. On some level this makes sense; we need test cases to understand a tool's uses and limitations. To effectively solve problems in support of planetary well-being, however, it helps to clearly frame a problem before choosing the technology to solve it.

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

We all have perspectives shaped by our experiences and the narratives we have developed about the world and about who we are. One of the most powerful moments of my career was when I had been given enough information about Indigenous presence, stewardship, and powerful knowledge systems that my prior belief system had to make room. It was like standing beside myself: I could see who I was, the lens and culture I had been raised in, and I could see that

the frame was limited. Imagine these lenses like classic cameras: if I step back from my particular viewfinder, I can see thousands of viewfinders around me, all with different settings and angles, all seeing differently. I don't think we need to judge our own lens harshly, but we can work so much more powerfully in collaboration, if we allow ourselves to see around and beyond it.

I am grateful for this opportunity to share my story. I have been writing essays and short stories recently, recognizing that our personal stories and vivid imaginations are as important to the work ahead as science and stewardship.

I send moral support to all of us who are navigating this era with care, compassion, and our unique perspectives!