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Environmental Change and Security Program

The Future of Science and Environmental Journalism

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Edited Transcript—Liz Shogren

Sorry, no slide show, but maybe that's because I come from the radio background, where the voice is everything. So, you can close your eyes, imagine you're listening to your radio.

When I started covering the environment beat at the beginning of the Bush Administration, I would never have guessed that I'd be still doing this eight years later. Environment is just the latest of a lot of beats I have covered, and there are challenges for me in covering this. The first time I tried to understand how mercury from air pollution gets into fish, I thought, why doesn't *The Los Angeles Times* want someone with a science background covering the environment? I was acutely aware that there were some holes in my background. My background is in Russian studies, and when I was based in Moscow, Russian studies came in handy—not so much at a global warming hearing. And when I was in Russia, I did do some environmental stories. I did a story about the impact of the Chernobyl disaster, and went to a town in the Arctic called Nickel, where there was incredible pollution. And doing those stories made me acutely aware that there was so much I didn't understand about the science and the environmental background of those stories. And at that time I didn't know how to learn what I needed to know to tell the stories fully. Hopefully now, after eight years of covering this beat, I've learned how to learn the things I need to do so that I can understand the stories and communicate them to the people who listen to my stories at NPR.

I covered the beat first for four years for *The L.A. Times*, and then for four years for NPR, which has given me kind of an interesting view of doing the same kind of beat from a different medium. And at *The L.A. Times* they gave me lots of time to work on the stories. I was able to spend months sniffing around the agencies and tromping through places like the coal fields of West Virginia and eastern Wyoming's coal bed methane boom, to try to understand how the Bush Administration policies were having an impact on the environment and on our country.

And doing the same beat at NPR is not the same at all. For broadcast journalism, NPR stories are long, but they're not full of all the kinds of nerdy details and facts that I loved to



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Environmental Change and Security Program

put in the *L.A. Times* stories. Instead, I'm looking for scenes and sound effects and characters and storytelling devices.

I did a whole piece on a physical examination of a dolphin. There I was, kind of kneeling in the boat next to the dolphin, with my big microphone getting the "aha" of the dolphin's breath into the story, and that was basically what the whole story was about. Of course, it was the challenges that polluted waterways present to this species, but it was also just a story about a physical examination. So the way that I tell stories is very different, but whether it was for *The Los Angeles Times* or now for NPR, it involves a lot of time and a lot of resources. Taking trips to places like Midway Island where I did a story about the challenge that all the plastic pollution that we throw out here is presenting to places very far away in the middle of the ocean. And also, a kind of quirky little piece about a young scientist, a field scientist who spends all of his time crawling around on his belly on deserted islands following after an endangered duck. So all different kind of stories, with lots of things to do, but as you can tell, they take a lot of resources.

At NPR, as in the newspaper, it's important to dig in and try to figure out, what is the government doing that maybe it doesn't want us to know that it's doing? And the Bush Administration was great for giving us those things to dig into. A year and a half ago or so, I had a scoop: e-mails from the White House telling EPA not to go for a really strong standard on how much ozone was allowed in the air. And during my newspaper years, I would have taken that scoop and written it straight out as quickly as I could. Because I was at NPR instead, I wanted to tell a story to try to explain it to my listeners, and so I went with a woman who has a lung ailment to the track early the next morning, and on code orange days she has to exercise before the sun is up because it's painful for her if she doesn't do it then. And then she spends the rest of the day behind closed doors. And so I used her as my way of telling the story. And in fact, that scoop that I had was just a few lines in the middle of the story, but the story, hopefully, was able to tell people who are listening that there is an impact to these decisions that the government is making. By not making the standards stronger, there are more days that she has to spend behind closed doors.

