Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

MURRAY FISHER INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON THREE

Murray Fisher, Naturalist
May 16, 2024
Interviewed by: Teddy Kunhardt
Total Running time: 27 minutes and 47 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT: Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Ever since I was a little kid, it always felt like my role was gonna be protecting nature. Any time that there was anything related to the natural world, whether it was Jacques Cousteau or whether it is going out and hunting with my uncles or learning to bird watch with our neighbor when I was 11, or being out with my mom identifying all the different plants, I had a sense that I was developing a stronger and stronger knowledge about an affection for the natural world than most other people my age. I just knew that that was — That I was lucky enough to have born witness to the sort of fragility and beauty of the natural world and that what came with that was a responsibility to figure out how to protect it. And my whole career has been about tacking back and forth between inspiring people about the natural world and the beauty that I've witnessed and that I want other people to see

and share it, and trying to stop the destruction of the natural world. So that's a long complicated answer to how I was turned on to nature as a kid and sort of how that influenced my whole career.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread

Murray Fisher
Naturalist

00:01:24:00

INTERVIEWER:
You had a pretty unconventional childhood going back to South America. Can you tell me that?

00:01:31:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Sure, I was born in Bogota, Colombia. My dad had been in the Peace Corps, he fell in love with Colombia. He came back up after the Peace Corp, went to Columbia University, finished there and ended up going and buying a ranch with a partner down in Colombia. My sister and I were both born there. I was six months old, though, when we moved back to the U.S., so it wasn't like I had a lot of experience in Colombia, but it was always a big part of our family and of our sort of experience.

00:02:00:00

INTERVIEWER:

Are your parents still alive?

00:02:01:00

MURRAY FISHER:

My mom's still alive. My dad died actually right before COVID started. He had a long battle with Huntington's disease, which is a degenerative brain disease and that had been sort of a long, slow, sad decline and especially hard for someone like him who was defined sort of by his physicality and his ability to move things and drive things, and it was hard to watch him lose that.

00:02:25:00

INTERVIEWER:

And tell me about your sister.

00:02:26:00

MURRAY FISHER:

My sister Jane is about three and a half years older than me. We had some fights as kids that we remember, but we were really, really close and loved each other, and I actually give a lot of credit to her for anything that I've been successful at in my life because she's been my biggest cheerleader and supporter and always willing to sort of get in behind what I'm working on and give me credit and support, and so I love her dearly.

00:02:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about your mother.

00:02:56:00

MURRAY FISHER:
My mom came from a really big, wonderful family in Richmond. There are 150 of us right now that are all descendants of her great-grandparents. That last name is Scott and we all stay together and are really close, and so she was always kind of the life of the party. Everyone's loved her, she was an amazing mom and she was really young when she fell in love with my dad and went down to live on this ranch in Columbia. That was like the last thing that anyone would have imagined. She got a lot of grief from her parents and other members of the family. They had said that you can marry anyone you want as long as they're from Virginia, and she ended up marrying this guy from Maryland who then took her down to Columbia, South America for eight years. And so she was sort of unlikely to be down there and I think that they were lucky because they forged such a strong relationship down there and they had a wonderful, blissful marriage. They were great parents.

00:03:52:00

MURRAY FISHER:
So I was really lucky between the two of them that they were always teaching me just naturally, not with any effort and not with any intent, about the natural world and so I felt like that's where I developed sort of a unusual affection for and relationship to the natural world was because of both of them.

00:04:08:00

INTERVIEWER:
Can you tell me who Emily is?

00:04:10:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Emily is literally the love of my life. Pretty much as soon as I met her I was in love. We actually met up at Fishers Island. I was 30 years old, she was 31. She was a best friend to one of my friends, girlfriends and I just immediately was drawn to her. She's really funny, she's an amazing artist, she's really athletic. She is an incredible photographer, an incredible mom, an incredible supporter of mine. I guess we met in the end of 2004, and so she's been along on this journey and she has been 100% supportive of it, and she's able to give me a lot of freedom and flexibility to go pursue these things. And also, in addition to being my biggest cheerleader, she's also a good critic of helping me think through the right thing to do or the right way to do things.

00:05:06:00

INTERVIEWER:
And do you have dual citizenship or?

