

The Write Angle

Episode 88

March 16, 2023

Lauren Korn: Hello and welcome to The Write Question.

Justin Angle: And A New Angle.

Lauren Korn: This is a one-hour crossover episode.

Justin Angle: I think we're calling it The Write Angle.

Lauren Korn: A Write Angle.

Justin Angle: Sure. Okay. That works for me. Okay. So, A New Angle is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Lauren Korn: The right question is funded by Humanities Montana and members of Montana Public Radio and from the Greater Montana Foundation encouraging communication on issues, trends and values of importance to Montanans. I'm Lauren Korn.

Justin Angle: And I'm Justin Angle. Today we're speaking with environmental philosopher Christopher Preston, author of *Tenacious Beasts: Wildlife Recoveries that Change How We Think About Animals*.

Lauren Korn: Christopher Preston's essays have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Smithsonian*, *E.On* and on the BBC website. He's the author of a number of books, including *Tenacious Beasts: Synthetic Age and Grounding Knowledge*. He's a writer, public speaker and environmental philosopher based in Missoula, Montana. Christopher, thanks so much for joining us today.

Christopher Preston: It's my pleasure to be here.

Lauren Korn: Yeah, Thanks for letting us experiment a bit with you for this crossover episode.

Christopher Preston: Of course.

Justin Angle: So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Christopher Preston: I grew up in southern England, a place called Seaford, which is surrounded by white cliffs, not the white cliffs of Dover, but White Cliffs.

Justin Angle: A different white cliffs.

Christopher Preston: A different white cliffs. Better white cliffs.

Justin Angle: Really.

Lauren Korn: Better white cliffs.

Christopher Preston: I think they're better than Dover's. But, you know, some people might disagree.

Justin Angle: Dover has the brand value.

Christopher Preston: It has the brand. Yes. Well, that's where I grew up. And my father was a dentist. My mother was a homemaker. And through my father, I got to interact with the landscape a little bit, a little bit of fishing, a little bit of shrimping was out and about in the wilds.

Justin Angle: And tell us the brief bio of how you made it to the United States and here to the University of Montana.

Christopher Preston: Well, I decided to go to graduate school in the United States to study this new field at the time called Environmental Philosophy. And I thought there would be no better place to study it than the Rocky Mountains. So, I enrolled at Colorado State University

for a graduate degree and started going up to Alaska for my very first summer and then did that for about the next ten summers. I got graduate degrees in Colorado and in Oregon, and then I found my way to Missoula for a one-year job where I realized this was a heck of a place to live. So, I set my target. So, I'm getting a permanent position here, which eventually happened about five years later.

Justin Angle: Very good.

Lauren Korn: Environmental philosophy is a little niche. You just randomly thought, this is what I want to do. How did you come to it?

Christopher Preston: Yeah, it's a very small field and a relatively new field. So, philosophy I thought was somewhat interesting, but would be more interesting if it was applied to something practical. If you could really kind of wrap your grubby fingers around the sort of subject matter of philosophy. And so, I'd heard about these applied areas, and environmental philosophy was an applied area of philosophy, and the environmental crisis was looming. The climate crisis was just beginning to get aware of it. And I thought, that's what I want to do with my philosophy. I want to stick it on something that feels like it's incredibly urgent and important. And if I can do that in a place as gorgeous as the Rocky Mountain West, then that's what I should do.

Lauren Korn: And that's what you have done.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And before you get into Tenacious Beasts, can I just ask like, how that, how your personal kind of on ramp to philosophy as an applied discipline, how that sort of translates to the students you teach now? Do you find that that brings more students into the philosophy tent?

Christopher Preston: I do think if your philosophy is concretely applied to something where a student who might be intimidated by the idea of philosophy can understand that, well, look, I'm going to sit in this class and I'm going to come out of it with a tool which will help me think about my relationship with the environment. I think that's very appealing, especially on a campus like ours where we've got a big forestry school, great wildlife bio people, Native American studies, environmental studies, we've got all of these students and all of this talent on campus that cries out for classes in environmental philosophy. So, it really it really works. I think it really kind of comes together here at UM.

Justin Angle: Yeah, and I've seen Christopher in action, I should say that he's a featured guest speaker in many of my classes, and we have him come in right at the onset and it just sets a great tone for sort of integrating a lot of philosophical frameworks into the study of business in my case, but other disciplines as well that it applies to.

Lauren Korn: How long have you been teaching environmental philosophy at the University of Montana?

Christopher Preston: I've been at UM now for 17 years.

Lauren Korn: So, I got my minor in wilderness studies and I feel like an environmental philosophy class should have been a part of that curriculum. I feel like it would have been an easy interdisciplinary course to take.

Christopher Preston: That would have been an appropriate fit.

Lauren Korn: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Well, do we want to dive into Tenacious Beasts?

Justin Angle: Let's get into it.

Lauren Korn: Let's do it. Yeah. Christopher In a section of the book called River Engineers, you write about Alexa Whipple, who witnessed the effect that beavers had on revegetation after a wildfire. Right. This experience seeing how a charred landscape was able to bounce back with beavers changed the course of her career. And we're talking about your career now. And I'm wondering what your career altering experience was. You know, I think that we've talked about how you got into environmental philosophy, but what led you to write this particular book then? Where did that career track come from?

