

Introduced

24. When life hands you carp

[THEME MUSIC]

JENNA MERTZ: This is Introduced, where Great Lakes stories meet invasive species science. Introduced is brought to you by Wisconsin Sea Grant and the Great Lakes commission. Hey, Bonnie.

BONNIE WILLISON: Hey, Jenna. How's it going?

JENNA MERTZ: Good. Tim, how are you doing?

TIM CAMPBELL: Great. Thanks for having me.

JENNA MERTZ: So I've got a question for the both of you. Have you ever gone dumpster diving before, or if not, dumpster diving, using something that somebody has thrown out or put on the curb or doesn't want anymore?

TIM CAMPBELL: I think my most cherished dumpster find was two old-- they weren't road bikes, but some sort of like hybrid bikes. I found them in grad school. And my roommate didn't have a bike at the time.

They were the perfect commuter bikes for grad school in that time in our lives. Because they were worth nothing. So if anything bad happened to them on campus, it was totally fine. So I'm always on the lookout for dumpster fines now, thanks to that.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah. For me, dumpster diving is one of my big hobbies. I love looking at people's trash. And here in Madison, I live in a neighborhood where there's a lot of renters. So people are always moving in and out. There's a certain time of year where everyone moves out at once. And there's so much on the curb, and it's such a great time of year.

Earlier this year, I had a really interesting find. I make videos. I'm a videographer. And if you guys have seen people on sets, they sometimes have these huge, white light bouncers. And those are \$100 plus. There was just one of those, lying on my street. And I'm like, this is amazing. I'm taking this and I have not used it.

JENNA MERTZ: That's super cool. For me personally, I think, the I have this pair of two stained glass lamps that my aunt found, that someone threw out in the trash. And they're very functional and beautiful. And I use them every day. So there's some really useful, beautiful items that you can find, that people have thrown out. And it's really surprising to think, hey, someone threw out this light bouncer, someone threw out this completely functional bike.

So, I had the opportunity to talk to an artist who actually takes this trash and turned it into treasure. But because this is Introduced, the trash that we're talking about today isn't like a bike or an old pair of jeans or a coffee table. It's something else entirely.

KIM BOUSTEAD: Buckthorn and carp are my MVPs. If I had to be on a team with a bunch of people, and we needed to survive on our own. I was like, I'll make everybody fish skin pants. And we'll be, yeah, we'll be covered.

JENNA MERTZ: That's Kim Boustead. Kim is an artist and a graphic designer based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who makes art using invasive species. She's made inks and dyes from buckthorn, earrings from invasive carp scales, and, as she alluded to right there, she's also working on fish skin leather.

TIM CAMPBELL: That's so cool. I would love some fish skin pants. I think they would really round out my Stop Aquatic Hitchhikers outfit, between the jersey and fish skin pants. Perfect.

JENNA MERTZ: Another idea, Tim, is that in addition to the pants, we could have a whole Sea Grant-branded carp leather tracksuit. [CHUCKLES] Sorry, I'm just picturing this right now. So you could have a carp shirt, carp jacket. It could just be fish everywhere.

BONNIE WILLISON: Would it smell too?

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah, it would possibly smell like fish. And then, Tim, like, you definitely be the coolest person at the boat launch.

TIM CAMPBELL: I already thought I was the coolest person at the boat launch. But having the carp outfit, I think, would really bring it up a notch.

JENNA MERTZ: And look, here's the thing we could complete the look with carp-scale earrings. So I bring that up because that's actually how I was introduced to Kim's work. So I saw these fish scale earrings on her website, which then took me to her Instagram. And I saw all of her creations. And the thing about these earrings is that they're beautiful. You would never actually realize they were fish scales at all. They're these creamy, translucent disks. You might think that they were plastic or something else. And I was just taken by how beautiful they were, and that it was made from this really uncommon material.

So that then got me thinking, what do we do with all the invasive species that we've picked, or captured, or scraped off boats? What do we do with all of them? So, for example, have either of you ever participated in work parties clearing buckthorn or garlic mustard from a local park?

And I'll interject here and say buckthorn, if you're unfamiliar, is this shrub or small tree. And it can quickly take over open areas and crowd out native plants.

BONNIE WILLISON: I've been a part of a few buckthorn-cutting sessions myself around here.

