

GOOD NATURED S2-EP8 JEN GANUN



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INTRO

Julia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges.

Sofia: We interview inspiring conservationists from lots of different backgrounds who each engage with conservation in their own ways. Today, we're thrilled to have Jen GaNun as a guest.

Julia: I'm Julia

Sofia: And I'm Sofia. Get ready to hear about music, movement, and wolves.

Julia: Hi Sofia.

Sofia: Hi Julia!

Julia: Today is the final episode of our second season of Good Natured and we have an incredible guest to end with a bang. We are going to tell you all about Jen GaNun today. She is part of a band. She is doing lots of cool stuff with music and dance, and we can't wait to hear more about all of that.

Sofia: Jen is a choreographer, dancer, and musician, and she is part of Lost Walks. Lost Walks is an ongoing artistic project and it's rooted in music, movement, collaboration, and conservation.

Julia: By partnering with wildlife organisations, the band works to raise awareness, empathy, and action towards protecting wolves and returning them to Colorado, which sounds very exciting.

And while I was super excited that we were about to record our final episode of this season, unfortunately I had technical difficulties that meant I wasn't able to join on the interview. You will hear me having a chat and a debrief with Sofia as usual on the outro, but I won't be talking during the interview because I couldn't make it sadly. Here's the episode!

Sofia: We've really missed Julia during the interview, but I think you'll really enjoy hearing what Jen has to say. So let's hear from her!

INTERVIEW

Sofia: Jen, we're so excited to have you on the podcast!

Jen: Thanks so much for having me. I'm really excited!

Sofia: Our first question is a slightly general one. Just to get us going. **What drew you to conservation and wolf conservation more specifically?**

Jen: I did grow up in New Jersey. I have always been fascinated with wild animals, animals that live in our home, and farmed animals as well. A few years ago, my folks were moving out of my childhood home, and going through some old boxes that they'd saved, like our school artwork. We found a picture and a profession of my love for animals through this, like prompt from probably my first-grade teacher of what I want to be when I grow up.

I'd written down three things: I wanted to be a dancer, a farmer, and a musician. And at the time that was what I thought the option was to be working with animals. Farmer was the only option. In a way I did always know that I liked this intersection. But I hadn't identified this passion until we started the project.

Sofia: It's so interesting how these things can come together because when you say those three things, it does sound like you're doing pretty well on them. You know, you're ticking a lot of the boxes that you set out for yourself. I think you're right, like our perception of when we're children, what being a grownup will be like, or what things will be like, can be quite different from what it actually turns out to be. I apparently declared when I was five that I wanted to be a marine biologist, but that was pretty much just because I wanted to go swimming with dolphins, you know?

Jen: Sure. Yeah - what drew me to conservation in general is, you know, I care about our environment. I care about humans and animals and want us to live in a healthier world. Wolves specifically, I wasn't necessarily attached to really, until we started this project. We decided that we wanted to start an artistic project that was creating music and movement together. And I was fascinated with animals and the way that they're kind of rooted movements move on the ground. And the wolf came up as a potential character in a story that we wanted to write. My real initial interest into the wolf was through this project.

And then when we wanted to learn more about the animal and get some lyrical content, we went to a wolf sanctuary in Colorado. We learned a lot more about what was going on with them in the States and what was happening with them specifically in Colorado. And I had moved to Colorado in 2008 and was completely unaware of this movement that was already starting, that was already happening to bring the

wolf back home to Colorado. When we went to the sanctuary, I learned more about the animal. I became more fascinated with them. Although it's already very natural for me to care about animals this was a completely new pathway to learn more about them. And then to use that information through an artistic project.

Sofia: Speaking of music, what makes music a good medium to communicate about conservation?

Jen: I think music is a great access point to feelings and to emotion and empathy. I was already a musician. My partner is a musician. It felt natural to use that medium, but it also can really translate to an audience and then of course it's easy to create more layers alongside of it with movement and artwork and the narrative.

It was really the first piece of this project was creating songs that then had lyrics with some intention behind it to educate on wolves. I think it is a beautiful way to experience emotion. I grew up with my dad, a classical singer, although I didn't always connect 100% authentically to that style of music - although now I really do. When I was a child, I was sitting in big old stone churches, listening to these beautiful choirs, harmonising with each other, and making this big sound out of what seemed to be like little humans. It felt big to me, even though I didn't really understand the music.