Christopher Preston: So, I mentioned I was up in Alaska pretty soon after my arrival in the United States. I would go to Prince William Sound, and I was working on a fishing boat, and for several years in a row I had this extraordinary experience where I would literally turn in my final papers for my courses in grad school, and I would hop the next plane up the Prince William Sound and all kind of tired and head spinning from the work I've been doing. Then I would get out on the water in Prince William Sound on this boat, which was called the Reflection. It was a gorgeous fiberglass salmon seiner. And within moments of being out on the water, there would be sea lions, there would be killer whales moving beside the boat. There would be bald eagles overhead. There would be bears on the beaches. And the power of these landscapes really kind of filtered straight into my core. So having been at school and, you know, looking at words and using ideas, I was suddenly on the landscape and literally feeling these animals close by. And that just has lodged with me, the power of that feeling has stayed with me. And so, when it came time to work on a new project, I said, I want to explore that feeling. I want to dig into it and do it with animals that have a good story to tell. You know, we all know about the biodiversity crisis and that crisis is real and there is nothing I've written which denies that crisis. But telling the good stories, I think, helps people feel the power of those animals. And that was really my goal with this book.

Justin Angle: And you start with wolves in the first section. And, you know, as a citizen of the American West, you must know how controversial topic wolves are. Maybe less so in Northern Europe, where the opening vignette is set. Talk about that choice and what distinguishes the arc of wolf recovery in Northern Europe from what we're experiencing here in the West?

Christopher Preston: Yes. So that first chapter is on wolves. And as you correctly point out, it is on wolves in Europe, which I think is a particular kind of case study. The reason why I think European wolves are interesting is they are returning, first of all, on their own. They have not been reintroduced into any country in Europe. They're returning on their own onto heavily populated lands. So, Europe has half the land as North America, twice the people and twice the wolves. So somehow Europeans are figuring out how to live alongside wolves so that obviously there's some potential lessons in there. The other interesting thing about wolves, I mean, obviously I'm fully aware of what a lightning rod they are out West. But the other interesting thing about wolves is wolves 15,000 years ago became pet dogs. They transitioned from being the ultimate symbol of the wild to being the ultimate symbol of humans and animals coexisting. And the whole motif of the book is to try and figure out coexistence. And so, the wolf, controversial as it is, difficult as it is to talk about, has already managed that transition from being the wildest of wild beasts to being the puppy that curls up at our feet in front of the fire. So, I thought the wolf would be a useful animal to start this book with, to sort of break open the floodgates and really kind of get deep and pretty quick.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And the wolf, and give us a little bit of the state of play in northern Europe. I mean, wolves still carry some cultural baggage, even though it was not formally reintroduced by government action. It's still you know, it's the central character in many European fairytales and so forth. So, there's some cultural resonance there.

Christopher Preston: It definitely carries cultural baggage. And, you know, there's nothing that I say that should create the impression that, oh, there's a way for wolves to show up and not cause any problem at all. But what I would add to that is that every European Union country is required to find a place for wolves on the landscape. They have to figure it out. They do that in part by adequately compensating farmers and ranchers and making sure that they have the tools at their disposal to live alongside wolves. They also do that by having urban people put skin in the game. And there are a number of volunteer organizations in different European countries that get people to go out on farms on the weekends, build fences, put up defenses, camp out in meadows with sheep where wolves might show up. The urban folk are putting skin in the game to say, if we want wolves, we're willing to give our time, our money, effort to make this cohabitation easier. And I think that's the model that is going to have to work wherever you are. There are challenges to living with wolves, but those challenges can be mitigated to some degree, and especially if the people who advocate for wolves are serious and committed about making sure that the burdens are shared.

Lauren Korn: What about a place like Montana that is growing? Yes, but it is still kind of this strange combination of rural and urban, right? I don't think that our wolves and our situation with wolves here could be easily mapped on to that situation. Do you feel like those circumstances, these volunteer groups that you're talking about, these urban volunteers, do you think that could happen here in a way that would fit Montana's population and the lifestyles here?

Christopher Preston: Well, the situation is different. You know, like the landscape is different. The demographics are different. But one of the larger purposes in the book as a whole is to say, when an animal returns, you get a second chance with that animal, you get to look at it again. You have better science at your disposal. You have better tools, management tools. You also have better techniques for living alongside the wolves. And so, I think it's possible to say, all right, there's a conception of wolves that we inherit from the past, and maybe that conception needs a little bit of updating. Maybe this is a different time. This is a different society. And maybe there are values that can spill over and change how we think about animals. And, you know, the title of the book is *Wildlife Recoveries that Change How We Think About Animals*. So, I'm trying to push the envelope here a little bit. I understand that that's controversial. I understand that these topics are difficult, but I think it's important to try and craft a 21st century conception of animals and not stick with the thoughts that we had in the past.

Justin Angle: Yeah, and that corresponds to this book's overall positioning in many ways. I mean, so many books about climate change. And, you know, as you mentioned, biodiversity and species loss, like they're framed in terms of loss and your book is framed in terms of gain. These are case studies about species recovery. And that theme of coexistence, can we press on that a little bit more? Like, how did you go about selecting the stories you wanted to tell in this book and keep you know, there's a lot to be sort of negative and down about in this space, but you keep a relentlessly positive tone in the book, a realistic tone, but very positively framed.

