

Debbie Sease

*Debbie Sease: Sierra Club Legislative Director, National Campaign Director, and Senior
Lobbyist in Washington, DC, 1981-2020*

Sierra Club Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Roger Eardley-Pryor
in 2020

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Debbie Sease at the Sierra Club's office in Washington, DC, early 1980s.

Abstract

Debbie Sease worked from 1981 to 2020 as a Sierra Club lobbyist in its Washington, DC, office, where she became Legislative Director as well as National Campaign Director. Sease was born in November 1948 in Oklahoma, where she contracted polio at age three. Each year throughout her childhood, Sease spent several months in a Texas hospital receiving surgeries to repair damaged leg tissue. At age 10, Sease's family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where her mother died six years later from cancer. Upon graduating high school in 1967, Sease took architecture and photography courses at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Sease soon became active in the New Mexico Wilderness Committee, where she met her first husband Dave Foreman. Conservationist Celia Hunter offered Sease and Foreman jobs as lobbyists for the Wilderness Society in Washington, DC, where they moved in 1978. Upon arriving, Sease dedicated her career to preserving public lands, initially on Bureau of Land Management wilderness reviews, and to advocating for environmental policies. In 1981, Sease began working for the Sierra Club, from which she retired in 2020. Her career in Washington, DC, spanned from the end of the environmental decade in the 1970s, through seven US Presidential administrations and numerous shifts in Congress, up through the end of the Trump administration in 2020. Upon her retirement, Sease and her husband Russ Shay split their time between their home on Capitol Hill and their cabin on twelve acres in the Shenandoah Valley. In this oral history, Sease recounts all the above with a focus on her nearly four decades as a Sierra Club lobbyist in Washington, DC, including details on particular campaigns and specific wilderness lands she helped protect, as well as her reflections and hard-earned wisdom on successful legislative campaigning. Throughout, Sease discusses ways the Sierra Club has evolved throughout her career, as well as the ways environmental politics have changed over time, especially in the nation's capital.

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Interview History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, PhD
Oral History Center
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Debbie Sease's interview for the Sierra Club Oral History Project explores her outstanding career of environmental advocacy and lobbying in Washington, DC, as told by the Sierra Club's longstanding senior director of lobbying and advocacy. Debbie spent formative years of her youth in New Mexico and identifies as someone from the American West. Yet, she has now lived over four decades in our national capital where she worked to preserve public lands, defend essential environmental policies, and pass new conservation legislation. The following interview history recounts the contexts for researching, recording, and finally publishing Debbie's oral history, and it concludes with my reflections on some of the significant topics and themes from our recorded discussions in 2020.

Debbie and I first spoke by phone and online over Zoom to plan and outline her oral history during the chaotic summer of 2020. Now, years later, I find it hard to adequately capture the daily anxiety and trauma many of us experienced that year. The deadly COVID-19 pandemic had spread globally that spring and the ensuing shelter-in-place orders to stop spreading the airborne coronavirus confined many to their homes, which tore at our communal fabric and produced severe economic shocks. Politically, the daily chaos of the first Donald Trump administration felt amplified during the pandemic, especially amid uncertainty at that year's impending presidential election. The great race to produce COVID vaccines had begun but was not yet realized and far from broad distribution. The experience of being cloistered at home while perpetually scrolling news about rising death tolls produced a profound sense of dread each day. By the time Debbie and I recorded her oral history in late 2020, anywhere from one thousand to over two-thousand people in the United States asphyxiated and died every day from the novel coronavirus, often in hospitals isolated from loved ones, unable to speak or breathe.

"I can't breathe!" were some of the last words gasped by George Floyd, a Black man murdered in the spring of 2020 by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Floyd's murder—one among many Black lives ended by racially motivated police violence—instigated waves of protest nationwide against systemic racism in America, including tearing down public monuments to Confederate enslavers. The Sierra Club had, some years earlier, initiated its own internal reckoning on racial aspects of its past, as well as its contemporary challenges with diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Sierra Club's then-executive director, Mike Brune, responded to 2020's racial zeitgeist by publicly castigating its founder John Muir as racist in a blog post that, like the pandemic, went viral. [Michael Brune, "Pulling Down Our Monuments," www.sierraclub.org (July 22, 2020).]

For my part, during that pandemic year in Northern California, I was lucky to begin working from home as the Oral History Center experimented with recording interviews remotely online using Zoom. Working from home in a cramped one-bedroom apartment shared with my wife and our energetic two-year-old daughter required adjustments, but we were grateful to weather together that year's social, economic, and political storms, even if isolated inside. Outside,

however, the world was burning—literally. During that hot summer, massive wildfires raged all across California's drought-ravaged landscape after an extraordinary lightning storm sparked 10,000 fires, eventually burning more than four million acres and making 2020 the largest wildfire season in California's recorded history. Smoke and particulates painted midday skies a deep shade of orange and, in a cruel conjunction with the coronavirus, our outside air became toxic to breathe. That year, few things felt familiar or safe. Those contexts set the backdrop on Debbie and my preparations for her oral history.

Earlier, in the spring of 2020, Debbie retired after nearly four-decades of working in the Sierra Club. She did so just two weeks after the Club's office in Washington, DC, closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Debbie and her husband Russ Shay, also a former Sierra Club staff member and then a semi-retired political consultant, spent much of their time that spring and summer outside of the city, away from their home on Capitol Hill. Instead, they shared time gardening, cooking, shaping wood, and creating art at their cabin perched atop a ridge above the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. In the late summer of 2020, as Debbie and I addressed topics we might want to discuss, I asked if she had any reports or documents from her Sierra Club work that she wanted me to read in advance. Debbie recounted how, upon her retirement, she returned to her eerily empty Sierra Club office to collect her things. Not one for memorabilia, she took home less than an accordion file folder of materials. She told me she was never much of an archivist, but she did have forty years of Sierra Club memories and stories to share.

And yet, during our preparatory discussions, Debbie also shared she felt some ambivalence about the Sierra Club in that moment and was undecided how to express it. Much of Debbie's laudatory career for the Club focused on public lands and wilderness preservation. The Sierra Club never abandoned those principles; however, Debbie noted how the Club's directed evolution in recent years expanded its earlier focus on preservation with increased attention to climate and justice, energy and equity. Debbie reflected that, recently, her earlier efforts in the Club to preserve public lands had come under scrutiny of being elitist and perhaps not even worthy, despite it being "great work," as she described it. Debbie also shared wrestling with a larger question: now, in the context of rapid climate change and mass extinction, did her preservation efforts even matter? Would the rate of global environmental change make obsolete the preservation of special places and habitat for living things? On that, I had no answers for her. But I heard Debbie's inquiries as the reflections of a recent retiree amidst a time of great change and turmoil, both around the world and within the Sierra Club. In hearing her reflections, I also learned how Debbie has a remarkable ability to thoughtfully examine any issue objectively, even those dear to her heart. I suggested that recording her oral history offered an ideal format for discussing these ambivalences. Perhaps her oral history offered a forum to reflect aloud on those struggles and to note, from her personal perspective, how things have changed over time. Together, we developed a rich outline that eventually guided our recorded dialog.

Prior to that recorded dialog, Debbie also connected me with a few people I could call to learn more about her life and work. In late September and early October of 2020, I had enjoyable, unrecorded, and informative phone calls about Debbie, in the following order: with Bruce Hamilton, a longtime Sierra Club staff leader, its former Deputy Executive Director, and, as Debbie noted, "my boss at the Club for many years"; with John McComb, a former Southwest Field Representative for the Sierra Club before becoming the Club's Legislative Director in

Washington, DC—later, a job Debbie also did—and the person who hired Debbie in the early 1980s for her first job at the Club (sadly, in September 2021, one year after John and I spoke, he died); with Melinda Pierce, the new Sierra Club Legislative Director in Washington, DC, who previously reported directly to Debbie in 1991 when Melinda joined the Sierra Club's staff when Debbie directed the Club's Public Lands Team before she became Legislative Director in 1993; with Maggie Fox, a dear friend with Debbie, a fellow outdoor enthusiast, and a longtime Sierra Club colleague who first joined the staff in 1983 as its Southwest Field Representative and who eventually became its Deputy Executive Director; and with Robin Mann, a longtime Sierra Club volunteer leader who was elected to its board of directors from 2006 to 2019 and served as Club president from 2010 to 2012. All were delightful conversations with people who share deep respect for Debbie. I'm grateful her friends and colleagues shared their time, stories, and insights with me.

Additionally, as part of my research for discussing Debbie's career, I read James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: Environmental Politics since 1964* (University of Washington Press, 2013). Turner mentioned Debbie specifically, noting that "in a world of environmental politics often dominated by men (especially at the upper levels), [Debbie] Sease steadily rose up the ranks of the Sierra Club, becoming its legislative director in the early 1990s." Turner wrote that Debbie possessed "a strategic mind, a clear sense for legislative politics, and a love of the western badlands" (page 239). To better understand the contexts in which Debbie worked in Washington, DC, I also read the updated and extended edition of *American Environmental Policy: Beyond Gridlock* by Christopher McGrory Klyza and David J. Sousa (The MIT Press, 2013). Klyza and Sousa argued that beginning in the early 1980s—around the time Debbie began working for the Sierra Club in DC—the US Congress, especially due to Republican intransigence, experienced protracted gridlock that prevented any major new national environmental legislation. Klyza and Sousa then proposed various avenues for working around such gridlock, including amending legislation via reconciliation, as well as seeking liberal court interpretations of existing statutes. Debbie's oral history adds nuance to Klyza and Sousa's views, and she highlights additional ways she navigated the realms of federal environmental policymaking throughout her productive career.

In late 2020, Debbie and I video-recorded just over fifteen hours of her oral history during six interview sessions, which we conducted online over Zoom between the end of October and mid-December. Debbie's oral history was my second-ever interview recorded online over Zoom. As reflected in her transcript, my then-spotty at-home internet connection produced occasional audio delays and frozen screens, which Debbie handled with grace and patience. We conducted her first interview prior to the November 2020 elections, and all her ensuing sessions after Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump to become the next US President. We concluded Debbie's final interview a few weeks before January 6, 2021, when Trump's supporters launched a violent assault against the US Capitol—just blocks from Debbie and Russ's home in DC—in an attempted coup to overturn the 2020 election result. Now five years later, American voters narrowly re-elected Trump to return to the White House. Politics, as also revealed throughout Debbie's oral history, is a wild and unpredictable animal.

Processing Debbie's oral history for publication took quite some time, for which I take responsibility. Various factors contributed to this delay. Amid ongoing adjustments to life and

work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I finally reviewed my own words in Debbie's transcript and sent her a copy to read and edit in March 2022. In February 2023, Debbie returned her reviewed transcript to me with minimal edits, mostly grammatical corrections. We then discussed the possibility of including digital photographs in an appendix, but this caused more delay. Ultimately, we did not include additional photos, but we did include Debbie's resume in an appendix. Adding further delay, my focus turned to another Sierra Club-related project. I spent much of 2023 co-curating with my colleague Todd Holmes the Oral History Center's interactive oral history-based museum exhibit called *Voices for the Environment: A Century of Bay Area Activism*. The exhibit, displayed in the Bancroft Library Gallery on UC Berkeley's campus, traced the twentieth-century evolution of environmentalism in the San Francisco Bay Area through the voices of activists who galvanized public opinion to advance their particular causes—from wilderness preservation, to economic regulation, to environmental justice. Along with archival posters, postcards, paintings, and historic documents, our exhibit included several videos where visitors could listen to earlier Sierra Club oral histories with past leaders like William E. Colby, Francis Farquhar, Ansel Adams, and David Brower. That year, I also became deeply engaged in other time-dependent oral history projects, including work with my colleagues Shanna Farrell and Amanda Tewes on the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project, which recently won an "outstanding project" award from the national Oral History Association. Now, at the start of 2025, I am very pleased to share Debbie's insightful, entertaining, and deeply informative oral history.

In her oral history, Debbie reflected on her four decades of environmental lobbying in Washington, DC, from the end of the environmental decade in the 1970s, through seven US Presidential administrations and numerous shifts in Congress, up through the end of the first Trump administration in 2020. Importantly, Debbie discussed in detail various lobbying and advocating strategies she used over those forty years to help make the Sierra Club so exceptionally influential. Debbie's oral history thus adds significantly to prior Sierra Club Oral History Project interviews about lobbying in Washington, DC, like those from the early 1980s with Brock Evans and W. Lloyd Tupling in the volume *Building the Sierra Club's National Lobbying Program, 1967-1981*, as well as the oral history of Doug Scott, the Club's former director of federal affairs, recorded in the early 1990s. Debbie shared her unique perspective on ways the Sierra Club reimaged and reconstituted its environmental agendas and campaigns over time to meet new needs and challenges, especially as Republican politicians became increasingly hostile towards environmental policymaking and as Congressmembers, even those supportive of Sierra Club aspirations, became increasingly more difficult to access. From Debbie's point of view, despite the Club's numerous transitions and adjustments, it kept its soul and therefore remained successful. As such, a major theme in Debbie's oral history is the power and resilience of the Sierra Club, which she attributes to the wisdom of crowds—that is, Debbie noted the aggregate power of the Sierra Club's grassroots volunteers as its greatest strength. Yet she also noted development of what she called the "astro turf," which is how, over time, oppositional anti-environmental forces have taken on the form and tools of previously successful environmental grassroots activists.

Debbie's narrative reflected the Sierra Club's breadth and its diverse components, analogous to the parable of blind men describing an elephant, each feeling different parts and coming away with a unique notion of the creature. She discussed being a woman leader among the Sierra Club

staff, while also sharing the lighter sides of staff engagement from her earlier days with the Club. Those lighter sides included humorous staff awards based on tongue-in-cheek inside jokes, which were hosted by a mostly imaginary staff-originated union group called CLAW, or Conservation Laborers Against Wrong. Her delightful stories include her first lessons on how Congress operates, which she received from California Congressman Phil Burton and his staff while working on Burton's infamous Omnibus Parks and Rivers Bills. Debbie also outlined different means of targeting environmental campaigns and, at different times, ways of using funds donated as 501(c)(3) money along with funds from 501(c)(4) in a single lobbying campaign. And she described numerous campaigns on which she worked and particular wilderness areas she helped preserve, including her role in passing the historic California Desert Protection Act, and her work protecting the Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico, also known as Baca Ranch.

The in-depth, full life-history approach to Debbie's oral history added other important topics and themes. Debbie shared some of her family's fascinating background, which includes a moonshine operation, the murder of a revenuer, an execution, and eventual moves from Arkansas to Oklahoma to New Mexico. Debbie recounted her early environmental activism to preserve wilderness areas in New Mexico, which she did with her then-husband Dave Foreman, who later co-founded the radical Earth First! organization. On that note, Debbie also addressed apocryphal stories of her portrayal in Susan Zakin's *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement* (Penguin Books, 1995), as well as rumors of her as a character in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 1975).

Importantly, Debbie described contracting polio as a child, prior to a vaccine, and the challenges and adaptations she and her family made as a result. Debbie's stories related to polio and her outdoor activism complement interviews in the Oral History Center's Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Oral History Project. She recounted polio treatments as a young girl, spending several weeks each year at a Texas hospital located some 700 miles away from her home. She discussed wearing leg braces and using crutches through much of her childhood, as well as the physical therapies her father conducted with her each morning. She also recalls camping with her family and hiking through national parks while carried on father's shoulders. Debbie explained how she never felt unable to do things, in part because her parents gave her a strong sense of self-confidence. As an adult, Debbie continued to pursue outdoor engagements, including as an expert kayaker on white-water rapids.

In 2011, a profile on Debbie in *High Country News* called her as "the most influential conservationist you've never heard of." That profile noted, "On any given day she might be meeting with members of Congress or administration officials, organizing a new Sierra Club campaign on coal mining or offshore drilling, giving strategic advice to the Club's volunteers, answering questions on a C-Span talk show, or dishing up tangy sound bites to journalists." [John A. Farrell, "The Most Influential Conservationist You've Never Heard Of," *High Country News*, May 2, 2011]. Debbie's oral history is full of tangy soundbites and plenty of strategic advice. If you already know Debbie, you can count yourself lucky. As I learned from our time talking together in 2020, Debbie is a brilliant and beautiful person. If you don't already know her, well, then you're in for a treat. Debbie's oral history gives you the opportunity to learn about the most influential conservationist you've never heard of, as told in her own words.

Project History

By Roger Eardley-Pryor, PhD
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October 2024

The Sierra Club Oral History Project preserves the Sierra Club's past through publicly available oral history interviews with Club leaders. The project, now over fifty-years old, is a partnership between the Sierra Club—one of the oldest and most influential environmental organizations in the United States—and the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley—previously called the Regional Oral History Office, and one of the nation's oldest organizations professionally recording and preserving oral history interviews. The project arose around 1970 amidst an upsurge of environmental activism that produced the first Earth Day and codified a suite of new legal statutes. Over the ensuing decades, the project has moved through cycles of intensity and lull due to the availability of funding for recording and publishing new interviews. Throughout, the Sierra Club Oral History Project has produced an unprecedented testimony of engagement in and on behalf of the environment as experienced by individual members and leaders of the Sierra Club.

The Sierra Club Oral History Project documents the leadership, programs, strategies, and ideals of the national Sierra Club as well as the Club's grassroots at regional and chapter levels from the early twentieth century through the present. These interviews highlight the breadth, depth, and significance of the Sierra Club's eclectic environmental efforts—from wilderness preservation to promoting environmental justice; from outdoor adventures to climate change activism; from environmental education to chemical regulation; from litigation to lobbying; from California to the Carolinas, and from Alaska to international realms. The Sierra Club Oral History Project, together with the sizable archive of Sierra Club papers and photographs in The Bancroft Library, offers an extraordinary lens on the evolution of environmental issues and activism over the past century, as well as the motivations, conflicts, and triumphs of individuals who helped direct that evolution.

In the summer of 1969, two separate but related events stimulated what became the Sierra Club Oral History Project. First, a fortuitous meeting occurred on a long bus ride from San Francisco to the dedication ceremony for the recently established Redwood National Park. The new and then-youngest Sierra Club president, Phillip Berry, sat next to Amelia Fry, an experienced oral history interviewer at what was then called the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library. Fry had conducted oral histories with several leading figures in California politics and natural resource management, including with Horace Albright and with Newton Drury, both former National Park Service directors and UC Berkeley alumni. On that bus ride, Fry suggested preserving the Sierra Club's unwritten history through audio-recorded, transcribed, and publicly available oral history interviews with the Club's leading volunteers and influential actors. Both Berry and Fry understood how written documents like board minutes, memorandums, and membership records could not possibly capture the Club's rich history and ongoing story, especially in lieu its rapid growth in the 1960s and its increasing complexity. Berry liked the idea of oral history interviews to capture more of the Sierra Club's rich past, its momentous

campaigns, and especially its human entanglements. After all, Berry's first Sierra Club presidency followed years of internal debate that resulted in David Brower's resignation as the Club's first executive director.

Additionally, during that same summer in 1969, Sierra Club member Marshall Kuhn met fellow Club member James Rother while hiking in Yosemite Valley. Rother, then ninety-years old, shared his memories from the early twentieth century of hiking with John Muir, the famed preservationist and Sierra Club founder. Kuhn realized that, unless recorded, the reminiscences of Rother and other early Club members would soon be lost forever. That fall, Kuhn convened an ad hoc committee of Sierra Club members interested in preserving the Club's written documents as well as recording unwritten experiences from its history. Kuhn's ad hoc group petitioned the Sierra Club Board of Directors for support, including Phillip Berry, who recalled his earlier discussions with Amelia Fry. In May 1970, one month after the first Earth Day, the board established a standing Sierra Club History Committee that initially included four former Club presidents and several former directors, with Marshall Kuhn appointed its founding chairman. That September, the board designated The Bancroft Library as the official depository of the Club's written and photographic records. With that, Kuhn and his committee focused on developing a significant Sierra Club Oral History Project.

Kuhn and the Sierra Club History Committee sought advice and support from Willa Baum, director from 1958 to 1999 of The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office (now the Oral History Center). Baum, a nationally recognized authority on oral history, agreed to train Sierra Club volunteers in the arts of oral history interviewing. For additional assistance, the Sierra Club History Committee also hired a professional consultant, Susan Schrepfer, a recent Ph.D. in environmental history then working with the Regional Oral History Office and with the Forest History Society. Schrepfer designed and mailed a six-page questionnaire to Sierra Club members who had joined the Club prior to 1931. More than half responded, which helped the History Committee identify several prospective narrators for initial oral history interviews. The History Committee, in conjunction with the Regional Oral History Office, selected additional narrators from the ranks of Sierra Club leadership over the prior six decades.

Beginning in 1971, Sierra Club volunteers from northern and southern California, along with oral history students at California State University, Fullerton, and at the University of California, Berkeley, began reminiscences of early Sierra Club members for the Sierra Club Oral History Project. In 1974, when Susan Schrepfer accepted a professorship at Rutgers University, Sierra Club History Committee-member Ann Lage began coordinating its oral history efforts. Lage, who earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in history from the University of California, Berkeley, soon joined the staff of the Oral History Center where she oversaw the Sierra Club Oral History Project, along with many other outstanding projects, until her retirement in 2011. Lage also co-chaired the Sierra Club History Committee with her husband Ray Lage following the death of Marshall Kuhn in 1978.

In 1980, with considerable support from the Oral History Center, the Sierra Club earned a sizeable grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to thoroughly document the Sierra Club of the 1960s and 1970s. By that time, the Sierra Club Oral History Project included thirty-five interviews conducted by Club volunteers, while the Oral History Center had conducted or was completing five extensive oral history interviews with Sierra Club leaders.

Between 1980 and 1984, the NEH grant and matching funds from the Sierra Club Foundation made possible the completion of an additional seventeen professionally conducted oral histories and forty-four volunteer-conducted interviews, totaling over 250 hours of recorded history.

Following the NEH grant period, the Sierra Club Oral History Project assumed a slower-paced routine. After 1984, trained Sierra Club volunteers contributed eight new oral history interviews to the project, resulting in two multi-volume collections published respectively in 1989 and 1996. The Oral History Center only conducted new interviews when donated funding permitted. As a soft-money research unit of The Bancroft Library, the Oral History Center must raise outside funding to cover its operational costs for conducting, processing, and preserving its oral history work, including the salaries of its interviewers and staff, which are not covered by the university. Between 1992 and 1999, the Oral History Center conducted eight extensive Sierra Club interviews, three of which featured narrators who had been interviewed previously. The pace of interviews slowed further in the twenty-first century. Between 1999 and 2018, the Oral History Center published five new interviews for the Sierra Club Oral History Project.

In the spring of 2018, renewed funding for the Oral History Center from the Sierra Club's William E. Colby Memorial Library and the Sierra Club Foundation restored life to the Sierra Club Oral History Project. In April 2018, Therese Dunn, the Librarian at the Colby Library at the national Sierra Club in Oakland, and Jim Bradbury, a Communications Specialist there, visited the Oral History Center to revive the project. They came to UC Berkeley and met with Martin Meeker, then director of the Oral History Center, with Ann Lage, the retired oral history expert on the Sierra Club, and with me, Roger Eardley-Pryor, on what was only my second day of work upon joining the Oral History Center as a new interviewer with expertise in science and environmental activism. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when most of the prior Sierra Club Oral History Project interviews were conducted, the Sierra Club, the nature of environmental activism, and the natural environment itself all had experienced significant changes. This new funding, from 2018 through the present, has enabled us to explore these changes in new, deeply researched, multi-session, multi-hour, video-recorded oral history interviews with a variety of Sierra Club leaders, from former board members and presidents to long-time staff members and environmental justice organizers. Additionally, in 2019, the Sierra Club's William E. Colby Memorial Library embarked on its own in-house oral history program called the Sierra Club Library Oral History Project. Those interviews and administrative work are performed by Sierra Club library staff with a goal of expanding the oral history collection through shorter, focused narratives of Sierra Club leaders, to complement the longer interviews conducted by the Oral History Center.

Our oral history methodology in the Sierra Club Oral History Project requires informed consent with narrators and includes discussions about the scope and content of interviews prior to recording. The life-history approach used by the Oral History Center, with multiple recorded interview sessions, allows narrators to present themselves as whole people and not as a simple reduction to one aspect of their personal lives, career, or activism. The recording of each interview is transcribed, lightly edited for clarity, and returned to the narrator for their review and approval to publish. We also provide legal protections where narrators can make informed choices about the preservation and access of their interviews. Upon narrator approval, all transcripts are available online for free through the Oral History Center website (<http://ucblib.link/OHC>) via UC Berkeley Library Digital Collections. Hardbound volumes are

deposited for research with The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley and with the William E. Colby Memorial Library at the Sierra Club's headquarters in Oakland. A list of all published and forthcoming interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project follows this project history.

On behalf of the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, I want to thank all narrators who, since the early 1970s, shared their precious memories in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. We also thank the Sierra Club Board of Directors for recognizing early on the long-term importance of preserving the Club's history and its evolution; to the past members of the Sierra Club's History Committee, especially its founding chair Marshall Kuhn; to special donors who provided funding for individual Sierra Club oral history interviews; and to the Trustees of the Sierra Club Foundation for providing the necessary funding to initiate, expand, and more recently renew this invaluable oral history project. Much appreciation goes to staff members of the Sierra Club who helped make these oral histories possible, most recently and notably to Therese Dunn. A special thanks, too, to all prior interviewers, and most importantly to Ann Lage for more than three decades of her exceptional work on this project.

I remain both grateful and excited to conduct new oral histories with volunteer and staff leaders of the Sierra Club, one of the most significant environmental organizations in history. And I appreciate deeply all the narrators who set aside significant time to conduct these oral histories, who welcome me into their lives, and who, in the process, share their meaningful memories of protecting the planet for all of us to explore and enjoy.

List of Interviews in the Sierra Club Oral History Project

ORAL HISTORY CENTER SIERRA CLUB ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEWS

Interviews conducted by the Oral History Center, University of California, Berkeley

Single-Interview Volumes

Ansel Adams, "Conversations with Ansel Adams," 1978.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1980s: A Broadened Agenda, A Bold Approach," 1988.

Phillip S. Berry, "Sierra Club President, 1991-1992: The Club, the Legal Defense Fund, and Leadership Issues, 1984-1993," 1997.

David R. Brower, "Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet," 1980.

David R. Brower, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and Earth Island Institute," 2012.

Doris Cellarius, "Sierra Club Volunteer Leader: Grassroots Activist and Organizer on Hazardous Waste Issues," 2005.

Richard Cellarius, "National Leader in the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club Foundation, 1970-2002, Sierra Club President, 1988-1990," 2005.

William E. Colby, "Reminiscences," 1954.

Robert Cox, "Sierra Club President 1994-96, 2000-01, and 2007-08, on Environmental Communications and Strategy," 2023.

Lawrence D. Downing, "Sierra Club President 1986-1988, on Grassroots Environmental Leadership and International Outreach," 2024.

Michael L. Fischer, "Sierra Club Executive Director, 1987-1992," 1997.

Richard M. Leonard, "Mountaineer, Lawyer, Environmentalist," 1975.

Vivien Li, "Environmental Justice and Urban Waterfronts with the Sierra Club and The Boston Harbor Association," 2024.

Norman B. Livermore, Jr., "Man in the Middle: High Sierra Packer, Timberman, Conservationist, and California Resources Secretary," 1983.

Aaron Mair, "Sierra Club President 2015-2017, on Heritage, Stewardship, and Environmental Justice," 2020.

- Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director: The Evolving Club and the Environmental Movement," 1983.
- Michael McCloskey, "Sierra Club Executive Director and Chairman, 1980s-1990s: A Perspective on Transitions in the Club and the Environmental Movement," 1999.
- Susan D. Merrow, "Sierra Club President and Council Chair: Effective Volunteer Leadership, 1980s-1990s," 1994.
- Laurence I. Moss, "Sierra Club President, 1973-1974, Nuclear Engineer: Energy and Environmental Policy," 2014.
- Michele Perrault, "Michele Perrault: Sierra Club President 1984-1986 and 1993-1994, Environmental Educator, and Nature Protector," 2019.
- Carl Pope, "Environmental and Progressive Politics: Sierra Club Executive Director, 1992-2010," 2014.
- H. Anthony (Tony) Ruckel, "Sierra Club President 1992-1993, Pioneering Environmental Lawyer with Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund," 2021.
- Doug Scott, "Campaigner for America's Wilderness, Sierra Club Associate Director," 2013.
- Debbie Sease, "Sierra Club Legislative Director, National Campaign Director, and Senior Lobbyist in Washington, DC, 1981-2020," 2025.
- Denny Shaffer, "Sierra Club Officer and Leader, 1970 to 1997: Focus on Membership, Finances, and Management," 2006.
- William E. Siri, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s," 1979.
- Wallace Stegner, "The Artist as Environmental Advocate," 1983.
- Gary J. Torre, "Labor and Tax Attorney, 1949-1982; Sierra Club Foundation Trustee, 1968-1981, 1994-1998," 1999.
- Edgar Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman and Leader of the Parks and Wilderness Movement: Gaining Protection for Alaska, the Redwoods, and Golden Gate Parklands," 1985.
- Edgar Wayburn, "Global Activist and Elder Statesman of the Sierra Club: Alaska, International Conservation, National Parks and Protected Areas, 1980-1992," 1996.
- Peggy Wayburn, "Author and Environmental Advocate," 1992.
- John Zierold, "Environmental Lobbyist in California's Capital, 1965-1984," 1988.

Single Interviews in process: Bruce Hamilton, Rhonda Anderson, Bruce Nilles, Verena Owen, Rita Harris, Mary Anne Hitt

Multiple-Interview Volumes

Building the Sierra Club's National Lobbying Program, 1967-1981. 1985.

Brock Evans, "Environmental Campaigner: From the Northwest Forests to the Halls of Congress."

W. Lloyd Tupling, "Sierra Club Washington Representative, 1967-1973."

Pacific Northwest Conservationists. 1986.

Polly Dyer, "Preserving Washington Parklands and Wilderness."

Patrick D. Goldsworthy, "Protecting the North Cascades, 1954-1983."

Sierra Club Leaders I, 1950s-1970s. 1982.

Alexander Hildebrand, "Sierra Club Leader and Critic: Perspective on Club Growth, Scope, and Tactics, 1950s-1970s."

Martin Litton, "Sierra Club Director and Uncompromising Preservationist, 1950s-1970s."

Raymond J. Sherwin, "Conservationist, Judge, and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."

Theodore A. Snyder, Jr., "Southeast Conservation Leader and Sierra Club President, 1960s-1970s."

Sierra Club Leaders II, 1960s-1970s. 1985.

J. William Futrell, "'Love for the Land and Justice for Its People:' Sierra Club National and Southern Leader, 1968-1982."

David Sive, "Pioneering Environmental Lawyer, Atlantic Chapter Leader, 1961-1982."

SIERRA CLUB HISTORY COMMITTEE ORAL HISTORY SERIES

Interviews conducted by volunteers for the Sierra Club History Committee

Single-Interview Volumes

Nathan Clark, "Sierra Club Leader, Outdoorsman, and Engineer," 1977.

James Moorman, "Attorney for the Environment, 1966-1981: Center for Law and Social Policy, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, Department of Justice Division of Lands and Natural Resources," 1994.

Gordon Robinson, "Forestry Consultant to the Sierra Club," 1979.

Multiple-Interview Volumes

The Sierra Club Nationwide I. 1983.

Alfred Forsyth, "The Sierra Club in New York and New Mexico."

Grant McConnell, "Conservation and Politics in the North Cascades."

Stewart Ogilvy, "Sierra Club Expansion and Evolution: The Atlantic Chapter, 1957-1969."

Anne Van Tyne, "Sierra Club Stalwart: Conservationist, Hiker, Chapter and Council Leader."

The Sierra Club Nationwide II. 1984.

John Amodio, "Lobbyist for Redwood National Park Expansion."

Kathleen Goddard Jones, "Defender of California's Nipomo Dunes, Steadfast Sierra Club Volunteer."

A. Starker Leopold, "Wildlife Biologist."

Susan Miller, "Staff Support for Sierra Club Growth and Organization, 1964-1977."

Tom Turner, "A Perspective on David Brower and the Sierra Club, 1968-1969."

The Sierra Club Nationwide III. 1989.

George Alderson, "Environmental Campaigner in Washington, D.C., 1960s-1970s."

Frank Duveneck, "Loma Prieta Chapter Founder, Protector of Environmental and Human Rights."

Dwight Steele, "Controversies over the San Francisco Bay and Waterfront, 1960s-1970s."

Diane Walker, "The Sierra Club in New Jersey: Focus on Toxic Waste Management."

The Sierra Club Nationwide IV. 1996.

Abigail Avery, "Nurturing the Earth: North Cascades, Alaska, New England, and Issues of War and Peace."

Robin and Lori Ives, "Conservation, Mountaineering, and Angeles Chapter Leadership, 1958-1984."

Leslie Reid, "Angeles Chapter and National Sierra Club Leader, 1960s-1990s: Focus on Labor and the Environment."

Sally Reid, "Serving the Angeles Chapter and the National Sierra Club, 1960s-1990s: Focus on Wilderness Issues in California and Alaska."

Sierra Club Reminiscences I, 1900s-1960s. 1974.

Francis Farquhar, "Sierra Club Mountaineer and Editor."

Joel Hildebrand, "Sierra Club Leader and Ski Mountaineer."

Bestor Robinson, "Thoughts on Conservation and the Sierra Club."

James E. Rother, "The Sierra Club in the Early 1900s."

Sierra Club Reminiscences II, 1900s-1960s. 1975.

Philip S. Bernays, "Founding the Southern California Chapter."

Harold C. Bradley, "Furthering the Sierra Club Tradition."

Harold E. Crowe, "Sierra Club Physician, Baron, and President."

Glen Dawson, "Pioneer Rock Climber and Ski Mountaineer."

C. Nelson Hackett, "Lasting Impressions of the Early Sierra Club."

Sierra Club Reminiscences III, 1920s-1970s. 1984.

Lewis F. Clark, "Perdurable and Peripatetic Sierran: Club Officer and Outings Leader, 1928-1984."

Jules M. Eichorn, "Mountaineering and Music: Ansel Adams, Norman Clyde, and Pioneering Sierra Club Climbing."

Nina Eloesser, "Tales of High Trips in the Twenties."

H. Stewart Kimball, "New Routes For Sierra Club Outings, 1930s-1970s."

Joseph [N.] LeConte, "Recalling LeConte Family Pack Trips and the Early Sierra Club, 1912-1926."

The Sierra Club and the Urban Environment I: San Francisco Bay Chapter Inner City Outings and Sierra Club Outreach to Women. 1980.

Helen Burke, "Women's Issues in the Environmental Movement."

Patrick Colgan, "'Just One of the Kids Myself.'"

Jordan Hall, "Trial and Error: The Early Years."

Duff LaBoyteaux, "Towards a National Sierra Club Program."

Marlene Sarnat, "Laying the Foundations for ICO."

George Zuni, "From the Inner City Out."

The Sierra Club and the Urban Environment II: Labor and the Environment in the San Francisco Bay Area. 1983.

David Jenkins, "Environmental Controversies and the Labor Movement in the Bay Area."

Amy Meyer, "Preserving Bay Area Parklands."

Anthony L. Ramos, "A Labor Leader Concerned with the Environment."

Dwight C. Steele, "Environmentalism and Labor Ally."

Sierra Club Women [I and II]. 1977.

Elizabeth Marston Bade, "Recollections of William F. Bade and the Early Sierra Club."

Nora Evans, "Sixty Years with the Sierra Club."

Marjory Bridge Farquhar, "Pioneer Woman Rock Climber and Sierra Club Director."

Helen M. LeConte, "Reminiscences of LeConte Family Outings, the Sierra Club, and Ansel Adams."

Ruth E. Praeger, "Remembering the High Trips."

Sierra Club Women III. 1982.

Cicely M. Christy, "Contributions to the Sierra Club and the San Francisco Bay Chapter, 1938-1970s."

Wanda B. Goody, "A Hiker's View of the Early Sierra Club."

Ethel Rose Taylor Horsfall, "On the Trail with the Sierra Club, 1920s-1960s."

Harriet T. Parsons, "A Half-Century of Sierra Club Involvement."

SIERRA CLUB LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interviews conducted by the William E. Colby Memorial Library, Sierra Club national headquarters, Oakland, California

Multiple-Interview Volumes

Sierra Club's Environmental Justice Leaders. 2024

Robert Tohe, "Sierra Club Environmental Justice Leader for Native American Communities in the Southwest."

Bill McCabe, "Sierra Club Environmental Justice Organizer for Southern Appalachia."

Jim Price, "Sierra Club Southeast Staff Director, and Co-Director of the Sierra Club National Environmental Justice Grassroots Organizing Program."

George Coling, "Environmental Justice Leader."

Sierra Club's Valued Volunteers. 2024.

Vicky Hoover, "Sierra Club Outings Leader and Longtime Volunteer."

John Holtzclaw, "Urban Planner and Longtime Sierra Club Volunteer."

Becky Evans, "Sierra Club Staff, National and Chapter Leader, and Longtime Volunteer."

Harold Wood, "Longtime Sierra Club Volunteer, Chair of the Le Conte Memorial Lodge Committee (now the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center), and Volunteer Webmaster of the John Muir Exhibit."

Interview 1: October 29, 2020

01-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor: Today is October 29, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is interview session number one with Debbie Sease. Hi, Debbie, how are you doing today?

01-00:00:17

Sease: Great. How are you, Roger?

01-00:00:20

Eardley-Pryor: I'm doing as well as possible. We are, of course, recording over Zoom in the midst of a pandemic, and in the midst of other political chaos. I am currently in Santa Rosa, California. And where are you today?

01-00:00:31

Sease: I am in Washington, DC, today.

01-00:00:33

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Well, let's get going. I'm really excited to be doing this oral history with you, so thank you for making the time to do it together. Usually, the first question is, can you tell me the date of your birth, the location of your birth, and maybe a little bit of the context of the world that you were born into?

01-00:00:53

Sease: Okay. Well, I was born in a little town in Oklahoma called Ardmore in 1948, November 22nd, to my mother, Francis Naoma Sease. Her maiden name was Sanders. And to my father, David Gordon Sease. And I don't remember much about the world when I was born but it was post World-War II and, again, my first memories aren't until I was a toddler.

01-00:01:32

Eardley-Pryor: All right. Well, maybe you can share a little bit of your family background, maybe even beyond your parents. Will you tell us some stories about your grandparents and what was it that they were doing in Oklahoma with your family at that time? Maybe start with your grandparents. You can shed some light on them.

01-00:01:48

Sease: Okay. Well, my father was originally from the Ozark Mountains in Northern Arkansas and his parents, a woman named Dessie Mae McMahan married his father, Herbert Sease. And Herbert Sease was a very colorful, charismatic, larger than life figure. Dessie was from a family that was sort of a leader in the community, well-educated, prosperous family. My grandfather was a little bit of a bad apple but charming. I've looked back a little bit at some of the family lore about it. The bottom-line is that when my grandfather, Herbert, was thirty-four, he was executed for the murder of a revenuer. He was somebody who owned a moonshine operation. But as you look back at the family history about it there is some conflict about whether he was framed for

political reasons because he was such a powerful bad actor, that there were people who just didn't want him around to know their secrets and such. So my uncle still, to the day he died, said that my grandfather was framed. The local newspaper did an in-depth story about it where they went back through the court records, and it was at best circumstantial evidence, and the idea of executing somebody on circumstantial evidence is pretty slim. But my father's lawyer did not make a compelling case that he was innocent either.

01-00:03:55

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:03:56

Sease: My father at this time was eleven and had an older brother, a younger brother, and two younger sisters.

01-00:04:10

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big family.

01-00:04:12

Sease: Yeah, six children. The first one died before he was one years old. So, it was a large family. The trial lasted for quite some while and then they appealed it to the Arkansas Supreme Court. And so, he was in prison for over a year awaiting death. Apparently he went somewhat visibly insane in the last several months. Whether it was real or whether it was trying to play into the insanity defense, who knows. But after his death my great-grandfather, his father, who was somewhat his partner in being a moonshiner and a troublemaker in the community, invited my grandmother to just come live with him and be his second wife. So, she moved to Oklahoma to live with one of her aunts.

01-00:05:11

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wow. To be closer to her father-in-law?

01-00:05:17

Sease: To be farther away from her father-in-law.

01-00:05:20

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, farther away. Okay.

01-00:05:21

Sease: Yes. She felt very threatened by his offer.

01-00:05:25

Eardley-Pryor: Why? How old was your dad when all of this was happening to him?

01-00:05:30

Sease: He was eleven. So this is something that the family did not talk about it during the times that my sister and I were growing up. We learned about it much later. One of my uncles, in fact, was a professor at Berkeley.

01-00:05:47

Eardley-Pryor: Oh?

01-00:05:49

Sease: Quite some number of years ago. I believe when Reagan was President, perhaps. Or no, when Reagan was governor of California. I think he lost his tenure for smoking dope with his students. He was a philosophy professor.

01-00:06:05

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds like a sixties moment.

01-00:06:09

Sease: Yes, it was. But any rate, that particular uncle decided to write his biography, his autobiography, and in it he delved some into this—and it was one of the first times that the rest of the next generation of the family heard any of the details about it.

01-00:06:28

Eardley-Pryor: That is wild. There's a concept called intergenerational trauma, that a family's experience of what happens in a former generation, whoever goes through this trauma, that later generations inherit ripple effects or echoes of that trauma in their own ways. And I'm wondering, for your dad or for you and your sister, were there any kind of ripple effects that this happened to have had on you?

01-00:06:52

Sease: Well, I am sure for my dad there were. My dad was one of the most centered, solid people you could imagine. But when you know the history of what happened in his childhood, it gives you a sense of what an act of will that was. So, as I think back on my father and who he was, how he treated people and what he lived through, it's clear that he overcame a huge deficit of opportunity.

01-00:07:36

Eardley-Pryor: And you mentioned that your grandmother moved from northern Arkansas—where this event happened in the Ozarks—to Oklahoma?

01-00:07:45

Sease: Mm-hmm. She had family there. She went to live with one of her aunts who was a teacher. My grandmother had a teaching certificate, had been to college, and she started teaching there. And she raised her family there with the help of her mother's siblings. The Thomases. And, in fact, my father spent a lot of time with one of his uncles who we called Uncle Tom.

01-00:08:26

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Wow. This family dynamic is just fascinating.

01-00:08:33

Sease: Yeah.

01-00:08:33

Eardley-Pryor: Just help me understand the timeframe. Can you say when, around what time this execution would have happened and your dad then moved to Oklahoma? Like the twenties, the thirties?

01-00:08:46

Sease: Hang on a second. My grandfather—I think it was about the twenties. I'm looking in a—

01-00:09:01

Eardley-Pryor: I guess that it would make sense if you said your grandfather, the one who was executed, was a moonshiner. Prohibition would have been in effect.

01-00:09:09

Sease: Yeah, it was in 1922 when the killing happened. So, it was a couple years after that that he would have been executed. Twenty-four.

01-00:09:21

Eardley-Pryor: And you said this isn't something that your dad or your grandmother really ever spoke about?

01-00:09:26

Sease: Well, my grandmother died before I was old enough to actually remember her. And my father never spoke about it. I never heard of this from him. So, my father's youngest sister Grace, she spoke about it to her children, and my sister and I heard about it from our cousins.

01-00:09:54

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:09:54

Sease: But quite aside from being a trauma for us, it was so far in the distance that it was an anecdote. I mean we thought, "Well, that must have been hard for my dad," but there wasn't a reality to it.

01-00:10:09

Eardley-Pryor: But that helped, at least, give placement to why you were born in Oklahoma.

01-00:10:14

Sease: Yes. So, my dad spent the rest of his years growing up in Oklahoma in a small town in the oil country, Dundee, a little town called Dundee. He met my mother's brother, her older brother, her oldest brother, and they became best friends. And my father was twenty-six when he married my mother, who was sixteen. They had been dating for a while.

01-00:10:50

Eardley-Pryor: That is young for your mom.

01-00:10:52

Sease: It is very young, and it's a huge age difference.

01-00:10:55

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

01-00:10:56

Sease: And my mother was the last of many children. She was living at home with my grandfather, Charlie Sanders, who was an oil field worker. His wife had died and left him a widow when my mother was just a baby. The women in my mother's family died pretty young, mostly from a cluster of cancers, ovarian, breast cancer. So it was not a family of long-lived women. On the flip side, my father's family, all of them lived into their late nineties.

01-00:11:41

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. So it was a crap shoot as to which genes would be passed along.

01-00:11:45

Sease: Yes, right. Yes. I think my sister got at least some of those of my dad's genes.

01-00:11:51

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Well, I was going to ask you about your mother's experience. You mentioned your father had this traumatic moment that happened in his young years, at ten or eleven. And then for your mother, her mother passes away and she's raised by her father for almost all of her life.

01-00:12:06

Sease: Yes. Right. And she is also raised by her eldest sister until her eldest sister left home. But at the time she was sixteen she was the only one living at home and apparently my grandfather was, as my father said, a mean SOB. And one night my father and my mother were going out on a date. They were going to go skating. And my mother had this skating outfit which—apparently in those days when you went to go roller skating you dressed for the event. The reason I describe it so well is it became part of our dress up clothes when we were children. But it was this purple fitted jacket with buttons down the front and the little epaulets on the sleeves and a circle skirt that was dark purple on one side and lilac on the other, so that when you spin in skating you get this flare of color, just like the ice skaters.

01-00:13:12

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds so fantastic. This is roller skating in, let's say, what, in the thirties or forties when they're dating at this point?

01-00:13:17

Sease: It must have been the thirties, yeah. So my mother's dressed up for this. They go out. My dad says, "Hey, why don't we just get married tonight instead of going skating?" And my mother says, "Okay." So they go wake up her grandfather, who was, I think, a Baptist or a Church of Christ preacher and said they wanted to get married and would he marry them. And one of the things about that story that just never landed right with my sister and I is why would her grandfather marry a sixteen-year-old to a twenty-six-year-old man? Now, he knew my dad but apparently, and this is the story my father did tell

us, he said, "Well, I don't know what it's going to be like married to Gordon." My father's name was David Gordon but his family called him Gordon. His business associates always called him David. So the grandfather said, "I don't know what it's going to be like being married to Gordon, but it's got to be better than living with Charlie."

01-00:14:28

So he married them and they, you know, set up a house. And the stories I hear from the early days of the marriage was—my father always had hunting dogs, bird dogs. And my father loved good food and was actually quite a good cook. My mother knew nothing about cooking when she was first married. So she would make dinner and my father would critique it and tell her what needed to be better. My mother was a—my aunt once referred to her as feisty. But she did not take much guff. So one night my mother made chicken and dumplings, and the dumplings were apparently really bad and so my father was complaining about it. And she said, "Well, if you don't like that, I'm just going to give them to Mike." Mike was the bird dog. And so she goes to put them down in front of Mike and my father says, "I'm not going to let my bird dog eat those dumplings. He could break a tooth." So he picks up the dumplings. My mother is absolutely furious. She goes in the bedroom, she packs her bag, she goes down to the local bus stop and gets on the bus or is going to get on the bus. And the bus driver said, "Child's fare?" And she said, "No, not child's fare." But she was not willing to get on the bus so she came home.

01-00:16:03

But the other story about my mother cooking for my dad that I remember, that was a famous story in the family, is my father loved cabbage. I mean his idea of cabbage is, you know, if you hadn't had it at least two meals a day you hadn't had cabbage in a while. So he was complaining that, "Naoma, you never make cabbage for me." And she said, "Well, yes, I did. I made you slaw yesterday and, you know, we had cooked cabbage with dinner." And so one night my dad comes home from work. And this is an era when you get home from work at 5:30 and dinner's sitting on the table. Or, as they called it, supper is sitting on the table. So my mother had a seven-course meal. Every one of them had cabbage in it cooked a different way.

01-00:16:55

Eardley-Pryor: Feisty indeed. I love it.

01-00:16:57

Sease: And yet—you know, my father said, "Well, it's about time. This is great. This is a perfect meal." I don't know how long they had been married when they had my sister. It was several years. And they had my sister and then for a very long time only my sister. And my father would occasionally send me conception cards on President's Day. I guess it was Lincoln's birthday, it was February 22nd. And he told me a story when I was old enough to understand it, that it used to be a federal holiday on that day, not just on the Monday but on that day, and that he came home or was home and said to my mother, "Why

don't we make another baby? Let's have another baby." And, of course, you know, obstetricians say that you're not exactly nine months, but the fact that I was born nine months later was evidence to him that that was my conception date.

01-00:18:04

Eardley-Pryor: And he would send you cards to memorialize it?

01-00:18:07

Sease: Yes, yes. To celebrate my conception day.

01-00:18:12

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. You mentioned your sister. What's her name, and when was she born?

01-00:18:16

Sease: Her name is Sandra Jo Sease. She married and changed it to Mahoney, her husband's name. She is eight years older than me, so I would say that means she was born in 1940.

01-00:18:33

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. So your parents had been married, you said, for several years before that. So when they did get married—when your mom, as you said, was sixteen, your dad was twenty-six—it sounds to me like it would be during the Great Depression.

01-00:18:46

Sease: Yes, it would have been. Mm-hmm.

01-00:18:49

Eardley-Pryor: Do they have any stories that they shared about what was like living through that period of time, especially in Oklahoma?

01-00:18:54

Sease: Well, no, I don't. My mother, when she was in college and was taking a writing class, wrote a story that was based on a story of my father's tales of living at his Uncle Tom's and accidentally strangling or allowing his uncle's prize bull to strangle itself because he neglected to tie it up. And in that story it talks about what a huge deal that was, you know, the impact to the family of losing this bull. But no, there was not much talk about the Depression. I mean they lived in a small town. But it was a rural kind of place where you grew a lot of your own food. You had a cellar full of canned goods and you raised a couple of beef and maybe some pigs. So I don't think for them the Depression was ever about going hungry.

01-00:20:04

Eardley-Pryor: I was thinking if there were stories of the Dust Bowl hitting the Okies and having the Okies then move out to where I'm at, here in California.

01-00:20:14

Sease:

No. They were in the part of Oklahoma that was the oil fields. So there was always work in that respect. I found papers in our family albums and things which included a pamphlet of a budget that—you know, my father worked for the Farmers Home Administration, made loans to small farmers for development and for housing. And one of the things that they would give the farmer when they would make them a loan was materials to help them manage the farm on a budget, manage their household expenses. So my mother had one of those pamphlets that had her budget of how they spent their money and saved their money and what they spent it on, which was, to me just completely a foreign concept.

01-00:21:15

Eardley-Pryor:

What kind of things do you remember from it?

01-00:21:16

Sease:

Well, I remember, one, it seeming to be very small. But it seemed like they accounted and planned for everything that was going to be an expense. And there was not a lot of flexible spending. And I remember, partly because I actually really like these foods, but in hindsight realized that at the end of the month is when things are tighter and remember having ham and bean soup as dinner many nights then and potato onion soup. So that was part of my mother's budget.

01-00:22:01

Eardley-Pryor:

In doing background interviews to prepare for our conversation together, across the board, people who knew you really well have celebrated your cooking—not as a cook, but as a chef. I mean, you're an incredible, incredible artist in the kitchen. So, I'm wondering where that came from, after hearing some of these stories about your mom's early work and your dad's passion for cabbage.

01-00:22:25

Sease:

Well, it came from my parents, from both of them. So when I was in fourth grade, that would make me, I think, ten, I said to my mother, I think, "I want to learn to cook." Well, actually before that, for Christmas, I got this little Pillsbury or Betty Crocker, who knows which brand it was, but a little thing. It was a kid's cooking set. It had tiny little pans and it had little tiny boxes of prepared mixes to make biscuits and cakes and things like that. And I got that for a Christmas present one year and I would make these tiny little cakes and I would give them to my dad. Well, my father, bless his heart, ate them, every one I made. He doesn't like cake. He doesn't like pie. He's not a dessert man.

01-00:23:18

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, that's a loving dad, though.

01-00:23:19

Sease:

Yeah. But he ate those things. So at any rate, when I was in fourth grade, one day I said, "I want to learn to cook." And so my mother said, "Oh, okay. Well,

you can make dinner today, Sunday dinner." And my family was very habitual in that—on rare occasions, it would be something different, but most Sundays we had for dinner fried chicken, baked potatoes, cabbage, coleslaw, corn or green beans or whatever vegetable was in season. And so the first thing I ever cooked in the kitchen, in a real way, was Sunday dinner. And I, to this day, say that my mother taught me to cook by keeping my father out of the kitchen enough that he didn't just completely take it over. But Sunday dinner was something that he would frequently cook. Not always, but frequently. But he showed me how to cut up a chicken, showed me how to dredge it in flour, how to put the pan. And so that first meal went really well. Everybody liked it. Everything was perfect. The second Sunday I decided to do it again. I don't know if you've ever fried chicken, but if you start with a whole chicken it comes with a couple of innard parts, one of which is the gizzard. And the gizzard has a pocket of moisture inside. And I didn't realize this, and I just stuck it in the pan with everything else. And so I'm turning things and this giant spat of grease just comes and hits me right smack between the eyes. And I abandoned dinner. Daddy finished making it that day and for probably a couple of months I did not ask to cook again. So, Roger, you have frozen [over Zoom]. I don't know if I have frozen on your end or not. Do we still have a good signal?

01-00:25:18

Eardley-Pryor: —unpaused now. Can you hear me at all?

01-00:25:20

Sease: Now I can hear you.

01-00:25:21

Eardley-Pryor: Are you back? Am I back? Okay.

01-00:25:22

Sease: You're back.

01-00:25:23

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, great.

01-00:25:25

Sease: So was I breaking up?

01-00:25:27

Eardley-Pryor: No, I could hear you all the way through. It took a bit before you—

01-00:25:36

Sease: And you've frozen again. So how do you want to proceed?

01-00:25:52

Eardley-Pryor: Let's pause the recording.

[pause in recording]

01-00:25:57

Sease:

So after having gotten popped in the face by the chicken gizzard I took a break from cooking Sunday meals. But after a while I forgot about that experience and on a fairly routine basis would make a meal. And then I got really excited about being more adventuresome. So my mother, one of the things that she made, was some kind of dessert that tasted like and looked like what I know now is strawberry mousse. It wasn't a traditional strawberry mousse but it was pink and strawberry-ish and fluffy. So I just sort of extrapolated what I thought might be in it. And I knew it had strawberry Jell-O. I knew it had frozen strawberries. And I thought, "Well, what makes things fluffy?" Egg whites. So one day my parents come home from having gone somewhere on a Saturday and I have made dinner and I served dessert. And it is absolutely gorgeous. I mean it's this pile of frothy stuff and my mother said, "Debbie, what is this?" I said, "Oh, it's your strawberry—" whatever we called it. And she said, "Really? I didn't think we had any heavy cream in the house." I said, "Oh, I used egg whites." She said, "You used raw egg whites?" It was the most hideous thing to taste. But I think the first cookbook I got that was my cookbook was Craig Claiborne's *New York Times* cookbook. I just would explore it. I tried to make baked Alaska once and set the kitchen on fire.

01-00:27:35

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, my gosh.

01-00:27:39

Sease:

But my parents, both of them, were incredibly encouraging of cooking. So my mother, when I was very young, did most of the cooking. She was an excellent cook. She had some specialty dishes that were very elaborate. I have to this day her cookbook, which was clips from magazines and recipes from other people. You know, it has some wonderful recipes in it. When I was in third or fourth grade, when my sister was just starting freshman year in college, my mother decided she wanted to go to college. We were living in a town that had a university and it was an opportunity for her to finish her education, which she had sort of put on hold when she got married at sixteen. So she did not get a diploma from high school. So she took the GRD exam and signed up as a freshman the year that my sister was a freshman in college. And now you don't think anything about adults being in college but at that time, in a small state school, the fact that a mother and daughter were freshmen together was a really big deal. My mother was thrilled. But, you know, and I think that my mother must have been ancient then. Well, I think she was like thirty-four.

01-00:28:57

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, gees. Yeah.

01-00:29:02

Sease:

Or something like that. Yeah.

01-00:29:05

Eardley-Pryor: Wait. Your mom and sister were going to the same university at the same time.

01-00:29:07

Sease: At the same time as freshman.

01-00:29:10

Eardley-Pryor: And as a result of that, does that mean that there was more of a burden for you to help with keeping the house going?

01-00:29:17

Sease: Oh, no. No. I mean I felt no burden at all.

01-00:29:20

Eardley-Pryor: Oh.

01-00:29:21

Sease: But it meant that my mother cooked less. Now, my father had always cooked breakfast for as long as I can remember. That was the meal that he cooked. And he continued to do that. But he took on more cooking of dinner. And the habit that my mother had prior to going back to school of having a lunch, a hot lunch ready for him at home every day ended. But my father was a fairly adventuresome cook. So after my mother died, when I was sixteen, we were in a grocery store shopping and there was this mountain of artichokes. It was the year that California had a really bumper crop of artichokes and they did a big marketing thing and exported them all over the country. And so there were these exotic things. So I got out my *New York Times* cookbook, had a recipe for artichokes and my dad and I ate an artichoke. Well, my dad said, "This is great." So during artichoke season every other night we would have artichokes.

01-00:30:37

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

01-00:30:39

Sease: I've sort of skipped ahead to my mother dying.

01-00:30:41

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. There's a lot to unpack in here. These, of course, are things we want included, but to hear them in the context of cooking and your passion for it is a really lovely way, too.

01-00:30:54

Sease: Yes. Yes.

01-00:30:56

Eardley-Pryor: But let's go back to another moment that we haven't really talked about but I think is really formative and important, which is at age three, in 1951, you contracted polio.

01-00:31:06

Sease: I did.

01-00:31:08

Eardley-Pryor: So can you tell me a little bit about, well—[inaudible].

01-00:31:12

Sease: Roger, you're breaking up. We should pause for a moment.

01-00:31:19

Eardley-Pryor: Okay.

[pause in recording]

01-00:31:23

Sease: So when I was three, 1951, the summer of 1951, it was the last summer before the polio vaccine and there was a big epidemic. My parents and I went out to a ballgame with some friends, and a little boy and I shared a milkshake, and the next day he came down with polio and a few days later I came down with polio.

01-00:31:49

Eardley-Pryor: God. And that is a big deal in that time period, before the vaccine.

01-00:31:53

Sease: Yeah. Before the vaccine. Yeah. And, you know, polio was a very scary thing for people then. My parents took me to the hospital. The course of polio is there is a short period of time in which you run a high fever and the virus attacks either nerves or muscles and either autonomic system or whatever the opposite of the autonomic system is. There are different kinds of polio, different kinds of impacts. But I was in isolation for a number of days. And actually one of my first childhood memories is seeing my mother's face behind a—you know how doors have an oblong glass window, some of them, and they have wire between the layers of glass? Seeing my mother's face in that frame because she was not allowed in. But I could see her face.

01-00:32:56

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. That's a powerful memory.

01-00:32:58

Sease: It was a very strong memory. So I remember being in this hospital in that. Then later, I was in it as part of—the active virus had gone, so my parents could visit but I was there for rehabilitation.

01-00:33:21

Eardley-Pryor: I don't know the course of polio enough to know how this happens. There's a moment where the virus is communicated, like it could be shared?

01-00:33:28

Sease: Uh-huh, yeah. Mm-hmm.

01-00:33:29

Eardley-Pryor: But then there's also, after that moment, the virus still continues to act within your body?

01-00:33:35

Sease: Well, it's not so much that it continues to act in your body as you then see the damage that it did while it was there.

01-00:33:43

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

01-00:33:43

Sease: So, for example, some polio victims experience significant damage to their lungs and they survive polio by being in what was called an iron lung, which helped them breathe. My lungs were not affected, and in fact I think the damage to my muscles and nerves was relatively modest. But the people that were treating it did not know much about what they were doing, and so one side of my body, my right side, was more affected than my left. So they protected the right side. So I had a brace on my right leg, but my left leg, it wasn't that damaged so they didn't. And the thing for polio with children is that you are growing. Your bones have not finished growing and your muscles, your muscles pulling on your bones sort of keep them in place. So during the next couple of years, not having put a brace on my left leg, the left leg was much more damaged. And so after my parents took me to a hospital in East Texas that specialized in polio and the right treatment was administered, I ended up having to wear a brace until I was thirteen on my left side, not on my right side, because of the damage that had been sustained after polio.

01-00:35:29

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:35:30

Sease: After the infection.

01-00:35:32

Eardley-Pryor: From what I'm hearing, though, it sounds to me like from that age forward, from three or four, you were wearing a brace on either the left or right leg for a decade.

01-00:35:41

Sease: Or both for a while, yeah.

01-00:35:43

Eardley-Pryor: And through most of your childhood.

01-00:35:45

Sease: And crutches. Yeah. And I wore crutches after surgery. Because polio was so prevalent before the vaccine a lot of effort had been invested in how to fix it. You know, rehabilitation. So one of my other early childhood memories, not a particularly pleasant one, is that heat was a really good thing for muscles and

nerves damaged by polio and to stop the convulsions. Well, there's a good memory and there's a not so good memory. The good memory is that my father—again, always being blunt to the point of a little overkill, told me the reason I had no further siblings was because when I was—just after polio I had terrible convulsions. Just, you know, bang, I would be in convulsions and would fall. And one of the things that they recommended for that was that I take a hot bath. I mean hotter than your hottest hot tub. And you can't put a three-year-old into that kind of water without them having a hissy fit. So my father would hold me and he would take the bath and I would be in this. And he said, "You know, it sterilized me."

01-00:37:18

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:37:19

Sease: I can't imagine how unpleasant that was for him.

01-00:37:22

Eardley-Pryor: Now I am thinking about my little girl who's about to turn three, and I can barely get her in a bath of any temperature, let alone a hot, hot bath like that.

01-00:37:33

Sease: Yes.

01-00:37:34

Eardley-Pryor: Ugh.

01-00:37:34

Sease: So the other thing my father did, and he did this throughout my childhood, was I had physical therapy exercises that I did and that were administered to me twice a day. And I don't remember ever missing them. It was something that first thing in the morning, on the kitchen table, my father would do the parts that he did, which was basically your tendons and your ligaments can shrink and become very, very tight. And there were stretching exercises. And later in life when I went to a physical therapist for back pain, they did the exact same exercise. And I thought, "Oh, yeah, did this every day." You know, so when I would go to a—want to go spend the night at a friend's, I'd need to arrange to come back at a particular time in the morning to get that physical therapy.

01-00:38:28

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:38:30

Sease: They just didn't let it slide. And, you know, it made a difference.

01-00:38:36

Eardley-Pryor: Just hearing these stories about how invested your parents, and especially your father was in your care—

01-00:38:41

Sease: Yes.

01-00:38:42

Eardley-Pryor: I would imagine it helped shape your sense of being so loved as a child, it sounds like.

01-00:38:49

Sease: Yeah. Yes. I did feel very loved. And while I don't talk about my mother as much, she was also very engaged in the care. The two of them were just incredibly supportive. You know, I spent a number of years on and off, not year-round but for months at a time, at the hospital down in southeast Texas. And it was six or seven hundred miles depending on where my parents were at the moment from where we lived. And they would come down every other weekend to visit me when I was there.

01-00:39:27

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. And I would guess bring your sister then, too? She would have been too young to be on her own, maybe?

01-00:39:30

Sease: Well, when she was younger she stayed with a neighbor or relative. And then when she was older she stayed on her own.

01-00:39:40

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. But your parents would come down these hundreds of miles to be with you while you were in this Texas hospital?

01-00:39:45

Sease: Right, yes. And this Texas hospital was in a Texas state park that was filled with live oaks, with Spanish moss and beautiful spring fed river. And we would camp there. I do have memories of eating off a Coleman stove, my mother cooking or my dad. And we would frequently invite some child from the facility who was there also whose parents weren't coming down—and we should pause again because, Roger, I think you've frozen.

01-00:40:36

Eardley-Pryor: I think I'm back again. Are you back? Can you hear me okay now?

01-00:40:38

Sease: Yeah. I can hear now.

01-00:40:38

Eardley-Pryor: Thank you for your flexibility.

01-00:40:42

Sease: Yeah.

01-00:40:43

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:40:42

Sease: So we would camp and my parents would let me invite one or more of the other children that were there that were able to go out and camp. But being at the hospital, you know, I missed my parents. I didn't like being away from home. But the facility itself was absolutely lovely. The people there were wonderful. They had school that one attended. But I was telling you I had two memories about heat. One was pleasant, one was not. The treatment that I would get there was they would put you in paraffin and then wrap wool blankets around it for it to hold the heat.

01-00:41:34

Eardley-Pryor: Like hot wax?

01-00:41:36

Sease: It was a paraffin that melted at a very low temperature so it wasn't burning you but it was hot. And the wool blankets would hold that heat in for a long time. And I remember absolutely hating that. And you're frozen again so we should pause.

01-00:42:03

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. I think I'm back. Are you back?

01-00:42:06

Sease: Yes, I'm back.

01-00:42:07

Eardley-Pryor: I'm sorry again.

01-00:42:10

Sease: Yeah, that's okay.

01-00:42:11

Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned this experience being in this Texas state park and camping. Were those some of your first memories of being in the outdoors like that, having camping experiences?

01-00:42:21

Sease: Well, being in that park, camping there, were some of my first experiences. The others, that my mother would plan these incredible summer vacations. My father, I think, probably got two to three weeks off a year vacation. We lived in New Mexico most of my growing up time. We moved from Oklahoma when I was six to New Mexico.

01-00:42:46

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. So you moved in the mid-fifties, a few years after the polio, first contracting the polio.

01-00:42:54

Sease: Mm-hmm, yeah. A few. So I had done first grade and second grade, I think, in Oklahoma. Third grade I did in New Mexico.

01-00:43:07

Eardley-Pryor: Well, what are your memories of that move, that transition from what was home to what became home?

01-00:43:12

Sease: Well, my sister and I thought that we were being exiled to the barren desert. You know, I mean, Oklahoma, I suppose, is greener than some parts of New Mexico. But the particular part of Oklahoma that we lived in, I went back as an adult and it's pretty desolate. It's plains. It's not verdant eastern hardwood forest. And the part of New Mexico we moved to was the high desert plains of New Mexico. Much prettier. But, you know, it was change. So we cried all the way there. And then we moved into our house and we both loved it.

01-00:44:00

Eardley-Pryor: Where in New Mexico did you end up? Where was that?

01-00:44:01

Sease: Well, we spent one year—so I think I mentioned my father worked for the Farmers Home Administration. The Farmers Home Administration, they have different offices in different states and counties. And my father had wanted to go to New Mexico. Actually, his best friend that I mentioned from high school that he knew, that was my mother's brother, had moved to New Mexico and we would go visit them. And my dad just really loved New Mexico, as did my mom. So he signed up for the first opening in New Mexico, which was not the most desirable placement there. It was a little town north of Albuquerque called Estancia. And when I say little town, it was a very little town. And he was there for a year and then was able to transfer to Las Cruces down in the southern part of the state. And Roger, you've frozen again.

01-00:45:03

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. So it sounds to me like you grew up though, most of your childhood memories in New Mexico is Las Cruces.

01-00:45:11

Sease: Yes, yes.

01-00:45:13

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Well, I was going to ask about two things. One is thinking about—I want to hear more about these trips, the—

01-00:45:24

Sease: Oh, right, the trips. And you're frozen again. Let's pause.

01-00:45:38

Eardley-Pryor: These times that you spent in the hospital in your medical treatment, I'm thinking about in the context of you seeing your parents budgeting, with tight budgets, and how that related to these epic trips and to these times that you had to spend getting treatments seven hundred miles away.

01-00:45:58

Sease: Well, so the godsend there was the March of Dimes. So stuff that insurance—I mean, as a government employee my father had good healthcare, but good healthcare doesn't cut it. And the March of Dimes, I learned as an adult, paid for huge amounts. But the expense of every other week going on a six hundred mile trip, I'm sure it did impact the budget.

01-00:46:28

Eardley-Pryor: Well, with these seven hundred mile, six hundred mile trips that they're taking every two weeks, that brings us back to these stories of your mother planning these epic vacations.

01-00:46:36

Sease: Oh, right. Yes.

01-00:46:36

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of the memories you have about these journeys?

01-00:46:39

Sease: So the planning was also part of the adventure. So my mother would get all of the maps and get the brochures and write to all the national parks. And it was hinged around the major national parks, but we would also see things that weren't national parks. But we would do these giant loops in the west, too. And one year get some portion of it and then the next year a different portion and camp. So part of the memories, the ones that are the strongest, are the ones where we had film of it. So my father had a moving camera. And, of course, film being one of those expensive commodities, and my father not wanting to waste it, we would have a picture of the "Welcome to Arizona" and "Welcome to Organ Pipe Cactus" with us standing in front of it. And then there would be something that interested my father, like a hayfield being mowed and there would be this long span of the entire operation. We camped during these. And I remember we went to Yellowstone and there's pictures of the bear's nose inside the car window with us feeding cookies to it. And I think, you know, how incredible and how stupid.

01-00:48:19

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. What was camping like for you in this time period? I'm guessing this is like through the mid to late fifties. What was camping like? What was the gear like? What was setting up tents like?

01-00:48:34

Sease: The gear, at least in my experience, tended to be Army surplus. So we had a pup tent for my sister and I and another tent for my parents. A Coleman stove. Sleeping bags, cots. I don't remember being at all uncomfortable. The food was good.

01-00:49:07

Eardley-Pryor: I also am picturing you wearing these leg braces as a child and visiting these parks and camping. What was that experience like, either for you or for your parents?

01-00:48:16

Sease: Well, for me it felt pretty seamless. My dad carried me a lot of places that I couldn't have gone otherwise. So I remember riding on his shoulders or piggyback. I'm sure it constrained the distance that they would go for something. But I never felt as a child like I was really limited by my physical ability. I was constrained because my parents were absolutely rigid of, "You've got your braces off, you're not walking." So physically I could obviously get up and walk across the room without the braces on. They weren't keeping me upright. They were protecting my growing bones from damage. But they were utterly rigid about it, to the point that when I was a kid I had nightmares that I had violated that.

01-00:50:22

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:50:25

Sease: So I crawled — a lot. putting on braces and taking them off is a bit of a big—you know, a tedious thing. But I never felt that I was physically unable. I was just constrained by this rule.

01-00:50:45

Eardley-Pryor: Share a little bit more, if you would, about—I'm thinking about you never felt unable to do things. I'd like to hear you talk about the ways you think this experience and your parents response to it helped shape the person that you have become, the person that you've grown into.

01-00:51:05

Sease: Right. Well, one of the things that my parents gave me was an incredible sense of self-confidence, as you said, of being loved, of being secure. Even if I did something wrong and they got mad at me, it was just temporal. When I was in fourth grade I tried out for cheerleader and the teacher called my mom before the tryouts and said, "I'm worried. Debbie's trying out for cheerleader." At this point I had crutches as well as braces. And my mother said, "Well, so what are you worried about?" She said, "Well, I'm afraid she's not going to win. She's not going to be a cheerleader." And my mother said, "Oh, is she going to be the only one?" And the teacher said, "Well, no. There's only a few spots and there's ten girls trying out." And my mother said, "Well, she'll be in good company then. Go ahead." And that attitude was that it—I'm sure I cried that I didn't get to be a cheerleader. I'm not saying, you know, I was just impervious to it. But the polio didn't stop me from being and trying to do anything I wanted to.

01-00:52:31

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds like it didn't really limit your parents, either, in the kind of adventures that they took you on.

01-00:52:34

Sease: No, no. Yeah. I went fishing with my father when I was young and then as I got older I went hunting with him. My father's nickname for me when I was a little kid was Catfish. And one day we were fishing, I think probably down in Palmetto State Park in Texas, near the hospital. I caught a catfish. And I don't know if you've ever seen a catfish. A catfish has got this sort of ring around its mouth. It's got these whiskers that stick out. It's a very unattractive fish. So I catch this catfish and my dad says, "It's a catfish." And I said, "Well, Daddy, why do you call me catfish?" And he says, "Well, catfish, all mouth, no brain. Eat anything it can get in its mouth."

01-00:53:29

Eardley-Pryor: Thanks, Dad.

01-00:53:32

Sease: I did have a pretty good appetite as a child though.

01-00:53:37

Eardley-Pryor: What were some of the things that you were passionate about as a little girl? What were the things that you really were into?

01-00:53:43

Sease: One of my first recollections is I was into my goldmine. I found some rocks that had gold, and my friends and I created this secret goldmining operation in the garage where we broke apart these rocks with a little sledgehammer and were collecting gold. And my theory was that I was going to get enough that I was going to buy—there was one of these—you know, you've seen these tricycles that are a car? Well, I saw one on display that had a motor in it and you could drive it, and I was going to buy one of those. My father came out and found us breaking apart rocks with sledgehammers without any eye protection on and informed us that it was fool's gold.

01-00:54:38

Eardley-Pryor: Aw.

01-00:54:39

Sease: Right. But I was so deeply into that.

01-00:54:45

Eardley-Pryor: I love that you were into mining, and then later into land preservation as these mining companies were trying to get at some of these underground mineral right.

01-00:54:56

Sease: Yes. Well, I just took my rocks from the surface.

01-00:54:59

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Right, right. I assume this was in New Mexico?

01-00:55:02

Sease: This was in New Mexico, yes.

01-00:55:05

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of your memories of being in Las Cruces? What was Las Cruces like during your childhood?

01-00:55:10

Sease: Well, it was a lovely town. There was a huge pecan orchard out to the east of town. It's in the Rio Grande Valley. My mother and father loved to take drives in the car. So many afternoons they would, after my father got home from work, particularly in the summer when you'd have such long light, would go for a drive and I would go with them. And we would drive into the onion fields and the whole world would smell like potato onion soup in a really good way. And they would just go in the country roads, the back roads. Lot of bird life. My dad loved—he loved watching birds but he particularly loved watching game birds. So there were pheasant, quail, turkey.

01-00:56:11

Eardley-Pryor: Is that what you guys would hunt together?

01-00:56:12

Sease: Well, we hunted together. I mean I would go with my dad when he hunted birds but I never hunted birds. I would just go along. I would hunt deer with my dad, from the time I was fifteen until after I left for college. I came back a couple of years and went deer hunting with him. I never shot a deer but in theory I was always willing.

01-00:56:36

Eardley-Pryor: What were those experiences like for the two of you?

01-00:56:42

Sease: They were great. They typically involved my mother's extended family, her brother, her older brother and his kids. And he had a big family. And then cousins. So we would camp in the national forest in this big tent that was made out of an old parachute that had a heater inside it. And fifteen people would be sleeping inside the tent.

01-00:57:11

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds incredible.

01-00:57:12

Sease: And playing poker late into the night.

01-00:57:16

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like these experiences you have of traveling with your family, them camping and staying to visit you in Texas, these hunting trips with family and friends, helped ingrain a love of the outdoors, I would think.

