

The Conch Season 2 - Erika Feller-Complete.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast, The Conch. We're continuing our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're uplifting some of the incredible women working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today we are so excited to have a great guest joining us, Erika Feller. Erika directed ocean and coastal conservation programs for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and began her career as a legislative and policy advisor on natural resource and environmental issues in the U.S. House of Representatives, and later joined the Nature Conservancy, where she led a North America wide initiative to promote sustainable fisheries. Erika is currently the Americas Regional Director at the Marine Stewardship Council, or MSC for short. Welcome and thank you, Erika, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's get to it.

Erika Feller [00:01:00] Thanks, Julie. I'm really happy to be here.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:02] So instead of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, can we say "NIFWIF?"

Erika Feller [00:01:07] Oh, I wish you would.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:08] Okay, good. So I don't know if we're going to talk about that at all, but just to let everybody know, we're going to say "NIFWIF" in the future. So before we dig into your current role at the MSC and how that's going because I'm really interested. Tell me how long you've been there now. Has it been a year?

Erika Feller [00:01:21] It'll be a year in July.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:22] A year in July. Well, congratulations. So I have a question around one of your past positions. You began your career as the legislative and policy advisor on natural resource and environmental issues in the U.S. House of Representatives, as I mentioned. So what was that like in terms of working within the government? And I ask that because in my experience, policy and working with the government on legislation is something that most or many NGOs in the sustainable seafood movement don't do for a variety of reasons. So why are we afraid or what are we afraid of, do you think? What's your experience like with that? And give us some tips, maybe.

Erika Feller [00:01:59] Well, I mean, first of all, say I loved working in government. I loved working in the House of Representatives. I've had a couple different roles in government over the years, and there is an opportunity there to work on issues that make a real difference in addressing important problems. You know, when I was in the House of Representatives, I worked for a great member of Congress. I learned a ton from him, and it's an unbeatable lesson in how American democracy works in practice. And, you know, I would argue my first job, I was a Knauss Fellow in Congress. That was how I got my job there. And during that year, we worked on reauthorization of the Magnuson Stevens Act in Congress, which I would kind of argue was a pretty big win for sustainable seafood in the U.S.. I mean, it was a while ago and it was a lot of environmental groups that worked on it. But, you know, I think that there has been real progress on sustainable fisheries made in Congress. And I guess I'd like to explore more because I'm not real sure that our folks in

the sustainable seafood movement, like they don't get involved because they're afraid or like I think there's probably a lot of other reasons.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:10] Yeah.

Erika Feller [00:03:10] And you know, especially working at the national level, advocacy work can be expensive, time consuming, difficult, and sometimes it does not turn out the way you thought it would. And I have personal experience with every single one of those adjectives. Personally. I mean, I found myself a lot more motivated by working on things where I could see a tangible impact. That's how I ended up at TNC. It's how I ended up at NIFWIF. It's how I ended up at MSC. And I think the policy is important, but implementation is critical. And, you know, we have these great laws on the books. And what I kind of see folks in the sustainable seafood community doing is harnessing the power of the private sector to be collaborative and innovative. And there may be ways that policy could help kind of drive things forward. But, you know, I think this is a community that's doing a lot of really important work in the space that they've kind of carved out.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:08] Yeah, I think so, too. And I don't mean to say that we're afraid of engaging in policy and legislative process, but in my experience, you know, when we've been asked in a large group setting, like, okay, who's going to deal with policy, like not many people volunteered. And I think you're right, there's a variety of issues. And I just wondered if you knew of any other issues why? Because we are definitely very market based and working collaboratively with the market and the seafood companies. But when it comes to working with government, it's just been a real tricky issue I think.

Erika Feller [00:04:43] Well there's so many ways I think that government contributes, right? Like, you know, if a fishery wants to get MSC certified, often, you know, the people who work in management in the government are part of that process. You know, the data that government collects on fisheries is really important and useful in kind of figuring out what's going on. And is this a sustainable fishery and where do we need to do things better? You need regulations and laws that kind of can reinforce the changes that proponents of sustainability want to see happen. Like there's lots of different ways that what we're doing is tied in with government. I think there's probably things that government could do that would be really beneficial. And sometimes I see these things where people are kind of scratching their heads like, Hey, this thing used to happen, but it doesn't happen anymore and it was really helpful. Why doesn't it? And, you know, maybe because, you know, the government found other priorities and there's not really anybody there rattling the cage and saying, hey, this is important, too.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:39] Yeah. And I think one reason I can think of off the top of my head is also, you know, a lot of these kind of marine conservation nonprofit organizations are funded by, you know, philanthropic donors. And there's a real definite, you know, no lobbying clause usually in these grants that were given. And I think that might be a little bit I don't know about confusing, but it's definitely probably a fine line, right. So people say, okay, instead of engaging with government, you know, because of my grant, which says no lobbying, even though you're not lobbying, they're just to say, okay, I'm not going to engage with the government. That's probably a pretty good reason, right?

