

TRANSCRIPT:

INTERVIEWEE: Shari Wilcox

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

DATE: April 13, 2022

LOCATION: Austin, Texas

SOURCE MEDIA: MP3 audio file

TRANSCRIPTION: Trint, David Todd

REEL: 4099

FILE: Ocelot_Wilcox_Shari_AustinTX_13April2022_Reel4099_NoiseReduced.mp3

David Todd [00:00:04] Well, good morning, David Todd here.

David Todd [00:00:07] I have the great pleasure of being with Dr. Shari Wilcox.

Shari Wilcox [00:00:11] Hello.

David Todd [00:00:13] Hello. Greetings.

David Todd [00:00:15] And with her permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas. And for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas here in Austin. And you would have all equal rights to use the recording as she sees fit as well. And I just want to make sure that that is a good plan and fits well with her goals.

Shari Wilcox [00:00:54] Sounds great.

David Todd [00:00:57] Is that all right?

Shari Wilcox [00:00:59] Absolutely.

David Todd [00:00:57] All right. Well, thank you so much.

David Todd [00:01:00] Well, today is Wednesday, April 13th, 2022. It's about 10:40 a.m. Central Time, and my name is David Todd, as I said, and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas and I'm in Austin, and we are lucky to be conducting a remote interview with Dr. Wilcox, who happens to also be based here in Austin. And she is a geographer and a staff member at the nonprofit organization, Defenders of Wildlife, and has spent a number of years studying and advocating for ocelots, jaguars and other animals. Today, we'll be talking about her life and career so far, and we'll take this chance to also especially focus on her work with the ocelot.

David Todd [00:01:58] So with that little introduction, I wanted to thank her for participating.

Shari Wilcox [00:02:05] Oh well, thank you for having me.

David Todd [00:02:08] It's a pleasure.

David Todd [00:02:10] Well, so I'd just start by just asking you about your childhood and early years and if there might have been some people or events in your life that. And those

who know. Early stages that might have influenced your interest in animals and including ocelots and other wild cats.

Shari Wilcox [00:02:34] I think I've always been a huge lover of animals, in particular cats. I am sort of a self-described cat nerd. I think early on in my childhood, we lived in Washington, D.C. and Arlington, Virginia, and a very popular thing for families to do in Washington, D.C. is to visit the various museums and the zoo within the Smithsonian Institution. And so, my mother and I spent a lot of time at the National Zoo and at the Natural History Museum. And I think those experiences ended up deeply woven into my worldview and into the things that I care about and the things that matter to me in my day-to-day life.

Shari Wilcox [00:03:22] Beyond that, I grew up in horse country. The area around Washington, D.C., is known as sort of an equestrian paradise. So, I was always outdoors, always enjoying time with animals. Additionally, my grandparents were very passionate about nature, and they would spend a lot of time in their airstream, traveling to different national wildlife refuges and national parks. We would go to Assateague Island every summer, and I think that love of nature really started there and that and this love for wildlife.

Shari Wilcox [00:03:57] But it was really not until college for me that this really all started to come together, and I found my way into a geography classroom my freshman year. Well, let's talk about that, so I think that I read that you got a B.A. in geography from Mary Washington College and later went on to get a M.A., a Ph.D. in Geography, as well as a certificate in nonprofit studies from the University of Texas. And this might be a good time to hear if there might have been some classmates or teachers that you met in school that might have helped lead you to your interest in nature and science and geography, and of course, the star of the show, the ocelot.

Shari Wilcox [00:04:52] Sure. So, geography was really not an expected place for me to head on as I arrived a college freshman year. I had never taken a geography class. It was not part of the curriculum where I attended school and I signed up on a lark and immediately found my home. The faculty and the subjects that were being explored at Mary Washington College were just so compelling to me. I was so interested in the geographic discipline and the ways in which it really considered the world around us.

Shari Wilcox [00:05:30] A lot of people don't actually know what the discipline of geography involves. It's definitely not rocks. That's geology. And beyond that, it's not just maps. Rather, I encourage people to think of it as a National Geographic magazine with all of these different articles that explore culture and landscape and wildlife. And so, I was really interested in these opportunities to study landscapes, but also the people and the animals that lived upon them.

Shari Wilcox [00:06:02] Geography has many subfields. I am a cultural geographer by training, and so I'm really interested in the relationships between culture and place. But I was also very interested also in animals and traditionally the only sub field in geography that would really wrestle with these non-human inhabitants. On the landscape was a field known as biogeography. But biogeography is really a branch, a branch of biology. It deals with the geographic distribution of plants and animals. But again, from really a biological and ecological perspective, I was really interested again in this meeting place of humans and animals and landscapes. And so, I found myself in the emerging years of a new sub field called Animal Geography and animal geography really wrestles with the complex entangling of human animal relationships in different places at different times.

Shari Wilcox [00:07:09] And what I really liked about this subject is that it shifted animals from being an object to be studied to a subject with their own internal lives, their own motivations, their own existences that deserved a mutualistic consideration. And from that, that grounding in animal geography, I came, I became very interested in environmental conservation.

Shari Wilcox [00:07:37] I'll say more to the subject now of, of spotted cats, including ocelots, I had started out my work in cultural geography, doing some field research in Belize and undergrad, and at that time I was looking at a project that nothing to do with animals. I was looking at an Afro indigenous group known as the Garifuna, and I was studying how they were using their museum and documentary films to claim a voice to describe their culture to broader audiences.

Shari Wilcox [00:08:13] And this the city, I'm sorry, this town, I was living in in Belize is known as Dangriga. It's where the Cultural Museum is for the Garifuna. And right down the road was the Cockscomb Wildlife Reserve or the Cockscomb Jaguar Reserve. And this is the largest, first and largest jaguar reserve in the world. It's not fenced in. It is a wild forest that aims that is managed to conserve jaguars, and this is really considered one of the hearts of Jaguar conservation. And I found that as I was doing my cultural geography project, I just couldn't get my mind off those jaguars. And so, I became really interested in these spotted cats. Additionally, ocelots also live in that landscape. Ocelots are a smaller spotted cat.

Shari Wilcox [00:09:03] And so I, I, while I was down in that place, I read a book by Dr. Alan Rabinowitz called "Jaguar" that described his fieldwork at the Cockscomb. And I also had the opportunity to encounter what are known as problem jaguars or jaguars who had found themselves in conflict with local communities that had been trapped and transported to the local zoo, that had a very special program set up for these problem jaguars so that they were not killed, but rather they entered into a global zoological association whereby they could live a second life, contributing to education outreach and contributing genetic material by being involved in conservation breeding.

Shari Wilcox [00:09:52] And so I was able to visit the Belize Zoo, which was run by a woman named Dr. Sharon Matola. And this was an incredible landmark project at the time where I got to see jaguars up close. And in fact, one of those Jaguars I encountered years later at the Milwaukee Zoo, a rather famous jaguar named Pat the Cat.