01-00:57:28

Sease: Yes, mm-hmm. I very much loved the outdoors. I also loved gardening. And my dad—you know, I have friends who say, "Oh, I hate gardening. I had to weed as a kid. My parents made me weed the garden." Well, my father took the opposite approach, he weeded the garden. He tilled the garden, got it all ready. He said, "Well, so what do you want to grow this year, Debbie?" I said, "Well, I want to—pattypan squash." So I would have a place. I'd stick the pattypan seed into the soil. I'd maybe water it once or twice. He would take care of it until it was blooming and then I would go out and harvest the pattypan squash and take it inside and have fried squash. So what's not to like about gardening when you have it in that sort of experience?

01-00:58:15

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and the fresh food right from a garden. How not to like it?

01-00:58:19

Sease: Yeah. So after I left home I gardened on my own and I found you actually have to do your own weeding.

01-00:58:28

Eardley-Pryor: You liked it when dad did this work.

01-00:58:30

Sease: But it did leave me with a great sense of optimism about how easy gardening was. And my mother had a different kind of optimism. My mother, in New Mexico—I don't know if you've ever read the *Milagro Beanfield World War*—

01-00:58:47

Eardley-Pryor: No.

01-00:58:48

Sease: —by—I've forgotten his name. But any rate, he talks about, in New Mexico, spring being rather a fickle season and he calls it the annual killing of the fruit blossoms. You've frozen. Ah, you're unfrozen. Can you hear me? I can't hear you.

01-00:59:12

Eardley-Pryor: Sorry, I was muted.

01-00:59:14

Sease: Okay.

01-00:59:15

Eardley-Pryor: So you were talking about spring being the annual season of killing the fruit blossoms?

01-00:59:18

Sease:

Yes. The annual killing of the fruit blossoms. And so what that means is that in New Mexico you get this false spring in early February and all the fruit trees blossom. All the flowering plants for spring blossom. And then in late February winter comes back for two, three weeks and kills all the blossoms. So my mother is—we bought a house in Las Cruces when we moved there. And my mother pours over seed catalogues and she looks at these gorgeous flowering crabapples and camellias and all these gorgeous flowering trees and shrubs and such and being on a budget orders them judiciously. Not a whole bunch every year. Well, in New Mexico these things don't look like they do in the seed catalogue. So she would put them in and they would sort of limp along. The only thing that really did spectacularly was the oleander, which turned out to be quite poisonous and so you had to move it in closer to the house so children and pets didn't eat it. But every year the catalogues would come and every year all of this knowledge of how bad spring is in New Mexico would go away and hope would spring eternal. So I say I have been shaped as a gardener by the influence of these two very positive things.

01-01:00:43

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. And do you still garden now?

01-01:00:47

Sease:

Oh, yes. I have three gardens.

01-01:00:52

Eardley-Pryor:

Wow. How does that work in Washington, DC?

01-01:01:02

Sease:

Well, I have a house on Capitol Hill which has a front yard and a backyard. Actually, fairly sizable for a Capitol Hill house but smallish. I have a community garden, good sized plot in the community garden. And then at the cabin, we have twelve acres.

01-01:01:22

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, that's a big property up there.

01-01:01:24

Sease:

Yeah. Most of its vertical but we have some flat that we garden. At some point I'll send you pictures of the super structure that I have built using a fencing thing called cow panels, cattle panels. They're galvanized rods that are put together in a grid pattern and they are about sixteen feet long and about five feet wide and people mount them on posts. But what I did is I mounted them end to end in a hoop with the ends in the ground and it creates a hoop house that deer can't get into and can't jump over and so out at the cabin I have several rooms made out of these that I grow tomatoes and beans and things like that in. The deer and the woodchuck and the rabbits are fenced out of.

01-01:02:22

Eardley-Pryor:

I would love to see pictures of that. That sounds fantastic.

01-01:02:23

Sease: Yeah. I'll send you some.

01-01:02:27

Eardley-Pryor: So gardening. What kinds of things do you grow in your various—now, three—gardens?

01-01:02:32

Sease: Well, the quintessential tomatoes. We have a blueberry patch that's probably twenty by twenty that we net the top of it so that the birds can't take it all. Most years we harvest over a hundred pounds of blueberries.

01-01:02:51

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-01:02:51

Sease: So lot of blueberries. We have blackberries that grow outside of the fence. There's a native—well, not native, it's an invasive berry, but grows wild, called a wineberry that Thomas Jefferson introduced to Monticello and birds have spread it. I grow potatoes. Green beans. Squash. This year I didn't grow any chilis but frequently I will grow New Mexico green chilis to have hot green chilis.

01-01:03:28

Eardley-Pryor: When I was chatting with Melinda Pierce in preparation of your oral history she had shared memories about great days in the office when you would come in having made like lemon verbena scones or something like that. One of the other stories she said was you would come in with like a gallon of blueberries frozen from the year before and say, "I need to make room in my freezer so here's these blueberries," from this incredible collection of blueberries that you had.

01-01:03:54

Sease: Yes. It is amazing how long blueberries will last in the freezer. But we are still eating 2019 blueberries and haven't started on, except for the fresh, the 2020 blueberries.

01-01:04:07

Eardley-Pryor: That's a good stash.

01-01:04:08

Sease: It is a good stash.

01-01:04:12

Eardley-Pryor: Another story you had mentioned earlier in our chat just today was how you referenced, "and this was after my mom died." Your mother died. And how old were you when that happened?

01-01:04:25

Sease: I was sixteen when she died.

01-01:04:30

Eardley-Pryor: What was her trajectory during those six years of moving to New Mexico before her death? What were those years of her life like?

01-01:04:37

Sease: So she went to college. I realize as an adult looking back, and even a little bit as a teenager I noticed that it's like a light went on for her when she went to college. My mother was a really brilliant woman. Her life was constrained by being a wife and mother and not a lot—she had a creative side and she would utilize that creative side but, again, didn't have a lot of outlet. And so when she went to college she lapped it up like a thirsty sponge. So she took a major in English literature, got a teaching certificate. But, you know, she would read books that she hadn't been exposed to before and she would just love them. And we had this ongoing fight for the longest time because she adored *Moby Dick*. Thought it was the best thing she had ever read and she wanted me to read it. And I couldn't get past the first two pages without saying "I hate this."

01-01:05:55

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

01-01:05:59

Sease: But my father was incredibly supportive of this. And so when she went back to college he took over much of the cooking. You know, as I said, he already did breakfast. That was his tradition. But my mother moved from being the main cook for the evening meals to being somebody who would cook on special occasions and my dad or I or my sister, but she too was in college and busy and sort of moving into her adult life.

01-01:06:36

Eardley-Pryor: What was that experience like for your sister, then, to be sharing her college experience with your mother also experiencing college?

01-01:06:43

Sease: Well, the college newspaper thought it was just cute as could be. My mother was somewhat charmed. My sister was, as any teenager would be at their parent being a part of their college education, deeply embarrassed.

01-01:06:57

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and it being covered in the college paper at the same time.

01-01:06:59

Sease: Yes, yes. Yes. So she, like any teenager, wanted her mother to take a little bit lower profile.

01-01:07:08

Eardley-Pryor: I'm just imagining those years in Las Cruces in that period in the—I guess that would have been the late fifties through the early sixties for you. For you and your parents, both sounded like a really lovely time.

01-01:07:22

Sease:

It was a lovely time. My mother loved college. She taught for one or two years in junior high. At that time, if you were a brand new teacher, the class they gave you was the troubled kids, the underachievers. And my mother was five, four-nine, I think, maybe not even five feet tall. Tiny woman. And I think I mentioned earlier that her sisters described her as fierce. Well, that was an understatement. So she took on this class of ninth graders that were, you know, juvenile delinquents. Many of them were Spanish or Latino and they spoke Spanish and so they would curse her in Spanish. And she knew that was happening but she didn't speak Spanish. So she went to a friend of my dad's and hers and said, "I want to know all the Spanish curse words. All of them." And so she goes into class the next week and one of these kids says—you know, calls her a puta, a whore. And my mother walks over, grabs him by the front of his shirt, sort of jerks him up and then spews all the curse words at him and says, "I don't want to hear any of those words in this class again," and then flaps him back down. I mean he was almost as tall as her seated as she was standing. But that kind of ferocity, just ah. And at the same time, except for the fact that she got sick, she was planning to foster one of the kids. Probably that very same kid in the class because his home life was so disintegrated but she saw something in him.

01-01:09:26

Eardley-Pryor:

Your mother sounds like an amazing woman. You had mentioned that the braces you wore on your legs you wore for about ten years, which would be, I would guess, until you were thirteen or fourteen or so.

01-01:09:39

Sease:

Mm-hmm, yeah.

01-01:09:42

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, what was that experience like of transitioning out of them? How did that change your experience of life?

01-01:09:48

Sease:

Well, the one thing about—this is going to show the shallow side of me. The one thing about polio that I found hardest to deal with was the visible impact of having braces and—this is going to seem really shallow—the kinds of shoes that braces go into. For the most part, a saddle oxford is as close to fashion as you can get. So they were ugly shoes. I hated wearing ugly shoes. And so I would go back to this hospital every four months and do an outpatient visit. They would take x-rays, see whether the bones had finished growing. And once that happened that's when they were willing to—a little while after that is when they were willing to let me go without braces. So for the last couple of years, I mean I would go every time thinking, "Oh, please, let that have sealed and they're ready to let me out of these things." And so I became a complete shoe horse. I had more shoes than, as my father would say, Carter's got little liver pills. So I loved shoes after that. But, again, it was about the symbolic part of it.

01-01:11:17

Eardley-Pryor: What was your social life like in New Mexico?

01-01:11:20

Sease: It was good. I had best friends that lived in the neighborhood that had been my best friend since fourth grade. We did everything together. And had a really vigorous social life. My senior year in high school, my dad—after my mom had died—my dad moved to Roswell, New Mexico, which should have been annexed to Texas. It's in the Plains. Not the most interesting of towns. But I moved there my last year in high school.

01-01:12:06

Eardley-Pryor: That's where you finished high school? In this new environment?

01-01:12:09

Sease: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

01-01:12:10

Eardley-Pryor: The year after your mother passed?

01-01:12:12

Sease: Yeah.

01-01:12:14

Eardley-Pryor: What was that like?

01-01:12:15

Sease: Well, I remember it being very pleasant. I had a good set of friends there. I was the new kid in town in a small town where everything is boring, so I was interesting. One of my friends from high school had moved there a couple of years before. And we hadn't been the closest of friends but we'd been friends and so she took me under her social wing. I had as a boyfriend somebody that I was engaged to through early college. We didn't get married. So I had a happy life there. It's not a town that—it's landscape isn't all that inspiring.

01-01:13:05

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. And less the town, I am thinking of that two-year period in your life. I guess maybe, let me start by asking what are some of your memories of your mother getting sick?

01-01:13:18

Sease: My memories of her being sick were—there was a lot of anger. Not on my part, but my mother was in pain and she was angry. And she and my father always had a testy relationship. You've frozen. I'm going to pause.

01-01:13:51

Eardley-Pryor: I think we're back.

01-01:13:52

Sease: Okay. My parents had always had a—volatile is an overstatement but vigorous relationship. And so they would squabble and, you know, yell at

each other. My mother threw a frying pan at him and he ducked and it went through the window. But, you know, these were short-lived flashes of anger. When my mother got sick, that anger became a bit deeper rooted and she was in pain and she was scared.

01-01:14:32

Eardley-Pryor: How did that play out in your world or for your father then?

01-01:14:40

Sease: My father is a caregiver. He has always loved taking care of women and he's had a lot of women in his life to take care of. So my mother, two daughters. When he remarried some years after my mother's death, he got two step-daughters, one of whom was my best friend in Roswell. We introduced our parents and suggested that they date. And so he was really an incredible caregiver to my mother at that time. But looking back on it I realize how incredibly hard it must have been for him.

01-01:15:27

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, and I would think for you, too. I mean, losing your mother and then moving to a new town. I guess that's the framework I'm thinking about this time, is that had to be difficult.

01-01:15:33

Sease: Yeah, but I don't have deep recollections of it. I mean my mother being sick was really hard on me. You know, when you're seventeen you just float through something, absorbed with what's in front of you. So I missed my mother. I mourned her. But my life wasn't unhappy after she died.

01-01:16:11

Eardley-Pryor: That's nice.

01-01:16:12

Sease: My dad and I made a first Thanksgiving after she was gone and my dad said—I don't know what time your family eats Thanksgiving dinner but my family both believed in overcooking a turkey and eating Thanksgiving dinner at one o'clock, not in the evening. So that meant you got up at 6:00 in the morning to put the turkey in to be sure it was fully overcooked. My dad and I in Roswell invited friends and some extended family, relatives had come for our first Thanksgiving dinner that we made together without my mom. And my dad says that his recollection of it was getting up at 6:00, following behind me and washing dishes for the entire day. He said at that time I did not use a spoon more than one time before I put it down and got another spoon. So we made turkey. We decided, again, in this adventuresome spirit to make an oyster dressing. So we found shucked oysters. What a nasty idea that is. Never make an oyster dressing for a turkey.

01-01:17:22

Eardley-Pryor: Let alone doing so in Roswell.

01-01:17:24

Sease:

Yes. I'm sure they weren't the best oysters. But we also had pheasant and quail and venison with that Thanksgiving meal. So we had a lovely time. I remember my father started to date after we had moved to Roswell and this dreadful woman took a fancy to him and decided that the way to his heart was through me, which was a very bad idea. And so she asked me what my father's favorite desserts were. Well, I mentioned earlier my dad doesn't eat dessert, doesn't like dessert. So I gave her mine and so she kept me supplied in coconut pies for six months. But my best friend Nancy had a mother who had been widowed for a number of years and was a lovely, lovely woman. And so Nancy and I decided that our parents should get together. Being a clueless, thoughtless teenager I say to my dad, "Hey, I want you to come over and meet Nancy's mom." So we show up—Selma is what her name was—is in their house. She has on—women used to wear things called housedresses, which were like little wrappers that they would do housework in. So she had her hair in curlers and she had a housedress on and she was doing the ironing. She said she almost never forgave me for that.

01-01:18:56

Eardley-Pryor:

It wasn't a lot of preparation that she knew about on her end, it sounds like.

01-01:19:00

Sease:

No, no. She did not know this was happening. And so my father wasn't all that impressed but he could sort of see past that. So he asked her out and took her to a—Roswell is close to a ski resort called Ruidoso. And between Ruidoso and Roswell is a little town called Hondo. And it had a fancy steakhouse with a dance band and apparently great food. So my dad decides to be special about this. He calls her up, he asks her out to go have dinner in Hondo. Well, it turns out that they had a country western band and dancing and my dad is an amazing dancer. Just loves to dance and is a great dancer and, bless her heart, Selma was a good dancer. And so he was smitten from that moment on. They dated until Selma's youngest daughter graduated from high school and went to college and then all three of us were in school at the University of New Mexico together and Daddy calls me and says, "So, Selma and I want to get married this weekend. Can you guys find us a Lutheran pastor who will do it?" So I get on the phone. I call this Lutheran pastor. I say, "Hi. Is there any way you could marry my parents this afternoon because the three of us, three of us kids are here and they want to do it while we're together." Somehow I left the idea with the guy that they had raised the children out of wedlock and just now were wanting to get married. So when they showed up and explained, "No, these are two blended families."

01-01:20:49

Eardley-Pryor:

I love it. Your dad's decision to get married sounds pretty great. Like, "Hey, instead of roller-skating, let's get married. Or "Hey, you know, this is a good weekend for me. Let's get married." That's beautiful. Well, you mentioned going to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

01-01:21:07

Sease: Yeah, mm-hmm.

01-01:21:08

Eardley-Pryor: Was college something that was always on your radar, in high school, at least?

01-01:21:12

Sease: It was. Yes. So I did something stupid with my college experience. When you're in high school, I don't know if they still do it, but at that time they gave you all these aptitude tests to sort of guide you in what you should do. Well, all of my aptitude tests steered me toward the outdoors, natural history, biology. I just fell off the charts on the hard sciences, math, engineering and truth be known, it's probably because I had just read—what is that? *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand about an architect and I was smitten by the idea of architecture. And I loved art. And so I just thought, "Well, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be an architect." So despite all of the indicators that said, no, this isn't a good path for you, I entered a six-year architecture program that was very oriented, I think, toward the adult male student who was coming back to study architecture. It wasn't really oriented toward freshmen. And knowing I was going to take architecture I tried to take drafting in high school. I was told—I can't believe this to this day. I was told, "No, we don't let girls in the drafting class. It's a boys only class."

01-01:22:56

Eardley-Pryor: Women weren't allowed to take high school drafting?

01-01:22:59

Sease: Mm-hmm.

01-01:23:00

Eardley-Pryor: This is in the mid-1960s?

01-01:23:01

Sease: Nor were they allowed to take auto mechanics. I could take home ec.

01-01:23:07

Eardley-Pryor: Those others were men's fields, they thought?

01-01:23:09

Sease: Those were men's classes, yes. Now, I needed both of those classes.

01-01:23:13

Eardley-Pryor: How did you respond to that?

01-01:23:20

Sease: I didn't like it very much at all. But, you know, I didn't do a sit-in and take it. So when I got in my first year in architecture, my work looked terrible and the people that were in my first year class were all experienced draftsmen. Like I said, they were coming back to get an architecture degree. I didn't do well in the engineering classes. And part of that was my fault, because I was a

freshman and being really smitten with the college life experience and putting very little effort into being in class. But the other part of it was the university's fault, because they didn't offer a—in the architecture program they had you start with a three hundred level engineering class because they wanted you to get that whole structural engineering sort of compact into one set of classes. So the prerequisites that would make you maybe succeed in that class I hadn't had. So I failed it the first time, took it again a second semester and the professor took me aside and said, "Look, I'm going to give you a passing grade on this if you promise me you'll never build anything more than two stories high and if you do you'll let me know where it is." So I was not successful at architecture. I did take a minor in photography and I was much more proficient and acclimated to photography.

01-01:25:03

Eardley-Pryor: You're an artist now. You paint. We were talking about setting up your computer, so that we could talk, upon your easel.

01-01:25:10

Sease: Yes, yes.

01-01:25:11

Eardley-Pryor: So it's still a part of your life.

01-01:25:12

Sease: Yes.

01-01:25:13

Eardley-Pryor: And I can imagine the drafting being something in your mind. It's like, "Oh, this is art."

01-01:25:18

Sease: Yeah, but it's art with too much ruler. So after—

01-01:25:25

Eardley-Pryor: Well, let me also ask just why University of New Mexico? I mean, that's a big move from either Las Cruces or Roswell to Albuquerque. What was life like in Albuquerque and why did you choose it?

01-01:25:36

Sease: Well, I applied in a couple of places. I applied to Boulder and Albuquerque. I think one other place. I got into Albuquerque and Boulder. My dad looked at it and said, "Hey, in-state tuition, girl. Not Colorado."

01-01:25:52

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

01-01:25:55

Sease: So it was exciting. It was the big city. It was still an easy drive home. And, you know, my father outfitted me with one of my many used cars and I drove off to the dorm.

01-01:26:12

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounded like your dear friend also was going to go there. So you already knew somebody that was attending, too?

01-01:26:19

Sease: Yes, I did. I was engaged to somebody who was attending there.

01-01:26:22

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, yeah. What's that story?

01-01:26:25

Sease: Well, I met this guy in Roswell who was home from college for the summer. And he was a charming person. Probably manic depressive, I think, as one looked at his later life. But, you know, utterly charming. Really sweet. And we started dating and my dad liked him. But it was very interesting. My dad would not have necessarily wanted me to marry him but he figured I had the good sense not to marry him even though we got engaged. And we were engaged for two or three years.

01-01:27:13

Eardley-Pryor: I guess maybe why get engaged at such a young age at this transitional moment?

01-01:27:19

Sease: Well, you know, he asked and I didn't say no. But the reason we quit being engaged is one New Year's Eve we were toasting and I toasted not being married this time next year. He took that as a bit of a bad signal.

01-01:27:42

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. Well, so just context wise, too, you begin university that—you graduate from high school in 1967 and then that next fall go to Albuquerque.

01-01:27:55

Sease: Yeah.

01-01:27:57

Eardley-Pryor: I'm just imagining this is such a tempestuous time in the nation's history with the rise of the Vietnam War, the ongoing struggles for civil rights. What are some of your memories of these broader events that are happening in the sixties during this time period for you?

01-01:28:15

Sease: Well, what's interesting is that at the University of New Mexico the big—I mean obviously there was protests against the war. But the thing that absorbed the attention of the study body there was this flap that happened with the state legislature, which came down on a graduate assistant professor of English who was doing a poetry literature survey course where you look at, you know, poets from Dante to Kerouac. And he had his freshman class read some poems from a poet named Lenore Kandel. And her book of poetry was called *Love Lust* poems. And there was some very graphic language in it. And some

student took it home and said this—I think the professor was black. And some little, you know, southern New Mexico college student brought this poem home, showed it to her redneck daddy who went to the state legislature and got the guy fired. Well, the student body rose up en masse, you know, looking for something to protest and protested this. And one of the only things I've ever won in a raffle was we convened outside the president's house and there was a cake that was baked that was raffled to everybody and it was iced with the word 'fuck' on the top because one of the poems that they read of hers said something about fucking. And so we all stood in front of the president's house and we had the megaphones and were going to see if we could make the house, you know, fall apart by shouting fuck at it. Well, I won that cake.

01-01:30:38

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

01-01:30:40

Sease: But there was also—

01-01:30:40

Eardley-Pryor: So you liked the cake?

01-01:30:40

Sease: Yes, yes. There was also the Vietnam War protests. And it was at the University of New Mexico somewhat dominated by the card carrying Communist lefties. You know, I mentioned *The Fountainhead*. I said something about Ayn Rand in a group conversation and you would have thought I had talked about Darth Vader.

01-01:31:14

Eardley-Pryor: Well, yeah. What sparked your interest in politics? I mean it became such a foundational part of the life that you breathe. When did that really rise for you?

01-01:31:26

Sease: I remember the—I think it was the first Earth Day. What was the date of the first Earth Day?

01-01:31:35

Eardley-Pryor: April of 1970.

01-01:31:37

Sease: Yes, it was the first Earth Day. I was sick at home and my boyfriend at the time went to the rally and came back and this is so shallow but I have to quote him on it. He said, "I'm so excited. There's the environment. We don't have to hang with the Commies anymore. There's the environment." So, I mean, there was this culture of, you know, protest, what's there to protest? But now there was this sort of more motherhood and apple pie thing to protest that wasn't dominated by these aging hippie Communists.

01-01:32:16

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

01-01:32:18

Sease: But I did get very interested in protecting a particular set of wildlands. This would have been in the—it wasn't part of the first roadless review but it was a special review that the Forest Service conducted. I believe it was part of a longstanding congressional mandate to look at the boundaries of the Gila Wilderness, which was America's first wilderness. I'm going to pause because you're frozen.

01-01:32:59

Eardley-Pryor: I think we're back.

01-01:33:01

Sease: Okay. The Gila was America's first wilderness and there was a mandate to come back and look at potential additions of roadless lands adjacent to it. And I got involved in some of the citizen activity of looking at those individual parcels of land and making recommendations and making citizen testimony on which ones should be protected—trying to influence the Forest Service.

01-01:33:30

Eardley-Pryor: So really some of your first political interests were around these environmental issues in wilderness.

01-01:33:35

Sease: Yes. Yes.

01-01:33:38

Eardley-Pryor: I'm also picturing just context-wise, time-wise, you moved to New Mexico, start these classes that sound uninteresting and not really your passion. But also you're enjoying being in this place, in 1968 being this very revolutionary year and also an election year.

01-01:33:56

Sease: Right.

01-01:33:57

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of your memories of that time period?

01-01:34:00

Sease: Well, I don't remember anything about the election. In fact, who was it that was running then?

01-01:34:07

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, God, it depends on when it was in '68, right?

01-01:34:12

Sease: Yeah.

01-01:34:13

Eardley-Pryor: Nixon ended up winning but against a variety of Democrats.

01-01:34:15

Sease: I wasn't paying attention to politics at that level, although there is a funny political story. Probably wasn't '68. It was probably a year or two later. I had a Great Dane, very large Great Dane, and I was walking him one night back to my house that I shared with some friends and this drunken man approaches me and starts hitting me up for a date. My dog growls at him and he said, "Look, no, no. I'm not trying to do anything." He said, "But I am a really important person and I'm influential. So here." He said, "If you want to see how important I am." And he gave me two tickets to the probably Democrat, because it was New Mexico—maybe it was Republican. But it was their annual gala fundraiser. And they were—you know, at that time I think they were \$200 tickets so it was very pricey. So I just took them and then took my dog on. And so I—[phone ringing] Whoops, excuse me.

01-01:35:25

Eardley-Pryor: Sure. You want me to pause it here?

01-01:35:26

Sease: Yes.

[pause in recording]

01-01:35:30

Sease: Okay. Okay, so I took the tickets from this stranger who accosted me, went home and I showed them to my boyfriend and he said, "Well, you know, we could use these." So we show up dressed to the nines wearing black armbands, which was the symbol of being opposed to the Vietnam War and went in and just, you know, sort of sought out the center of the stage and asked questions about, "So what are you doing about the war in Vietnam?" da-da-da. It got covered in the paper. It's one of the few times my father ever really was disappointed in something I did because he said, "that's the kind of thing in this state that is going to reflect back on me. It's going to be hard for me in my job that you did this highly visible political thing."

01-01:36:29

Eardley-Pryor: What came from that disagreement from your father's side?

01-01:36:33

Sease: Oh, not much. I mean, we went past it. But, I mean, it was a moment where he actually did say, "You shouldn't have done that."

01-01:36:45

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Reflective of the generational splits of the time period.

01-01:36:47

Sease: Yeah, it was. It didn't amount to anything but it was probably my first visibility stunt. While I didn't phrase it exactly as my boyfriend did, now that

we've got the environment, I did find activism in defense of the environment and with the people who do that kind of activism to be a much more comfortable fit than I did the anti-war activism. The anti-war activism was also very—not quite misogynistic but it was a very male dominated energy. It was utterly pre-feminist in its approach.

01-01:37:35

Eardley-Pryor: Did you find the environment group to be of a different ilk then?

01-01:37:37

Sease: I did. Very much. Although there were more men activists there, there did not seem to be any hostility or edge or belief that the women were just there for getting the dishes done.

01-01:37:56

Eardley-Pryor: Take me to the context of—this is after Earth Day. At some point in this you decide that this architecture degree is not for you.

01-01:38:06

Sease: Mm-hmm.

01-01:48:08

Eardley-Pryor: But you remain in Albuquerque.

01-01:38:11

Sease: Yes.

01-01:38:13

Eardley-Pryor: What did you do? What was that transition like for you?

01-01:38:14

Sease: Well, I got a job. I'm trying to remember what my job was. Oh, yes, I do remember the job I got. It was such a treat. I went to work for a landscape architect who had a business. I don't know if you ever heard of—there were a series of federal grants called UDAG grants. Urban redevelopment and something were the grants. Anyway, small towns of a certain size could get matching federal funds to do improvements if they could bring forward a master plan.

01-01:39:00

Eardley-Pryor: Sounds like a Keep America Beautiful kind of a thing.

01-01:39:03

Sease: Yes, very much like that. So the man who hired me because of my architecture study had put together a business of going to these small towns and pitching them that he would do the plan for them, master plan so that they could get these grants in and around Southern Colorado and New Mexico. And in theory, you know, you have a thing about zoning, you have a section about traffic and transportation. You have ordinances, et cetera, and

landscapes. In theory the firm would hire experts on those things. This guy didn't. He just hired people to do it and I was sort of the general—

01-01:39:48

Eardley-Pryor: You were one of the experts.

01-01:39:50

Sease: I was one of the experts. I was one of the general ombudsmen that, learned how to fix the printing press as we were doing it. But he was a complete scam artist and he put together horrible plans and he treated his staff very, very badly. And so at one point after, you know, a year or more of doing this, we all sort of got together and just decided that we were going to get him to fire us because we wanted to be able to collect unemployment. So he was going up to Las Vegas, New Mexico, which is a little town in northern New Mexico with a plan. We knew he never looked at them before he sent them off. He just counted on us to do it. So I did the zoning and I zoned downtown Las Vegas for nothing smaller than five acre lots. The guy that was doing the ordinances pulled up some ancient ordinances about how frequently you had to have spittoons and that you needed horse hitching things and put them sort of prominently. And, I mean, we just larded the whole report with these things. So Jose, that was the guy's name, went up. Does the presentation, hasn't even looked at it, and gets his head handed to him. And he comes back and fires us all.

01-01:41:10

Eardley-Pryor: Success.

01-01:41:12

Sease: Success.

01-01:41:13

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

01-01:41:14

Sease: So that was my first job out of architecture, working for a landscape architect. I got a job as a daytime bartender at a Pizza Hut that had a little bar next to it. So the original Pizza Hut started in New Mexico in West Texas and there were only a few of them. So that was one of the early ones. Ah, we'll pause because you're frozen.

01-01:41:42

Eardley-Pryor: Okay.

01-01:41:43

Sease: Okay.

01-01:41:43

Eardley-Pryor: So you tended bar at this Pizza Hut?

01-01:41:47

Sease: Yes. During the daytime. Which meant that there was a crowd at lunch. But for the most part it was pretty sleepy and mostly I got things ready for the evening bar shift. So it was an easy job. Good tips. Really nice clientele. You do meet a fair number of people who have a drinking problem if you're tending bar in the daytime though.

01-01:42:10

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. The day drinking crowd.

01-01:43:12

Sease: The day drinking crowd. But, you know, some lovely people.

01-01:42:16

Eardley-Pryor: And they tell great stories often.

01-01:42:17

Sease: I learned how to play gin really well. But I think that that is where I met Dave Foreman. Not part of the day drinking crowd but part of the lunch crowd.

01-01:42:31

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, coming in.

01-01:42:34

Sease: Yeah.

01-01:42:34

Eardley-Pryor: Before we dive into that next—because that blends in, of course, with your wilderness work. You had mentioned doing a minor while at Albuquerque, University of New Mexico, in photography.

01-01:42:49

Sease: Yes.

01-01:42:51

Eardley-Pryor: What came from that work in photography?

01-01:42:52

Sease: So I did work for, again, probably about a year, I think it was after tending bar, at a photography studio where I was hired as an assistant and did darkroom work, developing the films. It was a studio that, as many of them at that time, bread and butter was family portraits and portraits of children. I used to bring my kitten into the studio with me because your typical parent—do you have kids?

01-01:43:36

Eardley-Pryor: Yes. A three-year-old little girl.

01-01:43:38

Sease: Well, maybe you're not guilty of this. But the typical parent schedules the day to go to the photography studio right after they've been to the dentist and the

doctor and then they walk in and the kid sees a stranger and starts screaming. So I used to bring my kitten, a little orange tabby in. I would throw him in the back of my daypack and then ride in. For a couple of years my method of transportation was a motorcycle. My car broke down or whatever and I bought a motorcycle instead of a car as the next thing. And I would throw this cat in the pack and it would just, you know, purr along and then I'd let him loose in the studio. And it was the most easygoing kitten. You know, doesn't run from children. Children would pick it up by its tail and it would just purr. And a very easy thing to get kids comfortable, is a little fluffy kitten. And it was in lots and lots of the pictures. The other work I did with the studio was to—one of the clients that came in and wanted a photographer—you know, we'd do weddings and things like that. But one of them was a gay bar and they were having a drag review and they wanted somebody to photograph the show.

01-01:45:03

Eardley-Pryor: A drag show in Albuquerque?

01-01:45:04

Sease: In Albuquerque. Yes. And so I was the photographer for their big show. And as a result of that, several of the drag queens came to me and asked me to put together portfolios for them in their costume. Which was a really fun thing.

01-01:45:30

Eardley-Pryor: That has to be a lot more fun than these dumb kids coming in and trying to take pictures of them.

01-01:45:37

Sease: Hang on. My phone just rang. Let me make it go away.

01-01:45:43

Eardley-Pryor: That had to be much more enjoyable to do the photographs of the drag queens than these families and these kids that are crying.

01-01:45:55

Sease: Oh, hang on.

01-01:45:58

Eardley-Pryor: Sure.

01-01:45:59

Sease: So I have now turned the record off because I turned my phone off so I think I need to turn it back on and start it again.

01-01:46:07

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Let me just pause here.

[pause in recording]

01-01:46:09

Sease: Uh-huh. So to be honest, I don't recall where I first met Dave, whether I met Dave through the work on the wilderness study and then saw him more in the bar, whether I met him in the bar and connected with the wilderness study work through that. But somehow I did meet him.

01-01:46:32

Eardley-Pryor: It was all around that time, though, when you are doing—

01-01:46:34

Sease: Yeah. Yes.

01-01:46:36

Eardley-Pryor: You had started doing some of this wilderness work on your own and then worlds kind of overlapped when you met Dave Foreman.

01-01:46:40

Sease: Yes. Yeah. And so the New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee, the New Mexico Wilderness Study Group, I think is what it was called, anyway, was doing an assessment of the roadless areas around the Gila and Dave was very, very invested in that. And I worked with him. Did a lot of trips where we'd go into a roadless area and take maps and look at boundaries of where were the intrusions, where does it start being wild, where are the ends of roads, that sort of thing. It's a way of seeing a wilderness where you really get to know it and you feel a connection that's about doing something to keep it that way. And the Gila's great country. Very accessible.

01-01:47:38

Eardley-Pryor: What was it that got you interested in the wilderness to begin with? So you mentioned this person who came back from Earth Day and said, "Hey, there's this whole new field we can do work around," as opposed to, let's say, pollution or air pollution or water or something like that, you were drawn towards this wilderness work. Why?

01-01:47:59

Sease: Well, I think it's because I was drawn toward wilderness. I mean when I was growing up in Las Cruces one of my favorite things to do before I drove was to get my dad to take us out to this little set of rocks that were just—that popped up, they were called Los Huevos because they looked like eggs, right outside of town and up against the Oregon Mountains. And it had a trail that went around them, just a gorgeous little piece of wild country. So I think I was always attracted to wild land and the idea of preserving wild land, of saying this is going to stay this way. Just had a natural appeal. And I think I first got involved with it with the student coalition.

01-01:48:52

Eardley-Pryor: I see. With that interest you then said you met Dave Foreman, who was also interested in these issues and you connected. Dave, of course, goes on to found Earth First! and has his own career as an environmentalist in a similar

but different way than yours. What was Dave like that? What was he like in your first memories, early memories of him?

01-01:49:17

Sease: [phone ringing] I'm sorry. I can't make that phone go away.

01-01:49:25

Eardley-Pryor: That's okay. We can take a pause here.

[pause in recording]

01-01:49:31

Sease: So my early memories of Dave Foreman—I'm trying to think back because it's a long time since I've thought of him at that time as opposed to him as I knew him later. He wasn't a lot different than the later-in-life Dave Foreman, but he was perhaps less conscious of his image and persona initially than he later became. But he was somebody who was really passionate about the environment and passionate about protecting it and wild spaces and the notion of wilderness as a philosophy. He later said to me that one of the things that attracted him about me is that I had actually read Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. But I just sort of, you know, fell into being friends and then, you know, friendship grows and the next thing you know you're sweethearts.

01-01:50:51

Eardley-Pryor: What were some of the other things that you or both together were reading? You mentioned *Desert Solitaire*, your interest in that. What were some of the other things that were inspiring some of your passions at that time?

01-01:51:03

Sease: Well, Aldo Leopold and Loren Eiseley. So have you ever read Terry Tempest Williams stuff?

01-01:51:20

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

01-01:51:21

Sease: She feels saccharin to me. Sort of like too touchy feely, too over the top. Lauren Eiseley is somebody who comes at nature or came at nature from a hard science standpoint. And there is beneath it poetry but it's not so saccharin.

01-01:51:48

Eardley-Pryor: More direct, more factual?

01-01:51:50

Sease: Yes. I mean his stuff is incredibly emotional. I have cried reading Loren Eiseley's writing. And I may tear up just telling you this story. He writes about the prairie and about going into graveyards in the Midwest to find the corners where the mower can't get to and that's where you still find the remnants of prairie. He tells a story of going out on the Platte River in Colorado where the

Platte is described as being an inch deep and a mile wide. And he picks up a—what is the—it's a native fish that got famous for blocking a dam, but some sort of sluggish native fish. And he brings it back and he puts it in an aquarium in his basement, and he watches this fish and he waxes eloquent about it. And then he goes down one day and the fish has flopped out onto the ground and is just laying there on the basement floor for God knows how long. He puts it back in and, you know, being a Platte River fish it just bounced right back to life. But he is a science philosopher. Just incredible writing skills. And, in fact, I'm not sure I read everything he wrote because early on I started pacing myself because he was dead and I didn't want to read the last thing that he had written.

01-01:53:38

Eardley-Pryor: Ah. That's beautiful. You had mentioned other writers, and Ed Abbey, his writing, as something that you and Dave connected over. Was Ed somebody that was in your circle at this time?

01-01:53:52

Sease: No. He ultimately became part of Dave's circle, but I never met Ed Abbey. There is an apocryphal story, probably perpetrated by what's her name [Susan Zakin], the one that wrote a book about Dave, that I was the basis for one of the characters [Bonnie Abzug].

01-01:54:14

Eardley-Pryor: I've heard about this.

01-01:54:19

Sease: But I know who that character was. She was actually made up of two people.

01-01:54:24

Eardley-Pryor: Who were they?

01-01:54:25

Sease: One of them was a woman that was John McComb's assistant.

01-01:54:32

Eardley-Pryor: Really?

01-01:54:32

Sease: Yes.

01-01:54:33

Eardley-Pryor: So we haven't gotten to talking about John's role in your life yet, but John was then the southwest wilderness representative for the Sierra Club, and who later hired you.

01-01:54:40

Sease: Yes. He had a particularly charming, lovely assistant and half of what's her name [Bonnie Abzug] was based on that. But I never met Ed Abbey so

couldn't have been based on me. It was written before I was even active. But it's one of those stories.

01-01:55:04

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. That was something I had read about you, too in.

01-01:55:08

Sease: That book probably spread that rumor.

01-01:55:13

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, okay. Okay.

01-01:55:14

Sease: So Susan Zakin did a book about Dave and Earth First! called *Coyotes and Town Dogs* [Susan Zakin, *Coyotes and Town Dogs: Earth First! and the Environmental Movement* (University of Arizona Press, 2002)], which plays an amusing role in my life, which is that every time an intern—we'd get a crop of summer interns at the Sierra Club and finally, you know, one of them would say, "Oh." And they'd come in and say, "Are you that Debbie Sease?" But I am somewhat disdainful of that book because Susan wasn't very accurate. She was totally smitten with Dave and, you know, had sort of a hero worship for him and thought that he was the antithesis of Doug Scott, who had sold out to corporate America. But she interviewed me and then made up stuff that wasn't—you know, wasn't accurate at all. You've frozen, so I'll pause.

01-01:56:23

Eardley-Pryor: I think we're back now.

01-01:56:26

Sease: Okay.

01-01:56:26

Eardley-Pryor: Were you able to leverage any of these apocryphal stories, these myths about you in any way for your lobbying work?

01-01:56:37

Sease: Not that I know of. I mean perhaps it was a part of my persona that I wasn't aware of, but no.

01-01:56:46

Eardley-Pryor: Did you feel like there was any time where these stories impacted you, impeded you in any way?

01-01:56:55

Sease: No, no. When I say Susan Zakin was inaccurate, so she talked about me coming to Washington and how I missed the feel of a set of oars in my hand because I'd been a river guide. Well, I did used to guide trips. I never rowed a boat. I was a canoeing guide. So, I mean, she just got stuff wrong.

01-01:57:20

Eardley-Pryor: She just took, it sounds like, some poetic license with her storytelling?

01-01:57:24

Sease: Yes. Well, I mean, the opening scene in it is about them cutting down some billboards and after they've left a jackrabbit hops across the way. Well, there's nobody left to see that jackrabbit. So she just made it up from whole cloth.

01-01:57:46

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. It's probably telling, that this was the opening story, huh?

01-01:57:48

Sease: Yeah.

01-01:57:51

Eardley-Pryor: Well, take me back to this work that you are doing in the wilderness, the New Mexico Wilderness Study Group or whatever it was called, that you and Dave were both engaged on. Tell me a little more about what that was like and what your thoughts were about it all.

01-01:58:05

Sease: Well, again, it was just going into areas. It's, in some ways, my first experience with the power of a citizen lobby, of people who cared about these areas. Or people who didn't actually know about these areas, went into these areas with maps, got to know the area, drew lines on the map, and then when the forest service had a hearing these same people would show up and they would have adopted this area, this little bump that sticks out on a canyon that goes into the Gila. And they would know it up one side and down the other and they were a fierce advocate for it and they stayed an advocate throughout the whole process. So this is going to digress into future wilderness strategy but I'll just flag something. That one of my theories about how you build a constituency to protect wilderness is about getting people involved in the area and that a process that takes multiple years before you get to a final bill is one that is fed by the involvement. A tension with some wilderness advocates in past years was that they felt that the first thing that needed to happen is you needed to get a bill introduced because you couldn't organize without a bill. Well, if you get a bill introduced and you haven't organized and you haven't got a constituency that cares about it, that bill lands flat and it gets as many opponents as it has supporters. And so I have for a long time been a proponent of—it's a Saul Alinsky theory in a campaign you start slow and you turn the amplifier up and that you build and you don't just lead with the introduction of legislation, that you have an arc that leads you to that and part of the purpose of that arc is to invest people in it so that when the bill hits the ground it's got a constituency. The California desert was that kind of an operation.

01-02:00:23

Eardley-Pryor: Where was that learning curve for you? What helps teach you that that's the arc to follow?

01-02:00:29

Sease: Well, it was a fairly natural process. Sometimes you learn by mistake, sometimes you learn by things working. And in the Gila expansion I worked

with big groups of people that visited these areas, that mapped these areas and then when the Forest Service was asking for public comment, came as impassioned knowledgeable people with a stake in it to fight for them. So it was pretty obvious. You just watched it happen.

01-02:01:02

Eardley-Pryor: Were you doing this engagement while still in Albuquerque?

01-02:01:03

Sease: Mm-hmm. It's about a four-hour drive down to the Gila.

01-02:01:13

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned John McComb, who was regional staff member for the Sierra Club. Were there other organizations or other groups that you were affiliating with and doing some of this work with in conjunction?

01-02:01:29

Sease: Well, there was the New Mexico group, the wilderness study group. The local Sierra Club chapter was very involved. The Rio Grande group of the Sierra Club or the Rio Grande chapter of the Sierra Club. The Rio Grande chapter actually included the El Paso group because of distances in Texas. So the El Paso group was really involved in the Gila work.

01-02:02:03

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like this opened up some networking.

01-02:02:05

Sease: Mm-hmm, yeah.

01-02:02:06

Eardley-Pryor: Not only did you meet Dave and then John McComb, you mentioned now connecting to these people in El Paso.

01-02:02:12

Sease: Yeah.

01-02:02:13

Eardley-Pryor: Sounds like this was a broadening of your environmental community?

01-02:02:16

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

01-02:02:19

Eardley-Pryor: Did you have a particular place that you were passionate over that you became a special advocate for?

01-02:02:27

Sease: I probably did. It's lost in memory. In terms of that Gila fight, I think it was—you know, on a map I think it was something that was—it was something BB.

01-02:02:39

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

01-02:02:40

Sease: But I don't recall which one.

01-02:02:42

Eardley-Pryor: But it sounds to me like this period of time is when you're getting a sense of how that process for wilderness preservation happens.

01-02:02:49

Sease: Yeah.

01-02:02:50

Eardley-Pryor: And also learning these lessons about how to build a constituency to have a successful campaign, early lessons that became really important over the next few decades for you. I'm also thinking about it geographically. Did you stay in Albuquerque? Did you and Dave, when you decided to get together and become sweethearts, did you move somewhere else? What was your trajectory?

01-02:03:13

Sease: We were in Albuquerque for a year or two and we lived in the basement apartment of the Albuquerque Environmental Center, which was this big old adobe house in sort of the downtown district of Albuquerque. It was next door to a methadone treatment center. It was sort of a deteriorating neighborhood.

01-02:03:46

Eardley-Pryor: This Center in Albuquerque, was this funded a couple who had come from New York City and who helped tell these as Albuquerque Stories? Does that ring a bell for you?

01-02:03:53

Sease: Not really. Could be.

01-02:03:56

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. I had some great conversations with Michele Perrault and she—I can't remember the name of the couple [Joan and Hy Rosner], but they were in New York and they were doing work there and telling stories about the environment to help preserve places there and they moved to Albuquerque, I want to say, and tried to do the same thing there and they had these pamphlets and these environmental education centers. It was called the Albuquerque Story [*Albuquerque's Environmental Story*, 1978; later revised as, *Albuquerque's Environmental Story: Educating for a Sustainable Community* (Albuquerque Historical Society, 1996)].

01-02:04:25

Sease: No, this wasn't that.

01-02:04:26

Eardley-Pryor: I just didn't know if it was related.

01-02:04:28

Sease: Yeah. And that may not have overlapped the same time period. But no, the Albuquerque Environmental Center was a collective office space that different groups rented pieces of. So the Audubon Society had an office there. ZPG had an office there. The Wilderness Study Committee had their office there. And in order to help everybody afford it, Dave and I rented the basement as where we lived.

01-02:05:04

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, great.

01-02:05:08

Sease: It was sort of a loosey goosey time. We had a big old cat that we rescued from the pound and he was quite ill-tempered and he would be in the upper parts of it. Had a great big old living room that was used for meetings of all the groups. And when the study committee would meet there—Moose was the cat's name—would come up and he would find somebody who was sitting sort of forward on their chair and he would climb up behind them and settle in behind them. And then when they wanted to move back he would growl or he would snag them with his claws or he would bite them.

01-02:05:58

Eardley-Pryor: I like this idea of you guys living in a basement of this place with all this activity and activism happening and Moose patrolling the grounds.

01-02:06:03

Sease: Yeah. Yes, yes.

01-02:06:07

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I have a note here that Dave ended up taking a job working actually for the Wilderness Society.

01-02:06:17

Sease: Yes, yes.

01-02:06:17

Eardley-Pryor: Taking some of this activism and making it somewhat professional.

01-02:06:20

Sease: Yes. Clif Merrit—

01-02:06:22

Eardley-Pryor: What were you doing—oh, please, yeah. Who?

01-02:06:23

Sease: Clif Merrit was the field manager of the Wilderness Society and managed all of the field reps and he offered Dave a job as a full-time field rep for New Mexico and Arizona.

01-02:06:48

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Oh, that's a pretty big area.

01-02:06:50

Sease: Yeah, mm-hmm.

01-02:06:52

Eardley-Pryor: I've heard some incredible stories [from Tony Ruckel] about Clif Merrit as the most—

01-02:06:55

Sease: He's an amazing man.

01-02:06:56

Eardley-Pryor: —as one of the most knowledgeable people about wilderness in the world. What are some of your memories or stories about Clif?

01-02:07:04

Sease: Well, Clif was, he was fiercely loyal and protective of his team of representatives and he was the kind of boss that made it his job to just create the space for them to do good work. They were quite a varied group of people and he instilled just fierce loyalty on their part.

01-02:07:38

Eardley-Pryor: I'm thinking about these social worlds. You live in a place where this environmental work is happening. So it's very much a part of your life right from this moment. What was social life like? What were you doing on weekends? Was it going to visit these wilderness spaces? Was it camping trips? I mean what was that world like beyond the work?

01-02:08:04

Sease: Well, when we were in Albuquerque it was, you know, doing the work. It was meetings with activists, either with the coalition or with the Sierra Club or Audubon. We did a fair amount of educational stuff. There was a film that the Sierra Club had that was made up of a slide show, turned into a film. It was called *Glen Canyon, the Place No One Knew*.

01-02:08:35

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, yes. The former president created that with his children, I think.

01-02:08:40

Sease: Yes. Yes.

01-02:08:42

Eardley-Pryor: So you had a copy of it?

01-02:08:43

Sease: Huh?

01-02:08:44

Eardley-Pryor: You had a copy of this slideshow, turned into a film?

01-02:08:47

Sease: Oh, the Sierra Club did. And they would send it out to folks as an educational film to show to groups and get people to sign up and get active. I finally got to where I couldn't stay in the room with it. I had to walk out and leave because it shows Glen Canyon filling or the Glen Canyon Dam filling the canyons and it's just incredibly sad. But we would take that out and get people stirred up and then sign them up to be activists.

01-02:09:27

Eardley-Pryor: Had you joined any of these organizations as a member at this point?

01-02:09:29

Sease: Probably not would be my guess.

01-02:09:33

Eardley-Pryor: When did that moment happen for you? Do you remember?

01-02:09:35

Sease: I don't know. I don't.

01-02:09:38

Eardley-Pryor: You were doing the work.

01-02:09:39

Sease: I think my first Sierra Club membership came from being a staff person.

01-02:09:45

Eardley-Pryor: All right, great, yes. I have a note here, too, that in the midst of this work that's going on, that you're doing on the weekends and living in this place that you and Dave are in, that you then also took another position as a job with something called University of the Wilderness.

01-02:10:04

Sease: Yes.

01-02:10:06

Eardley-Pryor: What was that?

01-02:10:08

Sease: So we had moved to Glenwood after a couple of years in Albuquerque and—

01-02:10:14

Eardley-Pryor: You and Dave had moved?

01-02:10:16

Sease: Mm-hmm. And at that point I didn't have a job and in some ways life next to the wilderness is sort of lovely but it's also sort of boring. So Bill Mounsey, who was a wilderness activist in Colorado—I think I got to know he and Louise through their friendship with Dave.

01-02:10:45

Eardley-Pryor: Louise being his wife?

01-02:10:46

Sease:

His wife, Louise Mounsey, yes. So he had some trips that were going to happen down in the lower canyons of the Rio Grande and Big Ben National Park for canoeing and he invited me to be an assistant guide on a couple of them. And I did that and loved it. And at about the same time the person who was part-time, the executive director of the organization, took a full-time job elsewhere and so quit. So he asked me if I would take on that work, which wasn't too intense—you know, getting the catalogue out, getting trips booked and leading an occasional trip. So I did that. I did that for maybe a little over a year. Did some more trips down the Rio Grande.

01-02:11:41

Eardley-Pryor: Any good memories?

01-02:11:42

Sease:

Oh, great memories. Mostly of leading the southwestern trips, the trips in the Rio Grande. It's just an incredible resource. And they were small trips and for the most part people who want to go on a wilderness trip are fairly nice people and they're very excited about being given this outdoor experience and they're pretty good sports. A mutual friend of Dave's and mine joined me as the other co-guide on some of those trips, a guy named Bill Bishop. And they were just marvelous trips and totally absorbing but, you know, by the end of seven days I was ready to, you never see another paying customer again. You get over that and ready for the next trip.

01-02:12:35

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Whatever happened with Bill Mounsey and Louise?

01-02:12:38

Sease:

Well, Bill led trips for quite some number of years and then they retired in Evergreen, Colorado and in the last five, ten years Bill died and then subsequently Louise did. But they lived into their eighties, I think.

01-02:13:02

Eardley-Pryor: What happened to their nonprofit?

01-02:13:06

Sease:

It ended with them. They never meant for it to be a very big thing. It was just a thing that they did.

01-02:13:14

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

01-02:13:15

Sease:

So Bill in his early life was a trainer for the Eleventh Infantry Division.

01-02:13:25

Eardley-Pryor: Oh? Wait, the Tenth Mountain Division?

01-02:13:25

Sease: The Mountain—yeah, the Tenth Mountain. Yes.

01-02:13:30

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, that's great.

01-02:13:31

Sease: He was their Nordic instructor.

01-02:13:34

Eardley-Pryor: How did he pick up skiing? How did he learn to train these guys then?

01-02:13:37

Sease: Ah. I'm sure in his early life he probably was from Minnesota or something. But when the camp dissolved, at some point the place that was the officers' quarters for the Tenth Infantry between Vail and Leadville came on the market and Bill bought it. And that's where the headquarters of the University of the Wilderness was.

01-02:14:05

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. It used to be the old Tenth Mountain headquarters?

01-02:14:07

Sease: Yes. So one summer I spent living in a teepee at the Tenth Mountain officer's quarters and doing the catalogue and doing, you know, work, helping with the trips and we did backpacks into the Flat Top wilderness.

01-02:14:29

Eardley-Pryor: That is totally cool.

01-02:14:31

Sease: It was really cool. It was a gorgeous place. There was a little creek that ran down to the Homestead River. We called it No Name Creek. But you could stick a fly or your fingers or anything in and fetch out a few trout. So we had trout every day for dinner.

01-02:14:50

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. That's awesome. I imagine that this experience—I'm picturing your world of wilderness engagement moving outward and outward, further and further, both in a social network but then also being able to experience all these different kinds of wilderness locations.

01-02:15:08

Sease: Yes.

01-02:15:11

Eardley-Pryor: And living in Colorado for a bit.

01-02:15:13

Sease: Right. So it was during the time I was doing that, or right before I quit doing it, that I got a call from—or I didn't, Dave got a call from Celia Hunter at the

Wilderness Society who was the acting president or acting executive director of the Wilderness Society. The Wilderness Society had gone through a fairly significant staff upheaval when they hired their executive director and a bunch of the staff left with him and it left them just, you know, with a skeleton staff. And so Celia called up Dave and asked him if he would come to Washington temporarily to run their wilderness advocacy program and he said, "Well, I don't know. My wife's pretty happy here and she's got a job she's really enjoying," which was leading the trips. And Celia said, "Oh, well, let me talk to her. I think I have an offer that she'll not want to refuse." And she knew that I was very much into desert wilderness and she offered me the job of working on the Bureau of Land Management Wilderness Review, of organizing citizen engagement on that. And that seemed like a really interesting thing. So we said, "Well, we'll think about it." And this was a little before Christmas. And she said, "Well, we need to know by the end of the year." So a little after the first of January we packed up our stuff into two cars, a pickup truck and a little MG Triumph Spitfire and drove across country. Showed up in DC with—you know, we stayed at one of the Alaska Coalition people's house in their spare room for a while until we found a place.

01-02:17:10

Eardley-Pryor: What an adventure.

01-02:17:12

Sease: It was an adventure. The Wilderness Society used to do these things called wilderness weeks and they would bring in activists from around the country and they would take them and they would introduce them to the processes of Congress, the House, the Senate, the leaders of the committees, all of the agencies, and then teach them how to take their grassroots stuff and work it from home. So I had been to two of those but—

01-02:17:47

Eardley-Pryor: In DC?

01-02:17:49

Sease: In DC, yes.

01-02:17:50

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wow.

01-02:17:52

Sease: Before moving here. But other than that I had spent no time in the east. So my theory was that New York City started right about the Mississippi River and it was urban from there on. So I had a fairly, I would say, biased view against the east and so I just thought I was—you know, I'll come for this one year. I won't unpack my bags and I'll do this fun thing, and then I'll go back to New Mexico.

01-02:18:24

Eardley-Pryor: Before we dive into the beginning of DC, I do want to go back because there's things I forgot to ask about. You had mentioned by this point, you and Dave—that you and Dave Foreman had married.

01-02:18:34

Sease: Yes, we had.

01-02:18:35

Eardley-Pryor: What was your wedding like? What was one of your memories from that experience?

01-02:18:38

Sease: Well, it was amusing. To be honest, I don't recall why we decided to get married but we decided to. We sent out an invitation that was, you know, like a flyer that said, "Sease Foreman unincorporated to incorporate." And, you know, gave the details. We had it in the backyard of my stepsister, I think. Oh, no, actually we had it in the backyard of a couple of Sierra Club leaders in the Rio Grande chapter. You probably have heard their names from talking with Michele or others but it was—I have to think for a moment to recall their names. It was a couple. She was a PhD scientist and he was an emergency room doctor. [Bob and Philenor Howard].

01-02:19:43

Eardley-Pryor: Fascinating.

01-02:19:48

Sease: Any rate, it was a Sierra Club couple. We had it in their backyard and it was just a great impromptu party. A fellow Sierra Club activist, a guy from El Paso, got—this is just at the beginning of having the universal life mail order preacher licenses. New Mexico accepted that as a valid form of getting married so he got a license so he could marry us. And so we were married by him with sort of deeply constricted wedding vows because I found most of the language in them fairly offensive. So we stripped it down quite a bit.

01-02:20:35

Eardley-Pryor: Do you remember what you kept?

01-02:20:37

Sease: No. I don't. But we took out the honoring and obeying.

01-02:20:48

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. What did you do afterwards? Was there a honeymoon? Did you go anywhere?

01-02:20:53

Sease: I'm trying to think if we did. At that point we were living in Glenwood. So we may have just gone back to Glenwood. The wedding was held in Albuquerque.

01-02:21:04

Eardley-Pryor: And Glenwood was right off of this wilderness area that you were living by?

01-02:21:08

Sease: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

01-02:21:09

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, you had mentioned that the Wilderness Society had gone through this massive staff turnover.

01-02:21:18

Sease: Yeah.

01-02:21:19

Eardley-Pryor: That Stewart Brandborg was the former executive director.

01-02:21:23

Sease: Yes.

01-02:21:25

Eardley-Pryor: And he blew through all their money without a lot of oversight and then was ex-communicated from that position.

01-02:21:30

Sease: Yes.

01-02:21:33

Eardley-Pryor: And then you mentioned that Celia Hunter came in to help try to put these pieces together for the Wilderness Society. Can you share a little bit about who she was and what your interactions were like with her?

01-02:21:43

Sease: So the Wilderness Society Council, they didn't call it a board, it's your sort of typical non-profit somewhat donor oriented board. But these were also people who were larger than life figures in wilderness history. So the Marshall Brothers had both at one time been on the board or the council. Mardy Murie, who was Olaus Murie's wife and a wonderful pioneer woman in her own right, had been on the council. And Celia Hunter was an Alaska bush pilot explorer. I don't know if she actually had, other than being a bush pilot, a day job. But she was a longtime leader in Alaska wilderness preservation. And she was on the council, and I think at the time of Stewart leaving she was the president of the council. And she literally moved to Washington, DC for a period of time and took on the job of acting executive director.

01-02:23:07

Eardley-Pryor: I see. So she was kind of putting the pieces together because she was the one who probably had to force Stewart out?

01-02:23:14

Sease: Well, I think it wasn't a one-person thing.

01-02:23:18

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. Wow. Well, some of the stories that I've read about Celia Hunter—honestly I hadn't heard her name before until you mentioned her during our preparation discussions, with you saying that she gave you guys a call and said, "Hey, do you want to move to DC? I have this job for you." And I thought, "Who is this person?" And she sounds incredible.

01-02:23:37

Sease: Oh, she is. She was amazing. Amazing. And really good friends with Mardy. There's a story that they used to tell. Again, maybe it's true, maybe it's not. But that they crashed a bush plane in Alaska and both of them survived and it was several days before they were rescued. And when they were rescued they were, you know, found sort of camping under the wing, cockpit, you know, playing poker, drinking the supply of bourbon that was there.

01-02:24:14

Eardley-Pryor: That's the kind of person I would like to go on wilderness trips with.

01-02:24:19

Sease: Yes.

01-02:24:20

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Okay. So then she gives you a call, or you and Dave a call, and says, you know, "We're putting the Wilderness Society back together again—"

01-02:24:31

Sease: Temporary job offer.

01-02:24:34

Eardley-Pryor: "Would you come to DC and do this work?" And she offered you this opportunity to work on behalf of Bureau of Land Management, BLM advocacy?

01-02:24:42

Sease: Mm-hmm.

01-02:24:45

Eardley-Pryor: Why did you say yes?

01-02:24:46

Sease: In some ways that's a mystery because we had a pretty comfortable life. There's a part of just being asked, of somebody saying, "We value you. This is really important. We need you," that is somewhat compelling. The fact that it was temporary was a sweetener. You know, didn't have to make a long-term—you know, we didn't give up our house in Glenwood. We just closed it. And I think looking back I was sort of bored and ready for the challenge. And, you know, the venue of Washington, DC.

01-02:25:41

There's a little siren song there. John McComb, I don't know if he used this phrase when you were talking to him, but John McComb used to answer people who said "Why do you live in Washington, DC if you care about wilderness?" And John used to say, "That's because it's the scene of the crime if you want to protect wilderness." And, you know, it is the scene of the crime. It was the scene of the crime. And there was just the lure of being able to do some exciting stuff.

01-02:26:10

Eardley-Pryor: "The scene of the crime" is awesome.

01-02:26:14

Sease: Yes.

01-02:26:15

Eardley-Pryor: I'm picturing that as like the name of your career, the biography about your career: "Scene of the Crime." That's beautiful. You mentioned also this trip across the country from New Mexico where you were living on the edge of a wilderness area to Washington, DC.

01-02:26:35

Sease: Right.

01-02:26:37

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned you had traveled to DC a couple times before then.

01-02:27:40

Sease: Yeah.

01-02:26:41

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I'm also thinking about what was that experience like, moving from the west to moving to DC, especially in the winter. What was that adventure?

01-02:26:49

Sease: Well, driving across from New Mexico to Washington in January—it was a really cold, snowy January—with a cat in a convertible Triumph Spitfire—

01-02:27:05

Eardley-Pryor: Not in a convertible?

01-02:27:08

Sease: Yes.

01-02:27:08

Eardley-Pryor: So, wait. Moose made the trip with you?

01-02:27:09

Sease: No, no. Actually, by that time Moose had moved on. It was a cat named Frisco who was named after the San Francisco River. He was a really great cat. So he came to Washington with us. And so Dave drove the pickup truck

full of all our worldly possessions under a tarp and I drove the Spitfire. Everything was just crammed to the gills. And we did it in a fast slog. And then showed up in Washington and it snowed like the day after we got here. Maybe it was the day before. But there was ice and snow on the ground for six weeks. I mean it just—and Glenwood, while it's, what, four thousand feet, is southern New Mexico and when it snows it melts in two days. So it was a rude introduction to a different climate. We started looking for a place to live and I went out searching and, you know—I don't know if you've driven around Washington at all but it's a really easy place to get lost. So, you know, you'd be in a neighborhood street and you'd take a right turn and then you were on a freeway. But I stumbled upon a house in Rosslyn, Virginia, which is just across the river from Georgetown. And Washington has a height limit on buildings of nothing more than ten stories. So nothing taller than the Washington Monument. Well, Rosslyn didn't have that same bar so there was this little pocket of skyscrapers that popped up right across the river from Georgetown. It hadn't all been rezoned so there was this aging decrepit farmhouse from when it was farm country that was sort of listing to one side and on a vacant—otherwise vacant lot that had a for rent sign. Dave and I teamed up with Tim Mahoney, who was another field rep that had been called in for temporary duty and rented it. It became known as the Buckeroo Bunkhouse. I'm going to pause because you're frozen.

01-02:29:45

Eardley-Pryor: This is, I know, a legendary house, the Buckeroo Bunkhouse.

01-02:29:50

Sease: It is a legendary house. And, you know, the backstory of the Buckeroo name shows a little bit of the not entirely PC underpinnings of the men in the wilderness movement. But the Buckeroo Bunkhouse was called that because the field reps from both the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society when they would come to town would just stay there. We had an extra room. We had food all the time. There was the early recycling project of beer cans in the corner of the dining room, which when I briefly had a ferret, the ferret would go play in and make horrible caterwauling noise. The ferret only lasted about a week before I decided that is the stupidest pet anybody could ever get. So I took it back to the pet store and they wouldn't give me my money back but they traded me an aquarium for it. So I had an aquarium for several years. But the Buckeroo Bunkhouse was almost always inhabited by visiting field reps, one or more. And the front windows didn't really lock and so we didn't give people keys. We just said, "Crawl in through the front window by the couch."

01-02:31:13

Eardley-Pryor: Well, you mentioned that you and Dave moved there. But also, Tim Mahoney lived with you?

01-02:31:20

Sease: Mm-hmm, yes.

01-02:31:21

Eardley-Pryor: Who is he? Tell me a little about who he is.

01-02:31:23

Sease: Oh, so Tim Mahoney was the Colorado regional rep for the Wilderness Society and he was one of the people who was recruited to come back to create the skeleton staff. He also stayed and was the Wilderness Society's forest lobbyist and then an Alaska lobbyist and then came to the Sierra Club. Actually, he came to the Sierra Club before I did. One of the Turnage departures. And stayed at the Sierra Club for many years. Finished up the Alaska fight and some of the early Arctic protection fights and decided it was a good time to move on to something else. But he lives just across the valley from us out in the Shenandoah Valley, on the other side of the valley.

01-02:32:18

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, he stayed out east for life after the Sierra Club?

01-02:32:21

Sease: Yeah. Yeah.

01-02:32:20

Eardley-Pryor: Did you know Tim before moving to DC?

01-02:32:25

Sease: No. Well, I think I probably had met him at, you know, regional events or something.

01-02:32:30

Eardley-Pryor: What was he like to live with?

01-02:32:33

Sease: Totally charming. Easygoing. Although the combination of Dave and Tim, like I said, you know, the dining room had a pile of beer cans in the corner as the recycling pile. One night I made enchiladas for dinner. And they were different because, you know, you don't get all the same things in DC that you get in New Mexico. And Tim and Dave would sort of riff off each other and they started doing an, "Oh, this is interesting. Hmm." "Yeah, really interesting." And so I think it was from Tim, not Dave, I picked up the plate and I said, "Well, you think that's interesting. See how interesting you think this is," and slammed it face down on the floor and stomped off. Because they had been sort of haranguing me about the, you know, something about the food, complaining, and I was doing the cooking.

01-02:33:33

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Yeah.

01-02:33:35

Sease: But we used to have really big feeds there where everybody that was in town would come over and we would make enchiladas or tamales and, you know,

put everybody to work. It was great. It was a very good environment. And I'm going to pause because you're frozen.

01-02:34:00

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like that was a really dynamic and fun social experience to be in DC with all these workers.

01-02:34:04

Sease: It was. Yes. So did you know that there is a variety of squirrel that's black? It's not a grey squirrel that's melanistic, it's just a black squirrel. So we had these squirrels that would—these black squirrels, they're from Canada, and they were released in this country and then they sort of spread a little bit. But we had these black squirrels that would come for food. So I would give them cornbread and stuff. Well, in the city that tends to attract other creatures. So we had rats. And we trapped the rats and Tim and I decided that perhaps the westerners who used to hang coyotes out on their fence to discourage other coyotes, that we could do the same with rats. And so we nailed them up by their tails to the little wood fence that was on the side of the house.

01-02:35:07

Eardley-Pryor: I love it.

01-02:35:10

Sease: It was just a gesture. We didn't do it all the time.

01-02:35:14

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. But no, that's great. It just paints a beautiful picture of these—I mean, you were what, like thirty years old or something? Moving out there, having this new wild experience.

01-02:35:22

Sease: Yes, yes. These westerners, these sort of full of it westerners coming to the east and not acclimating.

01-02:35:33

Eardley-Pryor: Right, right.

01-02:35:34

Sease: And the Buckeroo Bunkhouse was around the corner, literally less than half a block from a fire station. So every night, many times a night, the fire truck would come out, sirens blazing. There was a streetlight right outside our house that shone in the window no matter what you did. So it was such an antithesis of an experience from the wild lands of southern New Mexico. But it was exciting. It was incredibly fun. And the people that were leading, particularly the issues that I cared about in Congress, were just ready to do stuff. And it wasn't about lobbying somebody to get them to be good, it was about working in partnership with congressional staff that wanted a bill to be as good as it could be. They wanted to get it passed. It was very energizing.

01-02:36:38

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds like a wonderful time in your life. [We're frozen again.] I think we're back now.

01-02:36:57

Sease: Okay. Yeah.

01-02:36:57

Eardley-Pryor: Can you hear me okay, Debbie?

01-02:36:58

Sease: Yeah. Yeah, I can now.

01-02:36:59

Eardley-Pryor: I was saying it sounds like it was just a wonderful opportunity that you seized, that you really took hold of and enjoyed.

01-02:37:09

Sease: Yes.

01-02:37:11

Eardley-Pryor: I think this is—oh, go ahead, please.

01-02:37:14

Sease: No, no. Go ahead.

01-02:37:15

Eardley-Pryor: Well, I was going to suggest that maybe we pause here for today and begin our next session with the work that you were doing in DC and what transpired from that point.

01-02:37:25

Sease: Sure. And I'll even see if I can get it in my mind a little more chronically coherent.

01-02:37:35

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, I think the stories you're telling and the narrative that you're sharing is fantastic.

01-02:37:41

Sease: Okay, good.

01-02:37:41

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Rich stories. And that's exactly what this is about. It's about capturing these memories that only you can share. I mean, that's the beauty of it. So thank you for today.

01-02:37:51

Sease: Well, I can share it, or the people who were in it with me can share it, but we don't necessarily have the same version of it.

01-02:38:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's right, that's right, yes. And your version is the one I want to hear, so that's great.

01-02:38:05

Sease: Okay.

01-02:38:06

Eardley-Pryor: I'm going to turn off our recording here.

Interview 2: November 12, 2020

02-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor: Today is Thursday, November 12, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is interview session number two with Debbie Sease. Debbie, it's great to see you again.

02-00:00:16

Sease: Good to see you, Roger.

02-00:00:18

Eardley-Pryor: This is part of our Sierra Club Oral History Project, and where we left—oh, and I am recording in Sonoma County, California, which is where I live. And, Debbie, where are you today?

02-00:00:27

Sease: I am in Washington, DC today, on Capitol Hill. My home now.

02-00:00:31

Eardley-Pryor: In a changing Washington, DC at that.

02-00:00:33

Sease: Yes, it's a happy Washington. The 92 percent of voters voted for Biden. So when we came back from the Shenandoah Valley, where about 92 percent voted for Trump, we went from an environment where people were very unhappy to an environment where everybody was celebrating.

02-00:00:55

Eardley-Pryor: Much more fun to be in the celebration.

02-00:00:56

Sease: Yes.

02-00:00:56

Eardley-Pryor: Especially when you're happy with it, right?

02-00:00:58

Sease: Yes.

02-00:00:59

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, certainly not your first political cycle and major change of power in DC. So we'll get into some great stories that you'll be able to tell about that and your years of working in DC amidst these political cycles. But where we left off last time, what I want to dive back into, is you had brought your own life story to moving to DC in the late 1970s and beginning work for the Wilderness Society and that the work that you were doing was around the Bureau of Land Management. Now, I've heard from Bruce Hamilton at the Sierra Club describe how they used to say of the BLM, they described it as the "Bureau of Livestock and Mining." Now, what is that joke and what kind of world was the BLM known as? What was going on with them?

02-00:01:50

Sease:

Well, that's a really big question, Roger, because when I first started working on Bureau of Land Management issues the very first thing I would have to do when talking to a reporter or to an activist who wasn't already familiar with it was to describe what are the BLM lands. And the lands are basically everything in the west that was left over after they gave away chunks to the railroad, they gave away chunks to homesteaders. Some lands were claimed for mining operations and then states got a share of lands. So what was left, which was a vast amount, was what hadn't been put into national forests and hadn't been established as national parks or wildlife refuges. So it was the great mass of lands that connected everything else. It is, in fact, what makes the west, when you are in the west, feel like the west. It is the vast open spaces. The amount of acreage that is managed by the Bureau of Land Management dwarfs everything that is managed by all the other agencies combined.

So many states in the West have well more than 50 percent of their land is managed by the Bureau of Land Management. So it's a huge reservoir of land that has been, even after all these years and after all the development pressures, much of it remains pretty much the way it was when it, was established. Big wide open spaces. Now, the scale of that that is not cut into pieces by roads or developments has shrunk over the years. It's shrunk over the time that I've been working on this. But the Bureau of Land Management literally was the undisposed lands and in the sixties they had a commission, established the Public Land Law Review Commission, and they made a decision of do we dispose of the rest of these lands or do we hang on to them. And it was a congressional commission and it took a long time and at the end of the day they said, "Yeah, we're going to keep them." But it was not a slam-dunk decision to keep them. There was a potential of just disposing of all those lands.

02-00:04:19

Eardley-Pryor: Just a big sell off.

02-00:04:21

Sease: Just a big sell off. Sell off or giveaway. And there is a long history of really nefarious efforts to make a big profit and get rid of the public lands. You've heard of the Teapot Dome Scandal?

02-00:04:36

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

02-00:04:37

Sease: Yeah, that was BLM lands. So at any rate, as a historian, there is a set of articles that you would probably really, really enjoy. It was written by Bernard DeVoto and it was a series of three articles in—I think it must have been *The Atlantic*—and it was called the "West Against Itself." And it was about this huge reservoir of wealth and riches that we had in common as a people, that

these were the people's lands and resources and how the west repeatedly over time kept coming back to wanting to squander those resources. It was written in the thirties, I believe, maybe the forties, and it is a precursor to the Sagebrush Rebellion, the big effort to dispose of the public lands and to ignore what the Public Land Law Review Commission said.

So you asked what is the Bureau of Land Management and why is it jokingly called the Bureau of Livestock and Mining. For many years the BLM did not have any congressional authority and mandate of what it was supposed to do. It had the findings of the Land Law Review Commission, but unlike the Forest Service, which has an Organic Act, the Park Service, which has statutes that say how the Park Service is supposed to manage lands, there was none of this for the BLM. So one of the things that was most exciting to me when I came to Washington in '78 is in the Carter Administration, the Congress had passed for the first time—it took them, oh, I think six years to do it, but they had passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act which was an organic act for the BLM, which for the first time said you're going to manage these lands. You're going to take care of them. You're going to have certain rules you follow. You're going to engage the public in getting feedback about how you manage them. And the thing that was really important to me, you are going to do what the Forest Service has already done—they didn't say it in colloquial terms, like this was all legalese—but you are going to look at all of the millions of acres that you manage and you are going to review them to see which ones of them qualify for potential wilderness protection. Which one of them have wilderness characteristics. And then in just this incredible brilliant thing that this—you know, buried in the fine print in good legislation there was a phrase that said, "And until Congress determines otherwise, you will protect all lands wilderness characteristics to retain their suitability for wilderness designation." Well, that is a huge hammer clause.

02-00:07:44

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

02-00:07:45

Sease: Because once the BLM says this land has wilderness characteristics, they couldn't go in and mine in it, let off-road vehicles play in it. I mean actually they did but they had to justify it as not damaging the wilderness characteristics. And so it created this mandate. Even though you couldn't pass a lot of wilderness bills very quickly, once the agency which, you know, had a formula for having to identify them, once they put the lands through that formula and they identified lands, those lands had to be protected to some degree.

02-00:08:25

Eardley-Pryor: It's like the Wilderness Act and what it did for Forest Service Lands, but this was what BLM would do with other federal land.

02-00:08:32

Sease: Yes. And it did it a little more clearly in terms of the "until Congress determines otherwise."

02-00:08:41

Eardley-Pryor: And so when you came to DC and you began working on the BLM Wilderness Review, had you had any experience with BLM lands before?

02-00:08:50

Sease: Yes, yes. I had been engaged in, as a citizen activist, commenting on and seeking protection for particular BLM lands in New Mexico.

02-00:09:02

Eardley-Pryor: I see. So that work that you were doing around wilderness in New Mexico included BLM land work?

02-00:09:08

Sease: Yeah, mm-hmm.

02-00:09:11

Eardley-Pryor: This was just bringing that work to a fuller level?

