In Hot Water- Episode 4- Social.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:11] Three generations hit the road to explore key seafood producing regions across the U.S. and hear from people working at the intersections of fisheries, aquaculture, seafood, and conservation while grappling with the effects of the global climate crisis. We may represent three generations, but we have a lot in common, namely a love of seafood and a dedication to contribute to community driven generational effort in movement towards climate justice. The result of these travels? Welcome to in Hot Water, a seafood and climate podcast series. Join me, Julie Kuchepatov Gen X, along with my travel companions

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:00:45] Crystal Sanders-Alvarado, Xennial and

Cameron Moore [00:00:47] Cameron Moore, Gen Z

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:49] as we travel the country and chat with people who share the challenges facing their region and their personal stories along the way we experienced some moments that make us ask "what the heck" as we try to understand why we are in hot water and what we can do about it. In this episode, we'll hear from academics, farmers, fishers, and activists about the root causes of inequality in the seafood sector in the region and their connection to climate change. We'll understand why we shouldn't discount Texas, or the youth, who are set to inherit a planet that is in hot water. I'm delighted to introduce Crystal Sanders-Alvarado, my traveling companion, audio engineer, producer, and contributor for this podcast, as well as The Conch podcast, and founder and captain of Seaworthy, a socio environmental equity building organization rooted in radical scholarship and dedicated to advancing systemic change for the healing of our communities, our land, and our oceans. Welcome to this side of the mic, Crystal. Tell us about your background and growing up here in the Coastal Bend of Texas, and how you became interested in fish and seafood.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:01:45] I left Texas in 2008. I grew up here my whole life in South Texas, in the Coastal Bend in between Beeville, Corpus Christi, and Aransas Pass. That's kind of where my circular path in Texas was. And I grew up in Beeville and Aransas Pass, kind of simultaneously. My great grandma and grandfather lived in Aransas Pass. My grandmother was raised there and when I graduated high school, I went to community college in Beeville and then came to Texas A&M for my bachelor's and attended grad school here as well. Researched fisheries when I started out at A&M, it was kind of like I wanted to be a marine biologist, I knew that like that was that was it. I knew I wanted to do that when I was like young, like at 12, I think is like my earliest memories of, I'm going to be a marine biologist, but I didn't really know what that fully meant or what the possibilities were and how really vast the possibilities are in this, like quote unquote marine biologist profession. And so, when I was young, I definitely thought it was like, oh, you like work with whales and dolphins, and that's like the sum of marine biology. And I saw a meme recently and it was like, why does, why do kids of like the 80s think that marine biologist is like the ultimate career? And then it was it's like a picture of Lisa Frank. And it's like these like psychedelic dolphins jumping through and it was like, this is why. And I was like, oh, yeah, that probably played some sort of part in it too. But I grew up on the coast. My grandfather and grandmother would take me to Aransas Pass every weekend. We'd go visit my great grandma, and then I would go fishing with my grandfather. And I think that that just developed my love of the ocean early, and I was just fascinated and can remember being fascinated with the ocean at that time. And we'd go fishing, and I didn't care if we were catching what we could eat. I was just like, what can I pull out of the water

and see what it is? And I still approach fishing like that today, so it's like, I don't care what I catch, I just want to see what it is and identify it. And if I can eat it, awesome. And then came to school and just kind of was like, I'm going to study marine biology and I got into it then and didn't really know but then it was like once I took ichthyology and Dr. McKee was my professor, that just like really was like, Holy shit, this is the rest of my life like, like fish is it and fish are everything. Which still remains true, even though it's like I'm kind of, my professional path and career is, is a really interesting experience of all the things and holding all the things. I still am obviously interfaced in seafood and have done most careers that involve the water and fish across the gamut, from academia and research to government agencies, working in the seafood industry, consulting in this area with the seafood industry, cooking, storytelling and I think all of it comes back to this like education and storytelling piece and this continuing to want to share information and so I very much identify as a scholar and so rooting down into like scholarship. But what I've always felt and part of the reason I left an academic path is because there's all of this information that's being found out. We do science over and over to get new knowledge, but then that knowledge doesn't really make it into the hands of the people that can do something with it. And scientists, most scientists, are notoriously bad science communicators unless they're talking to other scientists and that doesn't help us in the world at large to solve a lot of these global issues that we're trying to solve and so my path is kind of winded, in a roundabout way, to work with people who are on the ground and doing things like purchasing seafood directly, helping consumers understand what that means for them, helping chefs and restaurants and markets understand what that means for them, and then working through wholesale channels and larger purchasing to really bring that science into the ground, on the ground level with people who are interfacing with these issues but aren't scientists. And being somebody that they can ask those questions to, to be like, well, this label says it's sustainable. Why, can I buy it? And then and I am unfortunately usually the bearer of bad news and dasher of dreams like, nope, sorry. That's even though they say it's sustainable, it doesn't mean it is and here's why. And then here I'm going to explain to you the science behind why I'm telling you no. And sometimes the science by why I'm telling you yes. Like, yes, this is, and these are the reasons why and this is what we know. But I'm not going to do it in this complex way that a lot of academic scientists would approach it in being like, okay, well, statistically we've got this. I can talk about that too later, but I'm going to tell the story first and the way it connects with the person that I'm talking to in their own context, so that they can understand how it applies to their daily life. While I, myself, can also then go talk to the scientist and understand it and talk with them in their context, and then same, I've worked with a lot of fishers and helping them understand the context of the science, but I'm also a fisher, so I can, you know, I've come to learn the language later is code-switching, you know. I've code-switched my whole entire life and didn't know what that was until getting more vocabulary in social justice spaces in the last ten years or so.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:34] Speaking of communicating and the importance of language. When conducting research in preparation for this podcast, I understood that it's not advised to use the term, quote, climate, unquote here because it's politicized, and many are in denial about it. So, you can talk about the effects of climate change, like rising sea levels and increased storm frequency and intensity, but, god forbid, use the actual words climate and change. What do you think the challenges around climate change in the Gulf are right now? And why can't we talk directly about them as they relate to climate change?

