

Sz3Ep3 The Conch Tasha Nathanson_Final.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We are thrilled to continue our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean and most importantly, showcase the incredible people working in the seafood sector, share their journeys, examine the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are excited to have another special guest joining us, Tasha Nathanson. Tasha is the founder of Seven Leagues Leather, a circular economy fish leather tannery and fish leather boot social enterprise based in the Pacific Northwest. Welcome and thank you, Tasha, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's go!

Tasha Nathanson [00:00:44] Excellent. I'm looking forward to it.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:46] I am so excited to have you on here. We've been talking about this for a good long while, I have to say. And finally, we are able to make it happen. And I'm so excited and thankful that you're here.

Tasha Nathanson [00:00:56] Wonderful. Me, too.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:58] If you could give us a little bit of background on how you came to where you are today to be the founder of Seven Leagues Leather. I would love to get a little bit of the back story.

Tasha Nathanson [00:01:09] Yeah, it's a little bit of a long and winding road. In 2017, I wandered into a meeting of environmental artists who were displaying results from a group project they'd done on fish leather tanning, tanning by hand. I just returned from working in value added to agricultural development in the eastern Caribbean. I was looking to make an impact at home. I was kind of open and curious about what shape this would take, especially as, at that point, I'm a mid-career professional and I'm stretching into a kind of freedom that I've gotten from a recently emptied nest after a lot of years of kind of heavy, single, widowed parenting. So, I decided I was ready to start a business myself. I wanted to achieve some of the kinds of impact that I wasn't seeing accomplished in the nonprofit sector like I'd been working in just previously. And I had businesses like Patagonia and Ben and Jerry's as my lodestar because I wanted something that was going to make an impact. And I also had that value added agriculture lens already in mind, since that's what I'd been previously working in. And I just started looking for the right idea. And there at this art show was the idea. They were showing fish leather and it was so unexpectedly beautiful. It was this like tawny tanned salmon and these beautiful sturgeon skins and their patterns had scale pockets and diamond shapes. And I started tugging at the pieces between my hands and I'm sniffing it. And I realized that the scent is kind of vaguely woody, which is, you know, the smell of leather. And I understood later that by the time you've tanned it all, the smell is gone. And what you get is the smell from the tannins that you use to make the leather. And then I learned that fish leather is actually nine times stronger per thickness than other leather. So, it has this really high tensile strength so that you have this thin, flexible, beautiful result. And I could see the commercial potential.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:16] So you went to this art show, and you just became hooked on this leather and said, I need to do this myself. How did you learn how to do this?

Tasha Nathanson [00:03:25] I gave myself a year to research the idea, first of all, to figure out the market and look at the possibility for scaling it up. Please forgive the pun, it's kind of unavoidable. So, I started first researching the market to see is this something that it

would be worthwhile doing? And that's when I found out that Prada and Gucci and Nike and BMW were all using European fish leather in some of their goods. Nobody was doing it in North America. So, I saw that there was a market niche. I saw that there was an uptick in interest in fish leather. And so, then I started trying to figure out how to do it. I did a few crazy things. This is part of starting a business on the cheap. So, I found a tannery. It wasn't a fish leather tannery, but it was like this organic tannery in Austria. And the guy would take on workers. If you were willing to work for free, he'd give you room and board and he'd teach you some basic tanning. So, I used my airline points and went off to Europe and lived a while during the summer with that fellow who turned out to be quite the lunatic. But I learned some things. Then I came back, and I was just sort of hand tanning some fish leather myself to start getting a feel for it. And then I took some of the pieces that I had made, and I went to shoe school in Toronto. I found this place where I could do a ten-day intensive and put together a proof of concept to see whether it would work. Those are actually the shoes that are pictured on the website now. That's not the design that we intend to go with in the long term. The particular ones that are there are a knock off of a Clark desert boot. Simply because my shoemaking teacher told me that that was the easiest thing to make if you didn't know what you were doing. And I wore those for six months through Vancouver winter and spring, all the water, all the rain and the snow and everything else. And they held up really fantastically. And at the end of the year of the market research and the various different experiences, I decided this was a go and I incorporated.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:27] That is one of the most incredible stories I've heard, honestly. You went from not knowing how to make leather, let alone out of fish skin, to learning how to do that, and then also learning how to be a cobbler. Right. I mean, that's a pretty incredible story, I have to say.

