

John L. Brooks 03/22/2007

MM -- ... and the last name is spelled B R O O K S. And John, usually the first question we ask is -- how did you come to work with the Fish & Wildlife Service?

JB -- I started as a Refuge Manager Trainee in Moiese, Montana, at the National Bison Range. I received a cooperative education student program grant, if you will, from the University of Montana. I attended the University of Montana between 1976 through 1981. So I believe in 1977 I started working for the Service at the National Bison Range for that summer, and that was my first exposure to the Fish & Wildlife Service. From there I went back to school to finish my degree in wildlife management. The following summer I was detailed to Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Medicine Lake, Montana. So I got an idea of what prairie wildlife was like. And it was very, very fascination experience for me. I'd never experienced anything like that [indecipherable] habitat, all four species of grouse, everything. And then that fall, because they wanted concurrent duty stations, I drove from there down to the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. It was very cold. How can I ... I was not accustomed to -- being from California, but I dealt with the dynamics of the elk, gave interpretative tours, did all the jobs of an assistant refuge manager, and then went back to school. Now, because of these summer jobs, and because of that fall quarter that I took off, I did miss some class time at the University of Montana, so that's why I graduated in 1981. My final duty station as a cooperative student was at ... I'm sorry, was the National Elk Refuge. That's when I graduated. In '81 I was picked up full time by the Service as an Assistant Refuge Manager at Des Lacs National Wildlife Refuge in North Dakota -- Kenmare, North Dakota. Enjoyed it enormously. Unfortunately, a week after ... into the job, I had a very serious car accident, and was in the hospital for a month. Broke my wrist. Broke my legs. Glass in my eye. I was really in bad shape. So, it was at the same time Reaganomics had taken over, so my position was cut. So, here I am thinking 'alright, I just spent my whole life trying to get this job and now it's gone; what am I gonna do?' And I was really, really depressed at that time. But the Service came through. And they said 'look, you know, let's try to find you something somewhere else.' So, back then we had area offices. So I went to ... it was not Fargo ... must have been ... I can't recall the name of the city ...

MM -- Was it ...

JB -- Minot ... I'm sorry?

MM -- It was in North Dakota?

JB -- It was in North Dakota. It wasn't Minot. It was sal... the capital ...

MM -- Bismarck?

JB -- Bismarck. Thank you very much. So I went to Bismarck and worked in the area office. And I was able to work with all the different programs at that time. And when it came to working with law enforcement, I really didn't work with them. There was just a special agent for the whole state, and he basically gave me a summary of what law enforcement does. And he mentioned the wildlife inspector program. And I had recalled seeing something in National Geographic magazine at one time -- it was a front cover and it had these foxes or something, and they talked about endangered wildlife and stuff. And I remember thinking 'wow, that would be really cool to do [indecipherable] endangered wildlife.' So when he brought it up I said 'yeah, yeah, I want to do that.' So I applied for the job in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas, and Brownsville, Texas. I received the job in Dallas/Ft. Worth and then I started my career in law enforcement. So I drove down there, took up my first position. Although I have to say, my heart still was in the refuge system. I really wanted to be a refuge manager, but this was the next best alternative. I was there for three years, I believe, and while I was there the other two inspectors and I, we had the highest seizure rate in the nation, as far as for stopping endangered species from coming into the country. I learned a lot about international trade, about people who pass through customs -- what they bring. I was amazed. And I recall the first time I seized something on my own after being trained. Was a lady coming in with a pair of sea turtle boots. Customs inspector called me over and said 'this lady has some sea turtle products.' And so I looked at them and I identified them as spring sea turtle. I advised her what the laws were, and that it was illegal to bring in. And she was all 'if I'd have known, I never would have done this.' And I believed her. And I said 'well, it's okay. Do you have anything else?' She goes 'oh, no. No. That was it. Believe me, I never would have done this if I would have known.' I said 'okay. Well, if you just want to sign this abandonment form, you know, we'll get this taken care of.' And I could see out of the corner of my eye the customs guy looking at her, and he was raising an eyebrow. And he said 'wait a minute.' He said 'open

