

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: Raymond Skiles

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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Google Voice [00:00:01] This call is now being recorded.

David Todd [00:00:04] This is David Todd.

Raymond Skiles [00:00:07] David! Yes.

David Todd [00:00:07] Yeah.

Raymond Skiles [00:00:08] Raymond.

David Todd [00:00:08] David.

Raymond Skiles [00:00:08] Yes. It's good to be in contact.

David Todd [00:00:12] Well, it's kind of you to call. Thanks very much.

Raymond Skiles [00:00:16] My pleasure.

David Todd [00:00:18] Well, I just have been very interested in learning about your life and career, and I look forward to visiting with you a little bit today to learn yet more.

Raymond Skiles [00:00:31] OK. Well, you know, hopefully we have some value. I mean, in some ways it's unremarkable, but I've enjoyed it, and I'll see if it can be of some benefit.

David Todd [00:00:46] Yes, absolutely. And towards that, I thought maybe I could explain a little bit, both to you, and then for the record, you know, what we're intending to do today and make sure that that sits well with you.

Raymond Skiles [00:01:02] OK.

David Todd [00:01:05] All right. Well, I have a little explanation here, which is how I'll try to run through. Basically, we're planning to record this interview, for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, a nonprofit group. And then also to help build a book and a Web site for Texas A&M University Press. And finally to store the materials at the archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas here in Austin. And all that aside, you would, of course, have all equal rights to use the recordings as well. So that's, that's the thought and I wanted to make sure that that seems to be a good scheme to you.

Raymond Skiles [00:01:59] No, it sounds great. I have been involved with various oral history projects over the years, and I'm a big supporter of it. And it's great to get, you know, the voice and transcribe the records...

David Todd [00:02:13] Good!

Raymond Skiles [00:02:14] For future use.

David Todd [00:02:15] Great. Sounds like you've already been through this sort of rigmarole before, so I think that makes it much easier. Well, let's get started then. So I'll try to give a little bit of a preamble about where and when and who and, and, and we can go on from there.

David Todd [00:02:35] It is October 29th, 2020. And my name is David Todd. I'm in Austin. And I'm representing the Conservation Industry Association of Texas. And we are conducting an interview with Raymond Skiles, who worked at Big Bend National Park, in addition to other federal parks, from 1979 to 2018 and at Big Bend, he served as a wildlife biologist and as the wilderness coordinator. He is based in Alpine, Texas. And this interview is being done by telephone.

David Todd [00:03:12] And today I think we'll talk about a number of things. We'll be focusing on his experiences with the American black bear. And we're hoping that we'll learn something about its decline and its return in west Texas, and maybe discuss some of the issues of coexisting with the bear as it recolonized this area.

David Todd [00:03:38] So with that little introduction, my, my first question would be just to ask you if you could tell us about growing up in West Texas, out in Langtry and Comstock and maybe some of your experiences that come in doing ranch work and in hunting and fishing that might have introduced you to the outdoors.

Raymond Skiles [00:04:04] Yes, well, saying grew up in West Texas is hitting it on the mark? You know, being born here in Alpine, Texas, in 1955. But then my parents were teachers, so it was some time before we actually moved back to my dad's home in Langtry. They're, they were teachers: their careers took us kind of around the Trans Pecos, from, from Monahans to Rankin to Balmorea to Pink Rock which is over by San Angelo. I think about a year in Austin when my dad went back for some college.

Raymond Skiles [00:04:38] But you know, that's kind of a wide swath of central west Texas, or what we call the Trans-Pecos. But yes, we moved back to my dad's home town of Langtry where his parents and even his grandfather, who, who, he and his wife her were out at Del Rio. But my dad's grandfather worked on ranches around the Langtry and Dryden area. And then my grandfather, my dad's dad, was a ranch worker, a cowboy of the classic old style, working on ranches along the border there near Langtry, as well as in northern Mexico.

Raymond Skiles [00:05:28] And so anyway, I guess I was probably 13 or so and we moved back to Langtry and family built a house near my grandparents, on what was a small ranch. My grandmother was a teacher and my dad did all kinds of things. And they had a local country store and gas station. And so but, you know, the out of doors, you know, it's what that small community is, is all about. You know, we have very few people at that development. You know, you're here in a big, you know, wild area, admittedly being controlled, you know, for the purposes of ranching, production of livestock. But there were only about maybe 30 people living in Langtry when we moved back there.

Raymond Skiles [00:06:16] And so, Langtry sits right on the border with Mexico. I mean, literally from any point in town, as well as our house, which was about a half mile out of town, you could , the view is mostly of Mexico. And you could almost throw a rock, too, if you were a good, strong young man or a woman, I guess. So, so Mexico was always right there and it kind of, you know, being even wilder, or further from any towns - extremely large ranches with very little presence of people. So, so that lent, you know, lent itself to the lifestyle.

Raymond Skiles [00:06:52] And so, you know, kids like to be active and be out and about doing things. And that's what there was to do - to hunt, to fish. And certainly the people, including the family, you know, were, were steeped in those traditions, boating on the river, hiking and exploring our canyons. Native American evidence, you know, that's a well known for, for Native American rock art and shelters. And many of those were on the family property. And so history, both prehistoric and historic, was also a big part of of all the conversations, you know, that went along with parents who were educators and sort of steeped in the traditions of the people, as well as the wild nature, as well as people trying to make a living, you know, ranching, sheep, goats, some cattle, some horses.

Raymond Skiles [00:07:53] And, you know, so, you know, enjoying that, but also working at it. You know, my, my father leased an eleven thousand acre mostly sheep ranch to go along with the family's property. And so, you know, if we weren't recreating on a property now, or I should say, we weren't working on that property, we were, we were probably recreating through these outdoor pursuits. And so that built a familiarity, a comfort, I guess you'd say, with, working with wildlife, dealing with wildlife and other domestic animals, including, you know, killing them and eating them and processing them, you know, by hand. Now. And so, so, you know, there's certainly a level of that, that was contributing to later what I might select as a career, I suppose.

Raymond Skiles [00:08:45] Stop there for a moment.

David Todd [00:08:50] You know, one thing that I noticed in some of the notes that you sent me was that some of this land that y'all were able to use and enjoy included the site of the most southerly bison jump in the United States. And so I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what that means and what it looks like.

Raymond Skiles [00:09:13] Well, just to clarify, a bison jump site is, you know, in case some listeners in the future don't know, is, is something that Native Americans, you know, apparently used, not, not frequently, but, but well distributed across much of North America. When the opportunity occurred to have a a cliff or a some sort of suspended drop-off , an edge and they would bring together the people (it took quite a lot of organization, apparently) to, to herd wild bison, buffalo and bison, depending on how far back you want to talk about, to, to be able to herd them to this exact point where it was optimal for the animals to be driven and then surprisingly come upon a cliff that they were already had too much momentum to avoid. And then, you know, a number of them, sometimes many of them, might not as intended, go over the cliff and become injured or die at the bottom. And so that was, you know, to, to natives who had to hunt and gather, that would be a windfall of protein, of red meat. And, of course, all the socially values of skins and bones and sinew.