00:05:08:00

MURRAY FISHER:
I could, I have a Colombian passport from when I was born that's way, way, away expired and I haven't gone back and renewed that, so I don't have dual

citizenship, but we go back every three years and it's great that my wife Emily loves Colombia and then all three of our kids are now fluent in Spanish. And so we're kind of keeping that throughput of openness and interest in different cultures. Some of my best memories as a kid are just being in the living room with huge slide shows that my parents would show of the ranch and all the people that worked on the ranch and all of the animals. Probably, now that I think about it, one of the most powerful reasons that I developed this love of nature and desire to protect nature was all the wild animals that my parents experienced down there and just showed us through photographs and through stories.

00:05:53:00

INTERVIEWER:
But when did this aha moment come where you're like, okay, I'm gonna set my life to protect this?

00:06:01:00

MURRAY FISHER:
I mean, I remember driving from my school back to our farm and there was huge woods right on the side of Patterson Avenue that had been virtually clear cut for a new housing development. And I remember having an argument with my uncle and I remembered saying that the woods there were the last biggest tract of intact mature deciduous woodlands in central Virginia. And that that was the most important for these neotropical migrant warblers that were going extinct. And he said, “Nobody cares about those

warblers." And he was right. And so it was like, how do I figure out how to make more people care about these things? And in order to do that, that's been kind of my life's journey is like, does one do that as an artist? Does one do it as a scientist? Does one do it as an educator, maybe a politician? Music? How do we make people care about all the rest of the species we share the planet with? And I'm still trying to figure out what's the best way to have the most positive impact for that same outcome.

00:07:03:00

INTERVIEWER:
And while the other kids were playing sports, were you in the creek or were you also a quote unquote normal kid?

00:07:09:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Yeah, yeah, I did. I participated in all of the above. I had a lot more time at home, outside than most kids, but I also played soccer and lacrosse are my two favorite sports. What's hard for me and part of my frustration is as much as I care about and feel like I have responsibility for protecting the natural world and telling the story of the species we share the planet with, I'm also just as much. I love people. I love community. I love friends. I wanted to be a part of everything. I saw people who were outside of the mainstream in my high school or in my college, or anywhere. I never wanted to be that. I wanted to be right in the center of everything, participating in all the fun stuff. And so that, you know, how to carry this piece of this sort of wanting so badly to sort

of be a hardcore environmentalist, but also wanting so badly to fit in. Has been part of the struggle personally for me that extends to this day. And it's just a balance that I think everybody has these different things that they balance.

00:08:11:00

INTERVIEWER:
I actually think that I'm more likely to listen to what you have to say about the warbler because you're not on the outside fringe.

MURRAY FISHER:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
I view that as an asset.

00:08:21:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Exactly. Yeah. I always saw that I was sort of a messenger to the more mainstream America of someone who has had the opportunity and the luck to have been witnessed to so much of the natural world. And actually, for example, I took a year off of college and went and worked for a biologist in South America where I sort of went way out of mainstream, lived in a tent for eight months in the rainforest. And I was studying macaws as a intern for the Wildlife Conservation Society. And several days into doing that, I was like,

okay, this actually isn't for me. I do not want to be a biologist. I remember I was sitting in my tent. I was sick. We were in the middle of, near the Benne River in Bolivia. I was with one indigenous guy who had lived in the jungle his whole life. And the two of us were there. And he was helping me as we were setting up a camp to do all these different studies. And I was reading a checkoff book at night. About a Russian dinner party.

00:09:21:00

MURRAY FISHER:
And it was just the most fun dinner party and it just triggered for me a memory of like, okay, I love community and I love being with people so much that I can't be just a, you know, fringe biologist. And so how do I take this love and this passion about nature and bring it sort of mainstream?

00:09:42:00

INTERVIEWER:
So you realize it's not for you. You go finish up at Vanderbilt and then something happens.

00:09:48:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Right, so I did really well those last two years sort of back on track with how I was used to doing. Had a really — Enjoyed my last two years as much more focused. And my senior year, I read the book, River Keepers by Bobby Kennedy and John Cronin. And in reading the book it was the first time that someone articulated for me my own sort of vision of how to protect the

planet. I fell in love with the book. And was lucky enough to have known Bobby through family. So I wrote Bobby Kennedy a letter in the spring of whatever that was, 1998 and said, I read the book River Keepers and I was amazed by it and I wanna come up and figure out a way to work for you.

00:10:31:00

ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR.:
We believe our lives are gonna be richer and our communities are gonna richer and our children's lives are going to be richer if we live in a world where there are Shad and Sturgeon and Stripe Bass in the Hudson River and where our children can go to the banks and see the fishermen doing what they've been doing for generations.

