



SEASON 1, EPISODE 2
A Future-Focused Wollongong

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SPEAKERS

Catherine Wade, Operations Manager and Robyn Johnson, Director, Blend ESQ

Robyn Johnson 00:00

We can showcase to the world how you can transform an industrial centre into a clean energy precinct and a sustainable city. We have the ability to address our water issues, enhance our local flora and fauna, and it's not binary, we can have a thriving industry and address social inequities, whilst protecting our natural environment. So, I want to motivate people to take those actions.

Hi, I'm Robyn Johnson, and welcome to Wollongong, Let's Get Salty! For 20 years I've advised industry and business in environmental management, with leaders from community, environment and industry will deep dive issues that impact us all and discuss how we as a community can take action to move towards a sustainable future.

Today I have Catherine Wade, sustainability advocate, marine and geoscientist with me. She is one of the nicest people I know and lives her life strong in values centred on family, compassion and humour. We met about seven years ago at work, and with you joining Blend ESQ late last year as Operations Manager, this is the third consultancy we've worked in together. When I reached out to you last year, you were on the verge of shifting directions, and had started looking into further study in sustainability. What excites you about this next leg of your career?

Catherine Wade 01:32

Well, I'd been working in safety and quality management system development with a small focus on the environment but was feeling I really wanted to do more environmentally. I'd looked at doing further study in sustainability to move more in that direction, and then you called and asked if I wanted to join Blend ESQ, and it just seemed like the perfect scenario, where I could continue to work on safety and quality management systems, which is where a lot of my experience was, but have a much larger focus, looking at environmental issues. I could work with you, and I knew that you were passionate about caring for the environment and making changes in the world and your personal life similar to what I was hoping to achieve as well. I've said to a few people who have asked me about my job change, I'm super lucky to be paid to work in a field that I'm really passionate about.

Robyn Johnson 02:25

Me too, doesn't feel like work. So, in this episode today, I'd like to share some insights into the Blend ESQ mission with this podcast, the vision for Wollongong and what's driving us as individuals to keep making small changes in our own journey to a more sustainable life. As mums, we're both very aware that our kids watch our every move, making them good little motivators to practice what we preach. So, if we started beginning for you, do you think your parents and your childhood influenced your love of the natural world?

Catherine Wade 02:58

Yes, most definitely. For us as kids, we spent a lot of time going for bush walks or playing in the backyard. I always loved searching for frogs and lizards and spending time in the bush with my little brother and sister, and I was never sort of interested in cartoons and that kind of thing. I was always more keen to watch documentaries and learn about the wildlife and different ecosystems and that kind of thing, and even as a teen I also wasn't interested in all the normal things that teenagers are interested in like boy bands, I had a giant poster of a great white shark on my wall. So, I've always loved the natural world, and everything that's in it, marine and crocodiles and lots of different wildlife.

My childhood definitely did foster my love for the environment, what about you?

Robyn Johnson 03:49

Yeah, it's the same for me. A lot of my childhood was spent exploring outdoors, my family camped a lot. From the age of three, we were in the bush exploring places like the Watagan State Forest. We spent a lot of time in caves and in but they're kind of cool, damp, and watching these majestic scenes lit up in the dark, old growth trees in Tassie and feeling super small, chasing down waterfalls and swimming. Just the simple things at home as well, like lying on the trampoline and looking up at the sky, swimming in the pool, we were outdoors a lot as kids.

Do you think that your outdoor exploring with your family has influenced the way that you holiday with your kids or the things you do on weekends?

Catherine Wade 04:37

Yes, definitely. As a child, I loved exploring and we went on a lot of adventures. We went to Cape York and I really really loved all the wildlife and all the different environments that we went to. Last year, we were fortunate enough to escape before lock down and we took the kids to Cape York and they got to experience all the things that had fostered my love for the environment and the wildlife up in far north Queensland.

As a child, I also watched a lot of documentaries, and I think this really increased my love and appreciation for the natural world, and so I love watching documentaries with my kids now, and I really hope that it will reinforce in them the need to live a sustainable lifestyle and to conserve and protect all these amazing places, and creatures. So, Robyn, are there any experiences or examples of things in your childhood that have really influenced you as an adult?

