

TRANSCRIPT**INTERVIEWEE:** Melanie Anderson**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd**DATE:** April 22, 2021**LOCATION:** Conifer, Colorado, by telephone**TRANSCRIBER:** Trint, David Todd**SOURCE MEDIA:** Google Voice, MP3 audio file**REEL:** 4053**FILE:** MountainLion_Anderson_Melanie_Colorado_22April2021_Reel4053_NoiseFiltered.mp3

David Todd [00:00:03] Well, this is an interview that we're just starting to do with Ms. Melanie Anderson, and I'd like to explain what our purpose is here before we get too far into things. And the thought is that we would plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin. And I wanted to make it clear that although those are our goals for the non-profit, that that Ms. Anderson has all rights to use the recording as she sees fit as well. And I wanted to make sure that that sits well with her slash you. Does that sound good?

Melanie Anderson [00:01:04] Absolutely.

David Todd [00:01:05] OK, good, good. I just want to make sure that we're all on board.

David Todd [00:01:10] Well, let me lay out this, sort of, as an old journalist, you'll know this, the, the what, when, where, why, how issues. It is April 22nd, 2021. My name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. I'm in Austin and we are conducting an interview with Melanie Anderson, who has been a grantmaker in the animal protection program at the Summerlee Foundation of Dallas for over three decades. And she's also been a volunteer and board member for several animal protection groups, including the Mountain Lion Foundation of California. She's based in Colorado and this interview is being done by telephone.

David Todd [00:01:55] Today, I think our goal is, of course, to talk about her background, but then to sort of zoom in and focus on the mountain lion. And so that that's our aspiration here.

David Todd [00:02:13] We usually start these interviews by just asking if there might have been some formative, influential experiences from your childhood that might have led you into your interest, lifelong interest, it seems like, in wildlife and rescue and rehabilitation of animals.

Melanie Anderson [00:02:33] You know, I've been thinking about that and those of us in the animal world talk about that sometimes. How did you get started? And there, there are two camps, essentially, and one there, there are people who remember having special experiences when growing up and then there are the rest of us who it just seems like we came into the world that way. And I'm in that camp. I think I just came into the world that way. It's hard to explain.

Melanie Anderson [00:03:09] I do think that growing up in west Texas, I spent a lot of time outdoors, as much as I could as a child. And of course, the animals that I grew up with in the outside in west Texas were rattlesnakes and tarantulas and horny toads and lizards and

vultures and skunks. But I was fascinated with all of them and just really intrigued by them. And it's, it's hard to explain, but I think that's a big part of it.

Melanie Anderson [00:03:49] My father, who was an independent oil producer, would take me out into the field with him a lot when I was little. And so I got to see coyotes and hawks and all kinds of amazing animals. And they just, I just was always fascinated by them.

David Todd [00:04:12] Well, it's interesting from the little you've told me already that you're interested in a wide variety of animals and not necessarily the plush toy, fuzzy-wuzzy creatures, but maybe some of the ones with fangs and teeth and talons.

Melanie Anderson [00:04:31] Exactly. Yeah. Yeah, well, that was my experience. That's who I saw. And my father was, well, both my parents, appreciated animals and and loved animals and taught us respect for them. Not fear, but, but respect.

David Todd [00:04:54] That's, that's interesting. There is a difference, I guess, between fear and respect. I mean that you recognize their place, but realize that they maybe need some, some room and space to, to follow their life, and for you to follow your own.

David Todd [00:05:12] Well, maybe we can ask another question, of sort of a different phase of your life. As you started to go to school, did you find that there are any influential teachers or classmates or any particular experiences while you were in school or college that might have been important to you and, you know, leading you towards work with animals?

Melanie Anderson [00:05:38] No, not really. You know, I read all the usual children's books that featured animals as heroes and teachers and, and I liked, I loved, animal-themed literature, as in Charlotte's Web and stories of that nature. So, again, it was, it was just simply who I was. And, and I just went off in that direction on my own. I can't remember any particular teachers throughout my education that pointed me in that direction.

David Todd [00:06:19] OK, well, another chapter in your life, of course, is as you got out of college, and as I understand it, you worked as a journalist for a while at The Dallas Times Herald. Did you find that there was any kind of role in, in journalism where you found that perhaps information about a subject, whether it was animals or otherwise, could be important and valuable to changing public attitudes?

Melanie Anderson [00:06:52] No. There were a couple of things. When I was in college, I saw an ad in a magazine, a quarter-page ad, and it was a picture of a, a raccoon in a, a dead raccoon in a steel-jaw trap. And it was clear that the raccoon had suffered. And the caption at the bottom of the ad was, "because of their beauty, a grizzly death". And I cut it out. It was the Animal Protection Institute. And I cut it out, wrote out a little check for twenty dollars and mailed it to them. And within several weeks, I received a phone call from the founder and the president of Animal Protection Institute who was calling me to thank me for a 20-dollar check. And I found that was interesting.

Melanie Anderson [00:07:54] And he was he was curious as to why I was interested and what I was studying in college. And he encouraged me to attend some of their national conferences and become a member and, and read their materials. And so that opened my eyes to the world of, of animal rights and animal advocacy and the people who were really fighting on a national level for animals. And so that was something that I got involved with. And it was painful because I had no clue on a national scale, global scale, what was happening to animals

- the war on animals - how they were used, how they were mistreated, so that, that very much impacted my direction.

David Todd [00:08:56] Well, maybe you can talk a little bit about that. I understood that from really your very earliest years as an adult, you were doing volunteer work for animal protection. Could you maybe run through a few of the things. I think you were involved with some feral cat rescue and maybe some other efforts?

