**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:00): Today on the Women Mind the Water Podcast, I'm speaking with Paulita Bennett-Martin. Paulita is a multi-dimensional ocean activist who works in the area of advocacy, research and community building. She's personally aware of the value of storytelling after managing oral history projects. She currently serves on the board of Art Southeast, is the founder of Whale Week Savannah, and is the new federal policy manager for Oceana. The Women Mind the Water Podcast engages artists in conversation about their work and explores their connection with the ocean. Through their stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:45): I am pleased today to welcome Paulita Bennett Martin to the Women Mind the Water Artivist Series Podcast. Paulita is a multi-dimensional ocean activist, who has managed conservation research and campaigns in the Caribbean and the Southern US. She's a proud Belizean-American who works to ensure that where the ocean is involved, every voice is heard. Paulita fervently believes that the ocean unites us all. She works on National Ocean Plastics Policy for the ocean policy and conservation non-profit, known as Oceana. Paulita also serves on the board of Art Southeast, a nonprofit whose mission is to make Savannah, Georgia a destination for art and culture. She's a founder of Whale Week Savannah, a grassroots effort to educate residents to the plight of the North Atlantic right whale. The North Atlantic right whale is Georgia's state marine mammal.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:43): Paulita is clearly an activist who is a supporter of the arts. She believes that art plays a significant role in connecting us with our personal selves, as well as fostering a deeper understanding of each other. Welcome Paulita. Thank you for joining me on the Women Mind the Water Podcast. I am looking forward to hearing more about your background and how you as an activist incorporates art in your work. I'm going to say in advance that the breadth of your work and the brevity of this podcast is going to cause me to make some big leaps in my questioning. I want to make the most of your experience to inform listeners to the powerful connection between activism and art. Let me start by asking you to compare the ocean and the cultural traditions between Belize, Georgia and the US Virgin Islands. What are some of the elements that unite them and how do they differ?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (02:41): Wow, thank you, Pam. So exciting to be here talking to you. I would definitely say the first thing that comes to mind when you name those areas is the ocean. It's one of the things that is ever present through Belize, you're never far from the ocean. You're never far from thinking about the beauty of the ocean, the blue that resonates across the skies, similarly in coastal Georgia, where I am right now. Everyone's always looking forward to an afternoon stroll, sunset, or swim in the ocean or fishing off of our coast. And then similarly to the US Virgin islands, on any given day, you're probably going to spend a few minutes swimming across a beautiful reef, taking in the sights of the parrot fish and seeing the rolling hills that just kind of spill down into the beautiful Caribbean water.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (03:51): Well, you clearly have a passion for the ocean and in conservation work. Would I also be correct in saying that you are concerned about social justice issues as they pertain to the environment?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (04:04): Absolutely, 100% accurate. I think that my passion, my common thread through my life is the ocean, but I think that the ocean and the health and benefit of the ocean has a lot of connection and implication to social justice and vice versa. What's happening within our communities here on land often impacts those beautiful resources that I'm so in love with within the ocean. So I think it's interesting because I've seen this kind of popular piece that an artist did that just says, environmental justice is social justice. We are very connected to our resources within the ocean or within any area of the planet, nature as a whole. It's not separate from us, it's part of us. And so I do think that social justice is always in my mind.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:06): Well, I know you've managed an oral history project for the Ogeechee Riverkeeper. Tell me a little bit about this project.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (05:14): Absolutely. Okay. The Ogeechee Riverkeeper is one of the Riverkeepers from the Savannah area. Most of the watershed in Savannah is in Ogeechee, not Savannah. The Savannah River watershed is from a very small slice of the city and goes into South Carolina, whereas Ogeechee covers most of Savannah and then goes south. There was a large-scale fish kill from contaminants in the water, and there was a lawsuit that was filed by the Ogeechee Riverkeeper years ago, before I even came into the role of research coordinator there, and those funds, part of those funds were to be used to collect and preserve stories from that waterfront area, from stakeholders from the community, from the people that use the water. And so I came in and conducted interviews with people that range from fishermen to restaurant owners, to historians who live and work on the Ogeechee River, within the watershed.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (06:30): And so a lot of that was focused on working waterfronts people that do work the water, but there were other people involved in those conversations too. And that project went on to be housed at the Georgia Southern University. So there is an audio oral history archive there at the university and the Ogeechee Riverkeeper oral history project is part of their archives. So really incredible. It was a awesome thing to be a part of because I've only been in Savannah for five and a half years. So to jump into a project like that so quickly, that was in my first two years here, I got to learn so much dense history about Savannah, about Richmond Hill, Pooler, about the islands, like Tybee. I learned about native plants and native trees. I learned about fishing history and got to kind of pick up on which fish were plentiful back in the day, versus now, not even being able to fish those fish because they've been depleted so heavily.