And so as you can tell, these are all things that I feel very grateful for getting the chance to cover. I love the environment beat; it's so varied. Now global warming is a story that never stops giving. There are more stories than any of us can ever count and fortunately, first *The L.A. Times* and now NPR gives me the time and the resources to go and do these stories and I'm very grateful for that. But it's a changing time, as Seth pointed out for you with all of his



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slides. *The L.A. Times* Washington bureau where I did those stories is now closed. There's no one doing those stories that I got a chance to do when I was there. And at NPR, we just had a big layoff. NPR still has a big commitment to environment stories, and there still are people doing them, like me, but it's a different place than it was, and we miss our colleagues who are gone. And it's just a little sign of what is happening across the industry.

I still see a lot of reporters at global warming hearings. They're up on the Hill. If you go there, you will see all those press spots are filled, but they are representing different organizations. There are a lot fewer reporters from newspapers there, and there are more people from online services. And many of these online services provide really interesting coverage, but it's a different kind of thing. A lot of times it's a subscription service that you have to pay a lot of money to have access for, and I'm thrilled that those people are still there covering the news, but it's not quite the same, I think, as the old-style journalism, and I'm concerned about what that means for what the public gets to learn. I think that if you're an expert, or if you're an advocate, you can find out what you want to learn, much more than you were ever able to find out five or ten years ago, and so there is more information available online, and especially if you'll pay for it. But even if you won't pay for it, there's more information online.

But what about the person who is not particularly interested? Will they just run across it in the newspaper that they pick up and read? I think it's worth thinking about; as we understand about our country, it's a democracy, and if people care about the issue, that's what the politicians care about. And there is a lot of concern about climate change and other environmental issues in the country, but if people are not getting informed about the latest things, I think it will have an impact on how much the politicians care about it. We have had pledges from the Democratic leaders on the Hill and from the Obama Administration that they're going to go ahead with major legislation to curtail greenhouse emissions. Now, that's a huge effort that they want to undertake, and there are huge political stumbling blocks in the way. Will they manage to do that? It seems, well, they're all from the same party, shouldn't they be able to do it? Well, actually, it will be very hard to do, and what would push them to do it would be a public that understood the challenge and was concerned enough to push their politicians to do it. And does that exist? Doesn't that exist? I believe that whether or not that exists right now, or whether or not that will exist in the future has a lot to do with what the public is learning through the media. And hopefully, there will still be reporters around who will cover this in depth. I do think that there is a big role to play. And there are a lot of changes going along, as Seth was able to give you a lot of details about. So it will be





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interesting to see. And I mean, it's not a complete depression in the industry, but it's just startling to see how things are changing.

So what stories will I be looking at as the future goes? What stories will the other reporters who are covering the environment look at in the future? I think that all the money in the stimulus package will provide endless stories to follow, because a lot of that money will go to supposedly push us towards a greener future, and it will be interesting to see how it works. Will the electric grid actually get any smarter? We're going to spend tens of billions of dollars to get it there, let's go and look and see how much smarter is the electric grid getting. Will any of those changes actually make their way into real people's houses and change the way people use electricity? Make them use it smarter, or make them use the last of it. That will be interesting to see. Those will provide great stories. And of course, this huge story of whether or not the country will decide to curtail greenhouse gas emissions, and in what way they're going to do it. I think you can count on dozens and hundreds of stories on those topics, so that will be there.

And there are lots and lots of questions in that coverage that are fascinating to me. And one of the things that I think I didn't cover enough of in previous efforts of Congress to do something about climate change was, what are they going to do if they set up a cap-and-trade system, which they're talking about doing? That will potentially bring in enormous revenues. And what's going to happen with that money? Will that money be doled out kind of 16-17,000 ways, just kind of like a stimulus package every year? Well, I think that's one of the reasons that that bill sunk last time, is that it kind of looked like pork. Will it be handed back to the American people? That's what some of the people I've spoke to are talking about, and that's an interesting idea. So what happens with the money as a result of a big program like that, will be a big story to follow. And of course, what are the ongoing impacts to our environment from climate change? I think that those will be stories that, hopefully, NPR will still have enough money to put me on planes to go and look into and sniff around about, and hopefully, Seth will still be on those planes figuring those things out. We'll see.



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