Shari Wilcox [00:10:13] And so leaving Belize, leaving my field site as an undergrad, I realized that I really was interested in wildlife and conservation. And so following my undergraduate, I was able to an a obtain a position with Defenders of Wildlife, which is the same organization I am with now. That time I had an entry-level role where I was a coordinator for the Species Conservation Division, and I would say I was largely able to, to take that role to, I was hired into that role, because of my experience in Belize. And so my, my undergraduate education set me up to start my career in conservation.

David Todd [00:10:59] I love hearing this path that you've taken and some of the twists and turns. I think that you've told us to-date about your childhood and your education at Mary Washington and down in Belize. And you know, for some people, not all, but for some people, a book or a film or a TV show can be really influential, and it can help guide them to a world that they may not have been aware of beforehand. And I think you mentioned Alan

Rabinowitz' book. But were there other sort of cultural artifacts, I guess you might call them, that might have, you know, influenced you in some way?

Shari Wilcox [00:11:49] Earlier, I guess, an under undergraduate, I read "Of Wolves and Men", by Barry Lopez, and then a few years later, I read "Monster of God", by David Quammen. And both of those books had such an influence on the way I saw the world, the way I saw the natural world and predators and their perceived place relative to human society.

Shari Wilcox [00:12:15] When I decided to go back to school, I applied to the University of Texas and was accepted first into the Masters and then the Ph.D. program, and I ended up working with my advisor, Dr. Leo Zonn, on who actually does not have a background in wildlife. Rather, he is a cultural geographer that studies representation. So he's interested in the way different issues are represented in documentary film in museums and all of these different cultural outlets. And I think that was such a useful way for me to approach my work, and it gave me a very critical lens, a critical way of viewing objects like documentary film.

Shari Wilcox [00:12:59] Interestingly, I often struggled as a child to watch documentary films of wildlife in it. Now I know what I was struggling with is that the representations of animals were always about. It seemed like sex and violence. Either they were reproducing or they were killing something or somebody was dying on screen. And I really struggled with that representation of animal lives because it's a small portion of their day to day lives. And so, I was so much more interested in again, the way animals go about their day to day and how we as humans could have a broader understanding of their place in this world.

Shari Wilcox [00:13:36] In addition to Dr. Zonn, I also worked with Robin Doughty, who is also professor of geography, and he is really regarded as an expert in environmental change and human attitudes toward biotic communities here in Texas. Additionally, I got to work with Janet Davis in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and she is an animal historian and really helped me to develop my appreciation for the history from where we're coming from that informs these relationships today in conservation. And so, I ended up writing my dissertation.

Shari Wilcox [00:14:17] I received a very generous grant from the Smithsonian Institution and actually ended up spending some time back in Washington, D.C. I had an office in the very same museum that I had once visited as a child. And it felt like a very full circle moment for me to be back in the Natural History Museum now as a scholar in residence, doing research for my dissertation. And I ended up digging into the history of human / jaguar entanglements in the Western Hemisphere. And I was looking at this from the European perspective. How were colonizers, builders of empire, looking at these cats as impediments to empire, as trophies of conquest? And I took that study all the way up to the 19th century to understand the violent histories of interaction between humans, especially Europeans and then and colonists, relative to jaguars and to some extent, ocelots and other wild cats as well.

David Todd [00:15:31] Well, that is really interesting, I think that, you know, for a lot of us, the, the picture of, of wildlife is so limited, you know, maybe a scattering of books or articles or TV shows, but it's, it's pretty recent and it's pretty sparse. And it sounds like you had the chance to really delve into this history of spotted cats going back centuries. I'd be curious to hear, I know your dissertation is probably deep and complex, but were there some impressions that you took away from it about these? You know, these views of, of the spotted cats as trophies or obstacles to conquest or other relationships.

Shari Wilcox [00:16:22] Sure. I think one of the most interesting takeaways I had was that the people who were writing what became known as natural history, the record of animals in the new world were not the people on the ground in the new world. Rather, they were often sitting in laboratories in France, in Sweden, in England, writing and illustrating these giant volumes. But because they were literally a world away, they were often working from specimens like dead animals, as well as skins and occasionally a live animal. But usually they again were just working from bits and pieces of animals. And so we see a lot of confusion that endured for hundreds of years in natural history.

Shari Wilcox [00:17:11] And one of the fun things I had to untangle is what the heck they thought a jaguar was because a lot of times they would get an ocelot and think it was a jaguar, and I would read these reports to the Spanish court. And you know, these, these colonists would be saying, "Oh, these jaguars are very fierce. They're the size of a tiger." In fact, and in Spanish, jaguar is called "el tigre". But then in the French laboratory, they would be looking at an ocelot's body that they had been told was a jaguar. And they're like, "Well, this is a very small cat. Why are they so afraid of it?".

Shari Wilcox [00:17:46] And so there was a great deal of confusion, and the practice of natural history is all about acknowledging what came before, documenting all of the previous entries and then adding to them. And so, this confusion was deeply woven into the project and as late as the 20th century at the time that Ernest Thompson Seton is writing, he is still grappling with confusion and misinformation about these cats going back hundreds of years.

Shari Wilcox [00:18:20] And I am also very interested in the fact that up to the end of the 20th century, the jaguar was the least-studied big cat. There are seven big cats in the world. This one was the least-studied. They are very cryptic. They hang out in deep remote jungles, largely. They were difficult to access until modern technology made a lot of this a lot easier for us. But with that absence of field data as late as the late 20th century, we were still grappling with a lack of knowledge about these cats and their needs on, on the landscape, which is really interesting because in that absence, there was a reliance on older information that again was really flawed.

David Todd [00:19:06] That's interesting. So, if the information isn't available, we will, we will make it up even if it's a little bit mythic?

Shari Wilcox [00:19:16] Even especially if it's documented in the literature.

David Todd [00:19:18] Yes, that's so intriguing. Now I understand there is confusion about the jaguar vs. the ocelot, but were you able to take away any sort of impressions about the ocelot in particular where you knew they were talking about the smaller spotted cat?

Shari Wilcox [00:19:40] Yes. So, as I was researching these animals, I had certain research strings, or strings of words, that I would look for - "tiger", "leopard" - all these Eastern hemisphere, Old World words that were used to describe these animals. And then often you would be maybe looking in journals or accounts or news articles. And so you're trying to pass what the animal might be from the description.

Shari Wilcox [00:20:13] And so often we rely on the size of the animal being described and its behavior in the moment. And I actually have a really good example of this. We have a record of what we call it or what is referenced as a tiger cat in Bear Creek, just outside of Austin in 1884. And the account goes to describe the spotted cat, but it's described as heavy

and large, and it's described as fighting with dogs multiple times as this rancher is running the cats off away from his herd. Now from the term "tiger cat" and some of the description, we might think that's an ocelot because both ocelots and jaguars did roam as far north as Austin in the 19th century. But based on that engagement with dogs and the description of being a very heavy-sized cat, we think that it actually was a jaguar.

Shari Wilcox [00:21:12] But again, this is a perfect example of us trying to parse details from a brief account written over 100 years ago while we were trying to peer or peer back through the fog to sort out which cat it might have been.

