

GOOD NATURED EP 3 MEGAN CROMP



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CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

Sofia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges. In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more. I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

Julia: And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place. We know these are quite hard times and that everyone needs to have a bit of a pick me up. So we're hoping that this conversation will inspire you.

Julia: Hey Sofia!

Sofia: Hi Julia.

Julia: Today I'm really thrilled that our guest is Megan Crompton from Key Conservation. She got a bit fed up with the way things were going in terms of, you know, being a conservationist can be really hard. It is hard sometimes to get the support or the funding you need and so she decided to come up with a solution that was a mobile app.

Sofia: So she started as a wildlife biologist but now she has been working on developing this app. I've really gotten a sense of her as a very can do person. She just sees a need jumps in and then learns what she needs to know on the fly in order to address it.

Julia: Definitely! Having met Megan, I would say, I have to agree with you. She's a real go getter and once she's got a goal, she really goes for it. And I think it's admirable in a way to decide to start in a brand new field when you knew nothing about tech or app development. I think that's brilliant! And just having to learn everything from the start and from the basics and then building it up is as quite amazing.

Sofia: And another thing that's really cool about Key Conservation, which is the app that she's developing is that conservation efforts can be very isolated. As in there are lots of people who have really great intentions and really care about different causes but it can be quite difficult to match up your level of care and what you're able to give with an actual project that needs what you can give, or that needs help in a particular moment.

The app will be great in terms of fostering connection and then also making it easier for people to help and receive help.

Julia: Definitely, and actually I think that really resonated with me the first time she told me about the app because I remember when I was younger I was keen to somehow help conservation organizations, but every time I checked their website, the only thing you could do was donate money. And as a young person or a teenager, I didn't really have money to donate. So I think the fact that you will now be able to donate a skill as well is going to be something that is going to be a game changer.

If you have a bit of website design skills, for example, you could just say, 'Oh, you need a new website? I could help you build that'. And that would be a way of donating something to that organization, which I think has been missing so far. So that's something that I found really exciting.

Sofia: Absolutely. I'm sure that Megan will tell us all about it. So let's start chatting to her.

THE INTERVIEW

Julia: Hey Megan!

Megan: Hey guys! Thank you so much for being here with us today and for joining us on Good Natured.

Sofia: So let's start at the beginning. What drove you to become a conservationist?

Megan: Well I guess most people would say that being in the conservation field wasn't a choice. It just was in you from the beginning and I think I was definitely one of those people. I can't remember a time that I wasn't obsessed with the natural world or trying to

explore it somehow and I just, once I found out that could be a career, I mean it was a no-brainer for me. So from the very beginning!

Sofia: You must've done this a million times by now but do you think that you could just give us your really quick elevator pitch description of what Key Conservation is?

Megan: So at Key Conservation we're helping conservationists receive critical funding and support through a mobile app that provides real time updates on daily campaigns. So the app will have a scrolling live feed that will update as needs occur from conservations around the world. And the app will provide three ways for conservationists to get help and three ways for supporters to give it.

So the first way is through a first feature called skilled impact, which enables supporters to give their professional skills. For example, a graphic designer could help with outreach campaigns. A drone operator could help with collecting data, you know, stuff like that. So just having these skills to help conservationists saves a lot of money but also get people to get more deeply involved with what's going on in the field.

Second is that supporters can give funds to conservation projects. So this is different in the sense that everything is itemised. You can select what you want to give to. So a hundred percent of all the donations will go directly to these organisations.

And the third way is the in-person feature, which allows supporters to be alerted to real-time volunteering opportunities in their area through geo-based push notifications. So instead of an organisation reaching out on Facebook or whatever, say this is going on, we need your help. They can actually send a push notification to a set demographic in their area about something happening right now so they can actually get the help that they need. Then after the contribution has been put to use the organisation will send back a photo or video update to the supporter or show the outcome of their support.

So that's kind of the whole idea in a nutshell. There are other features that we're building out from like groups and events and different things like that but the idea is that people from all over the world can be on the front lines of conservation and actually see how their individual support made a difference.

Julia: Amazing! One thing that I find really impressive is the fact that you've transitioned from being a field biologist to then become some kind of tech entrepreneur. So I was wondering, could you tell us a bit more about your background and what led to the creation of Key Conservation?