Erika Feller [00:06:12] It could be, yeah. Definitely. The type of money you have to spend will definitely influence that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:18] Yeah, that's great. Again, we say on this podcast a lot that this is a topic that we could talk about for a whole other podcast. So I think that is a topic, you know, like how to engage with the government. And honestly, you know, your experience here is interesting because we had three presidencies. There has been vastly different approaches to natural resource management and even fisheries, you know, specifically. So I think it's really, really interesting, you know, how to navigate those waters figuratively and literally, especially when you have different administrations that have different ideas about how to do what and what their priorities are. Right.

Erika Feller [00:06:55] Indeed.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:06:55] So we recently had Linda Cornish from the Seafood Nutrition Partnership on the show. And this is a little bit of a long question, but I'm very interested in hearing your response to this. So Linda Cornish is leading the effort to build a National Seafood Council to conduct a national seafood marketing campaign. And that's akin to, you know, those national industry campaigns like the pork, "the other white meat" kind of marketing campaign that they have and other industry led marketing campaigns, which we're familiar with because, you know, if we're watching TV, we know what they're selling. So the impetus for this National Seafood Council was a recommendation and a report from the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MFAC), which you chaired at the time. And I'm not sure if you're still involved with that anymore in your new role, but we can talk about that. So this report was an exploration of what the government can do to help improve consumer confidence in and consumption of U.S. seafood. So the emphasis here, as far as I understand, is on seafood harvested in the U.S. So one of the criticisms I read about the current effort to establish a National Seafood Council is that the focus is on seafood in general and not on U.S. seafood specifically, so seafood from anywhere in the world. So as Chair of this committee who released the report, what do you think about this distinction that, you know, Linda's leading this charge and they're focusing on seafood in general, as opposed to kind of the recommendation from the report that suggests a focus on U.S. harvested seafood.

Erika Feller [00:08:20] So I'm really supportive of the direction that Linda and the Seafood Nutrition Partnership are taking off the top, for sure. You know, MFAC ran about a, gosh, that was like a two year process, looking at how a national campaign should be focused. They got a lot of stakeholder input. And ultimately, you know, MFAC's job is to advise the Secretary of Commerce on things that the agency that NOAA, Department of Commerce, NOAA Fisheries can do. And our recommendation to them was, look, you know, here's what we heard from all of these stakeholders. And the committee recommended that the campaign support U.S. products and industry, including both capture and aquaculture. But they also added without disparaging imports. We had a lot of discussion about that. You can participate in MFAC meetings. They're all broadcast and open to the public. Included under that recommendation, you know, one of the specific points was to focus on direct marketing to and education of consumers about the value of seafood for health and nutritional benefits, including how to select and cook seafood, debunking misinformation and fact checking, that sort of thing. So where I see SNP has kind of had to make some choices and they've pulled together groups to talk about this and think about what makes sense. They're focusing on promoting seafood at the highest point of agreement, which is public health. And I think this is really smart. There is a lot of evidence from other campaigns that you cited, like, you know, pork and milk and cotton and beef and all that kind of stuff, to show that these generic category marketing efforts are highly effective in engaging consumers. And, you know, I think this campaign is really exciting. It's something that brings the U.S. seafood industry together around a campaign that I think ultimately is

going to float a lot of boats and create marketing opportunities, create connections to consumers that are, that just currently don't exist, and maybe create opportunities for sectors of the industry that may not currently have the resources or the capacity to do that. So, you know, I think the approach they're taking is going to be most broadly beneficial to the U.S. seafood industry.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:31] I completely agree. And, you know, I should mention that I also fully support that initiative and I kind of signed on to the campaign. And yes, I think, like you said, it will float a lot of boats and it can only be beneficial to, you know, the U.S. based fisheries. Yeah. And I think it's probably going to be beneficial for the Marine Stewardship Council at some level as well, right?

