

GUEST: SUSAN SCOTT

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My neighbors were two sisters; they called them the old maids in those days—it was in the 50s, and they subscribed to National Geographic, which was the enormous of my attraction to go over there to their house. And I would sit on the couch, I remember it vividly, and page through the National Geographics, which we did not have. My family were not readers. And they would explain things to me. And I remember Easter Island was a big one. I'm going there, and I'm going here, and I'm going here, I'm going here.

Susan Scott of Oahu has been to those places she dreamed about in her childhood, and then some. She's a familiar name to those who followed her weekly Ocean Watch column in Honolulu's major daily newspaper, which she's been writing since 1987. Susan Scott, next on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. In addition to her regular Ocean Watch column in the Honolulu Star Advertiser, Susan Scott has written seven books about Hawaii's wildlife, including publications about plants and animals that live in the ocean as well as on land. Yet, having grown up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Susan Scott knew very little about Hawaii when she and her husband, Dr. Craig Thomas, decided to move here in 1983.

What was it like for you, your childhood? How would you characterize it?

My childhood was very loving and happy. We had a big extended family until my mom remarried. And she married a man who was not very enamored with children or really comfortable around children. And I was the oldest, so we didn't get along that well. He was pretty strict with manners, and all kinds of things that I hadn't really ever heard of before. [CHUCKLE] So, we had a hard time of it. They were heavy drinkers. Everybody in my family drank. All four grandparents, all my aunts and uncles; everybody. It was a drinking culture. It is a German-Scandinavian community, and drinking was an enormous part of the

culture. I didn't know people didn't live like that until I left home. I just decided pretty much when I was fifteen that I was not gonna have children, and that I was gonna have a different life.

At fifteen?

At fifteen.

What did they encourage you to do with your life?

They encouraged me to be part of the extended family, and work in factories, and stay there. And I think the vision was that we would all stick together and do the same thing. But whatever it is, I don't know what happens, but I think some kids just grow up with the travel bug, an adventure bug. And that was me, and I really, really wanted to do that a lot. And everyone thought I was crazy. They didn't get it. They still don't get it.

I left home when I was eighteen, and the first time in my life I heard a foreign language. I heard a migrant worker in Milwaukee who had been through our county to pick cherries, and he asked me a question in Spanish. I remember it vividly. I was dumbfounded. I could not believe how beautiful this language sounded. And so, he was lost, and in a little trouble, so I took him home where I lived, in a little commune kinda thing with some other hippie kids, and we found someone who spoke Spanish, and on the phone, and he said what he was looking for, a bus station and a place to sleep for the night. But it was this enormous thing. I'd never heard Spanish, I never heard any other language, really.

It was all Caucasian people in your small town, too.

Yeah; yeah. And I'd never seen Black people, or Asians, or anyone. And so, just leaving was just a really wonderful thing for me. And you know, I certainly had ups and downs as an adolescent and as a hippie, kinda wandering around, wondering what to do. 'Cause I didn't go to nursing school until after that. And then, that's when I decided if I went to nursing and got an RN, I could go back to Europe and maybe live and work in Ireland. When I met Craig, uh, which was in 1980, it was the end of that whole hippie thing, and he was really instrumental in helping me stop doing drugs and alcohol, and smoking, and all of those things.

How did you meet?

I met Craig in the hospital. He was an intern, and it was his first week there, and it was my last week there.

And where was this?

In Denver. He had gotten a residency there, and I had gone to nursing school in Denver. And so, we had just met just barely as we were both off going to do different things. I was going back to school to do something else.

You had decided not to be a nurse.

Right; I decided not to be a nurse.

Why not?

I think it was too indoors for me. I think I really had an adventure outdoor travel bug.

And it's kind of hard, isn't it? I mean, devote years to this training and this education, and you did it for a good reason, then you decide it doesn't work for you?

Well, it was only two years.

Still, two years.

It was an associate degree. Yeah, it was two years. I didn't feel that I could do it. I'm not sure why, exactly. I worked in seven different departments in seven years. I was a nurse for seven years. And I finally thought, I don't think moving around the departments is gonna do it for me.

And even though it helps with my travel bug, you decided, No, try something else.