Christopher Preston: So, the idea of talking about what you gain is just central to the whole thing. If I can make a little analogy with the climate change discussion, the climate picture is also bleak, and a lot of the news that we hear is bleak and even distressing. But what can help people move in the right direction on climate is to have a vision and to have a hope and to have a sense of what a better climate future would look like. And this is just a small example, but those of you who live in Missoula will know that we're getting more and more electric busses. When you walk on a sidewalk or you ride your bike on a street and an electric bus comes by, or if you're stopped at a stoplight next to an electric bus, you know, that's a better future. You're not listening to a diesel engine rattling, you're not choking on fumes. The whole experience is a better experience. And so, in that arena, in that climate arena, seeing and feeling and living a positive vision is highly motivating. So, let's flip that over to biodiversity. If you can see the vision, if you can feel it, if you can imagine what that future looks like, then that is likely to drive better behaviors, better policies, better advocacy on behalf of animals than if you're constantly worried that this is the end of the world and there's no potential future. So, you know, I tried to find species that could make people feel that possibility in species recovery.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to our conversation with Christopher Preston after this short break.

Lauren Korn: And welcome back. We're talking to environmental philosopher Christopher Preston about his book *Tenacious Beasts*. Christopher, it sounds like with the narratives in this book that you're pressing on the emotions of your readers, that you're trying to pull at some heartstrings with these stories. What about those of us who aren't the Christopher Preston's,

the Doug Peacock's, the Naomi Klein's? How do you reach the people who aren't crossing that civilization wilderness divide?

Christopher Preston: So, I understand not everyone comes at these issues from the same place. But I think there's a remarkably large amount of people who are excited by the presence of animals. And just to illustrate that, think of what happened when we all got locked down by COVID. We all disappeared inside our homes and kind of got our news from the TV or the Internet and then peered out of our windows, hoping that the world was still ticking over outside. And then these news stories started to appear about animals showing up.

Justin Angle: Right.

Christopher Preston: So, there were wild boar in Haifa. There were dolphins in the Bosphorus and in the Venetian canals in Wales. There were goats walking through the villages. And just remember how exciting that was to people. It was in the news because people I mean, yes, we were in a bleak moment at the time, but it was exciting for people to imagine that these animals were out there, and they would show up. And there's a lesson in there about animals in the first place. If you back away a little bit, they can show up. They are resilient, tenacious beasts. But apart from the lesson about animals, there's a lesson about humans in that, too. It's exciting. It's interesting when our world is animated by animals and when we realize that we're not the only people on this planet. And I think that's a pretty widely shared view.

Justin Angle: I share it, except I was a little bit taken aback by the stories of the murder hornet appearing and showing up. So, we set those aside.

Christopher Preston: Put those aside.

Justin Angle: Yeah. Yeah. But as long as there's no murder hornets, you know.

Lauren Korn: I had forgotten about the murder hornets, wow.

Justin Angle: I have nightmares about it. I mean, it started as this, like, fanciful distraction from Covid, and then it became a darker version of the reality we were living in anyway, set the murder hornets aside.

Lauren Korn: I thought, you know, I think that this book is really lovely. It's extremely readable, it's well-written. And it seems to me I don't know you personally, but it seems to combine a really deep love of writing with your environmental philosophies. And I'm wondering how the writing process for this book, crafting these narratives of other people and these animals, structuring each story and putting them together in sections. I'm wondering how that that process affected your thinking about the stories and affected your philosophies. Did your philosophies, did your thinking, did those change as you were crafting this book?

Christopher Preston: Well, the writing process was hard.

Lauren Korn: I imagine, yeah.

Christopher Preston: I really had to figure this out. This was not a sort of typical writing style for me, and I wanted to do something different. The first thing I learned, which actually it was a lesson that should be a take home lesson from the book, is that if you want to write about animals, you are going to find yourself writing about people. The animals recover with people around, sometimes helping, sometimes being extremely involved. And there are some stories in the book where people are intimately involved in an animal recovery, but you only get to talk properly about animals if you're also talking about people. And one of the lessons of the book is that on this Anthropocene planet in which we live in the human age, recovering animals are going to be sharing landscapes with people. And so, learning how to tell the stories in ways that showed the quirkiness of the people, the passion, the scientific knowledge, the commitment. That was something that perhaps surprised me. You know, when I started, I thought there's going to be a lot of wildlife bio in here and a lot of ecology. And I didn't think that the people were going to be such a large part of the story. But they are. And through the people, you get to the animals.

Lauren Korn: And so much of this book, as you've said, is navigating the premise that, or trying to negate the premise, that humans and nature are apart. Right. You are arguing that or for coexistence. And I'm wondering, there are so many stories in here where I was really grappling with this idea, are humans, is it humans and or with nature or are humans nature? And that,

and I feel like that's where a lot of tension in these stories exists for me, right? Like, all of these stories involve humans and animals. And so, what is our role as humans in these systems? I'm really curious about your thoughts on that.

Christopher Preston: It's the center of a lot of environmental philosophy, if anyone wants a quick sort of primer on what environmental philosophy is.

Lauren Korn: It really is.

Christopher Preston: Yeah, it is. It's that relationship between humans and the natural world. Are we in it? Are we outside of it? Are we sometimes in it? Are we sometimes outside of it? So, it's very complex. And where we kicked off with wolves in Europe, versus as wolves in North America, there is actually a different philosophy between the two continents. Traditionally, environmentalism in North America has been very wilderness focused. This is actually with the exception of Indigenous environmental philosophy. But settler environmental philosophy has been very wilderness focused. And you look to people like Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir, and you look to bits of legislation like the Wilderness Act.

Justin Angle: Meaning we set pieces aside as wild space designated, fenced off even.