Tasha Nathanson [00:05:45] Well, in both of those things, I don't intend to be either the tanner or the cobbler. As an entrepreneur, you sort of have to be everything, but you shouldn't be everything. You have to know where you need to hire good talent, but you're also even where you're hiring other talent, you have to know enough that you make the right decisions on who you hire and that you can make sure that they're doing what they need to do. So, I will never be the actual shoemaker, nor will I, in fact, be the tanner. But I know enough about it that I know how to make the decisions around both of those.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:16] That's amazing and incredible. I can't even tell you how cool that is. So how did you come up with the name Seven Leagues Leather. And what does that mean?

Tasha Nathanson [00:06:24] A league is a unit of measure, sometimes on land, sometimes at sea. And seven leagues is actually the distance that a Roman soldier was expected to walk in a day. So, it's a one-day march for Roman soldiers. Then folk and fairy tales started occasionally putting in an element of seven league boots. And these were magic boots that every step takes you seven leagues. So, with every step you're walking a day's march. And that idea really resonated with the business model and the product that I'm trying to build with Seven Leagues, which is designed to carry us forward to a better future. But it also refers to the Indigenous concept of seven generations, where you should consider the impact of your actions on the next seven generations to come and plan that you do things in a way that doesn't negatively impact them. And that's a great basis for ecological planning and it's really so much more responsible than the short-termism that has gotten us into the kind of climate trouble we're in today. And finally, there's a reference

to the Seven Seas, and we hope to expand our model outward. So just like the Seven Seas, we hope to be a little bit everywhere.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:34] Well, I have to tell you this. I'm already so excited to have you here on The Conch and talking about your business and the evolution and the growth and the learning that you've gone through and the meaning of Seven Leagues. That's really cool. I really appreciate learning more about the name and the thought and the thinking behind it. And we're going to talk a little bit more about the social enterprise part of your business, because that's also super important, and I really want to get more information about that as well. In my research about you for this podcast, I read that you use two byproducts from local industries, which are the skins, the fish skins from food processing and bark from wood processing, right? So, to create these high quality, thicker products with less impact than chrome tanned leather. Can you walk us through this process of tanning fish skin? I have no idea how any of that works, and I'm just thrilled to hear about this.

Tasha Nathanson [00:08:30] Yeah, there's a lot to unpack there. So first I'll just kind of go through the steps that it takes to make leather and then connect it up to those byproducts. So, to make leather, first you take a skin, you scrape it as clean as you can get it, you empty it of anything that would rot or degrade until all you have left is the underlying empty collagen structure. So, you do that by running it through a bath of mainly water, salt, and lime in a tanning drum. I will note the stuff that you're getting rid of in this step, it's all the remaining flesh and oil and scales and whatnot is also all that stuff that might smell. So, I will head off the favorite question about fish leather right now. Fish leather smells like leather, not like fish. That's because of that first part in the process. So next you need to tan the leather. So, you know, you've gotten this sort of empty floppy collagen structure and now you need to add something that you're going to use to make it into leather. And this is something that's going to fill the spaces in between the collagen and it's going to bind it and it's going to thicken it and it's going to preserve the result. And you can actually use a lot of different things to make leather. You can actually use things like oil, you can use brains. I kid you not, you can use urine. I don't do any of those things. You can also use different kinds of metal, which we'll talk about in a moment. And you can use plant tannins, which I will also talk about. But that's the part where you're tanning the leather and then the last part is that you need to finish it. So, you've just taken all the oils out of the skin, so now the oils need to be put back in. So, you put in other oils back in and then you might want to add color, you might want to put a coating on it, you'll need to soften it and so on. So, there are a bunch of different choices that you can make on the finishing depending on what results you want to achieve and what decisions you're trying to make on the environmental impact. You asked about the byproduct aspect of the skins and the tannins. The skins, I do buy from skin off processors who are processing fish without the skin. So those are byproducts that would otherwise either go sometimes to mink food or sometimes to farmed fish food, sometimes to fertilizer, sometimes to dog treats. Those are all fairly low value uses for it, but a lot of them actually go directly to the landfill. So, this is either repurposing them and saving them from the landfill or it's increasing the value that processors can get from them. And then on the tannin side, I currently do import tannins from South America. Crazy because importing tree products to the Pacific Northwest is like bringing sand to the Sahara. Yes. So, I actually went to the forest sector to Forest Products Innovation, specifically, which is a national forestry innovation center in Canada, and said, hey, up until the sixties, we produced tannins here. And that went away when things shifted towards chrome. But I presented to them my market research that said that there's an increase in interest in veg tanning and so a return to a market for those tannins. And wouldn't they like to produce those? Because I would like to buy them locally. And the

fantastic news is that they validated my market research. It was correct. And they now have a project on Vancouver Island and they're developing what will be an Indigenous owned business using waste from hemlock wood processing to make tannins. So, in the future I hope to be buying them locally.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:16] I feel like I missed a step there. So, you take the fish skins and then you scrape off kind of the flesh, right?