02-00:09:13

Sease: Right. And it was coming at a time when a big thing was happening. So under Carter and under the passage of that, they started a review. So the first step of starting that review was to actually figure out the criteria for how they were going to do the wilderness review and then each of the states would do a wilderness review. So the first thing I worked on was comments on their process for how they were going to conduct the wilderness review and comments on how they were going to fulfill that mandate for interim management of lands that they identified. And it was an interesting time because the BLM historically had been dominated by its key constituency, which was miners and grazers. Most of the BLM lands are leased for grazing at a really pittance of a price and the ranchers tend to begin to feel like those are their own lands. These are not the public's lands. This is my ranch. It's been in my family for three generations. And so that tension between these are public lands that are the public commons and this is my ranch and I've been stewarding this land for a really long time was a really major factor in working on BLM lands and working with and sometimes against ranchers. The mining industry—go ahead.

02-00:10:44

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned some of that work that you were doing was to comment on the process.

02-00:10:51

Sease: Yes.

02-00:10:52

Eardley-Pryor: Can you tell me a little bit more about what that means? Like what kind of work you were doing on process and comments?

02-00:10:55

Sease: Yeah. So you're an agency and you've been told, "Go out and look at everything and identify everything that has wilderness characteristics." And you've got a constituency that thinks that wilderness is just about the worst thing in the world and going to be a huge impediment to them. That constituency is leaning on you to make this a very cursory look and only the most pristine and precious and beautiful and non-conflicted of places is going to get into that screen. So that's what one constituency is pressing for. Activists like myself were saying this is a literal mandate to look at everything and if it meets one of these two criteria you need to put it in a special category. And one criteria was outstanding opportunities for solitude and the other criteria was outstanding opportunities for recre—solitude or recreation and largely untouched by man sort of meets the criteria of the wilderness act. But that is not a 100 percent kind of thing. It's that it's mostly wild and undeveloped. Well, the vast majority of BLM lands meet that criteria. So the BLM was looking both from a standpoint of—there were people within the agency, particularly the new head of the agency that had been appointed by Carter, Frank Gregg, who wanted to do the right thing, who was excited about the fact that the agency finally had a mandate to be a real steward of land. But he was also a pragmatist and he was balancing that against the very strong constituency of the western livestock and grazing industry.

02-00:12:50

Eardley-Pryor: How did that work out as far as—if Frank Gregg's role is the head of the BLM under Carter and he was excited about the potential to take serious the wilderness designation and review, then what was it like working with him with all these other constituents coming in, as well?

02-00:13:07

Sease: Well, it was interesting. When I say he genuinely wanted to do the right thing, it did not mean he wanted to do the same thing I wanted to do, because his vision of what the right thing was was a balance somewhere between the no wilderness that the local constituents wanted and the anything that isn't developed now, doesn't have a road in the middle of it, put it on the list that I wanted. He was very interesting to work with because the Bureau of Land Management, up until his tenure, they hadn't been an activist organization at all. The local BLM managers stayed in the local towns. They stayed there for years and years and years and it was just a—pretty much anything the ranchers and miners wanted they got. So Gregg took this law and tried to navigate with language a way that would, you know, identify a bunch of stuff that was pretty good quality but would not catch a lot of the stuff that wasn't likely to ultimately get designated as wilderness.

And one of the strategies that wilderness activists come in the door with, worked this way on the Forest Review and it worked this way on BLM, is you cast the biggest possible net that you can because part of your leverage for ever getting any part of it designated is letting go of the protection for the part that doesn't get designated. So if you're looking at a potential million acres of qualifying wild lands, that you really, really want that million acres, if you sit down at the table starting with that million, the top priority, you have nothing to leverage to keep that million. It's about losing from there. If in fact you take the letter of the law and you cast that net to capture everything that the letter of the law captures, then you've got some cushion when it comes time to say, "Well, you know, you don't want to designate it all but, you know, this million acres is really, really important." And Frank Gregg, I believe, wanted to cut that baby sort of in the middle. So the process of the review, it was a combination of lawyers, lobbyists, and activists. So the lawyers said, "Well, this is what Congress says in this legislation. This is what this means." Lobbyists saying, you know, "Well, I'm going to use that to push my agenda." And so how the actual regulations for doing the review were written, the decisions that were made in that of how they do the review, how hard they have to look, how big a net they have to cast, all of those were really important decisions and all of them were subject to public comment.

So one of the things that I did as a lobbyist is I would go in directly and talk with the people who were running that part of the BLM program and I would organize and work with citizens who organized to get comments in so that not only did the BLM feel the pressure of that, but they also felt supported.

02-00:16:54

Eardley-Pryor:

So this was about also ensuring that you had grassroots voices to enable your leverage in the halls of Congress or within the BLM?

02-00:17:03

Sease:

Right, right. And I worked with the attorneys in the Sierra Club and in Sierra Club Legal Defense, which is what EarthJustice was then called, and in Natural Resources Defense Council, who would look at those laws and they would, you know—many of these pieces of process were taken through an administrative appeals process to get to the right conclusion. When the BLM completed its initial inventory of lands the citizens in each of the 11 western states put together citizen proposals that were much, much larger than the BLM's proposal. And in some states the BLM adjusted their proposal pretty significantly but in other states it went all the way to the interior board of land appeals, which is an administrative review. And because the standard was such a clear standard, dropping lands that met those criteria was pretty hard to justify and so we won a bunch of those cases based on that there just wasn't good documentation of why it should be different.

02-00:18:29

Eardley-Pryor:

In part because of the way the law was written?

02-00:18:31

Sease: Yes, yeah.

02-00:18:32

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So I'm wondering about the structure of how all of this machinery that you're a part of and is operating. You mentioned working in collaboration with other lawyers and various organizations. How about working with these grassroots activists? Were these all Wilderness Society members?

02-00:18:48

Sease: No, no. So it was in fact a very broad coalition and it included Sierra Club activists, Sierra Club chapters. It included state wilderness organizations, sort of citizen activists that were not affiliated with a national organization but were a state operation. It included the Audubon Society, Friends of the Earth, Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, now NRDC. Natural Resources Defense Council didn't have much in the way of activist members but they did supply lawyers to the equation.

02-00:19:25

Eardley-Pryor: That's a lot of different organizations coming together.

02-00:19:27

Sease: Yeah. Yeah. So it was a big collaborative effort.

02-00:19:31

Eardley-Pryor: What was your experience within that? I mean, you had just moved to DC in 1978. You didn't really know a ton of people on the ground there and then here's this giant web of potential interactions or even required interactions to mobilize grassroots and get movement happening.

02-00:19:45

Sease: Well, it was an interesting thing. It was an experience of being a commodity that a lot of people were hungry for. So nobody cared that I was inexperienced or brand new or didn't know my way around. I was there and willing to do something on this and they were hungry because, I think I mentioned this to you earlier, this is the same time in the last couple of years of the Carter administration that we were getting the Alaska Lands Act across the finish line. And so every organization was dedicating 95 percent of their staff time and pressure to getting that completed. So the activists, the field reps for both the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club were just delighted to have somebody paying attention to this. So when I worked for the Wilderness Society I had a mailing list that—you know, we used snail mail then, not email—of the field reps with all the various organizations and the local groups that I would send out regular updates of what was happening in DC.

02-00:21:01

Eardley-Pryor: One of the themes you talked about when we first started discussing how to go about your oral history was this theme of being the right place and the right time.

02-00:21:09

Sease: Yeah.

02-00:21:10

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds to me like you arrived in DC at just the right time for this BLM review to happen.

02-00:21:15

Sease: Yes.

02-00:21:16

Eardley-Pryor: And you were in the right place and right time because DC is where all this was happening.

02-00:21:22

Sease: Yes, it was the scene of the crime, as John McComb used to say.

02-00:21:28

Eardley-Pryor: Another thing that gets to that right place/right time thematic is also how DC operated at that time.

02-00:21:33

Sease: Yeah.

02-00:21:35

Eardley-Pryor: And you've been there since, for the next thirty-nine years or forty-some years, staying in DC to do this work. What was it like then that's now different?

02-00:21:45

Sease: Well, I'll give you an example. Remember I told you I kept two little folders of my work life history? I was going through them. I will send you a scan of this. Let me just hold it up and show you.

02-00:21:58

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

02-00:21:59

Sease: Can you see that?

02-00:22:00

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

02-00:22:02

Sease: And it opens up and it opens up further.

02-00:22:10

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

02-00:22:12

Sease: So this is a poster size and designed to be stuck up on a wall, a poster sized mailer about all of the citizen wilderness proposals, WSA, Wilderness Study Area proposals for the BLM. This is something that was to generate public comment. I kept this document because I wrote it. I fundraised from the four organizations that I was a consultant for to pay for the printing. I literally took it to the printer. Do you know what press type letters are for headlines?

02-00:22:54

Eardley-Pryor: No.

02-00:22:55

Sease: These little headlines, the fonts, the bolder fonts. They come on pieces of mylar and you put them in place with lines and then you rub them until they stay on. That's how you would do that headline. I did the drawings in it.

02-00:23:10

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

02-00:23:11

Sease: And, I mean, it was a one-person operation, and I sent this out. I found my receipt. I had 40,000 copies printed.

02-00:23:23

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, my goodness.

02-00:23:24

Sease: And I sent them out in bulk packets to organizations, individuals, and we told folks that the most important thing they could do is write a letter supporting each of the citizen proposals. But if they didn't have time to do that, to clip out that bottom half of it which said—they were form letters with space for a few personal comments, and send them back to me. And I would have them delivered to the BLM. So with 40,000 of them printed, we didn't get more than 40,000 comments from this, I can guarantee you. But that scale was enough to make a humongous difference. That much grassroots pressure that was generated by this one mailer both made the BLM in those states feel pressure and made the ones that wanted to do the right thing feel support. And so the scale of what was possible, the scale of movement—because the other side didn't really use grassroots. So the biggest thing that has changed is a thing that generates twenty or thirty thousand comments is a failure. You need millions. So the scale of grassroots and what we call astro turf, which is sort of the fake grassroots that industry pays for. So that's one of the biggest changes, is just the scale of what it takes to make a difference with grassroots activism and the degree to which it used to be a tool of the environmental and the progressive—you know, the public interest community. And it is now equally a tool of industry and agencies for development.

02-00:25:24

Eardley-Pryor: The opposition has taken on their own grassroots approach.

02-00:25:26

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

02-00:25:27

Eardley-Pryor: And that's where the term "astro turf" comes from?

02-00:25:29

Sease: Yes. But the amount of work you can get from a volunteer who is volunteering because of passion versus a worker that you say, "Get on this bus and go to the public hearing," it still translates into a pretty strong advantage for genuine grassroots. But that's one of the really big differences.

02-00:25:51

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big difference. My mind takes that as a positive thing, that it takes that much more engagement, or that that many more people are engaged. You have to have a million people to influence something rather than just twenty thousand. But I'm not getting that from the way you're reacting.

02-00:26:12

Sease: Yeah. That would be one view of it. The other view is that the genuine bubbling up from passion grassroots has been overtaken by technology and by a smart opposition that says, "Oh, we can do that and we can put a lot of money into making that happen." Similarly, Congress was just an easier place to get access in.

02-00:26:43

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

02-00:26:45

Sease: Well, part of that is the volume of attention any given member of Congress, particularly in the Senate got. For example, when Dianne Feinstein came to the Senate they had to put—and it was not because of her. It was California. Both she and Boxer had to have different phone systems put in because they got so many constituent calls, it broke the Senate calling system.

02-00:27:13

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

02-00:27:14

Sease: Because California's so big and they only have two senators. And that is just the scale of people wanting to engage with that same finite number of people. It's gotten complex. So I half-jokingly said, you know, when I was a junior lobbyist I could get a meeting with a senator, and in my more senior years as a lobbyist I couldn't do it without five CEOs in tow. And that's not me that changed, it's the situation.

02-00:27:45

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. This makes me think about—we'll get into some discussions about the Sierra Club and its engagement and concern with overpopulation, and how that was taken over in some ways by anti-immigration activists. We'll get into that later. But one of the arguments that I've heard some of these supposed-population-concerned people make is that the scale of representation in the United States has drastically changed. So as the population has grown exponentially—there's now, you know, twice as many, three times as many, four times as many people in the past century—that the number of representatives has not. There's still the same number of senators. There's fifty. There's still the same number in the House of Representatives. But as the population has gotten so much bigger, that your voice has become lessened because there are more people in the pie, in the whole picture.

02-00:28:40

Sease: Well, that's a pretty simplistic assessment of it. In the Senate, the fact that we still go with the original premise of two senators for every state regardless of population—which leaves the State of Wyoming with the same number as the State of California—that is a much bigger issue than the overall population of the United States.

02-00:29:09

Eardley-Pryor: It's the structure of the system that really is the problem?

02-00:29:11

Sease: Yes. Yeah. That, and the electoral college. I mean, talk about something that's broken. And I just learned last weekend why we have an electoral college.

02-00:29:23

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me why.

02-00:29:24

Sease: Well, this is according to my husband but I think he is correct in it. And let's see if I can accurately convey it. It was because slave states wanted to be sure they retained their influence to stay slave states against the very large populated states of New York, et cetera, that weren't slave states. So it was about protecting slavery.

02-00:29:54

Eardley-Pryor: That's my understanding, as well. Yeah.

02-00:29:56

Sease: I mean, talk about a bad reason to have a broken system.

02-00:30:01

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, a slaveholder political system is probably not the one we should continue operating under. It may need some reform.

02-00:30:07

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

02-00:30:10

Eardley-Pryor: This is a great discussion about change over time, and you were at the frontlines of all of this. I have a note here that the BLM had 690 million acres of land. I mean, we're talking almost a billion acres of land.

02-00:30:28

Sease: Nine hundred and sixty million.

02-00:30:30

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, I'm sorry. *Nine* hundred and sixty million.

02-00:30:32

Sease: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

02-00:30:32

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. That's an absurd amount of—that's a ton of land to manage.

02-00:30:36

Sease: So, Roger, can you hear that phone ringing in the background?

02-00:30:38

Eardley-Pryor: I can. Do you want me to pause for a sec?

02-00:30:41

Sease: Yes. And I thought—

[pause in recording]

02-00:30:47

Eardley-Pryor: So the work that you're doing on the BLM is—the consequences of it, the potential impact of it, the scale of it—is enormous. But to the point we were just talking about, of change over time, I want to get into a discussion about how the Wilderness Society was changing, and how the Wilderness Society itself was changing over time in DC in this late seventies, early eighties period that you were there, and for us to get into a broader argument about the environmental movement and its change over time. The way I want to get into that is by discussing this argument that's made in a book called *The Promise of Wilderness* from 2012 by an author named James Morton Turner. And Turner says that the shift in environmentalism—it has often been said that there was a shift in the seventies over concerns, from classic concerns about land management, public lands and open spaces and wilderness, to broader concerns about public health and water and air pollution and toxics, these sort of second generation issues.

02-00:31:50

Sease: And, Roger, when is he saying that shift took place?

02-00:31:52

Eardley-Pryor: He says it happens in the later seventies. That across the 1970s, with Earth Day and this new realization of pollution, it becomes common in people's mind that there's a shift in what was classic environmentalist concern on

conservation and preservation issues, to these broader issues that included pollution and air quality and those sort of things, and energy. So let me just read a part of what he says.

02-00:32:15

Sease: Sure, yeah.

02-00:32:16

Eardley-Pryor: We can pick it apart or uphold his argument. So he says, "That transition," he says, "was *not* so much a transition from place-based, public lands and conservation issues of the fifties and sixties to the more abstract pollution, energy, and environmental health issues of the sixties and seventies that drove a restructuring of mainstream American environmentalism. Rather," he says this restructuring of American environmentalism that happens "was an iterative process of organizational transformation, the availability of new funding resources, a stronger opposition, and changes in federal environmental decision-making"—things like passing NEPA and the birth of environmental law—"all of which formed important components of a feedback loop that encouraged the consolidation and professionalization of environmental advocacy" as a movement. So, I'm wondering what you think about his characterization of the broader environmental movement changing, becoming more professional, and those causes on being the reasons why.

02-00:33:18

Sease: I think it is an overly simplistic assessment. There's been a lot of people who analyze what has happened on land protection advocacy over time. I think that—and I'm guilty of it myself, as a land protection advocate you have a certain myopia. Being attached to place-based actions is a narrow thing. It's very specific. I look at my own personal evolution as somebody who—the passion that kept me working for the Sierra Club for forty plus years is grounded in place and critters. But if you look at what threatens those places, maybe when I was a child what threatened those places was single activities. What threatens those places today is air pollution, water pollution, climate change. So if you put your head in the sand and say, "I'm going to work on wilderness and I'm going to work on forest protection and trails, and I'm not going to bother myself with all of those bigger environmental issues," well, you're not protecting land. So I think that there is a certain myopia on the part of a lot of dedicated land activists who want to just focus on the lands.

02-00:35:07

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

02-00:35:08

Sease: In terms of the professionalism, I mean, he probably has a bigger perspective on it than I do. But the Wilderness Society for decades had staffed itself with bureaucrats that either were moving out an agency when an administration would flip to a less pro-environment administration or that were just moving on. So it tended to be very oriented towards getting professionals. So the head

of their wildlife program was somebody who had worked for the National Wildlife Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service. So I don't think that that was anything particularly new.

02-00:36:00

Eardley-Pryor: I guess what I'm thinking, what resonated for me, why I brought this up between you and I, is that the Wilderness Society eventually lets you go in the midst of these BLM reviews, that are on a significant amount of land. There's such an opportunity to preserve wilderness in that review. But Wilderness Society doesn't have a plan to hire anyone else to do that work, this important work that you were doing. And it also is in the context of William Turnage taking over the Wilderness Society, this Yale grad who's coming in and sweeping away some of the grassroots activists who were in DC doing this passionate lobbying.

02-00:36:38

Sease: Well, if I were to do my own sort of grand thinking of what happened to the environmental movement, that those kinds of things happened, I would not attribute it to a shift toward professionalism or a shift away from land based. I would equate it more with early environmental organizations were managed by activists, and as the movement and the organizations grew, most activists, most passionate lobbyists don't necessarily know anything about management or about running an organization. So organizations tended to seek out people who knew how to run organizations. And the match between somebody who is a good business leader and running a non-profit made up of activists isn't always good. In Turnage's case, I just think he was a fundamentally flawed individual, a really bad decision on the part of the council and, you know, a disaster that—I wasn't the only one fired at the end of his very brief tenure. There were two, maybe three of the original staff still at the Wilderness Society. And that was out of fifty or so.

02-00:38:07

Eardley-Pryor: What was that like as a working environmentalist, to uproot yourself from your home in New Mexico to come to DC to do this work, and then have this internal structural change also happening around you?

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Sease: Well, I don't remember a lot of it in detail and I was pretty quickly—there's a certain amusement factor here. I was pretty quickly hired as a consultant for a group of organizations to do the same work, that Bill Turnage was convinced to contribute to. So there was a little irony.

02-00:38:46

Eardley-Pryor: He's paying you anyways.

02-00:38:46

Sease: Yes. They ended up helping to pay me anyway.

02-00:38:49

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, in the context of that transition that you have, and not on the kind of work you're doing but who is helping enable that work, I have a note here that Dave Foreman was also let go from the Wilderness Society.

02-00:39:04

Sease: I think Dave quit.

02-00:39:07

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, he did?

02-00:39:08

Sease: I think so. You know, I don't remember for sure but I think he quit.

02-00:39:12

Eardley-Pryor: Well, what was going on? What kind of discussions were you having about how he quit, and you stayed? What were your thoughts on that?

02-00:39:20

Sease: Well, he had gone back to New Mexico before quitting and I was still in DC. I don't recall us having a lot of conversations about it. I mean that's not to say we didn't. I just don't recall them.

02-00:39:35

Eardley-Pryor: So he had left DC while still working with Wilderness Society?

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Sease: No, he was the southwest representative for the Wilderness Society.

02-00:39:45

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

02-00:39:46

Sease: And came to DC for a temporary tenure while they got up and running, and he went back. He ultimately quit, but I don't think that he was fired by Turnage.

02-00:40:00

Eardley-Pryor: Can you tell me a little bit about that experience, of him deciding to go back and you deciding to stay in DC?

02-00:40:06

Sease: Well, it did not leave a really big mark on my memory. So I think that it was a pretty easy decision and one that we made, perhaps an overstatement to say lightly, but it did not create a lot of anxiety. You know, we came to DC on a temporary basis on two weeks of notice. I didn't say "I'm staying in DC forever." We continued to see each other, you know, periodically. But the longer I stayed in DC, the more clear it became that I really was establishing my life here.

02-00:40:48

Eardley-Pryor: What did you like so much about DC?

02-00:40:50

Sease: The work. Well, actually, there's two things I liked about it. And I probably would not have stayed in DC if I hadn't taken up a hobby that pulled me away from work and that I absolutely loved.

02-00:41:07

Eardley-Pryor: What's that?

02-00:41:08

Sease: River running, Kayaking. So when I was in New Mexico, before I moved to DC, I did some river rafting, that I just fell in love with floating down rivers. And I did some canoeing when I was working for the University of the Wilderness down in Big Bend. But during that time I also had two really serious life threatening accidents in water. I went on a little flooded river near our house in Glenwood called the San Francisco and it was in full on flood stage, which means that there is water going through downed trees. We lost control of the raft. The raft swept into a cottonwood tree. The cottonwood branch went through my life jacket sleeve, so I was pinned underwater with a branch of a tree, with my head underwater. Dave managed to walk out on the raft and break the branch and free me. So I was pretty shaken by that, but I so loved rivers that I continued to want to go kayaking. And we had just ordered kayak halves to put together and make kayaks.

So about a month after that, I got an opportunity to join on a trip on the Yampa River in Southern Colorado, north—in Utah maybe. But it's one of the big western rivers. You have to have a permit. And it, too, was in flood stage. And I went on the trip. And the first major rapid we came to, the guy who was rowing our raft took a look at it. It's called Teepee Hole and there is a hole right in the middle of the river, a recirculating hole. And he decided that instead of just going around it on either side, which is pretty easy to do, that it was such that he could hit it square and run it. So we all get back in the boat. I'm terrified because of my last experience. So I wrapped my—I'm afraid of getting thrown out of the boat, so I wrap the rope that goes around the boat around my wrist so that I won't lose it. We go, we hit the hole, the boat flips, I come up underneath the boat tied to it. And it is, I think, the most terrified I have ever been in my life. I mean, I literally thought, "Well, I'm just going to die." Because I've come up in a little pocket of air in the area, in the boat between the tubes. And then I think, "Well, I don't really want to die." So, you know, you sort of force yourself to say, "Okay, I'm going to get untangled from this." And the water is just incredibly cold. So long story short, I get out. People drag me up on the bottom of the raft. We pull into shore, get warm. At that point, my attitude about water, rivers, is just totally broken, and I am so terrified.

So the Yampa is a river that has a couple of big rapids and then it has a calm stretch and then it goes through—the very last day, it goes through what's called Split Mountain, and it's just steady whitewater. So we get about, oh, a

day before that section of river, and we camp at this little forest campground that's there that hasn't opened up for the spring yet. And there's a road that goes out to the highway. And I say, "I'm just leaving the trip. I'm not getting back on that river. I am not doing that last day. I'll meet you at the day camp." And so they dropped me off, and I hike and hitchhike my way to meet them a couple of days later at the take out.. So I have this deep reservoir of loving rivers and being absolutely terrified of them.

I move to Washington and one of the women that I worked with—I'm drawing a blank on her name now. She was an administration official in the Carter Administration. But very encouraging of women and women in the movement, and she invited me to join the Washington Canoe Club, which was just across the river from where the Bunkhouse was. I don't know if you've ever been to Washington, but near Key Bridge there is this beautiful old green Victorian building which is a canoe club with racing skulls and things like that. And it was, for the longest time, a men's club, and she was one of the first women to join. And so she wanted to invite other women to be a part of it. And so I joined the Canoe Club, and I bought a canoe, and I met a group of people who did whitewater canoeing and kayaking. And I went on a trip with them and I had positive experiences where I didn't half-drown, and so I bought a kayak and I started kayaking. And for many, many years, every weekend except in the absolute dead of winter, I would go to West Virginia or Virginia or Maryland and chase whitewater. I never got over my fear, but I got very good at kayaking, so that I could kayak difficult rivers and not be afraid, because I stayed in control. But I had an outlet outside of work that I had as much passion about as I did the work. And so I think that that is what—and it brought a circle of friends that weren't that internal circle that was with you in your day-to-day work, as well.

02-00:47:37

Eardley-Pryor: It almost sounds like a way to check out from the work, but also be renewed as to why you're doing the work.

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Sease: Oh, yeah. And I would come back from a weekend and having so—no matter how stressful work was, having just—Churchill talks about painting as a pastime and that you cannot relax from stress by simply stopping. You need to do something that engages your brain and your passion. And for me, kayaking was that.

02-00:48:11

Eardley-Pryor: What was about that fear that always stayed with you, and yet this desire to go back to the water?

02-00:48:19

Sease: Well, I did a lot of reading about fear, and at the end of the day I realized that my fear was not, you know, psychological. I was doing stuff that could kill me. And people do die, they put their paddle in the wrong place, hit their head

on a rock upside down. And so it was a dangerous thing and I don't really like—I'm not an adrenaline rush kind of person. So I was sensibly afraid.

02-00:48:54

Eardley-Pryor: I guess where I'm going is that you keep coming back to it.

02-00:48:58

Sease: Yes.

02-00:48:59

Eardley-Pryor: What do you think that was about?

02-00:49:01

Sease: One thing it was about is—I think we discussed last time we talked that I had polio as a child, and it left me not able to do a lot of physical things as well as I would have otherwise. And I mentioned that I got good at kayaking. I got really good at kayaking. I could run class four rivers. I even ran a class five river. And I did it with precision so that I didn't do the things that scared me. And so that satisfied a part of the athlete in me that didn't have any other outlet. At least that's my theory. And, you know, it gets you out of the city.

02-00:49:44

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. It scratches that nature itch, you're able to get outdoors. That's wonderful. I'm wondering, too, in the context of what was going on in the Buckeroo Bunkhouse, how Dave Foreman had left, was out west. Tim Mahoney, I assume, is still in DC doing lobbying, probably around Alaska work, I would guess. And then, also, you're there. Were you still living at the Buckeroo Bunkhouse during this time?

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Sease: Yes, I was. And Tim had started dating a woman in Alaska who is now his wife. And she moved to DC, and so she was living with us, as well. And then after a while, you know, I was telling my husband [Russ Shay] about this the other day—Sharon is a much more tidy and neat person and probably never lived in a house that was as quirky and rundown and weird as the Buckeroo Bunkhouse, either before or since. So after a few months, they moved out. I went through a series of roommates there and then eventually moved on into some other group houses.

02-00:51:02

Eardley-Pryor: And this was also in the context of you learning about this new river running community that you were becoming a part of, too.

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Sease: Uh-huh, yeah.

02-00:51:11

Eardley-Pryor: So your social world in DC is flowering at the same time that these work opportunities are flowering.

02-00:51:17

Sease: Mm-hmm.

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Eardley-Pryor: That sounds wonderful. I have a note here on some of that early work on the BLM wilderness review, that you were able to leverage—you mentioned this wonderful poster that you created and did some grassroots leverage to encourage the review to be a little more thorough. But that without as much attention, the Wilderness Society itself not initially continuing to fund you on this work, that the review process was not going as well as it could have gone in, I imagine, your mind. What was happening in those early stages, particularly as this change under Carter to Reagan was happening? Did the BLM process, this review process, change as a result of the political cycle and the shifting from Democrat to Republican?

02-00:52:05

Sease: Well, yes and no. Most of the processes, the review, the rules for managing things, had been finalized. So they weren't easy to change. But the audience for taking challenges to those reviews had certainly gotten tougher. Some of the state directors of the BLM—under Frank Gregg there had been some pretty progressive ones and many of those either got pushed to be less aggressive or moved on to other things. So it went into a time when there was less receptivity to the public pressure.

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Eardley-Pryor: I imagine that makes the work that you're doing that much more important.

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Sease: Well, and it also brings the work of the lawyers and the congressional oversight into higher relief.

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Eardley-Pryor: Why so?

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Sease: Well, so if you've got an underlying law that's pretty clear, you've got regulations that have been adopted that are pretty clear, and then you have a new set of agency personnel who aren't following the rules, your avenue for addressing that is to either take them to court or to get the Congress to exert their oversight authority on them. So the receptivity of the agency to do the right thing based on grassroots pressure diminished but there was still other avenues to exert pressure on them.

02-00:54:00

Eardley-Pryor: But, again, it comes back to the way that the law was written, that you can advocate on that.

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Sease: Yeah. And the way the regulations were put in place. So the early work with the agency, of getting them to—you ask early on why was it important, that

how they did the process was a particular way, it's so that it could in fact withstand a less friendly administration. You didn't have to just count on the goodness of their heart for them to identify wilderness study areas.

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Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful.

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Sease: But at the end of the day, there are, in many states in the west, citizen proposals that are much larger than the amount of inventory land because the inventory didn't turn out to capture everything it should have. In some places it did. The California desert.

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Eardley-Pryor: What I'm hearing you say is the grassroots activists in each state are saying, "We want more of this land to go into the wilderness review," and the state itself had limited its review of those lands?

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Sease: Well, the agency, the BLM in the state didn't identify them all. And so they responded somewhat to public pressure. They added some in. Some states did a better job than others. Some state BLM offices did a better job than others. Particularly bad states were Oregon. Oregon did a terrible review. And part of the big reason for that is there's a lot of timber and there's a lot of grazing in Oregon BLM lands. California did a pretty good job. There were some areas that we squabbled over but by and large when the citizens went to put their proposal together for a wilderness bill most of what they were proposing was in the study.

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Eardley-Pryor: So the way I'm hearing you talk about this, the BLM review is really structured state by state.

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Sease: It was implemented state by state, and the way in which the boilerplate language of how you do it, how it was implemented, varied widely from state to state. So I was on a tour of the Utah BLM wild lands with the guy that was the state director. He was somebody who had been in the Carter Administration under Frank Gregg. You've heard of burrowing in? When a political appointee goes into an agency job that is a civil service job so that they don't have to leave when things shift. Well, this guy had burrowed in and was the state director in Utah. And so he was somebody who had worked for Frank Gregg. He knew better. I did this tour one year that had a really light fire season and BLM buys their helicopter time by contract. So a lot of these states had a lot of excess helicopter time that they had paid for. So the excuse of a wilderness advocate being around was, "Hell, let's go fly over some of this stuff." I'm trying to remember what this guy's name was. [Gary Wicks].

02-00:57:25

Eardley-Pryor: This guy in Utah?

02-00:57:27

Sease: The guy in Utah, the state director. I'll think of it in a minute. But we were in the helicopter. The helicopter was going to go refuel and so they dropped us off on this ridge in the middle of the canyon country and they said, "We'll come back, be fifteen, twenty minutes." So we're sitting up there and we are surrounded by—you ever spent any time in Utah Canyon Country?

02-00:57:54

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, in Canyonlands National Park, backcountry.

02-00:57:55

Sease: Okay. There's some places where you just—as far as you can see it's ridge after ridge after ridge, canyon after canyon. It was one of those kind of places. And so I turned to the state director who was sitting next to me and I said, "So this area over here, you didn't identify as a wilderness study area, right?" He said, "Yes." I said, "And that area back there you did?" He said, "Yes." I said, "So why doesn't that qualify?" He said, "Doesn't have outstanding opportunities for recreation." I said, "What about solitude?" He said, "Well, it has opportunities for solitude but they're not outstanding." So time goes on—

02-00:58:38

Eardley-Pryor: As you're surrounded by all this.

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Sease: As we're surrounded. And the helicopter's delayed in coming back to pick us up. Gary Wicks is the guy's name. So I turned to him and I said, "Gary, you know if that helicopter doesn't come back and get us, you're going to find out just how outstanding this solitude is."

02-00:58:56

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

02-00:58:59

Sease: But, I mean, they just basically turned a blind eye. They just ignored it and said, "Well, it's not outstanding opportunities," and tried to reduce it. In reality, the area that wasn't in the study had coal leases under it. The area that was didn't have coal leases. And so they were not taking on the conflict of the coal leases.

02-00:59:20

Eardley-Pryor: So then, as an advocate, what do you do then with that experience, with knowing that that's how Utah was operating? How do you then operationalize?

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Sease: Well, again, the community's lawyers appealed the decisions, took them to court, pushed for expansion of the review and made some huge headway.

Again, not every area that they advocated for got in, but the inventory got better. And then we started working with Congress to try to designate some of them.

02-00:59:58

Eardley-Pryor: And share with me where your role as that big process comes in. It sounds to me like you're all over the place. You're in Utah, you're exploring these lands, you're talking to these different communities, but you're also in DC and trying to work with different administrators in the BLM. It was really dynamic.

02-01:00:16

Sease: My role changed with the change in administrations. So I was a conduit of information from what's happening in DC, learning what's happening in the BLM, anticipating what's happening, working with good contacts who were willing to go out for coffee with me and tell me the inside scoop and then getting that back to the grassroots. My early work was much more direct in trying to influence the policy. Later years of work on BLM I was basically a conduit of both information and advice to the citizen activists sort of working with them and then when we got a more friendly administration trying to put as much back on the table as possible. And then finally, trying to establish some early wilderness designations that did it the way you want to see it done so you set good precedents at the front end.

02-01:01:27

Eardley-Pryor: Give me an example. What do you mean by that?

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Sease: So working with a friendly delegation that wants to designate some of their wilderness. Making sure that when it's included there's nothing in terms of the language of the management of it that undercuts the wilderness act or remember I said that there was this hammer clause in FLPMA that said you will protect the suitability until Congress determines otherwise? Well, the last thing you want to do is go in and designate a 25,000 acre area in a state and have two million acres of potential wilderness released by Congress as the price for that. So to establish some good precedents of you don't release a bunch of land in order to get the land you want. Maybe you release a few little areas around the side that didn't really qualify or that you didn't really need. So you try to set up a dynamic where the pattern, how you protect wilderness, is established in a way that's going to benefit you over the long term.

02-01:02:39

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Can you think of a specific area or state in which you help set that precedent that you were pleased with?

02-01:02:47

Sease: Yes. In New Mexico there were three areas in the San Juan Basin, northwestern New Mexico, in coal country, in Navajo country, and they were very small areas but extraordinarily scenic and geologically important. They had these little hoodoo formations and one of them had one of the biggest

petrified forest resources anywhere. And so we worked for a couple, maybe a little more than a year, to get three areas there established, two as wilderness and one as a special manage—I've forgotten what the actual designation was. But it was following the pattern that I think is really successful for incremental wilderness passage, where you protect some things. You leave a latch string out that helps to pull in some additional areas and you don't give away the store to get those areas that you protected. So we didn't release large areas of wilderness study area. The one area that we couldn't get as wilderness, we created it as a special study area which, again, get that latch string for Congress to come back at a friendlier time, maybe, and get more.

02-01:04:28

Eardley-Pryor: The strategy for that sounds really smart. Where were you looking to help create that?

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Sease: I don't understand the question.

02-01:04:40

Eardley-Pryor: Well, thinking about this strategy, of "We want to make sure we get this particular part as wilderness. We want these latch strings there so we can get them later if we can't get all of it. And we're only going to give up this little bit here." That just seems like a really smart strategic move.

02-01:04:56

Sease: Well, I didn't invent that strategy. And, in fact, it was a successful strategy that had been used state by state in designating forest wilderness and I think even for getting wilderness within national parks. So it was a strategy that I advocated and applied to BLM, but it didn't initiate with me.

02-01:05:22

Eardley-Pryor: It was just a tried and true method.

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Sease: Yes. Yeah.

02-01:05:26

Eardley-Pryor: What was different about it then? This brings up the question to me of what was different about the BLM process that would have been different from, let's say, national parks or forest service wilderness?

02-01:05:36

Sease: The primary opponent of national forest wilderness was timber companies. And an unfortunate compromise, if you look at the maps of wilderness, and this goes a little bit to the why do people want to protect wilderness, you know, the advocates. If you're wanting to protect wilderness because you're a backpacker you don't necessarily mind if you're getting the rocks and ice and you're letting the lower timberlands that are wildlife rich go. But a lot of forest wilderness at the end of the day protected the peaks, the what we call rocks

and ice. The primary opponent of BLM wilderness was ranchers and miners. And then later in the day the anti-public lands people, the sage brush rebellion types that basically said there's too much public land and locking it up as wilderness—off-road vehicle enthusiasts were a bigger opponent on BLM land than forest. Not to say they weren't an opponent of forest. So the opponents were different.

02-01:06:53

Eardley-Pryor: That's good. And with those different opponents, then, does that change the way that you try to protect the land that you were trying to protect?

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Sease: It changes a little bit of your lobbying or advocacy strategy. One of the things that was really important, though, was to not let a second tier of wilderness protection come in for the BLM lands because they were different. So, for example, one of the things that was a management issue that we fought BLM was because they're low elevation. They are penetrated by a lot of two tracks that aren't really roads but could be called a road. And so in drawing the boundaries the BLM wanted to draw a line to the end of each one of those two tracks called a cherry stem. So they would draw the line to exclude a stock tank that had a two track trail to it that a rancher might use twice a year. We fought back on that and said, "No, that's not necessary," and the boundaries should be down here, topographical line.

02-01:08:15

Eardley-Pryor: So it was a debate about what constituted a road, it sounds like?

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Sease: Yes, that was one of the debates.

02-01:08:22

Eardley-Pryor: All right, this is great. This is just great context for how this is happening and how to think about it. You mentioned some of these big places that you felt were successful, precedent setting.

02-01:08:36

Sease: Well, they were little. They were actually little wilderness areas.

02-01:08:40

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, little wilderness areas. Do you remember the name of that one with the cool hoodoos?

02-01:08:47

Sease: Yes, that was the Bisti, B-I-S-T-I, Bisti Badlands. The second one, which was a little larger, also had some petrified forest in it, was De-Na-Zin, the Navajo name, and I'm not pronouncing it with the full Navajo inflection but haven't done it in a while. And then the one that didn't make it in, and I think got designated for further study, was Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah.

02-01:09:18

Eardley-Pryor: And Ah-Shi-Sle-Pah. But it did later become wilderness, did it not?

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Sease: I'm forgetting. It might have actually gotten added after the study. Fossil Forest is the one that got in for study, yeah.

02-01:09:31

Eardley-Pryor: Gotcha. Well, these lands near Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, near coal country, is there any coincidence that that happened to be New Mexico where you had these initial precedent successes, and that's also land you had always worked toward and loved?

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Sease: Maybe yes, but probably a bigger factor was the fact that I worked with the New Mexico delegation, Bill Richardson, who was a Democratic congressman, and Jeff Bingaman, who was a Democratic senator, on their election. I went out and volunteered for six weeks as a Sierra Club activist and helped them win their race. So I had really good relations with them, and they both came to Congress wanting to do good things. And there was a very strong wilderness activist group in New Mexico advocating for these. So that had more to do with it, more than that I had lived in New Mexico.

02-01:10:50

Eardley-Pryor: So you had put the time in to help bring them to DC, and then that enabled a working relationship?

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Sease: Yeah. Yes.

02-01:10:57

Eardley-Pryor: Can you think of other circumstances where you took that lesson and were able to do it again, where you were able to bring the representatives to DC that you wanted to work with?

02-01:11:11

Sease: Well, this example isn't quite as clear but it goes to relationship. Every year at election time I would volunteer and go work on a campaign as a Sierra Club contribution. And typically it was somebody who was either an incumbent that was on the interior Committee and needed, you know, a little help or a challenger. And I tended to focus it not so much on states where the issue was happening but committee assignments. But one year we got a complaint from Bruce Vento, who was the chair of the National Parks Committee, Democrat from Minneapolis, that nobody ever bothered to help him with his election. Well, you know, he ran unopposed almost every time. But this year the perennial write-in presidential candidate, Harold Stassen, was running against him. And so he said, "I have a real opponent." So I said, "I'll do this." So I went and volunteered for two weeks in Bruce Vento's campaign and, in fact, he had no race. He won by like 85 percent. But it really did long-term build a

great relationship with the person who was the head of the parks committee at that time and then ultimately became parks and public lands chair.

02-01:12:43

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. That also speaks to this long-term commitment that you had to DC in building these relationships, to put that time in and then be able to capitalize on it over time, as well. Just being there.

02-01:12:55

Sease: Well, I mean, that was the pattern that Sierra Club staff did. It was one of the things that I think made the Sierra Club have, in some ways, lobbyists with a little sharper edge than some of the competition. Because we didn't shy away from politics. So we endorsed candidates. We got involved in congressional races. You know, we showed up and walked neighborhoods with them at a time when a lot of c(3) organizations were saying, "No, I can't talk about politics." So it just gave us a bit of an edge.

02-01:13:36

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Well, maybe that's an opportunity for us to talk about you joining the Sierra Club, coming in and no longer working as a consultant in this period in the late seventies, but actually coming in as a full-time staff member for the Club. But before we make that transition, do you want to take a little break here? We've been talking for about an hour, just to give us a second to breathe?

02-01:13:55

Sease: Sure, yeah.

02-01:13:56

Eardley-Pryor: I'll do that.

[pause in recording]

All right, Debbie. So around 1980, 1981 or so, you then begin work officially for the Sierra Club. You go from working as a political consultant in some ways, hired by a number of different organizations to put that together, to being a staff member for the Club. What was that transition like for you?

02-01:14:19

Sease: To be honest, the transition was actually pretty seamless, mostly because the Sierra Club had been the biggest driver of creating the pool of funding for me to be a consultant. They were most engaged and even without being a consultant for other organizations, the role of the work was collaborating with other organizations. So it did not feel like a very big change other than that I moved from the office that Friends of the Earth was providing as their contribution into the Sierra Club office, which was a little closer to John McComb. But John was pretty much the guiding force when I was working as a consultant. Much more engaged than the other entities.

02-01:15:16

Eardley-Pryor: We had mentioned John McComb in our previous interviews, but more than that he was the southwest representative for the Club. Now he's in DC. So tell me a little bit about John's story and how he then comes to DC, and your engagement with him there.

02-01:15:33

Sease: Well, John, I believe, ran the Washington office, the lobbying office, of the Sierra Club in DC. He was already doing that when we moved to DC, so he had come just a little bit before that. And John was a really easy and wonderful person to work for. He cared passionately about the work, about the issues. He cared about people. And, you know, I said something sort of snarky about public interest lobbyists not necessarily making good managers. But John took that part of his job very seriously and really drove for not just the Sierra Club but for the environmental community in DC as a whole the adoption of technology, of computers, of fax machines. At one point, all the field reps of the Sierra Club, John went out to Radio Shack and got these little—they call them TRS-80, TR-80s, little tiny portable computers. Set up a dedicated email system. Put in a fax machine between San Francisco and DC.

02-01:17:12

Eardley-Pryor: And this is the early 1980s?

02-01:17:13

Sease: Yeah.

02-01:17:15

Eardley-Pryor: With an email system and computers?

02-01:17:18

Sease: Preceding the computers were word processors instead of typewriters. But I don't remember exactly when the TRS-80s came out, but it was the early eighties.

02-01:17:30

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

02-01:17:31

Sease: And the field reps had them. Then the Sierra Club had a dedicated—it wasn't email. It was called CC mail. I don't know what the CC was for, but it was a proprietorial email system. I think there are like 1500 Sierra Club people that were a part of it. John could probably tell you all about it.

02-01:17:54

Eardley-Pryor: But this technological innovation is something the Club, I think, has really not only prided itself on, but part of this other theme that you wanted to discuss, about the evolution and the continued success of the Club.

02-01:18:04

Sease: Yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah.

02-01:18:05

Eardley-Pryor: Being on the cutting edge of these technological innovations.

02-01:18:07

Sease: Yes. And John drove that for many years. The Sierra Club was way ahead of the best of the pack on that.

02-01:18:15

Eardley-Pryor: And even adopting fax machines at such an early stage.

02-01:18:17

Sease: Yes, yes.

02-01:18:19

Eardley-Pryor: You said there was a link between—back to the headquarters in San Francisco.

02-01:18:22

Sease: Yes. And maybe I have told you the story about Mike McCloskey and the fax?

02-01:18:27

Eardley-Pryor: I'd love to hear it.

02-01:18:29

Sease: You know Doug Scott, right? You've interviewed Doug?

02-01:18:31

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah [Ann Lage, at the Oral History Center, and Kent Gill conducted Doug Scott's oral history interviews in 1990 and 1993]. Doug was also in the DC office, is that right? Did he come in from the northwest to DC?

02-01:18:37

Sease: He came back and forth between the northwest and DC. He spent a lot of time in DC, but he didn't live there. But we had the fax machine. McCloskey needed something, needed to get something, an original, to DC for something, I think it was something for Secretary Andrus. I don't recall that for sure but I think it was sort of a high level thing. And it needed to happen that day. And so John said, "Well, fax it to me. The fax machine is in." I think it was in Doug's office or something. So McCloskey goes in. They put the paper in and—you know how the old fax machines went [clucking noise] as it went through? And they all wait patiently, and then McCloskey said, "It didn't work. The paper's still here."

02-01:19:36

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. As if it would just absorb it and send the paper.

02-01:19:42

Sease: Yes. It was like those automated change things in the old department stores.

02-01:19:48

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. That's great. That's a really good story. So John, not only was he helping innovate technologically for how the Sierra Club operated but then was also just, from the way you frame it, sounds like a really good guy.

02-01:20:03

Sease: Yes, he was a really good guy. I used to go into his office for periodic check-ins, and on his wall he had a poster which was a poster put out by some mental health organization. And I don't remember the details of it now, but it basically was this long narrow poster and it said, "If you see somebody struggling with somebody in life, don't just sit there. Help. Reach out a hand. Ask them." It was a pro-take care of mental health thing. And that was up in his office for as long as I worked with him. And he said, "Well, I've been the benefit of that, you know. When I was struggling with something, people reached out and helped me." And, again, that he would put that on his wall.

02-01:21:00

Eardley-Pryor: So, John was in charge at this time of the Sierra Club's DC office, and he was up through the mid-1980s. And then, over time, that became your role. You took on leadership of the Sierra Club's DC office.

02-01:21:17

Sease: Yes. Quite some number of years after that. Yeah.

02-01:21:20

Eardley-Pryor: What kind of things did you take from your first experience in the Club, as John's the head of that office, that informed your later leadership of the DC office?

02-01:21:31

Sease: Well, I took both positive things to do, and things not to do. And the positive was just the fact that John was so available and so engaged with staff and that he managed with a light hand. That he was a believer if you can't make mistakes without bad consequences you're never going to get good. So there was room to fail with John.

02-01:22:08

Eardley-Pryor: Why is that important?

02-01:22:10

Sease: Because if you are afraid to take chances, particularly in something that is as changing and where the odds of winning are pretty narrow, you're just never going to succeed. I will tell you a piece of advice that John gave me one time. It was when, I think, Secretary Lujan was the Secretary of Interior. He was from New Mexico. Republican. Not a really great guy but not nearly as bad as Watt. We had a press conference that was blasting the Department of Interior for something and our press secretary, when the Interior Department people came, wouldn't let them come into the press conference and barred the door from them. And so the Secretary's assistant called and just started ripping into

me. And I went to John. I said, "John, what do I say?" And he said, "Well, Debbie, it was a mistake for us not to let him in. You grovel. You just say that was totally unacceptable. I am so sorry." He said, "You make no excuse. You don't blame it on somebody else. You just apologize." And when you do that, when you totally capitulate and say, "You're absolutely right. That was utterly unacceptable, we should never have done that, I deeply apologize," they just can't say anything. It just takes all the wind out. But that was the kind of practical advice that John gave.

02-01:23:57

Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned some of the things that you took as things to do differently. What were some of those things?

02-01:24:03

Sease: Yeah. John could get very narrowly focused, very just absorbed in some details. Because he was the technology person, you know, I called him over when I was working on testimony on one of our early computers. We had shared computers that you would use. And I couldn't get something to happen. And I said, "John, I just can't get this." And he sort of shoves me out of my seat, sits down, pores into it, and then completely loses the document and I'm there for another four hours recreating it. Just a click here and a click there.

02-01:24:50

Eardley-Pryor: So the micromanaging, perhaps?

02-01:24:53

Sease: No, no. It's not that. It's that he would get so focused on something he would lose sight of everything. I mean he would just drill in. Whether it was you or whether it was the oddity of the computer and, well, let me just try this thing.

02-01:25:13

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, something that we've been kind of talking around but without going into too much detail, which I would like to do now, is the Sagebrush Rebellion and James Watt becoming Secretary of Interior under Ronald Reagan after 1981. And Rob Burford was the head of the BLM. Until I did some background research on this, and in talking with you in preparation, I had no idea that he was married to Anne Gorsuch, then at EPA.

02-01:25:44

Sease: Oh, yeah.

02-01:25:46

Eardley-Pryor: So DC is an incestuous town in some ways. But I'd love to hear you talk about the Sagebrush Rebellion, what that represented. And how you—in your role as an advocate for these public lands—thought about it and responded to it.

02-01:26:03

Sease: Okay. Well, Watt and the Sagebrush Rebellion happened at about the same time. They weren't necessarily related. But that dual attack on the public lands

literally put them on the map. Remember we started this conversation and I said when I first started working on BLM issues my very first job was to explain what the Bureau of Land Management was, what all those lands were. After James Watt went on the attack, after the Sagebrush Rebellion tried to get the country to divest themselves of all the public lands, that wasn't so much of an issue. It did actually get people's attention. So in some ways it made my job easier.

02-01:26:52

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, because there was more attention to BLM because of it?

02-01:26:55

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

02-01:26:57

Eardley-Pryor: Well, just on this point, I had always conflated in my mind the Sagebrush Rebellion and Watt, that he was part and parcel of it. And from what I'm hearing you say, these are two different things to think about. Is that right?

02-01:27:07

Sease: Well, Watt as Secretary of Interior came after the Sagebrush—Sagebrush Rebellion started in the seventies. Now, he was a lawyer with what was an inland institute.

02-01:27:25

Eardley-Pryor: Rocky Mountain something or other [Mountain States Legal Foundation].

02-01:27:26

Sease: Yeah. So, again, he was of them but it wasn't him being secretary that caused the Sagebrush Rebellion to suddenly loom large.

02-01:27:37

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. So he was just kind of a figurehead that represented that movement, but then in a powerful role as Secretary of Interior?

02-01:27:44

Sease: Well, and I would say more than a figurehead. I mean, the man had a philosophy that was, you know, deeply antithetical to land protection and land preservation.

02-01:27:53

Eardley-Pryor: So hearing you talk about it, that in some ways that made your job easier. In what ways did it make your job more difficult?

02-01:27:59

Sease: Oh, well, it made my job more difficult in that Watt was a little bit like Trump in the norms that he sort of blew past, in terms of his willingness to just open warfare on the public lands. There was no pretend that we're just going to nibble around the edges of this stuff. I mean he was really out to wholesale gut land protection. And I think he was a really dangerous guy. I can recall he

testified before the interior committee and one of the things he said is, "I am going to change the Department of Interior through the appropriations process, through the budgetary process." And he did. So Watt did not actually accomplish hardly any of the big policy things that he tried to do. They were so far overreached that they just got slammed down. They got thrown out in court. Blew up in his face. Got him fired. This is one of the things I wish I hadn't thrown away. But I had testimony, I used to testify on a regular basis to the appropriations committee and to the interior committee as they were putting together their budget requests for the federal agencies in their oversight role. And I did an analysis of what the Reagan Administration had done to the Bureau of Land Management through their budget process. And what they had done in a time of shrinking budget, they had shifted allocation between programs that permit, approve, develop, dispose of lands and commodities on the BLM and those budgets all grew during the Reagan years even though the overall budget was shrinking. And the budgets that are about planning, monitoring, evaluation, public involvement, protection, all shrunk. So at the end of the day the gap that had been created between the Bureau of Land Management funding to develop and dispose of its lands and the funding to protect and manage and plan for its lands was huge and Clinton came in in shrinking budgets and was never able to—you know, he did actually build up some of those accounts, but the gap, you couldn't close the gap. There wasn't enough resource. So the Reagan Administration did permanent damage to the land protection capacity of the Bureau of Land Management, and Watt warned the committee the first time he testified before them.

02-01:31:19

Eardley-Pryor: And that's exactly what happened.

02-01:31:21

Sease: Mm-hmm.

02-01:31:22

Eardley-Pryor: What about working with, or perhaps against, Bob Burford? What was your experience like with him as the head of the BLM under Reagan, or under Watt, I guess.

02-01:31:31

Sease: Well, I didn't personally, you know, meet with Burford and try to lobby him, but I did watch him testifying before Congress. And he would come across as just this sort of sleepy, no nothing. And I watched him in front of the interior committee say, "No comment," and "I'll have to get back to you on that." "I don't know," to an entire day of hearing. Never gave a substantive answer to the committee. So he was very slippery and good at not being pinned down.

02-01:32:10

Eardley-Pryor: Did that create any opportunities for lobbying on your behalf, to have somebody like that as a figurehead?

02-01:32:15

Sease: No. Actually, he was a very effective opponent because the Congress, you know, the committee had great people who would try to hold the BLM feet to the fire but if you can't get any answers, if you just—like I wouldn't engage with him. So he was a fairly effective bad director of the BLM.

02-01:32:44

Eardley-Pryor: I'm thinking about the atmosphere in Washington. Reagan sweeps into power in January of 1981, and there's some tension about that, especially in DC. It's a big shift. But then, in March of 1981, there's the assassination attempt on Reagan. I'm just wondering what it was like being in DC at that time, during that moment, and if you noticed any of the political winds shifting because of it.

02-01:33:09

Sease: I mean, I did notice the assassination attempt, but I don't recall having made any connections. But when Reagan was elected it was one of the first really big surprise disappointments of, "Oh, my God, how could this happen?" And Watt. But it also, for the Sierra Club, stimulated a massive grassroots buildup. It was very interesting. The Sierra Club for many years, most of its life that I've been with it, raised most of its money through direct mail solicitations. It had—right before Watt came onboard and started making front page news by attacking the environment—had decided to do this experiment with a direct mail house that vastly increased the number of pieces of membership mail we were sending out. And then that happened, and so those two things dovetailed and really created a spike in the Sierra Club's membership and its resources.

02-01:34:29

Eardley-Pryor: How did that then influence the work that you were doing?

02-01:34:32

Sease: Well, it meant that there was more money to spend to do stuff. But it also meant that there was more to defend. The Watt petition, which I participated in it because I worked for the Sierra Club, but this was a project of Doug's and Carl's, I believe.

02-01:34:57

Eardley-Pryor: Doug Scott and Carl Pope?

02-01:34:58

Sease: Yeah. Yeah. And they really, really drove it. But the million signature petition, the pictures on the front steps of the Capital, the really high visibility of taking a villain like that, and really elevating it, was a big change in terms of the grassroots perceived power and probably real power of the Sierra Club and of the community.

02-01:35:28

Eardley-Pryor: I would think it'd be exciting to be a part of that in DC at that time.

02-01:35:32

Sease: Mm-hmm. Yes, it was.

02-01:35:34

Eardley-Pryor: Well, it makes me wonder about the Club's DC office itself. At this time period when you joined the staff, in this early eighties time period, where was it and who was working there?

02-01:35:44

Sease: So when I first joined it, it was located on Pennsylvania Avenue across the street from a very famous bar called the Tune In, which is a funky old western bar with deer heads and deer tails on the walls and, you know, in the past a smokey interior that even after they banned smoking in bars, still carries that aura. Where members of Congress came down. In fact, it is the location—you mentioned the Sierra Club's Claw Awards, the Conservation Laborers Against Wrong, which was a tongue-in-cheek self-proclaimed union. It gave awards for stupid mistakes, sort of tongue-in-cheek awards. And Doug Scott won the first ever award in the category called, "Gee, Scoop, I didn't see you standing there," because he was having lunch one day in the Tune In, which has these booths that are fairly tightly packed, and he was waxing on about how bad Scoop Jackson was on something and, you know, "What we were going to do?" et cetera, et cetera. And as they get up to leave, turn around and Scoop Jackson's chief of staff is sitting behind him in the booth.

So any rate, across the street from the Tune In, on the second floor of a building that was owned by the Naval Lodge, a mason's group, and it's an old historic building. Really funky and rundown. And the masons have their meetings up on the third floor once a month and you would hear them and their chants and secret rites and such.

02-01:37:51

Eardley-Pryor: Their seances.

02-01:37:54

Sease: And, of course, there were cockroaches because there was a restaurant downstairs.

02-01:37:59

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, no. An interesting work environment.

02-01:38:02

Sease: Yeah. And so one of the things that John McComb was famous for was he left for vacation. He left a memo to the three male lobbyists of things that he wanted them to do while he was gone, which included cleaning the pigeon shit out of the air conditioner.

02-01:38:26

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

02-01:38:28

Sease: So while we were in that building, the staff grew enough to the point that there needed to be a bit more structure and internal management. And David Gardiner came on and ran the office, was the head of the office. And there were, I'd say, fifteen of us there at that time.

02-01:39:02

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, when David Gardiner was in charge?

02-01:39:06

Sease: Mm-hmm.

02-01:39:06

Eardley-Pryor: Is this after John had left, when John McComb had left? Or did David and John kind of co-manage the team?

02-01:39:12

Sease: So they overlapped for a bit and John focused more narrowly on some other stuff and David sort of took on the growing office. And then we decided that we needed to move out of that building and bought a building over close to the Senate side and moved into that building.

02-01:39:36

Eardley-Pryor: So, over on Capitol Hill?

02-01:39:38

Sease: Yeah. Well, Pennsylvania Avenue was close to the House on Capitol Hill. The building we bought was close to the Senate.

02-01:39:46

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

02-01:39:48

Sease: And David, I think he pulled together folks for a retreat and got a lot of feedback from the newer staff that they wanted a little more regular order and a little more sort of operational structure than what the office had. So when the office was John McComb and four lobbyists and a handful of support staff, it didn't have many operating procedures. Everybody did their thing. We worked together well. It was very collegial. Very cliquish.

02-01:40:35

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that?

02-01:40:40

Sease: Everybody knew everybody and was very confident, was very comfortable with how things were and didn't really notice that any newcomer might not feel so comfortable. So it was not deliberately non-inclusive, but it was by habit a very insular place.

02-01:41:07

Eardley-Pryor: When did that transition happen where there was more and more staff happening, to necessitate this move and then have that staff say, "We need a little bit more structure?" What time period are we talking about?

02-01:41:16

Sease: Well, we're talking about between '81 and '86, '87.

02-01:41:25

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. So, still through that Reagan period.

02-01:41:30

Sease: Yeah. And very gradual. But, you know, the DC office continued to grow. And you had asked earlier about women in the organization. I don't recall having felt slighted because I was a woman. And yet, one of my former staff who was there at the time, she was a receptionist, and she just came to an entry level job at the Sierra Club with a PhD in environmental science or something, because she wanted to be there. And eventually, she was the head of the lands department when I was running the DC office.

02-01:42:14

Eardley-Pryor: And who is this?

02-01:42:18

Sease: Melanie Griffin. And so, she had been promoted from receptionist through several different steps. But she recalls me getting very upset one time when NBC or PBS had called and they wanted a comment on something. And it was something that I was pretty familiar with and they were debating, "Well, you know, Tim doesn't know this much about it, Brooks isn't available." And it never occurred to them to actually ask the woman to do it. And we had all just done media training. And Melanie reminded me. And the three of them had completely blown it, and I had done a really good job. And so I just said, "Well, wait. Wait a minute. What am I, chopped liver?" I think I eventually did do the interview or do the callback. But, again, there was an automatic assumption that it was the boys that would do it. And apparently that was passive but prevalent.

So, at one point David Gardiner and I had gone out to Utah to meet with Utah activists on one of their many big coalition meetings to talk about what do we do with Utah wilderness. And on the flight back we took a redeye, and my idea of the ideal way to spend a redeye is sleeping. Find three seats and, you know. But David said, "Oh, let's sit together. I have some things I want to talk to you about."

02-01:43:57

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, not on an all-night flight. Come on, David.

02-01:44:00

Sease:

That's right. But what he proposed was that the office had gotten big enough that he did not feel like he could be the manager of all. I think there were like fifteen or seventeen people in the office, and he was the one manager. Everybody reported to him. And he asked me if I wanted to manage the public lands lobbyists. And I said, "Well, why are you suggesting it?" He said, "Well, you know, the Sierra Club is coming to a place where it values more the—" He said, "I'm not saying this to be rude," he said, "but the more feminine qualities that you have in contrast to some of the guys here." He said, "And as we get larger and more complex, those qualities are more valued."

02-01:44:54

Eardley-Pryor:

What do you think he meant by those qualities?

02-01:44:56

Sease:

Well, I think he meant that a little less competitive, a little less myopically focused on me and my agenda. A little more willing to pay attention to what the needs of the management of the office was. But I do recall not being completely thrilled at the idea of going from being a full-time person focused on this set of issues, to spending—at that point, I think I took on four direct reports as part of the lands team.

02-01:45:40

Eardley-Pryor:

And why were you not excited about that transition?

02-01:45:45

Sease:

Well, because I liked what I was doing and I had never managed staff. But I figured, you know, from people who had managed me well, it's not something you don't spend no time on. But I thought about it, and said, "Yeah, I'll do it."

02-01:46:04

Eardley-Pryor:

And why did you say yes then?

02-01:46:07

Sease:

Probably for the same reason that a few years later I competed for the job of being the head of the office. Because I'd rather do it than work for anybody that looked like they would do it instead of me, as I looked around.

02-01:46:25

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. What I'm hearing you say is, "I knew how to do it," and you knew how to do it well, and so might as well do it right.

02-01:46:34

Sease:

Well, it was a little bit more parochial than that. It was, "I will do it, and this other person or these other people who might be brought in to do it, I wouldn't want to work for them. I'd rather they work for me. I'd do better than they would, and my life would be better."

02-01:46:54

Eardley-Pryor: Well, you mentioned at the start of this that there were maybe four or so lobbyists. John McComb, you mentioned yourself. Who else was there in those early years, in those early eighties period?

02-01:47:06

Sease: Tim Mahoney. Blake Early who did clean air stuff. Jonathan [Jim] Elder, who's the owner of Bambi. I shared an office with him when I first came to work there.

02-01:47:31

Eardley-Pryor: You'll have to tell the story about Bambi on the record here, because I don't think we've spoken about that.

02-01:46:35

Sease: We've not spoken about Bambi. Well, when I first came into the office—again, I mentioned that it's this old antique building on the corner of Fourth and Pennsylvania near the House. And it was one of those big open spaces that partitions had been put up, and they didn't go all the way to the ceiling. So you could see the roofs of your cubicles in your little offices and then there was this vast lighting fixtures above. And I shared an office with the clean water lobbyist, a guy named Jonathan Elder. Or Jim Elder. Not Jonathan. Jim Elder. And Jim had this deer head, like an eight or nine point buck. You know, big well taxidermied deer head hanging in the office.

02-01:48:28

Eardley-Pryor: Nine point. That's a big buck.

02-01:48:33

Sease: It was big. And he said, "I hope you aren't one of those kind of people who mind hunting." You know, "Are you okay with this being here?" I said, "Yeah, it's totally fine." So after a year, he moved and he went on to another job somewhere, moved back south or something. And he asked me if I would keep Bambi, who he'd named this deer. And Jim had Bambi because his uncle bought Bambi in a pawn shop. So we have no idea who the actual hunter was. So just an artifact. And, you know, people used him as a hat rack and occasionally would put sunglasses on him. So when we moved from the very, very funky crowded little rat and roach infested to the new building that we bought, one of the things that David Gardiner tried to do was to sort of instill a new order of we're moving into a fancy building so, you know, we want to have things on the wall in frames, not just tacked up. And he said something about, "I don't think that we should bring Bambi with us."

02-01:49:49

Eardley-Pryor: What did you think?

02-01:49:53

Sease: I thought that things were getting altogether too straight laced and citified for me. I actually almost quit the Sierra Club over Bambi.

02-01:50:02

Eardley-Pryor: Really?

02-01:50:04

Sease: Yes. And, again, Bambi was just the metaphor. But we moved—

02-01:50:11

Eardley-Pryor: What did it represent?

02-01:50:12

Sease: It represented the non-corporate individual entrepreneur buckaroo, you know, we're all out here doing good things and you're just going to let us do our thing moment, as opposed to the "We've just moved into a fancy new building, and I'm going to tell you what you can put on your walls."

02-01:50:40

Eardley-Pryor: What was the fate of Bambi in this transition then?

02-01:50:44

Sease: [laughter] Well, so in the new office he said, "Well, a compromise. He can go in your office but not in the public space." So my office had a window that was at the top of the door height that was the whole front wall. It faced into the hallway. So I hung Bambi so that he was looking out that window into the public space.

02-01:51:15

Eardley-Pryor: [laughter] Technically not in the public space.

02-01:51:19

Sease: Yeah. So when we moved into our new office and it was time to move Bambi yet one more time. By that time, Melinda Pierce was the head of the lands team. I was under some pressure not to have a deer head in my office, because we had a hunter-angler program and then we had people who didn't believe in hunting. We were having this big fight internally about whether or not the Sierra Club would be anti-hunting. And so there was some pressure to not having Bambi hanging in the head of the office's office. So I asked Melinda if she wanted Bambi for the lands folks. And so she did the same thing I did with Bambi, which was hung him so he was looking out the window into the main thing. By that time, he came with a fair amount of paraphernalia. So he had hats, sunglasses, and he had—you know the kind of scarves that women of a certain age wear? There's a place in Paris that sells them. They're very expensive. Sort of elaborate scarf with lots of paisley pattern on the big square things that you fold. Well, I had done a presentation by invitation at the Naval College, and my little thank you gift was one of these scarves only with Navy insignia on it. So we tied that on Bambi's neck. It's really elegant.

02-01:52:59

Eardley-Pryor: I love the story of Bambi. There's something about it that also is reflective about how the Club is also evolving over time. Even from that first transition.

Each time it moves, there's some sort of representation about what the Club is up to at that moment.

02-01:53:16

Sease: Yes.

02-01:53:19

Eardley-Pryor: Before that move happens, it's a small tight-knit group, cliquish in a way. But it sounds to me like you were the only woman who was working in the Sierra Club's DC office.

02-01:53:29

Sease: Oh, no, I wasn't. For a while I was the only lobbyist, but by the time we moved, there were several others. And our political director was a woman.

02-01:53:41

Eardley-Pryor: Who was that?

02-01:53:44

Sease: Well, we had two. Rose Kapolczynski who was our political director for a while, and then Holly Schadler. Rose went on to be a political consultant who for many years ran Barbara Boxer's Senate campaigns and just retired from having a small political consulting biz. And then Holly Schadler became an election lawyer, big practice here in DC. She does our election law, electoral work.

02-01:54:21

Eardley-Pryor: I've heard you speak in a couple different ways about the role of women in the Club. For the most part I've heard you say, "I didn't really experience any kind of significant discrimination because of being a woman," and then at the same time there's these stories about the guys in the group not thinking of you as the expert to give a media delivery.

02-01:54:41

Sease: Right.

02-01:54:04

Eardley-Pryor: And so I'm wondering, what was that like? What was it like being a woman at the Club at this time period?

02-01:54:52

Sease: So to be honest, I did not feel it much. Part of that is that, in the rest of my life I had done a lot of stuff where I was an outlier. When I studied architecture, I was one of three women in the six-year program. All the rest were men. It wasn't a welcoming department for women. In hindsight, it bothers me a little bit, but at the moment it didn't touch me much. And occasionally I would get frustrated by something like the "I'm not going to think of you for the person who would do the interview." But it didn't bother me much. And it was relatively benign. So when I pushed back, it backed right down. So I think that there was sort of passive sexism, but not active.

02-01:56:04

Eardley-Pryor: That's good to hear.

02-01:56:07

Sease: And the Sierra Club has a lot of women leaders.

02-01:56:10

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

02-01:56:10

Sease: I mean, in their volunteer ranks, lots and lots. I would imagine, over the time I was with the Club, at least half of the volunteer presidents were women. Certainly some of the best of them were women.

02-01:56:23

Eardley-Pryor: Who do you have in mind? Who comes to mind when you think about that?

02-01:56:32

Sease: Well, I think about Allison Chin. I think about Robin Mann, both of whom did multiple terms. Boy, how quickly we forget names if we don't use them every day. Our most recent one, a woman from New York. We just had a great president.

02-01:56:56

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, Lauren Blackford?

02-01:56:57

Sease: Yes, Lauren Blackford.

02-01:57:00

Eardley-Pryor: What about other women who are on the volunteer side? I mean, the Sierra Club has long had women activists that are going on outings in the early 1900s. What about your relationship with the grassroots when you're trying to mobilize them? What role do you think being a woman played for you in that relationship?

02-01:57:23

Sease: I wasn't conscious of it being different because I was a woman. I certainly remember some of the women activists that I worked with being just extraordinary people. Judy Anderson, who, when we talk in more detail about the California desert, you know, she went out and took a class in cartography so that she could do the maps in a professional way. The official maps that are part of the legislative history of the California Desert Protection Act were drawn by Judy Anderson.

02-01:58:11

Eardley-Pryor: That's pretty amazing.

02-01:58:13

Sease: Yeah. And they're professional maps.

02-01:58:18

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here that in 1983, Maggie Fox joins the Sierra Club staff as the southwestern representative, the old job that John McComb had. And I know that you and Maggie developed this beautiful, rich friendship. I had such a great time talking with her, a couple different times, in advance of us doing your oral history together. Maggie's just a delightful person, in my limited experience.

02-01:58:44

Sease: Yes.

02-01:58:45

Eardley-Pryor: Tell me about your relationship with Maggie and her joining the Sierra Club staff in 1983. What was that like, and how did things evolve between the two of you?

02-01:58:55

Sease: Well, it was still very male dominated, the group of field reps and lobbyists, the core advocacy staff that would get together. And Maggie showed up at a meeting that McComb had organized of the whole field and a bunch of the lobbyists, and we just immediately hit it off. In terms of neither of us having a very high tolerance for being stuck in a bad meeting that had long since ceased to—has covered everything that needed to be covered, and to eat bad hotel food. And so, you know, we, I think, started our friendship by bailing on the meeting and going out and finding something good to eat. And then I take some responsibility for Maggie showing up a day-and-a-half late to her first meeting with the Utah Wilderness activists. And this again is—

02-02:00:03

Eardley-Pryor: Wait. What's the story on that?

02-02:00:05

Sease: Well, this is in the era before cellphones. I was coming out for this meeting and Maggie said, "Well, fly into Boulder. We're going to run the Dolores before the meeting, and you can join us. You run the Dolores, and then we'll just fly over to Utah from the takeout." Sounds great. So the Dolores is a little high. This is a river in Colorado. And I think her husband was rowing the raft, and we had two kayaks but he was taking a raft, and there's a rapid that piles into a wall. It's probably the hardest rapid on the river. And you just miss a stroke and you crash into the wall. And he crashed into the wall and broke an oar and lost an oar.

02-02:01:02

Eardley-Pryor: And wait, just for context, who is her husband?

02-02:01:05

Sease: Mark Udall.

02-02:02:09

Eardley-Pryor: Of the Udall family—

02-02:01:08

Sease:

At that time, he was not Senator Udall. He was just the head of Outward Bound in Colorado. So somebody who should have not gotten swept into the wall. But any rate, we broke an oar, which can happen. So we camped. And then Mark and Maggie paddled the kayaks out to get the car, come back, pick us up at an earlier takeout point and bring an oar for Mark to run. So it takes longer to get out than we anticipated, and so Maggie and I are rushing pell-mell for—I think it was Grand Junction, to try to catch a plane to Utah. And we were so close that we didn't stop to make a phone call and say, "Hey, we're running late," because we were already late. And this is in the days before security so, you know, we literally are running to the plane and, you know, pounding on the door for them to open it. But they will not open it, and it takes off. So then we decided, "Well, we can drive." So we drive all night, show up at the meeting the next day and, you know, the kind of anger that people have when they're worried and they think you're dead? So for about twenty-four hours, they had just thought, "They died on the Dolores. We've heard nothing from them." So Maggie shows up, it's her first meeting and she's late. I at least had a little bit of credibility built up. But they were very, very angry. And, you know, I was talking about the awards, the "Gee, Scoop, I didn't see you standing there." That next year Maggie got the Maggie Fox Time Management Award. [laughter]

02-02:02:58

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. One of the things that Maggie—

02-02:03:03

Sease:

But—

02-02:03:03

Eardley-Pryor:

No, go ahead.

02-02:03:04

Sease:

But Maggie and I were both really, really good friends. We have a very strong connection. But we also worked really closely together on a couple of things that mattered to us, and we each brought something to it that made it work. So we worked on federal reserve water rights and trying to make sure that, as wilderness areas were designated, that one of the things that was given away to get the designation wasn't the right to have water flow through them. Western water law is arcane and draconian, and it's very easy to lose the right to actually have the water.

02-02:04:02

Eardley-Pryor:

And you have this deep connection, too, of having these rafting experiences together, and then advocating on behalf of them.

02-02:04:09

Sease:

Yeah.

02-02:04:10

Eardley-Pryor: One of the things that really struck me from these great conversations I had with Maggie is just how much she loves you as a friend. The depth of your connection. And one of the things she framed as being so important is she said, "We both live our lives outdoors. We are not just people advocating for the environment, but that it's such a core part of who you are and being and experiencing the outdoors and to share that together." So I think that story you told about being late to the Utah meeting is right on the nose.

02-02:04:46

Sease: Yes. Well, and I can recall Maggie being back in Washington to lobby on something. She or I would say, "You know, we just need to go out to Great Falls and just scare ourselves witless and forget this." And we would occasionally do that. Not on Great Falls, below it, but—

02-02:05:13

Eardley-Pryor: That's perfect. Maggie's the one who actually told me about this imaginary union that you had referenced earlier, the CLAW Union, Conservation Laborers Against Wrong. Tell me a little bit more about what CLAW was, and what role it played in the staff of the Club.

02-02:05:34

Sease: Well, I think it was mostly tongue-in-cheek but it was also reflective of—one of the things about an organization that is so rich in volunteers who are so incredibly generous with their time and an organization that, in terms of priorities, never says no to anything. I mean, one of the things in the Sierra Club, if somebody comes to the Sierra Club and says, "Oh, I'd like to be a part of the Sierra Club but I work on, you know, short-nosed bats and you don't seem to—" "Well, here, let me give you some money and you can start a committee on short-nosed bats." That resulted in a situation where sometimes staff felt like they were pushed hard and taken for granted and not given the kind of attention and things that, if you're going to have a lifetime career at a place, you sort of need somebody paying attention to you. So the Sierra Club, when I first started working for it, didn't have a retirement plan. And eventually it took those things on, but a lot of what the Sierra Club took on in terms of treating its employees well happened after it got a real union that bargained for those things. So the tongue-in-cheek union was partly a forum for making fun of one's self and one's foibles and management and sometimes volunteers. But it was also, I think, a manifestation of a staff that was taken for granted.

02-02:07:41

Eardley-Pryor: Once the real union did form, and there were some of these benefits that were demanded and then earned and taken, what role do you think something like CLAW would play in the Club today?

