

Mark Luthin, Natural Land Institute

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Haley: Hello, and welcome to another episode of the *Green Exploration: Rockford* podcast. My name is Haley Dahl, and today I will be meeting with Mark Luthin, who is a member of the Board of Trustees for the Natural Land Institute and a volunteer steward for the Boone County Conservation District, as well as a retired environmental educator, to discuss the Rockford region's environmental issues from the standpoint of education, and how education can aid in the implementation of inclusive and green infrastructure that can offer viable solutions to these problems. ***Intro Music*** Feel free to introduce yourself. And then the first thing I would like to know is what motivated you to get involved in the environmental challenges in Rockford? Well, in the area, I'm gonna rephrase that, so the first thing I would like to know is what motivated you to get involved in environmental challenges in the area? Can you please give me some background on your involvement, interest and motivation? What projects are you currently working on? Stuff like that?

Mark: When I was in college, and likely even before it, I took an interest in the environment. Being a biology major, environmental science was kind of a natural tie in it. Although, I used to tell my students I never had a class in environmental science, mostly just reading and figuring things out. But I taught environmental science in the Belvidere schools for 32 years. And naturally from that, my knowledge base hopefully increased since I started teaching and the environments pretty important stuff, so that's a little bit of my background. So as far as the local stuff, I've been pretty involved locally, with a lot of different things. I was on the Belvidere Park Board, for instance, for 18 years, I think. In the Parks and Conservation Foundation that was established through that, I was a president for a number of years. Currently, I'm on the Natural Land Institute board, and I'm chair of the Education Committee. Natural Land Institute their mission basically is to acquire land and protect and preserve it for future generations and for the natural habitats, so they restore habitat. So that's more my my field, I think, is the restoration of natural habitats, less engineering aspect, but it's interesting though, that up at Nygren Wetlands, they've done some engineering, you know, unstraightening channels, things like that, whereas wildlife habitat goes, and that's pretty important. And that's also used in flood control. I think I mentioned to you that I've been involved somewhat in the Climate Reality Project, that's Al Gore's Global Initiative, actually. In fact, some of the guys that are in charge of the committee have met Al Gore and been

trained through his process. So there's a local organization of that. Partly, the pandemic I think kind of slowed my participation in that and some of the nights they were meeting I had other obligations, so I haven't been too faithful in that group, but it's interesting, of course. And that ties in nicely with your questions, but the infrastructure and things like that, locally, so...

Haley: I actually, I really appreciate learning more about the conservation and land restoration aspect of things, because to me, I feel like that's a very valuable insight that engineers can utilize while implementing green infrastructure. Because I feel like a lot of engineers in the past, you know, especially with urban environments, have inadvertently disconnected those urban environments from the natural environment. And I believe now it is time to take engineering and integrate natural environments into the urban environments.

Mark: And in some places, it has been quite nicely. In fact, in Chicago, there's some of that. I'm also a volunteer steward, I guess, at the Boone County Conservation District. I do a lot of volunteer work with them and collecting seeds and pulling weeds and cutting invasive brush and things like that, so trying to stay a little bit busy in my retirement, you know, so...

Haley: Yeah.

Luthin: Motivation, I guess is they say, "You don't plant an oak tree for yourself, you plan it for your kids and your grandkids." And so that's my motivation. And one thing I emphasize to my students in environmental science was sustainability. I mean, what we're doing, and what we have been doing is not sustainable and the earth is telling us that, that we're not doing things right. So that's the motivation right there.

Haley: That was very well said, I couldn't agree with you more. It is honestly almost scary to me how people don't think about that. They just do whatever the heck they want and they don't think about the natural repercussions. It's like some people believe they're like, above nature, and we're a part of it and it's our duty to take care of it, especially if we want to continue to utilize it.

Mark: Yeah, people would say save the earth and recycling. Well, the earth doesn't need saving, we do so...

Haley: Yeah, exactly, exactly, because the Earth is gonna go on. *laughs*

Mark: Yes it will!

Haley: The floating rock will still be floating! *laughs*

Mark: Yes, yes it will. Quite nicely.

