Wes Martel:
You know, when we're around places like Yellowstone, we get a very peaceful, blessed feeling. Because of that connection we have, to all above ground and all below ground. And so again, you take care of us, we take care of you. What the creator gave us takes good care of us. We're so thankful for that.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Hello, and thank you for joining us again for the Voices of Greater Yellowstone podcast. I'm Kristin Kuhn, your host. We have a very important episode for you this month and I'm eager to share it with you all. March 1st, 2022 marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of Yellowstone National Park. This important milestone is reason to celebrate this special place, but also reason to reflect on its history and envision a more inclusive future. Despite myths about Yellowstone being an untouched, uninhabited land before the Yellowstone Park Protection Act was signed in 1872, the lands that became the world's first national park were inhabited by or important to many Indigenous peoples.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Today, dozens of tribes can still draw ancestral connections to the park. To honor Indigenous ways of life and to explore how we can work together to create a brighter future, the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho tribes of the Wind River Reservation gathered people online to commemorate the park's anniversary while elevating the Tribal community's voice and conservation. The tribes will also host an in-person Inter-Tribal Gathering this June on the Wind River Reservation.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Wes leads GYC's work to protect and restore Indigenous conservation priorities that honor cultural landscapes, Tribal rights, and ways of life. We'll discuss his work, some of his favorite moments from the recent virtual gathering, and hear a few deeply personal stories about what has shaped Wes' storied career in championing both conservation and Tribal sovereignty. Also in this episode, despite all efforts to create a quiet recording space, you'll finally get to meet my party-crashing co-host, Teebs, my 15 year old deaf gray rescue cat. He chose to be especially vocal during this conversation, but let's hope that's an indication of how engaging you'll find it as well. And with that, let's meet Wes Martel.

Wes Martel:
My name is Wes Martel and I am the Senior Wind River Conservation Associate for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition. A lot of my experience and my history is I spent 20 years on the Eastern Shoshone Business Council for the Eastern Shoshone tribe or the Wind River Reservation and really acquired a lot of background knowledge and experience related to conservation work.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Is that how you got into conservation work, Wes?

Wes Martel:
Yes. When I was on the council, we had several subcommittees. We have two tribes at Wind River, we have two councils. And so we had several subcommittees to try to handle different aspects of Tribal business. One of the subcommittees was the Fish and Game Committee, and I served on that committee for at least, out of the 20 years, probably at least 16 years as the chairman of that committee. And I really started understanding how important the work of Fish and Wildlife Service is regarding scientific
and technical information in your management planning. You know, habitat studies, forage studies, harvesting data for hunting. In a lot of reservations, never had any type of game codes. It was year-round hunting. No limits on what you could go out and take. And worked on the Fish and Wildlife Service and during annual aerial census surveys or big game herds, we found out that our big herd games were decreasing. And in relation to the habitat and the forage that we had, and one of the areas that we have at Wind River, we have 138,000 acre roadless area. I think we're the only reservation in the country with the roadless area.

Wes Martel:
And this roadless area was created back in 1934. And so way back then, even our elders were thinking about conservation and how do we make sure our wildlife and our herds are protected. Because that area they designated as a roadless area, that's some of the best habitat in the world for elk and other big game. And so just being involved with that. And then when we finally did try to talk about establishing a game code, I was the chairman of the Fish and Game Committee at the time. And that was a political hot potato, to go out and talk to Tribal members about, "We're going to have a game code and we're going to stop year-round hunting and we're going to have to start placing limits." And we had public meetings, informational meetings with Tribal members to go out and talk about this game code. And I used to dread those meetings because boy, we'd just go get cussed out for about three or four hours and, "Ah, you're nothing but a sellout. You're taking away our treaty rights."

Wes Martel:
When I finally came to the vote, the majority of our people said a game code was the way to go. So that ... I was really glad that all that work paid off. And so now we've got ... Nowadays, a Tribal member for some areas, you can get up to five tags for elk because-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Oh wow.

Wes Martel:
We're harvesting, we're managing, we're protecting the habitat. We're protecting them during hard times and the winter times. And so that's conservation.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah, absolutely. So how did you convey ... Like what was your strategy or your story for conveying the importance of implementing game codes at that time? Because that is hard when there can be a perception that you're taking something away from people. What sort of tools did you use to make the case that that kind of management was important?

