



In collaboration with

BETH ROACH,

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Interviewer(s): Meghna Parameswaran

00:03 **Meghna Parameswaran** **To re-introduce myself, I'm Meghna. I'm a second-year student at Duke, and I'm studying International Comparative Studies and Environmental Science and Policy. I'm pretty new to the Environmental Justice Movement and environmental justice activism, so I'm really excited to have the opportunity to speak to so many wonderful people, including yourself, about the work that's being done. If we can just start off with you saying a little bit more about yourself and the work you do, whatever that means to you?**

00:40 **Beth Roach** **Awesome. Nyà:wę, čwé:t ahskè:nọ? [Nottoway/Cheroenhaka Language] Beth Roach. I'm saying "Hello, how are you at peace?" That's our traditional greeting, so we like to know if people are at peace. How we feeling, Meghna? We feeling good?**

00:54 **M.P.** **Yeah, we're feeling great!**

00:56 **B.R.** **Good, you're at peace. Yes, good. So, my name is Beth Roach. I wear many hats. I'm Vice Chair of the Nottoway Indian Tribe of Virginia Tribal Council. I've been on Council for over a decade, and that's really the grounding of so much of my work. I'm also the Clean Water Director for Sierra Club-national, so I work on water issues every day. I'm also Co-Founder of the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers. And I'm excited to talk to you about those**

three things, and how they're very tightly interrelated. And I have to say, welcome to the Environmental Justice Movement—we're excited to have you. We need more and more folks, and I hope that what I share with you all today opens your eyes to the different paths and routes that you can take in getting engaged in this activism.

1:50 M.P. I hope so, and I have no doubt that it will.

1:52 B.R. Yeah.

1:53 M.P. I think that we'll definitely come back to some of what you said about those interrelated topics and issues. I wanted to start a little bit with how you got into this activism since you said it's pretty grounded in your work with the Nottoway Council. If you could speak to where you grew up and where you call home and how your identity has grown through that?

2:24 B.R. Absolutely, yes. I was born and raised on the James River. I was born in Riverside Hospital in Newport News, and when I was born, the James River, one of the most well-known rivers in this country, was completely shut down to fishing. You couldn't eat the fish out of the river. And that was because of devastating contamination from a chemical called Kepone, which is a toxic nerve agent that had been dumped into the river up from where I grew up in Surry¹ for many years. I was born in 1981, so this is a few years after the Clean Water Act, and prior to the passage of the Clean Water Act, rivers everywhere, all across the country, were used as sewers for cities and dumping grounds for factories, and there really wasn't any oversight on what these companies were up to. And so that was the state of the river that I was born in. And my folks, my family—we are so connected to our waters. The river is where you can find us all summer long. Even when it was contaminated, it was still where we recreate and where we connect. I can still hear my aunts and my mom and my grandma yelling at us, "Don't drink the water!" We're swimming

¹ Surry County, Virginia

in the water, but don't drink the water. I don't remember seeing eagles growing up. I don't remember seeing Great Blue Heron(s). Later that decade, the river ban—the fishing ban—was lifted, and since then, we've seen the ecosystem rebound. Now, eagles are competing for territory, the Great Blue Heron(s) are back, the sturgeon have made this miraculous return, and so, within my lifetime, I've seen the worst-case scenario evolve into really one of the best examples of what can happen when you have the right policies and when you have people power and you have the will in order to do the right thing. So that was my grounding, and I was born and raised in a community that—I remember there was a friend of mine in elementary school—people in Hopewell,² how it was detected, was people were getting sick. The factory workers were getting sick, and so that was the 'canary in the coal mine,' if you will, and I remember one of my friends in elementary school, her father actually got sick and died. Having my parents have to explain that to me, and then they ended up moving away, to be with her mom's family. And then I've known others in the community that got cancers and died at early ages, and so the impacts of this not only was of course on the wildlife and the fishing, but definitely on peoples' health, and that really stuck with me for many years. So fast forward until about 15 years ago, I've at this point, just to give you a little bit of location description: born and raised on the James River; Surry, where I'm from—right across from Jamestown and Williamsburg—there's two watersheds in the county. On the north side, which is where we grew up—my family only moved in that region in the early 1900s—is the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the James River, which goes into the (Chesapeake) Bay watershed. Below that is the Albemarle-Pamlico watershed, which is right here. It dumps out into the Albemarle Sound, and we can talk more about this picture later. But my ancestral waters, the Nottoway waters, are connected to that lower watershed. So, the Blackwater River is in the southern part of our county. The Blackwater and the Nottoway form the Chowan (River) at the state line, so I'm still now within my ancestral watershed, living down here in eastern North Carolina in Bertie

² This section references the chemical plant in Hopewell, Virginia that was specifically responsible for the aforementioned Kepone contamination of the James River.

County now. Around 2010—maybe a little bit before then—the country’s largest proposed coal plant was being proposed to be in Dendron,³ which is where I have family connections, it’s 10 minutes from my parents’ house, it’s within 5 minutes of the school system that my mom taught in for 30 years, and it’s at the headwaters of the Blackwater River. At this time, I am a park ranger—I was a State Park Ranger for Virginia State Parks and our local park—so I was very used to public speaking; that’s a gift, a strength that I have, so I was giving hikes and paddles and tours and really connecting people to the importance of the environment and the history, so I was dialed in there. But when this coal plant came, when it gets to activism, you’re speaking from your heart. You’re speaking from, “I don’t want this to happen.” You’re saying to the corporation...[inaudible]...protect us. I saw myself at a crossroads where—sometimes my Internet gets unstable, so might be a little thing, if I freeze, I come right back, just so you know that.

7:54 M.P. Thank you, thank you.

