

**TRANSCRIPT:**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Mark Mitchell

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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

**Mark Mitchell** [00:00:04] David?

**David Todd** [00:00:04] Let's resume. Yes, I'm here, I'm here.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:00:06] Okay.

**David Todd** [00:00:07] Can you hear me?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:00:09] Yes, I can. Some, some girl said it was, recording was off.

**David Todd** [00:00:13] Yeah, I think we've resumed. Thank you.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:00:15] OK.

**David Todd** [00:00:16] Go ahead, please. You were telling about these private landowners and how they, they've sort of adopted these, these prairie dogs and why.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:00:25] Yes. And one of the things, and Lynda and I have discussed this a number of times, some landowners, they would, they want to put prairie dogs out there possibly as a, as a hunting animal. Now, obviously the, you know, in Mason, Texas, you know, they're not going to get people to spend a lot of money come to Mason and shoot two or three prairie dogs in a prairie dog town. But if you are a hunting operation and you have people from, let's just pick Pennsylvania, New Jersey, up East, they're going out West to go hunting. And during the day, they can actually, you know, hunt one or two. You know that, that's an added benefit, too. And if a ranch is willing to manage for prairie dogs and allow that, they're not, they're not going to decimate the population. And you know, it's, it's a, it's a hard but true fact that pretty much everything has to have a value nowadays or people aren't going to, you know, accept it on their property. And you know, the more value something has, the more people are going to manage it and protect it. So if that's the value that they can let some of their hunters, who are paying high dollars to go hunt white-tailed deer or whatever, also do this, that's a value, and they will manage that prairie dog town.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:01:53] If the values that, you know, give them a good feeling to restore an animal that you know, God or nature put here naturally, and now they're doing it on their property, and it gives them a good feeling, that, that's, that's a value that is really hard, you can't put a dollar on it. That's the kind of landowners that really seem to embrace the prairie dog and like it. And, you know, and a lot of those properties, they hunt also. It's not, you know,

but the feeling that they get, that they're helping all kind of wildlife and they're seeing other birds and butterflies and things use this property because they reintroduced prairie dogs, it's just, it makes them feel good. It's a good feeling. And, and everybody wins. The prairie dog wins. All the little animals using that prairie dog town wins. And the landowner is the one that ultimately gains the most.

**David Todd** [00:02:51] Yeah, I guess the, these values and benefits may not be financial. They may be just, you know, something that you, you want to see in your heart. And that's as valid as anything, I suppose.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:03:06] It is. And, you know, it's really good to see that we've got to the point where, where that can be a value. You know, historically, as a biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife, you would talk to a landowner and you know, he and his first question is, "If I manage for white-tailed deer, manage for turkey, or whatever it might be, how does that financially going to help me pay the bills?" And you know, you are always up against it with that type of landowner that you know it can help you grow a better deer, dot, dot, dot, that is more valuable and he could see that. But when you get landowners who aren't having to pay the bills and they can do something because of what it's doing for nature, that's a lot easier to work with those landowners, to be honest with you.

**David Todd** [00:03:56] I see.

**David Todd** [00:03:57] You know, it's, it's really interesting to talk to you about these prairie dog reintroductions because you've done restorations of other species. And I would love to, if you don't mind, just talk a little bit about your experience with javelinas and wild turkeys and white-tailed deer. I think you mentioned each of those as an animal that you helped bring back to an area where they, they might have been gone or much more rare than here, later.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:04:29] Well, when I first went to work and then in the late '80s, I was, of course, new and young, and I was more or less labor than anything. But we were, we were restocking East Texas with white-tailed deer. We would catch over a thousand deer a year, primarily from South Texas, to restock some of those areas in East Texas where the deer had been decimated. It was pretty easy, honestly, to understand what happened to those deer, which makes your restocking efforts a lot more successful, when you know the reason they, they, they were gone anyway. And most of that was overhunting and abuse of the population by people.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:05:11] And so all you had to do was, was stop that through regulations and laws, or a lot of it had to do with stopping the dog hunting, that was kind of part of the heritage of East Texas hunters, where they would hunt white-tailed deer with dogs. And that helped drive them out of a piece of country. And they just couldn't, they just didn't adapt well like that.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:05:33] So once we got those things under control, we could stock a thousand deer and, and now we have wonderful deer populations in East Texas, pretty much throughout the whole state that can support deer, we got deer now.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:05:45] You know, then, then I was involved in some stockings of Rio Grande turkey in areas that we found later on were kind of marginal. And, you know, we didn't know why they'd blinked out or, you know, were gone from that historic range. But we