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:08:04] Yeah, I think numerous right and just all-encompassing and there's the obvious that we talk about like sea level rise and rising

ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, and that is all very like prominent and especially in an area that relies on seafood and relies on the ocean and the nourishment that it produces for us as humans, both through food, through, you know, spiritual connection, through time outside, all the all the ways that we are nourished by the ocean, through oxygen that we breathe. And, you know, those things are happening and there's I think one of the largest hurdles to get over is to help people understand that they're real, that we know that climate change is caused by humans, that it's a very large thing that we need to address, that we all can't do it as like, I as an individual can't do it on my own, but we need to move past this like denial that it's happening. And one of the things that really like, to use a very Texan phrase, since we're here, chaps my hide is, is these conversations around like, well, we can't say climate change. If we say climate change, we're going to lose people. And it also chaps my hide in the conversation around sustainable seafood and like we need to not call it sustainable, we need to call it something else. And it's like you can't even get people. It's been called sustainable seafood for over 20 years, and you are still arguing about what, oh, what does it mean to different people? It's like sustainable is literally in that damn dictionary. Look it up. It's an established definition. This is what it means. Get behind it. We don't need to be like, your feelings are going to get hurt if I say sustainable or your feelings are going to get hurt if I say climate change, we know what these things mean. It's well documented by many, many people across disciplines across the globe. It's not just a left liberal California thing. It's like really happening. So, when there's these conversations, especially in like really educated spaces and academic spaces of like if we say climate change, we're going to lose people or we can't say it, it's only perpetuating this denial and we're losing time like we are in a race against time here. It's a waste of time, in my opinion, just like to be frank, to be just like, oh, well, like, how do we say climate change without saying climate change? It's like, just fucking say climate change because that's what it is. The more we like allow this skirting of the actual conversation, the more harm we're doing. I work at this point in my life in sustainability, but I've shifted more into the social equity aspects of it all and it's the same thing in that where we're trying to protect the privileged, where when we say, oh, well, we can't say racism, we're going to talk about racism and all the effects of racism, but we're not going to actually call it racism, or we're going to talk about all of the effects of white supremacy, but we can't say white supremacy because it's going to offend people. And these are the same exact people that are like calling people snowflakes and being like, oh, your feelings are so sensitive. It's just like, okay, there's actual facts to what we're saying here. And like, feelings matter, but like we have factual historical information about racism, about white supremacy, and we have factual information about climate change and that humans are causing it. We also have factual information that white supremacy is directly tied to climate change.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:11:55] One of the best eye opening like explanations of this that I have encountered is Dr. Rupa Marya. She is a doctor at University of California, San Francisco, UCSF. I attended a talk she gave at the Bioneers conference several years ago. I believe it was in 2018. But she put up a graphic that literally hit me in the chest and brought it all together. And she's since wrote a book with Raj Patel called Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice. And so, her graphic basically started off with colonialism, with an arrow coming down to white supremacy, coming down to capitalism. And then I'm going to pause at that. And then on the other end, we move through some different arrows that go in different directions. And I think we can probably share this graphic in the show notes. And her premise, the final arrow ended up into sickness and illness. And then when we go back from there, it was all illness comes from inflammation. All inflammation comes from trauma. And then the arrows from there go all the way back up to capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. So, what she posits then, is the only