7:55 B.R. So, I found myself at this crossroads where the local community was like, “We need someone to speak out about this, and you know how to speak out.” And I was like, “Okay.” So, I had to learn quickly how to take off that very objective state park persona that I had honed for many years and learn how to do that speaking from the heart. Thankfully, that coal plant, after a citizen lawsuit and after big green organizations came in—so Sierra Club, Appalachian Voices, Chesapeake Climate Action Network—if you’re a little community, and this is definitely an environmental justice community, if you’ve never dealt with a big, huge company, you don’t how to organize, you’ve never experienced that. So, it was wonderful to have these groups come in with that expertise to help us figure that out. I had to learn how to speak from my heart. And then also, thankfully, that’s when Obama’s rulings on coal and all of those, the energy policy shifted, and we were spared from that. But what I realized during that time and what has taught me, has come up many times now, later on with the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and other

³ A town within Surry County

threats, is that we in our communities need to always be organizing, learning more skills on how to organize, more skills around our issues, because even though we had slayed that Goliath, there are always many more Goliaths waiting in the wings, and so you gotta stay sharp.

9:31 M.P.

Wow, that's incredible. And it seems like your story is incredibly grounded in where you came from, who you are, your family, and your community. I really admire that and the way your activism has grown. I think, just given my experience with advocacy, I'm curious to know, have you ever felt burdened by this? Coming into this at such a young age or so early on in your life, maybe you felt an obligation to your community? How have you dealt with exhaustion from, as you said, "speaking from the heart?" Passion can sometimes be difficult to maintain.

10:23 B.R.

That's a really great question, and I appreciate that, 'cause we don't talk about that part, I think, enough. I would say, following that, once you get a taste of activism, I feel like there's these stages. You're like "Okay!" You're fired up, and you're ready, and you keep going at this pace. It does wear you out, and then knowing that there's many more fights around you. So how do you keep your balance, keep your sanity, keep your groundedness? Soon after that (coal plant win), the Atlantic Coast Pipeline was proposed. Our Council for the tribe, we'd dodged this bullet with the coal plant, and we were, at that point, just finishing up our state recognition process. So, we went from totally focused on state recognition to then being able to do a lot more community development, because when you're in recognition, that's all you work on—that's the focal point. And then one of the big reasons why we wanted state recognition so badly, other than, of course, it was the right thing to do, is that we would have the ability to, one, just be ourselves and be in community, and then two, to educate and create awareness about who we are. So, with that, on the Council my role began to be more into the environmental programming side—and so, I told you I was a park ranger, and so I was like, "Oh, cool, we're gonna do river cleanups, we're gonna just spend some time

outside together.” So we've been doing river cleanup for over a decade, and it feels good, right—when you go down to a river shoreline and you see a bunch of trash, and then after a few hours of hanging out together, you pick up trash, and you can look back and you can see, ‘we did something.’ There’s immediate gratification there. So, on one hand, I think just simple acts like that can keep you connected and keep you feeling like, “Okay, we are doing a little bit of something.” But then when the Atlantic Coast Pipeline came up—that's actually how I met Will Barber—I had that taste of activism, and I went to my Council, still a very young Councilperson and still not quite keen on how do you organize within a Tribal Community Council, to take on a pipeline issue? So, I went to the Council, and I was like, “We cannot do this,” stomped my foot, like, “We gotta take a stand!” And because every tribe has this—every person on your Council is different, everybody in the community is different, I started to hear things like, “Well, you know, Dominion⁴ does fund our powwow, does grant us money for our powwow,” so there's conflicts there. And then you're reminded that several of our community members work for Dominion, and a lot of my family do, too, so, it wasn't so cut and dry. Even though it was deep in my heart to stop that and do everything I could, I realized, “Okay, this is gonna take more time, to figure this out.” I did take a hit with that, and that was one of the first knockdowns that I really felt. I started to lose some wind in my sails, if you will. And so, since then, I realized that in order for my tribal communities to see and feel the world like I do, we have to spend so much more time outside together and not just in this negative headspace or the scary doom-and-gloom headspace. We need to spend time outside together in the resource, or in the environment, and have it be nourishing. So since then, we've started Paddles On The River, so we get together and we paddle together, we have a garden project. So, you have the world that you don't want to see happen, and then you also need to build the world that you do want to see. I think that when we are—when you're deeply engaged in activism, you have to stay strong against the fight, but you also have to channel your energy into the world that you wish to create. And the last thing I'll say is—

⁴ Dominion Energy, the company behind the Atlantic Coast Pipeline

and I hope that anybody listening to this and I'm gonna say this to myself, in this, too—the role of self-care is so important in this, and so making sure that you're sleeping well and eating well and reflecting and whatever that means to you; Make sure that you do protect that time for yourself, because we want all of us to be in this fight for the duration, and so we have to maintain our energies for that.

15:02 M.P. **Yeah, I think that's becoming more valued as we continue to try and fight the climate crisis and so many environmental issues that are coming to the surface. I think one thing that you said really stuck with me, which was that you wanted to share your vision of the world and share how you see the world and the environment with your tribal community. I'm not sure if this is necessarily a concrete vision, but maybe you could elaborate on what that looks like?**

15:36 B.R. Yeah, absolutely. I think our ancestors passed on so much wisdom, that it's pretty simple. One of the things that we do as a community is we give deep thanks, and so our Thanksgiving Address. The top three lines: Yękwarihowathá?seh Ekwehë·we ò·ne? čakwa?tikęhra·t, Yękwarihowathá?seh ę·na? ahonroč ò·ne? čakwa?tikęhra·t, Yękwarihowathá?seh à·wa? ò·ne? čakwa?tikęhra·t. So first we're saying we are grateful for the people—so we're grateful for each other, our community; We are grateful for the lands that we're on, ę·na? ahonroč; We're grateful for our à·wa?, our waters. And this Thanksgiving Address goes on and on and on—there's times where it's lasted a week in some places. And it goes through every element of creation, and it's giving thanks to the fish that live in the water, that clean and sustain us, and it's giving thanks to our medicine plants, and our corn, bean, and squash that is the foundation of our diet. It's giving things to birds that remind us to be happy and teach us how to sing—really every element of creation that you can think of, there's a function and a role, and we're expressing our gratitude for it. This is a daily practice that we do, and it's just part of that understanding that we are of this ecosystem, we are not over it, we don't have domain over it. And it's really that simple. So, I think as people that are reconnecting and rebuilding