02-02:07:57

Sease: So CLAW, I think it's demise came from two things, neither of which had anything to do with the real union. One was that a new CEO thought that an

annual celebration and a meeting, you know, a party, a group that's idea of giving itself awards was tongue-in-cheek, awards for messing up, stupid things—he took it very literally and hated it. And he made—

02-02:08:38

Eardley-Pryor: Who are we talking about?

02-02:08:40

Sease: We're talking about Brune.

02-02:08:42

Eardley-Pryor: Okay.

02-02:08:43

Sease: He just thought it was sick that the group would get together and give itself awards for screwing up. And I think Carl felt that way a little bit and had sort of tried to manifest these staff awards that paralleled the volunteer awards. And, you know, both of them may have been right that it was a little sick. But the thing that probably really killed it was the Sierra Club grew really exponentially, and the small group that knew all the history and had the experience and, you know, knew what punchlines to laugh at didn't ever figure out how to be inclusive with a whole bunch of new people, and they just felt left out. And so it became a part of the Sierra Club's not being inclusive. Again, and this is not just about people of color but just new staff.

02-02:09:55

Eardley-Pryor: That seems—

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Sease: So it tried to put some sort of rituals in place to bring them in, but it was a manifestation of a particular scale and type of operation, and it didn't really fit with a larger, different Sierra Club. So those of us who were part of it can continue to be amused by it, but I don't necessarily mourn its passage.

02-02:10:24

Eardley-Pryor: That's great context to have. There are a few other topics that we can get into. Let me just pause here for a moment. We can recoup where we're at.

[pause in recording]

All right, Debbie. So we'll reconvene tomorrow and continue our discussions, but let's just pause for today.

02-02:10:49

Sease: Okay, great. Good talking with you.

02-02:10:49

Eardley-Pryor: It's always great talking to you. Thank you for your great stories today.

02-02:10:53

Sease: Okay, bye-bye.

02-02:10:54

Eardley-Pryor: All right. Bye-bye.

Interview 3: November 18, 2020

03-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor: Today is Wednesday, November 18, 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. This is interview session number three with Debbie Sease as a part of the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Debbie, where are you today?

03-00:00:21

Sease: Roger, I am on a ridgetop in the Shenandoah Valley between two bends of the north fork of the Shenandoah River at a cabin that my husband and I own.

03-00:00:34

Eardley-Pryor: Wonderful. And I am currently in Sonoma County, California and we are recording over Zoom, in part because of the global pandemic that continues to unfold amidst other crazy things unfolding in the world. Today for interview session three I thought we could pick up on your early engagement in DC in the early to mid-1980s as a lobbyist on behalf of the Sierra Club, and talk specifically about how you learned processes for moving legislation forward around an omnibus parks and rivers package. What was this, and what did you learn from it?

03-00:01:15

Sease: The omnibus parks and rivers bill was a major piece of legislation that Phil Burton—who was a California congressman, who just happened to get on the National Parks subcommittee of the Interior Committee in the House—introduced. He was a very close friend of Dr. Ed Wayburn and Peggy Wayburn. Ed Wayburn lobbied him and said, "Phil, while you're in that position you need to protect more land, you need to protect more parks and rivers." And Phil said, "Well, tell me what to do and I'll go do it." And he decided to put together a massive package from coast-to-coast of new park designations, national park expansions, historic sites, national wild and scenic river designations. And he worked with the local members of Congress and put together this massive package. It had multiple units in every state in the country and it was this behemoth of legislation. It was, by its opponents and sometimes by its proponents, called Park Barrel. You've heard of pork barrel legislation that is about the money. Well, this was a park barrel legislation. And Phil Burton was the master of the legislative package. There's a famous story of him sitting down with a California congressman who—Phil wanted to designate, put some areas that were in his district in the package and the congressman said, "My constituents don't like that. People down there by it, don't like it." And Phil said, "Well, your constituents in LA like it." He said, "I know, but they're not near it." He picks up a map, he pointed. He says, "Look where the f-ing votes are. This is what you do." The guy eventually capitulated.

03-00:03:18

But the issue that I worked on in that package in particular—I worked on a bunch of things, but the one that was really close to my heart was the Rio Grande River through Big Bend in Texas. It went through Big Bend and then out of the park and along the big bend of the Texas-Mexico border.

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Eardley-Pryor: Now, you had told me earlier about an early outdoor wilderness trip you led while you were leading that University of the Wilderness based in Colorado.

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Sease: Yes.

03-00:03:52

Eardley-Pryor: And one of them went down to Texas. Had you traveled that river?

03-00:03:54

Sease: Yes, we did that section of the river several times as part of a trip so I knew the river well and it is an amazing resource. It's a really long, long river. Not very difficult whitewater but incredible wilderness. Both sides of the canyon, just miles and miles of empty wide-open space, stars like you've never seen anywhere else in the lower forty-eight. It's an amazing resource. And it was beginning to get quite a bit of use from recreation. It had no protection once it left the park. And Phil Burton had not included it in his package because of opposition of the local congressman. And I worked with the Austin group of the Sierra Club to get support and to put pressure on that member of Congress. But I also worked really closely with Phil Burton's staff and they were an amazing team of people. And, I mean, they would literally tell me who I needed to lobby, what I needed to do, what the most effective argument was—how Congress worked.

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And so I will never forget the very first markup—this is when a committee or a subcommittee takes a draft piece of legislation and they consider it and they maybe make amendments to it, they discuss different parts of it. They vote and then they pass it through the committee. So I had gone to the markup for this big bill that was going to have the river included in it. And I don't know if you've ever seen a picture of Phil Burton, but he was a large sort of Winston Churchill-esque man. He had these gigantic bushy eyebrows that he would sort of wiggle as part of his facial signature. And so he's sitting up there with a gavel. He has staff behind him. There are a couple of Republicans to the left of him and no other Democrats. I mean it's just him and his staff. And he mumbles something and the Republicans sort of make a point and he mumbles something more. Slams the gavel down and says, "Passed." I [didn't yet understand] what happened. So I go in and talk to the staff afterwards, and they said, "Well, he had all the proxies."

03-00:06:31

Eardley-Pryor: Wait. What does that mean?

03-00:06:33

Sease: It means that in that particular subcommittee you could vote by proxy and Phil had collected all the proxies of all the Democrats, and the Democrats outnumbered the Republicans. And so it was just a pro forma exercise.

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Eardley-Pryor: So he's just kind of nodding his head as they're all mumbling and then passes the matter anyways.

03-00:06:51

Sease: Yeah. The other story I recall about Phil Burton, which is not necessarily relevant to the work, but he had called in a bunch of environmentalists one evening after the congressional day was done to meet with he and his staff and talk about strategy. And as everybody sat down—it's, you know, after five o'clock, and Phil Burton was a notorious drinker. He usually had a big water glass beside him that was about half-full of gin. And so he turns to his staff and he says, "Bring me a drink." And he says, "And get these folks whatever they would like." There were like eight or nine of us. And Judy Lemon was the staff person. She said, "What can I get you to drink?" And, you know, three people said water. And you could just see him, his eyebrows sort of glowering together. And somebody said a coke. And he'd offered bourbon, and I said, "I'll have a bourbon." I was the only one that took him up on the alcoholic beverage. And you could see his smile. And she brings me a Burton-size glass half full of bourbon. I mean, I tried to just, you know, discreetly sip and not look like I was not doing anything with it, but at the end of that meeting I have to say I sort of staggered out the office. But in an odd sort of way, it made me normal to him, that I wasn't some uptight enviro-lobbyist. So Judy afterwards said, "That was a very smart move to take that bourbon, Debbie."

03-00:08:36

Eardley-Pryor: Great. There is a story I've heard about a statue of Burton in San Francisco.

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Sease: Yes, yes.

03-00:08:44

Eardley-Pryor: There's a deeper story behind something around that statue. What is that?

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Sease: The story is what the statue has in the pocket. There's a note that peeks out of the pocket and in the statue you can read the top part of the notes and it says, "When you're dealing with exploiters," and then the rest of it's hidden. But the rest of that quote was, something that Burton actually said fairly frequently, was that "When you're dealing with exploiters, first you have to terrorize the bastards." So in the park in San Francisco, there is a statue of Burton that's very majestic looking and then you can see that little top part of the note and sort of the insider story. And, of course, anybody who's read his biography, it's in there, as well. But the insider story is what the rest of the note says.

03-00:09:37

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. And so share, if you would, a little bit more about learning how legislative processes happen and what that staff relationship was with you and you understanding how DC operated.

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Sease: Right. Well, I mean, I was a complete newbie and did not have a lot of legislative experience under my belt. And these were staff that, instead of being standoffish and expecting me to know everything, would just tell me the lay of the land. They would tell me what was going to happen next, what kinds of support, who needed to be lobbied, who would be responsive to some grassroots pressure, what Burton was looking for. Because he wasn't necessarily looking for the same kind of support across the board as some other chairmen might. So they were very knowledgeable about the politics. They were knowledgeable about the substance and they knew what needed to be done by the advocates.

03-00:10:46

Eardley-Pryor: And how did you take that, then, to inform your work with the Austin Sierra Club Chapter?

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Sease: Well, it was clear that the only reason that Burton hadn't included their section of river that they wanted in the Bill was that the local congressman was saying, "No, I don't want it in there." And he needed grassroots pressure. And so the local activists put together a petition. They hand delivered it at his district office. They did press. I say it was a hand delivered petition from citizens, but the Austin group included a fair amount of high-profile Democratic politicians and they worked their local political network, as well. So they basically created a situation where this member of congress did not want to be on the wrong side of this. And I was able to take that into Burton and Burton used that with the member of Congress to say, "I'm sticking your river in here now."

03-00:11:53

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. This work that's happening around this Park Barrel project, as you named it, is also happening while all the BLM wilderness designation work is still ongoing. Is that right?

03-00:12:07

Sease: Yes, yes. So the BLM designation and study work was an extended administrative process that had different products that describe different parts of the process, extended comment periods after each of those products, implementation of those products. So it was not something where there was just this rush to a final decision. It spanned quite a number of years.

03-00:12:37

Eardley-Pryor: Well, and I'd love to hear you talk about the story around designating the first BLM managed national monument. The way it's pronounced, or at least the

way it's written, El Malpais. But probably spoken differently in the colloquial area.

03-00:12:57

Sease:

In the local community of Grants, it's called El Malpais [sounds like El Mal-pie, but usually pronounced el-mal-pie-EES].

03-00:13:01

Eardley-Pryor:

So, El Malpais, it seems, you were involved in creating this new legislative model and having the BLM manage its first national monument? What's the story around creating El Malpais and your work in it?

03-00:13:16

Sease:

[After my interview, I reviewed the legislative history and realized I had misremembered this while recording. I did pitch a BLM-managed national monument, but at the end of the day opposition to the concept resulted in a package that included a smaller 114,000-acre NPS unit and a larger 262,000-acre BLM managed National Conservation Area.]

Well, this was something that the newly elected member of Congress, Bill Richardson, was interested in. The community of Grants—to step back a moment, the El Malpais was a very large, extensive, mostly untouched, recent—recent as in hundreds of years, not in decades—lava flow. So in some ways, there's not a lot of user conflicts in a recent lava flow. It's glass, sharp rocks, tubes. Beautiful, but it doesn't lend itself to farming and anything you would want to mine is covered up pretty thickly. There's a little bit of grazing in the little holes that the lava went around but, again, it's not a lot of resource conflict. But the small western town of Grants probably wasn't that interested in a wilderness designation that was just going to basically say, "Nobody can take vehicles in here. We're going to lock it up and throw away the key."

03-00:14:31

But every small western community would love what they call a brown sign coming into town, which is—the park unit signs are brown with white lettering. Big tourist attraction. So they were quite interested in a national park. There was a conflict over whether or not, as BLM began to identify very special areas, whether or not the crown jewels were basically just going to be sucked up, given to the Park Service, leaving the BLM to manage the things that are for livestock and grazing. There was a counter philosophy and one that I shared that BLM had so many crown jewels that you weren't going to take them all away and that you actually needed to build the capacity in the agency itself to take care of those lands because if you tried to rob it of all the good stuff, that you would be left with an aptly referred to Bureau of Livestock and Mining, where the things that were left behind that needed protection, the agency wouldn't have the will or capacity to give it. So there was quite a debate within the community of organizations, members of Congress that cared, and the agency about that very issue.

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Eardley-Pryor: What's the other side of that argument?

03-00:15:57

Sease: The other side of that argument is that the Bureau of Land Management hasn't shown the capacity to truly protect resources. So if it's managing something special, you ought to give it to the Park Service and let it get managed right. So I don't know whether a bill was actually introduced but certainly there was a contemplation of a national park designation for the Malpais. And it was meeting with various controversy from different places. And my recollection, and I'm a little fuzzy on this, on the actual context, but my recollection is that I actually came up with a proposal and pitched it to Seiberling and to Bill Richardson, of why not make it a national monument that BLM stays the manager of and that that would have the impact of creating a new higher level of management of the BLM. It would mandate them to manage something with park-like qualities. It would avoid some of the conflicts that national park management designation brings, the hunting issue. Because hunting wasn't really a problem in the El Malpais and stopping it was going to create a huge conflict. Letting it continue in a national park would be a bad precedent.

03-00:17:34

So at any rate, it just seemed to accomplish a bunch of things. I advocated for that. Seiberling liked it. Bill Richardson liked it. The BLM liked it a lot. It was controversial within environmental groups. I actually think some of the park proponents, like the National Parks and Conservation Association was pretty down on the idea because they felt that to call something else a monument that wasn't managed by the Park Service would tarnish the label. And to be honest, I don't recall whether it was called something besides the monument in the final legislation. I think it was called the BLM National Monument, just as the later ones in the Grand Staircase Escalante that were designated by Clinton were called monuments.

03-00:18:38

Eardley-Pryor: It seems like there's a shift that happens. And maybe this is that shift, where there are fewer national parks getting designated but there are national monuments that function similarly, that are designated almost in place. Is that accurate or no?

03-00:18:55

Sease: Well, it's not inaccurate, but it's not big enough to be called a shift. So the monuments that the Park Service manage, they came to be monuments because of how they were created. They were created under the Antiquities Act and as such they were called national monuments. The monuments that Clinton created, again under the Antiquities Act, were called monuments for that reason. The El Malpais, I think, was one of the monuments that was a legislatively designated monument.

03-00:19:34

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

03-00:19:36

Sease: But creating new park units that hadn't been managed by the Park Service before and would be, was a very heavy lift. If it was of existing public land, the existing public land agency, whether it was the National Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management, fought tenaciously to hang on to the management of what they considered the things that they were most proud of in their portfolio, of lands and they didn't want the Park Service to take it over. If it was from private lands—you know, the last few of those were the Shenandoah National Park and the Blue Ridge Parkway, hugely controversial in the way that that private land was condemned.

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Eardley-Pryor: Why so?

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Sease: Because when they created the Shenandoah National Park there were people living there and the federal government came in using—I think it was the Corps of Engineers, condemned the land and purchased it for fair market value and took it away. Kicked them off.

03-00:20:48

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

03-00:20:49

Sease: And these were mountain people, and Appalachians. They did not want to lose that land. If you look at the documentary that Ken Burns did on the national parks, it was that section. It was really very illuminating. And some of that hostility to the National Park Service over that fed into how the Sagebrush Rebellion played in the east. Whoops. Hang on one second. I just dropped our recording device. It still seems to be going.

03-00:21:30

Eardley-Pryor: So that Shenandoah National Valley and Blue Ridge Parkway designation, that process happened in the eighties? [Designation of Shenandoah National Valley, and the start of construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway were both in the mid-1930s.]

03-00:21:36

Sease: Oh. Wasn't it earlier than that?

03-00:21:39

Eardley-Pryor: Or in the seventies?

03-00:21:40

Sease: Seventies?

03-00:21:41

Eardley-Pryor: That was part of the Sagebrush Rebellion though?

03-00:21:43

Sease: Yeah. Well, no. What I'm saying is that that having preceded, that left a bad taste and the Sagebrush Rebellion tapped into that animosity.

03-00:21:53

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

03-00:21:54

Sease: But the Sagebrush Rebellion was not contemporaneous with the Shenandoah National Park.

03-00:22:02

Eardley-Pryor: I see. Go back to this point we were just talking about earlier, of whether something becomes a national park versus being designated as a national monument. What I heard you say is there's not a shift that happens in that process, even though we haven't had a lot of new national parks but we have had new national monuments designated. So I guess I'm just wondering was there a shift that happened earlier to then, or later maybe under Clinton, where it was almost decided national parks wouldn't be created?

03-00:22:36

Sease: Well, I don't think that there was a decision that national parks wouldn't be created. But when a president uses the Antiquities Act to create a national monument, he can say this is going to be managed by the National Park Service, he can say it's going to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management or the Fish & Wildlife Service or the Forest Service. The easiest thing to do if you are taking a very large chunk of Bureau of Land managed—currently managed land and you make a monument is to actually have that agency continue to manage it under regulations geared to protect it as a monument. That was a controversial thing because there wasn't faith that the BLM would do it. So there was a lot of folks who were saying that the Grand Staircase Escalante Monument that Clinton designated was actually robbing the Park Service of something that should have gone to them and was—you know, there were longstanding proposals for parks, national parks within that area. They would not have been as large. There would have been a little donut within it. There were some people who said, "Well, we ought to do those and then we should surround it with a BLM monument."

03-00:24:00

But that was something that Bruce Babbitt—Bruce Babbitt believed in landscape scale protection and he believed that the agency that could bring that in the west was the Bureau of Land Management, and he believed in investing in the Bureau of Land Management so that they have the capacity and the will to do that kind of land management.

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Eardley-Pryor: And Babbitt, just for his background, he was the former governor of Arizona?

03-00:24:32

Sease: Mm-hmm.

03-00:24:33

Eardley-Pryor: Before getting tapped by Clinton to become the Secretary of Interior.

03-00:24:35

Sease: Right.

03-00:24:37

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds like, I would think, the precedent of El Malpais being BLM managed national monument, even though that wasn't through the Antiquities Act, there was at least precedent there to say, "BLM can do this, they already do this. Escalante should be a BLM national monument." Did the precedent of El Malpais play any role in encouraging these national monuments to maintain their management under the existing bureau?

03-00:25:07

Sease: I don't know if it did specifically. I had forgotten if it did. But obviously it would be a factor. They had been successfully managing a monument already.

03-00:25:20

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned with the El Malpais story, at that time, New Mexican congressman Bill Richardson. What was it like working with him and his staff on some of these issues, with El Malpais or even as he continued to evolve with his career in Washington, DC?

03-00:25:38

Sease: Well, Bill Richardson was a genuine character. He had a huge amount of street smarts and parlayed that into success in an amazing way. He was—probably not going to be heard for a long time—he was intellectually lazy and was accustomed to getting by on luck and good timing. He was pushing the El Malpais bill. He didn't show up for the markup and he was on the committee. And but for the leadership and the kindness of John Seiberling, that would have been a complete disaster. So working with him was always a little bit of a fast ride. My father used to say of some people that they were larger than life and twice as loud. Well, that was Bill Richardson. And so it was amazing to me in later years to see Bill Richardson become a self-started ambassador and peace negotiator. But he was parlaying that same sort ofchutzpah and charm and good luck. So, I mean, he cared about these things. He also cared about the accolades that came to him for doing them. one time I was sitting in on a meeting with he and his staff person and they got into an argument and it was like being in the middle of a lover's quarrel. And I'm sitting there on this couch thinking, "Oh, my God, can I get any smaller? Can I just disappear into the woodwork? Because they're going to wake up in a minute and they're going to realize that I'm sitting here witnessing this." So working with Bill Richardson was an amusing experience.

03-00:27:53

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note that among the other BLM conservation work that's happening as part of your advocacy is conservation of San Pedro, Gila Box, Red Rock Canyon. Do any of these stories, or any of these places have special significance for you?

03-00:28:12

Sease: Well, the San Pedro in particular is an example of one of the things that—it felt at the time, and sometimes in looking back on it, that I spent an inordinate amount of time agonizing over and fighting over what could be considered really small stuff.

03-00:28:32

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

03-00:28:33

Sease: Well, I will tell you. The San Pedro is a river. It's a little desert, what we call a riparian river. So in the desert, when you have a waterway, it creates a little ribbon of—a different ecosystem of green and wildlife. And it's a riparian area. And the San Pedro in Arizona was just such a riparian area. Incredibly beautiful. Rich in bird life and other wildlife. Plants and animals that are not found anywhere else in the country. And all dependent on that water that is there. So one of the fights that was going on at the time that the San Pedro was being designated was an issue of—when an area is set aside for a purpose, like the San Pedro National Conservation Area, is there an implication that, at the same time that Congress makes that designation, that it's also reserving a water right for that area?

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So the notion of federal reserve water rights is something that has been very hard fought for many, many decades. It first came up in the courts with an Indian reservation. In the west, water is allocated for use and the person who has the right to use it is the first person who used it. And so it's called an appropriations doctrine of water rights. In the east, it's where it flows. But in the water strapped west, it's about who used it first and struck a claim to it. So the way water is used in the west, of being drained out of rivers and going in to irrigate fields or give communities drinking water or whatever, if an area didn't have a right to water, then somebody could come in and pipe the water out and rob the park or the wilderness or the special place of water that are integral to the purposes for which it was designated. So the theory that was won in court was that even if Congress doesn't expressly designate a water right, when they make a designation, they are implying a federal reserve water right at the time of designation.

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So this had become a big fight in Colorado. I worked with Maggie [Fox] on a bunch of legislation where that was the fight and it was a real fight in those places. It was a wilderness area in Colorado where the city of Denver wanted to put a soda straw up at the top, drain the river that goes through the

wilderness dry, and pump the water to Denver. So whether or not the Holy Cross Wilderness could exert that it actually had a preexisting water right to what Denver wanted to do was really hugely important.

03-00:31:57

Eardley-Pryor: Did you say this issue came up first around Native American water rights?

03-00:32:03

Sease: It did. I've forgotten what the tribe was, but they basically said when this reservation was established the Congress would have implied water for us to use, otherwise we couldn't survive here. And they won. And so an Indian Reservation on—I don't know whether it was the Platte or some other river, ended up with a water right. And then it was applied to other federal reservations. So there was about a decade-plus in Congress when Congress was trying to pass bills that would deny and undermine that concept of a federal reserve water right. So even in bills where there was a wilderness that didn't have any water or it was all upstream and there was no other previous existing water right, there was an attempt by the Republicans in Congress to stick in water rights language that they hoped to have become standard, which would deny a federal right—so, in Congress, a precedent. Once you've done something once, it's really hard to have it not happen again. So the thing that you want to guard against is doing something once where it doesn't matter and you can say, "Hey, no skin off my back. I'm going to do this," and then that is used as a precedent to apply it someplace where it does matter.

03-00:33:28

Eardley-Pryor: Little things that seem like they shouldn't matter much, can matter a whole lot.

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Sease: Yeah. Yes. Yeah. And water rights was a classic example of that. That the Republicans would go to an area, didn't have a river, didn't have a drop of water, and they wanted to say, "Hey, well, we just want to clarify for the record that there's no federal reserve water right here." But if they succeed in doing that, it would make it very hard the next time you designated a wilderness. They'd say, "Well, now, this is standard boiler plate language. We always deny a federal reserve water right."

03-00:34:01

So on the San Pedro, there was a fight over whether or not the San Pedro was entitled to a water right at the time of the designation of this. And we came up with some compromise language that limited it to the purposes for which it was designated, but we did in fact preserve the federal water right there.

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Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

03-00:34:27

Sease: And a funny lesson that I learned from that work. So I've told you more than you probably ever wanted to know about federal reserve water rights.

03-00:34:37

Eardley-Pryor: No, this is great.

03-00:34:37

Sease: And I know more about federal reserve water rights than any non-lawyer should know, because it's a really esoteric subject. But I am not a water lawyer and there is a whole lot to know. So I was going to testify before the Senate Energy Committee on the San Pedro. And Maggie had originally been going to be coming in and doing this, because we were anticipating the federal water rights were going to be a huge issue. She was a lawyer, she was a water rights expert. But she couldn't make it at the last minute, so I was the one doing the testimony. So I had prepped. I had read everything a gazillion times. I mean, I was just so steeped in the details of the federal reserve water right.

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So I do my testimony and I finish, and Senator Dale Bumpers, who is from Arkansas and the chairman of the committee, a wonderful man, leans forward and he says, "Now, Debbie, can you tell me, where does the water in the San Pedro come from?" And I looked at him blankly and I said, "Groundwater? Rain? Not much from snow melt. You know, it comes from springs." He said, "No, I mean where does it flow from? Does it flow from Mexico or to Mexico?" And I thought to myself, "I have no clue, but how many rivers in the United States flow south to north?" So I said, "I think from Arizona to Mexico." And three staff are sitting behind him, one, Tony Benvenuto, that is the minority staff who I told you came over and lectured us on how to be an effective minority. And they're all shaking their heads. So I eventually say, "Well, perhaps I'll get back to you on the record on that." But indeed the San Pedro flows from Mexico to the United States. And it was a relevant question, because how do you actually protect the water right where the water's flowing in from another country? But it was an object lesson to me that I shared with many a volunteer lobbyist and volunteer who was testifying, is never fake it. Never try to guess. Just say, "I'll get back to you on the record with that."

03-00:36:57

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. When I got the chance to speak with Maggie Fox, in preparation for speaking with you, she celebrated your ability to testify. "A lot of different strengths in different people, but Debbie's ability just to go and testify on behalf of a certain piece of legislation was unmatched." And so I wanted to ask you about that. What was your process and what is it that you're trying to do when you're testifying?

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Sease: Oh, well, that's very funny you should say that, because I would say Maggie did a better job of testifying before Congress than anybody I have ever witnessed. You asked about Malcolm Wallop earlier. Maggie was there testifying. I think it may have been on the Holy Cross Wilderness and the water issue. But Wallop had been through—back up a little bit. If you're the enviro witness before the Senate Energy Committee, you are almost

guaranteed to be the very last panel. And maybe the last witness. And by the time you testify, only the chairman or somebody who is substituting for the chairman will be there and the rest of the dais will be empty. So the government elected officials, the opposition, all came before you. So Maggie is there. It's been a long day and Wallop has listened to absolutely nobody, particularly not the opponents. And Maggie, I don't know if you noticed on your phone conversation with her, but she's very soft spoken. And she sort of leans forward into the microphone, and she puts her notes down. She looks Malcolm Wallop in the eye, and she talks to him. For the three minutes, that is her testimony. He puts down his papers. He makes eye contact, and hangs on every word she says and has a conversation with her.

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So the secret to testifying, and I think Maggie actually did a far better job of it than I did, is to realize you've got three minutes. There's a flashing set of lights, Christmas bulbs of green, yellow, and red. And when the red light comes on you'd better already have shut up because the chairman will cut you off. But everything complicated you want to say is in your written statement that has gone into the record. And that to take three minutes in front of a committee, even if it only has one or two members of Congress and some staff, and read your statement of what's already in the record is just wasting three minutes. So the first rule is summarize your statement. Ideally, even if you can't not read, write a separate one for your oral statement so that you are not giving them what they've got in front of them. And, you know, to practice. Now, while that was my theory, there was a period of time when I was working with Maggie pretty closely on preparing the testimony because it was about the esoteric federal reserve water rights issue. And Maggie is amazing and wonderful and one of the things that she does is she promises to do more than she can possibly do in any given period of time. So every time that Maggie helped me with testimony, the testimony that she gave me arrived, at the earliest, the morning I was going to testify and at the latest somebody brought in her paragraphs to me as I was sitting waiting for my turn to testify. So I had a lot of impromptu stuff of stuff that I worked with Maggie on.

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Eardley-Pryor: Those are great stories. Where did you learn how to do testifying and how to really know what the purpose of that moment was?

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Sease: Part of it is by going to hearings and seeing what the members of Congress react to, seeing what good witnesses deliver. So, you know, watch people who are good at it and learn from that. Watch the members and see what they react to. So I attended a lot of hearings before I testified at my first one.

03-00:41:26

Eardley-Pryor: I have another note here about designating wild rivers. A couple of them that come up, and I don't know if this was part of this big bill that you had mentioned already that Phil Burton helped push through. But some of the

rivers that got wild river designation included the Rio Chama in New Mexico by the Chama River Canyon and the Rio Grande, the Merced River, the Verde River in Arizona. Do any of those places spark any memories for you?

03-00:41:58

Sease:

The Merced does in particular. Those were actually not in the omnibus bill, except for the Rio Grande in Texas. The rest of them were separate wild scenic river bills. And the memory that the Merced strikes for me is one of my first environmental interests was fighting dams on rivers. And there was a dam fighter saying that you have to win a dam fight hundreds of times, you can only lose it once. And so the Merced River, people had been fighting to protect it from being dammed for irrigation water in the Central Valley, I assume, for a long time. And they really, really wanted to get some permanent protection in the Merced. There was a local group, Friends of the Merced, that had been working on it forever. And I just think about the literally decades, multiple years of cycles of Congress, of getting somebody to introduce a bill, having it go nowhere, fighting. Both fighting the ground battle of keeping the dam at bay and fighting for the positive protection. And I was going through some papers recently, as I was clearing out my office, and I found a thank you note from the head of the local organization that was fighting it. It was a thank you note that was congratulating me on my promotion to legislative director and telling me how much they appreciated my help when they were fighting on that river. It was gracious, and it was a reminder of the incredibly good people that I worked with, and it was a reminder of what a great job I was leaving to go to the legislative director job.

03-00:44:00

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. When you're doing this work for these particular lands, you're in DC and advocating on behalf of them. And some of these places you talked about having a personal connection to, having been there, having run the river before. When another piece of land comes up that you aren't as familiar with, what's your process in learning about it?

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Sease:

Well, one of the things I try to do first off is figure out which way the river flows. This is a self-serving thing, but I always tried to actually do a field trip and see the place first-hand. Frequently that didn't happen until well into the battle and sometimes after the battle was over. But by and large, I relied on the knowledge of the people on the ground. I don't think I worked on a single piece of wilderness or wild land preservation that I was not working in partnership with local staff and volunteers. So I didn't actually need to know anything about them myself.

03-00:45:16

Eardley-Pryor:

And that speaks to that theme that you have brought up again, it's occurred throughout your oral history, but the power and the resilience of the Sierra Club, and the wisdom of crowds and the power of grassroots. That's great. I have a note here that there was some work that you did in the 1980s with

regards to the MX Nuclear Missile, and I don't know what the Sierra Club would be doing with regard to the MX Missile debates in the eighties. What was your role in that?

03-00:45:48

Sease:

Well, let me tell you—back up a little bit from my role. My role was to advocate against the bill that would have allowed the MX Missile to be funded and sited. But the reason the Sierra Club was involved in that was twofold. The first is that if you're going to put in an MX Missile system, you're not going to put it in the suburbs of LA. You're going to put it in a big, vast, open wildlands managed by the Bureau of Land Management. So you go to some empty open space that ought to be wilderness and park and instead you put an MX Missile there.

03-00:46:26

Eardley-Pryor:

What was the MX Missile? Why was this something special at this time period?

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Sease:

It was the theoretic defense that we needed to shoot down a missile that the Russians would be sending our way.

03-00:46:45

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, it was like a defensive missile?

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Sease:

Yeah, yeah. So three things came into play in terms of the Sierra Club being engaged. One was just where it would go. The second is, in tight budgets, spending more money than God has on an MX Missile that's not needed and is going to trash some land is money that you're not spending on something better. And then the third reason is that the Sierra Club actually has, for a long time, had a committee of volunteers that advocate against war and the environmental impacts of war. So they didn't like it from that standpoint either. So land use, bad use of money, and anti-war.

03-00:47:43

The interesting thing for me about working on the MX Missile was it was by and large a different set of DC allies. Not the typical people I worked with on wilderness and parks, but the anti-war groups, the fiscal hawk groups. So it was an interesting lobbying coalition.

03-00:48:10

Eardley-Pryor:

What ended up happening with regard to the MX Missile?

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Sease:

It died, not necessarily because of the campaign the opponents waged, but because of it being an expensive bad idea that wasn't necessary. But the opponents kept it from having an easy slide into early funding. Sometimes all you need to do is delay things until commonsense or fiscal realities take over.

03-00:48:39

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Yeah, I'm remembering this in the context of the 1980s, the resurgence of the Cold War under Reagan and nuclear concerns, and the Star Wars [missile defense] battles. So I would take it that the MX Missile was wrapped up in some of those controversies?

03-00:48:58

Sease: Yeah. I have forgotten the details of it but, I mean, it was about burying these gigantic missiles in silos and it wasn't all in the western public lands. I think some of it was in Kansas cornfields.

03-00:49:14

Eardley-Pryor: Crazy. I have a note here, too, about ongoing, perhaps never-ending efforts to try to revise or reform the General Mining Act of 1872.

03-00:49:26

Sease: Right.

03-00:49:28

Eardley-Pryor: What is that act and what is this perpetual battle about?

03-00:49:31

Sease: Well, in 1872, when the western frontier was being developed and the country needed minerals and needed to get resources out of those lands, they passed a law that made it really appealing and easy for entrepreneurs to just go out, stake a claim, do a little bit of work and they had the rights to the minerals and to however much land they needed to get those minerals out. And that was done in 1872. A lot of time, a lot of change happened and that law never got revised, and giant multinational mining companies have been going out all this time on to the lands that you and I own and staking claims and trashing things, sometimes in pursuit of minerals, sometimes just to grab the land. And every time anybody tried to reform it, tried to make it both be fiscally and environmentally responsible, the mineral industry and the Republicans in Congress would cry, "Oh, my God, you know, the national security. We need these minerals and you can't touch anything about the 1872 mining law." So it is an antiquated, harmful, utterly unjustified piece of legislation that is just grandfathered in. And the Sierra Club has had it as a perpetual priority to reform and occasionally has seen a window for making a real play at doing it. And I was around and assigned it during one of those windows. And a colleague of mine, Alison Horton, had actually competed with me for my job, first job at the Sierra Club and had taken a similar job at the Audubon Society. The two of us worked on this together. And we did this big thick notebook of all the information, all of the reasons. You know, it was a three-ring binder. There was a period of time when the *de rigueur* lobbying tool was a three-ring binder with thousands and thousands of bits of information that you buried a member of Congress in. So we had one of those for the 1872 mining law which we put together and distributed by hand and lobbied a bunch of people.

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We had a Democrat from Nevada who was on the committee and wasn't a really bad vote but he wasn't a good vote either. But he sort of kept up a friendly repartee with us and he complained one time that, it was so hard to oppose the enviros on mining, that, you know, he would never have a Teens for Tungsten, or he had some other alliterative thing. And then it was, the enviros always had sort of the people power on their side. So at the end of one Congress, as we had lost on this, we had a meeting with him and we took him a t-shirt that said on the front "Teens for Tungsten" and gave it to him. So there was, you know, good rapport. But we never passed it.

03-00:53:32

Eardley-Pryor:

I'd love to ask you about turning to more of your personal life, if now's an okay time to do that? I have a note that in 1985 your husband, your now husband, Russ Shay, moved to DC, and you eventually, a few years later, you and Russ get married. So I just would love to hear stories about how you and Russ met, and what life was like in DC after he moved there in 1985.

03-00:54:03

Sease:

Okay. Well, Russ and I were very good friends for many years before we were sweethearts. I met Russ the first year that I worked, I think, for the Wilderness Society. I had gone to a conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan in late November. It was an off-road vehicle conference that the land managing agencies had convened enviros and motorcycle and off-road vehicle groups to a big meeting to talk about how we used the public lands and get along better. And Russ at that time worked for the Sierra Club in California, and either he still did their newsletter, their ORV Monitor newsletter, or he might have already been their California rep. But he came to this meeting and Tim Mahoney, who was my housemate here in DC, had said, "Oh, you've got to look up Russ when you're at this meeting. He's going to be there, too." So we went out for a pizza together. It hadn't been long since I lived in New Mexico, where in November if the sun's shining and there's not a storm, it's not that cold. So I hadn't really packed a suitable winter coat. You know, this is Michigan, it's November. It's freezing. My first memory of Russ is him sharing—giving me his jacket.

03-00:55:39

But we really got to know each other the next summer when the Sierra Club sent him to Washington for a couple of months to work on the Bureau of Land Management wilderness review process and the interim management policy. And he and I did joint comments for the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society and worked on those together and lobbied the BLM together and became really good friends. I think Russ probably stayed at the Buckeroo Bunkhouse a bunch of that time. And over the years, we worked together on Cal Desert, on other issues that cut across. And at a certain point in our lives, I guess it was before '85 because we had a long-distance romance for a couple of years, we were together and it was sort of the right place and neither of us was involved in a relationship and we figured out that we wanted to be more

than friends. And so, as I said, for a couple of years Russ continued to work for the Sierra Club in California and I worked for here. My colleagues gave both Russ and I one of these CLAW awards, Frequent Traveler awards. And John Seiberling had an opening on his committee staff and hired Russ, and Russ moved to Washington. We moved in together, and we've been together ever since.

03-00:57:32

Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful. Where did y'all live at first?

03-00:57:35

Sease: When it was clear that he was coming to Washington—I was living in a group house with three other women and I started looking for a place and I found a place that was about four blocks from the Sierra Club office and about six blocks from the congressional offices on Capitol Hill. I rented it and we lived there for a couple of years. And then Russ's dad, who was an amazing financial planner and advisor, said to us, "You know, real estate's at a pretty low place right now. It's not going to stay that way long. You guys should buy a house." So we started looking for a house and we bought at almost the bottom of the market on Capitol Hill and got a place that needed a bunch of work and that's the house we still have.

03-00:58:34

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, that's great. The previous interviews that we've done, that's where you were at? The house that you developed?

03-00:58:38

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

03-00:58:42

Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful. You've mentioned John Seiberling. You've mentioned him a couple times in our interview today. Russ started working for him.

03-00:58:49

Sease: Yes.

03-00:58:50

Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit of background of who that person was?

03-00:58:53

Sease: John Seiberling was from Ohio. He was heir to Seiberling Tires. A classic renaissance man. Well educated. Philosopher. I think he seriously considered a career in opera. And I can't remember why he ran for Congress but he came to Congress and was appointed to be the chair of a special committee that was looking at the Alaska lands. Did that for two years. Then he became the chair of the parks and public lands subcommittee on Interior. And he was a brilliant, kind, passionate advocate for wilderness, for wild lands, for parks. He wanted to see every piece of land. He didn't want to designate anything that he had not seen. So he and his staff did lots of field trips, field hearings, inspections.

And John, who was not a great photographer—he would take hundreds and hundreds of slides. And so it was sort of famous in Washington that on a Friday afternoon you'd get a call from John Seiberling's secretary saying, "John was wondering if any folks from your office would want to come over. He has a carousel or so from his last trip he'd love to show you." And, you know, you never said no to the man, but you knew you were in for five or six carousels of slides. But his knowledge about the areas, of the people, the history, was incredible.

03-01:01:00

So back on the MX, I was in an MX hearing and I testified for the Sierra Club against the MX Missile and was there for the whole day because, as is the tradition, we were the almost last panel. And Seiberling, at the end of this, looks around the room and he starts into this quote which is, I think, from a Shakespeare play, but it talks about things begun badly, taking on a life of their own and continuing. I've forgotten the exact thing. It was, you know, a page and a half from a soliloquy from some Shakespeare play, which he just spurted out. And I afterward talked to his staff person, Stan Sloss. I said, "Stan, how did you know John was going to want that?" He said, "Oh, no, John pulled that off the top of his head. I didn't give it to him."

03-01:02:03

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

03-01:02:03

Sease: A colleague of mine got married in DC and he had worked with Seiberling a lot, and so they invited John and his wife Betty to the wedding. And as we were leaving the church, I was standing next to John and Betty, and the music that was playing was a—I think a Wagner piece or something. And John says, "Oh, don't you recognize that?" and starts to sing it in the German. I took Carole King in to lobby him on something. I think it was an Idaho wilderness thing. And John sang to her songs.

03-01:02:57

Eardley-Pryor: What a beautiful person.

03-01:02:59

Sease: Oh, he was a totally beautiful person, and his staff adored him and he treated staff so incredibly well. I remember I was riding in a car with him, I think it was on a field hearing for the Malpais, and Russ was staffing him and I was there as the Sierra Club, and somehow John and I were riding in a car together. And I was wearing a hat and sitting in the car and he says, "You know, Debbie, I think it's so great that you and Russ are a couple. It reminds me of the days when Betty and I were courting around." He said, "You know, she was my driver in the war."

03-01:03:46

Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

03-01:03:51

Sease: But he cared about his staff. He cared about their happiness. So Russ always said that he was spoiled by having John Seiberling as his first congressional boss.

03-01:04:04

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I've heard the nickname for Seiberling was Gentleman John.

03-01:04:09

Sease: The other nickname for Seiberling was Old Iron Pants because he would not leave the hearing in the hands of somebody else. He would sit through the whole thing and he would listen to what every single witness had to say.

03-01:04:27

Eardley-Pryor: Why do you think it was that he was so passionate about lands, being this Ohioan? I mean, I say that as an Ohioan.

03-01:04:37

Sease: He grew up near the Cuyahoga. One of the landmark pieces of legislation that he fought really, really hard for was the Cuyahoga National Recreation Area, I think it is. And he wanted to do an expansion of it, and he would pop the bill in every year. It was totally non-controversial. Everybody agreed with it, but it would get held back in the Senate in particular as something to attach stuff to and they would think, you know, "John Seiberling wants this in the House. This is low hanging fruit. It's a train that can carry my somewhat controversial thing through." And, of course, John wouldn't accept it, the price. so year after year he would not get the Cuyahoga. Finally the Cuyahoga got expanded before he left.

03-01:05:30

Eardley-Pryor: So it was, in part, just because he grew up around a beautiful—an area of the Cuyahoga that was lovely.

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Sease: I think so. Yeah.

03-01:05:37

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. What was it like having Russ and you in DC, both living these very political lives and sometimes even, sounding like, collaborating together, in the case of working with John?

03-01:05:53

Sease: Well, the collaborating was easy. The thing that I remember being a little dicey was when John's committee was looking at grazing reform and they were negotiating a bill and the Sierra Club, of course, was out on the far-left edge of anti-grazing and Seiberling was trying to broker the middle and Russ was the one staffing this. So there was, oh, I would say, six months when that was a subject we didn't talk about at home. We just didn't bring up grazing because it wouldn't have been appropriate. He shouldn't share insider knowledge with me, I shouldn't advocate with him. It was not a subject.

03-01:06:47

Eardley-Pryor: How common is that in DC, in having these couples that are working on sometimes the opposite sides of legislation, or possibly could be working together but maybe shouldn't? I mean, it sounds to me like that would happen a lot.

03-01:06:58

Sease: I think it probably is. You know, [James] Carville and what's her name [Mary Matalin] were the famous version of that. The political consultants, and the Democrats and the Republican leader.

03-01:07:18

Eardley-Pryor: Right, right.

03-01:07:18

Sease: I think it's pretty common.

03-01:07:21

Eardley-Pryor: All right.

03-01:07:22

Sease: It's a small world.

03-01:07:24

Eardley-Pryor: Well, I'd also like to hear about some controversial time that happened, but more about the Sierra Club itself. And that's when Doug Wheeler became—was selected as the Sierra Club executive director in 1986, and that short term that he served, just from '86 to '87. My understanding of that is that there was a great deal of controversy, particularly among the staff members of the Sierra Club, with regard to Doug Wheeler's leadership as executive director. What was your perspective on what happened with Doug Wheeler and the Club from your vantage point in DC, in the DC office?

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Sease: Well, one of the many times that I was really grateful that the headquarters was in San Francisco, three time zones and an entire country away. Doug did not spend a whole lot of time in Washington and luckily I was not in a senior enough leadership position that I had to interact that much with him. He wanted to pull the Sierra Club to the right, and I think as later history bore out, he was doing this for his resumé and not for the Sierra Club's benefit. He was, I think, a really bad choice of executive director. And he was one of a series of executive directors that didn't have any history with the Sierra Club and for different reasons didn't work out very well.

03-01:09:16

Eardley-Pryor: What happened within the hubbub of the DC office? I mean, I understand John McComb and Doug Scott were involved in some pushback against Doug Wheeler's leadership, and I think even that's when John left the Sierra Club as an employee, in part because of controversies with regard to Wheeler. What was your take on what was happening in DC?

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Sease:

Again, I was fairly isolated from it or insulated from it. It didn't affect my day-to-day work that much. And I think you're right, I think that that is about the time that John left. But it wasn't that much on my radar screen. I was relieved when he left.

03-01:10:07

Eardley-Pryor:

And then I believe the next person to come in was Michael Fischer, to become executive director. How were things different under his leadership?

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Sease:

Right. Well, Michael Fischer was—I guess that's who I was referring to when I said that bringing people in who had nothing to do with the Sierra Club was part of a series of wrong choices. Michael was a very sweet man who was very kind. He cared about the Club, but he never really got the Club. He didn't get its volunteer culture. I remember one time he—to the press—this was so sad, but it—I mean, it would have been okay to say it internally, but in his first introduction to the press, instead of reading his script that our communications director had given him, which would have been the right thing to say, he decided to ad lib it. And he said, "You know, I care about the—" The Sierra Club was at that time starting to do some stuff on clean air. And he said, "You know, I realized in my head that we need to do clean air, but I never could get my heart around that issue the way I could about Alaska." And the quote was, you know, "Sierra Club president says he can't get his heart around Clean Air Act." And that's, you know, the fight we're fighting at the moment. So he had a tendency to sort of step in it.

03-01:11:52

And then, again, I was a little isolated from the upper leadership politics and such. And during the years that I was doing public lands, I had the joyful job of having a job that the Sierra Club would give me enough resources to do what I needed to do. Not a whole lot, but they didn't pay much attention, the leadership didn't. So there was a crew of volunteers that cared about what I did. They paid attention. Bruce Hamilton, my boss, paid attention. But by and large, I was my own boss and the Club wasn't as interested. If it was interested in public lands, it was more about the big forest fight than the BLM fight. And so, it's a transition I saw in the California Desert when—the early years of the desert [campaign], the national Sierra Club would just, you know, say, "Well, what do you need? Okay, yeah. We'll get you that." And in the last year of the California Desert, it became a priority for the entire institution. And your day shifts from just doing the work to keeping that constituency fed and satisfied. And so during the Fischer tenure, I was in that mode of doing my own thing off in the corner and nobody was paying much attention. And so it didn't impact me much.

03-01:13:29

Eardley-Pryor: Did that experience of having that kind of freedom to just do your work as you saw fit, did that inform your management style later when you took over as head of the DC office?

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Sease: Yes. Absolutely. I think there is a great golden rule that you manage people the way you want to be managed yourself. And you asked earlier about Mike McCloskey and what it was like having him as the chairman. Mike pretty much stayed out of my hair. He was very deferential to not being a—, a big figurehead that was sort of taking all the glory shots. He really did consciously stay out of the way, and he gravitated to being a leader in something that the DC office wasn't doing very much on, which was international work. But he did sit down with me one day, give me some management advice, which was brilliant in hindsight. He said, "You know, Debbie, I've noticed you're of the generation that doesn't like very much management." He said, "I have been managing people of your generation for a while, and I find that they just really don't respond to very heavy-handed management." He said, "But you are now managing a different generation and if you manage them the way you want to be managed, you leave them wanting something more." He said, "The people you're managing want more structure. They want more leadership. And your job as their manager is to give them what they want, not what you want in a manager." And he was dead on right. And his guidance, at a really critical juncture in my management of the DC office, was incredibly helpful. So I never became the kind of manager that I wouldn't have wanted, but I did pay attention to giving people the kind of management that they want, as opposed to assuming they wanted the kind that I wanted. So I handle my direct reports different depending on their skills and what they're going to fare best on.

03-01:15:52

Eardley-Pryor: You have to really know who those people are to do that well.

03-01:15:55

Sease: Mm-hmm.

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Eardley-Pryor: Well, on that point of taking on new responsibilities, I have a note that in 1989 you are officially designated as the Lands Team director. And that's also the same year that George HW Bush comes into his term as President. And so a shift in power in DC, but not a shift in political party. What was different in this new role that you had as Lands Team director, and perhaps different under the George HW Bush presidency?

03-01:16:36

Sease: I hadn't thought about that in a while. Certainly what was different in terms of my role was—any time you take on management, staff management, I think the public interest sector in general, the environmental community in particular, is somewhat guilty of having created a management structure where somebody's good at their job, they're doing something, and either

there's more resources so there's more staff and they turn them into a manager. And many of those people don't change a thing about how they were doing their job before. And you can't be a manager and not carve out some time for it. So I went from being a land lobbyist with a portfolio that was fully occupying my time to managing staff, building a team by hiring more staff, and I had to let go of some of the hands-on stuff. I didn't let go of a lot of it, nothing compared to what happened when I went to being legislative director. But it was the first of a series of changes in my work where I did less of the direct lobbying, less of the advocacy, and did more of working with others to do it and to organize the team.

03-01:18:34

Eardley-Pryor: Who was a part of that team that you built to do the lands work with you?

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Sease: Well, let's see. I inherited an existing staff. I became the manager of a set of folks who had all originally reported to David Gardner, and that included Jim Blomquist, who did forest work, and—trying to think who else. I'm not remembering now. I then hired Melanie Griffin to do lands work. Oh, I think I also had inherited a guy from Alaska that was doing lands work. I've forgotten his name at the moment. But it was a pretty small team, and over the course of a few years we grew considerably.

03-01:19:53

Eardley-Pryor: Why so much growth at that time, after 1989 under your leadership of the Lands Team?

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Sease: Well, lands was a very big priority for the Sierra Club and the Sierra Club was growing. So after Reagan, the Sierra Club really grew and continued to grow. So it was part of a manifestation of just the growth of the Club and the growth of its DC operation.

03-01:20:29

Eardley-Pryor: The next set of questions I would love to hear you tell stories about are around the California Desert Protection Act. But before we dive into that I was going to ask if maybe we could take a quick break.

03-01:20:41

Sease: Okay.

[pause in recording]

03-01:20:45

Eardley-Pryor: Okay, Debbie, I'd love to hear stories about this long process to get the California Desert Protection Act passed, starting from pretty much the time you came into Washington, DC when the BLM was considering the California Desert areas almost as like a separate process from the rest of the wilderness designation BLM was doing, up and to the point when it's finally passed and

signed into law in 1994 under Bill Clinton. So what was your first experience in dealing with the California Desert for protecting that wilderness space?

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Sease:

Well, I think early on we talked about the process, working with the BLM on the process that they were going to use to implement the provisions of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act. And one of those processes was a wilderness review of all of the lands that they managed and there was also in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act a provision specifically on the California Desert and calling for a plan and a timeline that was tighter than the rest of FLPMA. So one of the things that caused was the California Desert was one of the first places where the BLM needed to implement and apply a review, study criteria, and an interim management policy. So I think you had asked in our earlier conversation why did it matter what the interim management policy was? You know, what impact would that have? And I think my response then was that it was something that we tried to get the best thing written so that when the agency was inclined to or didn't manage things properly, we had a legal handle.

03-01:22:43

So the California Desert was sort of the proving grounds for the inventory process or the study process and for how you protected those areas. What was interesting is that the California Desert, the staff that worked on it, were really—the desert planning staff were really committed to trying to do a great job. An early experience I had was going out to California, meeting with the volunteers and the California staff, and then going out into the desert with the BLM and the volunteers and looking at how they were doing the inventory. And I think I mentioned before that the criteria they were applying was does it have outstanding opportunities for recreation? Does it have outstanding opportunities for solitude? And, you know, I was wound up to give the volunteers message of, "You've got to do more. You've got to include it all." So we're on the way out to the area and the wilderness planner for the BLM, a guy named John Serring says, "Oh, let's stop here." And he said, "You know, we've been discussing whether an area has outstanding opportunities for solitude or recreation. Here we are. Here's this little triangle of land. There's this road here, that road over there, and then, you know, less than a quarter mile that way is another road. "So what do you think? How outstanding are these opportunities, Debbie?" And, I mean, literally we're in a little triangle. You can see all sides of it. And I thought, "This is sad." But I said, "Well, I mean, you know, we're not talking about areas like this." He said, "It's in the inventory. We inventoried this one in the initial inventory." I was really impressed. So at staff level, before it went through the political machinations in the agency, their inclination was to cut it exactly letter of the law, out—you know, you can recreate here. You can be alone in the middle of this. It's in. Now, that all got squeezed a little bit but at the end of the day the California Desert Wilderness study areas, there were a relatively small amount of acreage that the citizen proposal added to it.

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Now, what the BLM recommended for wilderness versus what they said meets the basic criteria, there was a big gap there and there was a lot of back and forth and the lawyers were brought into challenge the adequacy of the recommendation, the adequacy of how they were protecting the areas in the interim, and one of the biggest controversies in the desert was off-road vehicles and the damage that they can do to an area. So, you know, the BLM was letting the Barstow to Vegas race continue through areas that should be designated as wilderness. So some of those early fights were where we focused. And working with the lawyers and working with the volunteers. I was reminded in looking at Frank Wheat's book just how many volunteers and how many years—how many years before I even came on the scene, they were working to put this together.

03-01:26:27

Eardley-Pryor: This was Frank Wheat's *California Desert Miracle: The Fight for Desert Parks and Wilderness* that came out in 1999?

03-01:26:32

Sease: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

03-01:28:44

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I have a note, I don't know if it's from Frank's book or from that other book that I've talked about earlier, James Morton Turner's book, *The Promise of Wilderness*. But I have a note that under the Carter Administration, that very first attempt to try to designate land, there was only two million out of twelve million acres that were designated as wilderness. So I could imagine that those activists and you yourself were interested in demanding that there be a lot more included.

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Sease: Right. Yes, they did plans and they had recommendations but the thing that was the baseline that we were able to work from was not what they recommended but what they identified as worthy of study, of consideration. Because that became the floor against which the Congress and all of its various bills was operating. And not only in the California desert but in every state, the first fight that activists had was to try to ensure the biggest possible universe from which you were selecting because you weren't going to get all of the universe and if you started with the 200,000-acre universe in the California desert you were going to get totally screwed.

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Eardley-Pryor: So those first battles was just making the tent as big as possible.

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Sease: Yeah. And there was some help from the BLM in that and then there was some—you know the BLM would give with one hand and take away with the other. So the staff did an inventory that cast the net very wide and then they made a very skinny recommendation.

03-01:28:19

Eardley-Pryor: And you had mentioned from Frank Wheat's book that there was an ongoing process with the volunteers that are out there fighting on behalf of this land. I have notes here of a few names that I just picked up and I wondered if they ring bells for you as stories that you might tell around your engagement with them. Some of the ones that I have are Jim Dodson, Judy Anderson, Peter Burk, and then Eldon Hughes. Are those names that come up for you in this particular battle?

03-01:28:53

Sease: Yes. Those were four people who were incredibly instrumental in the work and the success of the desert and there were dozens more just as involved that aren't named and the thing that I noticed in looking back over Frank's book is Frank's book was a celebration of the volunteers. He mentioned a handful of staff that were engaged in passing but it was truly a partnership. So Jim Eaton, who was the head of the California Wilderness Coalition, was every bit as critical to the success of the desert conservation area, the plan, and ultimately the legislation as any one of those volunteers. Now, he was being paid for doing it, a pittance, I might say, but, you know, Frank celebrates the volunteer engagement but sort of passes over or mentions in passing the staff.

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There were two congressional staff that this became an all-consuming passion for. Kathy Lacey in Senator Cranston's office, who was a seasoned, experienced senior staff person, really knew what she was doing. Her professionalism is the thing that made the difference for that bill. And in the House side, Mel Levine had a junior staffer, brand new, green on the job, barely knew what she was doing, how to find her way in the door, and she worked so hard and such long hours and basically created a background that allowed Levine, Mel Levine who was an LA congressman I think recruited by Cranston or Burton or somebody to step in, knew nothing about it, and she gave him the kind of briefing and support that allowed him to navigate a very hostile House with the bill. And those two people were absolutely instrumental in passing this. So when I think of the California desert, to me it is a multi-year, multifaceted thing with so many heroes you can't count them all.

03-01:31:28

Eardley-Pryor: Do you remember the name of the woman who was that junior staffer that was working in Mel's office?

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Sease: Yeah. It was Betsy Ford.

03-01:31:35

Eardley-Pryor: Ah. So Betsy and Kathy Lacey, you said, were also really instrumental on the staff side of their representatives.

03-01:31:43

Sease: Yeah.

03-01:31:46

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. What was Senator Alan Cranston of California, what was his role in working with the Club in the past that he took on this passion for the desert?

03-01:31:23

Sease: Well, my first really big experience with him was the desert but I think he had been involved and instrumental in other California victories, redwoods, et cetera.

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Eardley-Pryor: Probably wise to be on the good side of the Sierra Club if you're a representative in California.

03-01:32:15

Sease: Yeah. Yeah.

03-01:32:18

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

03-01:32:19

Sease: And, you know, I mean, Cranston listened to the Sierra Club. He asked the question about what you want. Do you want something quick and dirty you can get in a little while? Do you want to go for the whole enchilada? He didn't phrase it that way but that was the question. And, you know, Frank's book sort of glosses over the amount of agonizing and debate and fighting there was over that very question, over the Mojave. Do you go for a park, do you take that on, do you not? I mean one of the things that I remember most particularly is a meeting during which the citizen proposal started out as a subset of what was under study with the thought of, this is what we think we can get, so this is what we're going to ask for. And under pressure from Doug Scott, myself, and the Wilderness Society staffer Terry Sopher, we pushed them really hard to be more ambitious and to be more ambitious from a strategic standpoint, that if you ask for two million acres you're going to get 1.5.

03-01:33:48

So you really have to look at everything that qualifies, everything that you can make a case for as opposed to the things you think can win. And to their credit, in a very short period of time because the pressure was on us from Cranston to deliver a recommendation, they absorbed that advice and they incorporated it and they incorporated it to the point that the legislative history is that they convinced the Washington types to be more bold.

03-01:34:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. What was going on in the Club in California with their interest in this? I imagine that the southern California chapter would have taken this on

in a big way. What was that like working with those groups while you're in DC handling some of the legislative aspects?

03-01:34:49

Sease:

Well, I used this word before and I'll use it repeatedly because it really did feel like a partnership. This is a group that had been working on this for years before I had even heard there was a California desert. They welcomed my participation. They listened to my advice. They gave me the benefit of their experience and they partnered with me every step of the way. So what I could bring to the table was the fact that, multiple times a week I sat down with Kathy Lacey. I went over the maps with her. I listened to her questions. I heard what she was getting from different opponents or potential opponents that she had to answer and I was the conduit back to the volunteers. I was also a conduit to Kathy about where people just have lines in the sand that they couldn't, wouldn't cross and why.

03-01:35:51

Eardley-Pryor:

Do you remember what some of those were? I mean is this like specific locations that you're talking about or something broader in principle?

03-01:36:01

Sease:

It ran the gamut from, a boundary here versus there. One of the big fights, and I don't know whether we fought this more in the House or in the Senate, was on the notion of cherry stems and where you drew a boundary. So a mentor of mine used to say that if you want to win the outcome of the meeting, be the one that brings the memo or writes the memo. And in mapping fights on the California desert, I would say the fact that Judy Anderson drew the maps—and you start with her working map and you modify it as opposed to starting with somebody else's map and modifying it to what she wanted was a big factor. So the BLM wanted to do what they called cherry stems. Or they didn't want cherry stems. What they wanted to do was prune the area so that—so if you've got a circle and around the perimeter of that circle, about a half—say you've got a four-inch circle and about a half-inch in from the rim in a couple of places you have a development and maybe you've got a road or a trail go into it. One of the ways you could do that is you excise around that. And so you end up with a boundary that goes like this. BLM wanted a smaller circle that excluded all of that. This was the fight over cherry stems.

03-01:37:38

Well, being the person that starts the map, that says, "No, the boundary of this area is going to go along this topographical line," and if there is a development that really needs to have access, we'll cut a stem around it. But if it just, you know, needs every two-year maintenance we'll write an exception in to let them do that. So it was those kinds of details that—the kind of on the ground knowledge that the volunteers in the California desert brought to the table that was more than most of the people in BLM, certainly more than any of the Congressional members or staff and more than I had. Gave them an

incredible power and what my job was to do was to try to help leverage that power to the best advantage.

03-01:38:32

Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit more about who Judy Anderson was and how she had these map making skills that you relied on this California volunteer to help create the maps or create the memo, I guess, as you might say?

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Sease: Well, my recollection, is that she was a schoolteacher. My understanding is that she went out and took a class in cartography towards the early stages of this because she realized that what we needed in the way of maps was more than what we had and more than what she or anybody else on the team had the skills to produce. And they literally became the official maps that the committee used. They are what is archived wherever the legislative reality sits, is a map that Judy Anderson drafted and the committee made markups on.

03-01:39:27

Eardley-Pryor: Talk about the power of grassroots, huh?

03-01:39:30

Sease: Yeah, yeah. And also talk about for an individual to—you know, when you do things in life you contribute to a joint effort and you can feel really good about that. But there are pieces and times where you can say, "I made this happen." This is my mark. And for Judy Anderson those maps are a massive set of marks that she made.

03-01:39:55

Eardley-Pryor: What were other successful pieces?

03-01:39:57

Sease: Eldon Hughes was an indefatigable lobbyist and his wife Patty came with him everywhere. They made countless trips to Washington. They brought with them some rescued baby desert tortoises that were door openers, and they were better than movie stars, to be honest.

03-01:40:23

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, what do you mean?

03-01:40:26

Sease: Well, we also brought movie stars into open doors to lobby Congress, but the desert tortoises were in some ways better than movie stars. Because any—

03-01:40:34

Eardley-Pryor: You would bring tortoises to Congress?

03-01:40:37

Sease: To Congress, yes. They would bring them in a box. Four little baby tortoises. And, you know, snakes nobody thinks is cute. Baby turtles everybody thinks

is cute. And they are. They're really, really adorable. And non-threatening and they're not slimy. And so they would bring them in, and they would talk about their habitat and the desert and it was just—at the bill signing, four desert tortoises are sitting on President Clinton's desk.

03-01:41:08

Eardley-Pryor: That's so good.

03-01:41:10

Sease: Yes.

03-01:41:12

Eardley-Pryor: And that was Eldon Hughes and Patty who would bring these tortoises?

03-01:41:16

Sease: Yes. Peter Burke. I mean, he had been an activist and done work on the Mojave for a long time. Did a lot of stuff. The thing I remember him doing was at some meeting we basically said, "Look, one of the problems we have is local opposition, all the little communities out here saying they don't want the Mojave to be a park. They don't want to see change. We're not going to be able to pass this if we can't overcome that." So Peter and Joyce, his wife, I presume, went on a two-person road show and they basically met with the city councils and the county supervisors all surrounding the Mojave and they got council after council to pass resolutions of support. I've forgotten what the overall number was but it was just a tangible powerful antidote to the California congressman saying, "Oh, there's local opposition to this." Well, no. I have, sixteen county resolutions right here. Sixteen city councils weighing in on park for the Mojave.

03-01:42:40

Eardley-Pryor: That's another powerful grassroots story right there. Wow.

03-01:42:45

Sease: And it's a lot of work. And it, I think, requires a fair amount of personal courage to go put yourself in front of a local city council and pitch them on this and they just did it again and again and again. And they didn't just walk in cold. They had lobbied the individual members of the council so they knew they had the votes. So the volume of work that went in to passing this measure at the end of the day was just logarithmically greater than any staff contribution could have been.

03-01:43:34

Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask you about how to maintain the work on something like this that takes years and years to accomplish. I mean we're talking just about the process of getting as much as you can in the recommendations and that happening in the late seventies to early eighties. But the first time the bill is submitted for a California Desert Protection Bill by Senator Cranston of California is not until 1986.

03-01:44:03

Sease: Right.

03-01:44:05

Eardley-Pryor: Takes almost another decade. It takes eight years before Clinton signs it with the tortoises on his desk. So how do you maintain that kind of commitment and work both on the staff and on the volunteers over something that lasts nearly a decade or more?

03-01:44:20

Sease: Well, I think there's a couple of factors. One factor is that I think it's easier and more sustaining to fight for something and have it take a while as opposed to fight against something that you keep at bay—so a contrast. We fight every year to keep the Arctic from being drilled. And we beat it back but we don't have it protected so we beat it back the next year. There are people who were in diapers the first time they were with their parents fighting this who now have children. So, I mean, it's been going on for a long time. But it's not very rewarding to only not lose. For the California desert folks, while they may not be getting it across the finish line, they are working for something. They're getting closer to that goal. They are getting benchmarks and they're also renewing themselves by going out into those areas. They're taking other people. They're continuing to do their hikes. They're expanding their chorus and their leaders. So while the trips that went out to the desert with press and with Morgan Fairchild and Alan Cranston and Ed Begley, Jr., were about getting those people and getting attention. It was also restoring for the folks who went back to these areas and built more supporters for them. So the desert itself I think became part of the sustaining force for that long, long battle.

03-01:46:20

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. You've mentioned a couple times now some of these movie stars or Hollywood figures that you have brought in to be a part of the advocacy. What was the thinking behind that, and what are some of the stories you have to tell from it?

03-01:46:33

Sease: Well, I think part of the thinking behind it is this is a California bill. This is Alan Cranston. I think he understands the power of celebrity and he enlisted them to help. And, again, part of lobbying is getting the door open. And I don't think it works as well now. It was a little bit new then. But walking the halls with a recognizable movie star or celebrity is a way to get doors to open. And it has different impacts. I can recall taking Morgan Fairchild to lobby Jeff Bingaman, Senate Energy Committee, and to lobby Bennet Johnston on the same day. Bennet Johnston was chair of the committee, energy committee. So Bennet Johnston's from Louisiana. And you walk into his office and he's got his chair that he sits in and he's got this big, overstuffed leather couch that looks like the Senate furniture. And there is behind that couch a wall of photographs of Bennet Johnston side by side or kissing or hugging or cozying

up to every beauty queen in Louisiana, Miss Louisiana, Miss Baton Rouge, Miss Cotton Queen. You know, it's a photo wall of Bennet Johnston and all the beauty queens. And so Morgan Fairchild comes in, sits down on the couch and Bennet Johnston comes over and pretty soon when you leave, they're just like that. And he's just eating it up like candy and she's dishing it out. You know, she's really good at this.

03-01:48:25

So take her in to see Jeff Bingaman. And Jeff Bingaman usually sits in this rather straight unpadded chair. But for some reason he's sitting on the couch. So Morgan Fairchild plops downright next to him. By the time we left that meeting Bingaman has slid up and is practically on the arm of his sofa leaning out like this to get away from her. But the celebrities that helped on the desert really did lean into it. They did fundraisers. They did press visibilities. They came to Washington.

03-01:49:12

Eardley-Pryor: What role do you think the desert played for some of these folks in LA?

03-01:49:16

Sease: Well, if you spent any time in LA—but to me, it seemed like it was an escape from the city. The spectacular parts of the California desert are just breathtaking—the additions that we were pitching for Death Valley, for Joshua Tree, the Mojave itself, just absolutely inspiring landscape.

03-01:49:51

Eardley-Pryor: What happened between the time from whenever the Cranston bill was proposed in 1986 up through—and there's a change in political leadership for California in 1992, the Year of the Woman. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer both become the two new California senators. How did your experience of the campaign change with this shift in political leadership in California?

03-01:50:15

Sease: Well, there was a view that we had a fairly narrow window of opportunity to get the desert bill passed after Feinstein came on. Boxer was certainly a hundred percent there. And Feinstein was willing to do it as sort of a legacy thing for Cranston, and she worked hard on it. But she was somebody who, as time went by, developed her own sort of signature way of looking at land protection. So the longer that went by the less likelihood there was that she was going to fight to the death to get Cranston's package across the finish line. There's a theory that some have expressed that Bennet Johnston helped her do this because some local activist in Louisiana, high school kid, lobbied him hard. I think the reality was—is that Senator Feinstein was a newly elected Democrat. Right from the get-go she was on the Appropriations Committee. Bennet Johnston wanted to do something that worked for her and have her owe him. And cultivate that relationship. Because he actually went way out on a limb in terms of how he managed the floor work on that and what he gave

her. You know, Bennet Johnston never did anything for free in his entire life. Consummate politician.

03-01:52:13

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here that in the midst of that, that time period even before Feinstein came in, that Johnston was in a campaign to become Senate Majority Leader as the Democrat from Louisiana, but he lost that title to Senator George Mitchell of Maine, who did become Senate Majority Leader from '89 to '95. So I'm wondering is Johnston's support for California desert somehow tied up in his efforts to become leader, or then trying to recollect his powers?

03-01:52:51

Sease: I don't think so. No. I think it was much more narrow than that. Bennet Johnston—in Louisiana their livelihood and safety depends on a lot of work from the Corps of Engineers and money. You know, New Orleans is below sea level. And Dianne Feinstein had a history of being sort of pro water project funding in California, and she was an important ally on that. So I think that there were narrower things at play than the speakership or the majority leader.

03-01:53:44

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. So when you feel like you have this moment after Feinstein and Boxer come in and you say, "Well, now is the time to push," how did that get activated? How is that mobilized?

03-01:53:56

Sease: Well, it was following on the heels of a progression of the House having passed a version of this. So when you look at this through the trajectory of Cranston introducing something, a year or two later the House moving something, the Senate moving something, the House then redoing it. It's all—if you have ever read Saul Alinsky on a campaign, it is about momentum and progression and you start low and you keep turning the volume up and you have incremental progress. You have benchmarks to show. I think the California desert in its long trajectory is a classic example of that. It's not that in '84, was it, '86 that—

03-01:54:50

Eardley-Pryor: Eighty-six is when Cranston puts the bill in.

03-01:54:52

Sease: Yeah. So Cranston puts a bill in in '86 and then in '94 it passes, it's finally law. There's a series of activities that build momentum toward that happening. So it wasn't just Boxer and Feinstein coming in. It's the House had gone through all they've gone through in previous years and it was just following on that momentum.

03-01:55:18

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of those incremental moments that come to mind for you in that process?

03-01:55:26

Sease: Well, I think back to—I've forgotten the year it was that the House first passed a California desert bill and won. I told you about Betsy Ford getting her boss up to speed to do the mark-up. So an LA congressman who doesn't have any part of the desert in his district, who's not been a mover and player on lands issues being the main proponent of a gazillion acre protection bill was a bit of a heavy lift. And he was viewed as a lightweight. And so he knew, and he told his staff that he had to be utterly, totally prepared. He couldn't be blindsided by any question. So she started weeks and weeks in advance building a briefing notebook for him for the hearings, for the mark-up, et cetera. I remember I think they moved the mark-up up so there was a rush at the last minute to get stuff done. And I remember pulling an all-nighter with her in the House office building putting the last parts of that notebook together so that whatever came up he could just reach, take a tab, go to it. Every little controversy, every little area. Just the volume of information and detail that she made available to this person. And then he needed it.

03-01:56:56

The House consideration of this thing dragged on for days. This is back when you could actually stand at the doors of the entry to the House, the Capital at the House and you could lobby the members as they went in and out. And in some ways, it's a little bit of a fictitious that you lobby them but your allies see you there, they know that they've got your support. They can ask you a question, whatever. So it's more of just showing the flag. And my theory was always wear something bright and show up. So the first day of the debate, I had this lime green silk shirt that had purple and gold. Not shiny gold but, you know, ochre appliques on it of, sort of, abstract animals. Very stand out kind of thing. And I was wearing that and Levine came out and he said, "Okay, Debbie. You really stand out in a crowd here. You got to wear that shirt until we pass this bill." I was beginning to wonder how bad is this silk shirt going to smell by the time the desert bill passes?

03-01:58:19

Eardley-Pryor: You told a story earlier about wearing a hat in the car with John Seiberling, and I've seen photos of you wearing like a cowboy hat, a range hat.

03-01:58:30

Sease: Yes.

03-01:58:32

Eardley-Pryor: Was that something that you would wear to Congress often?

03-01:58:34

Sease: Yes, I did. I mean, I always wore a hat in the southwest. And I just brought that hat up to Washington with me, and it became, I guess, a little bit of a badge of honor as a westerner. But I still wear western hats to this day.

03-01:58:59

Eardley-Pryor: Did that become, in a way, a signature for you walking the halls of Congress?

03-01:59:04

Sease: It wasn't deliberate, but it did become that.

03-01:59:13

Eardley-Pryor: Who was some of the opposition that comes to mind? We've talked a lot of the people that were big supporters, both volunteers and also staff members and representatives. Where was a lot of the pressure coming from that you were pushing against?

03-01:59:25

Sease: Well, a big constituency that was against it was the off-road vehicle industry and then the motorcycle user community. The mining industry was against it. The power industry, LA Department of—LADWP.

03-01:59:52

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, Water and Power.

03-01:59:53

Sease: Water and Power was against it. Or they weren't necessarily against it, they just wanted, huge swathes of the desert put off limits to wilderness so that they could build future power lines in it. The hunting community was against it. Not because there's that much hunting in the Mojave but the whole idea of a new designation that banned hunting became a huge fight, which is why the Mojave is a preserve, not a park. And then the Southern California Republicans mostly, but even some Democrats. So Rick Layman was ultimately—he was pissed that Mel Levine was chosen as the bill sponsor. He would have been happy to be a bill sponsor of a teeny little discrete bill. But Mel introduced, basically the Cranston bill. And so Rick Layman ultimately had to be satisfied and so they negotiated and the way that Rick Layman approached this was not, "I don't like this area, I don't like that area." It goes back to the conversation we had with the volunteers. He said, "You need to get rid of"—I think it was a million acres. Just, "I don't care which ones you cut. Just give me a million acres off this."

03-02:01:22

Eardley-Pryor: He was going for the big ten idea.

03-02:01:27

Sease: Yeah, yeah. And so, we had built some of that in. It was pretty easy to lose. And so this is where Jim Dodson and Judy Anderson sit down with the maps and say, "Well, you know, we really didn't think that this was going to make it

past the filing anyway." Gave him a million acres that was literally no skin off your back. I probably shouldn't say that out loud but—

03-02:01:51

Eardley-Pryor: Well, this does bring up the point that there were—in order to accomplish the success of such an enormous area to be preserved in this incredible bill, it did involve a lot of political compromise and horse trading. I heard Bruce Hamilton talk about Dianne Feinstein, that she treated this as—the way he described it, as the big San Francisco city mayor that she was, trying to appease everyone. And so there's all these different examples that the military might be able to drive their tanks on certain land, or the National Rifle Association and the Wise Use Movement wanted to be able to hunt, as you had mentioned, in the Mojave. So what are some of the compromises that you recall having to negotiate?

03-02:02:37

Sease: Well, the biggest one that had Senator Feinstein's stamp on it was grazing. There was like one or two grazing families left in the Mojave and Feinstein just said, "I am not going to be responsible for kicking a single rancher off this land," and she let them take her to the cleaners on what they got in the way of tenure, lifetime tenure, et cetera, in there. And would have given them more if Kathy Lacey hadn't been her staff person and hadn't fought back really hard.

03-02:03:17

Eardley-Pryor: What about negotiations with the military?