that bag.' And opened the bag, and there was another pair. And I just looked at her and my mouth dropped. I couldn't believe that she lied to me. That was the first time I was lied to - - and it was the last time I really trusted anybody. Unfortunately, I lost my innocence at that point. So we went on. The other inspector became a special agent. I stayed there until '84, then I applied for the special agent program, because I couldn't get back into the refuge system. And I was accepted. And so I went to Glynco, Georgia, where we have our criminal investigative training. And that was in 1984. And I was a class of 16. At that time, that was the largest class the Fish & Wildlife Service had put on for special agents, really beefing up their force. Congress had mandated a minimum of 112 agents for the nation. At that time, we had like 160 or something like that -- not a lot. Met other agents-to-be from all over the country, all different walks of life, different professions -- state wardens, refuge officers, college students. And we had a really close group; it was called the 'wolf pack.' Sixteen weeks there; learned everything about criminal investigations; learned everything about Fish & Wildlife laws. And then took off to Columbus, Ohio. That was my first duty station. Was issued a gun; that was the first I ever had a gun. And it was overwhelming, I have to tell you this, when I was holding this, I could just feel the power. I said 'wow, I really have a lot of power here, and I can't take this for granted, that I have the power of life and death, so to speak, and the government, the Service is entrusting me with this and to do a good job.' And I wanted to do the best job I could. When I arrived in Columbus, I had my supervisor, Andy Pierce, show me around, got me places to, you know, got me familiar with the area, and pretty much went to work right away. And I recall thinking that I was over my head. It was just so much. I mean, I went from a biologist - where I was comfortable; I went from a wildlife inspector - where I was the best; and now something and I'm just a number and really not comfortable. Because my whole essence was not about law enforcement -- it was about conservation. Come to learn out ... come by ... I come to find out later that the law enforcement component is just a great integral part of what conservation is all about. It took me about, oh, I'd say a year, for one day I just woke up and said 'you know what, I can do this job.' And I never looked back after that. But I do recall my first assignment, there was an operation called Operation Rockfish taking place. It was a special operations investigation, multi-states in the east coast, state officers, federal officers; we all got together for a big briefing and were going to take down these people who were trading illegal fish. We all had our assignments, and I was the only federal agent on my team, with state officers. And these state officers had tons more years experience than I did. And I remember thinking 'okay, I'm in charge.' And I did not let them see the fear. I stepped up to the plate and took charge, and went, you know, followed my training, and everything went by the book. But I remember thinking that was really scary -- really

scary. So after Columbus, Ohio, I transferred to Newark, New Jersey. And at that time they didn't have any agents there. The agent had gone off on maternity leave. And it's a big port of entry -- a sea port of entry, and I had port experience as an inspector, and was a new agent, no one really wanted to go there because, as with most people in the wildlife field, Newark isn't their idea of a place to go. So, being from the city I didn't have a problem with that. But the other thing was cost of living -- real expensive. I didn't have a problem with that either. I'm single -- it was an adventure to me. I said 'I'll go.' And in my mind - if I go now I'll never have to do this again.

MM -- Do your penance.

JB -- Do my penance, exactly. So, went there. We had a great team there of inspectors, and myself, and the supervisor. I worked everything from migratory bird enforcement, throughout the whole state -- down from Cape May all the way out to the Pocono's area; lot of import/export, seaport stuff; we did the training video for the Fish & Wildlife Service called *An Invasion Techniques* -- which highlighted the techniques smugglers used to bring things into the country, to help other inspectors and agents around the nation; we did a 'canned hunt' investigation -- is where people were taking captive-raised wildlife like tigers and lions and whatnot, shoot them in a cage, pay \$20,000 and then take their picture with it to say 'I went to Africa'; to fire arms investigations with ATF; parrot smuggling. It's quite interesting. The highlight of my career in Newark, I would have to say, would have been a songbird investigation we had. People back in that area who were trading in songbirds -- cardinals, bullfinches, siskins, everything of that nature. So I paired up with a state officer; we did a quasi undercover operation where I was the undercover agent and he was the uniformed officer. And I would go in and I would question people and I'd see what they had. And I looked more like a college student back at that time, and also, at that time, a black officer in the Fish & Wildlife Service was unheard of. So, these people didn't think that I was an agent, or an undercover agent, so it worked well. They had their inclinations, but they just did not ... no way it was going to happen. So, we busted so many people, and the state was able to realize about \$12,000 in fines from that, to where that industry was pretty much shut down. I was feeling really good about that. And back at that time, Columbians were heavily into drug trafficking. And there were some Columbians, in that area, who also were dealing in birds. I'm feeling like I am invincible at this time, so -- I went after the Columbians. And gave them a call, set up a meet, was going to meet in New York City, but at the day they set the meet up, I couldn't do it. I had to go somewhere else.