00:10:49:00

MURRAY FISHER:
What really drew me to Bobby was that he, like me, had had a childhood where he had developed an affection for and obsessiveness about the natural world which carried through. So I started that summer of 1998 at River Keeper as an AmeriCorps intern. And I spent just one year doing— We created a museum about the history of the Hudson River that was in Bobby's office at the Pace Law School in White Plains. So I learned everything about the Hudson river through the creation of that museum. I went and did children's programs where I'd go and take big stuffed Stripe Bass and Sturgeon and take them to schools all the way into New York City and all the up to Albany to do programs about the Hudson River. And what happened to

me then was I, my brain was turned on much more than it had ever been in any of my previous education. And I remember really clearly being in the river with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Scientist.

00:11:48:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Up by Athens, New York, about a hundred miles north of here, and we had big nets and we'd waders on, we were up to our hips in the river, and we were catching all the different fish that would come up. And were pulling them up and we are identifying them and measuring them and then sexing them, talking about them, letting them go. And I just, that moment, I remember saying, this is how we should educate our kids. It doesn't make sense that Murray Fisher spent K through 12 and then college in a desk. I wanted to be actively helping protect the planet and the idea of doing that turned my brain on so much more. I literally realized then that there has to be a school about the Hudson River, and that education should start from passion about our local, natural, ecological, geographic place, in this case, rivers. But what happened, so many things were happening in my head. One is I thought after three years that it was kind of time to do the next step to be a more effective advocate. I was at Pace Law School.

00:12:47:00

MURRAY FISHER:

So I saw these people who were becoming lawyers to have an additional tool to help protect the planet and enforce these great environmental laws we have around the country that are rarely enforced. And so I thought, well, maybe I should go to law school. And number two was go back to the idea of the Hudson River School. And I called it on this sheet of paper, Waterkeeper Academy. This Waterkeeper Academy can be a place to train future Waterkeepers, because it's in the middle of New York, it's at the intersection of the Hudson River, Long Island Sound, and New York-New Jersey Bays. It's the center of sort of, financially, of the world. It'd be a good place to raise money. And there are millions of kids that we can train to become future waterkeepers. I was in New York City where I was surrounded by all these different kids of every different background, every different ethnicity and color. And I had been working at Waterkeeper Alliance where the majority of the waterkeepers I was working with were older white men. And I just was really struck with this idea of if, if we're trying to create an army of people to protect the planet, we're not representative of everybody. And so we're gonna lose.

00:13:55:00

MURRAY FISHER:
So this Waterkeeper Alliance needs to have an infusion of new talent, new perspectives, new people who care about these things too. And the reason that there isn't that is because which kid in New York City is having hours after hours, week after week, year after year of exposure to the marine environment? Virtually none. And so as soon as I started putting out this idea

of we need a school to train young people to become keepers and waterkeepers and learn about the marine and environment, it was incredible how every single door just started opening up.

00:14:30:00

INTERVIEWER:
Everything seems to be lining up for the Harbor School. How does this idea then form a reality for a school?

00:14:38:00

MURRAY FISHER:
We put in a proposal. We put it in a concept paper in October of 2002. I pulled together a team of maybe 15 people. I was 27. I wasn't sure what my role would be. I had no formal training in education, knew nothing about starting a public school in New York City. And so our concept paper was approved. So for seven years, one of my many jobs was helping find a place on the water. And so it was after school programs, weekend programs, summer programs, all the boat stuff, all the marine stuff, all of that was incorporated into what we created in 2010 called New York Harbor Foundation. And then Billion Oyster Project was born out of that.

00:15:20:00

INTERVIEWER:
What is the Billion Oyster?

00:15:22:00

MURRAY FISHER:

Billion Oyster Project was born as a way to engage Harbor School students originally in restoring their classroom. I mean, really from like the idea in 2009, what we did is we started testing out will oysters survive in New York Harbor. That was the first thing. Pete Malinowski brought down 100,000 seed oysters from his family farm. You could hold them in your hand. And he built a floating upwelling system, which was just a floating system that pumped water over those oysters in the harbor at two or three times the rate of natural give more oxygen, food, getting rid of waste faster. Put those into the floating upwelling system, first in the Hudson River and then moving it to Governor's Island. Not only did they mostly survive, but they had really low mortality and they grew really well. And that 100,000 oysters was the most oysters in New York Harbor in the last 100 years. And so we realized, wait, they can survive now. And then we were part of the Clinton Global Initiative where we made a commitment to restore 10 million oysters to New York Harbor over the course of three years.