Christopher Preston: Exactly. And specifically, the Wilderness Act says that. It says we should be visitors, but we should not remain. So, if you have that in the sort of the cultural baggage,

then presumably you're going to assume that animals should exist in those wild spaces and humans should exist in a different space. In Europe, that cultural baggage is not so present. And also, I would say in indigenous thought in North America, that baggage is not so present. And so how you think about the recovery of animals in different places, in different cultural context is going to change. And one of the things I found in researching these species that are coming back is that people have to be intimately involved in ways that will make some environmentalists quite uncomfortable. But you have to be pragmatic, and that looks like the way some things are going to go.

Justin Angle: Yeah, you press on that sort of idealism versus pragmatism debate quite sharply in the segments that deal with genetic purity of certain species. Let's talk about what is that concept and how is it so kind of contested in species recovery?

Christopher Preston: Yeah. So, genetics come in a couple of times into the story when I'm talking about salmon or also when I'm talking about bison and the sort of traditional quote unquote view would be that the genetics of an animal like a bison need to be uncontaminated. It needs to be pure bison. There needs to be no lingering effects of human activities in order for this to be the real deal. In practice, that turns out to be very difficult. And there was an article published since the book manuscript was finished suggesting that every bison in North America has the influence of hybridization with cattle in its genome. That view is was published last year. I have heard people want to contest that view, so they want to hold onto the idea that there still might be genetically pure bison. But let's say that's true. Let's say it is

the case that every bison in North America has some cattle genes in it. Then we have to adapt to that reality that the bison has human influence. Turns out that actually those cattle genes might not be the only human influence in the bison genome because the bison's ancestors on this continent were much bigger animals bison priscus and bison latifrons were huge, almost twice the size of current bison. Bison shrank here, perhaps partly due to climate changes, but also due to the fact that they had a new predator to deal with. And this was an upright predator that threw spears at them. And to escape that predator, they had to be smaller, and they had to be faster. So, one theory is that bison in North America took their current form because of humans.

Lauren Korn: Can I press you on something or just kind of ask you to clarify? Why does it matter if bison, if wildlife, if wild animals are purer?

Christopher Preston: Well, the standard line in conservation biology would be that it's the evolutionary process, the distant historical evolutionary process that caused animals to take the form that they do. And so, if you want to conserve wild species, you have to conserve that form that evolved. And for the most part, it would have evolved for many species without human influence. So there has been a presumption in conservation biology that searching for something like and you know these terms, as soon as you say the term, you realize they are problematic. But searching for something like genetic purity is the goal in conservation.

Lauren Korn: And that's what that's where my mind gets so tangled, this whole idea of human and/with/in nature. Right. Because when we're thinking about wild animals that are evolving, we are animals evolving alongside them, too. And so, should. Yeah, again, my mind gets tangled because I want to say, well, that's just the natural evolution of bison living on an earth, on the planet with humans.

Christopher Preston: Well, it's super complicated, it's super puzzling. And, you know, we're doing environmental philosophy sitting here around this table talking about this. And there are definitely no easy answers to these questions. Certainly, I think I can say that moving forward, we are going to have to accept that human influence is increasingly going to be part of the genetics of the species around us. I mean, they are living on a planet that humans are changing and that will filter in overtime into all organisms' genomes. So, there's this interesting transition going on, I think, right now in how we think about animals. And just to go back to the title of the book, we want a contemporary, scientifically informed version of how to think about animals. And I'm hoping that my discussion helps us push in that direction. But these are not simple questions. They are extremely complicated. And, you know, I like to sort of tease my wildlife bio friends that there's philosophy at the heart of this, you know, it's not pure science. There's philosophy.

Lauren Korn: Ethics.

Christopher Preston: Ethics, values. There's judgments about what counts as authentic. These are all philosophical questions. And so, people like me and those interested in philosophy need to be in these discussions.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And so many of the stories you tell kind of intimates some of the contradictions at play in some of these views. I mean, you mentioned the notion of, you know, this romantic notion of nonhuman influenced evolution. So, the conservation biologists would want to remove the human from the process, yet creating a world now where that is possible demands a ton of human influence. So yeah, those two sort of points of view kind of collapse upon the reality of the modern world.

Christopher Preston: Yeah, I mean, you're totally hitting the nail on the head here, Justin, it is that these issues are dynamic. They're changing. The world in which we live is changing. I don't want to pretend to speak for conservation biologists. I sort of laid out a caricature of a few, but as time goes on and as animals, well, some animals are going to struggle and die out. Some animals are going to hang on and change. And some species, like the ones I profiled in the book, are actually going to come back strong. And so, we've got to figure out new relationships with these animals. And that is difficult stuff.

Lauren Korn: You've been listening to part one of a two-part crossover episode of The Write Question and A New Angle. What have we been calling it?

Justin Angle: The Write Angle?

Lauren Korn: Yes, we got it this time. This episode was produced by Chris Moyles and me. I'm one of your show's hosts, Lauren Korn. Our music was written and recorded by John Floridis, VTO and mashed up by Jake Burch.

Justin Angle: Support for A New Angle comes from First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications, UM's College of Business, Montana Public Radio, Consolidated Electrical Distributors and Drum Coffee.

Lauren Korn: Funding for The Write Question is provided by the Greater Montana Foundation encouraging communication on issues, trends and values of importance to Montanans. Many thanks to Humanities Montana for supporting this program since 2008. And thank you for listening. The Write Angle is a production of Montana Public Radio.

