

Field Trip: How to Change Your Life via the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles Ologies Podcast April 2, 2019

Oh, heyyy. It's, very literally this time, that lady in the vest and the lanyard at your local museum who's just bursting with facts she's not telling you because you just need to know where the bathrooms are, Alie Ward, back with a very, very special episode of *Ologies*. I'm taking you to my favorite place. Pile in! Buckle up! Your internet Dad is taking the family for a ride. [*car horn: "beep-beep, beep-beep"*]

"Okay, Dad Ward," you're thinking, "What in the Sam Hell? What is this field trip episode? Is it a bonus one?" No, not really. It's just a regular episode and maybe this will be the only one of its kind, ever. Maybe I'll start tossing these in kind of regularly. Let me know what you think. I'll make a post on Patreon. Y'all can tell me if you want more of these and where to go.

PS- Thank you patrons for making this show possible. Thank you to everyone wearing *Ologies* merch. Thank you to everyone who subscribes, and reviews, and leaves comments. You know I like to read a fresh one to you every week. For example, from AshCasr says:

The episode on microbiology (gut biomes), gave me the kick in the butt to finish applying for grad school. I got my acceptance letter today. Thank you, Alie, for admitting to wearing mismatched socks and making me not wish doomsday on all snakes.

[*gasp!*] Ashcasr, congrats! I'm so excited for you. Could I be more proud? The answer is no, I could not. Also, Chelsea Shields, I hear from your students who have left reviews that you're quite the stingray expert. So, consider this a formal invitation to be on the show. You did it. All in favor, say [*deep slow Alie voice: "Heeeyyyyyy."*] Motion passes.

Okay, so what is this field trip episode all about? What's the deal? Sometimes, I just want to take y'all with me to my favorite, and most inspiring, and comforting or life changing places. Kind of like if you were a frog in my pocket that I could carry around and say, "Jerome," - that's your frog name - "How awesome is this place?" So, since last week's victimology episode was kind of on the heavy side, I just wanted to lighten things up, give my own brain a little break and take you guys on a trip with me just to shine a light on a place that changed my life. Again, if this is your first *Ologies* episode, last week was super heavy, which was abnormal. And this week, I never do field trip episodes. I just needed a little bit of a break and I thought I'd do something weird. So if you're like, "What is this podcast all about?" There's so many episodes in the back catalog, you'll get the vibe. Anyway, the last two weeks have just been, like, a little heavy. And then, this one I decided to make something a little weird.

So, the Natural History Museum, a place that changed my life. And I also wanted to give you some advice I wish I had when I was going through this really, really tough time in my life. Some of you

know, *Ologies* would not exist without the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, who in no way is paying me to make this podcast or this episode. In fact, I didn't really even ask them or consult them. I just really love the everlasting shit out of them. So, if you live in LA or if you visit LA, I just want you to know how cool it is. So once again, they are not paying me or approving this episode. I just wanted to get it out of my heart and into your ears. I'm going to tell you about my favorite hidden spots in my favorite museum, and let's just let our minds and feet kind of wander the halls. So, hop in my pocket, Jerome, and settle in for a field trip to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

Okay. If you've listened to the museology episode with Ronnie Cline, or the entomology episode with Lila Higgins, I mentioned that this museum changed my life. I'm going to retell the story again just in case it slipped your mind.

The year is 2013 and I'm working in travel and food TV. I'm wearing fancy dresses. I'm eating pie and drinking margaritas for a living. There's a four-page spread in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in which I am wearing \$1,500 Giuseppe Zanotti five-inch heels, which are very uncomfortable and borrowed from a stylist who was annoyed that I can barely stand in them. They're literally called, "Cruel Wing pumps." They are awful. They live up to it. I want to put them into a metal bucket and light them on fire. [*whiney voice: "I haaate it"*] So, I'm uncomfortable from my toes to my brain. My life on the outside seems very, very glamorous and very perfect. And during this era, I have also never cried so much in my life.