Haley: *laughs* So that being said, I would like to know how you define environmental challenges? How would you define the parameters of environmental challenges in the area?

Mark: It's an interesting question, can look at it multiple ways. One challenge and this is me, as a teacher speaking, is the education aspect. How to get people aware of what we're doing. And like you said, how do we get people to care? You know, too many people think, "Ah, it's not gonna affect me. So what do I care?" And how do we get them to look towards the future and look at the sustainability aspects? So to me, that's always been the biggest challenge and that's why I got into education, I think is so I can maybe touch a few lives and those lives, you know, take it further. We'll see in 100 years if I was successful, right.

Haley: I remember your class being challenging. I mean, that was biology, I, unfortunately, was never able to take advanced topics. I was planning on it, and then I ended up going to Rock Valley, but I ended up taking environmental science there. And that class definitely opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn't even realize. That class definitely touched me. So I believe, you know, they make biology, chemistry, science classes like that, those are mandatory, so why isn't ecology mandatory. Ecology has to do with the earth that we live on. I feel like that's very practical to our everyday existence.

Mark: Right, right.

Haley: And I guess I don't understand why it isn't something that the Common Core, the education system, sees as something that everyone should know. Because I feel like if people understood more about how the environment works, ecology, they would be more susceptible to receiving and accepting necessary environmental legislation that needs to be passed to combat things like the climate change crisis that we're currently experiencing on this planet.

Mark: Yeah.

Haley: So that's my thoughts in education.

Mark: No, I agree. Of course, so...

Haley: I've heard things being said about flooding in the area.

Mark: Okay. The flooding, not only the Rock River, especially downstream by Blackhawk Island area, but the Keith Creek, I think is called, tremendous issues and a recurring yearly event, it seems and, to me, it doesn't make sense to have that be a reoccurring, very expensive event. There's a lot of ways to, I don't want to say control flooding, because floods are a very natural part of an ecosystem or a river or a stream or anything like that, but like you said earlier, you know, to be a part of nature, I think we need to instead of trying to battle nature all the time, by trying to prevent the floods, which makes it even worse, downstream, allow floods to happen, and let that water spread out in areas that it's not going to impact people's homes and, you know, and things like that...

Haley: Like wetland environments?

Mark: ...that work with water.

Haley: Do you have any knowledge as how this has changed or evolved in the community? How or why?

Mark: Yeah, not for sure, especially with the Keith Creek. I know it basically if, if you go over it, it's basically a cement channel, you know, and that's not the way to control water.

Haley: Based on your knowledge and engagement. What work is being done to address the environmental challenges in the Rockford or Belvidere area? What have they been doing well, where are there areas for improvement?

Mark: You know, my work, I think I mentioned already, my work with the Natural Land Institute, Niagara and wetland up by Rockton, Illinois, big 700-some acre converted farm, but there's a huge wetland and they had, the original farmers had straightened out the creek, called Raccoon Creek, and when Nygren first came about they unstraightened it, they put the meanders back in the stream. The last several years that wetland has been because of all the water that we've had, that wetland was really underwater a lot. And there were pelicans there most of the summer, you know, feeding on fish and things like that, so it was more like a pond. All that water was kept there, instead of going downstream, it would feed into the Pecatonica River, and that would feed into the Rock, etc. So all that water was held there, not going into someone's yard, it was basically, you know, the wetland was absorbing it. Wetlands also tend to absorb pollutants and things like that. Of course, they provide a lot of habitat for wildlife, so that's one thing. My work with the conservation district, and Dan Kane talked about this a bit, they've acquired some properties like Piscasaw Fen, which is up not far from Capron and kind of north and east of Belvidere, you know, places like that, you know, putting what once was a farm back into native vegetation allows for flood control, not only because it's a wetland, but the prairie roots are super deep rooted, they they can absorb a lot of water and things like that. So there's smaller organizations, the park district in Rockford, Winnebago County Forest Preserve, Natural Land Institute, Boone County Conservation District, a lot of organizations are doing work that maybe their initial focus isn't in flood control or things like that, is providing habitat, but there's a lot of benefits to just providing the habitat for the birds and butterflies and bees and things like that.