Tasha Nathanson [00:12:23] Yep.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:23] How do you introduce the tannins into the fish skin? How does that work?

Tasha Nathanson [00:12:28] It's kind of like you make tea. Mm hmm. So, you have these plant products that you put in water and salt, and you make a big vat. In my case, I've got a rotating tanning drum, and you put the skins in, and you put the tannins in, and it just rolls around, and in the end, it comes out. It's penetrated. It's actually chemically bonded with the collagen in the skin. Oh, and you can do this by hand as well. Those artists that inspired me initially were doing this by hand. It penetrates more thoroughly if you have constant motion. And I mean, there are some different things that when you're doing this commercially, that you can get better penetration and higher heat resistance and just kind of better results than by hand. But you can even do this by hand in a bucket in your kitchen. It won't be quite as long lasting a leather as a commercially made leather, but it'll last a good, long time, and it can also be done that way.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:13:26] Are these tannins extracted from tree bark? It's the bark, right?

Tasha Nathanson [00:13:31] Mainly. So, what plants use tannins for is anti-microbial and anti-fungal protection for the plant, which is really cool because if you're wearing or using a piece of veg tanned leather, it gives those properties to the veg leather as well. So, if you imagine a tree, its first line of defense is bark. It says, I have this thick and difficult bark, don't bother me, that's my armor. But if something, whether it's an insect or a fungus or a disease, gets through the bark, the next thing the tree is going to meet it with is the tannins. And the tannins are very acidic and nasty and they kind of fight off those microbes. So that's why you would tend to find it in the inner bark is it's right in that interface between the bark on the outside and the wood on the inside, and it's often in that layer in between. And what's cool about the project, I mean, this is maybe getting a little bit too much into wood for listeners who are more interested in fish.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:30] That's okay.

Tasha Nathanson [00:14:31] Is that so when you are processing wood, you take the bark off and the forest industry doesn't let me call it waste because it gets burnt for hog fuel, which again is a super low value use. But they said it's not wasted. It's byproduct.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:45] Right. Right.

Tasha Nathanson [00:14:46] Okay. To get the tannins out of it, it's a water process. So, they process the bark, they get the tannins out. But the cool thing is then you still have the bark. You can still burn it for hog fuel. And it burns even cleaner because since we move logs through the ocean. They're very salty. And burning that salty bark often is corrosive

for the machinery in the plant that they're burning it to use as energy. And so it burns cleaner. So, there it is. It's just like an extra thing that they can take out and they'll continue the rest as it is.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:20] So that's really fascinating because when I think of tannins, I think of wine, right? This wine has a lot of tannins in it. That's kind of what we're tasting, right?

Tasha Nathanson [00:15:28] That's exactly it. And that feeling in your mouth. You know whether it's a feeling from sipping the wine or whether you have just eaten into a slightly green banana or certainly an unripe persimmon, that feeling that all the water in your mouth just disappeared and ran to hide somewhere else.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:45] Yeah.

Tasha Nathanson [00:15:46] Yeah. That's tannins that you're running into there often.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:49] Okay. So that helps me get this image of how that all works in my mind. Again, I think it's fascinating. I wanted to ask. You mentioned you use natural plant extracts for the tanning process and conventional leather production worldwide uses something called chromium. And that doesn't sound good. If you could give me a quick idea of what the environmental impact of traditional leather production is, that would be really helpful.

