**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:01): Today on The Women Mind the Water podcast I'm speaking with Mariah Reading. Mariah's an eco-artist who applies a zero-waste philosophy to her artistic practice. She paints landscapes on discarded objects. These landscapes, her representative of the places where the objects were found. Once painted, Mariah photographs her work to highlight the landscapes and obscure the discarded object.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:26): 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. I am pleased to welcome Mariah Readingto the Women Mind the Water part of a serious podcast.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:47): Mariah grew up in Maine. There she developed a deep appreciation for nature. This appreciation has led her on a journey, one that includes visiting many of our national parks. Thus far she has visited 24 of them. It's inspired her to create recycled landscapes, an ongoing art project that speaks to the need to preserve and protect our country's diverse landscapes.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:13): Mariah's commitment as an eco-artist includes working as an arts in the parks volunteer in Guadalupe mountains national park assisting in Yosemite's facelift efforts and creating conservation workshops in the Channel Islands National Park. Thank you for joining me on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I'm looking forward to talking with you about your journey to the national parks and the artwork that this has inspired and all your other experiences.

**Mariah Reading** (01:44): Thanks.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:46): I'd like to begin by asking how growing up in Maine led you to become an artist and use art in service of mother nature.

**Mariah Reading** (01:55): So I grew up in Bangor, Maine, and I was just surrounded by this major river and streams close to the forest. I could get to the coast relatively easy. The end of the Appalachian Trail and Baxter was close by. There were all of these moving parts and then amidst all of those landscape features, there were the seasonal changes.

**Mariah Reading** (02:20): So I would get to breathe in all of the sense of spring and then see that transition into fall bright colors. So the landscape of Maine was just constantly moving and it's hard not to be inspired here. So I always grew up doing art. My parents really fostered that in me and my brother, my dad studied art in college. So they were just like, "Take the paint brushes and go." So I just always grew up painting and sketching. And in college I decided to major in visual arts and education. So I focused and that's what I wanted to do getting into college.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (03:05): All right. So there is no disrespect in what I'm going to say, there's only admiration. But when I say that so many artists paint pretty pictures, that's what I see. But I think you are a rarity among artists, because your pictures are both beautiful. And as an artist, you are aware of the environmental impact of painting. What led you to a zero waste practice?

**Mariah Reading** (03:30): It was, again, college, I was immersed in all these different forms of art. I was just so invested in the arts. So not only did I take painting classes, but I took lots of sculpture classes, and dance classes, and photography, and printmaking, and was just trying to do it all so I could suss out what was the best fit for me.

**Mariah Reading** (03:56): And throughout that, a lot of the classes are based on installation or at the end of the class or semester you have a final exhibit, and then what happens to it when it's done, it just gets thrown out. And I notice that in the performing arts as well. A lot of things get reused, but a lot of things just have to be thrown out.

**Mariah Reading** (04:15): And specifically, I took a mold making class where we mix big vats of concrete and rubber molds and just touch our paint brushes on it to work through the medium. And we just had to throw those out because concrete couldn't be washed down the drain, or there's no way to reuse it if you didn't use that exact amount.

**Mariah Reading** (04:37): So that was the moment that I started to really realize that I was inspired by landscapes that ended up being harmed by my practice. So I wanted to switch up my gears and be more mindful about my footprint as an artist and to try to leave the landscapes that inspired me better than I found them.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:01): I think that's wonderful. So let's talk a little bit about your experience with the national park. What was the first one that you ever visited? And what about that experience led you to resolve to visit more of them?

**Mariah Reading** (05:16): I visited Acadia. It was my first park. Wabanaki Confederacy land, I grew up going here. I have pictures of me as a little baby on the Cadillac Mountain, granite on the carriage roads, looking over the beautiful rocky cliff side. And I think it's just one of those things that growing up here, not that I took it for granted, but it's just always there. So I feel like it never really felt like a national park or anything, and you're like, "Oh, I just get to go to the beach. This is so fun."