way to get rid of the sickness that we're experiencing. All illness that we're experiencing is for us to decolonize, to dismantle white supremacy and decolonize in the North American United States context of where we are. And so, we know, right, that oil and gas industries, which are very prominent in this Corpus Christi area, they're literally surrounding us and we know that they had science very early on. I'm forgetting the exact year, but this has come up recently saying where they're scientists, their own, the oil and gas scientists predicted climate change, saying if we continue, this is what's going to happen. These are the repercussions. This is what we're going to experience. And then they bury that research and hid it. And then they did it anyway. And here we are. And then now the science that we actually have going back to that science that they had, and their predictions are very closely comparable. They did nothing about it there because they were concerned for profit, and they had a capitalist motive. And capitalism, part of the tenants of capitalism, is you do everything you can to maximize profit at any cost, human, environmental, any cost. The dollar is the end all, be all. And that tenant comes from white supremacy, right? We've shown that people can live in harmony with the land. Indigenous people across lands and time immemorial have harvested, have used what the land and the waters have provided, and done so in a way where it can be replenished, where it's sustainable, where it's regenerative, where it's whatever you want to call it, responsible. Yeah. This traditional knowledge of Indigenous people was ignored, and Indigenous people themselves were erased through genocide, and that knowledge fell away and had to be privatized by them. They had to keep it to themselves in order for survival. And capitalism has continued to proliferate. White supremacy has continued to proliferate, and we're coming into a time where we are seeing shifts in that. And while we're seeing shifts in that, we're seeing this awakening of people to like, we can't continue this way in any of it, right. And then we're also seeing the, like, beasts of capitalism and white supremacy taking their dying breath and like, coming back and fighting as hard as they possibly can, particularly through horrible legislation. Like, you can't say climate change and not solving anything. It's just like, you know, flat out climate change isn't going anywhere, and gay people aren't going anywhere. Not talking about it or telling people not to talk about it, banning books, isn't going to change anything. So, this rise in fascism is directly tied to our climate issues and the future of all humanity no matter who you are. You could be a white supremacist and you are still going to be affected by climate change. You aren't going to be saved. So, that's, you know, some ways that they tie together. They're numerous and, you know, climate change is this large concept, right? It's something that's happening. You know, it's used as a verb. It's used a noun. And so, I think, yeah, when people hear the term climate change who have not been told about these different facets of climate change, we've talked to people on this trip and they've said things like, yeah, we've gotten these really big storms. We've had these like really serious droughts. We've had a lot of rain and it's really unusual lately. And then we got this like really hard freeze, and we didn't have electricity, and nobody had heaters and, and I hear that a lot while I'm down here too. But so it's not unique to our interviews. It's not unique to the people we've talked to. It's like people in my community here who name these things, and then it's like, we don't know what's going on, like, why is this happening? And it's just like, this is climate change, and this is why it's happening. And I think the detriment to not naming climate change, like very explicitly, leaves people in this darkness of why didn't I have electricity when it was 20 degrees outside, and I didn't have any heat? One, that's a policy thing that's specifically a Texas energy grid calculated decision by the state of Texas to keep people without power in these times, because Texas is removed from the rest of the entire country energy grid, which if they were connected, nobody would have gone without electricity during these freezes. The heavy rains, the increased hurricanes, which are just going to keep coming. It's, Corpus in a very like quote unquote lucky area when it comes to the lottery of hurricanes and doesn't get hit very often but with climate change, the storms are going to