Yeah. It just didn't work for me. And I did my pre-med courses after that, at the University of Colorado. And then, Craig finished his residency and really, really wanted to come to Hawaii and rest, and have some time off before he started working. And so, we came to Hawaii in 1983 just for the summer. And that was it; we've never, never even considered living anywhere else. But we always said if there's another place we find—'cause he likes to travel, obviously, too. If we find a place better, we'll go there. And we still say that, but you know, the places that we're going now are wonderful, and I really enjoy the South Pacific

and the other islands, and Mexico, and the places that I've been sailing these last few years., but I would never leave Hawaii.

What was it about Hawaii that made you know, We're gonna stay here, we're putting down roots?

Well, part of it is, I feel really at home here. I think the culture is American, and there's a lot of wonderful things about America that I really like. But I also think that the multicultural part of Hawaii really spoke to me. Well, I went to Chinese New Year and had a fantastic time. We just loved it so much. You know, we watched the lion dances and the dragon dance, and we had Chicago hotdogs. And all this different ethnic mix is really, really fun, and I appreciate that all the time. I like the mix here. And I feel like I'm always kinda traveling while I'm here at home and meeting people from different places. So, it really works for me.

The multi-ethnic cultures and people may have been Susan Scott's initial reasons for wanting to stay in Hawaii, but there was something else here that she hadn't discovered yet, something she probably would never have guessed would become her life's passion.

When you came here, you enrolled at UH Manoa.

I enrolled at UH Manoa because I was so afraid of the ocean. And Craig and I both really liked Hawaii and the cultural part of Hawaii, and we loved Oahu.

You were afraid of the ocean?

I was afraid of the ocean. Well, I grew up in Wisconsin and went to school in Denver. I had barely seen the ocean. So, I didn't know what a tide was. And when people said the surf was up on the North Shore, I didn't know. I remember thinking, Up where?

[CHUCKLE]

What does that mean? [CHUCKLE] So, it was interesting to go to school, and thinking I would just take a couple of courses. And I had just come off the really hard pre-med schedule, which I'd finished, and so, it was really fun. And I had all these different people from all over the world at school. My lab partner was from Singapore, and I met a lot of local people who made fun of some of the things I said, and about the ocean, and they thought that it was just crazy that I thought, wana, for instance, was really a cool interesting thing. 'Cause I had thought that sea urchins were plants.

[CHUCKLE]

I had no idea. So, the more I learned, the more interested in got, and I finally ended up with a degree in biology and a certificate in marine journalism from the Marine Option Program. So, I'm a very proud graduate of MOP.

Well, what is your job?

I'm a freelance writer. And so, I've contracted with the Star Advertiser, the Star Bulletin for many years, to do a weekly column. And one of the things the editors were interested in the beginning was that I would have the science point of view from the animals. So, I could write about the marine animals and marine science in a way that reporters probably wouldn't. And so, those were sort of my sample columns, and the editor who hired me said, Well, let's just try this for a while and see how it goes. And that's the only contract I ever had.

And as the Star Bulletin dissolved, here you are with the Star Advertiser.

Star Advertiser; right.

You continued along with them.

Well, I was lucky. I made the cut.

You did.

Yeah; I was very lucky.

From being afraid of the ocean to essentially spending your life around it.

Right; exactly.

In it, on it, around it.

Yeah. I think part of the feedback I get for my column and my books is that the sense of wonder is still in the writing. And I feel that; that's very genuine.

And the curiosity is the case there too.

To me, I feel like I'm in a movie sometimes; just even walking on the beach, I don't have to get in the water. And I feel so lucky that I not only got to study and learn the science part of marine biology, but that I get to live it. You know.

Well, I love your column. And you know, I think so many people read it and say, Ah, I always wondered about that. In fact, I was gonna tell you that there was this period, I think it was a month; it was one June, I can't remember which June, but I remember thinking, Everything you're writing about this month, every week I open it up, and it's something I really, really wanted to know.

Oh, that's great. Oh, I'm glad to hear that. Yeah; I get really good feedback from the column, and it really keeps me going, keeps me interested. I think I'll be a little old lady going into the newspaper, still writing about my experience with the ocean. But it is a lot of fun.

