

**Karen Simms**

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Interviewed by Shela McFarlin

Arizona Memory Project

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SHELA MCFARLIN (SM): This is Shela McFarlin, and I'm interviewing Karen Simms.

Today is April 18, 2012. We're at the new BLM Office at 3201 East Universal Way in Tucson, Arizona. And so Karen, I will ask you first of all what your current position is at BLM.

KAREN SIMMS (KS): O.K., well as of **today** (chuckles), it's still ecosystem planning team lead for Las Cienegas National Conservation Area. And then next Monday I will be in a detail as the assistant field manager.

SM: And you've been in the assistant field manager position before?

KS: I have—in every different variation that we've had here. (laughter)

SM: Well, that's why it's good to interview you, because you have lived on Las Cienegas, you have worked on Las Cienegas, you probably go out and recreate on Las Cienegas. And so could you start off by just kind of going through what your involvement has been in lots of ways?

KS: Sure. And it's been a **lot** of involvement—a big part of my life, actually, working out there. So I started with BLM in August of 1988 as a cooperative education student. The first thing, when I got the call that I was getting this position, was that they wanted me to live on this new property that they had acquired. That sounded wonderful, but I didn't know anything about it, I'd never been there. My fiancé at the time and I drove out there, and we were told kind of where to go.

And we went to the Empire Ranch headquarters. There's a big historic house, and there was another little house, and there was a little bit more modern house. We really didn't know which one we were going to be living in, but it turned out to be what we called the field station at that time. It was just an amazing kind of experience, because the area was so incredibly beautiful, and we heard grey hawks calling. It was just like, "Wow, we're really going to get to live here!" It was like an amazing opportunity.

So probably that first, I'm thinking like year and a half, that I worked for BLM, we had another student that was also hired in Range, called Carol Lavor [phonetic]. And our job was basically to inventory the resources on the Las Cienegas, with not a lot of guidance. And so that first probably year, year and a half, we did things like plant collections; we eventually did riparian monitoring along the full baseline with photo points along the creek. At that time it was still being grazed pretty extensively. Carol tried to relocate photo points that Phil Ogden had put in, with kind of limited success.

[~02:58]

SM: And Carol was with the University of Arizona?

KS: Ya [yes], at the time, ya. And that's who her major professor was, in Range. So there was a connection there. Did lots of plant collections, learned the roads. We're always on call for whatever it was that they felt that they needed us to do. And then my husband now, Jeff—at the time my fiancé—was a fisheries biologist that had the opportunity to volunteer out there. So with him we did all these fish inventories of the whole creek, and where the fish were, and all their fish

habitats—I mean, just really extensive. Then we also got the opportunity to do bird banding with some volunteers from the Tucson Audubon Society that had started, I think maybe even a little before BLM acquired it. And so every month they would come out, and we would go out with them and band birds. I mean, if you can imagine for a young person starting out with BLM, it was a pretty awesome experience. And to have all that freedom to put what you'd recently learned in school into play, and try to understand the resources of an area. So that's pretty exciting.

[~04:08]

SM: And you stuck with it. (KS: Ya.) And you said that was newly acquired by BLM. (KS: Right.) What was it called then?

KS: It was called the Empire-Cienega Resource Conservation Area.

SM: And when did it become Las Cienegas?

KS: It became Las Cienegas, the national conservation area, in 2000. So between those two times, I went from starting out as a wildlife biologist and doing a lot of wildlife work, to being asked by our manager to take over as the planning team lead to develop the resource management plan for Las Cienegas—which I started doing that in 1995. And prior to that, we had attempted to do a resource management plan amendment to the Phoenix RMP that would have covered the Empire-Cienega area. What happened was, it was a very traditional planning approach, just going out to the public, scoping the issues, very formal way to do things. And then we took those issues, we developed alternatives, went back out to the public. It just wasn't met with very much enthusiasm—in fact, a lot of kind

of anger and resentment, for several different reasons: one being that they weren't really able to be all that engaged. Two, they didn't like—especially this being a pretty newly-acquired area—that we seemed to think we knew more about how the area should be managed than maybe people that had worked there longer in other ways, using the land. They didn't like the fact that it was so—that RMP amendment was so ... not detailed as to what was really going to happen on the ground. And their fear was, “Okay, we get a little bit of involvement at this sort of high-level allocation RMP level of planning, and **no** involvement whatsoever of what's really going to happen on the ground.” So it didn't go well.