A few months prior, my Dad had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma, which is a blood cancer. You can see the hematology episode with the Earth angel, Dr. Brian Durie. And my Dad, by the way, he's doing well. He's still kicking its ass. I also went through this wrenching, wrenching breakup with the love of my life who happened to be having a mental breakdown of his own at the time. It was awful. He's doing great now. That makes me happy every single day. But at the time I was just a tear factory. My heart felt like if you left hamburger meat in your glove compartment. I was a mess.

So, I randomly was offered a tour of the bug lab at the Natural History Museum and Lila Higgins ushered me past these tanks of California newts and into this private insectary where they were hatching beetle grub and cockroach babies. They had butterflies with these glimmering chrysalises and scorpions that glow under black light. And I told her at the end of it, that that hour was the happiest I had been in, maybe, years. And she just kind of casually suggested, "Yo, you should totally volunteer here." As if I were the kind of person to do those things. And I was like, "Ugh, dude, I wish." Like in the polite way that you respond to far-fetched things like, "We should go do drugs in Joshua Tree," or, "Come to Aruba!" You're like, "Ugh, I wish. I wish." And she's like, "No, really, we really could use the help."

I went home, and later that night as I was sobbing, as was my custom, I thought, "How could I make things worse?" And at the time I was too depressed to pay for things that would make me happy, such as a museum membership, and I thought, "Well, if I volunteer there I can go for free. So there's no stakes." Just in case you think I'm just a very nice person, I'm actually just a thrifty, sad

opportunist. So, I signed up, again no stakes, and I had to fill out an application. And on the first day I showed up at the staff entrance for orientation. I was led into this conference room with some senior citizens and some very shy-seeming undergrads. And there was this a full day of training where they passed around some bones, and pelts, and some old dishware, and taught us about how to talk to people about science in a way that's emotional and matters.

And the way that docents interpret, (that's like the fancy verb that means just tell you about shit) is that they don't lecture. They're trained not to do that. They're trained to ask open-ended questions until *you* deduce and you answer your own curiosity. So instead of like, "This shark is bananas. It has tiny teeth because it eats little prey." You say, "What do you notice about this shark?" And people say, "It's dead." And you're like, "Yes. What else did you see?" And they're like, "It has tiny teeth." And then you say, "So what do you think an animal with such small teeth could eat?" And before you know it, you've interviewed someone until they figured things out for themselves.

I just fell in love with volunteering. Every Wednesday morning in 2013 I would arrive at 9:00 AM. I'd put on this blue vest. It smells kind of like hair, kind of like a musty sweatshirt, but in a comforting way. I'm not sure how often they wash the vests, but I didn't ask. I didn't mind. And, in these morning meetings they'd give us a rundown of how many kids we are expecting. Sometimes like thousands would bound off buses and run up the stairs like this high tide of little bodies streaming into the foyer. And sometimes in the morning meetings we would discuss artifacts that were out for repair, like a gorilla hand was in the taxidermy shop. Sometimes we'd spend the last 15 minutes of the meeting just shooting the shit. An older volunteer named Timothy always had these really long corny jokes to tell. And then at the punchline everyone would just explode into groans and, like, genuine laughter because it was just so adorable. This other guy would update us on his koi pond. And I would just be there, just sitting there listening, not having to eat cupcakes on camera and not wearing fake eyelashes, just spending three hours a week at this place making zero dollars because it was the only thing that lifted my spirits. I would only miss weeks if I had to go travel for work.

And I started just little by little, letting people know that at heart, I love science and I was working at this museum for fun. My friend Andy worked at a production company, and they were looking to hire a science correspondent for one of their shows, and he knew I was volunteering at the museum. So, they called me in for a meeting and a few weeks later while I was volunteering a shift in the Butterfly Pavilion, I got the call that I got the job. Andy, by the way, was just nominated for an Emmy for editing *Innovation Nation*. We're still shooting. It's been five seasons.

So, the Natural History Museum totally changed my life. This year, the NHM asked me to host some live Q&As, like *Ologies* style for First Fridays. And, so I'll be there on April 5th and June 7th talking live with some curators about hidden gems and secrets they have in the vaults. So if you're in LA, come to those. Honestly, it's my favorite thing that happens at night in LA. There are bands, and DJs, and wine, and food trucks. You can wander this whole museum at night and listen to lectures, and in this case, an *Ologies* style Q&A. The whole shebang is just sexy. So if you're not in LA, that's also okay. The museum figured out a way to live stream my Q&As, so anywhere in the world you can watch them on the NHM LA Facebook live. They're putting them up on their YouTube after the

fact too, and I'll link the videos in the show notes. Last week we did a talk with a guest from the malacology episode, Dr. Jann Vendetti.

