



“I HOPE...”: VISIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE IN COASTAL LOUISIANA
A PORTRAIT AND INTERVIEW SERIES FEATURING LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN COASTAL PROTECTION AND RESTORATION

Narrator: KELLYN LACOUR-CONANT

Interviewer: LAUREN LEONPACHER

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00;00;00;10 - 00;00;26;00

LAUREN: My name is Lauren Leonpacher, interviewing Kellyn Lacour-Conant concerning her memories and experiences in Louisiana wetlands, as well as her hopes for a sustainable future in coastal Louisiana. This interview is being conducted on Scotts Bluff on the campus of Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on the afternoon of October 22nd, 2021. Do you understand that portions of the taped interview and pictures taken during the interview will be used in publications and a variety of media?

00;00;26;07 - 00;00;26;19

KELLYN: Yes.

00;00;27;04 - 00;00;28;26

LAUREN: Please state your full name and spell it.

00;00;29;11 - 00;00;38;02

KELLYN: My name is Kellyn Lacour-Conant. K-E-L-L-Y-N L-A-C-O-U-R - C-O-N-A-N-T.

00;00;38;18 - 00;00;40;27

LAUREN: If you'd like. You can tell us your birth date and where you were born.

00;00;41;07 - 00;00;45;03

KELLYN: I was born April 13th, 1993 in Houston, Texas.

00;00;45;24 - 00;00;46;25

LAUREN: Did you grow up in Houston?

00;00;47;06 - 00;00;56;13

KELLYN: I did grow up in Houston. Yeah. My family's from Louisiana. My parents moved there before I was born, and I spent all my summers in Louisiana, but I grew up in Houston.

00;00;57;00 - 00;00;59;23

LAUREN: So how long have you lived in coastal Louisiana?

00;01;00;02 - 00;01;03;07

KELLYN: I've lived full time in coastal Louisiana since 2016.

00;01;04;04 - 00;01;09;28

LAUREN: Can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with the wetlands, both personal and professional?

00;01;10;13 - 00;01;36;17

KELLYN: Having grown up in Houston, it's the "Bayou City", so I grew up with the water just being part of the urban landscape. Um, all of my family are avid fishermen and hunters, so I grew up going to Matagorda Bay to go wade fishing with my dad and crabbing with my aunts in Grand Isle. Um, used to go bird hunting and all sorts of things.

00;01;36;17 - 00;02;06;15

KELLYN: So my family is from a small village originally along a river that runs through Kisatchie Forest. So wetland ecosystems have always just been a part of my family heritage and culture, and have always been present throughout my life. And it just felt natural to break into this field, professionally, um, because it's always been a passion of mine and I want to protect my home.

00;02;07;04 - 00;02;21;19

KELLYN: And the more that I learned about opportunities in science, it just felt right to do this type of work to protect my home and the water and the land that my community loves and needs.

00;02;21;23 - 00;02;32;18

LAUREN: So we're interviewing you today because you've been a huge advocate for coastal restoration. Can you tell us a little bit about your academic and professional pathway that led you to where you are now?

00;02;33;09 - 00;03;01;11

KELLYN: Sure. So in high school, I was recruited by the Student Conservation Association um, to do environmental advocacy and conservation projects throughout the Houston area, as well as in Galveston and Katy. Um, and so I did that throughout the school year. And in doing so, they sponsored to send me to national parks in different areas over the summer to do these summer trail hitches.

00;03;02;23 - 00;03;30;06

KELLYN: Um, I would not have been able to travel and see these places otherwise. They sent me to Alaska and Arizona, Washington. So I got to learn about restoration ecology from professionals and actually do that hands-on work myself as a high schooler. And it just blew my mind that, "People do this professionally? Like you can be outdoors and you can do trail work and you can restore forests professionally? That's a real job. That's just not something that, you know.. You can make a career out of!" That blew my mind.

00;03;30;06 - 00;04;03;17

KELLYN: And so I studied biology in undergrad. Um, I went to a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts, Amherst College. Originally, I thought I wanted to study journalism or anthropology because I wanted to address big social issues, but it just made most sense for me to address environmental issues because that helps everyone else too. Everyone needs a healthy place to live. Animals need a healthy place to live. Um, so I started studying biology, and focused specifically on restoration ecology.

00;04;03;17 - 00;04;43;07

KELLYN: Um, as someone who grew up in the Gulf Coast, oil spills happen every day, and so that was something in the forefront of my mind that I wanted to possibly address one day professionally to help protect the Gulf Coast. Um, so I studied biology, did some internships with the Nature Conservancy and Georgia Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Georgia DNR actually, doing preserve stewardship and prescribed fire work.

00;04;43;11 - 00;05;06;17

KELLYN: And I was slowly trying to make my way back home to the Gulf Coast, just taking jobs where I could seasonally, trying to make my way back home. And was offered an assistantship at Nicholls State

University in Marine and Environmental Biology, studying long term oil impacts from Deepwater Horizon. And...that, that was my dream. You know, I wanted to work on oil spill impacts along the Gulf Coast.

00;05;07;12 - 00;05;37;26

KELLYN: And that's... That was my big game changer. I wanted to be back in Louisiana. I wanted to be closer to home. I wanted to be studying wetlands. And from there, it's just...it's just snowballed from there. I've taken every opportunity I could to really invest myself here and be a part of the community and learn everything I can about wetland ecosystems and try to find my niche and how I can best serve the Gulf Coast and the state of Louisiana.