our culture, it's so important to just remember those very simple ancestral wisdoms that have been passed on to us. What does it mean, then, to live by these words? And if we all agree that these words are the right thing for our ancestors and for us, then that's the lens, that's the frame that we need to look through. So one, it's just understanding that piece. And from there, it's understanding what your own individual role can be, and it looks so many different ways. Like public speaking is something that I'm good at, but there's others that are terrified of it, right? But maybe they're good at engineering, and maybe there's different things that they can do to help us understand the mechanics of how to solve something. We have—I bring up the engineering piece because our Chair of our Language Committee, he's in his 20s, he's a young guy, and he's an engineer. And our language—studying our language and how the language, everything's in relationship to each other just like that Thanksgiving Address is in relationship to each other; And so we use these outdoor activities I've described—the paddles, the cleanup, the garden—to practice our language. So it's layering on our Thanksgiving Address, our language, our activities together as a tribe, and just trying to knit all those things together to show that our identity as a people, as a culture, are all deeply intertwined, and giving everybody an opportunity to access that in different ways, is important to me. And I know that it's not enough, I realize it's not enough for me to be excited about these things and passionate about these things. I need more people excited and passionate about that. And so, my shift—I would say I balance the policy work, the hard, that hard gnarly stuff, with really focusing on my community members and getting them engaged. And I think it's working. We can talk more about some of the concrete things that have happened as far as some movements that we've made, but it's really just giving people the opportunity to connect and to show how they're all interrelated.

19:40 M.P.

Yeah, I mean just sitting with this idea of interconnectedness as you spoke about it is really beautiful, so I'm glad that you have been able to share that with others and that is so rooted in your understanding of the world. It's hard these days, I think, to find that connection with the world around you and

to figure out your place in all of that, so it's really inspiring to hear such a simple but also complex way of looking at things. And I think this is a great segue into some of the work you're doing right now, with the Sierra Club and otherwise. So, I'd love to ask—maybe this is too broad of a question—but how your work has evolved over time, from your initial activism that you were describing and now your work with current organizations and the Sierra Club.

20:46 B.R.

Sure. So, I mentioned the Atlantic Coast Pipeline fight, and I have two prongs to things that have happened since then, okay? So, one is that we—we as in Natives on the East Coast, this is not just a Beth and a Nottoway thing—when we witnessed what was happening in Standing Rock with the Dakota Access Pipeline, it was truly eye-opening for Natives and non-Natives to see this historic stand against these industries and this honoring of their rights and standing up for it. And so, while we sent as much support and love and prayers and energy as we could, not all of us could physically go there, but we started to look around and realize there are threats happening here, and we have to also figure out our own version of taking a stand. What ended up emerging is a group that we've loosely formed called the Coalition of Woodland Nations, and the idea of that was that there are folks in every community that are passionate about this work and that we need to organize, and at least have—be in conversation with each other. Our most—(in) times immemorial,⁵ our communities always had runners that would go, you know, before we had these cool cell phones and cable Internet, we had people that went from community to community and shared news of what was happening and messages from each other. So that was the premise, was, “Okay, we need to be in concert with each other, we need to be talking.” And we had some successes. There's an example of the Mountain Valley Pipeline—there was a deal that was being proposed where \$1 million was gonna be offered to tribes all along the pipeline route and word got out to the community; we were able to help share that. So, the grassroots movement was able to go from these runners into the communities up to their councils that said, “No,

⁵ Time beyond the reach of memory; as far back as can be remembered

look, we're not gonna take that," `cause then that would mean that they were out of the fight—it just kind of shuts them off. But we also found that it was difficult to organize. We didn't have a whole lot of organizing experience then. We just had a lot of heart. And what we also realized is that all of the people that were the most involved in the Coalition were also big into seedkeeping. They were all so tied to our lifeways. And light bulbs started going off with us, and we were like, "Well, of course, the people that are involved in agriculture are the ones that are dialed into 'we can't mess with this ecosystem, it's already at threat, and so let's do everything we can to protect the ecosystem.'" Another challenge that we have at the Coalition is all of these things take money. Activism takes money, everything takes money, and resources. It's a bit better now, but certainly, in 2014, 15, there wasn't a whole lot of money flowing for Indigenous activism. And so, we evolved the Coalition of Woodland Nations to be the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers. So, what we do is we not only support seedkeepers and activists within communities, but we also use our platform to raise money and to get seeds and things—whatever communities need, because also gardening costs money, too. So, we realized we have to generate our own support, and we would need to do it in a way that—I've been a fundraiser for 20 years, so I've seen it all. I've seen funders change their minds, I've seen people lose grants, I've seen applications take hours and hours and hours for \$5,000 that take the same amount of time for a hundred (dollars). We don't want to hinder people with that. And so, we want to be able to provide support in a way that is really easy and unrestricted and just free-flowing.

And so, it's these challenges that you come up against, and then you start to find solutions from that. We also are focused heavily on these endangered ancestral seeds, and that's really where the Will Barber work comes in, because we realized you can't just put them on a shelf like a book. You have to keep these seeds alive, and you have to keep growing them out, and you have to keep telling their stories, and you have to share them back with their communities. So, as much as we are about protecting our future, looking ahead, we're really using these lifeways, this

traditional ecological knowledge, as our grounding source to do that. It's connecting people to their past, but also with the intent of making sure that they keep going in the future.

So, definitely, that evolution is something that we couldn't have predicted, but it makes a lot of sense now. And I would say, too, just to that, we realized that it's not enough to know how to garden, it's not enough to—we're all striving to recollect our traditional ecological knowledge that has been dispersed, with colonization and all the terrible things that have happened to us, but the climate is changing. It's happening. We know this. So, a couple of weeks before the pandemic kicked off, we were in a group chat, these seedkeepers, and we were sharing the bits and pieces that we've had from teak—like plant when the dogwood leaves are about the size of sorrel leaves, that tells you when the soil is warm enough to plant. So just these little reminders that are connected to nature. Well, there was a really extreme heat snap in February and it warmed things up and it let—we didn't have any wisteria that year because it got confused, and it came out, and then it got cold again. So, we were like, “Oh no—”. We also need to be as cognizant and as informed as we can about the climate crisis and what's happening, and tracking how our temperatures are changing and how our growth zones are changing. And then we realized the seeds that were born, that were evolved in a certain region might not do the best there anymore. So, it's just being able to adapt to what's coming has begun to be really clear and present in our minds, as we organize around seeds.