Melanie Anderson [00:09:17] Yeah. So the feral cat rescue was something extraordinary. I had a kitty when I was 13 and he, I took him to college with me. And then when I graduated and moved to Dallas, started to work. This Kitty was with me and he died of old age. He died of cancer. And I buried him in my backyard. I had my first house in Dallas. I buried him under this huge persimmon tree, which was one of my favorite trees in my yard. And within a couple of days I noticed a strange cat sitting under that tree by the place where Spats had been buried, and I'd never seen that cat before. And then another day there was another different cat and a different cat. And I began to see there were cats everywhere in that neighborhood. And some of them didn't look so good. And some of them were friendly and most of them were not.

Melanie Anderson [00:10:40] And so I, I talked to some folks at Alley Cat Allies, and I started a trapping program just on my own because it was clear that, that there were a lot of homeless cats in my neighborhood. This was in east Dallas, out towards White Rock Lake. So I started doing the feral cat rescue and racking up a huge credit card debt because I was taking them to my private vet to be spayed and neutered and vaccinated. And then I was trying to adopt some out that were socialized, just kind of started on my own, simply because you just don't want to see these, these animals suffering. So I started writing about that, about homeless cats and feral cats and, and went down that road, which makes sense because I'd grown up with cats all my life and I had no idea of their plight and that there were unsocialized domestic cats that were suffering.

David Todd [00:11:54] Wow, you, you go all-in. I mean there are some people who I think have opinions and maybe they write the check or they might make a call, but, but this sounds like you really went to great ends to, you know, trap and inoculate and spay and adopt out these cat. That's impressive.

Melanie Anderson [00:12:19] I think, you know, David, I think is just something about empathy and relating to, to suffering. And some people, some people have a lot of it, but it's not always healthy. But and it, you know, just to see others suffering hurts. So you try to do what you can. And we all have different ways of, of trying to address that.

David Todd [00:12:45] Sure. Well, I guess one way you'd addressed, and I think really empowered your concern for animals, is to get into the philanthropic field. And, you know, you, as I understood it, came to the Summerlee Foundation in 1989 and worked with the foundation's donor, Annie Lee Roberts, to put together a animal grantmaking program. And I thought it'd be really interesting to hear about those early discussions with Ms. Roberts and how this all came about, how you, you know, figured out the direction of the program.

Melanie Anderson [00:13:27] Yeah, well, Annie Lee had, who was just an extraordinary woman. She, like I, had cared about animals deeply from childhood and she had some interesting experiences. She grew up in Terrell, Texas, and her father was extremely wealthy and owned a lot of land. And one of the things he did, he leased one of his properties to a

traveling circus. So Annie Lee, as a child, as a little girl, when, when the circus rolled into town, she ran down to the property because she wanted to see the animals. And she was extremely upset at what she saw, how the animals were brutalized, how they were treated, and it, that impacted her enormously.

Melanie Anderson [00:14:28] And so one of the things she wanted to do, one of the things she wanted her foundation to address, is performing animals, captive animals, their treatment, trying to end that kind of abuse and create sanctuary for wild animals. Sanctuary for wild animals was very important to her.

Melanie Anderson [00:14:52] And she even told me a time that she saw a farmer in Terrell, Texas, and he was beating his plow horse. The horse was struggling and couldn't go very far. And the guy was beating the horse with a whip. And Annie Lee was a child back then. And she marched out into that field, and talked to the farmer and begged him not to hurt his horse, which impacted him. But she had some interesting experiences growing up.

Melanie Anderson [00:15:27] And she and her husband didn't have children. So he had predeceased her by twenty years. They were both, they both came from extremely wealthy families. So Annie Lee wanted to create a foundation. She had been giving in her lifetime. She'd been giving grants to, donations to, a wide variety of animal organizations. So she wanted to create this foundation for animals because of her interest. And the other part was Texas history for her husband's interest, as well as hers. But she was more deeply rooted in the animal protection side.

Melanie Anderson [00:16:10] I didn't have to guide her very much. She was very strong-willed. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. And so we had some interesting conversations. But again, she, she was clear what path she wanted the foundation to take.

David Todd [00:16:31] Well, and I gather that one of the paths that the foundation took, and I know there are many and diverse sides of animal protection, but one of them was on mountain lion protection. And I was impressed by the Grantees' Voice report that you were nice to share with me. And how many of the donees were really impressed, struck by, by the foundation's long-term focus on mountain lion protection and what a benefit that had been. And I wonder why it is that, that splinter of your program has been such a long-standing concern.

Melanie Anderson [00:17:24] Well. And Annie Lee wanted Summerlee to address those issues that were the most underserved, heavily exploited, underserved, no protection, and no one paid much attention to it, and that certainly was, is, still, unfortunately, the mountain lion. So in our wildlife program, that's who we focus on - mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes and black bears. They're heavily exploited, they're heavily hunted, they suffer horribly and they have very little protection. And back then there wasn't, there wasn't a lot of research on these animals. Still isn't, although mountain lions has really, research on mountain lions has really blossomed, thank God.

Melanie Anderson [00:18:26] But it was interesting because I didn't know much about mountain lions. And we got a request from the Mountain Lion Foundation. And one of our board members, one of the Summerlee board members, was a rancher near Austin. So when I presented this proposal, this was the first year, Annie Lee was president of the board, still alive. And I presented the proposal and, and this particular rancher, Lavinia Griffith, who was

a distant relative of Annie Lee's, she said, "why in the world would we want to protect a varmint like that who, who does nothing but kill, and kills our cattle?"

Melanie Anderson [00:19:15] And honestly, I was embarrassed because I didn't have a ready answer, and it was a little uncomfortable. And Annie Lee could see that. And so she says, "well, Melanie, why don't you do a little extra research and come back and talk to us about why you think mountain lions need help and protection." So that opened things up. And I went back to the Mountain Lion Foundation and I started reading a lot more material. And so when I, when the board meeting reconvened, I could talk more about how lions didn't have any protection, and how they were heavily exploited, and how important they were to healthy ecosystems. And the, the proposal passed. So that started me on that path, I believe.