00;05;40;21 - 00;06;10;20

KELLYN: Um, after Nicholls, I took a job with the state Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, working on large scale restoration projects and feasibility issues. And then I shifted gears and went into the nonprofit world looking at food insecurity and urban farms in Baton Rouge, um trying to connect people with growing their own food, trying to put produce in corner stores and food pantries.

00;06;11;14 - 00;06;41;25

KELLYN: Um, and then this year, I took a position with the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana as a restoration programs director overseeing our Oyster Shell recycling program and our native plant program. And I am also a Ph.D. student here at Southern University in Baton Rouge in the Department of Urban Forestry focusing on traditional and local ecological knowledge as it relates to forested and coastal ecosystems.

00;06;43;07 - 00;07;03;01

LAUREN: So it sounds like you've had a lot of diversity in the types of jobs that you've had and the location. So you've probably got a lot of different kinds of experiences. Is there any moment or.. or memory that you can recall that made you feel particularly hopeful to do this kind of work?

00;07;05;15 - 00;07;33;26

KELLYN: Yes. Um, last year during the midst of COVID, I participated in the Sacred Waters Pilgrimage, which is hosted by the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, the United Houma Nation, and a number of indigenous tribes up and down the Mississippi River. And so we did in-person visits as well as virtual ceremony, every full moon from Juneteenth to Winter Solstice.

00;07;33;26 - 00;08;01;09

KELLYN: We started at the headwaters of the Mississippi and made our way down to the delta landing in Venice, Louisiana. And that sisterhood, that togetherness, bringing people together to learn about how we're connected by the water and how we can help heal each other, and heal the water, and the water can help heal us. Um, that was... really needed for me.

00;08;02;10 - 00;08;36;07

KELLYN: Um, the culminating event was the winter solstice ceremony in Venice, Louisiana. And just being on the on the beach across from Fort Saint Philip, you know, in the middle of the night, just surrounded by women of color and allies and just... being connected by the water and helping to lift each other up, that made me feel really hopeful because everybody I know in this field is busting their tail trying to do everything that they can for other people, for their community.

00;08;36;07 - 00;08;47;29

KELLYN: For the water, for their environment. And it's a good reminder that you're surrounded by good people who just want to lift each other up and support each other and you're not alone in this world.

00;08;49;14 - 00;09;10;28

LAUREN: I would imagine that there were a lot of really beautiful conversations that happened in that space, over a period of those different spaces. Did you talk about what you personally or collectively envision the future of coastal Louisiana looking like? What a long-term goal would be and how we could work to achieve that goal?

00;09;13;19 - 00;09;38;18

KELLYN: Yeah, I always fall back to the three L's of Land, Language and Liberation. You know, it feels like a lot of the issues that we deal with today, they're not new. They've been centuries in the making. Um...and they're tied up.. The environmental issues that we experience, they are directly tied up to how we treat each other and how we treat human beings.

00;09;38;27 - 00;10;10;14

KELLYN: I think when culture started to separate humans from the ecosystem, and treat them as separate entities, as humans as superior to nature or what have you, and try to control and dominate it, that started this toxicity that we feel today. I don't think it's a surprise that even in economically developed country like the US, we have high instances of maternal mortality. We have a lot of poor health indicators.

00;10;10;14 - 00;10;41;24

KELLYN: So, clearly what we're doing, industry wise or economic wise, it's not actually helping our people. A lot of our people are sick, whether it be mentally or physically or what have you. And we see the same thing in our environment. Our environment is sick. Um, so what I would like to see for the future is us to reconnect to the earth and to our environment. The earth that we're standing on, that's our oldest ancestor.

00;10;41;25 - 00;11;05;17

KELLYN: Same with the water and the air. They were here long before us, and they're going to be here long after we're gone. And I think if we start to put our place in the world in perspective and stop trying to dominate nature, and try to learn from it and live with it, that will change our perspectives and how we engage with nature, and how we navigate this world.

00;11;06;09 - 00;11;11;27

KELLYN: And we'll stop trying to fight a losing battle, and hopefully it'll make ourselves better.

00;11;14;27 - 00;11;35;04

LAUREN: Can you talk a little bit about what knowledge you would want to pass on to future generations of Louisianians to know about what we're doing now? Trying to preserve this land, trying to restore and make a difference, trying to reconnect. Um, just describe to us anything that you think would be something we'd like to...to pass on to them.

00;11;38;02 - 00;12;13;27

KELLYN: Um, just the joy and the beauty! Us being out here today. We're in the middle of Baton Rouge, I-10 is right there, but how can you not look out on the river and see the fish jumping, and the waves and the wind, and just not feel filled with joy? And that's something that I feel is missing sometimes in our conversations about natural resources, or economics, or...you know why we're protecting this.... I feel like it shouldn't be a partisan issue at all.

00;12;14;06 - 00;12;36;03

KELLYN: We should want to protect this land and the water for future generations to come so that they can thrive and feel the same joy that we've had living in Louisiana. It's such a unique, special place. Nowhere else like this. I wish I could take a snapshot, and, you know, just give it to the next generation.