03-02:03:20

Sease: The military really came in the door with the ask for a whole lot more than you need kind of strategy. And, again, Kathy Lacey was a bulwark against Feinstein just capitulating to that. But there was some new language. We talked earlier about precedents. There was some language put in at the request of the military about low level flights, et cetera, et cetera, which in places where it'd be really problematic, we have seen the Congress try to say, "Hey, we just want the California desert language. That's standard for wilderness now." Well, no, it's not.

03-02:04:11

Eardley-Pryor: So that was something that did get in, low level flights across the desert?

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Sease: Yeah, yeah.

03-02:04:14

Eardley-Pryor: The military jets?

03-02:04:15

Sease: Yeah.

03-02:04:16

Eardley-Pryor: I imagine that might have something to do with regard to Operation Desert Storm and the first Iraq War in 1990.

03-02:04:24

Sease: Well, I think what it really had to do with is just how big a deal military operations were in that area of the state.

03-02:04:36

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. There's that huge Air Force base in the Mojave, if I recall.

03-02:04:38

Sease: Yeah, yeah. And there's multiple ones. And so, again, they were a vested interest that had to be dealt with to get it across the finish line.

03-02:04:51

Eardley-Pryor: This is sort of a side question, but I also know that the Mojave Desert had become a site that's really important to private space flight, that Space X and other companies like Blue—I don't remember, Blue Horizon or whatever is Jeff Bezos's thing. But a lot of these private space industries did a lot of their testing and initial work in the Mojave. Did that ever come up in any of this, any private space industry work?

03-02:05:20

Sease: Well, it might have come up, but it didn't come up on my radar screen.

03-02:05:26

Eardley-Pryor: Are there any concessions in order to get this done that happened that you still think about and regret?

03-02:05:41

Sease: Hmm. Regret might be too strong a word, but the California Desert also crafted some of the original language about border operations, which was more than was necessary for the Border Patrol. It was necessary to get the bill across the finish line but they got more than they needed to get, and that has been hung around our neck on every border wilderness deal since.

03-02:06:20

Eardley-Pryor: I don't—

03-02:06:21

Sease: So the California Desert Act set precedent low level over flights and on border patrol access that were written more broadly than one would have ideally wanted. And certainly, I think, more broadly than the Border Patrol actually needed.

03-02:06:37

Eardley-Pryor: We'll get into this in a bit, in another session I'm sure, but the issue of immigration became a sticking point within the Sierra Club. Internally, within

the Club, as a big moment of debate. Did this issue with border control land, did that fit in with those debates internally, within the Club over immigration?

03-02:06:57

Sease:

No, not at all. It was a land issue entirely. And the concessions that one made in the California Desert—and this is going to reveal in my heart of hearts I am not uncomfortable with deal making—are that the concessions that were made in the California Desert on military, on border, on grazing and on the hunting issue were all worth it for the price of how much we got. You wouldn't want to give those things away for a million acres. But would you give it away for seven million acres, eight million acres? Yeah, we did.

03-02:07:44

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. Seven-and-a-half, eight million acres is a lot of land to protect.

03-02:07:49

Sease:

Yeah, yeah. So we were negotiating. We were negotiating with things that had a ripple effect beyond this bill. But from my perspective looking back on it, we fought hard and we got full value for what we gave away.

03-02:08:05

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. I mean, it's one of the largest land conservation bills ever in history. And some of the great accomplishments that this bill had, including establishing Death Valley and Joshua Tree national parks, expanding existing wilderness areas, creating the first national preserve in the lower forty-eight outside of Alaska in the Mojave National Preserve. What are some of the things that you are most proud of, that you in particular, you really love this particular area, or there's something that you really fought hard to make sure was in there, that sticks out for you?

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Sease:

Well, I look at it from a slightly different perspective. It's nice that Death Valley is now a park, not a monument. It's nice that Joshua Tree is a park, not a monument. But it doesn't make a whit of difference to their management. What mattered was the areas that got added. What mattered was the wilderness that got put in place that created those linked areas. What mattered was the Mojave. So when I look at this, putting a national park name on Joshua Tree and Death Valley, I wouldn't have paid a nickel of compromise for those. But they actually helped to float the bill.

03-02:09:26

Eardley-Pryor:

In what way?

03-02:09:28

Sease:

In that everybody likes a national park. It's a bigger deal than a national monument. So what I feel best about in the California Desert is the volume of connected new protected areas.

03-02:09:45

Eardley-Pryor: Why is that important?

03-02:09:47

Sease: If you think about wilderness and wildlands protection as something besides a place for people to go and recreate. If you think about it as protecting biological integrity, having spaces that are interconnected, that are big enough for habitat. You know, we have animals whose range has been chopped up by roads and development and they can't get—and now chopped up by border walls. And so the key to having survival of biodiversity, one of them, is habitat that is unbroken. Contiguous large amounts of habitat. And if people get pleasure from backpacking in it, that's great. But the real issue is having that place stay the way it is.

03-02:10:56

Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned that the bill was eventually signed by Bill Clinton with tortoises on the desk in 1994. Before getting to that moment of signing, when did you realize that you were close? I mean, this had been eight years in the making from when the bill was first introduced. When did the momentum really start picking up, and then how did your job change because of that?

03-02:11:20

Sease: Well, the momentum really picked up when the Senate started moving a bill. And what's interesting about my job is, at that same time, I had transitioned from being the head of public lands to legislative director and was stepped back quite a bit from the day-to-day operation of the last bits of the land protection. I mean, I stepped back a little bit when I became the head of the Lands Team and actually hired somebody whose full-time job was the desert. That was Marty Hayden.

03-02:12:15

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned earlier that the Sierra Club itself, there became more to manage internally when the Club realized that there was going to be a moment that this was going to get passed.

03-02:12:30

Sease: Oh, right. Well, I mean, the little things that you notice changing is, in the past, when it was just me and the volunteers, I would go to a meeting with Kathy Lacey and I would come back and I'd call Judy Anderson and Jim Dodson and have them pass the word. Once the whole Club became engaged in it, I had to do a big memo, had to brief the executive team. And, you know, that came with resources. Of, "Oh, we'll turn the field staff on to this. Oh, we'll do a gigantic all Sierra Club mailer." So the price of that greater involvement was cheap compared to what you got for it.

03-02:13:20

Eardley-Pryor: Bruce Hamilton told me a story he remembered of when the Senate vote finally was coming forward, you needed to somehow rally one more vote, and

I think it was Carol Moseley Braun that maybe had some sort of challenge of getting her car started or something?

03-02:13:35

Sease:

Well, actually what it was is the session of Congress had pretty much run out. Bennet Johnston did a little parliamentary maneuver where he extended the legislative day to beyond twenty-four hours and the Republicans had mounted a filibuster and the Democrats had filed a cloture motion to break the filibuster and force a vote on the bill. When you do a filibuster, the way you break the filibuster is you file a cloture petition to break the filibuster, but you can't do anything with it for a certain number of hours. And so the Republicans were trying to run the clock out. Bennet Johnston extended the clock. Brilliant man. And they had a cloture vote and I think it was on a Saturday morning and Carol Moseley Braun couldn't get her garage door open to drive in, and so they held—you know, the vote usually lasts fifteen minutes. And they just held it for over an hour and finally, she comes in. And my husband was actually working on the Senate at that time and he was upstairs in the gallery and I was standing at the doors. And he came down and said, "Moseley Braun's in. They're going to vote now."

03-02:14:54

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. And then you knew it was secure then.

03-02:14:56

Sease:

Yeah.

03-02:14:59

Eardley-Pryor:

What did you do to celebrate?

03-02:15:00

Sease:

I don't recall. I know in the old Sierra Club office, the sort of funky one on Pennsylvania Avenue, it was so close to the house that we had a lot of house victories to celebrate. We'd invite the members and the leaders over to our ratty office and drink champagne and pop the corks. It was a two-story tall room that had little cubicles and offices built with ceilings that didn't go all the way to the ceiling. So there was an upper mezzanine level that had nothing but the lights and cords. And before we left that office I went up and gathered the campaign corks. And the ceilings of all the offices in the main area were just littered with champagne corks from the Sierra Club having celebrations there.

03-02:15:59

Eardley-Pryor:

What a great way to say goodbye to that space and remembering all the victories.

03-02:16:02

Sease:

It was. Yeah.

03-02:16:03

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Is there anything else from the California Desert that comes to mind? Stories that you want to share or people that were involved that come around that effort?

03-02:16:21

Sease: I don't think so. I think I've covered the ones that come to mind. I'm sure that there will be others that I remember and wish I had mentioned them. But no.

03-02:16:30

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. That's great.

03-02:16:33

Sease: For every person I have mentioned there are literally dozens of people who were doing similar things over long periods of time.

03-02:16:43

Eardley-Pryor: This also does—it may eventually—

03-02:16:46

Sease: Actually, there is one person.

03-02:16:48

Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

03-02:16:50

Sease: I haven't mentioned Bob Hattoy, who was the Southern California regional rep at the time of the desert. And Bob was one of those wonderful larger than life figures that would walk into a room and have strangers coming over to hear the end of a story he was telling and laughing hilariously. His joy in life was infectious. And he was totally a city boy. So he went on one of those early desert trips, and I remember he showed up, and, you know, here's the whole Sierra Club with our little Sierra Club paraphernalia and Patagonia things and fancy sleeping bags. And Hattoy shows up with this gigantic bedroll that he borrowed from his nephew, which was full of Star Wars cartoons.

03-02:17:49

Eardley-Pryor: I think I had that bedroll.

03-02:17:54

Sease: But Hattoy was an incredible lobbyist. He could talk anybody into anything. He was great with recruiting celebrity help. He was a really good lobbyist, and he was amazing with the press. I remember one time he suggested that having James Watt as Secretary of the Interior was like having WC Fields running a daycare center. Hattoy was the rep during that and he was, again, like a little bit of fish out of water, city boy with all of these volunteers who were such experienced wilderness users and advocates, and yet he managed to be helpful and to charm them with his naivete.

03-02:19:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, I think this might be a nice point for us to take a break.

03-02:19:04

Sease: Yeah, I think so.

03-02:19:05

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned you becoming legislative director in 1993 and there's some exciting events that happened even before that—Clinton getting elected, for instance, Carl Pope becoming executive director of the Sierra Club—that I'd love to hear more about, but not today I think, maybe.

03-02:19:19

Sease: Okay. We can talk about those on a future call.

03-02:19:20

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds great. Well, thank you so much for your time today, Debbie.

03-02:19:23

Sease: Yeah, thank you, Roger.

Interview 4: November 23, 2020

04-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor Okay, today is November 23rd in the year 2000 [sic]. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. This is interview number four with Debbie Sease as a part of the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Debbie, it's great to see you again.

04-00:00:20

Sease: Good to see you, Roger. And speaking of dates, it's actually 2020, as opposed to November of 2000. Just to correct our tape.

04-00:00:29

Eardley-Pryor This is an excellent point. This is an excellent point. Yes, 2020, in this crazy year of insanity and elections and pandemics. I'm recording in Santa Rosa, California, on that note. And where are you today?

04-00:00:44

Sease: I am back in Washington, DC, recording from my house on Capitol Hill.

04-00:00:48

Eardley-Pryor Okay, great. Well, I'd like to just dive right in from where we left off and that's to move into the 1990s era, which, as we begin in 2020, that's about thirty years ago.

04-00:01:01

Sease: Time flies when you're having a good time.

04-00:01:03

Eardley-Pryor Right. That's right. I have a note that Melinda Pierce joined the Sierra Club DC office in 1991 and was hired as a grassroots coordinator for the Alaska Coalition, and this relates back to the persistent attacks of the Republican establishment against the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge. Could you talk a little bit about what it was that Melinda began doing, and what kind of assaults she was trying to deal with and react to, and maybe even about why or how this is such an ongoing thing in DC politics?

04-00:01:41

Sease: Sure. First off, when the Alaska Lands Act was passed, part of the compromise that got the deal across the finish line was there was a little section of the Arctic Coast that was left out of wilderness. It was part of the National Wildlife Refuge but the coastal plain of the Arctic in the Wildlife Refuge was not designated as wilderness, as well. So in theory that's easier to get past the impediments of drilling than if it had been wilderness. So there had been a longstanding desire on the part of conservationists to get that last bit of protection. It was also left out of wilderness because the oil and gas industry had their eye on it. There are no proven reserves in the coastal plain, but there is a suspicion that they could find recoverable oil that was profitable. But what's, I think, a bigger factor is it became the poster child either for

protection and, more problematic, the poster child for the industry of, "If we can open the Arctic to drilling, there's no stopping us." And so it was the headline fight on oil and gas drilling and has been for thirty years. And we keep barely winning. And, most recently, Trump has signaled that, it's okay to go drill there.

04-00:03:26

Eardley-Pryor Right.

04-00:03:27

Sease: But one of the things that helps to protect the Arctic is that it's a very expensive place to drill and the cost of even exploration is high and the cost of recovering oil is really high. So when oil prices are low there's not a lot of incentive to actually drill in the Arctic. But it's a longstanding fight, and it's something that goes right to the heartstrings of conservation. It is both real, in terms of it being one of the wildest places in the world, and it is symbolic.

04-00:04:05

Eardley-Pryor Yeah. The symbolism seems to be really carrying this thing onwards and onward for decades.

04-00:04:13

Sease: Yeah. So Melinda's first job at the Sierra Club was actually as part of a coalition. She was housed at the Sierra Club but, her main duty was being the person who was driving the Alaska coalition. Melinda's an amazing organizer. Really understands grassroots organizing, working with volunteers, lining people up. And she also understood and finally honed the skills of connecting that to Congressional and administrative advocacy. So she was a great hire. And once the Sierra Club had her under our roof, we just never let her go.

04-00:05:02

Eardley-Pryor What has been her trajectory since joining as this coalition as a grassroots organizer?

04-00:05:07

Sease: Well, she was that for a while. She stayed focused on the Arctic, continues to have that as part of her portfolio. I don't know what the title change was but she became a senior lobbyist on lands issues. And she also represented the Club on endangered species issues, because every few years, just like we have a continuing fight to defend the Arctic, we have a continuing fight to not have the Endangered Species Act reauthorized in a way that guts it. I think I spoke with you earlier in our conversations about how powerful a tool the Endangered Species Act is because of the way it's set up. And as it is supposed to be, in theory, reauthorized every ten or so years, that's an opportunity to open it up and try to change it. And so it never gets reauthorized. It just stays in its current original mode and that's a big fight. And Melinda worked with a coalition on that and represented the Sierra Club in that coalition for many years.

Ultimately, as my portfolio as legislative director got more and more crowded, and it was clear that I was not able to do the job of legislative director and everything else that was on my plate, I reorganized and hired Melinda as a deputy. And while it was, in terms of the structure, theoretically my deputy, we pretty quickly evolved into her title being legislative director, because, particularly externally facing, title matters. And if you're going to walk into a Hill office with the authority and portfolio that Melinda had, she needed the title that went with it. And it wasn't deputy director of blah-be-blah—you know, my title was like seven words long. And she did not need a seven-word title to be the face on the Hill. So legislative director was what her working title was.

04-00:07:16

Eardley-Pryor

That's great. And it sounds like, in a lot of ways, she followed the path of your titles at work, being a public lands director and then on to legislative director.

04-00:07:26

Sease:

Yes.

04-00:07:29

Eardley-Pryor

What was your working relationship like in helping mentor somebody to come take on some of these roles that you had done yourself?

04-00:07:37

Sease:

I have mentored a lot of people, and so I don't hesitate to talk about mentoring people. Melinda never needed mentoring. All Melinda needed was somebody to clear a little bit of obstacles from in front of her, and she did her job perfectly. So of all the people I have ever managed as a direct report, Melinda is by far the easiest, least demanding, and just an incredible performer. So I learned a lot from Melinda. We have similar attitudes about how you approach the Hill. So we really, over the years, developed an incredibly strong partnership and a reliance on each other for bouncing ideas back and forth, solving problems. But I always felt that if Melinda was representing us in a meeting, she wouldn't say anything different than I would if I were in the meeting.

04-00:08:33

Eardley-Pryor

You mentioned a shared philosophy on how you approached the Hill. Can you expand on a little bit of that, what you mean by that?

04-00:08:42

Sease:

Well, yeah. How you lobby, how you get something from point A to point B, there's a lot of different attitudes about what works. There's a lot of myth. The natural instinct for somebody when they are lobbying Congress, if they don't learn better or if they don't have really good instincts, is to assume that if I just tell Congress what's right, they're going to do it, because it's the right thing, and because I'm right, and because I care about it. And the way you really move Congress is by figuring out how to get a majority of people feeling like it's in their self-interest to do what you want them to do. So if it's to pass a

wilderness bill, you don't go to somebody and say, "You pass this wilderness bill because it's the right thing to do." You go to them and you demonstrate why it's a good thing for them. And maybe it's a member of Congress who cares passionately about wilderness, and then you can just appeal to that. Or maybe it's somebody who has a big chunk of their constituency that cares about it and you demonstrate that. But Melinda is somebody who came very naturally to the notion that how you move Congress is about finding out what motivates the members of Congress and working to appeal to those motivations.

There's an awful lot of stuff that is done in lobbying and in grassroots organizing that is not connected to actually influencing the target. So this is going to be a bit of a digression but the Sierra Club had a manual on organizing and how to plan a grassroots campaign, how to win a campaign.

04-00:10:34

Eardley-Pryor

I remember it. And it would get updated periodically.

04-00:10:37

Sease:

Yeah. And the essence of that—and we did trainings and we would take people and we would give them a hypothetical situation and we'd divide them into teams to figure out a plan. And part of the organizing strategy—and, you know, it didn't come right off the top of the Sierra Club's head. It was drawn heavily on Saul Alinsky, the early organizer. But it identified what's your goal, who's your target. And the target was who can give you what you want. If you convince the target, they have the power to do what you want. And then who are your sub-targets, people who influence your target. So, for example, if you're trying to get an executive order, your target would be the president. If you can get the president to want to do it, then he has the power to write the executive order. Your sub-targets would be the relevant members of his cabinet, governors that he cares about, people in states that he's going to face again in his next election. So battleground states weigh in. And then at the end of the day, when you figure out your tactics, your target and your goals, you say, "Are these tactics actually going to influence my target or my sub-targets?" And it is amazing the number of campaign plans you can look at and they have this huge plethora, a whole year worth of tactics, and only a very small number of them have any relationship to influencing the targets or the sub-targets. And Melinda was somebody who instinctively figured out that a plan, an organizing plan, a strategy actually has to move the target or it has to move somebody who can move the target. And that seems like basic ABCs, but it is incredibly counter to human nature and your gut instinct. You have to train yourself to think that way. So that was what our philosophy was.

04-00:12:53

Eardley-Pryor

Where did your training in that come from? You mentioned Saul Alinsky and this operating manual that kind of gets updated, but I would sense that your

experience in DC was a lot of learning on the job, but also learning from others. Where did that sense of strategy and tactics come from for you?

04-00:13:11

Sease:

Well, it came from people who had run winning campaigns and people who had lost campaigns. I mean, there's nothing like losing a campaign to actually figure out what you did wrong. So I had the benefit of working with people who were really good at this. People like Doug Scott. People like John McComb. People like Russ Shay in California. Folks who had put together strategies and won campaigns. Tim Mahoney, one of my colleagues and a guy who worked on forests and passed a gazillion forest wilderness bills, was a master at that. So you learn by observing others. Smart members of Congress will actually teach you that strategy. Phil Burton taught me that strategy. Phil Burton's staff gave me the fine points of it. So it is something that you can learn just by experience on your own but that's a slow way. It's much better to actually expose yourself to people who have gone through some of that hard learning.

04-00:14:19

Eardley-Pryor

That's wonderful. As we're thinking about people that you have worked with, I also make note here that in 1992, a Sierra Club staff member who is very much involved in DC politics, Carl Pope, becomes the new executive director for the Sierra Club. What was that transition like for you? Or, let me just maybe ask, what was your work with Carl like before he became executive director, and then how did it change?

04-00:14:45

Sease:

Well, that's a long answer. I had known Carl and worked with him to some degree since the beginning, of [me] being both with the Wilderness Society and then with the Sierra Club. He spent a lot of time in DC. You've interviewed him, right?

04-00:15:08

Eardley-Pryor

I've never interviewed him, no. [But Ann Lage at the Oral History Center did interview Carl Pope. See, Carl Pope, "Carl Pope: Environmentalism and Progressive Politics: Sierra Club Executive Director, 1992-2010," interview by Ann Lage in 2013, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2014. I have spoken with Carl Pope by phone a few times for his insights during my preparations on different Sierra Club Oral History Project interviews.]

04-00:15:13

Sease:

Okay. Well, somebody in the project has interviewed Carl. But Carl is absolutely brilliant. His mind is like a steel trap. Every piece of information that comes by lands there and stays there. He is perhaps the most self-confident person I have ever dealt with or worked with, and that self-confidence is both there when it's justified because of that brilliance, it's equally there when he's just out on a limb and has no underpinning of fact,

which is one of the interesting things to learn as you work with Carl. Don't let the facts stop you. Carl came to DC in the last years of the Carter Administration, on visits, to work on fighting one of Carter's bad ideas, which was the energy mobilization board. And all of the undesirable features that come out in somebody like Carl were on full display in that. I was representing the Wilderness Society in those coalition things, and Carl was in town, he knew how to do it, and anybody that didn't agree or might not be on board just needed to get out of his way. And so my first exposure to him was as him being sort of the heavy from out of town who was going to take over and didn't have a whole lot of respect for anybody else.

Over the years, after I came to work for the Sierra Club, I had more exposure to Carl and he was the director of the department, and I had a pretty good working relationship with him. But I didn't have a huge amount of faith in sort of his leadership and the direction he would take the organization. I enjoyed the buffer I had. And I remember sitting down with my boss David Gardner and saying, "You know, David, I don't mind working with Carl as conservation director or in his current role, but I worry that he—I don't want to be working when he's having more influence." And it was like months later that he became executive director of the Club. [laughter] But I did, over the years, grow to have much more respect for Carl. And it's not to say that I did not see his foibles, but I really appreciated the strategy, the sheer brilliance and the tenacity that he would bring to work. I remember—he was an interesting, incomplete leader.

04-00:18:28

Sease:

I think I have mentioned that if you want to be a manager you actually have to let go of some of the other things you were doing to make room to really be a manager. To be an executive director of an organization, you have to let go of some of the day-to-day stuff to be the executive director. You have to pay attention to the cats and dogs. And when the board hired Carl, they actually recognized that that might be a problem, and so they had him do a coaching thing for a year with the business department at the University of San Francisco, and they took Carl on as a project and sort of advised him on how to be an actual leader of an organization, not just a player in his own right. And for a while, Carl took this brilliance that he had and this attention and focused it on the mechanics of the Sierra Club and the structures and how to do that, and it was really quite impressive. And he actually got a bunch of stuff done that was important. And then—

04-00:19:42

Eardley-Pryor

What do you have in mind when you think about those things, this restructuring? This is also around the time, I'm thinking, of like Project Renewal and Project Act, the governance of the Club is changing at this time.

04-00:19:51

Sease:

Yes, yes. He was involved in some of those things. Some of that blew up in his face because Carl pushed for probably more change than the institution was ready to take at a given moment, and he also sort of walked away from it a little bit in terms of hands-on interest. When the Gingrich Revolution came, Carl's attention immediately shifted to what we called the War on the Environment, and he delegated all the running of the organization—and this is an overstatement, but it's a characterization—he delegated the running of the organization to his deputies. You know, his CFO, and his head of human resources, et cetera, and paid much less attention to it and put on the hat of, "I am the director of the conservation department, and I am the CEO." And those things can, I think, make for a fairly ragged leadership of an organization. Carl pulled it off as well as anyone could because, again, he brought a lot of talent to the equation. But you could see the holes where a Mike McCloskey, who was a much more boring executive director, paid attention to those holes.

04-00:21:24

Eardley-Pryor

What kind of holes come to mind in this transition, especially in the nineties with the Gingrich Revolution and this focus on the War on the Environment? What are some of the holes, structurally in terms of leadership, that you are remembering?

04-00:21:36

Sease:

Well, I think that the level of change that the various institutional reorganizations required, they didn't give it that much attention. You can't go in and cut big chunks of volunteer power, and [then] not stay at the table and pay attention to how the chips are falling. And I think Carl sort of let his attention drift and delegated to people who weren't quite up to it. So as a dynamic, powerful leader he took on some big things, and then didn't see them through to the finish. So they didn't land quite as well as they could have landed if his attention had stayed.

04-00:22:16

Eardley-Pryor

I see. What comes to mind for me, as you're telling me these things is, especially, the reorientation of committee memberships—there used to be a zillion committees, and even regional conservation groups, until that sort of restructuring [of the Sierra Club] that happens in the nineties.

04-00:22:23

Sease:

Yeah.

04-00:22:35

Eardley-Pryor

So what did you sense—because what I'm hearing from you is that [restructuring of governance and volunteer power] wasn't paid attention to as well as it could have been. What did you sense, either from the grassroots or in your role in DC, in the DC office, as the ramifications of that not being attended to?

04-00:22:52

Sease: Well, there was bitter resentment along the part of a lot of grassroots folks about national. And I always thought that that was a staff versus volunteer, but the more I was exposed to it the more I realized it was about local volunteer versus national organization. So the elimination of the regional vice presidents forum, which was arguably a complete waste of money in tight financial times—fly a bunch of people around for regional meetings that, there's no structure, there's no reason, it's just, you know, one more title and one more committee—made sense. But it had a lot of collateral damage. A lot of bad will was developed.

04-00:23:42

Eardley-Pryor How does that then influence the way that lobbying can be done?

04-00:22:50

Sease: Hmm, I don't think it has a huge impact. Because what's interesting is even the same volunteers that would be unhappy about national versus chapters, at the end of the day would still come to town and help lobby.

04-00:24:11

Eardley-Pryor They still have their passions for what they care about.

04-00:24:13

Sease: Yeah.

04-00:24:15

Eardley-Pryor Well, these are wonderful reflections on your behalf here, so thank you for sharing those.

04-00:24:23

Sease: I'm sure Carl would think the same. He might actually agree. [laughter]

04-00:24:31

Eardley-Pryor And I was just thinking your sense of Carl evolved over time, having more exposure to working together, and I can only imagine that his would have been the same with you and having more and more time and more trust. And your resilience, of him seeing what you are able to accomplish, both on the Hill and managing the office. But it seems like also over time he came to rely on you more and more and trust you more and more in a lot of ways.

04-00:24:56

Sease: I think I did win Carl's respect in terms of somebody that he could trust in terms of lobbying advice, strategic advice. You know, Carl would get his mind wrapped around something, and it was very hard to get him to let go. So one of the fights that I can recall having with him, and I was picked to bell the cat. I mean, everybody tried it. But at the end of the day, I went in and basically just threw myself on the mat to stop this. But Carl, as we were facing the—[sigh]—I guess it was Dubya.

04-00:25:40

Eardley-Pryor George W. Bush.

04-00:25:41

Sease: Because it was after 9/11, and Carl had just finished reading a history of the American Revolution that he was totally smitten by. And so his analogy was that—because we had no power in Congress or in the White House, that we had to engage in guerilla warfare, and that we were guerillas. And he couldn't listen, he couldn't hear when people said, "No. Nobody after 9/11 wants to be saying that they're doing guerilla warfare. That's the absolutely wrong image." I mean, he was just wrapped up. One of the things that Carl could do—when he gave a speech it was fascinating to listen to—is that he would have these metaphors. And he would start with one, and it would seem a little odd, and then he would sort of circle around it and weave it together and at the end come back. And so he had done this with this whole notion of revolutionaries and guerilla warriors and sabotage. And his whole team just said, "No, we absolutely can't do this at this time. It's a bad thing anyway." I mean in subsequent years, the Sierra Club completely strove, but didn't succeed—I don't think you actually can—but to eliminate war analogies from our language, from our comparison. And everything from "campaign" to "boots on the ground" it's all war analogies. But we now strive to not do that. And I remember fighting with Carl over this and just trying to use every chit I had to convince him that this would blow up. And he eventually, with great reluctance, thinking that I was wrong and that everybody else was wrong, but just agreed that, as an executive director, you cannot go against that much of a tide of your own organization, even if they're wrong. So he backed off on it.

04-00:27:55

Eardley-Pryor I guess, there's learning on the job.

04-00:27:57

Sease: Yes. [laughter]

04-00:27:59

Eardley-Pryor I also have a note that, I mean, right after Carl [inaudible, poor internet connection].

04-00:28:11

Sease: Roger, you broke up so much that I don't hear what you've asked. You've completely frozen.

04-00:28:17

Eardley-Pryor How about now?

04-00:28:19

Sease: Now you just came back.

04-00:28:20

Eardley-Pryor Okay, great. Well, I was going to say, just after Carl took on the mantle as executive director, you also elevated yourself up into becoming the full

legislative director in the DC office in 1993, right around the time that Clinton is inaugurated as this new Democratic president. So it's a time of massive transition within the Club, within DC, within the Sierra Club's DC office and I'm wondering if you can just reflect on those moments of transition, and what stands out to you in your mind.

04-00:28:55

Sease:

Well, I will tell you one thing that stood out. And, again, I've been fairly critical of Carl as a manager, but here is a flip side of that. We were sitting in the old Sierra Club office, I think it was still the old office, maybe not. But we were jammed in one little office room, and it was time for—Clinton was making a decision on who to appoint for Secretary of Interior, and there were, I think, four or five lobbyists who had different opinions of what we should do. One of the people being considered was Bruce Babbitt. And Bruce Babbitt didn't want it because he wanted to be on the Supreme Court. He had said, "Please don't have me be Interior Secretary." One was Bill Richardson. I've forgotten who the others were. But there were several candidates. But the end of the day the one that was most likely to be able to get past the conservative western states—they always feel like they sort of had their thumb on the scale for Interior Secretary—was Bruce Babbitt. But Carl asked everybody in the room what their opinion was. We went around the room and he said, "Okay, we've discussed this. Now I just want to hear what's your call, what's your take?" And he listened to every single person, and it came back to him and he said, "Okay, I've heard you. Thank you for your input. I'm going to make the decision now," and he told us what it was. And it was just such a clear example of somebody being a manager that listened to people, but felt able to take that input and make a decision, to actually have the buck stop with him. And I sort of took note of that as, oh, this is good management.

We ultimately weighed in for Bruce Babbitt and said, "No, he should be Secretary of Interior, not Supreme Court justice." And Bruce Babbitt—you know, there are no secrets in Washington—credited the Sierra Club as one of the reasons that he got pulled into that job, and he probably never forgave Carl for it.

04-00:31:27

Eardley-Pryor

Well, on that—I mean, there are just so many major changes with Clinton's Cabinet and these new positions, and people getting swept up even from the Sierra Club DC office amidst that transition. But with Bruce Babbitt in particular, what characterized him as Secretary of Interior? What are your thoughts on his leadership, his activity in that role?

04-00:31:52

Sease:

Well, I think he did a good job. He was different than Andrus in some ways. One might say he was less successful. You know, Andrus did the Alaska Lands Act, which is a pretty huge accomplishment. But Babbitt cared really passionately about the public lands, about the BLM public lands. He had a

vision of a landscape level protection and he hired really smart people, gave them the room to try to figure out how constraints of what you can do as Secretary of the Interior and those agencies in four years or eight years, how much you can accomplish with that. And he put forward the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument, which was breathtaking in its scale and in the amount of controversy that it had to overcome and the amount of controversy that it created. He really pushed hard and smart for those things. He was an easy person to work with. He had a sense of humor. Invited interest groups into his office to talk with him. He listened to them and bantered back and forth.

I think that a bit of an Achilles heel for him is that he developed an attitude about how you negotiate, how you get something across the finish line based on the work he did on a central Arizona project, water fight in Arizona, which was a huge mess. And everybody coming to the table claiming more water than there was. And Babbitt drove a compromise that was quite brilliant. The thing about that situation is that he had a power, that if they didn't come together, that he could sort of basically impose something that nobody would like as well as the compromise. So he brought that same attitude to his role as Secretary of the Interior, but he didn't have that same power. So he would negotiate thinking that he was going to get those kinds of concessions by just setting up the table the way he had in Arizona, but he would be really disappointed with what would come out the other end, and he never seemed to get that it was because the missing ingredient was the power he had as governor, when he was in Arizona, that he didn't have as Secretary of Interior in the parallel situation.

04-00:35:01

Eardley-Pryor

It's fascinating. So with him trying to replicate this executive power he had as governor in his role as Secretary of Interior, how then does that affect the way that you would lobby, either on behalf of or against some of the things that he was doing or that his deputies were doing?

04-00:35:21

Sease:

Well, it wasn't that he was trying to replicate the power. It's that he was trying to replicate the negotiating style without the power. I don't remember the details of how it impacted my lobbying of him but just as I would adopt my strategy for anybody I was lobbying, recognizing that he was trying to do that and that he was doing it without the end push I am sure informed the way I would pitch my arguments. I doubt very seriously I was as blunt as I have just been with you. Because one of the other things that I believe in lobbying that was taught to me very early on—you asked who I learned to lobby from. I learned to lobby a little bit from an absolutely wretched snake oil salesman of a people process trainer. His name was R.T. Williams and he did these sort of pyramid schemes people training things. And they were just awful. But one of the things he said that settled with me, and I have probably repeated it to junior lobbyists and people that I have been training more times than I can

count, is that if you want to change somebody's behavior you have to leave them room to change without losing face. And so that is a flaw that many bad lobbyists have, is they start their lobbying in a way that their target, to give them what they want, the first thing the target has to do is lose face and say, "Oh, well, I was wrong. You know, I was being venal and selfish and now I hear you." So I am sure that in lobbying Bruce Babbitt and recognizing at least in my view that he had a flawed strategy based on thinking he had more power than he did, was I probably didn't point that out to him and make him lose face.

04-00:37:31

Eardley-Pryor You can't paint them into a corner, right? That's great.

04-00:37:34

Sease: Yeah, yeah.

04-00:37:36

Eardley-Pryor I love that it comes from such a strange location, but it's, you know, a piece of advice you can take and actually do good with.

04-00:37:42

Sease: Yes, yes.

04-00:37:43

Eardley-Pryor That's wonderful. Well, another change that happens, we had hinted at, is that people from the DC office get pulled up into the Clinton Administration. Here I'm thinking in particular of David Gardner, your boss as the former legislative director of the Sierra Club DC office, getting pulled into the EPA. And then, of course, you take—

04-00:38:07

Sease: Roger, can we pause for just a second? I think some—

[pause in recording]

04-00:38:14

Eardley-Pryor Okay. So what I was asking, as David Gardner gets pulled from being your boss at the Sierra Club DC office as legislative director to working in the EPA with Carol Browner, what then happens in the context of you becoming and taking on the mantle of legislative director? What were your thoughts on that, and what would you do different?

04-00:38:33

Sease: Well, I don't think I would do it different. I've not really regretted taking on that role. But my thoughts at the time, and I still, if I question it, would have these same thoughts, is being the head of the Sierra Club's Public Lands Program in Washington, DC is about as sweet a job as you could find anywhere. I had a great team that I was working with. I had a portfolio of work that I loved doing, and there was just nothing wrong with that job. And

so there's no way that taking on the legislative director job was going to be a better job than that. It was the perfect job. And, in fact, the person that I hired to replace me thought it was the perfect job, too.

But the things that went through my mind as I looked around at who the likely people would be that would take that job, and how different they would be in positive or negative ways from David Gardner, how my life would change based on their skills and their approach, and I didn't see anybody in the wings that I thought I particularly wanted to work for. And it seemed like what they were looking for was a set of skills that I had. And so at the end of the day, I decided to throw my hat in. I think that's not uncommon, that people advance because they would rather be the boss than work for the people that they think might be their boss.

04-00:40:27

Eardley-Pryor

Yeah, it's a sweet move for controlling the things you know you can control, right?

04-00:40:33

Sease:

Yeah. And with that preface, I certainly enjoyed the job of legislative director. I don't mean to say that it was a bad job in any way. But you couldn't design a better job than the Director of the Public Lands team.

04-00:40:51

Eardley-Pryor

What changed then for you? You had mentioned when becoming the Director of Lands Team having to make space for the management of a team, and hiring new people to accomplish the goals that you had created.

04-00:41:02

Sease:

Yeah.

04-00:41:03

Eardley-Pryor

What kind of changes like that happened at this new position, when taking on these even broader roles?

04-00:41:09

Sease:

It was that kind of change in spades. By logarithmic expansion. It left very little time for hands-on campaign work. And in order to make that time for hands-on campaign work—all Sierra Club jobs are really full-time jobs. It became the kind of job that doesn't ever end. So you wake up thinking about it. You spend long hours at work. You take work home. You go to sleep thinking about it. So it was much more time consuming, and it squeezed out even more of the specific campaign work that I had been doing on particular issues. That being said, I did take on sort of a leadership role for the Club on a couple of issues that came up during that time and I reveled in that opportunity. But that was not the day-to-day.

04-00:42:26

Eardley-Pryor What were those campaigns that you said, "I really want to be a part of this one?"

04-00:42:31

Sease: Well, it wasn't so much that, how it came to pass. One of them was the Roadless Initiative by Clinton in his second term. I told you that the person I hired behind me is the head of my Lands Team, had said, "Yes, this is the best job in the Sierra Club." But particularly after a bunch of years of hard congresses and appropriations seasons where we were fighting lots and lots of appropriations riders, it could get really exhausting. And Melanie Griffin, who was the head of the Lands Team, we get this announcement that Clinton's going to do a roadless review, Roadless Area Initiative, and it's a huge campaign, and the Sierra Club Board and our Foundation pull together a big war chest and they say, "Drop everything. We're going to do this." And Melanie is the person to lead that campaign. She's the head of the team. And she comes to me and she says, "I don't want to do it. I can't take on one more thing right now." She had some issues in terms of her family's health and such like that. But it just wasn't a good time to take on a big new campaign—so she said, "Instead of being excited by this, I just wish it would go away." And I said, "Well, how about I take it on?" And she said, "Oh, my God, that would be so great."

So I worked with her team, and the rest of the Sierra Club writ large, to develop our campaign plan around it. And, again, it was just a grassroots campaign to demonstrate support. It wasn't that we were trying to convince them to do the right thing. We were trying to demonstrate that they had the support to do it, to give them backing. It was a great issue. And it was a president who was in his second term, ready to, you know, make a little legacy.

04-00:44:37

Eardley-Pryor That's right. At the end of the term there's, like, that opportunity, isn't there?

04-00:44:38

Sease: Right, yeah.

04-00:44:39

Eardley-Pryor "Now's the time." And it's crazy, too, because that Roadless Review that Clinton begins is still now, in 2020, moving its way through courts to be implemented.

04-00:44:52

Sease: Yeah. Now, the other issue that I took on, I took on earlier in the process, and it was the Soot and Smog Standards. Carol Browner basically pushed to do new, tighter standards for air pollution. And for me, that was a stretch. I mean one of the things that I struggled with a bit in taking on the role of legislative director is I had deep experience in the entire portfolio of land and wildlife conservation issues, and zip on pollution. Nothing. I mean I remember doing a

radio interview during the War on the Environment. I had prepped all of the stuff. And the radio announcer said, "So the Clean Water Act, when was that passed?" I had not a clue. [laughter] You know, I hadn't prepped on the basic stuff that anybody who had been doing pollution issues for ten years, like I had lands issues, would know in their sleep. So there was a learning curve. So in taking on the Soot and Smog, I mean, I remember meeting with Carol Browner, and I think she must have thought, "This is who I have heading the Sierra Club's lobbying office?" But, again, it was just a grassroots campaign to give her support. And we gathered petitions and letters, and we bundled them up in massive quantities so that they became a visual element at a press conference. And we presented these in front of the White House in an orchestrated press conference. It wasn't a rally opposing them, but it was to give them to her and to take them in to—I think it was actually into Gore.

We had identified this young man in Chicago through one of our "building environmental community" organizing efforts. We had run an ad about a clean air rally in Chicago. This kid, who was asthmatic, says to his mom, "Mom, we got to go to this rally. This is about me. This is about getting the air clean so that I don't have to stay indoors on bad air days, that I can go outside and play." And his name was Kyle Dammitz. [See, Monika Bauriein, "Every Breath You Take," *SIERRA* Magazine (July/August 2006).] And Kyle became a poster child for the clean air stuff, and he organized in Chicago, he went to rallies with his mom. I mean, he was like eleven at this time. And we had decided that when it was time to present these positions to Browner, which was supposed to be in like April or May, that he would come and deliver them and do a speech. Well, things got delayed and delayed and delayed and it was July and one of those triple digit days in Washington where it's a hundred degrees, a hundred percent humidity, and the air quality is in the red level.

04-00:48:13

Sease: Not good for an asthmatic.

04-00:48:15

Kyle Dammitz Not good for a kid with asthma. But Kyle insisted on coming. His mom brought him. And he's there with his little nebulizer. Everybody cried. And he makes his little speech and he presents the petition. And Carol Browner, bless her heart, took him into the White House and up to meet Al Gore.

04-00:48:35

Sease: How cool is that?

04-00:48:36

Eardley-Pryor Yeah. And I remember thinking to myself—Michael Fischer, a former executive director, sort of stepped in it by talking about how much more he cared about the Arctic than boring issues like clean air. I had thought to myself, you know, clean air doesn't have the emotional appeal that wilderness does, but that day when I saw Kyle Dammitz, and he was talking about,

"Passing this new standard is going to mean that I get to go outside and play more," it was very real and very emotional for me.

04-00:49:13

Sease: That's pulling on the heart strings there.

04-00:49:16

Sease: Yeah, yeah. I never felt that sort of lack in pollution issues again after that. It became part of the—it had just as big a place in my heart as the wild lands or wildlife did.

04-00:49:33

Eardley-Pryor Yeah, realizing that there are people that are so impacted by all of it.

04-00:49:40

Sease: Right.

04-00:49:40

Eardley-Pryor Yeah. Well, in thinking about how you took on these two different campaigns, the Roadless Rule and then the Soot and Smog with the new standards with the Clean Air Act, and you mentioned both times, that it was organizing a grassroots campaign and you knew how to do that. It wasn't as much of a steep learning curve, at least on the pollution side, to do your job well. And I'm wondering, what are the mechanics of that? So you're in DC realizing "We need to organize a national campaign on this." How does that then operationalize from there?

04-00:50:13

Sease: The missing piece of what I said is it's also about being a voice for that grassroots power to an administration. So an administration that wants to do the right thing is still faced on a day-to-day basis with choices. Choices that make an easier path, choices that get rid of somebody that's nipping at their heels and complaining. And so you still have the role of advocate. And I was part of a coalition in both of these cases that met very regularly with senior people in the White House and the administration and the agencies pushing for the Roadless Rule or pushing for the Soot and Smog standards to be as good as they could be. That's not to say that Carol Browner needed me to convince her. But she needed me and the rest of the coalition to be voicing that articulately, hopefully, and backing it up with grassroots.

And the grassroots—I mean, as a Washington lobbyist, I didn't have a lot of the hands-on work of generating the grassroots. My role was to figure out the targeting, figure out who we needed to get messages in from where. So I mentioned earlier that, if you're trying to lobby an administration, one of the things you think about is what are the battleground states. Because those are states that any sitting president, particularly one in his first term, is looking at because they're going to face the voters there and that's going to be where it matters. So for a Democratic president, what Alabamians think doesn't weight as much as what people in Ohio think. And, for that matter, what Californians

think doesn't weight as much. They have a tendency to pay attention at a more granular level. I'm not saying they're not paying attention to Alabama and California, but if you want to get on the radar screen in a decision-making way on a sitting president, you focus where he's getting the news first.

04-00:52:33

Eardley-Pryor

That's great. So, yeah, I guess I'm thinking, just in terms of that. You're focusing on how to lobby on behalf of that campaign, but also part of this bigger nation-wide process of getting people in Ohio or in some other battleground states to really get involved.

04-00:52:53

Sease:

Right.

04-00:52:54

Eardley-Pryor

And so I guess, what I'm wondering is how does that process work? If you're in DC saying, "All right, I'm going to be drumming up this grassroots support and I'm focusing on the lobbying part," what about the rest of that huge machine that's moving?

04-00:53:08

Sease:

Okay. So there's two ways that that works. One, internally in the Sierra Club, the senior team during the Clinton Administration included the director of our field program, the director of our communications team, the legislative director—that was me. And—

04-00:53:32

Eardley-Pryor

Who are those people that you're naming off, at that time?

04-00:53:34

Sease:

Kim Haddow was, initially as a consultant and then eventually as the head of the communications department, was doing the communications. Bob Bingaman was the field director. Bruce Hamilton was the head of the conservation department. I don't remember what we called the grassroots online digital stuff in that era, but the person who did the direct outreach stuff. And those folks would meet on at least a weekly basis, if not more often, and get right into the weeds of strategy on how to generate those, whether it's comments or whether it's rallies in different places. So some combination of Bob and his team and me and my team would sit down and figure out, what is the grassroots—what's the shape and targeting of the grassroots pressure we want? What's the timing? And Bob is also a big fan of Saul Alinsky, and how do you start it at a low volume, and how do you crescendo to the absolute peak at the time you want it? So those kinds of daily planning things happened.

04-00:54:57

The second thing that happened is that the Sierra Club is not the only organization out there doing it. We are the ones that had the deepest bench for grassroots organizing, but there are a whole lot of other organizations. And funders in particular like to fund coalition work, to try to get those

organizations to be working collaboratively so that they're spending their money most effectively and getting the biggest bang for their buck. So we would also participate in coalition strategies and figure out—part of that was influencing the coalition to share our strategy. Some of that was actually taking on some of the coalition strategy and having it influence ours. [Some of that was] divvying up the turf, trying to make sure that the full impact of grassroots that could be felt was being felt. So when the Wildlife Federation, for example, was a part of the coalition, they were going to make sure that the hunters and anglers—the hook and bullet boys, as we called them—were weighing in, as well. The Audubon Society was going to be bringing the birders. And that's a little bit of an oversimplification, but it was about getting all those voices in.

04-00:56:21

Eardley-Pryor

I see. There's just so many parts and so many different ways that the Club itself and its allies can get something accomplished.

04-00:56:28

Sease:

Right. So there is direct grassroots, like writing a letter, making a phone call, going to a district office, showing up at a hearing. There is also what we call the "blue smoke and mirrors," which is the public demonstrations, the rallies. Have you heard the term "blue smoke and mirrors" in politics?

04-00:57:01

Eardley-Pryor

I've heard of smoke and mirrors, but not blue smoke and mirrors.

04-00:57:04

Sease:

It's from Jimmy Breslin in "How the Good Guys Finally Won". He said that all political power was primarily from blue smoke and mirrors. In Washington, in politics, much of what moves legislation is the blue smoke and mirrors of power. And an example of that is—I think it was maybe on—it might have been on the soot and smog standards. No, I think it was probably the Roadless Rule. It's where the media and the grassroots come together. We were going to be doing yard signs about the issue. And it was a pretty small operation. Very targeted in just a handful of states. And what we did is we found neighborhoods where the reporter that reported on that issue lived, and we put most of the yard signs in that neighborhood. So that it looked to the reporter of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*—I'm making up the particular example—like there was this huge campaign going on roadless stuff, because in his neighborhood, that's where the yard signs were.

04-00:58:32

Eardley-Pryor

Wow.

04-00:58:34

Sease:

Another tactic, it may or may not be blue smoke and mirrors, is if there is a politician that you're trying to influence, you figure out what his schedule is. You show up with banners at the airport when he comes home for a district recess. You have a bunch of volunteers call to have recess meetings. So there

is just this feeling, it's not just letters that come in, but there is this feeling that everywhere you look, people care about this issue. And so between the Sierra Club and all the other organizations, you're trying to make sure that you've got that going.

04-00:59:10

Eardley-Pryor

And that point you made [earlier] about timing being so important, to know the person's schedule, to know when's the right time to get in touch with them, let alone the time to really make sure—that if it's time to mark-up a bill, for example, I mean, timing really can influence things.

04-00:59:26

Sease:

Well, and for the soot and smog standards, we probably could have gotten just as good of standards without that whole full-tilt-boogie grassroots campaign, because Carol Browner wanted to do it, it was the right thing to do. Clinton wanted to do it. It had a lot of momentum. But there was also a potential that the moment it hit, the ink was dry on it, that Congress would pass a bill or somebody would put a bill in a Congress to undo it, to try to weaken it. And so one of the things we did with that administrative campaign is we didn't just look at what was going to influence the president, we looked at where we were going to have to fight to keep it in Congress. And so, if we had a gettable but weak member of Congress on this issue, that's where we'd do a bunch of our administrative lobbying. At the end of the day the thing that's nice about that is how it's paid for. That kind of work is paid for with money that is in greater supply and is tax deductible, 501(c)(3). It's a legitimate use of 501(c)(3) money. And if our only reason for targeting that district was to influence a member of Congress that would have been wrong. But if we have a lot of places to choose, and we keep an eye on where we want to be building strength with our (c)(3) work, we can make a case for spending (c)(3) money, building the strength there, making the case, and then, at the appropriate time, putting a little (c)(4) on the table to go directly at that member of Congress.

04-01:01:15

Eardley-Pryor

This part is fascinating to me. Knowing how to stretch these dollars that come from these different pockets that you can only use in certain ways. And the context of this, too, is important. In the nineties, the Sierra Club's having serious financial issues. I mean, they're stretched as thin as they can be on their credit. They can't take out any more credit. There's a real struggle. Membership is starting to taper down a little bit because now there's a Democratic president. And so using monies in these ways is so important. I'd like to hear you explain to me a little bit more, because I didn't quite catch all of it, what you mean by an administrative campaign versus maybe a legislative campaign, and then how does 501(c)(3) versus 501(c)(4) monies can be used.

04-01:02:06

Sease:

Okay. Well, I will give you the world's shortest version of 501(c)(3) versus 501(c)(4). Under the IRS rules, in section 501(c)(3)—is why it's called that—

it describes organizations that are a charitable organization. And donations for those organizations are tax deductible because they are doing a charitable or educational purpose. And the work that they do can be funded with tax deductible money. If an organization is primarily for lobbying, it's classified under the IRS as a 501(c)(4), and donations to a 501(c)(4) are not tax deductible. Well, the Sierra Club, thanks to a set of ads we ran to defend the Grand Canyon back in the sixties, I think it was, lost our 501(c)(3) status and became a 501(c)(4). So donations to the Sierra Club, as an organization, are not tax deductible. People can in fact give money to the Sierra Club Foundation, and that foundation will charitably fund some of our work. That's how a lot of our campaigns are run, as charitable campaigns funded by a grant from the Sierra Club Foundation.

But for most organizations that are 501(c)(3), they have a cap that they can spend a little bit of money lobbying. And so everybody pays really close attention to what's lobbying versus what's not. In the IRS, Internal Revenue description, they exempt certain activities as not being lobbying. And so one of those is advocating with the administration on policy. That is a 501(c)(3) charitable educational activity. It's not lobbying, because you're not trying to influence a piece of legislation. Roger, you've frozen.

04-01:04:24

Eardley-Pryor Do you have me again? Am I back?

04-01:04:26

Sease: Yes. Yeah.

04-01:04:26

Eardley-Pryor Okay. So what I'm hearing, you can use the 501(c)(3) money to lobby the administration because it's not—[inaudible, poor internet connection].

04-01:04:36

Sease: Because it's not considered lobbying, because it's not passing legislation. The other thing you can do with 501(c)(3) tax deductible money—

04-01:04:47

Eardley-Pryor [Inaudible]—be considered lobbying?

04-01:04:49

Sease: You froze for a moment. Can you repeat that?

04-01:04:52

Eardley-Pryor Yes, I'm here. No, I'm here. I hear you.

04-01:04:54

Sease: Okay. So the other thing you can do with tax deductible money is you can work with the Congress in their oversight authority. So one of the things that Congress does is it passes legislation. Trying to influence that is not a tax-deductible activity. Another thing that Congress does is it exerts oversight

over the agencies. So they hold hearings where they ask the administration to come in and talk to them about policy. They send letters of inquiry and opinion to the administration expressing opinions about things. So the two things that you can influence policy with, with (c)(3) money, are lobbying the administration on policy and working with Congress in its oversight capacity. A final thing that can influence policy with 501(c)(3) money is litigation, which is not considered (c)(4) either. So the three things that an organization that's got a lot of (c)(3) money in its coffers does is advocate with the administration, work with Congress in its oversight capacity, and fund litigation.

So when the Clean Air Act, we were going to—go ahead.

04-01:06:26

Eardley-Pryor

[Inaudible, poor internet connection]. No, I'm sorry. Please.

04-01:06:30

Sease:

Okay. I'm seeing you move, but I'm not hearing any voice.

04-01:06:35

Eardley-Pryor

I'm sorry. I was going to jump in and ask a question about—during a campaign, you had mentioned, you would use the 501(c) money to do this work but then you would sneak in a little (c)(4) money at the end, and I didn't quite understand how you could do something like that.

04-01:06:53

Sease:

No. I misphrased that if that's what I left as an impression. One can look at the timing and the sequencing of when you spend what kind of money. So there is a legitimate 501(c)(3) opportunity to lobby the administration, and you do that. You then come in after that and you lobby Congress. As you're lobbying the administration, depending on where you do the work it may have some benefits for when you are trying to do your congressional work. So, for example, I mentioned the oversight role. One of the things we did on Clean Air was we orchestrated a letter signed by members of Congress asking the EPA to set strong soot and smog standards. And then we got people to sign on to it. It was called a "Dear Colleague" letter. So a Dear Colleague to the administration is not legislation. It's not (c)(4). It's (c)(3). But once you've got a member of Congress committed, signed on to a letter lobbied by his constituents to sign on to that letter saying, "I support strong soot and smog standards, strong Clean Air standards," then that member of Congress is unlikely to vote to hijack and undo that rule. So it's a legitimate way of setting the stage for being able to defend it legislatively when the time comes. So we were thinking of those kinds of things as we were putting this strategy together.

04-01:08:40

Eardley-Pryor

That makes a lot more sense, and it is fascinating. In some of our background discussions you had mentioned something that I think you called the "Vento-Green" letter. Is that similar to this letter you're talking about as an example?

04-01:08:57

Sease:

It is an example of that. I have, after the passage of time, forgotten which particular Clean Air fight the Vento-Green letter was around. It may have been around the soot and smog standards, but I think it might have been around an earlier iteration. But, at the end of the day it's the same strategy of getting people to sign on to a letter. And in the case of the Vento-Green, I was not that involved with the letter, but they gave medals to members of Congress who had signed the letter. I'm thinking [looks around]—I used to have one of the medals. It was like one of those oversized Olympic medals and it was on a red, white, and blue striped silk ribbon and when we were cleaning out the office and throwing away junk there was a bunch of Vento-Green medals and I took one and it hung on a door for the longest time. I thought it might be in this room, but it's not.

04-01:09:56

Eardley-Pryor

That's great. Well, even just thinking about these strategies of getting something you can show and have one of these blue smoke and mirror events, where you have a bag full of letters that you're going to go deliver to Al Gore, signed by people that he cares about. That seemed to be a regular, effective strategy in this period in the nineties. I'm thinking about, with the War On the Environment [campaign], there was a "Bill of Environmental Rights" that would then get signed and delivered to Newt Gingrich saying, "Stop the war on the environment." So that strategy just seems like it was something that was happening on a number of different levels in the Club at that time.

04-01:10:38

Sease:

And, again, it's not something that we invented. Somebody, I think it was Kim Haddow, was in an antiques store, and she found and bought and gave to me a cedar shingle. It had a postcard glued to it. And it was, I think, from 1947, and it was to, I think, a member of Congress or maybe it was an agency, and it was lobbying for some labor issue. And so, you know, back in the forties, people were doing grassroots mail with that kind of interesting kick of having it be on a cedar shingle that was made by labor. It hung on my wall for years, just as a reminder that we did not invent grassroots lobbying.

04-01:11:50

Eardley-Pryor

Well, we've talked around some of the context of the nineties but a lot of it does also hinge around the Gingrich takeover of Congress, this "Contract with America."

04-01:12:01

Sease:

We called it the Contract *On* America.

04-01:12:04

Eardley-Pryor Ah, the "Contract *On* America," from the Club's perspective—

04-01:12:07

Sease: Yes.

04-01:12:08

Eardley-Pryor —I'm just wondering, what were some of your memories of that takeover in DC? What was your feeling within the office? What happened when that moment happened?

04-01:12:19

Sease: It was extremely sobering. Very depressing. Just the idea of, both, the draconian agenda and the power they had to drive it forward. I mean, they, literally, the very first thing they were going to do, was gut the Clean Water Act. What is interesting in looking back at it is that there were a bunch of things that would harm the environment that were part of the Contract on America. The only thing that made it through in that Congress that did lasting harm was something we had been fighting for years, was a sort of camel's nose under the tent, subtle reg reform thing, and it went through because Democrats compromised on it. But basically the whole agenda, the gutting the Clean Water Act, et cetera, was shutdown.

04-01:13:22

Eardley-Pryor What was the camel under the tent, the nose that got in?

04-01:13:24

Sease: And it was shut down in part—oh, it was a reg reform thing that basically said—let's see if I can remember the details of it. That Congress could basically undo regulations with a single—with—I'm sorry, it's really esoteric and complicated. But it allowed Congress to undo administrative regulations with a fast track to do it. So it was basically going after not a particular regulation about a particular issue, but going after the whole way regulations are put in place and held in place.

04-01:14:20

Eardley-Pryor [Inaudible] Was that with regard to executive orders?

04-01:14:25

Sease: It was in regard to full rules and regulations that had gone through a huge public process.

04-01:14:33

Eardley-Pryor Oh. Almost like a line-item veto for Congress.

04-01:14:38

Sease: Yes. Yes. In some ways it could be compared to that. But that's the only thing that made it across of the Gingrich agenda. And part of that was because Gingrich's side took over the House by Republicans winning in some pretty mixed districts. So there was one in Washington State that I can recall. We

had a lobby week and we had folks out on the Hill. At the end of everyday people would come back from their Hill visits and they would debrief and we would have what we called the warm beer award for the best intelligence and we also had coached people on the elevator rule of do not talk about targeting, lobbying, strategy on an elevator. You never know who's there. And so one of our lobbyists came back with a story of having heard, overheard, had walked behind Rick White, who was a newly elected member of Congress from Washington State talking to Newt Gingrich and saying, "Look, you have got to quit having me vote against the environment. It's killing me in my district."

04-01:16:11

Eardley-Pryor

That's good information.

04-01:16:12

Sease:

He was one of our primary targets. As in every time he voted for one of those things, we took it to his constituency and his constituency did not vote for dirty air, they did not vote for dirty water. They didn't vote to get rid of government regulation. And so he would just get slammed for it, and he became a voice that had larger impact than the number of people who were actually in his situation. This is one of the ways we beat back that Gingrich assault. The other was that they overreached. If they had done on all of that what they did with reg reform, just take a little bit, just take a little bite, they'd have probably gotten a lot more of it across the finish line.

04-01:17:03

Eardley-Pryor

I'm picturing in '92, '93, Clinton sweeps into DC. There's this exciting moment, I would think the Sierra Club's idea is "we can get a lot done." And then '94 comes, and this crash of, "My God, [inaudible] this Republican Congress." Within the Sierra Club's DC office, how did you make that transition from saying, "We're on offense, this is great," to suddenly, "Holy cow, we're on big-time defense." What was that like within the DC office?

04-01:17:34

Sease:

Well, that was one of the times that I would say Carl Pope's chops as a leader and as a strategist really came into play. So he convened the leadership of the Club both in DC and San Francisco. Robbie Cox may or may not have talked about this, because Robbie was brought into these, but we convened out in San Francisco for a multi-day meeting to talk about, what is our response to the war on the environment? How do we handle this? It was basically just all hands-on deck. Everything was reoriented around this defensive strategy, and about shifting from offense to defense. And we created a—one of my biggest memories was a job that I came to absolutely loathe, which was we sent out a daily email, at the end of every day, an update on the war on the environment.

04-01:18:45

Eardley-Pryor

That's a ton of work.

04-01:18:47

Sease:

It was the word from Washington on what was happening. As I was packing up my office, I had all these books on quotations, and I thought, "Why do I have these?" Then I remembered that the top of every one of these, you know, War On the Environment, Issue 121 or whatever, there was a quote, some relevant quote to, hopefully, what was below in the text. And so I had all these quotation books. But it became an exhausting duty to do. So—

04-01:19:25

Eardley-Pryor

Just finding the quotes for all of these updates, let alone having to then fill in what update was and what you were doing.

04-01:19:30

Sease:

Yes, yes. So initially it was something that Carl did for about a month just to sort of set the stage. Then he handed it off to me. I think I eventually recruited some people to come in and do it, but we did it for more than a year. I'm sure that the Sierra Club librarian probably has some of them. And I'm sure that some of them are really bad, because it was the last thing I would do at night and, you know, I think it was before the era of spellcheck. [laughter]

04-01:20:09

Eardley-Pryor

That's great. Maybe, Debbie, we could take a little break. We've been talking about an hour. Just a little pause together.

[pause in recording]

So Debbie, I wanted to ask—there's a book that came across my radar in preparing for your and my discussions here, and it's called *American Environmental Policy*. The updated version is called *Beyond Gridlock* and it's by these political scientists, Klyza and Sousa [Christopher McGrory Klyza and David J. Sousa, *American Environmental Policy: Beyond Gridlock*, Updated and Extended Edition (The MIT Press, 2013).] They are talking about, they imagine there was this golden era in which all this massive national level environmental legislation got passed in the mid-sixties to the nineties—I mean, NEPA, the Clean Air, [inaudible, poor internet connection], all these kinds of big things. And they say that around 1980, we see gridlock in Washington, DC in passing major, national scale environmental legislation, which from your and my discussions, is not the case. All the wilderness bills that get passed in this time period is major environmental legislation.

But one of the things they say—and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this—is that there are five ways to work around gridlock. And so this is really coming into your world, as to how does DC operate, how do we get things done on environmental policy. And so I'd love to hear your perspective on these, so I'll just read them out. One is that, when you're trying to get things done, is you can try to amend legislation via reconciliation, or what they call "rough riding," riders on bills. Another one is executive orders by presidents, like designating roadless areas or national monuments. The third one would be

using courts to interpret statutes that can block economic development. The fourth one they frame as a collaborative pathway, bringing society back into policymaking rather than a command-and-control policy from top down. And then the fifth one, which I imagine we'll get into detail later, but is a shift—they say, perhaps a devolution—but a shift of environmental policy from Congress, because of the logjam in Congress, to focus on the states. The priorities vary from state to state, so you can try to get things done at a state level rather than DC. So with those, what are your takes on that framing of how to get around gridlock?

04-01:22:31

Sease:

Well, I think that it's a mixed bag. And it's also a set of strategies that sometimes the anti-environmental opponents have been much more adept at using than pro-environment proponents. For example, the riders and reconciliation. Most of the major losses we have had on the environment have been done through the budget or appropriations process, as a rider. The opponents to the environment in the last couple of Congresses have had literally hundreds and hundreds of anti-environmental riders on every bill. Now, that assumes that Congress is actually going to pass appropriations bills, which they have been failing to do for the last several sessions. So, it becomes a moot point if it isn't on the budget omnibus bill. But I find legislating through riders to be primarily a negative thing. One of the counter examples of that is that, for many years the ban on offshore oil development—California coast, et cetera—had been as a repeated every year appropriations rider that was just stuck in. But by and large, most appropriations riders have played against the environment.

04-01:24:03

Executive orders? I think that monuments have been designated. Obama used executive orders, I think, very well to try to get some of his agenda through. But at the end of the day, in terms of doing climate, for example, you need the power of Congress. You need the power of the purse and you can only get so far with administrative rules and executive orders.

Taking things to the states is an interesting thing. And it's played on both sides of the pro and anti. One of the great examples of how it's worked for our side is, for years, we could not get fuel economy standards raised. Just couldn't get past the lobby of the auto industry. So a very brilliant strategist who used to run the Sierra Club's energy program, a guy named Dan Becker, developed an approach working with the states and he found states that were willing to pass state regulations that called for higher standards. States that, if you got enough of them, they represented a big enough part of the market that the auto industry did not want to have to deal with a bunch of different state standards, and they wanted a federal one. California being one of those big states. And it worked. It created the environment where, when Obama went to raise fuel economy standards under his administration, the auto industry was ready for that to happen, because it would get them out from these thirteen states that had passed fuel economy standards that created different requirements for cars

sold in their states. It's also being challenged in court. And one of the things that Trump has tried to do is to prevent California from being able to have higher air quality standards. So, any of these tactics sort of cut both ways.

04-01:26:25

In going to the states, we have in fact had great success at passing clean energy measures in various states. But the flip side of that is that there's an effort driven by the Koch brothers to go and preempt local ordinances that are stricter than the statewide. So it's called preemption, and it's basically trying to take away of the power of the big cities where there is a more progressive agenda and give power back to the rural more conservative parts of the state. So it's a complicated equation.

The collaborative? I think it has been one of the least successful, and maybe it works—

04-01:27:24

Eardley-Pryor

Why doesn't it work?

04-01:28:25

Sease:

It may work on some things, but when you're dealing with environment, at least my perception, is that the low hanging fruit has already been dealt with. So the consensus approach gives you a weaker standard or less protection than what you need. You need the bold action to actually make a difference, particularly if you're dealing with climate change. The idea of a consensus-driven collaborative process where, "Let's just all put our issues on the table", well, one of those issues that sort of is the 900-pound gorilla, and it loses the power to deliver what it needs in a climate negotiation. So I've not had good experiences with these collaborative processes. I have found that they are, by and large, used to diminish the standard.

Now, there are exceptions to that. For years in Idaho we could not get any wilderness passed. We couldn't get this huge chunk of land in the Owyhee Canyonlands done. And Mike Simpson, a Republican member of Congress who cared passionately about wildlands, working with a state conservation league, the Idaho State Conservation League, and a bunch of local activists and ranchers who actually did like the land, they just wanted to be able to run their cows on it also, they came up with a pretty damn good proposal that's a lot more protection than Idaho had before.

04-01:29:12

Eardley-Pryor

Who was that Republican that you had in mind?

04-01:29:14

Sease:

I'm drawing a blank on his name. I'll look it up and remind you. [Mike Simpson].

04-01:29:27

Eardley-Pryor

On this point about collaboration. I also have a note here that from 1993 to 2003, during that period, you are on the board of the League of Conservation Voters. And I was wondering, is that part of that collaboration building?

04-01:29:46

Sease:

No, no. The League of Conservation Voters was an environmental PAC. It was started as a—most environmental organizations did not have political programs; they didn't have PACs. And it was to give a political voice to the environmental organizations. And so it was initially made up with its board being members of existing environmental organizations. So, the spot that I took on the League board was David Gardner's previous slot, representing—I mean, he was there because he was the Sierra Club. He, in theory, was representing the League of Conservation Voters when he was working on their board. And I served on that board for ten years or more.

It grew as an organization away from being the environment's sort of coalition PAC as more environmental organizations developed their own PACs. And it had a more traditional board of funders. So it now is made up of big donors that help to raise its money. But it's all about electoral work. So no, it's not about the consensus stuff.

04-01:31:06

Eardley-Pryor

Are there any stories that come to mind about your time serving on that board?

04-01:31:13

Sease:

Not really.

04-01:31:21

Eardley-Pryor

I also have a note that you were a founding member of the American Rivers Board, which is certainly near and dear to your heart. What was that experience like?

04-01:31:32

Sease:

Well, that was actually an interesting experience. So that organization grew out of a bunch of—people who were river protectors, by and large, we were dam fighters. It was about fighting proposals, particularly in the West, to dam free flowing rivers. And these proposals would come up and you would beat them back and you wouldn't be able to say, "Hey, that's done." You've to fight it, or the next one, the next year. And so you eventually lose the fight, and it's underwater. I think Brent Blackwelder, who was also one of the original co-founders, used to say that "You can only lose a dam fight—," or "You can win it many times, but you can only lose it once." And a group of river aficionados, river runners, people in conservation organizations came together in Denver for a long weekend meeting and talking about what we need. And we formed—I think it had a different name at that point, it had a longer name. But we formed American Rivers. I think it was the American River Conservation something. And decided to raise money to hire an

executive director. It was a small struggling organization for a long time. It's actually pretty robust now.

04-01:33:29

Eardley-Pryor

What was it that that group would do? What need was it meeting that you needed to create this new organization, and endow it?

04-01:33:37

Sease:

It was bringing attention to the protection of rivers. So other environmental organizations were not putting enough priority on adding rivers. There hadn't been any rivers added to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. I shouldn't say any. There had not been many rivers added to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, to the system. We were losing dam fights. It was low on the list of priorities of organizations and there was a thought that it needs an organization that is looking out across the country for rivers. And it actually did help to fulfill that mandate, that missing piece. River protection is hard to get. In the west, every ounce of water is owned by somebody. And in the east, even people who want the river to stay pretty much the way it is are very threatened by the idea of some federal designation that will bring more people to "their" river.

04-01:34:49

Eardley-Pryor

I had a great chat with Melinda Pierce, and she was sharing with me that, occasionally, maybe once a year or so, but regularly, that you would invite people in the Sierra Club DC office to join you on a river trip. And you would teach them how to roll, or you would teach them how to read water. I just would love to hear you share about what that—[inaudible, poor internet connection]—do you think that it served—

04-01:35:20

Sease:

So, you cut out a little bit. But I think you asked me if it served a purpose of bringing folks together. Did you?

04-01:35:30

Eardley-Pryor

What was your goal? Yeah. Yes.

04-01:35:31

Sease:

Yeah. Well, part of my goal was that groups of people doing things together that are enjoyable and out in nature and challenging, it's good. It's a natural version of a ropes course. Part of it was just sharing something that I loved and part of it was that periodically, the DC office would say, "Oh, we should go have some adventure together." And from my perspective, one of the easiest things to do together is to go down a river. And so this was back in the day when national [Sierra Club] didn't pay much attention to what we were doing with our office, our little satellite office [in Washington DC], and so nobody said, "Oh, you can't do that. We don't have insurance," or "That would be a dangerous thing." So we did a couple of trips where we just went out on the Potomac, which is—there's a stretch of the Potomac that's got pretty easy white water within thirty minutes of the office. We did a flat-water trip in the

Jug Bay National Recreation Area. We went out there. And they had canoes and we paddled around in the marsh grass and such.

04-01:36:47

And then we did a trip that, I think, at least three-quarters of the office signed up to go on, which was a camping trip on the Youghiogheny in Pennsylvania, which is a pretty serious white-water river. And we rented rafts for most people. I kayaked, and a couple of other folks, friends, came to sort of help, in kayaks. And it was a good trip. People had a great time. Bruce Hamilton, poor guy, walked off in the woods to relieve himself and slipped on a rock and dislocated his shoulder. So he came back and his shoulder's sticking up. Well, it is a classic boating injury, because in kayaking, if you're out on a brace, you've got your shoulder extended and if the water grabs your paddle, you could pop a shoulder out. So most experienced kayakers have had first aid training in how to relocate a shoulder. So Maggie Fox and I are both on this trip, and we see Bruce. Both of us have had training in relocating a shoulder, and we also know that if you relocate it within a few minutes of it being disclosed, it's a way less serious injury. So we get Bruce to lay out on a rock. We take a helmet and fill it with rocks and we hang it from his—his arm is sort of hanging down, and we hold it bent. And we start piling rocks in the helmet to gently keep adding weight and weight and weight until it pops back in. That is a much gentler way than sticking your foot in somebody's armpit and jerking. But it does pop back in. It was great. It makes this really nice sound. Just goes right back in. But Bruce, instead of just spending the rest of the day sitting in the raft, starts paddling again. So he undid all of the good we did by relocating his shoulder in the first thirty minutes after it was done, and he had, you know, six months of physical therapy afterward.

04-01:39:00

Eardley-Pryor

That's a wonderful story. The poor guy. Well, you'd mentioned what a positive experience that can be to help [inaudible, poor internet connection]—together, and to [inaudible].

04-01:39:18

Sease:

Roger, you've frozen so I don't know what your question was.

04-01:39:21

Eardley-Pryor

Sorry. Can you hear me now?

04-01:39:22

Sease:

Uh-huh.

04-01:39:24

Eardley-Pryor

Well, you mentioned that national was [eventually] paying more attention to DC, and insurance issues, and all these kinds of things. When did that happen, and what change did it lead to in the office environment?

04-01:39:41

Sease:

Well, it was a gradual thing that national paid more attention. Part of it was that my unofficial title was "Head of the DC office," but sometime during the

late nineties and early 2000s, the DC office grew. And instead of being just a set of people that were my direct reports and indirect reports, other departments started having a team in the DC office. So the communications department had a team, the advancement department had people there. pretty soon, it was an office that was sort of a small version of everything that was in San Francisco. And while I was still unofficially called "the Head of the DC office," those people didn't work for me. It became a bigger operation. And as it became bigger it became more on the radar screen and more bureaucratic. As did the whole organization. So sometime in the last five or ten years, simple trips that the Sierra Club used to do all the time—if a board meeting was somewhere, they would go out and take an adventure and a tour of something. Those became considered official trips that you had to have a trip leader and insurance forms and all that sort of stuff. So my reference to the earlier time was it was just—nobody was paying attention to that then.

04-01:41:10

Eardley-Pryor

Yes. What instituted the need? Why was the result of having this expansion in the DC office? Why did that all happen at that time?

04-01:41:21

Sease:

Well, the Sierra Club was growing. And each one of those expansions happened based on the need of that particular department. So, advancement—that's what we call our fundraising department—started basing people here because it was a good place to raise money and to have people actually on the East Coast. Communications always had had a single person there, but it grew a larger team as the communications part of our work became much more important. As digital strategies became a—it was a whole new department, and that team had folks there. Again, it was a natural process of the growth and expansion of the Sierra Club itself.

04-01:42:22

Eardley-Pryor

I see. So, I'm reflecting on the nineties starting off in financial dire straits for the Club in general, and by the end of [inaudible, poor internet connection]—war on the environment to encourage more people to join, and private funding from, now, this massive infusions of [inaudible]. And I'm wondering if those financial aspects are something that plays into the work that you do in DC?

04-01:43:03

Sease:

Roger, I'm sorry, you broke up through most of that so I don't know what the preface to those factors was.

04-01:43:11

Eardley-Pryor

I'm sorry.

04-01:43:12

Sease:

What were the factors you listed?

04-01:43:14

Eardley-Pryor My connection can be [inaudible]. I was thinking about more membership meaning more money. The membership grows so [inaudible].

04-01:43:28

Sease: You've completely frozen again.

04-01:43:31

Eardley-Pryor God damn it. [silent pause] How about now?

04-01:43:38

Sease: You're breaking up.

04-01:43:42

Eardley-Pryor Ugh. Wow.

04-01:43:43

Sease: Okay, I can hear you now. Okay.

04-01:43:46

Eardley-Pryor Okay. I was saying that David Gelbaum was donating at the time [inaudible]—lot of—[inaudible] and that factors in.

04-01:44:00

Sease: So you cut off right after "David Gelbaum" and came back at "factors in."