increase in frequency and they're going to increase in strength and Corpus's lotto ticket is not going to always hold up, and that's climate change.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:00] Speaking of white supremacy, there's a significant group of shrimp fishers in Texas that we have only mentioned once in this series, and they deserve more than a mention. I'm talking about the Vietnamese people who immigrated to the U.S. and Texas, in particular, following the end of the Vietnam War. The majority of Vietnamese American shrimpers arrived in the United States during the second and third waves of immigration following the end of the war, and many of them were already seasoned shrimpers and fishers. So, there's a book called The Fisherman and the Dragon: Fear, Greed, and a Fight for Justice on the Gulf Coast, which outlines the struggle of fishers of the Gulf Coast of Texas in the 1970s, the decline of the shrimp fishery due to the poisons from the nearby petrochemical plants, oil spills, pesticides, and concrete. The real culprit of the decline. Instead of blaming the chemical plants, according to the book, white shrimpers could only see one culprit - the small and growing number of newly resettled Vietnamese refugees who had recently started fishing. From the book, "Turf was claimed, guns were flashed. Threats were made after a white crabber was killed by a young Vietnamese refugee in self-defense. The situation became a tinderbox primed to explode, and the Grand Dragon of the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan saw an opportunity to stoke fishermen's rage and prejudices. At a massive Klan rally near Galveston Bay one night in 1981, he strode over to an old boat graffitied with the words USS Vietcong, torch in hand, and issued a 90-day deadline for the refugees to leave. Or else, quote, it's going to be a hell of a lot more violent than Vietnam, unquote." The white fisherman roared as the boat burned. Convinced that if they could drive these newcomers from the coast, everything would return to normal. The Southern Poverty Law Center intervened and took the KKK to court, charging that they infringed on the Vietnamese shrimpers' civil rights. The courts ruled in favor of the Vietnamese and the Klan, as well as the shrimpers they attempted to help, were forced to back down. Today, the Lone Star State remains home to thriving communities of Vietnamese Americans, including over 80,000 people in Houston. And Vietnamese shrimpers still call Sea Drift, the coastal town where the conflict was concentrated, their home. However, in addition to the challenges facing the Texan shrimp industry, which we discussed at length in this podcast series, Vietnamese shrimpers experience additional challenges such as the de facto resurgence of racial exclusion through limiting licenses, and evidence suggests that the failing economics of shrimping, i.e., rising cost of doing business combined with increased imports of less expensive shrimp into the U.S. From countries such as Vietnam and China, has affected Vietnamese American shrimpers more than others. The Mobile Register reported in April 2005 that most of the hundreds of shrimping boats repossessed over the past three years belong to Asian Americans. But much of this information was found on the website Facing South, and particularly from an article called "The History of Vietnamese-American Shrimpers in Texas." You can learn more about this history and conflict in the 2019 documentary Sea Drift, which examines the reverberations of the shrimpers conflict with the Klan. And we absolutely must mention another champion, Diane Wilson. This information here is mostly from an interview of Diane with Delger Erdenesanaa in the Texas Observer from April 24th, 2023. "For three decades, Diane Wilson, a fourth-generation shrimper from Sea Drift, has been trying to hold Formosa Plastics accountable for its pollution in Texas. Polyvinyl chloride powder from the plant dusted everything in town when she was young, and by the 1980s, more and more sick and mutated fish were showing up in locals' catches. In 1989, Wilson learned Calhoun County had the most toxic pollution of any county nationally, according to EPA rankings. What followed was a harrowing fight to clean up industry on the Gulf Coast and save her beloved Lavaca Bay with a series of hunger strikes, arrests, legal action, and books. Her first is titled An Unreasonable Woman. As family and friends

shunned Wilson for going against the county's biggest employer, she persisted. Wilson became a staunch ally of the region's Vietnamese fishermen, who in the early 80s were targeted by the Ku Klux Klan for supposedly encroaching on white fishermen's territory when pollution was the real culprit behind dwindling commercial fisheries. Finally, in 2019, Wilson was vindicated with the historic $50 million settlement from Formosa for its pervasive plastic nurdle pollution. Her victory was the largest ever settlement won by a citizen from an industrial polluter under the federal Clean Water Act. Formosa has been ordered to cease discharging plastic nurdles in the wastewater and clean up the plastic that's accumulated over decades in Lavaca Bay, Matagorda Bay, and Cox's Creek. Wilson donated the whole settlement to a trust to be used for a variety of environmental causes. She was recently recognized worldwide with the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize. The Goldman Prize is the highest international award for grassroots environmentalism, akin to the Nobel Peace Prize. Each year, the prize committee recognizes six activists from six continents, and Wilson is North America's 2023 winner." She's also the co-founder of Code Pink, the Texas Jail Project, Texas Injured Workers, Injured Workers National Network, and continues to lead the fight for social justice. So, in a full circle moment linking her fight against polluters in her own backyard and her support of Vietnamese shrimpers, she recently concluded a hunger strike to protest against the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel Corporation, a subsidiary of Formosa Plastics Group in Vietnam. In 2016, the steel plant released toxic chemicals into the ocean. The chemicals included phenol, cyanide, and iron hydroxide, which killed fish and other marine life and polluted the waters along the coast. This information was taken from the San Antonio Bay Waterkeeper website. The disaster caused significant damage to the local fishing industry, which was the primary livelihood for many in the region. Fishermen reported massive fish die offs and illnesses after catching fish from polluted waters. The government issued a fishing ban in the affected areas, leaving many fishermen without work. The protest was to demand the Formosa Plastics Group, its subsidiary, and the Vietnamese government to compensate the thousands of Vietnamese fishermen whose fisheries and livelihoods were ruined by the Formosa Steel Factory disaster and asked the Vietnamese government to stop retaliation and release prisoners who sought justice in international courts. Diane has written several books. I mentioned An Unreasonable Woman, and there's a film about her called The Water Keeper. Through Diane and our guests on the podcast series, we see so many incredible and formidable champions of the environment and the communities that are fighting for a climate just future. I'm from Portland, Oregon. Crystal spends time between San Francisco and Texas, and Cameron lives in Denver, so we are all relatively ensconced in these pretty liberal bubbles. Why should we engage in conservative spaces?