Tasha Nathanson [00:16:17] About 100 years ago, people figured out that you could make leather using chrome and it's cheaper. It takes a lot less skill and talent, but it's a bit of a bargain with the devil because it's polluting to the land and cancer causing to the people who use it unless you have all sorts of really super expensive controls on what you're doing. As I said, about 80 to 90% of leather produced today is chrome tanned. None of it is done in Canada because it is simply too expensive to meet the environmental controls and regulations that we would have around chrome leather production. So, when those environmental regulations came into play, tanning just simply left Canada. So now we buy the product back, but it's created over there in some place that we don't think about. In Europe, they're more likely to have put the money into those recaptured technologies and the safety precautions. So that's less likely to have an impact. That's a small percentage of the leather market. Most of it is made in Bangladesh, China, Ethiopia, Morocco, those kind of places where people aren't protected from it. The other thing that I learned when I started researching this, because I didn't know any of this before I saw those environmental artists and started learning about leather, was that you use a different form of chrome to tan the leather, but it can transform into hexavalent chromium if it's heated up, which is the stuff that pollutes the water and harms all of us. So, if you buy some shoe that's chrome tanned. And here in North America, mostly what we do with our trash is we send it to a landfill and landfills heat up. There is the possibility that we are, you know, for all of those environmental standards that say, okay, you can't actually do this, here, we are nonetheless importing the result back. And it is quite conceivable that under the heat conditions in landfills that we're bringing the problem right back here. So, I really don't see the reason for doing that when we have this other alternative. So, there are some other aspects of veg tanning that it does use more water than chrome tanning does, and that's also an environmental impact. So, for Seven Leagues, we have the design for a water treatment and recapture system that we intend to put into place once we're in our permanent spot. At the moment, we're in temporary digs, so we're not going to install it just yet. We do want to work on water recapture to be responsible around that, but tannins

come from plants and so the plants themselves are giving climate services to the world through their carbon services. Plants are better for the environment; they are renewable and they work on the carbon system to help us combat climate change while they're growing. Whereas in addition, if you're looking at chrome, it's not renewable, it's not providing carbon services. So environmentally, veg tannins are the things to do all the way.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:26] The way to go, it sounds for sure. And you mentioned that several higher end, high fashion houses like Prada, they are using fish skin in their clothing and maybe shoes? Where do they source their fish leather from?

Tasha Nathanson [00:19:42] Most of them are getting it from Europe. There are a number of different fish leather tanneries in Europe, already in Iceland, in Germany, in Norway, in Portugal, in France, there are fish leather tanneries. So, all of them are working with farmed Atlantic fish in terms of their salmon leather. You can make fish leather out of a number of species, but salmon is some of the most beautiful leather. So, all of them are working with farmed Atlantic. Some of them are chrome tanning. Some of them are veg tanning. There's sort of a variety of different impact in terms of the choices that they've made around the treatments. Another issue that I always look at is what kind of coating are they putting on it. Sometimes some are putting a plastic coating on it versus some are not. Certainly, Seven Leagues would never use any kind of plastic coating. We think that it's a natural material. We want to keep it natural and biodegradable or as close to biodegradable as we can possibly make it, while ensuring that it's durable. Our niche in the market is going to be the only ones working on wild Pacific responsibly caught species. So, we will have different fish. Certainly, we're already doing quite a bit with different Pacific salmon species. We also want to develop our recipes so that we can be working with halibut and tuna and ling cod, and there is an Ocean Wise certified sturgeon farm that's not too far from us. We would like to work with them. We're making sure that we're very careful in our environmental impact, you know, what species we work with and how it's been caught so that we're not adding to the problems, but instead that we're adding to the ability of coastal communities to make a living locally and to get a lot more from their catch. I was really inspired that with Iceland they have a 100% fish policy where they're trying to use 100% of every fish that they land and to push each part of it as high up the value chain as they possibly can. And with this approach between 1981 and 2018, even though their catch fell by 45%, the value of their catch only fell by 15% because they're making sure that they use the whole fish, and they use it to its highest possibility. And this is something that we're not doing in Canada, but that we need to do in Canada.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:22:07] That's also really inspiring. I think a lot more people are talking about whole fish utilization. I mean, it has to be done and so much fish is wasted, not only the skins and the bones, but just the meat itself, right? I think anything that we can do to support whole fish utilization is amazing. So, I had a question. Do you only use salmon? But you answered that already. So, you're saying you can do this tanning treatment to different kinds of fish skin, right?

Tasha Nathanson [00:22:39] Absolutely. And there are other tanneries elsewhere that are using all sorts of fish. In Kenya, they're making fish leather out of Nile perch. In Brazil, they're using both tilapia and pirarucu, which is an Amazonian River fish. And there are some other tanneries that are using other kinds of fish. I really have this concept where wherever there's fish processing and the right kind of market, I would love to have another Seven Leagues and we can work all over the world because we can work with different fish species.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:13] Oh, that's awesome. That's even better. I love that idea. I think you're right. I mean, you're in the Pacific Northwest. You have access to this incredible salmon with this incredible skin that makes an incredible leather. So why wouldn't you do that, right?