So, the point of this episode isn't just to give our brains a break and sing the praises of the NHM, but also just to inspire you to take a look at your own life and see if you want to shake it up at all. I just want to let you know that I know times are tough. If you're feeling off-course from what you think your deal in life is, if you feel kind of lost, or if you're feeling just low in the self-esteem realm. Or if you feel like you're not really living a life that feels very true to who you are, or you're just kind of in a rut, binge watching shows that aren't even that good, maybe sit down, let yourself make a quick list of the things that you like in life the most. Maybe it's books, or math, or cooking, or nature, or plants. Maybe you're into animals, or makeup, or space, or building stuff, or clothes, and just figure out if you can spare a few hours a week or a few hours a month to just go use that interest and volunteer somewhere.

You'll leave each time feeling like you made your life better by helping out. It's amazing how selfish volunteering can be. And you'll have weird conversations with people you'd otherwise never meet, and you'll learn things that one day might come in handy in case you get an offer for your dream job. Hi. Hello. Hi. And you'll just start, like, a new little era in your life. Go through a breakup? Volunteer. You got laid off? Go volunteer somewhere. Grieving? Maybe volunteering at a puppy rescue might be good for you or reading to kids at an after-school program. It's free. It costs the same amount as cutting your own bangs or texting your ex. It's less expensive than the many cheese teas I have consumed on bad days. By the way, cheese tea you guys, look it up. It's cream cheese foam on top of tea. It tastes like cheesecake. I'm here from the future to tell you it's really good.

So, if you come to a First Fridays event or you're just going to the Natural History Museum of LA County, I'm going to tell you the things I love in the museum the most, and then we're gonna hear from a few curators who just wrote a book about their favorite stuff in the museum. Okay, hang on for that. But first, we're going to do a few ads from sponsors. Again, NHM, not sponsoring the show. Um, before we do ads, I always tell you about a charity that I really like and this week I wanted to tell you about TicketsforKids.org. Tickets for Kids provides at-risk children with experiences that inspire hope, and dreams, and achievements for a lifetime. They help pay for kids to go to museums, and athletics, and art and cultural events. 196,000 kids have been taken on field trips because of TicketsforKids.org. So, a portion of the ad proceeds will go to them and here are some other people making *Ologies* possible.

[Advertisements]

Okay, we're back. So, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. What are my favorite things to see? You guys ask me this all the time and have just going to tell you in this episode that way I can refer back to it. Number one, there's a whole hall called Becoming LA and it's the history of Los Angeles. Everything from Scarlett O'Hara's dresses, to ostrich eggs, to old carts and maps. There's this one thing - I see people walk by it all the time - it's a desk in a glass case. It's kind of an old-timey desk put together roughly with wood. It's Walt Disney's very first animation desk. Like,

he drew some of his first cartoons for Disney on it. If you happen to go to the museum, go to the Becoming LA Hall, look for Disney's desk. It's bananas. Also, there's an extinct auk, which is a large penguin-like creature and it's in the Bird Hall. Again, they're now extinct, but there's a dead one in the Bird Hall.

Okay, if you go into the African Mammal Hall, one of the dioramas is of a greater kudu and for some reason it's just my favorite. The landscape of Kenya is this beautiful sunset, and the kudu is, like, standing on this rock with these antelope horns that are perfectly spiral, and there's something just very architecturally pleasing about it. So, if you ever go to the NHM, look for the greater kudu in the African Mammal Hall. Say hello.