Now, these people didn't know who I was or what I looked like over the phone, so we sent another agent in, in my place -- and the state officer went with him undercover, just for backup -- could be sort of some dangerous people. So they went to this building, that turned out to be an abandoned building. They knocked on the door [indecipherable] nothing happened. So they called me and said 'you sure you have the right address?' Said 'yeah, that's the address.' So, we figured they just backed out on us. But then the state officer received a phone call from one of his informants that said 'they were waiting for you across the way. And if a black man would have shown up they were going to take him out.' So, I used that opportunity to call them back and say 'hey, I was there, where were you guys' you know, 'you gave me the wrong address.' And he's like 'ah, well, we were there.' He's totally confused now, just had him totally off center, 'cause I was going to go after them again. I actually felt complimented that he was going to put a hit on me 'cause I was doing my job. But, that became a little too much for the state officer, so he backed off. He said 'it's too much.' So that died, unfortunately. From Chicago ... I'm sorry, from Newark, New Jersey, I went Chicago -- Chicago, Illinois. And pretty much the same thing -- waterfowl, Lacey Act cases, bear gall bladder was a big thing out there. And I had also just come back from the International Police Olympics, which was in Australia that year, and I made a lot of contacts internationally with the other wildlife counterparts. And while in New Zealand I was talking to one of the officers and he says 'you know, we have a really big problem with bird smuggling here. People are laundering birds from Australia here, sending them to the States.' And I said 'yeah, we know. There's a couple of people were looking at, yadda yadda.' And he says 'well, could you make a phone call for me.' And I'm like 'okay, wait, I'm not here on official business -- can't do that.' I did it anyway -- made a call. The guy was ... the person he was looking at ... Let me back up. I told him, I said, 'you need to try undercover techniques, that's the only way you're going to get in to these people.' And I outlined some ways that he could do this. That's when he asked me if I could make a call. So I called the guy and I said 'yeah, I'm from the States, you know, blau blau blau.' Throw out some names and he says 'well, I know this person and that person.' He threw out some really ... some people that we had been looking at and hadn't been able to tie into some of the bird trade. Tony Silva was one of those persons. And so, that really piqued my interest. And he said 'I will send ... I'll set you up, send you some birds back. Right now, this is how we'll do it. You give them to Tony. This, that, and the other.' And I said 'okay, we'll meet.' And of course, I didn't, because I didn't have authority to do that. I just didn't go. And when I came back I brought it to the attention of management. And our special operations unit was actually working an undercover case on him at that time, so they incorporated my case into their case. We were able to catch Tony

Silva, and several other people that were smuggling birds from that region of the country ... of the world. And it turned out to be very successful. And that's just networking, just networking. So, I feel good about that. So after Chicago, I decided to go into the Washington Office as a senior special agent. Now, at this time in my career, I don't know - 10 / 15 years on, did I want to go back to school. I really had considered, and actually applied for, the Kennedy School of Government, to receive a degree in public administration. But I also applied for this position in D.C. in a newly formed branch of International Affairs. International Affairs totally appeals to me. So I applied. I got the job. So I decided not to go back to school. And from there I was able to take trips to Bangladesh, India, England, several other countries, giving lectures on wildlife law enforcement techniques, training, this, that, and the other. And it was a great experience. I did outreach with the local schools, inner city schools in DC, schools for the deaf, I mean, everything. And not bragging -- someone's looking at this -- but at that time, if you mentioned law enforcement in the Fish & Wildlife Service, that was synonymous with John Brooks. Because I was everywhere. Everyone knew law enforcement because of what I was doing. I was trying to actually bring us out of the closet, if you will, and bring us more into the fold of what the Fish & Wildlife Service was doing. That we were an integral part. And it worked.

MM -- Probably meant the end of doing special operations though, isn't that right?

JB -- Yeah.

MM -- Your face was well known after giving these talks ...

JB -- Yeah.

MM -- ... and so on.

JB -- Yeah, exactly. But I had no problem being in the public and I was totally happy that way.

MM -- We'll edit that out.