Raymond Skiles [00:10:29] So so those are very important sites. And and the one on the family property at Langtry, just east of town, is called Bonfire Shelter. Bonfires, as the name might suggest includes some sort of an ignition, combustion. Oh, yes, it does appear that, you

know, on at least one big occasion when there was lots of bone and probably rendered fat and grease and that sort of thing, whether intentionally or not, you know, something ignited this stuff probably after the butchering had already occurred. And so the archeologists have determined that there must've been a very hot fire that was fueled by, you know, those remnant parts of the animals. But, yes, quoting archeologists who have worked up to now, could change in the future with new discoveries, but up to now, it's the most southerly location for one of those activities, and obviously the, you know, the artifacts and evidence left today.

David Todd [00:11:36] And, what period of time do you think that bison jump site was used?

Raymond Skiles [00:11:42] Well, they're, they're still studying that and trying to sort out just, just the details of it. But it appears that the earliest that might have been some 2500 years ago. And then at the most recent, maybe in the, and I may be wrong about this, I'm thinking maybe in 8 to 1200 years ago. I should pull up that info, but anybody wants to do a Web search on Bonfire Shelter can probably confirm or find those, those dates.

Raymond Skiles [00:12:19] But then there were, there were repeated events.

Raymond Skiles [00:12:23] And so there may have been many years, even hundreds between some of these events. But, no, they're still trying to sort out, you know, by study of the layers of bones, you know, what the different ages within that overall period might have been.

David Todd [00:12:45] Well this is really interesting and a good start. You told me about your, your upbringing, and I thought maybe we could move to the next chapter and talk a bit about your education. I understand that you graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in wildlife ecology? And I was curious if there were any particular lessons that were imprinted on you there or if there were some students or professors that were really influential during your time in university.

Raymond Skiles [00:13:22] Right. Well, it certainly, you know, took me from someone who was, you know, primarily what we'd call field-oriented and, you know, sort of saw wildlife from the perspective of human benefit from game hunting. And I think I already understood it, but it certainly did help me appreciate the non game as the profession followed the species that we don't automatically attribute some benefit to humans, but, but they are beneficial, just maybe less direct as something you put on your plate to consume or photograph or recreate with.

Raymond Skiles [00:14:08] So, So, yeah, just seeing the breadth of a biological study and pursuits and understanding the interactions among species and even, you know, between wildlife and the other components of an ecosystem of plants and soils and hydrology and geology. And, you know, it it really sort of helped build a much broader perspective for the environment.

Raymond Skiles [00:14:37] And then, yes, you know, seeing the scientists that I was studying under and being taught by, and what their various pursuits were, were very important, and what they saw as issues. You know, up to that point, you know, I hadn't sort of gotten into the, or understood more deeply, the threats to, to nature in general, to our environment in general, to species of animals, important or yet to be discovered. And so, you know, a shift from just sort of knowing about what is there, to, to understanding the values and how the modern

world has put pressure on and put at risk, you know, wildlife of many sorts, but not limited only to wildlife, were, you know, were, were big realizations, important understandings for someone who might be a professional in the field.

Raymond Skiles [00:15:42] But then, you know, I know I can certainly say that Dr. David Schmidly (he was a mammalogist, professor of mammals) and he was a terrifically able teacher and, you know, was one of those rare ones that could kind of make a connection with, with every student individually. And, you know, provided a lot of support, encouragement and, you know, challenges at the right time and pats on the back at the right time. So I think it was he was quite instrumental. And of course, he, you know, he's well published even in popular literature. You know, he wrote the Mammals of Texas that and then subsequent versions. He's still out there doing this work even today. And so he's a name that many people already know if you're slightly involved in wildlife academia.

Raymond Skiles [00:16:47] But, yeah, I never considered myself a particularly good student coming from Comstock High School. I will admit that we were probably underprepared as students going up to university level, so I had to work very hard. But that in itself was an important lesson to work as hard as you could. To go through that process and then graduate in that degree field, you know, was just amazing. I learned a lot. You know, if you really put your mind to it, commit to it, work hard, regardless of what level you're starting at, you know, you can achieve something. I think that was valuable many times later on.

David Todd [00:17:36] You know, after you got out of college, you had a number of jobs at different sites around the country and traveled. And, you know, I would love to discuss that at some point, but I'm hoping that since our time is short, maybe we can focus on your, your career at Big Bend National Park, where I believe you started working in 1979.

Raymond Skiles [00:18:07] Right.

David Todd [00:18:08] And gosh, that's over 40 years ago. And I was hoping that you might be able to just give us a little bit of a glimpse of what the park was like then, you know, how the landscape may have been and the wildlife that you might have seen at that point, and you know, the sort of visitation that was occurring then.

Raymond Skiles [00:18:29] Sure. Well, you know, might sort of expect me to say, "Ooh, there have been so many big changes." And while there's been a few, you know, I think one of the, I can call it a gratifying thing is that, you know, a national park is intended to be a place that is kind of off-limits for at least developmental changes that humans, you know, bring to most places they exist, you know, more building of this and that. And so, you know, I think it's a very important statement to say that in many ways, you know, just to look out upon the landscape of the National Park, you know, the geology, the mountains that are there, the plants and animals, much of it is is this the same 40 years later. And I've seen it that it's a good thing that that preservation, you know, is doing its job as a national park is intended to be for, you know, peiece of a land of certain size of our natural environment. So, you know, I can, I can walk, you know, most of the trails. And so, you know, this sure looks very similar to what it did when I came.

Raymond Skiles [00:19:40] Now, have you been there 40 years prior to that, I mean, the park was established in 1944, you know, just coming off heavy, heavy grazing for several decades. You know, agricultural stewardship was dominant for lots of people and tens of thousands of heads of livestock. And I think that in previous decades would have shown an immense

change, just in the vegetation that came back from an almost barren landscape. To, you know, look more natural and would be hard to tell that that kind of use had occurred now.

Raymond Skiles [00:20:18] Now, that said, even when I first arrived there, I would go to, you know, talks by naturalists. Recognize that my first job there was not as a biologist, but was working for the concessions company that runs the stores and the restaurant and the lodge and that sort of thing. There was, I needed a job to jump right into in the place I wanted to be right after graduating from college.

Raymond Skiles [00:20:46] But I would study the park and go to the educational programs and things like that. And it was commonly stated that, you know, there were some missing members of the family out there, wildlife family. And those included black bears, Mexican wolves, for instance. And then, of course, there were several endangered species. But, but, but, you know, that's why later on in my career, it was so thrilling to see that the black bear did come back. So that's a change from, from 1979. And I think is one of most monumental occurrences for the entire history of the national park. To have black bears become a real and persistent and highly noticeable influence on on the park, of both the natural history of the park and that they dig, they feed, they eat things, and tear up things. Now I'm talking about vegetation here now, as well as the experience that the visitor would have now going to a place where bears are a part of life, part of the experience of being in that national park. So those are certainly some big changes.