We then had the Arizona Wilderness Bill and the EIS and the Wild and Scenic Rivers, so it just all got put on hold. And then our manager decided in '95, “Let's restart this.” He'd heard about ecosystem management and collaboration and thought, “This is the way that we want to try to do this plan instead.”

[~06:30]

SM: So you and Jesse Juen, who was the current field manager at that time, the first Tucson field manager (KS: Right.), all of a sudden you took a new and drastic approach.

KS: We did.

SM: Today, this is not as uncommon as it was then. (KS: Right.) And you combined this **extreme** public participation with adaptive management. So what was that conversation like when you guys decided, “We gotta take a different direction”?

KS: Well, first I was a little apprehensive, because here I'd been doing wildlife work, that's what my degree was in, I was very comfortable doing that. And I was a

little apprehensive about stepping into planning. I remember telling Jesse, “Don’t fill my wildlife position, because I’m going to want to go back to that when this plan is done.” And he goes, “Um-hmm, we’ll see.” But he left it open the whole time I did the plan. And of course by the time I was done with the plan in 2003, there wasn’t any going back to what I was doing before, because I was on a very different track.

So initially the conversation was about trying to understand what this animal of—you know, What **is** collaboration? I remember in adaptive management, taking a course that actually.... It was called Applied Biodiversity Conservation. Do you remember Allan Coopridger [phonetic]? Well, he was one of the instructors of this course. That really had a big impact on me, because there was a lot of things that he said in that course that really applied to this whole ecosystem management approach that we were deciding to take on Las Cienegas. That’s one of the few training binders I kept, because of the impact it had on the way that I was thinking about things.

We engaged Carlos Nagle, who was basically an independent facilitator, had done a lot of cross-border work. But he came on board to help us for about the first year and a half, with facilitating and designing some kind of a public engagement process, because I had no training or experience in what I was supposed to be doing. And Jesse and I were both very people people—you know, we liked to talk to people—but again, having the skill set to know how to effectively facilitate a process, we didn’t really have those skills. So Carlos was really helpful.

I remember I met with him like I think practically every week at the Keuken Dutch Restaurant, which is now no longer there, in Tucson. And we would have these strategy meetings about what we were going to do at the next meeting and so forth, and he was a very great mentor to me going through this process.

The adaptive management piece, I'm not sure I really exactly remember how that came into play, but it was something that was definitely being talked about at the time that we started working on the plan. I think not as consciously when we first started the plan did we necessarily think how the design of it would fit with adaptive management, but as we began to work through it and talk about the alternatives—and I'm sure some of the stakeholders brought that concept up as well, that it was a good thing to do. Where it really hit home with us was on the grazing alternatives, where we actually attempted to have an alternative where we said we're not even going to have a set stocking rate, we're just going to totally flexibly adjust the stocking rate for livestock out here, based on the resource conditions. The state office couldn't quite buy that.

[~10:11]

SM: That's the BLM?

KS: The BLM state office. They felt our regulations wouldn't allow us to be **that** flexible. So in going back to the stakeholders, part of sort of our negotiation with them, for them being comfortable with having flexible grazing, and for some people even **having** grazing continue, was we would be doing a lot of intensive monitoring of the grassland resources and the riparian resources, and adjusting

those livestock numbers annually, as well as how they were being moved through all of the pastures on Las Cienegas. So really the initial focus on the adaptive managements was a lot around the flexible grazing. And then as we've sort of learned more about it, and learned how to apply it, we've expanded it to a lot of other plan implementation pieces, like vegetation treatments, and reintroducing species like the prairie dogs, and expanding the frogs, and all of those kinds of projects.

[~11:12]

SM: And now we live in a world in which we have some new issues, like climate change, or vegetation replacement. So is the process going to hold up for handling a new issue?