Haley: It's like a domino effect, you'd say?

Mark: Definitely and you know, bring them back to pollinators for instance that helps our own food crops get pollinated, you know, the apple trees and cherry trees and your garden tomatoes and things like that, so...

Haley: Conservation is definitely a very crucial part of sustainability. Sometimes we just got to take a step back and let nature do her thing because she gets this.

Marks: Sometimes you gotta help her out a little bit, but...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: Because we let things go bad, so...

Haley: That's for sure. So moving on, based on your knowledge, I would like to know more about green infrastructure, such as EV charging stations, accessible public transit, green spaces would probably be more your speed, etc. Specifically, what infrastructure improvements have you seen, been a part of, would like to suggest that could or has provided solutions to the Rockford metropolitan area, Belvidere area, the environmental challenges here.

Mark: I had heard that CherryVale Mall, that the gymnastics place out there now.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: I think it used to be a movie theater. I had heard that was a charging place for Tesla, but I'm not sure about that, but I really haven't seen any in Rockford. I've seen them in other communities, but not Rockford, so...

Haley: They're making some plans to implement some EV charging, according to the R1 Planning Council, they have a whole plan. I know they've been implementing greenways and stuff to help with Keith Creek and flood mitigation.

Mark: I think some of those houses that were frequently flooded have been torn down. And people...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: had been moved and that makes sense. And I think it'd be nice to get someone like Natural Land Institute in. Right now it is just turf grass, it'd be nice to get some more native species in there...

Haley: Definitely.

Mark: ...that are deep rooted that can absorb it.

Haley: Restore it back to its original environment.

Mark: Yup, yup.

Haley: That definitely would be ideal.

Mark: Yup.

Haley: Better than just leaving the lawn because I'm assuming they have to maintain that lawn too.

Mark: Yeah, gotta mow, right? *laughs* The Rockford mayor is really on board with some of these initiatives, so I think that's a good sign. If you can get them involved, then they can move things along a little bit quicker.

Haley: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: And I think with the current occupier of the White House, I think where cities and states communities are going to see some grant grant, what's the word I'm looking for?

Haley: Money?

Mark: Yeah, yeah, grant money or just money from the federal government to institute some use, the charging stations, get more solar on top of roofs and things like that. One thing that the burpee museum I know has, a green roof tap on. Stupidly, I got into discussions with people on Facebook, which is a stupid place to argue, but now they're talking about solar fields taken up all this good ag land and stuff.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: But there's a lot of rooftops that are just asphalt or just black. I mean, there's a lot, a lot of square footage up on top of buildings for solar power. That's, it's wasted space, so...

Haley: For solar, for rooftop gardens, for a lot of things that could help our communities just not being used, kind of just like how there's so many abandoned buildings, especially in Rockford, but we're still contributing to urban sprawl with around Riverside. You know, they just put up that Costco, like they put in that roundabout with the Casey's, and the Burger King and the new hospital. I mean, obviously, certain things probably need to make new infrastructure for that, but I'm assuming they're probably going to be doing some neighborhood development out there. There's no need for that, because there's so many abandoned houses that could be occupied and even like abandoned factories and stuff that could be, there's just a lot of wasted space. And it doesn't help with the water regeneration either because it's not permeable.

Mark: Right. I visited a place that actually had permeable parking lot, which was interesting.

Haley: Yeah, it can be done. It just isn't.

Mark: Yeah, yeah, and the whole thing wasn't impermeable, just the edges were, so...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: It allowed all the water to drain, so, which was kind of cool.

Haley: Yeah, that's interesting. I never even thought of that, just, you know, using the boundaries as permeable because then the runoff would just ideally get sucked back in. That would definitely mitigate costs for implementing that.

Mark: There is a special type of asphalt, so...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: When you mentioned the build up on this side of Rockford, what's happening on the west side? Which is, maybe, another sustainability concern is the poverty that you can see on the west side of Rockford. All the growth is all on the east side of Rockford. You know, you talk about inclusiveness and things like that. I mean, we have food deserts locally. I think even Belvidere kind of does, since the one downtown grocery store must be the Pig and went to Sullivan's, I guess. When they shut down, there's kind of a food desert on this side of town. Now Aldi's is doing pretty good business, I say, I live north and west of Belvidere, so...