felt it had to do with unregulated hunting and non-protection and things like that. So we were putting turkeys back. And we're still struggling with that to some extent today.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:06:16] You know, some of it is that we found that if we put Rio Grande turkeys in areas that were not super conducive to Rio Grande habitat, it was more suited to eastern turkeys. Then we would restock Eastern turkeys from other states in those areas.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:06:28] And typically what you see with the reintroduced animal that is doing good, you see the population increase, increase, increase and then it kind of peaks and then it comes down to a level that it can sustain over a lot of, over the long term. And that's the important thing.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:06:47] So, so many of the populations historically we stocked with pheasants back in the '60s and those populations, at least like in Southeast Texas, around Bay City, El Campo, Wharton area, those populations took off, got to be real hotbeds of populations. And then they just cratered and crashed, and where now we don't have any because it wasn't honestly suitable habitat.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:07:10] And when I got here to Mason Mountain in '99, there was already talk about interest in javelina. And javelina is a super neat little animal that is a game species in Texas. There's only three states you can hunt javelina in - that's Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. We have by far the most. Its historic range extended to the Red River northward, extended eastward all the way to the Brazos River. And it had been extirpated from probably three quarters of its range, to where now is considered a South Texas animal and a West Texas animal.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:07:48] But there were still, there were still reports of javelina in the southern part of the county, but they had been gone from the north part of Mason County for 75, 100 years. And so we wanted to try to reintroduce those, but learn, if you were going to do that, what you, what it would require. And so as a research project in 2005, we started and, you know, 2004 we started and we brought in javelina from South Texas, and they did really good. And what we found out that we got, we got an established little javelina population here that we can have some hunts. And mainly what we do is have youth hunts for javelinas.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:08:32] Not a lot, because, you know, it's a, somewhat of a fragile population. It looks like a pig. And a lot of people think it's a pig, but it's got, its biology is nothing like a pig, because they only have two a year and are lucky if they can raise one of those two. And they're just not as prolific as the feral hog. And so, you know, you've got to kind of protect that herd, to be honest, you would, you would shoot them out very easily, which has happened throughout their range.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:09:02] And then we got into, because of the horned lizard, Texas horned lizard, it's such a charismatic species that everybody's interested in, we started trying to figure out how we can reintroduce those. And Mason is really fortunate in that we're right on the edge of where they still exist. If you go west of us 15, 20 miles, if you go south of us, 15, 30 miles, you still have horned lizard populations, but you don't have them here anymore. And so we started that reintroduce them here so that we could hopefully learn what, you know, why they are extirpated from so much of their range.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:09:45] And we started with the adults and we found out that moving adults quickly was a waste of time. Then we collaborated with the Fort Worth Zoo, which was

very interested, and they are now raising horned lizards and we're releasing them at three to five days, up to maybe a week and two weeks old, on Mason Mountain. And this past year was the first year that we've seen success in released horned lizards actually having offspring. And so we found some clutches this year. So I think we're making headway here.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:10:23] And I just recently got back from a Texas horned lizard meeting of all the people involved, and I'm very excited about where we're going with this and what we're learning. Possibly, you know, we're starting to maybe understand some of the biology so that we can make good guesses as to, you know, why they, they no longer exist in parts of the state that they once were common. And how do you, you know, much more importantly, how do you remedy that so that you can put those species back where they used to be?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:10:59] Honestly, where they exist today, they have very stable populations - in South Texas, West Texas and some of them northwest all the way up into Lubbock, where they exist. But the eastern part of the state, Eastern maybe half of the state they're no longer found, hadn't been found the past 20, 30 years. And you know, it's a species that everybody finds neat and would like to see it worked with. So that's kind of exciting.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:11:28] And so it's just natural that, you know, once you do that, I always say there's two things that you know, field biologists really like to do, and that's to reintroduce animals to places that they used to be, and to do prescribed fires because it makes the habitat so much better for the other ones. So, you know, I've been fortunate that I've been involved with doing both of those to a pretty, pretty good extent.

**David Todd** [00:11:55] It sounds exciting. One thing that I, I'm curious to hear your perspective on is that with a lot of these animals that are proposed for reintroduction, I'm thinking of Attwater's prairie chickens or others is they, they get the stimulus and the sort of regulatory support from the Endangered Species Act. And, but that brings along a lot of controversy and some pushback. And I'm curious, you know, the prairie dog was proposed for listing, I guess, back in '98, and it was a, you know, controversial thing. And folks, I guess, discussed the chance of doing that again. And your sense, but I was just wondering, what, do you think that would be a productive way to go or be counterproductive? What's your attitude?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:12:53] Well, whenever anything is listed, threatened or endangered, especially by the Fish and Wildlife Service, not so much state listed, but federally listed, private landowners are very apprehensive then to have it on their property. You know, there's a perception that if you find out I have an endangered species on my property, that the government government is going to come in and start telling me what I can and cannot, cannot do.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:13:23] I worked with bald eagles when they were still federally listed and dealt with private landowners who had these eagle nests on their property at that time, and that was what they always told me. And it was, you know, you had to, you had to really create a good, a good relationship with that landowner where he could trust and really open his place up to you and let you work with that eagle nest. And he didn't feel like that we were going to come in and start telling him what he could and could not do on his property.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:13:54] Some of the species, you know, like Attwater prairie chicken, for instance, is that, you know, there's just not, there's just not a lot of habitat left for Attwater prairie chickens. You know, we don't know exactly why the populations have declined so