Robyn Johnson 05:35

Yeah, for me, I remember visiting the Great Barrier Reef, when we were in early high school, and just falling in love with the underwater world. I was just immersed into this blue landscape teeming with fish and groupers, and I just instantly became hooked on marine environments. And my now husband and I, we did our scuba diving course when we were 18, and then we spent pretty much all of our 20s underwater, exploring the Great Barrier Reef and off the coast here, we did Fiji, and one of my favourite memories actually is a place in Thailand called the Chumphon Pinnacles, and we had dropped to about 30 metres depth, and we were waiting for another group. So we're sort of just hovering above the ground, and I looked up, and there was another group sort of beginning their descent, and we just had

this incredible visibility, I could see all the way to the surface. And there was a school of like Barracuda circling, and then a bunch of other fish. It was so serene and so beautiful. I don't even know that I've ever seen anything as beautiful as that. (Cath - Wow, that's amazing). And it just yeah, it made me feel so small, and yeah, I just kind of became hooked on that underwater experience, and now the kids are getting stronger swimmers and bit more confident in the water, I hope that we can get back into more scuba diving and share that with them. (Cath - Yeah, that's amazing).

So let's move on now from our love of the natural world into why we studied what we studied, w both did Earth Sciences at the University of Wollongong. We started there in the late 90s. We didn't know each other at the time. I think I might have been a year ahead of you, but what spurred you down that path of study?

Catherine Wade 07:36

So through my high school years, I really loved marine biology and was one of those kids that always said yes, I want to be a Marine Biologist, and was fortunate enough to do some work experience in Year 10, where we went out to the five islands off Wollongong, and we pulled penguins out of their burrows and weighed and measured them and that really fostered my love for the marine environment even more, and once high school was finished, I had a really great experience at Wollongong Uni doing marine science.

What about you Robyn, why did you choose to study biological sciences?

Robyn Johnson 08:12

For me, I had a year off after high school, I had started a computer science degree and just decided that that was not for me, and then in the second half of that year, I got a traineeship at Mount Annan Botanic Gardens through Green Corp. One of the educators was an Aboriginal knowledge holder of the Dharawal people and her name was Auntie Francis Bodkin. She was an amazing, inspiring woman who just had a love of the earth sciences and flora and fauna and spending that time with her just really ignited my passion to go on and do further study, and she really encouraged and influenced my decision to do environmental science.

It was an unexpected turn for me because I hadn't done any science since Year 10. I hated science at school. So, it was tough going into year one of uni without that background, but you gather your friends around you, and you get through it, and it was, I guess because I was so interested in it at that point, it became a passion to learn more. So, what's next, you finished your degree and then tell me about your early career and your journey to today?

Catherine Wade 09:23

So, I would have loved to pursue a career in the space of Marine Science and that kind of thing. But jobs were not very common, and they certainly weren't close to where I lived or where my family and friends were. So, I ended up studying postgrad safety, which was definitely a few degrees away from my passion, but it's trained me to think about risk and consequences and I now see these everywhere I turn in the natural world and so I then went on to work in the safety industry for quite a while and then had some time off after having three children.

I then ended up at Eco Logical where I met you. In my time at ecological I worked on flora and fauna reports and environmental impact assessments, and then I moved on to another consulting company and worked more on integrated management systems. There I was more looking at safety and quality with a small amount of environment, and that's when I started to sort of really feel like I would love to focus more on the environmental aspect of management systems. So, Robyn, what about you, how have your career experiences led you to this point where you'd like to focus your efforts on sustainability?

Robyn Johnson 10:39

Yeah, I've spent my career so far working in chemical storage, waste management, mining, roads, and infrastructure. I've had the opportunity to extend my expertise, also beyond environment into workplace health and safety, business strategy and quality management. I jumped around quite a bit starting out in the built environment, and then progressively working my way into projects that were more in the planning stage, so I could influence workplace design.

I had an eye opening moment, a couple of years ago, I was working as the Environment, Health and Safety Manager for a proposed new coal mine in the Southern Highlands, and I'd only been involved in the project for a couple of months when I had to prepare a presentation for a grade of Year 5 students who were interviewing us, and I realised in the process of doing some reading to prepare for the presentation, that I had become somewhat jaded about global environmental issues, and also, the progress in technology that had been made since I last really had a look at it. And so they inspired me to reassess the direction I was heading in with my work.