Raymond Skiles [00:22:07] Now certainly there have been some developmental changes. You know, the, the, the continued progress of upgrading roads and buildings and houses, you know, that staff might live in has made a remarkable difference. You know, originally it was a narrow two lane. It was paved by the time I went out there, roads that came in and out of the park. And you know they followed the landscape, you know, down into arroyos and up on the slopes and it was a very rough road. And quite often, you know, during the rainy season, water would be running across the road, and you'd have to be very careful about that. You know, to, to nowadays when big, bigger roads are there to fit our modern large vehicles and recreational vehicles and make the routes smoother. So, you know, big fill and big culverts, and rarely do you kind of encounter the landscape, with the intimacy that was there in '79.

Raymond Skiles [00:23:06] And of course, even that was light years ahead of what it would've been, even 40 years before that. There were no paved roads. So when I first went out to work there, you know, the really rundown ancient trailer house was the best housing that might be offered to seasonal employees like I became later. And today they build solid structures with air conditioning and heating, and even television, satellite radio and things like that, which, which which are different. I will say some positive and some negative consequences of those. But, you know, even being in the basin, that important area, that lots of people go to the Chisos mountains and look up and see Casa Grande Peak, and Emory Peak and Polo Mountain. And all those are all still there. All in all, they're in fairly natural condition. So, so that's, that's a, that's an important achievement, given that so few places in the modern landscape remain unmarred, you might say.

David Todd [00:24:18] You mentioned that you saw the improvements in the roads, buildings out there. And my understanding is that during the mid '80s, you helped lay out some of the new ways that visitors might experience more of the, sort of the back country by building access trails and erecting signage and laying out new campsites. I was hoping you might be able tell a little about that, about how you might open up that landscape to the visitors to the park, could really understand it, and enjoy it.

Raymond Skiles [00:24:56] Yeah, right. Well, I have already worked as a seasonal employee in the education branch, what we call interpretation, for several seasons there, between going off to other national parks and other parts of the country. But, but I had done that one winter and then I was offered this job to, to, to kind of do something that had been begun happening in a lot of national parks. Big Bend, like others, had, had, had gone from very little use of the back country, as it's called, the trails, by people who wanted to spend overnight and it was getting to the point where a lot of people were coming out and part of that, you know, folks could just kind of camp wherever they wanted to. They had to have a permit, you know, sort of giving an idea of what area of the park they would be in. But, but I remember hiking when I was working for the concession, you know, prior to that change and, and during the busy times like spring break or Christmas or Easter, you know, you'd literally be stepping over tent strings and such as you hiked to the main trails up in the high Chisos. And there, you know, there were a few places that were nice and flat and everybody congregated right on those, you know, again, to the point where it was kind of cheek to jowl. And, you know, associated things like going to the bathroom and the waste that would be left, trash and that sort of thing, as well as just pounding down the grass. And, you know, people would break branches in order to fit a tent in. And so the damage was expanding and becoming unsightly and becoming an impact on the environment, as well as on other hikers and users.

Raymond Skiles [00:26:44] And so, so they hired me to be a supervisor for a project to, to, to try to fit in about the same number of people, but do it in a way where there would be designated campsites that were off the main trail, generally, mostly out of sight of the hikers that were just coming through on the main trails like Boot Canyon Trail or South Rim Trail. And, and so, so, you know, there was an assistant and then another volunteer. So three of us spent the summer up there looking for good campsites. They were off the trail, that would fit the criteria that we established. And then clearing those sites, in some cases, yeah, we we did some damage in order to improve the situation and make it go to be sustainable and limited in the impacts. But anyway, yes, so it was a great summer, again, a wonderful opportunity to experience, you know, the wildness, I sometimes call it wilderness, even though it's not been designated by Congress, under that Wilderness Act. But, and then to spend most my time, you know, up in a cabin, up there with, with no running water, electricity and working with other people. And then the trail crews and normal maintenance of trails folks were up there, too. And what a wonderful experience. But yeah we, we, you know, cut paths and opened up campsites, lopping limbs might be in the way. And we put in logs that would create an edge of the camping area, and made wooden signs and put them on posts, dug the holes for the signposts, just kind of did everything, along with photo documentation. I mean, you can go to the park library now and see all the, you know, the other product, the before and after photographs with lots of measurements so that in the future, people could see if we actually achieved the goal of limiting the spread of impacts from camping and creating what is still there today as some 50 campsites that Chisos Mountains for people to enjoy when they want to spend the night.

David Todd [00:29:11] Well, then I guess subsequently I'm thinking in '87, you started working at Big Bend as a resource management ranger, and it sounds like lots of responsibilities there. I guess working with the park, of course, and then the Rio Grande Wild and Scenic River segment, and then protected areas down in Mexico.

Raymond Skiles [00:29:38] Right.

David Todd [00:29:39] And and some responsibilities for endangered species, rare species such as the Black Bear and mountain lions, trying to manage some of the human conflicts there. I was curious if you could talk a little bit about the mountain lions, which I think is maybe a good introduction to some of the same coexistence problems that you later dealt with with bears. I'm sure that there were some lion attacks and you had to somehow cope with that and address it. Can you give us some examples?

Raymond Skiles [00:30:18] Well, a little background - you know, mountain lions persisted in the Big Bend, you know, from the prehistoric through the historic ranching era, despite being quite persecuted as predators on livestock. And then, you know, unlike the bears that were never wiped out, you know, it's a testament to their secretiveness, their wiliness, their opportunities, opportunistic ability to, to, to find food where and when they can and then avoid humans, to as large a degree possible, because that's their primary threat.

Raymond Skiles [00:30:57] And one of most exciting [excuse me, I'll take a drink of water here], one of the most exciting lion interactions I had when I first went out there in '79 to work for concessions was one night I was, after the lodge had closed, I was walking like a number of employees do, to the let themselves into the lodge because that was the only television in, you know, in the area. And we would sometimes go in after hours and watch TV. And anyway, I was walking in the dark with a flashlight up the sidewalk to the restaurant, to the lodge and then just flipped my light up no more than 20 feet in front of me, and discovered I was walking right behind a mountain lion on that sidewalk. You know, it was just unimaginably exciting. I was thrilled about it. I wasn't particularly afraid. It showed me no threat, in fact I suppose it knew I was there at some point, but it never even turned around to look at me, and it veered off, you know, before it got to the building. And so, so, you know that it gave me a real personal experience, something I was already hearing about all the time.

Raymond Skiles [00:32:06] And then when I, when I arrived back in '87 as a permanent employee with the resource management branch, they were in the park at that time. Now, Mountain Lion researchers, now from of all places, Texas Tech and then also Texas A&M University (right, now, this was some years after I'd gone to school there). And, and so I was placed in a position as the designated National Park Service participant in those research activities, and that's a common thing, just sort of to help the projects fit well into the national parks, but also participate. You know, be the one doing things along with them - tranquilizing an animal, shooting it with a dart gun, trying to trap the animals, radio collar them, track them around. And so it was a great, and you know, pretty intensive introduction to mountain lion ecology. What, what, what they do, where they need to do it, and how that intersects with people, both in a benign way, learning that the mountain lions may be coming right through campgrounds and the housing areas and such in the middle of night with nobody having any idea about it, until we, you know, found many things like that through radio telemetry and tracking devices and spending the night following them in some cases, you know.

