

A New Angle

Episode 86

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Justin Angle: This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. I'm joined today by Alex Few and Jared Beaver, the creators and hosts of Working Wild University, a podcast about the interaction of science and culture playing out on working lands across the American West.

Alex Few: We tried to provide voice to the silent middle, which really is a much larger constituency than the polarized extremes.

Justin Angle: Season one deals with wolves one of the thorniest issues playing out on ranches and public lands in Montana. Alex, Jared, thanks for coming on the show today.

Alex Few: Thanks for having us, Justin.

Jared Beaver: Yeah, thanks. It's great to be here.

Justin Angle: Absolutely. So, we'll start as we always do. Tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do? Alex, why don't we start with you?

Alex Few: So, I grew up in the suburbs of Houston, sort of as subdivision met cattle country. And my dad was in the oil industry. He brokered deals between oil companies and international shipyards. And my mom, when I was a young child, she was pursuing a masters for family therapy. And then when I was nine, my father died, and she adjusted her career to have a little bit of flexibility and took on some different hats as being self-employed and eventually retired as a housekeeper.

Justin Angle: And how did you make your way to the West?

Alex Few: Yeah, well, I went to grad school in Seattle. And I'll never forget, I think it was my first weekend of grad school. A couple of us hiked up Mount Ruth on the north side of Mount Rainier and looked over onto the Emmons Glacier. And I was like, this little girl from Texas who was like, I'm not in Texas anymore. This is a wild place.

Justin Angle: Jared, how about you? Where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Jared Beaver: I grew up in North Carolina in the piedmont of North Carolina. My family had been situated there for about eight generations. My mom was a grade schoolteacher for almost 40 years, and my dad was a plant quality control manager. He went to school, had a biology

background, wanted to go to school for wildlife, but had kids and kind of had adjusted his career and a little bit and he kind of worked in the industry.

Justin Angle: Super, and how did you make your way West?

Jared Beaver: Well, I've just always been attracted to kind of wild, big open spaces. I love wildlife and the outdoors. It's why I went into planning a career around that and kind of fell in love with a mixture of research and just human connection and outreach. And the position opened up in Montana and I couldn't resist it out West is always a place I felt called to be. And here I am.

Justin Angle: Jared, so people understand, you're a professor and Wildlife Extension specialist at MSU, what is an extension specialist like, what is that role? I know that MSU has a variety of extension offices. What is that kind of role all about?

Jared Beaver: When I did my master's, my main professor was the extension wildlife specialist for the state of Tennessee, and I got to see him wear a couple of different hats. You know, he had the mentorship aspect of students and the research, applied research, and still got that kind of one-on-one boots on the ground connection with landowners. And I just, I loved it. That's why I kind of went in this and continued to develop my career. And so, my position as assistant professor and extension wildlife specialist is, I'm about two thirds extension and one third research. And so, I have, you know, a research component and graduate students. But the

bulk of my job is working with county and reservation agents within extension producers, landowners and various other stakeholders on wildlife related issues, you know, within the state of Montana and even outside of the state. And so, a lot of what I work with comes from, you know, people approaching me with issues and trying my best to address those in a timely manner.

Justin Angle: Yeah. So, it seems like a project like the two of you have collaborated on, Working Wild University, is just right in the wheelhouse of the sort of work an extension agent should be up to. Talk about, how did you two meet and how did this collaboration kind of come to be.

Alex Few: I met Jared through the Conflict Reduction Consortium, which is a group of about 40 stakeholders from across the West convened by Western Landowners Alliance to engage in landowner led, facilitated dialog that will hopefully, and has produced recommendations around policy management and research needs for our large carnivore livestock conflicts. So, Jared came to that group shortly after he arrived in Montana, and I'll let Jared tell the rest of the story from there.

Jared Beaver: Yeah. So, I moved here in February of 2020 and started April 2020, which is right when, you know, the Covid shutdown in the US really started happening. And, you know, that made it really tough to have the start of an extension program which involves making meaningful connections on the landscape. And so, I started trying to think creatively of how to

have a sustainable extension program in light of uncertainties with travel and shrinking budgets and advancing technology. Kind of like we're all meeting kind of electronically here. That and that partnership with Alex really started to bloom and we started to talk about ways we could expand on some of the conflict reduction work that she was involved with and her Working Wild challenge, as well as the issues that were being brought to the forefront to me and in Montana.

Justin Angle: So, let's press on the conflict piece a little bit, Alex, when you talk about conflict, are you referring to the interaction between predators and livestock? Are you referring to the conflict between the people who are managing those animals or have opinions about how those animals should be managed or treated or not managed?