TIM CAMPBELL: And I've pulled some garlic mustard in my day.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah, and it's one of those things where you can see what you've picked. And usually when you're in a work group, you end up picking quite a bit. When I was an intern at a couple places, we did a lot of invasive species removal. And a lot of it was buckthorn. A lot of it was garlic mustard or sweet clover.

And when we did it, we would put it in sacks. And then we would throw those sacks onto the back of a truck. And it like went to what was called the pit of death, which is where we would dump these sacks of invasive species.

And I don't know what happened to him. It was just like, OK, here they go. Maybe they get burned, maybe they get chipped. If we cut buckthorn, sometimes, we stacked it in the woods. But anything that I throw in the trash, I stopped thinking about it after I threw it away.

But the thing with Kim here, is that she didn't stop thinking about it. She saw value in what people were throwing out and decided to do something about it. So today on Introduced, what happens when life hands you lemons? Here in the Great Lakes, we've got a lot of invasive species that are here to stay. How do we make lemonade?

We hear one artist take.

BONNIE WILLISON: I mean, making lemonade out of lemons. But what about making carp pants out of carp?

TIM CAMPBELL: And I much prefer carp pants to carp lemonade.

[WHIMSICAL MUSIC]

JENNA MERTZ: While Kim always had an interest in art and being outside, she didn't just wake up one day and decide to make art from invasive species. Her journey began over a decade ago in Chicago with a dress.

KIM BOUSTEAD: I went to an exhibit at the Field Museum. And there was this gown that was an, it was an Isaac Mizrahi gown that was sequin, white sequin. And from far away, it was just really pretty. And I went to go look up closer, and I saw that it was very textured sequins. And the didactic said it was made from pressed, bleached salmon skin.

And so that got me thinking about this idea of, we've got excess of carp. You can use that as a material. What could we do with that?

JENNA MERTZ: A few years after this encounter, Kim moved to Minneapolis and started volunteering with a local organization called The Friends of the Mississippi River. And she spent a lot of time removing buckthorn. So she's working in these areas, she's cutting this stuff, she's hauling it. And she's thinking about this dress, and the wheels in her brain begin turning.

KIM BOUSTEAD: I really was interacting a lot with buckthorn, and starting to see, really, how much of an excess there was of it. And it was really pretty wood. I was just like, wow. There has to be some sort of

use for this. And I can't think of a better material to source than something that you have a lot of that nobody else wants.

BONNIE WILLISON: That's really cool. It reminds me of my friend from college, growing up in Chicago. Their family would go out and not get a Christmas tree every year, but they would get buckthorn, and put it up and decorate it.

JENNA MERTZ: Did they cut like an actual like small tree, or do they piece together the buckthorn or what? Do you know what it looked like?

BONNIE WILLISON: I think they went out and got a bush-sized buckthorn, from a riverbed, if I'm remembering this correctly. I always really like that story, and that reminds me, it seems like, the same spirit as what Kim is doing.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. And so Kim uses different parts of that buckthorn for different projects. So I mentioned this earlier, but she's made ink from the berries, which are this dark purple color. Kim's also used the wood, not for a Christmas tree, but for other decorative purposes.

And the thing about buckthorn wood is that, when you cut into it, it's this bright yellow color. And it has an orange center. And it's really pretty. It's really beautiful. And having cut a lot of it and stacked a lot of it in the woods. I never realized that it was pretty or beautiful, until Kim said that.

For me, I always thought of buckthorn as, this is a nuisance, a nemesis. I have to be out here picking this stuff. And so it's like a whole paradigm shift for me. Oh, buckthorn is beautiful. It has this beautifully colored wood.

TIM CAMPBELL: It's hard not to think of some of the invasive species, especially some of the plants we work with, as being beautiful or just aesthetically pleasing, like purple loosestrife. Who doesn't like a nice purple flower?

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah. When I was in high school, I was very into photography and doing photo shoots. And I found a beautiful purple flower on the side of the road in a wetland, and had me and my friends pose next to it, and did a little photo shoot. And I'm pretty sure it was purple loosestrife, which is funny.

But a lot of these plants were brought over because they're beautiful. People use them in their gardens and stuff. And they wanted to bring them when they immigrated. So it makes sense.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. And Kim recognized that it was beautiful-- buckthorn, the wood. And she also wanted to do something with all of it. So what she did was, she paired up with a local ecologist, and began brainstorming ideas for a workshop.

KIM BOUSTEAD: And so we decided to collaborate. And we made buckthorn wreaths while learning about buckthorn and its impact on the Mississippi River. It was a free event at a place called Water Bar. We had a great time. It was like really fun. And I was like, oh, it's nerdy.

