

Interviewee Name: Parker Gassett

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Interviewer(s) Name(s) and Affiliation: Natalie Springuel (Maine Sea Grant) and Eliza Oldach (UC-Davis)

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Interview Description:

Parker Gassett, a University of Maine graduate student who lives in Camden, ME, talks about a values-based approach to science and citizen science, and describes his graduate work on getting water quality tools to community members along the coast of Maine. He explains the reasons he developed a sense of place around the Maine coast, how that's been shaped by time away, and what he sees changing in these special communities.

Collection Description:

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Transcribed By: Eliza Oldach

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[21:47]

NS: Natalie Springuel

EO: Eliza Oldach

PG: Parker Gasset

[0:00]

NS: Oh, here we go. So, now that we have all the background out of the way, I'm gonna be holding this close to you

PG: I like it. Yeah.

NS: Um (laughs). So, right, hands up! Um, let's start by having you state your name and spell it for us.

PG: Sure. My name is Parker Gasset, P-A-R-K-E-R, Gasset, G-A-S-S-E-T-T.

NS: And where do you live, Parker?

PG: I live primarily in Camden, but also in Portland, Maine, when I can, and at Sugarloaf Mountain when I can.

NS: Ah, nice. And what do you do?

PG: Um, right now? It's almost hard to answer that. Right now I'm pursuing a degree at U-Maine, tryin to follow up on some education, but what I do is, uh, any number of things, a lot of times in the environmental and marine environment space.

NS: Like, give us an example.

PG: Yeah, so, so right now I'm in a, I'm in a graduate program that's working on marine policy. In the past, I've done a lot of education programs that are around the marine environment. Um, and a number of Conservation Corps programs and kind of the confluence of leadership training programs and conservation work that's actually on the ground and outside doing projects for communities.

[1:20]

NS: And what brings you to the Forum?

PG: Um, I'm working on project that's trying to get the fishing communities some better access to ocean chemistry tools, and trying to understand how those ocean chemistry tools can be better able to actually fit the needs of the fishing community. And so I'm kind of here to, to hear some of the concerns, especially from the shellfish community, uh, about climate change issues.

NS: So you've been attending the Shellfish Day today?

PG: Yes.

NS: Yeah. How did that go? I wasn't able to attend

PG: Yeah, Shellfish Day has been really interesting. It's been a combination of some very science oriented talks with a lot of practical information about different, uh, aquaculture projects ongoing. Um, I think most importantly, it's just a space and a time for people to convene, um, in a place where there is a lot of overlap in mindset and a lot of shared ideas and goals for people in this community, but we're, we're a large and long coastline so having everybody get together is, I think, just kind of a core element of why this works. Why the Fisherman's Forum and this day, in particular, works.

NS: Um, so tell us a little bit more about your work related to ocean chemistry changes.

[2:43]

PG: Sure. Um, I have been getting involved in, in, in asking, asking questions about what are the local effects of climate change? And how are local communities either equipped or in need of support for planning and preparing at a municipal scale? And so, in the water quality space that's brought me to a really large community of, of people who do local water quality testing. And specifically, my projects, over the past couple years, have been, uh, seeing how able these community water monitoring networks are to look at ocean and coastal acidification. And if they are able to kinda incorporate these new climate change challenges in their regular series of priorities for environmental stewardship, what's the next step to get their monitoring to the state level and to federal research programs so that we can kind of best work on these issues collectively?

NS: So community groups that are involved in water quality testing, et cetera, how can they use some of the new methods?

PG: Some of the new methods and also how can the data that they are out there gathering inform some of the research priorities and management priorities that we have at, at a more regional scale. So last year, I helped run a series of citizen science training workshops for coastal acidification. And those took place in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine. And this next year, we're working with that same community, uh, to kick off a, a blitz sampling event, we're running a shell day sampling event where everybody from Long Island Sound to Downeast Maine can do some sampling in a, in a coordinated way and answer some new questions about these, you know, regional and also very local issues.

[4:42]

NS: Very cool. And what, um, what kind of methods are the groups using, the citizen scientists?

PG: You know, a lot of it is just being out on the water and taking bottle samples. Um, you know, there's a number of different scientific instruments that can be used that are, you know, great, great for local communities, but also really good education tools for students. Um, and each program kind of has its own set of instruments that they can use, or their own set of methods they can use. And those are because the issues in each community are, are unique.

And so they, you know, over time, establish a monitoring network for place-based issues, but in confronting new challenges associated with climate change, uh, you know, we might find that a lot of the data and information they're already collecting is really informative about these long term issues that in many ways we're already seeing affect the coast.

NS: What excites you about citizen science?

PG: I think it's a, it's a way to, to make the science process feel real and personal for people. And to use science as a tool for, uh, value-based issues for, for people, you know, science isn't just a job or a pursuit, it's a tool we have to answer questions and move forward for the betterment of society, the betterment of our communities. And so citizen science is a great way to, um, to democratize that process. And, uh, and it's a great way to have people enjoy the environments that, you know, that they call home, while also being a part of a project that's thinking about some really long term stewardship needs and, you know, enter a really philosophical space about their home environments and their home communities.