David Todd [00:21:29] That is so interesting, I guess, you know, we're so used to having lots of access to graphic images where there are photographs or videos. But you know, in another era it was, it was words. And I guess words can confuse us even now, and especially when they're, you know, hundreds of years between now and when they were recorded.

David Todd [00:21:57] Well, so let me see if I, if I've got this right, you're, you've prepared this dissertation about the relationship of (I'm not going to get this as well as I should) of the early colonizers with the spotted cats and these, these levels of confusion and I guess misinterpretation?

David Todd [00:22:29] And, and I believe that you went how shortly after that into the academic world. Is that right? After you got your Ph.D. degree?

Shari Wilcox [00:22:41] Yes, that is correct. I ended up with a job at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which was a huge privilege. That is actually the campus where Aldo Leopold worked and pioneered wildlife studies, wildlife sciences as a field. So, there's a deep history on that campus of a deep environmental ethic, of a study of mutualism, an understanding of interdependence and the environment. And it was an extreme honor to be working on that campus.

Shari Wilcox [00:23:19] I was not in a tenure track role. I was associate director of a research center with the Center for Culture, History and the Environment, and I was there three years. And actually, the only reason I left was I saw that Defenders of Wildlife was advertising a job in Austin, Texas, for someone to work on a number of endangered species in the state, including the ocelot. And this was really the first time that Defenders was starting to work in Texas. And I just could not turn down that opportunity to return to the city that I love and to be so much closer to my field sites in South Texas and frankly, to get to work on ocelots so much more. I was just tickled to take this position.

Shari Wilcox [00:24:09] And so in 2019, I moved back to Austin and began a transition from academia into the nonprofit sector. And I do keep a toe in academia. Still, I'm a research fellow at the University of Texas at Austin and adjunct faculty at the University of Texas - San Antonio.

David Todd [00:24:33] Well, I think it's interesting because although I guess the subject is different, it is similar, you know, that you're talking about wildlife and conservation and education, I guess they're, the disciplines of working in the academic world and in the nonprofit advocacy world, are very different. And you know, I was hoping that you might be able to talk about where there are these distinctions and where the overlaps might be between those two worlds.

Shari Wilcox [00:25:08] Sure. I would say one of the biggest distinctions is as an academic, you are really an objective observer, whereas working at a nonprofit, you are more of an advocate, you have a defined position. So, when I was doing research, I really attempted to observe the world around me to make observations, to theorize on what I was observing, but I would not, in my work, take a specific position. Rather, I attempted to make arguments, again much more theoretical arguments about what I was observing.

Shari Wilcox [00:25:48] Now, in my role at Defenders, I am an advocate. That is one of the roles of nonprofit organizations in our country, that we sometimes call it "the third sector". And nonprofit organizations do many things in this country. I've only ever worked for environmental nonprofits, but in that sphere, we often fill gaps in conducting research and in facilitating policy development and implementation, ensuring accountability to the law and facilitating collaborative partnerships between different stakeholders. So, we are very engaged on the ground. We work to mobilize public support to educate different groups to elevate concerns of different communities, to be a voice, and also to speak alongside different groups at different times. And we work to maintain relationships with communities, businesses, federal and state agencies and lawmakers.

David Todd [00:26:56] That's well put. It sounds like you wear many hats there - all important. And I guess a lot of this work in your case has been revolving around the ocelot and other spotted cat. This might be a good time to talk about the ocelot, and maybe you can just introduce us to kind of a layperson's level understanding of life history and the ecological niche that the ocelot fills.

Shari Wilcox [00:27:32] Sure. So, ocelots... I often get asked what is an ocelot because it's such a unique name. In fact, people often think it's a lizard if they don't, aren't familiar with the name at all. Ocelots are, of course, wild cats. They are medium-sized wild cats, so they are about 15 to 30 pounds. So, the smallest ocelots are about the size of a large house cat. And they get a bit bigger from there.

Shari Wilcox [00:27:59] What makes the ocelot stand apart from all of its feline peers is that it is very uniquely marked in a chain rosette pattern. So, these look like elongated smeared rosettes or big open circles on their coat. In 1929, Ernest Thompson Seton, who was a naturalist, wrote that they are, "the most wonderful tangle of stripes, bars, chains, spots, dots and smudges, which look as though as they were put on as the animal ran by". And I love that description. No two ocelots look alike. They are all uniquely marked, and that makes studying them a lot easier. These days, we rely a lot on camera traps, and ocelots are so distinctive looking from one another that we are able to build a record of individuals in ways that are a lot more challenging for species like mountain lions, where the cats share a really similar coloration.

Shari Wilcox [00:29:01] Historically, these cats have ranged from northern Argentina through Texas, as far north as we think the Oklahoma border, so the Red River. And as far East as Louisiana. They were also present in parts of Arizona and New Mexico.

Shari Wilcox [00:29:21] Like all cats, ocelots are predators. They're obligate carnivores, which means they only eat meat so they rely on preying in order to survive. They are dietary generalists, which means they are not picky about what they eat. But again, they are small cats, so they take small prey, and ocelot is never going to take down a cow. Rather, they and they really seem to prefer rodents and bunnies, as well as birds and lizards, as well as other amphibians and reptiles.

Shari Wilcox [00:29:56] Because of this, ocelots are not considered what we call a "conflict species", because they really aren't at odds with agricultural production on the landscape or ranching. Again, they are not generally interfering with livestock production on the landscape.

Shari Wilcox [00:30:16] I found this really interesting quote. Spencer Baird was the secretary of the Smithsonian in the mid-19th century, and he was assigned to do a report on the mammals of the US-Mexican boundary. And I found this quote that, "the ocelot is but a small robber. Its importance in regard to the development of civilization stands in strict proportion to the size of the game he's preying on. He is, however, eagerly hunted for his beautiful fur."

Shari Wilcox [00:30:52] And I think that actually speaks a lot to the fate of this animal on the landscape here in the United States, as well as throughout the species' range. It wasn't so much about conflict with humans, but rather the ocelot became a desirable trophy.

David Todd [00:31:12] OK, that's interesting, so I guess what you're saying is the ocelot was not large enough to tackle a sheep or goat or certainly a cow or horse. But their, their pelt was so beautiful that folks would hunt it to just secure that fur.

Shari Wilcox [00:31:37] Yes.

David Todd [00:31:41] Well, I gather that may have been one of the reasons behind its decline. I mean, they're terribly rare, as I understand now. I read your article for "Wild Without End," in something called "Celebrating Ocelots in the Lone Star State," and you you did a nice review of some of the several factors that might have been part of their decline. And I was hoping that you might be able to talk about some of those impacts on the animal.

Shari Wilcox [00:32:17] Absolutely. So, as you mentioned, the ocelot is quite rare in Texas. Texas is the only state in the United States that has a breeding population of ocelots. We believe that there are 60 to 80 cats remaining total, and they are broken into two populations here in Texas. One lives at Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge. That's public land. And then they also live on private ranch lands north of Laguna Atascosa.