Raymond Skiles [00:33:39] And so so, yeah, it gave me an excellent foundation for the next few decades working, you know, to conserve those animals, sort of advocate for them when the park was contemplating, you know, new development or different visitor activities, you know, but primarily trying to, to mitigate the threat from humans to lions and vice versa. Big Bend has the distinction of being the national park that has had the most attacks on humans. And I think it's fair to say the most aggressive incidents if you didn't end up with direct contact between the lion and the person. And, you know, that had been the case even before my arrival. You know, I think we did a lot of important things to mitigate the risk there.

Raymond Skiles [00:34:36] But by then, yes, I was involved in the response to several attack incidents that occurred in the park during the time I was working there. And those are, those are really remarkable, unfortunate events. Now no one has been killed by a lion there, but various degrees of injury have occurred. And, you know, so, so, you know, being personally involved in and even leading parts of those responses were a big part of my, you know, my experience there as well as doing what what I could to plan our responses, even when we weren't in the thick of one, trying to help educate staff on how to, you know, to educate visitors, involved in producing literature and signage and training for staff and response plans. It's always great if you can already know what you need to do and what many of you need to do and just have it either written down where, you know, if I'm not there in the park, maybe the dispatcher or some ranger can pull out the documents say, "OK, here are the categories of activities that needs to happen right now after somebody you know is attacked by a mountain lion." So those for all those were you know, loomed large in my career, there in Big Bend.

Raymond Skiles [00:36:04] And I will say I'm looking out, looking out my back yard right here at three deer, just walked into my yard here, mule deer - the nice thing about Alpine, Texas. No, no lions seem to be chasing them though.

David Todd [00:36:15] That's great. Well, this might be a good time to pivot to another large animal that now calls a Big Bend home. Maybe we can talk some about black bears.

Raymond Skiles [00:36:31] Sure.

David Todd [00:36:32] You know, from what I've read. Vernon Bailey, the early federal biologist, came through and said that black bears were abundant in the Chisos in 1901. And then some other researchers, Boral and Bryant, says they were fairly common in the mid thirties. But my understanding is that by the time the national park was set up in the 40s, they were very rarely seen. And I was hoping you could sort of walk us through what might have happened in those intervening years.

Raymond Skiles [00:37:08] Right. Well, the way I understand it, and this comes from those same records, that you've quoted as well as others on different sources. Is that, is that, yeah, you know, prior to, and I'm talking about just maybe a decade prior to the 1944 establishment of the park, bears, you know, went from being at least a occasional ,somewhat regular, occurrence, if not abundant, to, to basically not being there. And I'll qualify that by saying, to me, being there means reproducing, you know, females bringing up cubs. Biologically, those are the key players to a population, in contrast to the males, which during those years came through at least. There are records. There's photographs of sightings. But always, as far as I could tell, transient animals.

Raymond Skiles [00:38:14] And that's what males do, is that they will, you know, typically when, when young and dispersing away from their, their, their home territory, they have to go off the big treks trying to find habitat, females, and hospitality, you might say, where they're not persecuted. And so the males, they come through periodically. But there was not evidence of a reproductive population there, which to me is the key to saying, yeah, bears live there.

Raymond Skiles [00:38:47] And you know as well as I can tell, you know, obviously I mentioned the heavy, intensive agricultural use, lots of sheep and goats, which are particularly vulnerable to bears (and mountain lions, I might add). And I believe it was in the mid-30s that the government supported predator control, got underway, and to my

understanding included the use of poisons, which had not occurred in the past. And so I think all those factors kind of came together just before the park was established. In fact, there's good records that the ranchers were putting more and more livestock into the area once the 1936 bill to, to, you know, to create a future park, the future park being the one that was finely dedicated in '44. But for, you know, eight years there, there was an understanding this is the time to make the most of the agriculture before you know it ended. And then I'm sure that that included predator control for the great increase of animals that had come along.

Raymond Skiles [00:40:00] And then prices were up for those animals. This was also an economic thing during the war years, '41 through '45 or '46. Now production, you know met with good prices during, during a lot of that time. So at least that's my speculation, I think informed speculation, that all of those influences came together to spell an end to the bears being resident there.

David Todd [00:40:28] It sounds like the government trancing was was a pretty big factor. But was there also much recreational hunting for trophy or for hides or other reasons.

Raymond Skiles [00:40:41] Well, I don't know that we have records, or at least I haven't seen them, of how many animals were taken for those purposes. But absolutely, I mean, they're they were considered as a sport animal, a game animal and even my grandfather went to the Big Bend on hunting trips. I don't know that they were pursuing bear, but I know he had friends that ranched out there and had land near Langtry. And now, you know, during the 30s and maybe early 40s, you know, they'd go out there hunting. And so, so, so, so that was, I think, certainly an impact. And then I mean, there is even you know, there's kind of a one famous poster that bears reproductions of the Chisos Mountains Hunt Club that indicated a commercial venture probably covering a number of different private ranches that, you know, indicate that there was enough hunting to be done, that that it could support commercial endeavors. So, so, so that has to be an influence. But I've never seen it quantified - no records of how many bears maybe were taken, in particular year through hunting, and I suppose there just wasn't that kind of record-keeping at the time.

David Todd [00:42:04] Well, I guess so, in '44, the park gets set up, so hunting of any animal, I guess, including the black bear, would have been prohibited?

Raymond Skiles [00:42:16] Right.

David Todd [00:42:16] And then in '83, if I have the dates right, Texas outlawed bear hunting more broadly. And in '86, Mexico gave the bear endangered species protection. Could you talk a little bit about some of those measures and what sort of effect they might have had on helping restore the bear?

Raymond Skiles [00:42:41] Well, they certainly, you know, set the stage for changing the paradigm, whether, you know, whether the bear showed up in a national park or, or out on the private lands around it, to the degree that people were following the rules. There would not be just the open season that there might have been for at all times. And in fact, no seasons, under those restrictions.

Raymond Skiles [00:43:06] But, you know, you could still ask the question, well, do I benefit if there's no bears, period? And so to me, the benefit is that it sort of set the stage, you know, in case some bears, you know, did migrate back in. And when I mean, I say back in, that means from Mexico, because throughout this entire period, bear populations have persisted very

near the U.S. in mountain ranges along the border. They had a very different history of land tenure, and, you know, predator control perspectives and even, you know, manpower. No, no, no big governmental programs to to be out there, you know, trapping and killing predators for the ranchers. And bigger mountain ranges, with huge bear populations over there in Mexico. So, so, so to me, what what this Texas state rule did was set the stage. It didn't bring bears back directly. You know, nobody trapped them and brought them in and released them. But sure enough, you know, that that certainly helped when bears then later on, due to the Mexican protections and apparently increases in populations there, that it might create the need for bears to move to find habitat. Now, it set the stage for, for, for, you know, a welcoming, if you want to call it that, a place for them to be when they did arrive in Texas later on in the Big Bend.