JB -- Okay. But from one of the trips I took to India, I received some information from their authorities about this product called shahtoosh. And shahtoosh is a wool developed from the Tibetan antelope. It was actually NGO's that came to me first and they were looking for help, because they were not getting help from their government. They said this animal is endangered, it's going to extinct. This thing is really making the rounds around the world. It's selling anywhere from \$400 to \$8,000 a shawl. We need to stop this. So, they took me to some stores, we asked some questions, I did the field test because I ... shahtoosh is basically ... it's like a cashmere scarf -- but it's better than cashmere. It's so fine it will pass through a wedding ring; you can put it in and it will go all the way through. It's that fine, and it's that warm, and it's that light. It's really a powerful product. So, I looked into it. We talked to their equivalent to the Secretary of the Interior over there, and he acknowledged that there was a problem. I was there with CITES - the United Nations counterpart in the wildlife arena. And we had a meeting with the Indian government, and he acknowledged that there was a problem. But what he said was, he said 'this is a very touchy situation, in the fact that this product is being made in the province of Kashmir.' And Kashmir, if you know anything about the history in that area, was very disputed between Pakistan and India -- who owns it. They really want to be with Pakistan. But if they were to go in and actually break this up, it could have caused an international incident -- a war -- a nuclear war, for that matter. So he had had a meeting set up with the weavers from that area. They were actually coming down. He asked us to sit in, so we did. The weavers came in, they told us this very lame story about how kids walk out in the spring and they painstakingly pick the wool from the ... shedded wool of these Tibetan antelopes off the bushes, and they bring them back and they weave them into this shahtoosh shawl. Well, where the animal occurs is in the Tibetan plateau, there are no bushes -- first of all. They don't come down anywhere near there. And we had already had information that they're slaughtering these things -- with automatic weapons. So what it turns out is that, from our investigation, is that Tibetans were killing the animals, trading with the Kashmiris for firearms and tiger bone. The Kashmiris would weave it into the shawl and then take them into the interior to sell them throughout the world. The tiger bone would be sent up to China and sold as medicinal products. So two endangered animals were being affected by this. So, after they told us the story, we listened and then we said 'look, CITES does not allow this thing to be exported. CITES [indecipherable] one animal we will not let into the United States.' And I said 'when I return back home I will make everyone aware of this.' And they got really angry and they stormed out of the meeting. So, ... But when I got back, I had talked to one of the other agents in the D.C. Office and he had already received

information from France that this product was circulating. And he had some names and some places where he believed that these products were going to. So we sent out leads, and around that same time I was about to be transferred to San Diego. So I actually followed up on all the leads myself. And because of that we were able to shut down that trade. And that animal, I have no doubt, has been saved from extinction because of that case. It would be extinct by now. So ...

MM -- That's a great story.

JB -- So, San Diego. After that I went to San Diego to get experience in habitat cases -- endangered species habitat cases, which is very difficult to work. It deals with development pretty much, and you have to basically prove that the impact of this development has pushed this endangered species out; several of those cases, and also border crimes, with again, some bird smuggling, reptile smuggling, and things of that nature. We, the other agent and I, have effectively shut down the bird trade on that border and pushed it east towards Texas. We had cases where we were seizing birds a 100 at a time, 90 at a time, and worked well with the Mexican government to try to get coordination on both sides, just to make sure these things weren't going to be traded unlawfully. And, as a result of that, we started a repatriation program, because what currently ... what had happened at that time was birds being brought into the country would go to quarantine for 45 days and then Fish & Wildlife would give them to Agriculture to auction them off. And it just didn't seem right, because now, even if I was that smuggler, I can go back and buy my bird -- which is not illegal. It just seemed that we were sort of perpetuating the trade, 'cause they were still going to get them at great prices. So, if I buy it from a smuggler, or if I buy it from the United States government, I'm still getting a cheap bird. So, we decided to contact the Mexican government, and we started a repatriation program. And they actually would send the birds back down to the wild. And they invited the press to go with them if they didn't believe that that's where they were going. And that has been in place for about five years now. And it's going well. And that's it. That's where I stand. Hopefully I'll retire in January 2008 and start a career writing books and playing music.

MM -- Let me go back and ask a few questions.

JB -- Okay.

MM -- This is a great story. But it's oral history too, so people have the questions. I have. And to go back to your first law enforcement position as a wildlife inspector -- you were trained in wildlife management you said?

JB -- I was trained in University of Montana wildlife management.

MM -- Great management program up there. But, what did you have to learn to go from that background to be a wildlife inspector?

JB -- The wildlife inspection program consisted of teaching us how to handle live animals -- reptiles in particular. I'll never forget, one of things they told us in basics was 'you treat every shipment that comes in like there's a spitting cobra inside.' And you know, that means goggles, snake hooks, the whole nine yards. 'Cause you never know what someone's sending. They may label it as something very harmless -- like a chinchilla - and it's really a spitting cobra. So, we were trained in handling techniques, wildlife identification, on some ... because in my wildlife management class it was North American wildlife. That's it. I could tell you a ferret, a marmot, a wolf, a grizzly bear. But I didn't know anything about ... I mean, [indecipherable] tiger ...

MM -- Amazonian snakes ...