A lot of it is based on observation. You see something, and you wonder about it.

Right.

You do the research, and then you talk with people.

Well, and I have lots and lots of really interested readers, like you, who write me notes and say—

Yeah; what is this?

I found this, can I send you a picture? Or, Have you ever heard of this? And uh, I just feel really lucky that I have so many readers now. And I have readers in Australia, now that it's online, the newspaper's online. I got an email from Switzerland last week, and another from Malta.

And there are infinite things to learn about the ocean. It covers, what, three-quarters of the Earth's surface. You've got a lot of material forever.

I'll never run out of material. Yeah.

Tell me about some of the columns that have resonated most with your readers.

Well, I think that sailing columns resonate the most. And it's interesting, 'cause I worry the most about those being boring to people. Probably because I feel like the column should be about discovering marine animals, and I think the thing I like writing best about is, what you said, finding something and wondering how it works, and then discovering, like, Oh, my gosh, this nudibranch has its own little garden on its back. Which we have right off on the North Shore, we have a bunch of these. And so, if I'm writing about sailing, it feels more like a little bit of

a travel log. Like, I did this, and then I did this, and then I did this. And I think, I'm probably driving people crazy. It's like, Oh, big deal.

What's the latest new thing you've learned?

Chitons; I've never seen a Hawaii chiton. And so, when my friends emailed me that from California and I looked it up, I looked it up in the Hawaii books I have and said, We have those. They wear a girdle. [CHUCKLE] This is called a girdle that goes around. I found a website by Sam Gon, who's the Nature Conservancy biologist here, and who I've meet several times, and so, he had something about chitons, and trilobites. He calls the chitons trilobite imposters. [CHUCKLE] Pretenders, or something. 'Cause he gets emails from people that say they found a trilobite.

Chiton; so that's C-H-I-T-O-N.

Right. That was all new for me. I spent two days doing it. So, I don't earn very good money, because I spend so much time writing each column. But I have really a lot of fun doing it. And then, I think if I quit the column, would I still work so hard at getting all the little details and getting it right? And I don't know.

Gives you a reason to give structure to your positive wonder about the world.

Well, it does. It does.

Makes you more alert, too, I would think.

It does. 'Cause I'm always thinking, Oh, I've gotta write about that.

Right.

Well, then I have to remember what kinda day this was, or what beach it was, or was it rocky beach, or sandy. A lot of my observations are not actually in the water. Which is one of the things a lot of my readers write and say, I've never been in the ocean, I don't swim. I love your columns, because I can relate to it through your eyes, but I don't feel like I have to actually get in the ocean to know about these things. 'Cause I don't always get in the water, either.

And meanwhile, you've been writing books as well. I'm fascinated by All Stings Considered. And I know everyone has asked you, I've asked you, when you get stung by a Portuguese Man 'O War, which is very common, there's always someone willing to give you their home remedy.

That's right.

But do any of the remedies work, or is it just time that works?

Well, I had a doctor friend that used to say, tincture of time was the best remedy. And what we say for almost all jellyfish stings.

Almost all.

The reason so many things work, and everyone has so many different remedies is because it's a self-limiting injury that goes away by itself anyway. Craig and I did some studies with the City and County lifeguards, and we had a really good time. We had unmarked bottles, so it was a blinded study, so no one knew what they were putting on. And then, we had victims of jellyfish stings fill out a questionnaire; spray this on and tell us on a pain scale how it was. And so, we had a statistician from City and County running the numbers, 'cause we wanted to make sure we weren't making something worse. And we had meat tenderizer mixed in a concentrated form in water, and we had Sting Aid which they were selling at the time in all the stores, and fresh water and sea water. Sea water was our control. And the statistician called us, I remember the day, and said, I think you might as well stop the study, 'cause the sea water is so far ahead of all the others. So, that told us that it was statistically significant. So, don't do anything. Rinse it off with sea water and go home.

Sea water seems to be an answer to so many things.

Yeah; it really is.

I always remember a prominent coach who had a progressive disorder, and I asked him what he was doing for it. And he goes, The ocean is my therapy, and it's made me happier than anything could have.