**Mariah Reading** (05:45): So probably one of the first pivotal national parks that I went to as a more fully formed human was Yosemite. Me and my family went on a California road trip and went through Yosemite Valley, and I was just blown away by the scale of things, like walking down in Acadia, you can see people hiking. You're like, "Oh, there they are." And getting to drive and walk through Yosemite Valley and be like, "I can't even see..." My brain was just out of control, the perspective and the vastness of it all was intangible.

**Mariah Reading** (06:24): So that's where I began to get my NPS fixed, but each one I'm just always amazed that each national park and native land that they're on just provides so, so much inspiration, and there's so much history and dynamic beauty there.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:43): We're very lucky in this country to have those national parks. What was the first item you found that you painted on, and where did you find that item, and what exactly did you paint on it?

**Mariah Reading** (06:55): So the beginning of my project was back in 2016. I went out to the Schoodic Peninsula of Acadia National Park and found multiple pieces of Marine debris. So buoys, ropes, plastic water bottles, of course, fishing line, that sort of coastal community debris. So I painted the Schoodic Peninsula onto it. So at that point I was taking multiple pieces of trash and adhering them together to form a cohesive canvas. So that was the first one.

**Mariah Reading** (07:33): And then from there, I continued going to specific parks, finding multiple pieces of trash, making one canvas and going from there. And then in 2017, I volunteered for the Guadalupe Mountains National Park, and that was my first time getting to really live in a park as opposed to just doing quick day trips or just out and backs. So that's when I started finding single objects that really spoke to me.

**Mariah Reading** (08:03): So that's when I started holding up the objects amidst the landscape and integrating photography into my work. So the pivotal piece there was a half a hubcap that I found, which again it's like a portrait of the landscape, like buoys art portraits of Acadia. Car parts are portraits of Guadalupe Mountains because there's a major highway going through and the hubcap cracked off to form the outline of the mountain range that I happen to be in.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:36): Nice.

**Mariah Reading** (08:37): So it's cool to read up on the texture of the pieces and see how it relates.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:42): Okay. So I hope people who are listening will find time to watch the video version of this podcast, because it's truly amazing how the items Mariah paints are both visible and disappear into the surrounding landscapes.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (08:57): Because the focus of this podcast is on the ocean, I'd like to know, of the national parks you visited that are adjacent to or include the ocean, which has been the most memorable for you, and why, and how has it inspired you?

**Mariah Reading** (09:13): I think it all begins and stems from Acadia and I see Maine as my home. So Acadia is definitely a hugely pivotal place for me to be. It's just so dynamic and to feel a part of the community, I feel even more invested in integrating my art into beautifying the landscape and doing trash cleanups and all of that. So Acadia, obviously it's like a huge place in my heart, but I also, whenever anybody asks what my favorite park is, I always say Channel Islands back on the coast of-

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:00): California.

**Mariah Reading** (10:01): ... Southern California. So I lived in California after graduating for three years and it's cool. They're like on opposite ends of the United States and to see how these very removed parks from each other are related. Both Acadia and the Channel Islands are pristine parks on the land when you're hiking across the landscape up the hills and mountains, no debris, it's beautiful, it's spotless.

**Mariah Reading** (10:28): And then when you get to the shoreline, everything comes up. It's the Marine debris churn. So I love the Channel Islands too. I think seeing the ocean as a resource is really, really interesting. We have pine tree forests here and at the Channel Islands it's a kelp forest with all the Garibaldi fish and the sea lion swimming through.

**Mariah Reading** (10:55): And I'm a big sea kayaker. So I got out to sea kayak through some of their caves out there and it's pretty amazing to push shove off from the hustle and bustle of Southern California and be in one of the most remote national parks in the lower 48. So those are definitely two highlights.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (11:17): So I feel certain that you share of trash in all these places. How do you choose what item you're going to paint on?

**Mariah Reading** (11:25): So there's a lot of factors involved. A lot of times I don't really have the time to do something. I am just going for kayak, or the rain comes in or the weather's below freezing. So I just pick up items and then bring them to my studio space and respond to them there. I'm looking for durable surfaces, but I've recently gotten into painting on clothing items so I can stretch them around canvases.