Also in the Mineral and Gems Hall, there's a meteor that someone found and they had to chip a piece off to be like, "Is this big rock a meteor or what?" so you can see where they chipped a piece off. Also, you can go into this vault and look at these absolutely bananas gemstones, and earrings, and crowns, and diamonds, [*sped up clip from Rihanna's Diamonds, "Shine bright like a diamond"*] and emeralds. You just have to go into this vault and there's usually a guard there and a huge vault door, so it feels very, like, *Mission Impossible*. [*clip from Mission Impossible: Luther Stickell: "He's at the vault."*] So, don't sleep on the Gem and Mineral Hall. Go look at some sparkly things.

The Dinosaur Hall has a gravid *Plesiosaur*. What do those words mean? [*old timey snobbery voice, "Old, old timey sea reptile."*] And I think it's, "gravid," because I think when it's a reptile they're gravid and not pregnant. Anyway, it's a fossil of a HUGE sea-dwelling reptile, [*old timey snobbery voice, "whose belly was filled with babies."*] Also there are these two big tanks on the main floor and one has an oarfish in it, which people used to think were sea serpents. They're these long, like, 15 to 18-foot long silver fish with this bright red mohawk and these two fins that look like these big long canoe oars. And it's dead, and it's in a big, glass, watery coffin and you could look into it. And once a kid asked me if it was alive and I was like, "No, this is dead." And she was like, "Oh, is it in heaven with my Grandpa?" And I was like, "Sure."

Also, there's a megamouth shark. Again, huge shark. Big mouth. Tiiiiny teeth. And apparently they're seen very rarely. They're still alive. This one, I think, died in 1984. They think that perhaps they have bioluminescent lips and that their lips glow at night. And so that little critters are like, [*rave music plays softly*] "Oh, what's this? Is there a rave?" And then it's just their big mouth. [*record scratch*] So that's the megamouth shark. You have to go look at that.

If you go up to, I think the second floor, there's a hidden Dinosaur Lab. You have to go around a corner and you can watch paleontologists chipping away at dinosaur fossils. It's like around the corner from the diorama hall. It's nuts. You can watch them work. It's so cool.

And if you go down to the very bottom floor, there's something called the Nature Lab and they have a bunch of live animals there. Like, they have a bunch of rats and they run around in these clear tubes. And little fun fact, they're all lady rats because if they put men rats together they would, like, eat each other to death. And if they put lady and man rats together, you'd have a lot of rats. [*"Ohhhh, rats. Rats, rats, rats." -Silicon Valley, season 4, episode 8*] Also in the Nature Lab, they have

these drawers of insects that you can pull out. They have a tarantula hawk that's this big, beautiful, dark midnight black/blue color, and then it's got these pretty amber colored wings. And it will kill tarantulas. Also down in the Nature Lab, there's an infrared camera that shows you what it looks like when a snake sees you. And I found out there that I had a thyroid problem because I was like, "Why aren't my hands showing up on this thermal camera?" So thanks, NHM.

One of my favorite, favorite things is in the back of the Bird Hall and I'm so afraid that the Natural History Museum is going to, like, rehab and renovate the Bird Hall, but it's kind of old and I love it that way. Okay, [*suspense music starts*] you walk in the Bird Hall and you walk over this boardwalk over a marshland and you're like, "Oh, this is pretty dope." And then you keep walking. Then you see in this room, it's like this big cavernous room with a rocky mountain in it and there are a bunch of California condors and they're eating a goat. You're like, "What kind of metal business is this?!" It's great, there's no one back there. You know what? Keep walking. Keep walking and you find yourself in a rainforest. It's all these, like, birds chirping, and vines hanging down, and it looks like something from Disney World but super creepy. And, you walk in, and it's dark, and your pupils are like, "What's happening?" And, then walk to the right and you'll see a staircase. You walk up the staircase and midway through this staircase, you stop. Turn to your right and you will see a Harpy eagle eating a red howler monkey. It's astounding! [*end suspense music*]

Here's the thing, you would have to walk to the very very back of the Bird Hall. You would have to go into a very pitch black rainforest and then, you'd have to stop in the middle of the stairs and look over and you will see the eagle eating a monkey. It's very severe and it's one of my favorite weird little hidden things in the museum. So, if you go to the Natural History Museum in LA County, make sure that you do that.