04-01:44:10

Eardley-Pryor I'm so sorry.

04-01:44:11

Sease: That's okay.

04-01:44:13

Eardley-Pryor I can hear you great. I'm sorry that I cannot be heard. I was asking about when new funding comes in, like from David Gelbaum, are you plugged in to where this money is coming from and how it was to be used?

04-01:44:32

Sease: So the way that funding—I think the biggest change I saw in funding in the Sierra Club, and it changed the work we did and how we did the work, was a shift that occurred over a period of a little more than a decade, where at one point the Sierra Club was about 80 percent unrestricted membership funded and 20 percent restricted. That meant that about 80 percent of our money was (c)(4) and was for whatever the Sierra Club wanted to spend it on. So the priority setting process that the board and volunteers went through every year or two was a really important thing because you could spend that money on anything. So it could be Alaska this year, it could be Utah the next year, it could be the supersonic—whatever was the big plane that we fought for a while. It was something that the board could choose. At the time I left the Club, that [funding] had shifted to where we were about—these are rough figures, 80 percent restricted and 20 percent unrestricted.

04-01:46:01

Eardley-Pryor That's a big change.

04-01:46:02

Sease: So our budget had grown tremendously, but in that same timeframe, it wasn't the Sierra Club was getting less money when it was tight on money, it's the cost of raising that money was growing. And so when we would do direct mail and support the organization, it would use up a larger quantity of the money that came in the door. So there was less money. Even though it was flexible, a lot of it went to cover the bottom line. So the way we grew the spending power of the organization was through big gifts. You mentioned David Gelbaum, who was for years before his name became public, was called Mr. Anonymous. And he gave very loosely restricted funding. Kept a pretty light hand on it, so it allowed a great deal of flexibility. Then after that, we started getting very large gifts to do particular work. Bloomberg invested in a massive anti-coal program. Which was great. Coal was good to get rid of. But one of the things that it did is it took an organization of a certain size and created this big bulge in one particular area, which created a lot of internal stresses and tension. And that was happening—

04-01:47:40

Eardley-Pryor Like how?

04-01:47:42

Sease: Well, there are many ways it could manifest, but if you just think about an organization that was at one point 80 percent of its money was flexible to spend however it wanted, it would pick a new priority every year, suddenly having a very large staff and budget, but it was all about coal. And so you lay that on a grassroots governed organization in lots of locations and you can have a lot of resentment build of the haves and the have nots, a state that says, "Well, maybe coal's not the most important thing my chapter wants to do, but you've got five staff doing it and I've got one," because of where the money is. So, again, it was, I think, a challenging set of resources.

At the same time, when Bloomberg gave the scale of money he gave to fight coal and it was in a focused campaign that was really about the numbers. "I give you this many dollars, you reduce coal by this many metric tons through this formula," it showed what the Sierra Club could do at scale with resources and a focused agenda. Because in the past our resources, we might have had big resources, but they got spread to everything. This restricted money kept it focused and it got to scale and it showed the incredible kind of campaign effort that the Club could do under those circumstances. And, again, there was collateral damage from that. A lot of resentment.

04-01:49:35

Eardley-Pryor That's a really great point, and it brings to mind—well, first off, can you hear me okay?

04-01:49:42

Sease: Yeah, I can. Mm-hmm.

04-01:49:43

Eardley-Pryor Okay. It brings to mind, the harnessing the Club's power in that kind of way and showing what it's capable of with that sort of directed, focused effort was something that outside agitators who were concerned about immigration—and a lot of related issues that they wrapped around environmental protection but was really about immigration for them and restricting immigration—tried to take over the Club to get their hands on that power. And so I'm wondering if you could share your perspective on these immigration battles that were happening, whether the Club was going to take a neutral stance like it did in the late nineties, up to this attempted take over the Club from outside people on a campaign to become directors, which resulted in 2003 with this Groundswell Sierrans campaign to stop that takeover. These immigration issues, because they last for so long with the Club, I'm wondering what was your experience of them from the DC point of view. Were these concerns, these battles internally that the Club is having around immigration, affecting any of the work that you could do in terms of getting legislation moved or in lobbying?

04-01:51:04

Sease: Yes. The very public fight that the Club had on staying neutral on immigration, I think took a pretty big—the Club took a pretty big hit for it. One, the staff, by and large, were very much against us coming out in any way that was anti-immigrant. The agenda was pushed by board members who were elected as petition candidates, and even after defeating the anti-immigrant position, it made us realize how vulnerable we were. And even the position of neutrality by outside people was looked at in a weird way of, "Why are you even having this conversation?" And it stood in the way of us, when immigration became a political issue that was juxtaposed with some of the other things that we were fighting for, it became an impediment to us being in coalitions we wanted to be in because there was still a faction within the Club that wanted us to take a stand. There was a narrow set, that didn't necessarily want us to take a stand on immigration, but who believed that population and migration, immigration to the United States, was an environmental problem, and they wanted that recognized. And they wanted that recognized even if it brought troubling political challenges. There was staff, that if that volunteer effort had not fought that back, would have left immediately.

But I was trying to hire a political director a few years after it, and she went through the interview, she was really great, and she would have been a wonderful political director. And she looked at me when I said that I wanted to bring her in for more interviews, and she said, "You know, my grandfather would roll over in his grave if I went to work for the Sierra Club after what you guys have done on immigration." She was a Latina.

04-01:53:39

Eardley-Pryor So it sounds like it impacted hiring in some ways, in a lot of ways.

04-01:53:43

Sease: It did. And, you know, I was in meetings where I think Mike Brune, and a former political director, and I were brought into a group of the Democratic leaders when we chose to endorse—or, oh, it was when we didn't endorse [inaudible].

04-01:54:13

Eardley-Pryor I'm sorry, Debbie. I don't know if you can hear me, but I—we cut off on my end. I couldn't hear from, "I was in a meeting with Mike Brune," at one point and then I couldn't hear the rest of it.

04-01:54:25

Sease: Yeah. And I couldn't remember who the person was we had not supported in a race. But basically, we had members of Congress remind us of our history on immigration. And, again, if you look at the details of the history, the Sierra Club did the right thing. But the fact that there were people within the Sierra Club that wanted it to do the wrong thing was out there. It made the folks who worked on our—what we used to call our population program, and which we rebranded and I think very wisely as our gender equity program, they were working on women's reproductive health issues. It made it very hard for them in coalition because even our very good work against the global gag rule and reproductive rights for women was viewed through a lens of, "Is this about your anti-immigrant folks?" So it was a very difficult thing.

And what's interesting to me is it paralleled the same time that a set of folks who thought we weren't taking a though enough stand on forest issues and wanted us to adopt a policy of ending all commercial logging. And it had the same zealotry. It had the same elements of people from other groups, for whom ending commercial logging was their solo issue, coming in as petition candidates and then forcing a vote of the board. You know, the logic of "Shall we end commercial logging on our national forests?" It's a pretty easy sell to Sierra Club members. But when you think about it, it actually made it harder for local Sierra Club folks to effectively manage and work with the Forest Service to get good management of their forests. And it is still currently our policy so I'm sure that if I were still accountable to the Sierra Club Board, Chad Hanson would want to have my head for saying that. But it was a stupid policy for the Sierra Club to adopt, and it has not led to greater environmental protection.

04-01:56:45

Eardley-Pryor Yeah, so Chad Hanson and his John Muir Sierrans. I'm just thinking about that. If you make it a zero-sum issue, there's no room for coming to the table to find something that's going to work.

04-01:57:01

Sease:

Yes. And so there were many Sierra Club chapters that were effectively getting compromised solutions that were protecting lands and their hands were tied at doing that. It's one of the things that actually led to that national versus local tension that I was talking about earlier. And, you know, Chad's absolutist—it was not just him, but he and his cohorts, their absolutist policy cost us some protection deals that could have saved trees. And I remember he was in our office one night, and he was harassing my forest lobbyist And he said, "Well, you now, the blood of tree stumps will be on your conscience." And I think to myself occasionally, well, actually you probably caused more tree stumps than my lobbyist did because you kept us from saving half a loaf because you wanted the whole loaf.

04-01:58:08

Eardley-Pryor

Can you think of specific examples with regard to forestry practices? Like how you had mentioned some specifics with these immigration issues where you think these issues that are happening, these internal battles, are actually shaping the way that we can try to move policy?

04-01:58:25

Sease:

Well, for years, every wilderness bill that we were asked to weigh in on was a fight to get it past the folks on zero cut, because it might envision some areas that were currently off limits to logging being released. It really tied the hands of local chapters working on forest management plans because no forest management plan was coming out that was a hundred percent zero cut. And so the zero cutters in the Club would basically stand in the way of a local chapter engaging in a compromise for forest management. Particularly in California. Roger, did I lose you? [long silent pause] Hey there. You're frozen.

04-02:00:32

Eardley-Pryor

—kay. Can you hear me now?

04-02:00:35

Sease:

Yes, but you're breaking up still.

04-02:00:37

Eardley-Pryor

Gosh, I'm sorry.

04-02:00:38

Sease:

I was just going to say, should we just pick this up on a future call?

04-02:00:43

Eardley-Pryor

Maybe we shou—[inaudible]—I apologize. It sounds like we can hear now. Do you want to wrap up your thoughts? Do you want to wrap up some of your thoughts, because I can hear you and I know we're recording.

04-02:00:59

Sease:

So where did it cut off though?

04-02:01:03

Eardley-Pryor Last I heard was saying that the give and take between, you weren't able to get certain specific wilderness bills passed because there was some sort of release that might happen to allow logging in one area, and having to get it through—

04-02:01:21

Sease: So I'm not confident that we actually didn't pass the bills, but the Sierra Club's ability to support some of them was curtailed by fights with that committee. And the bigger problem occurred with local chapters who were engaged in planning exercises with their local national forest and trying to come up with a forest management plan, their participation in that process was constrained by this absolutist policy. It was very frustrating for a lot of the forest activists. It's been mitigated a little bit—

04-02:02:01

Eardley-Pryor This come up in the context that—oh, I'm sorry. Please, it's been mitigated?

04-02:02:07

Sease: In recent times, a little bit. But it's still, I think, it's an absolute—well, in contrast, our policy on clean air and clean water is that we want it 100 percent clean. It isn't, and the activists have never let it be, an impediment to making incremental progress. The way that end commercial logging has been applied has been as an absolute, and it's been an impediment to making incremental progress. That's what's wrong with it.

04-02:02:51

Eardley-Pryor Yeah. This line of conversation emerged from our discussion about immigration and the albatross that became for the Club. Why was this immigration issue and the end commercial logging issue, why did those come up in your mind as being related?

04-02:03:08

Sease: They came up as related because the time in which candidates were running as petition candidates for the board were running on those two issues. And between the two issues, they didn't constitute a majority, but they constituted a very effective lobby bloc, and they coalesced even though they didn't necessarily care about each other's issues. So it was an incredibly dark time in my mind for the Sierra Club. I made it a point after a certain period of time, that I just wouldn't go to a board meeting, because I would come back so despondent from having watched that in action.

04-02:04:01

Eardley-Pryor That makes sense, just the timing. And, as you say, it's something that still has a legacy twenty years later of hampering the Club in some ways.

04-02:04:10

Sease: Uh-huh, yeah.

04-02:1004014

Eardley-Pryor

Well, this sounds to me it might be a good place for us to pause this interview session and we'll pick up another one to talk about the Bush vs. Gore campaign in 2000 and all that spun off after that.

04-02:04:29

Sease:

Okay.

Interview 5: December 7, 2020

05-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor: I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. Today is Monday, December 7, 2020, and this is interview number five with Debbie Sease for the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Debbie, it's great to see you again. Where are you?

05-00:00:18

Sease: Good to see you, Roger. I'm in Washington, DC today, in Capitol Hill.

05-00:00:22

Eardley-Pryor: Wonderful. And I'm in Santa Rosa, California. We're doing this, of course, over Zoom for the increasing wintertime spike in the pandemic that we're all dealing with. But good news, vaccines are on the horizon.

05-00:00:35

Sease: That's right. And it seems like your internet is hanging in there at this early hour.

05-00:00:40

Eardley-Pryor: Let's keep our fingers crossed that that continues. In your last interview, we moved into some of the topics in the nineties, the Republican takeover of Congress under Newt Gingrich, through the late nineties and some of the discussions around immigration for the Club. I want to step us back to a moment that we referenced earlier to hear your story about a staffer in Wyoming Senator Malcolm Wallop's office who, when the Gingrich revolution happened, came to you and said, "Here's how you become a good minority partner when you're no longer the power broker and your team isn't the one in charge." What's that story? Who was that staffer, and what did they tell you?

05-00:01:20

Sease: So the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee was where almost all resource and land based environmental legislation came through. The Clean Air and Clean Water came through the Environment and Public Works Committee, but the lands-oriented stuff came through Energy and Natural Resources. And for years, under Democratic leadership, that had been dominated by the Democrats in the majority. And the Republicans had been the minority. The staff on the minority committee were really good staff. We knew them well. And when the Congress flipped and the Republicans were in charge, one of the senior staff in the energy committee, a man by the name of Tony Benedetto who was Italian—he sort of looked like the cartoon character Tio Pepo, the Italian mouse.

05-00:02:26

Eardley-Pryor: I don't know him.

05-00:02:28

Sease:

Anyway, he [Tony] was a sort of larger-than-life kind of figure, very Italian, and really plainspoken. And so, he came to the Sierra Club, to the lobbyist he was used to dealing with and said, "Look, I'm happy to tell you how to be successful when you're in the minority because your techniques that you use when you're in the majority aren't going to serve you very well." So we set up a brown bag lunch. He came to our conference room and all the lobbyists gathered around and Tony told us how to be effective as a minority. And, you know, it was good advice. We followed a lot of it.

05-00:03:05

Eardley-Pryor:

What's the difference? What did he have in mind when he said, "These techniques you've been using in the majority won't work in the minority." What were those changes you needed to make?

05-00:03:14

Sease:

Well, by definition, when you're in the majority you have the votes. You control the gavel. And what you want to be on the agenda, assuming the majority agrees with you, gets on the agenda. You can be pretty heavy-handed with the minority and just run over them. When you're in the minority and you're trying to get something done, you win by persuasion or trickery or riding the coat tails of something else. You don't win by brute force. So it was a basic lesson in, learn the techniques of the opposition as opposed to the party in control. He's dead now so this can't come back to haunt him, but he actually talked to us about using process to delay bad things, using the rules of the Senate as a way of impeding action. He also reminded us of something as good lobbyists we should know that the way you effectively lobby is you figure out what would make somebody want to do what you want them to do and then pitch it that way, as opposed to pitching it, "Because I'm right and you're wrong."

05-00:04:29

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. Moral high grounds don't often work against big-power politics.

05-00:04:32

Sease:

Yeah, yeah. But to me that's an example that when you get below the—and not always but frequently, when you get below the partisan member level, that there's some really good people on both sides of the aisle that want to do some good things.

05-00:04:51

Eardley-Pryor:

So I wanted to hear you tell that story in part because I think it speaks so well to the relationships that you formed with people on the Hill, that a Republican staffer would come to you and say, "Let me help you learn how to be a better lobbyist on behalf of your issues, even though I may not always agree with them." But it also made me wonder, too—Tony being, I assume, a guy from Wyoming representing or working for Malcolm Wallop—if some of these lands issues and some of these issues the Club really cared about, resource

conservation, preservation, were things that he was interested in seeing happen in the West.

05-00:05:28

Sease: Yes. It's pretty clear that Tony cared about land protection. I'm not sure he was from Wyoming. Particularly when you get to a committee level, sometimes members will hire for expertise. And they also sometimes inherit the staff of a previous member. And they don't have to keep them. I mean, Tony may have been from Wyoming, but I'm not sure.

05-00:05:59

Eardley-Pryor: I gotcha.

05-00:06:01

Sease: I doubt it actually.

05-00:06:02

Eardley-Pryor: That's good. That's good. That's good for me to have that bigger perspective. That's great.

05-00:06:04

Sease: Yeah, yeah. Well, that was sort of a rosier time, an age of innocence. Now, typically, if you look at some of those committee staff on the Republican side, they came from industry, they came from the lobby firms for industry. There's a lot less of that kind of energy.

05-00:06:27

Eardley-Pryor: Less congen—what's the word I'm looking for?

05-00:06:29

Sease: Yeah. Congeniality.

05-00:06:32

Eardley-Pryor: Congeniality. Yeah. Coordination, congeniality. Around the same time, in this mid-nineties period, I know that we talked a little bit about the Club going through some financial troubles in the nineties and running some deficits. And we talked about fundraising and how you can make money work for you in different ways on legislative campaigns versus administrative campaigning. But the consequence of the Club having some of these deficits and running pretty low on its credit was a need to let go of staff members. And some 10 percent of the national staff had to be let go in the nineties. I'm wondering how that impacted you and your leadership of the DC office.

05-00:07:15

Sease: It was a really difficult time. The management of the Club, the leadership that was looking at the fiscal and the human resources processes, was probably not the strongest the Club has had. The person who was overseeing, not the human resources department head, but the person who was overseeing that on the leadership team had come from American Express and had a pretty much "Take no prisoners" attitude and—

05-00:07:55

Eardley-Pryor: Do you mind saying who you're talking about?

05-00:07:56

Sease: I'm talking about Debbie Sorondo. And so she set up a dynamic with myself and with Bob Bingaman, who was the field director, who was also faced with these potential layoffs, that was very corporate. And in hindsight, I realize it was probably that we were not as experienced in the real business world as other managers of staff might be outside the public interest sector. But the other thing was that she just had not one whit of a human side in the workplace. I think, outside of work, she was probably a perfectly nice person. But it set up a dynamic, a very hostile feeling. I probably said this in our interview before, if not I'll say it now. There are no secrets in the Sierra Club. If you told more than one other person, the world would know it soon. So I remember quite distinctly a meeting where we were going to talk to the staff about the potential for layoffs, and I had gotten a call from my boss asking me if I had to name two people to go, who would they be.

05-00:09:23

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. That's a tough call.

05-00:09:26

Sease: Well, and not one that you really want to respond to that way.

05-00:09:32

Eardley-Pryor: Who was your boss at that time?

05-00:09:35

Sease: The boss that I'm referring to then is David Gardner. He had gotten that request from Carl, no doubt. And at any rate, I didn't give him two names, but we went through staff and asked questions about funding, et cetera. Long story short, my office was on the third floor of our office building. The conference room was in the basement. In the time after I hung up that call, walked down the three flights of stairs to the basement conference room, who we had discussed had traveled through the Sierra Club network and everybody knew. Now, with a little bit of the telephone game, in that it wasn't very accurate and there were two people who believed they had been named as the people who would be laid off if layoffs came. And one of them never got over it. They always felt that they had been named by me personally and by the Sierra Club as potentially going to be laid off. They weren't. Eventually we offered some voluntary buyouts to try to reduce the severance that people would be owed. I was very lucky in that a couple of senior people and one junior person decided that that was a great opportunity for them, and so they left. And so I did not end up—I had to lay off one person based on seniority, and it was a person that I was not unhappy to lose. So I got lucky. But it was a traumatic time.

05-00:11:33

I remember I had had a vacation planned during it, to do a canoe trip down in the Lower Canyons, the Rio Grande, with my husband. We went on a commercial trip with some outfitters to a place that I used to lead trips. But, you know, the logistics of it are a nightmare. And so the idea of just paying somebody and they pick you up at the airport and they take you to the river was great. And I realized on day two of that trip that—I woke up in the middle of the night and I realized that for the first time in months I was having dreams that weren't day residue. And that the stress was going away. And it gave me a sense of just how stressful it had been.

05-00:12:21

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. And how important it was to be back in nature.

05-00:12:23

Sease: Really hard times.

05-00:12:41

Eardley-Pryor: I'm wondering how, then, did that shape your ability to manage the office and move forward from that difficult time? What did you learn from it, and how did it impact the way that management happened in the DC office?

05-00:12:41

Sease: Well, I learned some things not to do. That both Bob and I had been put in a position that we had to push back really hard not to do those things. I learned that there was one thing that Debbie Sorondo was right about, and I thought about it for myself when I resigned, which is that once somebody has decided to move on, a long, extended before-you-leave tenure is not a good idea because people let go and emotionally people start to distance. So for the folks that were doing voluntary layoffs, there was a pretty wide margin of how long they could stay before they left. And the bureaucratic advice was get them out the door fast because they'll not be loyal to the Sierra Club. Well, that didn't necessarily be the case, but they did start to let go and distance, and it was a source of tension. Because there was somebody who was there that wasn't going to be there, and they made the decision themselves, they were senior enough that they would never have been the one laid off, there was still a little bit of resentment based on how the management had handled it. So it was an interesting lesson, that once a decision like that has been made, that one should probably limit the amount of time, not make it four months.

05-00:14:26

Eardley-Pryor: What were the things you mentioned that you and Bob Bingaman learned and knew that you needed to push back to ensure it didn't happen again the next time. What were those things that you're thinking of?

05-00:14:35

Sease: They were just things about how you treat people, about how transparent you are. I mean my guess is we would have been a little bit more humane than was actually advisable, and it wouldn't have necessarily been kind because we

were a little naïve. But there was so much hostility and secrecy. And, again, secrecy that leaks doesn't have any benefit at all. Not even the benefit of things staying confidential. So it reinforced my belief that there are no secrets in the Sierra Club, so you might as well be transparent and honest.

05-00:15:22

Eardley-Pryor: That's good. I was going to ask you what you do with that information about the phone call traveling three flights down.

05-00:15:27

Sease: You just know. You recognize it. I mean, every new boss I have had in the Sierra Club, I have told them that story and I've just said, "Don't plan your strategy based on an assumption that you're going to be able to keep something confidential."

05-00:15:45

Eardley-Pryor: It's kind of a radical openness required by management in that regard.

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Sease: Well, I don't think the Sierra Club is unique in that.

05-00:16:00

Eardley-Pryor: A couple things that also spin out of these financial challenges is a reorganization that the Club goes through. And this goes to a theme in your oral history you wanted to address, and I think we have, but it's the Club reimagining itself and reconstituting itself and evolving over time to meet the needs that it has and also the challenges. So that reorganization in some ways changed the governance structure in the nineties. I'm thinking about Project Renewal and Project ACT as the two names that came up. And Project Renewal reoriented the way that decisions were made by the board and, I think, through the executive committees or the executive director. And then Project ACT changed some of the grassroots structure of the Club, changing the way committees even work. And I'm wondering how these big changes filtered into how the DC office was operating and even what kind of projects it was focusing on.

05-00:16:56

Sease: Both of those projects, Project Renewal, Project ACT, had some pretty significant intended and some equally significant collateral consequences. You know, the Sierra Club is a true small "d" democracy and it has the power and the benefits that come with that. It also has the inefficiency and sort of—I'm not finding the word, but when you overdo something, it sort of loses its essence. The Sierra Club could get very heavily into process, and multiple committees of jurisdiction all having a say, and making a decision could feel like a two-hundred step process on something that everybody should be able to agree on. So it set up redundant, not necessary, and expensive structures as a part of its just natural process of existing, and those processes and those venues would sort of set up more of them. I mean, I remember when I first came to work for the Sierra Club somebody said, "Oh, that's a meeting of the

com-com." I said, "What's the com-com?" "Oh, the committee on committees." So an organization that has a committee on committees is just the ultimate in bureaucracy. So the effort that was led in part by Robbie Cox and Carl Pope, others as well, it was a good thing to do. It sort of limbered up and made a little more streamlined a very big powerful beast that had gotten pretty hampered by its own weight of bureaucracy. It also did some decisions in a blinders-on way without being aware of how much emotional stake people had in some of those venues and processes and how—you could either say how incredibly important they were, or what sacred cows they were. But one way or the other, those processes took on some symbolic big bureaucracies, fairly high spending bureaucracies within the Club, but with lasting damage to relationships.

05-00:20:15

Eardley-Pryor: What do you have in mind by some of these big changes?

05-00:20:17

Sease: The regional vice presidents is one. Which was a venue that—

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Eardley-Pryor: Wait, is this the RCCs? The regional conservation committees?

05-00:20:32

Sease: Yes, yes. Yes. Regional conservation committees. I forgot the nomenclature. And, you know, Carl basically said if there's one thing I'm going to get done in this reorganization, it's to wipe those things out. He was viewed as the person who wiped them out.

05-00:20:47

Eardley-Pryor: Why was that such a priority for Carl, do you think?

05-00:20:51

Sease: Because they had evolved into being sort of one of the worst fat bureaucracies. Sucked up a lot of resources. Didn't accomplish a lot.

05-00:21:08

Eardley-Pryor: What I'm hearing you say, though, is also that people were really invested. Some of the volunteers, perhaps, were deeply invested in them, and their identity, maybe, was wrapped around in them?

05-00:21:16

Sease: Yeah. Yeah. And it became a symbol for people who weren't a part of it but felt that Carl was on the warpath for sacred institutions. And so you can look at that and say, Was it worth the price?" I don't know. But there was a huge price.

05-00:21:40

Eardley-Pryor: How did those changes then, both in terms of the identity of grassroots activists feeling like the Club is maybe leaving them behind or their priorities

are no longer the Club's priorities, how does that then shape the work that you could do in managing this also-restructured DC office?

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Sease:

It was not a lot of direct impact. So it was indirect impact. The atmosphere of trust between national and local Sierra Club took a hit from that. And it wasn't just a hit of staff to volunteer, but national volunteer to local volunteer. So it did a little bit of damage to relationships. Not to the specific relationships that an individual like me would have with an individual they'd been working with. But it changed the turf that you walk into as a national Sierra Club staffer, into a particular location. You might be walking into some bitterness about that fight.

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The other thing it did, though, is it was a big sink of money and time. So it was a very redundant and cumbersome bureaucracy. Maybe there was some part of it that could have been salvaged that was the useful thing that made it start and with less damage, but it wasn't done that way.

05-00:23:19

Eardley-Pryor:

The nineties sound like a really tumultuous time for the Club.

05-00:23:22

Sease:

It was, I think.

05-00:23:23

Eardley-Pryor:

From financially, to the Republican challenge in Congress, and then this restructuring. And the immigration issues that emerged, becoming a point of contention. I'm wondering, with these collective challenges of the nineties, do you think they had an impact later, on the ability of the Club to do the work that it wanted to do?

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Sease:

Well, the biggest impact from my perspective is that was the time during which the Sierra Club moved from being an organization that was funded primarily by membership dues which came in for whatever we wanted to spend them on. We were 80 percent unrestricted money, 20 percent restricted. By the end of the nineties and early 2000s, we had flipped that. The short version—of what made that financial crunch is the income from members, membership, stayed pretty steady. But the cost of securing those members kept going up and up and up. And so the Sierra Club had a larger membership, it was bringing in lots of money, but it cost more to do that, which left less money to do the things that weren't keeping the lights on. So the Sierra Club weathered that. We could have just gone belly-up during that time. We'd never been an organization that had a lot of restricted grant money from big donors. I mean, we had major donors, but it was sort of a bubble on the membership money. [Major donors] wasn't the basis of our wealth. During that time, we identified a couple of different threads of large money, some of which was fairly unrestricted. The money from David Gelbaum.

05-00:25:53

Eardley-Pryor: Mr. Anonymous, I think you called him.

05-00:25:55

Sease: Mr. Anonymous, the poor man. You know, he wanted to be anonymous to protect his children. And it was a Sierra Club volunteer, I think board member, who outed him, and just for no good reason. I mean, he wasn't trying to hide that, you know, he had made his money from coal or anything like that. The guy made it from having a faster algorithm for processing stock purchases. There was an article about him in the *Anthology of Philanthropy* or something like that, the yearly magazine of philanthropy, that analyzed he and his two partners. There were three of them. And one of his partners and he basically said, "We are going to make a gazillion dollars and give it away fast to make change." And, you know, the Sierra Club got what seemed like huge amounts. We were a pittance of what he gave away.

05-00:27:10

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wow. I didn't realize that.

05-00:27:11

Sease: Yeah. It's a fascinating article. The *Journal of Philanthropy*, something. My guess is if you Google him and philanthropy you'll find it. Really fascinating piece. [See, Thomas Meyer, "Priming the Pump: David Gelbaum Gives Big, and Early," in *Serving Those Who Served: A Wise Giver's Guide to Assisting Veterans and Military Families* (The Philanthropy Roundtable, May 2013). See also, Zachary Mider, "The \$13 Billion Mystery Angles," www.bloomberg.com (May 14, 2014), accessed March 12, 2022.]

05-00:27:23

Eardley-Pryor: But his involvement in that, the little bit that he gave of his wealth, it was a big chunk of the Club.

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Sease: A huge chunk of the Club.

05-00:27:30

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds like it reoriented the way that the Club funded itself.

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Sease: Well, not just he. But for Gelbaum's money, but for a couple of bequests that came right at the right time—and bequests tend to be unrestricted, as well—the Club would have maybe, you know, either shrunk dramatically or not continued. But instead, we sort of shifted how we were funded. And it created a situation with, more staff control and less volunteer control. Because if you're raising specific money to do a specific thing, then the volunteer priority setting process that happens every year is not very relevant. Because if all you have money for is to stop coal plants, the fact that you've decided protecting the greater northern opossum is your priority is not going to count for much. It

also created a lot of resentment as the Sierra Club got large pots of money for a couple of discrete things, like coal.

05-00:28:45

Eardley-Pryor: Resentment from who?

05-00:28:48

Sease: Resentment from—I'm not saying the New Mexico chapter was resentful, but I'll give this as an example of how shifted things were. The New Mexico chapter a couple of years ago, I think had eight- or ten-years people in its office staff. More than half of them were paid for by coal and worked for the coal campaign. So there had been growth, but the growth had been in one particular area. And that's not to say that the New Mexico folks didn't care about coal. But they cared about a whole broad set of things. There was a long history. If you get a pot of money, however big it is, and you divvy it up based on how you can get the will of whatever set of decision-makers to go along with you. So the shift from unrestricted money that the Club had a lot of processes and interest in controlling how it was spent and deciding how it was spent and tended to spread it quite a bit was overtaken by a situation where you could control by what you asked for, assuming you got it.

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So, for example, I had a staff person, a guy named Dan Becker, who cared passionately about climate change, who believed that the single biggest step, and he said this all the time, but the single biggest step to stopping global warming was to change fuel economy standards for cars. And he believed that anything else the Club did that wasn't that was a distraction from the most productive thing you could do to stop climate change. And so he was a very successful fundraiser for this program. He had a brilliant idea about how you'd get it across the finish line. Was a good campaigner. A good campaign designer. And he also was wicked smart and basically many donors who would have just given us money to fight climate change gave us very narrowly restricted grants to work on fuel economy standards. And so for years, when the Congress was looking at broad energy bills, our primary engagement in those in terms of numbers of staff, anything we were sending out in the mail, was on fuel economy because that's where we had money and our staff person had, Machiavellianly, narrowed it so that he would be able to set his own priority. Now, he didn't do it because he's a bad person or doesn't care, but his view was the one that he was going to fund and support.

05-00:31:44

Eardley-Pryor: And there are ripple effects from that kind of focus.

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Sease: Yeah, yes. Well, and in fact, you mentioned earlier the summit that the Sierra Club had where we adopted climate change—

05-00:31:55

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, we haven't spoken about it on the record yet, but in 2005, the Sierra Club Summit in San Francisco.

05-00:31:58

Sease: Yeah, yeah. We can go to that when we get there. But—

05-00:32:01

Eardley-Pryor: What was that point you were going to make?

05-00:32:03

Sease: The point I was going to make is that it was the sort of second hit of saying we have priorities. So we started getting priorities through how the money came in, and then we ratified that we were going to actually seek money almost entirely around a set of priorities. It was, you know, a one-two punch.

05-00:32:35

Eardley-Pryor: So what I'm hearing is that in the nineties, the transition around the way the Club finances were being created and was brought in—[inaudible]

05-00:32:46

Sease: Was starting us down a path of setting priorities through something other than the plebiscite, where volunteers would vote and say here's what we think is the most important thing. So there were a few years where, in the priority setting process, energy, fuel economy standards did not come up at all as anybody's priority. And yet, if you look at the flexible dollars or the dollars for stuff, not infrastructure, that the Sierra Club was spending, it was spending a boatload on that issue. And, of course, volunteers would challenge this, and Carl and others would say, "Well, you know, that's what we've got money to do."

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Eardley-Pryor: So that transition that's slowly evolving really, you said, from what I'm hearing you say is, it gets reified or cauterized, maybe, in the 2005 Sierra Summit?

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Sease: Right, right. And, again, we can look at those as two utterly unrelated things. But they are two big impacts on the tabula rasa for setting priorities every year that is truly a—every chapter votes, they codify those results, and then you figure out, "Oh, the Sierra Club's priority this year is protecting Alaska."

05-00:34:11

Eardley-Pryor: Well, actually, let's go into some details because now we're on the topic. How did the Sierra Club prioritize its main issues, and how has that changed over time? Because it sounds like it was a complicated process, and it became maybe more simplified?

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Sease:

Well, it was a very bureaucratic process, very regimented process that, at a certain time of year, surveys would be sent out to every chapter, and those chapters would go through a process of seeking from their members what are the things that you're working on. What are the priorities, what do you think the Sierra Club should be having as a priority? And I am sure during my tenure at the Sierra Club this process went through lots of iterations that people who were following it thought were watershed changes. But by and large, it was seeking input from lots and lots of people, running it through a bunch of Sierra Club meetings and processes, and at the end of the day the board of directors, on an annual and sometimes every other year basis, picking a set of priorities.

05-00:35:25

Eardley-Pryor:

How many are we talking about, as far as like, at the end of that process?

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Sease:

Well, in theory, you know, one or two top priorities. In reality, the list was never less than ten, and the distinction between being a top priority and a lower tier priority wasn't big. But the distinction of not being a priority was rather a big deal because rules or culture evolved. And I say this like people were ill-intended. But in a big bureaucracy where people are fighting over resources and bandwidth and you're trying to actually keep some kind of priority and order, you find things like this to hook it on. But people would say, "Well, you're not a priority issue, so you can't have the field staff on call to do your work. That's only going to be for priority issues." So there was this continual attempt by the leadership of the Club, both at the board level and at the staff level, to try to rein in this appetite for everything and focus it enough on some things that you could actually make a difference. But it makes for a lot of internal politics.

05-00:36:46

Eardley-Pryor:

I can imagine. Does anything come to mind as a way to highlight that story?

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Sease:

Well, before the [2005] Summit, the intended and unintended consequences of us having staff to work on energy and the only issue that they would work on was fuel economy and you're starting to see issues around coal, oil and gas development, climate. At the time that there was a climate bill moving through Congress, our primary staff person was only working on fuel economy, which is how I ended up being in many of those meetings, because I was paid for flexibly.

05-00:37:37

Eardley-Pryor:

Interesting. Gosh, the details that go into how a big organization, all these machinations happen and how it affects an individual's daily schedule.

05-00:37:48

Sease:

And it's logarithmically more so in an organization that has volunteer governance. And that's not to say our volunteer governance is a sham, but it is a complicated thing that has a lot more moving parts. And even with the best of volunteers, a very large, dispersed volunteer process is not likely to head you in a direction of a tightly crafted short priority list. It's almost impossible to see that outcome happening. Except when something looms as big as climate. And that's something that the summit actually stepped in to. I mean it's a matter of the reality of the world was such that it imposed this external reality on the set of decision-makers. Now, that being said, after that was over, everybody was still trying to figure out how to shoehorn the little thing that they didn't want to let go of. You know, "We still have to fight grazing fees on public lands."

05-00:39:06

Eardley-Pryor:

And somehow you need to find a climate justification now.

05-00:39:09

Sease:

Yeah, yeah.

05-00:39:10

Eardley-Pryor:

Is that what I'm hearing?

05-00:39:11

Sease:

Or some other way to justify it. So people were willing to sort of lean into climate and say, "Yes, this has to be the big deal." It was much harder to get people to say, "And I'm going to back off on this thing that I've always cared about."

05-00:39:27

Eardley-Pryor:

I was going to ask if you think volunteer engagement in Club issues has changed over time and whether these changes you're talking about from the nineties in to the early 2000s affected that, if at all.

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Sease:

I don't think there's been a watershed change in volunteer engagement. Certainly in the long period of time I was at the Club the increase in the number of chapters and even groups that have full-time staff working with them has certainly grown. There has always been a question, I won't call it a tension, but a question of are staff who work for a chapter national staff or are they a different kind of staff. And the last several months the chapter staff have decided they want to be a part of the union and that's drawing into question the fairly odd employment relationship that chapter staff have with the organization.

05-00:40:48

Eardley-Pryor:

Who do chapter staff work for? Are they responsive to the chapter's executive committee, or to the—

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Sease: Committee. Yes, yes.

05-00:40:54

Eardley-Pryor: And what is the relationship to national then?

05-00:40:56

Sease: It's changing. In recent months it's changing, and I haven't kept up with exactly how. But it's getting more formal because for a long time the national—their healthcare, their pay, the mechanics comes from national. But the reality is that if you're working for the Illinois chapter of the Sierra Club your boss, the people who have the power to hire and fire you and in the past at least set your salary, was a group of volunteers on the ex-com, which could vary from year to year. So that's no kind of job security. So it wasn't a long-term workable process but fixing it and how you fix it and the dynamics of how power shifts when you do that is a really big whoop.

05-00:41:57

Eardley-Pryor: And that's something that's going on right now?

05-00:41:59

Sease: As we speak. Yeah.

05-00:42:01

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. Wow. Well, this is great. I love talking to you, Debbie. You're so uniquely informed in all these issues, having lived through them and having thought about them in such productive and interesting ways. I do want to steer us back to this time in the nineties. And we mentioned immigration being a concern in the nineties, and I have a note that Dave Foreman—

05-00:42:27

Sease: I want to stop you even in phrasing it that way.

05-00:42:30

Eardley-Pryor: Oh? Please.

05-00:42:30

Sease: Immigration was not an issue in the nineties. A small group of hostile-to-the-Sierra-Club individuals decided to get the Sierra Club to be the first environmental organization to join an anti-immigrant thing. It was an outside hostile takeover, or an attempt. It wasn't that the Sierra Club suddenly said, "Hey, you know, I think we have a problem with immigration."

05-00:42:58

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Thank you for that framing. So the anti-immigration attempt to take over the Club was also happening. We mentioned a bit of that in the previous interview. But on that point, I have a note that Dave Foreman joined the Sierra Club as a board member, the board of directors. And from my understanding from our discussions, he was swayed in some of the

environmental wrap-up around anti-immigration. And I'm wondering if you could talk about what that event was like for you.

05-00:43:34

Sease:

Well, it was irritating for me. And Dave—it's hard to know just how deep his passion on the issue of population as a potential environmental threat and as limiting immigration as a way to address that really was. But at the same time that the immigration, anti-immigrant takeover was happening on the board, there was a set of petition candidates on the board who were pushing for a more aggressive zero-cut logging policy. And that was something that Dave was extremely committed to.

05-00:44:16

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah, that seems like [more his thing], right?

05-00:44:17

Sease:

Yeah. And folks were basically forming ad hoc coalitions to help each other. And so I think that while Dave was a bit of a misanthrope, didn't actually like people that well, whether they were immigrants or non-immigrants, it was pretty easy for him to say, "Yeah, our population is getting too big, and as long as we have people immigrating here from other countries it's an environmental problem." I mean, it's a specious argument. Even if you believe that immigration to this country from other countries is an environmental problem, your solution to it is not to limit immigration but is to address the root causes of the migration that's happening. But if you really believe it's a problem, the solution to it is to deal with consumption in this country, whether it's consumption by people who were born here or consumption from people who come here.

05-00:45:28

But the part of the population, US population as an environmental issue that I think is most specious, is that "We realize that the consumption in the United States is an environmental problem, so we just want to limit how many people come here," as opposed to "We want to fix the underlying problem of not consuming so bloody much."

05-00:45:51

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. And especially in a global economy in which manufacturing of those consumable items is done abroad. How do you deal with that without having major systemic change?

05-00:46:204

Sease:

Yeah.

05-00:46:04

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. Thank you. You know, I have a note here about a really cool protest event that you helped organize, and I can't remember if we discussed it or not. I don't think we did. And it's the story of the 21 Chainsaw Salute.

05-00:46:21

Sease: Oh, yes. This is one of my favorite events.

05-00:46:23

Eardley-Pryor: I believe this happened during the Clinton Administration.

05-00:46:26

Sease: It did.

05-00:46:29

Eardley-Pryor: Can you tell the story behind the 21 Chainsaw Salute?

05-00:46:31

Sease: I can tell the story behind that. So there had been a bad fire insect outbreak in the forests, and so there was a salvage logging bill that was moving through Congress. And the trouble with a salvage logging bill is you could make an argument that you need to go in and get down those dead trees or the trees that are full of spruce bark beetles and do it in a way that is all good for everything, but the reality is that once you get that camel's nose under the tent they went in and clear cut forests in the name of forest health. There was a lot of pressure back and forth, and Clinton signed an absolutely horrible forest salvage logging, "forest health bill," that, you know, trashed NEPA really bad. And so we decided to make a statement about it. We were sitting around strategizing with the little—

05-00:47:42

Eardley-Pryor: Who's we?

05-00:47:43

Sease: Carl, myself, Bruce [Hamilton], couple of other lobbyists—a group that during that time, you know, regularly met and talked about what was happening. And I said, "Well, we should have a 21 Chainsaw Salute in Lafayette Park." I have a tendency to fire off snarky comments in the middle of something and not think much about it. Got a laugh. And Carl said, "You're right. We should. What would that take?" And I said, "Well, I'll sic some interns on it," and we got a permit. And the funniest thing is there was a hardware chain here in DC, Hechinger's, which was run by the Hechinger family. Great, liberal, do-gooder philanthropist. And I sent my intern to see if he could rent some chainsaws, and he went to Hechinger's and he told them what it was for. And they said, "Well, we don't rent chainsaws. But I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll sell them to you. You bring them back, and we'll give you your money back." And so the intern walks off with twenty-one chainsaws. We had organized all of the CEOs and poo-bahs in the DC environmental community to send out press notifications. And the other sort of funny part about this is most of these folks have never seen or done anything with a chainsaw in their life. And we did take off the saw chain from the chainsaws. We were not in Lafayette Park with a lethal chainsaw.

05-00:49:28

Eardley-Pryor: That's wise.

05-00:49:29

Sease: Which was wise. I'm sure it probably was necessary in terms of our permit. But they did have gas and they did have chain oil, and so we fired them up and they all raised them up over their heads in salute. And you know what happens with a chainsaw? It sprayed oil. So Robby Cox, who was doing it for us, for the Sierra Club, said he had a tie for years that had these oil splash marks from the chain.

05-00:50:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

05-00:50:02

Sease: Now, one of the sort of side stories of not really thinking it through and not knowing the details of what we were doing. I don't know if you know anything about twenty-one-gun salutes.

05-00:50:13

Eardley-Pryor: No.

05-00:50:14

Sease: A twenty-one-gun salute is seven guns fired three times. It is not twenty-one guns. [laughter] But years later, or a few years later, we were meeting with Al Gore, and he mentioned that that was an event that really did get the attention of the folks in the White House.

05-00:50:45

Eardley-Pryor: What did Gore say about it?

05-00:50:47

Sease: That's what he said about it. There wasn't much press about it. I think we got a picture in the back page of the *Post* and maybe it was an AP picture. But, again, it did not create this huge press buzz. But the audience of one that was supposed to get the message of "We are batshit mad at you" got it.

05-00:51:12

Eardley-Pryor: That's effective then. It wasn't media effective, but it was strategically effective.

05-00:51:16

Sease: And what was also interesting is that the administration staff who had argued against signing the logging bill felt vindicated.

05-00:51:29

Eardley-Pryor: Felt vindicated like it was the right thing or it was the wrong thing? I don't follow.

05-00:51:33

Sease: No. They had said this was a bad thing to do, "You're going to get in trouble for it." And there we were, making their case for them. So there was more than the audience of one. But it's an event that I feel really good about, even though I can only take credit for the idea, not for the thought of really doing it.

05-00:51:57

Eardley-Pryor: It's a pretty awesome event to have happen. Well, along these lines of great ideas and effective work, I have a note here, too, that in 1999 the Sierra Club bestows on you the Mike McCloskey Award for "an employee who has reflected and strengthened the meaning, purpose, and mission of the Sierra Club and contributed to the prestige of the Club with a distinguished record of achievement in conservation causes." I was wondering what that award meant to you, and what was the context of receiving it?

05-00:52:32

Sease: The context of receiving it was, for years, the Sierra Club has done volunteer awards, have an annual banquet, and we give out, you know, hundreds of awards and take many, many, many hours to do it. And there had never been a staff equivalent. There had been the sort of tongue-in-cheek staff-originated union called CLAW, Conservation Laborers Against Wrong, and that group gave laugh-at-yourself, laugh-at-your colleague awards. And I don't think any of our executive directors liked—but particularly Carl, didn't like that. He thought it was sort of sick for the way staff to celebrate each other is by highlighting their mistakes. We thought of it as being able to laugh at yourselves. But I can see his point. And so the institution developed staff awards and they named a few particular awards, and then they set up a process for being nominated by your colleagues, and then a group would vote on it. And then, after the first set of awards, the recipients of each year's awards would be the team that would review nominations for the next year's awards.

05-00:54:04

This is going to seem like an odd comparison. When I first got it I thought, "Oh, well, that's nice." Got a little engraved mug and lovely Ansel Adams print. But I found, as I thought about it, that it was a little bit like when I got married to my husband Russ. And we'd been living together for a number of years and decided to get married. And I thought, "Well, this isn't going to really make a difference." And yet there was this odd reaction that I had to the ceremony and to being married that was in fact something different than just living together. So for this award, after my initial, "Oh, that's nice," I did find myself very touched by it. And I, somewhere here, have the—oh, there. I have my paintbrushes in the mug.

05-00:55:05

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, that's great. Yeah. It's one of those things that may be difficult to explain but there is something different about it.

05-00:55:13

Sease: Yeah.

05-00:55:14

Eardley-Pryor: I can identify with the marriage analogy.

05-00:55:16

Sease: As I thought about that it was my colleagues who nominated me, and what they decided to recognize were the things that I would want to be recognized for. So it showed—sorry, my phone is ringing in the background.

05-00:55:41

Eardley-Pryor: That's fine. Do you want to pause and answer it?

05-00:55:42

Sease: Yeah, pause for a second and I will—no.

05-00:55:51

Eardley-Pryor: What I'm hearing you say is you felt like you were seen for the work that you were doing, that your colleagues recognized the things that mattered to you.

05-00:55:55

Sease: Yes, yes.

05-00:55:58

Eardley-Pryor: That's a special feeling.

05-00:56:00

Sease: Hang on just one second and I am going to see if I can get to the thing of actually starting a new recording.

05-00:56:10

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. I'll pause us here again.

[pause in recording]

So, Debbie, I have a note, too, around this time—similar to around the time that you are bestowed and receive the McCloskey Award—is machinations are happening in New Mexico to try to preserve what has now become Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico, otherwise known as the Baca Ranch. What is your experience with Baca Ranch, either having been there, experienced the landscape, and then also the legislative side in trying to preserve it?

05-00:56:45

Sease: Well, my experience with it growing up in New Mexico was frequently trespassing on it and occasionally being caught trespassing on it. It is a great place to ski in the winter. Just big bowl of pure snow that's pretty much flat. Great views, 360 degrees. And it's surrounded by national forest so it's very tempting to just trespass. And more than one time I have been escorted off of the Baca Ranch, trespassing, before I moved to Washington. I was always very fond of it. It's a huge chunk of land that had amazing potential for protection. Had not been left untouched. I mean, it had been grazed and trees

had been cut and a bunch of stuff had happened. There were a lot of attempts to find some way of acquiring it. It was what's called a Spanish land grant. A big chunk of land was granted by the government of Spain to some dignitary. I don't actually think it was the Bacas. Maybe it was. But it had been in private hands for a long time, and there was a desire on the part of the state or the feds to acquire it. What ultimately happened is that Senator Pete Dominici, who's a Republican and somebody who had actually done a fair amount of land protection, always with, you know, a little bit of an edge towards "Let's not do it all," was very interested in using the Baca as a model to demonstrate this trend in how the conservatives in the West who liked the idea of some public lands, thought we had too many of them and thought there were too many restrictions. One of their favorite approaches was to say, "Well, let's do some kind of collaborative management." Or when faced with the Endangered Species Act coming down with hard regulations to protect a species would say, "Why don't we come up with a consensus plan about how we protect these places for the prairie chicken." And so one of their favorite approaches was this collaborative management, that, you know, "The federal government doesn't do a good job of managing public lands. We can protect the resources and have a lot more opportunity for economic development and local involvement," et cetera, et cetera. So Dominici—

05-00:59:42

Eardley-Pryor:

So, just for me to understand this sort of hybrid model that Domenici is arguing for, it is both public, so the federal government would have a role, but private interests would still have a role? I guess, I'm not sure what he had in mind.

05-00:59:55

Sease:

What he had in mind was not just turning it over to the Forest Service or Park Service but investing in one of these collaborative management things. During the Bush years and a little bit during the Reagan years, we had a lot of proposals like that coming forward from the land managing agencies themselves, of, oh, let's do a cooperative management agreement. There is a think tank in Montana. PERC. P-E-R-C, and I've forgotten what that acronym stands for. But if you're interested, you should look up their assessment of how this model worked for the Baca Ranch. Because basically what they said is it didn't have the government support that federal land would have, you know, like a park would have. And it didn't have the access to doing economic things that private land would have, so it sort of was an orphan in both directions. It ultimately failed as a management model.

05-01:01:09

Eardley-Pryor:

The Baca Ranch did?

05-01:01:12

Sease:

Yes. That's why it's a national park preserve today. Obama, in 2014, actually got rid of this weird corporate trust that was managing it. It was in theory designed to pay for itself and to protect the resource, and that really doesn't

work. And folks were fairly unhappy at Dominici putting that proposal as the hard price for getting the land in public ownership and protected. But I think that in the final analysis it was okay as an interim step, and we now have it managed by the park service.

05-01:02:08

Eardley-Pryor: I see. What was your experience in helping to bring this hybrid model into existence in order to preserve this land in New Mexico? What do you remember working on, either with Domenici or with whomever else was the senator there? I guess Jeff Bingaman, the Democratic—

05-01:01:39

Sease: Jeff Bingaman. I actually recall having very little role in it and I think that that was not because I wasn't paying attention. I think it was something that was very generated by the senators and their staff, and in New Mexico. The environmentalists didn't come to them with this proposal and then they said, "Oh, we'll do it this way." My recollection is it was something they sort of initiated in response to a citizen saying, "We should acquire the Baca Ranch as a park or a wildlife refuge."

05-01:03:09

Eardley-Pryor: I see. So it was citizen effort and then the politicians responding to that in this hybrid model, and then the Club saying, "All right, let's make this happen."

05-01:03:19

Sease: Right. But I think sort of low on the citizen effort. I mean there was a longstanding desire, but this was—I mean if I went back in time I might actually see it a little differently. But my recollection is that this was something that was very driven by the senators and their staff.

05-01:03:40

Eardley-Pryor: Interesting. And this new model, this land-swap agreement, where you're trying to preserve land but also make money from the land, I'm hearing from you that that model just didn't have enough of a backbone on either side for it to work. So the federal government did have to come in in order to maintain preservation?

05-01:03:59

Sease: Right. Well, starting from the very premise that you can maintain a large area that is going to be heavily visited and used by the public based on the receipts of grazing and logging and entry fees is just a false premise, particularly when the fee one charges for grazing is, by law, like a dollar and forty-five cents per animal per month on public land. And so it was set at that low level when comparable private land rents were fifteen to twenty dollars per animal per month.

05-01:04:44

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, wow.

05-01:04:45

Sease: Yeah. That's one of the issues that I futilely worked on many times, was to try to raise the grazing fees, which is, to make a bad pun, a sacred cow of unknown proportions in the west. Reform the 1872 Mining Law and raise grazing fees, two windmills that I was Don Quixote for.

05-01:05:13

Eardley-Pryor: That's great, that's great. Well, in the process of the Domenici and Bingaman making this land swap in 2000—around then is when I think they actually created the Valles Caldera National Preserve—is also an election year. So Bush v. Gore happens in 2000, this historic election with major political consequences and even geopolitical consequences. What are your memories of the Bush v. Gore campaigning? I mean, I imagine the Club was very much behind Gore on these issues. What was your role in that campaign season?

05-01:05:58

Sease: I'm trying to remember. I believe I managed the political director at that time. There was a brief period when our political director reported to the conservation director, Greg Haegele, and not me. And I'm just trying to remember when that was. My involvement was not directly on the political program in that race. I worked with the political program in terms of getting the board to do an endorsement. I provided materials and staff. I think by that time I was no longer deploying out to individual races, and I probably took some vacation time and did some voluntary campaigning.

05-01:06:53

Eardley-Pryor: I got you. Well, yeah. I was going to say then, if you weren't deeply involved in the campaign, how did the campaign that's happening around you then impact the work that you were trying to do in DC?

05-01:07:04

Sease: As you get closer to November it becomes all encompassing. The presidential race that I was much more directly involved in was the Kerry campaign.

05-01:07:20

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, in '04?

05-01:07:23

Sease: And that one I did go out for about a month to Ohio, to Columbus, and work with our folks there. And that was one of the bitterest losses that I've experienced, and I've experienced a lot of political losses.

05-01:07:45

Eardley-Pryor: My own memory of that is I had just moved to California from Ohio—well, from Colorado, but being an Ohioan—and watching the returns that night, that Ohio is what gave Bush his reelection. When Kerry lost Ohio and Bush won it, that was the race. And so yes, I can understand the pain of that.

05-01:08:05

Sease: Yeah.

05-01:08:06

Eardley-Pryor: What was it that you are going through during that? I mean, here you are deployed again. They hadn't done that in a while. So what are your memories of the Bush v. Kerry race?

05-01:08:16

Sease: Well, we had made a huge investment in the independent collaborative thing with America Votes. Ohio was one of our major places that we were engaged in. And we had an issue where a staff person who was set to be on point in the Columbus office at the last minute decided to move to Cincinnati. There were issues between the manager in the office and the chapter and they just basically needed an adult in the room to try to keep things from exploding. So it was an interesting deployment in that I went someplace where things had been in motion for many, many, many months and they had a plan. There were people assigned to duties and here comes this senior person with absolutely not one bit of work on my plate to do other than to keep them from throttling each other. But I'm a human body. So what I ended up doing was being the commissar. I gathered bottles of water and ordered pizzas and had energy bars for these gazillion people that we sent out walking neighborhoods. And then I walked some neighborhoods. But I ended up taking a pretty menial—of course, there is nothing but menial tasks in political work. Don't let anybody tell you different. You know, a handful of people make some decisions and they just pile forward and then there's just boatloads of work. But I remember it was my first experience of really coming to hate pollsters and their predictions because in the afternoon of election day, I'm on a briefing from Celinda Lake and Mark Melman and others who were basically predicting this gigantic win. You know, exit polls are telling us this. So I go brief the set of walkers who are going out and I, you know, paint this rosy picture, and then I go back to my hotel room to sort of clean up before coming back for the victory party. And I turn on the TV and I just see state after state after state going down, including Ohio. And I just thought, you know, two hours ago you guys were telling me that it was in the bag. It was a hard race.

05-01:11:06

Eardley-Pryor: Something you brought up just now, you mentioned America Votes, the organization that Cecile Richards created in 2003 before she then went on to lead Planned Parenthood. And my wife was working for Planned Parenthood, so I remember when Cecile would come and visit, it was a big deal. But among these kind of organizations, not just America Votes but other progressive organizations that were formed in the wake of the Bush victory in 2000, are trying to stitch together progressive politics and the Club being pulled into this broader progressive campaign organization work. That seems like a big change, and, I would think, would impact the DC office and the Sierra Club's work in a big way. I mean, here you are being pulled into an America Votes campaign and sent into Ohio in 2004. So in the wake of the Bush victory in 2000 against Gore and all the contention that that created, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how DC responded and how

political movements responded to start stitching together these organizations like America Votes, or ACT (America Coming Together), or the Center for American Progress, yada-yada-yada, and how that impacted your work.

05-01:12:20

Sease:

Well, I think that those organizations—you can certainly make a case that they came together because of the horror of having lost Bush v. Gore. But you can make an equally compelling case that they were growing exponentially over time as a function of rulings about electoral funding and the legal aspects.

05-01:12:52

Eardley-Pryor:

What the story on that? What do you mean?

05-01:12:53

Sease:

Basically the interpretation of independent expenditures, hard money versus soft money in politics, and America Votes basically using the same electoral finance laws that the opponents were using and it changing how our side did work. That was driven in very large part by the opportunities and the challenges presented with removing campaign contribution limits, et cetera.

05-01:13:29

Eardley-Pryor:

And this all happening, of course, also in the wake of what you already talked about and the way that the Club's finances are being redirected then.

05-01:13:36

Sease:

Right, right. But thinking about America Votes in the Bush v. Gore and how tremendously this changed in Obama's race. The Sierra Club, in our Ohio office, we were getting volunteers that had nothing to do with the Sierra Club. It's the most diverse table I've ever seen at the Sierra Club. It was folks who would come in at night to phone bank. And they were coming to us because the Gore campaign and the coordinated party campaign didn't have a field plan. They didn't really have a plan for using very many volunteers and there was a plethora of volunteers who wanted to get engaged. So they were sending them to America Votes and to the Sierra Club and to other organizations that were doing their own field operation. And so that became the pattern for us in Gore and Kerry. But when Obama ran, they put together a state-of-the-art field program.

05-01:14:45

Eardley-Pryor:

The Obama campaign did that on their own?

05-01:14:47

Sease:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And, in fact, it made having an independent field action operation a bit weird.

05-01:15:00

Eardley-Pryor:

Was there conflict? Is that what I'm hearing?

05-01:15:02

Sease:

It's not so much conflict as you can't—if you're doing it independently, you can't coordinate with the campaign. If the campaign's doing jack in the way of a field program, that's not an issue. But if the campaign is running a bigger than ever field campaign with a really attractive candidate, it means that if you're trying to do an independent field campaign, you're competing with them for volunteers and you're bumping up against them. Because, in fact, people take pretty seriously the not coordinating.

05-01:15:34

Eardley-Pryor:

Ah, ah. Well, with the creation of this broader progressive coalition that does happen in the wake of 2000, I'm just wondering if that created challenges or opportunities for the Sierra Club itself and the work that it was doing in DC. I guess what I'm thinking, was the rise of these new organizations and this desire to have broader political organization collaboratively a hindrance? Were people saying, you know, "Here's the things we want to do. We don't want to go to this dumb meeting and have to talk with all these other progressive groups. We want to do the work we know we want to do and can do. Here I have to go sit in another meeting." I mean, was this happening or was it something else?

05-01:16:14

Sease:

Yes and no. What you describe happened in a different venue. In politics there didn't seem to be any lack of enthusiasm for meetings with us, and having lots and lots and lots of collaboration endlessly. Individuals like me may have a small tolerance for it, but as an institution we were just happy to meet with ourselves.

05-01:16:42

The place where I saw there being a push for collaboration that was probably more than was necessary is funders. The progressive side of the philanthropy table has a long time been frustrated that enviro groups are not streamlined and there's not just one source to go to, that there's all these different ones with slightly different priorities. And so one of their interests as a community has been to try to get the enviros to work better together, which is, on the one hand, perfectly understandable. And many years ago Ted Turner gave a grant to a collection of environmental groups. About sixteen groups I think were originally a part of it. He gave a million dollars, which at the time seemed like a huge amount, but with a simple purpose of helping the groups figure out how to more seamlessly do joint communication with their members so that they could quickly do an alert to all their members, whether it was by snail mail or email that got rid of the duplications, or they could do phone banking in a collaborative way. And this funded both the table for doing that kind of coordination and the mechanics of getting the lists with brokers that could merge/purge them. So that was sort of a simple, mechanical, "You guys need to be able to work together better. Do it on whatever you want. Here's some money to make it better." The logical or illogical extension of that is a lot of the funding for work on climate and energy is driven by a collaboration of

fundes who gave money to what became almost a separate freestanding long-term campaign. Almost an organization in itself, which was the collaboration, the campaign arm of a bunch of groups. So—

05-01:19:06

Eardley-Pryor: Does it have a name?

05-01:19:08

Sease: I do. If I say it I'm probably going to end up having to purge it from the— [laughter]. Well, so, the fundes that are driving this, the Energy Foundation, were Hewlett, there were a set of consultants, Corridor Partners, made up of folks who were experienced in the community and in philanthropy. And, again, it was all well intended to get better coordination. But what, it in my mind, ended up resulting in is a centralized campaign that sort of forced people to work together and it wasn't necessarily good for the long-term strength of the individual organizations. And it tended to result in campaigns around lowest common denominator bills.

05-01:20:12

Eardley-Pryor: Does anything come to mind specifically?

05-01:20:15

Sease: The Waxman-Markey Energy Bill. Everybody worked on that. The campaign apparatus was funded by this collaboration.

05-01:20:24

Eardley-Pryor: I see.

05-01:20:25

Sease: And, you know, you put twenty million dollars on the table for organizations to be able to spend on campaigning. It's not something they have in their budget, so it's very, very attractive. What it does is it puts donors and donor advisors more in a driver's seat around strategy and bottom lines and it ultimately takes power from individual groups and from their governances.

05-01:20:53

Eardley-Pryor: So what I'm hearing you say is that for those individual organizations, they lose some of their own control but also some of their own ability to make those kind of decisions on their own.

05-01:21:06

Sease: Well, it's not forced on them but, you know, you put a big pile of money on the table and say, "We can do ads. We can hire organizers. We can send out, you know, endless direct mail, and we'll pay for it. And, yes, you have a voice in what it says, but that voice is managed by the collaborative." And part of that energy behind that was that the fundes were very, very frustrated by the somewhat amateur-hour ad hoc nature that a coalition of very disparate enviro groups would bring to a collective table on a particular campaign with, you know, Sierra Club maybe having one level of sophistication and the local

birding group a different level and different priorities. And so it was a, I think, well-intended but not necessarily always effective effort to get a greater level of coordination and collaboration.

05-01:22:20

Eardley-Pryor: Has there been a learning curve since those early progressive coalitions were stitched together and these new piles of money were there, or is it still the way things are done?

05-01:22:30

Sease: I think it's increasingly the way things are done, particularly around big issues like climate. And it is a frustration to the funding community and to the folks who advise them and work for them that we haven't been able to get traction on solutions to climate change. And if you are a philanthropist and you're frustrated that the organizations that you fund aren't getting traction, you look for a solution to see if you can solve that. I'm not convinced that it was the best approach.

05-01:23:14

Eardley-Pryor: How would you structure things differently that you think will be more effective?

05-01:23:20

Sease: Well, I actually think that there is a philanthropist who has done it somewhat differently. So Mike Bloomberg participated in that. Gave a little bit of money to those collaborations. But he also looked for organizations that had clout or presence or some capacity in a particular place to employ a particular strategy. And he and his staff worked with them to come up with—I mean, getting a grant from Mike Bloomberg is not a piece of cake. For the first grant we got from him, we had a woman who was a statistician working with his staff for almost a year creating models of how many dollars spent, and which ways will result in how many tons of coal reduced per dollar spent.

05-01:24:25

Eardley-Pryor: That is detailed accounting.

05-01:24:26

Sease: It is detailed accounting. And, you know, it's not unexpected from somebody who made their own fortune. And it resulted in an extremely structured and disciplined coal campaign that delivered on the key performance indicators. It also turned the acronym, KPIs, into almost a curse word in the Sierra Club.

05-01:24:53

Eardley-Pryor: What is KPI?

05-01:24:55

Sease: Key performance indicators.

05-01:24:58

Eardley-Pryor: Okay.

05-01:25:00

Sease:

So a source of tension between the organic Sierra Club, the "we do anything we want, and whatever we think needs to happen, we'll just lean into it," and—I talked to you about internal tensions between the haves of the coal campaign and the have nots. So at the same time that the Sierra Club is saying we are going to move heaven and earth to become more equitable and inclusive, we have a coal campaign that is funded at a very large level with key performance indicators that it has to meet to keep getting those monies in to make good on the money they have. So it became a tension where folks would say, you know, KPIs are racist, inherently racist, because they are pulling you in a direction that isn't about what we need to do right now. It's about following the dictates of a donor.

05-01:25:56

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, that's interesting. But you also bring it up as a model of success.

05-01:25:59

Sease:

Yes. No. I am saying it created a controversy. It also took a lot of coal plants and potential coal plants off-line. Made a huge impact in advancing climate change. So it is an illustration that if you are an organization like the Sierra Club and you have a very broad set of goals and you say want to do them all and we're going to do them all tomorrow or yesterday, that you start heading down a path where good things become competing entities.

05-01:26:43

Eardley-Pryor:

How do you resolve those challenges where there's the racial and social-cultural issues to be addressed along with meeting these KPIs that tend to have success in their goals?

05-01:27:03

Sease:

Well, that's a huge question and nobody knows the answer yet. How will the Sierra Club address that? There are parts of the Sierra Club that say we can do both but you can't let go of KPIs, not if you're serious about climate change. There are parts of the Club that say if you keep your attention on the KPIs, your commitment to diversity and equity is just a fig leaf. And I think it's a really serious challenge for the Club because one of the things about attracting people to an organization like the Sierra Club is you attract people who are advocates, who are organizers. And if they are advocates and organizers who have a top priority and, in fact, a top priority for good reasons of getting rid of systemic racism, then anything that, as an organization, you say, "Well, no, we need to do this other thing instead or in addition," becomes a source of tension. So the Sierra Club, in a very genuine effort to not just be doing tokenism in terms of becoming more diverse, has brought in and empowered some voices who are very impatient for change and that is coming up against some voices that are very impatient for addressing climate change. And you wouldn't think those things would be in conflict but there's a saying in the Sierra Club—I'm sure the Sierra Club didn't invent it—but we used a lot of "yes, and." You know, "it's not 'either/or,' it's 'yes, and.'" One of the things I

experience is that it's "yes, and" as long as what you're bringing up isn't in conflict with a direction the Sierra Club has decided it wants to head right this moment. And if it is, then you're just showing fragility. So it's a challenging time for the Club, and one where I think is perilous. Because the Sierra Club, if it does not become more relevant to the diversity of people that are America, it'll just fade away into nothing. If it evolves in a way where the issues, the very protection of place, becomes an embarrassment and something that is viewed as white privilege, it will die a different death. So it's a time of transition, and it's not at all clear how it navigates that to avoid either of those outcomes.

05-01:30:20

Eardley-Pryor:

How much does the Club look at other organizations into what they're doing as a means to influence its own evolution? And let me preface that by—I'm thinking about National Wildlife Federation hired Mustafa Santiago Ali, when he resigned from the Trump Administration's control of the EPA, and helped institute a way in which the National Wildlife Federation will run an environmental justice framework through almost every major executive decision it makes. So it's almost like a lens, in order for steps to move forward. It needs to look through that decision-making process with environmental justice framework on it. And I'm wondering if that is something that the Club is trying to wrestle with, of how do you make these priority decisions while also maintaining the need for its involvement on diversity, equity, and justice?

05-01:31:15

Sease:

I do believe the Sierra Club has invested, not necessarily in that particular person, but has brought in experts. At the beginning I said that we have hired people who are impatient for change, that our organizers and our advocates—so I'm not saying they're just being impatient for change. But what that means is the pace of change, if it's the pace that a large organization actually manages to deliver, is at best unsatisfying and at worst a laughable insult. So the Sierra Club leadership has been under pressure to demonstrate that it's not just talking the talk, but is walking the walk. So an interesting development happened after I left. So I'm only hearing the staff talk about it, but the—

05-01:32:24

Eardley-Pryor:

And you retired—this is just a few months ago. You left in 2020?

05-01:32:26

Sease:

Yeah, yeah. But there has been a change in our philosophy for recruitment for positions in response to demands from the union and in response to concerns that we were not advancing people of color fast enough. And that our pay scales weren't equitable. So what the Club has decided upon as a management and recruiting philosophy is that a job will be posted based on the description of the work, that recruitment will not look at experience or skills, and that it'll be paid for at whatever that job category is. So somebody who is particularly skilled at that would not be able to get more, and that the only way of

changing the remuneration is tenure with the Club. Well, you might imagine the managers who are trying to deliver on programs being told "you can't recruit for skills" are about to set their hair on fire. So it's an example of something that you can understand the intent that goes to saying we don't want to discriminate against people who have not had the opportunity to develop those skills. But on the other hand we have a donor who's saying, "You're going to deliver this product." And maybe you can find the person with those skills without recruiting on that, but if you can't pay them for those skills any more than you would pay somebody who had no skills that took that job, then you're not going to be able to necessarily deliver on that donor's demands.

05-01:34:26

Eardley-Pryor: That gets to that tension you were talking about between KPIs and—

05-01:34:30

Sease: Right. And so that's become a metaphor, is that it's about equity and not KPIs. And it makes Bloomberg be viewed—I mean, the guy didn't make his money on bad things. But we have organizers in the organization who say, "I don't want to work on something that's funded by Bloomberg." I could see that if we were getting it from the Koch Brothers. But anyway, it's a circular, complicated series of things that are, I think, falling on the Club at a time of tremendous challenge and tremendous change. And with really deep passion and good intentions on parties, but not necessarily coming to a place that's going to succeed.

05-01:35:34

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Can you think of any other times, in your experience with the Club, where it's gone through such transformation and evolution like this?

05-01:35:45

Sease: I can think of many times and places when the Club has gone through evolution, probably not of this scale. It seems like it's a mechanical thing, but it actually, I think, was fraught with quite a bit of emotional energy. The shifting of the annual setting of priorities that were a popular vote to something that was much more driven by a board and senior staff and funding. It was a really big shift.

05-01:36:29

Eardley-Pryor: Was that during this Project Renewal and Project ACT period of changes that happened in the nineties? Or are you thinking more about the 2005 Sierra Summit around climate change priorities?

05-01:36:38

Sease: I'm seeing those as an arc.

05-01:36:49

Eardley-Pryor: That's a similar kind of evolutionary change that really reoriented the Club in a major way.

05-01:36:56

Sease:

Right. And, you know, I think the Club has come out from that in a very strong position. It's conceivable that the Club will come through this transition. But the tensions I see between—there's sort of three points of the tension. The rank-and-file volunteer that came to the Club because it cares about wild lands, open space, and climate change, clean air, clean water—basic environmental activists. The person who has come to the Club, attracted to the Club by the statements it made and the gestures that Mike Brune has made in terms of saying we are committed to inclusion, equity, and diversity, and we're going to walk the walk. So that it's attracted people whose top issue, whose driving passion is righting racial injustice. And putting that in the mix with a sense of there is a very short window for doing something on climate change that will keep the world from frying. And it's not to say that there is not some sweet spot that weaves that all together, but the potential for it just being a train wreck. I have sat in meetings where the Sierra Club staff savage our volunteers in the aggregate as being racist and clueless, utterly clueless, telling stories, and these are stories that are real. We have people, individuals, who have asked organizers to come into their gated communities and give a presentation without even thinking about what the experience might be like for them in getting there. But the levels of hostility and readiness to believe the worst has set up a dynamic that is—it's been very fraught for a couple of years.

05-01:39:49

Eardley-Pryor:

How much did these tensions influence your decision to retire?

05-01:39:55

Sease:

A small amount. Maybe it was—just adding one more thing. I mean the Sierra Club is going through a time of, I think, great transition and it is going to need to draw upon leaders to do the right thing. And I've spent forty years in the Sierra Club being one of those leaders that CEO after CEO has brought me in and valued what I've brought to the table. And as I looked at continuing that for another few years maybe, I—not so much that I didn't think Mike Brune would listen to me, but he had set up a structure in which my voice didn't ever reach the decision-making process and was unlikely to reach it in increasing levels. So, I thought about that. I was given an opportunity to reapply for my current job with a new title, and I had actually made the decision to do that, to go forward and apply. I figured, you know, I've got the experience, I've got a good resumé, and I've had great performance reviews for my whole tenure. But I was sitting in a meeting, it was about our political plan, and I listened to the interplay between Mike and his deputy and what they wanted my political director to do and how little opportunity they were providing for me to actually put a perspective in, or how little I felt it would be viewed. And I came out of that and I just thought, "You know, life is too short. Been there, done that. I have other things to do." The next day I started telling my staff I was going to leave. And, you know, my staff feels that I was put in a situation where I left because I had to apply for my job. Actually, I thought about

leaving for that reason, but I had gotten past that. I left because I didn't think I would have much influence in the current management, and I didn't have a lot of faith in the current management navigating these really difficult things that we talked about.

05-01:42:50

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. From what I'm hearing, it's a combination of feeling like those in charge were not going to be able to manage this transition as well as you hoped, and that your voice wouldn't have the same role to help steer them in the right way.

05-01:43:05

Sease: Mm-hmm.

05-01:43:09

Eardley-Pryor: Maybe we can take a break here and pause—

05-01:43:10

Sease: Okay. Okay.

[pause in recording]

05-01:43:18

Eardley-Pryor: So, Debbie, I have a note that in 2005 your work in the Sierra Club's DC office—you get a new job title and that title becomes Federal Campaigns Director for the Sierra Club. What did that job-change entail for you?

05-01:43:38

Sease: Roger, I'm thinking for a moment because if it was the change from National Campaigns Director to Federal Campaigns Director it was one change. If it was from Legislative Director to National Campaigns Director it was another. I'm just trying to remember which happened in 2004.

05-01:44:05

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I don't remember what the previous job title was. I don't have that—

05-01:44:10

Sease: I think it was from Legislative Director.

05-01:44:13

Eardley-Pryor: That sounds about right.

05-01:44:14

Sease: Okay. So, if it's that change it was in 2004.

05-01:44:18

Eardley-Pryor: I have in 2005 is when your Federal Campaigns Director title was bestowed—or invented.

05-01:44:24

Sease:

Well, I think it probably happened in 2004 actually, and I noted it in 2005. Up until that time, I had been the National Legislative Director, and in 2004 we were doing—in 2003 we had been doing a Building Environmental Community campaign, which was an educational campaign in a lot of targeted states where we were organizing our base, Sierra Club activists, around environmental issues that they chose and that were really important to them. We were building capacity and public sentiment around the environment.

05-01:45:12

Eardley-Pryor:

What was different about that Building Environmental Community project from what the Club had been doing forever?

05-01:45:19

Sease:

Well, it was a particular project that was funded by a grant. The Beldon Fund funded it. It allowed us to build up organizing staff and door-to-door canvassers and get volunteers, train them to go door-to-door around environmental issues, to do press around those issues and it wasn't different in kind but it was different in structure to what the Sierra Club might be doing. So it was around environmental issues. So, for example, New Hampshire Sierra Club took on a local—I think it was a waste disposal fight. In Illinois, they took on a clean air fight. So it was basically applying the premise that you can build an environmental bench working on a local issue that people care passionately about. Then you have that bench, and you can bring it into your next fight. So in two-thousa—

05-01:46:36

Eardley-Pryor:

Well, I'm thinking in 2002 the Beyond Coal Campaign begins in Illinois and eventually emerges to become this national, even international scale Beyond Coal Campaign. I'm wondering if that local sort of organizing in Illinois around this one coal plant that spurred this broader thing, was that an influence on helping create this Building Environmental Community project?