Alex Few: When I talk about conflicts between wildlife conservation and agriculture, it is as much about the people as the individual animal species. My entry point into this field started back when I was in California working on a bighorn sheep recovery program. And there, you know, there was a lot of discussion about the potential disease transmission between domestic sheep and wild bighorn sheep. And I saw some of the real challenges that posed for agriculture. And, you know, the wolf livestock conflict issue is not so different in that, you know, as we think about the recovery of wide-ranging large mammals in the western U.S., it often comes into conflict with people's livelihoods. And that gets into a really intense emotional space. And I actually think that having space for those really difficult conversations is a big part

of this work. At the Conflict Reduction Consortium and through the Working Wild University podcast.

Justin Angle: Yeah, well, let's start shifting the focus to Working Wild University. So, season one starts with wolves, and I mean, if you're going to think about complex, contentious issues in the West, wolves have to be at or near the very top of the list. Why start with wolves? What about this topic is so compelling to you?

Jared Beaver: Well, you really hit the nail on the head there, Justin, in terms of, you know, the emotions that wolves can present. And, you know, it seems everything around wolves is controversial and complex and there's a lot of nuance to explore there. But when you really think about it, you know, wolves should really be celebrated as a success story, you know, in terms of what their numbers were over 100 years ago. But, you know, it doesn't seem like anyone is happy with the approach that we take on wolves or that it always, you know, brings up and stirs different reactions and emotions. We wanted to get into a complicated issue that allowed us to still highlight the landscape and the people at the heart of the struggle. And so, we figured there was no better place to start than wolves.

Justin Angle: Absolutely. Alex, talk about, you know, the conceit of the first episode is defining the problem, and that's a difficult thing to do in this space. It's probably hard to get people to agree on what the actual problem is. Over the course of your experience and inquiry into the wolf issue, what do you think, how would you define the problem?

Alex Few: In talking with all of the diverse people, voices that are featured in the podcast, you know, people came back to that first question you asked is this about the wildlife or is this about the people? And over and over again, we heard that so much of the conflict comes between people. So, we started asking ourselves why? And that's how we define the problem. The why is that people don't have a shared vision for the future of wolves in the West. A big part of this podcast is helping to build mutual understanding. As our society has become more and more urbanized, there are fewer people that have direct experiences with agriculture, and people in agriculture make up less than 1% of American society. A big part of the podcast is trying to feature those voices the people who are living and working on these working wild landscapes with wolves so that we can build mutual understanding across the rural urban divide. If we can have empathy for each other, if we can understand each other's perspectives, we might be more successful in gaining a shared vision of the future.

Justin Angle: Jared, your view on defining the problem.

Jared Beaver: In simple terms. You know, in the West, one of the things that makes it so great is we still have wildlife and connected landscapes. I mean, we have one of the richest assemblages of large ungulates and large predators in the Northern hemisphere, and everybody in the world cares about that. And we all want similar things. But as Alex mentioned, you know, there's that, you know, we don't have that shared vision of what that future looks like. And so how we get there is kind of where that disagreement comes in.

Bottom line, we really wanted to highlight, you know if we lose the habitat, we lose the wildlife. And this podcast really tries to hit at explaining how intact connected, you know, landscapes are, you know, critical along the economic viability of working lands in the West. Like they're a key component. They're the ligament that kind of holds it all together. And this podcast gives us a platform and wolves give us that medium to connect all those pieces.

Alex Few: And I'll just jump in here because that economic viability piece is key, right? If we're going to maintain a habitat that supports these wide-ranging species, we've got to keep working lands, working. It maintains an open landscape and connects all the private public spaces. And so, there are many things now challenging the economic viability of working lands, water, development pressure and wolves is just another one of those things.

Justin Angle: Yeah, let's maybe get specific there. So, from a rancher's perspective, it is an industry that is becoming harder and harder to sustain. For all the reasons you outlined there, wolves are predators that threaten the livestock. How big of an issue is that for ranchers? I'm sure it varies ranch to ranch, of course, but how much of a concern in economic terms are we talking here for the typical Montana ranch?

Alex Few: I think it really depends. I guess you asked about a typical Montana ranch. I think Montana ranchers have the tools in the toolbox they need to manage conflicts. Wolf depredation of livestock can cause significant economic impacts. And when I talk about all the

tools being in the toolbox, you know, what I'm really talking about is the four C's that's compensation, conflict prevention, control and collaboration.

