

GOOD NATURED EP 11 ANGELIQUE SONGCO



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CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

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

Julia: In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more.

Sofia: I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

Julia: And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place.

Julia: Hi Sofia!

Sofia: Hey Julia!

Julia: Today is a very exciting episode because it is actually the last episode of our first season. And for this very special episode, we're happy to have with us Angelique Songco. Angelique is the Superintendent of the Marine Protected Area Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that is based in the Philippines.

Sofia: Tubbataha Reefs is a strictly no-take zone for fishers but it is open for tourism activities and it is ridiculously biodiverse. So it has over 360 coral species, 600 fish species, eight marine mammals, a hundred seabird species.

Julia: One thing that is really interesting about the way it's managed as well is the fact that Angelique through her work has been really good at protecting the reef by working with local populations and tourists. And so I'm really curious to hear a bit more about how she works with all these different stakeholders.

Sofia: One of the reasons that I'm really excited to talk to Angelique is that she has crafted some really incredible relationships with local people and with her team in

managing this protected area. And she has a great nickname, you know we'd love good nicknames on this podcast, and hers is Mama Ranger.

Julia: And obviously she is the perfect final guest for this season as she is really into diving and loves the oceans. And so obviously that's the perfect fit for Sofia!

Sofia: It's the marine episode! Finally!

Julia: So I think without further ado, we should just have a chat with Angelique.

INTERVIEW

Julia: Hi Angelique! It's such a pleasure to have you on the podcast today. I wanted to start this episode by asking you a bit more about what exactly drove your passion for the marine world.

Angelique: Well, as a child, I spent a lot of time in the rivers because I lived in a province, before we transferred to Palawan, we were in a province that was more or less landlocked. And so we spent a lot of time in the water and swimming and all that so I was pretty much confident in the water. And when I finally saw the beauty of the ocean, it was just so different and I was trapped. I just had to do something for it.

You know I live on an island and we're surrounded by the ocean and I was just curious what was in there. And so I got interested in diving and 10 years later, I studied to be a diving instructor. I first dived here in Puerto Princesa, I mean close in our province. And I was doing many dives here but then one day I had the opportunity - in 1982 in fact - to dive in Tubbataha. I was an open water diver and it just completely blew my mind.

I didn't realize that there were so many creatures in the ocean and I saw from the tiniest ones to the giant whale shark, and everything seemed to be there. And then I realized that something so beautiful needed to be kept in that state. It had to be protected.

And years later, when I was working as a diving professional on the dive boats that would go to Tubbataha, we would see there illegal fishers that would use dynamite or collect turtles, some illegal activities like that. I was so happy to have been given the opportunity to work here and be able to do something to stop the decline of Tubbataha.

I learned to scuba dive and I began to spend so much time in the water. And through the years, I noticed that the condition of the marine environment was deteriorating, especially in the Tubbataha reefs where I used to work as a diving professional.

I realised that the value of the park was decreasing. There was illegal fishing and all that. And I think it's our nature that when we see something beautiful we want to protect it. And so that is where my passion began!

Sofia: I get that! I think that those first experiences of being in the sea can be so amazing, entering into this completely different world.

Angelique: I've done lots of dives here close to home, but then the dives in Tubbataha were really different. That just kind of clinched it for me. I just had to do something about the ocean when I first went there and saw how beautiful the ocean can be. Because then I realised that the place that I've been diving in for so many years is actually a degraded version of the real coral reefs in our country. And so I was seeing a pristine reef and it's just overwhelming.

Sofia: You mentioned these first dives in Tubbataha Reefs and those were before it was designated as a protected area. How has the reef evolved during the time that you've known it? How has it changed?

Angelique: Well when I was diving there, I was not very aware of the organisms and their functions and all that, I was just enjoying myself. I was looking at beautiful things and now I understand better what this is behind all this phenomenon. For example, there's always, these two fish that are always together and you wonder why but now I understand these relationships better. And so I cannot compare that, you know, because I was looking at Tubbataha with different lenses. The first time I went, I was just appreciating it. And now when I look at it, I worry if I see something that's wrong and I'm now thinking we should do something about this, how do we change this? How do we improve this condition? Before I was just a tourist enjoying myself.

