

TRANSCRIPT:

INTERVIEWEE: Rick LoBello

INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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

Rick LoBello [00:00:04] Hello.

David Todd [00:00:05] Hello, Mr. LoBello.

Rick LoBello [00:00:07] I'm sorry about that problem, David. It's the first time I've had that problem on Zoom. And the only thing I can think of is I work for the city of El Paso, and their I.T. department sometimes does things to us and blocks us, and people try to email me and it never gets to me. And I can't, I was just on Zoom the other day, so I don't know why. But in any case, here we are.

David Todd [00:00:36] This is quite all right. There's, you know, glitches make life a little extra interesting, I guess.

Rick LoBello [00:00:44] Yeah.

David Todd [00:00:45] Thanks for your patience with, you know, the technical aspects here. And of course, thank you for your interest and time and doing this. That's the big thing.

Rick LoBello [00:01:01] Sure.

David Todd [00:01:01] So, I don't want to chew up your whole day, but I did want to ask you before we jump into this, if you had any questions or comments that you wanted to express.

Rick LoBello [00:01:11] Well, I would like to have a copy of the interview, if asked if that's not a problem.

David Todd [00:01:17] Oh, absolutely, yeah. So, I can get you an MP3 and a transcript.

Rick LoBello [00:01:25] OK. Sure.

David Todd [00:01:25] And that's the least I could do. Sure. You bet.

Rick LoBello [00:01:29] Well, I'm ready.

David Todd [00:01:30] Okay, well, why don't we jump into it? And, as you may have seen from this little script we've been emailing, I typically try to introduce the project and give a little, very brief introduction to yourself. And then, basically just go through those questions

that, that you've been looking at, in that order. So we try to keep it as user-friendly as possible. But if you find that there are other things that you would like to explore, you know, please go ahead, because I'm just here kind of as your listening post and...

Rick LoBello [00:02:12] OK.

David Todd [00:02:12] I try to say as little as possible, frankly.

Rick LoBello [00:02:16] Sure.

David Todd [00:02:16] This is your story. And again, thanks for telling it.

Rick LoBello [00:02:22] Be happy to.

David Todd [00:02:24] Okay. Well, let's start then.

David Todd [00:02:28] Good afternoon. My name is David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Rick LoBello. And with his permission, we plan to record this interview for research and educational work on behalf of the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a web site for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas here in Austin.

David Todd [00:02:58] And I just want to stress that Mr. LoBello would have all rights to use the recording as he sees fit as well.

David Todd [00:03:06] And before we went any further, I wanted to make sure that's all okay with you.

Rick LoBello [00:03:11] That's perfectly fine.

David Todd [00:03:13] Oh, great.

David Todd [00:03:14] Okay, well, let's begin. It is Friday, July 8th, 2022. It's a little before 3:45 Central Time, 2:45 Mountain Time. My name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I'm in Austin. And we are fortunate to be conducting an interview with Mr. LoBello, who is based in the El Paso, Texas area.

Rick LoBello [00:03:45] He has been involved in wildlife conservation for many years, serving as executive director of both the Big Bend Natural History Association from 1986 to '92, and the Carlsbad Caverns Guadalupe Mountains Association from 1992 to 2000. And then most recently, he has served as the education curator for the El Paso Zoo, from 2000 to to the present day.

David Todd [00:04:12] And throughout he's had a strong interest in the Mexican wolf and in its protection and possible restoration someday to Texas.

David Todd [00:04:21] And so, today we hope to talk about his life and career, and especially focus on his work with the Mexican wolf as just an example of the kind of conservation work he's been involved with.

David Todd [00:04:34] So, with that little introduction, I was hoping you might start us off by telling us about your childhood and early years, and if there were some people or events in your life that helped encourage your interest in animals and perhaps wolves in particular.

Rick LoBello [00:04:54] Well, thank you, David. I've been excited and active in studying wildlife all of my life. I got started, I think, when I was four years old and my mother was a bus sponsor on a trip to the Buffalo Zoo in western New York when I was in kindergarten. And I'm almost positive that that experience at the Buffalo Zoo really got my attention when I was growing up in western New York.

Rick LoBello [00:05:30] And when I went to school, my first grade teacher was a birdwatcher and I still remember her playing bird sounds on a record player and getting us all excited about looking at the birds in our yards.

Rick LoBello [00:05:46] And then all through my early years, growing up along the shores of Lake Erie, my dad was a hunter. I was not a hunter. I was the only member of my family that chose not to hunt, but to grab a camera instead. I'll never forget when I was a little kid, my dad had found a litter of red fox pups and brought them home and we had them for a while. And how he went hunting and how he took us out into the woods. And I saw all the different animals that were out there.

Rick LoBello [00:06:26] And then I would always ask my parents to take me to the zoo.

Rick LoBello [00:06:31] And then it wasn't long after that I got my first two-wheeler bicycle, and I found how to get to the closest creek, Big Sister Crick along the edge of my little town, Angola, New York. And I would go out to various habitats, including woodland areas, streams and ponds, and watch for all kinds of animals, birds and frogs.

Rick LoBello [00:07:02] And when I was in school, I did a project on raising white mice, and there was a time when I had pigeons and a raccoon. And all of these experiences I had growing up were basically strongly supported by my mother. And then with my father's help, I also learned to appreciate nature and everything about animals.

Rick LoBello [00:07:29] So, my childhood was a great childhood. I feel like I was very fortunate to be able to just walk or get on my bicycle and visit wildlife habitats, and I can see how those experiences as a child had a big influence on my life as I grew older and will make.

Rick LoBello [00:08:05] [Can you raise your volume? I'm having a hard time hearing you.]

David Todd [00:08:09] [Yeah, sure. Absolutely.]

David Todd [00:08:11] No, I was just curious if, other than those, you know, maybe were sponsored by your school or maybe with your family, if any of those were with peers, were there some friends that shared this kind of interest in the out-of-doors?

Rick LoBello [00:08:30] Yes. I had a couple of friends from grade school and middle school and high school that would go with me to these various locations, including my cousin Dolly [Ann Marie Collura]. And we used to go along the shoreline of Big Sister Creek and catch crayfish and all kinds of animals, salamanders. So I was by myself part of the time, but most of the time I was with either my friends and my cousin.

David Todd [00:09:06] It's interesting. And then you mentioned that your father was a hunter, but you were not. But that you seemed to be interested in photography. Is that something that goes back a number of years?

Rick LoBello [00:09:19] Yeah. I bought my first camera from the gas station near my house for like \$2. It was a little plastic camera that used black and white film. And I still have some of those pictures.

David Todd [00:09:36] And were some of them of of creatures that you saw or raised?

Rick LoBello [00:09:42] They were pictures of going on hunting trips with my dad. He would go in the woods looking for deer and I'd be sitting there in the car taking pictures of horses and other animals that I saw near while I was waiting for him to come back.

David Todd [00:10:02] Well, something else occurs to me. Sounds like you had outings with your family and with school. Did you have, like a Boy Scout troop or a summer camp that you you might have been part of?

Rick LoBello [00:10:18] No. Actually, there was a, there was a youth group. It wasn't Boy Scouts. It was just a youth group that was sponsored by the local fire department, I believe. But it wasn't Boy Scouts.

Rick LoBello [00:10:34] Most of my experiences in nature growing up were pretty much unstructured. Just going out on my own and discovering the animals and plants where I lived, and then going to the library and getting books and trying to figure out what I was seeing, and dreaming about going to places like Africa. And I spent a lot of time with books as I was growing up.

David Todd [00:11:02] Well, in fact, that was something I wanted to ask you about. You know, some people have kind of structured introduction to nature and conservation, sciences and so on. But others, you know, they read on their own, and they watch TV shows they like, or maybe they see movies that they enjoy. Were any of those things influential for you?

Rick LoBello [00:11:28] Oh, yeah. I would say Walt Disney had some nature programs that I would watch on Sunday night. We'd all be glued to the TV on Sunday nights. And then also, I believe it was on Sundays, or Saturdays, we would watch Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. And watching shows like that on TV definitely had an influence on me as well.

David Todd [00:11:54] That's great. Well thanks for sharing that. So, this may be skipping ahead and I hope I'm not skipping over anything. But were there experiences when you went to college? And I understood that you you went William Jewell College and earned a degree in biology in 1974. And were there any professors there or maybe, you know, fellow students that had these same kind of interests?

Rick LoBello [00:12:24] Oh, definitely. I had some great professors in the biology department at William Jewell that really helped me a great deal, including Dr. Bert Wagenknecht, who was the chair of the department, and Charlie Newlon. I worked under Charlie as part of a work-study, and he had a snake collection there in the biology department of about 20 different kinds of snakes - venomous snakes, rattlesnakes, non-venomous snakes. And so as I worked my way through college during those four years, I had a job in the biology department.