much. We've got good ideas that it is brush encroachment, just change in habitats. But the Gulf Coast prairie, you know, the tall grass prairie that they existed in, and at one time were so healthy in, it is not there anymore. And I don't know what it would do to, you know, take it back at the prairie chicken refuge. And years ago, I used to even work with prairie chickens. The prairie chicken refuge is seeing some success in treating fire ants and some success with some of the clutches. Like, you know, there's some indication that the fire ant populations had a lot to do with the decline on that piece of property.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:14:55] They still can manage the habitat, but it's five, six, eight thousand acres, whatever it is, that's not enough, honestly, to, you know, to sustain that many prairie chickens. They're an animal that needs lot of room, lots of big open prairies. And so in a case like that, you know, the, the Endangered Species Act doesn't, isn't going to affect a lot of landowners because they just don't have the habitat prairie chickens are going to need.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:15:27] There are some landowners down there that I remember actually using the Attwater's prairie chicken and its endangered status to try to stop some development that was coming through, whether it's pipelines or oilfield or their high lines. So, you know, it can go both ways to where landowners want them or not.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:15:50] With, with the black-tailed prairie dogs, that was one of the things that we crossed is that landowners would say, "Well, what happens if you put these prairie dogs out there and they move on to my property and now they're endangered are y'all going to tell me what to do?" And we were sure that this would be somewhat of a protected, you know, not a natural population, to where if it gets on a piece of property, that they're not wanted to be, Texas, Texas Wildlife Services said they would go remove those prairie dogs, regardless of their status, if they might be threatened or endangered.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:16:32] You know, it's, it can help a species, I think, putting them on the listed species because then, you know, there are some, some kind of things that can't be done with that, with those animals. But it's, it sure be a lot of blowback from some of the populations and some of the ranchers and farmers who had these and you know, are they going to just decimate the population, get rid of them before it gets listed, which we've seen that happen before.

**David Todd** [00:17:05] Yeah, I guess, to try to avoid the whole issue, just make it moot.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:17:09] Exactly get rid of them while you can, and, you know, we've seen that happen. So that can be a downside rather than just working with landholders who understand them, and accept them for what they are.

**David Todd** [00:17:21] Yes. Well, just a couple more questions, I know you have other things to do and I sure appreciate you taking some time with us. It seems like part of what you're trying to do, of course, here rebuild colonies and support the prairie dog population in general. But it sounds like there's also kind of an educational role for these prairie dogs, that they're sort of ambassadors. I mean they, they are, like you said, I mean, it sounds like they're pretty charismatic and people enjoy watching them and seeing how they affect other animals. Do you see that as one of the big jobs that this prairie dog is doing for you?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:18:04] You're exactly right on that, is, is that they are, you know, a charismatic animal, for those people who are interested in them. Now, if you went to Lubbock, Amarillo, to that portion of the state where they haven't been gone that long, they may not be

as charismatic for those, you know, those people. But, you know, we got recreational landowners around here and these people want to see that. And it is not, you know, in a lot of cases, it's not very hard to educate them on the value that they have. You know, and it is surprising how, how well received, they really can be.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:18:43] And then once you get a landowner who does want a black-tailed prairie dog, one of the biggest advocates is the first landowner I've worked with. And, you know, I've given talks to landowners when he was, other landowners, when he was present, and he pretty much takes it over and carries the banner for the prairie dog, about you know what benefit they are to him and how him and his wife, family and friends, how, you know, how much enjoyment they get out of them, watching everything use them.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:19:14] So, you know, a landowner can be a bigger asset and advocate for species than even the government employee like me because, you know, when he gets to talking, people listen to him, honestly, more than they listen to me. And it's a great thing to see, you know, kind of like planting a seed, and just watching it grow. And it's surprising sometimes how it does grow, how a movement can grow like that.