JB -- Exactly! All these species that I had no idea ... and so we learned how to key them out -- whether it's a product, or live animal, or parts of that animal. And there were times ... at that particular point in the fashion industry, like, trims of animals would be on products like purses, or coats, whatever. And I may have just this much of a skin of a snake, and I need to be able to identify what species that came from. So, our training was extensive, in that respect. And getting back to the spitting cobra -- there were some special agents that came down, new special agents, and they were sent to Dallas for me to train them in wildlife inspection, because they were going other places, but they needed to know something about wildlife inspection. So I took them out on an inspection with me and I said that, I said 'you treat every shipment like there's a spitting cobra in it.' And this was a shipment of snakes. And it said 'Harmless Snakes.' I said 'don't believe them.' So I said 'put your goggles on.' And these people were acting very nonchalant, cavalier, about the whole thing. I got a radio call and I had to go make a phone call back -- then we didn't have cell phones, it was

just the radio. I said 'you guys don't touch this box 'till I get back.' I left. They touched the box. Opened it up. Spitting cobra came out. No one had their goggles on. Fortunate for them, one of the persons had a badge which reflected the light, and the cobra spit on the badge and not in their eyes. So when I came back, everyone was huffing and puffing 'wow, you were right.' [indecipherable] I said 'I told you not to touch it.'

MM -- Most of the people you caught smuggling in wildlife, just individuals ... or who had done it, you know, inadvertently, or one off time; or were they regular ...

JB -- As an inspector they were regulars. We dealt, in Dallas, with commercial wildlife trading -- mainly. And so the big shipments of live animals, or boot products, whatever, were commercial dealers. And they knew the routine. But, as in any criminal case, I still have to prove knowledge. And so they could easily say 'I didn't order that.' And then my job was not to take it to that level. I would turn it over to a special agent and that special agent would investigate it further. But on my level, I was to identify the wildlife and either approve it for entry, or refuse clearance, or seize it.

MM -- Then you mentioned Newark, there was a trade in songbirds. The natural question there is what did people use the songbirds for? Are they eating them; pets? I mean, I honestly don't know what ...

JB -- It was a pet trade.

MM -- A pet trade.

JB -- It was a pet trade. And my investigation revealed it was older people who were dealing in this. And generally people who had some ethnic ties to their old country -- Italy, China, whatever, where they commonly have songbirds as pets, for whatever reason. So they were taking them out of the wild, they were importing some. Some migratory birds were being imported unlawfully -- like the bullfinch -- European bullfinch. And then they would try to cross-breed them to get either vibrant colors or beautiful song. And we saw prices ranging from \$10 to \$400 per bird.

MM -- I don't think people even know that trade exists.

JB -- No. I didn't know until I stumbled upon it.

MM -- I mean, Dave Hall gave us a turn-of-the-century songbird trap. We never did figure out exactly who was using it down in Louisiana.

JB -- They may have been eating them down there.

MM -- Yeah, that's what he speculated.

JB -- Yeah.

MM -- It's just an old illegal trap, I guess.

JB -- But in the New Jersey / New York area, they were actually trapping them for the pet trade. And they would have lure birds out there. They'd put a cage have a lure bird during the spring. The bird is singing and it's bringing in a rival male, whatever. Boom! You've got a trap on a trap, you catch that bird. And then you sell it; and you trade it; and you [indecipherable]; or whatever. It was a big, big, big, business. And people were afraid once they found out they were getting busted.

MM -- Now when did you go to Glynco? Did you say it was, like, '84?

JB -- 1984. It was August 1984, I believe.

MM -- Now, that was 23 years ago. What was the special agent training like then compared to today? Stuff you can discuss. I'm sure there's some stuff you shouldn't.

JB -- Sure. It consisted of eight weeks of Criminal Investigation School that every federal agent goes through, whether you're FBI, DEA, or whatever. At that time we learned the

basics of search and seizure, rules of evidence, all the things you're going to need to enforce federal law. And then, after that, we had our specialized school, which is called Special Agent Basics, and we were SABS 13 -- Special Agent Basics School 13. And that prepared us for more specialized work in migratory birds, endangered species, marine mammal protection act, all that thing. We had guest speakers come in -- agents -- that, or inspectors, that would teach us in those things. The migratory bird segment was taught by Terry Grosz who was ... he was a giant, literally, in that field. And he'd come in, and we had day classes, night classes, and everything. That was so intense. He says 'is this a diving duck or dabbling duck?' You know, look at the feet; look at the speculum; look at everything. Now, I had some background in that, so it wasn't as difficult for me. But other people, it was difficult. And he pointed out, and rightfully so, you are going to be looked at as the expert in the field, when you get out there. Whether you know ... whether they know their birds or not, they're still going to look at you as the expert. And you need to know your birds. Not only are the hunters, but the state officers ... and if you can't pony up, then you lose credibility for everyone in the Service. So, we had to identify birds on wing; with silhouettes; based on how they're flying; their songs; and this, that, and the other. And it was a good course. Endangered species course dealt with just import / export, which I already knew; and marine mammals, what was happening with the act at that time; refuge protection act; and things of that nature.

MM -- Were most of the special agents ... did they have a lot of wildlife management background?

JB -- No.

MM -- They came out of, like, law enforcement?