Lauren Korn: Hello and welcome to The Write Question.

Justin Angle: And A New Angle.

Lauren Korn: This is part two of a two-part crossover episode.

Justin Angle: I think we're calling it The Write Angle. Okay, that works for me. Okay, so A New Angle is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

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Justin Angle: And I'm Justin Angle. Today we're speaking with environmental philosopher Christopher Preston, author of Tenacious Beasts: Wildlife Recoveries that Change How We Think About Animals.

Lauren Korn: In the previous episode, we took a deep dive into environmental philosophy. Justin, where do we want to start with this episode?

Justin Angle: Let's talk explicitly about species recovery and cultural recovery. You study a tribal population in and around the Elwha River and the dam removal in that zone of that zone of Western Washington. Talk about that part of the book.

Christopher Preston: Yeah, I'd had long had a dream to go and see the site of the Elwha Dam removal. So, these are the largest dam removals in US history. They will shortly be superseded by the Klamath River dams, which are going to come out. But the two dams that came out of

the Elwha are a fascinating case study in both ecological revival and cultural revival. When these two dams came out, they opened up about 75 miles of spawning habitat on the Elwha River, most of which was within Olympic National Park. So fantastic habitat if the salmon could get there. The other exciting thing about the river is it arrives in Puget Sound through the Lower Elwha Clallam Tribal Reservation. So just an ideal place to restore a river. I sit on a beach with Robert Allison, with the lower Elwha Clallam tribe, and we looked at where the river mouth came out there. This beach didn't exist a decade ago. It was formed by the sediments that washed out of the river when the dams came out. And so, the tribe actually gained a new bit of real estate, which is one fascinating thing about it. What they also gained is a place to go clamming, because while the dams were in, the shore there became very cobbled, and those cobbles were not hospitable to the clams that the tribe had traditionally harvested. Now that the cobble is covered by these sediments, these clams are back. So, this traditional clamming activity has returned. And of course, the salmon are returning, too. And Robert told me one of his dreams when I sort of said, how do you see this unfolding? Where do you want it to go? He said, I'd really like to see a tribal subsistence coho fishery come back and the coho salmon in the Elwha are really starting to thrive. When the dams came out at first there was five years where the recovery was a little slow because there's a lot of sediment in the river. A lot of the spawning grounds had not really kind of settled into their sort of balanced ecological state. But things are starting to settle down now and Coho are being discovered in the river in numbers that are really taking off exponentially. So, between 2017 and 2022, they started capturing Coho Smolts that were ready to move back into the river and into the ocean. And those numbers went up from about 1500 in 2017 to over 50,000 in 2022.

So, these Coho are recovering. And I just read within the last couple of weeks that a tribal fishery, a subsistence fishery for Coho, could be a possibility within the next year or two. So, this is a really exciting ecological and cultural recovery.

Justin Angle: And this is, essentially, we're writing a new history. Dams have never been removed at this scale, and so scientists and anybody interested are learning so many new lessons here.

Christopher Preston: And what's important about these dams is many of them are coming out because they are no longer economically viable. So, you know, maybe they had a purpose. Maybe you could justify them when they were built, but you can't justify them anymore. And so, if it is cheaper, culturally, more beneficial, ecologically more beneficial, this is a slam dunk. You know, it's a no brainer. And what you see happening is really uplifting. One other thing I want to mention about this beach and the Elwha. I heard that killer whales in Puget Sound was starting to patrol the mouth of the Elwha again.

Lauren Korn: Amazing.

Christopher Preston: And they were patrolling there because the giant Chinook salmon that used to come up this river in their thousands. And these fish were 100-pound hogs, they call them, big enough that if you had one on your shoulder, its tail would drag on the ground. So, these enormous Chinook salmon, which have been gone for a century, are just starting to come

back. And the killer whales are smart. They know where the good eating is and they're starting to show up at the mouth of the river.

Justin Angle: Amazing.

Lauren Korn: You mentioned that, you know, these dams are being removed because there are X, Y and Z numbers of benefits to humans. And I'm wondering if recovery always comes back to the human, right, we're removing these dams, which has, you know, they have great, great recovery benefits to animals, but we're doing it for human reasons, does it always need, do we always need to find a human reason to help the environment, to help these wild animals? Or is there a way that we can do this work thinking solely about the animals, even if it's at the detriment of the human?

Christopher Preston: So, it depends where you're making the case. If you're making this case in a state house somewhere around the country or you're making it in the Capitol, in Washington, D.C. It sure is, you have those economic arguments, those human arguments. That doesn't mean that the arguments for the sake of the animals themselves can't also be in the mix. I mean, those other arguments deserve to be there. They often are in there around the periphery. But if I was going to go stand up as an expert witness to make an ethical case, I would want to have as many of those human centered arguments in my pocket as possible, because those are the ones that can be most persuasive.

Justin Angle: So often when we're sort of articulating this human reason or the economic benefits, we're quantifying things. Dollars saved, dollars gained, lives saved, lives lost, number of salmon going how far up the river. When you're talking about the cultural revival, cultural recovery, it's a little harder to quantify things like subsistence level fishery. You know, I'm sure you could impose a definition upon that, but it's a little harder to measure these cultural aspects that you investigate in the book. Talk a little bit more about that.