And how has the state of Tubbataha changed? Because of these different lenses it's hard for me to tell really. I really cannot say because the comparison is, you know, the measure is not the same.

Sofia: It's almost like you started to feel more of a sense of agency, maybe? Or more of an ability to change what was going on there, do you think?

Angelique: Yes because then I was tied, you know, like I was now linked to Tubbataha. Whereas before I was just a visitor looking at it and enjoying it, now I was working. So I felt like I had the obligation, the responsibility, to do something. Maybe even if it's not even right all the time, you know. If there was coral bleaching, I would think like now we're suffering from coral bleaching. And I would think, well what can we possibly do to change this? You know, even if there's really nothing we can do, I just feel like I must do something!

Julia: And I'm just wondering, I believe you started working in Tubbataha after it was designated as a protected area. Could you tell us why the government decided to start protecting it?

Angelique: I was working there before it was a protected area and the call for Tubbataha to be protected started with scuba divers. And because they were the only people that could see Tubbataha and were using it, you know, aside from the illegal fishers. And so the scuba divers who were mainly from Manila, pressured the local government here and so what happened was that the local government of Palawan requested the President of the Philippines to protect Tubbataha in 1987. And that is from the urging of this group of scuba divers who go there every year and are also

alarmed by the degradation that they witnessed. And so finally in 1988, the precedent established it as the first national marine park in the Philippines. And also as a no-take zone, it is the first no-take zone in our country!

Sofia: Wow, that's amazing! How did the fishers react when fishing was banned in the area?

Angelique: There was a lot of illegal fishing still going on. The park was established in 1988. In 1989, we recorded the lowest coral cover, just a year after the declaration and that was because there was no enforcement to speak of. It was a paper park because it's so far, it costs a lot to protect it, it's difficult to put people there because the access is very seasonal. And so for a long time, there wasn't any active enforcement that was going on. And so, the park was not doing well in the first few years. And later, when we finally got our act together and we had help from WWF Philippines, an NGO secured funds for us to be able to manage the park and that is when we were able to establish our presence there.

The fishers were not very happy. We had several consultations with fishers that used to go there and eventually they said: 'Okay, we will forgo fishing in this area'. And the local community that used to own Tubbataha also said 'Okay, We will give up our fishing rights' and in exchange the management of Tubbataha gives them a percentage of tourism revenues that is to fund their livelihood activities there. So until now we have this particular partnership and we have also promised to as much as possible hire people from the small municipality to work in the park.

Sofia: What was the history of fishing in Tubbataha?

Angelique: Before the Cagayancillo people, you know, it's an island municipality about 80 nautical miles from Tubbataha, the residents there had this rite of passage where they take young boys, like 12-13 year old kids. They would go on a local sailboat and they would sail to Tubbataha to stay there for a month. Catch fish, dry them, blah, blah, blah, and all that. And so they teach the young boys to fish and all, and so that was in the early days.

But then in the seventies, when we began to have the motorised fishing vessels, it became unsustainable because then even people from other municipalities from far away towns would come to Cagayancillo, pay for fishing permits (less than \$10 for a permit), hire the locals to go on their boat and then go to Tubbataha and fish. And in some cases they would use illegal methods, sometimes they would get turtles as well and turtle eggs and seabird eggs, just anything that is edible. And so after a while it became unsustainable because people were beginning to use cyanide and dynamite. We even had foreign fishermen go there in the eighties.

The community is only composed of 6,000 people. They can't eat all that fish. And even in their own islands, they have a lot of fish. They just go on excursions like one month excursion because the fish that they get there they barter with other provinces. But then otherwise for just ordinary day to day fishing, they have a lot of fishing areas in their

own municipality. So there were not causing the degradation. When other fishers arrived from other places, that was when we had the problems.

Sofia: It's interesting that in terms of the timing of the decades, that sort of happened at the same time as when scuba diving became widely accessible and we were finally able to go underwater and even see what that was and understand the marine environment in a completely different way. And you were saying that the people who were advocating for Tubbataha to become a protected area where the divers. So do you think that was some kind of interplay there?