Haley: Yeah, and even by Poplar Grove, the only grocery store around, they do not have very good produce, they do not have very healthy food stocked there. And it kind of stinks because, you know, if I want to get food anywhere, I have to either go there or drive, you know, 10, 15 minutes into Belvidere or Rockford. And it's frustrating because unless you come right when their shipment comes in, they will literally have moldy tomatoes for sale. It's not good. Especially because I like to eat healthy. I like to eat fresh produce. It's a shame, but they kind of have, like, a monopoly on the area when it comes to food, but they also don't entirely provide the best food either.

Mark: I've seen designs of cities where it's actually a city, so people are living in town, oftentimes, they don't even have cars, taller buildings, so you get more people packed per square mile, but everything, all their needs, are within walking distance, whether it be food, you know, groceries, even small libraries and things like that. Everything's within walking distance, which makes sense.

Haley: Yeah, definitely.

Mark: We fell in love with the car in our country. You almost have to, so...

Haley: Yeah, I know, I just bought a bike for myself in the fall. And it's been a lot of fun, you know, just kind of exploring the city and... but I also, I don't see myself purchasing a car in a long time, to be honest. And I just don't see the need for a car in the city, but there's a lot of people still that drive. And it takes forever to get anywhere *laughs*

Mark: And it is very expensive to have a car in the city, you know, for parking, and like you said, just trying to get around. Bikes can get around easier, so...

Haley: Yes, and it's fun and active and you get to be outside. What are your thoughts on Belvidere, Rockford, taking action towards implementing solutions to these environmental challenges and more

specifically in BIPOC, being Black, Indigenous, People of Color, neighborhoods compared to other neighborhoods?

Mark: I'm all for it. I brought up the food deserts, and I'm sure there are, because they've closed some Schnucks in Rockford. Where do they go? You know, they have to drive somewhere to get their groceries and that's unfortunate because [a lot of times they don't have access to vehicles](#) and buses don't always run when they need to and...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: Things like that.

Mark: I think the bus system in Rockford, I don't know for sure, but I think it's pretty decent. People can do pretty well, but...

Haley: Yeah I've heard they have a pretty accessible bus system throughout Rockford, which you need that. You need to make sure that the transit gets to every neighborhood because people got to get to work and got to get their food, and it's a sustainable transit solution. So I'm very pro-public transit, as well. Pro-biking, pro-walking. Let's leave the cars, but that's a challenge in the Belvidere area.

Mark: It is, it is.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: And, you know, I live in a subdivision so...

Haley: Me too.

Mark: I want to bike into Belvidere, it's, that's a pretty good hike. And I do it, more for exercise rather than to go to a store or something, but...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: You're right. I'm a bad guy.

Haley: No, I drive my car a lot too because, you know, I live like 10 miles, I believe, from Belvidere and I live about the same from Rockford, and I work in Loves Park. I work, also, in downtown Rockford. There's no way I'm biking over there. That's, it's a 25 minute drive for me to get to downtown Rockford, so...

Mark: Right, yeah, me too. We do have solar power on our roof, so...

Haley: Oh, that's nice. Unfortunately, we don't have anything of that sort in my house. I've asked my dad, I was like, "Have you, like, checked the little thing on the electric bill where you can opt for green energy?" I don't know if he did, but I suggested that.

Mark: Lastly, now's the time to go solar. There's federal tax credits, there's state rebates, essentially, they're called renewable energy credits. Probably 70% of my panels were paid for already.

Haley: Oh, wow.

Mark: Yeah, and now, day like this, I'm generating electricity, so basically, my goal is to generate more than I can use. So I send some back down the lines, and then ComEd pays me, so...

Haley: Yeah, it's nice. It's nice. Specifically, in regards to projects that you've done around Belvidere. Is it pretty inclusive across the board in where you're doing these projects and who they affect?