And it was a different entry point for people who think of conservation work as just work. So it really, to me, it was this really important stage of awareness for people. And from that, people had reached out to me and said, I'm starting to see buckthorn everywhere. I'm like, yeah, that's right. It is everywhere.

JENNA MERTZ: So after this, she began thinking about, what can I do next? And that salmon skin dress from Chicago was still on her mind. And she had this experience where she transformed this abundant, unwanted plant into art. These buckthorn wreaths. Why not try and do something with invasive carp? So a quick explainer on invasive carp, for those who haven't listened to episodes 4 and 5 of season one, there are four species of invasive carp-- bighead, grass, silver, and black. And invasive carp can outcompete native fish. And when they really take off, like in a river, they can be everywhere. So if you've seen, like me, videos of giant fish jumping out of a river and slapping people in the face, those are carp-- specifically, those are silver carp. And that was probably the Illinois River.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah. It's funny. One of my first things I did when I got hired here was go with Tim to Kentucky to an invasive carp conference. We were at a reservoir, I think. And just, I saw so many carp, more carp than I've ever seen. We were netting them and everything, and demonstrating how to remove them from water bodies.

But I've seen, when they do that, they go in and they net all the carp in a lake, and they take them out and they either sell them, or sometimes I'm like, what do they do with all those fish? Are they just going to waste? It's disturbing to think about when you see all the fish that they take out sometimes.

TIM CAMPBELL: And I think that's a really common concern and question we get when people talk about these harvest programs is, people want invasive species controlled, but they also are concerned about waste.

BONNIE WILLISON: So it sounds like Kim decided to make leather? Is that right? How did she start that process?

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. So Kim didn't know how to make leather of any kind at the beginning of this process. She had no clue. So she did what many of us do when we don't know how to do something or what we're doing. She looked it up on YouTube.

[WHIMSICAL MUSIC]

KIM BOUSTEAD: The things that were popping up had to do with urine tanning. And there was also ammonia tanning, which is the same idea, but only you don't have to use urine in order to make the ammonia. So I started with the ammonia. And I thought it was going just fine. I decided it was time to stir this thing. And I opened it up. And clearly something had gone wrong. And it was completely rotten. And the smell just, like, took over the whole house. And I puked. And I remember I had two roommates at the time. And I had tried to set up fans by the time they were entering. It was too late. They're like, what is that smell? And can you move out?

TIM CAMPBELL: Yeah. That story did not turn out the way I thought it would. Although maybe that should be expected for amateur adventures in tanning.

JENNA MERTZ: And YouTube. YouTube can take you down a lot of paths, not all of them the correct ones. [CHUCKLES] But what's great about Kim and talking with her, is that she isn't afraid of failure. She said something like, most of her work is just fails. And that's a really big part of her art. So tanning with ammonia, that was a dud. So Kim and her friends decided to pivot to option two. Option two was tanning with urine-- their urine, to be exact.

KIM BOUSTEAD: So this is really bizarre, but I think you guys are up for it. But there were three of us. And we were saving our pee for a while. And my friend was putting it on top of her refrigerator. She had two kids, and they told the people in their class about it, which I think is really funny. But the process was, you soak it in this urine, and then you stir it, and you tend to it. And then the next phase is that you rub lard into it. And so we had given it enough time that we thought would be OK. And took the skins out, which we didn't realize were rotting. Because they didn't smell as bad as the other stuff. But we literally were taking urine-soaked, rotting fish skin and rubbing lard into it. And it smelled, like I said, really, really bad. But we were like, I don't know if this is right or not. So that was when I had to take a couple years off.

BONNIE WILLISON: This liquid is, this the carp lemonade that you're referencing in the beginning of the episode, Tim?

TIM CAMPBELL: Like I said, carp pants are much preferable to carp lemonade. Carp pants every day of the week.

JENNA MERTZ: So one thing I love about this whole process is that it's so gross. Kim's failures are actually rancid. They smell bad. And it makes me feel better about my own mistakes in trying new things. When I try new stuff, or I'm writing, or I try new art, or whatever, it doesn't usually make my roommates want to move out, or it doesn't make me want to vomit, and doesn't smell too bad. So I admire Kim for doing this in the face of not knowing quite exactly how to do it yet, and not being scared of making mistakes.