Wes Martel:
Well, the initial reason was that in our beliefs the animals, the fisheries, the wildlife, they're our relatives. And we have to take care of our relatives. Reciprocity. You take care of us, we take care of you. And then the other side of it was that right before that, the state of Wyoming started putting out some public notices that they were going to start imposing state game laws on the reservation. And so that was an immediate red flag right away. And I think that was the major factor was that the only way we can stop Wyoming from coming and imposing that game code on our land is having our own game code.
Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Oh, okay. That makes sense.

Wes Martel:
We got to protect our sovereignty, we got to protect our treaty rights, and we got to do it our way. And so to me, that was a determining factor, that the majority of people said, "We got to do this."

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Okay. Yeah. That does seem like a pretty good motivation.

Wes Martel:
Yes.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
So Wes, you have a very storied career in conservation and in Tribal government. How did you come to find yourself at the Greater Yellowstone Coalition?

Wes Martel:
Even when I'm not on the council or employed by anybody, I'm always meeting with our two Tribal councils here. I'm always talking with them, I'm always telling them, "We got to start taking over nations. We got to start exerting our sovereignty on the water, taxation, energy, and environment." To me, that's my mantra. Water, taxation, energy and environment. Here at Wind River, we're in a very unique position to really be able to exercise our governance. To use water, taxation, energy, environment to connect and to strengthen ourselves, not only politically and economically but spiritually. And so when you look at those four topics, and you know the Wind River Reservation, we're just a microcosm of Wyoming. Energy, agriculture, and livestock. Recreation and tourism. Government sector jobs and small businesses, private ... You know, there's not big time corporation in our small towns.

Wes Martel:
That's what we have here. As a tribe of the two Tribal governments and with the resources we have and the control we have over our two and a half million acres here, we can diversify our economy. We can create those governmental structures and programs that create money and jobs. And that in turn creates the economy. And so conservation is an important part of that because that's why people come out here. They want to see buffalo and grizzlies and big horn sheep and we've got that here. We're probably never really going to open up our res the way other public lands are opened up, but we're part of the GYE, the ecosystem. And so that's really our major purpose and our major function is to play that, be that part of the ecosystem, in a way that we're helpful and we're respectful and we know what's going on.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. You know, at GYC we spend a lot of time thinking about and talking about how special the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is. What about the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem resonates with you? What makes it so special to you and where does Wind River fit in to the ecosystem for you in that way?
Wes Martel:
You know, when our mountains. For Indian people, our mountain, we call them the old men, because they've been here forever. And when we're around those areas, those are from our region. When we're around places like Yellowstone, we get a very peaceful, blessed feeling because of that connection we have. To all above ground of all below ground. And so again, you take care of us, we take care of you. What the creator gave takes good care of us. We're so thankful for that. We're so appreciative of that. And when you ... And there's a lot of places you go, you can feel that. Not just Yellowstone, a lot of other places. You just feel good being there. Just makes you feel good. On the other hand, there's a few places you can go where you don't get that feeling.

Wes Martel:
So that's part of that connection, how do we watch ourselves? How do we take care of ourselves and protect ourselves? And the animals and the birds, they're with us. They tell us. They help us. And right now they're telling us that we better do something about what's going on right now, with climate change, with all this pollution and degradation that we're placing on our environment and our water. They're telling us that we have to speak up for them. And so that's more, that's, that's what we do as GYC and as Indigenous people. We got to speak up for those at camp don't have a voice.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Absolutely. The park system and public lands of the United States of America are a very big part of non-Tribal Western conservation practices. And Yellowstone National Park, of course the lands that we now know as Yellowstone, existed long before a boundary was drawn around it and they were turned into a national park. But Yellowstone National Park just celebrated, observed, its 150th anniversary of its creation. And you and your team hosted, just a few days ago now, a virtual gathering to commemorate the 150th, but to specifically elevate the Tribal community's voice surrounding that observance. Can you tell us a little bit more about how the idea for this event started and what your vision for it was?

Wes Martel:
You know, going back just a little bit earlier, you asked me how I got connected with GYC. It was actually kind of like I was telling you, I've been doing all of this work with my councils for free. I never get paid for any of it, but I am always talking with them about conservation and governance and protecting our sovereignty. And then finally, one of my brothers, his wife, one of her friends from Montana sent her the job announcement for this position. And then my brother's wife, she said, "This is something that you might look into, you might be interested in." And so I looked at what they were talking about and I said, "I've been doing this for the past 40 years and then haven't been getting paid for it," you know?