Mark: I would say, generally, their inclusive to the extent that we don't exclude anybody. Natural Land Institute is working on this, and I'm actually on an equity task force, that we're looking at how to be more inclusive with our BIPOC neighbors. You go to an event, and there's primarily white people there.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: And how do we not just get more members, but, and some of it's cultural, and what we need to do is kind of help the cultures. You think of Belvidere with their Hispanic community, how do you get that culture, and that culture definitely, you go down through Belvidere Park on any given day, and there's a lot of Hispanic families utilizing the park and, and that's great. That's what it's there for, but how do you get them out into more natural areas? That's what we're working on. So...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: There is an effort to be more inclusive.

Haley: Now, that's good. That's good. If disparity is perceived, how can Rockford and Belvidere implement more inclusive solutions? What has being on the equity task force and you said they've been working on trying to find more ways to promote inclusivity. What have you guys been discussing?

Mark: This just started probably in the fall. Well, we've actually been looking at this for several years, but the events last summer, I think a lot of different organizations are now looking at being more inclusive. I don't think many organizations were trying to be exclusive, but because of our society we were.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: We've kind of focused on some of the history of systemic racism, which I'm a part of, being white...

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: ...and my ancestors didn't own slaves, but I can walk down the street and not be harassed. I can walk into a store and not be followed, you know, things like that, that we as non-People of Color, as white people take for granted. And so...

Haley: Yes.

Mark: ...there's some learning involved for us as to what it means systemically and from there hopefully we can learn and do things better. And Belvidere is a very white community and it's gradually become a fairly high percentage of, I would say more Hispanic, the Brown People of Color and there's been a lot of resistance to that from some of the old guard in Belvidere and maybe you've noticed some of that too.

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: Coming from Belvidere schools, so...

Haley: Especially with the events of the summer, I saw a lot of [students/former students] on social media from the Belvidere school system speaking basically against the Black Lives Matter movement. There's a lot of refusal to accept the fact that systemic racism exists, I feel like in the white population of our area, they don't want to hear it. They don't want to. Essentially, they don't want their bubble to be burst because...

Mark: *laughs*

Haley: You know, there definitely is that white privilege bubble that exists, and people get comfortable in it. And they get uncomfortable when people challenge that and they're like, "Hey, this stuff's going on." And then they're like, "No, no, no." Ignorance is bliss, essentially, and the challenge is trying to make people receptive to that, you know, promoting that awareness. I think this is coming back to education, what we were talking about earlier, and it's definitely a very deep rooted problem, but it's important for all sectors of society to be addressing these.

Mark: And I agree. You look at the populations that are most hurt by climate events. Now, they're not talking just climate change, they're just talking about weird climate, you know, like the stuff down in Texas, you know, the deep freeze that they had and the big snow. That's a weird climate event. And we had a lot of snow this winter. And now, the populations that are most hurt by those weird climate events tend to be people of poverty tend to be People of Color, you know, Houston gets devastated by these hurricanes and who gets hurt? It's the people that live by the refineries. They're the ones that have

water issues, you know, look at Detroit, Michigan, and Flint, Michigan, with their water issues. Who was hurt by that? It wasn't the white people.

Haley: Definitely not.

Mark: So...

Haley: I was actually just talking about Flint, Michigan yesterday in my US sustainability class, because we were talking about water. And I actually did research paper my freshman year, about how the events of Flint, Michigan were essentially a result of the environmental racism in our country, because if you look at everything that went down with that situation, GM, I believe, they petitioned to switch their water back to the original source, instead of from the Flint River. And because they found that the water was corrosive to car parts...

Mark: Oh, geez.

Haley: ...and so the city approved it, because GM, you know, produces capital for that community. So they're like, "Yeah, that's fine." But then when the residents petition for the same thing they denied it. So, and it comes down, what I found in my research paper, was that it was coming down to racial capitalism, they saw the Black community as disposable because they weren't, you know, making enough capital. So they were basing their decisions very financially, but completely disregarding the humanity of the Black community. And it's really, really upsetting to me, and I feel very passionate about trying to fix these environmental issues, while also including everybody. It's really disgusting to me how they could allow a car manufacturer to switch their water that they knew was dangerous, but they refuse to do it for their, the people in their community.

Mark: Yeah, yeah, and, and that's been going on for centuries in our country, you know, examples just like that.