Jennifer Pollack [00:25:50] In fact, I'm going to take you on a little side trail, but I just had a professional conversation with some colleagues who are from more liberal places for sure and having this conversation about, you know, there's a, there's been sort of a response from a lot of professional organizations and societies. They don't want to bring meetings to places that are not welcoming to all people and, and it's this sort of been this struggle for me personally and for those of us who live in the places that are then being sort of excluded from bringing in the voices that really need to be here because on one hand, I totally agree, like there's, what other way can people protest besides saying like, we're not going to bring our money and spend it in, in the places where you've deemed or you've made these decisions. But on the other hand, we are still living and working here and these, if you, if you don't come to the places where we are, it, it arguably does more harm, right? Because then the bubble, you know, then the voices that you don't want to hear also don't just become very distant or disappear and then it sort of becomes normalized. So, I, yeah, it's a challenge for me. I always, I also joke that it's much harder to sort of feel the way you feel in places where that's not necessarily the prevailing sentiment

and so I think having lived many, many places and I would say like running across the gamut of the political spectrum, you can always find your people. It just takes a little bit more time in certain places so it's sort of like, you know, you can find your community wherever you are.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:27:26] So when we ask, like, what can we do on all of these things: climate change, solving for white supremacy, for racism, for social justice, injustices, it all starts inside of you and it all starts in your home and the smallest step, right. And that is going to be practice for the bigger steps, for the things outside. And it's really about what you do when no one's looking. And what decisions are you making when you're not performing for other people in California, in Portland and Denver, you know, like when you're not having to compare yourself and be better to somebody in the South, right. Because all of that work that, that all the liberal states will just start calling that, platform themselves on, started in the South. The civil rights era didn't originate in San Francisco. It was down here. And the forward thinking starts with communities of color in areas where they are highly marginalized, highly oppressed, right. And then privileged people in places like California get to co-opt those ideas and pretend they own them, while not actually like standing in solidarity with the people in their cities. And I'll speak to San Francisco specifically in it being, like, considered this liberal haven and we're amazing, which, it's amazing. I feel extremely safe there in my body. I don't feel that same safety in Texas, and I observe the things that aren't affecting me. And gentrification has completely, ongoing gentrification has removed the Black population from San Francisco. It's removed. There's still, I think, there's conflicting numbers between San Francisco's now 3% black population or 6% I saw something the other day, so I don't want to quote one or the other, but it's small in comparison to what it used to be. The areas that were historically Black in San Francisco have been highly gentrified, all of them, forcing people out. When I first came to San Francisco in 2008, it was inhabited by lots of creatives and lots of artists who now can't afford to live there. And San Francisco just continues to ignore that while talking about the South as if they're not doing the same thing, right. And so, starting closer, right, so people in liberal cities need to like, really self-examine what their image of themselves are and being like, oh, we're better than the South. We're better than Texas. Florida, at the moment, is just a shit show of disgust, so most people are better than Florida at this moment but there's also marginalized people in Florida. There's queer and trans people in Florida that are having to flee the state, that are having to move away because of the laws and the policies that are being passed against their bodies. And we as San Franciscans don't have any control over that in terms of like, our voting voice, and state policy in that way, because we don't have input there for, you know, we're not paying taxes. We're not doing any of that business. But we can look at the ways that the same beast of white supremacy, because that's what it is, is being harbored in our liberal cities. What are the ways that we have embraced white supremacy for our own benefit? And how do we start to deny it, right. And we have to, like, be willing to give things up for ourselves, right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:31:38] Another extremely important interested party, and one who will inherit this planet in its emergency state is the youth. Throughout this series, we've heard from Suraida Nañez-James, CEO, and founder of the Gulf Reach Institute. We are fortunate that her daughter Evelyn joined us in further conversation. Evelyn is 11 years old, a soccer player, an ocean advocate, an explorer at heart, and a friend to all animals. She is also the author of two books about a dog called Captain Paws. You're a published author and wrote a two-book series called Captain Paws and Captain Paws and The Attack of the Robo Cat 2000. So, tell me about your books. I am fascinated and what inspired them.