Erika Feller [00:10:51] Yeah, absolutely. I think getting people to eat more seafood creates opportunities to engage more people in sustainable seafood.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:58] Totally agree. Totally agree. So, you know, as I mentioned in your introduction, you've gone down a winding road to get to your current position at the MSC or Marine Stewardship Council, which is, you know, not unusual. It's very common. Like myself and other guests that we've had on the program who have not really started out as fishery scientists or marine conservationists. But anyway, we got to this point. Right. So could you tell us about the MSC and your role there? I'm really curious to hear from you specifically, potentially how your role has evolved since your predecessor was there.

Erika Feller [00:11:31] My predecessor was here not very long ago. I'm still pretty new. But.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:11:35] You are. Yes.

Erika Feller [00:11:37] I think people generally know like what MSC is, right? We're a global nonprofit and we essentially maintain two standards. One standard is for fisheries, and it looks at the, you know, sort of the target species, are those stocks being managed in a sustainable way. It looks at the impact of the fishery on the environment, so bycatch and habitat and things like that. And it also looks at the management effectiveness. I haven't been here long enough to refer to them as P1, P2 and P3.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:04] Yeah. It's a lot to remember, honestly. Yeah. I don't blame you.

Erika Feller [00:12:08] That's one standard that we have and that's for fisheries. And then we also maintain a second standard, which is for chain of custody. And, you know, that's the part of it that I think is really cool because it's not just is the fishery sustainable, but how do you as a consumer know that when you see that blue tick mark on a seafood product at the supermarket, how do you know that that seafood came from an MSC certified fishery? And that's what that chain of custody standard does, is it gives you that assurance that there is a mechanism for connecting the dots between that logo and that fishery that it was caught in. And I think that part is really, really important because, you know, confidence, I think, is really important when you have consumers who are shopping on a values basis. They really care about the environment. They want to know, is what I'm buying the thing that's actually reflecting my values. So I think that's kind of MSC's program generally. And so there's parts of the organization that work on setting and maintaining those standards who work with third parties, who actually do the assessments and make the determinations about certification. What my role is, I work in a part of MSC

called outreach, and so I'm the regional director for the Americas. And that means I get to oversee what MSC does in North America and Latin America. And we work on outreach with the fishing communities and seafood businesses to help them understand how the MSC program works, help them understand how to access it. How do they think about what are the benefits that this program can bring to their business and how to move forward. Then we also work with partners to help them connect the dots between that blue eco label, like you see at the fish counter or on the supermarket shelf, back to the benefits that purchasing that certified seafood is going to have for the ocean. And that's much more of kind of our marketing and communications function is helping people talk about what that commitment means in terms of change on the water.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:05] So I imagine you work very closely with the communications and marketing teams then.

Erika Feller [00:14:09] Yes, I do.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:10] Yeah, I can imagine. Just a little note about the chain of custody. I agree with you that, you know, chain of custody certification is super important. And to be able to kind of verify, you know, not only that, the product is sustainably harvested from sustainably managed stocks, but also and how it goes through the supply chain and tracing that and making sure it's verifiably legal and etc., you know, everything that the chain of custody standard does is so important. And it's a little known fact that I actually was a chain of custody auditor for.

Erika Feller [00:14:41] Really?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:42] Yeah, I never conducted one. I did become certified and I did work with a certifier, but that was through my old job when I was working years ago with Russian salmon fisheries and just helping them understand that, you know, it's not enough to get certified. You actually have to certify your supply chain. You know, it was another level of complexity, to be honest, about how important it is to make sure that, you know, it's not enough just to get certified. You have to bring it through a supply chain that's also certified. And so we called it, so like, the certification is a truck, right? And then the chain of custody is the wheels on the truck. So you can't really move the truck without these wheels. And that's kind of the very same simplified visual that we used when we talked about that. But it worked. I mean, we had several fisheries that ultimately were certified and then became, you know, obviously they got chain of custody. So it's a great program. I really enjoy it. So, you know, you mentioned you're charged with continuing to expand the MSC's work with fisheries and the supply chain and consumers in Canada, U.S. and Latin America. And that's a big swath of different geographies and languages and cultures and fisheries and, you know, all that kind of stuff. Like everything is very diverse, right? So what's the main challenge or maybe a couple of challenges that you face in this expansion and how are you addressing this or these?

