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Martha Williams [00:00:10] Good question. I always wonder about as a parent myself, what are those formative experiences that might lend a person to go one way or another or into a certain area? So probably for me, when I grew up on a farm north of Baltimore and so spent most of my time outside, and my mother knew the plants and the birds and we knew when the swallows would come and go, you know, I think when you grow up on a farm or a ranch, you pay attention to the seasons, to the weather, you pay attention to the environment around you and it's, it's so important to all that we did. So, I guess it was just instilled in me at an early age and we grew up just with a great appreciation of wild places and wild things.

Martha Williams [00:01:13] Oh yes. Probably changes and maybe, some improvement, and then continuity. So, so let me think about that. You know, they're the places where you go repeatedly.

Jim Thull [00:01:29] And I'm sorry, this was near Baltimore, is that correct?

Martha Williams [00:01:32] Near Baltimore we would go to the Adirondacks in the summers, the same place in the Adirondacks, every summer. And then we went west often too, so there were, so as a family, we had places we visited repeatedly and then we would explore new places too. So if I think about the places that I've visited throughout my life, I'd say they've stayed fairly constant because they were pretty, they were wild places to begin with. Where there's been, I think, tremendous change is in some of those beloved places it's the development in the environment. So, you know, thinking of gateway communities, or think of the change in Bozeman, you know, over the decades. Another piece, I guess, what was so important to our family, my father and mother were very much involved in agricultural preservation. So where we grew up, the pressure for, there was a great development pressure conifer starter castles that were taking over old time dairy farms and agriculture, but because of the investment in agricultural preservation that that state took on, there still are lots of farms around there. So you clearly saw a change from development but some of those old time farms are still there.

Jim Thull [00:03:01] So, speaking of the wild areas that you remember as a kid in the Adirondacks, I always mispronounce it, places like that, in your opinion, is the reason why some of those are still great wild areas, because of legislation protecting them?

Martha Williams [00:03:18] Yes. I mean think of our national parks, think of Forest Service lands, BLM lands, our public lands. And I think of when I talk about public lands I think of them as being federal, federally protected lands, but also state lands or local government lands, it's those lands that are accessible to the public. So, yes, the presence of mind, the prescience for those individuals who really saw how important it was to enact the Wilderness Act, to set aside the organic, the Organic Act for national parks. All of those public lands that we think of now didn't happen haphazardly. The fact that we can enjoy them now was, was a product of hard work and people thinking forward at the time.

Martha Williams [00:04:19] Well, I have admitted before that I am. I'm a true believer in the Endangered Species Act and so I'm not apologetic about that. And I think it's the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act, those are extraordinary pieces of law that, I think they make our nation, set our nation apart from others and make it really special. One thing about the Endangered Species Act I think about all the time, certainly in my position now, is that it was, when it

was set up, it was there, it was focused on habitat and protecting habitat as a place for species to be healthy. And so, I, you know, if I look at trends I worry about, very much worry about, the, a trend to focus on specific species instead of the habitat. And I think the habitat's what's critical because it's hard to know with climate change or changes over time what species might thrive there. But if the habitat is healthy, you know, they're going to have a better chance. So I think that's, that's something that sometimes gets lost in how we look at the Endangered Species Act.

Martha Williams [00:05:47] I think absolutely we can. I mean I think of that, think of an analogy to trust responsibilities and that, I remember years ago, we were looking at the way Colorado looked at their school trust lands and whether we wanted to replicate that in Montana. And the thinking was that you preserve these wild places. You think about them as protecting the corpus of a trust and that you can spend the interest but you're always protecting the corpus and so I think of our resources sometimes as that corpus. And so if we go too far in developing them now, they're not going to be there for future generations.

Martha Williams [00:06:39] Well, I think your question poses that. I mean, a balance implies that it's going to tip sometimes and you do something to bring it back into balance and so management of natural resources, I think, requires a constant balance that, that's never, you can't rest on your laurels. There's never stasis that, there is always going to be some little tinkering more bigger tinkering that comes along the way. What that balance is, I don't, it depends on the situation. But I think Montana's on the cusp of being too successful. That's a good thing. You know with that, it's drawing so many people in, and, and that's, that's tricky because you want to stay relevant. I think about conservationists and the ability to do our work requires that we be relevant and that people care about what we do. So how do you get people to care about it? Don't you, one way is to get them to engage and to be outside, so, so there's going to always be a little bit of a balance and that you want people to enjoy it and care about it. But you don't want it to negatively impact the resource or hurt it for future generations. So yeah, I think that's where we're at that stage in some places. That we love it to death.