EMJ [00:32:24] Okay, so it was during distance learning, and I was in third grade, and I was bored. And so, I'm like, why don't I write a book? And so, at the time, my dog was next to me, and I was trying to find some inspiration to, like, have a character. And so, I like to my dog and I'm like, you're going to be the character. And so, the entire series is based off my dog. And so, in the book, he, like Captain Paws has, he's a stray and I got it off because, before we got our dog, he escaped for two weeks, and we could not find him. We did get him back, though. And so, in Captain Paws, the Captain Paws is a stray dog, and he gets, like, zapped and he has all these, like, superpowers and uses them to help people. And then the second book, this one is, they're all dedicated to something. So, the first one was dedicated to my dog, Rocky. The second one was dedicated to one of my friend's, cat. And so, the, the cat is the villain in the story. And so, it's like this big cat and, like, wreaks havoc in the city, and I'm not going to spoil it. But of course, Captain Paws saves the day.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:38] So, both of your parents are marine scientists. How did this influence your love of the ocean and experiences growing up on the Gulf Coast?

EMJ [00:33:47] Both of them taught me, like, what our environment is like right now and what we can do to improve that as well as what like animal is this. What are you seeing? And like what, just like observing your environment that you live in.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:02] What are some of the challenges that you think we're experiencing right now or, you know, we're experiencing right now.

EMJ [00:34:07] Pollution. It's a big thing when I go to the beach because, of course, there's nurdles and there's all sorts of different pieces of trash and the water, it doesn't, it sometimes it, it's weird, I don't know, and it doesn't feel the same anymore.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:24] Yeah, and you can notice those changes even in your 11 years.

EMJ [00:34:28] Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:29] You were a speaker at the 2022 Gulf of Mexico Youth Climate Summit, alongside the likes of people like Philippe Cousteau Jr, which we learned about, which is amazing. So, tell me a little bit about that experience.

EMJ [00:34:42] I made some people cry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:45] Did you?

EMJ [00:34:45] Yes, me and my mom made a video, and I did like a voiceover. And so, I talked about the, the changes I see and what I do to help, and also wrote a poem and I read that too, which was basically like what's happening and that we need to find a solution.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:07] And you said it brought people to tears.

EMJ [00:35:09] Yes, it did.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:11] That's amazing.

EMJ [00:35:12] Brought myself to tears as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:13] Did it bring you to tears as well? Yeah. I mean, these are some serious issues that we're talking about, right? Suraida, tell us about how you started the Gulf Reach Institute and the Gulf of Mexico Youth Climate Summit.

Suraida Nañez-James [00:35:26] In 2010, I really started thinking about creating my own organization. I always say that it was always hard to find a place for myself, or, you know, we talk about leadership positions. There wasn't many, and there still is not. If you look at women as CEOs, if you look at Latinas as even smaller percentages that are in those positions. I got tired of waiting. You know that proverbial little thing that people always say is a seat at the table. Well, they're never going to give us a seat at the table or it's going to, it's going to be in their time, you know, whoever controls those tables are going to give us, they're going to decide that. So, I got tired of people deciding when I was invited, so I decided to create my own. And it hasn't been easy. So, the, the Gulf of Mexico Youth Climate Summit is something that the Gulf Reach Institute, I think it's been over two years now. I had, Armon Alex and Maggie Peacock, are two amazing forces, and I saw them doing some of the things that they were doing. Armon was a mentee of mine at the Texas State Aquarium, and I had recommended him for an internship to be a water ambassador with Earth Echo International and he got it. You know, I talked to a person. I said, I know some people. Let's see if we can get you on there. He was within like an hour he filled out an application and he submitted it. And then they had this idea and had been creating some social, social media things, but hadn't really been able to kind of do the first step to launch it. And so, I knew that was an opportunity. It's like one of those you see this like amazing thing and you're like, you know, we have to have this. So, I said, okay, I have this nonprofit, you know, we've been doing some teen science cafes that has a little bit of a different focus, but we would really love to do something that focuses Gulf wide because we really, our mission is uniting the Gulf through education, health, and advocacy, right, because that's what we really need to do. And we just sat, and we have a picture of, I think it was in my bedroom and we're like, hey, do you do you want to come on as a, as a, as our premier youth program? Because I see what you guys are doing and, you know, I can facilitate some of the funding, open doors in the Gulf, use the network that I have and that I've created over many years of being in this area, and maybe something will come out of it. So, we always say that's where kind of the dream started for that. And since then, you know, they've led a lot of efforts locally here, regionally, I've been talking to the city manager and just trying to get sustainability. And there's, there's a lot of push back here and there, but it's also an opportunity to do that. We had our first youth advisory congress. We have two young men from Mexico that are part of that. Last year was the first virtual summit that we had. We had about 200 people sign up online. And of course, we, you know, we were still starting off, we didn't know. And we had Philippe Cousteau. He was our keynote speaker, because he knew Armon and Maggie through, through Earth Echo International. And then we had a couple of folks talk to, had some just talks and panels about voting and all those things. So, all again, all the connections of conservation policy and education and how those intertwine but it was it was focused on, you know, 14 to about 25 is the age range. And it was an opportunity for them as our first one. So, it was open to anybody in the Gulf. Now we're planning the second one, as I think I totally forgot the date. It's like July 15th. That's our first in-person one. So, we're flying in our Youth Advisory Council, and it'll be a small, but I think it's a good launching point for what we want to create. We have a big vision for that. We want to be able to host these across the Gulf and then hopefully internationally someday, but we know that takes time and a lot of sweat and tears to get to that point. But that's the vision is to be able to do that, to really unite our Gulf, our youth. And the thing about the summit is that it is youth led. Like I'm not