Justin Angle: Can you maybe give us a sort of short form definition of each of those C's?

Alex Few: Sure. And jump in here, Jared, if you want to define any of them. Compensation is basically compensating people for the losses that they experience with wolf depredation.

Justin Angle: Got it. Okay.

Alex Few: That's the simplest form of compensation. But what we know and what you'll hear on the podcast is that producers who are living with wolves have to spend a lot more time managing the situation. And that additional time and labor is not compensated. And we think that's an important part of how we think about compensation. When you're asking people to live in a landscape shared by large predators, conflict prevention, again, we're talking about those non-lethal tools that help prevent conflicts from happening. And when they fail, which those conflict prevention tools are not always effective, lethal control is an important way of stopping conflicts. So that's killing wolves that are depredating livestock. And I want to be clear that that's different than hunting. So lethal control is a tool implemented by wildlife managers and then collaboration. And I will just say that Montana really sets the bar high for collaboration. So, there are place based collaboratives like Madison Valley Ranchlands Group and Blackfoot Challenge, and there are many others throughout the state that really help bring

people together, some of these diverse interests to help support and solve problems in their local communities.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to our conversation with Alex Few and Jared Beaver after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Alex Few and Jared Beaver about their fascinating new podcast, Working Wild University.

Justin Angle: Yeah, let's maybe press on that a little bit. Jared, in your role as an extension agent, how would you kind of categorize the spirit of collaboration in Montana and on this issue in particular, I mean, we hear a lot about conflict and so forth, but, you know, Alex is saying it's a particularly collaborative environment. Talk about your view of that, how people, you know, come together to try to find solutions.

Jared Beaver: Expanding on what Alex was just saying and leading into the collaborative aspect is that at the end of the day, expanding wildlife populations, which is a success story in Montana on a shrinking working land base, you know, you're just concentrating wildlife and livestock on the landscape. And so, conflict is inevitable. And any time we continue to shrink the bottom line for producers, there's added stress and there's added concern. They need durable solutions. And that's what kind of Alex was talking about. And really, one of the things we hope to do is provide that common ground so that more collaboration can start to take

place and we could start to figure out how to build those tools to be more durable as we move into the future. And in reality, the struggle with wolves is not, you know, felt equally across the landscape. It's the landowners and livestock producers that have to deal with the bulk majority of the issues. And landowners and livestock producers provide a tremendous value to society. And in reality, what we've seen is they just want to be recognized, I feel like, for a lot of that and what they provide to society, whether that's open space or wildlife habitat or having to try and adapt these tools and resources to address conflict. And there's a lot of cost there that that isn't covered. You know, whether that's indirect costs, which we still don't know, a whole lot of like indirect could be, you know, stressors to livestock that produce kind of a decreasing return. And it could simply just be stress from a mental health and awareness standpoint. And so that's where collaboration really comes in, is making sure that the people that are dealing with this problem are most affected by this problem, have a platform and a voice. And from my personal experiences with a lot of the stuff that Alex and WLA are involved with in their programing is they're really willing to step up to the plate.

Justin Angle: We've talked about the economic pressure on ranchers that wolves kind of create or can create. Let's talk about some of the economic benefits, and that's one of the things you cover in the show is, you know, wolves and the number of tourists that come to watch wolves and photograph wolves in Yellowstone National Park and beyond that is a significant economic force, arguably a benefit to the park and the gateway communities to the park. Talk about that aspect and how that plays into this story as well.

Jared Beaver: Episode eight I believe Yellowstone wolves really gets to the heart of that and really where wolves are on the landscape and the economic drivers behind that really can change management right. In Yellowstone, you've got more of a preservation approach. And one of the best opportunities to see wolves in the world. And that drives people to Yellowstone National Park. And, you know, we heard it when we did interviews there. And in talking to people and for a lot of the border towns around Yellowstone, tourism dollars from wolf watching is, you know, a critical component, just like having open, connected landscapes that are mostly working lands are for critical for feeding the world. And some of those intricate values like, you know, clean water and clean air and a lot of those other ecosystem services. And so, trying to find a balance between those and then, you know, within that is state management of wolves oftentimes offers a hunting opportunity and a lot of state budgets, you know, state wildlife management agency budgets, you know, the bulk majority of that comes from, you know, hunting dollars and excise tax. And, you know, that's where most of the conservation efforts from a state management perspective is being generated. And so how can you balance those? And is there a way to diversify those conservation dollars? And I think episode eight, you know, starts to try and really dive into that question.