Tasha Nathanson [00:23:26] Absolutely. Yes.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:27] You mentioned that you purchase your fish skins from processors, is that correct?

Tasha Nathanson [00:23:33] That is correct. Part of the idea is that we want to support people working with sustainable, responsibly caught wild catch. And so part of that is giving them more value for what they land. And so, we want to be able to pay them for it. It's also because we need that skin to come off in not a single piece, but a single piece each side, if that makes sense. We need the skin taken off intact. We need for it to be refrozen pretty much right away because if it started to rot at all, it's not going to make good leather. So, we do need certain kinds of treatment on that skin. So, when we talk to fish processors, we explain, look, we're looking for a win-win solution. We need to keep the cost low enough that we can still make a leather that people are able to afford and buy in order to make it profitable. But we want to pay them enough that they want to work with us. And what we've found so far is that smaller and family-owned processors are much more eager initially to work with us. And we've gotten some really great partners on board already with that. The larger processors are less interested in changing the way they do things. So, it's so far been a little bit harder to work with the larger processors. But I'm quite confident that once we get on the market and they see what a great product this is and they see the good press that you can get from doing the right thing, in addition to being paid for the skins, that they'll come along afterward. Smaller producers are a little more flexible.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:07] So theoretically, if you're producing fish leather and shoes out of certified fish like MSC certified, Marine Stewardship Council, certified salmon, you could be certified, right? I mean, that shoe could be certified.

Tasha Nathanson [00:25:23] As well as me being certifiable.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:25] Yes, that too.

Tasha Nathanson [00:25:27] Yes. These are all good things that we could potentially do as we ramp up to try and figure out. I mean, traceability is a big part of leather right now in general and impact for any business. You got to be looking at your impact and how you can reassure the customer that you're doing the right thing, that it isn't all talk, that it's real. So, yes, whether we can talk about, you know, we're using MSC certified or, as I mentioned, Ocean Wise or, you know, looking at the various different schemes to make sure that we are being responsible and that we are communicating that in a meaningful way to our customers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:03] So you recently, I read, became an Ocean Startup Challenge 2022 winner. So, what is that and what does that mean to you?

Tasha Nathanson [00:26:11] Yes. Well, this is a national Canadian challenge. This is in its third year. It started off just on the east part of Canada. It's now been opened up. I think this is the first year it was opened up to the West Coast as well and to be truly national.

And we are extremely excited about it, not only because it comes with some money, but also it comes with a certain amount of coaching, but also networking. And it just shows a bit of external validation of the direction that we're going in. So, we're very excited about that and we're going to use that to pivot ourselves towards more investment and working on building the business that way.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:55] That's great. And congratulations on winning that Ocean Startup Challenge. I had never heard of it before. There's quite a few of these incredible challenges happening all over, so I give you all the kudos for winning that. That's amazing.

Tasha Nathanson [00:27:08] Thank you. We're pretty excited about it as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:11] Yeah, I mean, it's great to get recognition for things. I'm merging two questions a little bit. I read a quote from you that said, "Because the goal of Seven Leagues includes sustainable social hiring and local production, not a quick scale up, followed by a sell off for profit taking and a move to overseas cheap labor. We are not looking for venture capital, but instead for a patient impact investment." So that's what you're looking for in terms of how to further finance your business. But I want to talk about the labor, and you're looking to support social hiring and local production. And I also read that you had a hard time finding someone to tan your fish at the very beginning, right? This person that you did find ultimately left and then you decided to invest in a program to create an apprenticeship. Can you tell me a little bit about that because I think that's fascinating?