Megan: I'm a wildlife biologist. I've worked with a lot of different organisations from nonprofits, federal agencies from like the park service, academic institutions, zoos, and I've worked with all different types of species as well from you know, working with invasive plants, sea turtles, bears, all different types of things.

And I just found that every organisation that I worked for, no matter what it was or how much funding they have, they all had similar problems. And that usually was lack of funding, access to a global or local audience being able to get to them too in a real time manner or be having a set supply is set aside for unplanned events, such as a hurricane or wildfire or something that would come through and devastate a population, and they didn't really have a lot of access to skilled help.

My background formed this whole basis of building a key. It was a lot of little things that started building up, but then there was one particular incident when I was working as a sea turtle researcher. We had run out of funding for our project and we were working in an area where there was a lot of affluent tourists who had a lot of funding they could give up and we were struggling just to even pay for gas, to go and save lives of sea turtle nests being washed out to sea. And there was such a disconnect here between in the work that we were doing in the field and the people around the world who love wildlife or nature in general. And I was like, there needs to be a better way for us to reach out to people and get them involved. So that's kind of where the idea for Key started.

Sofia: So just thinking about all of these kinds of different types of conservation that you've done, what skills did you already have as a field biologist or as a field conservationist? And what did you have to learn from scratch in order to make Key a reality?

Megan: I think if you're going to be a conservationist the number one skill you can have is being adaptable and not really take no for an answer because you have to be resourceful. You have to find a way to help this species that you're working with and it means a lot of times working with a lot of different stakeholders or meeting new people that are in the area that you're trying to work with or convince people to support you.

So a lot of skills that conservationists already have are really prime for entrepreneurship. I just think that for me, I have hard time complaining about the same things over and over again so when I want to do something, it's like 'okay, we can commiserate and this is bad but let's get to what is the actual problem here. Let's not put a bandaid on a bullet wound. Let's fix the bone.'

And so for me, it was like, okay, let's let's find a better way. And I know there's so many other conservationists out that had similar problems and I was just tired of everyone's

struggling when I knew there was so many people around the world that want to make a difference.

Sofia: And how has the process of making the app changed your perspective and your approach to conservation?

Megan: I think the one thing that sometimes some of us might be fed when we were little is that you have to be success specialist in one area of conservation. And I would argue that having a lot of different skills outside of conservation is probably one of the most powerful things you can bring to conservation. And it's okay to take a different path into this world. And you can make just as big of a difference than someone who spends their life specialised in one thing. And so those skills and just talking to the general public who have all these amazing skills that we need in conservation and how excited they are to potentially utilise them, it's exciting to see that coming together.

And I think that's one of the biggest lessons I've learned is that you can dive into your other interests and it can actually make you a better conservationist overall.

Sofia: I think that's super true. I think that so often in conservation, we are way too narrow about what a conservationist is or what a conservationist does, and actually you can be bringing in skills and just doing different things and still be contributing to the causes that you care about.

Megan: Exactly and I mean I'd argue that right now, it's an all hands on deck situation with the world and how exciting would it be if we can empower everyone with their own talents? The world would change overnight.

Julia: Definitely, and I think what resonated with me as well personally is this idea of interdisciplinary work and the fact that you can have one more arrow to your bow. I don't know if that's an expression in English or if it is only in French. And actually that brings me to our next question really nicely, because we were wondering, obviously you've done quite a transition, what are the biggest challenges you've faced on this journey to develop the app? And did you have any technical people related or like motivation issues and what has helped you overcome them?

Megan: I think the number one thing is not being in the field. That's where my heart is. That's where my soul is. Being out there, hands on, working on the front lines, but I'd have to remind myself that I'm trying to build something, to help all of my fellow conservationists to be able to do that and get back out there for myself as well.

So I think that's just the hardest thing, when I'm tapping away on the computer and I just want to be out and doing things that I used to do and love. Learning everything from scratch, like when I started thinking about doing an app, I had no idea how to even make an app! So I ended up taking a couple of courses online about how to do UIUX design for apps and I downloaded over 50 apps, just researching what I liked out there. I call Key our Frankenstein baby because it's like a bunch of features from different apps that I love.

I had to build both sides of the app. So from the conservationist side and then from the supporter side. And so that was really complicated to figure out how they all interact together. I designed each of the art boards for every single screen. So every button that you click had to go somewhere, I had to design that whole thing out. It took me over a year to design. It was really complicated.