Rick LoBello [00:13:05] And thankfully, I was able to take advantage of that opportunity working for the biology department to help me with my career. Because during my junior year in college, one of my classmates from the biology department got a job in Yellowstone National Park as a fire control aide, and he invited me to come up and see him during the summer. And while he was out working, I spent time with one of the park ranger interpreters at Yellowstone, and I went with him on nature walks and saw some of the programs that he did.

Rick LoBello [00:13:47] And I said to myself, "Wow, I want to be a park ranger someday. I want to work and live in Yellowstone National Park." But the problem was at the time, I didn't have any experience in education or in, you know, leading people or working in a national park. And I needed to get that experience, because all the jobs I had, besides working for the biology department, were when I was a kid growing up, picking strawberries and working at a restaurant, mopping floors. Had nothing to do with being a park ranger.

Rick LoBello [00:14:22] So, I contacted the chair of the, why, my professor Charlie Newlon at William Jewell, and I said, "You know what? I need to get experience talking to people about animals." So, he allowed me to use our snake collection and to give snake talks in the biology department classroom for Scout groups and any other group that was interested in learning more about snakes.

Rick LoBello [00:14:47] And then after I gave my first talks there in the biology department, some schoolteachers in Liberty, Missouri, where the college was located, found out about me, and they started inviting me to take the snakes to their classroom. So, I got a lot of experience teaching kids about snakes when I was an undergraduate.

Rick LoBello [00:15:09] And so, when I was able to apply for a job as a park ranger, I could say I had good experience talking to people. And so, the biology department had a great influence on helping me get that experience. I created my own volunteer program there.

Rick LoBello [00:15:26] And then my classmates in the biology department were also very close to me, and we would go out on outings where we'd go hiking and go looking for snapping turtles and visiting wildlife refuges. And our professors would take us on field trips to wildlife refuges where we would go for extended periods, like even a whole week at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge, north of Kansas City, Missouri.

Rick LoBello [00:15:57] So, yeah, I had some great experiences with the biology department and Charlie Newlin, he wasn't a Ph.D., he was a professor though, and he had a great influence on me. And he created so many opportunities for me to, to explore nature as part of the classroom experience. He allowed me to do a research project on fox squirrels to gain some experience on working with nature and doing research.

Rick LoBello [00:16:31] And then he told me one day he said, "Rick, look at this." There was an ad in the Kansas City newspaper about a herpetology course at the Kansas City Museum of History and Science. And I went to that course and signed up for it. And I met Dr. Richard Baldauf, who used to work for the Wildlife Department at Texas A&M, and he was a herpetologist who specialized in frogs.

Rick LoBello [00:17:00] And lo and behold, we got to know each other. And he hired me to work at the museum for two summers at the Nature Center there that they had. And he had a very strong influence on me. He was kind of like my mentor when I was in college. And he

encouraged me and he helped me decide to move to Texas to work on my master's degree. And he was an outstanding environmental advocate. And he used to do a presentation called, "Listen to the Earth". And I probably heard that presentation a dozen times.

Rick LoBello [00:17:35] But he was a wonderful friend.

Rick LoBello [00:17:37] And so, those years at William Jewell, at the college, working with my classmates, and then working at the Kansas City Museum of History and Science with Dr. Baldauf and the teachers that were there, had a really big influence. And by the time I left Missouri to move to Texas, I was ready for my master's degree, and then I got my first job.

Rick LoBello [00:18:04] What, what brought you to Texas? I grew up in western New York. And then I went to William Jewell College in Missouri, outside of Kansas City, for four years. So, when I finished my B.A., I was sitting in Dr. Baldauf's office at the Kansas City Museum of History and Science, and we were talking about what I was going to do next. And so I talked to him about possibly going for a Ph.D. program, and a master's program. And I got a recommendation from a student who was a year ahead ahead of me, who went to Sul Ross State University in Alpine. And he really liked it there.

Rick LoBello [00:18:43] And Dr. Baldauf was familiar with that school, and some of the people working there. And because he had me excited about frogs and toads, and all amphibians and reptiles, one day we were looking at the Peterson Field Guide to Reptiles and Amphibians of North America, and we went to the page that showed the pictures of the Couch's spadefoot toad and the narrow-mouth toad and all the other desert toads that are out here.

Rick LoBello [00:19:14] And I said to myself, "Wow, I want to go there, so I could see those toads." And I tell people all the time, jokingly, if it wasn't for my interest in wanting to see a spadefoot toad, I probably never would have moved to Texas.

David Todd [00:19:33] And what do you think the appeal was, or is it that just did something click? Was it just one of those things that seemed important?

Rick LoBello [00:19:38] I just fell in love with amphibians. You know, when you work with, you know, Dr. Baldauf. And again, he was from Texas A&M before he moved to Kansas City. He was totally in love with frogs and toads. I mean, you'd go to his house and all his students for years, like giving them all these statues of frogs and toads. And he had them pictures everywhere of frogs and toads. And he was, you know, he published papers on frogs and toads.

Rick LoBello [00:20:06] So, I worked for him, and working for him, working for someone who loves frogs and toads, you know, rubs off on you. And so, he just had me all excited about them, and we'd go out and we'd find breeding ponds around Kansas City - spring peepers and all kinds of frogs calling at night.

Rick LoBello [00:20:26] And to me, it was, it still is exciting. And I'm excited about going out tonight. We've gotten some rains, so I'm thinking about going to a pond near my house to look for spadefoot toad, even tonight.

David Todd [00:20:41] That's great. Well, so, take us to this next chapter in your life. You arrive in Alpine, I gather, at Sul Ross State, a different sort of place from where you grew up or where you went to college.

Rick LoBello [00:20:55] Right.

David Todd [00:20:56] What was the experience there like?

Rick LoBello [00:20:59] It was it was similar to William Jewell. And then I met professors who loved their work and loved studying plants and animals. Dr. Barton Warnock, who at the time was the father of botany in West Texas, in the Chihuahuan desert. He was the head of the biology department, or the science department, at Sul Ross State University. And he was my main contact, and he admitted me into the biology department for my master's degree.

Rick LoBello [00:21:35] And then I worked heavily with Dr. James F. Scuddy, who was more of a zoologist, and both of them took their students on field trips. So, I'm positive that those field trips that they took us on had a big influence on us, and, and me in particular. And the field trips for the most part were at either at Big Bend National Park or Guadalupe Mountains National Park.

Rick LoBello [00:22:02] And then when I found out I was going to get my first job in Big Bend National Park, the guy that hired me said he wanted me to do a botany program for the Park Service. So, when I found out that that's what he was expecting of me, and I was more of a zoologist than a botanist, whenever Dr. Barton Warnock would take us on field trips, you know, he would tell us about all these plants. And then in between conversations, I would ask him everything. I'd say, "What's this? What's this? What's that?" Because I knew that I needed to learn all these plants in Big Bend.

Rick LoBello [00:22:36] And so, I, I learned so many different weeds and plants from Dr. Warnock. And so, by the time I got the job during the summer of 1975, I was pretty well versed on the plants of Big Bend National Park. And it really helped me a great deal having those opportunities to learn from, you know, the expert, Dr. Warnock.

David Todd [00:23:02] You mentioned that you took some field trips with Dr. Warnock, and I guess Dr. Scuddy, too. What sort of places would they take you to?

Rick LoBello [00:23:13] Well, we would you know, we would go, like with Dr. Warnock, he had permission from the Park Service to use one of the old residences from one of the pioneer families down at Rio Grande Village. And so, we, I forget the name of the building we were at, but it was a research station. So, all of us would, we brought our sleeping bags and food. And he took us on hikes in the Boquillas Canyon on the Rio Grande Village nature trail. We went to the hot springs. And, you know, we went everywhere.

Rick LoBello [00:23:50] I mean, Dr. Warnock, like Dr. Maxwell, who was the expert on geology in big Bend, he just knew everything and he would, as we were driving to Big Bend on the road from Marathon to Panther Junction, he would just stop along the road and take us, we'd climb over a fence, and he'd show us this little tiny cactus that was found no place else but that one spot. So, he knew everything and so he took us in those areas.

Rick LoBello [00:24:19] And then Dr. Scuddy took this and similar areas. You know, we've got a campsite. Dr. Scuddy took this, I know, to Fresno Canyon, which is now part of Big Bend

Ranch State Park. And so, both of them would just take us on wilderness expeditions where we would either sleep on the ground with a pad and a sleeping bag, and we'd build a fire, and we cook our own food. Or we would be in a building where there was a stove and we could cook there.

Rick LoBello [00:24:51] But I would say that most of the experiences I had with Dr. Warnock and Dr. Scuddy were out in natural wilderness settings.