Okay. Those are just my favorites. But I went to the NHM last week for this special panel discussion with the authors of this new book they put out. It's called *Wild LA: Explore the Amazing Nature in and Around Los Angeles*. And if you're headed to LA or if you live here and you love nature, this book rules. It's like equal parts nature guide and a trip planner, and it essentially unveils the hidden nature in every park and canyon, perhaps even in your own neighborhood if you live in LA. [*clip from Randy Newman's I Love LA, "I love LA."*] It was written by a few friends who've been hugely influential to me in terms of science and science communication. And one of them, Lila Higgins, again is the person who started me on my museum journey.

I asked the authors to sit down with me and tell me their favorite passage of this new book, again, *Wild LA*, and also their favorite thing in the museum. Now, Lila Higgins said it was a small exhibit hidden around the corner in a stairwell at the museum. It's close to the ground floor elevators and it's of the Delhi Sands flower-loving fly. It's a federally listed endangered species. Thank you very much. And they're so big that they sometimes get mistaken for hummingbirds and they have these cone-shaped bodies and sometimes emerald color eyes.

Lila Higgins: They are large and they look a little bit fuzzy. And they have striping. Again, some people think they look like bees. Don't you remember the time we went to the Lorquin Society meeting down at BioQuip? They had some there, we were looking at them. And, I'm pretty sure you were pretty down with them. That fly guy that was there?

Alie Ward: Yeah, that guy was hot. Can you do me a huge favor? Don't get mad at me but it didn't start recording until later. Can you just read the passage again? I love you. Thank you.

Lila: So, this is my favorite passage from the book from the snails and slugs section:

Like other snails, the common garden snail is a hermaphrodite, which means it has both male and female sex organs. When a pair comes together, each harpoons the other with a love dart. It introduces hormones to induce mating. To reproduce, they intertwine their bodies and extend their penises from behind their heads to exchange sperm. Mating can take anywhere between four and twelve hours.

Alie: [sighs] Twelve hours....

Lila: [laughs]

By the way, that bug society meeting was a few years ago. I remember it well. That guy was dapper as hell. He was in his fifties or sixties. He had a binder full of exquisitely drawn flies. I'm not going to lie, he had some game. And a wife, so don't get excited. Also, if you want to know more about the incredible romance of slugs and snails, you can listen to the malacology episode, and for more of the wonderful Lila Higgins and her charm and British accent, you can listen to her episode on entomology.

So, next up, I asked Charles Hood, who's a writer, and a bird nerd, and contributor to *Wild LA*. He read me his favorite passage of the book and told me his favorite thing at the NHM.

Charles Hood: Hi, I want to read from page 89:

It's easy to confuse the American Crow with its rowdier, more robust cousin, the Common Raven. Both are all black, impressively smart, and able to find and eat a huge variety of foods from worms, to acorns, to bird's eggs, to lizards. In Los Angeles, people used to shoot both as farm pests, but as city has replaced farmland, we've both grown more tolerant. Crows can be seen everywhere in urban Los Angeles. Ravens are usually spotted in large parks, mountains, deserts...

Then I just want to jump ahead:

Smart, smarter, smartest. Crows and ravens are super smart. They can use tools, recognize not just the faces of people they like and don't like, but even the cars those individuals drive.

Alie Ward: [gasp!]

Charles: *They know how to crack nuts by letting cars drive over them. And can use traffic signals to figure out which cars are coming next. Some scientists believe they're as good at problem solving as chimpanzees. Our estimates of their intelligence rise higher with each study.*

Alie: I love that they're just like, "Here's a Hyundai, put a walnut down."

Charles: Oh my goodness, yes. And there was a study out in the Antelope Valley where people were trapping ravens and they could actually tell the cars the researchers drove to know, "Okay, they're here today, I'm not going by the garbage dump."

Alie: Oh my god... Now, do you have a favorite artifact or area in the Natural History Museum here?

Charles: Yes, and I have to encourage people to donate money so they can go on the behind the scenes tours with the hoity toity people. This is not open to the public. There is a thing called a pelt vault. It's a refrigerated unit for storing the entire skin of an animal. If you can imagine, like, dry cleaning rods just draped with zebras and giraffes...

Alie: [GASP!]