I think it can be a passive form of expression. Although for us, it's very intentional, I think for an audience member, it can be as passive as you want it to be. And you can really get something out of it. It personally provides a lot of joy for me and for our other members of the project where the emotion that we've put into the music and into the lyrics it can be really raw. It can feel healing when we express that way, and it can feel powerful. It feels like an easy way to express those emotions through music.

Sofia: I think you're right. Music is such an emotional medium. It just puts across emotion in a way that is so effective. I don't know what it is about music that does that, but conservation can be so emotional as well. Right? There are so many big emotions, feelings, and idea that go into it and are behind it. And so, it's a fascinating union and way to approach it that I hadn't really seen before.

Jen: Thank you. Yeah, I agree. It can be very emotional, and it does feel like a necessary outlet for me, at least when I learn about the kind of horrors that are taking place in the war on wolves in the States, it really affects me, hooks me, and in a way, this is a way for me to process what I'm learning about.

I think what other people are feeling when we witness this type of horror. I think it can be, maybe we call it like a home for that sadness or despair and a way to kind of process through it as more information comes along.

Sofia: So, it's kind of a combination. As you are creating this music and putting it together, it's like a source of catharsis for you and somewhere for you to put all of your emotions and process, how you feel about everything that's happening with the wolves. But at the end at the same time, I think it can also be an emotional experience for people listening to sort of capture these emotions and identify with them and maybe even find a home for the way that they are feeling. So almost a way of accompanying them as they process their emotions as well.

Jen: I hope so! That is part of our hope is that when somebody experiences either our songs, our videos, or a live performance, I do hope that they come away with a feeling. Then maybe that develops into looking into that a little bit more, not just as a personal way of processing it, but maybe to learn more about what are these songs about, what is the story? Is this rooted in fact? And hopefully then having like an access point to an interest in the movement to bring wolves home and to protecting them.

Sofia: Your new album is titled Blood Lantern. Can you tell us a bit about the meaning?

Jen: Sure. It's a name that's based off of how pack structure and their family structure has enabled the wolf survival and then the development of wolf culture with knowledge transfer across generations. Older wolves are sharing hunting strategies and techniques with younger wolves, then passing down knowledge from one generation to the next, which then maintains this culture that's very unique to that pack or family.

I think this is something when I learned about this wolf pack culture, it was really touching to me because I think we can imagine sometimes that humans are the only ones that have this with our families. That we have culture, that we have deep roots, that we're learning from our elders and it's not true. Animals because they speak a different language and communicate in a different way sometimes I think we do a disservice by not listening or learning that way. It's really meant to kind of engage the audience and knowing that families exist, and cultures exist outside of our very own unique individual cultures or human culture.

Sofia: And speaking of packs and groups, this new album sounds like it was quite a big group project. Could you tell us a bit about the artistic process behind the whole project and how you work with other people like biologists to bring it to life?

Jen: Absolutely. We're an ongoing project that's rooted in music, movement, collaboration, and conservation. The music part is we have six musicians that are working within the band to create the songs and the lyrics cycle along with it. We have a crew of dancers that are creating movement in collaboration with the music.

And then we have many other folks who are in the community who are supporting us either through donated space, so we can meet on a weekly basis to rehearse and practice. They may be collaborating with us for a short-term project that maybe we're doing a beer pairing together or they're helping us create art that's based off our story. And then the way we partner with wildlife organisations is we're involved in Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, where we met biologists and the folks who are really working within the scene, boots on the ground to bring wolves back to Colorado so working on getting the initiative on the ballot in 2020, and then now working within these working groups who are figuring out a management plan so wolves can be safe when they are brought back to Colorado.

We were lucky to get connected with a woman named Kate Vannelli who years ago offered to just like sell our merchandise at one of our shows. But she's also - she was kind of hiding from us at first- she's a National Geographic Explorer. She works with rhinos and conservation and cheetahs, and then she's also a beautiful visual artist.

She helped us create our record cover which kind of displays a wolf and then many wolves within the picture with other environmental elements in the background. We've had so many different connections with different folks who, although they don't perform with us, are really involved and have really supported us in getting to where we are and how we can get to perform this the way we want to.

Sofia: Oh, that's so cool! It sounds really collaborative, which is great. The project is strongly rooted in music, but as you were saying also in movement, since that includes these performances. **I'm curious to know why was the movement part important to you and how did you work with the dancers to bring these songs and stories to life?**

Jen: I grew up a dancer, I was performing until I was about 26 with other dance companies. Dance has always been really important to me and something that I enjoyed as a dancer myself, and then as an audience member. I think it can relay some of the similar emotions that we were talking about with music.