**Mariah Reading** (11:57): I wouldn't say that I'm looking for anything specifically. Most of the time, the process is improvised. I just happen upon something and that inspires a new way of thinking, a new way of learning and this adjustment process of, "Okay, how am I going to stick some paint on this weird slimy object?" or whatever it happens to be.

**Mariah Reading** (12:20): But I would say throughout this project, a lot of what I found is water bottles, shoes, lots of single shoes, just things that are reflected in our own lives, I would say. Most people wear shoes, most people, as hard as we may try to not use single use plastics, they're ubiquitous.

**Mariah Reading** (12:44): So finding objects that reflect the space that we're in as humans right now is my jam. And also I alluded to this before finding objects that the texture of the objects speaks to the landscape. So like water bottles that have ridges in them and seeing those ridges in the angular rocks on the coast of Maine, for instance, or reading into the objects shape and how that relates to the shape of the environment I'm in.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (13:20): Okay. Do you ever meet people who see your work as little more than a craft project rather than seeing it as art? And what do you say to people who might say that you're just doing craft?

**Mariah Reading** (13:34): I say we don't have to be friends. I've received really good support throughout the years, which I'm always amazed at. I think the demographics that my art is hitting mostly is similar to my demographic. Like my friends from college, we're all in the same age bracket almost. And I'm hoping to expand a little bit more, but I think something specific to millennials and Gen Zers is that a lot of us are experiencing eco-anxiety and this anxiousness associated with arthroplasty that we're living in right now.

**Mariah Reading** (14:29): So I haven't really gotten too much lashback. Sometimes I think especially with fine arts education is a really important thing. So being able to use my art as a tool to educate others on what I'm doing and why I think that's an important facet to it. And then also, I think crafts are just as important as art.

**Mariah Reading** (14:55): So I think there's a lot of times crafts are belittled for some reason as opposed to fine art. And I really don't think, oh my God, there's like... Especially in Maine, there's countless incredible crafts people that are way more talented than I... I hope to be half as talented as they are with book making or basket making or whatever it may be. So I think that's another thing that education could do well to provide just contextualization of crafts are amazing, art is amazing. You're creative and I think bringing beauty to the world can't be wrong.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (15:36): Would I be correct in using the verb transform to describe what you do?

**Mariah Reading** (15:42): Yeah, I would say so. I like to say breathing new life into forgotten objects. But it's actually the best gift when I hop around a lot and move to different parks for residencies. And so a lot of times the staff there or I do workshops, so the visitors there see the art that I'm making and know that I'm hunting for trash.

**Mariah Reading** (16:11): So I've had a few people knock on my cabin doors and leave me hubcaps or leftover shoes. And it's always delightful. This is so nice. Who else would be stoked to just have somebody knock on their door and leave them trash? I'm always very, very pleased.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:35): So what's one of your favorite things that you chose to paint?

**Mariah Reading** (16:44): That somebody's gifted me or just that I've done in general?

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:47): Any of that?

**Mariah Reading** (16:49): Oh man, it's so hard. I think that hubcap one is pretty significant for me, just because it started it all and made me realize that not only could I be a painter, but I could also integrate photography, and sculpture, and be this mixed media artist. So the half a hubcap, El (Hub)Capitan is definitely a significant one that I've held onto, that one's not for sale.

**Mariah Reading** (17:16): But I think each item that I find has its own flare and flirt. So some surfaces are harder to paint on, but you work through it. Recently I've been working with a lot of clothing, like I mentioned. Last winter my big project was finding... I found 20 or 30 pairs or lone gloves and mittens.

**Mariah Reading** (17:45): So I sewed all of those together and then stretched that sewed mass around a canvas. So it was involving a traditional canvas procedure. But on these untraditional surfaces, and then I painted a cove on the coast of Maine that I lived right by onto it. So that one's called [crosstalk 00:18:09].