Alex Few: I'll just add a little bit to that. I think that Yellowstone wolves are highly visible both if you go to the park to look for them. But just in the news, right, people have a sense that Yellowstone wolves represent wolves in Montana. But let's remember what the landscape in Montana looks like outside of the park. Montana is about 70% private lands and about 96% of the wolf population lives on those private lands. So, when you think about the issues around

wolves and Yellowstone, it's important to remember that that is a piece of the story of wolves in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem. It's not the whole story.

Justin Angle: Right. And it might gain outsized attention in the popular kind of conception of wolves as well. So, you know, the two of you have deep knowledge and expertise and experience in this space, coming into this project. What were some of the biggest surprises? What new things did you learn? Jared, why don't you start with that?

Jared Beaver: Some of the new things that I came into it is that we're not. You know that far off from our common understanding, almost all of us care about the connected open space and the, you know, what draws us to the West and the wildlife and all of that. We all want similar things, too. The surprise really was, as we hit on in our very first episode, is that sometimes we just disagree on how we get there. But seeing that connection and hearing some of the same common themes, regardless of, you know, the entity that it was coming from, whether it was from, you know, former wildlife biologist or our producers or some of the NGO groups that we talked to is that I don't think we're as far off as we think.

Justin Angle: Yeah, that's not an uncommon conclusion in a lot of these issues, like keeping the focus on the goals and the kind of understanding like, wow, people kind of want the same things and they do differ on how to get there. Alex, your view of surprises? Did anything kind of catch you off guard in the reporting and investigation?

Alex Few: You know, I just want to build a little bit on what Jared said. I think part of the reason we discovered we weren't so very far off, and I would agree there were some moments where that was how close we were on some things was very surprising. And I think it's also important to recognize that we spoke to a lot of people in the middle. Right. And if you think about wolves and how polarizing a topic they are and when you think about the voices that you typically hear in the media on wolves, you're hearing from those very polarized extremes. And we try to provide voice to the silent middle, which really is, I think, in my opinion, a much larger constituency than the polarized extremes, but a much quieter one. And so, we were able to hear what really sounded like a shared vision or pretty close to a shared vision, because we were talking to people who, while they represent different interests and different sides, are all in that middle space.

Justin Angle: Oh, man, that is so prescient in many ways. The truth is often in the middle, and we live in a media ecosystem that sort of serves us the most extreme views and tries to solidify folks in those views. So, I particularly appreciate that conclusion, but also that sentiment that you bring to this work. One final question, and let's pull the lens way back. What is it about wolves? I mean, they have like a kind of an anthropological cultural role and almost a mythology in our history. The Big Bad Wolf, Little Red Riding Hood, Grimm brothers. Like all of these fairy tales, you find characters like the wolf. What do you think it is about the lore associated with wolves that gives it such cultural resonance?

Alex Few: It's funny. We interviewed Nathan Varley, who takes people wolf watching in the park as part of his business. And, you know, he interacts with people all the time that, you know, always have wanted to see a wolf. And he told us one story about taking somebody into the park and the person sitting there watching wolves saying, wow, they're really just like dogs. And I think it's that similarity to a creature that we live with that is such a part of our family that gives some of the special qualities that people imbue wolves with. I also, you know, think that they are a symbol of wilderness, but they have this sort of juxtaposition by being this sort of family member.

Justin Angle: So, will there be a season two? Are there other topics that you both and your colleagues are interested in exploring or what's coming down the pipeline? Jared, do you want to give us a little preview?

Jared Beaver: I don't want to expand too much on season two right now, but I can tell you that this is built to be a reoccurring show. There are a number of wildlife related issues that relate to working landscapes and people and, you know, the social and cultural and emotional aspects that we really try to highlight in Working Wild University. So, season two is in the works and much like the first will feature land focused stewardship examples of, you know, a couple of different wildlife species. And so, like the first you're going to hear from a lot of different stakeholders from state federal managers, obviously our land stewards and producers and ranchers working, you know, towards a common benefit for wildlife species. And a lot of the ecosystem services.

Justin Angle: For folks that want to learn more about Working Wild University and subscribe and listen and do all the things you want them to do. Where would you point them online?

Alex Few: Our website is workingwild.us so you can check out all of the show notes, all of the episodes there. You could do us a huge favor by subscribing and leaving a review.

Justin Angle: Well, Alex, Jared, thanks for spending some time with us today and best of luck with the show.

Jared Beaver: Thank you so much, Justin.

Alex Few: Thank you very much. This is fun.

Justin Angle: Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49. A generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.