Tasha Nathanson [00:28:07] Our business model is honestly a little bit in review right now. I had intended initially to bootstrap. I was inspired by how, for instance, Patagonia was able to be a more ethical business, in part because Yvon Chouinard never gave away equity in the business, so he didn't have to bend to shareholders who wanted to strip out cash fast and furiously in an unsustainable manner. I've reached as far as I can go on my own funds and I'm rethinking how to finance the business. And in addition, I'm also realizing that, money aside, I can't do this as alone as I have been, even aside from the money aspect. So, I'm looking for partnerships and these can take a number of forms. Highest on my agenda are some partnerships with First Nations or Indigenous folks here to see if we can develop some win-win solutions and whether that looks like on the apprenticeship model that you referred to, whether we partner on an apprenticeship model and say, hey, if I guarantee that it's members of your band that get the training, would you like to help me develop this training? We're going to be bringing a consultant over from overseas for a month to do some training. We're going to turn that into some modules that we can repurpose and use so that we can build that ability to tan leather here in Canada once again because it's a skill that simply isn't here. Initially, I had combed through immigrant profiles to find someone who had arrived with this training from overseas, but investors kept giving me the feedback that that was a vulnerability. Because what happens if that person leaves? And with my plan to replicate and franchise the business, well, every time I open a new one, how am I going to train those new people or find those new people if I'm reliant only on finding immigrants who have it? So, I am super excited about this training model. I think that this is a gift. It's a funny looking gift because it forced me at the time to take a look and say, okay, we should be able to train this and to do it over and over. And I'm super excited to build this skill. And what I'm finding is that others are excited about it, not just for my fish leather tannery, but I've talked to people in other cities who are looking at leather in general as a circular economy product that Canada could produce. So I have had conversations with some other cities where they're talking about this. I've had a conversation with a particular post-secondary institution that is interested in this as a

material design aspect, because there's a lot going on in leather right now as well in terms of, yes, it is a multi-thousand year old process, but we're always improving it. And so there are a lot of changes and improvements coming right now and I would say it's a really modern thing. So that's part of my excitement with the apprenticeship program. So whether that would be, as I said, with First Nations folks or whether it would be another group, sometimes I think, you know, someone in beer brewing, frankly, might have a good skill set to start with because you have the basics of some chemistry and you have that mindset where you're trying to take art and science together and make a really cool product that people will buy. And it's actually not that far off of leather tanning as well, anyway, looking for the right partners there for the apprenticeship model and very excited to rebuild that skill here. And you know, the first part of your question, you were saying in general, what are the different social enterprise aspects? There are a few more. One is that the scraping of the skins is currently a manual process, and most of the fish leather tanneries I know do this as a manual process. No one's come up with a machine that does a really good job of it. We get the skins from fish processors that have either been removed by hand or mechanically, but all of them have a bit of flesh and oil still on. And so that's something that has to be scraped off by hand. So, when I started thinking about, okay, if this is a manual process and we can't avoid the fact that it is, how could we make it more interesting? And one of the things that, for instance, occurs to me is what if we worked with maybe, say, refugee women who need to get some local work experience before they can get into the other job market? What if we hired them and we included things like lunch and learns on how to write a resumé and different aspects of Canadian hiring and basically some job coaching and that they could work with us for a while. We give them the coaching and then they could move on into other jobs and we could take more people in. So that's one way that we could take a look at something that's an unavoidable part of the business and turn it into a social asset. I know a number of folks have said to me that that's actually potentially a really good job for folks who are autistic who like things to be a little bit the same sometimes and are less aggravated by repetitive work. So that might be another potential. But I think it's bringing this mindset where you say, okay, how do we solve a bunch of problems? It's that win-win scenario. So rather than starting with the question of how could I make an obscene amount of money as fast as possible and keep it for myself? But instead say, how could I run a profitable company that could finance as many good works as possible? One of them being my salary, of course, but also that we could solve other problems. And to do that by making more modest profits and spreading them around so that a larger number of folk's benefit.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:38] That was so interesting and inspiring. I think the way that you approach these problems in this creative, impactful way is really, again, inspiring. Just wow, really cool.

Tasha Nathanson [00:33:50] I would like to give a shout out to the social sciences there because I'm trained in comparative politics and political science. And what you do in comparative politics is you look at things as a system. What system is going on in this country? What do they say they're trying to do? What are they actually doing? Why did that happen and what are the unintended consequences? If I want to do something similar in another country, what's different about it? Why will it work or not work? And so it's that systems thinking instead of symptom thinking, where you're actually looking at what is the system that is producing this and how could I intervene in that system? And also looking at the impact on people and I say this because in the march towards constant STEM, STEM, STEM, STEM, STEM, and everyone is supposed to have an engineering degree. I see a lot of use for engineers and that's a wonderful skill set. But I think there really is a place for

other ways of thinking too. And I think our world is suffering from a lack of other ways of thinking.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:48] Yeah, that's incredibly insightful. Speaking of systems. So, you kind of straddle the seafood industry and the leather tanning industry. How do you find them the same or different in terms of equality and maybe in other ways?

