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Interview with Heather Doherty

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Interviewer: Maggie Higby

Interviewee: Heather Doherty

Date: Tuesday, February 7th, 9:30am

Place: Brown Family Environmental Center (Resource Center), Gambier, OH

Maggie Higby: Let's just introduce ourselves. This is Maggie Higby interviewing Heather Doherty. And, um, Heather can you tell me what you do here at the BFEC?

Heather Doherty: I'm the program manager.

MH: Okay, so what does that mean? What do you do?

HD: I do environmental education programs...um, for the college and students but also for the greater community.

MH: Okay, great. Like the field trips.

HD: Right. We do field trips for the elementary school kids. We organize a lot of programs on a regular basis. Like we just had somebody in here who presented venomous snakes of Ohio. That was fun. [laughs] But yeah, the opportunities to learn about and connect with the out-of-doors is really our mission.

MH: Cool. Um...and, um on a broader scale what is the BFEC all about?

HD: Well, let's see...we have a five hundred acre preserve here, and so our mission is to conserve natural diversity and...make this space available for, uh, fulfilling Kenyon's mission, so that's education for a lot of different classes. Um, some of them are science related, some aren't. We have anthropology and art classes coming down, so they use our facility. So there's a lot of science, um...uh, research that happens here. So this is a – kind of functioning as a, like a field station. Um...and then the – but we also provide opportunities to connect people with nature in the community as well. Yeah.

MH: Okay, great. Um...so there are numerous trails around here that you guys have created and maintained.

HD: Right. Right.

MH: How does your proximity to the Gap Trail, um...enhance the BFEC or vice versa?

HD: You know, so we have...eight miles of nature trail here. And the – and you're right, the Gap Trail does run right through the middle of our preserve, as does the Kokosing River. So I think it's...it's a – it's really wonderful that we have all these things coming together in one place. And I think we could take

greater advantage of the fact that a lot of people come and – to use those facilities. And we actually have a plan in place right now to do that; to enhance orientation and interpretive signage that would help draw some of those people here. Um...because I think right now, if you're on the Gap Trail, you can access our trails off the Gap Trail, but there's not great signage about where you are and what's available. Um, so we need to do a better job about making visitors feel comfortable about that. Um...from our – from a...a kind of outdoor, recreation perspective it's really great that I think all three of those things intersect. So it helps create kind of a critical mass of resources, which I think our – our county is really lucky to have. Yeah...yeah.

MH: Yeah, absolutely. That's a great idea, having more sign posts. I know I'm always running along here and I want to go up into the trails and it's like – sometimes I see one and I'm like, "Is that – is that a trail?"

HD: Right. Right. We – well we kind of...we've expanded the trails significantly in the last...five years. And so the signage is – is catching up with that. Yeah...yeah.

MH: Great. Great, that's awesome. Um...how, how much usage would you say the Gap Trail gets?

HD: They estimate that they have a thous – a million visits...is that right? A year. And so that – some of those are people, the same people who come again and again and again...um, who, who walk the trail every day. But some of that is...um...you know, people who are making day trips to come here. So, so we...I consider it, at least a regional attraction. So people from adjacent counties from central Ohio using it.

MH: Absolutely. Do you feel that – when you look out your window do you often see people?

HD: Yeah, I – in good weather, yes. And there's – there's days when it...when the trail can be really busy. Lots and lots of people on it. I'm not – I'm not on it...um, I'm not personally on it a ton. Um...but, yeah, I think...I – I don't – that's an, that's an estimate. But I think that's – that's probably not far off the mark. So.

MH: So, so you said you don't personally use it a lot. Do you prefer to use the wilderness trails or -?

HD: I do prefer nature trails. It's also...I have, um, I have two young children now. So, figuring out how to get the family on a bike is tough. [laughs] We have one tow-behind...thing. Now we have a second child and it's like, "I'm not sure how this works." I've used it for cross-country skiing when it snowed. Um, that's really great. And I do walk down it some. But I used it a lot more, um, before...before I had children.

MH: When you were solo.

HD: Yes. Yes I used it...I would ride my bike on it. There were, there were times when I was riding it, you know...at least a dozen times, um, a summer. So...pretty, pretty regularly. Yeah. Yeah.

MH: Um...so, why do you think that the community values the trail so much?

HD: I think...It's like, you can go for a walk anywhere, but I think it's nice that it's really dedicated to pedestrians and cyclists. So there's less concern about...you know, safety. And also it's really...it's kind of, it's really beautiful. I really like, when you go – if you go – have you been, have you been on the entire thing? Right. So if you go that way –

MH: Towards Mount Vernon...?

HD: Yes. I'm sorry – if you go West – you're, you walk through, I think it's a really nice woodland. Um...and the trail starts in Mount Vernon so I think that's a really nice access point for people who live in Mount Vernon. Um...and then, of course, it cuts around Gambier and Kenyon, and then it runs through some really...um...more open farm country. So I think it's just...I just think it's, um, really attractive. And I think, you know, you see a lot of people out there really intent on exercising. I think for people who are trying to be fit, like, it's just – it's just a great resource. Um...there's also a few places where they've put playgrounds next to the trail, I think that's probably really attractive to some people. Um...so there's – there's also the, the history of the trail. Of course, this used to be...it used to be a – a train line.

MH: You think that's helpful for people...?