And I really wanted to add another layer and have it feel like an inclusive performance that includes many different access points to the story or to the emotion. When I started experiencing a dynamic disability in my late twenties and realised that I myself would not be able to move the way I wanted to but I really still wanted to be creative in that way and it still felt really cathartic for me, even if I could only use my words and expression in words to then work with other folks who had a different ability than I did with movement. When we started the project, I maybe thought there was going to be a point where I would be playing some of the music and then I would pop down and do some movement with the dancers.

But by the time that we started gathering dancers who were interested in the project, I was actually in the hospital after a heart surgery and was still finding inspiration for movement while my friends through dance were gathering folks who were interested in the project and holding a sort of audition.

I really put that in air quotes because we wanted anybody who wanted to be involved at this point and cared about kind of part of our vision and mission, we wanted them to be involved. We had a group of very diverse dancers with backgrounds in many different aspects of dance who helped us create the initial production, which was our first record *Wolf, Woman, Man*. And we've been able to perform for the most part all together. There are some moments where space will not allow our entire performing crew so occasionally, we will perform as just musicians as just a kind of regular old rock and roll band. I really do think that the gift is in kind of presenting music and movement together because it's this beautiful marriage between the two of them and because lyrics and the music really find its way into the movement. It's very intentional how we create together. I think that it really can go hand in hand.

Sofia: In the work that you were doing as a choreographer. What was your inspiration? Was that the movements of the worlds? Was it kind of the landscape? Was it maybe the emotions that you were feeling about the wolves or what went into it?

Jen: All of the things you just mentioned have found its way into the movement. Sometimes we're working with choreographic exercises that I share a bit of our science that we've received from the biologists. Learning about how the howl is multifaceted and it could be a warning, it could be a way to bond with your family members, to communicate a call of solidarity, a reunion, joyful expression.

In many ways throughout this second production *Blood Lantern*, the howl can show up in all those different ways. We've learned that wolves harmonise and work together. When they're mourning, they stop certain activities and may just do one low, long, loud howl. The mourning period can go on for any amount of time and they've captured this in the wild and in captivity. I'll share that with the dancers, some of the science information, and then we work through improv to find movement that really expresses that. Sometimes it's very intentional and I can point directly to what that movement is meant to represent.

And then other times it's more abstract and meant to evoke a feeling of what's happening in that moment.

Sofia: So you've got musical wolves, not only musical people? That's amazing. Having spoken about all of these songs, do you think you could walk us through the writing of one of them and just tell us a little bit about the lyrics and what inspired them?

Jen: Sure, we in the very beginning of our narrative in *Blood Lantern*, this new record, the first song called *Dawning Mountain* is about how wolves are starting to wake up, gather, and move through a new space and how they're following each other, working together, and following their alpha leader and bringing them into a new space.

That's kind of setting up the scene for the next piece, which is the title track *Blood Lantern*. This song is about how wolves are supportive of our environment, even though humans don't see it that way all the time. For instance, one of the lyrical phrases goes, well:

*"We have the paws, the claws, the grip
To reach where you cannot
Trophic in cascade with the wolf
In ever rising crop"*

That's based off of the trophic cascade and how wolves being an apex predator can have an effect on the environment all the way down to songbirds and the health of our rivers and our grasses and everything that can live in an ecosystem.

When you take that apex predator out, there may be a disastrous effect that happens. We're talking about the trophic cascade in the song. We're also talking about how wolves can access different places in an environment where humans can't. So, if elk and other ungulates are overgrazing or staying in the same space for too long and not moving the way they're naturally meant to, they may cause over erosion and the grasslands to not be healthy. This phrase, we have the paws, the claws, the grip that wolves are able to get onto mountain tops or deep into valleys where humans may not be able to get to to keep elk or deer moving the way that they should.

Sofia: What does the combination of words blood lantern refer to?

Jen: Blood Lantern connects the blood as a nod to family culture and the blood pedigree that we have this shared experience running through our blood. Then lantern is meant to evoke the feeling of somebody leading the pathway and lighting the path to follow. The light in the tunnel basically is meant to kind of showcase the alpha who's leading the pack through a new space.

Sofia: This is a question that we ask everyone who comes on the podcast. Is there another conservationist you find particularly inspiring and why?