David Todd [00:20:16] That's so interesting. Well, this makes me sort of wonder about maybe a lot of our sort of preconceived notions, prejudices, that that, you know, grantmakers might have. And I was curious if, if you had similar visits with other trustees, maybe within Summerlee or among your foundation community writ-large.

Melanie Anderson [00:20:46] Yeah, it's, it's been tough, David. And it's interesting, so a lot of organizations come to us and they want funding for wolves and they want funding for grizzly bears, and I have to explain to them, there's already a lot of funding for those animals. I've seen it and there's no funding for the four species I previously mentioned. I don't know why there's so much funding for endangered species. We seem to hammer species until they're in trouble and then we pour a lot of money into bringing them back. Why aren't we focusing on those animals who are being heavily exploited? They don't yet have endangered species status, but we should be looking at protecting them before they get to that point.

Melanie Anderson [00:21:40] And that brings me to another issue of when we really started getting into mountain lions. I attended a mountain lion conference, a workshop, where people present on the status of lions in the Western states. And there I met Morris Hornocker, who was a biologist and had the Hornocker Wildlife Institute. And he this was right before wolf reintroduction into Yellowstone National Park. And he wanted to pursue research into how wolves were going to impact the mountain lion population in the parks - Yellowstone and the Tetons. And he could not get any funding for it, from any wildlife funders because no one wanted any potential negative information coming out about wolves that would somehow hamper the wolf reintroduction program. So I told him we'll fund it, we'll fund that research, and we did. And that continued.

Melanie Anderson [00:23:05] But it showed that indeed wolves negatively impact mountain lions and they're, it's just who they are. Wolves are ferocious predators, competitors. They're very aggressive and they kill mountain lion kittens. And as they came in, and as their population grew in Yellowstone, a lot of lions had to leave. They left Yellowstone and they moved down into the Tetons.

Melanie Anderson [00:23:37] So that, that whole thing continues today. I've seen it. I just saw it in Colorado. They had an initiative wanting to bring back wolves in Colorado. I voted against it. I talked to my friends, I, I talked to a lot of people I knew. And the reason - I like wolves too, but there's only so much space today for this whole array of carnivores and Colorado doesn't have the large national parks that Wyoming does, and so ... there's trophy hunting of lions as well. So I think research has shown that when you introduce wolves, you just, it's just like putting another nail in the coffin for lions. It just creates another hardship for them to deal with.

Melanie Anderson [00:24:38] So it's all very tricky on which animals do we protect? How do we manage all of this? We've messed it up for them and now we're trying to bring it back for them. But it's very complicated and difficult. And again, Summerlee is, is championing the underserved and the misunderstood and not getting a lot of attention.

David Todd [00:25:07] Yeah, it seems like it's a really difficult field because there are these, I guess, sort of competitive situations between a whole array of needy species and problems. And, you know, you, you have to, you know, pick one. You can't do them all.

David Todd [00:25:28] So one of the things that, again, going back to this report that the Grantee's Voice found, I was impressed by the donees' gratitude that the foundation supported both activism and science. And I was wondering how you as a funder balance advocacy programs and then research efforts?

Melanie Anderson [00:26:04] Well, you know, it takes both. It takes long-term funding and it takes all, all efforts, every which, every aspect that we can address. It's a, it's a campaign. It's, it's multifaceted. You can't, you can't just focus on one. And I think it's, I think part of the problem that we have, we humans in this field, we think, too, that good science, good scientists can't also be advocates, that if somehow we become advocates, we're not presenting with them.

Melanie Anderson [00:26:52] I'm sorry, I have a cat.

Melanie Anderson [00:26:55] We're not. We're not, presenting good science, that somehow they don't go hand-in-hand. And I hear biologists talking about that, too: "Well, we can't really be advocates because we'll lose our credibility." But that's changing. And I have found that with Panthera, an international organization that focuses on research for all wild cats, they've become advocates. And I think we have to do that. I think we're at a point where we have so many animals suffering, and we're losing so many species, we have to get good science with advocacy. And so Summerlee in wanting to promote that, we fund both, both, both aspects. They go hand-in-hand. And it's the only way we're going to have impact.

David Todd [00:27:52] So if I'm following you, maybe what's going on is that the, the research is no longer just an academic question of curiosity about how the natural world works. But just, it's gotten to the point where ecosystems are in such disarray that you, you pretty much have to be both an advocate and a researcher. You can't just look, look away.

Melanie Anderson [00:28:19] Exactly.

David Todd [00:28:21] Is that fair? OK, so, gosh, you know, over three decades of grants - are there any particular grant programs that affect mountain lions, maybe particular in Texas, that, that when you look back, you feel most proud of?

Melanie Anderson [00:28:45] You know, I'm, I'm very proud of our work with Sul Ross. And thank God for them. I know it's tough, it's been really tough. And they're the only institution in the state that have taken this on, that have concerns. And they, they got a lot of - Sul Ross, in the beginning when they started this program, ranchers around that region who had donated, made large donations to Sul Ross, said that if you if you start this mountain lion research, mountain lion program, we're, we're cutting off your funding. We don't want, we're not going to give you anything.

Melanie Anderson [00:29:33] And to Sul Ross' credit, they said that's what we're here for. We're a university. We're here to explore, to find answers, to promote sound science. We're sorry if we lose your donations, but that's the direction we're taking. And I know there are other universities in the West that did not take that tack. I'm proud of them. Proud of Sul Ross for doing that. It's a tough state to work in. And yet Louis and Patricia have just been fantastic. So I feel good about that. And we want to support that.

David Todd [00:30:13] That's interesting. I, I guess these institutions are always sensitive to what funders will support and won't always follow the facts where they might lead them.