I had to do that on top of working and doing school and stuff. Just finding those right resources was really hard. There's not really a place for conservation entrepreneurs and since then, I've been able to find the support that I needed. I actually made a post on Wild Labs and said, 'Hey, is there like a conservation tech startup for people who have ideas like mine'. And from Wild Labs, I was able to be connected with Conservation X Labs and they you helped support all these really ambitious conservation solution ideas and they were able to get us some support.

And then I was able to get connected with Conservation Optimism, and they've been able to give us the support so it's been a journey of building relationships and partnerships with people who believe in the bigger vision. It's really about not giving up and really reaching out for that support. And keep believing in your idea even when you want to give up!

Julia: So would you say this network aspect was one of the most important part of the support that you got?

Megan: Definitely! I think that probably the best thing in conservation is your network. Sometimes people have a hard time asking for help. It's just more about being humble and being like, 'I don't understand this'. But being willing to learn. I think a lot of people go into life and say, 'Oh, I don't know that'. Well, every single person who is an expert now started not knowing anything! If you think about it from that perspective and you just keep chipping away at it, eventually you'll know so much. Now I know how to design an app and I designed a website and all that stuff. And it's crazy, but these things happen if you are passionate enough and you don't quit!

Sofia: I love that idea that everyone has to start somewhere and everyone who is now an expert used to know absolutely nothing, but by caring, you can get there.

So now a more general question. What makes you optimistic about the future of nature and conservation and why do you even think it's important to be optimistic if you do?

Megan: Well, I definitely do! I always make the argument that you wouldn't be in conservation if you weren't optimistic because you go into it every day saying 'I feel the work that I'm going to do is going to make a difference', unless you're just doing something to pass the time.

I'm excited, especially, about what's going on here with the Conservation Optimism movement. We've seen it grow so much the past couple of years and I'm excited about our partnership because what we're working on with Conservation Optimism, as you know, is that when they share a story about what's going on with an organisation on their blog, the idea is that we will be able to have a button where the readers can click. And they'll be taken directly to the Key Conservation app and will be able to learn more about that organisation and have direct actionable steps they can take right now to do more. So instead of reading a story and be like 'Oh, that was really nice', they can do something and be a part of it.

We just see now how many people are looking at what's good out there. I've been talking to a lot of different organisations about that, and about the help they need. And the other side of what I do is actually talking to the general public because we do a lot of outreach to get people involved in our goal is to not only get organisations on the app, but also individuals. We want to hear from people who aren't directly working in conservation and get their feedback. I hear all the time about the different skills that they have, and I know what these organisations need because I met with them and it's just so exciting to see the skills that are just waiting in the wings to help all of these organisations. I think it's going to be a game changer and I just can't wait to see all of that in action. I'm optimistic about making significant change around the world.

Julia: It's definitely one of the features that I was thrilled about when you first told me about it. I love this idea of you can donate skills. So say you're a web designer and you might want to help an organisation make their website better. Then now you will be able to do that through the app.

Megan: With everything that's going on in the world, the fact that we can empower people from their couch to be on the front lines and make just of a significant difference as someone going there in person potentially because you're able to use their skills or fund something directly and they can see the people behind it, and they can have a deeper relationship with these organisations than they normally would if they're just giving a set amount a month and not really understanding the impact it's having.

I just think that right now the conservation sector is ready for a revolutionary change and I'm excited to bring the general public on board instead of just it being our exciting movement.

Sofia: It's all really great! We ask a version of this question to every guest on the podcast to get a sense of what's important to them in a conservation context. So if you had to pick one organism to highlight and make a case for, it could be an animal or a plant, or I guess you could also choose a fungus, what would it be and why?

Megan: Oh, man! Well, that's an evil question! I always talk about the Alalā, which is the Hawaiian crow, because they were the first species I worked with that was extinct in the wild at the time. I was working on the Big Island Hawaii and we worked on the captive breeding programme before they were going to get released to the wild. And they're so smart, so charismatic, and it's really powerful when you are up close to a species, that's been on the verge of going extinct. I get kind of emotional thinking about it and I remember walking up to their aviaries, taking care of them and hearing their calls and it's so powerful hearing that and being like 'Wow, this could be lost from the forest forever. What we're doing right now matters'.

That was a changing point for me personally, because we went out looking for potential other wild Alalā that might be there out in the forest and I was talking to a couple of the locals and a lot of them didn't even know what an Alalā was or that they even existed. And it bothered me that people didn't know their own species and I was like, well, that's just how the world is. People forget that nature is part of their heritage and a part of what makes them who they are. I feel like the Alalā made me think about that in a way so I guess I'd make the argument for them.