Christopher Preston: Yeah, it's tricky. And, you know, I'm so excited that we're talking about so much environmental philosophy here because, you know, it's a complicated question, like these values that are not economic values. They are I mean, sometimes you might call them intrinsic values or natural values or something like that. They are hard to quantify. You can't really put a number on them. I mean, you can do surveys and you can say if you had to pay for this, how much would you be willing to pay? But that's not really an adequate way to capture the value of cultural revival, for example, or the value of just knowing that there's salmon that were there in your grandparents' time that are now back.

Justin Angle: Right.

Christopher Preston: How do you value that? And I think it's not ethically desirable or appropriate to say, come on, give me a number. I need a number on this before I can make a decision on it. I think instead of looking for a number, you have to promote a certain sense of what's good in the world or a sense of what's right in the world. Perhaps conjure up a little bit

of an emotion in a person so that they can feel how much it matters that an animal has returned. So, I talked to Terry Dahl, who is a member of the Blackfeet Nation, and she has been involved in bison recovery up there on the reservation and was asked by other tribes in the Blackfeet Confederacy to write an economic plan for bison return on their reservations.

Justin Angle: Wow, that's quite a lift.

Christopher Preston: Well, she said to me, she said the idea I would write an economic plan for this really didn't sit right with me. So, I wrote the plan anyway, because that's what I was tasked with doing. But she said, I wrote into the plan, you're going to have bison back on your landscape for the first time in a century. Think about that. Just think about what that means. So, she put that up there kind of right at the start and then did the economic stuff later on. But that was not the stuff she really cared about.

Justin Angle: Yeah, that's such an interesting framing that we have to, I think your words were conjure some emotion or to inject some emotion, and it's certainly easy in our current political environment to inject emotion into any side of any argument. The trick is injecting a shared emotion, right, and animals, maybe the wolf and the grizzly bear notwithstanding, are avenues where that seems like it might be possible. In your travels and the characters and the people that you spoke with about this book, were there instances of disparate political values kind of coming together around an animal?

Christopher Preston: Yeah, I mean, that's like a super question. Like, are animals a vehicle to create some kind of unity? Is there something about an animal that can transcend political divides? And, you know, you're right to point out that there are some animals that seem to make those political divides worse. So, let's put those aside for right now, complicated cases. But let's talk about animals that actually can help bridge a political divide. When I was out on the prairie researching bison, I sort of stumbled into the pronghorn antelope recovery and pronghorn antelope have gone from a low of about 13,000 to about a million now. So that's a pretty spectacular recovery.

Justin Angle: In what period of time? Like, how many years?

Christopher Preston: Between the start of the 20th century and today.

Lauren Korn: Wow.

Christopher Preston: So, like a century of recovery. Andrew Jakes, who is an expert on building fences, actually fences that can accommodate wildlife and also keep livestock within a certain boundary. Andrew said to me, I have yet to meet a rancher who doesn't like pronghorn. And it's because, you know, pronghorn is not like a giant elk that's going to eat all of the grass on the prairie. It's not a bison that's going to knock down a fence. It's just a pronghorn and they're beautiful to look at. They look fantastic on the landscape. Some people like to hunt them and, you know, they taste good. Pronghorn are welcome on most landscapes. This was what

Andrew was telling me. And so, there's an animal whose recovery can bring people together. And rather than, you know, with this book that I've written with, there's probably 15 or so animals that that have recovered that that I talk about in here. I mean, there's plenty more than that. If one wanted to go national or international. But with a recovery, you can look to the ones that bring people together and, you know, put the polarizing ones aside for the moment. And part of that, my purpose is to, you know, not just wade into the deepest controversies and, you know, point out how difficult it is to get people to politically agree. My point is to find species that can bring people together, to conjure that emotion, to get people excited across the political spectrum and then see where that takes us. See if that can take us to somewhere good.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to our conversation with Christopher Preston after this short break.

Lauren Korn: And we're back speaking with environmental philosopher Christopher Preston about his book *Tenacious Beasts*.

Justin Angle: Some listeners will know that I don't have a ton of affinity for owls, but you have a particularly compelling and powerful segment of the book about owls. Lauren, that section spoke to you in particular.

Lauren Korn: I love to hate it, this chapter, because again, it just really challenged my mind and my own ethics in a really, really compelling way. So, I'd love if we could talk about this specific

chapter. It's an owl with a parachute. Christopher, will you read a passage from that particular chapter?

Christopher Preston: Yeah, I'd love to. I have to set it up a little bit before I do that.

Lauren Korn: Yeah, absolutely.

Christopher Preston: The tenacious beast in this chapter is the Northern Spotted Owl, which, rather than having recovered fantastically, is still struggling. But it's tenacious. It's trying to hang on there.

Justin Angle: And a lot of people don't like the spotted owl in the Northwest.

Christopher Preston: There's some politics there as well. But let's put that aside for now. So, these spotted owls can be helped by doing something about an invading owl. This is the barred owl that came across from the East Coast. And Justin, I know you don't want to talk about barred owls too much.

Justin Angle: I was attacked by a barred owl once.

Lauren Korn: So many nightmarish creatures in your life.

Justin Angle: That's all I need to say.

Christopher Preston: Yeah. So, I'm sorry to bring this up.

Justin Angle: It's okay. Trigger warning.

Christopher Preston: Okay, so these barred owls in the area and there has been a study that went over five years to see if you could do something about these barred owls in order to give the spotted owl a fighting chance. And I was there in that study at the time where they were trying to figure out how many barred owls there were in that particular section of forest. And the way you find out if there are barred owls there is you go into the forest with a speaker that plays a barred owl call, and if there is a barred owl in the area, it hears the call and it comes flying in screeching, saying, what are you doing in my territory?