David Todd [00:30:30] Well, maybe we can dig in a little bit to some of the more specifics about some of the mountain lion support that you've been engaged with at Summerlee. And, and I think it might help if, if we just try to understand your view of, of the ecology that mountain lions find themselves part of in Texas. And I know that you're not a scientist per se, but I know you've read pages and pages, and I was wondering if you might give us sort of a layperson's introduction to what you see as trends in panther populations and range in the state, and maybe beyond if you could touch on that.

Melanie Anderson [00:31:19] You know, I, I don't know what to tell you about their range. That's, that's a difficult one. So there were populations in west Texas and south Texas, and it's my understanding that the south Texas population probably won't survive. They, they have been heavily hammered and highways and development. The south Texas population will disappear. So that leaves the west Texas population and that's going to be challenging. My, my feeling, I think one of our largest grants that we've committed to before I retire is with Panthera and it's a range-wide assessment of mountain lions, pumas - so from Canada to the Patagonia region. And it's going to take several years. But I think at this point, it's, it's the only thing that, it's the last thing Summerlee can do for lions. And what's it what's interesting...

David Todd [00:32:41] Do you want to just hold for a minute and let that run through?

Melanie Anderson [00:32:46] OK. Sorry about that.

David Todd [00:32:51] No, that's quite all right. Quite all right.

Melanie Anderson [00:32:54] So there's been a range-wide assessment of every large wild cat on the planet, except for mountain lions, and I'm not sure why that is. And there's always been this belief and promotion by our, our state agencies that lions are doing well. But we know at this point that every large wild cat on the planet is suffering. They're not doing well, so why do we think mountain lions are doing well? So I think the range-wide assessment is, is going to be extremely important. Unfortunately, it's going to take a little while. But I think we need that. We need that data. And so that, that's something I'm waiting on and I'll be curious about. But like I said, it's going to take several years and it may not be that lions are endangered enough that their entire status will change. But we're going to find those areas, those regions, where they have been extirpated or where they have no chance of surviving. So it will bring attention to how they're doing and their plight. And I think that's important.

Melanie Anderson [00:34:28] And one of the reasons that lions are so important, David, is because they're, they're keystone species. And keystone species disproportionately influence their environment and they're often the ones that support the best ecosystem health and, and biodiversity. And lions have even, mountain lions have, even a more special status in that

they're called an "ecosystem engineer". And these are animals that create or modify habitat for other animals, which means they generally increase biodiversity in those local areas where they exist and the amount of types of habitat available for a wide range of other animals.

Melanie Anderson [00:35:37] So they, they're a species that create large carcasses when they kill and wolves do not. Wolves tend to dismantle their prey into small chunks and large carcasses are actually more important to ecosystem health. So they, lions, feed more mammals and birds than any other predator. And in addition to that, they feed a large range of invertebrates and a large range of different kinds of beetles. So we're finding that in reality our one large American cat may be one of the most important species to our entire ecosystem health.

David Todd [00:36:42] That is so fascinating.

Melanie Anderson [00:36:45] Isn't it?

David Todd [00:36:46] Wow, I had never heard that sort of aspect of their role. I mean, I guess I had heard, and you may want to address this, that that mountain lions, I guess, keep some of the deer population in check. But this role of, well, what happens after they make a kill and what, how does the, the, you know, the carrion, the carcass, feed secondary animals in the food chain? That's a really interesting insight. Thank you so much for sharing that with me.

David Todd [00:37:20] And so, you know, one thing that strikes me is that, as you've I think pointed out, there, there isn't the kind of level of deep and wide research on mountain lions, and yet there are a lot of myths. I mean, you're talking about Ms. Robert's cousin, who, you know, had, I guess, disdain for the animal and maybe not the best informed. Can you talk about some of the myths that you've run across about mountain lions that really just aren't supported?

Melanie Anderson [00:37:59] You know, I, I don't know about myths other than the reality of a large predator on the landscape. I do know this, which has been interesting out in the West Texas study: a lot of the ranchers out there in the West Texas study area insist that lions kill their calves. And I think Louis and Patricia have shown that that's simply not true. They, they will take a calf maybe every now and then, but every single rancher out there, every calf that dies, they insist it was a mountain lion kill, even when a veterinarian (Louis and Patricia have had veterinarians go out there, examine the body and say, this is not a mountain lion kill). Yes, it is. The ranchers will argue with a veterinarian who says, no, this is not a mountain lion kill. So this insistence that lions are hurting their cows, going after the calves, damaging their livestock, I don't know how to address that. Even in the face of truth, they don't want to believe it.

David Todd [00:39:28] Huh. It's just one of those sort of legacy feelings that gets passed on, and ...

Melanie Anderson [00:39:35] I guess it is. And the thing that's changing, the thing that will change out there, is that some of those old ranchers are dying off. It's not become financially productive anymore. And new people are moving in, buying the land. Pam Harte, I think she's one of those who loves the wildlife, loves mountain lions. There are a lot of people buying land out there because it's such a beautiful part of Texas and they appreciate all of the wild animals

and all of the animals out there. And they're no longer interested in that. And I think that's what's got, what's got to change. And, you know, even if you offer non-lethal deterrence to the ranchers out there, they, they won't go for that. I don't, I don't know how to address that belief system, holding on to a belief system in the, in the face of a totally different reality.

David Todd [00:40:47] You mentioned a phrase there that I may not be totally aware of, and others, others might be new to it. What is non-lethal deterrence?

Melanie Anderson [00:40:59] Oh, my gosh. There are ... non-lethal deterrents are being analyzed and used heavily in Latin America, on pumas and other large cats. And so non-lethal deterrents are a system with special fencing, a system with lights, sound triggered if a predator moves towards these fields where there is prey, lights come on, sound comes on, special fencing, the use of donkeys and other animals. And it's very successful, extremely successful in South America and Central America.