Erika Feller [00:16:00] Oh, good. I'm glad I get to list more than one challenge.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:04] Of course, you can't just pick one.

Erika Feller [00:16:05] I mean, I kind of I kind of love your analogy. And, you know, I think sort of points to the is the importance of like what my team does is the outreach of kind of being there to help explain this sort of complex system. I mean, what are we going to do? Fisheries and seafood supply chains are very complex and, you know, you need a

standard that's going to meet that. And that takes a little bit of a helping hand, I think, to help people navigate it. But, you know, other challenges, you know, for one thing, it would be really great if people ate more seafood. So we're going put that on our list. Just a nod to Linda. Another one I think I would throw out there is kind of the path to certification. You know, there's a lot of certified fisheries in I like to call it my hemisphere. But, you know, we have a lot of fisheries that are on that path to certification. And how do you help them make meaningful progress and achieve the MSC standard? I think out there, that's kind of an important challenge that's in front of us that we need to figure out how to work with fisheries to meet that. And that's, you know, some of my background is working on the ground with fishing communities to try and understand like what's wrong, I guess, from a sustainability standpoint and how do we take steps to address it and then how do we kind of change our business or whatever, make sure that we're operating our business in the way that we can take advantage of, you know, the story of what we've accomplished. This is a path, I think, that has been really great for fisheries that have figured out how to travel it. But it's not easy. It's really not easy. So I see that as a huge challenge. You know, the other is for folks in the supply chain, it's, you know, there's the chain of custody standard of how do you connect the dots from the fishery to the consumer. But then how do you connect the dots in communicating with your customers and really understand and take full advantage of the value that having that ecolabel brings to your business and to try to communicate with people about seafood and about their choices. I think that is another one that's right in front of us. Like we live in a world where there's an awful lot of people talking to consumers and trying to convey a message that gets through that in a way that's compelling and credible and useful to people in making the choices that I think, you know, all the surveys indicate this is the choice they want to make.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:18:17] Yeah, I think you identified a really interesting challenge. Because in my experience also is that a lot of the value that comes out of the fish that are harvested is in the supply chain itself. It's not really captured at harvest. And so I think a lot of people are struggling maybe to figure out how can we bring some of that value back to the fishers themselves. Right?

Erika Feller [00:18:38] Exactly. I mean, I've seen a lot of different approaches for how you do that. I think vertical integration is one solution that has kind of come to it. But, you know, one of the things that MSC does is, for example, you know, a percentage of licensing goes back into what's called the Ocean Stewardship Fund. So, you know, that's a way to kind of take revenue from one portion of the supply chain and put it in a place where it's going to go and invest in research and, you know, support for fishery improvement projects or other types of actions to help fisheries make progress towards sustainability.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:13] Yeah, I.

Erika Feller [00:19:14] That's one thing that we can do, but yeah, it's a tricky one.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:16] Yeah, I like that. That Ocean Stewardship Fund has been around for several years, right?

Erika Feller [00:19:21] Yes,.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:22] I love that. I love that so much. And that's an annual kind of competition.

Erika Feller [00:19:27] Yeah. And you know, it's one of the great lessons of my career is conservation costs money. You need people to do the work. You need money for them to kind of get the job done. And I think finding ways that, you know, sort of channel that investment in a place where people can access it and use it to make the change they want to make in their fishery. That's like the Holy Grail.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:47] Absolutely. I mean, yeah, you can't do anything about money for sure in this world. So, you know, to prepare for a conversation, I read an interview you gave around the time that you started at the MSC. So, what, a year ago, right? And you were asked how you would describe the future of the sustainable seafood movement in five words or less. And you said, quote, "The phrase that comes to mind for me is everyone has got to eat. So we're looking at the kind of future where we're going to have serious issues due to climate change and major shifts in food production. We have to have a lot of options on the table when thinking about how to keep the world fed and sustainable seafood is an important part of that conversation," Unquote. So I completely agree with you. Climate change is literally the biggest challenge I think we are all facing as a planet. And I'm curious, there's a lot of things happening in the world and in nature and in the environment due to climate change. And so I'm asking you, you know, what is happening in fisheries because of climate change? And how is the MSC thinking about its future and its tools and its standards? And what measures might the organization take based on the new realities that are facing fisheries, if anything?