And then how that dovetails into water, for me, is after the Tribal Council was like, “We're not gonna have a standoff here,” and I was like, “Okay, I'm not gonna have a standoff.” But I had to take a big pause and really think about, “What is it that we could do? What is it that we could do as a Council that feels right, that is still impactful?” And The Lumbee Tribe, in 2019, had passed—maybe it was 2021—a tribal consultation mandate. See, the problem with the pipeline fight, or any other thing, is that as state-recognized tribes—and then unrecognized tribes have zero rights—but as state-recognized tribes, there was no—the

agencies didn't have to consult us. So, the policies aren't there. Even if we wanted to do these big stands, we don't have the backing, we don't have that in code, that's gonna say, "Okay, we have to talk to these folks." So, taking inspiration from that movement, I got my tribe to adopt a tribal consultation mandate, which says that everything in the Nottoway River watershed, and it's really pulling from that Thanksgiving Address; it's saying, "We are concerned and have agency over all the waterways, all the land, all of the things that are happening; We want to have a say in it, we want to be at the table, and we want to be consulted in it." And it took about a year for me to get folks to wrap their heads around it, but this is now after several years of us doing these cleanups and these paddles and this garden work, and so we had more of the will there because we've been connecting the dots so much.

And all of that work has evolved—has led me to being in this national role with Sierra Club National. I've got the opportunity to help craft a tribal water program. We're calling it the Southeastern Tribal Water Program, and it's really pulling from all these experiences that I've had—from the pipeline, from the Kepone, from wanting to have more agency as a state tribe or a tribal council. And it's saying—with the Sierra Club, our favorite thing is to tell everybody what they should be doing. We speak truth to power. We have the ability to speak to government agencies, and we work in collaboration with many frontline communities and NGOs to say what needs to be said. So, the goal is just to keep building power within our communities and to elevate our voices on a national-international stage. We've got a United Nations Water Conference panel event coming up in two weeks—I'll make sure you get that information. So, we have Southeastern women that are all doing water work on that panel. And then, not only do we want to get our voices out there, but we also want to help all non-Native stakeholders understand how to better work with us, because there's a lot of learning there, too.

30:26 M.P.

Wow. Congratulations on this program, that's amazing. I don't want to go too far back in your trajectory, but I have a

couple of questions that came up along the way. So first, when you're talking about your seedkeeping work and how you're having to adapt to climate change and some seeds aren't able to be cultivated in their native area anymore, how do you balance preparing for the future and adapting to the current ways of life (with) staying true to your roots?

31:09 B.R.

One thing that makes us different in our approach, as far as seedkeeping and the way that we organize within the Alliance, is that, similar to how we are grounded—and we work with mostly Longhouse⁶ people, so traditional Longhouse would include—Longhouse communities would be Nottoway, Tuscarora, Meherrin in the South, but then also thinking about the Iroquoian-speaking tribes up North in New York, so Onondaga, Mohawk, Cayuga, Seneca, and then Tuscarora are also up there. So, we have been given another gift from our ancestors, which is our agricultural calendar, which is our ceremonial calendar. Every month—sometimes there's a couple of ceremonies or activities that happen, in some months, there's more than one. But they timed everything by what they're observing and by placements of the stars, and that's how year to year, through the scientific method of observation and trial and error, they were able to figure out how to sustain our civilization for thousands of years. So for us, the common ceremonies that people do without—if you pluck them out of the major calendar, you hear about Strawberry Ceremony or you hear about Green Corn Ceremony or Midwinter—but there's really so many that go throughout the year, and each one has a very specific function, and they keep us in line.

So, we're able to use our space here as a way for us to practice that and to track what we can with what's going on up in the stars, track it with stories that we would be able to collect, and then we pay close attention to the changing seasons—I mean, this is a warmer spring than we've had in a long time, except for this week, so we're making note of this. And all we can do, each one of us, and each generation, is one, let's go back to these things that worked for so long—and sometimes, there's always

⁶ A [style of dwelling](#) that reflected the social organization of Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) culture.

typically an agricultural function, and yet there's also a remembering of your ancestors and an honoring of those who are coming forward, so there are really holistic elements to each ceremony.

And that's another thing that keeps us—going back to one of your earlier questions—that absolutely helps and keeps us grounded and feeling whole and not so overwhelmed, is that we understand there are cycles in nature, we understand that there's changes, and there always have been, and our job is to do our very best at understanding that and passing that knowledge on to the next generation.

33:57 M.P.

Wow. That's impactful.

34:02 B.R.

And there are a few things coming up. So the next ceremony is Corn Planting—or actually, and just so you know, for future folks y'all, this is March 10th, and this past weekend—and sometimes things happen when they happen. So, Thunder Ceremony is about now, and we have stories about dragons and snakes, and we see skinks on the maple tree, which is the leading tree, and that's telling us that the thunders are here and that it's starting to get prepared. So, some things are on certain times, but then some things happen when they happen, and then we're like, “Ah, okay.” And then we also have—we know that Corn Planting is coming up, and that's a little bit more set. And so, it makes it more fun because you're like, “Okay, now it's Corn ceremony! Gotta prepare for that!” because we've witnessed it, because that's actually something that we're observing in real time.

34:52 M.P.

It's so cool that everything is so connected, and you can pay so much attention to the way that the Earth is changing around you. I find that really—I'm trying to think of the right word—grounding, yes, but also, I think that I wish more people were able to experience that kind of connection with nature and linkage to those beings around them, in some ways.