JB -- Law enforcement. We had ... we've had people in the past from secret service, customs, state agencies. In my class we had state officers, refuge officers, wildlife inspectors, and one college student. Now, that was a turning point for law enforcement at that time, because prior to that, most of the officers being selected were from the state. Now, just because you're a state game warden doesn't mean you know everything about wildlife. I mean, your patrol officer, basically, in some states, don't ... they patrol for fish, in order to do [indecipherable], whatever. So there was a great learning curve for some of those officers. And we were a close knit group, so the wildlife ... former wildlife inspectors

helped out. We were just like family. So, they helped us in interrogation, and we helped them in identification.

**MM** -- How about your ... International Affairs, that's very interesting. What made International Affairs decide that it was time to talk about law enforcement overseas?

**JB** -- I have no idea. It was something that either the Chief of the Directorate decided that they wanted a Branch of International Affairs in law enforcement. Probably because of [indecipherable]. And we were, and still are, looked at as the leaders in wildlife around the world. And so USAID and the Office of International Affairs were putting money up to allow us to go and help train these other countries, to get them up to speed. That was a great experience. Generally what would happen is we would receive a lesson plan, prior to going, on what they wanted; who would be attending; this, that, and the other; the level of English that they knew. And then we would go over for a week to survey the area, to get an idea what type of law enforcement problems they have. And then give a week lecture. And then after that we would take another week and look at the area and go out with them and do some practical application. And I'm glad you brought that up, 'cause I'm happy to say that ... that ... I don't want to look like I'm bragging to anybody -- but I actually helped turn around Shri Lanka. That country was used as a smuggling point as well -- for Indian wildlife. It's a little island on the southern tip of India, and they would smuggle things into Shri Lanka and then send them out. There were false documents from everywhere, whether it was coral, live birds, reptiles, whatever. And so when we were doing our review of the airport, I mean, right there, a guy comes in with a crate of birds - live birds, and wants to send them out. And, I was there as an observer, and I said 'look, this is ... you can't do this.' And so they quickly realized that, you know, they actually ... they're law enforcement too. so they have some authority; whether it was as you queue in line to come into the country - keeping people back at a distance so you can interview one person, where they typically let them all crowd up there, and so you feel smothered -- alright, you go, you go, you go, you go; to get in this guy on export, to say 'where'd you get these birds from.' So they did check it out. They found out they were illegal. And they seized the birds. And then, I stayed in contact with several of the customs officers afterwards, and they said, 'you know what, you did us a great service, because we are now effectively making seizures left and right.' And they've been able to control their resources. So ...

MM -- That's a great story. What were some of the other perspectives that were different for some of the international law enforcement?

JB -- The Philippines ...

MM -- Where I spent three years.

JB -- Okay. So, you know that culturally it ... some of the cultures make a big difference in how they approached their conservation effort. Some people may say that 'well, we have a choice of feeding people or taking care of the environment.' And I've never, ever, seen that to be the case. You can do both. What do you want to do? You can make the wildlife resource work for you, if you're really concerned about revenue. Culturally, the Philippines just seemed to be not wanting to make waves for everyone involved, and so that's why they were having a lot of the problems they were having.

MM -- When I was there they were having huge tropical fish ...

JB -- Yes, and coral ...

MM -- And dynamiting ...

JB -- Yes. And they were doing that ... they dynamite the coral reefs to catch fish. And I said 'this is unacceptable.'

MM -- It's a combination Asian reticence and corruption, I guess.

JB -- Right. Exactly. Exactly.

MM -- JB -- [indecipherable]

JB -- England, actually, surprisingly, their wildlife law enforcement is placed in effect by the mounted police, so it's a collateral duty. So, it wasn't so much a willingness not to do it, it was more being allowed to do it, or being told 'you can do this.' So the lecture over there

went real well. And I didn't do a follow up so I don't know how it went, but I did enlighten them on some of the things they need to look for as police officers. And I tied it into police work versus wildlife conservation work. And they totally understood.

**MM** -- Seems like you got a lot of bang for the buck out of this program?

**JB** -- I did.

**MM** -- Is it still on-going?

**JB** -- I was the first and last. So, I don't know how to take it. Either I did a terrible job ... But, they did away with that, and they reincorporated it into the Branch of Investigations, where, actually, I was placed ... I did three years in D.C. if I recall. And in ... so in the Branch of Investigations, I took over the migratory bird treaty act desk, and some other minor laws, I can't remember which ones they were. But doing the migratory birds, which is reorganizing the regulations dealing with the hunting, and baiting, and all that thing, all that nature things ... of that nature, as were taking place at that time.