Angelique: Oh, yes! That's true. And I think there was also a tension because the local communities were saying: 'We're wondering why these rich people can enjoy Tubbataha while we cannot'. Because when it became a park, they were told you can no longer fish here. It's a no-take zone and then they wondered : 'How come we cannot use this park, which is ours, part of our community, but there's all these rich foreigners and rich Filipinos that come and use it?'. And so that was a point of tension for a while there.

You should think about the rich appropriating what belongs to the poor. We had that issue for a long time. And also you're right that scuba diving became more or less mainstream almost the same time.

Julia: Actually I wanted to ask you a question about something that you touched on a little bit already. You received a prize in 2019 for your work protecting the reef biodiversity but also meeting the needs of the local population and tourists. And as you said, that must be a really tricky balance to make sure that all these different groups are happy. So how do you go about making conservation work for both locals and tourists?

Angelique: It's that every stakeholder needs to forego of something. I mean everybody had to contribute something of themselves or of what's important to them. It was important for the local communities to fish in that area because it's like a traditional fishing ground for them. But then in exchange for that, we had to share the revenues in the park and the dive operators, for example, that bring tourists have to agree to be regulated. They had to forego some of their quote on quote freedoms that they used to enjoy there in exchange for a product that is sellable and so everyone had to contribute something for it to work. And I think then it becomes more acceptable. It's not just the communities giving up something and the other part just taking in the benefits and the advantages. We all gave up something but then we also benefited something from it.

Julia: It's all about the compromises.

Angelique: Yes, that's true.

Sofia: But those compromises can be very difficult to reach. Having those conversations can be a real challenge and being able to convince people that if they give something up, they will get something back, that takes a lot of trust.

Angelique: In the beginning, that was the most important thing for us. It was the confidence building stage of our relationships. We didn't know each other. We were just an aggregate of agencies that had to work together. And so, you know, we had to build trust but you see we've been here for 20 years and we've been friends for a long time then so it's become easier at least after decades.

But the good thing really is that after we were able to explain to the communities the value of Tubbataha we never heard any complaints from them. You know what was the major complaint at the beginning? They were saying: 'Why is it that when you say Tubbataha, you say Tubbataha Reef Sulu Sea Palawan Philippines? It should be Tubbataha Reef Cagayancillo Palawan Philippines!'. Not seeing their name in there was a major complaint. It's like a pride of place, you know, just put our name in there, just so that the whole world knows that this park belongs to this community. And since then, we've used their name everywhere and they have really been very supportive of the conservation of the park.

Julia: Clearly you've been really good at building these relationships as well. I've seen that the local communities and your team members call you Mama Ranger, which is quite an affectionate nickname.

Angelique: Yes, because I nag too much, it's probably why!

Sofia: How do you go about trying to maintain these close relationships with your team members but also the local communities?

Angelique: We keep communication lines open all the time. I'm just talking to another person, I'm not talking to a mayor or something. On the personal level I think it's very easy to get along with people. If you don't think that I'm the manager of this place and you're the mayor of that place. If we just treat everyone like, you know, ourselves then it's really a lot easier. I don't know, I'm just a people person. I think that's the short version of it!

Julia: I think that's such an important aspect of it though. We need people's persons to build these bridges and build these relationships.

Sofia: And so often conservation is about people, right? It's about people convincing other people of the importance of these kinds of natural spaces and having these more sustainable relationships with them. And can I just ask, what kind of enforcement do you do in Tubbataha Reef?

Angelique: Because it's a no take zone, enforcement is quite straightforward. Every time we arrest someone, the Philippine Navy, the coast guards, Cagayancillo, and my office, those are four agencies that are involved in the filing of the case and I'm usually the complainant.

And in 2007 to 2010, we filed over 400 cases and we brought everyone to court, not a single one got off scot-free. We brought everyone to court and after 2010 you would look at the graph and we hardly had any cases. We did not have illegal fishing cases

last year. The year before, we had somebody wandered into the park but we no longer have that problem. I think the strong man tactic worked. It seems to have. And so now that isn't our major concern.

Enforcement is our least favorite part of the job, that goes for the law enforcers as well. And we're just happy that it's over. We would really rather just not have to bring these people to jail because it's a lot of work, lots of tears, there's lots of acrimony and all that.