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:09): That's a real challenge because I would think the paint is soaked up in the glove material.

**Mariah Reading** (18:15): It's all about the layers. There's lots of layers involved, sand things down. So the acrylic paint can adhere more easily to them and then I lay [inaudible 00:18:28] or two or three, sometimes have to wait a couple of days for things to fully dry. It's just all about the layers. But usually I have like two or three to 10 projects working at once. So I'm kind of a dabbler. I like to do one thing, put it to the side, do a little thing, put it to the side and pick and choose.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:52): That's good. So how do you hope your work will affect the conversation about natural settings?

**Mariah Reading** (18:59): I guess my hope is that my work people see their own habits reflected into their work and can make small changes in their lives, and especially as they're navigating through these native lands, national parks, they're getting in the tens of millions of visitation per year. They're being loved to death at this point. So I hope that my art can allow people to pause and think about their own consumption habits and just make small changes.

**Mariah Reading** (19:37): It's really, really overwhelming to be in the midst of this changing world. And I think it's anxiety provoking to be like, "I need to be zero waste immediately." So I'm not close to that. I'm a consumer as well and I'm just taking small steps every day and reusing things slowly but surely to try to become this zero waste artist, the zero waste person. But I couldn't do it all at once. I couldn't have done it as an 18 year old. So I think just seeing opportunities and taking small changes in your life to leave your own personal community better than you found it.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (20:21): That is admirable. Because not everybody feels that way. So what's next for Mariah in terms of national parks to visit?

**Mariah Reading** (20:31): So I'm going to the coast of Oregon soon for a three and a half month long residency at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology. So I'm really looking forward to that. That's not necessarily in a national park, but it's on this beautiful preserve land right on the coast there.

**Mariah Reading** (20:51): So I'm hoping to do a bit of traveling while I'm in Oregon and Washington, potentially Crater Lake is on the list. I'm bringing my snow shoes out and I love the winter. So that's definitely on the list. I haven't had the privilege of getting out there yet.

**Mariah Reading** (21:10): I'm trying to be more mindful of the places that I'm in. And I think when I first started this project, I wanted to go to every single national park as fast as I could, and now it's just like, okay, I'm here. I want to be here. I want to respond to this place that I'm living in now and trying to be more present and reflective of that as opposed to spreading myself so completely.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (21:35): Finally, I ask all of my guests to offer advice to listeners on what they can do to help the ocean. What is your advice on how to protect our natural treasures?

**Mariah Reading** (21:46): Again, I think it's just thinking about your consumption habits. Unfortunately, we're in this system where all of our debris and to detritus ends up in the ocean. So to think about who you buy from, buy locally, limit your plastics, all those things that a million people have said before. But it's true because the watershed carries it. It all goes, we've got the Pacific garbage patch, we've got all this stuff.

**Mariah Reading** (22:18): So I think just putting yourself in the perspective of this global world that our trash, and debris, and pollution and all that, it's not out of sight out of mind by taking it in. It's like in the fibers of the world right now. So I think, again, just going back to making small changes, try to be mindful.

**Mariah Reading** (22:43): And I try to listen to those pings that I get, like when I forget my reusable water bottle or forget my reusable coffee mug or something. And I feel a ping in my heart and I'm like, "No," see that as progress. That is a good thing, you're not complacent about it, you're not indifferent about it. That is a meaningful step and you won't forget it next time. So I think meeting yourself where you're at, but then also trying to limit those plastics and buying smart if you can.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (23:18): So Mariah, thank you for being on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I really am pleased to have had a chance to talk with you about your recycled landscape project. I think what you are doing is brilliant. I know some of my previous guests will be excited to learn about your work. And I wish you luck in your future endeavors. Please keep in touch, maybe we can find a way to collaborate in the future.

**Mariah Reading** (23:41): Yes, I would love to. Yes [crosstalk 00:23:45].

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (23:46): So I'd like to remind listeners that I've been speaking with Mariah Readingfor the Women Mind the Water podcast. 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 use of her 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.