Charles: ... leopards, tigers. It's called the pelt vault and it's not open to the public usually but it's part of the collections of the mammalogy department. And they let you go through on tours with the 'proper donation.' It's just tremendously cool to walk in and see an okapi pelt!

Alie: Oh my god!

Charles: Yes.

Alie: Gotta get that VIP tooooooour!

Charles: Absolutely, yes. [laughs]

Alie: Damn!

Next up is my good friend, Dr. Jason Goldman. He is an amazing scientist. He's a journalist. He's a leader of *Atlas Obscura* and other science-based trips. The story he reads from his *Wild LA* book, it's amazing. It's so inspiring and touching. I loved it.

Alie Ward: Doctor, can you tell me your favorite passage in the book?

Dr. Goldman: Uh, sure. Yeah, it comes from the chapter on, I think it's the chapter on backyards? Yeah, it's the chapter on backyards.

Alie: Ooh, okay. [stifled laughter] Go ahead.

Dr. Goldman: *Leo Politi Elementary School sits just two miles from downtown Los Angeles in one of the densest parts of the city. This means that there's not that much room for nature to grow or kids to play. A few years ago, then-principal Brad Rumble decided to take an empty part of campus and grow a garden. With the help of students from a nearby high school, they planted sages, oaks, monkey flowers and other native species. They dug a vernal pool. Then they waited for the birds and insects to show up. Teachers began using the space for lessons, and Brad took students there to talk things through when they were troubled. Not long after the garden grew in, wildlife turned up. The students counted dozens of species of birds in the garden and hundreds of insects. But that was expected. The surprise was that student disciplinary issues dropped to almost zero and science test scores skyrocketed. Brad said they went, "From the basement to the penthouse in science."*

Gardens don't just benefit wildlife. They also benefit us. What would our city look, sound, and smell like if every school and property owner provided a bit of quality wildlife habitat? If enough people landscaped their yards with wildlife in mind, those gardens could become corridors for travelling between larger green spaces, allowing animals to hopscotch safely across the city from backyard to backyard. Los Angeles has a good amount of undeveloped green space, but acre for acre, the nature of Los Angeles is the nature of the backyard.

Alie: Woah... I'm gonna cry about a backyard. That's great.

Dr. Goldman: Good. You should.

Alie: [laughs] You should... Do you have a favorite exhibit, artifact or area of this museum?

Dr. Goldman: My favorite thing about natural history museums is not necessarily the public parts, the dioramas. People think of a natural history museum, they think of these dusty old dioramas. Most people don't realize the real function of a natural history museum is the collections. It's to preserve biological specimens and cultural

specimens for a thousand years or more so that researchers a millennium from now can understand something about the world as it exists today. So, I love just walking through the collections and looking for stuff.

Alie: What if you can't get into the collections? What do you look at?

Dr. Goldman: You should ask a curator really nicely and I'm sure they will take you on a small tour of at least a part of the collections.

Alie: What about the garden? Do you have any favorite spots in the garden?

Dr. Goldman: I'm not going to say the willow hut, because I know that's *your* favorite space.

Alie: No! It can be both of ours!

Dr. Goldman: No, there's a spot... I believe the sign says that it's like a, "Listening tree." It reminds me of one of those old school little horns that old people would stick in their ears to, like, hear you better? But it's basically that but it's tapped into the root system of this tree underground. And on a really hot day you can hear the cavitation inside the root system amplified by this speaker thing. So, it's taking something that is normally invisible in nature and making it... it's still invisible, making it audible. Making it noticeable.

Alie: Ooooh! I'm gonna go stick my microphone up to it.

Dr. Goldman: Yeah, you should. I don't know if trees cavitate at night.

Alie: I don't know what cavitate means.

Dr. Goldman: It's the movement of water and nutrients from the root system up into the tree, into the canopy.

Alie: Okay. Well, we'll see. We'll hear!

Dr. Goldman: Yeah. We'll hear. We won't see.

Alie: [laughs] Thank you, Doctor.

Dr. Goldman: You're welcome.