David Todd [00:25:02] And it's interesting to me that these wilderness were, I guess, in high desert, very different from where you grew up and where you went to college.

Rick LoBello [00:25:11] Oh, yeah. Yeah. You really learned to appreciate water in west Texas. So dry.

David Todd [00:25:19] Yeah. So, when you were at Sul Ross, I understand that you earned an M.S. in biology in 1976. What was your principal course of study, what was your particular interest?

Rick LoBello [00:25:38] You know, I told you that I moved to west Texas because I wanted to see spadefoot toads and of course, work on my master's degree at the same time. But when I first moved out there, my main interest was studying pronghorns. I was fascinated by the pronghorns that lived on the plains around Alpine and Marfa. But there just wasn't an opportunity for me to start a research project on pronghorn.

Rick LoBello [00:26:05] And, but Dr. Scuddy wanted me to at least try. So, he introduced me to Roy McBride, who was the main person that got me interested in the wolf, which we'll talk about soon. But it turns out that I wasn't able to do a research project on pronghorn, but Dr. Scuddy had a grant from the National Park Service to do a vertebrate survey of the animals that lived around the Lake Amistad area, in Val Verde County, where they were building Lake Amistad. And so, they wanted to find out what animals were still living there after the dam had been built and so many areas were flooded to create this large reservoir.

Rick LoBello [00:26:53] So, I did a vertebrate survey for my master's degree of Lake Amistad because of Dr. Scuddy giving me the opportunity to use the grant money that he had.

David Todd [00:27:05] I see. Okay.

David Todd [00:27:07] Well, you know, it's wonderful. It sounds like these teachers that you had both in college and in grad school, not only, I guess, taught courses and took field trips but sort of gave you these leads to jobs and opportunities that, you know, you've really built on. That's, that's pretty special.

Rick LoBello [00:27:27] Yeah, I was very lucky, my first summer looking for employment, Dr. Warnock was fond of me well enough to recommend me to both the National Park Service and to the Texas Parks and Wildlife. So, my first summer in West Texas, I was actually offered jobs at both parks, and I was offered a job at the Big Bend National Park and at Davis Mountain State Park. But I chose the Big Bend.

David Todd [00:27:58] I see. Well, tell us about that first job. That's often a pretty impressive kind of experience, you know? Something that really leaves a mark.

Rick LoBello [00:28:09] Oh, yeah. I'm telling you, working as a park ranger in Big Bend National Park was, was absolutely the best job I've ever had. I mean, I've made more money in other jobs, but, you know, all I did every day was go to the ranger station, give out information to the visitors to the park about what they could see and do. And then the rest of the time, I was leading nature walks and I was doing presentations in the amphitheaters at the campground in the Chisos Basin and at Rio Grande Village.

Rick LoBello [00:28:46] So, during a five-day week, I would spend over half of my time talking to people from all over Texas. I got to know the people of Texas so well during those years that I was a park ranger, that I could tell just from talking to you because of your accent if you were from Austin, Houston, Dallas or Odessa. That's how well I knew the people of Texas.

David Todd [00:29:12] And the difference between a twang and a drawl?

Rick LoBello [00:29:16] Yeah, I could I could pick them up. And, and so, during that time, one of the things that helped me a great deal was when I had the assignment of operating the ranger station in the Chisos Basin, because in 1975 and 1976, the visitation to Big Bend was not as high as it is today. So, there'd be days when I'd be working in the Chisos Basin, or I might come in contact with just maybe a dozen people. Well, I got an eight-hour day up there, so I would grab books from the park library and just read them from cover to cover. And I became so knowledgeable on the animals and plants and the geology and the history of Big Bend that my friends nicknamed me a walking encyclopedia on the park.

Rick LoBello [00:30:10] So, when you have all that knowledge and passion and love for your job and for a National Park, it rubs off on the people you meet. And at Big Bend, even today, I believe they post on the bulletin boards the schedule as to what nature walks are being conducted that day and what programs are being presented in the amphitheater. And then they would put the name of the ranger who was presenting. And over the years that I was there, I actually had a fan club. I mean, it wasn't an official fan club, but there were people who would come to the park and look for me and say, "Let's go on Rick's hike. Let's go on his program."

Rick LoBello [00:30:52] And years later, the Parks Wildlife biologist told me it was because of the programs that I was given that he decided to pursue a career as a wildlife biologist in Big Bend. So, that was very satisfying knowing that I had influenced him that way.

Rick LoBello [00:31:10] So, I would say that those years that I wore the uniform and wore that Ranger hat were probably, and not just in Big Bend, but also in Yellowstone, where I worked, were some of the best years of my life. And during those years, when I was in my twenties, living in the national parks and working in the national parks, that's where I really developed an environmental conservation advocacy ethic that I have today.

David Todd [00:31:41] Yes. We should talk about that. It sounds like you shifted from being an interpreter and, you know, ranger at Big Bend and at Yellowstone. And then later, I think from '86 to '92, you worked as the executive director of the Big Bend Natural History Association, and maybe you can fill us in how you got that job and what some of the duties and goals for the Association might have been.

[00:32:11] Well, at the time that I was hired to take that job, I was in between jobs in the parks, living in Alpine, working with a local businessman in Alpine on running a recreation

center for teenagers. And during that time, I decided that I really wanted to try to get a job again in the national parks. So, when I was driving across the country to visit my family in New York, I had picked up a copy of the Odessa American, and I saw this advertisement for the job that I eventually got as Executive Director of the Natural History Association.

Rick LoBello [00:32:56] So, I applied for the job, Dr. Baldauf at the Kansas Museum of History and Science, wrote me a letter of recommendation. And plus, I had done a good job as a park interpreter, so there were still people associated with the park that remembered me. And so, I was very fortunate to get that job.

Rick LoBello [00:33:17] And I learned a lot about how to run a business as a result of knowing people like Rob Dunagan, who owned a beer and Coca-Cola distributorship in Fort Stockton. And he would coach me on how to be an executive director and run the finances. And then, of course, I was able to take all of my passion for the natural history of the Big Bend, and I was able to take that and use it as my main motivation and driving force in making the nonprofit organization that I was executive director of even better.

Rick LoBello [00:33:59] And so, during those years that I was executive director of the Big Bend Natural History Association, I had a fantastic working relationship with the park superintendents like Jim Carrico and the chief naturalist, like Bob Rothe. And they just let me that may be who I wanted to be. And they let me actually be executive director, and they also let me do some nature programs at the same time. So, it's almost like I was able to do education and be an executive director at the same time. And so, I just loved it. I had a wonderful time there.

Rick LoBello [00:34:39] I see. So. The Association was sort of a companion and support group for providing some extra programming and funding, I guess?

Rick LoBello [00:34:55] Yeah. The Big Bend Natural History Association at the time was one of about 60 different non-profits operating in the national parks, with the main purpose of supporting the educational programs in national parks and also in providing funding for the National Park Service so that they could get support for things that they couldn't purchase with their regular park service budgets.

Rick LoBello [00:35:28] So, my main goal in operating and leading the Natural History Association was to increase revenues by expanding the bookstore operations and the visitor centers, and then to make sure we made enough money to provide more funds for the Park Service.

Rick LoBello [00:35:53] I see, I see. Thanks. Okay. And if I'm right, you later did kind of some similar work at the Carlsbad Caverns Guadalupe Mountains Association. Is that right?

Rick LoBello [00:36:06] That's correct. Yes. Correct. Yes.

David Todd [00:36:09] Different site but similar general role and function?

Rick LoBello [00:36:14] Right.

David Todd [00:36:17] Okay. And I guess that gave you another chance to learn more about the natural history of that region of Texas and New Mexico.

Rick LoBello [00:36:26] Yeah, it was very similar to Big Bend, but of course, the geology was pretty different in that, you know, it's more limestone, Capitan Reef geology compared to what was down in Big Bend, which was a combination of limestone and igneous. And then, of course, you know, my office was right on top of Carlsbad Caverns. So, I loved that job. I was able to meet people that I needed to talk to to help improve the organization. I would say, "Well, let's not meet in my office. Let's just get on the elevator and go in the cave." So, I would have meetings in the cave with people that I needed to work with.

Rick LoBello [00:37:08] So, and I loved seeing the bats every night coming out of the Carlsbad Caverns. I was fortunate to be able to get permission from the Park Service to actually live in the park versus in the town of Carlsbad. So, my apartment was overlooking the cave and its natural entrance. And so, every night I would smell the bats flying out of the cave and just I felt like I was part of the cave myself, I was so close to it every day.

David Todd [00:37:41] That's terrific. What a wonderful place. You know, most people go to work in there, they're in some sort of a warren of offices and hallways.

Rick LoBello [00:37:50] Yeah.