David Todd [00:41:55] That's great. Well, you know, it seems like kind of a win-win that that might lead to some co-existence there.

David Todd [00:42:04] You know, one thing that that I've been interested in just, you know, sort of superficial reading that I've done, is that there is not the kind of data that you'd expect for such a large and important part of the ecosystem - that there isn't a mountain lion harvest report requirement, mandate, for, for cougars being killed in Texas. Do you think that that would be useful or, and if so, any idea why it isn't required?

Melanie Anderson [00:42:45] I think it's not required because ranchers want to, they don't, they just want to kill and they don't want to have to report it. It's sort of like when wolves were reintroduced, and the ranchers announced that they weren't going to participate and shoot, shovel and shut up. And it's that, I think it's that anti, "I don't want to have to report to an agency what I do on my own private property."

Melanie Anderson [00:43:25] My belief, what I think we should do in Texas at this point, is just put a moratorium on killing lions, just a moratorium on killing lions and see what happens. I don't think it's going to help to, to give them game status. They're not going to, they're not, people aren't going to come to Texas to trophy hunt lions. I just think we ought to stop; just if there was some way to put a temporary moratorium on all lions and see what happens and start there.

David Todd [00:44:08] So you mentioned this issue of, of game status and maybe we can explore that a little bit. So my understanding is that while there was an effort back in the early 90s by the Sierra Club to protect mountain lions as a game species, you know, give it a season, a bag limit, something, you feel like that is just not a good solution to figuring out what's a sustainable way to manage mountain lions.

Melanie Anderson [00:44:42] Not anymore. No, I don't. I don't see Parks and Wildlife wanting, Texas Parks and Wildlife wanting to do that. And, I'm not sure how good Texas Parks and Wildlife is managing game species, to be perfectly honest. You know, Texas Parks and Wildlife looks the other way with these killing contests, these massive killing contests of mesocarnivores, which is just horrible. So I just I think a moratorium at this point - that's what California did. California implemented a moratorium for a certain number of years and then they renewed it. And then, then there was a push to open up to game status. But the residents of California then decided they didn't want to kill lions at all. So California, of course, is the

only state with a viable mountain lion population that doesn't trophy hunt them. So I think that's, I really honestly think that's where we are at this point with lions in Texas. We've hammered the population so badly, I think we're going to lose them.

David Todd [00:46:18] Sorry about that, David. That's my Summerlee line, so I have to, I can't turn it off.

David Todd [00:46:38] Sure, no, I understand. That's OK. You're a popular woman!

Melanie Anderson [00:46:44] It's that May one deadline.

Melanie Anderson [00:46:47] So I'm afraid we're going to lose lions. I think a moratorium at this point. I don't think that, I don't even think they'd be a good game species or have a season on them. I think we just need to stop the killing for a while and see what happens.

David Todd [00:47:03] Well, you know, it's interesting. I think that you've been approached by folks who work with endangered species, rare species. And, and there's a whole sort of regulatory system, of course, for, for managing those creatures. Do you think that's not such a viable way for mountain lions to go, I mean, given their increasing rareness?

Melanie Anderson [00:47:35] I think, I think ultimately, yes, which is part of this, but I'm hoping the information will show us from this range-wide assessment of mountain lions. Yes, that's a few years away, though. And, and we've hammered lions so badly in Texas, and we know they're not that many coming up from Mexico to keep Texas supplied, so I honestly believe just a moratorium for a while and see what happens.

David Todd [00:48:17] That's interesting, so sort of a, sort of a, a hiatus.

Melanie Anderson [00:48:23] Yes.

David Todd [00:48:24] In the kind of pressure on them until there can be some data from this Panthera study.

David Todd [00:48:30] You know, we've talked a bit about mountain lions in the wild. And, and before we get too far along, I did want to ask you a little bit about this kind of strange netherworld of mountain lions that are kept as pets or guard animals that are exhibited, you know. And then there's this sort of underground trade, as I understand it, in mountain lions. Can you introduce us a little bit to that and what some of the issues are that you've, you've run into with that?

Melanie Anderson [00:49:09] Yeah, I've you know, I haven't seen it as much as I did in the past. You could open almost any newspaper in Texas and you'd see that mountain lion kittens for sale. And I actually got a call one day from a couple who lived in Dallas and they had a mountain lion that they had purchased, a young mountain lion, they had purchased. And it was a disaster, of course. They had purchased him as a kitten and now he was going through puberty and about to become an adult and completely unmanageable of course because he's a mountain lion and tearing up their, tearing up everything they had, and being aggressive towards them.

Melanie Anderson [00:50:08] So they didn't want him anymore. And they wanted me to come get him. They wanted me to come get him. So I contacted Lynn Cuny at Wildlife Rescue

in the Hill Country, and she came and the two of us went over there. And, it was indeed this, you know, very young adult, a very young mountain lion in this couple's living room. And to their credit, they had not declawed and or defanged him, which is what a lot of people will do. And I've never, I've never seen anything like that before. And so we were able to to get him, to capture him. And he went to live the rest of his life at Lynn Cuny's sanctuary and have a nice wooded refuge.

Melanie Anderson [00:51:07] But there's a lot of that that's going on. It's not just mountain lions, it's bobcats, it's ocelots. It's all kinds of wild cats. And it's always a disaster there. It's ... I would love to have a mountain lion kitten to play with. That's, they're so beautiful. But that's not their purpose. It's I, I don't know. I don't know. I think most people just don't think about what they're getting into. I'd like to think that, that they they're not they're not aware. But it's crazy. And that should be completely outlawed - the selling of wild cats as pets, or any wild animals as pets. So there's just so much room for abuse from reptiles to, to big cats. It's sickening.