Erika Feller [00:20:59] Oh, in short, I think we're still working that out like everyone. So when I said that, one of the things that I was reflecting on in that blog that you're quoting was a study that came out last summer, and it was looking at different sources of food production, and it was looking at kind of the relative carbon footprint across all kinds of different sectors for food. And it excluded seafood. It talked about, you know, beef and poultry and pork and grains and a whole bunch of stuff like that. And it didn't talk about seafood. And, you know, it talked a lot about sort of some of the actions that were indicated to try and reduce the carbon footprint of some of these different sectors. And I just thought, wow, this is really extraordinary because generally seafood is acknowledged to be a relatively low carbon footprint source of protein. And since that report came out, you know, we had the genuine Alaska pollock producers produced their report. They had a study done, you know, looking at documenting the carbon footprint of their fishery all the way through to the distribution. And they showed this is like pound for pound. Alaska pollock is literally the lowest carbon footprint source of protein you can go looking for. So I think, you know, overall, we need to kind of increasingly look at seafood as a place where we can get protein that has a lower impact on the environment than other sources. So I think it's just going to grow in importance is the bottom line there. But then on the flip side, we also know that climate change is having this huge impact on the oceans. You know, things are changing and distribution of fish populations is changing. We're already seeing a lot of these kind of changes in range of species across the North Atlantic, in the North Pacific. We see them in the tropics. We see marine heatwaves that have increased by more than 50% in the last 30 years. That has a huge impact on marine species. It can have these localized, really sudden impacts on marine life. And, you know, this all kind of flows through to the people who are trying to make their living out on the water and what they're delivering coming in to markets. And so, you know, you sort of think about that kind of change is happening on the water and oh, geez, you know, how do we respond to that through MSC? And, you know, I think that's the part when I say we're still working that out. Yeah, we're still working that out. But I also think and this is the thing that gives me some hope is there's a lot of evidence that fisheries can respond to this. There are fisheries that are already healthy and sustainable are probably going to be better able, more likely to

persist through these kinds of major shifts. But the thing that I also think gives me some hope is just the potential of when you have an industry come together and say we really care about sustainability, we are going to take action and we're going to understand what our impact is on the environment, and we're going to address implementing solutions and how we operate to do that. That initiative and engagement and understanding of the environmental context of fisheries is also going to be critically important to finding solutions, management solutions, in the future when you start to have impacts that we don't have a lot of experience with. So you're essentially kind of building that engagement and capacity at the fishery level that you're going to need, I think, to find the solutions going into the future. I just kind of think when I started working in this area, the idea was very much that there are fisheries and then you have regulation on those fisheries, and that regulation is what keeps them sustainable. And what I see in this movement is actually no, no, no, that's part of it. The policy and regulation are important. What keeps fisheries sustainable is also the engagement by the people who are fishing and what they're bringing to the table in terms of what are the solutions that are going to work for our fishery. And I'm just so grateful for these people because we're going to need all hands on deck, I think, when we start to see more changes start to manifest themselves.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:24:59] Yeah, I mean, that's a really great answer and thank you. I know it's a difficult question. Just climate change in general is like, okay, how are we, you know, as a standard holder going to adapt our standards? I mean, that's not an easy question to answer, right? Because again, it's like it's global, it's species specific, it's region specific, it's down to like the fishery, you know, literally the community level specific. So, you know, engaging with the people on the ground is absolutely critical, as you said. So there's a lot of momentum now around social responsibility in seafood and ensuring that seafood is not caught using slave labor, for instance, or that the people in the supply chains are paid a fair wage. And, you know, I could name a lot of other things that really fall under the social responsibility bucket. So how does the MSC, whose mission is to end overfishing and ensure seafood is caught sustainably, ensure that seafood certified by the MSC is not only environmentally sustainable but socially responsible?