Martha Williams [00:08:11] Yeah sure. This, and I think of the Smith actually as a little bit different than some of our other rivers. I think of the Smith, to me personally we manage it probably not always for pristine experience because it's like that river that's like the first time experience or inexperienced people that it's, it's sort of accessible to all. And so I don't, I wouldn't want it to be too precious. I think as we try to balance use, to be really careful to not be, to lead us out or say we want to keep people out because we want to keep the experience pristine for some of us. There have to be places where, you know, I think the last summer I went to Wolf Creek or went to the Missouri River just on 4th of July because I was working and that's the only place I had time, time to go and I got there and there were people on like floating mattresses and inner tubes and a, like a stock tank and I had laughed and I thought so I don't want us to keep all of our rivers too precious and keep that, people, away from that. Like there's, there's beauty in, in people just being out and having fun and enjoying our rivers too. So, it's a balance and, and how do we manage that? That's Fish Wildlife and Parks is charged with that, with river recreation. Gulp, that's a big responsibility, and no pretending that it's going to be easy and everyone's going to agree with us. But nonetheless, we've been charged with it.

Martha Williams [00:09:52] The future is in our youth. No, no question. That, I mean, you know, our environment will be in their hands. They'll be our future leaders. So how, getting youth outside, how the outside resonates with youth is, can decide whether we stay relevant, and whether we can have those wild places whether they'll be there or not. So

critical to engage the youth. How we do that? I think everybody's working on it. But boy if I'm going to be really honest, I'm, as I travel around in my current job and I go to meetings I'm pretty struck by the single demographic at those meetings and I, I just was at the North American Conference of Wildlife and I looked around I thought, where the young people? Not only, where's the diversity, but where different diversity and gender, ethnicity, how about age groups, you know, it was upper level management, that's who selected to go there. We needed, I went to one session where there were some younger people and the vibrancy there was palpable. So we, I, we need to do whatever we can to engage more people. Appeal to a broader, broader subsection than we have been now, but that to be careful, I mean to honor the past. Honor those who have put blood, sweat, and tears into having the rivers that we have and having the places we have in sustainable farms in agriculture we have. I mean there, that's a really important piece too. So there's honoring the people who've put so much work into what we have. Yet, I think if we don't look forward and engage youth and engage a broader section of our population, I worry for our relevance. Support relevance, meaning I worry and support for what we do.

Martha Williams [00:12:09] Oh, good question, so are a lot of our budget comes from licensing, hunting and fishing licenses but also a large portion of our budget comes from federal dollars and they're from there're two sources of federal dollars. Pitman Robertson and Daniel Johnson and those are taxes on, on one hand, sport, fishing, tackle, yachts, pleasure boats for the fisheries side and then also on shooting, ammunition, and gun sales for Pitman Robertson. So right. So it's like a little bit of a conundrum that our, our for the most part, state agencies, State Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and parks are funded through parks and can't be funded through licenses but through licenses and sale of ammunition and, and sporting equipment.

Martha Williams [00:13:15] Well, out-of-state licenses generate more money because of the cost difference. So and, and, so where most states are seeing a decline in their license sales, we have not. Right now, we're doing very well with those and I thought about that the other day, I was going to the airport and, and there was a group, a big group of people going to South Africa to go hunting and I thought huh. A light bulb went off and then I thought we, in some respects, Montana's becoming the South Africa. You know Alaska, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado, but especially Montana is becoming that South Africa in North America for, for hunting and fishing and so. An extra responsibility to take care of those resources.

Jim Thull [00:14:15] Do you think that there's, that can lend weight to preservation when there's that economic impact for the state that there's?

Martha Williams [00:14:26] Yeah, who wants to kill the goose that lays the golden egg? Absolutely. I mean I worry about, I remember when there was sort of, there was a transition where for a while, we talked about those, you know, outdoor resources as somewhat incalculable. You know, that, why monetize this because it's comparing apples and oranges, that it's really the experience that matters. So why do we have to monetize everything? But at the same time, we're realizing the economic impact of outdoor recreation is enormous.