**MM** -- Any other recollections from the overseas work before we move on?

**JB** -- Not really wildlife related, but when I was in Shri Lanka and touring the area, I was amazed that ... and those people are dark, but they looked at me as 'wow' ... you know, they were just amazed, seeing a black man. And I said to them 'well, we're the same color, what is the problem here.' They'd never seen a black American before.

**MM** -- 1980's, '87 through '89 in the Philippines, my best buddy over there is African American, and the Philippine government saying 'you're not really an American, are you?' And he's like, 'peace corps volunteer -- what do you think?' Very hard.

**JB** -- That was enlightening. You get a different perspective from the other side of the world, on what's going on. But other than that, all the programs were received well. We made ... we did gains ... we didn't just stand up there and lecture. We had teams. We

made it a challenge for everyone. And everyone came out of there with something -- either working knowledge, or a better understanding of wildlife conservation and why it's important to them to take the lead. And most of the people in the seminar did. They took the challenge well. So, ...

**MM** -- You've spoken to a lot of groups domestically and internationally about law enforcement. What misconceptions do the people have about Fish & Wildlife law enforcement? Once they discover we have one.

**JB** -- Sure. I was actually going to point that out. They don't know ... the biggest disappointment for me for the ... on the Service, is that we don't tell enough about who we are and what we do, to the public. It's a small segment of the population that know who we are. And that segment either has some dealings with law enforcement, or they live near a refuge -- they have some nexus to a wildlife refuge, or they're a developer and they deal with the [\[indecipherable\]](#). But the general public, as a whole, has no clue. So, when I get the question 'well, what do you do? Are you like a forest ranger and you sit in a tower and you look over the ...?' That's generally their ... still their conception: that I'm Smoky the Bear / Ranger that sits up in the tower and looks over the wildlands. And I say 'no, it's more than that.' And then I go into: 'we protect endangered species, domestic animals, ...' I give them some examples of something they can relate to -- smuggling. In San Diego I'd say 'you know, people who smuggle wildlife across the border -- it's my job to arrest them.' 'You arrest people? Do you carry a gun?' They have no clue. So you're really educating them in that: number one -- that wildlife is important, there are laws that protect them internationally and domestically, and it is taken seriously. It's just not some crime that is placed on the books just to make people feel happy. And it's sort of like, you know, when Rachel Carson did her pioneer work; people didn't take it seriously until it was brought up to the forefront. So, I think the Service could do a better job, overall, in letting the public know what we do. And that didn't answer your question, but I'm ...

**MM** -- Well, yeah, it did, actually. I mean, those are misconceptions we've encountered down here with school groups too.

**JB** -- And they wonder why I don't wear a uniform. So, one of the things I made a conscience effort to do early in my career was to wear a suit, because, in my opinion, the

public's idea of a federal agent was someone in a suit and tie. And I noticed that if I wore jeans or a tee shirt or something like that, credibility was not as high as if I came in in a suit. For several reasons: I was young; I was a non-white American; and, you know, 'is this a serious crime.' So, three things -- three strikes against me -- to start with. So if I'd come in wearing a suit, and show my badge and credentials, and act professional -- give them what they perceive to be what a federal agent is -- I realized I got a lot more cooperation that way. Even with other agencies.

MM -- That's very true. I mean, you just assume.

JB -- Yeah.

MM -- You're going to dress like an FBI agent.

JB -- Exactly.

MM -- Or Fox Mulder.

JB -- Exactly. It's funny you mention Fox Mulder, because on some of my lectures I actually say 'well, I'm sort of like Fox Mulder on the X-Files, anyone seen the X-Files?' And back then yeah, everyone saw it. And I said 'well, instead of working with the ...' I can't even remember what I said now. 'Instead of working with the strange and the ...' I'm sorry, I just ruined that, because I can't remember. But I really got a laugh, because I said 'I work with the ...' Never mind, I can't remember. but I used that analogy of the FBI.

MM -- That's what people know.

JB -- Yeah, that's what they know.

MM -- Now, in your experience in your law enforcement career, were the wildlife crimes pretty much exclusively wildlife or were these people mixed up in other nefarious activities?

JB -- They ... the criminal element that I came into contact with were mixed up in a variety of things -- not just wildlife. It was ... it could have started on wildlife. And some people started at -- let's say for the parrot trade. They saw a bird in Mexico. They were appalled by the conditions it was held in. They took it -- smuggling it into the country. Other people would see it 'oh, that's cute! Where did you get it?' 'Oh, I can get you one.' And then, now, they're getting birds to supplement their passion of helping birds. So it comes from, now, I'm not helping -- I'm perpetuating the trade. But in my mind, I'm still helping these animals. But those people also were smuggling pharmaceuticals into the country. When I dealt with an ivory smuggling case in New Jersey, that person was dealing in automatic weapons. Everything from A to B. In San Diego drug smuggling and wildlife smuggling was very common -- that ... they're connected.

