

FORESTNET PODCAST #001

Transcript

GARY: Welcome to ForestNet. I'm Gary Chancey. This is an audiocast from the Wayne National Forest in southeastern Ohio.

Today, our guest is Becky Ewing. She's the Forest Fish and Wildlife Biologist. Becky, welcome to the show.

BECKY: Thanks for having me, Gary.

GARY: This Forest Service program is going to be focusing mostly about a great topic that we're pretty partial to, and that is, up and coming Frontier Boat Launch facility, which is going to be built on the Ohio River near Marietta.

And tell us why we're so excited about this project.

BECKY: Well, the Frontier Boat Launch facility is really going to be great for folks who want to get out on the river and either fish or pleasure boat. We have a stretch of river that really isn't accessed real well by boat launching facilities. This one here is going to have lots of parking, a really, really well designed ramp for ease of access into the water and out onto your trailer, and nearby communities, too.

GARY: Well, we want to remind folks, too, that the funding for this facility is really coming from the state's Cooperative Boating Access Facilities grant program, which is administered by the ODNR Division of Watercraft. Now, the grant, originally announced in August of last year, was among the largest awarded through the program this year, and that year being 2007, actually, now that we're in 2008.

And we're talking about \$2,247,000 presented to the Wayne National Forest to construct this boat launching facility on the Ohio River. And that was something that we were very happy about. Of course, a lot of people put a lot of work in the design of this facility, and it's really going to be great for that community up there.

Now then, let's move right along, talking about some of the pre-work. So tell me a little bit about some of the pre-work that was involved.

BECKY: What we do a lot of times when a project is occurring is, we always have to go out and look at the area, investigate it for habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive species, and we also just look for wildlife in general.

In this case, being a boat launch facility on the Ohio River, we were concerned about two freshwater mussels. One is called the Pink Mucket Pearlymussel, and the other is called the Fanshell. Both of those are federally endangered species.

And we – construction of the ramp, we wanted to make sure we weren't going to impact those.

GARY: Who were some of the partners that you worked with there?

BECKY: Well, we started out with the Ohio Division of Wildlife, who actually did a depth survey of all the shoreline areas in this area. And it came to that where this Frontier Boat Launch is going to go is the best site for a ramp – ease of access, again.

The next is, we worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, specifically the biologists on the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge. They were the folks who helped us actually do a mussel survey.

GARY: Now, when you do a survey, what all is involved in that process?

BECKY: A person has to have a lot of skills to do this. You have to be a certified diver. You are going down into depths of 20' or more.

You also have to have knowledge of threatened and endangered species, mussel biology. Not everybody can do that. Sometimes mussels, even though they are in the same species, may look just a little bit different in different bodies of water, so you have to be familiar with it.

And that's what we were looking for, and fortunately, those divers with the Refuge can really help with that kind of thing.

GARY: Now, did you go in the water?

BECKY: I waded. (laughter) That's it, yeah.

GARY: So were you there, maybe to take the bags of mussels from the divers?

BECKY: Yeah, we did. We helped them out. We were there. They were doing the diving, but there is a boat tender, and we were on shore helping them collect the mussels once they brought them in to shore. We would help scrape Zebra mussels off, which I'm sure we'll talk about in the future here. Bag them up, and get them ready for their relocation to Grape Island.

GARY: And so they found these mussels on the bottom of the river, there.

BECKY: They are found in all depths of water, and all kinds of substrates, and they dive, and they pretty much walk the bottom with their hands, looking for these mussels. They'll pluck them out of the sediment, put them in a bag, bring them in, they identify and measure them, put them back in bags, and they'll relocate them to another part of the river.

GARY: Well, great. Tell me about the two species, again, that you're more focused on.

BECKY: The Fanshell and the Pink Mucket Pearlymussel, they're two mussels that, again, are large river species. Their decline, just like any other kind of mussel, is really due to the degradation of the water quality in the Ohio River, and to the changes in its habitat. The building of the locks and dams changed the river from a riverine system to one of – like a pool system.

They're endangered, and they're not in many places, but we always have to look for them. We didn't find them, but we found 16 other species. None of them were threatened and endangered. All of them were very interesting, though. We have a couple that were considered sensitive species.

GARY: But no endangered species were found?

BECKY: Right. And so the project was cleared, then, by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service because of that.

GARY: What did we learn from the other species that are there?

BECKY: Well, we found that these mussels, even though we were looking in an area only about an acre in size, that the mussels are very particular about where they do live. If the substrate got too silty, they just wouldn't be found. They really like the cobbled areas.

But we've got 16 species that vary from ones that like sandy substrate, maybe shallow areas, to ones that are more deeper. So it was really interesting to see how they all were found, and how the data came out with that.

GARY: So where do these species come from?

BECKY: Well, mussels were there. I mean, mussels were in the river all along, and –

GARY: So they're native to Ohio?

BECKY: They are native. These mussels that we were looking for, we did find two species of non-native mussels, the Zebra mussel and the Asiatic clam. But these 16 species were there. They breed, reproduce, and continue to prosper in the river.

GARY: Now, how did the non-native get there?

BECKY: Non-natives came – primarily, they're introduced through European or Asian shipping, or things like that. The Asiatic clam has been here a long time. The Zebra mussel has been here a much shorter time, and has probably gotten more

notoriety. But it came through the Great Lakes, and has spread out through the rivers.