Wes Martel:
So I said, "Yeah, I might as well see if I can." It just really was amazing, the response I got from GYC. I've been at this for a while, so I know what we need to do and I kind of got a plan of where we need to go. And what GYC wants to do with the Wind River Conservation Office fits right into that plan. We got to start educating our young people about Wind River governance, Wind River treaties, Wind River water, Wind River conservation. And that all connects. Our language, our culture, our tradition connects to education and scientific and technical needs that we have. And so that's exactly what we're going to be doing here with our office at Wind Rivers. How do we connect the elders to the young people? How do we ... What I was telling Colleen and Letara the other day, I said, "When we have a hydrologist out there telling our young people about all the micro-invertebrates and all of us technical terms and other things
that they use," I said, "We got to have a Tribal elder right there with them telling them why we believe, how we respect this water." And we believe there's a spirit in the river, tell them about that spirit and how to talk to that spirit.

Wes Martel:

And every once in a while you go to the river and you make an offering to the river. Maybe some tobacco or maybe some seed or maybe some shade or maybe a piece of meat from your meal. You make an offering to those spirits. And so that's our connection that we have. The Greater Yellowstone Coalition is allowing us to not only feel that, but allowing us to protect that. And so that's why I'm enjoying my job.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:

Well, you are a very important and integral member of our team and certainly you are a visionary and you're vision is helping guide our work. And all of us, really. So we're so, so pleased to be part of the same organization.

Wes Martel:

I've always said that, "You know, Wind River, we really have with our land base ..." And we have relatively small tribes. You know, those Arapaho tribes, about 10,000 members. The Shoshone tribes about 5000. You've got some of these tribes with small reservations, they've got 30,000-40,000 Tribal members. And so we've got a land base, we've got the mountains, we've got water, we've got resources. We've got the governance to manage that the way we want to manage and protect ourselves. And we want to take that vision that we have and that effort and that government and start helping other tribes that are in within the GYE. Understand their governance. Because as tribes, Tribal governments, we can have higher standards like for air quality and water quality than the state or federal government. That's governance, that's sovereignty, that's conservation, that's power.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:

Yeah.

Wes Martel:

What if all the tribes of the Missouri River Valley Basin had the same water quality standards? We'd have a big voice in protecting the river, not ... Air quality. So there's a lot of other area. Right now, they're planning, they still want to do uranium mining. They're talking about a nuclear facility down here in Kemmerer, Wyoming, which just is over the hill from us. So we got to start gearing up and we got to start protecting ourselves. And this meeting that we ... Just this virtual Zoom gathering that we had, that's where we want to elevate it, into the higher echelons of the federal government and Tribal leadership and NGOs where we use all of our might and our power to address what's going on out here.

Wes Martel:

And so if our tribes with our standards and our sovereignty and our treaty rights, and then even under the National Historic Preservation Act, Archeological Resource Protection Act, Antiquities Act, some of these other laws trying to throw it off-reservation. I've always told tribes, we should have Tribal environmental policy acts just the same way as we have the National Environmental Policy Act. And that way, number one, we get control of who's doing what on our reservation. And number two, it gives us
more authority off-reservation. That's how we need to look at that. That's where NGOs come in, that's where the GYC comes in, because we all need to fight this together and we all need to work it together.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
So it sounds to me, Wes, like you feel that there's a tremendous amount of untapped leadership power that exists in collaboration and coordination between different tribes and different Tribal governments. You know, with the assistance then of entities, but is that kind of what your ... Was that your vision, is that you see like this deeper collaboration that then sort of elevates the ability of all tribes to work together to then hold, really, everybody to higher environmental standards.

Wes Martel:
You hit the nail right on the head when you said there's a dearth of knowledge out there right now on governance.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wes Martel:
And that's what ... You know, our office here, we're focusing on Wind River. But working with Jason Baldes and the National Wildlife Federation and the Buffalo Program. And we're connected to the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council. We're connecting kind of on more of a national level, way beyond the bounds of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. But that's necessary, that power and that clout that we have together will give us more power and clout on GYE and other ... And our viewpoint, just like everybody else, Y to Y, Yellowstone to Yukon. That's a lot of territory there that needs to be protected. We need to start working, looking at international relationships with our brothers and sisters in Canada.

Wes Martel:
So this event we had on Tuesday really was a good sounding board and a good springboard for that to happen there. The speakers we had from the federal side, the speakers we had from the Tribal side, there were just a good mix of comments that really got people understanding, "You know, there's some issues here that need to be discussed. There's some thought we need to be going along. Tribes need to have inclusion and a voice in these issues. Why have they been excluded?" You know? So to me, it was really a good session of just making people think of this big picture. And June 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, we're going to have even more opportunity to expand on it. You know, gather that strength and power with all these other organizations.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
So what do you think it is about the fact that we had this big virtual gathering on the anniversary of the founding of Yellowstone National Park as a national piece of protected land? So what about out the 150th anniversary do you think made that Inter-Tribal gathering particularly powerful, poignant, timely? What's the nexus there for you?

Wes Martel:
I think buffalo is what connects everybody. Whenever you think of buffalo ... I mean, Yellowstone, and that's one of the first images that comes to your mind is buffalo. And that's what really pulls together
the tribes. And even non-tribes, right? Even all Americans. When we see a picture of buffalo or when you think about Yellowstone, that buffalo was there. And I think the beauty and magic of Yellowstone is still helping us. That's how we believe is because Indian people, our relatives in that park are still helping. They're ... Just like I said, they're telling us, "You need to speak for us. You need to talk up for us." And so I think that's another feeling that people got when we were talking about how do we elevate Indigenous voices? How do we practice more conservation? How do we start connecting? And to me, I think people are also recognized that Indigenous management practices are a formidable weapon in climate change.

Wes Martel:
And so I think there's ... Oh, I just think now there's just more of a interest and more of a feeling and more of an attraction to parks and how do we take care of them and how do we protect what's there? The grizzlies, the buffalo, all these other things. So I think that was really kind of a mood of everybody that was in our virtual gathering.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Right.

Wes Martel:
They felt that, and that was all to be part of that.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. There was a really distinct energy in that gathering.

Wes Martel:
Yeah.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
It was very, very cool to witness. So how do you feel, and maybe this is a really complicated answer. There's a complicated answer to this, but if there is an answer, what are some of the ways that you think non-Tribal land management agencies, nonprofits and other non-Tribal entities, can do a better job not just of saying they want more Tribal voices in part of their decision making but actually taking action to include Tribal priorities in the decisions they're actually making for the lands that we are all trying to do a better job of stewarding?

Wes Martel:
I think one of the first things that they really have to get at is understanding of the treaties. And to most people, a treaty is just a piece of paper. And when our ancestors signed those treaties, they were trying to protect our way of life. And the Treaty of 1863 for the Eastern Shoshone tribe, that treaty we had 44 million acres of land. Right where we're at now, where in west central Wyoming, it went west into Idaho, south to Utah, took up the Great Salt Lake, east into Colorado, and then back up here in Wyoming. We had 44 million acres. And so our leaders back then thought, "44 million acres should be enough for us to be able to protect our way of life and preserve our ways and preserve our knowledge and what we have." And then five years later, the Treaty of 1868, they knock it down to two and a half
million acres. Federal park managers and forest service managers, they really need to understand what that treaty means to us, trying to protect our way of life.

Wes Martel:
The pine trees are a very important part of our beliefs. One of our most important relations. We always make offerings to them when we get a chance, use them in our teas and medicines and eat part of them too. So they're a very important relative. They take care of us, we take care of them. And so that's really the understanding that federal managers have to get. And that's kind of sensitizing them and I guess it's like sensitivity training and sovereignty training wrapped into one. Because me, I've always felt that our sovereignty and our spirituality are connected as Indian people. And so that's where we really need to hammer home to federal managers is the sensitivity they must have to our beliefs and our values and how we connect to everything around us. And then the understanding of that treaty was not a grant of rights to us. It was a grant of rights from us, but everybody treats it the other way around. And so to me, that's standing up for our treaty rights and again, governance. That's always my priority. We are Tribal leaders, we got to be able to stand up and talk for that and defend that.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah.

Wes Martel:
And make sure that we always are driving that point home.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
One thing that seems like can be a hang up, and I'm making a lot of assumptions and going out on a limb here, so forgive me to anybody who's listening who takes issue at this statement, is that it feels like sometimes Tribal involvement is approached from like a stakeholder level. Where if you are trying to let's say implement like a new project, if you're an agency trying to implement a new project and you need stakeholder involvement, Tribal representatives end up being included in that at the level as say like a recreation interest group or a specific community as opposed to being connected on the level of like a sovereign nation.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
And so there feels sometimes like there is a discrepancy in ...There's just an order of magnitude different between what we tend to think of as stakeholder involvement, from like different members of a community to communities with different interests, and Tribal involvement which seems like it should take in a far higher echelon than simply like making space for Tribal members at like meetings with stakeholders. Does that resonate with you or do you think I'm missing the mark there?

Wes Martel:
You know, you always hear us talking about the government and government relationship. And that's what you're talking about right there. And you're exactly right, that's ... We're never really fully looked at as a government to government.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Right.
Wes Martel:
You know, with our treaties and being a federally recognized tribe, we're right at the top with the federal government. Then you have the state government under that, then you have county governments under them. Then you have municipal gov under that and all these other ... And we should be right at the top. And most of the time, we're an afterthought.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Right.

Wes Martel:
"Oh, we forgot to include the tribe." And then sometimes tribes don't even get notified of actions and activities that affect their lands and some of their resources, and so there's really that gap. We should always be at the table. But we're not. And part of that was our fault, I believe. And that's where governance comes in. You know, as Tribal leaders, we got to be knowing what's going on in the state legislature and deals that are affecting us and what's going on the Senate Indian Committee and in Washington. And you know, all these other ... The national entities that affect us.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wes Martel:
We should always be saying, "Hey, we're government. We've got a government relationship here. We demand to be notified every time these meetings are being held." And then the other side of it is right now a lot of tribes, we don't have strong policies and code. In fact, we don't even have policies identified for resources or conservation. We don't have codes, we don't have standards. We don't have regulations. We don't ... So again, getting back to government, tribes really have their own responsibility to make sure that the federal government knows how they want their resources managed, knows how they want environment protected, knows how they want cultural, archeological, resources all out there notified and consultations. You know, we can place a lot of the blame on the federal government for their in ineptness, but at the same time as Tribal governments we have an obligation to help them wise up. Give them the information they need so they're not leaving us out and excluding us. They understand these tribes need to be here.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. It seems like movement needs to occur everywhere.

Wes Martel:
Yes, exactly.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Sure. Bringing it back to the 150th gathering that we just held for folks who were unable to attend that, we do have a recording on the Greater Yellowstone Coalition website. I believe it's www.greateryellowstone.org/gathering. But can you share what were to your mind some of the highlights of that time we spent together?
Wes Martel:
You know, just kind of ... Not kind of. Just having the Indigenous presence. Starting off with our elders and our drum. And I know there was some audio difficulty with the drum and how it sounded out there, but a lot of the people that I talked to had commented said that really helped set the tone for what we need to talk about.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
I feel like one of the really powerful takeaways, for me and I hope for others from the gathering that we just held, was it is very possible to be honest with each other, to talk about hard things, to be real, and to look toward the future with positivity and determination. And that just by having authentic conversations about the mistakes of the past and the really painful parts of the past does not preclude us from doing a better job in the future. And I hope that that sort of like energizing, motivating message was something that people could take away from that gathering as well. And for the non-Tribal members in particular on that call, I think it's important to take responsibility for what can sometimes feel like our desire to stick our heads in the sand, because we're like, "Well, that's all stuff that happened in the past and I wasn't here for that and I wasn't part of that." And like we have to get over that and be able to show up at those conversations and listen and not get defensive and to commit to doing a better job moving forward. And to continue to show up in those spaces. So I was very grateful for the opportunity to be part of that.

Wes Martel:
Yeah. And Faith summed up just what you said, about a lot of different experiences and all of it. But what she said kind of at the end there was like, "We honor difference." We honor difference. We don't fight it. We don't ... You know, we're not hostile to it. We honor differences and see where we can find out how we divide our differences and make them work for the good of all of us. So I agree, that's what everybody was just saying, there was just so much. In fact, one of my friends from Montana just texted me, she said, "You had some heavy hitters there." She said-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Oh, big time. There's a lot of power and influence on wisdom in that virtual room.

Wes Martel:
Yeah, I know. And that was the other thing, just the feeling you got virtually.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah.

Wes Martel:
You know, just think what would've been ... How it would've been if it had been all together, you know-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Right. Which brings us to the next thing, because we are going to be together. We're going to ... Originally, we had the marked event be scheduled for in-person but because of the way that COVID continues to move through our communities, we punted that back to June, so we are going to have an
in-person gathering in June. So can you tell us a little bit more about what that's going to be like and what your hopes for the June event are?

Wes Martel:
Well kind of our initial planning is just more of what we did on Tuesday, but with some additional ... Little more detail on some of the programs and some of the issues we're dealing with, on the ground programs. But we're also really working with the Forest Service and Park Service. We're trying to get a lot of their federal managers and people here, so not only to train them but also to get discussion going, get them to meet people, get them interacting, get some recognition going, get some force going.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
I love that. Really looking forward to that. But Wes, celebrating, commemorating, observing the 150th and parlaying that into these really powerful gatherings is clearly a huge lift but it's certainly not the only thing that you're doing down in our Wind River office. So can you tell us a little bit more about some of the other work and other program areas that you are tackling down there with GYC?

Wes Martel:
Locally, we're starting what we're calling the Water and Buffalo Initiative for Wind River. And our slogan for that effort is, "Water is life. Buffalo is power. Food is healing." And right now, there's some things going on in Congress. Congress, the House of Representatives passed the Indian Buffalo Management Act about six months ago. And so we're hoping that United States Senate passes that Indian Buffalo Management Act here in the very near future. The language of the Act states that the Secretary of the Interior will work with tribes, not only to help them put together buffalo management plans and code, but will recognize those tribes that have buffalo management codes and regulations and standards. There's no tribes that have that right now. And so when we started our Wind River Water Code here, we had a couple of good attorneys, Dr. Charles Wilkinson on the University of Colorado Boulder, and then Dr. David Getchis, who was ... Both of them were very well versed on federal Indian law, federal Indian water rights law. They helped us put together our Wind River Water Code.

Wes Martel:
So we know the process on how to put together a code. That's what we need to start, we're going to start doing here at Wind River, is provide that training, but also help our community here at Wind River understand our governance for these codes we have, the policies that we develop for these codes and then the legal, technical, administrative parts of that we use to back up these policies that our Tribal elders and our community make. That's the governance. How do we connect the grassroots to the governance? So that's not only going to happen here at Wind River, we want to help all the other tribes in the GYE, all those 49 tribes that are connected to Yellowstone, we're going to help them. And we're going to work together on that.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah, that's really exciting to think about. So buffalo, let's talk about buffalo for a little bit. You shared a store a few weeks ago when you and I were chatting about what it was like to welcome buffalo back to Wind River. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to share that story with us again now.

Wes Martel:
You know, on October 11th we had the honor of having 50 head of buffalo delivered back here to the
res. And 25 head went to the Shoshone tribe, 25 had went to the Arapaho tribe. And so each tribe has
their own little area now where they're holding their herds. When they brought those 25 head to the
Shoshone area, the buffalo herd pasture, they pulled up one of those big old stock trucks and you know,
those stock truck have those oblong holes on the side of it. So it was parked there for a while and I could
... I was watching, I could see those buffaloes stand in there and kind of move around over there. So I
walked up to the side of that trailer and there was a buffalo there had its side to me. And I put my hand
in there and I put my hand on that buffalo's side. And I could feel him, he kind of twitched a little bit in
that spot where I touched him, but I could feel his heart in me and I could feel my heart in him. And he
said, "Well, hey [foreign language 00:41:29]." And I went, "[foreign language 00:41:33]. Welcome
home."

Wes Martel:
And when they opened up that gate for that stock trailer and they seen those buffalo come running that
onto our land, that was one of the best feelings I ever experienced. And that's what's connecting us. We
have power. And with water and with energy, especially with water, tribes are going to have political
and economic clout that they've never ever realized. And that's where we need to go.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
What can you hope for the future?

Wes Martel:
I want my young people and my children and grandchildren and great grandchildren to understand what
Win River governance is all about. And how thankful and blessed we are to still have what we have. We
still have our lodges and our medicines and our ceremonies. We still have our Indian doctors, those that
could take care of you and heal you and protect you. We still have ... I've seen things in our lodges and
ceremony that most people would never ever believe. Just humble Indian men and women with that
connection to what we have. Enormous power and healing. And we need to protect that, we need to
save that. And at the same time, we need to understand the modern technological ways, to be able to
adapt. And that's what we've been able to do. Since 1492, we've had to adapt and we need to
strengthen ourselves so we can do that and take care of the coming generations. And we get to a point
where we have to act.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wes Martel:
For some it's already too late. There's tribes that are extinct. There's animals that are extinct. There's
birds that are extinct. There's fish that are extinct.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Wes. You know, you ... It's very clear that there's so much that you
have, so much wisdom and experience, and so many stories that you have to share with the younger
generations. Who shared those things with you?
Wes Martel:
You know, I lost my parents when I was fairly young. Lost my dad when I was nine, lost my mom when I was 12. And luckily on my mom's side, I had a grandma and grandpa that stood up for us. And so there was five of us and I have three sisters and a brother. And at that time, we were in the age range from 12 to two years old. And my grandma and grandpa took us in. And they had to fight for us. The BIA was trying to send us out to non-white homes all over the country, different places. And that's how they used to do it back in those days. But my grandparents actually had to go to court. Had to go to court to fight for us.

Wes Martel:
Lucky the court ruled in our favor. And so, you know ... But back when I was young, you didn't go around asking a lot of questions and bothering people. You listened. And you got to be a lot around the elders. A lot of my grandpas used to gather up. And in our family beliefs here, you can have a lot of grandpas. You can have a couple dozen grandpas, just on your mom's side. You can have a couple dozen grandpas on your ... Yadda yah. Because of extended family relationship. And like my grandma and grandpa, all their brothers and sisters were also my grandmas and grandpas. So that just spreads out. But you can always be around people talking. And even back then, reciprocity was always part of what they did. In my younger days, when they had harnesses and horseshoe and bridles and saddles and all that, they took good care of them. They said, "These are going to take care of you, you got to take care of them." All their tools, their shovels, axes, pitchforks, picks, everything that they used in their everyday lives to cut wood, to hunt, to gather, all that. They took care of it. He said, "You take care of that, it'll take care of you."

Wes Martel:
So that's the belief we always live with. Don't waste water. Don't waste food. Always share. Don't take more than you need. And so as I ... And I never ever, in my wildest dreams, thought I'd be on a Tribal council. And so I came back home. I was going to start college and I came back home and I got a summer job. And the summer job was I started a Tribal newspaper, the Wind River News, I think 1977. And that newspaper is still going today. But I was the editor of that newspaper for a while. And so I started asking a lot of questions of Tribal leaders and Tribal attorneys and federal officials and reporting on it in the newspaper. And I really caught a lot of hell from Tribal leaders and others about some of the stuff was reporting on. But boy, the community loved it. They said, "We're glad you're telling us. We're glad you're asking questions. We're glad to find out about this."

Wes Martel:
And so that's what launched my political career. They said, "You need to be on the council." And back in those days, it was a pretty simple process. They'd just have a Tribal meeting and people said, "I nominate Wes Martel to be on the Shoshone Business Panel." And that's all it was, just a little old simple community meeting. And you'd have a bunch of people on the list. And here I got ... I was totally amazed I got on the council. And then ... I was raised by my Arapaho grandparents, but I'm [inaudible 00:48:40] Shoshone. So that caused me some inter-Tribal conflict and politics also. "Ah, he's nothing but a damned Arapaho. He's not going to do anything for our Shoshone people." And when I first heard that at the first big old general council meeting, where you got a whole bunch of hundreds of people and they were calling me down.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Hmm.

Wes Martel:
Because I was half-Arapaho. And I was just sitting there thinking, "Man, I don't need this. What did I getting myself into here? What am I doing here, man?"

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
"Wait a second."

Wes Martel:
And so I was up there and I was getting ready to leave. And some old ladies came up, about five of them. Five old ladies, they're all gone now, but they all came up and a lot of those people out there were calling me down. Boy, they were calling me down, you know. And they said, "Don't listen to those people." They said, "We're glad you're here. We need somebody to talk for us. We need somebody that's going to stand up for us." That's how I got to spend 20 years on the Shoshone council, because of those old ladies.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
I was going to say, that sounds like an incredibly powerful moment to have had.

Wes Martel:
Yep. They helped me quite a bit.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. One thing that we like to ask folks who join us on the podcast, if they have a specific conservation hero like a role model who they can point to as saying, "This is the person who really inspired my conservation career or interest." Does that resonate with you or for you is it more that grew up with that ethos of reciprocity surrounding you and you think that's where your conservation values comes from? Which, you know ... What do you think that is?

Wes Martel:
Kind of a combination. You know, when we're ... Back in my younger days, we never had elk heads hanging on our wall. Fish mounted, hanging on our wall. Everything was used. And so you always ... Very inclusive activity that helps you respect and honor all that we have and all that we use. And so just being around those elders, talking about our relatives, all these good things we have. Take care of them, they'll take care of you. That's what really helps me. But also when I got on the council, then got on the Fish and Game. And then Dick Baldes-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wes Martel:
Jason Baldes' dad.
Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah.

Wes Martel:
He's a Tribal member and he was one of the Fish and Wildlife Service leaders, and he was the one that really got me into the technical side of things, how that connected to what we believe. And so he's my hero.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Wes. Is there anything that comes to mind of things people could do or actions people can take, either Tribal or non-Tribal individuals, to support your vision for the future and your conservation goals?

Wes Martel:
Well, start off by a good land acknowledgement, you know? And then, "Who was here before me?" And then once we find out about that, try to find out a little more.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Wes Martel:
We really need to, number one, figure out what's happening to tribes in some of these areas and how is our federal government responding to that? And so that's why I'm glad to be getting these federal, and hopefully these Park Service and Forest Service people, at our gathering in June because we really need to start exploring that interaction and how do we make it happen. And so that's ... I'm really looking forward. And I think this June gathering we're having will really expand that because we really need to get to the halls of Congress, and there's a lot of other work and a lot of long, long, hard work ahead of us. But-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah.

Wes Martel:
I think we've really got ... We've got a good start and I think we've got some momentum and we've got to take advantage of that.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. Momentum. I think we can feel that right now and it's a beautiful thing.

Wes Martel:
Yeah.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
For sure.
Wes Martel:
Feels good.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
It does.

Wes Martel:
Yeah. It feels good to be a part of it.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
It does feel good to be a part of it. Yeah, absolutely. Is there anything else that you want to share today or that we haven’t covered that you want to talk about? We’ve covered a lot of ground, but is there anything, any other threads you want to tug out in this conversation?

Wes Martel:
Some of the things I’ve experienced in my life really shows some of the dark side of the dealings we’re involved with as Indian tribes. And the thing that really strengthens us, for me, is my family. And our elders tell us, “When you’re rich, you have a lot of relatives.” And so me, my dad was Shoshone and my mom was Arapaho, I’m pretty rich. I got a lot of relatives from both tribes.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah.

Wes Martel:
And even within my family I’ve got five children. I’ve got 19 grandchildren. I’ve got four great-grandchildren. You know, I don’t ... I told you I lost my parents when I was fairly young. They never ... My parents never reached to age where they got to see grandchildren. And so when I got my first granddaughter, that was the best feeling ever. That I got to reach that age to see a grandchild. And now I’ve got 19 of them and I’ve got-

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
19.

Wes Martel:
Four greats! So I’m very rich and blessed. And so that's what gives my strength and my energy is my family and my children, my grandchildren. My wife, she's an environmental scientist with Fish and Wildlife Service. She knows that technical and administrative, scientific ... So she's always feeding me that side of it too. And then when I'm home, I attend our ceremonies and go to the sweat lodges and get strength. And I'm just lucky to be where I'm at right now.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. Well, that's beautiful. And I know you have ... We're hoping to have saved a little bit of your voice today since you have to go cheer now, speaking of grandchildren. Go cheer at your granddaughter's very important basketball game.
Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. So we are certainly wishing her all the ... Well, it sounds like she doesn't need luck. She sounds like a talented gal, but-

Wes Martel:
Yeah. Hopefully they can get it going.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Yeah. Wonderful. Wes, thank you so much for taking time to talk to me today, to share your story with us. So much gratitude for you. I'm so glad that you are part of our team.

Wes Martel:
Thanks for thinking of me. Thanks for letting me talk.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
Absolutely.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
We are so grateful to have Wes on our team and for the generosity with which he shares his wisdom and expertise. Wes, thank you so much for the wonderful conversation and continued leadership. We hope you had enough voice left to cheer extra loudly at your granddaughter's basketball game.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
If you are interested in learning more about the recent virtual and upcoming in-person Inter-Tribal Gatherings, you may do so in the show notes. You can watch a recording of the entire event, read our blog recap, and sign up for the event in Wyoming.

Kristin Kuhn, Host:
The Voices of Greater Yellowstone Podcast is produced by the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a nonprofit dedicated to working with all people to protect the lands, waters, and wildlife of this remarkable place, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. We appreciate you stopping by and we'll see you next time.