Jen: You know, probably Kate Vannelli. That's the woman who created our record cover, she is a humble artist. She is an educator through National Geographic as an Explorer and the way she makes these connections through different art forms and then also different projects that are educating the public on different movements within animal conservation. I think that she does a really beautiful job of educating

the public through art and then also through making connections through different organisations.

Sofia: That's so cool. Our last question, do you feel optimistic about the future of nature? If so, why or if not, why not?

Jen: I feel a balance, I think of hope and despair about the future of nature. I find it honoring to kind of hold both sides. That it's okay to lean into the sadness and the despair and the horror that can happen in our natural world. I had a close friend of mine once tell me that it's okay that I don't always have a positive attitude. That we'll get back to it at some point. This was not in a toxic positivity type way, but in a way that it's okay to honour that I'm a sensitive person and things really hook me and sometimes feel poisonous when I witness or learn about something that's sad and awful in the natural ecosystem. But I think that's also how folks can attribute empathy and full feelings as a gift of motivation, because eventually it does. Once I move through it, it can motivate me to keep going. I think then in the end, empathy and coexistence is really what gives me the most amount of hope. I would like to, when I can, be choosing the side of hope rather than despair on what the future is.

Sofia: I think you're so right. It's a balance. I think acknowledging that grief can ultimately be really empowering by kind of giving a voice to it and allowing yourself to acknowledge it and move through. But hope is key as well in terms of staying motivated and kind of managing to keep going. I think that probably brings us to the end of our questions. Thank you so much for being with us, Jen, and thanks for sharing all this information on your project!

Jen: Thanks so much for having me. It was really wonderful to chat.

Sofia: If our listeners want to find more information about you, how can they do that?

Jen: You can check out our new record, *Blood Lantern*, on all music streaming platforms. You can look at our website: lostwalksband.com and then *Blood Lantern* has its own website: bloodlantern.com where you can learn more about our narrative through lyrics, and then you'll also receive some wolf information. And then you can follow us on socials to stay up to date, know what we're doing and know when we're performing @lostwalksband!

OUTRO

Julia: Sofia, I can't believe this is already the last episode of Season Two. I'm really sad about it, but also what a great conversation to end it on. It was inspiring hearing about how music, art, and conservation can come in together.

Sofia: Yeah, definitely. I'm so curious to hear what you thought about the interview, you know, like what were the things that you found you really connected to?

Julia: I mean, I'm not going to lie I had major FOMO being at home, not able to join that call because of my Wi-Fi, but it was a brilliant conversation. I'm so happy that I got to listen to it afterwards. One thing that really resonated, which you addressed during the interview was this idea that what you want you to do as a kid sometimes can be kind of spot-on, but also kind of limited. I remember I wanted to be someone who studied animal behaviour in the wild, because I wanted to be like Jane Goodall. It kept with me for a while because I even wanted to do a degree in ethology, the study of animal behaviour, but then somehow, you know, my career slightly adjusted and I realised that it's quite a niche thing to do. You kind of course correct a bit as you go in your life.

Sofia: It's almost like the sentiment can be really powerful. And even sometimes weirdly like the name you give, it can be accurate, but what you end up doing is so different from what on the day to day than what you expected. Something I already liked about Jens' and Lost Walks' approach to conservation was the way that it's so collaborative. The idea that it's not just about one individual's drive, but about how we can pull together: the drive and the talents of lots of different people to get to a common goal.

Julia: For sure. And I love that as well. This aspect of there so many people involved. It seems that even in terms of like lyrics or thinking about choreography, it was very much the synergy of different people coming together and having this force of how they wanted it to sound, what the choreography would look like. But also, I love that they really kind of engage with wildlife biologists, with conservationists and learn from them to make sure that what the lyrics were about were actually as accurate as possible, which I felt was, was a really cool way of going about it.

Sofia: Yeah, even that way of connecting with Jen's inspiring conservationist, Kate Vanelli, I thought it was really cool because they met at an event which Lost Walks was already doing. I think there's something cool about the idea that to find the right collaborations for your project, it's not always about just like finding and identifying and targeting and emailing loads of people. If you start doing the project in a way that feels good to you and in a way that you're connected to people will find you as well. And a lot of those might be people who can bring such valuable perspectives and talents to your project.

Julia: Yes, it reminds me of a conversation we had in Season One, where we were saying how important it is to find your tribe and, in that conversation, we were saying a bit more people needed to actively look to find these people. But I love that in this case, it's the reverse that happens. I think there's a lot of power to it. Putting yourself out there and especially now with social media, you know, you can do that pretty

easily. Then you attract people who are interested in what you're doing, because they can see that you have that passion and that you're working on these topics that are of interest to them.