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (07:43): So it really gave me this historical environmental understanding of where I was at, but I also got to pick up on sort of food ways and that part of the culture that is kind of different to me, I'm always thinking of things through the ocean and through the fish and through the reef. But then I started to also learn about how people would cook redfish and what plants they would be harvesting to cook with and the teas that they make and stuff like that, so that was an incredible project.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:19): That's really the beauty of storytelling. And I that's one of the reasons I love this podcast is because I get to talk to so many interesting women involved in so many interesting projects. So I'm really glad to hear that. So was your work with the Ogeechee Riverkeeper project where your interest in storytelling began or did it enhance it?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (08:44): It enhanced it. I wrote plays when I was a little kid. I was always into hearing stories and giving stories. And so I think storytelling is just part of who I am. And I almost wonder if most people aren't a storyteller in some way shape or form. So I would say it's always been part of me, but the Ogeechee Riverkeeper Oral History Project, definitely made it more vibrant. And then before that, I would say my work in the Virgin Islands, working on the lionfish research, doing a lot of participatory style research, where we spent long amounts of time with the local fishermen, learning what they did, maybe actually doing some of the things, like helping them at their fish stalls and being a part of their world and listening and giving time to hear their stories, made our research that much more robust. It wasn't just numbers and something that we could punch into an analysis for the data to shoot out of. We actually got to know the stories that made us understand why things were the way they were.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:08): Okay. I'd like to learn more about Oceana and your work with the nonprofit. How did you come to work for the organization and what exactly do you do with Oceana?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (10:19): Yeah. I actually got my first start with Oceana way back in 2014, in Belize, doing research on plastics. And the thread here with the storytelling is that I was doing research on plastics, looking at quantitative data, collecting data along beaches and what was washing up from the ocean. Through that, I started to learn more from actually the conversations I was having between collecting data with locals, and then the locals were interested in what I was doing, so they would get involved and help participate in collecting the data too. Well, I did the research, a summer research intern with Oceana, and then when I came back to the states, I took a job here on the coast of Georgia and Oceana found out that I took the job in Georgia and they wanted to place somebody in Georgia.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (11:25): And so lo and behold, I wound up back with Oceana three and a half years ago in April, I think April, and I started out as a campaign organizer, mostly focused on our offshore drilling and energy campaign, then became field representative, focusing on our offshore drilling and energy, our responsible fishing work, and that includes sharks and whale campaigns. And I started working a little bit on diversity, equity and inclusion principles within our organization then. And then about two months ago, I wound up moving into the role of the Federal Policy Manager. So now I spend most of my time focused on ocean conservation policy on ocean plastics. So I am focused on our campaign is to reduce the amount of single use plastics that are being made and used in the United States.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (12:31): Let me double back on our discussion of storytelling. Can you give an example of how storytelling is effective in your ocean advocacy work with Oceana and plastics?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (12:47): Oh gosh. Yes. Of course. Well, I don't even know that we think of it as storytelling, but it absolutely is. When we're going into work on getting a bill passed or getting a bill written, you have to find champions who are our representatives, who were voted into office to represent us, who care about these issues. And the only way that people care about the issues is if they had a personal experience with it, that they know something about the issue. And if that wasn't their personal experience, nine times out of 10, it's somebody else's personal experience that actually grabs them. So you can come in with the scientific background, which is important. All of Oceana's campaigns are scientifically based. We have a scientist on each campaign. However, you have to be able to take that information and tell a story with it.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (13:42): Not just, yes, the 10 most prevalent, single use plastic items cleaned up from beaches, et cetera, are single use plastics, you have to be able to explain that organizations have been collecting litter from beaches and waterways across our planet for the last decade. And since 2017, that that has become predominantly single use plastics. The top 10 items that are cleaned up every year by thousands of people across our planet are things like forks and knives and straws and bags. They're single use plastic items, things that we don't need. They're made to use one time, and then they wind up in our nature, in our waterways, for a lifetime, so, that's the story part. The data's in there, it's factual, it's scientists that are finding this information out for us, but then how do you take that and transform it to something that actually influences somebody, that resonates with them. And so I use storytelling all the time, scientifically informed, fact-based storytelling.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:05): I'm going to switch gears a little bit. And I was fascinated to learn that the North Atlantic right whale is Georgia's state marine mammal. I wasn't aware that the North Atlantic right whale was even found in the waters off Georgia. And then when I did a little more research, I was surprised to find out that Maine, where I live, doesn't claim any marine animal for the state. However, the North Atlantic right whale is a contentious subject in Maine because the lobstering industry is at odds with conservation groups over federal regulations established to protect the highly endangered whale. Can you tell us about the climate in Georgia regarding the North Atlantic right whale?