So after these two experiences, Kim really wanted to learn how to properly tan fish skin. So she reached out to an expert. She reached out to Janie Chang, who's an artist from Vancouver, Canada, who's also an expert at making leather from salmon skin. And one of the most important things that Kim learned from Janie is that you don't need urine to tan fish skin.

BONNIE WILLISON: There's an easier way?

JENNA MERTZ: There's absolutely an easier way, and less stinky way, and does involve collecting your bodily fluids on the top of the fridge.

KIM BOUSTEAD: There's three different processes that she had taught me for making the leather. So I tend to do bark tanning. I've used sumac, and willow is the plant that I like to use the most. Because word on the street is that it makes the softest leather.

And that's what I wanted from this leather. It can be a little bit crispy. So you collect bark, you collect the plants. You remove the bark-- very time-consuming. And then you boil it down like a tea. And you prep, you skin the fish, which is also really, just, I'm like, what am I doing with my life, when I go to skin this stuff?

So scrape it, you know, clean it, and then let it sit-in the solution for a while. And tending it, it takes a week or two.

JENNA MERTZ: So with Janie's help. Kim's attempt at making fish leather was a lot more successful. There were no stink bombs. There were no jugs of urine. There was no rubbing of lard into rotting fish skin. It was just, real, 100% made in America fish leather.

KIM BOUSTEAD: There's a moment where-- so you take it out of the solution. You roll it up in a towel. And it looks like the thing that you've been looking at for the past two weeks. But then you roll it up in a towel, squeeze out all the moisture, and then when you unroll it, it looks like leather. And it made me squeal with excitement because it was so cool that, I'm like, I did that with things that are just all around me.

JENNA MERTZ: All right. So here's some photos. So you can see that, Bonnie. And if you scroll through, there's lamprey.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah. Wow. This is not exactly what I was expecting. There's little bags that she's made that are maybe canvas. And then the bottom of them have this really crinkly leather that is brown. There's a green one. I just want to feel that leather.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. The fish skin bags of the carp, to me, it almost looks like dragon scales. I immediately saw that, I'm like, oh, that's some Dungeons and Dragons stuff right there. Some dungeon master has to get one of these carpskin bags.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah, that's super cool. And she makes it from stuff that's just in the world around her and uses it to make stuff. I am wondering, though, where does she get the carp?

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. That's an important question. So Kim told me she got her carp from the Minnesota DNR, who issued her a permit to possess them. And that's because carp are invasive species. And you can fact check me here, Tim. But I know there are lots of rules and regulations that govern if you can have them, if you can move them around. What can you tell us about that, Tim?

TIM CAMPBELL: Yeah. This is a cop out of an answer, but it's complicated. Varies state to state, species to species. So I really think it's context dependent. And if you want to make carp pants or buckthorn art

and sell it, you should check with your local invasive species coordinator, or somebody with a state agency first.

And there might be different rules between if you're just making it for personal consumption versus if you want to sell it. So check with somebody.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. And that's a good reminder. And Kim is careful about following those rules. And that's why she also partners with ecologists. So people who know those rules and regulations. And that's important to her too, when she's teaching people how to make art with invasive species, like the buckthorn wreath making workshop. That education component is really important to her.

KIM BOUSTEAD: It is like really fun to share these things that seem like magic with other people. It's exciting to create things with people. It's exciting to give people the tools they need to make something and know that they will be inspired, and probably teach other people.

But I just really think it is an exciting entry point, inspiring and exciting entry point to environmental issues, like poor water quality, and just getting people interested in that and starting to pay attention. If people are touching carp and painting them and making prints of them, it really holds in their memory.

And it is a positive thing, too. You're creating something out of that. But it also really makes you understand how real this thing is. And I think that it's memorable.

TIM CAMPBELL: I really like that Kim is engaging people with these workshops that might not be interested in these issues, otherwise.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. And it's in a really profound way. You're handling the fish or the buckthorn. You're making something out of it. And in that process of handling it, you're getting to know the plants and animals.

And I know Kim talked about this. For her, working with invasive species has made her feel even more connected to the world around her.

KIM BOUSTEAD: I feel like relationship with a place is a very abstract concept. But people can understand relationship with a friend, or anything like that. And it's just this idea of caring and reciprocal relationship, where you're giving and taking.

And I feel like the practice that I use to collect these things really familiarizes me with a place, and makes me understand just how changes in climate can affect these plants and the life that is around it-- extreme drought and excess heat, really.