Erika Feller [00:25:53] Oh, that's a good question. For somebody coming out of the conservation community. I've learned a lot about this since I've been with the MSC. So, you know, the MSC is an environmental standard and it has, you know, very, very focused on ending the global crisis in overfishing. But we also very much recognize the importance of working to mitigate the risk of forced labor or child labor, social inequities in the seafood industry. So these are practices that MSC condemns, and we recognize how important they are in terms of taking action. So, you know, since 2014, any fishing vessels that have been prosecuted for forced labor violations are excluded from our program. And since I think 2018, MSC fisheries and at sea supply chain businesses have had to publicly report on their labor practices. That's I think since 2018. And so as a result of this, fisheries representing about a fifth of the world's marine catch are reporting on their labor policies and risk mitigation measures, many for the first time. Is this enough? Probably not, no. So MSC has introduced labor auditing for MSC certified supply chain businesses. That was in 2019. Certified supply chain businesses have to undergo an independent third party audit or basically let MSC to commission its own independent audit unless they're entirely in low risk countries. And then in 2022, we're proposing that that applies to all supply chain businesses is something we're working on. And so there's more stuff I think that's going to be coming out. We're expecting in 2023 to produce a MSC Labor Policy and procedures to kind of consolidate all of this stuff under a single scheme document. And we're also looking at eligibility criteria that might explicitly set out like which labor practices could automatically exclude a business from becoming certified. So, you know, I think there's

ways that even with an environmental standard, you can reinforce the importance of, you know, addressing some of these really pressing social problems.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:01] Yeah, I totally agree. Is there anything short of, you know, rearranging your standard, which, you know, is, again, we talked about is a very complicated process. Are there partnerships that you enact to kind of support, you know, the labor rights or, you know, social responsibility within these supply chains that you might certify?

Erika Feller [00:28:21] I think so. And I mean, I see a lot of folks in the sustainable seafood community talking about creating those partnerships, and MSC has definitely been part of that. And I think one of the things that I'm sort of acutely aware of too is when, you know, when you get out there on the ground, you know, the stuff you know, and a lot of people who are sort of involved in fisheries conservation aren't necessarily experts in human rights. So I think there's a lot of opportunity on the ground for collaboration to kind of help people understand what are the kind of concrete things that you could do to start to build these types of things into projects.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:57] Yeah, I totally agree and I think hear, hear for more collaboration with groups on the ground because that's where you're going to get the most comprehensive and true kind of advice, right?

Erika Feller [00:29:07] I would hope so.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:08] Yeah, me too.

Erika Feller [00:29:09] I just I say that knowing how hard and just, you know, it's like the closer you get to the ground, that's almost like the harder it gets. But that's the place where it's so important to make a difference.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:19] So switching gears here a little bit, going from kind of environmental, you know, sustainability to social responsibility. Now I'm going to talk about something that's near and dear to my heart is Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE, which is my organization. And, you know, we're about building gender equality and empowering women in the seafood industry. So could you share one or two aspects of the seafood industry, you know, in your experience and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector? And what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities? I asked this question of pretty much all my guests, so there's no wrong answer.

Erika Feller [00:29:57] Oh, just give me a second. No, I'm kidding. I'm trying to give you a good answer. So I think the first thing I would say is I have to sort of acknowledge my own limitations in that I'm pretty new to the seafood industry. So I got to speak from my own experience, which is much more with kind of like more of the sort of conservation policy part of the sister community over there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:19] Yeah, that's great. I'd love to hear that.

Erika Feller [00:30:21] And I think, you know, so I do want to speak with to broader brush, but these are just kind of like the general themes that I've observed. I have met some really amazing women in seafood, a lot of them you have had on your podcasts, which is so cool. I've enjoyed listening to it. But that's kind of like this idea of like, Oh, okay, cool,