Alie: [laughs]

Last up is Dr. Greg Pauly. He's the curator of herpetology and I forgot to have him read his favorite passage because we got to chatting about how LA is the birdiest county in the country. It's what's called a biodiversity hotspot. And in the same day you can see Bighorn sheep in the mountains and

green sea turtles in the Lower San Gabriel valley. I asked him about his favorite thing in the museum.

Alie: What's your favorite artifact in the museum?

Dr. Pauly: Okay, this is such a tough question because the museum has 35 million historical objects, so to say this one is my favorite... But as the curator of herpetology, when I first arrived here and was going through the collections, I was absolutely blown away that there is a yellow-bellied sea snake that was collected from Orange County, collected on the beach here in southern California. And actually it was collected on Thanksgiving morning in 1972.

Alie: Oh my god...

Dr. Pauly: Which is, like, the greatest Thanksgiving ever, in my opinion. And that was such an amazing specimen just to know that yellow-bellied sea snakes occasionally would show up in southern California, but that's the only one that had ever been documented.

Alie: [*gasp!*]

Dr. Pauly: And then, in our most recent El Niño, the 2015-16 El Niño, we actually had three yellow-bellied sea snakes wash up.

Alie: Oh my god!

Dr. Pauly: We've actually had two more wash up since then. So, we're now at a total of six yellow-bellied sea snakes have washed up on the coast of California. It's this amazing situation where we are able to, sort of, document the increasing range of this species and it's largely tracking the warming oceans. So, this species now, I think we can basically treat as, like, this is a species we can pretty much expect, you know, off the southern California coast every year in these really, really low numbers. Occasionally one is going to get subjected to tremendous cold, and it's going to wash up... it's going to be very unhealthy and it's going to wash up and that's how people are going to find it.

The sea snake is actually... it's yellow bellied for all the reasons that lots of aquatic organisms have lighter bellies. It's just countershading. So, a predator from below is looking up, sees something, but it can't see it very well because it's light just like the surface of the water. Predator looking down from the above, the animal is dark, because it's looking down on a darker ocean. It's just standard countershading. Nothing to do other aspects of, "yellow-bellied."

Alie: I had no idea. Now I'm gonna go out on every Thanksgiving looking for yellow-bellied sea snakes.

Dr. Pauly: I think that's a great thing to do on Thanksgiving morning.

Alie: [laughs] I will not eat them. Thank you so much!

Dr. Pauly: Absolutely.

And yes, I looked it up, and, "yellow-bellied" may have morphed into an insult meaning cowardly because of this trait of reptiles. But, hello. Hi. If I had countershading to hide me from predators or people that I didn't want to run into at Trader Joe's, that's not cowardly. That's just smart as hell, so get off my darker, counter-shaded back about it. Also at the NHM this week, there's a new exhibit called Antarctic Dinosaurs, and to hear more about it you can check out *Ologies* editor and the patron saint of podcasts, Steven Ray Morris. He's putting out an episode of *See Jurassic Right* this week in which he tours the exhibit.

[Clip from Steven Ray Morris, "I'm at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, because I'm gonna go to the Antarctic Dinosaurs exhibit early. I'm super excited to check it out. But, I'm running late so we should probably go."]

And, heads up, this exhibit is based on research excavating fossils from under ice. There are hands-on excavation activities and a behind-the-scenes look at what it's like to be on one of those expeditions, but probably without the icicles hanging out of your nostrils and just wanting a bath so bad. Now, I haven't seen that exhibit yet. It opens April 3rd, it goes until *[clip from Steven Ray Morris, "January 5th."]* In case you're in LA, *[clip from Randy Newman's I Love LA, "I love LA."]* maybe you'll be heading back from *Coachella*. Maybe you're touring grad schools. Perhaps you're visiting an aunt who's having a divorce party. I don't know your life. Also, we didn't even plan to both have NHM episodes this week, me and Steven. It's just very beautiful synergy because we both dig fossils. *[DJ airhorn]*

So, on my way out of the museum, I stopped into my very, very favorite spot. Which is this willow hut and the subject of the hashtag #WillowHutWednesdays. It's this little house made out of willow reeds and it's my favorite thing, maybe, ever. And then I kept walking through the gardens:

Okay, so it's after hours, the museum is closed, and I'm supposed to be walking out, but instead I'm sneaking away to the willow hut! Which is my favorite spot in the museum! [gasp!] There's no one in here. It's super dark. [laughs] I'm totally hiding in this willow house made by David Lovejoy. It's this house in the garden, and it's made out of willow sticks that are all woven together, and it smells so good like a tree, and I want one. And I hope they don't catch me but I just wanted to come and say hi to the hut! Hey hut! [sniffing] I just sniffed the hut. It smells like branches. I dig it. Okay, right, leaving the hut.