David Todd [00:37:50] You know, to be able to, you know, be in this very special natural spot must have been a treat.

David Todd [00:37:57] And we're going quickly here, but I wanted to sort of give an overview of your your history and work line. So, I understand that after being at Carlsbad Caverns Guadalupe Mountain Natural History Association, you worked at the El Paso Zoo, where you've been the educational curator here. I wondered how you got there and what that job has entailed.

Rick LoBello [00:38:25] Well, the way I got connected with El Paso had a lot to do with flights from El Paso to Buffalo, New York, because whenever I went to see my family in western New York, I had a choice of either going to Odessa and catching a flight or going to El Paso. And I was able to catch more flights that were to my liking from the El Paso airport because I could fly directly to Chicago and then from Chicago to Buffalo. When I would fly from Odessa, I would have to fly from Odessa to Dallas and Dallas to someplace else. It was more changing of planes. So, I chose to go to El Paso whenever I would fly.

Rick LoBello [00:39:13] And then when I went to El Paso, I would visit places in the city like the El Paso Zoo. And during the time that I was living in Big Bend, I decided that, because of my desire to want to help protect Big Bend, that I would not be able to do that at the level I wanted to do it by living in the park. Because when you're working for the government, you just can't say what you want to say. You have to, you know, follow the company line and you have to be careful that you don't say things that would be against the government.

Rick LoBello [00:39:52] So, I said, "You know, if I'm ever going to, because when I was a park ranger, I started to learn things about the park that were not very, things that I was happy about." For example, the Mexican wolf - I felt like the wolf had been extinct from the park for years and that it should be brought back. Well, it's kind of hard to advocate for bringing back the wolf and organize anything that would be a grassroots effort if you're a park ranger.

Rick LoBello [00:40:23] So, I decided when I was in Big Bend that I wanted to live in a city so that I could influence more people in support of conservation. So, when I was recruited to go

to Carlsbad, I said to myself, "Well, at least I'll be near a town." And so, when I got the job at Carlsbad, I was able to join Rotary again. I was a member of the Rotary Club for a while in Alpine, Texas, but then I joined the Carlsbad Rotary Club, and that gave me an opportunity to network and communicate about nature with people in a city setting.

Rick LoBello [00:41:03] And, but I had said to myself, you know, even when I was in Big Bend that I would like a job at the El Paso Zoo someday. So, the El Paso Zoo was on my radar screen for over a decade. And so, the Carlsbad job was like a stepping stone to El Paso.

Rick LoBello [00:41:27] So, when I worked at Carlsbad, I was there from 1992 to the year 2000. And during those eight years, I had a lot of success and I did a lot of things in support of the main conservation projects I was interested in, in supporting wolf advocacy, and not just in Big Bend but in other places in North America, and then also in supporting transboundary conservation along the border with Big Bend. And so, I was able to lead an effort with Rotary on that.

Rick LoBello [00:42:00] And it just so happened that when it was time for me to leave Carlsbad, I moved to El Paso. I already had a house here that I bought when I was working in Carlsbad. I actually knew I was going to move to El Paso someday, so I built a house here even while I was working up there. And and then when the zoo education job opened up, I applied for it, and I got it.

Rick LoBello [00:42:29] And so, there I guess you could reach more people, just the public, I guess, in the El Paso / Ciudad Juarez area, all those visitors that came to the zoo. And you would do programs there, some sort of outreach?

Rick LoBello [00:42:48] Oh, yeah. When I first came here, I, and I'm still involved today. I, you know, I'm the zoo's first education curator. There was no education curator before I was hired. And I've been in this job now for 20 years. And so, when I first got here, I was in charge of not only education, but marketing and special events. So, when I came here, I organized conservation education events like an elephant festival, Habitat for Wildlife, and other types of related events that promoted conservation. And so, I was able to take all my passion for helping to protect nature and put it into action here at the zoo.

Rick LoBello [00:43:36] And that's been my whole focus at the El Paso Zoo over the past 20 years, is to support the mission of the Zoo, which is basically to not only conserve wildlife, but to encourage people who come here to get involved and to make changes in their life in support of conservation.

Rick LoBello [00:43:59] And so, this job has been perfect for me. It's probably is definitely the best job I've ever had, because I'm totally involved with conservation education every minute of every day.

David Todd [00:44:12] I see. Well, you know, you've mentioned a number of different kinds of animals that you've been interested and engaged with, from mice, to bats, to elephants. Maybe just as an example of the many kinds of animals that you've spoken about and thought about, could we visit some about this Mexican wolf, which seems to have drawn your attention for many years.

David Todd [00:44:42] And I thought maybe a place to start would be not all the way back with the long career of wolves in West Texas, but maybe just to the year when it blinked out, you know, when the last ones were seen, which I gather was right around 1970. Is that right?

Rick LoBello [00:45:06] Yeah. The last two Mexican wolves that were documented in West Texas were killed in 1970 on a ranch in Terrell County, north of Big Bend National Park, and then on a ranch south of Alpine, Texas, near Cathedral Mountain.

Rick LoBello [00:45:28] And Dr. Scuddy had access to the skulls and was able to document that they were *Canis lupus baileyi*, the subspecies of the gray wolf called the Mexican wolf. And so, that happened four years before I moved. The last two wolves in Texas were killed four years before I got there.

Rick LoBello [00:45:54] And then when I moved to Alpine in 1974, I lived in a dormitory for graduate students, and right across from the dormitory was a Mexican wolf living in a large dog kennel, a dog pen. And this was a wolf that the university had as a mascot, because the mascot for Sul Ross State University is the wolf - the Sul Ross Lobos. And so, that's when I first learned that there was a wolf, but I'd only been living there about a month or so, and someone didn't like wolves and they poisoned the wolf. And so, then that wolf died.

Rick LoBello [00:46:39] So, about three years later, I was working in Big Bend and my friend, Roy McBride, who was in the graduate program at Sul Ross and who Dr. Scuddy introduced me to when I was interested in the pronghorn. Roy and I became friends, and when I was in the park, you know, I would go to Alpine where Roy lived on a ranch, and I would get groceries because there weren't any grocery stores in Big Bend National Park. And even outside the park there was just the Study Butte store, which had just a few things. So if you wanted to get groceries, you had to drive 2 hours.

Rick LoBello [00:47:23] So, he called me one day and he said, "Rick, when you come into town again?" And I said, "Well, I'm not sure, but I need to get groceries pretty soon." He says, "Well, when you come to town, I want you to come out to the ranch and I want to show you something."

Rick LoBello [00:47:35] I'd already been out to his ranch before, and I knew he was studying mountain lions, and he even had a bear there for a short period of time. And so, when I went to his ranch (this was, I think, the summer of 1978), he had captured a Mexican wolf. And he told me how he was hired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in response to the Endangered Species Act classifying the Mexican wolf as an endangered species. He was hired to go into Mexico to catch as many Mexican wolves as he could for an international breeding program to help save the species.

Rick LoBello [00:48:13] So, the plan was to catch the wolves out of the wild before they went extinct because they were almost extinct in Mexico. And then to breed them and then hopefully someday find a place to release them.

Rick LoBello [00:48:27] Well, here I am, a park ranger in Big Bend. And I'm saying, "Well, why not release them in the park?" Well, that's more easily said than done. First of all, there wasn't a big enough breeding population to do that. So, when I saw that wolf in a large pen on his ranch and I had my dad's eight millimeter camera and I took some film of it, I just said to myself, "I can't I can't just look at this wolf and do nothing. I got to do something."

Rick LoBello [00:49:00] So, within a week or so, I wrote a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service saying, "Hey, I'm working in Big Bear National Park. I want to help save this wolf." And that's how I got started in advocating for the conservation of the Mexican wolf was because of that experience, seeing the wolf at Roy McBride's ranch.

David Todd [00:49:24] Well, you know what we're talking about the wolf, I think it would be interesting to hear your thoughts about Roy McBride, who I understand is just legendary in the world of predators, from wolves to mountain lions, and beyond. You know, it sounds like you've had a long friendship with them.

Rick LoBello [00:49:46] Yeah. We, we were really good friends when I was, during the 1970s. And there was a moment in my time at Sul Ross where I needed a place to stay because the dorm had closed. I forget why I couldn't stay on the campus. And so, I actually lived with Roy McBride and his family for about a month.

Rick LoBello [00:50:10] And Roy was hired by a rancher in South Texas to translocate some mountain lions to his ranch, because this rancher in south Texas felt like the best way to control his deer herd, because it was expanding, was to bring in some predators. So, Roy was hired by this rancher to transport mountain lions. And so, he invited me to go with him. So, I drove with him in his pickup truck, and a mountain lion in the back of the pickup. And we went down there to release this mountain lion. So, we grew pretty close during that time.