Shari Wilcox [00:32:51] Now I made the point that we are the only state with a breeding population. There are also ocelots present in Arizona. However, all of the evidence we have as of this time is of male ocelots right down there near the border, actually, the exact same area where jaguars are documented from time to time. The theory right now is that these are male dispersers. These are young males looking for new territory coming up into the borderlands. So without evidence of a female, we do not meet the criteria for a population.

Shari Wilcox [00:33:30] Here in Texas, we have ample evidence of females and babies on the landscape.

David Todd [00:33:37] [Now I may stop you there for just a moment. I think we're getting.

Shari Wilcox [00:33:41] Yes.

David Todd [00:33:41] Some of that feedback. Are you hearing it?

Shari Wilcox [00:33:45] I did just in that last moment. Why? I changed nothing. All right. Let's see, are we back to good? You know, sometimes it hits your position in a room. Could you have possibly moved?

Shari Wilcox [00:34:05] I shifted a little bit. Yes, I did.

David Todd [00:34:09] Ok. Sometimes there's a weird kind of feedback because you're close to some kind of EMF. It's all very mysterious. But if you could move back to where you were before that might be wise.

Shari Wilcox [00:34:23] Yes, I'm back there now.

David Todd [00:34:25] OK.

Shari Wilcox [00:34:26] I don't think I'm catching the interference anymore.

David Todd [00:34:29] Cool. Great. All right. Sorry to interrupt you.

Shari Wilcox [00:34:31] Oh no, no.

David Todd [00:34:33] These male dispersers, both jaguar and ocelots, that that might be the good part of the population in Arizona, maybe we can take off from there.]

Shari Wilcox [00:34:43] Perfect. Now, to talk more about the historic and contemporary pressures that led to this very small population in the United States in the 19th and 20th, early 20th, centuries, there was widespread eradication of all predator species on the landscape. So the U.S. government was incentivizing the killing of wolves, of wild cats, other predators with the idea again, that they were an impediment to progress. And so many ocelots, we believe, were just killed at that time due to these efforts to eradicate predators, not because they were actually causing that much trouble.

Shari Wilcox [00:35:32] Additionally, in the mid 20th century, fur coats became very popular. And I had mentioned earlier that ocelot pelts were very much prized. They are very soft, very plush and beautifully marked. Unfortunately, it takes a number of ocelots to make one fur coat. And so, in the mid-20th century, the populations suffered losses throughout its range because of that fur industry.

Shari Wilcox [00:36:02] Additionally, keeping ocelots as pets became very popular around that time. Salvador Dali had a pet ocelot named Babou, who was on the social scene with him. This cat would go to dinner in Manhattan. It was everywhere and it was being photographed, and it made ocelots as pets a thing in the United States. Life magazine in 1961 did a whole photo story on a woman living with her ocelot in her home. There was a club at the Long Island Ocelot club that would have regular meetings and banquets that they would bring their cats to. And even National Geographic got in on the act: I have a book from National Geographic from that time. It refers to the ocelot as, "an overgrown tabby in fancy dress and a debonair man about the forest who tames easily." And so, when you have respected authorities like the National Geographic referring to these cats as taming easily and as overgrown tabbies, you really have seen pet keeping being socially sanctioned. It became very popular.

Shari Wilcox [00:37:19] I just want to say ocelots do not actually make great pets. Their urine is incredibly pungent, and many of, they are wild animals. So, even if they are tamed, they don't much like it and they certainly don't want to live in homes with people. And so, we strongly discourage this idea of pet-keeping ocelots. We need ocelots on the landscape where they can contribute to the conservation of their own species. B.

Shari Wilcox [00:37:46] Beyond that, today, we're not so worried about the fur industry. We're not worried about poaching for pet-keeping. What really is affecting the population today is habitat loss.

Shari Wilcox [00:37:59] Now I mentioned earlier, ocelots are dietary generalists. They're not picky about what they eat. They are incredibly picky about where they live. And so they are what we call a habitat specialist. In Texas, they live in one landscape -Tamaulipan Thornscrub. Tamaulipan Thornscrub is a forest of thorny bushes and succulents and low-lying trees and I always think of that forest as being sort of in an arms race. Everything in that forest has a barb on it. And again, this force is very low-lying and the cats love it. It provides excellent cover for them, for hunting, for denning, for protection. And so, this is really the only landscape we're going to find ocelots in in Texas.

Shari Wilcox [00:38:57] Unfortunately, Tamaulipan Thornscrub is only found in the Rio Grande Valley, which is experiencing significant development pressure. So, we're seeing the loss of land at an alarming rate, both to agriculture and now more than ever to urbanization. And so, with that, we are seeing the fragmentation of habitat. We are seeing general loss of thornscrub.

Shari Wilcox [00:39:24] And we're seeing roads be built and more traffic upon those roads. Now the roads issue is huge. The leading known cause of ocelot mortality, or ocelot death in the United States is being hit by a car. We had a terrible year in 2015. We had seven ocelots killed on roads in South Texas. And so, this fragmentation of habitat means cats are attempting to move around a landscape that is increasingly perilous for them and they are crossing roads. And unfortunately, sometimes meeting their fate on those roads as they're moving, particularly at night. This is a nocturnal species, a small animal moving quickly across the landscape under cover of darkness. And unfortunately, drivers just don't even see them, and they end up hit by cars. And so that really is the, the leading concern is loss of habitat, fragmentation of habitat and increasing road density and traffic.

David Todd [00:40:35] OK. Well, I guess we had had a question in here earlier about the range of the ocelot, and my understanding is that they are confined, as you said, to the Tamaulipan Thornscrub in the lower Rio Grande Valley. And is there a sort of countervailing, you know, companion habitat to the south of the Rio Grande River?

Shari Wilcox [00:41:04] Yes. These ocelots live in areas of Tamaulipas in Mexico, as well as portions of Sonora. They're, or in Tamaulipas, they are also living in Tamaulipan Thornscrub. That's where it gets its name.

Shari Wilcox [00:41:19] Now, as you move further south and west, in the Sonora, the cats are occupying different habitats. But the common denominator there is the density of the habitat. These animals like a lot of cover. They do not like to be near humans. These are not animals that will hang out around human settlement like bobcats might. Rather, they are very reticent, very shy and prefer dense habitat.

David Todd [00:41:47] Gotcha. OK, well, thanks for explaining that. Now I noticed that you had not so long ago presented a paper called, "Ocelots in Texas: Conservation Challenges and Opportunities". And I'd really be interested to hear what you think about what the different risks are, and the openings might be for recovering some of these possible populations.

Shari Wilcox [00:42:19] I think the risks, as I just highlighted - that expanding urbanization, the expanding development, is, is the greatest risk in the Rio Grande Valley. We are seeing unprecedented growth at this time, unexpected growth, even since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That area is growing rapidly. And there is new investment from employers like SpaceX, which I'm sure we'll talk about later, who are drawing new people to the Valley. And so again, we're seeing an expansion of the urbanized area, of the suburbanized area. And with that comes loss of habitat and more people on the roads now with those major risks.