Martha Williams [00:15:05] Oh. Oh, I love, so actually wild places, I, I am a true believer also in longtime farms and ranches, is the fabric being so important to the community fabric and that sometimes we miss that. But I, I love the gravel leaves I love the Centennials because I feel like it's a step back in time and not so many people go there. I like wide open spaces not as good in northwest Montana. I love being in the trees but I do

love the plains and wide open spaces and love, love the smell of rain, I love nighttime. I love being out at night, or waking up in the morning and hearing the birds moving through. I think of it as what you just said earlier, it's the smells and the sounds and the sights altogether.

Martha Williams [00:16:11] Well, I think of floating on the South Fork of the Flathead and, and you know, packing in with, I love horses, so riding in and having the mules and dropping us off, you know, for a week in the wilderness. I love, I love sleeping in a tent. I love sleeping on, outside not in a tent. I like being out, even if it's for a weekend. But the longer trips, the better. I love, I love eastern Montana. I love the Missouri Breaks. I can't think of a place I don't like.

Martha Williams [00:16:56] Well, I think, I think of being in a tent and hearing a grizzly bear circle my tent.

Jim Thull [00:17:05] That qualifies.

Martha Williams [00:17:05] I think of, of, of, of having an owl come out of a tree and just swoop by me and you know they're so quiet when they fly. But I can feel, feel the air move around me. Gosh. I mean, I can think of Yellowstone and Glacier. I think of the first time I ever went elk hunting. It was misty and like, following their scent. It was more that it was just really fun to be following them. I can think of catching fish and screaming and yelling and being excited, watching the first time, probably, you know, the first time on Madison seeing a fish take my fly. Know that, like learning to look for my fly and even learning how to do that. I for water wading, just even wading in the Blackfoot near Missoula, getting away and just being in a stream. I'm not picky I'm like, anywhere.

Jim Thull [00:18:18] No, that's fair, that's great. And those were the experiences for me that you, you have to experience, you can't recreate, you know, feeling that the air from an owl pass you by or you know, the, the sound of a grizzly near your tent. That is,.

Martha Williams [00:18:31] Right. It's very visceral.

Jim Thull [00:18:32] That's a moment you never forget but, you know, you can't. You have to have been there to experience it. You can't really truly explain to somebody else how it was.

Martha Williams [00:18:39] Right, I think of the, I'm lucked out with my parents, one Halloween going to freeze out Lake and the, cause I've been thinking about it recently with the snow geese moving through right now. From freeze out Lake all the way to the Rocky Mountain Front, we could see nothing but snow geese. The, the sky was filled with snow geese, there wasn't any space and thinking how extraordinary is that, and how, how often do you get to see something like that.

Jim Thull [00:19:12] That's amazing.

Martha Williams [00:19:12] So, what that brings up for me, it's that power the immense power being awed by the world around you, and to me that's the relevance. That's what's so important to endangered species to these broad expanses of land, to all the work we do it's that ability to be awed by something so much bigger than ourselves.

Martha Williams [00:19:48] Yeah, I've probably always been an angler, but not always super interested in it. Growing up we, I, my mother fished, and my father fished, and I probably had a crush on somebody. I had crushes on people, on men who liked to finish and so I would fish with them and then learn to love it myself, mostly just because I love to be on the water so, so I probably was late in really learning to love it. But I did it because I was outside with, it was more being with people. But, but I love the places it takes you.