Haley: And...

Mark: Horrible.

Haley: ...that is why we need to raise the awareness and start doing better, because...

Mark: Agreed.

Haley: ...it's 2021. We have no excuses.

Mark: We can do better, so..

Haley: We can definitely, it's there. The resources are there. The knowledge is there. We just have to do it, you know?

Mark: Yep, we're on the same wavelength.

Haley: Definitely. That was really inspired me to begin this podcast. Originally, I was like, "Oh, I can see what environmental issues are happening in Chicago," and how places like Little Village and places on the southside have been experiencing a lot of environmental racism in Chicago, so I was like, "Oh, well, I could research what's going on there," but then I'm like, "Well, maybe I should look more closer to home. And I was very curious about what environmental issues the area was facing because I didn't have a clue. Given my experiences, you know, middle-class family, white family, in a pretty white neighborhood, I wasn't very exposed. This has been eye opening, In regards to everything that's been going on in this community. It's definitely made me a lot more appreciative of the natural spaces that Rockford has to offer and compassionate towards the struggles of the community. Because you know, everyone is always like, "Oh, Rockford such a crappy place or whatever," but then they never really think about, what is actually happening? And how is this actually affecting the populations? You know? So that's kind of where I was coming from when I decided to make this podcast.

Mark: Oh, cool.

Haley: I really appreciate you taking the time.

Mark: And talking with you gives me a lot of hope for the future, so with people like you and board, I think, I think we're in good hands, so...

Haley: I definitely have a lot of hope for my generation. You know, once we get through school...

Mark: Yup.

Haley: ...and get our feet under us, I think there's gonna be a lot of, you know, good change in all sectors of society. I have hope. I know there's a lot of people that are pretty grim about things, but it's like, what's the point if you're not going to be optimistic? Like come on, now. Let's do this. *laughs*

Mark: One thing that I always heard throughout my whole career as a teacher, "Well, what about kids these days?" And I go, "Oh, kids are kids, they're no different than when I was a kid in high school," which seems like a long time ago now, but some people were saying, "This generation, they don't want to work," and I go, "You know, that's not true." I really disagree with that. And I, and I think culturally, you guys are a lot more tolerant than when I was in school, in terms of sexuality, and you know, who you're dating and things like that. To me, that's a good sign of hope, so...

Haley: Definitely, every generation is going to be different. I really enjoyed the conversation today. And connecting again with the community I've really enjoyed that, I actually just went on a bike ride. I ended up biking from Love's Park all the way to like downtown Rockford. We were riding along the Rock River and everything. It was really cool.

Mark: Yup.

Haley: And I've been spending a lot of time in Spencer Park recently, and Rock Cut State Park, things that I just really didn't utilize enough growing up. It's like why was I not here? Literally could have been, but I just wasn't.

Mark: Yup, yup.

Haley: I feel like that comes down to the awareness and education and just knowing what's available to the communities.

Mark: I know, last year when we were basically in lockdown mode, we explored a lot of forest preserve areas that we hadn't been to so..

Haley: Yeah.

Mark: It was kind of nice to do some hiking, so...

Haley: Definitely because you know, that's really not advised to be going on huge excursions and, you know, vacations and all that.

Mark: Yeah.

Haley: So little day trips, I feel like definitely have been appreciated and utilized a lot more.

Mark: Yep, thank you.

Haley: Thank you again for your time. And I really appreciate you sharing your knowledge and insight and I hope you learned something from today's conversation.

Mark: I did, yeah. Okay, well, it was good to see you, Haley.

Haley: I think now would be a good time to wrap up this episode. ***Outro Music*** As always, I would love to thank Mark luthan for sharing his valuable insight during this discussion. I would also like to thank anyone listening in on this podcast. As I always appreciate your support of green exploration Rockford. I would just like to remind you to take whatever you learn from this series, and consider how you as an individual can be a contributor to a sustainable future in your day to day life. And don't forget to not only show Mother Earth some love, but your fellow humans as well, each and every one of them because all humans deserve to live in a quality environment. My name is Hayley doll, and I am signing off. Stay green and stay exploring Rockford