Shari Wilcox [00:43:07] We also are seeing major opportunities here. And I know that you did interview Dr. Bill Swanson as well as Dr. Hilary Swarts, and I think their work holds the promise of the future for this population because that groundbreaking work has the promise of supporting genetic diversity in this population.

Shari Wilcox [00:43:32] When I talk about habitat fragmentation, there are two levels where the ocelot population is affected. Number one is at the individual level, the safety of an individual cat as it moves in the landscape. But more broadly, the whole population suffers with fragmentation because the cats are not able to meet each other for genetic exchange, for breeding, to find new mates. And so, these two populations are isolated from one another.

Shari Wilcox [00:44:02] And so through the promise of Dr. Swanson's work and the collaboration from so many scientists working on the ground, we have the opportunity to breed genetic diversity back into these populations in the future. This is still very early days, but this is a wonderful opportunity that we are embracing.

Shari Wilcox [00:44:27] Beyond that, planning for corridors, for wildlife corridors and building road crossings for ocelots are really the opportunities that we have to embrace. Texas Department of Transportation worked with Fish and Wildlife to build 12 or 13, depends how you count them, wildlife crossings specifically designed for ocelots around Laguna Atascosa. And these crossings have been a huge success. They enjoy incredible public support and they also are actually working. The cats are using the underpasses. We have documentation from cameras of different male ocelots wandering on and off the refuge, utilizing the crossings. And so that also is a real promise for the future. In order to assure these cats some level of safe passage as we work to reconnect corridors for them.

David Todd [00:45:29] You know, I've read and I'm sure you know more about this than I do, but that this issue of, of protecting corridors and providing crossings seems like a very big concern and goal, and I think that you told me that there are some large amounts of money budgeted in the transportation bill, Federal transportation bill, for wildlife crossings. Can you give us sort of the bigger aspect to that, beyond ocelots?

Shari Wilcox [00:46:02] Yeah. So, let's see here. Sorry, sorry, I got lost in my own notes, I made a few notes about this.

Shari Wilcox [00:46:10] So yes, roads are a major concern in wildlife conservation, not just for ocelots, but so many species. We actually lose 12 percent of all wild animals in North America to death on roads every year. And this is an issue of animal safety, but it's also an

issue of human safety and property damage. We experience, as a society, \$8 billion a year in property damage and losses due to strikes with wildlife, not just endangered wildlife, but the more common animals, notably deer. And so, finding support for wildlife crossings is as much a human issue as it is a wildlife issue.

Shari Wilcox [00:46:59] My colleagues who work in Washington, D.C., worked very hard to have a \$350 million, \$350 million dollar provision put into the transportation bill at the federal level to support the construction of wildlife crossings. This was really important because while wildlife crossings enjoy public support, there wasn't a lot of funding for them. States were struggling to find the money to build them. They are not always cheap to build.

Shari Wilcox [00:47:32] Some under, some are underpasses - go under roads. Others are overpasses that go over roads. And there's a lot of work that has to go into siting these so animals will use them. A lot of fencing is used to funnel animals across roads, safe places, and so there's a lot of planning and it's not cheap. And so fortunately, with the inclusion of these funds in that infrastructure bill, we have a source of funding that states can draw from to build these underpasses like the ocelot crossings that we have in South Texas.

David Todd [00:48:09] Well, that's, that's encouraging.

David Todd [00:48:12] So while we're talking about ways to help with the ocelot's restoration, I notice that you had written an article that gave ways that individuals might be able to help, I mean, beyond what TXDOT and the federal government can do to build underpasses and overpasses, but things that just, you know, Joe Blow and Jane Doe might be able to do in their own individual lives to help the ocelot. What might you recommend there?

Shari Wilcox [00:48:52] So this is one of my jobs, is thinking about how people can help. Ocelots are reticent species, as I've mentioned, you're not ever going to be able to see them on the landscape. And sometimes it can be hard to motivate people to action when they can't see the thing that that's going to benefit from that action. And so, I like to break it down into six steps that can help people start off with helping us to promote ocelot conservation and to foster interest in these cats again.

Shari Wilcox [00:49:29] Well, actually, you can always go to a zoo. There are a number of zoos here in Texas that do have ocelots on display, including the San Antonio Zoo, Houston Zoo, as well as, I think, a number of zoos in North Texas. So, while you're not going to see them on the landscape, you can experience these cats in that environment, which I think is a really powerful way to motivate action. So, I encourage people to take the opportunity to see an ocelot in the fur.

Shari Wilcox [00:50:00] But beyond that, there are a lot of ways that they can help that are fairly low effort, I think. You know, a lot of us have a lot going on in our lives and we only have a few moments to spare. But there are still ways to help. I encourage people to be message amplifiers to follow different groups and scientists who work on ocelots, on social media and to share their content to comment on their content because that gets that information out to broader audiences. Also writing an op-ed or a guest blog is another way to state your commitment to conserving Ocelots and Texas.

Shari Wilcox [00:50:43] I also encourage people to learn more. For instance, listening to this oral history or attending a webinar or attending the Ocelot Conservation Festival are great ways to learn a little more and be good advocates for these cats.

Shari Wilcox [00:51:01] Getting kids involved is always important at all ages. So, research projects, presentations, art projects, poems, creative endeavors are always for kids to engage with ocelots and to think through why these cats matter to them. And this really helps them to increase their own knowledge. And I also think there's really something powerful about what we learn about as children, just as we started this interview today. A lot of what we end up caring about later in life starts early.

Shari Wilcox [00:51:38] Now, if you have a little more time to dedicate to helping in the fight to save ocelots, being an advocate who speaks out at public meetings, who writes letters, who signs petitions is a great way to lend your voice. We post things on our social media, Defenders of Wildlife Texas on Facebook. Again, petitions we're running, lawmakers they can reach out to, agencies they can comment to, to help raise a collective voice for these cats.

Shari Wilcox [00:52:10] If you happen to live in ocelot-occupied areas, you can really affect change by changing your behavior on the landscape. Largely, that means slowing down on roads. As I mentioned, deaths on roads are the leading known cause of death for ocelots in the United States. And so, slowing down to the posted speed limit gives you more time to react if you do see an animal dart across the road.

Shari Wilcox [00:52:40] Additionally, because ocelots eat rodents, it's very important that we don't use poison, rodenticide, to control rodent populations around ocelot-occupied areas. So, investigating non-toxic rodent control techniques is another really important way you can help ocelots.

Shari Wilcox [00:53:03] And finally, if you have the time, volunteering is always a great way to help. There are a number of citizen scientist opportunities, including tasks like scanning photos from camera traps, looking for signs of animals, or you can volunteer with a group like mine and help us get the word out. There are many ways to put your skills to use to help these cats.

David Todd [00:53:31] That is very helpful and encouraging. Yeah. So, I think a lot of people feel like there's little they can offer and do to help. So nice, nice alternatives there.

David Todd [00:53:48] So I think that one of the other things that, that you've been involved in through Defenders of Wildlife in trying to protect the ocelot is to support the expansion of National Wildlife Refuges, which I guess would affect Laguna Atascosa as well. Can you tell us a little bit about how that process works and why you think that's an important goal?