Rick LoBello [00:50:48] And we've stayed connected over the years. I, I was on the phone with them for a couple hours last year and, and we talked about everything related to his life and, and the wolf. And, you know, he's a very smart man and he definitely is a living legend. I can't think of anyone in West Texas that I've ever met or even heard of that knows as much about wildlife, like predators, than Roy McBride. And so he's a, you know, I don't want to, I can go on and on, talk about his career, but he had a big influence on me. And I'm really glad that I had that opportunity, because it was because of his phone call inviting me to the ranch that I got really interested in the Mexican wolf.

Rick LoBello [00:51:34] I see. Well, and did he ever give you much details about his trips down to Mexico to capture these, some of these last remaining Mexican wolves to pull into the captive breeding program?

Rick LoBello [00:51:52] He gave me some information, but most of the information that I got was from his written report. He was hired by the Fish and Wildlife Service to go down there. And so, he actually created a report on the Mexican wolf in Mexico for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So, most of what I know about Roy and his work in Mexico comes from his written report, which I believe was part of his master's thesis.

David Todd [00:52:21] I see. Okay. So, he's documented a lot of that.

David Todd [00:52:28] Well, maybe we can just sort of move to the, I guess, the next step and what the Fish and Wildlife Service had planned there, which is, you know, after capturing these Mexican wolves and I imagine there was a captive breeding program and, if I'm right there, there's a breeding program right there at the zoo where you work.

Rick LoBello [00:52:49] That's right. Well, for years, the wolf here at the El Paso Zoo was mainly a ambassador species for conservation. In other words, we were keeping mainly wolves that were no longer needed for the breeding program. So, we would just have, you

know, older wolves that came from other zoos. And we didn't really have a facility for the wolves here that was big enough for breeding. So, when we opened up the new Chihuahuan Desert exhibit a few years ago, we were able to provide habitat for a wolf pack instead of just a couple of wolves.

Rick LoBello [00:53:30] So, now I'm very happy to say that our zoo is not just exhibiting these animals, but we're actually breeding them and helping to restore them in the wild through a cross-fostering program, which basically involves taking wolves born here at the zoo. And when they're like a less than a week old, flying them over to Arizona and New Mexico and putting those little pups in wild Mexican wolf dens to be raised by wild Mexican wolf mothers. And this is a very successful program, and it's been going on now for about half a dozen years. And for the past two years now, we've been able to contribute wolves to the cross-fostering program. So, we're actually helping to strengthen the gene pool in the wild from wolves born here in El Paso.

David Todd [00:54:30] I see. Well, and so maybe this is a chance to talk a little bit about why you think this is important, whether it's capturing these animals, doing the captive breeding, and then releasing them. And, you know, what do you think is missing in the habitat in your part of the world by there not being Mexican while there?

Rick LoBello [00:54:59] Well, I'm a strong believer that all the parts of an ecosystem are important and everything is connected. And predators play a very important role as, as control factors for the prey species that they hunt. And by having predators in the wild, they help to keep the animals in the food chain healthier by their presence, by controlling the sick animals that could possibly have diseases that could spread to other animals, and just helping to prevent overgrazing.

Rick LoBello [00:55:39] And a perfect example is what happened in Yellowstone when the wolf was released there. For years, the elk population had grown to the point where they were overgrazing the stream banks of the rivers in Yellowstone, to the point where plants that used to grow there could no longer grow there, because every time you'd have a willow come up, the elk would eat it.

Rick LoBello [00:56:05] So, as a result of wolves being reintroduced in Yellowstone, a lot of the riparian habitats have been able to come back. And now we're seeing more habitat for animals that were no longer, that at one time were pretty rare, like beaver and songbirds. And so, there's been a definite improvement to the biodiversity of Yellowstone as a result of wolves being there.

Rick LoBello [00:56:31] And the same thing can happen in Texas, and it's already happening in Arizona and New Mexico, because the wolf is now living wild in the Gila National Forest, for example.

Rick LoBello [00:56:44] So, I really believe that it's important, if we're going to conserve the environment, that we do all we can to make sure that the species that were there before we moved into and came upon the land here as European settlers before I was even born, that we try to restore as much of the ecosystem as we can.

Rick LoBello [00:57:11] So Texas Parks and Wildlife is doing a lot of things like bringing back the desert bighorn, for example. But I really believe that that program is supported more by

hunters who want to kill those animals, which I'm not against hunting, but because the wolf is a controversial species, it just hasn't had a chance even to come back to Texas.

Rick LoBello [00:57:38] So, the current thinking is, if we're ever going to bring back the wolf, which is definitely a missing part of the ecosystem in Chihuahuan Desert, we're going to have to get the political support from Texas Parks and Wildlife. And the only way that's going to happen, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife, is if the stakeholders, like large landowners and ranchers living in West Texas, are willing to collaborate and support such a project.

Rick LoBello [00:58:08] So, currently there's a new organization that formed about a year ago called the Texas Lobo Coalition, and I'm one of the founding members and a board member today. And that's their major focus - bringing together stakeholders and seeing what it will take to get them on board to support some kind of reintroduction of this apex predator.

David Todd [00:58:34] You see, say you have a meeting with Texas Lobo Association and some of these stakeholders, some of these local property owners, what is the argument, the case you make. You gave this wonderful example of what's happened in Yellowstone with the effect on willows and beaver and songbirds and so on. Is there a similar scenario that could play out here? What would happen in the Trans-Pecos if you returned the Mexican wolf? What do you think you might see if that were to happen?

Rick LoBello [00:59:11] Well, I think, I, personally, you know, have ideas. I don't have scientific data to back up these ideas, though I do have some background information in my head. One of the things that I think would happen if you brought back the wolf is the wolf could help to control some of the exotic species that are invasive, and they've taken over many areas of West Texas, such as European wild boar, which are affecting the lowland and elevation plants in many areas of the Trans-Pecos. And also aoudad are out there, and they compete with native desert bighorn. So, I believe that if you brought back wolves, it would help to control some of these invasive species.

Rick LoBello [01:00:06] Also, I believe that having wolves in the ecosystem in West Texas would benefit pronghorns, because one of the predators of pronghorn fawns is the coyote. And everybody knows that when you have wolves and coyotes in the same area, the wolf normally wins because they will kill coyotes. So, if you have a way to control the coyote population in a natural way, it could benefit the pronghorn, which has suffered greatly over the past decade.

Rick LoBello [01:00:40] So, and there's also diseases that are killing the deer herd. And I believe that a lot of these things that are affecting these diseases that are affecting ungulates like mule deer and pronghorn might not be as severe if there was a wolf back in the ecosystem.

Rick LoBello [01:01:00] I see. Okay. Well, that helps. That helps a lot.

David Todd [01:01:04] Well, given those those kind of arguments, why do you think there is this resistance? I think that part of Texas Parks and Wildlife Code actually bans reintroduction of wolves in the state. And I gather a number of the landowners out there have been reluctant to see this happen, too. What do you think they're thinking?

Rick LoBello [01:01:32] Well, first of all, let's just talk about why there is the opposition. The Texas Wildlife Code, by the way, I have contacted Carter Smith numerous times on the phone

and in writing, asking for his help. He just refuses to help me to find out more about that Wildlife Code, because I believe, if you read the Wildlife Code, it was not written to prevent Texas Parks and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from ever conducting a wolf restoration program. That Code was written to prevent me and you from doing it. So I can't go out and find some wolves and let them go legally. And if the Fish and Wildlife Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife were to collaborate on a wolf reintroduction program for Texas, that Code could easily be overcome, in my opinion.

Rick LoBello [01:02:33] The main reason why there's opposition to wolves, obviously, we know that wolves do prey on livestock. But there's a lot of mistrust among the landowners in West Texas about the federal government doing things about private property rights, for example. They're afraid the government will try to control what happens on their lands.

Rick LoBello [01:02:59] And, you know, there's just a hatred for the wolf and a distrust of people who live in cities. I've talked to people who live in West Texas who won't even talk to people who advocate for the wolf because they feel that people living in cities who advocate for bringing back the wolf in Texas are stupid and don't know anything.

Rick LoBello [01:03:26] They say things like, "If you lived out here where we live, you would understand why we don't want wolves. And because you don't live out here, you don't understand us."

Rick LoBello [01:03:37] So, to me, the key is not just, you know, getting stakeholders to provide a plan that everybody could support. Like, for example, why can't we support reintroducing them in Big Bend National Park? And why can't that program protect any ranchers from ever being impacted by controlling that population so that if the wolves were to leave, they would be you know, they would be not allowed to leave. They would be captured and put back or put someplace else, using satellite telemetry, for example.

