

Catherine Blalack:

From the deep forest of the Canadian northwest to the red rock deserts of the American Southwest. North America offers a myriad of opportunities for hiking, camping, trekking, and simply enjoying the abundance of the natural world. Today, Megan Burdi, the librarian for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will be speaking with Jon Waterman, an esteemed author and National Geographic explorer, about his intriguing book titled *National Geographic Atlas of Wild America*, which highlights jaw droppingly beautiful wilderness areas. This vivid book will feed the soul of everyone who loves wild places.

This is the Future of Conservation podcast, where we feature thought leaders on the frontlines of protecting wild places and wild things and share their story to inspire us to look at nature in a new way. I'm your co-host, Catherine Blalack, from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Conservation Training Center, located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.

Megan Burdi:

So, Jon, this is the second in a trilogy. Can you tell me how you came up with this project, and how does it build upon the *Atlas of National Parks*?

Jon Waterman:

Well, *Atlas of Wild America*, the second of three atlases is a sort of a natural follow through to the national parks. I think a lot of people don't realize that many national parks have wilderness areas within them, but this is an opportunity to expand on the meaning of wilderness and its extent, not only in this country, but in Canada and Mexico. I've selected areas, wild places from those two countries, from the continent, to write about. So, I have the opportunity, I had the opportunity to write about history of the wilderness movement, the heroes behind the movement, to write about the different facets of wilderness and wild land and wildlife protection, wildlife corridors and Endangered Species Act and protected rivers. All of it fits under the umbrella of wild places. So, it's a very natural follow up to the national parks.

Megan Burdi:

And just what is it about wild places, about remote places, that speaks to you as an author, as an adventurer?

Jon Waterman:

Well, it really speaks to my whole life. This is what I've been doing since I was 12 years old. Mountains first spun my clock as a 12-year-old on a summer camp trip up into the mountains of New Hampshire. And then, by the time I was a teenager, I decided that I wanted to spend my life adventuring and wild places. So, even more so the national parks where I had a brief career, wild places are my *bête noire*. They're something that define who I am and something that's mean a lot to me.

[instrumental music]

Megan Burdi:

So, you really expanded your territory since your first books. You know, starting in the Arctic, but now you're covering entire continents. How have you changed as a writer, as an adventurer, in that process of expansion? Writing such a sweeping book?

Jon Waterman:

Well, in one sense, I, I kind of had this dream decades ago that I wanted to take long journeys. To me, my passion was to go to a place to immerse myself in a place and get to know it, develop a sense of place, and then to share it. Since I was a teenager, I knew that I wanted to share these experiences because people didn't understand what I was doing. And this also dovetailed into, protection of these places. I began reading at Ed Abbey as a teenager and realized that our wild lands were in need of protection. So, to answer your question, I really have just pretty much been following the same trail all along and find new places and new dimensions to write about. Although my next project that I'm at work at now with the National Geographic is entirely different. It's a history of America, and I'm not a historian, but I happen to have this this hobby of of history, reading history. So, it's a this is a total tangent and a 180 for me. But the rest of my career, whether it's been to the Arctic or in mountains or down rivers, has pretty much been that trail down into wild places. Immersive journeys.

Megan Burdi:

Immersive journeys. That's fantastic. And a great description of your books. When you were writing *The Atlas of Wild America*, did you have a reader in mind? Someone you're trying to reach with your message?

Jon Waterman:

I should have a reader in mind. And I have had a reader in mind for other projects that I've worked on, but on this particular project, that of wildlands, I really I want to reach out every person that because I feel like wilderness, thanks to the the Wilderness Act of 1964, I feel that wilderness belongs to everyone. It's like the national parks. It's something that is a democratic privilege that we, have as a right, as a as Americans. I met some Europeans summer before last, and I was in the middle of the Noatak Preserve Wilderness, an Arctic Alaska that had flown halfway around the world to spend a good portion of their summer just immersed in this wilderness, because they don't have anything like that in Europe. What they have are smaller parcels and beautiful mountains, but on a much tinier scale. And these two Europeans came simply to fish and immerse themselves in this concept that that now is really not found on the on their continent in the way that we have it here in America. So, I consider it wild places a privilege, but I don't think that most people know about them. So, I'm throwing out a wide net to hopefully bring in a lot of people into increased understanding and protection of these places.

Megan Burdi:

Speaking of protection, you traveled all over North America, you know, through the years. What do you think is the most pressing issue facing wild places today?

Jon Waterman:

That's a good question, but there's no question in my mind that it's it's really, about the climate crisis. I see that the climate crisis has affected things in a way that that's, make everything else pale, particularly in the far north where I've spent 40 years traveling in the Arctic places and, it's not only affecting the landscape, but it's the wildlife and even the culture that, for instance, the Inupiat people who are now suffering these strange changes, these wildfires, where there are never wildfires in the past, for instance, they have thunder and lightning storms where they've never had thunder and lightning several decades ago. And, the consequences of this climate change, I no longer call it change. I call it a crisis because it is a crisis. You don't have to live in the path of a wildfire to know that, that our world is rapidly coming to a boiling point.