Shari Wilcox [00:54:20] Absolutely. So, I think it's important to know that the CEO of Defenders of Wildlife is a past director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And so, the National Wildlife Refuge System is at the heart of what Defenders of Wildlife does. We work to defend and strengthen those refuges, and we work as an ally alongside them. In 2021, we did launch a new campaign explicitly targeting expanding the refuge system. And this allows the refuge system to do so much more to address biodiversity and climate crises and to promote more equitable access to the outdoors. So, this National Wildlife Refuge campaign was really another way for Defenders to contribute to the presidential administration, the Biden

administration's commitment to "30 by 30". And what that is, is to conserve 30 percent of our nation's lands and waters by 2030.

Shari Wilcox [00:55:26] And also, it enables us to support another administrative initiative, which is America the Beautiful, which is really seeking to improve access to nature for underserved communities. And so, we are working on Capitol Hill and on the ground to support funding and initiatives that allow these refuges to grow, and growth means acquisition of priority lands. So, we work alongside a number of partners in South Texas to help identify which spots are most important to add to Laguna Atascosa and where willing landowners exist, who are willing to sell, of course, to help grow and infill the refuge. Because Laguna Atascosa on a map looks like one big contiguous unit, but it's not. There are little gaps within the refuge that are private lands.

Shari Wilcox [00:56:24] And so we're very interested again in creating those corridors for wildlife, including the ocelot. And one of our collective goals working alongside Fish and Wildlife and many partner organizations is what we call the Ocelot Coastal Corridor, or sometimes it's called the Conservation Coastal Corridor. This is the area of South Texas that starts at the border and goes north to Laguna Atascosa. And so that's about 20 to 30, maybe 40 miles long. And we are really seeking connectivity in that area. We need space for ocelots to roam. And so that is really at the heart of our work in the refuge system campaign, the expansion campaign and more specifically, Laguna Atascosa, which is identified both by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Defenders of Wildlife as a priority refuge.

David Todd [00:57:26] OK, well, talking of this Coastal Corridor makes me think about some of the projects that are along that, that stretch of habitat that goes from Laguna Atascosa in the north to the United States / Mexico border towards the south. And those include both the SpaceX development, which I guess is relatively new, near Boca Chica, and then some of the the older but ongoing developments along the Brownsville Ship Channel, including these LNG facilities that I think are currently being planned. And I was curious if you could talk about how these ocelots and their future interact with these industrial projects.

Shari Wilcox [00:58:27] Yes, these are unique challenges. I can say, outside of Florida, most of my colleagues aren't dealing with these specific challenges. Both LNG, which is liquid natural gas export facility development, and Space X pose challenges to ocelot conservation because they do lie within that broader corridor. So, the LNG terminal or proposed LNG export facilities are along the Brownsville Ship Channel, just to the south of Laguna Atascosa and well within the documented area the ocelots have been seen in the last 30 years at this time. Part of the Ship Channel is developed back toward the City of Brownsville, but the coastal area remains pristine and beautiful, and we are fighting a proposed development there because that habitat is so important to the connectivity of this corridor. We have Tamaulipan Thornscrub present there, a number of other ideal habitats, including coastal prairie. Again, they are in beautiful condition.

Shari Wilcox [00:59:38] And so we have been working on the ground and in administrative procedures and through the courts attempting to challenge the construction of these export facilities because we think it's short-sighted to destroy that landscape for a product that is frankly dated. We, in the longer term, are moving away from LNG. It's a very volatile market. It plummeted in 2020. Now it's 2022, it's back up, but that is sort of a bump, a temporary bump. And so, our argument is that this is short-sighted. It's driven by volatile markets, the agenda and the technologies around us. When I say the agenda, I mean from the presidential

administration, as well as the technology all around us, the green energy that we're developing, really does not justify destroying this habitat for short-term gain.

Shari Wilcox [01:00:38] SpaceX is a very unique and challenging issue. The Boca Chica site for Space X is an experimental rocket launching site, and that means that they are working on launching a rocket whose power has never before been witnessed. You can imagine how concerned we are about that. SpaceX itself sits on private land, but it's a very small parcel of private land and it is surrounded by public land and water.

Shari Wilcox [01:01:10] This includes federal wildlife refuges, state parks, a civil war battlefield and also beaches, which are all of our beaches here in Texas. This area is home to 10 endangered species. There's the ocelot, the jaguarundi, which is another small cat actually not documented in the area in the last 30 years, but is technically still in its home range, as well as all five species of sea turtle that nest and use beaches in Texas and a number of endangered birds, including piping plover, red knot, and aplomado falcon. Now, ocelots are really sort of a footnote in the story.

Shari Wilcox [01:01:58] We are concerned what vibration and noise might do, but our bigger concern is about the corridor itself. We are not excited about having experimental record-breaking launches happening within a conservation corridor. Furthermore, many of the endangered species I just listed - sea turtles and birds in particular - do come right up to that SpaceX site, and there's already documented impacts on a number of bird species so far. Some of the experimental launches at that site, which are not yet full-powered launches, have led to wildfires in the National Wildlife Refuge and raining flaming debris into public parks.

Shari Wilcox [01:02:46] This is, in our view, a safety issue, and so we are calling for a full EIS or environmental impact statement. This would be an in-depth assessment into the impacts of these activities on the environment. We think this is absolutely necessary. Currently, SpaceX is trying to rush through what we call an EA or an environmental assessment, which sounds very similar, but it is not nearly as in-depth, and they're able to gloss over a number of environmental impacts. And so at this time, mid-April 2022, we are awaiting decision from the FAA on which direction they're going to go with the Environmental Assessment. And we again are advocating strongly for the EIS and we are sort of in a holding pattern until the end of the month, all of us. SpaceX can't launch, and there's not much environmental groups can do until we know what the plan is.

David Todd [01:03:51] Well, you talked about some of this industrial development to the south of some of the known ocelot habitat protected habitat at least. And I think another development that's been of concern has been the extension of the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico as it runs through the Lower Rio Grande Valley. What sort of impact do you think we are seeing from the Wall as it exists, and as it's planned?

Shari Wilcox [01:04:27] So as of this time, there is not a border wall in the last stretch of the border as it heads to the Gulf of Mexico, so along the edge of the lower Rio Grande National Wildlife Refuge, there is no wall. Rather, these are federal lands that are patrolled in different ways, and we ardently support that remaining a wall-free area because in the very long term, we are hopeful that this might be a site where an international peace park might be able to develop. And what an international peace park would be is a large, contiguous section, U.S. and Mexico, where both sides of the border are managed for their biological diversity. And so, we really need the wall to remain, or this area to remain wall-free.

Shari Wilcox [01:05:20] I'll say the ocelot is often mentioned with regards to the border wall. The ocelot does not live at this time directly near the border. However, again, much like SpaceX and LN, we are concerned about harms too of the corridor, looking forward to ongoing conservation plans for the area. Now, in other areas, the wall has been very troubling because of the way it's being constructed on top of levees and within the floodplain of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We're very concerned about the impacts of flooding events and how that might trap wildlife against the wall and drown them because this is a river that can surge at times and can become quite powerful, and the wall is, of course, usually an unmovable object. And so that can create some real problems for the flow of the river and the natural inhabitants that live along its shores.