So, I really appreciate you sharing the way that your community has been able to do that. And to your last point about helping non-Native people connect with Native stakeholders and organizations across the Environmental Justice and Climate Justice movements understand your unique perspective, how has that work looked like for you? What are some of the biggest challenges that you've faced—also biggest successes—in sharing that?

36:16 B.R.

Yeah. I have so many examples of... frustrating things, and I won't go into, but something happened this week that took a lot of wind out of my sails and took some emotional labor for me to wrap my head around. So, I would say what's so important was to remember there's certain big-picture things, within my tribe and many tribes in the Southeast. Also, the Southeast has 70 percent of all state-recognized tribes on Turtle Island and on this continent. Most of your federally recognized tribes are Midwest and West. We also have, I would probably say the highest unrecognized community. And if you layer on our first contact and colonization and 200 years of the Crown and then this Manifest Destiny and then the Revolutionary War, the federal tribes were recognized as this Western expansion out. But that leaves most of us in the Southeast stuck in time, almost, or deeply impacted by history. So, to that end, as state-recognized tribes, we do this as volunteers. Leadership—our chiefs, our council—we juggle a lot with our families, our jobs, and... I work on environmental issues, but I also work with our federal recognition efforts, I work on Land Back—so getting actual land back in our hands—I work on co-management with The Nature Conservancy, we've developed some good partnerships. So, we're holding a lot. And so if you're seeking to work with a tribe—and it's getting a bit better, people are understanding this a bit more, but I've seen in the past where you would send an email to a tribal email that might be the general email or might be a chief, and if you don't hear back and people are like...[inaudible].

38:31 B.R.

Yeah, so if you don't hear back, people are like "Oh, they're not interested, they don't care," when really, they just don't have

capacity for it. So, one, it's recognizing that there's low capacity. So, what does that mean? How do you fix that? We can't really always fix the capacity piece, but how can we work with that knowledge? That requires just a ton of patience and knowing that it takes a very long time to build trust, and it's very quickly to lose trust too, which is something that happened to me this week... But it's just understanding what we're up against and understanding that you might need to just come around and be here. And that doesn't mean come to the powwow and bombard us during our busiest weekend of the of the year. Come to the powwow, please come to our powwows and enjoy it and take in our culture and our way of being, but understand that it's a slow process in order to build these relationships. That's a really big one.

Two, it's also—one huge thing, I mentioned after state-recognition, we've focused so hard on education and awareness because for us growing up—I told you I grew up on the James River across from Jamestown Island, and most Virginians will tell you, and outside of Virginia, the only stories you heard of Native people for the longest, longest, longest time were about Pocahontas and John Smith. And Disney did us no favors, even to that story, by screwing that up. So, in order for us to even 'get to the table' for co-management or co-stewardship or to be consulted is that people need to understand who we are and what happened with us and why we're not necessarily in the history books. We've had professors write that we were extinct, as if we were a species, and that's just disregarding the fact that there was a eugenics movement in Virginia and that the Racial Integrity Act,⁷ 'paper genocide'⁸ forced our people to go underground and be silent, and that the Native American Religious Freedom Act wasn't passed until 1978 so we couldn't even speak our language and practice our ceremonies—until the same year that *Star Wars* came out. It disregards all of those things that are just like, "Why aren't y'all being a people?" We're like, "Because there were laws that were enacted and very severe consequences if you did

⁷ [Virginia law](#) passed in 1924 prohibiting interracial marriage, with other racial discrimination impacts.

⁸ When a people [disappear](#) from a society's tangible records by being removed off census data and other government records.

identify as being Native.” So just taking the time to understand what our challenges have been and why you don't necessarily know our story. Ask yourself, “why don't you know our story?” You gotta do your own homework. Unfortunately, there are sites out there that people, they want that quick fix. They want to go to nativelands.ca and click on a zip code, and then they want to see whose land you're on, and there's real issues with that, especially in our region, because people were moved around, names were changed. The people that developed that site, none of them are from this region and so they don't understand the nuances. You almost need a timeline layer to it, and it doesn't exist, so that website actually causes us a lot of problems, more so than it solves.

These are examples of things that we're up against, which is why we spend a lot of time doing as many talks as we can, getting our information out there. There's more and more of us that are going into advanced studies, but that's also not available to everybody. I have a degree in History, but I don't yet have my doctorate—I don't have time to write all these things. I hope that I will one day, so also very grateful for them—for opportunities like this to tell our story. There's real challenges with folks not knowing who you are and what your challenges are. Just this week, I was presenting the solutions that we've come up with to this person, but I don't think that this person—I think they were missing this understanding of who we are and what we've been through. So, if you don't understand our challenges and our struggle, then you're not gonna recognize the solutions—the creative, the progressive, the grounded-in-real-life-experience solutions that we're presenting. So, that's the hard part. But then on the flip side, I mentioned the Nature Conservancy—we spent a year building relationships together and then we entered a memorandum of agreement that said that we're gonna co-manage all of their properties in the Nottoway watershed. I think our audience here would appreciate why a tribe would be so careful about signing paperwork with a White-led organization. It took a while for us to get it through, but there was a long relationship-building, there was patience, there was a lot of patience on the Nature Conservancy side, and they understood that it took us

through our own process—which, every tribe has their own process. And so, for us, we have a tribal council meeting on one week—month, we have a tribal body meeting the next month, tribal council, tribal body. So, for us, the Nottoway especially, this is Longhouse culture, but we work on consensus. So, it takes a long time because we are becoming one mind. And that's the other piece that I didn't translate in our Thanksgiving Address. And so, we first say, “Yękwarihowathá?seh,” so, “We are grateful.” And then the middle line is “for”— “Ekwehè·we, ahonroč, à·wa?” And then we say “ò·neč akwa?tikęhra·t,” and that means, “We are now one mind.” And so we live by this principle, and it takes us a long time to become one of mind, but once we do, then it's like green light, you can hit the gas and pedal and we can go forward. And now, you're gonna hear a lot more—I can't tell you everything that we're doing with Nature Conservancy, but soon you will hear more about what we're doing. And so there are really wonderful examples of if you build time in for trust, and if you take the time to listen—and it wasn't always easy; There's been times when they were trying to rush us and maybe going out of turn, and we had to flag that and redirect... When you go through those tense moments—when you go through it instead of avoiding it, it makes you stronger, it makes the relationship stronger. It's all about building relationships and just having patience in mind when you do that.