Sofia: It's such a balance because obviously Jen and the band and all of that collaboratives had put so much work into that performance already, but that was kind of what allowed them to get to this next stage and to just find the next people who would be really great to work.

Julia: Yeah. And that brings me to another point I wanted to make about the importance of context. I feel like in this conversation, it was so clear that the context here were so important. Jen was saying she always had an interest in animals, the environment in general, but as she didn't necessarily have a passion about the wolves specifically until she moved to Colorado and started hearing about the wolves and the fact that people were trying to reintroduce them and really learning from outreach projects and conservation project that were local to her area. And so, I think sometimes it's kind of like the synergy of different things coming together. And suddenly you have this combination of factors that makes you click suddenly you're like, oh, okay, this is all coming together. Now I'm seeing this artistic project that we could start based on everything around us and I thought that was really cool.

Sofia: Like he way that wolves hadn't been her focus until she moved to Colorado.

Julia: Yeah, I think it happens a lot in life. As we said, with this idea of what you are, as a kid can evolve a lot, go to different places, move to different countries, and then discover new things or new ways of doing things. That can really impact on the way you see your life and what you decide to focus on, which I always find quite interesting.

Sofia: I think that's so true. And even if her context changed or the species or the focus changed, there was this continuity, right? Already she had an interest in animals and in music, dance, and in movement because she'd been a dancer and it was just kind of finding a way to combine those things. And to bring together this sort of catharsis, using these like artistic and musical talents that she had to address a topic that maybe hadn't been explored in this way before and that she was uniquely equipped to do it.

Julia: I think it connects with we've had that with other guests as well throughout our two seasons so far of this idea that you can really tap into your feelings through art. It's a different way to express as well, what you might be experiencing or the way you might experience nature or the future of the planet, which is obviously quite a heavy topic. But I feel through art, we really get to explore those things in a very different way.

Julia: And I think it's what makes it so powerful because you know, you can give people a lot of scientific facts, but I think there's something with the music and the dance and just the art in general that makes it resonate completely differently with people and kind of taps into these different aspects.

Sofia: I think you're right, so many of our guests have touched on the way that art can be a way to process emotion, to explore the world around us, and that it can just be such a valuable thing to have kind of in your toolbox within conservation.

Julia: We've had lots of amazing guests this season. We hope you enjoyed them. This is it for Season Two of Good Natured, but we would love to hear your views. If you've enjoyed a particular episode. Or each of our guests said who was inspiring them so if anything resonated, we'd love to know. Please let us know on social media using #ConservationOptimism.

Spotify now has an option for you to rate the podcasts if you haven't done so yet. Please give us a little rating on there. That's it for this episode. We hope you enjoyed it. If you have any thoughts or reaction, you can also send us a voice note at podcast@conservationoptimism.org. And before we officially sign off and go into the credits, just a quick note to say that we have a little treat for you at the very end of this episode so don't stop until you've reached the very end of this podcast.

Sofia: We've so enjoyed doing these episodes and talking to these fascinating people and being able to share that with all of you. You can also reach us on Twitter @ConservOptimism. This episode was produced and edited by Julia Migné and myself, Sofia Castelló y Tickell.

Julia: Our theme song was composed and produced by Matthew Kemp. Our transcripts are available thanks to the help of Alexandra Davis.

Sofia: This season of Good Natured was funded by Synchronicity Earth, the Whitley Fund for Nature, and the University of Oxford Departmental Public Engagement with Research Seed Fund.

Julia: And again just to finish on a big thanks to all our guests this season and to all of you listeners!

BONUS

Julia: Well, hey, you thought it was the end, wasn't it? But not quite yet! For you, as this is the end of the season, we've got a special treat. We have actually embedded the song Blood Lantern to this episode, so you get an idea of what it actually sounds like as we talked about the lyrics a bit earlier in the episode, so enjoy the music. Bye!

Blood Lantern

Sickness and death in herds
My pack will flush them out
Nothing but skin and bones
To feed our empty mouths
We're passing to the urn
My kin will push them out
Nothing but wasted fur
To quench our barren mouths
They're on the top, below you now
Even though you are wrought
With smoke and stone left them alone
To waste away for not
We have the paws, the claws, the grip
To reach where you can not
They cannot hide or graze the side
Of hazy mountain tops
We have the paws, the claws, the grip
To reach where you cannot
Trophic in cascade with the wolf
In ever rising crop