I'll be like, oh, all of a sudden, there's no berries, or the plant that was usually here isn't here. So I feel like, by encouraging other people to also use those methods, they can start developing stronger relationships with place.

TIM CAMPBELL: I think there could be ways that invasive species make you notice things about your local environment more. It might be an entryway into paying a little bit more attention. If you care about invasive carp, you might also be noticing water quality or aquatic plants or the other fish in the river.

If you're cutting buckthorn, maybe you're noticing the birds that are in the same space. For me, like being able to reliably identify phragmites has made me check out some habitats and ecosystems that I haven't always been inherently interested in.

JENNA MERTZ: Yeah. Hearing Kim talk about that, it made me pause and think. Because it makes a lot of sense. Like when I was out picking buckthorn or garlic mustard, that was the time in my life I was actually learning the most about local ecology. I was out with someone who knew this stuff, so they could point out, like this plant and that plant.

But I remember when we were picking sweet clover, or maybe it was garlic mustard. And it was hot and sweaty, and I was just like done with it, but probably had four more hours of work left. And we saw this little jumping mouse. And I would not have seen this adorable jumping mouse.

And I think it's called a meadow jumping mouse or something. The rodent people can let us know if that's right. But I never would have seen that or witnessed that, or had that experience if I hadn't been out there picking garlic mustard. So I think there is really something to be said about interacting with your environment opens you up to different experiences.

TIM CAMPBELL: Yeah. I think that's a really good thought. When people learn about invasive species and maybe connect more with their environment, maybe it can help them think a little bit more about what they're for, and not what they're against.

None of us like invasive species. And we know the impacts they have to the environment. But just trying to reconnect with the ideas of why we're managing invasive species, like we like healthy, functioning ecosystems. We like to be able to go fishing. We want to see certain kinds of birds.

And that's really why we're engaging in this, not because these species are the enemy, or something like that.

JENNA MERTZ: And I think that's like where art can maybe help us see things differently. Kim probably wouldn't have been thinking about invasive carp in this way, if she hadn't seen that salmon skin dress in Chicago, and thought, huh. That's really interesting. Can I do this with other fish, especially all these abundant fish that we don't want?

And so art opened that door to invasive species, and then invasive species, in a way, opened the door to the environment around her.

I like to think about Kim foraging along the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, cutting buckthorn, and skinning carp, and just falling in love with this world that's around her, that she's gotten to know so well.

KIM BOUSTEAD: There's a Mary Oliver quote-- attention is the beginning of devotion. And I feel like it really is this starting point of people caring more, or figuring out how to start their relationship with environment.

JENNA MERTZ: So if you're interested in seeing more of Kim's work, or would like to make some fish leather yourself, you can check out Kimberlyboustead.com or her Instagram to learn more or sign up for her workshops.

[MELLOW MUSIC]

This season of Introduced is written and produced by Bonnie Willison, Jenna Mertz, Tim Campbell, and Nicole Angell. Please subscribe, rate, review, and share this podcast with a friend. This podcast is a production of Wisconsin Sea Grant, with support from the Great Lakes Commission. Thanks for listening, and see you next time.

JENNA MERTZ: Can I address both of you, and say, hey, Bonnie and Tim? Or should I just address one person, and be like, hey, Bonnie? We should just do a triangle of people.

BONNIE WILLISON: Yeah.

JENNA MERTZ: OK, let's just give it a try. OK. OK. Hey, Bonnie.

BONNIE WILLISON: Hey, Jenna.

JENNA MERTZ: Hey, Tim.

[LAUGHTER]

TIM CAMPBELL: Hey, Jenna. Hey, Bonnie. Why are introductions so hard?

JENNA MERTZ: I don't know why this is so difficult.

BONNIE WILLISON: OK. OK.

JENNA MERTZ: I'll mention both of you. And then you'll be like, hey. And then Tim will be like, how are you doing?

BONNIE WILLISON: I'll say, how are you doing? And then Tim will go, thanks for having me, or something.

[LAUGHTER]

It's great to be here this afternoon.

JENNA MERTZ: OK. OK. Sorry I'm just going to laugh doing this. Hey, Bonnie.

BONNIE WILLISON: Hey, Jenna. How's it going?

JENNA MERTZ: Good. Tim, how are you doing?

TIM CAMPBELL: Great. Thanks for having me. So excited to be here with you. Both of you, who I've never talked to before.

[CHUCKLES]

JENNA MERTZ: It sure sounds like it, doesn't it?