45:08 M.P.

Yeah. I think the harm that Native communities have experienced is unfathomable, in some ways, and so I'm wondering how you have gone about repair, even if it's incomplete, or not possible all the time? And I hesitate to say healing, but some form of reckoning in ways that have served your community?

45:42 B.R.

Yeah, I think one thing that makes us all so proud is, growing up, I knew that we are Native, and we kept that close to the chest. And I'm mixed White and Native, so the White side of the family really tried to keep that under wraps. Part of it was because of, I think, racist ideals that they embodied, and then other parts of it were protection. Those who ended up being darker-skinned, of course, had a different experience. I grew up in the South, in the

80s, and I have been asked to this day, more times than—I think most people who don't look completely White have heard this, no matter what background you are—but, “What are you?” I've been repeatedly asked my entire life, “What are you? What are you? What are you?” As if I'm not a human being. Like, “What are you?” People have to figure it out. I've been asked if I were so many different things across the globe because people just wanna put you in a box. “What are you? I have to know. I need to know how to treat you. I need to know how much respect I'm gonna give you.” I think those are the bigger connotations to it. And then for our community, we started to reorganize in the early 2000s, and the power of being able to stand firmly in who you are and to be able to walk in that identity and to be able to proudly say, “I'm Nottoway Tribe of Virginia, this is who I am, this is who my ancestors are,” and for that to be safe and okay... My brother is much more fair-skinned than I am—green eyes, brown hair. We have had very different lived experiences, and you see that often. If somebody comes out darker, they have a very (different) lived experience than other folks in their families, even. So, for me, I'm so proud that I can walk every single day and live this life, and be fully embodied in my culture every single day. This is something that my parents had to keep on the hush. My grandparents definitely did. My great-grandmother used to chase my grandmother around and try to put sleeves on her and put a bonnet on to keep her skin from getting dark. And I've heard many times growing up, just overhearing people be like, “Don't let her get too dark, don't let her get too dark.” So, these concepts of identity and the implications of not being able to be who you are, they have deep wounds. But if you are able to step into your own power and who you are, and not only know and be able to live by your ancestors' ideals and wisdom, but to be able to live them and pass them on—that is healing. That is stopping the generational trauma, as much as you can. That is saying, “It stops with me, and that the world that I'm creating is not gonna look like that anymore.”

48:52 M.P.

Yeah, I really resonate with that, in my own family and community. Not to say that our experiences have been the

same, but this being able to connect yourself to your family and to your identity and feeling confined to that because you look a certain way, but maybe not feeling as if you have the knowledge base or the memories or the physical pieces to create that puzzle that completes your identity... it can be difficult to find that pride in yourself. So, hearing that you have found some semblance of that peace—to reference your beginning comment—it's really inspiring to hear, and I'm very happy that that's been the case, even if it's been hard, which I'm sure it has been.

I was wondering a little bit about your work in the Sierra Club, because I'm not super familiar with the history of the organization, but I do believe that it did have some more top-down, potentially more White environmentalist connotations at its start, so I was just wondering how you've grappled with that and what that experience has been like?

50:33 **B.R.**

That's an excellent question, too. Happy to talk about it. I'm not afraid of that one. So, Sierra Club, as most of y'all might know or have heard recently, in these past few years really have been reckoning with this early history of the ideals of John Muir, who said some terrible things about Indigenous people. He was homeboys with eugenicists, and their whole idea was that White folk are at the top and they shouldn't intermarry, interbreed with anybody down below. There were bylaws that existed up until 1959 that said no Black folks could be members. And then even beyond the earliest days of them advocating for removal of Native folks from our lands to keep them pristine so that rich White folk could come see pretty lands without Native people being there. Then, there's this whole exclusion of Black folk. And then even up until more recent history, there was some endorsement of anti-immigration and population policy... which targets Black and Brown people.

So, there's these really heavy periods and legacies that Sierra Club holds. I've been with the Club since 2019, I started in the Virginia chapter. And the model of Sierra Club is that there are these volunteer leaders, grassroots networks, and their staff. And

like any organization, you're gonna get a mixed bag of all these folks. Have I encountered things that were unpleasant? Yes. And also, let me say that I've worked for state government, I've worked for several other nonprofits, and I've seen the rise and—first, it was political correctness, and people were rolling their eyes at that; And then it became diversity, equity, inclusion, and that has got its peaks and valleys, or waxes and wanes with it. And I've seen it all from these different perspectives, and I would say for the past several years, Sierra Club has invested heavily in consultants and training and changing our bylaws and changing our strategic plan and our values to, one, get away from that. I was actually on the team that helped to eradicate the population policy from our entire policy that says, “We do not advocate, this is not our stance anymore.” I'm also on a team now that is developing policy for tribal co-stewardship management, and so it's us saying, “We need Native people at the table for all of these things, we are on all Native land, so to the best of our ability, we need to advocate and hold space for Native people to do this.” And in my own team, you know, you can only control so much; We are a massive organization, so I only have a small sphere, but within my team, we are very, very dedicated and committed to each other, and we hold the ideals of justice very very—and being in right relationship, because I think even DEI, there's problems with just saying DEI. It's being in right relationship—that's what it's really about. So, we embody that. And then above me, I have two women of color, and then our new Executive Director, Ben Jealous— First Black Director of the Sierra Club. He led the NAACP for four years, he just started, and he's not gonna have it, I can tell you that. And so, yeah, I feel like where we're gonna go and what we're investing in is there. And there's a very strong union that backs up folks that are feeling like they're being taken advantage of—all the things—so they're being protected. And in order to also do what I can, I've started an Indigenous affinity group within the Club. Because I'm national staff and I'm based out of D.C., I do have a bit more access to the folks that are able to influence that. So, as I meet Native staff from across Turtle Island, across the country, we're trying to organize to make sure that we're protecting ourselves. It's hard, but it's also exciting to be in a place where I can

confidently say that even though we're nowhere near where we need to be, we're farther than the other places that I've been in, and that from within—from what I can control, it's good, it's strong.