there telling them what to do. They're creating a toolkit. It's called Hope for the Gulf. They're looking at the panelists that they want. They're choosing the topics and issues that they see as important, right. If you're looking at diversity in biodiversity, what does that mean in the Gulf and what affects that? So, all of those things, it's really great to see that because we again, it's intergenerational, but it's a, it's a different mindset of what they think is important. What they see is important. And you know what they push forward because some of them are actually doing research. We have one young man doing research in Veracruz and on coral reefs. But the Gulf Ambassador Program will serve more kind of a general ambassador program where they can learn about issues in the Gulf and that's that has to be created, these modules. And then these first ambassadors will also be given funds so that if they have a passion project, if they have an initiative they want to take in their local community, which we emphasize, you know, you work locally and then that connects because when the youth start to connect, they see that, oh yeah, that happens in my community too. And they go across, across countries like, oh yeah, that's happening, we have water issues here. We have habitat issues here. Climate justice issues here. And so that's, that's a great connection for them. So that's a five-year program that we've been given funding for. That'll take some time to, to get off the ground but it's going to be really amazing to see what these young people are doing and then how they use the funds to create change in their own communities, and then how that really unites, you know, all of those, those issues and then ways that they're problem solving and that they're contributing to the solution as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:09] What are some of the things that the youth are doing?

Suraida Nañez-James [00:41:11] Some of them are high school, so, which is amazing to me. They're looking at, I think one young woman is up in north Texas, so she, she applied for the Youth Advisory Congress. She's looking at how when we look at the watershed, right, how inland communities affect trying to connect those two groups of youth. Because you don't have an ocean there, you don't have a Gulf there, but they she understands that we still, they still affect what's happening in the waters there. There's been, of course, like marine debris initiatives. A young man in Florida is doing that. I think Luis is doing or he is doing coral reef ecology at the University of Veracruz. Another young man is looking at, which is super interesting, is there's some type of salamander that's kind of an indicator species in cenotes, and if you don't know what cenotes are, they're basically the only freshwater resource, right, in that Quintana Roo area. But really trying to educate the tourist industry of how that water is being taken and what it, because if they see the change in that and he made a very powerful statement of saying you don't, in all of these big hotels that are being built for tourists and stuff, they don't understand where that water's coming from. And he sees that, and he sees a change in that because it is a big change, right? You got mangroves, all kinds of things. So, they're doing some pretty great things.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:38] Sounds awesome. Why is it important to engage youth in these efforts?

Suraida Nañez-James [00:42:42] Healthy people really create healthy environments. You respect yourself and you respect who you are, and you love yourself. That tends to translate into how you respect the environment, how you love the environment, and how you connect to it. And I think that's kind of the gap right now that we're seeing. But young people have, they have a different mindset. They have no barriers. And that's a good thing sometimes. I hold back. I must admit that I hold back sometimes. We've been conditioned that way. I know I have, and becoming aware of that is, is good because you see these

young people just fighting because we're leaving them, and it sounds like doomsday, right, but it's also an awareness because if you're aware, then you can combat that. I kinda feel like I'm getting emotional now. Because it's where, you know, that's her world. I will not be alive to see the things that she has to go through. And so, if we can do anything and it's intergenerational, we hold a lot of wisdom as well. There's a lot of elders that hold wisdom. There's knowledge keepers. There's all kinds of people who have the capacity to give us and to share with us. But young people also have their own, their own movements and their own creativity and their own passions. And when you combine those, that really creates a powerful place and a voice that we can for, you know, for our Mother Earth who's given us so much. And we take, that's you know, we always say that the earth was fine without us. It did just fine. But no, just it gives us the chance to really think about how we can work together. But what can we do? And what needs to be done and some of those are pretty big asks because we know where a lot of that stems from. And we know that those entities have a lot of power.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:31] What have you, Suraida, learned from the youth?