[6:35]

NS: I want to hear a little bit more about, you said values-based engagement in science. I don't know if that was your exact quote, but, yeah, say more about that.

PG: Yeah. You know, I suppose that, at the, at the end of the day, you know, every everyone has a certain environmental ethic for their favorite places, you know, these places that they like to spend time in, that they their families go to, um, any number of reasons why you can fall in love with a place and want to protect it. And this idea of protection is, is where conflicts emerge, because, you know, what is the best way to, to, to care for an environment, um, is really different to different people. And so I, you know, this value-based science, maybe, you know, I don't, I don't think that's a particular term, but, but thinking of scientific pursuits in terms of the values that are at the core of those pursuits, um, it would be about connecting to people, connecting people with, with the reasons that we're investigating a certain challenges. Um, I'm kind of getting a little astray, but.

NS: That's okay. It's interesting to me, because I feel like people often, you know, at, scientists are supposed to be non-advocacy, you know, impartial, but I feel like I'm hearing you kind of flip that on its head, like, what is it that people get into science for to begin with is based on who they are and what they care about and what they value.

[8:10]

PG: Right. Right.

NS: Yeah. How did, um, how did you get into this work? Like, as a kid, what was your, what was your connection?

PG: Yeah, so, so I grew up in a, in a coastal town. Um, I, I grew up in Camden, Maine, which is this really fascinating confluence of, of, you know, of local, a lot of local history in Camden, Maine as a, as a shipbuilding town and a historical site for, you know, centuries in a lot of ways. But I grew up in Camden, Maine, and pretty close to the water meant that free time as a kid would bring me to the coast because it was, it was open space. So, you know, in Camden, and a lot of a lot of people don't know this, but you can actually go beneath the

town along the river, and it's the whole structure that makes the bridges around where Megunticook River flows out into the harbor, and you end up experiencing this like catacomb of, of underneath-Camden space. And so as a kid, that, that was the area to explore. And, there's something about the coastline that is just inherently, it's a more, it's a more raw and maybe rustic version of how communities are interacting with the environment. And there's only so much that you can build along the coast, that doesn't succumb to power of nature in some way. And so there's an authenticity to spending time, like, right at that, shoreline that is really fascinating to me.

[9:59]

And, and, you know, for me that led to, uh, just an interest in being in environmental places in general, whether that was trips up to Baxter State Park, or, you know, other wild places in Maine. Um, but ultimately, uh, wanted to ask, you know, how I could make time in natural environments, more of a vocation or more of a full-time pursuit, you know, not just be a weekend warrior to great places, but to have it be, you know, at the core of what I'm doing. And, uh, so, a lot of that lead to led to education programs that are in environmental sciences of some kind. And so, uh,

NS: Yeah.

PG: So, uh, it's through school programs, and through, you know, institutional educational opportunities, um, I kind of kicked off this pursuit of, of going to wild places and studying marine ecology. And for me, that meant I was, I got a great chance to go to the Galapagos Islands, I lived there for six months, and then I started sailing up and down the east, Eastern Seaboard on schooner boats, and, um, seeing kind of a different side of what, of what marine science and marine-based communities look like, you know, from the Caribbean, you know, through Downeast Maine, and everything in between, and, you know, at the core of it, were always these, these questions about, you know, what is the relationship between, uh, you know, how do people treat their coastlines? What are, what are the, how do people use spaces that they live in, what are the priorities? Um, you go to some places that are, you know, their gemstone of their home is that it's a park in a protected area of land, and that's their revenue, and that's the, the culture, the community, and you go to other places, and that's not a priority at all. You know, every coastal place has some kind of special, you know, is special in some way. But, you know, I really saw in returning to Maine after a number of years, that, that Maine has a lot of those special places, and in part, it's, uh in part, it's happenstance, and in part, it's because a lot of people came to Maine and, and wanted to protect this land for a long time.

[12:26]

And now our whole state kinda has a chance to, to renovate that land conservation ethic, to new forms of, you know, new forms of commerce, new forms of economies, you know, to, to hold on to the, the elements of a working waterfront that really make Maine's communities what they are, but also to, to allow those to adapt to new forms of people traveling to, along the Maine coast and you know, experiencing this place in different ways. Kind of a monologue.

NS: That's great. It's good stuff.

PG: I'm like, half trying to just answer and half trying to think like, what does a radio conversation want?

NS: You're doing awesome.

PG: Okay, maybe I'm missing it.

NS: Um, oh no, you're right on track. One question I had for you is that you grew up in Camden.

PG: Yeah.

NS: And then you went off and lived in really cool places like the Galapagos, I'm very jealous, and other places, and then worked your way back here and have been back for a little while. What, what are you noticing has changed?