Raymond Skiles [00:44:47] And, you know, there could be other factors for that initial sort of recolonization. For instance, you know, those big mountain ranges also have big fires. And one Mexican biologist suggested that huge forest fires during that time may well have also created some some reason for bears to leave and head north, you know, over a temporary period. Drought conditions, you know, during part of that might have been an influence. Nobody can know for sure. But I think it's fair to say that all those were influences that really resulted in what could have been no more than one female bear making it back across, you know, from, from the Serranias del Burro or the Maderas del Carmen mountains in Mexico into the Chisos, and finding some decent habitat there.

Raymond Skiles [00:45:42] And, of course, the only other ingredient needed was those transient males, which there had always been on occasions. So that wasn't going to be a limiting factor. But females don't move much. They like to kind of live near where they were born and grew up, in contrast to the males. But the genetics studies that were done later, during the time I was there, indicated that, yes, there may have been no more than one female that was a key founder of the return of population there to the Chisos Mountains. And later on, you know, very likely others made the trek. But just to get it started, you know, was, it was likely one individual female in the right place, the right time and a place to be, a place where they were welcomed, not persecuted, which is, you know, the fundamental value of a national park.

David Todd [00:46:42] And maybe you can help us sort of frame this. From what I have read, there was a visitor named David Lloyd who photographed a female bear with three cubs, I think in the Chisos in 1988. Is that the first documented sighting of a breeding bear in the park?

Raymond Skiles [00:47:04] Well, that's what I see as the fundamental beginning of the recolonization. Now, I will say that that I did find in some old park records a sighting of a female with a cub or more some years prior to that. But apparently nothing came of that in the sense that they weren't seen again later. You know, they didn't seem to establish residency where they might be repeated. So and then they may have just kept moving, or not survive, which is often the case with with transient animals, particularly females, with young cubs. But, you know, absent that one sort of transitory event that didn't seem to result in a population, yes.

Raymond Skiles [00:47:50] And I was there at the time, you know, I'd been there. It was the year after I returned and was working for the Park Service, that, you know, the bears still didn't live there. And that's what people were told. And then some guy came along and said, well, I saw some bears up on the trail. And, and I don't think I was at the front desk at the time.

I'd moved into the resource management branch away from visitor contact. But I recall he was told, "well, you know, sometimes people make mistakes. Maybe they could have javelinas. That's that's definitely been the case, that they've been mistaken for bears. So, but this guy, David Lloyd, you know, he said, well, I'll get my color slides developed and send you a copy. And he did that. That, that was the Eureka moment. I got to see that slide. And sure enough, there was a mother bear with three little cubs small enough that they would've been not impossible, but highly unlikely, that they would have, you know, as a group traveled across the desert from the Mexican mountains. And then other bear biologists would suggest that those animals, they probably came from from where they, those cubs were probably born there, near where the photographer took their picture. And then, of course, you have to remember at that time, there wasn't any guarantee that it was going to turn out different from that previous example some years before. But sure enough, after that, there were more sightings and observations of bigger cubs with that female. And then, you know, the trajectory was just kind of up from there. I think the next year there were maybe 27. And we kept track, you know, not that those numbers are complete, but they can be considered minimums. You know, the park said, hey, anybody that sees a bear report it - staff, visitors. And there's a, there already was a system of wildlife sightings, records that were used for birds and other animals. And so, you know, one of my jobs, I took on. I said, hey, let's start, you know, start documenting those, putting them into a computer. That's kind of a new thing, you know, generating graphs every year about how many sightings were reported and what the nature of those were. You know, whether individual bears, mommas alone, mommas with cubs. And so we created it. You know, that was the beginning also the bear database for the park, which, you know, we can show quite dramatically how every year after that, the members of bears encountered, and the number of bears - I know population at a minimum just increased and increased and increased for a number of years.

David Todd [00:50:45] Well, you know, it's interesting to me that the bears were in a sense of re-colonizing range that they had before and, and doing it on their own initiative. It seems like a lot of introductions of rare animals require some human intervention. And I was wondering if you could comment on on that, in this sort of natural change that was happening.

Raymond Skiles [00:51:19] Well, I think, you know, it was a very fortunate occurrence. And I already mentioned the key ingredients being there - nearby population extant and, and, you know, biological imperatives that sometimes some of them would move, looking for four available habitat. So, so those key things are there. Now, to me, and I recall discussions, you know, about, before the bears were back, you know, about why doesn't the park, you know, go get some and bring 'em in here. Isn't that what a national park for? And I agree that that is what they're for.

Raymond Skiles [00:51:55] But, you know, in the big picture of a national park, well, funding and even the potential for controversy, you know, bears in Texas, I think to this day by most landowners and a lot of people are seen as kind of a threat. And you know the potential even if politically it would have been possible to reintroduce bears, actively trap them and bring them in. It would have represented so much expense and potential controversy and fear that that just wasn't happening and wasn't likely to happen, much less than understood costs of converting it.

Raymond Skiles [00:52:37] So, so it was kind of, you know, fortuitous that, well, you know, despite the lack of human National Park Service initiative, the bears did their thing. Well, thank goodness, you know, all the ingredients were there for them and came back on their own and and the national park, even though they probably would not have ever taken it on

because of those reasons I just described, they understood their mission, you know, which would be to support animals that are native that were re-colonizing. And so there was never a question as to whether they would be accepted or welcomed by the National Park Service. And the fact that it would have been daunting to, to actively do it did not change the fact that that they were understood to be part of what the national park was for, when they did show up and when they began to reproduce there and and admittedly present the Park Service with some real challenges that they needed to get up to speed on.

David Todd [00:53:48] Well, maybe you can touch on some of those. I gather the park administrators and the many visitors probably welcomed the idea of bears being there. But I guess coexisting with them, you know, a large predator, is just not always simple. And I was hoping you could talk about some of the strategies that you developed, I guess in the early 90s when there was like, I think I read there was a bear raid on a Big Bend camp site, the first time in 40-odd years, in 1993. And y'all had to, I guess, put together some sort of a reaction to that.

Raymond Skiles [00:54:28] Yeah, well, you know, I can certainly say that while the mission of the National Park Service was clear now to all employees and all managers, the, you know, the welcoming factor of that might have been highly variable, because even prior to Big Bend having them, most National Park Service employees move around the country. You know, I had been in a bunch of other parks as a seasonal employee and permanent, permanent employees, you know, tend to move off, and especially if they have ambitions toward higher ranks and pay and that sort of thing. And so, so there was already this term for other national parks, you could say, oh, that's a bear park. You know that, just saying that, you know, understood that there was parks like Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier, you know, all the Alaska parks, those are bear parks. And then that simple term carried a lot of weight because they do that Big Bend was going to have to become one of those, and that meant huge investments, huge changes, lots of lots more responsibility.

Raymond Skiles [00:55:37] And sure, so as soon as it was quite apparent that those, that Mr. Draper's photograph were recovered, because not just mom and three cubs is that, you know, many more bears within a few years. And yes, the early 90s, we began seeing some, some, some problems and recognized, hey, it's time to really get it in gear to do the things that the bear parks had learned to do. And so we actually and I conducted it, brought in the authorities, specialists from other parks that, that were bear managers and, and, and biologists from some other agencies and such. And, you know, we had an idea, but we said, hey, we want to show you guys the situation here and then get your feedback. Tell us what we need to do. We're going to create a plan. And, you know, creating a plan is one thing, but implementing is entirely another.