KS: Well, I believe that there's still an important tool in adaptive management that we will continue to use—at least as long as I'm still working out there. But what we're realizing with climate change and some of the other really rapid changes that are happening, is that even adaptive management by itself isn't enough of a management and planning tool to allow us to address those kinds of changes. So we're looking at a new tool called scenario planning that lets us look at—it's a little bit hard to describe, but I'll attempt to—that lets us look at alternative futures that we could be looking at with climate change. So you take some of the predictions of climate change, for example, for the Southwest, that it's going to be hotter—anywhere from, I've heard, really two to like five degrees or more hotter; that we're probably going to have drier winters—although that's a little bit uncertain; and the monsoon patterns are also a little bit uncertain. So you can see

even within the predictions, we're one of the more uncertain places. We're not at the coast where we know the sea level is going to be rising and things like that. So you take those predictions, and then couple them with other sources of uncertainty, like what's the growth pattern going to be, based on the economy right now? What's maybe going to happen with federal budgets and federal agencies over time? All those things are very uncertain. And so you come up with sort of some narratives about these different possible futures you could have. And then you don't try to predict—this is what I originally thought we'd be doing—you don't try to predict which one of those futures you're going to be trying to go towards. You rather say, "O.K., they're all out there. We're going to monitor things that are happening, and if we see ourselves on a path to one of them, each one of them will have a series of strategies that we want to follow.

There'll be some strategies that are common across **all** of them, and some that are maybe unique to the path that we appear to be going down. So that's, in a nutshell, what scenario planning is all about. So you take that and you couple it with adaptive management, and you can see how it couples nicely. You're going down a path—whatever, let's say, we laid out four futures—you're not going to accurately predict exactly what that future's going to be. So whatever path we appear to be following is still going to have the adaptive loops on it that we're going to be making about all of our management. So it's going to be pretty interesting, and as far as I know from talking to people, we're one of the first places, again, that's really embracing in BLM this idea.

[~14:07]

SM: Las Cienegas seems to be a testing area.

KS: It is, ya [yes].

SM: You've now got about twenty-three years under your cloak here in various positions. (KS: Yes.) You must have an absolutely favorite story. What would be your favorite story?

KS: Oh! favorite story from Las Cienegas. Well I probably have several. One of my favorite stories has to do with John Donaldson. This was when we first started working out there. It's kind of a silly story, but it illustrates a little bit about the beginnings of the relationship with John Donaldson, who was the kind of curmudgeonly rancher that we had on Las Cienegas. I'm not sure how this initially came about, but at some point he lived out there in a little house at the headquarters, so we were neighbors, and he offered that we could use the washing machine and dryer that he had set up for some of his ranch hands there. And I remember that the very first time we went to use it, it stopped working. He was very gruff, and we were kind of scared about what his response was going to be (laughs) when we told him that this washing machine that [he'd] allowed us to use is not working. Because you just never knew, he'd just fly off the handle. And he was actually very nice about it, told us, oh, you know, "no problem." So that was a big relief.

        Around about that same time, I had a cat that I had brought with me, and unfortunately she was an outside cat as well, and she went missing. I remember going up and again asking him, "Have you seen my cat? Could I look in some of these buildings for the cat?" thinking he's going to be all, "(yelling) Rah! Rah!

Who cares about the stupid blah, blah, blah cat?!” And instead he was very, very nice, and he was like, “We’ll keep an eye out for it.” We looked in all the buildings. Never did find her, which was sad. It was just one of those kinds of stories.

There were definitely some very special moments that we had out there. After living at the Empire Ranch headquarters, we moved to the Cienega Ranch, which was on the other side of the property. Part of that was because they said we could stay at the Empire Ranch field station, but we didn’t want to live with the fire crew—you know, newlyweds, fire crew, [unclear]. So we moved to this other little house on the far side of the property. And when we went to move into that house, the ranch hand who had moved out had left his two dogs behind, albeit temporarily. And we went up to move in, and these dogs were just like nasty. They were growling at us. We’re sitting here thinking, “How are we going to move into this house? These dogs won’t even let us anywhere near the door!” And so we finally made friends with them, and we called up John and said, “Something has to happen with these dogs.” And I kind of missed them after they finally came and got them, because we’d sort of made friends with them.

But when we were living out there, I remember we used to take walks in the evening and the night hawks would be flying up on the hills above there. And we were really close to the ag fields on Cienega Creek, so we would walk down there. One time we saw a bobcat that was stalking a whitetail deer and her fawn around in the agricultural fields. It didn’t have success, but we were watching it.

But it was those kinds of really amazing things that you got to experience, because you're just in the middle of nowhere, with all of this nature around you.