00:16:21:00

MURRAY FISHER:

That brought in more publicity. It didn't bring funding with it, but it gave us a really good platform. And little by little, we raised enough money where in 2014, we hired Pete away from being a full-time aquaculture teacher at Harbor School to come run Billion Oyster Project.

00:16:38:00

INTERVIEWER:
Can you explain that the oysters are providing these storm shelters, but they're also filtering the Hudson?

00:16:44:00

MURRAY FISHER:
A adult oyster can filter a gallon an hour, so 24 gallons a day. Then they create the habitat because they create these reefs and provide protection on the shoreline from storms. And all of a sudden, Hurricane Sandy happened in 2012. That was such a huge storm event for the city. We were a little bit hesitant to say, oh, there should have been more oyster reefs, even though we'd been claiming that that was an important function of oyster reefs.

00:17:09:00

INTERVIEWER:
So what I'm trying to figure out is this is such an important project you're doing. Why are we doing it with kids? Why are doing it students versus getting a whole lot of professionals to come in here and do it?

00:17:22:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Any coastal city, whether it's in Sydney or Paris or London, has some oyster restoration project because there's some native oyster that is almost functionally extinct in that place, but it's almost entirely scientists,

professionals, fundraising to go out and restore those oysters. We started from the Harbor School and we saw that giving the kids a responsibility for saying you are the leaders of this project. At the Harbor school, they're the ones who are growing the oysters. They're the ones who are doing all the marine biology studies. They're are the ones who are doing all of the building of the actual reef materials. They're the ones who're driving the boats out to the reefs. They're the ones who are doing the scuba diving to deliver the oysters to the reef and to monitor them. So it's much more powerful for them to have that responsibility. And it's more powerful for the project to see, well, in the Harbor School case, 500 kids who are out working actively to restore the Harbor.

00:18:22:00

MURRAY FISHER:

So we want to engage all New Yorkers in this project, led by the kids, but all New Yorkers, because we think that if we just restored a billion oysters to New York Harbor, but it was just scientists, or it was just a non-profit group that was doing the work, then it wouldn't change the city's relationship with its marine environment. And ecologically, we've restored 140 million oysters. We see baby oysters all over New York harbor on hard surfaces that have not been there for a hundred years. And the educational and cultural always were equally important to me and Pete. And to everyone that we've worked with and any partner and funders saw that. And we think that it's been a key reason that it has been even more effective in getting people's attention was because it was sort of led by the youth and engaging all people.

00:19:07:00

INTERVIEWER:
Yeah, you and Kris Tompkins both say restoration without education is just temporary.

00:19:12:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Exactly. One of the reasons that Billion Oyster Project was so powerful and so compelling was that we were making it clear to the young people who are engaged, our students, that the adults don't have the answer here, that there has never been an effort to restore a billion oysters in New York Harbor, that we don't any idea what the right answer is. And that in their engagement, in their participation, they are now part of a massive city-wide experiment. And they can participate however they want, they can participate as scientists, they can participate as boat drivers, they can participate as publicists, as, you know, policy makers. That was really powerful where any kid who we were working with realized that we were embarking on a gigantic restoration experiment together in New York City. One of our teachers said, “We always complain that kids aren't responsible and then we loathe giving them responsibility.”

00:20:11:00

MURRAY FISHER:
And so here we were telling teenagers that you are responsible for restoring New York Harbor and the impact it had on kids' psyche, kids who maybe weren't good at something before or didn't know what they were good at or

what they're interested in, all of a sudden had that responsibility and seeing the pride in their eyes when they're taking off their wetsuit. There's mud everywhere or their oysters were down on the harbor. I'm so proud of that and so grateful to be part of it and just… I really do wish the whole world could see that happen. In New York City, 1.1 million kids. Instead of like, how do we house them in a box so that they don't cause trouble? What if we put them to work restoring our planet? I do yearn to spread those lessons out for other people around the world to see just how incredible it's been to watch the young people grow when they're given the responsibility for helping restore their local marine environment. It's incredible and hopefully people are still learning from that.

00:21:14:00

VOLUNTEER:
It's lovely out here.

00:21:23:00

BILLION OYSTER PROJECT MEMBER:
This is our first file.

VOLUNTEER:
Oh my God, this is so exciting.

BILLION OYSTER PROJECT MEMBER:
So let's take that one.