Raymond Skiles [00:56:41] And anyway, it was a really good start to be able to put down in print, you know, that we need bear-proof or bear-resistant trash containers, and not just containers, but, you know, protocols for managing that stuff and storing it. And then it's final destination at the landfill (the park has its own landfill). So to be able to fence the bears out. And it's not just any old cow fence. It has to be very deep in the ground and 10 feet tall and electrical wires around it and things like that. We needed food storage options for campers and visitors. We needed signage. And I put it, I put it into, I think, five categories: facilities, which is what we've been talking about. Then there's education, you know, and that includes cranking up articles for a new park newspaper, for signage, for notices that could be posted on bulletin boards with what to do that the visitors need to read and as well as, you know, face-to-face information, educating the visitors that you know, have never seen a bear or even been

close to one as to how they were going to need to behave. And then we needed law enforcement. Rangers needing to be trained in how to manage people, you know, that needed encouragement or or, you know, influence in not following the rules, even creating rules. What's going to be allowed and what wasn't, and enforcing those rules. And then we needed research. We need to be able to understand these particular animals - where they liked to be, where they liked to feed, what, where those places intersect with human developments and, and trails and things like that, as well as, you know, what about the population? You know, how many could live here and what are the risks to the bears, even just from natural climatic changes? And are they inbred? you know, are they at risk, because there just aren't enough of them when they go to breeding and that such.

Raymond Skiles [00:58:57] And so, so all those were were categories of activities that brought most of the park staff into implementing. And not to mention, I mean, nobody's ever put a pen to paper on it, but my estimations are that the park in a few years and I'm going to say, five or six, probably spent well over a million dollars, particularly retrofitting facilities, you know, creating hard doors where there had been only flimsy screens or or trash receptacles or the, you know, the change in the landfill use, all the signage and staff time that went into all that training and such. But but I'm very proud of the park and I am proud that I played a, I hope an informed role in getting the park, you know, geared up fairly quickly.

Raymond Skiles [00:59:52] Now, most of those parks, you know, the bear parks I mentioned earlier had had taken a long time to get to the level that the Big Bend was in a very short time. And in those parks, there were bad experiences that prompted that, you know, terrible incidents where bears, you know, getting in people's stuff, breaking into cars and buildings and then terrible responses like, you know, lots of bears killed - and largely secretly. You know, we all see photographs of Yellowstone, you know, back in the day, people feeding the bear out their window or being in bleachers, literally, when the lodge in the park dumped their food waste out so bears to come see it and everybody could be around to ooh and ahh and photograph it.

Raymond Skiles [01:00:42] And then sure enough, those people who loved that experience as visitors didn't know how many bears were again being shot because they were getting too aggressive. And you know, Yosemite had their secret bear dump, that finally got exposed by a reporter from I think San Francisco. They said, had an article written about it - it was national views and so, the bad old days taught them what they needed to do. But Big Bend was in this delightful position, if the managers could do it, to try to have everything they needed to know from those bad experiences to implement with a brand new bear population that had not already gotten what we call habituated and maybe do it right for the first time, you know, before all that. And then I don't know of any other parks that had that opportunity now, but Big Bend did.

Raymond Skiles [01:01:44] So I'll slow down here, but I'll make one more statement that today, you know, 2020 now, 30 some years after those first bears returned, the park has had remarkably few incidents. Only one bear had to be relocated because of its, you know, its habituations, its problems, you know, that humans could not not live with. And I think that's a remarkable record.

David Todd [01:02:16] It is! Yes. It sounds like you'll learn from the struggles and experiences at other parks before it goes out of hand at Big Bend.

David Todd [01:02:27] It's a little bit about another aspect of black bear behavior. And I think it's interesting that that while they were getting reestablished in the '80s and '90s, in 2000, I've read that a group of bears actually left the park and one of them traveling gosh over, what would it be, close to 70 miles, moving towards Mexico. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about why they might have vacated the, the park.

Raymond Skiles [01:03:02] Yeah, well, that was during, during a research project. I mean, one of my roles was to try to find funding for studies that needed to be done. And now a bunch of bears were radio-collared. I mean, more than 20, which is kind of phenomenal for that small population. And they were great researchers. PhD and graduate students on the ground and literally in the air (because it was before satellite tracking). But a lot to be done. And these researchers, you know, they at some point came to the office and said, "you know, Raymond, you know, we, we seem to can't find several of the bears, you know, that were stalwarts of the population, local residents." And so, so we decided, well, let's go further afield in the air to see if we could find them, from an aircraft telemetry monitoring. And sure enough, you know, this one and that one would like finally catch the signals, you know, some distance well away from their normal home ranges.

Raymond Skiles [01:04:11] And, you know, to this day, it's hard to put a finger on exactly what was going on. Apparently, that that was a dry year. But, you know, when you look at the records and even years after that, it was not exceptionally dry. There had been, I think that maybe have already started a few years when this oakleaf caterpillar had defoliated trees. But, you know, it appeared that there were still acorns being introduced. And it's hard to put a finger on that, although it could have been an influence. But but, you know, the best researchers could tell was that, hey, you know, they just weren't, they didn't have the resources they need, probably food-related. So, you know, key, key foods being, you know, acorns from oak trees and madrone berries and juniper berries. So those, those are kind of the fundamental big producers that the bears really need lots of in the fall to get through the winter denning period when, when they wouldn't be eating. And then that kind of coincided with, when this exodus occurred.

Raymond Skiles [01:05:27] So it really did send alarm bells through us managers and me being the wildlife biologist in particular, that, wow, you know, if this can happen. We think the population went down from probably 25 or 30 animals to maybe a dozen. And again, that's a educated estimate now. But, you know, we, we had a good thumb on the pulse, so to speak - lots of radio collars, lots of tracking going on, as well as just documenting the sightings that anybody, you know, had of bears, using that for, for, for population estimates. .

Raymond Skiles [01:06:06] And, yeah, you know, the first you know, there's a thought that, well, maybe they know where they're going. You know, going to some better place. But turned out that it was kind of like scattershot. There were some bears that had south, some east, some north. Now not as many to the north, but, you know, various sites, certainly directions. And a lot of those bears didn't make it. I mean, particularly females with younger cubs, you know, tracking and then follow up, assuming they were still on the U.S. side showed, wow, they died. You know, very sad thing, even for researchers who are trying to be neutral for animals that they had literally handled and studied and followed for months or years. And a few, though, did end up in a place that could get them through the, the time they were faced with, that being other Mexican mountains.

Raymond Skiles [01:07:00] And then a few of those came back. And that would mean a pretty big track, you know, like you mentioned, 70 or 80 miles or more, by the time you

considered all the zigzags. But it decimated the population. And it made us realize that, hey, all these things that that, you know, we've been doing, you know, hopefully will be enough, but it may not. There could be events that could even wipe out the population again, because the Chisos Mountains is really the, that's the habitat they need. Now they can use some of the other habitats, you know, the arroyos and the desert and the river. They can trek through them, they can use them for a while, but without the trees and acorns and the madrones and the junipers, for both food and habitat, they weren't going to persist in Big Bend.