David Todd [00:52:05] Yeah. I think something else that you had mentioned in passing were these killing contests. And I think that, I wasn't really aware of them and their, I guess, upsurge in recent years. But I was curious if you could talk a little about trophy hunting of of mountain lions and the, you know, what some of the trends are and the sources of that kind of effort.

Melanie Anderson [00:52:39] Yeah, that's hard to address. The trophy hunting of mountain lions is how every western state in the United States manages lions, except for California and Texas. And, I know it's hard to understand, it's hard to understand why someone wants a beautiful cat as a trophy.

Melanie Anderson [00:53:13] And I will tell you an interesting story about Panthera and Howard Quigly, who started with the Hornocker Wildlife Institute. And Summerlee was funding this enormous study, as I mentioned previously, in the Tetons and Yellowstone National Park. And, of course, lions aren't trophy hunted in the park, but they are certainly around the park. And I had noticed a lot of the research that we funded in several Western states - one upsetting aspect of it was that trophy hunters, outfitters would target lions with collars. And they would target lions with collars because they wanted the trophy and because they were easy to find if they could get in on that radio frequency. And then they didn't want the science. They, they were afraid. They were afraid the science would show that these lions shouldn't be hunted anymore.

Melanie Anderson [00:54:21] So in the Yellowstone and Teton area, if you killed a collared lion, you had to return the collar. So they would bring the collar back to Panthera and they would have to give the, the name and address of the, the person who killed the lion. So one of the interesting aspects that Howard would do - I really admired him for this. He would call the the hunter and he would say, you know, "you killed Lion F66. And we have five, six years of data on her, and I'm just wondering if you'd be interested in knowing a little more about her."

Melanie Anderson [00:55:19] And he said about nine times out of ten, they would say, "yeah, yeah." So Howard would proceed to tell them where this cat was born, how she grew up, the experiences that she had, what she did, the certain kind of prey that she went after. Just kind of giving them a picture of an animal with a life, who enjoyed certain things, who had a skill set of sorts, who had these experiences. And he said that by the end of the call, more often than not, the guy seemed a little remorseful, like he maybe was rethinking this. And I think

that's important. I think it's important that hunters think about these animals and the lives that they have and how they ended that life. So I think that's one important aspect of it.

Melanie Anderson [00:56:34] The killing contests are much more brutal. It's however many of these animals you can kill within a period of time. And I think the sad thing is, is the biggest one in Texas, I think is in Tom Green County, which is my natal county. I was born in San Angelo, Texas. That's Tom Green County. And it is, it's a free-for-all on however many coyotes, bobcats, gray foxes, all of these mesocarnivores who are so important to our ecological health, and how many of them they can kill in a certain time period. It's cruel. It's, it's about cruelty. It's not about a humane death. It's nasty. And even Texas Parks and Wildlife, even the state agencies, will say it's not biologically sound. It's a train wreck for these animals, but they won't stop it.

Melanie Anderson [00:57:32] Several states have outlawed it. Colorado has outlawed it. But Texas Parks and Wildlife, I believe, (no, has Texas outlawed it?), I think they, they think there's an economic benefit to these rural counties. So here are these rural counties who are suffering. And this brings a lot of people in. But really, do you want those kind of people to come into your county and wipe out these animals that are so critical to rodent control? And the list just goes on and on. And I can't believe that state agencies are looking the other way on this.

David Todd [00:58:20] Yeah, I, it's, it's, it's hard to be objective about it. It just seems staggering.

David Todd [00:58:32] You know, one thing that I think this makes me think of, and I was wondering if you might have some insights about it, is, you know, a good deal of the Parks and Wildlife budget, the funding for the agency goes back to the, the guns and ammo and, and fishing rods and other kinds of of equipment - taxes, excise taxes. And do you think that that's part of what drives Parks and Wildlife's hesitation to interfere with these, these kinds of killing contests or, you know, the more progressive ways of managing the species?

Melanie Anderson [00:59:25] I do. You're absolutely right about that. I think that most of us in this work believe that our state agencies need another form of revenue and that the North American model of wildlife management needs to go away. The North American model of wildlife management is managing animals by killing them and how much revenue you get from trophy hunting. And those of us who are non-consumptive have no role in our state agencies. So I think there's been, I've been hearing talk about revamping that for at least a decade, and we're willing to do that. Those of us who are non-consumptive, who have been interviewed, would gladly pay more taxes on binoculars and tents and outdoor equipment and birdwatching equipment and everything that, that we use when we go out and we want to camp and we want to have wildlife experiences of seeing them, photographing them. We're all willing to pay more for that privilege, if we stop killing. And the idea is to bring state agencies a whole other form of revenue. So instead of licenses to kill, permits to kill, we will contribute. And the state agencies have been reluctant to think about that or go with that model. But I think that's what we have to do. I think I think that's the only way to change things. And I think at some point that will be the direction we take as new generations of humans become less and less interested in killing animals and having trophies.

David Todd [01:01:41] Well, and I could see moving away from, like you said, the Pittman-Robertson approach to funding wildlife agencies as maybe being a good thing to hit a more stable form of funding, because I gather that the ranks of hunters are declining with time and

non-consumptive uses are rising. So maybe that would be good for dollars and cents, and not just for the, the wildlife.

Melanie Anderson [01:02:14] Absolutely it would.

David Todd [01:02:17] Well, I'm curious what your thoughts would be about how you, how you would persuade folks. You know, it seems like, on the one hand, there's the sort of objective way to talk about animal management. You talk about their biology and their ecological situation, the population, the range, all the sort of scientific stuff. And then there's, there's the more sort of gut-wrenching, soul-tearing ways to talk about the unethical treatment of, of wildlife that there aren't maybe as widely understood as they should be - the canned hunts, the leg-hold traps, and so on. What do you think's the way to sort of move wildlife management forward and the funding of that public kind of attitude towards it?