Justin Angle: My worst nightmare.

Christopher Preston: So that's what you do. You make yourself a potential victim to a barred owl who shows up. So, I'm out in the forest there on a dark night in Washington. In the fall, the forests around Cle Elum did not have the barred owl density of Oregon's coast range. We have to work a little harder for our owls, said Melissa Hunt, with a dash of pride. After five stations without any sign, I wondered if today's rain meant we weren't going to see any owls tonight. They don't fly much when it's wet. They don't like how noisy their feathers are. At the sixth

station, just when Hunt was getting to the crux of her story about her recent elk hunt, the recording on the speaker was suddenly interrupted by a more urgent call coming from somewhere to my left. Barred owl. Hunt switched on her powerful flashlight and flicked it around the nearby trees. We craned our necks upward. She stopped it on the snag right next to the road. There she is, said Hunt. I followed the beam to the tree and saw absolutely nothing. The gray wood of the 50-foot trunk came to an end with a couple of short stops and what looked like a rounded husk of bark. Where? Right in there being plain as day. You can see the shine in her eyes. I still saw nothing. I always thought of my eyesight as decent, and the longer I looked, more embarrassed, I started to feel. Then the husk limped to one side for 2 seconds before moving back upright. I grabbed my binoculars and scanned them up the trunk of a tree until I reached the top. The husk transformed into an owl, its chest feathers dappled with streaks of gray. Through the binoculars, I could see a pair of black eyes glistening in the light. Now, that would be a near perfect shot, said Hunt. 20 meters or less. No branches blocking the way. So, Melissa Hunt was one of the best in the business at shooting barred owls out of trees. And she told me she had shot 350 owls. And I actually before putting that in the text, I said, are you all right with me saying that in the text? And she says, yeah, this was my job. I justify it ethically in my mind. But she was lethal towards barred owls and by suppressing barred owls in that part of the woods, she had shown you can help spotted owls survive. And that's the heart of the ethical dilemma here. Should you shoot one owl to save another?

Lauren Korn: And another question that you explicitly ask in that chapter is how much manipulation of a system is permissible to help a species return. Will you talk a little bit about

your own navigation of that question, how you think about that chapter, specifically that instance or that particular example of recovery.

Christopher Preston: Yeah. So that section of the book deals with, as you say, it deals with this question of manipulation, how much manipulation. So, I talk about these owls, I talk about marzipan bears in Italy, where people supporting the bears are pruning apple trees to create food for these bears. And I also talk about European bison restored to forests outside Canterbury in Kent. And these bison had to be brought in on trucks and they're going to be monitored, you know, because there's not a huge amount of space there. So, there'll be quite a lot of manipulation. So, this is a question like if you're going to have wildlife, how wild do they have to be? I mean, is a bar, is a spotted owl that lives because you're shooting barred owls, you're sort of giving it a helping hand at every moment. Does that count as a spotted owl living wild, or is that spotted owl somehow kind of compromised if it's not living completely on its own means due to its own kind of smarts, its own forest smarts? And I try to wrestle with this question because some species have become conservation reliant. And that spotted owl is a case in point. It's hard to see how the spotted owl is going to survive the barred owl arrival in the long term. It's just hard to see how that can happen because the barred owl is a more powerful beast. It's aggressive. It outcompetes the spotted owl. And so, if we want spotted owls, it seems like we have to do something about barred owls. And that's a very tough question. Melissa Hunt, we chatted about the ethics, and she is convinced that you have to do that. She said, take your emotion out of it. If you want the spotted owl, you got to do this kind of thing.

Lauren Korn: And forgive me if I'm generalizing or finding something that wasn't in the text, but we want the spotted owl and not the barred owl, because the spotted owl is the native species to that area, whereas the barred owl came over from the East Coast.

Christopher Preston: That's right. The barred owl came over as a result of human activities. That's a key piece of the ethics here.

Lauren Korn: And yet the spotted owl is being recovered due to human activity.

Christopher Preston: Well, that's true, but it's a native species. They're really sort of a flagship species for the region.

Justin Angle: Yeah, just spell it out a little bit. Like these things fly. Like, how is it introduced by human action?

Christopher Preston: So, it's a very, this is very interesting and a little bit contentious as well. But I spoke to the expert who is convinced that this story is the correct one. The barred owl was previously not able to cross the Great Plains, but it became capable of crossing the Great Plains after white settlers started doing two things planting trees and killing beavers. So, planting trees created habitat dotted across the Great Plains. Killing beavers allowed a lot of sort of shrubby vegetation to kind of grow up. So, killing beavers also created habitat That

meant that these barred owls could fly cross-country and Justin, they were not flying sort of single overnight flights across country, to, you know, attack unfortunate people in the northwest. They were hopscotching their way across. Generation after generation, you know, maybe, you know, one owl sort of had a few miles west and then the next generation, a few miles.

Justin Angle: In an alternative universe this could be a story of a tenacious beast. You described the barred owl as tenacious.

Lauren Korn: Well, that's true.

Justin Angle: Another thing worth mentioning and be curious to get your thoughts on this mechanism in general is the spotted owl, has raised to in some communities, has risen to such prominence due to its listing under the Endangered Species Act and all the mechanisms for recovery that that's put in place and all the activities that that has precluded, including most prominently logging. So how does the Endangered Species Act as a mechanism for these recoveries kind of play into the story?