GARY: Now, I understand while you were doing this project, you actually had done – maybe not volunteers, but seasonal help that was with the Forest Service, and other volunteers got involved as well. How important is it to have those people on hand to help out during the summer months?

BECKY: Well, volunteers play a real critical role for us. We are fortunate that we are located in an area where we have lots of educational institutions, where we can draw on those students and give them good experiences, too. We were fortunate to have two Hocking College students. One was working with us, the other was working with the Fish and Wildlife Service, both doing internships.

We also had an older, retired man, who was the boat tender. He's a diver himself. Without those folks, they really helped make the process go faster, which is important when you're dealing with live animals. You want to treat them carefully, get them back in the water as fast as possible.

GARY: Do you expect any future projects? You know, where people can get involved in this kind of activity in the water?

BECKY: We always have need for volunteers. Our greatest need is usually in the spring, and summer, and the fall. And we have opportunities for people who are interested in fisheries, wildlife or botany, even recreation, archeology. Basically, you just have to come in and talk to us or give us a call. We have an easy to fill out form, and we can hook you up with the right project.

GARY: OK, that's for volunteering, right?

BECKY: It is.

GARY: So what's your phone number? If folks are listening, they might want your phone number, to get in touch with you.

BECKY: Well, our main number is 740-753-0101. They can ask for me, and we can get you hooked into the right person.

GARY: Again, that's Becky Ewing. The number is 740-753-0101.

So what's so great about mussels?

BECKY: Mussels are very cool animals. Some people know them as –

GARY: They're really an animal?

BECKY: They are an animal. They're an invertebrate. They have no backbone. Some people call them clams – that's another name people often use. Shells is another name.

But mussels are so cool, because they're actually the filters of our streams and lakes. It's interesting, you know – when we were doing this project, the divers would bring mussels up, we'd put them in tubs. And you know, at the time, the Ohio River was a little turbid, not too bad, but we'd fill the tub with Ohio River water, put those mussels in, it's a little cloudy.

You give those mussels about 30 minutes, and that water would be crystal clear. It's just the process that mussels and other invertebrates that do filter, they play a really important role in our ecosystem.

GARY: The mussels do?

BECKY: They do. The river has become more clean, and we do have agencies that monitor that, and they monitor it through water quality testing, fish sampling, and all. With the loss of mussels, we're losing one of our natural filters.

GARY: When you say we're losing them, what do you attribute that to?

BECKY: Well, it has been the change of the water quality – in the past, there's been water quality problems. But also the change in the habitat. Once that river changed from a free-flowing river to one with dams and – it's just a pool system, that really changed those mussel habitats. Most mussels are declining. It's one of the fastest declining groups of animals we have in the country.

GARY: Sometimes people kind of complain about the mussels, saying they get into the rotors of the boats, and stuff like that. Is that true, too?

BECKY: Well, there is the Zebra mussel, which is the non-native mussel. And this little thing – they're not very big, not much more big than your thumbnail. They will just build up and encrust things. And a lot of power plants or water intake systems will get clogged by these mussels.

They also will build up on the native mussel shells, and if they build up to the extreme, they may even suffocate the mussel.

GARY: Wow. So they can be mean little fellows, huh?

BECKY: Yeah, it's unfortunately one of the bad introductions we've had of non-natives.

GARY: And like you said, they're a non-native. Where would they come from?

BECKY: They come from – if I remember right, they come from the Caspian Sea area of Eurasia.

GARY: And they're right here in the Ohio River.

BECKY: Yup.

GARY: So they spread rather quickly?

BECKY: They do. And you have to watch, really – boaters who are going into the river, if they go to use the Frontier Boat Launch in the next few years, you really have to be careful about washing your equipment, make sure your boat gets power washed, make sure the stuff in your prop, the weeds and things, are taken out. Because you don't want to launch at another lake or another river and introduce those materials to that new place. You'll have the same situation then.

GARY: So really, boat owners need to think a little bit ahead when they're using that area?

BECKY: They do. When you're finished with your day, just head on over to the car wash, and blast it off. You make sure no Zebra mussels are going to the next lake you go to.

GARY: So the best advice there is to – now on the Wayne National Forest website, we have pictures of mussels. Is that correct?

BECKY: That's correct. We took some pictures while we were out. We have some from underwater, and then some from land, when we were processing the mussels, meaning measuring them, or scraping Zebra mussels from them.

So we've put some up there of the different kinds. And I think the folks who are listening to this will like to look at them, because mussels come in so many sizes and so many colors, so many shapes. So it will give you just a little taste of what the – the things we were seeing.

GARY: So they won't bite you, will they?

BECKY: No, they won't bite you. They might squirt you. (laughter) But they won't bite you, yeah.

GARY: Really? And then, what – is that a defensive measure?

BECKY: Well, mussels, they breathe and feed with these two siphons. And when you go to pick one up, they've sucked in some water – that's how they breathe. Well, they might close their shell up really quick, and squirt a little bit of water out.

GARY: Really?

BECKY: You've just got to watch out.

GARY: Well, that's ForestNet for this time. Thank you, Becky Ewing, the Forest Fish and Wildlife Biologist for the Wayne National Forest here in southeastern Ohio. Thank you for joining us today.

BECKY: Thanks for having me.

GARY: Until next time, I'm Gary Chancey, your host of ForestNet.

END OF INTERVIEW