Rick LoBello [01:04:15] So, if you want to do that, the number one key that I keep telling people is one word, and it starts with the letter R and it's called, "relationships". If you want to get people to collaborate and work with you, you have to know them. You have to, you have to have a relationship with them. And there really isn't any program that I know of, besides some of the programs that Texas Parks and Wildlife works on with bighorn sheep, for example, where it focuses on developing relationships between those who see the value of bringing back predators like the wolf and those who don't see the value.

Rick LoBello [01:05:01] So, that's the main goal of the Texas Lobo Coalition, is to develop relationships with the people who live on these big ranches, whether they have livestock or not, and getting them to sit down and talk about this and to find out where the opposition is and where the common ground is.

Rick LoBello [01:05:23] Not everyone who owns large areas of West Texas is against bringing back predators. As a matter of fact, I've talked to ranchers in West Texas, and they have told me things like, I love the idea of bringing back the wolf, because if I ever sold my ranch, I could say to the potential buyer, "I got mule deer, I got javelina, I've got mountain lions and I got wolves." And that increases the value of the land to some people who are, who love nature.

Rick LoBello [01:05:56] And nowadays, a lot of these large tracts of land in West Texas are not being operated as livestock ranches. They're just people who are buying up all this land

because they want to own a lot of land as an investment. And so, over the past 30 years, land ownership in West Texas has changed dramatically. And Texas Parks and Wildlife recognizes that. But they're not going to go out of their way to try to communicate to those people on their own.

Rick LoBello [01:06:29] So, it's going to take a grassroots effort like the one the Texas Lobo Coalition is working on to make it happen. And if we can convince enough people in West Texas to sit down at the table and come up with some kind of plan that protects the livestock industry, that protects private, you know, private land ownership, then I think there is a way to work with public lands, on bringing back a small population of wolves.

Rick LoBello [01:07:01] Well, this might be a good segue to to ask about some of the techniques that you think might be promising to allow co-existence between a rancher with a cattle or sheep or a goat herd and, you know, a reintroduced wolf pack. What are some of the ideas that are being tried and that you think might be valid?

Rick LoBello [01:07:26] Well, first of all, in Arizona and New Mexico, and I can't really speak for wolf restoration in other parts of the West, but I do know in Arizona and New Mexico, there are programs that are out there to prevent the conflict between livestock and wolves. And what they're called is wolf drift fences, or cattle fences. And what they do is they build fences to prevent cattle from moving into areas where there's wolves. And then they patrol those fences to try to make sure that the cattle don't go into those areas where the wolves are.

Rick LoBello [01:08:10] So, one of the ways that you help the co-existence of livestock owners and wolves, you work on ways to prevent livestock from mixing with these predators.

Rick LoBello [01:08:24] The El Paso Zoo, for example, is supporting a program in Africa called Lion Guardians, which was featured on CNN as one of the CNN Hero nominees a while back. And these people in Africa patrol the areas where the lions live, and they let the people who have cattle know when there's lions in the area, so they can bring their cattle in at night and put them in a place where they're protected from the lions, and then they help to chase the lions away from the cattle.

Rick LoBello [01:08:55] So, this is happening all around the world to prevent conflicts between not just predators and livestock, but all kinds of animals.

Rick LoBello [01:09:02] Like in Sumatra, the Zoo is supporting a program called the Flying Squad, where we're actually supporting an effort to keep elephants from agricultural areas by supporting trained elephants who are ridden by mahouts to patrol the edges of the park to keep elephants from agricultural areas.

Rick LoBello [01:09:24] Well, the same thing can be done with wolf reintroduction. First of all, I would not advocate for putting wolves in an area where there's a lot of livestock. I would try to find protected areas, protected habitat, that is away from areas where there's livestock. And then obviously, wolves do travel long distances, so one of the techniques that could be used to help manage them would be to have a few wolves from each pack with radio collars that are monitored by satellite. And you can put on these radio collars a tranquilizer. So, if a wolf decides to leave an area, you could actually tranquilize it from a satellite and then go get the animal and prevent it from going into an area where there's cattle.

Rick LoBello [01:10:18] That's fascinating. Gosh, sort of 21st century ways to manage wildlife.

Rick LoBello [01:10:26] Some of the techniques I've heard about - I'd love to hear your comments about. I've read that some folks promote the use of guard dogs or birthing corrals or cleaning up dead livestock to avoid attracting wolves that might be interested in the carrion. Do you have any opinions about those ideas?

Rick LoBello [01:10:54] Guard dogs are definitely doing a good job of helping to prevent conflicts. Not just here. I'm not sure where in North America they're being used, but I know in Europe they've been used. I think there's not enough education on the value of guard dogs. But I believe even in Arizona and New Mexico, some of the ranchers are using guard dogs to help protect their cattle from predators.

Rick LoBello [01:11:26] And it's not just for wolves; it's for other animals like mountain lions, not mountain lions, but lions in Africa. I think some of the cattle are being protected by guard dogs over there as well.

David Todd [01:11:44] Well. So, one of the things that I'm kind of intrigued by, and I'm sure you've thought about it a good deal, is that when people come to visit Guadalupe Mountain National Park or Big Bend, they want to see the probably the full suite of wildlife, including, you know, some of these predators, controversial, whether it's mountain lions or Mexican wolves. Do you see the possibility of boosting the visitation at these national parks in Texas, if Mexican wolves were successfully reintroduced. Do people want to come see them?

Rick LoBello [01:12:25] It's definitely having an economic impact in places like Yellowstone, because, I mean, there's all these tour companies that have come about over the years that actually take people on tours to go look for wolves. And there are a lot of people who go to Yellowstone every year just to look for wolves and grizzly bears and everything else that's up there. But wolves are a definite, definite benefit to ecotourism, and I believe they would be a benefit to ecotourism in Big Bend and just West Texas. I think if there were wolves, well, you know, if there was Mexican wolves in a place like Big Bend and you might see one, that would definitely attract people to the park and to that area as well.

David Todd [01:13:16] You know, I'm reminded of what you said earlier about one side going down into Mexico to capture some of these last Mexican wolves. And I'm curious if there is still a population down in that area that might be a reservoir for natural recovery in Big Bend.

Rick LoBello [01:13:41] Well right now, there is talk, but no definite plan that I know of, of returning the wolf to the mountain range across from Big Bend. There are efforts in the State of Chihuahua to the west of Big Bend where wolves are being released. And these wolves are actually moving. They're going out from these areas. As a matter of fact, there was a wolf that was released in northern Chihuahua a few years ago that actually came very close to the city limits of El Paso. It had a radio collar on it, and it went up towards the Organ Mountains Desert Peaks National Monument near Las Cruces, and it crossed back into Mexico and returned to the area where it came from.

Rick LoBello [01:14:35] And it's very possible that some of these wolves and Chihuahua, if the population grows, could actually wander into the Big Bend country on their own without ever needing to be reintroduced. They would just come back on their own, just like the black bear. It's come back on its own in Big Bend National Park today. And if that happens, the Park

Service and Texas Parks and Wildlife, they're going to have to leave these wolves alone because they're protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Rick LoBello [01:15:11] So, it's really a benefit to people who are concerned about wolves coming back to support efforts now so that we can be ready for that day when it does happen. I think it, I think it very well could happen where wolves do cross into Texas from Mexico.

Rick LoBello [01:15:31] There are no immediate plans that I know of to put them in the Maderas Del Carmen, in Coahuila, across from Rio Grande Village and Boquillas. But still, there are areas to the west of this region where wolves could disperse and come to the Big Bend country on their own.

David Todd [01:15:57] Well. So, one thing I'm curious to hear your thoughts about, and I think you've at one point been interested in the international park pairing, between Maderas del Carmen and Big Bend. Do you see that as being a, you know, a chance to try and promote the, you know, Mexican wolf recovery by looking at this in more of a ecosystem-wide way rather than just the American side?

Rick LoBello [01:16:30] Yeah, if there was an internationally recognized transboundary protected area in the Big Bend, I think that would help to create more funding for conservation and increase collaboration. And collaboration between the park staff at Big Bend, and the few people who work in those areas in Mexico is, there is collaboration, but it's very minimal and there's very little funding to support the conservation programs that need to happen to further protect that region.

Rick LoBello [01:17:16] And so, I'm working now with the members of the Sierra Club on the border here to try to come up with a roadmap on how to move forward in the future to see that happen.

Rick LoBello [01:17:28] Right now, the National Park Service is not actively involved in promoting a transboundary protected area, mainly because they have other priorities and not enough funding to take care of the priorities that they already have. But the National Park Service has always supported the concept. How to go about it and make it happen is the missing ingredient.