Megan Burdi:

How did that impact how you wrote this book? What kind of information did you include to reach that wider audience?

Jon Waterman:

We're talking about the *Atlas of Wild America*?

Megan Burdi:

Yeah.

Jon Waterman:

Well, I, work with a great team at the National Geographic and the, the book includes a lot of maps and, and a lot of liberty with what kind of maps to use. And I often found maps that show climate science, temperature changes and seasonal anomalies and, there were lots of opportunities to tell that story. I didn't want the book to be a downer, of course, but it's objective and factual. So, include climate crisis information where it was pertinent and it's pertinent in, in almost all, wild places, because you see these places affected in a way that you don't see the urban, portions of our country affected.

Megan Burdi:

On a lighter note, was there a favorite place that you profiled in the *Atlas of Wild America*? If you could pick just one?

Jon Waterman:

Well, I picked several places, deliberately, that I hadn't been to, that are very remote, inaccessible. And the one place that I want to go more than anywhere else is, a Canadian national Park, Aulavik National Park. And a busier there might be, 36 people that go to this park. It's on the northern half of Banks Island in the Canadian archipelago of islands in the Arctic. And there are vast herds of muskox and the, the, the miniature caribou called the Peary caribou. It has the most northerly navigable river, the Thompson River. And I would like to go float the Thompson River and then paddle the the Arctic Ocean. It also has a species of bear that is new to the world, because the grizzly bears have gone further and further north, and they've begun mating with the polar bears and that bear was first sighted on this island almost 20 years ago now. And there's a couple of generations of that bear because they're able to reproduce. And if it's a polar bear sire that created the, the the, this hybrid bear, they refer to it as a pizzly. And if it's a male a grizzly bear sire that created the new species they call it a grolar bear. So it's an interesting sort of combination of white and brown sometimes, you know, looking like a polar bear with a muscular grizzly bear hump on it. So, it's a place that I want to go because it's it's also changing, but it's so remote. And still so wild, and there's no one lives anywhere near it.

So is is that my favorite place? I've never been there. I don't know, but it's a place that's the most enticing place for me. I have favorite places that I return to in the book. The Colorado River Delta is one of them. This is known as the the, Colorado River Biosphere Reserve. It's actually lacking river water, but it's still the most magnificent and sky filled place that I've ever been in. It's interesting combination of desert sky and mountains and ocean, dried out river and still a tremendous amount of bird life. I haven't been there for a few years.

The place that I continue going back to is the Arctic, and two places in the Arctic, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which everyone I imagine has heard about, and another place that probably very few listeners have heard about, the Noatak National Preserve, which is directly adjacent to the gates of the Arctic National Park, also very seldom frequented place. And it contains the largest swath of wilderness in the country, over 13 million acres in conjunction with the legislated wilderness area area and Gates of the Arctic National Park. So I spent a good portion of last summer in that preserve, walking and running the river.

Megan Burdi:

What's your next adventure? Where are you going after the publication of this book? After-

Jon Waterman:

I would like to go to Banks Island truth be told. I would like to go to New Zealand. I'm told that they, have a culture of wilderness appreciation there that is, bar none, some of the greatest wilderness preservation in the world. So, Zealand is on the top of my list. I've never been.

Megan Burdi:

You want to give us a preview of the next book you're going to publish as well, or talk a little bit more about the conclusion to your trilogy?

Jon Waterman:

Yeah. Well, thank you for asking, that the third atlas in the series. I can't believe I'm actually on the third one now, because each one is a massive research and writing project, and there are so many maps and photos and illustrations in addition to a tremendous amount of text, more text than in my other books. The third one is going to be called *Atlas of Historic America*, and it will be released on, the the 250th year anniversary of this country and people are going to be a little bit more interested in history than in other years. And, we decided to cover it all. We the team that I work with at the National Geographic, I have of, nearly a dozen different academic advisors, and we're trying to tell the stories that I didn't learn growing up in school. Stories of enslavement, Native American displacement, and the whole diaspora. People of color that came to this country that often don't have a voice and that are neglected in history books. We're trying to tell it all. Granted, it's, it's a lot to tell. And one book, but again, through maps and photos and all kinds of illustrations and, lots of sidebars and tangents, we hope to get close to, to, telling history a different way.

Megan Burdi:

Well, thank you for joining me today for the Future of Conservation podcast. Jon, I want to thank you for meeting me here at the National Conservation Training Center.

Jon Waterman:

You're very welcome. Thanks for having me.

Catherine Blalack:

More than ever before, we need wild places. They are essential to our health and well-being. Jon Waterman has spent a lifetime exploring the natural world, and I hope this episode leaves you inspired to explore nature at its finest. Thank you to our listeners and a special thank you to our guest, Jon Waterman, for sharing your adventures with the world through your photography and writing.

Catherine Blalack:

To continue listening to the future of conservation, check us out on Apple Podcast or other podcast apps. If you know of interesting people or have ideas for a future episode, contact Catherine Blalack at catherine_blalack@aws.gov. See you next time.