Suraida Nañez-James [00:44:35] Oh, man. Okay, I'm going to answer that honestly. Is, I've been really blessed to be able to start finding my voice again, right. That's, now I'm getting teary eyed just again. I wanna cry. Again, it was hard being in, in a field where you hear things even though people don't understand that you're listening. Being called certain things and never people don't realize, too, that I was educated. I guess that don't look like I should be educated. Times like, you know, little things that affect you, like, why don't you go back to your country, even though I was born here. Why are you speaking Spanish when you're in America? Even though that's a gift because we're able to connect with so many and communicate. Those little things that that happen personally affect you professionally. And sometimes I think that I kind of step back. All right. And maybe why I left science as a main focus, even though I'm still involved in it. So, seeing these youth who have such courage and some of it is out of necessity because they don't have a choice, right? Like this is the world that they're going to live in, has helped me. And then other groups too, and they're not necessarily youth. A lot of our Indigenous groups here and advocacy groups that we become friends with. They're just fighting for a healthy way of life. Like, it sounds so simple to say. We just want a safe place to live, for our kids to grow up in. We open the water; we are not scared to drink it. If we're breathing air, we don't want to have asthma. And our kids, it's. They're not asking for millions of dollars; they're asking for basic human needs. That's water, air, a place to live. And when I see them do stuff and even Evelyn, she's a lot braver and a lot more direct, I think, than, than I am even now. And so if I'm learning anything is that it's okay to speak up. You're not always going to be liked. And, yeah, it's my voice. It's finding that voice again that I knew I had at one time, and I, I it kind of suppressed and now it's coming back. I can use that for good. And realizing that I have a lot of power within myself as well. Like, I always talk to Crystal because she inspires me as well to just be free and be myself because that's been a big thing and that's why I love her. That's what we're family, right? That's why I say we're related somehow so I don't care about drinking from her water bottle. But, but yeah, she's been a big part of my life, you know, that's, that's Evelyn's aunt, her tia. So yeah, if I had to look at one, it's just, they're just teaching me. They're teaching me how to, to be brave and to gain that courage back. And I think that in itself is extremely powerful because again, you know, and it's not just me, you know, there's other people that, you know, I'm (unintelligible) but yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:47:42] Do you have any tips for like, you know, not losing hope? Like how do we continue to be hopeful and move forward in addressing these challenges? And you can certainly also chime in here.

EMJ [00:47:51] I'd say just look at the good just like find the things that you're like at the beach, like all the seagulls that are super loud, the fish you see swimming through. Just like the animals. Just look at them.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:48:08] And you'll feel hope.

EMJ [00:48:09] And you'll feel hope again.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:48:11] How about you, Suraida.

Suraida Nañez-James [00:48:12] I think that if we're looking at, so I always say like the beach is like my, my recharge zone and so taking her and sometimes she doesn't notice it either, like even when she was little, right. We took her all the time. And even now, like she can spend hours there just looking at the sand, going in the water. Time kind of doesn't make sense anymore like it just kind of fades away. And, if you're looking at like that eco anxiety, that climate anxiety, a lot of that healing again goes back to nature and just being outside. And I think for a lot of, especially kids her age and, I taught, I was a teacher as well, so that was I see a lot of that with my students is connection to tech, but not connection to, to nature. And the difference is in, in when we take them outside and just, you know, especially with Covid that happened, you know, a lot of we tried to do a lot of things, of kids going outside and backyard science and walking and things like that. And which is why we encourage her to, you know, just to stay active but also the beaches is kind of our retreat. She, she loves the animals. She loves doing observations. She definitely loves history. But the animals are one of her bigger things is she likes to to, she asks a lot of questions. She's a big question asker.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:49:34] What are your hopes for the future? And what would you like to tell adults about their responsibility for the health of the Gulf and the health of the environment as a whole?

EMJ [00:49:44] My hope for the future is that people will realize that the earth is changing, and climate change is real. People don't believe that, and I find that hard to believe. And I just I hope people just like, realize that, and for adults that to speak out because my mom said she kind of held back and I think that's really important. My name is Evelyn. I'm ten years old and this is my Gulf story. I love science and gardening and learning about the ocean and its history and the things that live in it. I love being creative and just through writing and art. And most of all, I love teaching about the ocean and bringing awareness to how important our Gulf and our ocean is. Water connects us all. Water is living and just like any other living thing, it should be protected. Since I was little, I loved the water and I loved the beach, and I just loved going there and staying there for hours. But as I've gotten older, I've seen more and more trash. And it's kind of hard cause it's not like it used to be. So that's when I realized, I needed to keep taking action for our Gulf and oceans, to continue using my voice and to encourage kids like me to use theirs.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:51:40] Thank you for joining us for In Hot Water, a climate and seafood podcast by Seaworthy and SAGE. Let us know what you think by leaving us a review on your favorite podcast platforms. And don't forget to share with your seafaring friends. In Hot Water is a production of Seaworthy and Seafood and Gender Equality, or

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