Shari Wilcox [01:06:25] So, we actively monitor and are advocating for reduction of physical barriers at the border, and instead we are encouraging other technologies, other ways of surveying the border, that are more wildlife-friendly.

David Todd [01:06:45] OK. So, I have heard, you know, some criticism of the strategies for protecting ocelots, in the sort of reliance on some of the protective corridor along the Rio Grande and as you pointed out, as far as is known, no ocelots have been seen there in decades. And I think that the criticism is that money spent there was probably a benefit for lots of reasons - you know, the open space and the flood control and the other animals that use that area. But for the ocelots, it might have been a better investment to, as you say, expand Laguna Atascosa or maybe buy more ranch lands to the North. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, how the ocelot, which is, I guess, this poster child for conservation down there may not have benefited as much from a lot of the investment in protecting lands down there.

Shari Wilcox [01:08:07] Yes, I am familiar with those criticisms, and I would say that, it is actually all is a win. And what I mean by that is we use the ocelot sometimes when we're talking about environmental conservation in the lower Rio Grande Valley sort of like a cultural umbrella species, meaning whatever benefits the ocelot is going to benefit a lot of other critics. The Rio Grande Valley is such a unique ecology, it is the only place like it in the United States. It is a meeting place of neotropical environments with our more continental environments of the United States. And especially along the river, there are so many powerful arguments for ensuring that these lands are maintained, their ecological integrity is maintained. Flood control, human safety - in terms of when you start to mess with the stream channel, you can change flood events in a region. And so, leaving these areas wild allows them to absorb flood activities as they do in natural systems.

Shari Wilcox [01:09:18] And so the Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge is not contiguous. We call it pearls on a string running down the river. And so the federal government has invested over four, I forget how much, actually, but hundreds of millions of dollars over the decades purchasing this land as it comes available in order to create the corridor along the river. And again, the corridor along the river is not so much about ocelots. It's historic ocelot territory, but it's really about so many other species, including a number of threatened and endangered, including an incredible array of avian species of birds.

Shari Wilcox [01:10:01] And as much as the ocelot is known in South Texas, birds are even more popular. This is a global destination for birders. Migratory birds some winter in this location. Others stop over as they're moving across. And that, the birding and ecotourism, brings an incredible amount of money to this region. A study Texas A&M did a decade ago found that ecotourism alone contributed 463 million dollars to the local economy and created 6500 full-time jobs. And that was at that time. Birding has actually taken off in the United

States as a pastime. COVID actually, in many ways helped to bolster birding as a local hobby that people could do. And so now we're seeing as things are opening back up, that this is going to become an even more popular destination for folks who want to see once-in-a-lifetime birds.

Shari Wilcox [01:11:08] And so I think it is so important that we consider these parcels of land that are acquired for their economic impact, for their ecological impact that's much broader than the conservation of one species.

David Todd [01:11:24] OK. Oh, well, thanks, Shari. I think that's a good view to take. I appreciate it.

David Todd [01:11:33] So I thought maybe we could just kind of move back a little bit and look at your role as a representative of a nonprofit organization such as Defenders of Wildlife and can talk about how you fit into this conservation picture because there are so many aspects and so many people involved. And I'm curious how you feel you fit into this world, you know, what your niche is. I think at one time you explained that your role is sort of as an explainer or a translator for the general public. Maybe you can sort of expand on that, help us understand where you where you fit in.

Shari Wilcox [01:12:19] I have a fairly unique role in Defenders. Most of our staff live in Washington, D.C., and they work on policy. They work in legal dimensions. That's largely our wheelhouse. However, there are about 40 or 50 of us with these incredible jobs called field conservation associates or field conservation representatives. And these are wonderful jobs if you can find them, and if you are "people people", yep, or if you are a "people person".

Shari Wilcox [01:12:55] I spend a lot of time talking to scientists who work on ocelots. So, I speak with Dr. Hilary Swarts a lot to understand the latest in what's happening on the refuge, the challenges they're facing, the opportunities, where they need support, where they might need some bolstering.

Shari Wilcox [01:13:14] Some of that I communicate to my colleagues in D.C. because we have connections into different levels of the Fish and Wildlife. So sometimes we can carry messages internally to new audiences within the system to help bolster the work on the ground.

Shari Wilcox [01:13:32] But a bigger part of my job is chatting with different groups. We often call them stakeholders. "Stakeholders" is a very broad term for different groups that have some investment in a conservation agenda or priority. And so, part of my job is to grow our stakeholder base, to grow the groups of people out here in Texas who feel that they have a stake in ocelot conservation. And so, I spend time talking to the public. I spend time talking to lawmakers at the state level. I also will, I do public talks. I do private talks. I support the work of other groups, grassroots groups in particular. We look to amplify their voices, amplify their efforts that are connected to the communities in and around ocelot-occupied areas.

Shari Wilcox [01:14:31] And so we're trying to call attention to the ocelot and to raise awareness for the challenges to its survival in Texas. Now, of course, I don't just work on the ocelot. I work on a number of other threatened and endangered species as well. But this work is really at the heart of what I do.

David Todd [01:14:50] Okay. Well, there are just so many ways that you communicate. I've just seen some of the examples in reading more about you and, you know, you've gotten the word out how through books and peer-reviewed journals and general readership magazines and newspapers, online blogs and video talks and online seminars. I mean, it goes on and on. And I was wondering if you could talk about just some of the possibilities and then the hurdles that you might find with each of those different formats.

Shari Wilcox [01:15:36] I would say the greatest challenge is being heard in a cacophony of voices. Social media has given us all platforms to speak our every thought. And so, there is a challenge in the clarity of our message. There are challenges in different formats. In, in, for instance, I'm thinking of social media, not that we want to go viral, but we want different posts that we create to gain traction and to be shared. And you're competing with so many other issues that are being presented by other groups. And they all matter. And so getting our voice out there too, getting our issues out there too, is a challenge.

Shari Wilcox [01:16:24] I actually have been running a social media page called "Viva the Ocelot" for a number of years for a group called the Friends of Laguna Atascosa, and that one we've had a lot of luck with. There's a recipe to engaging the public and I'm still learning it, but people want to see ocelots and they want, they want good news with their bad news. And so, we spent a lot of time just sharing views into the lives of these cats through the camera trap photos. And we've had a few posts sort of go mini-viral and almost hit a million people. So that's really exciting.

Shari Wilcox [01:16:59] I do write for scientific journals because that is a very different audience than general readership magazines or newspapers.

Shari Wilcox [01:17:08] So what I'm learning, with coaching from our communications team, is that there are different audiences within these different formats. There are different ways of addressing them, and there are different ways to do calls for action, for asking people to do something like I highlighted earlier. And so, it's a real art and balance, and it's something I'm still learning.

David Todd [01:17:33] Well, that's very humble. Clearly, you're effective - boy, a million hits. That's remarkable. That's wonderful.