05-01:46:57

Sease:

I don't know. To be honest, I don't. I mean the influence on this, it's been around for a long time, which is that you can build capacity around an issue that people care about and put a campaign together, and then you're in a stronger place for having done that.

05-01:47:15

Eardley-Pryor:

It's just deepening the bench in that particular moment.

05-01:47:16

Sease:

Yeah, yeah. So Building Environmental Community was that program and it was funded as a public education program because it wasn't about passing legislation. Was no electoral program because it wasn't about electing an official. We shut that program down in 2004 and in many of those same places we started up a program that was paid for with different money and

used it for language, picked a different issue and was doing voter education around that same thing.

05-01:47:53

Eardley-Pryor: And so that one, because it is voting specific, needed a difference in funding?

05-01:47:58

Sease: Yes, yes. It was paid for with money that is esoteric. It was called 527 voter education money. And we created a really big effort to do that. My role in that year was to take on the coordination. The actual pieces of that program were spread among a bunch of people in the department, from the organizing department to media, et cetera. But my role was to try to just stay on top of the moving pieces and make sure everybody was in communication. So it was a coordinating role. And it ate a bunch of time and so I hired a deputy legislative director to take on a bunch of the work that I was doing directly on the legislative stuff, managing the staff.

05-01:49:00

Eardley-Pryor: Who was that? Who did you hire?

05-01:49:03

Sease: A woman named Debbie Bogart. She was in the organization already and I promoted her into that role. And because my role was different, it wasn't legislative, it was this thing, David asked me—it wasn't a promotion. He just said, "You need a different job title." And so I came up with that amorphous title of National Campaigns Director, which I was just going to use for a year. But it actually was one of those things that covers a multitude of different activities that you might be doing and isn't limiting and sounds, you know, puffy enough to get you in the door if you're trying to set up an appointment with somebody important. So I just kept it for many years. Ultimately I changed it to Federal Campaign Director because, as the Sierra Club reorganized our conservation department, the person who was heading that up, a woman named Sarah Hodgdon, wanted to use the National Campaign Director because we were doing all these different campaigns. And so her version of that title was a very different set of work but she needed that title. So we narrowed mine to Federal Campaign Director, which I kept for a good long while.

05-01:50:32

Eardley-Pryor: I like the flexibility in these titles.

05-01:50:33

Sease: Right, right. But it was an interesting set of work. And we did those voter education sites in a bunch of really important states and taught people how to canvas and go door-to-door and talk to people about stuff. And at the very last minute we turned that operation over into a political operation. Shut down the voter education work.

05-01:51:07

Eardley-Pryor: Why, and then, with what impact?

05-01:51:09

Sease: Why we did it is because we were actually talking to people about voting for a particular candidate, which you can't do in that way.

05-01:51:21

Eardley-Pryor: And what was the impact where the campaigns—

05-01:51:22

Sease: We lost. Actually, no, the impact, if you look at all the states we did it in, it was a pretty impactful program. And it was a long-term impactful program in that the two different programs, the Building Environmental Community and Environmental Voter Education, those concentrated efforts of bringing in staff and resources and focusing on a coordinated campaign effort, whether it was an educational campaign or a voter education campaign, really did build capacity in those places and capacity that we still enjoy today.

05-01:52:04

Eardley-Pryor: And so when you say we lost, are you thinking about the John Kerry election?

05-01:52:09

Sease: Yeah, the Kerry campaign. That was the last bit of it.

05-01:52:15

Eardley-Pryor: I wonder what kind of impact longer term—I mean, you mentioned the Obama Administration had its own field organizing plan that was incredibly successful. But how much they were able to benefit from all the groundwork that had happened by the Sierra Club in other organizations to draw in these people who had been trained in previous election cycles.

05-01:52:35

Sease: Well, I'm sure that they did partake of them. They partook of the ones from America Votes, as well. But they also had put in charge of their field operation some folks who really got field, who really understood it, how to make it work, why it was important, and they just did a great job. And they had an inspiring candidate.

05-01:53:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's a big part of it. A charismatic and powerful, historic candidate. Are there people that come to mind that you are thinking of that you remember as being effective, either in the Building Environmental Community, Environmental Voter Project, or within the Obama Campaign?

05-01:53:17

Sease: Well, housed in the Sierra Club, I mean, I am talking about Building Environmental Community and EVEC in a very personal way. But the person who really built those from the ground up and trained the staff and changed

the culture of the field staff into an organizing culture was Bob Bingaman, who is the Sierra Club's organizing department lead.

05-01:53:47

Eardley-Pryor: How did you and Bob work together?

05-01:53:50

Sease: Really closely, seamlessly. Bob's a passionate but easy-going person. So he will, you know, get his hackles up if you cross him or if you're not carrying through. But he is always ready to listen and engage. And I learned a lot about organizing from him.

05-01:54:25

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of the things that come to mind that you think really you took from Bob?

05-01:54:28

Sease: Well, I didn't realize I was taking these from Bob until he recruited me to do a couple of training sessions where we taught our campaign planning model. And he gave me the book that he and a couple of other folks in the Club had put together on the campaign planning matrix. And it incorporated a lot that I already knew, but it codified it in a way that, from the first day I read that manual and then the next day taught it, it profoundly influenced how I planned a campaign. It was so logical and one thing follows the next. It became for me a way of checking to see if I had gone down a cul-de-sac in trying to figure out how to shape a campaign. And the essence of it is, the first part of a campaign is you figure out who has the power to give you what you want. Is it the mayor of a city? Is it a state legislator? Is it the president? Is it the Congress? So if you're trying to get a law passed, your target can't just be the president. It has to be who can pass that law. And then once you've figured out your target, who are the sub-targets, the people who can influence that target? And then what are your tactics? And at the end of it you look and you say. "Are these tactics, do they influence either the target or the sub-targets?" And if they don't influence either one of them, then you're just spinning your wheels. And you would be amazed at the number of campaign plans that have tactics that do neither of those two things. So we have discussed a little bit the thought of big rallies, marches on Washington.

05-01:56:37

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, like 1995 is the twenty-fifth anniversary of Earth Day and, I don't know, ten thousand people marching on DC and the mall that year. What are your thoughts on how effective those are, or how meaningful those are?

05-01:56:53

Sease: I tend to think that big rallies are less effective than most people who care passionately about the environment. I think that they are held in greater esteem, particularly by people—I don't know, maybe at some point in your trajectory of being an activist you go through a stage where you want to go out and demonstrate. I did that against the Vietnam War. Got tear gassed a

few times. May or may not have had a cumulative impact on that. But the era in which a huge gathering, a show of force—yes, it has an impact. How big an impact? Big question. And if you go back to one of his primary theories of organizing, is you start with the volume low and as you go through your campaign sequence, the volume gets higher and higher and higher. So if you start with a hundred thousand people on the Mall, what do you do next? Do you get two hundred thousand? And are you in this endless cycle of having to spend more and more time recruiting more and more people to come to something that may or may not be making a perceivable difference? I'm not saying that rallies don't work, but they all ought to be put up against that test of who's my target and is this really going to be noticed by, and if it's noticed by, is it going to impact my target?

05-01:58:36

Eardley-Pryor: That's fascinating.

05-01:58:38

Sease:

So after that big Earth Day rally we, maybe even before or during, we were much more focused on getting all of our local chapters to do some kind of local Earth Day event. We would try to put together a theme, materials, but we felt we had much more impact by generating those local events than by busing a bunch of people to the Mall for a day.

05-01:59:06

Eardley-Pryor:

It's fascinating just to think about the different purposes. Right. There may not be a strategic legislative purpose or a targeted political action from those campaigns, but I'm thinking about my experience in some of those kind of big marches and what they meant, not so much as a target for change, but more that there are other people out here who care about this issue, that I'm not alone, and the importance that that served. Right? Like for you, I'm picturing the Vietnam War, thinking "This is insanity, we need to get together and show that we're against this, even if there are consequences like getting tear gassed." And that can then serve as a means to build the bench, as you had said earlier, like some of these voter education projects. So I'm wondering if some of these rallies really isn't as much about implementing change as it is about forming communities that then can be steered toward implementing change.

05-02:00:07

Sease:

No, I think you're right. And then the question comes how big does that march need to be, where does it need to be, what are the opportunity costs. So, for example, the climate march that happened in New York and other cities [the 2014 People's Climate March]. I mean the impact of that was not so much on the decision-maker, but when you looked and you saw the different communities, the folks that weren't just your typical Sierra Clubber, the first responders from New Jersey showing up under a banner. You could say that was a march that was probably useful in the short-term and long-term. Making an annual event of that, is that a useful thing? Probably not.

05-02:01:09

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. I want to ask you about other major events. There was another major rally we've talked about already, the Sierra Summit that happens in 2005, right in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. And in this Sierra Summit, the Club reorients its priorities around climate issues with a lot of volunteer grassroots support to then have a greater trajectory of "Here's what we're going to try to do." I have a number of things that I want to ask you about, but one is what happens to the lands program? What happens to these traditional bellwethers of Sierra Club activism and success in protecting public lands with this reorientation around climate and energy?

05-02:01:56

Sease: Well, I'm glad you asked that question. But let me first say that something like the Sierra Summit that results in a monumental sort of shift away from the annual priorities and towards saying "This is one big whoop, and here's the moving parts that we care about," the impact of that is huge. And much of that impact is positive, but anything that's that big a change is going to have some negative impact, as well. One of my favorite sayings is a question of whether something is an accident theory of history or a great man theory of history. I think the Sierra Summit was not so much either of those, but in certain realities you put a set of pieces on the table and inevitably those realities are going to cause this thing to happen. So you bring a bunch of Sierra Club activists together. You give them a lot of information about what's happening in the world. And they're all educated environmental people who've been paying attention in their own realms anyway on the looming threat of climate change and the fact that the way we get our energy, the way we burn our energy, where we get our energy are the single biggest contributors to our current problems of air and water and land pollution and loss of wild land. It all ties back, or the bulk of it ties back, to what we do for energy. So you face a group of well-informed active people with that, and then you add what the science is starting to say about climate change to it, and it is almost inevitable that the ah-ha moment of, "Oh, my God, this is an overwhelming priority and we have to get our act in gear, and we need to be doing everything we can about it," that's going to happen. You layer that on with a fundraising department that is saying, "It's time for a capital campaign and it needs to be oriented around something big," and that puts a structure around that energy. And so the Sierra Club, that's all good. We need to be doing that. It was silly that our only energy issue was fuel economy.

05-02:04:58

At the same time, there's the unintended consequences of doing that. So the Sierra Club has a lands program. It is what most of our members joined because of. It is what most people who write an extra check in their membership thing are sending money to. It's because they care about wolves and polar bears and wild places and not cutting down all the trees. And you say, "Hmm, we're going to go do energy, fossil fuels." Particularly at that moment in time, more so than right now, that's a pretty, hmm, what about

lands, what about wildlife? And, you know, you could do a lot for lands and wildlife by just stopping the way we develop and use fossil fuels, but that's as an add-on. And so there was a decision that what we would have—because we were only going to have these campaigns that fit under the climate recovery umbrella. So we did Resilient Habitat, and—

05-02:06:11

Eardley-Pryor: Is that what the lands program became?

05-02:06:15

Sease: Mm-hmm. And it became focused on creating resiliency for wildlife in a changing climate. Well, now, that is a really big deal. It's important. There's a lot you could do on it. And it does some to overlap with the traditional "stop development of wildlands, protect lands as wilderness." But it is a narrower constraining vision of it, and it leaves behind some of the passion, some of the *raison d'être* that people bring to why they are wilderness activists.

05-02:06:59

Eardley-Pryor: Let me ask you about that, because that—I know preserving wild lands and wild animals and spaces for all of that recreation and preservation to happen is near and dear to your heart. So how did you respond to this transition?

05-02:07:12

Sease: I thought it was unfortunate and potentially very serious trouble for the Sierra Club. And yet, I was very much in favor of us taking on climate. So one of the things that I was given an opportunity to do, one by Mike Brune, noticed as he came on to be executive director of the Sierra Club, that he was getting a lot of complaints from people about the Sierra Club having turned its back on public lands.

05-02:07:48

Eardley-Pryor: And for context-wise, Mike came in, I think, in 2010? That's right?

05-02:07:53

Sease: Yeah. So we had resilient habitats for a long time during the climate campaign. Mike said, "We're the Sierra Club. We have to care about lands." So he assigned Sarah Hodgdon, who was his director of the conservation department, to do a deep dive. Look at the Resilient Habitat Campaign, the Sierra Club's Public Lands Campaign, its history, and figure out what we should do on this. So Sarah, who—I haven't spoken much about her as a boss. She was a really wonderful person to work for.

05-02:08:33

Eardley-Pryor: In what ways? Why?

05-02:08:35

Sease: Differently than other bosses I have had. The other great bosses I have had have been helpful, but mostly stayed out of my way. You know, cleared obstacles, nudged me occasionally, but didn't get in my space much. Sarah

was somebody who was—if this actually stays in print and she reads it, she is going to laugh and then grit her teeth. But she was way more into the peas and carrots of our work than I was. And I used to tease her about it. You know, she was really a lot about process. But she was into process for very good reasons and put serious attention to making sure the process was a good process. So we talked earlier about getting the gigantic grant from Bloomberg for working on coal. I would say if Sarah Hodgdon had not been involved in working with Bruce Nilles on putting that funding proposal together, we wouldn't have gotten the money. Because I saw her redrafts of this, because I was part of the group that got to look at the proposal as it was evolving, and she would do what our grant writers typically do, which is add, you know, in track changes this series of questions. "What about this?" and "What does this mean?" And probing to get somebody to actually lay out what is the strategy. Don't just gloss over the high points.

05-02:10:15

Well, she brought that to the deep dive on Resilient Habitats, and she tapped me to work with her on it. And I said, "Oh, sure. Happily." And she said, "Well, no, Debbie, it's probably going to take us a year, and it's going to be up to a quarter of your time." And I remember thinking to myself, "This shouldn't take more than a month, and it's going to be at most a few days' worth of work." I was so wrong both in terms of how long it took, how much work it was, and in order to get both the end product and the buy-in that that end product had, it was time that needed to be invested in it. So if Mike had come to me and said, "Do the deep dive and do this," I would have done a very different thing, and it would have been far less successful than what Sarah did. So I learned a tremendous amount from her about giving due diligence to necessary good process.

05-02:11:36

Eardley-Pryor: And what was it that together you did to reorient this Resilient Habitat program?

05-02:11:41

Sease: Well, she and I, and a cast of hundreds who were brought in and helped build this thing, redesigned the Resilient Habitat and the old Lands Program to—I'm trying to remember what we named it. It's just now called Wild, but it was—

05-02:12:14

Eardley-Pryor: The Wild America Program?

05-02:12:14

Sease: Yeah, mm-hmm. I mean, I literally spent a year of multi-hour phone calls with large numbers of people, and it was drawing from that what this was. It was distilling that. It was running that back up to some of our more diverse staff with different perspectives and learning in the process that, you know, maybe we could think of different ways of describing why this is important to be more relevant to a broader segment of our membership.

05-02:13:02

Eardley-Pryor: Can you think of an example of something where that occurred?

05-02:13:07

Sease: It was in the write-up. I'm just trying to remember what it was. Oh. So one of the favorite stories we tell, it's true, and it is an illustration of the power of just a couple of people in relationships, was John Muir and Teddy Roosevelt sitting down and drawing out the original national monuments and national forest reserves. And that I had written an intro to something and it had that. And Byron Gudiel, who is now our organizing manager, just said, "You know, that doesn't conjure—these two privileged white men sitting down and drawing circles for their little club to go hiking in doesn't conjure up the image that you want." And, again, it was habit. It's a great story. It evokes a certain image. But it's an image that's not necessarily resonant with everybody that it could be. And Byron, throughout the process, he was on every one of these calls, was bringing that kind of perspective but in a way that was not saying we shouldn't care about public lands. It was saying we need to broaden how and why we care about public lands.

05-02:14:34

Eardley-Pryor: Do you remember how you changed that language? Because it has been so habit, Sierra Club habit, to look to Muir, who spoke so eloquently about preservation, as the model for "Here's the reason for preserving public lands." Do you remember how that changed?

05-02:14:52

Sease: Well, we took out that particular reference and I think we led that paragraph with something about the way in which the lands were important to people for all kinds of aspects of their life. So we put a more people-centric spin on it.

05-02:15:14

Eardley-Pryor: Aside from the language and the reasoning for why public lands matter so much, how did the actions to preserve public lands change in the wake of this deep dive that you and Sarah and all these others did?

05-02:15:29

Sease: Well, so the mechanics of what you do to protect public lands didn't change a whole lot. We still supported wilderness bills. We supported park expansions. We fought bad logging proposals. The way we engaged with people on it changed. And particularly the way we engaged with allies. And it wasn't so much a result of the redesign of the Wild program and the rebranding but it was a result of the changes that the Sierra Club was going through. But we have always worked with native communities, local communities in protecting lands. We became very conscious of how we worked with them and whether or not we were letting our size and our comfort with the media take the front line versus their voices being first. So a simple example of that is we've got good relations with the press. When something happens that affects the Arctic, something we've done—it's really easy for us to do a press release, have the quote. Our current lands team makes really sure, if at all possible, that they get

in touch with the Gwich'in leader that has been working with us and they get the quote. They get the credit. We both deserve the credit. It's easy for us to get the credit. It takes a more conscious effort to make sure that the credit is shared.

05-02:17:22

Eardley-Pryor: That's a great example. Yeah, and even just the change from Resilient Habitat and Lands Program to becoming *Our* Wild America Program.

05-02:17:36

Sease: Right. It was basically restating and owning that the Sierra Club is committed to that vision of a wild America.

05-02:17:51

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note here, too, that in the midst of this title change and the changes that are happening in the 2000s, that there's also a consolidation of offices. The DC office is actually either changing locations, or there's two different offices that come together?

05-02:18:09

Sease: Well, we were in a little building close to the Capitol, that we could walk to the House and the Senate from, that we owned. We bought it, and we did a pretty good deal in terms of it paying for itself quickly and it being a rent-free accommodation for our office. But as the Sierra Club grew, as campaigns like the coal campaign had multiple people based in DC, as the different departments in the Club decided to have a DC presence, we had just completely outgrown that office and we had spread into two buildings, which was very inconvenient. It didn't work well. And we'd been looking for another building to buy. We eventually found a building to buy, put an offer on it. It fell through. We rented the space that we were in and we moved that building from two buildings into that building. And my role in that was that—one of the jobs I had as the Federal Campaigns Director had nothing to do with federal campaigns, and it was that I was the manager of the operations department that was based in DC. So our office manager, our receptionist, and the sort of support administrative help we had, which, to be honest, I really have no skillset in that. And as we got bigger and more complicated, it was not a good use of my time, and I wasn't providing the kind of management that those operations needed. But at that time I was. So the woman that I had hired as office manager, blessings on her, was incredibly organized and we worked with San Francisco and we did the move, which was a gigantic mess.

05-02:20:12

Eardley-Pryor: I can imagine. And then still trying to keep the wheels moving in that new location.

05-02:20:15

Sease: Yes. And one of the things I learned from that is there are—titles, and who gets an office, and where that office is are probably the biggest emotional high stakes things in any office.

05-02:20:38

Eardley-Pryor: How did you handle those?

05-02:20:40

Sease: And our CFO was a penny pincher.

05-02:20:47

Eardley-Pryor: Was it Lou? Lou Barnes you're talking about?

05-02:20:49

Sease: No. It was Lou Barnes?

05-02:20:51

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah.

05-02:20:52

Sease: Yeah, he wanted to do everything as cheaply as possible. And so he really leaned into the new, "Oh, everybody gets a workspace and very few people get offices," which I pushed back hard on.

05-02:21:12

Eardley-Pryor: Why? Why did that matter to you, in your mind?

05-02:21:16

Sease: Because every person I have ever supervised that has moved from an open workstation to an office has said it was the single best change in terms of their quality of work life, the quality of their job and their productivity. It is a myth that people do better in open workspaces. I mean, take the prestige aside. It's just easier to do your work if you have the ability to close a door. And also, the fewer spaces you have, the more the dynamics of that "who gets one, who doesn't" comes into play. But I won some of the battle, but I lost a lot of it. And so figuring out who went where was a fraught challenge.

05-02:22:18

Eardley-Pryor: This brings to mind the challenges of managing a number of dynamic staff members who are impassioned about what they do, and perhaps sometimes have blinders on about only their issue, but you need to have them work cohesively and with others. They need to play nicely. I'm wondering if you could share some stories about people that you have had to manage that are big personalities, that are very effective at their jobs, but your role is helping make sure that they can do their jobs within a broader group. Can you share some stories about that or people in particular that come to mind?

05-02:22:56

Sease: Well, I can share a story about a couple of them, at least. Both of them have long since left the employment of the Sierra Club so there's no consequences. But Dan Becker, who ran the energy program, which was solely fuel economy, was a brilliant strategist. A very hard-edged person. Didn't suffer fools at all. And was abusive to his staff if they weren't performing very well. So managing him was a really serious challenge.

05-02:23:37

Eardley-Pryor: How did you go about doing that?

05-02:23:40

Sease:

Well, I'll get there. At the same time, somebody on the staff was, a guy named Dan Weiss, who was our political director. And Dan was absolutely passionate about the political program, and he and Dan Becker did not get along well at all. They both had edgy personalities, and they were like oil and water. And Dan Becker got an old gas pump and had it set up with a clock, like the ZPG clock that clicks how many people there are? And it basically had a formula that would kick out how many tons of carbon would have been saved if we had implemented fuel economy standards. And just a little computer laptop inside of it would crank these numbers. And, you know, it was a press gimmick, but it lived in our reception area. And somebody sabotaged it. And Dan Becker was absolutely convinced that it was Dan Weiss. Dan Weiss utterly totally denied it. He may or may not have been the one that did it. I could never actually ferret that out. But they were making the place toxic for everybody around them. So in what may or may not have been a good management move, I called them both into my office and I told them that they had to change their behavior. And I said, "You know, my father when he was growing up did this terrible thing. He didn't realize it was as cruel as it was, but he tied two cats' tails together and threw them over a clothesline." And I said, "You know, I've been tempted, I've actually had fantasies about doing that with the two of you." I said, "But if you don't figure out how to get along, I am going to send you on a mandatory ropes course together." And they both so abhorred the notion of doing something like that with the other than that they—they didn't change, but they sort of pulled it in and quit frightening the horses. So the apocryphal story is that I threatened to tie them together with a rope and throw them over a clothesline. What I actually threatened them with was sending them on a ropes course after having referenced the other thing.

05-02:26:29

Eardley-Pryor: That's a great story. And it helped save that toxic build-up that was happening.

05-02:26:36

Sease:

Uh-huh. Yeah.

05-02:26:39

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great. There are a couple other people that came up in background interviews, in thinking about volunteers, even having to manage sometimes volunteers who then maybe become staff members. And I'm thinking in particular of, from central America—or from the Midwest, based in Missouri, a guy named Ken Midkiff, who really cared about CAFOs and the feedlots. I guess his issue was that. And they'll say there's never enough money going towards their pet project. Or other Midwestern staff members maybe who care about river flooding and these issues that were happening in the early nineties

around the flooding in the Mississippi. How do you manage these people who are constantly needling about not having their pet project be prioritized?

05-02:27:28

Sease:

Well, you don't manage all those people. I mean that is one of the byproducts of a Sierra Club that, for decades, basically said, "Oh, you care about that? Well, here. Here's a little pot of money. Go do something on it." And [the byproduct of] a Sierra Club staff, in particular, whose favorite saying was, "Better to ask forgiveness than permission." And so Ken Midkiff was one of those. Actually, Ken Midkiff was one of the few field staff that I did literally manage for a while because he was doing a Water Sentinels program that came under my purview even though he was based in the field.

05-02:28:14

I think that the techniques for managing people like that is not that different than managing really good performers. You just have to spend more time doing it. But it's actually listening to their complaint and their concern, and it is then trying, to the degree possible, to turn them toward a productive reaction to that, as opposed to a destructive reaction to it. So one of the critiques that—actually, it was Dan Weiss who gave me this critique of my management style. I learned from it. He said, "You know, Debbie, sometimes when I come in and I talk to you about a problem, I just want you to hear me. I just want you to listen and understand that I have the problem." He said, "And you immediately start trying to solve it. And that's not hearing me." And I realized that I did do that. And that it was cutting off that part of somebody having a place that they can just vent. It's not to say that you never want to offer or push them toward a constructive solution. But to cut quickly to that? I wasn't meaning to cut short the complaint or to be dismissive of it. But just to get to, "Well, here, I can do something about that." And it was an incredibly valuable lesson, and it's one of those lessons of do it wrong until somebody tells you and then you can learn from it.

05-02:29:59

Eardley-Pryor:

That's great advice on how to manage dynamic people of all kinds. I want to ask, too, about—we've talked about this transition in the mid-2000s to focusing on energy. And with that change, it's a different kind of politics, I would think, on the legislative side, in the DC world. Big, big money in energy politics. And the Sierra Club didn't necessarily have that same background, historically, in that realm. It was sort of on the edges, I would imagine, of resource conservation. So I'm just wondering, with this deep dive into energy politics that the Club goes into, how that shaped the legislative actions and also managing the DC office around those topics of energy? How did that change in the wake of this transition in the Club?

05-02:30:51

Sease:

Well, I would say one of the harder things about that transition is that while the Club—in the environmental advocacy community in Washington, the Club is typically the 900-pound gorilla. We've got more staff, more

experience, good connections. So we come in not with a lot of humility but, you know, ready to take our big seat at the table. On energy, we had consciously walked away from that seat on everything but fuel economy, and we sat on a very big part of it, larger than life on fuel economy. So as we made this transition at a time when the Congress was beginning to look at a comprehensive climate measure, we had some challenges in terms of our place at the table, our influence, and how much actual experience we had in some of those other realms. And we came at it with—the Club has never—I say this without being critical of other environmental organizations. There's a role for people who are trying to figure out a way to ally with industry so that you can bring industry a little closer to the center. There's a role for the folks who are the basic drafters of the deal. They sort of look like, "Here's how much support there is over here. Here's the things that we want. This is where the deal is." That's the NRDC's of the world, Natural Resource Defense Council. The Environmental Defense Fund are the folks that are trying to bring the industry to the table. And the Sierra Club has always had more of its foot in "we are the advocates outside the tent." But, under Mike Brune's leadership, he wanted a much bigger foot outside the tent, less of one inside the tent. And so we're coming into this energy fight after a few years under Carl who, you know, had at least one foot outside the tent, sort of pushing the envelope. So on the one hand, we're the new kid on the block because we haven't been paying attention to stuff other than fuel economy, and we're being demanding. We're saying, "No, that's not good enough." And so that, I think, created a few years of challenge where we had to demonstrate why, even though we hadn't been at the table, we had to be now, and they had to pay attention to what we said because we actually had the boots on the ground.

05-02:33:54

Eardley-Pryor: What were the consequences of that stepping forward in a new way?

05-02:33:58

Sease: Well, ultimately, I think our voice was influential. But in the interim times there was a lot of tension, a lot of frustration on the parts of some of our allies who said, "Hey, you know, you guys didn't earn your seat at the table on this bill." But we took it.

05-02:34:23

Eardley-Pryor: I've heard discussion about the Green Group, this meeting of, oftentimes, the Group A and Group B of a Green Group? And I'm not quite sure what those distinctions are, but I understand you have a role to play in some of these meetings with the Green Group. What is the Green Group? What is Team A, and what is Team B? And what role do you have in this?

05-02:34:45

Sease: Well, I only played a role briefly. But to step back, there was a group of enviro CEOs, sort of the big ones, that met and then decided to keep meeting occasionally. And they were originally called the Gang of Six. And then they

expanded and they became the Gang of Ten. And then suddenly one day, eventually, they realized that words matter and being characterized as the Gang of Ten, it really wasn't helping them much. People didn't take it right. So they decided to call themselves the Green Group. Their staff sort of laughingly suggested that perhaps they just keep the Gang and be the Gang Green.

05-02:35:45

Eardley-Pryor: [laughter] Words do matter.

05-02:35:47

Sease: Words do matter. They took the Green Group. And it was an—

05-02:35:50

Eardley-Pryor: Who are these organizations? Who are the leaders that are a part of this big group in your mind?

05-02:35:54

Sease: Well, currently the Green Group is forty-some organizations.

05-02:36:01

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, this is a big group.

05-02:36:04

Sease: Yes. It has a full-time staff, and it is a venue through which some of that coordinated philanthropy coordinates. And it is a group that has, in large part, under stimulation from Mike Brune, taken a hard look at just how lily white and privileged it is. It waited so long to do that that it said, "Oh, we want to open our doors to other groups," and they said, "Yeah, I don't think we want to be associated with you."

05-02:36:55

Eardley-Pryor: So the outside groups said, "That's not really our group. Thanks anyway."

05-02:36:57

Sease: Yeah, yeah. They said, "We don't want that." So Mike has led a process that's taken a really deep dive at looking at what it would take for that group to either reconfigure, or die and come up from the ashes, as a more diverse group that actually represents the breadth of enviro views. It was a work in progress when I left, and I haven't paid any attention to what's happened to it in the interim. But to go back to your question about the A and B groups. So the Green Group for many years was just called the green group. It was small "g" in both respects because it wasn't trying to be another organization. It was a collection of CEOs coming together to do collaborative things and initially just to sort of support each other as CEOs of organizations. They met once or twice a year, and they decided to ask their number twos or their leg directors—in most cases it was their leg directors—to convene on a regular basis to talk about the nitty-gritty stuff of coordination. And that group, mostly tongue-in-cheek—but again, things stick, you've got to be really

careful about acronyms because they just develop a life of your own, and you never get rid of them—called itself the B team. That didn't mean that the green group ever thought of itself as the A team. There was no A team. It was just the B team. And because it was self-named, it didn't actually focus on the pejorative. But some years into that, being what it was called—in fact, I mean, it's on email lists, et cetera, somebody said, "This is not reflective of us being important. We shouldn't have that name. We shouldn't call ourselves the B team. That's suggesting we aren't the A team."

05-02:39:22

One of the things I love in language is when you hear something out of context and it makes you realize the context of a word that has become—or a phrase. So, for example, in Britain to "ground" electricity you call it to "earth" it, or the "earth cables" for the battery. It makes you stop and think. "Oh, that's what grounding it means. It means it's going to the ground." Or the first time I was listening to the Congress, watching a floor debate, and they called on a woman, congresswoman, and they called her "the gentlewoman from." And gentleman is just a word. It doesn't mean gentle man. But when you hear gentle woman. And so B team had just come to be just—it's just like the x something. It was meaningless. It wasn't being said to denote that we weren't the A team. That's just what the name has become. But it has changed. I don't know what to call it now.

05-02:40:52

Eardley-Pryor: Right.

05-02:40:55

Sease:

But one year they would rotate who was chair of the Green Group and would be responsible for convening the meetings and providing an office with a staff person that was the Green Group coordinator and just took on some bureaucratic duties. They also, particularly if it was a friendly administration, got to sort of be a point of contact for an administration. So Carl was the Green Group chair one year, and the duty of the legislative director of that chair was to convene the weekly B team meetings. So that was my role. And then the other role was to go as an eyes and ears of that B team group to their retreats and then go back to the B team group, not counting on all of their CEOs to individually brief them, and "here's what came out that's relevant to us as a group." Neither of the Sierra Club executive directors that I have worked for that have a role as Green Group chair have really liked either the way the group works or being chair. Carl didn't like it at all, and Mike Brune just absolutely hated it. And poor Melinda is the one that got to play that role for him.

05-02:42:31

Eardley-Pryor: Melinda—

05-02:42:32

Sease:

Pierce, yes. I had done my best to diminish how often the B team needed to meet, the kind of tasks it took on. Because we had coalitions around every issue. It was sort of like the superfluous layer that wasn't the actual people working on these things. It was just this layer. And so because other people were really working on it, other people would come and it would become this giant amorphous meeting. Really hard to put an agenda together for. But under a couple of green group chairs who really liked the idea of that being a robust body, it had grown back up and was a huge burden for Melinda to hear that Mike was chair.

05-02:43:20

Eardley-Pryor:

Does this green group and these different teams that are meeting, do you think it serves a purpose that isn't already served elsewhere?

05-02:43:29

Sease:

Yes and no. I think any group like that that convenes and comes together and starts to meet is driven by some kind of purpose. It is not unusual for that initial purpose to be lost and sometimes replaced by something new and really important and more frequently just to evolve into something that may or may not have a need to exist but continues to and is amorphous enough that it just sort of wallows. So Mike and a couple of colleagues on the Green Group have put more than a year, dedicated staff time, hired a coordinator to try to work with a small group of environmental justice organizations to see if there is a way of convening a new version, an alternative to the Green Group that would be meaningful and representative and it has been, I think, one of the most difficult things Mike has ever tried to do. My staff person that was staffing him on it believes in it really passionately and multiple times, you know, she was in my office saying, "I can't do this anymore. I just can't do it. It's just too—"

05-02:44:52

Eardley-Pryor:

Who was that?

05-02:44:54

Sease:

Liz Perera. And, you know, she was doing good work on it but it was just totally draining and seemingly going nowhere. And being layered on top of her day job.

05-02:45:11

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. It's fascinating to think about the evolution the Club is doing and its realization to become more inclusive and efforts towards greater diversity on staff, but also in priority campaigns. That internal reckoning of the Club is then having these ramifications on an organization like the Green Group, right?

05-02:45:32

Sease:

Well, the Club is not the only organization that is both internally driven to be more inclusive and externally pressured to be more inclusive and struggling

with it. I mean, the Club is several years ahead of the other organizations in terms of when they noticed it, when they decided to start doing things, and have had, I would say, probably by and large better experiences and results than some of our colleagues who just, you know, either through their own ineptitude or just circumstances, have had it blow up in their face. And we don't get praise for what we've done, but we get, you know, begrudging acknowledgement that we haven't completely screwed it up.

05-02:46:33

Eardley-Pryor: Take what gains you can get, I guess?

05-02:46:35

Sease: Yeah.

05-02:46:35

Eardley-Pryor: I want to go back to something we've kind of been talking around but it involves money coming in and decisions that then can be made or campaigns that can be run because of it. And this is the controversial, or what became controversial decision, to accept money from Chesapeake Gas, the natural gas company, in order to shutdown coal plants. And it was a big chunk of money, I mean, tens of millions, twenty-six some million that came in that eventually, I think, became enough of an issue that Carl felt like he had to resign when it became more publicly known. So I guess what I'm wondering is, was the Chesapeake Gas issue, which I think began in 2007 or so, was that something that was on your radar in influencing the way that the DC office operated?

05-02:47:24

Sease: So can we just take a brief break?

05-02:47:30

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, of course. Hold on one sec.

[pause in recording]

So, Debbie, I want to ask you about the reality that the Sierra Club accepted major funding from Chesapeake Gas, the energy company, in its effort to fight coal, coal plants, and I'm wondering what your knowledge was of this acceptance of gas money, and what your thoughts are on its ramifications for the Club.

05-02:47:55

Sease: Well, I was aware of it and my thoughts on it are complicated because it's a classic example of a good outcome being tainted by some piece of it. You know, there's a question, I don't know who asked it, but if we fight fascism with fascist methods, do we become fascists ourselves? This is a variation on that. So Chesapeake is—probably isn't as big as it was—but Aubrey McClendon and Chesapeake were big players in developing natural gas and fracking. An absolute environmental evil. At the same time, there was a potential gigantic boom in new coal construction which would have been the

death knell if it had gone forward for ever dealing with climate change. So Bruce Nillis believed that while eventually you needed to get past natural gas, that natural gas was a legitimate bridge fuel to block coal, and that the single most important thing to do was to actually block that new investment in new coal plants, and that if you didn't do that, politics are never good enough to get rid of them. Well, the flip side of that coin is that if you reinvest from coal into natural gas and you put that infrastructure in place, you've created an obstacle toward getting toward actual renewable. So it's a complicated question. But taking money from Aubrey McClendon and Chesapeake helped the Sierra Club fight off those coal plants. One can keep a straight face and say, "We did it, not to be in bed with the gas company, but because that was an important outside goal." But there's an old saying that you lie down with dogs and you end up with fleas, and Aubrey McClendon was lying down with a dog. I can remember going to a lobby meeting with Carl and Aubrey McClendon and Rahm Emanuel, who was a congressman then instead of the mayor of Chicago. And I felt like I needed to scrub down with lava afterwards because Aubrey McClendon was just slicker than greased owl shit and selling a bunch of lies, and Carl was just sort of standing there. But in taking money from Chesapeake, even if we put it to really good use of killing a bunch of coal plants, we were in bed with the devil. So when Mike Brune was hired, he learned of this. The second thing that was problematic is, this was money and a donation that was not transparent to the board.

05-02:51:14

Eardley-Pryor: In what way?

05-02:51:16

Sease: They were not aware. They did not know that we were taking money from Chesapeake.

05-02:51:21

Eardley-Pryor: Oh, similar to the David Gelbaum, Mr. Anonymous circumstances?

05-02:51:26

Sease: Yes, similar but way different. [laughter] And I was not aware at the time that that was something that the board was not aware of. So Mike Brune, brand new executive director with a budget that is counting on many millions of dollars from Chesapeake, looks at that. You know, Mike's a crusader, chain yourself to the power plant kind of guy. And he is also seeing this burgeoning anti-fracking movement that is already having conflicts in the Club. Not because the Club thinks fracking is good but because they're not making a high enough priority of it. So back to the conversation we had earlier of "my issue's not getting enough attention." So the last thing you want is take more money from a natural gas company and have the story be you're not hard enough on fracking because you're in bed with those guys. So Mike is a brand-new executive director, took what I think is a very, very courageous and honorable position. It's something that helped me initially develop a good bit of respect for him, even though he and I were not on the same page on a lot of

stuff in terms of style and approach. The fact that he was willing to take that on, to say to the board, "We've been taking this money. We're not going to take it anymore," and then to work with our media team to basically expose himself by doing an exclusive with *Newsweek* as opposed to waiting for it to leak out. So, the end of the day, was it a good thing that we took money from Chesapeake? We killed a bunch of coal plants with that money. Was it a bad thing to be aligned with somebody as smarmy as Aubrey McClendon and Chesapeake? Yes. And it was a really bad thing to not actually have the board have their eyes open if they were going to be in that kind of compromise situation. So I think that was probably one of the less wise things that Carl did during his tenure. Did it for the right reasons, but still, you know, at some point you have to say just—the downside's too big.

05-02:53:57

Eardley-Pryor: Well, do you have any other comments that you want to share before we wrap up today that come to mind on topics we talked about that you want to readdress, or anything further on Chesapeake Gas?

05-02:54:15

Sease: Well, I guess I would say I feel a whole lot more comfortable getting money from somebody like Bloomberg. You know, he may be a rich man but pretty clean hands and he spends his money on really good causes. So I think Chesapeake was a mistake. I mean it's a mistake. If I were in Carl's shoes, I might have made the same mistake. I don't know. I probably would have brought a few more people onboard, just not feeling comfortable having it be behind closed doors.

05-02:54:57

Eardley-Pryor: The lack of transparency was part of that mistake?

05-02:54:59

Sease: Mm-hmm.

05-02:55:00

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Well, let's use that as a point to pause the conversation.

05-02:55:04

Sease: Okay.

05-02:55:05

Eardley-Pryor: We'll pick this up for another interview session to close things out. Thank you, Debbie.

05-02:55:11

Sease: Okay. Great.

Interview 6: December 11, 2020

06-00:00:00

Eardley-Pryor: Today is December 11 in the year 2020. I'm Roger Eardley-Pryor from UC Berkeley's Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library. This is interview session number six with Debbie Sease in the Sierra Club Oral History Project. Debbie, how are you today?

06-00:00:18

Sease: I'm good, Roger. How are you?

06-00:00:20

Eardley-Pryor: I'm great. Where are you today?

06-00:00:21

Sease: I am in DC on Capitol Hill in my home.

06-00:00:26

Eardley-Pryor: All right. And I am in Santa Rosa, California in Sonoma County. We are still recording amid an escalating pandemic. Things are getting worse, as we were just saying offline. So, I feel lucky that we are safe in our homes at the moment.

06-00:00:42

Sease: Yes. Actually, you know, Roger, on that note I think about how protected from the difficulties of this I am. My husband and I—I'm retired, he's a semi-retired consultant. You know, we own a house. We have plenty of food. We don't have to go out. We can even get our groceries delivered. And I think about the experience that people are having that don't have that luxury, and I feel, even in this horrible time, incredibly lucky.

06-00:01:14

Eardley-Pryor: Yes, same. I deeply empathize with that because of how secure we are, I mean I am. I'm able to work from home. I have the privilege of doing these kinds of interviews, and that I can do them with these online tools, have groceries delivered, and just be, you know, sheltering is truly a treat. Yes. Well, to get back into some of the history that you and I are sharing together—

06-00:01:43

Sease: Ooh, pre-pandemic.

06-00:01:44

Eardley-Pryor: Pre-pandemic, yeah. The "before" times. Last we spoke we were talking around some of the topics that arose in the early 2000s under the Bush presidency, George W. Bush presidency, and some of these coalitions that were stitching together, progressive coalitions, and the Sierra Club being pulled into a broader array of topics, not just traditionally environmental topics, but topics that involve social issues, labor issues, class issues, diversity issues. And as a way to get into some of that discussion—as part of a background interview in preparation for our discussion, Debbie, I had this

great chat with Robin Mann. And she explained her perspective as a volunteer leader of how federal policy decision-making happens. And I would love to hear your discussion of how that policy works, particularly from the staff point of view, on how volunteers and Sierra Club staff come together to make a decision as to how to move forward on a piece of federal legislation or a political alignment, and what that process looks like. So would you mind walking me through how those decisions get made in accommodation with volunteer and staff input?

06-00:03:02

Sease:

Yes, I'd be happy to. And at the same time I'm going to talk about how decisions about signing on to group letters—coalition letters—happens, because they're related both in terms of the process and the challenges and the sort of growing challenges in a more complex world.

06-00:03:18

Eardley-Pryor:

Great.

06-00:03:19

Sease:

So under the Sierra Club bylaws, a staff person who is either the director of the conservation or program department or their designee, and the volunteer vice president for conservation or their designee are a two-person team that needs to review legislation to see if it's something that the Sierra Club could support. That doesn't mean that those two people start *tabula rasa* and decide, "Oh, we're going to support this legislation versus that legislation." Those two people are charged with the duty of figuring out is this legislation consistent with Sierra Club policy. Is it something that the affected Sierra Club entities, whether it's a local chapter or a committee that deals with a particular issue or some other part of the Sierra Club, is it something that is supported by them and that they agree should be endorsed? Is it consistent with Sierra Club values? So that process—and by and large—I've done it with many different VPs for conservation over the years but my recent experience of doing it with Robin Mann is probably a classic example. We would divvy up the work with me taking charge of consulting with relevant staff that follow the issue and know the ins and outs of how this is in terms of effective legislation, legislation that—sometimes you could support the policy but you would say, "No, this legislation is too narrow or it's too broad." There'd be things that staff would know. Robin would take on the job of consulting and collecting information from the affected Sierra Club. We would have a conversation at the beginning of that, figure out what things we might want to probe, who the people were, and then we would get back together.

06-00:05:31

Eardley-Pryor:

For example with Robin, what do you mean by the respective Sierra Club entities?

06-00:05:34

Sease:

So, for example, a piece of wilderness legislation for Colorado. The Colorado chapter would have a pretty big say in whether or not that was a piece of legislation we should support. They know the areas, they know how much they can get, they know whether they'd be satisfied with it or not. A thing that crosses boundaries of multiple states, a Mississippi River basin initiative might effect a number of chapters. A different Sierra Club entity would be legislation about clean air. There are volunteer committees—oh, here's a better example. A wilderness bill that had some language in it about wildlife management. So on the staff level I would check with staff. Robin would check with the leadership team of Wild America and either she or somebody on that team would check with the wildlife volunteer committee because they have a stake in what that language says. Or if there was some land that was released and was going to get logged as a result of protecting other land, you might want to check in with the folks who care about timber cutting. So it can be complicated to check all of the various stakeholders. By and large, the—

06-00:07:08

Eardley-Pryor:

And that responsibility, in this context we're talking about Robin taking on, is at that time vice president of conservation? It's a nationally elected board member who then is serving in that role, who takes on the responsibility of checking with the various volunteer Sierra Club entities that you're talking about?

06-00:07:26

Sease:

Right.

06-00:07:28

Eardley-Pryor:

And then your job as political director in DC is to check in on the staff?

06-00:07:35

Sease:

No, no. My job as being legislative director or director of advocacy, whatever, is that job. In both of those cases that could be delegated. I mean, so Robin, bless her heart, took that on. Other VPs for conservation have said to the staff, "Well, you let me know what you find out about all these volunteer entities, positions, and then I'll get back to you with our decision." So Robin didn't just take the authority, she took the responsibility, as well, and that's how she and I divided it up.

06-00:08:15

Eardley-Pryor:

I gotcha.

06-00:08:17

Sease:

We also would frequently, on something where there had been a set of folks working together on it, we would start with a recommendation from—say on a wilderness bill, our Wild America committee would come to us and say, "We'd like to support this and we've checked with the following entities and the following chapters and everybody's in agreement," and that could be pretty much, bam, rubber stamp.

06-00:08:42

Eardley-Pryor: I gotcha. So with Robin representing—or in this case the conservation VP representing the volunteer side and you checking in with staff on what is appropriate for the Club in terms of its legislative interests and ethics and all these sort of things, once that decision gets made, let's say it is one of these rubber stamp things, like, "Boom, this is easy, we're in," where does it go from there?

06-00:09:08

Sease: Generally we would take it back to whatever entity in the Club was working on it or whoever had asked. So the most common thing would be one of my staff who works as a lobbyist with a campaign or a campaign staff would say, "We want to take a position on this bill," for it or against it. And we would get back to them and then they would send out a letter to Congress saying, "We support this," or "We oppose this." A lot of that was a fairly mechanical exercise. In recent years—it was not unknown many years ago but it grew in volume—the Sierra Club became a catch. If you are doing a group letter, if you are collecting people who support some sort of broad bill, having the Sierra Club on it is a desirable thing. So many organizations would be working on an issue that might be an environmental issue but not something that the Sierra Club was particularly active on at the national level. And they would want the Sierra Club to be a part of the support for their legislation. That would present a challenge for me, that I didn't have the bandwidth, I didn't have staff working on it that knew whether it was a good or bad piece of legislation, something we should or shouldn't support. If we only had a few of those, the capacity to do the due diligence to figure out whether we should put our name on it was doable. But for a number of years, particularly when we were on the defense—for some reason people like to introduce bills as flags in the sand when they can't actually pass legislation, we would get such a volume of those that it was almost overwhelming and they would tend to be on issues that were at the edge of what we were working on or paying attention to. So the ability to figure out whether it was consistent with our policy was a strain and the sheer volume of it at times would put Robin and I in a position to just say, "You know, we don't have the bandwidth to figure out whether it is," so we're going to say no.

06-00:11:22

Eardley-Pryor: Wow. I mean with this plethora of possibilities that people want the Club to be a part of and take a decision on, can you think of an example of something you're thinking of that was on the edge or that it was really difficult?

06-00:11:34

Sease: Yeah. So I will give you an example. If this came out in real time, I'd probably get an inbox full of people saying, "No, no, no. This is the central issue to the Sierra Club." But I'll frame it a little differently. It's not a non-environmental issue, but there are issues that the Sierra Club has worked on. It does not have staff assigned to those issues. They're really complicated issues. One of those is nuclear power, nuclear waste, nuclear weapons. The Sierra Club has

volunteer committees that care passionately about those issues. Many of those committees have volunteers on them whose main organization allegiance is to a small nuclear focused organization and they are wanting to bring the Sierra Club's weight along with them. Not a bad thing to want. They were a very demanding set of people. Like every few weeks we would get a bill. Maybe it was a good bill, maybe it was a bad bill, maybe it was strategic, maybe it wasn't. And Robin and I did not have the knowledge, didn't have the bandwidth to figure out is this a bill that the Sierra Club really should be on? We could put our faith in that small cadre of volunteers and I'm not saying that they didn't have the knowledge to make that call. But particularly in things that are very hard-fought battles, like nuclear waste issues, it's pretty complicated to figure out where you need to land to have the most impact. What's a rational place and what's a pie in the sky? What's got complicated, unintended consequences that would be very inconsistent with something else? So we didn't want to say yes and yet we would endlessly frustrate these people and they would come to us sometimes twice a week with a, "Oh, my God, the sign-on deadline for this legislation is tomorrow." And Robin and I were both pretty ruthless about just saying, "No, can't do it."

06-00:13:56

Another example of that—again, it's an environmental issue but it's one that we don't have deep capacity on—is farm issues. And so the Sierra Club used to have dedicated staff working on the Farm Bill every year. And as funding and priorities and what it takes to influence a Farm Bill shifted, we moved away from that.

06-00:14:27

Eardley-Pryor: Now, when you say we used to have staff, what time period are we talking?

06-00:14:33

Sease: Oh, let's see. When I was first hired as legislative director, one of my hires was to bring somebody in to work on the Farm Bill. So in the late nineties, maybe up to 2000.

06-00:14:57

Eardley-Pryor: And then when do you think that transitioned away, where there no longer was a dedicated staff member focused on that?

06-00:15:04

Sease: Well, when Catherine Hohmann left, we did not hire behind her on Farm Bill. We gave that portfolio to somebody else who already had a very full plate. [laughter] And, again, if you ask the Sierra Club do you care about farm issues, they would say yes. And we have an incredibly active volunteer committee and that committee, particularly when the Farm Bill was going forward, wanted to sign on to letters and to support or oppose particular provisions. But the Farm Bill is one of those examples where something that is good in some respects can be really bad in other respects. And if you're engaged in it and you're weighing the pros and cons of is this the right

compromise, you know, is it okay that we're taking this because we get this and it's in the long run going to work, then you can take positions on that. But to take positions based on some other organization's priorities and values with blinders that you don't really know what you're doing—so we were very hesitant to just say yes very quickly. In this case we kicked it back to the farm folks and we said, "You know, you have to come to us with an argument of why this bill is consistent with the Sierra Club policies, how it is and how the affected chapters support it." That diminished the volume some. And, again, I sound like I'm critical of this committee. These people were really hard working and they would, for each of these bills, send us, you know, three, four-page memo. But both Robin and I, I think, shared a view that the time one spends in focusing on moving a piece of legislation that is central to your mission that you're deeply engaged in is a more valuable chunk of time than making sure you put your name on a hundred different amendments that you aren't going to do much more than put your name on it.

06-00:17:26

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. What is an example of something that you remember thinking "This is clearly something my heart is in and the Club has a deep interest in" that wasn't as complicated?

06-00:17:41

Sease:

Most of those things that the Club is deeply interested in come to me very well vetted with a recommendation that is easy to follow. Now, sometimes it would come to us with, "Here is the conundrum we face in whether we support this bill." That would happen fairly frequently on wilderness bills. Frequently is probably an overstatement. But that's a venue in which you will get things where you have a bill that designates some wilderness that you and the local folks who've been working on it care deeply about. In order to get that, lands that aren't designated may have some management language that is not the ideal. How bad is that management language? How much of a precedent is it? Is this something that we're pretty confident that if we can only keep it in limbo for another two years we can get it? Those kinds of things make for the more challenging decisions. And they also make for the kinds of tensions between different parts of the Sierra Club, where a group of people who are focused almost entirely on national forest logging and stopping it might be diametrically opposed to a local chapter that was focused on getting these six areas, that if they aren't protected might get logged, really protected and letting some of the other stuff maybe get logged, maybe not getting logged, but putting their emphasis here. Those are legitimate disagreements. They're real tensions. And sometimes Robin and I were the vetting between that.

06-00:19:35

Eardley-Pryor:

And it was up to—in your capacity, your role to help vet that decision-making process and balance those conflicts within this lower level within the Club.

06-00:19:45

Sease:

Right. And to also recognize when the delegation of authority that I had was one that I needed to kick back up the chain. So in the case of position on legislation, there were times when I would say, "You know, this is above my paygrade. I can make this decision but the consequences either way are going to have enough of a ripple effect that the person who actually has the authority, as opposed to have delegated it to me, needs to take that so that they get to make that call." I found that the parallel to signing on to legislation was signing on to sign-on letters. And these were even more common. The round robin letter that two hundred groups or twenty groups or six hundred individuals sign-on to become the go-to strategy for trying to signal that something was important in Congress. Everybody wanted the Sierra Club on that letter if it had anything to do with the environment and sometimes if it didn't. And we adopted a philosophy toward this—[phone ringing] Is that my phone?

06-00:20:56

Eardley-Pryor: I think so.

06-00:20:59

Sease: Hang on, let me unplug it.

06-00:21:01

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, let me pause.

[pause in recording]

Okay, go ahead, Debbie.

06-00:21:04

Sease:

So sign-on letters became a go-to strategy, and the Sierra Club was invited to sign-on to dozens and dozens of sign-on letters every week. In order to try to get a handle on that, I think it was actually one of Robin's predecessors, Dave Scott, who was in that role, and I worked together with a staff person who was working on volunteer and chapter support. And Bruce Hamilton was involved in this, as well. And we came up with a memo that went out from the VP of conservation that outlined both our process for sign-on letters and articulated our philosophy, which is that yes, we sometimes sign-on to group letters but that by and large the Sierra Club wants to speak in its own voice and only do a group letter if it is a part of a strategy that we believe is effective to further an issue. That we don't want to just lend our name to every group letter that's going down the pike. And then we articulated the process, which was similar to signing on to legislation, of running the text of the letter by, making sure that it was embracing something that was consistent with Sierra Club policies and values and that the local things had been vetted.

06-00:22:41

And this is something that took up an inordinate amount of time. I would say over the last five years, particularly when we were on the defense, because

there was just like a sign-on letter a day, and it became sometimes a tense issue because not signing on to a letter sends a message. And organizations that really wanted the Sierra Club on wanted to be able to feature that the Sierra Club was on, would then go around that process, sometimes going directly to our board of directors and making a flap that "Why is the Sierra Club not on this?" More frequently going directly to our chapters and saying, "Hey, will you sign-on to this?" And it was not a malevolent thing, but our chapters—it was an education thing of them thinking, "Oh, yeah. Of course we'd sign on to that," and not paying attention to that. So both sign-on letters and vetting legislation have been an ongoing challenge.

06-00:23:48

It's a challenge that got vastly more complicated as the Sierra Club began to take positions on things that were beyond the scope of narrow environment. For one thing, the rules changed. To take a position on a piece of legislation that was not environmental in nature and that we hadn't taken a position on in the past needed to go—one, it needed to at least go to not the designees, but the VP of conservation and the program director or the conservation director. But if it was really outside the realm of environment, it frequently needed to go to the board for a ruling by the board.

06-00:24:33

Eardley-Pryor:

Can you think of an example of one of these outside—what you would consider outside the realm of environment that you needed to have this upper level of approval?

06-00:24:39

Sease:

Yes. I can actually recall a debate with the board. Maybe Robbie [Cox] mentioned this. When Dianne Feinstein introduced a gun control bill and her staff person called up and said, "Will you guys support our bill?" And Mike Brune and Robbie Cox took it to the board. And I sat on that board call and listened to them make the case for it. In fact, I contacted Robbie after it and I said, "Robbie, I don't know if you wrote your notes down or not, but you need to write them down right now because that is the best articulation of this I have ever heard, and we're going to need to use it again and again." But they made the case—and I'm going to paraphrase and it's not going to be nearly as articulate as what Robbie said—but that, part of our mission is to protect the human environment, and if in your neighborhood there are guns that are—you know, you never feel safe going out, if children are getting shot while they're in their carriages, et cetera, that's the environment. And that we need to stand up on this. Yeah. And so we did. We supported it.

06-00:26:04

Eardley-Pryor:

With these sign-on letters and this decision-making, sometimes you realized this is complicated enough that it needs to go up to this next level. Are there other examples that are more explicitly environmental, where you say, "This is above my pay grade," for example, you had said, that you can think of

where you would need to have that higher-up decision-making? And then who did you then go to? Who was it that you then had to bring that to?

06-00:26:31

Sease:

Well, probably a better example is on sign-on letters. So in my role, through all the executive directors that I have worked with, I have had the authority to sign them on to letters, whether a letter from the Sierra Club or a letter from the Sierra Club and others. And that is an authority that I balanced against knowing that—having the power to put somebody's name on something is a trust. The flip side of that is—in the Sierra Club, basically, you have the authority to sign one level above you on to something. So my direct reports could sign me on to something. One of my direct reports gave me a quote in a press release that—oh, it was about somebody being appointed to a federal position, and they made some terrible analogy that the champagne corks were popping in some war-torn Middle Eastern country. I mean, it was just an awful quote and personally insulting, and it had my name on it. And I had to go into that office some months later and they remembered that quote. And I had to own it. I had to take the consequences. So I have always remembered that if I am having the power to use somebody else's voice and that it's fraught, that it could get them hung out to dry by the person they're criticizing or whatever, that they need to get to make that decision. So I would periodically flag something for the ED, of here's my recommendation about whether you sign-on but you need to take a look at this, and here's the pros and cons.

06-00:28:35

Eardley-Pryor:

I see. Can you think of an example that you struggled with and said, "No, this is something that they need to choose?"

06-00:28:44

Sease:

I probably have a dozen examples, but I'm not remembering one right this moment.

06-00:28:50

Eardley-Pryor:

Okay. If one comes to you, I'd love to hear it.

06-00:28:52

Sease:

Okay, yeah.

06-00:28:53

Eardley-Pryor:

Just as a point of clarity, you had mentioned when this transition went—back to when we were discussing the Farm Bill, you mentioned a transition away from an explicit focus on farm issues in the DC office was when Katherine Hohmann left. Around when was that?

06-00:29:10

Sease:

Oh, I knew you would ask that. Probably early 2000s. And the Farm Bill gets reauthorized like every four years. So we had had somebody in the nineties on a Farm Bill. We'd had somebody in, I think, for the 2000 Farm Bill. And,

again, Katherine Hohmann took on a bigger job than the Farm Bill and it was only a very small part of her portfolio. But because she had the expertise she was still on call there. And it wasn't that the Club left farm issues behind, because we kept focused on—you know what a CAFO is? Confined animal feeding operations. And that stayed in place and probably didn't quit having dedicated staff until after the big Sierra Summit where we shifted so much emphasis to energy issues.

06-00:30:19

Eardley-Pryor: After 2005.

06-00:30:18

Sease: And it was a function of funding and priority. The Sierra Club never quit caring about CAFOs, and as we circle back to antibiotic resistant bacteria, we're probably going to care more about CAFOs again.

06-00:30:37

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I mean, all these stories that you're sharing are reflective on broader themes that we've highlighted throughout your oral history. And one of them is the multiple kinds of Sierra Clubs. Depending on how you're looking at it, there are multiple Sierra Clubs from your point of entry or your lens. In our prior discussions, you had talked about the story of the blind man and the elephant and all the different blind men having a different sense of what this elephant is. And it sounds to me like, from the legislative perspective there are multiple Sierra Clubs, as well. And the political side, having to think about what our role is here, what is our ethos. I'm interested to hear if, in these decision-making about signing on letters—and, "Are we going to align ourselves and use our brand and our significant weight in a way, by signing on or not,"—if your sense of the Sierra Club, from whatever angles you're at, has changed over time as a result of having to make these decisions on, "Are we going to sign on to this?"

06-00:31:50

Sease: I suppose my perspective on it has evolved. So I'm not going to say I came into the Sierra Club with this view. But my view of the multifaceted Sierra Club versus the one united voice is that there's room for both. But only in a particular way. So the Sierra Club has a "let a thousand flowers bloom," attitude, and, as an activist, if you want to work on something for the Sierra Club and it's not a priority for the Sierra Club, more power to you. And maybe there's some resources that you can cobble together. And that's great, and I don't think that we want to squash that kind of—whether it's local individual, individual chapter, committees of people. You know, I think it is grand that even though the Sierra Club doesn't have dedicated staff or a budgeted program on nuclear waste issues, that we've got people who care enough about it that they dedicate their expertise, they comment on new agency rules and they keep the Sierra Club's skin in the game on that. But the flip side of that is that the Sierra Club cannot just be the thousand flowers blooming, and even those multifaceted things have to be contained by consistency with the

overarching policies and values of the Sierra Club. Mechanically, it's a tension. It's not necessarily philosophically in tension, but just the mechanics of making sure that as the individual component parts of the multitudes of things that the Sierra Club does and cares about and engages on are not inconsistent with the big overarching vision. And that is something that is easier at times and harder at other times. A place where I think it's come into sharp view of how hard it is, is when the Sierra Club is narrowly focused on what's good or bad for the environment or for this particular part of the environment. It's relatively easy to make sure that the small specific thing over here you're doing is consistent with the big overarching view on the environment.

06-00:34:28

On the other hand, as the Sierra Club has grown to adopt a broader view of what's important to the Sierra Club, has expanded our view of what is included in the environment to include more precisely the human condition and all of the things associated with economic and racial justice, that then expands the universe of what this narrow thing needs to be consistent with. And it puts a set of people who may not be as cognizant of what is right and wrong in that broader field on point to make sure that the narrow thing that they're following isn't inconsistent with the Sierra Club's broad values. That's really come up in terms of who we ally with. There's a saying in politics that politics makes strange bedfellows, that two people who are diametrically opposed on most of life's issues might come together on a narrow thing because of their interest and be allies for the moment. That is a tradition that the Sierra Club, over the years, has embraced. It is a tradition that has come under very sharp question, of do we want to ally ourselves with people who may agree with us on this one thing but whose values are antithetical to ours. That's a series of gray areas. You know, you can think of an example where everybody would agree. Well, of course we would not ally ourselves with the Nazi party. But would we ally ourselves with the National Rifle Association over protection of a prairie, that they want to hunt the prairie chickens and we want to save them?

06-00:36:34

Eardley-Pryor: That gets complicated.

06-00:36:35

Sease: It gets complicated. Life's complicated.

06-00:36:37

Eardley-Pryor: Well, you talked about the mechanics of this decision-making process, making sure that it allies with the values, and you talked about these mechanics being separate from these philosophical issues. But the values of the Club also evolve over time, and that does get into what is the philosophy. Philosophy and values are aligned on this. So do those mechanics change as the Club is evolving in terms of its values?

06-00:37:05

Sease:

Well, the broad outlines of the mechanics have stayed pretty much the same for several decades. The stress that is put on those mechanics, how adequate those mechanics are to the situation, to the need, I think comes into question. So one can say, is it really enough to have the VP for conservation and the designee of the program director make the call on whether this is consistent with our policies, and do they have the bandwidth to do it? So the Club, the board of directors, has engaged more vigorously in some things. An example that came up in the last couple of years was, we are working—after the really ugly history we've had on immigration—the Club did take a position in favor of the Dream Act. And we worked in alliance with some immigration groups, pro-immigrant-rights groups, and we've taken statements on that, all hoping to heal that somewhat tarnished reputation that the vote of the membership caused. But one of the approaches that we outlined for "How do we know what position to take on an issue that's not within our expertise?" So, we developed some guidance, and the guidance basically said that if it's an issue on which we have Sierra Club expertise, we'll take a position if it's consistent with what we, with our policy and our strategies, et cetera, based on what we know. If it's an issue that we don't have the expertise, but our allies are asking us to sign-on, if our allies are in agreement, we'll consider signing on. If our allies are divided over it, then we don't have the bandwidth to make a decision on which of our allies are right.

06-00:39:29

And that came up when the immigration rights community split over whether to call for abolishing ICE. And I had two indirect reports who were working with allies that were on different sides of this issue, both with the immigrant-rights communities. So one set of staff was working with the border wall folks, and the other set of staff were through the trade program working with the more straight immigrants' rights issues, not about the border wall per se but about immigration quotas, et cetera. And the coalitions that they were working on split over whether calling for abolishing ICE was a good strategic move. And the coalition that thought it was, calling on us to sign-on to this. And the staff person that was working with the other coalition said, "No, this is really volatile within the community. We can't take sides on this." So the board asked for a memo from me and the two staff people. So I pulled together the pro and con arguments, got it all teed up, and blessings on the board, they realized that they weren't ready to take on this issue, so they kept tabling the discussion and until they made a decision. We didn't do anything. And eventually, the opportunity sort of blew past us. But the question still comes down, and at some point, over some issue—whether it's this one or another—the Club will try to figure out under what circumstances will we choose sides between our allies on something where we don't have the bench. And the more we get involved in issues that are broader than the environment, the more we think. And maybe in reality, but at least think that we have the bandwidth to make up our own mind. We at least will have opinions.

06-00:41:51

Eardley-Pryor: Fascinating to hear about the way the brand of the Club is managed in so many different ways. I mean, from talking to people on the board who are on decision-making committees as to whether they're going to accept money from this commercial donor, like from a business alliance and thinking, "Are we going to allow our brand to be used this way?" And it's also happening in this political realm in all these different categories—that managing the brand is such a big part.

06-00:42:23

Sease: Yeah. Well, another example of that, and again, something that the board ultimately made a decision on, is historically the Club has not weighed in on leadership positions in Congress within the parties. And it's not weighed in based on the argument that we are a non-partisan group. So we're not going to weigh in on who the Democrats decide is the Democratic—

06-00:42:54

Eardley-Pryor: Chairperson or something?

06-00:42:56

Sease: Yeah, Chairman of the Democratic committee. That was the original assessment. The underpinnings of it were that it gave us a fairly safe harbor to not have to pick a fight on something that we actually had very little influence and would just live with the consequences of picking wrong. I mean, so there was a little bit of a self-serving thing to it, but we had a long history of having told many candidates for Speaker of the House, or Majority Leader, or Chairman of the Democratic Committee, that we just don't take those positions. And, you know, they don't hold it against you if you don't support them. We didn't. And when Keith Ellison was running for the chair of the DNC, he came to us and Mike Brune said, "Well, I don't know why we've never taken positions on this. I want to support the guy. He's completely consistent with our values." And Perez, I think is who was running against him, you know, who knows him. Well, it went to the board. Very close vote, but they ultimately decided they did not, for a variety of reasons which may or may not have included how adequately one side argued versus another, that they weren't going to weigh in on it. They weren't going to change that policy or that protocol.

06-00:44:28

Eardley-Pryor: Do you think that was a wise decision?

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Sease: Well, I was arguing on the side of, "Please do not weigh in here." And, again, that may have been me being not courageous and being a Luddite, or it could have been me being incredibly wise, that this is not a fight worth picking.

06-00:44:47

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like your hands could be tied if you throw your support into the ring and that person loses, but you still have to work with the person who is in power.

06-00:44:57

Sease: Oh, I thought you were going to go a different place, because I was staffing Mike Brune and he was definitely in favor of changing this. And so I had to assemble both the pro and con arguments. I couldn't find a single person on staff who wanted to do the pro arguments for making the case because the whole political team, the political volunteer committee made a recommendation against it. And then the beginning of this call Mike says, "Debbie, do you want to sort of lead this presentation?" And I thought, "Oh, how could you set me up that way?" Because, again, I am his staff person. I cannot argue against him. So I had to be just as neutral as I could be. But the weight of stuff I was bringing forward was all against it.

06-00:45:49

Eardley-Pryor: [laughter] Doesn't sound like a proper debate. "I'm starting on this side. Now take the other side and present it, please."

06-00:45:57

Sease: [laughter] But nobody weighed in on that side.

06-00:45:58

Eardley-Pryor: Well, this might be a nice segue for us to talk about Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who is a Nevadan, a Democrat. There was a lot of wilderness in Nevada that the Club, I think, would be interested in, and to have a Senate Majority Leader as a Democratic and a Sierra Club ally could be a real benefit. But I also can imagine a Senate Majority Leader, especially from a conservative state, is a mixed bag. So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about—as Harry Reid became Senate Majority Leader, I think around 2007 up through 2015 or so, through a lot of the Obama era, what was your experience from the perspective of the Sierra Club in Washington, DC of your relationship with Harry Reid? Are there any stories that come up for you from that?

06-00:46:48

Sease: Yes, there's a lot of stories. I worked a lot with Harry Reid and with Harry Reid's staff. Harry Reid and Carl Pope had a really good working relationship, so they connected every time or most times that Carl would come to town. And Harry Reid had a very good relationship with the Nevada Sierra Club chapter. They liked him. They recognized the good things he did on the environment. He was not a fan of reforming the 1872 Mining Law. He was a fairly big proponent of mining companies. He came from a mining family, fourth or fifth generation Nevadan. He has on his coffee table, or had on his coffee table, a book about the mining history of Nevada. So this was not something where he was in the pocket of some big mining company. This was part of his values and who he was. He was a westerner.

06-00:48:04

Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that?

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Sease: I mean, you know, in the full sense of the word, some of the values and attitudes that come from being a part of the West. Both the good and the bad. I mean, you know—

06-00:48:18

Eardley-Pryor: What are some of those values, in your eyes?

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Sease: Well, on one side there is the "These are resources. They are here to be developed." From that western standpoint, it's not exploited. It is to be utilized for the prosperity and productivity of our state. On the other hand, he also deeply valued the natural environment. He was a consummate politician. Very, very astute. Incredibly intelligent. And I don't know what the right adjective is. Anybody who thinks a politician that does some good thing is like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* all the way through and through, is bound to be disappointed. And Harry Reid was a mixed bag. I mean, he was a guy who made deals. And he made deals for good causes, and he made deals for not so good causes. He acquired a huge amount of power and was ruthless in using it, both for good and bad.

06-00:49:51

Eardley-Pryor: Can you think of some examples of, either good or bad?

06-00:49:54

Sease: Well, the good—I can think of two good examples. One is he took a stand against coal and really stuck his neck out on a line in saying, you know, "Nevada's going to become a coal free state. We're not going to count on power from coal." And I am shaky on the details of how to support this argument, but I do know this to be the case, that that was partly based on a pro-environment, coal is damaging, it's a contributor to climate change, what coal companies do to coal workers is really obnoxious. And he was also a senator from a state that had a lot of power lines going through it, and it actually didn't hurt him to be for a different kind of power than coal power. So there was a Machiavellian side to virtually any decision. So he made gigantic land deals to sort of create the impetus. Probably didn't want to look too closely under the tent at who benefitted. And the part that we benefitted from, we benefitted a great deal. It drove a bunch of wilderness across the line.

06-00:51:36

The other example—two things. I was called in with somebody else to a meeting in Harry Reid's office when he was working on the Nevada wilderness. And my guess is we were dragging our heels on some piece that he felt couldn't be in it because he couldn't get agreement, and we were being the Sierra Club and saying, "No, you know, without that we're just not going to want it." And he called us in, and he had an office, long narrow office and

he is sitting at the end in his little chair. This was before he was Majority Leader. And all his staff are lined up in chairs and so there's like this V-shape. And then there's two chairs right in the middle as you come in. And we walk in and he says, "Have a seat." And so myself and the lobbyist that was working on this with me go in, we sit down. And he just rips into us. I mean, I have felt savaged by members of Congress before, but that was one of the top ones. Just steamrolled us about how useless we were and how, you know, we were standing in the way of all this wilderness, you know, and when were we going to get this. And then gave us some assignment and walked us out the door without us even really being able to say a word in defense of ourselves. I felt I had been taken to the woodshed. So that's one side of Harry Reid.

06-00:53:09

And another is late in his career as Majority Leader. I was sitting in a meeting in his office. He would have periodic meetings where he would bring in either the CEOs of the major [environmental] in-groups or the lobbyists. Frequently, I was there in both of them because our CEO was across the country and didn't always get to hop on a plane and come back at the last minute. But I was watching him, and I was looking at how old he was, and he seemed frail. You could see that it was taking a huge toll on him. And I thought to myself, you know, my father is roughly his age, a little older. But today he played nine holes of golf and tomorrow he's going to get up and he's going to go play nine holes of golf. And this man is coming in—it was a really hard time in Congress, really stressful, and I just thought, he's chosen that life. He's chosen it for reasons that are satisfying to him, but he's giving a tremendous amount. It is taking his lifeblood to do this.

The final Harry Reid story I have, that's about me personally, is he fought Yucca Mountain, dumping waste, storing it in Nevada, which would have been a disaster. An utter unmitigated disaster.

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Eardley-Pryor: Why?

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Sease:

Because there was really no guarantee that it wasn't going to leak, and you were basically taking—twofold. You were taking waste from places where it's probably not in a good place now, but to pick it up, truck it across the country, and put it in a place that's still not a good place is a really bad idea. And the moment you start doing it, you remove one of the biggest impediments for making more waste. So you're going to create an incentive to, "Oh, it's okay to make waste now and dump it in that same insecure spot that at least half the scientists say this is going to be a disaster for Nevada someday and make it an uninhabitable state." So here is this incredibly powerful politician, you know, deal maker, et cetera. Sierra Club had a position against Yucca Mountain and dumping waste there, so periodically, I would be called over to join in a press conference. And it was one of the last times, and it had gotten pretty far along

in the legislative thing that was about to let it go forward. And Harry Reid was holding a press conference with the rest of the Democrats in the delegation and some interest groups. And we were out in the Senate Swamp, which is a little area outside the Capitol. Why it's called the Swamp? I think it's a low spot. But anyway, it's an outdoor place that they have power setup and ability to plug in mikes. And I had done my little bit, you know, and all the senators had done theirs, and they were doing questions. And Harry had stepped back. Then everybody stands behind the podium while the next person is speaking. And he was standing between myself and Shelly Berkeley.

06-00:56:37

And I was thinking to myself that, you know, I've seen this man, you know, posturing and doing good and doing bad and he made a statement and it was talking about future generations. And I had this feeling of here is something that this politician is doing that his success or his failure, the people in this state are going to live or die with. And as he came back from the podium, you could see he'd sort of teared up, had given a very emotional speech. And he stepped back in the line, and he reaches behind himself with his hands and grabs the congresswoman's and my hands and just basically gives our hands a squeeze. And it was just such a human moment to me. And again, maybe I was reading it entirely wrong. But to me, it was just reflective of here is somebody who is sobered by the scope of what his success or failure means on this.

06-00:57:55

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds like that might be sometimes a rare moment to have something like that in DC.

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Sease: Well, I think it's not a part of every Congressman's makeup. I have been privileged to work with some members of Congress who I think bring that capacity to it. Mo Udall, John Seiberling, Bruce Vento, Barbara Boxer.

06-00:58:24

Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned that Carl Pope had a really great relationship with Harry Reid. But I also know Mike Brune came in in 2010 as the new executive director of the Sierra Club. And, of course, Harry Reid is still very much in power as Majority Leader at that time. How did that transition go in the relationship with the Club to Harry Reid?

