A new plan for Oregon’s Rocky Coast: grant project overview
Stories about government policy can be wonky and dry. When I first proposed to illuminate the potential impacts of updates to Oregon state policy for near shore habitat originally devised in 1994, I recognized this very real risk. But my goal was to present stories that resonate with everyday people, not just those interested in state policy. So, my aim was to tell captivating stories that spotlight important issues related to the wildlife, habitats and people who might be affected by the policy.

In the end, the stories I reported brought to life the issues affecting Oregon’s rocky intertidal ecosystem by explaining how research and protections might affect specific at-risk wildlife including sea stars, charismatic Black Oystercatchers and depleted bull kelp, which face threats from the effects of climate change, marine heat waves, a steady stream of beachgoers and even mysterious disease.

My original goal was to tell these stories on XRAY.fm, a radio station with an audience in Portland and nearby areas. Ultimately, I was able to reach much bigger audiences than anticipated. I delivered six radio pieces — one aired nationally on Minnesota Public Radio’s *Marketplace Morning Report* and five heard on radio and online throughout Oregon and parts of California and Washington, along with photos, a video and complementary digital text articles. The crux of this work ran in February 2021 as a five-part series on Jefferson Public Radio, stories that were distributed by statewide NPR affiliate Oregon Public Broadcasting. One of those radio pieces is set to air in the future on another nationally-heard show, *Living on Earth*. 
All in all, the number of stories, diversity of sourcing, and audience I was able to bring to a little-known set of issues was more than I’d hoped for. Below are brief descriptions of all the stories I reported and produced as part of this grant project including links and available audience data.

**Checking In On The Sea Stars**  
*February 2021 on Jefferson Public Radio and Oregon Public Broadcasting*  
Scientists don’t know why some types of sea stars are returning to Oregon while others were hit so hard by disease they’re critically endangered. Continued research at places like Cape Blanco on Oregon's south coast could provide insights. This article and audio story also ran online on OPB.org [here](#). And, a complementary [video](#) featured select audio from the radio story and footage captured while reporting on sea star research.

**To Help Black Oystercatchers, Groups Push For Education -- And A Few New Rules**  
*February 2021 on JPR and OPB*  
Seen throughout Oregon’s rocky coast, Black Oystercatchers are shorebirds that nest high up on large rocks. But as more visitors flock to the coast, these birds face threats from human disturbance. Advocates think education - and in some places - new restrictions - will help. This article and audio story also ran online on OPB.org [here](#).

**A Key Role For The Region's First People**  
*February 2021 on JPR and OPB*  
Natural resources in the Northwest are closely linked to tribal culture and identity. As Oregon’s ocean advisory council works with community groups to update policies for managing the rocky shores, sovereign tribal nations have special status and unique needs. This article and audio story also ran online on OPB.org [here](#).
Can We Stem The Loss Of Complex Kelp Ecosystems?
*February 2021 on JPR and OPB*

Kelp’s leaves and stems grow in coastal waters, sheltering all sorts of organisms – even tiny shrimp eaten by whales. But kelp has been depleted on parts of the Pacific coast. Now, proposals to update Oregon’s policy for its rocky shores aim to replenish those kelp forests. This article and audio story also ran online on OPB.org [here](#). This story is also expected to air on *Living on Earth*, a radio show and podcast [heard across the US](#) on 250 public radio stations.

How Reagan’s Oil Push Led to the Oregon Way Of Coastal Habitat Protection
*February 2021 on JPR and OPB*

In the ‘80s when President Ronald Reagan pushed for offshore oil, Oregon pushed back. But it turns out Reagan’s oil agenda inspired the state to create policy to protect its shores. This article and audio story also ran online on OPB.org [here](#).

Sea urchin “ranches” provide uni while protecting kelp forests
*October 2020 on Marketplace Morning Report*

Kelp researchers are working with urchin divers to develop a unique approach to culling urchins that are having a detrimental impact on kelp forests along Oregon’s coast. Not only did this story reach a national audience, it presented an important environmental issue in a business-themed story reaching people who may not normally engage with content about threats to rocky coastal habitats.
Reporting impact

Because Oregon’s update for policy protecting its rocky coastal habitat is still in development, in order to assess impact, I can only point to the large reach of the audiences who heard, read – and viewed – this reporting. This was a multimedia project involving radio, online articles, photos and a video. A variety of media heard and viewed across a variety of channels including terrestrial radio, streaming audio, web articles and social media posts (JPR posted the stories and video) created an array of content touchpoints for all sorts of audiences.