David Todd [01:17:42] You know, during this pandemic outbreak, many of us have been sequestered and haven't been able to have real presence with people, and I'm, I understand that in earlier times, and maybe reviving, that there's been this Ocelot Conservation Festival that that you and Defenders of Wildlife and Friends of Laguna Atascosa have organized. And I'm curious what you see the opportunities for with that festival.

Shari Wilcox [01:18:25] The Ocelot Conservation Festival is really a showpiece event in the Valley. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Friends of Laguna Atascosa have been hosting this event for 20 years now, I believe. I think the first one was 1997, so it might be, I think it's 25 years. And this is how it has evolved over time. But at the heart of this event is a series of public outreach and educational events that are targeted to families and nature enthusiasts who live in Brownsville and Harlan.

Shari Wilcox [01:19:03] And some years there has been what we call an ambassador ocelot, a zoo ocelot who's trained to travel and to attend events like this. She actually comes from Jack Hanna's zoo, the Columbus Zoo, or no, I'm sorry, the Cincinnati Zoo. So we haven't had that cat

in a number of years now because of COVID, but it was always a real privilege to have this ocelot travel from Ohio to Texas, and a lot of people would come out to meet this ocelot. They were certainly not allowed to touch her, but they were able to see this cat up close and she was a wonderful ambassador. We were able to hold a Ocelot Conservation Festival in person this year. It was in March and this year we were not able to have an ambassador animal. It turns out actually that wild cats can catch COVID from humans, and there have been a number of zoo cats documented catching it from their keepers. And so, at this time, wild cats are not in zoos, are not able to interact with the public for that reason.

Shari Wilcox [01:20:12] But we were still able to host a wonderful day at the Gladys Porter Zoo, which has been an incredible partner. They do a lot of the veterinary support for the Ocelot Conservation Program in Texas, and they also host events for the festival. And it was really great to get people back together and have fun educational activities for the family. And we're looking forward to continuing the hosts of that event in various forms, different events throughout the Harlingen Brownsville area next March in 2023.

David Todd [01:20:48] Well, good. It'll be nice to get people together. There's nothing like that sort of sort of, you know, collaborative effort and the camaraderie that you have when you see that there are other people who care about these creatures too.

Shari Wilcox [01:21:04] Yes.

David Todd [01:21:07] Well, we're sort of drawing to a close here. I, I'm curious since I understand you work and have studied the situation for the jaguar, I was curious if you could talk to us a little bit about how the conservation efforts for the jaguar and the ocelot may, you know, interact or compare. Any thoughts about that?

Shari Wilcox [01:21:37] Ocelots and jaguars, do you share a historic home range in the United States. At one time, this included Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. I'm actually part of an inter-organizational team that is exploring the feasibility of reintroducing jaguars to the Southwest. And I should say that we do have jaguars present in the borderlands of Arizona and New Mexico, but these are again male dispersers and they do not qualify as a population. And what we are proposing is to reintroduce a population of cats not at the borderland, but more north northward in an area that we've identified and named the Central Arizona / New Mexico Recovery Area. And it's a very large area of national forest and some tribal lands. This is a 20 million acre parcel of land that we have, we've identified as being ideal for prey, vegetative cover and access to water. And this was an area where jaguars roamed as recently as the mid-20th century. The last one died in this area in the 1960s. And so, we're proposing reintroducing jaguars, and this area, we believe, could sustain a population of about 100 jaguars. So, it's a huge area.

Shari Wilcox [01:23:07] Now this is a big moonshot idea. It would take a remarkable level of partnership between state and federal agencies, as well as tribal governance and a number of NGO partners. But we think it's worth exploring. And again, this would be decades long. You don't rush into a project of this scale, but it's something we're hopeful for now, I said.

Shari Wilcox [01:23:33] The jaguars also once roamed in Texas. Unfortunately, there's not an area big enough in Texas that meets the criteria to support jaguars at this time. So, at this time, no area in Texas is considered a target or candidate area for reintroduction of jaguars.

David Todd [01:23:57] Well, it's exciting that there's the potential for something in a Texas-adjacent area of, let's say, Arizona, New Mexico. I hope, hope that pans out well.

Shari Wilcox [01:24:11] So I notice that you have served as a member of the Ocelot Working Group, and I was hoping that you might just try to see what you and your colleagues foresee for the ocelot in Texas. What do you think may be coming in the future?

Shari Wilcox [01:24:31] Woo, that's a really good question. The Ocelot Working Group is very new. It was just formed, I think, in the last six months. And this is a really exciting moment for those of us who work on ocelots. Small cats, medium-sized cats in general are understudied. Ocelots are included in that group. And so, it's rare that you get to encounter other people who study this animal outside of the immediate people you work with on a project. And so the Ocelot Working Group seeks to create a community for us to share information, techniques, findings, identify challenges we're running into, funding opportunities, publication opportunities, across the range of this cat.

Shari Wilcox [01:25:19] And so, we meet in an app called WhatsApp, which is sort of like a chat app. And it's quite a lively group because the ocelot spans countries that speak three different languages, three major languages, as well as amazing diversity of indigenous languages. But typically in the app, I see a conversation where we'll be ping-ponging between English, Spanish and Portuguese, so it is quite lively. I think we're very excited to have found each other and to have this forum to speak with one another, because in the past we had a wait for publication of scientific papers in order to know what other groups were working on this cat.

Shari Wilcox [01:25:59] So I think this is really exciting and is a great step forward for the cats conservation across its range because we benefit when we share information.

David Todd [01:26:11] That's so true. Well, you've been nice to share a lot of information with us today. So well said. And before we finish, I thought I should just ask if there's anything you thought we hadn't really done justice to, if there was a topic you wanted to explore a bit regarding the ocelot or other wildlife conservation questions.

Shari Wilcox [01:26:39] Goodness, no. This has been a very holistic conversation. I think the note I would end on is that we need everyone. We need, we need a plurality, a diversity of voices speaking out on behalf of conservation, of this, of this wild cat, and of wildlife throughout the state of Texas. Conservation of wildlife in Texas is challenging. We have very little public land, and so very little access to even understand what challenges wildlife are experiencing on the landscape. And so, I invite landowners to explore different conservation easements, different ways to get involved in conservation on their lands. And I also invite folks who maybe live in suburban and urban environments to explore ways that they can get involved because their voices matter as much as landowners. Because we're all in this together and together, we can save the Texas ocelot.

David Todd [01:27:43] Right. That is a good rallying call. Thank you.

Shari Wilcox [01:27:48] Thank you.

David Todd [01:27:48] Well, Shari, it has been a pleasure to talk to you and hear your many thoughts, and I wish you the best and that our paths cross at some point in the future and I learn more about your good deeds.

Shari Wilcox [01:28:07] Well, thank you very much for having me. I really enjoyed this.

David Todd [01:28:11] Well good! The feeling was mutual. Well, let's keep in touch. Thank you so much.

Shari Wilcox [01:28:16] Thank you.

David Todd [01:28:17] All right. Take care.

Shari Wilcox [01:28:18] Bye.