Tasha Nathanson [00:35:04] Well, it's funny. I would actually say I'm at the intersection of even three male dominated sectors because there's the fishing industry. There's the forestry industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:14] Right.

Tasha Nathanson [00:35:15] And then there's the leather industry. And none of those are places where you see a lot of women. And I think there are some differences in all of those. There's maybe a few more women in leather in that it does have some overlap with fashion, which is an area that women have had a little more interest in, although they're more likely on product design and less likely in tanning. But they do exist there. Obviously, there are women in all of these realms because you interview some of them. But if you're looking at the gender equality aspect, there are a few things that I would say. One is if we want different results, we need to let different people in and support them to get in. And entrepreneurship and startups is another area where you just don't see a lot of women, and particularly in manufacturing because it takes a lot of money to get in. You can't get the loans ahead of time. You have to be producing revenue before you can get loans. And in order to get to that revenue generation, you have to have already bought, imported and gotten that machinery set up and everything else. And so it's an area that really is difficult to get into. And so, again, if we want to change the way we're making goods and the impact of them, we need to let some different people with different ideas get in, not just the people who already have the money that they made off of the old way of doing things because they're going to just replicate what they're already doing. As an example, I am the only fish processing winner in the Ocean Startup Challenge, only one of two circular economy businesses, and only one of three women owned businesses out of 30 winners. So that starts to give you an idea of what there isn't much of, because the bulk of what gets rewarded, whether it's in this program or just in general with investment, is digital technology. Oh, the investor class does love a nice new app, and they love robotics. But if you think about with digital assets and engineering things like who earns the money and gains employment from those kinds of businesses? You start to notice that they reward a very certain kind of person and that those businesses don't tend to spread the gains around beyond that class of people. And I do think that women are more likely in general to be solving more problems than just how do I make more money when they dream up a business. Not always, but often. But then the investors are still mainly men or the occasional woman that I encounter in the investor programs often comes out of a fairly macho program like engineering or whatnot, and they completely ignore the human impact of technologies that they're trained to develop. And in fact, I have learned when I am pitching not to talk about the social impact of the company that I'm hoping to develop, I talk about the environmental impact because that's very investable at the moment. I do talk about partnerships with First Nations because there's a lot of nervousness around access to resources so that's seen as de-risking a company. But I don't talk anymore about what I just told you about looking at, oh, could I perhaps use these repetitive jobs to provide support to refugee women or jobs for folks with autism or whatnot? Because as soon as I say those things, investors run screaming. And that's a problem. And I do believe that that correlates with a gender problem. And frankly, I don't want to make a unicorn. Unicorns

aren't real. I want to make a camel. I want to make something that makes good use of resources, that's tough, that's reliable, makes it through adverse conditions and gets there. Not something magical that doesn't exist.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:57] I agree with that as well. I don't need to be a unicorn. I like the camel analogy. I think it's a good one. So how can SAGE, Seafood and Gender Equality, help you as a woman in seafood? I have no sway over what happens in forestry potentially or in tech, but I might be able to help you in seafood. So how can I do that?

Tasha Nathanson [00:39:19] I would love to get in touch with other folks in the seafood industry who might want to partner with us, work with us, explore if there are more of those win-win synergies, I can give you a great example that just happened. In fact, yesterday out of the blue, I had a student from one of the local universities reach out and ask if she could talk to me. And it turns out that she has grown up in the sport fishing industry and works in remote fishing lodges. And she was super excited about what we were doing and immediately put me in touch with some fishing lodges that might have an interest in being part of what we are doing, whether it's providing some really super extra-large skins that come from the folks who are catching fish there, whether it's providing a place to sell fish leather items like we're producing them because they said people in those lodges would be interested, but they saw the connection between what I'm doing and what they're doing. So if there are other folks in seafood who see some connection, who are interested in exploring that, I would absolutely love to hear from them.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:27] That's great. We will definitely find out how to see you online and how to get in touch. And we'll put that information in the show notes and at the end of the episode. So, this podcast is to inspire people working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. You definitely represent a woman that I envision as a listener of The Conch. So, what advice would you give to women or gender minorities already in the business or thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector?