Rick LoBello [01:17:55] So, that's one of the things that I'm also working on, and I've been working on for decades is not just promoting the idea that President Roosevelt brought to the world's attention when the park was first being planned. You know, most people in Texas - there's two things that they don't know. One is most people in Texas don't know that Big Bend National Park is a very unique national park, in that it was not established by the federal government by taking federal land, like Yellowstone and Grand Canyon, and making it into a national park, because there was no federal land to make it to a national park.

Rick LoBello [01:18:36] It was the people of Texas that said to themselves, "We want a national park." So, they went out and raised the money back in the 1930s to buy the land that was owned by the ranchers at the time. So, they bought out the ranchers, bought their ranches and took all that land and deeded it to the State of Texas and to the federal government to make a national park. So, Big Bend National Park is actually a gift from the people of Texas to the world.

Rick LoBello [01:19:08] The other thing that most people in Texas don't know is that Big Bend National Park was never meant to be a park on the U.S. side only. The original proposal and plan that went back to, that goes back to the 1930s, where meetings were held here in El Paso, binational meetings, was for there to be an international park on both sides of the border.

Rick LoBello [01:19:33] And it just so happened when President Roosevelt died, the people that carried on his work, just weren't able to finish the project and it never happened.

Rick LoBello [01:19:46] But the original proposal was for there to be an international park. It never was meant to be a park on the U.S. side only.

Rick LoBello [01:19:52] So in my opinion, Big Bend, that park, is incomplete and it will not be complete until both sides of the border are fully protected.

Rick LoBello [01:20:02] Now, there is some protection on the Mexican side, but there's no tourism. There's very little collaboration on the border, even though there's the desire for more collaboration. And one of the ways that we can make sure that the collaboration and support gets to where it's needed is to have a internationally recognized, by the government of Mexico and the government United States, that this is our international protected area.

Rick LoBello [01:20:36] Well along those lines, do you and your collaborators out there have opinions about the construction and planning of the border wall to fence off some these areas for, you know, interdicting immigration or contraband?

Rick LoBello [01:20:56] Well, there's two groups of people in our country, those that support the border wall and those who don't. Most people that I know and I work with who are sensitive to protecting the environment are against the border wall. They believe, and I believe, that there's better ways to control immigration than build a wall that's not working. I mean, I can tell you that there's people that cross every day illegally into this country and legally, and there's tunnels that go under that border wall, and people get visas and they extend their visas and don't go back. It's just a waste of money and it's impacting the environment in that animals should be able to go back and forth are no longer able to.

Rick LoBello [01:21:46] So I don't know a single person that supports protecting this region who supports the border wall.

David Todd [01:21:56] And do you think that the Mexican wolf would be one of the animals that would have a difficult time moving across the international border if this wall is completed out there?

Rick LoBello [01:22:10] Oh, yeah, it's already happening. I mean, these wolves that are living in Arizona and New Mexico, many of them have radio collars. And there's at least one recent record of a wolf from New Mexico that was trying to cross into Mexico, but was not able to because of the wall. It had to turn back. You can see it. You can just track the movements of the wolf where it went up to the wall and turn around.

Rick LoBello [01:22:42] So, it's affecting animals that are endangered because the Mexican wolf is one of the rarest mammals in the world. It's critically endangered, which means the numbers in the wild are so small, it's very possible something could happen to them in the

future and they all could die, like a disease, for example, when you have such a small population.

Rick LoBello [01:23:04] So, but deer and jaguars, for example - the jaguar used to live in Texas and New Mexico and Arizona and other parts of the West. And they never were as numerous as the mountain lions, but they were here, and they had a role to play and they were just over-hunted.

Rick LoBello [01:23:24] And so, now the jaguars that still live in northern Sonora, are reproducing and they're dispersing. And some of them have actually made it into Arizona and New Mexico. But it's going to be very difficult, if not impossible, for jaguars to repopulate Arizona and New Mexico with the wall.

David Todd [01:23:50] Yeah. It does make me wonder.

Rick LoBello [01:23:54] If there was a wall in Big Bend, you wouldn't have black bears in Big Bend today and you wouldn't have black bears coming back into Texas. When I first moved to Texas, black bear were extremely rare. Now they're starting to become common again.

Rick LoBello [01:24:09] And it's all because of Mexico. Mexico had this population, they still have a healthy population in the mountains of northern Mexico. And if it wasn't for that population of northern Mexico, you would not have bears in Big Bend, and Black Gap, and Big Bend Ranch, and the Davis Mountains. They wouldn't be there today, because by the time Big Bend National Park was established, the bears had been over-hunted and the habitat had been impacted.

Rick LoBello [01:24:38] So the National Park Service was hoping that someday bears would come back. But it didn't happen until 40 years later, when a sow, a bear from probably Coahuila who had been, who was pregnant, came into the Park and had a litter of cubs. And that was documented in 1988.

Rick LoBello [01:25:00] And now they're estimating the population of about 40 bear in the Park.

Rick LoBello [01:25:07] That's a transboundary population. You know, very few people think that bears in Big Bend could survive if they weren't able to go back and forth across the border in helping to increase the genetic diversity of the gene pool.

David Todd [01:25:26] This is all so interesting.

David Todd [01:25:27] Well, you know, it seems like for many years you have been an educator and advocate to try to explain these issues to people. And I was hoping that you could just lead us through some of the different groups and programs that you've organized. I think one of the ones that I had learned about was the Mexican Wolf Coalition of Texas that I think you helped form, what, more than 30 years ago.

Rick LoBello [01:25:59] Yeah. Matter of fact, when I became the executive director of the Big Bend Natural History Association in 1986, it was during that time I knew well about, I knew a lot about what was happening with the Mexican wolf. There was the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan of 1980, and I was informed.

Rick LoBello [01:26:22] And so, by the time I became the executive director of the Big Bend Natural History Association, I said to my colleague, Robert Rothe, who was the chief of interpretation, "We need to inform people about this. We need to tell them about what's happening so they can be involved."

Rick LoBello [01:26:39] So, I was able to have a lot of influence on the articles that were published in the Big Bend newspaper, which is called, "The Big Bend Paisano", which is still the newspaper for the Park today. It's just published once a year, but it's a, it's just a informative newsprint thing that they give out at the gate when you come in, that tells you all about the park and it has news articles.

Rick LoBello [01:27:03] Well, the articles that I started writing about the wolf ended up reaching this lady in Richardson, Texas, who called me and said she wanted to help the wolf. And I said, "Well, I think an organization needs to form." And she said, "Well, would you help form it?" And I said, "Yeah." So, we formed the Mexican Wolf Coalition of Texas.

Rick LoBello [01:27:25] And for a number of years, we tried to convince Texas Parks and Wildlife to support this concept and this idea of bringing back the wolf. It turned out that that wasn't going to happen. So we continued our advocacy until the first wolves were released in 1998 in New Mexico. And then that organization kind of fizzled out. And for years there wasn't an organization.

Rick LoBello [01:27:53] But thanks to some friends of mine and a lady who works for the Austin Zoo, her name is Hope Carr, a new group has formed called, "The Texas Lobo Coalition".

David Todd [01:28:08] Well, tell us about the Texas Lobo Coalition. I'd like to hear about that.

Rick LoBello [01:28:13] Well, it's a group of people from across Texas. It includes biologists and people who work in business from Dallas to Fort Worth to Austin, and El Paso and other parts of the Southwest. And these are people who strongly believe in the idea that the wolf needs to be brought back.

Rick LoBello [01:28:34] And they also believe that the best strategy that I mentioned earlier is to work closely with large landowners and other stakeholders to get them involved as part of the solution, versus the government telling them how it's going to be done. The whole idea is to tell the government how we want it done.

Rick LoBello [01:28:57] And I've been very outspoken at board meetings that I have attended in telling people at these meetings that the only way we're ever going to have success in getting stakeholders on board is to develop relationships with them and also making sure that they understand that we're not wanting to hurt their livelihood and we want to protect their livelihood.

Rick LoBello [01:29:25] The days of trying to do conservation by shoving it down the throats of people who live in those areas are over. You cannot have successful conservation without having the support of people who live in that area. So, that's what I believe needs to happen. And our greatest challenge is to develop those relationships.

Rick LoBello [01:29:48] And we are working on plans to have a meeting here, perhaps at El Paso or Alpine, where we have a roundtable discussion where we can at least get people in the

same room and where people can get to know each other and talk. And hopefully that first meeting will help us understand everybody's opinions better so we can find out who's supportive, who's not supportive, and what it would take to get the non-supportive people to support some idea of how it could happen.

David Todd [01:30:22] You know, I'm intrigued to hear how you've worked on groups back in the early nineties and now you're working on one in the 2020s, and one of the big changes from maybe your early adventures with this is that social media has become such a powerful tool. And I was wondering if that has been, you know, a good bit of leverage for you at the Texas Lobo Coalition.