Melanie Anderson [01:03:12] I think that, as Jane Goodall said, I, I, I think that telling stories about individuals, it's Howard's, it's Howard's way of talking to hunters, by bringing home that this particular cat was an individual with a life, with - she had a personality, she had talents, she had thought processes. She had experiences. I think that's, I think that's the way we have to go through certain individuals. Individuals move us, it's really hard for the public, especially in the environmental movement, the public, to understand and get behind ecosystems, understand what that means. I mean, intellectually, yes, we get it, but does it hit us in the heart? And I think what hits us in the heart and in our mind are individual stories of individual animals. These are sentient beings who have skill sets and personalities. Like every cat, every dog, every companion animal we have, has a different personality. Well, so do these wild animals. They're not automatons or robots. Each one of them is an individual. And all of the scientific research has shown that they have their own talents and as I said, skills and preferences. And I think that we need to tell more stories about these individuals. We can talk about their importance to the ecosystem and how lions are these incredible ecosystem engineers. And that's valuable. But they are sentient beings. And I think that's a process we need to really move on and tell more stories and have a way to get that message out more and more. I know it's, it's daunting. And there are those humans who will, they'll, they'll never think of some animals that way. But I think that's changing. And I think that's the route we have to go. It's not so much what's in our minds, but what's in our hearts.

David Todd [01:05:51] Yeah, it it makes me think, and this is sort of an aside, but to think about the the whole Black Lives Matter movement and what seems to have really persuaded people to change big policies about, you know, police treatment of big communities is some of these individual killings. And maybe it's the same situation with, with wildlife that you just have to look at the individual. Well, that's a really interesting insight.

David Todd [01:06:32] Well, let me ask you a few more things. I don't want to keep you all day, but there's a few other questions I'd have for you if you have a moment.

Melanie Anderson [01:06:42] Sure.

David Todd [01:06:43] So I understand that you live in the outskirts of Denver. And, and I was curious about how, when you're in that sort of urban-wildlands interface and there are these potentials for, for conflict. How, how do you manage not just the animal (we've talked about mountain lion management, protection and restoration), but how do you manage the people that may be coming into conflict with them? How do you sort of move towards

coexistence in these kind of interface areas where there may be a few collisions between a large wild predator and a person?

Melanie Anderson [01:07:31] Yeah, you know, I think most of us who live out here live out here because we love, we want to be with the wildlife in a non-consumptive way. I think that, that's something we all have in common, at least in this neighborhood where I am now. And I live in along the Front Range in what they call foothills, and but I live at 8300 feet and it's heavily forested. And so I've got I've got black bears and I have red foxes, gray foxes. I have not seen a bobcat but my neighbors have and I have not seen, with my own eyes, a mountain lion. But people have on their trail cameras and we've seen kills from mountain lions. So they're here. We know they're here. And I think a lot of us live out here because that's what we want.

Melanie Anderson [01:08:41] One way we communicate tonight, I'd like to have other ways, but one way we seem to communicate in our neighborhood is there's a Facebook group that's strictly for my neighborhood. And a lot of us communicate on that Facebook group with photos and stories and, and things of that nature. But I'd like to see more targeted education and maybe realtors could do that as well. But I think targeted education for that particular ecosystem. So if you're looking to buy a house in this area, here's the plant life, the animal life. Here are the dos and don'ts. I think that's important is a little more education for those of us who live in that wildlands-urban interface.

Melanie Anderson [01:09:42] One of the things that I deal with, David, is that I've got red foxes who have appeared with horrible mange. And the reason they have horrible mange is because people up here are using rodenticides. And a lot of us have posted about how horrible rodenticides are, how you don't want to use that, and how many other animals rodenticides kill besides the target. And so there's, there's, there's a lot of education that needs to be done. So maybe through social media, maybe through realtors showing people homes up here. I don't know. There, there, there just needs to be more information on how we can live with these animals if we're lucky enough to have the privilege to be here.

Melanie Anderson [01:10:39] That's a really interesting insight. I'm particularly taken with your thought about the role of realtors who often, I guess, will, will talk about, you know, square footage, bedrooms, bathrooms, your loan, the local schools. But do they talk about what might be outside your door? You know, the four legged creatures walking by?

Melanie Anderson [01:11:06] Exactly.

David Todd [01:11:07] Well, that's really intriguing. You know, something else that, that I think is, is unique to the mountain lion and maybe relevant here while we're talking about people and how, how to talk about the, the sort of combination and maybe contest between lions and people, is that these now lions have such a iconic sort of spirit and aura of, of wildness. I mean that they are they are truly untamed. And I think, I think that, that is, is something that it is really both amazing and also sort of off-putting and frightening for, for people. How do you, how do you think about mountain lions in that, in that regard?

Melanie Anderson [01:12:03] You know, I, I've never encountered a lion in the wild, so I don't know, you know, what my reaction would be if I did that, how I would ... I might have a very different feeling. I have a very good friend who is a conservationist, and she, she loves animals the way I do. And she has encountered a lion in the wild. And she said that it scared her, that the look on the lion's face when he or she saw Audrey. Audrey said it was a, it was a

very interesting feeling because I felt, you know, like prey. I never had had that feeling of that vulnerability. This animal could kill me. It might kill me. Of course, it, the lion just looked at her and turned and walked away, which is mostly what happens. But so I don't know that fear. But I know I have friends who are afraid of them and, you know, we learn how we're supposed to behave if we encounter them and. Yeah, they can, you know, it's, it's I don't know, it's hard for me because I haven't had that experience.