PG: Um, I, I guess I just noticed the momentum of the place, the, the pace of changes along the coast, the pace of, of conversations about, uh, economic changes, and, um, you know, almost economic prospecting along the state and, and a lot of new business that's trying to, you know, tap into what makes Maine so special. Um, there's just a momentum that I'm more aware of now than I ever was before. And in some ways, that's, in some ways that might be a little bit naive, or in the, you know, in the bubble of, of where I am now, because you can still go to so many fantastic and remote places. And, you know, there's a, there's a sense of timelessness and calm there that is, you know, pretty much permanent. Um, but but I do notice this kind of feel of Maine is, Maine is moving quickly, in some ways. And, uh, and there's a lot of people who are really deeply concerned with getting it right. And this idea of getting it right is not just one answer. So it has, I feel like it's made for a really dynamic conversation about, uh, a really dynamic conversation.

[15:05]

NS: Um, I want to give Ellie a chance to ask questions, because I know that you're thinking about a lot of these issues, too, and this is probably sparking your thoughts. So if there's any questions or thoughts that you have

EO: Sure, I'll jump in with a question. Um, one of the things you study is the impacts of climate change. How do you see—

NS: Hello,

EO: climate change influencing that dynamic conversation that's happening? Seems—

NS: Can we just pause, could you poke your head out and tell him 10 minutes?

EO: 10 minutes?

[Indistinct.]

[15:36]

EO: Okay.

NS: Just so we don't lose him, no, we're still good. He's up after. So.

EO: Okay,

NS: I'm sorry, please re-state your question

[Indistinct.]

[15:44]

EO: So you study the effects of climate change. And I wonder how you see climate change playing into these dynamic conversations on the coast of Maine.

PG: So, I, I'm climate change is a really big issue, it's not just a long term issue, it's a now issue. But you know, I think that to really, to really keep your, to keep your eye on the—how should I say this, um— we, we have to remember that, even at a local scale, if you're worried about environmental issues, there is a, enormous influence that just a local community can have on environment, positive and negative. So regardless of this looming challenge of climate change, it's more about getting our ducks in a row to have, you know, safe clean water, healthy environments that are producing the, you know, the, the marine resource, the commercial species that we need. So I feel like climate change is, is not only a very real threat, but it's also just a reminder that if we're going to work on sustainability issues, then you, you have to be focusing on good practice on the first place. Um, I'd like to say that with a little bit more clarity, um.

NS: Go for it.

[17:08]

PG: Thanks. So, marine climate change, and climate change overall, is undoubtedly, of enormous concern. But we can't overlook that small and local challenges are still foremost the greatest challenges for our environments. So, you know, as a, as a society, and predominantly as a, as a society of people that are trying to prosper, we need to figure out ways that do that harmoniously with the environmental resources that also bring joy to our communities. And, you know, if climate change is your top concern, I think that's really well-advised if you're thinking about this global perspective, of the new challenges that communities will face that they've never had to face before, but at the end of the day, we still need to figure out, you know, clean economies in terms of pollution, we need to have clean water, we need to have ample habitat for not only the commercial species that we rely on, but the whole suite of, of the food system that supports, you know, a healthy area. So in terms of thinking about climate change, you know, this will be a, a pressure on the, on our ability to achieve all these goals, but we need to be working, you know, at each stage to make sure that we're, we're living harmoniously, with, uh, with the environments that take care of us. Still kind of philosophical, but.

NS: Given that, um, and maybe as a wind-down question is—

PG: Sure

[18:58]

NS: What are your hopes for the future for Maine's communities?

PG: Hopes for the future of Maine's communities? Um, you know, I think it would be really great to, to hold on to some really core elements of Maine's culture. I think of self-reliance as being just this really fundamental element of, of what Maine people are all about. And, and, you know, this indulgence in, you know, working in natural landscapes and having the natural landscape be a, a daily component of your lifestyle, just very close to how you live your life. Um, and to me, that means recreating some of, some of the industries in Maine to better fit that. Uh, you know, there are a number of sectors that, you know, can be in great sustainable relationship with environmental values, and, you know, very progressive environmental values and environmental solutions even to existing problems. You know, it takes, it takes a certain, you know, willingness to, to explore what those look like, it takes a certain amount of creativity to reinvent what are successful economies elsewhere, and make them work for a place that is as special as, as Maine and, and the Maine coast. You know, to make sure that we don't lose, I don't think we're going to lose what's special about Maine, but to make sure that we really embrace the most special elements about Maine communities, and Maine's, you know, working landscape as an asset to how we reinvent different industries to make it really function for people economically. Try that out (laughs).

[20:59]

NS: Any final thoughts before we have to wrap up?

PG: Um, here, I'll just say like, I'm not a fisherman. I don't have an aquaculture farm. My relationship to the coast, and to the water is, you know, has always been about exploration. And, and, um, and it's just, it's just a, it's, it's a special thing to have a sense of place for an entire coastline, you know, to see the similarities and, and, uh, maybe I'm rambling. That's great.

NS: And we could go on.

PG: Thanks much. Thanks.

NS: Yeah, very cool. So yeah.

[21:45]