Sofia: What makes you optimistic about the future of the oceans?

Angelique: I think people have become more aware of the services and goods that come from the ocean, the benefits that we get from this. And then science is able to show this to as much people as possible. Before, you know, you'd have to look at magazines and all that, but now everybody can learn about it.

And so there are people, young people, the next generation of managers, showing interest so I'm really optimistic because there's lot of interest in marine conservation these days. And there's lots of support from people who may not even be in this area of work. And yeah, there's hope!

Julia: Our final question is one that we ask all our guests and it is if you had to make a case for one species and it could be an animal, a plant or something else, what would it be and why?

Angelique: Well, I would really like to protect sharks. They've been here since forever! And it would really be a shame if we lost them during our watch. They're very beautiful creatures in the water.

Julia: Was that the species that impressed you the most when you went diving for the first time?

Angelique: Yeah! That was the species that interested me the most. I'm scared and I'm awed, you know. Like you have all these misconceptions about sharks. When you go in the water, then you think it's going to get to you and so there's also this awe that you look at this perfect animal and it's so beautiful in the water and it just knows what it's about and they're beautiful.

Sofia: I agree! In my experience when I've seen sharks on dives before and it's just like they are so lean and so efficient, like they just cut through the water in this crazy way and you're like: 'Yep, you've definitely been here for a very long time!'.

Julia: And I think that mixture of awe and fear as well, plays a role. It's just that you have that very strange feeling or at least when I'm underwater and I see sharks, it just makes it very special. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to answer all our questions, that was super interesting!

Angelique: Well, thank you too!

OUTRO

Julia: Wow, What an amazing conversation! I'm so happy that we finished our season with this special episode on marine conservation.

Sofia: it was great! I loved hearing everything that Angelique had to say and then also hearing about the history of Tubbataha and thinking about all of the phases that this one place has been through. Now it's a protected area but how it was also previously a place where young people would go to hone their fishing skills. And after that perhaps becoming somewhere that was over exploited and now being under this really interesting form of management.

Julia: For sure. It was really interesting hearing all the different phases of this specific space. And also one thing that I really loved is how Angelique got connected to that place when she started diving there. And one thing that particularly resonated with me is when she talked about when she first saw sharks and how that brought this sense of awe.

As a kid, I remember snorkeling and seeing a shell one day that was really beautiful and I wanted to take it and bring it to my parents and then legs came out of it and it just started walking away. And I remember thinking, wow, there's so much I don't know about the ocean and there's so many bizarre creatures out there. And that really brought home for me the sense of awe that I felt for conservation and animal behavior and just wanting to learn more about it.

Sofia: We brought this up with Angelique but the access that we now have to underwater spaces is amazing and kind of totally unprecedented, right? Like a hundred years ago, it would have been impossible. Obviously humans are not built to breathe underwater so the fact that we can understand and manage these places is incredible.

One of the things that I find amazing about diving and in particular, doing research or spending a lot of time in one place like Angelique does, is that you can almost come to understand these marine spaces in the way that you understand a place on land and you can get to know it like know which animals live in which places usually or what kind of dynamics they have with each other and it's really magical! I have never spent as much time as Angelique has in Tubbataha obviously, I would love to get to that point someday.

Julia: That's true. I think another interesting thing though, is that even though she spent so much time in that reserve, it's a bit of a dichotomy in the way that when you stay in one spot for long enough, you might not be able to notice the changes.

So for example, people who have kids, they see them every day. They've noticed the changes less than people who see them only once in a while, but here it's really interesting to see how, despite the fact that she's been in that area for so long, she still manages to see all these different transitions and pick up on the changes.

Sofia: Absolutely, it's almost like she was wearing different glasses when she was either that in a tourism capacity or then in a conservation capacity. And it was interesting how she said that she almost couldn't think about the place in the same way or even perceive the ways in which it might have changed because she was looking at it through these different lenses.

Another thing that I found really interesting was when she was talking about her first dives in Tubbataha and how they were so different from anywhere that she had been diving before. And it reminded me of this concept of shifting baselines, which we use quite often in ecology and conservation, and essentially the idea behind it is that your perception of what is normal is shaped by what you have witnessed before. So across generations, you might end up with different expectations for the environment, and you might not realise that a place has changed or become degraded because you didn't witness anything different in your lifetime.