MM -- We've got a ton of the Asian pharmaceuticals next door. Was the bulk of that confiscated with individual collections? Somebody bringing in tiger bone or just ... I'm just curious, 'cause it comes to us piecemeal.

JB -- Right. Most of the Asian medicinals that we confiscated, that I recall, were commercial shipments -- they were either falsely labeled or ... all those came through Newark, New Jersey, on sea shipments. And if you get this big container, you just put a couple boxes -- hide in there -- no ones going to really go through the whole thing. It's a shell game; it's a needle-in-a-haystack sort of scenario. Several individuals did bring them for their own personal use, but the volume that we've seized over the years have definitely come from commercial in[ ]tations.

MM -- Well, let's switch gears entirely and talk about one other unique experience you had, and that's being a book author. Tell us how you started doing that, 'cause I took your books home last night, shared them with my kids. They loved them.

JB -- That's good. Great. I like to hear that.

MM -- Now they're back in the archives, safe and sound, but I wanted them to see them.

JB -- I was writing a case ... I was working on a case in Chicago, and it dealt with ... I received a call that these kids were throwing rocks at a goose that was nesting on the lake. So I went out there; found the goose nest; and they'd broke all the eggs with rocks. These were juveniles; so, it's one of the policies -- we don't prosecute juveniles. I had to do something. And I didn't know what to do. I located where the parents lived, so I went to the parents, trying to appeal to them to control their kids. They weren't interested. 'Oh, they're just kids, don't worry about it.' And I really felt helpless at that point in time. I couldn't arrest them because they didn't commit the crime. I couldn't arrest the children. I couldn't issue anyone a violation notice. And I walked out of there very frustrated. So, as I'm driving home I said 'someone should do something about this, you know, someone needs to write books, or get these kids educated, so they know that this is not acceptable.' Talking to myself, of course. And 'well, why don't you write the book?' 'Yeah, why don't you?' 'Well, I'm not an author.' 'Why not? Why can't you write the book?' So I wrote this book called *Animals Don't Talk* trying to get kids to understand that: number one -- pets aren't your friends ... I mean, wildlife is not a pet, and don't treat it as your pet. Don't crawl into the cage with the polar bear in the zoo. Don't go out and try to touch a skunk. This kind of thing. They're wild animals, treat them as such. Treat them with respect. But also, treat your friends with respect. If you learn respect at an early age, these sorts of problems, hopefully, will not occur. That was the message of that book. And I just liked it. I thought, I mean, you know, I mean, it didn't really do anything. I sold some books, but being a full time agent it's sort of difficult to be an author at the same time. So I made a choice. But throughout the years I've written other books. I've ... the last one I completed was called *Making A Difference* and it's about parrot smuggling on the Mexican border. And how the Mexican government and the Fish & Wildlife Service have collaborated to stop this trade. And I basically wrote that one because, at least in southern California, the perception is that the Mexican government is corrupt. Alright, there is some corruption. But that doesn't mean everyone is corrupt. These people are trying to make a difference. They love their wildlife. They want to make a difference. And so what I wanted to show the public is that -- there's corruption on both sides of the border. Just don't think just 'cause they're Mexico, they're corrupt. They are helping -- here's the proof.

MM -- They're great books. One last question and that is -- how have you seen law enforcement change? You've been in it almost 30 years. The longest tenure of anybody we've talked to. how has it changed from the early '80's through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?

JB -- We've gone from a 'division of law enforcement' to an 'office of law enforcement,' therefore we have line authority with the Director. That's the biggest change. We went from an 1812 grade series -- game management -- to 1811, which is truly criminal investigator. We are now beholden by all of the rules and regulations that other criminal investigators have. We are truly criminal investigators now. There is no disputing that. With big changes comes great responsibility. So, we need to step up to the plate, as an office, and do our job to the best of our ability. Basically, what I'm saying is, the changes I've seen was -- more relaxed, we were still sort of in that game warden mentality -- just doing waterfowl work, just doing Lacey Act deer cases -- where now we are truly looking at the big picture -- international wildlife trade, commercialization, the things that are going to have great impact on species worldwide -- not just in the United States. In addition to still doing the more traditional work that we've done in the past. We are doing forensics works with computers. I'm actually a forensics scientist. Where we go off to seize ... we do execute a search warrant and there's a computer in there, that computer has to be imaged in accordance with the rules set out, set forth, in the federal regulations. And it's just a whole new ball game. We are definitely a player now. The only change that needs to be made is the public needs to recognize that.

MM -- John, this is a super oral history. Thank you so much.

JB -- My pleasure.