Martha Williams [00:20:33] I think that question I should have thought of that before I took the position. No, I think a couple of things. One, the irony of me, I'm not a scientist by training so I learned early on while I love the environment, my aptitudes, I'm more of a people person, and relationship, like big systems thinker, and so didn't get a degree in science instead a philosophy undergrad, and then went to law school because I just think, you know, I think that way better and so thought that was hopefully where I could make more of a difference and then I've just taken opportunities that have come my way and, and as I've said earlier, when I saw people or knew of people who I thought were, seemed extraordinary to me I wanted to learn from them. I've kind of, I followed them, or I found, I found them and found jobs where I could learn from them and that's how my career just went all along. I first I went to law school in Missoula because I wanted to study public land law and there was a teacher there Marjorie Hunter Brown who I wanted to learn from. Turned out it was, she was incredible and I'm really glad I had that chance to learn from her because she was humble. She was bright, she was thoughtful, she taught public land and Indian law so that niche, that mix between Indian Law and Public Land Law was really fascinating. And then I, when I went to work for Fish Wildlife and Parks as an attorney, at that time I was really interested in public private conservation and wanted to learn more about conservation easements and real estate and knew that if I'd gone in private practice I wouldn't get to do it very much so I wanted to learn from an attorney at Fish Wildlife and Parks. That's what he did and work in the conservation easement field. Turns out he didn't stay very long and it turned over to me and so I had to learn on the fly. And then I went to the Department of the Interior, I was the solicitor for parks, National Park Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service and I went there in part to learn from Michael Bean, who was a counselor at the time, and just to me seemed like a very again humble, thoughtful, wise person. So I went there, learned as much as I could from him. And then the opportunity to teach at the law school, teach natural resources law, wildlife law, public land law, and oversee the Land Use and Natural Resources Clinic. So really work in a clinical setting. I went to, left D.C. and went to Missoula to teach at the law school. That, I did that because I believe so strongly that in the next generations and building that leadership depth, building the bench, and getting to work with students and the students booing me they were extraordinary. So I mean I have, I have so much hope in them. They were so good and then the governor called me about this position and at first, I was, I thought he was calling for a reference for one of my students. I didn't think at all, had never thought of this position but then considered it seriously because of the sense of timing that these different pieces were aligning and I wouldn't have done it five years ago, 10 years ago, probably not five years into the future, but right now seemed like the time to do it.

Martha Williams [00:24:50] Rolling up our sleeves, a lot of hard work, I think not pretending that it would be easy. Yet I think there are some commonalities that having water in the streams is good for everyone. And I think most agriculturalists most people who live on the land truly appreciate wildlife. I mean not working with landowners who are dealing with grizzly bears for the first time in 100 years. There are challenges but they're also somewhat fascinated by it. I think that's the same for water that's and water that's so important for our ecosystems and fisheries. So I think there are commonalities in that everyone would like to see water in our streams how it happens. I think takes a lot of hard

work and no pretending there are no easy answers to that and that's OK. But sometimes maybe give a little. One place you take some somewhere else. I mean I think of it as the bigger picture and how do we fill it all together. I do feel really strongly that it's more important for us to find ways for people to stay on the land than make it so hard. They can't be there because I'd much rather see not only for our resources but also for our communities. Others see long term landowners there then. People coming and going and or development so so the trade offs. I think sometimes what might seem hard isn't as hard if you are looking at the long term picture of how do we keep these community fabrics together.

Martha Williams [00:26:50] Yes. Thank you for asking that. Absolutely. And an I. Yes politics I think can get in the way of that. I feel strongly that it's my job as the director to be looking down the road to thinking of how do I leave this place. How do I leave the agency in the best position to be protecting these resources for a long time.

Martha Williams [00:27:26] We do work closely with them. I think we have to work closely with tribes. That is though always evolving and I think we can always do a better job. No question. I mean I think we got a lot of history to come and we have varying degrees of success and different history with with each tribe to not paint the tribes in Montana with a broad brush. Do you realize the context and place is important for each of them. I would like to improve our relationship. Most definitely as we go forward you know not think that it's OK to leave it as it is an example grizzly bear recovery. So as we're working toward delisting grizzly bears. What does that mean to the tribes versus what it means to us as a state versus what it means to us as a nation. And so realize that for tribes they I think by and large they're happy to see bears delisted and for us all to manage them collectively by tribes don't want to see them hunted. And so how do we. Some of the tribes all of them and to varying degrees they have the spiritual connection to certain species like bison how are we handling treaty rights and hunting bison. And in Montana a very narrow kind of difficult geographical location yet wanting to respect these tribes that have had these longstanding treaty rights in place before we even became a state. Those are two examples I can think of switchbacks rocks recovery we're working to recover swept Fox on tribal lands and and couldn't recover them without that without their help and coordination. So working with tribes is important because for you know one whole number of levels but at very least we can't do it by ourselves. We should never think we can.