By presenting this work as a series of radio stories that ran throughout an entire week which was heard by a regional audience, in addition to garnering distribution of that work to a statewide audience, it likely had a greater impact in terms of education and awareness of issues affecting rocky coastal habitat and the potential impact of updated policy than just one lengthier story might have. After all, both reach and frequency are tried-and-true elements of advertising and advocacy for a reason.
Only general audience metrics are available for the on-air radio versions of the primary Jefferson Public Radio series. JPR’s most recent Arbitron ratings showed the station had more than 90,000 listeners tuned in for at least 15 minutes monthly. The station has 10,000 members and served a 60,000 square mile listening area including 22 counties with 57 transmitters around the southern Oregon and Northern California region. Oregon Public Broadcasting ran all five JPR stories on its website which serves audiences throughout Oregon and southern Washington and averages 1.6M views per month. *Marketplace Morning Report* is heard by 8.5 million listeners each week.

In addition to the on-air radio audience, the JPR series of online articles and streaming audio captured approximately 900 unique pageviews and around 3 minutes of time spent on average.
There were two key challenges in reporting these stories. First, because I embarked on this project before actual proposals for new rocky coastal site designations had been submitted to Oregon’s ocean policy agency, it took awhile for strong story angles to emerge. Timing was a related issue here. Despite the fact I kicked off my reporting in June of 2020, to ensure the work had the greatest impact within the timeframe for which the grant allowed, I had to wait until proposals were made public in February 2021 to actually report the stories for JPR. Every piece mentioned the larger context – that the state is updating coastal policy and would make community-led proposals for potential site designations available for public comment in March of 2021. I believed stories reported for the Oregon and regional audience would be premature without that call-to-action to take a look at the proposals and comment on them. By mid-April, public comments are just being assessed. Ultimately, there could be even stronger stories with more political dynamics in the future in relation to the rocky habitat site proposals.
Another challenge I experienced throughout my reporting process was engaging with tribal sources. Because I did not have experience building sources in Oregon tribal communities before launching this project, I had to start from scratch to engender trust among sources who were hesitant to publicize their concerns and have a well-deserved skepticism of government and media.

I ran up against several blockades, and even when I was able to reach people from area tribes who could be affected by possible site designation proposals, tribal representatives for the most part declined to comment or even speak on background. However, it was extremely important to me to make sure tribal voices were heard in this reporting. In the end, I found alternative routes to the sources I was able to meet with.

In particular, I discovered a series of water summits for tribal youth put on by Changing Currents and contacted one of the organization’s coordinators, Shirod Younker. He generously introduced me to his father, Tom Younker, who is featured in my piece about the concerns of tribal members on the coast. I was also able to connect with Doug Barrett, a.k.a. Running Bear. Both of these sources helped provide color and insight. In addition, I was able to include audio from another tribal source from a publicly-available state ocean policy meeting.
There was a related challenge here. Because tribal engagement in regards to the rocky shores policy update is so sensitive, much of the work state government representatives are doing to ensure tribal involvement is not publicly known. In fact, throughout most of my time reporting these stories, I was under the impression that tribal members did not have appropriate representation because a seat open on the agency working group overseeing the policy update intended for a tribal representative sat unfilled. It wasn’t until the very end of my reporting that a source on the agency working group revealed to me that a separate government-to-government process had been taking place between the state and tribal groups. The story I reported about tribal concerns in relation to issues raised by the policy update addresses that sensitivity and the reasons for it.

It’s also worth noting that after a few conversations with sources regarding the potential for site designation proposals relating to sea otter reintroduction to the Oregon coast, it became clear that story idea was before its time. The primary group involved in this work, Elakah Alliance, decided not to submit a site designation proposal this time around.

If anything, the challenges faced in this reporting reinforced something I’ve known for years as a seasoned reporter: that the truth is rarely what’s right on the surface. It’s important to keep digging and persevere.
Funding impact

Funding from SEJ made this work possible, full stop. As a freelance reporter at the time and extremely reliant on regularly reporting and pitching stories, I simply would not have embarked on this project without funding. It gave me the ability to dedicate time to develop sources, conduct research and travel. And it afforded me the ability to visit sources and see some of the places that brought to life the issues my reporting would address.

Thanks to SEJ for making this reporting project possible. I hope other SEJ members can pick up the mantle and continue this work and I'd be more than happy to facilitate.

Please find original estimates and actual expenses in this shared spreadsheet.

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