Rick LoBello [01:30:55] Definitely.

David Todd [01:30:56] A Facebook page and a website and you know how's that working for you.

Rick LoBello [01:30:58] Yeah, that's correct. Yeah. Most of the people that I have developed relationships with, I develop them as a result of finding these people, finding me on social media, and letting me know that they want to be involved.

Rick LoBello [01:31:19] And here at the Zoo, I have a great opportunity to help reach even more people, because part of my job here at the zoo is to write a blog about our conservation efforts. And because the Mexican wolf is one of our most important species that we're working with, there are many opportunities to update our readers on Mexican wolf activities.

David Todd [01:31:48] Okay. Well, you know, another place that I think it's interesting to see how, you know, this whole education effort and promotional effort for returning the Mexican wolf has been within the National Park Service. And I read that there have been people, including William Penn Mott and Ro Wauer, who have expressed some interest at the Park Service in restoring wolves to National Park lands, including Big Bend. And, you know, I was curious if from your experience working within the Park Service and within these sort of sister organizations, if you could tell us anything about the kind of internal discussions about the role of a wolf recovery.

Rick LoBello [01:32:43] Well, when I first got involved in advocating for the wolf in Big Bend, this was before the Mexican Wolf Coalition formed in 1990. And at that time, William Penn Mott was advocating for wolf restoration in the national parks. So, all I had to do was pick up a copy of the National Park newsletter, called The Courier, with William Penn Mott on the cover, and reading the article that he wrote about wolves. And I simply took that to the Park superintendent, and I said, look, here's the director of the Park Service advocating for wolves. So, it makes sense that we should advocate for wolves soon. So that's how Big Bend got started really: it was by when Penn Mott showing his support for the return of wolves in places like Yellowstone. And then it just spread to Big Bend.

Rick LoBello [01:33:44] Now, since then, you know, there's always the importance of stakeholder support. And the National Park Service is extremely sensitive to making sure that their relationships with their neighbors are healthy. And so, the National Park Service, since the first advocacy for, because all the advocacy for Mexican wolves started in Big Bend National Park, didn't start in Alpine and it didn't start in Austin. It started in Big Bend National Park during the years that I was the director of the Big Bend Natural History Association. And that's where it started.

Rick LoBello [01:34:28] But since then, the various superintendents who have been in charge of the Park have been supportive of wolves, but not willing to go head first in actually being an advocate and a driving force, mainly because they didn't want to make their neighbors mad. They wanted to have that relationship with their neighbors that was healthy.

Rick LoBello [01:35:00] And when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided that they were not going to include Texas as part of the recovery, that, of course, gave the Park Service an excuse of not wanting to do anything because, you know, it was very easy to say, if you're superintendent of Big Bend, that we work with the federal government and the agencies that are supporting conservation. And if the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service doesn't support bringing back wolves to Texas, then we can't really support it either. But if the wolf were to come back on their own, and of course, the Park Service would definitely be protecting those wolves.

Rick LoBello [01:35:48] So I believe that the main reason why the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took Big Bend and Texas out of the recovery plan (because originally Big Bend in West Texas was included as potential places to bring back the wolf), was because Texas Parks and Wildlife was against it. And if you're a federal agency and you want to work with the state wildlife agencies, you don't want to do things that's going to hurt your relationship with them.

Rick LoBello [01:36:23] And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a lot of conservation programs in Texas, like saving the Whooping Crane and Attwater's Prairie Chicken and the Houston toad. And, you know, these are all endangered species. And they don't want to hurt their relationship with Texas Parks and Wildlife by saying, "Well, we're the federal government and we're going to put wolves in Big Bend no matter what."

Rick LoBello [01:36:48] So, once the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found out that Texas Parks and Wildlife wasn't supportive, they decided to remove Texas from the recovery plan.

Rick LoBello [01:37:01] But that was 30 years ago. Over 30 years ago. Times have changed. A lot of the people who were stakeholders 30 years ago aren't even alive today. And they've sold those ranches and there's no longer cattle ranching going on. There's a lot of big ranches where I believe there is support.

Rick LoBello [01:37:21] The question is, "How do you gain that support and how do you develop relationships with the people who would be supportive?"

David Todd [01:37:31] This is so fascinating to hear the politics and the opinions among all these stakeholders. Thanks for coaching assignment of you.

Rick LoBello [01:37:43] One of the things I've been intrigued by is that there are, you know, a number of these subspecies of wolves. And each has its own sort of political constraints. And I wanted to ask you about two of them. And one is the red wolf and the effort to try to return them to some kind of viable place. Of course, I guess they were first captured in Texas and then relocated.

David Todd [01:38:13] But do you see many connections between that red wolf recovery and the efforts of the Mexican wolf back on its feet?

Rick LoBello [01:38:23] They're two different situations, really. The habitat for the red wolf is greatly decreased because of all the development in the Southeast. But there are still

wildlands where they're trying to bring back the red wolf. In Texas, the red wolf was part of the eastern part of Texas. And Roy McBride was also the one who caught most of those too. He actually had some of those down on his ranch.

Rick LoBello [01:38:53] But as far as the connection between the two, I think there is a natural connection in that, you know, they're both wolves. They're two different kinds of wolves, but it is part of Texas natural heritage. And the Texas Wildlife Foundation has a program now that supports protecting the wilds of Texas. And they've raised a lot of money and they're trying to get even more money. But unfortunately, the wolf is not on their list.

Rick LoBello [01:39:34] And why do you think that is?

Rick LoBello [01:39:37] You know, I really don't know. I think the main reason why, it's probably because they're fearful that if they do support wolf restoration in Texas that the political forces that are against it will hurt their other programs.

Rick LoBello [01:39:59] You know, I've talked to wildlife filmmakers in Texas who make documentary films about wildlife in Texas, including some that are recently released on PBS. And I'm almost positive that the reason why they're not advocating for the wolf is because they're afraid that if they do, that some of the people who support their films will pull back that support.

Rick LoBello [01:40:30] There's just so much hatred against the wolf. It's part of the culture of North America. When I was growing up, there was Little Red Riding Hood. And Hollywood would put killer wolves in movies.

Rick LoBello [01:40:48] And if we're going to overcome that part of our history, we just have to focus on the facts and helping people to understand the value of apex predators. I really think that protecting apex predators like the wolf can have other benefits besides keeping prey species in check, besides helping to bring back species like the pronghorn antelope, and controlling coyotes, and the value of ecotourism.

Rick LoBello [01:41:25] But think about it, wolves need large areas of land, and the more large areas of land that we have, the more plant cover we're going to have, and the more plant cover we're going to have, the more carbon capture we're going to have, which is so important in controlling climate change.

David Todd [01:41:50] It's all connected.

Rick LoBello [01:41:52] Everything is connected. And I really believe it's important that we do all we can to protect natural spaces because ... this is how I say it as simply as I can, "If the world is not safe for wild animals and plants, it's not going to be a safe place for people, because we need everything that the natural world needs to survive."

Rick LoBello [01:42:30] That is a good summary.

David Todd [01:42:34] Well, we could talk for for a long time, I'm sure. I've learned so much from you.

David Todd [01:42:41] But I don't want to take more of your day. I know that quitting time has passed. And I wanted to ask you, though, if there is anything you might like to add before we have to break off.

Rick LoBello [01:42:56] I think the main thing I would like to add is that everyone who pays attention to what's going on in the world today needs to realize that if we really care about our quality of life, and if we really care about our children's, and our children's children's quality of life, we have to remember that that quality of life is directly connected to the natural world. And the only way the natural world can be protected is if more people get involved. There's too many people sitting back thinking that other people are just going to take care of these problems. The government's going to take care of it. Well, the government is pretty limited as to what they can do.

Rick LoBello [01:43:49] So, I think the main thing is people need to become informed, and they need to be engaged. And if they don't become engaged and stay informed, then the quality of life is not going to get better. It's going to get worse.

David Todd [01:44:09] So, it's sort of the canary in the coal mine idea.

Rick LoBello [01:44:12] Yeah. Yeah. Mm hmm.

David Todd [01:44:16] Well, a powerful thought.

David Todd [01:44:20] Well, I wanted to thank you, Mr. LoBello, for what you've done over the years, many years, and, and for taking time today to talk about it and help us understand.

Rick LoBello [01:44:33] Well, thank you for the opportunity and good luck with this project. I hope that I've contributed in a way that helps more people better understand the situation here in Texas.

David Todd [01:44:46] You have. You're a good teacher.

David Todd [01:44:48] Thank you very much. And I wish you the best. Have a good weekend.

Rick LoBello [01:44:52] You too. Thank you. Bye bye.

David Todd [01:44:54] Bye now.

Rick LoBello [01:44:55] Bye bye.