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (15:52): Yeah. People are upset. North Atlantic right whales have been Georgia's official state marine mammal since I think April of 1985. The Georgia General Assembly unanimously voted to make this whale our state marine mammal because there was this incredible discovery back in the early eighties, where they found a calf, a dead neonate off of one of the barrier islands here in Georgia, little St. Simon's Island. Once that discovery was made, scientists from the northeast came down and said, "Well, we've got to figure out what's going on. We didn't even know these whales were... What's happening?" They went up, they got aerial footage. Really interestingly, they went up with volunteer pilots from Delta who just wanted to go up and fly and get more experience flying. And they didn't have research dollars like they do now. So they went up in ad hoc teams and tried to get photos, and they did.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (17:01): And they realized that there were mothers and calves up and down our coast. And they realized in that moment, because they were seeing that these were newborn calves, "Oh my gosh, this is where they're coming to have their babies." And so basically between the south end of South Carolina through the north tip of Florida and Georgia being right in the dead center, that is the calving corridor. And it's been recognized as such since the eighties. Things will shift through time due to climate, but what's happening here in Georgia is people are fired up. They're upset because we're losing whales. We're down to approximately 360 of these whales, left in the ocean.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (17:55): There's serious concerns for the recovery of the species, and they're facing giant challenges. Those two giant challenges are collisions with ships, with vessels. So they get struck by vessels and killed. And the other piece of that is entanglement in the fishing gear, like the lobster gear in the northeast. And those two things are very hard to manage because it pits wildlife, nature, the whale, against industry. And so it's a very hard fight and struggle, but in Georgia, more people now than when I learned about North Atlantic right whales a decade ago, more people than ever are aware that the whales come here in the winter. People actually get together at the start of North Atlantic right whale season and do events to raise awareness for it. Classrooms now do projects at schools.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (19:01): Oh lovely. So why did Paulita, the ocean activist, joined the board of Arts Southeast?

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (19:09): Easy. I love art. I love art. I can't get enough of it. I actually owned art galleries years ago and another life. In Miami and Atlanta, I had art spaces and I've always been a supporter of the arts, especially emerging arts and Art Southeast is actually the location of the very first Whale Week.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (19:40): Before the podcast ends, I'd like to ask you to offer three key things that concern you about the state of the ocean and speak to what people can do to make a positive difference.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (19:52): Absolutely. Three key things about the state of the ocean. First, plastic pollution. The amount and rate of single use plastics being produced and making their way into our oceans is devastating. It's basically equivalent to two dump trucks a minute, pulling up to the ocean and dumping into the ocean. What we can do is we can hold government accountable. We need alternatives to single use plastics. The people producing these plastics should be held accountable. It's their waste. And our government is the one that can do that, so we really need to encourage and push our government to do more, to reduce the amount of single use plastics being produced.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (20:39): The other piece is that we really need to think about endangered species like the North Atlantic right whale. And of course, always balance the concerns of industry with conservation. But we really do need to listen to the conservation voices more, because we have for a long time, been driven by industry. And that's because we always attach jobs and money to that. But there are certain things like endangered species, like the North Atlantic right whale, that we'll never get back again, if we lose them. And that is devastating. So we really need to be, I think, more in touch with how dire situations are, and again, hold our government accountable and hold the industry accountable. They're the economies of scale that have these gigantic national and global impacts on these things.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (21:42): We, as individuals can also make smart choices. Of course, we can choose to use reusable water bottles. We can choose to recycle. However, we are not a system of scale. We're an individual. So, we can do our own little actions every day, but it's unfair to put that pressure on people when we're talking about shifting such gigantic systems.

**Paulita Bennett-Martin** (22:10): And the third piece of this is we need to have responsible fishing. We need to protect things like the Magnuson-Stevens Act, that's our federal policy structure for how we manage fisheries. We need to pay attention to what we're doing to our fisheries, because our fisheries, they are the community under the water, our fish, and how we impact fish and ecosystems and everything can be either wonderful and bountiful, or it can be depleted and catastrophic. So I say that pay attention to fisheries' trends, pay attention to the seafood that you eat. Learn about being in touch with the things that you are a consumer of, but also hold the government accountable, that's what they're there for. They're there to serve us and they want to do their job. And there's some really great people in government that we need to just support them and make sure that they can get good work accomplished.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (23:13): Paulita, thank you. I found it fascinating to talk to you. I appreciate that you found the time to be on the Women Mind the Water Podcast. It has been a pleasure to meet a water woman with such insight. I'd like to remind listeners that I've been speaking with Paulina Bennett-Martin for the Women Mind the Water Podcast series. The series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com An audio only version of this podcast is available on the Women Mind the Water website, on iTunes and other sites, such as Spotify and Stitcher. Women Mind the Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the song, Women of Water. All rights for the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson.