

The Conch- Tanasia Swift FINAL.mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:04] Hello. My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast The Conch. We're moving along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, showcasing the incredible people working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face, and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are so excited to have a very special guest joining us, Tanasia Swift, Tanasia is a marine educator from Brooklyn, New York. She is the field station's program manager for the Billion Oyster Project, where she facilitates outdoor programs at local oyster reefs throughout the city. Welcome and thank you, Tanasia, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's do this.

Tanasia Swift [00:00:45] Thank you for having me. I'm excited to chat and be on the podcast.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:49] Awesome. So I'd love to hear a little bit more information about the Billion Oyster Project and what's its mission.

Tanasia Swift [00:00:58] The Billion Oyster Project, we're a nonprofit based in New York City, and our mission is to restore oyster reefs to New York City, and that's through public education initiatives. We work with schools all around New York City, community groups, volunteers, community scientists, essentially anyone who wants to participate and get involved. We have something for them to do, and that's at our local oyster reef. So there are reefs that we install all around New York City, as mentioned. So there is something for everyone to do. And the mission, once again, is to repopulate New York Harbor with those oysters.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:01:34] I want to talk about the oyster reefs in a second, but first, I want to ask you, I read that you attended the New York Harbor School and now you're installing these oyster reefs throughout the five boroughs in New York City. Could you share about your background and the road you took to end up where you are today? And tell us a little bit about your journey because I think the New York Harbor School, and correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds really unique, and I want to hear more about that and your experience and how you ultimately ended up where you are today.

Tanasia Swift [00:02:02] Yeah, definitely. So, I did go to New York Harbor School many years ago. I feel like it's been so long. When I was taking a step back to middle school, even before middle school. I spent a lot of time around the harbor with my dad and he was a fisherman. So essentially anywhere he would go when he would go fishing, hanging out at different piers, I was right alongside him. And so that essentially started our sparked my relationship with the water. And then once I was in middle school, I had it in my mind that I really wanted to go into marine science or marine biology at that time is really what I wanted to do. And at that same time, there weren't many or any high schools actually in New York City that focused on marine science. And just in time, the New York Harbor School was founded in 2003, and it was and still is a maritime high school, a public high school. So, it follows the same DOE regulation to apply for it as a regular high school. And I went and attended, you know, for my high school career. And that really like changed and shaped the way that I saw the New York Harbor as a living ecosystem. And now since I've graduated, so I graduated in 2008. Now it's a CTE so career and technical education high school. So, students are doing work related in various maritime fields. So, from professional scuba diving to marine biology research, aquaculture, marine policy, marine technology. And they're doing all of this work, once again, alongside of Billion Oyster

Project. So, it's grown definitely since I've graduated. And sometimes I wish I could go back, but I'm super proud of like what the Harbor School has done. After high school, I attended Stony Brook University studying environmental studies, and that's when I also learned about like environmental justice and like all of the different ways that you can become an environmentalist or just like participate in various initiatives around the harbor, around the world and like this movement of environmentalists. And after graduating from college, I went into the nonprofit world, mostly working as an educator and then fast forwarding you know a couple of years down the line. In 2013, I started working for the Billion Oyster Project. It's been history ever since. So that's sort of like my short answer to how I essentially got from this little girl in Brooklyn to now working at the Billion Oyster Project.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:47] That's an incredible journey, and I didn't realize you've been there for so long.

Tanasia Swift [00:04:51] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:52] Wow, that's really great. Okay, so the Harbor School sounds amazing. You said it's the only school in New York, maritime school? Is that the only school like that in the U.S.? Because I don't think I've ever heard of one.

Tanasia Swift [00:05:04] I know there's a couple of, like, maritime focused high schools around the United States. I think there's one in Connecticut. The names are escaping me at this moment. And there are some on the West Coast that have similar missions where they're like very maritime focused. And there are other programs, of course, but they're usually like undergraduate programs. And I believe New York Harbor School is actually the only school in the United States that has a professional diving program where students are getting their certification as a part of their regular schooling, not like an additional elective that they're doing. So that's pretty cool.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:40] That sounds like a great experience, and I'm sure it has evolved since you went there last. And I think you're probably one of the only people who would say, I really missed my high school years. And want to go back.

Tanasia Swift [00:05:51] Yeah, I do. I do.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:53] That's awesome. So, I'm in Portland, Oregon, right? And so when I think about New York Harbor, I've been to New York several times. I don't really see oysters and the connection. I imagine I'm not unique in that. So, I would love to hear a little bit more about the history of oysters in New York City and their significance and why is restoring them in New York really important?

Tanasia Swift [00:06:16] So oysters have a long history in New York City from cultural reasons, even before settlers moved into what we now know as New York City, the Lenape, the original people of the native lands here were using and harvesting oysters. And so we have evidence of that now today we show middens which are just like piles of shell that are sometimes compacted or hidden into different sediment. So, we know that Lenape were harvesting and eating oysters and consuming them. And then during the time when we have the industrial revolution, many people began to see that New York City's oysters were like some of the best tasting oysters in the world. So they say. So, you had folks, you know, mostly guys on their boats coming to New York City harvesting oysters. It also had connections to the slave trade. So, people were working along the water, not only

bringing in goods and various things, but also shipping oysters from New York City to various parts around the world. And so people were eating oysters from the rich to the poor. So rich would eat oysters and like, you know, fancy restaurants while the poor would eat oysters just off of a cart. So, they'd have someone harvest them directly from the harbor and go out on their skiffs or boats, pull them up, put them on a cart on ice, on the half shell, and then you're literally serving them along the streets of New York City. And that essentially became sort of like the key food within the city. And then it got to the point, of course, as you can imagine, where because we're harvesting so many, of course, with pollution and then, you know, dredging up the harbor so that these larger boats can get in, the populations began to decline. And we didn't realize that until, you know, you see that the sizes of the oysters are becoming smaller and smaller. And then people are also beginning to get sick from eating oysters because of the pollution. And then that's when we realized, like, hey, this is an issue. So now New York City is closed to shellfishing, so you can't actually harvest any shellfish from New York City's waters because of the pollution. And oysters, they're important because they're a keystone species. So like, you can imagine a species that sort of like keeps every other species in line. And oysters act as that. So instead of having, like a coral reef, which is, you know, a habitat for various fish and critters and wildlife that you would see in like tropical waters, New York City's equivalent would be oyster reefs. So, when we destroyed that, we sort of like lost lots of habitat for the fish and the other critters that would normally live here. And that essentially created this decline in various other species that would normally, you know, travel to and from the city. And additionally, oysters, they filter the water, they're great filter feeders, so they help to, you know, cycle nutrients in the water column. So, you have this great clarity of water for the most part. And of course, once you're eating oysters back then, no one was really thinking about those things. But now we're trying to get to the point with the Billion Oyster Project where we're just harvesting or we're planting oysters, not necessarily for harvesting purposes, but for the ecosystem benefits.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:46] Right. That was what my next question was going to be. So, you're planting these reefs for restoration of the ecosystem as opposed to putting them in and then harvesting them and then people eating them, right?

Tanasia Swift [00:09:58] Yeah, that's correct.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:00] Yeah, that makes sense. Okay. And then just to clarify, you mentioned oyster shell middens. Is that M.I.D.D.E.N.S, a midden, right?

Tanasia Swift [00:10:11] Yeah, correct.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:11] And that's just a bunch of shells. Like a pile of shells?

Tanasia Swift [00:10:15] Yeah, it's like a pile of shells that was left during the time of the Lenape. Some of them have been piled over with sediment. So sometimes you're, like, imagine you take a piece of land and you, like, cut it straight down the middle. Sometimes you'll see shells in the core of that piece of land, and some of them are exposed. Shell middens still exist today in various parts of the city, and I'm sure they're outside of the city as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:43] That's amazing. I had heard that term. Actually, I had read that word before, and I didn't know exactly what it meant. So I think it's interesting that it even has its own word as opposed to just a pile of shells.

Tanasia Swift [00:10:52] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:54] So one particularly colorful description of you that I read when I was conducting research about you before we joined together here in conversation is it said that you are, quote, "like the Johnny Appleseed of the water world, planting oyster reefs in New York City's estuaries from Coney Island to Sunset Park, Governors Island and the Bronx River." and that you are, quote, "determined and excited like a mother of millions to see the success of her efforts. She recruits and trains an army of students and teachers in the classroom and in the field to help establish reefs and monitor and collect data on the growth of these incredible mollusks." So that was, (inaudible) "like a mother of millions." That's amazing. Do you feel like that? But what is the process for oyster reef restoration and how does that look in action?

Tanasia Swift [00:11:42] Yeah, so there's so many moving parts when it comes to restoration specifically in New York City. Part of it is, you know, like the back end. So you have to get permits. So permission to install the reef. You have to design the reef. Yeah, of course. The community engagement side of things and the oyster shell collection part of it. So all of these pieces are moving at the same time like a machine. Every piece has a different purpose. And in order for this machine to go into place, everything has to move accordingly. First, we sort of start with an idea of where we want to plant a reef, and this can be based off of historically a place that oysters were known to inhabit. Or it can be a lead from like a community partner. Sometimes you also get a grant where, you know, this grantor was hoping to work in a particular area. So, we start with an idea, and then from there we'll do a site visit at that location just to check out what the access looks like and influence what the design of this reef would entail. From there-and that part also includes community members- we just did a site visit a couple of days ago, so we'll invite some of our community partners or some of the local communities to these site visit just for the input throughout the entire process. Yeah. Then we'll start designing what the reef would be. So whether it's a reef that has environmental concrete, so this e-concrete material, whether it's tall reef or a short, shallow reef, a reef that something's floating or a reef that is just going to be placed on the bottom, a reef that's encapsulated inside of a structure. So that goes into the design process. And then we also think about the ways that it can be used by community. So, if it's in the middle of the harbor, a place that's hard to reach, it might not be so suitable for community outreach and engaging students in that way. So, I start to design and at the same point, we're also collecting shells from restaurants all over New York Harbor. It takes a year for shells to cure. So basically, after you've eaten an oyster or a clam, they go into a large pile and then for a year they sit in the sun. The rain essentially washes them off. And of course, bugs. Looking at the various, you know, shells that on the pile to the point we have the sterilized shell after a year. And so once those shells are cured, we then take the shells and we put them inside of a tank. That tank is filled with harbor water and then also oyster larvae. So, they're introduced at the same time. Oyster larvae is swimming around for about the first three weeks of its lifespan. They attach those shells and then once those shells are seeded with oyster spat, what we call baby oysters, we'll just monitor them for an additional three weeks or so and then they're ready to be planted out into one of our reef locations with the design that we've set in place. And then in terms of community input and community engagement, so alongside when the restoration side of things are happening, we're going out to communities, getting them excited about oysters coming to their location, getting their input on the designs, recruiting local schools, reaching out to the schools, and doing site visits. We're looking at wild oyster populations. So all of this happened before the reef gets put into place. So you're getting people excited about what they're about to experience. And then the day finally comes where you have community members out. You have your local

community-based organizations, you have your local schools out, you have elected officials out, and they're all there together, working alongside BOP to physically plant this reef into the water. That's the most exciting part of it all. So, we plant the reef together and then you set days for community members and schools to go out to that same reef that we've planted and monitor. So, seeing how the growth of the oysters are doing and now the students are seeing all the critters that are being attracted to this reef, so they're seeing the efforts of their work after it's been installed and seeing what oysters can do to provide habitat for other critters. And so that's the fun part of everything.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:16:11] That is amazing. I love that story so much. And I love that the steps that you just outlined and how it's so engaging with, you know, all the constituents and building the enthusiasm. And I think I read there's a working waterfronts conference. Right? And I've read before in I think it's Maine, where there's a lot of contention between people who are actually working on these waterfronts and people that are buying up land and developing, you know, upscale homes. Is that something you encounter or you're able to avoid that because of the outreach that you do in the community beforehand? Or do you know what I'm talking about?

Tanasia Swift [00:16:52] Yeah. So there are various stakeholders that utilize the spaces along New York City's waterfront. So New York City specifically has about 520 miles of shoreline, and most of that is public land. And of course, when it gets to the water, ownership is, you know, there's a gray line between who owns what. But typically, it's not owned by individuals where it's privately owned. I think, you know, that hasn't necessarily been too much of an issue for us, but I think there have been some concerns in terms of like, what's the vision of a waterfront would look like in, you know, ten years. 20 years. Yeah. Should we include oysters in that if we know that there is a potential that oysters could be harvested or more people are working on the water. So one of the I guess to give a more direct answer when we go for our permits, we get our permits from one of the entities is the Department of Environmental Conservation. So that's in New York State. And one of the concerns that we have to sort of address is the issue of like poaching. And it's a very valid issue, right? So we have to make sure that whatever reef that we're planting in is not necessarily going to be completely accessible where anyone can just walk into the water, pull those oysters up and poach them. And so for that reason, we build those relationships with the community members to act as additional sort of like eyes on the water. Yeah. And then also create relationships with landowners to get their permission. Of course, before we even get those permits, they have to be on it as well or, you know, on board. Right. So, there's various ways that we help to do that by creating those connections with local community members, whoever the land owners are. Sometimes there are fishermen that we're creating those connections with. There are boaters that we have to create those connections with. So various stakeholders. And the way that we do that is just by going out and becoming part of the weaved community of the waterfront.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:19:02] That's amazing. I love that. The weaved community of the waterfront. That's so great. How do you maintain these oyster reefs? Do you have to continually go out and seed them or do they just start to take over and naturally reproduce in the water?

Tanasia Swift [00:19:18] That's a great question. So, once we install an oyster reef at a location, the plan is to go out on a monthly basis with groups so that we're engaging with them. But then we'll do a larger data collection day, one in the spring, one in the fall, to look at the growth of the oysters. And we also look at if they're actually populating or if

there's a wild offspring or if they produce offspring and if there's wild populations from oysters around the harbor. So we don't have to go out and like reseed these reefs. Once they are installed, they begin to, like, grow on their own. And it's crazy because, like, you start off with this very what looks like a basket of just shell and at the time of installation, the oyster spat, so once again, these little baby oysters, they're so tiny that they look like pepper flakes on shell. So, when you first install it, it looks like a basket of just like blank shell. And then you go back a month later and then you'll see oysters that are about like an inch tall. And then within like a year, you have about three inches or more of growth and they start to create these 3D structures. So not necessarily looking like that blank basket, but really looking like a natural oyster reef. And sometimes it gets to the point where they start to grow within the structures that they're placed in. So, imagining like a tree growing naturally around a fence or a gate or growing through that fence or gate. That's what's happening with some of our oysters. They're growing and literally like taking over. So, some of them don't need to be reset. I mean, there is a level of mortality when you're planting oysters. They're going to have that first spike of mortality, but then the populations begin to even out because, you know, just the way nature works.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:21:18] That's so cool. You gave us a little insight and a glimpse to your journey and starting out fishing with your dad and being out on the water with your dad. And I also read that by the age of 17, you were a certified scuba diver and assumed you'd pursue a career as a marine biologist studying sharks. And it wasn't until your undergraduate studies that you learned about environmental justice, which you mentioned, and social sciences, and you realized that your ultimate aspiration is to bridge the gap between urban communities and the marine world. And it sounds like you're doing that now. And so tell us about that gap that you saw between urban communities and the marine world because I think I've talked with a few people that are doing that very same thing and I think it's just amazing. So, tell us a little bit about that.

Tanasia Swift [00:22:00] So I grew up in Bed-Stuy in Brooklyn in the nineties, very much landlocked community. And then at that time, like the community in Bed-Stuy, it was—you know, harsh in terms of like the social issues that were happening. But at that same time, I was also in a high school, this maritime high school, which is taking students to the waterfronts around New York City for going on various trips and using the harbor as our classroom. And then I also have the opportunity, as you mentioned, to get certified as a scuba diver when I was 17. So I did this program in the Bahamas where I received my certification. And during those months when I was in this program, we also had students from the local communities come and learn how to swim with these exchange students from the U.S. And so I thought that was like a crazy idea, Like students in the Bahamas, you know, are learning how to swim because it said that, like some of them don't necessarily receive technical training with swimming, but they're along the water. In my mind, I was like, well, technically, like New York City is also a coastal city. And when you think about how many people know how to swim or have used the harbor in that way, there aren't that many. So, these little seeds were being planted sort of like as I went throughout my journey. And then in college, I was learning about environmental justice communities where you have communities that are not equally sharing resources in terms of like environmental resources or like communities that don't receive enough resources to provide, you know, good, healthy air, great water quality. And I lived in New York City Housing Authority at that time. And I guess, community and surrounding communities around that I've just always thought of as a neighborhood that needed work, to say the least. So I just felt like I was being able to go and do all these amazing things right through school and through college, going to see what the marine life looks like in various places. And then I would come back to my community where I live and then back to being in the

dumps, you know, for lack of a better word. And so I, in my mind, wanted to figure out a way where, like the place that I love and the thing that I love so the water and the ocean could, like, overlap because it felt like when I would spend time along the water, I didn't see people that looked like me or that was from where I was from in those areas. And so, I wanted to bridge that gap because they felt like two completely different worlds. And being that I did want to do marine science, I thought for the longest that I would have to leave New York City. But it then occurred to me that I don't have to leave New York City. I can start doing this in my neighborhood and keep it local and then work in the communities that I grew up in. And using New York Harbor as that resource for education. So that's how that happened.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:12] Yeah, it sounds like Billion Oyster Project is perfect for that, right?

Tanasia Swift [00:25:15] Yeah, exactly.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:25:18] Part of getting people closer to the water and connecting with the water and in addition to the Billion Oyster Project, you're the founder of Water Women NYC, which is a community group aimed at getting women to connect with water where you are currently developing a mentor program, I read, for young girls to become environmental advocates of their local waterways. So, could you tell us about this exciting thing?

Tanasia Swift [00:25:42] Yeah. So as mentioned, I would go scuba diving or spend time on the water. And then I had friends who were like, you know, just from the neighborhood to just around and like, I want to do this too. Like, I want to participate. Let me know when you're going out. And so it initially just started out as just like me inviting a couple of friends out to the water whenever I would go kayaking or if there is an event with the Billion Oyster Project that I'm hosting it, where it's like I'm just inviting my friends out to come hang out. And then it sort of like went from that to like me and a few of my colleagues creating this community group where we're like scheduling and bringing women, as mentioned, to the water and doing this together because we felt like a lot of the activities and sports that are water related are very male dominated and very white male dominated. And it's, of course, hard whenever you're like the one person who sticks out or stands out and you're trying something new and you don't feel very comfortable because of the community, you know, that you're in. So that's how that essentially started. And as we were going along, I wanted to create something much larger than just like having something that's recreational. So we started to develop this idea to have this mentorship program, which was still like ironing out a lot of the details with that. With the idea or the mission to get young girls to then be the advocates for environment initiatives. So hopefully planting the seed for the new next generation of environmentalists. And then also it's just like passing the torch on. I'm sure there's going to come a time where I'm not going to be at the forefront and then I want to be able to have someone who, you know, can continue the fight for environmental education, environmental justice in New York City. So that's how that came about.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:34] You're the mother of millions.

Tanasia Swift [00:27:38] Hahaha

Julie Kuchepatov [00:27:39] I love it. What's your experience been like with mentorship, and do you have a mentor?

Tanasia Swift [00:27:43] Not officially. I can't say that I've officially had like one mentor per se, but I've definitely been mentored by various people in various ways. And when it comes to mentorship, there has been various influences, so from people to experiences. Even like the young girls that I have interacted with. When you think of mentors should be thinking like the mentor being the older, more experienced person, but also like receiving so much great knowledge in life, you know, from the young girls that you're engaging with. But I remember always wanting to, like, have like one mentor, someone who can, like, show me the ropes and help me through it. And then at that time, when I had to be about 20 or 23 years old, there really wasn't many options, at least I thought, in terms of like mentorship. And then as I started to grow older, I realized that, like I do have so many mentors from the women who helped me create Water Women NYC, even just like Ayana Johnson, just, you know, putting bugs in my ear and like, inspiring me to continue on. So, yeah, so wanting to share all of that knowledge that I have gained and picked up along the way with the younger generation.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:03] I think that's so great. So, you know, we talked about this a little bit before we started recording. And, you know, SAGE is about building gender equality in the seafood sector. But I think with you, it's interesting. So you and I have been at the same meeting before around building DEI in aquaculture workforce. So our paths have crossed before. And I think with you, you're in conservation and restoration and you work with the restaurant industry to gather shells and you work in community engagement. So you straddle a lot of different, I guess, sectors or areas. Right? And so I was curious if you could share one or two aspects of any sector or just in your daily life and your interactions in your navigating through life about the culture of these industries or these areas that may contribute to inequalities in your experience? And what are some of the things that these industries can do to lessen these inequalities?

Tanasia Swift [00:30:03] Automatically. I think of an experience that I have this past week where we were doing a visit and along the waterfront. I feel like many of the yacht clubs are male dominated. They definitely are like male dominated. Yeah. And we were asking you know like, so how do you get women involved? Why is it just men that are part of your club? And, you know, they kind of like laughed and chuckled it off and said, well, you know, we hope to get more women involved. But in my mind, I was thinking like, how are you doing that? You know?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:30:37] Yeah.

Tanasia Swift [00:30:37] And part of what I've experienced in terms of these inequalities is the fact that like the waterfront, as I mentioned before when I was talking about Water Women NYC, is very male dominated. And then like, even from like the culture and the conversations that might feel like, oh, we're just having a chuckle here and there and we're just telling jokes. The jokes and the conversations, the type of environment that you are around can be very misogynistic. And if there's no one there to balance that out and to check, you know, those sorts of bad behaviors, then it's going to continue on. And there's no one who is going to be at the forefront like trying to actively change that. So those are just thinking about like the waterfront, I think generally is like one thing that came to mind when you asked that question is just changing the dynamic and changing who's using the waterfront, changing who has access to the waterfront. And that might be that, you know, why is it that there are so many men with boats? You know, we need to change that so that there's more women with boats. And it's not necessarily just because, but thinking about various aspects of how we use the waterfront and who has the right to change that or who has the right to engage with the waterfront. And then also thinking about the world of

policy, you know. A lot of that goes into restoration and how the waterfront is designed and how the waterfront is used. And sometimes I go into these meetings where we're talking about these changes and who is going to write the new initiative in order to make those changes. And I still see that there are inequalities in who's writing and developing new initiatives along the waterfront or just like environmentally as well. So just like who is in control of the pen is very important.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:39] Yeah. And I think I would imagine like a historically a yacht club has some pretty strict policies around who can join, right? I mean, I don't know about today, but I'm sure historically they did, right?

Tanasia Swift [00:32:51] Right. Yeah, definitely. Even with the idea of, I feel like I'm about to go on a tangent.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:57] Do it.

Tanasia Swift [00:32:59] Even though like, oysters, a lot of the restaurants in New York City that were selling oysters historically, you know, stories that said they're like men getting away from their wives and their social clubs and oysters were just used as the food that was readily available. So, it was basically a social club for men. And it was men who was at the waterfront, men who were harvesting the oysters. So, when you have those sorts of dynamics historically, they continue on unless someone starts to change that. So definitely thinking about how oysters have played a role to some degree in like the lack of diversity in some of these fields.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:41] I'm sure someone's written a dissertation about that somewhere. Should find it. I'll try to look for it and put it in the notes. Those are really great observations. So, this podcast is to inspire people working in or thinking about starting a career in the seafood sector. And I know you're not directly working in the seafood sector, but I would say indirectly for sure. So what advice would you give people already in the business or thinking about starting a career in seafood or in conservation?

Tanasia Swift [00:34:07] I think the advice that I would give, it's actually advice that I received. But I am not the creator of this advice, but. Just because it's hard doesn't mean that it's not meant or not intended for you, especially when you're breaking barriers. It can feel very isolating. It can feel like you're doing it alone. So knowing that there are other people who are along the same path and mission as you are, and you can collaborate with those people. But just because it's hard doesn't mean that it's not meant to happen. So that's what I would say. And like of course, it sounds very cliché in terms of like don't give up, but also find a balance because breaking barriers like mentally, socially can be very draining. So, continue to fight for it, but then also find a balance with the reason why you were doing this and continuing to keep that happiness also at the forefront and approaching your work with joy. So, it's going to be isolating but continue at it. It might be hard, but that doesn't mean that it's not for you. And then it will be a struggle but continue to remember why you were doing this. So having those moments of like, Oh, this is why I'm doing this and just having fun with it, you know, it's good for your mental health as well. I know I have to tell myself as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:34] Celebrate the small wins. There's no such thing as a small win. So celebrate it.

Tanasia Swift [00:35:37] Yeah, exactly.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:39] I think that's great advice. So how can SAGE, Seafood and Gender Equality, help you?

Tanasia Swift [00:35:44] I love seeing people who are doing similar work. So continuing to share those voices so that whether it's through the virtual world and through podcasts. So, listening and hearing all of the various voices that are on the podcast or doing work and being able to uplift those voices so that we can all connect. Of course, power in numbers. So continuing to share those voices and resources, I think that's a way that I would love to continue to like watch SAGE as you all grow. And I'm definitely going to be like chiming in and like researching other people as you start to uplift those voices as well.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:27] That's great. Yeah. Thank you for that. So, like you said, SAGE is about uplifting and amplifying diverse voices and this podcast is one of the main ways that we're doing this. So, I'd love to give you the opportunity to uplift someone. So, who would you like to uplift and why?

Tanasia Swift [00:36:42] Ooh. Okay, I. Can I get two?

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:47] Of Course.

Tanasia Swift [00:36:47] Okay one is going to be, so the founders of Water Woman NYC, Paola and Abby. So Abby, she is also an educator and she works at a school in Brooklyn and she just got accepted into grad school, So shout out to Abby.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:04] Yay.

Tanasia Swift [00:37:05] Also, knowing what her vision is and how powerful both of them, Abby and Paola, are so continuing to uplift them. I think I just wanted to shout them out. And knowing that creating an initiative is very hard. But like, I just wanted to give them an amazing shout out because they've just been phenomenal collaborators to work with. And then additionally, I know I said two, but I'm going to go ahead and do one more.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:37:31] Do it.

Tanasia Swift [00:37:33] So I was on a recent dive trip with students for getting their open water certification and they're high school students once again. Then I had a conversation with one of the young girls. I'm not going to mention her name, but if she listens to this, I'm sure she'll know who she is. I was like, Hey, you have dreams of going into scuba diving as a career. And she said, Oh, no, not really because of the culture and community, it's just not very welcoming to people like me. And she's a young Hispanic girl from New York City. And I mean, granted, I know the reality of what that feels like, but I just want to, like, let her know if you're listening, like, let her know, like, it's okay to, you know, feel that way. But also knowing that there are people like you who are being pioneers to creating those diverse spaces. So, I hope you continue on with it and don't let those challenges pull you away from something that you love just because the community is not what you want it to be. Create that community for yourself. And I'm really looking forward to seeing what this young lady does next.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:45] Well, those are amazing shout outs. And I agree. I hope this young lady is listening and I also am cheering you on from afar and anonymously. I really love that shout out. It's amazing. So, tell me, what's next for you?

Tanasia Swift [00:39:00] Yeah. So, continuing, of course, to plant oysters, engage with community. And then there are some new things coming up with Water Woman as we're starting to like, you know, do the grant searches now. So, there's going to be some new developments with that. I'm looking forward to that. And then we'll be able to share some of that news, you know, hopefully soon. So, yeah, that's on my radar.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:25] That's great. I will definitely keep my eyes peeled for news from Water Women. Do you have a website? How can we find you online?

Tanasia Swift [00:39:33] We're developing that now, and that's a part of the unveiling. We're working on that now; it's not completely done. But I do have Instagram and Water Women NYC. You can also just like search Water Woman NYC. So, we're on Instagram working on that as well. My Instagram is @EarthAsia524. So that's Earth. E. A. R. T. H. A.S.I.A.5.2.4.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:39:59] On Instagram.

Tanasia Swift [00:40:00] On Instagram. That's right.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:02] And how do we find the Billion Oyster Project?

Tanasia Swift [00:40:04] So billionoysterproject.org. You can like look us up online. And we also have an Instagram page, Twitter, and that's @billionoyster for both of those.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:15] Quick question about Billion Oyster Project. Do you expand into other regions or is there plan to do that or is just strictly just sticking to New York?

Tanasia Swift [00:40:24] We're sticking to New York City for now. So, like even outside of New York, the five boroughs, we don't necessarily work outside of the five boroughs. Being that our target is in New York City, we're sticking to New York City. That doesn't mean that that's always going to be the case. But for now, we're trying to just get those oysters right back into New York City. So that's where we're at.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:40:47] That's your mission. That's what you're sticking to. I think that's great. And I really, Tanasia, we've come to the end of our time here, and I really want to thank you so much for not only joining me on the conversation, but also for everything that you do. You're a true inspiration. And I was really, really excited to meet you and hear more about your efforts and the Water Women NYC is super exciting and I will certainly keep my eyes peeled for any kind of grants I think you might need and might be able to use. So.

Tanasia Swift [00:41:16] Thank you.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:16] Yeah, I'm always on the search for that as well, so I will definitely keep you in my mind around that. And I just want to thank you for everything.

Tanasia Swift [00:41:24] Thank you so much. I really appreciate the work that you've been doing and just like meeting you and just being such a joy. So that's amazing. So, thank you for that.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:41:33] Well, you're welcome. Thank you for tuning into The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just 2 seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you.

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:41:51] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality, or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.