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Sease: Oh, it's a very funny story. Mike has yet to live it down. There are some of his colleagues who will still tease him about it. It was very early in his tenure with the Club and Harry Reid called one of these meetings where all the CEOs of the major enviro groups are called in for a meeting. And so Mike had developed this habit of tweeting to a vast list of the Sierra Club about what was happening in his day and saying, "So, what do you think? You know, what shall I do?" And so Mike tweets out to his Twitter followers, which

aren't limited to Sierra Club members and include some press people. "Meeting today with the Majority Leader. What shall I ask him?" Well, he shows up at the office and there's press there. And, I mean, this wasn't a secret meeting but Harry Reid's not going to announce that he's meeting with the heads of a bunch of enviro groups and invite the press. So Mike has just turned his meeting, his private meeting, into a press event. So in his Majority Leader's office, there's an outside office with a receptionist and there's couches and such, and then there's his inner office, a little fireplace and his chair and a couch and everything. So everybody's ushered in and Harry is sitting in his chair. And everybody introduces himself. I think Mike is standing. And Harry just rips him for announcing this to the press. And every meeting that Mike had with him after that, he would refer to him as the tall guy from the Sierra Club. And not remember his name. But, I mean, he never let him forget that he had just botched it.

06-01:01:06

Now, by the same token, Mike's meeting fairly recently with Nancy Pelosi. She met with him when he first did the transition, but he hadn't had occasion to meet with her. And Pelosi took all of the fondness and respect and camaraderie that she had for the Sierra Club and just transferred it immediately to Mike. And Mike had taken some stands upon the advice of staff that were sort of siding with her over something. We did actually break tradition and sent support when she was being challenged as—I think it was Minority Leader. I think it wasn't as Speaker. I think it was as Minority—maybe it was as Speaker. Yeah, it was Speaker. And we found some finesse, and she noticed it. And so when Mike came in, she referred to him as, "Oh, my dear friend Mike." And exhorted him to the rest of the CEOs, about what a great guy he was. Well, the same person who would tease Mike about being that tall guy from the Sierra Club with Harry Reid was in that same meeting and would tease him about being Nancy Pelosi's pet.

06-01:02:30

Eardley-Pryor:

What about your relationship with Mike Brune when he came in? You suddenly have a new executive director, a very different style of management, but also someone who didn't have the same historical background in the Club that Carl Pope had had, who you had worked with for decades even before he became executive director. So what was your experience of working with Mike like?

06-01:02:50

Sease:

Well, I think that my experience working with Mike and developing a relationship may have been somewhat parallel to his experience of working with me. Which is that I think for both of us, we started off with a little bit of the jury's still out, and respecting that we'd each had some power that we needed to acknowledge on the other's part. I mean he was the new ED. I couldn't just say, "Hey, I don't like that." And I was the longstanding, well-beloved person at the Sierra Club that he didn't want to needlessly alienate.

And I think we had a—I wouldn't call it testy. It was cordial. But there was a period of time where I know he was earning my trust and my respect gradually, and not steadily. There were setbacks in it. And my guess—and what I have learned from others who he shared his confidence with—that I was similarly gaining his respect. We worked pretty well together. We didn't always agree, and I very much applied the lessons I knew as a lobbyist to how I managed my relationship with Mike.

06-01:04:38

Eardley-Pryor: Give me an example, if you can.

06-01:04:41

Sease: Yeah. I can give you a very good example. The theory, and it's one I tried to teach my staff, as well, is that—and it's something I actually learned from Ogilvy on advertising. If you have three good arguments for a product, you figure out what the best one is and you repeat it three times with the time allotted, and you don't take the two weaker arguments. So in Ogilvy's case, his example was a rat trap. You have a rat trap that's made out of oak instead of pine, so it's going to last forever. It's got a safety feature so that you're never going to snap your fingers in it. And it's humane, so it doesn't hurt them, the rat. So which of those features do you pick when you're trying to sell this rat trap? Well, you don't say I'm selling you a rat trap that's going to last a hundred years because nobody wants to think that they're going to need a rat trap for a hundred years. And you don't sell a rat trap that says this is going to be kind to the rat. Because when somebody's buying a rat trap, they don't care about the rat. You say this is never going to snap your fingers.

06-01:05:49

So I applied that same approach to Mike. And so as he would seek my opinion on something, I learned to—I never hid from him the pros and cons of a particular decision. But I would shape the argument with the side that I wanted him to land on, putting the reasons that would be most appealing to him in front. So, for example, when the question of, do we make the exception to our rules and give Nancy Pelosi some support when her Speakership is being challenged? I did not lead with, "Ooh, that would really ingratiate us to Pelosi," because that is a losing argument. It's not how Mike wants to think of himself. It's not how he thinks of making decisions. So I pulled together an argument about how it was—I can't remember what it was. It was a hard one because almost all of the reasons to weigh in on her behalf were pragmatic. But I found an argument that was not about pragmatism, it was about power and about making a difference and using our voice for something that was going to actually have an impact. And as time went on, I actually developed a good bit of respect for Mike. I think we spoke last time about him taking a very bold and courageous approach to not taking money from Chesapeake when it made a hole in the budget. I think that Mike has challenges as a leader. You know, he's got some strengths that offset them, and then there's some Achilles heels.

06-01:08:12

Eardley-Pryor: Do you mind sharing what you have in mind, of both the positives and negatives in Mike moving forward for the Club's future?

06-01:08:18

Sease: Well, I've shared the positives. He is really deeply into making a difference, and he cares passionately. It seems like damning by faint phrase to say he works hard, but I think he really puts himself out there. The two things that I think are weaknesses—and maybe they're not the biggest weaknesses, but I encountered them on a regular enough basis that I saw damage from them. And one is his approach to how do you inspire and push people. And Mike will challenge a group of people, and he is a charismatic leader so he can get people to really, really want his approval and to engage with him. And no matter how hard he has pushed people and how hard they have strived, it's never enough. So not so much that at the end of the day it's not ever enough, but his response is to diminish it, and to ask for a bit more. And that's, I think, a philosophical thing, where he thinks that's how you get the most out of somebody, is by never being satisfied. You know, if you can achieve the goal, it's not a worthy goal. And that, applied as a leader of a big organization struggling against really huge external challenges, can be incredibly deflating. So frequently, after Mike would come to town and he would talk with my team, I would have to prop them back up again, because they would have stretched themselves in response to his challenge as a leader, which is a great thing, and then they would feel that he'd shot them down. Which led them the next time to not want to be very direct and bold with him. I remember him coming to a staff meeting in DC and asking, "So, what would you have me do different? How would you have the Sierra Club be different?" And he was quite open to that kind of fierce response. Nobody said a word. And he came to me after and he said, "Debbie, why wouldn't they speak up?" I said, "Mike, they're afraid to. They're afraid you're going to just whack them down."

06-01:10:54

The other challenge I think he had, and it's one that is probably more systemic and harder to fix, is he is naturally oriented toward being the guy in charge, being the CEO, being the executive. And that comes, I think, for a really good executive with a lot of burden of boring stuff—and it's diminishing to say boring stuff, but making the trains run on time and paying attention to the little details. There's always a tension between doing the big leadership thing, either internally or externally, and doing the day-to-day. And I think executives always have to balance that. And there's no perfect balance, but I think that Mike has very high expectations, and then does not invest sufficiently in supporting the mechanics for the things to work. So his leadership team, his executive team, has floundered. He's a really hard man to work directly for.

06-01:12:25

I'll tell you a quick story. We had a meeting of the whole leadership of the department in San Francisco, and we're sitting around and everybody's rating

their stress quotient on a one to ten. They do a test and then they get a score on how well or poorly they're dealing with stress. And everybody on his team, his executive team, when their scores were revealed were in the outer edge of stressed out, not managing their stress well. A complete anomaly. I mean, people in the room were stressed, but his executive team was stressed beyond the max. And they all felt that no matter what, they couldn't get their job done. And I asked a question in that meeting which I think Mike would have liked to have stuffed a sock in my mouth, but it became the metaphor for the room, for the day's conversation. I said, "And so Mike, everybody's talked about how overworked they are, and they don't have the resources to do what they need to do. If we had a million dollars just come in the door, how much of that million would you spend on giving people the resources to get that job done, and how much would you spend on a new program?" He said, "I'd spend it all on new programs." And he would. And there's the result. We'd have a bigger program. We'd be taking on bolder challenges. But his team is, by definition, going to be in that upper echelons of stress because of that kind of philosophy.

06-01:14:01

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. A tension of taking care of those on the team versus doing more for the mission of the organization.

06-01:14:08

Sease: Yeah. And I don't even think it's about taking care of those on the team. It's just about taking on more versus investing more in. And this is not unique to Mike. There is an underappreciation of how much it takes to get anything done. And so there is an under-investment in that. And particularly in a non-profit organization. You know, if you're held accountable on a yearly basis or a monthly basis for the profits and losses, then maybe you actually keep a better track of that. But in the nonprofit sector, the "what we want to do" is so big, the resources we have to do it are so inadequate to the task that the tendency and, you know, this is not unique to Mike, but the tendency of the institutions is to invest too little and say, "Do more with less."

06-01:15:07

Eardley-Pryor: Debbie, I wonder if this might be a time where we could take a break—

06-01:15:10

Sease: Yes.

06-01:15:11

Eardley-Pryor: —and then we can continue our discussions.

06-01:15:11

Sease: Okay.

[pause in recording]

06-01:15:16

Eardley-Pryor: Debbie, I want to ask you about how, in 2009, the Climate Change Bill that ends up failing, is moved through the House. I think it was called the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 or the Waxman-Markey Bill. What was your experience and the Sierra Club's experience working toward or around that bill?

06-01:15:38

Sease: The answer you would get to that question is probably different now than it would have been if you had asked it then.

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Eardley-Pryor: Why?

06-01:15:49

Sease: Well, I mean, the experience is the same. But at the time we were dealing with Waxman-Markey, we were very focused on how inadequate it was to the challenge, and how the structure of it was challenging. It got worse, not better, as the Senate was trying to pass it. Ten years later, with no climate legislation done, one might say, "Hmm, wonder what would have happened if we had actually gotten Waxman-Markey?" Not the Senate version of it, but Waxman-Markey. And, you know, I'm not enough of a technician to be able to tell you whether it would have been better or worse, but it certainly raises a question that we didn't have the power in 2009 to pass an inadequate bill, and in 2020 we still don't have the power to pass even a—can't even get a bill like that through one body. So we are failing at addressing climate. So when you look back at a window when people whose knowledge and whose judgment and whose passion I deeply respect—Henry Waxman, Ed Markey, there are no better friends of the environment, smarter people, great statisticians, hearts in the right place, and fierce fighters. And so I feel a little hubris when I think, "Oh, well, the bill they were pushing wasn't quite good enough." I mean, it wasn't quite good enough. But maybe it was the best that could be pushed and have a chance of getting across the finish line and give us something that could have been addressing this for the last ten years.

06-01:17:50

Now, that being said, we turned our attention when it was clear that we weren't going to get that bill, as did many others—I mean, Sierra Club wasn't being uniquely farsighted in this. But we turned our attention to working with an administration on doing every single thing they could do with administrative powers to start curbing carbon. But we're still so far from where we need to be.

06-01:18:19

Eardley-Pryor: What were some of those things that you remember the Obama Administration being able to do with executive authority that you couldn't get done through Congress?

06-01:18:28

Sease:

Well, I mean, we couldn't get anything done through Congress. The thing that Congress has the power to do are certain limits and rules and processes and the power of the purse. Anything that costs a bunch of money to do, you have to appropriate. You can't do that without Congress. So the executive authority could, within existing laws, spend money particular ways and set limits to the max within those laws. And Obama did that, by drilling down and enforcing and writing detailed regs for some of the Clean Air statutes. So, putting mercury standards in place, wasn't directly about the climate. But if you force a coal company to clean up mercury pollution in order to run its power plant, then at the same time, they're either deciding not to invest in that power plant or put up clean up things that also deal with climate change. They used their power to shift fleets, federal fleets to less carbon producing vehicles and equipment. Putting in place fuel economy standards. I told you I had a staff person who used to say fuel economy standards was single biggest step to curbing global warming. [The Obama administration] did a huge amount on that, both trucks and vehicles. And appliance efficiency standards. Just, you know, going at climate with what somebody called not the silver bullet approach, but the silver buckshot.

06-01:20:19

So Obama did a whole lot of things. And I remember taking this proposal to Mike Brune and saying, "So this is what we're going to ask the administration to do." And Mike said—this was in the second term—said, "Well, there needs to be more. Why isn't there more on this?" Well, because they've done all the things. "Well, how about this?" They've done that. And the things that remained to be done to address climate in big ways require federal legislation, congressional legislation.

06-01:20:53

Eardley-Pryor:

Is the Waxman-Markey bill an example of this sort of compromise versus ideologism that we've been talking about?

06-01:21:08

Sease:

I don't know, and the reason I say that is that depending on who was looking at Waxman-Markey, it was the idealogues bill, and somebody else looked at it and it is, you know, lowest-common-denominator compromise. So one of the things that was at play on Waxman-Markey, and it will be at play if we try to pass a climate bill next year. That there is a set of players who believe that the best way to deal with the kind of change that needs to be manifested to address climate change is through market incentives. Through creating a marketplace that will actually drive what you want, thus the cap and trade. So California's RGGI [Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative] bill, based on that very premise.

06-01:22:02

Sierra Club, a long time ago, a long time before justice was a really big word in its vocabulary, basically said cap and trade is a flawed strategy, and it is

very inequitable in its application. Groups like Environmental Defense Fund or the Natural Resources Defense Council, not because they're bad people or not good environmentalists, think that cap and trade is the avenue you follow to get there. And that is one of the things, I think, that made the work on Waxman-Markey so hard, is that the community of allies that were working on it had different attitudes about what success looked like. You know, my old boss, Sarah Hodgdon, on working with me on anything, one of her pet phrases as a manager is, "Well, what will success look like? Describe to me what success looks like." Which is actually a fairly challenging thing because it does force you to say, "Well, what is it going to be like? What does winning mean?" And in the case of climate legislation at that moment, success looked very different to the allies that were around the table and some of the champions. So prior to Waxman-Markey, you know, McCain, he was a great guy on climate change. His view of success on climate change included nuclear power.

06-01:23:51

Eardley-Pryor: You're talking about John McCain, Senator John McCain?

06-01:23:53

Sease:

John McCain. Yes. Yeah. And he got very cross-wise with the Sierra Club that we wouldn't endorse his approach. We wouldn't endorse his approach because it included nuclear. I remember [Senator] Tim Wirth, great enviro, coming to a Sierra Club meeting and deciding that it was the occasion to hector us about how our nuclear policies, that he agreed with them until climate change, and now that we had climate change we couldn't get there fast enough if we didn't use nuclear, and look at France and look at this. You know, great minds differ when faced with a problem of that scale. So it was a very testy alliance working to get a bill across the finish line. We supported Waxman-Markey passing the House, as moving the ball forward, that it needed to be improved in the Senate. The cognitive dissonance of looking at the makeup of the House and the Senate and saying, "We're going to pass this across this finish line into the Senate, in order to improve it," there was a huge gap there. Because under no circumstance is something that leaves the House, with its political makeup, going to get better in the Senate. It's only going to get worse. And so one of the things that was painful to me about the years of working on that bill was our willful collective lying to ourselves. Now, there were, I'm sure, a set of people in there who truly believed that it would get better in the Senate or die, which it did die.

06-01:25:45

Eardley-Pryor: On the bill's death, how much was that cognitive dissonance—or maybe, the disagreements within the environmental ally community—a factor, versus healthcare being the push that the Obama administration made as far as, "This is the thing that we're going to get across with a Democratic Congress," as opposed to putting their weight behind the climate bill?

06-01:26:11

Sease:

Those are good questions and probably all of the above were a factor. But after you sort out everything, you could have lost better if you'd fixed all those other things. But I don't think you could have won, even if you'd have had all those other things fixed. So you wouldn't have lost by so much. But I don't see—[sigh, and a pause]. I found myself, after Waxman-Markey, putting together a plan for dealing with climate legislation and success, and pushing for us to quit thinking of a two-year plan. That we kept writing plans that required an eight-to-ten-year campaign to get the power you needed to get what you wanted, and we were doing it in a series of two-year increments because reality demanded that. Well, here we are in 2020. If, instead of before Waxman-Markey, trying to say, "We are going to get a climate bill as Obama's first thing out of Congress," what if we had actually said, "We know we're not going to get a climate bill, and we're going to try to get a climate bill as the last piece. And we're going to put together a campaign that is an eight-year campaign that builds and that has that strategy." Now, I'm not convinced that I could visualize a winning campaign for that, because I also know what the factors against it were. But the frustration of lying to ourselves, that we could pass the kind of legislation, the kind of profound change that is needed to address climate based on a two-year campaign makes me sort of shrug when somebody says, "Well, it's because Obama put healthcare first." I think the dynamics for getting healthcare were closer to where they needed to be for him to actually get it, whether it ran first or second or third. And the dynamics for getting climate are only just now getting there, and yet the politics have changed.

06-01:29:08

Eardley-Pryor:

Are some of those dynamics just the realities of climate change, like hurricanes and fires, are more prominent and more able to be understood now than they were ten years ago?

06-01:29:25

Sease:

That's part of it.

06-01:29:24

Eardley-Pryor:

What dynamics are you thinking of? What political dynamics are you thinking of?

06-01:29:30

Sease:

The political dynamics I'm thinking of, and this is something that my climate staffer and I a long time ago agreed on—

06-01:29:39

Eardley-Pryor:

And who was that?

06-01:29:40

Sease:

That was John Coequyt, who was the head of our federal and international climate campaign. Is still. I think it has a different name now. He and I basically felt that the politics of climate change based on party were doomed.

That the way you could get a winning majority for climate was based on geography and cost. So the thing that motivates Congress to actually act when it's hard to act is when their ox is getting gored. So a simplistic view of this is you look at everybody who is going to face the incredibly expensive consequences of dealing with un-fixed climate change, and you work a campaign around convincing them that, one, you've got to stop it and, two, you've got to charge the guys that are causing it to pay for the unavoidable consequences. So you look at the coasts. You look at the South. You look at, now, the West where fires are burning. And you, over a course of multiple years, by matching the science and the politics of geography and the—you know, so how much did Katrina cost? How much did Sandy cost? And you figure out places where the ox that's getting gored is not just poor and helpless, but somebody with power is being hurt by this, and you galvanize that into action. Very Machiavellian way of looking at what we sometimes try to look at through a more idealistic lens.

06-01:32:01

Eardley-Pryor: But it even reminds me of the analogy you've made prior of Saul Alinsky's methods of slowly turning that dial up at the right time over time.

06-01:32:10

Sease: Right, yes.

06-01:32:11

Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds to me like the political approach to climate change has not taken that yet, that's slow turning up the dial.

06-01:32:21

Sease: Yeah. And, again, even as you say slow turning up the dial and you realize how small our window is, how smaller it's getting every day. It's getting smaller logarithmically, not arithmetically. And yet, we can't let the external pace keep us from at least, within the constraints, of exercising good strategy.

06-01:32:50

Eardley-Pryor: On this point of strategy, I'm interesting around when the Club made this shift from focusing on federal legislation to paying more attention to successes that could happen at a state level. When, in your perspective, do you think that transition that more attention to the state successes occurred?

06-01:33:12

Sease: I think it occurred episodically and evolutionally. So it wasn't all of a sudden in a particular year we turned our attention to the states. So a couple of venues caused us to turn our attention to the state. I think I've spoken earlier about our strategy on fuel economy, to pass a bunch of state bills so that the auto companies came to the table to accept greater fuel economy standards based on not wanting to have to deal with California and a bunch of other states with separate standards. We've done the same of getting some model states to pass climate bills. We've also made huge progress in state legislatures around moving to 100 percent clean energy, getting states to commit to it. Some of

those things were driven by opportunity and some of those things were driven by need, as opposed to an overall shift of philosophy of "we're going to the states." There are some things that you need to do if you're going to fix climate change that you can't do with fifty states doing something, but you can look at fifty states as, "Do you get a tipping point?" So it's a combination of a squeeze plat of both ends against the middle. And, you know, when the House and the Senate and the presidency are all controlled by people who are science deniers and anti-regulation, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to say, "Hmm, maybe we should look at some of these governors that are on our side."

06-01:34:56

Eardley-Pryor:

So would you say that that greater attention—although, as you say, it was evolutionary and progressive—but greater attention maybe happened in the nineties with the Republican takeover of Congress, or was it something that you think was even more recent?

06-01:35:11

Sease:

No. I mean I think it happened episodically. So, yes, here was a big slug in the nineties. But more recently, when Trump was elected, we really turned up our attention to the States. And that wasn't a new invention. So we did this 100 percent clean energy push in the last couple of years. But it was built on a model that was ten or fifteen years old called "Cool Cities," where one of our energy staff came up with this idea of, we're going to work with a bunch of mayors and get them to commit to and invest in moving to clean energy, and then that will create pressure for state legislation that will feed that. So it's not as though it just popped into our head in the 2000s or 2010 to start doing 100 percent clean energy pledges with mayors. It's an old trick that's got some new resonance.

06-01:36:24

Eardley-Pryor:

I got you. Or maybe, it grew enough that it reached a tipping point, that it was able to—

06-01:36:32

Sease:

Oh, no, we actually abandoned it, put it on a shelf, and then pulled it back off the shelf for this new iteration, and we pretended that we'd never heard of it from before. [laughter]

06-01:36:41

Eardley-Pryor:

Great. Another event that I would love to hear your perspective on is that sometime, I guess, after the 2010s or so, sometime in the twenty-teens, the Sierra Club makes a major decision, a big change in its policy with regard to civil disobedience. That for a long time the Club had said, "We will do everything within a lawful means. We will not engage in civil disobedience despite the moralism of the cause. We'll stay within the confines of the law." And that changed in allowing Sierra Club members to be arrested or protest in certain ways. Can you talk a little bit about your perspective on that transition in the Club, and then especially how it's enacted?

06-01:37:30

Sease:

Yes. My feelings on that are complicated. They're complicated depending on which lens I look at it through. So a big wallowing organization like the Club that has got lots of pressures and pulls and pushes is well served by protocols that help it keep sort of a steady course. It's also hampered by them—and I have been in the position of being incredibly frustrated when I'm trying to turn that big ship, and I run up against those. So I see both the desirability and the downsides of some hard and fast protocols that just keep you from having to spend a lot of time agonizing over a decision of are we going to do, for example, civil disobedience, are we not? Because "hey, sorry, that question's off the table. We just don't do civil disobedience." I would say that the number of man and woman hours that the Club has saved over the last thirty years of having that as a protocol—we used to make this joke all the time, you could have an FTE with the man-hours you've saved from that. So that's good. Did that mean that we missed opportunities where people of conscious needed to lay down their hearts in pursuit of this and have civil disobedience? Maybe. So I think that the Club's approach, of the board really spending time digging into it, setting up some protocols of what it would take to do civil disobedience, that's all-good process, and probably a response to the increasing number of questions and needs and opportunities. So, you know, for an organization that evolves somewhat slowly, it was probably a good thing to do. I don't think that for an organization like the Sierra Club there's very many opportunities and reasons why one would participate in civil disobedience that are worth the cost of it. So, although I'm not in disagreement that the Sierra Club should have the capacity to make that decision if it wants to, I think that civil disobedience, for me, it would take something larger than anything the Sierra Club has engaged in. Or maybe not so much larger, but more connected to the civil disobedience having an impact. I don't have a deep belief in the power of civil disobedience to change history very much or very often. And I think that more times people are being somewhat self-indulgent when they engage in it. I mean, the idea of chaining oneself with a plastic strip to the White House to protest against Obama on Keystone [Keystone XL Pipeline], and getting arrested in an orchestrated way where you were told you have to have fifty dollars in your pocket, and "we'll take you, and it'll be a misdemeanor," et cetera, et cetera—to me, I'm not sure what that accomplished. And I think that, the spectacle of people sort of elbowing to be—"Oh, I want to be the one, I want to be the one," it to me seemed less of a moral imperative or power tactic that was needed or destined to work. Now, after the fact, people can say, "Hey, if we hadn't done that, we would have lost on Keystone."

06-01:41:53

Eardley-Pryor:

Was the Keystone XL pipeline, was that the first time the Club did engage in civil disobedience?

06-01:41:57

Sease: I think it was. I think that was the case on which we did it. I could be wrong, but that's my recollection.

06-01:42:05

Eardley-Pryor: What do you remember of the process? So if the Club has made the decision, "Yes, we are going to engage, but we can't just let every member do it on their own. It's going to be very strategic in how it's done. We're going to choose who does it and when"—what is your memory of that process?

06-01:42:22

Sease: My memory is a blur of meetings and phone calls and emails that reflected some of the processes that I didn't have to personally sit through. It was a lot of process.

06-01:42:34

Eardley-Pryor: And from what I'm hearing, it also sounds like there are some egos involved in scrambling to who's going to be the one.

06-01:42:42

Sease: And, you know, I don't think it was a big mistake or much harm was done by the Sierra Club deciding to do that in the short term. I look around at the number of times and the opportunities under which our allies engage in civil disobedience, and the fact that, now that we have done it, it does sort of raise the question each time of "We need to decide, are we going to engage in that." And I think it's an overutilized tactic that has way less impact than the people who participate in it believe it has. That's not to say you should never do it. But I think it's overused, and it was a timesaving and maybe good, maybe not-good thing that the Sierra Club could just avoid having that long process to figure out "do we do this," when at the end of the day, it may not make a difference that we do or don't.

06-01:43:47

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note that there was another change in your job title, as far as your resumé goes, that in 2014 the new job title became Senior Director of Lobbying and Advocacy for the Sierra Club. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about if that change really was substantive or not, or what was going on that required or enabled that change?

06-01:44:20

Sease: Well, one could look at it through different perspective and say, "Yes, it reflected some substantive changes." I, at about the same time, took on overseeing a component of our state lobbying, and at the same time roughly took on again overseeing our political program. So there were some substantive changes. The title wasn't necessarily reflective of that, although at the same time I got the title, I had an updated job description. I think it's the first job description I had in writing since I had applied for the job of Legislative Director. So as a process thing, it updated my job description to reflect what was actually in my job. I'm pretty sure it came with a raise, which

was, of course, in the Sierra Club always welcome. But the downside of it was that, you know, my previous title of National Campaign Director then changed to Federal Campaign Director, was a three-word title that could fit on a business card. And while it covered a lot of stuff, didn't create a bunch of questions of "What the hell is this?" So I shifted to a title that was completely meaningless and so to this—well, until I retired. If the press team was doing a quote from me, they just called me the Legislative Director. They didn't use that title. When I testified before Congress, it almost invariably got shortened to something else. So, it was sort of a paper title that, you know, was somewhere in the bowels of the HR department but did not have a whole lot of impact.

06-01:46:05

Eardley-Pryor:

I got you. Well, along with the role of being leg director, of Legislative Director, or at least that title, you've also made mention of a Political Director. Can you talk a little bit about the difference between what a Legislative Director versus what a Political Director does?

06-01:46:21

Sease:

Yes. A clearer title, if you wanted to reflect the difference, would be to say a Legislative Director versus an Electoral Director. So the Sierra Club—and the other way we characterize it is capital "P" and small "p". So, legislative work is inherently political. You're dealing with politicians, you're passing legislation. You know, what could be more political? Capital "P" politics, in our nomenclature, refers to electing members of Congress at the federal, state level, and elected local officials. So, it is about engaging in the electoral process—endorsing candidates, opposing candidates, running independent expenditures, doing coordinated work, raising political money, giving away political money, mobilizing volunteers to go knock on doors on behalf of candidates. That is what the Political program does. And not every organization that has a legislative shop also does Politics. Sierra Club was an early adopter of getting involved in Politics—capital "P" politics—and endorsing candidates, and then working on behalf of them. That work has changed dramatically over the years as the rules about political money and what you can and can't do with what kinds of money have changed. But the Sierra Club, I've forgotten the exact year that we did our first electoral work, but it was a decision that was made somewhat easy by the fact that we were a 501(c)(4) organization post the Grand Canyon dams. So, we didn't have to worry about doing this and creating a (c)(4) to do it because we were not a (c)(3).

06-01:48:23

Eardley-Pryor:

Right, yeah. From my memory, it's that that stretches all the way back to the seventies and what was called SCCOPE.

06-01:48:27

Sease:

Yeah. I think so.

06-01:48:28

Eardley-Pryor: At the time I think it was called SCCOPE. The S-C-C-O-P-E.

06-01:48:32

Sease: Yeah, SCCOPE.

06-01:48:33

Eardley-Pryor: The Sierra Club Committee on Political—I don't even know—Education or something, yeah. [Sierra Club Committee on Political Education (SCCOPE) began in the mid-1970s with a focus on voter education, and it first engaged in endorsement and advocacy in the early 1980s.]

06-01:48:39

Sease: Yes.

06-01:48:42

Eardley-Pryor: If there are two different roles, let's say, two different people hired, one is a Leg Director and one is a Political Director or Electoral Director. How are they different?

06-01:48:58

Sease: They are different in the tasks, you know, endorsing candidates, mobilizing people to go knock on doors. They're the same in that they are dealing with the same universe of stakeholders, so starting with the politicians themselves. You're developing a relationship with a politician. One of the ways you develop a relationship with a politician is through lobbying them, through asking them to do legislation, through helping them pass legislation. Another way you develop a relationship with a politician is by endorsing them, or opposing them and losing. It overlaps in the way you deal with volunteers. So the same volunteers that are the grassroots lobbyist that are asking the member of Congress to pass a wilderness bill and are going out and looking at the boundaries of that potential wilderness area are the very same volunteers that, when it comes time for the political program to engage, that we go tap into and say, "Hey, will you come make phone calls? Will you come to a rally? Will you go knock doors?" So there's overlaps in the processes and tasks and the players. And they can be incredibly reinforcing, and they can be in conflict. So one of the decisions the Sierra Club made early on that I inherited when I became Legislative Director was that that person was overseeing the political shop and that those two entities would be combined into one that looked holistically at the relationship we had with members of Congress through the political lens and through the legislative lobbying lens. There was a time when, not so much as a conscious decision, that these need to be pulled apart, but just players and who was overseeing what, where those got separated for a while. And then, at about the same time that I got that title change, 2014 I think it was, they were reunited. And at the same time, as we had developed more fully both our state lobbying but increasingly our state political electoral work, to have those all housed in one collective basket of units was a conscious decision on the part of the Club.

06-01:51:38

Eardley-Pryor: That's helpful, thank you. As a part of this new role that you took on, that did have some changes—not just the title change. One of the notes I have is that you helped redesign the political program in a way that allowed for—well, that it broke the cycle of losing staff. That you allowed for political cycles to occur, but also maintain a little bit more uniformity into who's doing this work. Can you tell me a little bit about that, the redesign of the political program that you were engaged in?

06-01:52:10

Sease: Yes. One thing to clarify is that every few years the political program was redesigned and reevaluated. So one of the first things that I did in stewarding this redesign effort was to look back at all the previous redesigns and articulations of what the Sierra Club political program should look like. And what was really interesting to me was that where we landed on the key element of what the Sierra Club political program needed to have and do—to be effective, and to retain staff, and, as a donor once accused us of "not playing in our weight in politics," to play at our weight class—that there was a consistency to these things. But the other consistency was that at the end of every cycle, there would be an assessment and people would come up with these ideas and then they would just abandon it. And then two years later they'd take a deep dive and look again and come up with the same ideas. And there was a sort of a lack of recognition of, "Hey, we've thought of this before and why didn't we just do it?" So those things, I mean, when you look back at them, they just seem so incredibly simple. But the first one is that we should engage in multi-cycle planning, that the Sierra Club political program should not say, "Hmm, it's 2018 or 2017 and we're going to plan for the 2018 political program, and what's happening in 2018 is the be-all, end-all." That we were actually going to look at multiple cycles and say, "Here's where we are. Here's what's happening over the next couple of cycles. Here's where we need to build strength." So if you look and you say, "In 2018, this set of senators are up, but in 2020, this set of senators are up, and there's a presidential, and then there are these governors races"—that you can actually come up with a plan of where you invest, where you try to get capacity. We also said that we were going to look at our political program and where we built strength and how we built strength in concert with where we needed to be strong for our conservation and legislative goals.

06-01:55:00

Because politics and lobbying are paid for with different kinds of money and there's very strict rules, there tended to be a firewall that grew up between legislative strategy and political strategy. As part of this redesign, we clarified, and our compliance people hate me saying this. They say it oversimplifies it. But we clarified that it's not really a firewall, it's a barrier of direction. It's a one-way street. So you can do political work and invest political money to effect an eventual legislative outcome. Totally legal. You can't do legislative work or public education work to effect a political outcome. So we redefined

the way you segregate your work into being the directional street of how the money flowed, and that created an opportunity for better coordination between our political and our legislative and our educational components. And thus made it better for the Sierra Club to be able to actually utilize its strength. Because we had this huge problem with the political shop being completely autonomous from the rest of the Club and not much relation.

06-01:56:34

The other thing that we did was to say we're going to design a program that utilizes and taps into and funds the Sierra Club's strength. So anybody and their dog, with enough money, can buy an ad and put it on TV. But the Sierra Club has two big assets. We have a brand that's really powerful, well-respected, well-recognized. And we have grassroots activism that's structured. So if we design a political program that takes whatever small amount of money we get compared to what the Koch brothers are putting in someplace, and we spend it without regard to the way our assets help us leverage that money, then we're wasting a donor's money. So we said we're going to design our political program, we're going to pick the races we engage in, we're going to choose the tactics we apply so that we spend every dollar that we raise for politics in a way that is leveraging our assets, that is utilizing the strengths of the Sierra Club. And that doesn't mean we never advertise. If advertising with the Sierra Club brand is a really powerful way to get something across, great. But the other way of using our brand is the fact that we are trusted. This redesign was going on in 2014 and we had just come off a bruising, terrible—it was 2015, I'm sorry, the redesign was happening. Had come off a bruising loss in the 2014 elections. Just awful. And I remember going to the tables that the political groups have because our political director quit, and I was in the process of redesigning the program and then going to hire a new political director. And I listened to people talk about what they did and what worked and what didn't. And nothing worked. I mean, people, they would come back and say, "Well, you know, we invested—", and each one of them was talking about investing more than the whole Sierra Club program was. And, you know, the progressive table, it just—everything flopped. But basically it was like a noisy election where there was just a glut of advertising and things. People were tuning it out and not listening. And it occurred to me—I'm not the only person this occurred to. I mean, it's not like I saw the light. But it was clear that the Sierra Club brand, the fact that Sierra Club had people next door who know how to go out and talk to their neighbors and who are a trusted brand and a trusted voice, that that was an asset that, as we put together our 2016 political work, that we should be tapping in to. Because more paid advertising was not going to be, based on 2014, a big success. And even if it was, we weren't going to be able to have enough money to do it at scale. And so it was about really trying to figure out how our brand, our trusted voices of people and our activists and the structure we had to maintain and train those activists, could be assets that could take money. So we put this all together in a memo. We worked with a couple of donor advisors who were pretty steeped in politics and knew the Club pretty well.

06-02:00:24

Eardley-Pryor: Was this the same donor that had said you aren't playing at your political weight?

06-02:00:26

Sease: Actually, you know, it wasn't. But they were advisors, maybe, to that same donor. They probably said it sometime during the course of it, of the reboot. But they worked with us to help redesign our program. And they did it at the behest of a donor who cared about us and wanted us to be—actually, a donor who cared about politics, and thought the Sierra Club would be a good asset, was a donor of the Sierra Club's, and decided that the Sierra Club would be better if it were playing at weight. So they actually commissioned these two donor advisors to work with us on this redesign. So the redesign we're doing internally for our own purposes and that sort of overlapped.

06-02:01:18

Eardley-Pryor: Do you mind sharing who these donors were, just so we can be clear?

06-02:01:20

Sease: It was Bloomberg. And the donor advisors were Corridor Partners—Kathleen Welch and Bill Roberts, two people I've known for a long time. And they were really good allies in this. They didn't do the redesign, but they basically put on a donor hat and looked at the redesign and said, "Well, that doesn't make sense. What's so important about that?" And they would push back at how we shaped and articulated this redesign. Then they would call into question things that might be just—"Are you just assuming that that's the case? Or can you really back that up?" And it was a multi-year process. We did the redesign in a little less than a year. Got the board to approve it. Hired a political director who didn't stay long but, I mean, basically we made the hire and said, "We're going to test this out for two years and see if this is actually the right job for you." But that—

06-02:02:28

Eardley-Pryor: Who was that?

06-02:02:29

Sease: That was a guy named Khalid Pitts. But he hired a couple of people during his tenure who stayed on and who were both really, really good and one of whom, the Deputy Political Director, applied for and eventually got the Political Director job and has just finished up her third cycle at the Club.

06-02:02:57

Eardley-Pryor: And who is that?

06-02:03:00

Sease: Ariel Hayes.

06-02:03:04

Eardley-Pryor: Who was the other person that was hired, that Colin hired?

06-02:03:07

Sease: Oh, hang on one second. Wow. How quickly we forget names when we don't say them every day. It'll come to me in just a minute.

06-02:03:22

Eardley-Pryor: We can add it in later. That's one of the blessings of an oral history.

06-02:03:24

Sease: Okay, yeah. Yeah, it was the PAC director.

06-02:03:27

Eardley-Pryor: But Ariel Hayes has stayed on as part of this redesign?

06-02:03:31

Sease: Yes. Yeah. And she's grown the program and she has taken this redesign and made it into a reality and working very closely with Mike Brune, who leaned into this program in a really big way. I mean, one of the reasons I think he was frustrated with the previous political director is that they did not engage him as a partner and sort of just said, "Oh, well, you don't get politics, so I'm not going to bother."

06-02:04:02

Eardley-Pryor: Who was that prior political director, right after the redesign?

06-02:04:07

Sease: I'm trying to remember her name. She wasn't with us for a long time.

06-02:04:14

Eardley-Pryor: Was this Kathy?

06-02:04:15

Sease: No. Well, I mean Cathy was her boss, and Cathy certainly brought that same attitude. So part of, I think, what was happening at the same time as the redesign is Mike was invested in the redesign. And it was the opportunity for him to have a learning curve at the same time as the Club was having a learning curve. So he was invested from the ground-up in this redesign. One of the other things that the redesign called for was an increased focus on the states. Not that we hadn't done stuff in the states, but to actually build up our capacity. And working both with Ariel, the new Political Director, and with the state director, legislative director Jennifer Hensley.

06-02:05:34

Eardley-Pryor: The state director [Jennifer Hensley], and then Ariel as the Political Director.

06-02:05:38

Sease: Yes, as the Political Director, both working in really close partnership to identify what states, from both the state and federal perspective, are going to be important in upcoming—this goes to the multicycle planning—elections. Where do we have the base capacity that a little investment from the Club could get us there? And identifying a series of places, of states where we built

up capacity, and then forming a partnership with the chapters there, because they run their own state political programs. You know, national doesn't come in and run them. But figuring out ways to partner, to do this together.

06-02:06:37

Eardley-Pryor: It sounds to me like this redesign in some ways was no longer reinventing the wheel every political cycle.

06-02:06:45

Sease: Right. Yes. It isn't about reinventing the wheel, and it's about actually following through on the lessons you learned from the last election. So it was so funny. When I looked back over all the back planning, every year they would say, "You know, we need to look more than one cycle ahead." And then, you know, you'd go to the planning, and there'd be no thought of the upcoming cycles.

06-02:07:11

Eardley-Pryor: It does surprise me it took that long to really implement that at a structural level so that it became—

06-02:07:17

Sease: Well, actually, even having implemented it, the siren song of the upcoming election and its needs and its imperatives is really intense. It is very hard to say, "Well, you know, we really do need to invest in X place because over the next six years it's going to be important three times." Maybe not as important as this. And the other part of it that was—I think we are still struggling as an institution to do, and we will probably continue to—is matching where our assets and strengths dovetail with the political opportunity. There are political needs and opportunities in places where we just don't have the capacity. And so every year we have a debate about, "Well, you know, Iowa ought to be one of our priority places." Well, yeah, except we don't have a very strong bench there, either—you know, and sometimes didn't have chapter staff, didn't have a functioning chapter leadership team. Just didn't have any capacity. So it's a function of articulating what the plan is and the strategy, reminding oneself of it, applying it a few cycles in a row and actually habituating oneself to resist the temptations that pull you away from multicycle planning and into just, "Oh, my God, where do the pundits say we should spend the money this year?"

06-02:09:10

Eardley-Pryor: I can't help but think that this broader focus—instead of just being so focused on that one electoral opportunity right in front of you, to have this broader perspective—happened around the time of Trump's victory in 2016. Is there some sort of relationship between the Club going through this redesign to have a broader, long-term view that might have any kind of relationship to Trump winning, the surprise victory of Trump? Not being focused on that one election that was in front of you? And I don't mean you specifically here—

06-02:09:48

Sease:

No, no. I'm just trying to—this whole thing did not happen in response to Trump winning. Trump won in the midst of us applying this strategy and this approach. And one of the things that we had, I'm thinking back to—getting my years straight. In 2014, we had some state and local victories that were a good result. In 2015, we had an investment in Virginia. Again, we did the same thing in 2017. So the Trump loss was not the first application of this new multicycle approach. And it did take us a couple of cycles to get it working and to begin to get the support of donors. So this last year, the 2020 cycle—in 2018, I think the political team did a really good job of pulling together with pretty limited resources—a big investment from the Club of its own resources, but not a lot of external, which is what you need to come in to really build that up. Did a good job of doing proof of concept of work, and then put together a plan for 2020 and pitched that to donors and actually got some donor investment.

06-02:11:43

Eardley-Pryor:

Oh, cool. So putting the wheels in motion, that you see success in 2018, that you could then leverage for external funding to do more in 2020.

06-02:11:51

Sease:

Yeah. And, again, what's interesting is success is not just how many races did you win. Because, you know, even when the Sierra Club makes a huge investment, there's a lot of factors that go into whether somebody won or lost. But what did you deliver? How many doors did you knock? How dispositive was your work? And Ariel and her team did a great job of actually making those cases and then demonstrating them and documenting them and then articulating how they could do them in 2020.

06-02:12:30

Eardley-Pryor:

You've talked about when Bloomberg came in and made all these requirements, these key performance indicators for the Beyond Coal campaign. Did that trickle down into other aspects? For example, these political campaigns and Ariel being able to say, "We knocked on X number of doors." Is there a relationship between these?

06-02:12:52

Sease:

Well, so to back up to Bloomberg, I don't think to this day we've gotten political money from Bloomberg. His political shop is a very separate thing from Bloomberg Philanthropies. And at this point, maybe soon, but at this point we have not demonstrated that to them, that we're the place to invest their political money, that shop. But donors that give political money for a long time have been very interested in—they don't call them key performance indicators, but at the end of every political cycle we get a request from the donor advisor saying, "So can you tell us how many doors you knocked? How many targets did you have? How many volunteer shifts did you do? "So there is an appetite for quantifications of what you did.

06-02:13:50

Eardley-Pryor: I remember in the past two major presidential elections a lot of internal debate within the Democratic Party of who are we going to support, especially in 2016, between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton. And I'm wondering if the Club, if you recall, was having its own internal debate about where it was going to be lending support? Or if there are some sort of battles that happened between those who supported Sanders versus Clinton in 2016?

06-02:14:21

Sease: So the Club had had a long history of not endorsing in primaries when it was a question. And there was an appetite starting—the appetite began to emerge in the race that Obama won but didn't, I don't think, become manifest in quite the way that when Bernie and Hillary and others were all in the same primary. There was a lot of discussion, a lot of planning, a lot of thought of, "Do we endorse during the primary when it's still relevant? Do we not? If we do, how do we make that decision?" And the Sierra Club is a California based organization. California is a fairly progressive place and there's a lot of Bernie supporters there. So there was a cadre of people that, in volume, that probably were pretty serious Bernie supporters. The leadership of the organization probably had Bernie supporters and Hillary supporters and probably people who we've long since forgotten were even in the running. And then there was just the whole question of, does the Sierra Club endorse in a presidential primary? You know, that would be a big whoop.

06-02:15:51

Eardley-Pryor: Was that something that is on the political side for staff to make a decision on, or is that something that the board needs to decide?

06-02:16:00

Sease: No, that is something that—there is a handbook that's an inch thick that's the political guidelines that are the rules. I mean it's like legislation of how the Sierra Club does its political work. Very, very regimented. And it spells out how you make a presidential or vice-presidential endorsement. Who can speak, who can have an opinion on that. So, for example, certain senior people in the Club are not allowed to make a personal endorsement because they are so associated with the Club that it would be like the Club having made the endorsement. So the executive director, the president of the Sierra Club, the political director are all not allowed to actually make a personal endorsement. And they sort of sign up for that. And if they do make a personal endorsement, they lose their vote on the Club's endorsement. So any board member who makes a public personal endorsement before the board has made a decision doesn't get to vote on it.

06-02:17:05

Eardley-Pryor: Interesting.

06-02:17:07

Sease: So whether we would endorse, and if we did, whether it was Hillary or Bernie—and even once it was pretty clear that Bernie was going to lose, when

we would announce that we were going to endorse Hillary—was a big question subject to huge amounts of debate. And eventually, the board made a decision of when it was going to endorse Hillary and the date that that would happen. But it was not while there was still the question of who was going to be the candidate. And even so, it was controversial. Particularly in California.

06-02:17:52

Eardley-Pryor:

Because the Club is headquartered in such a progressive area—the Bay Area itself, coastal California—versus the way that politics work across the country and the requirements of being effective in Washington, DC, does it create challenges that the Club has its headquarters in such a progressive area versus trying to represent things at a national scale in DC?

06-02:18:20

Sease:

Well, I won't go to whether it creates challenges or not, but I can recall going to California multiple times a year for board meetings and meetings and other events. And I would always stay with my sister, who lived in Sunnyvale, and I would drive every morning from her place to the BART station that was farthest out, about a thirty-minute drive. And I would listen to KQED. And I remember in the middle of, you know, really dark, grim times in Washington, I was in the car listening to it and it was the day that the California climate bill was, officially taking effect or it's one-year anniversary. And, I mean, it was just gushing about all the stuff it was doing, and I thought to myself, "You know, no wonder they have a different view. They wake up in the morning hearing things like the climate bill is at its one-year anniversary today. This is not the real world." So whether it created problems or whether it actually created a positive counterbalance to reality, it certainly created tensions in the perspective of what was possible and what the real world was like. I can remember Jen Hensley saying to me, "You know, these are people who do not live in middle America. I live in middle America, and I see a different world than our leaders in San Francisco are seeing," or Oakland eventually.

06-02:19:58

Eardley-Pryor:

What role do you think that "California Dreaming" aspect has on what the Club goes after?

06-02:20:07

Sease:

Well, I do think it helps to fuel the ambition of your reach has got to exceed your grasp. Which is a natural thing for a public interest group to have. I think it probably makes that "what's a reality of the reach" and "what's the reality of the grasp" a little bit different. It has certainly made for a series of executive directors a learning curve in terms of how to deal with Washington politicians.

06-02:20:46

Eardley-Pryor:

I want to ask you, too—we've talked about Trump's surprising victory, electoral victory in 2016. And what was your role in having to then readjust from the expectation that Clinton was going to win, that the Sierra Club would have a continued partner in a Democratic executive authority, to then Trump

being president and having to shift, I imagine, very quickly from being in an offensive stance to a defensive stance? What was involved in that for you?

06-02:21:22

Sease:

Well, in the many decades that I worked with the Sierra Club, I believe there were probably more instances of waking up on the Wednesday after election day and having to deal with expectations and shoring up the morale than there were moments of celebration and, "Oh, my God, the world is great". I would say the election of Trump was way harder than any previous one.

06-02:21:51

Eardley-Pryor:

Because it was such a shock, or why?

06-02:21:54

Sease:

Because he was so bad. Because the gap was so huge. And that's not to be dismissive of the previous ones. But, again, it was the shock and it was the gap between somebody who would be good, that we felt comfortable endorsing and somebody who would—I mean, even then, we didn't know how bad Trump would be. But it was still sobering.

06-02:22:29

Eardley-Pryor:

What is your memory of that day?

06-02:22:32

Sease:

Well, my memory of that is sitting down with Melinda Pierce. And, you know, we had a presentation to staff and to board leaders pretty quickly after this happened. And I remember one phrase in the PowerPoint that we put together, being that "this was not our first rodeo," that we had been here before with, the Republicans holding triumvirate power and pointing out what we accomplished in those times, how we did it. Laying out a strategy of actually using the overreach of the Republicans as the thing that—in a jujitsu move—to overturn them. Talking about how we are in for a marathon. This is not going to be a sprint. And I remember having to, for both of us, having to really push ourselves to not just tear our hair out and scream at the masses. Instead, of being the adults in the room that say, "Here's how we're going to make lemonade, guys." And at the same time, acknowledging the pain that people were feeling. So what a miserable day. Miserable few weeks actually.

06-02:23:56

Eardley-Pryor:

How did you manage your own emotions through all that?

06-02:24:00

Sease:

I seem to recall spending more time in the woodshop when I was home and going out to the cabin a bunch. And I remember having a conversation with a young staffer that was not somebody on my team, I think he was on the communications team. And I was in my office after hours one evening and he came by and he said, "Debbie, do you have time to talk?" I said, "Sure." So he sat down and he said, "You were here during Bush, Bush II." I said, "Yeah. I was actually here during Reagan." [laughter] And he said, "How did you

survive?" And I spent about an hour talking to him. And I said, "You know, part of the way I survived those times was I was really into kayaking, and I would go out every weekend that it wasn't icy and I would scare myself witless on some river, and everything would go out of my mind that wasn't about getting down that river." I said, "I'm not suggesting that you go out and endanger yourself. But find something else." And I told him the story from Winston Churchill that I am very fond of, Winston Churchill talking about painting as a pastime, and that if your world and your life and your work is intense, you have to not just stop doing that work but you have to do something else that you focus on. I said, "So whether it—for you maybe it's hang-gliding. Maybe it's finding the perfect recipe. But, you know, whatever it is, do something that takes you away from work." So a couple of weeks later, I'm walking down the hall and I see him. And he said, "I followed your advice. I took a hike this weekend on the Billy Goat Trail, and it was so beautiful out there and I didn't think about Trump." I felt so—you know, it's a tiny accomplishment, and it was one that in my work in the recent years I'd had a whole lot less time working with junior staff one-on-one like that. But I felt really proud of having accomplished that thing, of giving this young man some advice that actually worked for him.

06-02:26:31

Eardley-Pryor:

That's beautiful. When you think back about these recent years under the Trump Administration, what are some of the things that stand out to you in the work that you are doing that you really cared about or that just stand out for you?

06-02:26:48

Sease:

Well, one of the things is I do, or did, a lot less hands-on direct lobbying in the last decade at the Club. A lot more in the office managing lobbyists. But I do go out on some lobby meetings. And just seeing the impact that the totally dysfunctional Senate and the White House was having. I remember meeting with Barbara Boxer when she was there and just seeing the daily drain on her. Or any of the Democrats. I mean, sitting down with Ed Markey, who has got to be the nicest person in the world, and just seeing the way it was just draining them on a daily basis, and feeling relieved that I was distanced from it a little bit.

06-02:28:02

Eardley-Pryor:

Why do you think it was such a significant change? I mean, I'm trying to wrap my head around—when Trump was elected and when he was inaugurated in 2017, some things did feel different. It felt darker.

06-02:28:15

Sease:

Well, it wasn't just policy. And, you know, it's not just Trump. I mean, it's McConnell. You know, on Trump's inauguration, he says, "It's the biggest crowd in history at my inauguration," and the pictures are showing that it's a pittance. And then he wants to fire the Park Service for the bad thing. It just sets the stage for the kinds of lies that you would never think would go

unquestioned or that people would float. It just happened. So for me, at least, it was the setting of the bar at an unbelievable new low.

06-02:29:06

Eardley-Pryor: You made the decision to retire in 2020, and I'm wondering what were your reasons for then? I mean, how much did this Trump era shape that? Was it more than this? Was it something bigger? Had you always had your mind on this time period? What led to your decision for retirement?

06-02:29:27

Sease: Well, as I look back on it, prior to my decision to retire, I think I had not thought about retiring much at all. You know, I would meet up with friends and they would say, "Hey, when are you going to retire?" And I'd say, "I don't know. When I quit liking working." But I was engaged and fulfilled by work. I liked my job; I liked my team. I am sure that eight years of Trump and the lack of progress and the lack of continual reward that you get for things happening right contributed to the state of mind I was in. But the Club was headed into a bunch of change. One of the things that the Sierra Club suffers from is cascading and overlapping change processes. It just seems to have an appetite for more than is healthy in any given time period. And our recent leadership has been guilty of that, more so even than past leadership who were pretty guilty of it. So we were headed into yet one more reorganization of the department, a whole new structure. Sarah Hodgdon had retired, and she was my immediate—well, actually, she hadn't been my immediate boss for a while. But she was a place of sanity in this, and she left. And the person who took over from her as the department head, I didn't have the best relation—I mean, I didn't have an awful relationship with him, but I didn't have his confidence. He didn't have my confidence.

06-02:31:15

Eardley-Pryor: Who are you talking—

06-02:31:16

Sease: This was Jesse. Jesse Simons, who became the new department head. And I was at a place where I needed to actually apply for the job that was most of the work that I was currently doing. It would have a different title; they had created a new position. They encouraged me to apply for it. And I did.

06-02:31:40

Eardley-Pryor: You were applying for your own job.

06-02:31:42

Sease: Pretty much, yeah. I think the only difference in it and my current job was that it had the law program reporting to it. But in the past, the law program had reported to me, as well. So, again, it was a collection of things that I either was currently doing or had done in the past. I ultimately made the decision to go ahead and apply for that. That's why I actually had a resumé to share with you that sort of summarized what had happened over the last forty years. But a few weeks into that process, I was having a meeting and I listened to what

was going on and how people were interacting with each other and with me, and it just dawned on me that we're going through a huge change process. I am not going to have much influence with the people who are driving this, and life's too short to be this miserable. So I decided to quit. And, you know, it wasn't a bad time to quit. So I made a pretty quick decision and have not regretted it at all. I mean, I am still very fond of the Sierra Club. I liked the people that I worked with, including the leadership, but I am glad not to be struggling to have a voice in the kinds of evolution and changes the Club is trying to navigate now.

06-02:33:29

Eardley-Pryor:

I'd like to talk a little bit about some of those changes and the evolution happening. But you had mentioned them as almost like a cascading sort of thing, like Venn diagrams all coming together. What are the various different aspects of these changes that the Club is going through that you have in mind?

06-02:33:45

Sease:

Well, there's external changes, and then there's self-imposed change. So the restructuring of everything, and the redesigning of campaigns and the rebranding, all of that, those are internal change processes. You can look at any one of them and say, "Absolutely fine thing to do." I think a sensible leadership, and I use this as a collective, not just an individual, but a sensible leadership would look at what any business guru will tell you about change in organization and say, "You know, we need to be judicious, and we're not going to pile six of these on top of one another in a given year and then start a brand new one the next year just because we can." There are external changes that are in the world. I mean, changes from as simple as, how does an organization that has made its bread and butter through direct mail—people opening an envelope, writing a check, sticking it in the mail—how do they deal with an age where people don't open their mail? Do their fundraising online? How does an organization that has decided it is going to make not just a little shift in how it treats equity, inclusion, and diversity, but a big shift, to say, we are not patient to do this at a slow pace. We're going to become a class A or level three—or whatever the nomenclature was—organization on this in rapid time. The changes in the external world of politics, of how politics, processes of policy change, how those are influenced, what it takes to make a difference, how people feel about government. I mean, the decades of the anti-regulatory, the Koch brothers et al, basically undermining faith in the fundamental role of government. How does a policymaking organization that works through government navigate that? So there are all kinds of changes.

06-02:36:29

Eardley-Pryor:

I want to bring up one aspect of those changes you mentioned on the equity, inclusion, and diversity front. This past summer, Michael Brune put out a very conspicuous blog post that was about "Tearing Down Our Monuments" in the light of taking down monuments in the South that are to Civil War generals and leaders, and he aligned that discussion and those events to tearing down

the Sierra Club monuments, and naming John Muir in particular. [Michael Brune, "Pulling Down Our Monuments," www.sierraclub.org (July 22, 2020).] And it became a riled issue that got national attention on this blog post, and I think seems to probably be reflective of some of the internal dialogues that are happening in the Club in concert with these external factors that you're talking about, too. I think there is some sort of story that you told me, but I don't think we have on record, about a bust of John Muir in the DC office, a monument in some ways of John Muir. Would you mind sharing what that story is around this image of John Muir in relationship to this blog post that came out this summer that was very controversial?

06-02:37:43

Sease:

Well, the image of John Muir came down well before the blog post, so it was not instrumental. But I think that the whole issue of John Muir, how the Sierra Club looks at him, is just one more example of how complicated things are. So John Muir, in his life and times, did and certainly said some things that were racially insensitive, particularly his comments about Native Americans. My understanding from people who have researched the history is he, later, actually acknowledged and grew and said that was a wrong thing to say. It's not an excuse to say somebody is a man of their times, but he was a man of his times. He did a great deal of good work. He was a man with some privilege. He had the ear of the President of the United States. The Sierra Club has always been very, very proud of John Muir and probably in blindness to any flaws that he might be bringing to the table. So there's no argument that one should take a close look at that and evaluate, you know, by and large, is this somebody that we want to associate with? It's not something, in my mind, that you just say John Muir once said something racist about an Indian tribe, therefore we should expunge him from our archives. So that's going on in the background.

06-02:39:25

The Sierra Club conducted a safety assessment of its facilities because we had had a couple of buildings in places where there had been an armed person come into a building and the folks—I don't think they were on the same floor, but there was enough happening in the streets and across America to make the Sierra Club say, as a large institution, we need to do an assessment of how safe our facilities are and establish some protocols about how we operate. So we had somebody conduct a survey. And as he conducted this survey of people in the DC office—there was, in our waiting room, a bronze bust of John Muir that a Sierra Club activist and artist in Wisconsin had donated to the Club and had said, "I did this, and I want to have it hang someplace that matters," and so he gave it to the Sierra Club. So we had a little ceremony and we hung it. And it was a, you know—I think the insurance value on it was ten or fifteen thousand dollars, and it weighs about forty pounds. So it's not an insubstantial thing. And it just hung on the wall in the reception area.

So, I believe, as part of an orchestrated campaign to make a point, a lot of the staff that were interviewed expressed to this guy that, as a person of color, that they did not feel safe in the Sierra Club office because they had to every morning walk past John Muir, who was a known racist. Well, this got the attention of the Club. And people were saying, "What do we do about this?" And this was also during a time of negotiations with the union over the contract, and there had been some intimation of stuff about John Muir being resolved as part of a union negotiation contract. Yeah.

06-02:41:36

So it occurred to me that it would be pretty easy to at least have the bust of John Muir not be an issue. So I wrote a note to my boss, Michael Bosse and Sarah, his boss, and said, "I've looked at it. It's not bolted to the wall. It's just hanging on some heavy hooks. I could just come in some Saturday and take it down, hang something else up there and have this thing not be a daily reminder of something you're not wanting to deal with as part of the contract negotiations." So they talked about it and thought about it and said, "Well, maybe we should send out a note that we're doing this." I said, "No, I don't want to do that. I just want to have it go away." "What will we say if people ask?" "I'll say I heard people were disturbed by it, and so we took it down. Just a piece of art." So eventually they agreed. So my husband and I came in one Saturday, took it down. There was no place to put it. And I mean, it is something an artist gave us, rated at being fifteen thousand dollars' worth of bronze art. So I wrapped it in a sheet, wheeled it on a cart, and it leaned against my office wall until I left.

06-02:42:59

Eardley-Pryor:

When did the takedown happen? When did you go in to remove it?

06-02:43:01

Sease:

Oh, it spent at least a couple of years in my office. So a while ago. And nobody ever asked me about it. Somebody asked one of my staff. Said, "So what happened to the John Muir statue?" And John said, "Oh, Debbie took it down." "Why?" "Because people were upset about it." "Oh, okay. Hmm, that's nice." And the discussion of John Muir did not go away. The discussion of us having a bust of John Muir in our office went away. But as I was leaving for retirement, I thought, "What do I do with this thing?" I mean, I accepted this on behalf of the Sierra Club. It's a valuable piece of art. It's just sitting in my office. So I took my sheet back. I left it sitting in the middle of my office floor. I thought about leaving a little sticky note on it that says, "Your problem now," but I stopped myself from that. And for all I know, since we are not going into the office during COVID-19, it's still sitting there gathering dust in the middle of my office floor. [laughter] But to me it's an illustration that the bigger issue of what do we do about our reverence of John Muir and our reference to him—and for decades our stationary had one of our favorite quotes from him at the bottom of it, which is, "When you pick out anything in the universe, you find it's hitched to everything else." Do we just completely

get rid of that? Do we actually lay out the reality of this history? But at a minimum, if we've got a bunch of staff saying, "I'm uncomfortable with this, it's become a symbol to me, "we don't hang a statue of him up.

06-02:44:51

Eardley-Pryor:

I'm struck by the internal reckoning that the Club is doing around racial injustice, or environmental racism—and the Club's own history in engaging in all of those issues—and climate change. The way I heard you talk about the diversity and equity issue is, this is something that needs to happen but maybe not at the pace that is being pushed internally. And my mind then goes to thinking about climate legislation. It's like, well, there is only a short window of time for climate change. I'm wondering if these issues of time and scale are at play here.

06-02:45:41

Sease:

Not—so, the issues of time and scale on climate change and the issues of time and scale on righting our organization's racial injustice are not necessarily related. Each one of them I believe, as any big change process, is seen in the context of time and scale. So even if you looked at addressing the Sierra Club's achieving the Sierra Club's diversity and equity goals, the capacity to achieve them is not divorced from how fast you try to achieve them. I believe that you would lose your effort to achieve them by getting the pace wrong, grasping more than you can. Or you could slow the pace by how fast you try to do it. I'm not saying that those two things are inversely related, but that as you look at any big change process, any big goal that you want to achieve, that you actually have to weigh the practicality of, how much can you get, how fast? I mean, it's the same conversation we just had about climate. Climate change legislation needed to pass ten years ago, but we might have been better served to put together an eight-year campaign as opposed to a two-year campaign. So, you can have that conversation about climate change in a sort of abstract, non-emotional—I mean, depending on who you're talking to, it doesn't become an issue of morals and judgment. But I feel a hesitancy of raising that question in the context of how fast does the Sierra Club evolve as an organization around diversity, equity, and inclusion—that that's not an okay conversation to have, because to question the pace is to question the validity of the outcome.

The reality is pace impacts your ability. Maybe you can get there best by going really fast, pedal to the metal, but that's not a given. And so a frustration or a discomfort that I have with this particular change process in the Sierra Club are not different than virtually any other change process, is that people don't like to think that anything but pedal to the metal is the best way to get there. And so I've always been comfortable raising the questions of how we do this, how do we do it most effectively, being the devil's advocate. It is a more uncomfortable thing to do in the context of this issue because the judgment of your commitment to it comes into question. I am sure that wilderness activists have questioned my commitment to wilderness when I

have said, "Don't put a bill in this year because you're going to lose." But it feels different in the context of this issue.

06-02:49:05

Eardley-Pryor:

Yeah. It's interesting, too, to think about the Sierra Club's relationship with race and its evolution on that in light of its incredible standout—the way that it stands out with regard to gender inclusion and equity. I think the Club has been a model—and you, yourself, I think as a model of women being very successful and powerful in the Club and having their voices heard and being really effective players in steering the Club's evolution. And I've heard you talk about, perhaps the Club is not learning the lessons of its success around gender inclusion and equity and power with regard to race. I guess, maybe let me ask you, is there a distinction between the Club's success on gender versus its relationship with race?

06-02:50:10

Sease:

Well, yes, there's a distinction. I mean, I think that clearly the Club reflects a better success of having put women into positions of power in the Club than it does on race. I have a theory, which may be totally wrong, but one of the ways that people come into the Club—I'm thinking from a staff perspective, as opposed to a volunteer perspective right now—and how they succeed is, for example, our internships. I look at so many people who are in positions of power in the Club and they got a start as a Sierra Club intern. That is an avenue that is open to people with some privilege, to be able to afford to do a summer internship, be at a college that offers credit for a summer internship, not need three months of salary. Early in my Sierra Club career, I tried to figure out ways of getting around that, to try to attract people of a little broader mix. And it's hard no matter how you go about it because you can still create barriers.

But I think that the other thing that has factored into people's success at the Sierra Club—we had a saying in the Sierra Club that we had grotesquely overqualified people for our jobs. We had somebody who had a master's in environmental studies being the receptionist, answering the phone. She eventually became the head of a program. But she could afford to take an entry level job with that kind of experience. She had that privilege. I think there is less of a barrier created by that across gender than there is across race, in that a lot of privileged white people of both genders could afford to take a job at the Sierra Club—which never paid competitively even with the rest of the public interest sector—because they cared about the environment, because it was a passion of theirs, because they wanted a foot in the door. But they could afford to do it. They had that opportunity.

And I think two things came in the way of us attracting those same people of color. One, those grotesquely overqualified people of color who care about the environment or any public interest sector, they were incredibly competitive on the marketplace. They did not need to come to work for the Sierra Club who

paid twenty, thirty, forty percent less than any of our competitors. So we priced ourselves out of a competitive market. And then we create this barrier with our internships. But that same barrier didn't exist for women because there were women—maybe it didn't work for all women, but there were women who could avail themselves of those opportunities. So that may be part of the reason that we've done better on that. It's just an accident of the mechanics that got in the way of getting a more diverse workplace.

06-02:54:01

The Sierra Club a number of years ago tried to articulate a policy for diversity hiring. You know, it said if you have two candidates of similar qualifications, you have to hire the more diverse one. It had a series of things like that. We eventually took this to somebody who was an expert and they said, "Look, what you have to do is twofold. You have to be recruiting in places where you get a diversity of candidates. If you have a diversity of candidates you will become more diverse. And you have to create an inclusive atmosphere that diverse candidates want to work in. It's not about having a diversity program, it's about having an inclusion program." Which is one of the things that a recent hire did. It used to be called DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion. And I actually think got it formally changed to equity, inclusion, diversity. Or it's now just called our equity and inclusion. But, you know, an institution like the Sierra Club is hardwired with some things that are impediments to big change, and I think one of them is the fact that we have historically underpaid people. So we have attracted people who can afford to be underpaid.

06-02:55:46

Eardley-Pryor:

You mentioned the diversity, equity, inclusion—or equity, inclusion and diversity program. I'm wondering what your memories are of its evolution. I'm thinking about, in the early 1990s, the environmental justice program was initiated, and John McCown being hired and him being the only environmental justice staff member out in the field for years. But that was in the nineties, and I don't know what the story is internally within the Club around these issues being more broad than just having workers out in the field on these targeted campaigns.

06-02:56:25

Sease:

I have to preface this by saying my awareness of what was going on internally in issues like that across that swathe of time is so narrow. I mean, I was back here focused on passing wilderness bills. I am aware that we had some environmental justice program, that it gradually grew over time. My first really serious awareness of it came during early 2000s with Greg Haegele, who was hired as a deputy to Bruce Hamilton. This was after a couple of disastrous EDs, and we decided we basically wanted to groom somebody from within to be the new ED, and nobody from within that was in line for that had the least bit of interest. So when Bruce decided to hire a deputy, that was one of the things he was looking for, is somebody who might want to be ED someday. I am sure in your conversations people have talked about Greg

Haegele. He had a very short time with the Sierra Club. Tragically died a few years into his tenure. But he was one of the single most brilliant people I have ever worked with. And incredibly caring and dedicated and just capable of making any campaign work. I learned so much from him.

But he [Greg Haegele] was one of the first people I heard articulating, with a goal toward getting it picked up within the Club, that as an organization that we could not survive if we did not become more reflective of the demographics of the country. And he worked with and appointed staff to put together and work with the board on a diversity—at that time, it was called diversity, equity, inclusion. What did they call it? Not a protocol, but a pledge to it. And this happened in 2006, I think, 2007 maybe. And the board adopted two different things. One was just sort of setting it as this is a policy and a value we have, and the second was digging a little more deeply into and here's how we will invest volunteer and staff time in moving us in that direction. And it ultimately emerged into a department with a department head that looks at that issue. I mean, it is a serious commitment by an organization to, this is going to be one of the pillars of what we do. But, you know, the Sierra Club, it's a big wallowing organization, and like anything that goes through that it's one of many challenges and priorities that the Club will grapple with, and not any part of it's going to be perfect.

06-03:00:12

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. Maybe we can take this time to step back to look both forward and backward in thinking. What do you hope for the Sierra Club in going forward? What do you hope will be its future?

06-03:00:32

Sease: I hope that the Sierra Club defines a path and a way to continue to be the Sierra Club rooted in the protection of place and land and water and expanded to humanity, that engages people of all races and provides benefits to people of all economic strata. And that it does that in a way that continues to have its volunteer ballast that keeps it from—keeps it truly democratic, set on a basic course. I think that's a hard wish for the Club, because the challenge is that it has become the organization it is, appealing to the values and priorities of a set of people who are fairly monochromatic and monovalued. Those are good values they have, but they're not very diverse. And as you try to become more diverse, you have to open yourself to more diverse priorities and values. I mean, so I question, does the Sierra Club become a place that's a really good grassroots activist place for ending police brutality, because that is the priority of people? Certainly the way the Sierra Club has operated in the past, that would be the trajectory we took in terms of setting priorities. It'd be based on what the people who were at the table cared about most. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. But in my vision, I would like to see it add, as opposed to subtract. So build a more diverse organization that is focused on the environment, and not the environment through a narrow lens but the environment. I would hope it's not an organization that decides to be

embarrassed by having set aside parks and wilderness. And yet it's possible that it could. Look at it the wrong way and you could say, you know, "Parks are for the privileged class." I don't believe that, but I think it's a path one could go.

06-03:03:39

Eardley-Pryor: In looking the other direction, thinking about the past of the Club and where it has come in your long engagement within it, what are some of the things that you are most proud of?

06-03:03:57

Sease: Well, depends on how you look at pride. If I look at pride of where have I had the most impact, where is the difference of me existing versus not, going to make the biggest difference, probably it is the many, many interns and young staff that I supervised. I had an intern year-round in my first ten years at the Club, and I look at what those interns have done. They might have done exactly those things without me. Some of them would have become lawyers instead of becoming heads of environmental associations. But I have had a pretty good bench of interns who, later in life, came to me and said, "You made such a difference for me. You gave me an opportunity that started me down this path." And I think about the work that they continue to do, and I say that is a contribution that is not going to be made moot by rising sea level that wipes out the national park that I helped establish. So that's probably the thing I am most proud of, or that I think will have the most lasting impact.

06-03:05:27

The work on redesigning the Resilient Habitat is also something that I feel proud of, because it had a good end result and it brought a lot of people who—there was a choice at the beginning of that of losing people, of alienating people, one set or another of people, and that process was additive as opposed to taking something away. I had not even the biggest part in it, but I had a small part and I feel really good about that. And probably the third thing is building on the redesigns that so many people did for the political program and actually getting it across the finish line as a redesign.

06-03:06:49

Eardley-Pryor: Are there any other stories that come to mind that you want to share about your time and engagement with the Club?

06-03:06:44

Sease: Oh, I'm sure I'll think of many of them after we've hung up. [laughter]

06-03:06:50

Eardley-Pryor: Well, I want to say, as we come to the conclusion of your oral history here, that it has been an absolute pleasure to speak with you, Debbie, and to hear these stories and to bond with you over them. So, thank you for sharing them with me.

06-03:07:05

Sease: Well, you're welcome. You are a very good interviewer. I have been infinitely more candid than I ever intended to be.

06-03:07:15

Eardley-Pryor: Well, I certainly appreciate that. Thank you.

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Debbie Sease resume from 2019

Debbie Sease

Senior Director Lobbying and Advocacy

Sierra Club

Washington, DC

An Experienced Leader with a Proven Record

- Leading successful legislative and administrative advocacy campaigns
- Building effective cross functional teams
- Managing complex projects
- Devising winning strategies using both inside and outside approaches
- Driving program development and redesign
- Leading teams through multiple consecutive and cascading change processes
- Raising money, stewarding and developing donors
- Developing and managing budgets
- Efficiently using resources to maximize impact
- Managing staff at all levels
- Leading programmatic assessments and redesigns
- Building trust and strong partnerships with volunteers and chapters and
- Working effectively in diverse coalitions

Sierra Club Work History Highlights

Senior Director Lobbying and Advocacy Sierra Club (2014-present)

- Currently oversee 7 units: Federal Policy Team, State Advocacy Team, Political Program, Federal and International Climate Campaign, Gender and Equity Program, Living Economy Program, Democracy Program. Manage 7 direct reports plus 18 indirect reports.
- Led an assessment and redesign of the Political Program in 2015 that developed a multi cycle plan to build capacity for a fundable program that leverages Sierra Club's strengths, broke the cycle of losing staff every cycle and led to growth in scale and effectiveness
- Developed a new advocacy capacity to support chapter lobbying and enhance collaboration and coordination between chapters and with federal lobbying, two staff currently and has led to greater cooperation and coordination
- Coordinated final push to secure Obama Administration actions
- Steered collaborative effort to shift from federal offense to defense in the face of Trump victory and developed effective defense strategy
- Restructured Federal Policy Team

Federal Campaigns Director Sierra Club (2005-2014)

- Project manager for Building Environmental Community Project
- Helped lead Resilient Habitat Redesign that resulted in Our Wild America Campaign
- Led reorganization of Washington Office
- Managed consolidation of two offices and move into current building

Legislative Director (1993-2005)

- Led SC administrative advocacy campaigns for stronger soot and smog standards and roadless area protection
- Coordinated SC engagement on Waxman Markey Climate Legislation
- Orchestrated iconic and attention-getting 21 chainsaw salute (protest) to President Clinton in Lafayette Park
- Represented Sierra Club in coalition lobbying effort to defeat NAFTA (unsuccessful)
- Created a model for staff engagement in political program with the biggest ever staff participation in EVEC and SCPC
- Dealt with longstanding structural and staff morale and management issues in the Washington office

Lands Team Director (1989-1993)

- Built a lands team with three new hires
- Coordinated team efforts on wilderness, ancient forests, endangered species, Arctic Refuge defense
- Led campaign to establish 6 million acres of new protection in the California Desert

Public Lands Lobbyist (1981-1989)

- Led collaborative campaigns to designate the first BLM wilderness areas
- Proposed a legislative model for BLM managed National Monument (El Malpais) and established BLM conservation areas in the San Pedro, Gila Box and Red Rock Canyon.
- Helped to secure wild river designations for the Rio Chama, Rio Grande, and Meced Rivers
- Helped to defeat damaging proposals including MX missile, Federal land disposal proposals and efforts by Secretary Watt to administratively release wilderness study areas

Work History Prior to Sierra Club

Lobbyist on public lands for The Wilderness Society, Consultant for Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, The Wilderness Society and Friends of The Earth, Acting Executive Director for a small organization offering educational wilderness adventures, river and wilderness guide.

Volunteer Service, Awards and Recognition

Sierra Club Special Achievement Award, 2005

Sierra Club Mike McCloskey Award, 1999

Profiled in High Country News article, 2011

League of Conservation Voters Board, 1993- 2003

Founding member American Rivers Board

Partnership Project Board and Executive Committee