Another time we had a ferruginous hawk that crash landed in the ag fields in a storm, and it broke its wing, and we went and rescued it, took it to a wildlife rehab person. Eventually they brought it back and re-released it out there. So a lot of neat, neat experiences. Certainly getting the chance to walk the whole of the riparian area on Cienega Creek, doing those fish surveys. And then seeing over nearly twenty-five years the changes on the property, especially in those riparian areas, going from pretty degraded, with livestock grazing, to just phenomenal growth and development of those systems after the cattle were taken off, and some of the other changes, was a pretty amazing experience.

Not many of us get to stay or choose to stay as long as I have in a place, and so the kinds of changes that I look back and see, I sometimes go, "I don't know how I got to where I am, how much time has gone by." It seems like it flew by, but just a lot of really, really neat experiences.

And then the other part of it, which I always emphasize, is the people that I've gotten to work with over the years have just been an absolute highlight of my career—the ranchers, the environmentalists, the recreationists—everyone that I've worked with in this collaborative process. It's been very, very rich and rewarding. I'm so glad I did take that step that I was afraid to take, to work on all of this.

[~19:23]

SM: So you must have a vision for Las Cienegas, of when your children's children come back. What is that vision, what do you hope to see there?

KS: Well, I certainly hope to see it, I think, be a very natural place still. That was one of the key things when we were working on the land use plan, is people didn't want to see a whole lot of development. They really wanted it to be a landscape that you could go out and feel like this is a little bit like maybe what it used to be like in the greater Tucson basin before it became a city. So for them to be able to go out there and experience some of that solitude, and to see intact cienega and riparian systems and grasslands would be wonderful. That's my hope and my vision, that somehow we'll figure out a way to hold it all together, despite some of these changes that are coming down, that are frankly a little bit frightening to think about. With climate change maybe the stream **will** dry up, but maybe we'll figure out a way to make it resilient enough that we'll still be able to have that resource out there.

SM: O.K., I hope so. This is Shela McFarlin, interviewing Karen Simms, for the Arizona Memory Project.

KS: I think the biggest part of it is just the experience of working on this planning effort with this group of people for as long as it took. And the value that that is having now, looking at some other areas. So I did all this work on Las Cienegas, and I was really frankly kind of surprised that all of a sudden we started being a case study for the bureau, for collaboration and adaptive management. Because you don't know, when you're working in the field, on the ground like this, always what everyone else is working on in the bureau. And apparently our success just

gradually began being celebrated and talked about across the BLM. We were invited to the White House Conference on Collaboration Conservation. I think that was in 2004, about. And various other places. And we were asked to be a case study in the department's technical guide for adaptive management. And now we're branching out, and I'm really excited about this.

We're taking the model of what we've been doing on Las Cienegas with collaborative adaptive management, to the Agua Fria National Monument in Arizona. And a team of us, which is myself, a facilitator, and then the Nature Conservancy rep we've been working with for a number of years, have formed a facilitation team that we're taking to Agua Fria and helping them with a coordinated resource management plan that's between the Forest Service, Game and Fish, **and** BLM. And they want to have the stakeholder engagement, and the collaborative adaptive management built into that. So it's just a whole new process, but so many of the lessons that we learned on Las Cienegas are helping us work with them on this new process. And that's pretty exciting, and we've now started hearing interest from other areas as well. So that mentoring piece I think is going to be a really fun way to sort of round out probably the end of my career, to keep doing that with some other areas.

[~22:52]

SM: And just one final question for you: Las Cienegas can be described as a grassland with a significant and important riparian area through there, but we're in the Arizona desert—why do we have fish there?!

KS: Well.... (laughs) That's a really good question. The fish are there because they were part of really a system that historically stretched along the Santa Cruz River, and we also had on the San Pedro River. And so the fish in those systems, when they started drying back, and development started happening, and all kinds of other habitat destruction, Cienega Creek was one of the places that because of chance, and the fact that it was part of a large ranch, the fish just happened to be able to continue to persist in that small little stream, whereas they were wiped out in much of the rivers that became dry in the Tucson basin. So it's really like a little piece, a little intact piece, of what once used to be much more widespread.

[~24:00]

SM: That must surprise a lot of people.

KS: It does. It does surprise a lot of people. And you know, it's the same thing with a lot of the wildlife that are now threatened and endangered species. In Arizona, in the desert, any place you do get water coming to the surface is just an incredibly vital part of those systems. It's probably more than 90% of the animals have some affiliation with those riparian areas at some point in their life cycle. So very, very significant resource.

SM: O.K. Thank you very much.

KS: You're welcome!

[END OF INTERVIEW]