They've now been released into the wild, which is exciting! They're no longer extinct in the wild and are trying to get back out there. It is kind of a symbol of potentially thinking about nature as your heritage and to remember that these species that are from where you are, are part of who you are as a country. That is a nice symbol for that because the Hawaiian culture is really amazing and deep and so it's something in a different way that we could look at conservation in the world.

Sofia: Such an interesting take on the question!

Julia: And I guess that's the perfect way to end this podcast actually! With an example from a species that was once extinct and is not anymore. Can't really get any more optimistic than this.

Sofia: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Megan: Thanks for having me!

OUTRO

Sofia: That was so great. It was so interesting. I loved her description of the forest in Hawaii and going out there and hearing these calls and just thinking about what would happen if the crow was gone. I think to me, it really highlighted the emotional connect conservationists can have to animals and places that they really care about.

Julia: And I found that what was really interesting about that point as well is the fact that she was saying that lots of people didn't really know the species, like local people from the area. And I find that to be true in so many different instances, which it's something that is quite empowering because it means that then you can go and raise that awareness for that species. So I think that's something that can be a positive as well.

Sofia: In the end, everyone has different priorities, right? There are so many people who aren't necessarily thinking about, for example, the crows in the forest for perfectly good reasons. It's just an opportunity to go out there and get them to think about it and realise what an amazing heritage and what cool animals they have around them that they can know about and connect to.

Julia: And it's definitely everywhere as well. In the UK, I've heard so many people, for example, who didn't know what a pine marten was and then that gives you the opportunity to get into really cool projects and how it's been reintroduced to various places and I find that really cool, the fact that you can raise awareness of species everywhere.

Sofia: It's true. I personally have a big thing for eels and I have found in so many situations, I don't understand how I end up talking about eels. My friends know that I'm obsessed with them. I ended up on a first date just being like 'Sorry, you haven't heard of eels?!' You become an ambassador for the animals that you care about and their amazing life cycles. What did you find interesting in the interview?

Julia: I really liked the fact that she put a strong emphasis on networking and not just networking with people but how organisations are stronger together. And I think it's really true. More and more we're seeing these collaborations between organisations where we realise that we can be so much stronger about working together and just making sure that we let each other know what we're working on.

Sofia: So much of conservation and so much of the joy of conservation is in working with other people and finding other people who care about the things that you care

about. It can be very lonely being the only person who's worried about something or who really cares about something. I think that's always that thing of coming up against problems, you're working on something and you, and you come up against a challenge. And in those moments, it's just so nice to have someone else who's aligned with you and who wants to get to the same place that you do so that you can hopefully pull your skills and your thoughts to move forward.

Julia: Well, Sofia, that brings me very nicely to the last point I wanted to raise actually, which is, I love the fact that she showcases how it's really possible to still pivot in your career. That you don't have to be stuck in one way of being a conservationist and you can always learn new skills. There's so many ways that we can just always transition and it's not one clear line. Your career doesn't have to be fixed and I find it personally really thrilling.

Sofia: I think that you and I are fairly similar in being interested in multiple things. I've always had a crisis, basically my entire life of being like, 'Oh, I love writing. And I love doing communication and I love drawing, but then I also love doing science'. And it's just thinking, well, actually your life is not set. These parts are not necessarily just one strict way. There are lots of ways of doing it.

And I think even if go getter-ness is not a technical term. It may not yet be in the Scrabble Dictionary. I think that having an element of that is really helpful in being able to combine things that other people wouldn't have thought of combining and having the confidence to do that and start up and be like 'This is going to be me'!

Julia: And I think that's the perfect way to end this episode. So that's it for now.

Sofia: So thanks to Megan Crompt! Go and look up Key Conservation, especially once it's launched. I think there are going to be some really cool opportunities to give your skills and your money, if you have it, to push forward the conservation causes that you really care about.

Julia: Brilliant! So that's it for this episode, we hope that you really enjoyed it. And we'd love to hear your thoughts, or if you want to send us voice notes, you can do this@podcastatconservationoptimism.org. And if you have anything you want to share you can also use the [#conservationoptimism](#) on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

This episode was funded by an ESRC Impact Acceleration Accounts grant through the University of Oxford. Original theme music composed and produced by Matthew Kemp.