Melanie Anderson [01:13:39] I know Alan Rabinowitz, who was a jaguar biologist, scientist. He, he had an experience with a jaguar. He was he talks about it. He was tracking this particular jaguar and, you know, following the tracks. And then the tracks ended and he was baffled. And it's what, what had happened, well, the jaguar knew that Alan was tracking him and he had gone off the trail and he had come back up around so that he was following Alan. And Alan turned around and there was the jaguar. And jaguars are a lot more aggressive than mountain lions towards humans. And so Alan was thinking, "uh oh, this could be a problem, and he started kind of walking backwards and he fell over a log and he fell flat, he fell flat on his back. And he said in that moment, he knew this was probably the end because he was down. The jaguar would come and kill him and sort of had that, you know, that panic and fear, but also thinking this animal I've revered and loved is going to take me out. And nothing happened. And he set up and the jaguar was gone.

Melanie Anderson [01:15:08] But, you know, you think about things like that and that fear that we have: this is a, this is a wild animal who indeed can, can kill us. But there's also something, you know, I think there's something very humbling about that and our, it tells us what our place in nature is. I don't know. It's, it's hard for me to tell people, "don't be afraid of mountain lions. Just be careful, be cautious, know what to do. And it's important they're here. And we've got to we've got to learn co-existence."

Melanie Anderson [01:15:48] Well, it's, it's, maybe it's, it's one of the ways that the mountain lion may survive is that it has this respect and fear that it engenders and other living people, living creatures like people, that this is clearly a significant animal that needs to be respected.

David Todd [01:16:18] And so I think as we start to wrap up here, you've been working on on mountain lion protection for decades, literally. And I'm curious if you can look back over the years and then forward as well and give us a sense of maybe the trends that you've seen, you know, the changes since the, the late '80s in people's attitudes or in the protection/restoration support that you've seen, and what you anticipate in the years to come?

Melanie Anderson [01:17:01] Well, that's going to be difficult. I, you know, I'm, I'm worried about the years to come simply because of the things we're facing, the climate change, the mass extinction of many animals. I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm, it's a, it's a ... that's a tough one because, you know, it's all about what your life's work has been trying to protect these animals. And in the long run, will they will they still be here? Perhaps not. I don't know.

Melanie Anderson [01:17:48] I think there's more. I think there's a lot more respect for mountain lions now, all large wildlife. Well, even the small ones, too. I think those of us who are fortunate to live among them get to know them. And that's really great. I know there's still fear. There's a lot of fear of lions, but there's also a lot more knowledge. I'm really proud of the research that we have funded. There's just so much more knowledge about these animals, which has to be a good thing. I'm hopeful about trophy hunting ending, as we previously discussed. I think the younger generation, they're just not that interested in going out and

killing animals. And I think that's going to end. I wish I had more hope, but I do know that our planet is in peril and it's only going to get worse and that I don't know what that, I don't know what that's going to look like.

David Todd [01:19:09] Yeah. So there's, I guess, the mountain lions thing. And then there's this bigger context that is so hard to know. It seems like kind of a race between, in my view, between attitudes changing and the, the ecosystems fragmenting and so on.

Melanie Anderson [01:19:29] It's true. And let me let me just say this. There is one thing I'm hopeful about and it's one thing we've been finding. And that is there's, there's proof that lions are moving back eastward again. And so some of the, we've been funding some organizations to track the migratory pathways that lions are using and then doing surveys and education work, pre-education in some of these communities in the Midwest and East about mountain lions, as mountain lions began to move back and create a different home range, what that might look like living with a mountain lion or two in these particular areas. So there's some hope there. And we are seeing an easterly trend for some of these cats. That's kind of exciting, kind of exciting to think that they may be moving back to those places from which they were extirpated all those years ago and that there might be habitat for them and prey for them.

David Todd [01:20:53] Well, that's neat, and they might be moving into areas where there weren't this sort of preexisting attitudes of, you know, contempt or, yes, that we're faced with in some of the Western states.

David Todd [01:21:12] Well, this has been so helpful and I really appreciate you, you know, lending some of your hard-earned experience to help us understand what's going on with mountain lions, and wildlife protection in general. Is there anything you'd like to add before we taper off?

Melanie Anderson [01:21:36] I don't think so. I appreciate you spending all this time with me and listening to me, because sometimes I feel like I'm rambling on and on, and I could go I could go on and on, even. So, it's good to cut it.

Melanie Anderson [01:21:48] You know, that last question you asked me, I've been thinking. There is some reason for hope. And I think about these animals. They, sometimes we as humans think we know them and everything about them and we don't. They're, they're in and of themselves, and, and they surprise and amaze and startle us. And, you know, just like black bears came back into Texas on their own and found a place, I think some of these animals, maybe they can find places to live, and that they're more, hopefully, they're more resilient than we give them credit for. I hope so.

David Todd [01:22:39] That's that is a wonderful hope and maybe it's, it's got some, some real possibility behind it. I really appreciate you sharing that.

David Todd [01:22:54] Well, thank you, Melanie. I think that I may think that you're finished for today, and thank you for, for this - maybe just the first installment - I hope we have other chances to, to talk. But thank you for your time today.

David Todd [01:23:16] And what I'm going to propose that I do is stop the recording. And then if you could just stay on the line for a few more minutes, and not close your app, that will allow time for the recording to upload to the cloud. That's sort of the last step in this whole recording process. So if you could help us here, that be great.

David Todd [01:23:41] Sure. How long do you want me to leave it open?

David Todd [01:23:44] Maybe a couple of minutes. Would that be OK?

Melanie Anderson [01:23:47] You bet.

David Todd [01:23:48] All right. Thank you.

Melanie Anderson [01:23:48] And also, David, I want to tell you, I really appreciate everything you are doing. It's, it's so important. And Texas doesn't have a good history of protecting all of its biodiversity. And I just think what you're doing is critical. It's super good work. Thank you.

David Todd [01:24:09] Oh, well, this has been a wonderful excuse to talk to people I love and about the things I'm really interested in. So thank you for making that possible.