Well, I could say the same thing. Yeah. There is something about sea water. And even walking next to it works for me. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah.

I don't have to actually get in it.

Discovering new wonders about the ocean and wildlife and writing about them has never stopped being exciting and fulfilling for Susan Scott. Yet, after doing this for eighteen years, she came to a point in her life where she needed to do something different.

You know every type of animal you could ever find in a tide pool.

Yeah; exactly. Well, I'm still learning. That's the fun of it. So, I still really find the thrill of it and the joy of it.

As your life has gone along, you've actually gotten more and more, well, immersed in the ocean.

Right. Yeah; I started sailing. I didn't know how to sail before I met Craig, but uh, in 2005, I sailed to Palmyra. I learned how to sail.

Wait a minute; that's a big jump.

Oh.

First, you're afraid of the ocean.

Yeah.

And then you're sailing with Craig, and all of a sudden you're sailing to Palmyra?

Well, I had a big midlife crisis. I had a really, really hard menopause shift in hormones, I think. I don't know; I felt crazy. And I think a lot of women have these hormone times in their late forties and fifties, and people do think they're crazy. People thought I was crazy. I felt like I did lose myself. I thought, I don't know who I am or where I'm going, or what's happening. I had been trying to write a novel, and like most novel writers in the world, it was rejected, rejected, rejected. And that's normal, but I took that so hard. I took to my bed and didn't get up for days. And I'm not like that at all. And so, I had a really miserable time with it, and that Women's Health Initiative study came out that said hormones are bad for women, so I was not on hormones. And finally, I said, [CHUCKLE] I'm going somewhere. My life feels like it's over anyway, so whatever happens, it's gotta be better, it doesn't matter what I do. So, I learned how to sail a boat by myself, without Craig, which was the first time. And a lot of people said, Well, he taught you how to sail, or you learned how to sail with him. Taking it myself was an entire different universe, and making all the decisions was really different.

Were you a solo sailor going across the ocean that way?

I got a job with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a volunteer in Palmyra. They really needed some help doing a study there, and it would take four months.

But they didn't have any way for me to get there, or a place for me to live when I did get there. 'Cause Palmyra is a pretty remote camp. And so, I thought, Well, I have a sailboat. I'll just go there. I'll sail there, and I'll live on the boat, and then I'll see what happens after that.

How long did it take you to sail there?

It took me a week to sail there, with some big catastrophic boat failures, actually. And I sailed with a biologist friend, a young man who's still a very dear friend. And he had never been on a sailboat before or never sailed. So, the two of us were really novices. And we made it to Palmyra. We managed to patch the boat together enough to sail there, and Craig sent down the parts to fix it.

What was that failure? What happened?

The forestay broke. Which for sailors, if you know boats, is what holds up the mast and the sails. And so, we managed to save the mast.

It broke in bad weather?

It broke because it was put together wrong.

Oh!

Here in Honolulu. It was new. That's a very big deal. It's about as bad as it gets without getting a hole in the bottom of the boat where it's sinking. But we did fine. We didn't know much then. I know a lot more now. I think I'd be a lot more calm now.

All the elements are bigger than yourself, and can combine against you.

Yes. And I learned too, that you're really dependent on the boat for your life, but you're also dependent on your wits to fix the boat, because things break all the time. The most common conversation among sailors is what big thing broke, and what did you do. And I wrote a book about it called, *Call Me Captain*, which is a really big part of my life. I've been writing that for a long time. And University of Hawaii Press is publishing it.

It's so hard to write about yourself, I would think.

It was very hard. I actually had a wonderful editor from San Francisco, a really good editor who's a professional editor, and she helped me. And I think the big

part of her, besides being a good editor is, she didn't know me personally. And so, she could say, I can't picture this; I don't know what were you feeling. And so, I rewrote with her over years. And the UH Press does not usually publish memoirs.

Oh, congratulations.

So, I feel very lucky. So, I sailed to Tahiti from Palmyra, and then to Australia. I really got the bug.

That's amazing.