Raymond Skiles [01:07:54] And to me, even today, that, that issue is the biggest one, the small population dynamic. We have the threat of what now we can even describe as climate change impacts on their environment. And my word, you know, that makes it even more important not to have to remove bears because of human behavior, mistakes and that sort of thing.

David Todd [01:08:22] Well as you look into the future, what do you think is going to be required to ensure that the black bear' recovery continues? I think you mention the challenge of climate change. And then also worries about the conflicts with people in an ever-developing state.

Raymond Skiles [01:08:47] Yeah, well, I'll start by saying I think that the future is still somewhat precarious. I mean, you know, that that habitat being so small that there's a biological principle of what's called meta-populations. And that means, a population that consists of a bunch of different, smaller groups that while they may be isolated from each other. And a perfect example, you know, these, the "sky island" concept, you know, that you may be aware of, anyway, that's sort of a concept of these mountain ranges with, with, you know, more productive habitat and species that depend on them, that are there out in the desert with sometimes dozens or more miles between them. And these small groups depend on each other, even though they may not every year have some sort of interconnection. And then so, so we really have to look at both the Mexican side, those big mountain ranges with lots of bears, the Chisos Mountain, a tiny mountain range with a tiny number of bears and say, well, what, what was it that the under pre-European conditions made these pretty solid, you know, good populations that could persist, you know, over eons, maybe. And you just look at the map, you know, I'm really surprised that it's not made better progress. But let's call the Mexican area pretty well established. All of the mountain ranges have their bears. We'll say not always: you go further west, they seem to have been wiped out. But the populations south and east of Big Bend, and that's where the ones that came to the Chisos and repopulated, were sourced.

Raymond Skiles [01:10:38] But there's a bunch of missing links. Now, what about north of the Chisos? That is right here where I am and Alpine's part of the Davis Mountains and now well, well documented to have to had a big bear population back before they were wiped out. And then there's, there's others as we go toward the Guadalupe where, where there's an extant population that has persisted. And so, so, the Chinati mountains over north of Presidio and then a bunch of smaller mountain ranges north of the border, still do not have bears. And to me, that meta-population issue is that that Chisos population's out right on the edge, you know, and kind of supported from only one direction, whereas for, for real solid long-term persistence, we have to look and say, hey, you know, it may be dependent upon there continuing to be colonization and then particularly in the Davis mountains here, in the Chinati Mountains and another mountain range, in Mexico, the Sierra Rica, where, where they were wiped out, and have not returned.

Raymond Skiles [01:11:52] So to me that that maybe, you know, an important thing to look at. But certainly the protections that have been placed on those, some of those mountains, the nearest ones in Mexico through their designation as protected areas, is a good step that might help prevent, you know, just habitat degradation and development, which it doesn't have to be hunting and predator control. There's other things that can decimate a bear population and maybe those things will help solidify the dangers that have already come into place. Having a national park, you know, continue to be vigilant and visitors that do the right thing is very important.

Raymond Skiles [01:12:40] And, you know, another concept, then again, it's not founded, you know, with numbers, you know, on a research report. But, but during the 30 years, I saw from the first bears to, to an excellent record high number of bears, you know, when I retired in 2018, you know, I could estimate, and pretty well show you numbers for for at least 40 bears. And I think that was a record. You know, we just had not had, you know, as high a density of bears. I think in that time the bears were still to some degree learning their environment, and you know what things they could take advantage of. We began seeing a lot more use of the arroyos, you know, the foothills of the Chisos, bears in places that they hadn't been, you know, in this entire 30 years. They started using, you know, in the 2000s. And then we're getting, you know, documentation of them on game cameras and things like that.

Raymond Skiles [01:13:42] And I still have this idea that I've never heard anyone else suggested that they they they still may learn to fish in the Rio Grande. They certainly cross it a lot. But, you know, you go to northern rivers and things and see the bears actually get fish out of those rivers. And as a kid, you know, my grandpa taught me to go out and get into the very shallow riffles. And then you could see carp and other fish feeding in those ripples because their, their dorsal fin was sticking up out of the water. Of course, we would gig them and make fish fbait out of them. But, but, you know, when, when it wouldn't surprise me if somebody eventually comes in and says, hey, you know, we found bear out in some riffles, and it looked like it was going after fish.

Raymond Skiles [01:14:29] And of course, that's a wacky idea that hasn't been demonstrated yet. But my point is that, you know, when bears come back to an area, they don't know all about it. They may be able to learn over time. And might, that might explain, you know, the persistence of bears through the terrible record years' drought of 2011 seem not to have a great impact on them, even though it was a much more severe drought. And what I think if we could document less food apparent to us than than had occurred back in 2000, which was, you know, a decimating impact on the bears. I have just been shocked that 2000 event does not appear to have recurred even under conditions that may have been more severe. And then, of course, like I say, seeing bears using and living in, and reproducing in some areas not away from the mountains, but, but more the foothills and by the arroyos, tells me that they, they may have, they may have increased their abilities to exploit that habitat.

David Todd [01:15:40] Well, it's interesting how it appears that the bears may be learning and adapting. And I thought maybe as we start to wind down here, you might have some comments about how people are perhaps evolving as well in their attitudes about bears. Have you seen much change in people's attitudes, the visitors to the park, and then those who are trying to make a living in ranching near the park?

Raymond Skiles [01:16:16] Well, let's start with visitors. There are kind of two different categories you mentioned there. And a real positive thing is that, you know, Big Bend's

visitors are mostly from Texas and and lots of them are repeat visitors. So, you know, unlike most national parks, the length of stay is longer than, than most other parks. And then our key clientele, if you want to call it that, starting with Austin and then Houston, the Dallas - Fort Worth area and San Antonio. And, of course, you know, lots of smaller towns, but those are the key demographics that send people toward the Big Bend. So certainly by no means is that all visitors.

Raymond Skiles [01:16:59] But repeat experiences have been good, you know, generational learning from now that we're in the second or third generation of Texans who the have been there with bears present, you know, has meant that most folks arrive with some understanding, you know, from previous experience or learning. So it's still the case that that virtually all Texans come from places that don't have bears. But it seems like they're, it just sort of seems now is the way, the way to do business. Now, people show up with, with the understanding of what they're gonna need to do a lot more often now. Still, a long way from from everybody being where they need to be by the time they reach the park gate. But, you know, the bears have been widely reported about, written about, experienced, and, and so on. So that's a good thing. And, you know, while early on folks might found it onerous to have to store their food properly or bring and not allow themselves to keep food or coolers in the back of their pickup truck. So I think there's been a positive evolution there.

Raymond Skiles [01:18:16] Now, visitation, though, is getting higher and higher. I believe the park exceeded 400,000 visitors for the first time here just a couple years ago. And in that trajectory, despite this one year of COVID being an exception, obviously appears to only be upward. And, and that's you know, that, that is more stress on the system and more people that need, you know, the knowledge and the education and the right equipment and commitment. So, so, you know, the future, you know, continues to be challenged by increasing visitation. Certainly. That said, 4 or 500,000 is still pretty small compared to these big bear parks that I've mentioned before. But that that is an ongoing challenge.