VOLUNTEER:
A little fish. A couple fish.

INTERVIEWER:
I want you to think about the day your daughter was born and describe if there were feelings that you remember when you first held her.

00:21:41:00

MURRAY FISHER:
Yeah, so our daughter, Grayson, was born on December 19th of 2011. Yeah, I mean, that was one of the most important days of my life. I got to hold her right when she was born, cut the umbilical cord. She started crying. She had a crazy purple cone head. They wrapped it up. They gave her to Emily and she immediately started nursing and the nurse couldn't get over it. She's like, wow, it's called a latch. She's, like, "That's the best latch we've seen." They were taking pictures and sharing it. And it's just funny because Grayson's been that kind of a daughter. She's always really good at things and has just been one of my, I mean, pretty much best friend for the last 12 years. We do everything together. I coach her lacrosse team right now and she's a great big sister to her brothers. But yeah, that moment when Grayson was born was one of the most important days of my life and one of best feelings in the world. And the beginning of… I had no idea what an incredible journey, adventure we were entering. And I just remember going up to everyone afterwards being like, I'm the luckiest guy in the world. Grayson is now 12 and we have twin boys, Alex and Penn. They're eight years old.

00:22:56:00

INTERVIEWER:
And what have you learned so far about being a father?

00:22:59:00

MURRAY FISHER:
It's humbling. You know, it's humbling when you're trying to be someone who, the way that I have been is wanting to change people's opinion, open up their eyes to things that I care about, have them maybe behave differently to protect the planet. If that's been sort of my one long-term goals, it's humbling just trying to even manage three kids and having comfort with… Being more patient and not expecting as much. I mean, still having high expectations for them as individuals, but not expecting them to do exactly what I want. That's been sort of for me, one of the big lessons, trying to develop that patience, letting them be who they're going to be, learning from them. I'm amazed at how difficult it is and how fun it is at the same time. And when it's difficult, I just need to remember all the fun times.

00:23:57:00

MURRAY FISHER:
I thought that I knew and cared about the natural world until I embarked on this experiment. I was inspired by the book *Half Earth* by E.O. Wilson. E. O. Wilson is one of the premier entomologists in the world, biologist. And he put forward in this book, this vision of if we want to protect the other, say 10 million species that we share the planet with, we have to set aside half of the

earth for them. And we have to figure out how to live without destroying that 50%. He's one of my heroes, but he's been studying this forever. And he said, if we can save 50% of the planet for the other species, we'll save 80% of this species from going extinct. And so I was so inspired by that. We said, well, let's take our property and just give half back and let's do a half earth in our yard. And I let a bunch grow and I started planting other stuff. And then I got confused about, well what's what? I realized that I had all these different guidebooks and all these notebooks, this kind of mushroom, this kind bird, this kind tree, this kinda dragon fly.

00:25:03:00

MURRAY FISHER:
And I wanted to monitor the change over time as I was rewilding half of our property. And so that changed me. Totally transformed how I related to the natural world because I had the time, for the first time in my life, to actually observe nature in a way that was much more slow and intentional and joyful. And it really transformed the way that I looked at the world and the way that I looked at myself and my role in it. I remember reading a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote that said, “To believe that which is true in your own private heart is true in the hearts of all men or women.” That is genius. I'm so frustrated about figuring out how to share that with people because it's impossible to get anyone to slow down enough to experience the same thing. I've hiked my entire life through every kind of mountain all over. I've missed 90% of the life.

00:26:04:00

MURRAY FISHER:

And now I know it's there. So that's been a sort of challenge to figure out what does that mean for me professionally? What does that mean for me as an individual? The thing we were talking about before about mainstream fitting in, that's getting pretty far over here. Maybe I'm trying to pull the mainstream over there and say this is really important stuff that I want everyone to be aware of, that this is interesting and important and cool and beautiful.

00:26:31:00

INTERVIEWER:
So looking ahead, how concerned are you with the state of the planet? And are we all doomed or is there hope?

00:26:40:00

MURRAY FISHER:
I have a little bit of a weird take on that, which is that I think humans mostly will figure things out through technology. I think that humanity is actually gonna be okay. And so what I try and do is I'm trying to even get for myself the courage to even articulate that we have a moral obligation here, that it's not about our own survival. I think we can exist on this planet billions more people with only a few species left that we eat and that we propagate and inside huge buildings with huge solar energy. It's not hard to picture humanity surviving like that. It's just, it's not the world I want for my kids. I've got wildness in me.