Julia: I think that's really interesting and also connects to something that we touched on a little bit during the episode, which is this idea of pristine environment being somehow of higher value than an environment that may be more degraded. And I think it's really important to emphasise that even degraded areas still have values.

And I think, especially for people who live in urban settings, you know, it might just be your local park or it might be an area that other people might think really degraded, but actually it's still very much a value for communities because it's still bringing them this sense of nature being around them. So I think it's important to remember that even degraded areas still have a role to play and shouldn't be completely discarded.

Sofia: I mean the reason that some of those areas are degraded is because people come into contact with those spaces so often and actually are gaining a lot of benefits from them. I think that absolutely can be a danger in kind of holding up these very, I mean, even the word pristine seems a bit dangerous. My entire PhD is about human-made structures in the ocean and in what ways is marine life colonizing those structures? What values do they bring to humans and how do they change our perceptions of the ocean? So I think that we really need to be thinking about all of these different marine spaces and the ways that people interact with them.

Julia: Actually, it's really interesting that you're bringing in this a human aspect, because what I wanted to talk about next is also the fact that I loved how she puts so much emphasis on the fact that she's a people's person. And I think it's often undervalued or people put it as kind of like a soft skill that people may have, but it's so important in whatever role you may have. For me in communication, it's also a really important skill because if I don't build trust with different stakeholders, then people won't bring me stories and I won't have anything to work on. And I think that's true in so many different settings in conservation.

Sofia: I think trust is such a delicate and important thing, which can be really difficult to achieve in conservation, particularly when you're working in spaces, which are so

important to people, as Tubbataha so clearly is. And it just seems like Angelique builds those relationships so effectively.

Julia: Yes and also it was so interesting when she mentioned that what the community was upset about at some point was the fact that the name of the community wasn't in the name of the marine reserve. And I thought that was, in a sense, it was just beautiful because then they had this connection to that place and to that space and they were just asking why are we not represented in that name? It's this disconnect, which I thought was again really interesting.

Sofia: And I think, again, it speaks to Angelique's skill in creating that sense of shared purpose and ownership in the management of Tubbataha, which means that people felt empowered to make those changes and support conservation in that area in order to make sure that it would be maintained into the future.

Sofia: As we're coming to the end of our first season. I just also wanted to say that it's been such a pleasure talking to such a variety of conservationists and just learning about all of these sides and perspectives of conservation.

Julia: Definitely and I really enjoy the fact that we had such a range of conservationists! We went through ecopoetry to field conservation and then to theater making. Hearing about what makes people optimistic or what makes them keep going is really inspiring in its own way. But it was also I think a lot of very interesting things in the challenges that they shared with us. And I think that's also where we had some interesting discussions.

Sofia: And I think even starting to think about optimism in itself to think about what are the ideas that lead us to be optimistic and also what even is optimism. Is it persistence? Is it hope? It seems like everyone has a slightly different perspective.

Julia: And even just hearing the choices that people made for our very last question and the species they picked and more importantly why they picked it or why they decided not to pick was really fascinating. And I felt it gave us a completely different perspective on all these different guests that we've had.

Sofia: Totally! I think so much of conservation is prioritizing. I know that we had some resistance from people about that question and I think it was a really interesting lens. I think we'll probably switch it up in season two but it was really cool to hear people's answers. And even to hear that resistance because I do think that a single species approach to conservation is not the way forward.

Julia: We were definitely quite provocative with this question but I think it definitely led to interesting conversations. But if you listen and have any suggestions for a question that you think we should ask every single guest on season two, then please reach out and let us know on Twitter or on Instagram and use #ConservationOptimism to reach out.

And we would also love to hear your thoughts about season 1, which episode was your favorite? What themes did you enjoy? What would you like to have heard a bit more of? Let us know!

Sofia: And what would you like to hear about next? So if there are any particular people that you think would be really fascinating, then get in touch with us!

Julia: And again, while we go on a break until probably spring, make sure to share the podcast, make sure to subscribe and help other people find it!

Sofia: So goodbye for now. And we will speak to you again soon.

Julia: See you in spring.

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