55:17 **M.P.** **While we're on this topic of progress...I wanted to ask what's some of the largest progress that you've seen recently within the EJ activism space, or maybe the broader environmental space, and are there any initiatives or ideas that you feel are missing from the space, currently?**

55:45 **B.R.** I would say, I'm thinking about pipeline fights, in particular. And so, in the beginning of the pipeline fights in Virginia, because there wasn't quite that understanding of how to work with Native communities, from the outside, I saw people who were maybe Indigenous be tokenized as *the* voice for Indigenous peoples, and they weren't enrolled, and they weren't a leader for communities. So, they were brought in as like, "Oh, but this is kind of like the diversity and inclusion thing," like, "Oh, but we have a person, that is here to do this thing." And a lot of that was also I think because, just not knowing the nuances of working with tribal groups.

And on the other side of the coin, tribal governments have been needing to learn how to step up and address these things. I think that there now is an understanding of, "Okay, we just can't pick any Indian to put out there, we actually need to"—and not to say that nobody can stand up and be an activist, I'm not suggesting that, but that they're not in place of the actual communities. And just because the tribal governments aren't coming out hard on this doesn't mean that there's not potential to work with them, and to find the place for them to be advocates in ways that make sense to that community, so that I've seen change.

What we're hoping to change is...I think I mentioned that we all have different tribal government meetings and structures. When you don't have consultation and engagement from the very beginning, which is what we saw with (the) Atlantic Coast Pipeline, we hear about it at the last bit of the game, the shot

clock is running, and if you come to us and you say, “We need your opinion on this,” and we're already within the last comment day period, and we've already had our last tribal council meeting that month, it doesn't make sense; We can't put those pieces—we can't put one thing in front of the other. So, there has been better policies advocated for with FERC, Federal (Energy) Regulatory Commission, to not only work with federal tribes, but that state-recognized tribes have a say in that, so the regs⁹ have improved, and part of that is us submitting comments on the process and saying, “We call foul on this,” and so I've seen a bit of improvement there.

But none of it's enough. There's still a lot of—in the Clean Water Act, especially—there's a lot of provisions for federal-recognized tribes, but the state-recognized tribes don't have as much power. A lot of that deals—is because our relationship is more with our state governments, and so we have to do a better job of having that relationship with our state governments, and any regulatory agency. And even the ones that I've worked with—they need more training on how to do this. And I think another challenge is for us as Nottoway people, or whoever, a tribal person—you are a tribe for your life, and you are grounded and connected to a place. In my experience, I've seen job turnovers happen so often, and so even if you had somebody great in these positions, and if you had great training, they don't have that connection to place, and so you're constantly having to re-organize—reteach, if you even have that opportunity to do that. So, still a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of that.

Where I find inspiration, though, is definitely from your generation. Y'all aren't taking it, y'all aren't having any of the mess that I think—I see y'all building on the work that we've been doing. I see that. And I see this understanding of justice and equity being so insidious to these big systems. It used to be the Environmental Movement is kind of siloed, and it's not. The environmental justice exists—or injustices exist—because racism exists. And so, having the insight to address these inequities and these systems of thought, that's—we have to get

⁹ Regulations

to that. We have to really try to unravel that, and I take great inspiration from y'all helping us to drive that point home.

1:00:33 M.P.

Thank you. And we take great inspiration from you guys and all of the foundations that you've created, so hopefully the next couple of generations will be okay, and we'll be able to make some change. I know we're probably getting close to the end here, just because it's a little past two, and I know you have a meeting at three. So, I just wanted to ask one more question, which you kind of started to answer in that last part, but: What do you think is the future of environmental justice, and more specifically, your intersectional vision for how you hope things will play out? And you can answer that in a way that seems fit to you.

1:01:23 B.R.

I mean, the fact that there is a term out there for environmental justice is a big thing. I grew up in a very low-income area. We didn't know that we were an 'environmental justice community'— you just are a community, and you exist. And so, I see economic inequities everywhere, like in Bertie County, North Carolina—we're the poorest county in North Carolina. And I think when we think about environmental justice, or injustices, we should think about Black and Brown and other people of color, but we also forget that there are a lot of low-income White folk that are being exposed to harmful pollution and extractive industries too, and so I find that as we lean into better economic policies, and how we are treating ourselves as a people in terms of our economies—that's so critical, because the poverty level is really what I think determines where the threats and the pollutions and all those things are. So, for us in the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers, we want to build wealth. So we want to create jobs, and we want to pay our growers at a very fair rate, and we want to be able to have the money be on the circular economy and go right out. And there's so many people that want to help us, but I hold down multiple jobs, and many other people hold down multiple jobs, and so if we're struggling to pay our bills, then we're not gonna be able to be out there and be activists. So, we have to be mindful of that.

I would say too, once you check in, you normally can't check out of this work, and so I would say for anybody, find what connects you to your causes. Find—there's pieces to work on, and find what fits for you. And also, don't forget to balance that with nourishing practices. I mean, we have shut down the coal plant, we dodged the ACP¹⁰ bullet, now, we've got sand and gravel mining that we're looking at, and we have deforestation and logging—which is tied to the wood pellet industry, which goes over to Europe, so that's, again, economy. But find what grounds you and what you're connected to, balance that with nourishing activities as much as you can. And I would also just hope that everybody stays open-minded about who needs help, and help where you can, but I would also just encourage folks to be connected to where you are. And know that it will exhaust you. You will feel like, “What can I do?”

And we're not all gonna see change that we want to see every time. I'm very fortunate that I've seen the James River rebound in my lifetime, but we're not gonna see every single thing rebound, but we all have a responsibility within our lifetime to do whatever it is that we can. That can look like public speaking, that can look like documenting these stories—there's so many ways to be a part of this movement, and I'm excited to see how it does evolve and grow, because I think that it's something that certainly isn't getting smaller, it's not going away, and it's the right thing to do. I rest easy at night knowing that I'm on the right side of history, and that's enough for me.