Tasha Nathanson [00:40:57] I guess the advice would be to join with others. Usually, you get some sort of inspirational, oh, just do it. And I think that that's not realistic. And I think it's reach out and make connections. And for me, I find partnerships have been the things that have helped me the most. I can give a positive shout out to Forest Products Innovation that they're actually providing me a rent free start up space for my tannery. So, the day that I reached out to them and said, hey, I have this market information to share with you, I didn't charge them for it. I just said, here's a good idea, please run with it, I need you to do that. And they turned around and offered me some space.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:36] Wow.

Tasha Nathanson [00:41:36] There have been some other encounters like that where if I have come at it in a generous soul to say, here I have something to share with you that they have come back to me and worked in reciprocity. And I try not to be Pollyanna, I try to be careful enough. There have been the instances where I've talked with someone who it became clear they were trying to get all of what I was doing so that they could replicate it and those conversations ended. So you do have to have your spidey sense out, but I would say we have to reach out to find the people who might be fellow travelers and to help each other and lift each other up.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:11] That's excellent advice. So, again, SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry and this podcast is one of the main

ways we do this. And you've already given a shout out to social science. I'd like to give you the opportunity to uplift someone who you would like to uplift and why?

Tasha Nathanson [00:42:31] I would like to uplift anyone who is working to make things better with their business and who is looking to make business a force for good and to be thoughtful in how they go forward. I think we do need to go forward. It's wishful thinking if we just think everything's going to fall into place. What I like about what our team at Seven Leagues has done when we reach together and we work on our values and whatnot, is that we talk about being optimistic. We talk about being solution oriented rather than complaint oriented. And that's what gets me up and out of bed each day is that I feel that I am working on something that I really do believe can make a positive impact. And I would like for other people to be inspired and uplifted, not to just give in to the forces around, but to find the other people. And it's sort of that Mr. Rogers thing is, even when things are bad, look around and you will find the helpers. And I would say, look around, find the helpers and let's amplify that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:36] I think that's a great shout out. So, when will we be able to buy salmon skin boots or shoes?

Tasha Nathanson [00:43:41] The salmon skin boots are coming a little bit later down the line because of the learnings that I've had with launching this business, our first target is to produce wholesale leather and we're currently looking for about 80% of what we make to be wholesale B2B. So we are also looking for companies that are interested in using our leather potentially in their products so that we can get that going. After that, we will have the boots. The boots are going to be pretty exciting. They're going to be a Chelsea pull on boots. So we're looking at the high end, the Blundstone wears. So, I will say that Blundstones are designed in Australia, made of chrome tanned leather in sweatshops in Asia. There is nothing Pacific Northwest about them, but you will find them on everybody's feet because they're very practical.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:27] Yeah.

Tasha Nathanson [00:44:27] So we are going to make a very Pacific Northwest pull-on Chelsea boot that is fish leather, that is not chrome tanned, and that is designed and possibly made here. So, we're looking forward to when that happens. But first, we got to get some revenue coming in and that's going to come from our wholesale leather.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:45] Well, we will definitely keep our eyes open. And by the way, you do have a wonderful newsletter. So, I encourage our listeners to sign up to receive that because it is really, really good. Do you write that yourself?

Tasha Nathanson [00:44:55] I do write most of it myself.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:44:57] It's great.

Tasha Nathanson [00:44:57] Our goal is to only put it out four times a year so that we don't fill up people's inboxes too much, but that we write a good enough letter that you are looking forward to it and you want to read it. So, we do work really hard to make sure that it's well crafted.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:11] Yeah, it's really great. So how can our listeners find you online?

Tasha Nathanson [00:45:15] We are at 7, as in the number seven not the word seven, 7Leagues.com. So that's 7Leagues.com. If you go there, you'll hit our website. You can sign up for our newsletter. You can take a look at some of our impact, some of our photographs, and how we make the leather and then some of our information on where the business is going. But definitely sign up for that newsletter. Also, you can sign up on our socials. We've got Facebook and Instagram. We put different stuff on social media than we put on the newsletter. If you are only going to get one thing, I would say get that newsletter. We really do put the time into that one.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:45:54] Yeah, I agree. Well, we've come to the end of our time and our conversation today. Tasha, I just want to thank you again so much for finally coming on the show. I know it's been a little bit of time, but I'm really thankful that you came. Thank you so much for being such an inspiration again, straddling, like you said, three different industries and leading the way as a real inspirational woman who's really doing a lot of great things for the community, for the industry, and for the future.

Tasha Nathanson [00:46:21] Thank you very much. I will try and live up to that description.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:46:25] Thank you for tuning in to The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just 2 seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you!

Speaker 3 [00:46:38] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.