Martha Williams [00:29:41] Full disclosure you know I mean I. My training was as an attorney and I always joked but not so jokingly that I'm a professional worrier because you know that Russian is to think of contingencies and think of what can go wrong and how do you address it. So so I am a worrier and I joke what doesn't keep me up at night right now. But I think the main. Challenges I see aside from how to have an agency run as efficiently as it can so that it's better able to address the challenges coming its way. I am concerned about climate change. Fire drought. I'm concerned about use pressures pressures from people loving our resources too much and how do we get into that tricky business of allocating use and and trying to move people around. How do you do that without making social judgments. And how do you choose which resources to impact and which not. So climate change pressures. I worry very much about our operating environment right now and us as a nation getting complacent about the value of conservation. And I just am concerned politically right now about it being okay to say the. Civil service that the state government employees are part of a deep state. That worries me. How do we how do I oversee employees who work incredibly hard and are very capable. How do I help give them the space to do the best job they can when there can be pilloried by certain contingent saying oh they're just part of a deep state. You know there's a there maybe it's I

that goes to a concern about a lack of understanding of civics and civic engagement and that we as an agency any state agency as a nation we should be we should care about the rule of law. We have the constitution we have the federal Constitution that the state constitution which is extraordinary. We have statutes in place. We have rules. We have guidelines. We don't do these things willy nilly. But without I guess the final concern and maybe that kind of just the others is without relevancy without people caring what we do and understanding what we do. It becomes very hard to follow the laws. It becomes hard to adapt to climate change challenges with climate change. It becomes harder to address the challenges that come our way if people. Don't care about what we do. So do we think about the people component I think agencies. Have. Conservationists for a while we're so focused on the resource we forgot the people. I think people is frankly just as important because we need the support to be able to do the hard. Conservation work.

Martha Williams [00:33:19] No. I don't know so much about how important it is to be politically active. Another way of putting it is. It's critical for people who care about these issues to be engaged. That if you love to fish it you need to be engaged and understand how that fishery got there or what's the work that was put in place to restore the habitat. Or where does the water come from. You know what drives that. Do we care about the clean water. Do we care about allocation of water or water adjudication or new you know. So we need to be engaged. It's absolutely critical.

Martha Williams [00:34:11] I'm totally worried about it right now that we that we do that we become complacent and take us for granted and or have someone say oh well what it would astounds me right now and I I heard it the other day at the Environmental Quality Council somebody saying Well of course I love the environment of course I care about clean air and clean water and yet taken action that's very contrary to that that it's okay to say one thing and do another. That's where engagement matters. To say wait a minute how can you say that and do this. The two don't necessarily fit together. I think. I as you were just talking about that people come to Montana to fish or to hike or to go to wild places if they're coming here for vacation. Sometimes they don't want to be bothered. You know I understand that they come here to go away and so they don't want to talk politics and I don't want to have to get into the weeds on a certain policy or whatever. Yet somehow some recognition that. What they come here to enjoy that experience is a product of hard work.

Martha Williams [00:35:32] Well I've I've always had a fascination with Bhutan so I really want to go to time. I want to see the cranes migrate through. I know in Pakistan and Bhutan I have never been to Africa and I've worked on you know I've worked on site teams issues and an ivory ban potentially. I'd love to go see elephants and big game species before they're gone. I worry about that. I'd love to see. I'd like to go to see polar bears before they're gone. Those are those are things. Those are three things that have been on my bucket list. I'd love to go way south in southern Chile and Argentina B and see Hemingway wild places there. I can't imagine many a ticket or trip that I've turned down. It's me. Yes but right now I don't have very much time to go away on those big trips but those are in the top five that are in the top five. I love fishing and one of my favorite experiences is fishing near the Bering Sea. Silver Salmon came in off the ocean and and sleeping at night and hearing the birds move through you know early fall or you know end of August beginning of September I'd like to do that again. There are not many outdoor experiences that I'd say no thank you to.

Martha Williams [00:37:22] Funny the governor asked me that when he interviewed me for the job about my legacy and I liked him I like my legacy. I'm not interested in it for a

legacy. What I'd like to see for fish wildlife and parks is to be in that athletic stance of being effective and healthy as an organization as a team ready to address whatever comes its way. And there are gonna be things coming into play. No doubt you we think of PKP aquatic event with no disease or fire or drought whatever they're going to they're going to be issues. Fish Wildlife and Parks will always act to deal with. So if I can leave the agency in a better healthier spot to address those I would be pretty proud.

Martha Williams [00:38:18] Thank you for having me. I feel honored to even be invited. My only my parting thought is for us to be patient and kind with each other in a little more. Remember that humility as we tackle some pretty heady issues that are totally worth it. Really super that we get to do it. So to think of it is a privilege to do the work we do and and be a little more forgiving over each others. We do it.