HD: I think people...I think some people really enjoy the...the...I think it's a caboose that's in Gambier? I think - someone told me – you know, there's people in the world who are birders. You know, people who go crazy to see birds and they'll go out of their way to see a bird they think is hanging out in an area, and someone was telling me recently that they think there's also train people, that go out of their way – and people have stopped in here to ask us where this is. Where the caboose is. Um...I think it's a – it's a nice connection to history, too. Um...so...I don't know, it's just, it's...on a nice day, it's nice to have a – a space that's really dedicated to recreation and being outside and enjoying nature. So.

MH: Um...and how do you think that relates to the sustainability of the Knox County Community as a whole? You know, does this enhance and sustain it?

HD: Well, you know, I think – I think it's really exciting. You know, I was talking about the connection between different resources, um, earlier, but we actually...we have a – every county has a Convention and Visitors Center. Which you might not...you might not expect for a rural county. But it's really great. Our – our Visitor and Convention Bureau just put together a new marketing package called Knox Ways. And so they're highlighting, um...all the things with recreational and scenic beauty in the county. So we have scenic byways, we have a scenic river which is really special. We have the Kokosing Gap Trail...um...we have a – a really active park district. Um, Knox County Park District. And voters passed a levy, um, to fund them a couple years ago. And that's...you definitely cannot take that for granted. So the community supported that. I think that really shows that they value these resources. And then, you've got us here. So I think...there's a lot of, again, like building a critical mass of things, like if you're – if you're interested in...like if you live in Columbus and you want to go someplace where you can be out in the country, um, there's all those things kind of combine for a good experience, and a varied experience. Um...which is, I think – I think it's really exciting, and I think...you know, a lot of rural counties don't have that kind of...I don't know, that kind of interest and support for stuff like that. So...I

think, it makes me hopeful that we have, um, that people understand that there's a – a dollar amount associated with conserving these resources. So people like the fact that they can walk through a forest on the trail, um, and they can...they can access the river in several places and then there's lots of hiking trails. And then – but they also realize that, um, that has the potential to bring money into the, um, into the community because when people travel here to do those things they're spending money. You know, for food and transportation and perhaps lodging, and...um, you can rent bikes in Gambier now. Which is great, I think that kind of enterprise has been around off and on. But there's all kinds of little opportunities for it to kind of pump money into the economy. So...it's – the local value for our own use, but it's also, of economic value. So I – I think our community's invested in that means that they're starting to value that. So.

MH: That's so nice that you feel such support.

HD: Yeah...I guess I don't have a lot to compare it to. But it does seem like a lot of rural communities...also just don't have these – just don't have the...the – the resources to begin with. Like, they don't have any trails, they don't have a scenic river. I – I think this is a really beautiful place to live. And I think...it's great, I think a lot of people feel pride about that. And that's not – that's not true for a lot of places, and it's not true for Ohio in general. [laughs] [phone rings] Sorry about that.

MH: That's okay, you can pick it up if you want.

HD: I'll – I'll pick it up in a minute. It's just loud!

MH: No problem.

HD: So...I guess how that ties in with...I'll wait until it's done ringing. I think how that ties into sustainability is that – that means that...hopefully this is, we're creating a future where people will be healthy. Which has all kinds of financial...um...ramifications. Um, but we're also, like we've got this real kind of excuse to, um, conserve natural resources. Which is, I think, a, you know, a big part of sustainability is, do we have, um – do we have green space that meets our needs? And...um, and also, having a trail, I'm sure some people use it for transportation. Which I think is pretty exciting. I know some people ride their bike...some people who live in Mount Vernon and work at Kenyon use the bike trail for – to commute. And I – I don't know a ton of people who do that, but I know it happens now and then. So I think any – any opportunities for that kind of stuff I think is really great. Um...but it's, like, we're building an economic – kind of an economic engine off of something that is – that is inherently green. So.

MH: That's very cool.

HD: Yeah. I think so too. Yeah, I don't know how much money it generates and...the con – the Visitor and Convention Bureau would have more actual information about, um, about that. And kind of what their goals are for that.

MH: Visitor and Convention Bureau?

HD: Yes...and I can get you contact info on that. The guy – the director is, uh, Pat Crow. They also have a website called Knox Ways, I think.

MH: I think I've been on their website, actually. I should explore it.

HD: Yeah. Yeah...so. I think...what else? So, yeah. I – I think the more – the cool thing about this particular site where the environmental center is...again, there's kind of an intersection of the trail and our site, and...the – the river. One of the really cool things about the trail is that it crosses the river in several places. And it has these -

MH: Beautiful trestle bridges.

HD: Yeah! These...awesome bridges. I think the one...the one just to the East of us, between the environmental center and the KAC is really gorgeous. And it's actually a really gorgeous spot on the river, and it's actually a really nice space to access the river. Um...so, um, so I think all those things just build off of each other. And the – and there's things like, you know, people tell us as they're walking west towards Mount Vernon they can see mink along the river. Um, and they come up on the trail. They're a – they're a river-y species, so they...but the trail is really close to the river in lots of places, so mink will be up on the trail or they'll see them from the trail, we have...um, a bald eagle nest two miles downstream along the trail. And there are several nesting pairs in the county, so I saw a – I saw a bald eagle out my window yesterday, flying over the river. So...you know, those types of things are, I think – really build our opportunities for eco-tourism. And we have, you know, endangered species of birds, we have endangered fish, we have endangered salamanders in the river, I think these are things that people are excited to see.

MH: That's so cool.

HD: Yeah.

MH: Um, that's all that I have...but is there a part of the story I missed, or something you want to add?

HD: I don't think so. If I think of something else...If I think of something else I will – I will let you know.

MH: Well, that's great. I had never thought of it in that eco-tourism sort of way. It's very cool. Well, thank you so much, Heather.

HD: You're welcome.