So, the gardens have fountains, they have a pond. [steps on gravel path] You walk over gravel. It's so HUGE. My god, the smell of outside makes me so happy, it's unreal. So many trees. Now we're gonna check out the listening tree that Jason talked about. Okay, so there are these horns, they look like a trumpet end on a stalk. [gasp!] It's this whooshing sound. [echoey, warbly sound] Oh my god! Sounds like a ga-ga-ga-ghost! The placard says, "Put your ear to the trumpet. A microphone underground picks up the sound of water moving from the roots to the leaves of the tree." [GASP!] It's this really beautiful oak tree. Awwwwww, it's so good. Okay, bye museum. [ethereal bedtime lullaby bells music plays softly]

So in summation, go to a museum, look at, touch, hear things. If you have a few extra hours, maybe consider volunteering anywhere doing anything that would make your heart happy. Also, come to NHM on April 5th or June 7th for First Fridays for my live *Secrets from the Vaults* with NHM curators. I'm also supposed to be there on May 3rd but I just found out I got nominated for a daytime Emmy for writing on *Innovation Nation* and I should probably go to that. It's on the same night, May 3rd. I don't know what to do. But April 5th and June 7th I will be there for First Fridays. So, come to those. It's at 5:30 and 7:30 and those will also be live streaming on the NHM Facebook if you are nowhere near LA and you want to watch.

And as long as I'm just telling you my whereabouts, I got invited to go on a trip with *Atlas Obscura*, and they do all these really great tours and now they do vacations where you can go check out some science or some history on a vacation. They're doing a trip to Hawaii with teuthologist Sarah McAnulty, you know her from the squid episode, and she's going to be doing some research with squid. So, it's a really, really small group of people that can go, and I think that they have maybe two spots left. So if you've been thinking about going to Hawaii, and you're free at the end of June, and you want to just splurge and take yourself on a squid trip, I will be there. ["*You good on sunscreen? I'm good on sunscreen.*"]

Also, if you listen to the very end of the episode, you know I tell you a secret. And this week my secret is that I had to dye my hair and I was on a trip. And so I took a Lyft to Walmart and I purchased some hair dye. And then I was like, I'm going to ruin these hotel towels. They're going to look like there was a hemorrhage on them. And, so I bought a roll of paper towels, and I dyed my hair in a hotel room, and I'm just going to tell you, if you're ever in a pinch and have to dye your hair in hotel room, maybe you're on the run from something - again, I don't know your life - you can always buy some paper towels. It's a considerate thing to do if you ever leave town without doing enough grooming and upkeep and then you have to do it on the road. I feel like the secret is applicable to no one, and I don't know why I told it.

Anyway, maybe go to a museum, or go anywhere that has something you can look at, or touch, or smell, or hear that makes you happy. And if that doesn't work, then cut bangs. All right, I heart you all. Thank you for listening to this love letter to the museum. Okay, berbye.

Transcribed by Mike Melchior, past volunteer at Indianapolis Zoo

Some links which you may enjoy:

[First Fridays: Secrets from the Vault](#)

Last month's "[Secrets from the Vault](#)" [livestream video](#) with Dr. Jann Vandetti

[Wild LA](#) book! Get it!

[How to volunteer at the NHM](#)

Find other ways to volunteer, no matter what you're into or where you live with [volunteermatch.org](#)

[The Worst Shoes: \\$1500 Cruel Winged Sandals](#)

[Multiple museum passes](#)

[Dehli Sands Flower-loving flies](#)

[Greater Kudu: architectural antelope](#)

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[Yellow-bellied sea snakes in California!](#)

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