I had different friends help me. I never sailed alone until I got to Mexico. And in the Sea of Cortez there's only seventy-five miles across, and so I started sailing alone there. 'Cause I thought, Oh, I'm never gonna be that far offshore. My big problem with going offshore alone is, if something breaks that's beyond my strength, I don't feel very strong, and as I age, I feel less strong. I lift weights, but it doesn't make me feel capable. And on the way to Palmyra, when we had the big boat failure, I really needed Alex's strength.

You've seen some amazing visuals at sea. I know you've described spinning dolphins.

Right.

What else at sea have you seen that's amazing?

Well, one thing that I saw that was amazing, but I didn't really realize it until later when I looked it up and read, it was pilot whales. And pilot whales are among the very few—I think there's only two species, maybe three, in the world of animals that have menopause, and females live long after they stop reproducing. And pilot whales are one of them; Hawaii's pilot whales. So, when they swam up to the boat, on my trip to Palmyra, they were the only whales that came to the boat. And then later, when I read about them, I thought, Well, there you go.

[CHUCKLE]

They were coming over to see me, and that was a really good sign.

How's that going for you? [CHUCKLE]

That was good.

Do you sleep well on the boat in the middle of the sea?

No. I don't sleep hardly at all. I sleep; I feel like I'm not totally exhausted, but when I get somewhere, I sleep a lot. But I'm always on call.

And yet, you love being on a boat where you don't sleep much?

Well, I'm not offshore that much. So, the trip from Mexico to the Marquesas that I did this year was a twenty-eight-day crossing. And that's really a long, long crossing. And then, the rest of the year was just little trips, so you know, a day or two. And then when you get where you're going, it's a wonderful, peaceful anchorage usually, and you can sleep just fine.

How big is your boat? Tell me about your boat.

Oh, the boat's thirty-seven feet. It's French ketch, and it's easy to single hand. It's set up so you can single handed maintain the sails and do what you need to do by yourself. But it's also roomy enough to sleep comfortably six people. So, there's three separate cabins. It's a center cockpit boat with an aft master cabin, and a center and a forward.

So, you could conceivably go alone, although that's not advisable.

I could go alone. And people do go alone. I think part of it, too, it's a social event. You know, it's been really a good social thing for me to have, to be able to skipper the boat, and have friends come along. And as a biologist in Hawaii, I have a lot of friends who are really good on the water and they've been on research vessels, and they know the water, and they're not afraid of big waves. And so, they may not necessarily know a lot about sailing, but they do what I tell them, and we've had a really good time.

You like being the skipper?

I do like being the skipper. I do. Sometimes, there's times when I think it'd be really fun to just be on somebody else's boat and let them worry about what's going wrong, or where we're going, or should we go all night, or should we pull in. But mostly, I like it. I enjoy it.

And you're telling me menopause is what triggered all of this?

It is. I think, Leslie, I would have never gone on that sailboat by myself, unless I was really desperate and miserable.

I'm wondering if those people who you said thought you were crazy; did they think you were even crazier when you started taking the sailboat out virtually on your own?

That I was crazy when I got home?

Well, no; you know, once they heard you were—

When I got home, I was fine. [CHUCKLE] It cured me. [CHUCKLE] I think getting outside of my own self, and I think if there's a lesson there, and I would never presume to tell anyone else what to do with their own. Menopause or misery, or midlife or early life crisis; I felt as confused and mixed up as I had when I was a teenager, with all those hormone storms and things, and trying to figure out what I was gonna be, where I was gonna go. And I came from a place where I really wanted to do something different, but didn't know what. And this was the same kinda thing. And I thought, whatever happens, I'm losing it here, so it's gotta be, it's gotta be good. And if I never come back, or Craig and I don't stay together, well, that's just life.

Susan Scott has made it through many challenges. She continues to sail and explore with the same passion and wonder that she's always had, and through her writing, we all get to tag along. Mahalo to Susan Scott of Oahu for sharing her stories with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

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Where are the places you'd still like to go?

Well, I've never seen the pyramids of Egypt, and that one of the pages of the National Geographic of the Imer [PHONETIC] sisters. And we talked about the pyramids. I remember that, and Easter Island, which I did get to see the moai. So that was good. So, I would like to go to Egypt, but there never seems to be a very good time, politically. I'm never sure.

Because think the open ocean is safer than Egypt.

Oh, I do; I do. I think it is.

[END]