Christopher Preston: So, this was interesting. When I got into this this spotted owl story, one of the first questions I asked is, are you out on the forest shooting these barred owls because of what happened in the 1990 with forest policy and because of the Endangered Species Act and the biologist who was coordinating the study. So, this was not Melissa. This was Dave Wiens

of the USGS. He was saying, no we are protecting the spotted owl because the barred owl is devastating to this ecosystem. It wreaks ecological havoc. So at least according to Dave, this was not really an endangered species issue. It was an ecological issue.

Justin Angle: Yeah, more of an invasive species.

Christopher Preston: Yeah. Yeah. Now, that's not always the case. If you are shooting one animal or suppressing one animal to help another. And so, in the case of salmon going up the Columbia River, we can find certain types of predatory birds or seals and sea lions being removed to give the salmon a chance. So, in that case, it is specifically to help the endangered species that you do lethal management. In the case of the barred owl on the spotted owl, at least according to the people I spoke to, this was not so much an endangered species issue as it was an ecological issue.

Justin Angle: So, Christopher, in our remaining time, I'd love to ask you about an area where I think you and I share some similar objectives and maybe even a similar ideology. So, you in this book have made a leap in a way from your previous books. You are you're writing in a different style for a much broader audience. Talk about that as a philosopher, as a professor at a university. Why have you chosen to try to reach a broader audience? Why is that important to you?

Christopher Preston: So, as I mentioned a little bit at the start, I got into environmental philosophy because I thought philosophy is super important, and especially if you can see where the rubber meets the road, if you can see where it actually counts for something. And so having done professional philosophy for two decades now, increasingly I felt it an obligation to show people where the rubber meets the road, to actually show why they should care about questions of whether humans are in or outside of nature, questions of the value of a species. Is it just economic or is there some other kind of value? So, I see it now more and more as my task to be out there showing people this stuff matters, showing them how it matters, and trying to use a language that people can relate to. And so that's meant adjusting my style a little bit, also adjusting the venues in which I try to publish and then putting a lot of effort into getting out there in the world and talking to people in environments that they're comfortable in and getting this stuff outside of the academy.

Lauren Korn: What does that mean? What other environments are you kind of walking into with this book that you wouldn't have otherwise?

Christopher Preston: Well, through Humanities Montana, I do a lot of state park talks. I do talks in public libraries. Breweries.

Justin Angle: Yeah. I got to attend one of those.

Christopher Preston: More and more radio interviews and podcasts. I'm trying to bring this stuff outside of the academy and bring it into people's living rooms. And that stuff really matters to me. I mean, I got into this in the first place because I care about these wildlife species. I want to see them do well. And so, if I can contribute to that in some small way, that is going to be a more satisfying legacy than, you know, another paper in a journal somewhere.

Justin Angle: That has to be a little tricky. Being a philosopher at a university. I mean, it's not, there are certain corners of academia that look down on that as a practice that if you're not entirely theoretical and deeply abstract in creating new areas of knowledge, that you're not really fulfilling that responsibility. So, you have tradeoffs that you've made here.

Christopher Preston: It's a balance I have to negotiate, and I haven't given up totally on writing papers for those academic journals. I still do that regularly, but I can also put time into this other sort of writing. And it is more true to what I think environmental philosophy is about. Environmental philosophy is about creating a better place for us all to live with dignity, with justice, with excitement and interest. And so, I think I'm being true to the discipline when I do this, and it's very satisfying. I'm really enjoying this part of my career.

Justin Angle: I'm so grateful to hear that because it is wonderfully written book, it is accessible, and it is a great onramp for people that want to kind of have a framework for understanding some of the complexity in this world that is so easy to sort of just throw up your hands at and think of as doomed or as out of your control or as just such a hill that is too

daunting to climb. So, thank you for this work. And it's really, I think it's meaningful to me and I think it will be meaningful to anybody that has the has the impression read it.

Christopher Preston: Well, I'm just happy I get the chance to do it. I feel very lucky that way.

Justin Angle: We should probably do a little bookkeeping here, so to speak. Christopher, this book will be available at all the places. It's out in press now, and you're on a bit of a book tour. Tell us about that.

Christopher Preston: It's just been out a week. It's available pretty much anywhere you can buy books. But I encourage you to use local independent bookstores. I have a speaking schedule on my web page. Christopher J. Preston dot com, and you're welcome to check in there events that you might be able to attend or attend virtually. And yeah, I'm doing what I can to get the word out.

Justin Angle: Awesome. Well, I'm grateful for the time you spent with us today. I'm grateful for your work and this collaboration with you today, Lauren.

Lauren Korn: Yeah, thank you so much for being with us. And thank you for being with me, Justin, too.

Justin Angle: Absolutely all the things. Christopher, thank you and congratulations. This book is an achievement.

Christopher Preston: Thanks. This has been a lot of fun. I appreciate it.

Lauren Korn: You've been listening to a special crossover episode of The Write Question and A New Angle. What have we been calling it?

Lauren Korn and Justin Angle: The Write Angle.

Lauren Korn: This episode was produced by Chris Moyles and me. I'm one of your show's hosts, Lauren Korn. Our music was written and recorded by John Floridis, VTO and mashed up by Jake Birch.

Justin Angle: Support for A New Angle comes from First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications, UM's College of Business, Montana Public Radio, Consolidated Electrical Distributors and Drum Coffee.

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