cool, cool, cool. We've totally solved it. Wonderful. And I don't think that that's true. I have worked in the conservation community for most of my career and I've worked in government. And, you know, it still feels really, really hard sometimes. And I think that this remains a really important question, not just for women in these communities, but also just kind of anybody who deviates from sort of the normal archetype of what we think people should look like and be when they're working in these spaces. And to me, you know, there's a lot of incredible women in seafood, but I kind of feel like to figure out how to lessen these inequalities, I almost think we need to sort of broaden our minds a little bit about what does it even look like to do a good job? You know, I have conversations. I've had conversations over and over and over again throughout my career where people kind of talk about what it looks like to be really effective as an advocate or as a guy who does conservation deals or this, that, and the other thing. You know, the picture you often get in your mind is of a certain type of person, and they're typically male. They're typically white. They're typically very extroverted and powerful and have a certain educational background and all of this kind of stuff. And, you know, I think that there's a lot of room in here for people who come from a lot more different backgrounds. And it's almost like the challenge is to sort of say, well, can a good job look completely different depending on who the person is that's doing it? You know, so if it's not somebody who fits that archetype that I just kind of described, if it's somebody else, whose style is to be more quiet or somebody who maybe comes from a vocational education background or maybe didn't go to college, but has an awful lot more kind of like real world or, you know, applied experience or, you know, more female characteristics versus men or people who come from different ethnic backgrounds or different types of communities. I think there's a lot of different ways to do the things that we're trying to do. But a lot of times that difference in execution doesn't get recognized. And so you sort of sandbag the guy that doesn't look like what you expected because they didn't look like what you expected. You know, we're not always necessarily conditioned to, you know, look at and understand what that impact is that they're really having. And some of the people I've met in my life, like who I've been completely blown away by and are sort of my heroes in this space. So a lot of them are people that don't necessarily come across the way you expect people to, you know, and their power is a little bit more kind of quiet or thoughtful or comes at things around, you know, from sort of a different angle than what people think is their normal way.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:20] Yeah, I mean, that's such a great point. I think it's really about asking ourselves, we do this a lot, like you said, what does success look like? And I think a lot of people don't explore other alternative successful outcomes, like you said. But there's, like you said, multiple ways to be successful potentially that we don't necessarily see because we're not getting the diversity of opinions and suggestions and solutions coming towards us. And so definitely agree with you there. Open up the conversation to everyone. So what does success look like? And it might actually be shocking. It might come from someone who, like you said, has this great applied experience that we never even considered. So I completely agree with you. And I think that's one of the struggles that I look at daily when we're kind of coming from inside of a sustainable seafood community that I really encourage us all to kind of think differently about, right?

Erika Feller [00:34:13] Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, it's one answer. I think there's probably a million answers to your question, but I've also heard some really great feedback on this question on your podcast. So I'm just going to call that my contribution.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:25] Yeah, I think that's great. And I think it's a new kind of suggestion, which we haven't heard yet. And I think you're right, there are some really great suggestions coming out of this podcast, which I hope people are heeding and paying

attention to because that's the whole point. Right? But next question I have, you know, is this podcast is to inspire women working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. And you are leading a team of, I read about 30 people, is that correct?

Erika Feller [00:34:53] I only have five direct reports, but yeah, there's about 30 of us here at the Americas.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:34:57] Yeah, that's a big team, though. I mean, regardless if you have five direct reports. There's still people reporting to them right underneath. So that's a big team. And so clearly you have experience hiring for your teams. I'm not sure exactly how many people you've been able to hire in this position, but in the past, I'm assuming you've done some hiring. And, you know, your expert advice I think would be really valuable to specifically to me and our listeners, I hope, so, what advice would you give to women already in the business or, you know, in the seafood industry or in the seafood community or that are thinking about starting a career in this exciting sector?

Erika Feller [00:35:32] Oh, gosh, I think there's probably a lot of things. I think you can't underestimate the value of networking. And I kind of mean that in two ways. I mean, the first one is that I helped lead a class every year. And we have this panel where we give advice to all of the up and coming grad students. And one of the things I always tell them is don't be afraid to ask people out for coffee and ask them about what they do. And, you know, just kind of get to know people who are in the space and understand the different types of jobs they do. And, you know, think a little bit about where you might fit and what your contribution is, particularly coming from the conservation community. You know, we tend to be motivated by ways that we can make a change, having some kind of vision for what kind of contribution we want to make. It's not always necessarily about compensation or those are really important things, but there is kind of this qualitative values based to that aspect, I think, to working in the sector. And so I think, you know, trying to understand other people's paths and what they do and having a picture of like what are the types of things that you would find really interesting. But I think at the same time is like keeping yourself open to the possibilities. Like, I've had tons of different jobs in conservation. Like, I really, really, really love working in fisheries and I love working with the seafood industry. It's some of the most rewarding things I've gotten to work on have been in the sector, but I've also worked on forest land conservation. I've worked with ranchers, I've worked on endangered species, I've worked on a whole host of different issues - water quality, habitat restoration, lots of different areas. And often those roles have taken me out of the thing that I really sort of always seem to keep coming back to. But every time you do something like that, it opens your mind up. Like you start to understand a little bit better how the world works. So it's kind of this fine line of figuring out how you can fit in, but as a friend of mine says kind of the maximizing the serendipity potential when your ability to take advantage of opportunities that come up. The other thing I would throw out there as just kind of a bit of advice for people coming into the sector too, is it kind of goes to the whole networking thing is when you interview when you're talking to people about positions that are open. Treat it like a conversation. Like interviews go both ways. It's not just you selling yourself to the person who you really hope will hire you. I think it's about finding out what they're all about, what they envision for this program, trying to get a picture in their head of how you're going to work together and how you're going to be part of that team. Because my experience in the sector is you're almost always part of a team that never has quite enough resources or capacity to do all of the things you think are really important. So that kind of, you know, teamwork and ability to kind of see how you fit into things, I think is ultimately going to be really, really helpful. Is this an environment where I'm going to be