1:05:26 M.P.

Thank you for that. And I just remembered this, but since you had said that the picture behind you is of the watershed, I was just wondering if you could say a little bit about what that means to you?

1:05:48 B.R.

Yeah, good flag. All right, so, I took this from my kayak. There's no filter on it. This is April, I think it was 2020, and the shoreline is over here, and then this is a cypress tree. Cypress trees grow with their friends and family, they have to hang out together.

¹⁰ Atlantic Coast Pipeline

They're part of a system, and they grow where the water meets the land—literally on the shorelines, so, something has happened here. The Chowan River is behind me. This is looking towards the Albemarle Sound and Salmon Creek, which is Site X, the “Lost Colony” (air quotes) to this side. So this tree, for us as river people, as cypress people, [Chattanooga], cypress trees are hugely, profoundly sacred in our communities. For us, they're in our tribal seal, they're our canoes, there's medicine, they're beautiful, they're buffers, they have these knees that come up and they keep the shoreline stable, and they can help weather the floods and the storm events that come, and so cypress trees are everything. What's happening in our region...and we're not, as a people, we're not necessarily on the ocean shoreline, so you see sea level rise there all the time, you see the effects of that very much, it's a physical way to see it. For us, the clearest way for us to see effects of climate change are what's happening with the cypress trees. So not only is this showing you an inundation that has happened here—so this was a shoreline at one point, and then all of this is filled in—but also, and this is very sadly... I'm about an hour from the Outer Banks, and so if you drive from here down Highway 64 to get towards Manteo, you go through several patches of what they call ‘ghost forests,’ and it's just as dystopian and terrible as it sounds. It's literally forests—these cypress tree trunks are hollowed out, and they're dying and decaying, and you could just see that there's transition happening. And cypress trees can handle some salt; There's some species that, or variations of them that can handle more salinity than others. (But) by and large, they're mostly a freshwater tree. So, the ghost forests are because of the saltwater inundation.

So, if we wanted to point to people, especially tribal people, and be like, “Look what's happening, look what's happening to our cypress trees,” to kind of wake them up, this is the way to do it. And where I live—I live on a ridge, just like where I grew up, between the James River watershed and the Blackwater, I'm on a ridge between the Chowan River and the Cashie River, which flows into the Roanoke River, so they meet at the sound there. And behind my house, there is, about half a mile from the river, maybe a little bit more, there's an ephemeral stream, it's rain-fed.

And after we moved here, we were walking with who we call our ‘tree friends’—they have a tree farm that they do restoration, repairing, and buffer work with—and it was spring, and we had just cleared out around that stream, and one of our ‘tree friends’ said, “Do you know you have baby cypress here?” And I was like, “What? No, I did not know we had baby cypress.” And there’s like baby cypress trees, like a little group! There’s not one baby cypress tree, there’s not two, three—there were like 13 in that section that we hadn’t even known. And we’re not close to the river, we’re up the stream. So, I flagged them all and I talk to them, and I visited every single day. But a lesson that I learned, that’s an observation that we’ve been talking about, is that the land knows what needs to happen. It knows what to do. Our natural systems have been here for longer than humans have. It knows what it needs. The question is, is it happening fast enough? Are these cypress trees gonna grow up to be strong and big adult cypress trees that can help weather the storm, weather the flooding, and things like that? So, with the Alliance of Native Seedkeepers, for example, and with the Nottoway Tribe, we’re tip-toeing our way into this. We’re like, “Well, one of the things that we can do is help nurture baby cypress trees.” So, we’re evolving our work into also being a nursery for longleaf pine, for cypress, and the goal is that we’ll be able to provide the tree seedlings and hopefully get them in the places they need to be, as things change rapidly. It’s our way of taking this lonely cypress tree and to marry that with our little baby cypress trees and say, “We hear you, we see you, and this is what we’re gonna do about it.”

1:11:03 M.P. Recreating the family.

1:11:05 B.R. Yeah, exactly.

1:11:08 M.P. I think it seems like a lot of the work that you're doing is supporting those natural processes so that even if we do have short time, hopefully nature will be able to do its thing. And I hope that too. So, I wish you luck with growing those cypress trees and being able to support them through their lifetime.

01:11:33 B.R.

Thanks

01:11:34 Meghna

I think the last thing would be if there was anything that you felt like we didn't get to that you wanted to cover, we have some time. Otherwise, I can just go into next steps for the project.

1:11:49 B.R.

Sure. We covered, I think, most of my greatest hits there, so what I would like for people to think about is: your place in this world, what you can do, and what nourishing practices that you can put in play. I also encourage folks to do ancestral work and to call on your ancestors and think about how they play out in your modern life. I think there's a lot of value in that. And stay grounded, stay lifted, stay in prayer, whatever that means to you, and go outside and be a part of it because that's where you're gonna hear what you need to hear.

1:12:49 M.P.

Thank you. And I would love to just sit in that for a second. So, the last part of this would just be to make sure that, logistically, we have everything set in place. I just first want to say thank you so much for doing this with me. I just feel really lucky to have been able to hear your perspective, and I'm hoping to add some nourishment to my life. So, thank you. I can't really fully express my gratitude. And as for next steps, I will collect this recording and then transcribe this conversation and send over the transcription, hopefully within the next couple of weeks to you, just to make sure everything looks okay, or if you want anything taken out of the recording or the transcript, we can discuss that and then hopefully give you some more information on the process of putting all of the recordings of the oral histories together and the descriptions that will go in Duke University Archives as we move forward with the project. So, I'll make sure to keep you updated, but I'm usually on my email, so if you have any questions, I'll try to respond as soon as possible.

1:14:33 B.R.

It's been a pleasure, Meghna. Thank you so much. Nyà:wę. I appreciate it.

1:14:37 M.P. Thank you. And I hope you have a great rest of your weekend.

1:14:42 B.R. Take care.

1:14:43 M.P. Bye.