I also realised that there was increased demand on business to be able to demonstrate their environmental performance, and to obtain social licence from community. From a customer satisfaction perspective, being able to demonstrate a responsible supply chain and sustainable operations are emerging as a quality risk to being selected as a preferred supplier. So, for example, tender and pre-qualification questions that arise from being in the supply chain of government, or listed companies who are required to report on ESG metrics and modern slavery. There's increased consumer demand for transparency on environmental performance. There's a number of green certification programs that haven't existed in the past, we have state plastic policy, we have a changing electricity grid, and a rise in resource recovery facilities, and fuels made from recycled products, and I could go on.

But armed with this new curiosity for practical solutions for better environmental management, I'm now trying to shift my focus from just working towards compliance with ineffective environmental laws, to work with businesses that are really pushing for more sustainable operations.



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Catherine Wade 13:51

That's very interesting, there really has been a shift hasn't there, on needs for businesses their focus on sustainability. So, what's the inspiration for the podcast, and why is it centred around Wollongong?

Robyn Johnson 14:05

Yeah, so the idea for the podcast hit me in November last year, when we were in the midst of the local council election, it became apparent to me that there was more happening in local industry than the public and even the political parties were aware of, and I thought sharing positive stories from within

industry, could be a way to shift local mindset from, 'it's all too hard, we're doing nothing' to 'let's build some momentum and work together on this'.

Wollongong is a very unique local government area. We have big industry, mining, manufacturing, a port, a university and tech centre, we have electricity grid infrastructure, proximity to Sydney and regional centres like Western Sydney and Nowra, and we have of a city centre that's pushing for active transport, greener buildings, greener spaces, and foreshore entertainment precinct where we're trying to engage more with the beach.

And the people who live here love the environment, we're here because we love the beach or the parklands or the escarpment, and a lot of our lifestyle revolves around that connection to being outdoors and in nature, and therefore, a community that's receptive to protecting the environment.

Living in our community, we also have a range of experts in the environmental sciences, climate change science, electrification, local food production, and a range of other expertise that we can draw on to understand local adaptation to manage the predicted more frequent extreme weather events and longer drought periods.

The aim with the podcast is to talk directly with experts and industry, local government and community leaders to get the facts rather, than obtaining information indirectly. I also want to draw out what actions we can take as individuals and businesses. I hope to be able to answer some common questions about where to start, what's impactful, and hopefully to connect people with each other, through raising local awareness of initiatives and upcoming opportunities.

I want the people and businesses of Wollongong to recognise the strength of our collective mindsets and expertise. We can showcase to the world how you can transform an industrial centre into a clean energy precinct and a sustainable city. We have the ability to address our water issues, enhance our local flora and fauna, and it's not binary, we can have a thriving industry and address social inequities, whilst protecting our natural environment. So, I want to motivate people to take those actions. (Cath - It's exciting).

So, you've had your eyes open longer than me, tell me about your sustainability journey, so far?

Catherine Wade 17:09

Growing up, my parents always had a fairly strong concern or care for the environment, they were always conscious of wasting water and energy and all that sort of thing. So, it was always instilled in me from a very young age to care, and as a mum, in my late 20s, I really wanted my kids to care about the environment, and I knew that the kids would call us out if we weren't practicing what we preached, and so that really enhanced my passion to make a difference and start making changes in our everyday lives.

As the kids are getting older, I can see them noticing more what we do and copying more what we do, which is obviously natural, and so I'm extra conscious about the decisions that we make in our house. I'm always striving for less rubbish and wanting to get that bag of rubbish each week that goes out in the bin, smaller and smaller. And each time I look back just 12 months, I can really see a lot of changes that we've made in our household, and I think, wow, I can't believe I was doing that 12 months ago, I would never do that now, that's exciting to see the change.

We've reduced our red meat consumption along with our waste, and a couple of years ago, we put solar on our roof, which has been exciting. Even my husband got a little obsessed for a while there with watching how much energy we were producing, and there's more we can do, and we will do but at this point, the solar has been a really great addition to reducing our energy costs, as well as reducing the amount of coal that we're burning.