Raymond Skiles [01:19:08] Now, I mentioned the meta-population idea that, but boy, the Chisos bears and bears in West Texas, even arguably the state, you know, they're probably going to be dependent on whether or not bears will be accepted as they arrive in other parts of the state. You know, the Davis Mountains here, you know, there are ranches on the Pecos River, the Hill Country of Texas. And, boy, you know, I think the jury is really still out on that. I wish I could report. Yeah, back in the late 80s and early '90s, I thought, wow, you know, the Chisos got colonized, man, they won't be long till they're in the Davis and other places. And I am sorely disappointed that to this day we don't have, you know, a a persistent, you know, reproducing population somewhere else in the state. And what's it gonna take?

Raymond Skiles [01:20:12] I wish I could say that, you know, that the ground has really been laid for, for, for success on those lands, but you know, I think, I think it's gonna be a real challenge to the degree that there's still livestock on on much of the range of ranches throughout this whole end of the state. There still seems to be a really negative perception of what bears would mean to be part of that mix, despite, you know, most of the landowners knowing about ranches in New Mexico and Colorado and Montana, I mean, you name it, where where there are cattle and there are bears. And they actually seem to benefit because the numbers are high enough to hunt and get good money out of it for landowner. Now, there just doesn't seem to be that perspective of value. Let's give it a try.

Raymond Skiles [01:21:05] And in fact, you know, artificial feeding. And I thought about hunting over wildlife feeders like deer and corn and protein feeders are a real negative in bear

habitat because bears, you know, they, they love that sort of thing. And they you know, they may tear up the feeder getting at it. You know, there's, there's even the state of Texas fosters those kinds of things, which I think are negative for bears. I learned because my family's property had had the agricultural tax assessment, some people call it the ag tax exemption, that really reduces your property taxes if you're an agricultural producer. And then, you know, like many others in the state, we decided that that, you know, we didn't want to continue with domestic livestock, but we would like to take advantage of the state's respect for what they call the the wildlife tax assessment. And you have to be in the ag tax assessment in order to go into wildlife tax assessment. And they require certain activities. And, you know, you get to choose. But the key ones are to feed the deer and other wildlife to help you qualify for, for this beneficial, pretty low tax status. And so, so the state itself encourages the wildlife feeding, which is detrimental to bears from the perspective of most of those landowners that feed the the deer. And sometimes they have javilena and often the quail or dove, you know, as the benefiting animals for their properties.

Raymond Skiles [01:22:56] And then, of course, various other things I've heard ranchers tell me, well, yeah, you know, there's good water pipes, you know, in arid areas you have to run pipes to supplement water all over a big ranch and man there's great technologies that let you just lay that pipe out on the surface and and not have to worry about digging in rock to put in pipe ditches and things and and those darn bears they'll chew on a pipe, you know, and these plastics, you know, they will poke a hole in. And so we don't want them. You know, not to mention the notions that their livestock could be vulnerable to bear predation on, I think, rare occasions, which is what is normally the case. And some different methods of managing a lot of livestock might be necessary. And so those are those are still big issues.

Raymond Skiles [01:23:45] As well as subdivisions of the land. Quite often as the ranch sells and ranches out here are big, you know, a modest ranche is thirty thousand acres and large ones are multiple hundred thousand acres. But when they sell, they're typically not going to another rancher or somebody who's particularly interested in necessarily the wildlife. Typically, they go to folks who've got big money from the cities. And if it's not that, then they get sold to subdivision, a bank or investment group, will buy a ranch and then immediately divided up into five to maybe one hundred acres and bulldoze roads all over it then and start selling those off for hunting camps and vacation homes. And in some cases, people want to go live in some, some place with no neighbors nearby. And it's a economical way to achieve that. And that fragmentation of the habitat and increasing the people and the number of opportunities for bears to encounter negative consequences, you know, is a big influence here. So, so that's a long way of saying that I've been very discouraged and I have to admit I'm still not optimistic about large areas of the state having bears re-colonized. That said, maybe some smaller areas of the state. You know, there's a protected area of some 25,000 acres in the Davis Mountains that the Nature Conservancy is the core of. And I like to think that if a female showed up there, you know, and had cubs, they already got the males coming through, that maybe there could be some some small populations at least, or the seed pockets, you know, for, for some more populations but in 30 years since the Chisos, it just hasn't happened yet.

Raymond Skiles [01:25:44] Well, it's it's an encouraging prospect. And, you know, I hope that things do work out well for the bears and thank you so much for telling me about them. Is there anything you'd like to add? I think we should probably let you go. You've been very generous with your time already.

Raymond Skiles [01:26:04] Well, I said there's nothing I'd rather talk about how so I go on and on. But no, I think we've covered the bases pretty well.

Raymond Skiles [01:26:15] I just again, I really hope that the future is not only the status quo we have now, but that the increasing potential for making bears part of our lives in Texas and, you know, particularly out here. This year has been a, has been another really interesting, may be record-setting, year in the number of bears that have been showing up north of the border, not necessarily living there, but migrants and and, of course, migrants are a key to getting them started somewhere, regardless of what the cause of that migration might be.

Raymond Skiles [01:26:51] And, you know, just in the last few days, two different females with young cubs have shown up, unfortunately, in Del Rio, Texas, and they've met with problems. One of them was killed, one of them shot, and now the next one may. They, they, I think they're trying to trap it, maybe as we speak, with its cub and then relocate it somewhere not too far off.

[01:27:13] And and, you know, so, so, so those are some good signs. But they, you know, we have to demonstrate we have what I call the value system, you know, the reason for saying that, "oh, yeah, we know we can accept them and the future they bring." And so to me, that is the real challenge. You know, maybe it's a task ahead, you know, by people and agencies and organizations that, that, you know, can see a different future to to focus on these opportunities to, to start building support for bears and help, you know, create a value system that that can support their, their presence, whether it be around towns or on ranches, that also have other goals for those landscapes. And so anyway, there's hope and there's opportunities and, you know, I hope to see some dividends from maybe some of those changes if they can, if they can happen.

David Todd [01:28:17] Yeah. Well, it's good progress in the past. And you've certainly been a part of that. And I hope that we all get to see, you know, as you say, dividends and good returns, growth in population in the years to come.

David Todd [01:28:35] Well, thank you so much. It's been great talking to you. I hope you have a good day. We've finally gotten some clear weather here, and I hope that you have good weather out there as well.

Raymond Skiles [01:28:49] Yeah. Well, thank you for the opportunity. It's my pleasure. Hopefully my experiences can benefit folks in the future. And call us if you have any other follow up questions you might have.

David Todd [01:29:00] OK. Well, thank you so much. It's good to talk to you, Mr. Skiles.

Raymond Skiles [01:29:04] You take care.

David Todd [01:29:04] Take care.

Raymond Skiles [01:29:04] Bye.

David Todd [01:29:05] Bye.