**David Todd** [00:19:43] Well, that's great, it's nice to have allies. Well, so considering everything you've told me, and what you've learned, what do you foresee as the future for prairie dogs in Texas?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:19:59] Well, you know, I'm obviously on the fringe of prairie dog, you know, the prairie dog range. You know, if we can get 10 or 15 landowners in this portion of the state or at least in Mason county that want to maintain a two to five or 10-acre prairie dog town, I think that's neat.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:20:23] You know, the bigger picture is what's going to happen to them in the heart of the range, which is the Panhandle and West Texas. And you know, I think that for most things, especially West Texas, far West Texas, you know, they're a little bit slower to change than, than we are. The farther East you go, the, the, the, the more change we accept. And, you know, I just hope that some of those landowners out west are starting to become more accepted, acceptive, of the species and that they see them as an asset. And I think that's true. I think you're seeing that in some of those areas, that's good to see.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:21:06] So, you know, we probably won't ever see them back to the huge prairie dog towns of the past. But I hope, you know, I hope that they'll be there for my grandkids to go see and, and their kids going down in the future.

**David Todd** [00:21:23] Yes. Well, just one last question. You've been so kind to answer so many questions, but is there a sort of open-ended question I can ask you, is there anything you'd like to add that we just haven't given enough justice to so far? Something else you'd like to discuss about prairie dogs or just your life with wildlife?

**Mark Mitchell** [00:21:52] Shoot. You know, I'm not good at talking about myself, but, you know, I'm just fortunate enough that I was in a place that we could try this and fortunate enough that, you know, when we tried it, it actually was received well by some of our people and by some of the landowners. And I just feel really fortunate. I'm not a prairie dog expert by any means. But I had, you know, through this, I have, my eyes have been opened and I've learned so much about that species.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:22:27] And as you learn about each species through a 35-year career, you find out how, you know, how interconnected everything is and how, you know, when you got a healthy, healthy prairie dog colonies, you got other animals that benefit from it, and it's really good to see. And you know, I've been really fortunate over 35 years that I've met some really, really fascinating and, and smart people, and I've got to learn a lot from them. Whether it's Lynda Watson, who's a private individual, or some of the old-time biologists that I've got to work with going back to the 1980s, and some of my early mentors actually went to work in this field in the '50s. And then some of the people I met back in the early days actually went to work in this field in the '40s, although they were retired by the time I got to know them. And I think that, you know, we've seen such a shift in attitudes amongst Texans, landowners or just enthusiasts that to a great extent, the future for most of our wildlife species looks, looks pretty solid. They've got a lot of hurdles to overcome with, you know, increasing urbanization and the population explosion that we seem to be going through, but I feel very confident, very confident that the prairie dog, along with everything, has got a bright future in Texas.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:24:02] So, I'm just glad that, you know, I could be a part of it, some little bit. If nothing else, just to sit on the sideline and watch what it's doing and feel good about it, so that my kids, and their kids, you know, they'll be able to experience some of the outdoors that I did.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:24:21] Well said. Well, I, along with your kids and grandkids, who I sure would probably feel the same way, I wanted to thank you for, you know, sort of making sure that these wonderful legacy animals continue into the future. And thank you so much for being so articulate about this experience that you've had. Nice of you to share it with us.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:24:48] David, I enjoyed it. And if I could do anything else to help you, let me know.

**David Todd** [00:24:53] All right. Well, I hope our paths cross in the future and thanks again for spending time today to talk to us.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:25:01] Okay. Can I ask you one other question? Of course. So what is this going to be now? I've looked on your website and I've seen some interviews with Carl Frentress, who I knew at one time, Al Brothers, as another thing. Is this going to be just, is it going to be like on your website that people can click on, or what?

**David Todd** [00:25:22] Yes, that's the plan. I mean, I think it has a lot of value. And I think it just has more and more value as time goes on. You talk to people who've got, you know, intimate hands-on experience with the natural world. And I think, you know, as more and more of us live in cities, and have indoor jobs, that's just rare. So I just every time I talk to somebody like you who, who has had a different kind of life outdoors, it's, it's just super valuable and means a lot.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:25:58] OK. Well, would you be interested at all in coming and filming the prairie dog town and what we do here?

**David Todd** [00:26:04] I'd love to come visit. This, this project is really just an audio project. So we're not, we're not taking a lot of the images, but when, when we can and we raise money and so on, I'd sure like to try to come out and see what you're doing.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:26:22] Well, I'd glad to give you a tour and spend the day with you, if you want to. Give me a call and you're more than welcome.

**David Todd** [00:26:28] Well, that's that's a really nice offer. I'd love to see what you're doing out there and I hear nice things about Mason Mountain. It's a good place, I hear.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:26:37] It's a neat place. I still enjoy it after 20-something years there.

**David Todd** [00:26:44] Well, hang in there and I hope you have a good holiday. I realize it's President's Day and thank you for taking time out of a day-off to join me.

**Mark Mitchell** [00:26:54] Great! Let me know if I'm doing anything else.

**David Todd** [00:26:55] Okay, this has been good. Thank you so much. Bye bye.