valued and heard and have the kind of opportunities that I want, are always good questions to be asking yourself when you're in an interview with somebody.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:27] Yeah, I think that's great advice. And we had someone on here. Maybe it was in season one, I can't remember now, so forgive me. Whoever said this, I'm going to quote you, but I can't attribute it to you. So they said, you know, think about your skill set and don't be afraid if it's not applicable. Like you might not think your skill set is directly applicable to the job that you're applying for, but it might be. And so take that chance, take that opportunity. And like you said, that's networking and understanding other roles in the industry will help you understand better if your skill set is applicable, even though on the surface it might not be. But because I think that's what we need in this industry to kind of move forward is a lot of people that aren't even necessarily from this industry but have really great skills that they could contribute. Right?

Erika Feller [00:39:09] And that are probably really, really needed.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:12] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Absolutely. I would absolutely second that 100%. So SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices in the seafood industry. And this podcast is one of the main ways that we're doing this. So this is your opportunity to uplift someone. So who would you like to uplift and why?

Erika Feller [00:39:32] Can i have two?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:32] Of course. Yes.

Erika Feller [00:39:34] Oh, I'm so pleased. So I have two. The first one I want to uplift is a woman who I just think the world of Lisa Damrosch. She runs a seafood company called Legacy Seafood that's based in central California and she is part of a fishing family that has been fishing since the 190 something or anothers. And I got to know her and her brother Jeff ages ago when I worked for the Nature Conservancy in California. And I have just seen both of them really committed to sort of thinking about what the future of the industry is, really seeing the importance of sustainability to that future livelihood, but also the connection of sustainability to how they want to kind of frame their business and talk to their customers about it and that sort of thing. And Lisa has really taken on this really challenging role of thinking about how to like build this company and market these fish. And, you know, just every time I see her, she's doing some new thing that is completely impossible. And she always asks me, Erika, what do you think I should do about this? Like Lisa I've no idea, but I just think she's brilliant and I'm so glad she's there. The second one I want to uplift is a woman named Sandy Nguyen. And Sandy runs an outfit in Louisiana called Coastal Communities Consulting and they mainly work with a big kind of Vietnamese American community in coastal Louisiana, very involved in fishing. And Sandy has been the voice and portal for this community to be involved in everything from fisheries management to responding to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, to all kinds of management decisions around coastal and water resources that impact their fisheries. And I've just seen Sandy in action and she cares so much about this community and she's just a ferocious advocate for them.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:31] So Sandy's last name again, Webb?

Erika Feller [00:41:33] Nguyen.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:33] Okay, that's great. I have never heard of either of those women, but that's not shocking. It shouldn't surprise anyone, but these are definitely women that I would certainly welcome on this podcast in the future, if possible. So it sounds like they're both amazing and I really appreciate you uplifting them because again, that's what I love about this whole community, is that there are so many amazing people doing amazing things that really don't get a lot of recognition a lot of time. So that's really great.

Erika Feller [00:42:04] I am so happy to let you know about them.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:42:07] Yeah, it's amazing. So, Erika, we have come to the end of our time together in this conversation, and I just have to say thank you so much for all your work. And I know you've stepped into a very challenging role at the MSC and I am absolutely thrilled that you are there not only as a woman, but just also as someone who, again, like you said, weaves between conservation forests, fisheries, you know, seafood again, like, you know, bringing skills that we desperately need and that we want to see more of. So I really appreciate you coming on and sharing your wisdom in this conversation on this podcast. And I know that, you know, our paths definitely cross in the future and certainly in the near future. But I really look forward to chatting with you again.

Erika Feller [00:42:56] Julie, thanks so much. This has been really fun and I look forward to our paths crossing soon.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:43:02] Thank you so much. Thank you for tuning into the Conk 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 [00:43:17] 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.