My local community has been full of wonderful like-minded people who really care about the environment and have really encouraged me. Friends up the street initiated a group called Ocean Plastic Patrol, which saw a dozen or so school kids meet up every Friday morning to collect rubbish along our beautiful local beach. And I know other small businesses have really led the way in solar, and it's just a really encouraging environment to see so many people caring about the environment, and minimising waste. Electric bikes are super common, everyone rides bikes everywhere and tries to avoid getting in the car when they can, and so other people have definitely fuelled my passion for learning about sustainability and alternative fuel sources and minimalism in my local area. It's been a really big learning curve, and I've felt really fortunate to be surrounded by all these people that really care so much about the environment.

I'm feeling really hopeful and positive about the realisation for many people that it's time to make changes regarding climate change. I think the silver lining to all of these significant events like flood and fire is that it's really motivating people now to act, and so it's really an exciting time for change. So, what spurred you on, what's really motivated you and in your journey?

Robyn Johnson 20:06

Yeah, so after my little awakening, I kind of spent the COVID lockdown, reading and watching and listening to things around better environmental performance. And I feel like I went through all the stages of grief for the loss of a stable climate, and for a hopeful future for the kids. But I've circled back to the positive side of that, that I have knowledge and expertise that I can share with my family and with my clients to move us forward.

For me, it became quite a philosophical question around what I was consuming, the supply and demand chain, and the hierarchy that I was applying to my choices. So, I started to kind of switch my thinking and go, okay, well, rather than make my choices based on individual needs and wants, can I flick that and put the environment first.

So, if I'm looking at a product, and considering this hierarchy, I ask myself now, is it good for the environment firstly, is it good for the community that's manufacturing, or making that product or communities in that supply chain, and then is it good for me? And by doing that, I really have to think, and it slows down that purchasing process, so I have time to think.

And so, I also put into that the safety hierarchy of controls, the decision of can I avoid it altogether, is it something that I just don't need, and if not, can I substitute it for something else? Or can I buy it second-hand? Or can I borrow it, and I start really questioning this consumption of things. So my journey has really been about less consumerism, and removing triggers and prompts for products and using things up until there, you know threadbare clothing, or using up the supplies in the pantry and in your bathroom cupboard until they're done. And many of my choices have been around packaging, where's it coming from, reducing my fossil fuel dependence, and a big one for me, we had house plans approved, and much to my husband's dismay, I took them back to the drawing board to look at how I could do it better and more sustainably.

So, what we've ended up with now is a building that will rely more heavily on products that are either being reused, or have higher recycled content, and I've done a lot of reading into local supply. So, trying to source it from Wollongong, Western Sydney, Sydney, and, and totally just eliminating things that would be imported from overseas, so no Italian stone benchtops coming here.

It's a challenging journey, and like you, I look back on the last 12 months and just look at the phenomenal amount of tiny little behavioural changes that we've made. That just made me feel so good. There's actually a lot of freedom in not being up with the trend or not dyeing my hair, and not getting caught up in at all. With that we've really tried to focus on simplification, we make more things from scratch, which

is kind of a bit of fun getting the pasta maker out and we fix stuff. We've bought second-hand bikes from the Revolve Centre at the tip and done them up. It's actually quite a lot of fun, and I feel really good sharing that journey with the kids. They've started not hassling me for clothing, and we look at Gumtree and Marketplace first and buy second-hand from Salvos and it's been a great journey.

The other thing for me was understanding the data and my footprint, that was looking at how we got about in terms of transport and our stationary energy in our house. So, I still drive an unleaded car, but I now have a plan that my next car will be electric and our plans for our house are all electric and I just don't drive my car where I can avoid it. I work from home a lot and the kids will often cycle to school or we will get the bus and we're just trying to eliminate trips from our weekly plan in order to just start now and do what we can right now.

Catherine Wade 24:58

So, it's the start of a really exciting journey, what can we expect from upcoming episodes of The Let's Get Salty podcast and also information sharing from Blend ESQ?

Robyn Johnson 25:10

Yeah, we have a really exciting lineup of guests coming this season, particularly around energy and electrification. And then in the background, you and I have been doing a lot of reading and research into putting together some action plans for business so that we can start to answer some of those questions of where do I start and what is impactful for our business to do? So, I'm really looking forward to finalising those and making them available for release.

Thanks for coming today. I've really enjoyed this episode of sharing what we're trying to do here, and I look forward to continuing this journey with you.

Catherine Wade 25:50

It's really exciting, and I'm really grateful for the opportunity, thanks for having me.

Robyn Johnson 25:54

You're welcome.



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