

Life & Times Transcript

08/30/00

LC000830

VAL>> ON LIFE AND TIMES TONIGHT --

THOUSANDS OF PELICANS ARE SICK AND DYING AT A DESERT LAKE, BUT NOBODY CAN FIGURE OUT WHY.

PHILIP BRUCE>> NOBODY REALLY KNOWS FOR SURE WHY BOTULISM INVADES THE SALTON SEA AND SPREADS THROUGH THE FOOD CHAIN, BUT WHEN THE PELICANS GET IT, IT'S LIKE A MASSIVE DOSE OF FOOD POISONING THAT CAUSES THE BIRDS' NERVOUS AND DIGESTIVE SYSTEMS TO SHUT DOWN.

LINDA EVANS>> THIS YEAR, WE'VE ALREADY ADMITTED 700 BIRDS AND IT DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE OVER. IN FACT, THIS IS THE TIME OF YEAR WHERE IT'S USUALLY THE WORST.

VAL>> EVER BEEN CONFUSED OR MISLED BY A HEALTH STUDY YOU HEARD ON THE NEWS? WELL, WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF JUNK SCIENCE. WE'LL GET THE FACTS WITH OUR REAL SCIENTIFIC EXPERT IN TONIGHT'S THINKERS, SHAKERS & NEWSMAKERS.

AND WE TAKE YOU TO SANTA BARBARA WHERE A RENOWNED KOREAN VIDEO ARTIST DECLARES "TELEVISION HAS ATTACKED US FOR A LIFETIME. NOW WE STRIKE BACK." WE'LL SHOW YOU THE WORK OF NAM JUNE PAIK AND HIS TAKE ON TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY.

THESE STORIES COMING UP NEXT ON LIFE AND TIMES TONIGHT FOR WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2000.

LIFE AND TIMES TONIGHT IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE FOLLOWING FOUNDATIONS:

THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION
WHICH IS DEDICATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INFORMED CALIFORNIA CITIZENRY.

AND THE L.K. WHITTIER FOUNDATION
DEDICATED TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE BY SUPPORTING INNOVATIVE ENDEAVORS IN THE FIELDS OF MEDICINE, HEALTH, SCIENCE AND EDUCATION.

VAL>> GOOD EVENING, I'M VAL ZAVALA. WARREN OLNEY IS ON VACATION.

OUR TOP STORY TONIGHT, AN ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER. WILDLIFE RANGERS HAVE PULLED MORE THAN 1,000 SICK OR DYING PELICANS OUT OF THE SALTON SEA. THAT'S A MAN-MADE SALTWATER LAKE IN IMPERIAL COUNTY. THE BIRDS ARE SUFFERING FROM AVIAN BOTULISM. THE DISEASE STRIKES EVERY SUMMER, BUT THIS YEAR IS THE WORST SINCE 1996 WHEN BOTULISM KILLED A RECORD 1,400 ENDANGERED BROWN PELICANS. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT, WHILE MORE BIRDS ARE GETTING SICK THIS YEAR, FEWER ARE EXPECTED TO DIE. PHILIP BRUCE EXPLAINS WHY.

PHILIP>> PANCAKES. THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL THE ONES THAT JUST LIE THERE, THOSE THAT ARE ALL BUT PARALYZED BY THE TIME THEY'RE RESCUED, AND THEY COME HERE BY THE TRUCKLOAD. IF A BIRD CAN FEEL TERROR, THIS IS WHAT IT MUST LOOK LIKE.

PAT NAPP>> WELL, I WAKE UP AT NIGHT CRYING. I SEEM TO BE THE ONLY ONE THAT FINDS THE DEAD BIRDS. I KNOW I'M NOT, BUT IT ALWAYS THROWS ME. THE FIRST DAY, I FOUND TWO.

PHILIP>> PAT NAPP IS A VOLUNTEER AT THE PACIFIC WILDLIFE CENTER IN IRVINE, A PLACE THAT'S THE LAST BEST HOPE FOR HUNDREDS OF BROWN PELICANS DYING OF BOTULISM POISONING. THESE BIRDS HAVE ALL EATEN TAINTED FISH IN THE SALTON SEA, A GREAT SALTY LAKE IN CALIFORNIA'S IMPERIAL VALLEY ABOUT 100 MILES SOUTHEAST OF LOS ANGELES. EVERY SUMMER WHEN IT GETS HOT, BOTULISM BREAKS OUT AGAIN AND THOUSANDS OF BIRDS, MAINLY BROWN PELICANS, GET SICK FROM EATING THE FISH. MANY OF THEM ARE LEFT PARALYZED IN

THE SCORCHING HEAT AND NEVER MAKE IT OUT OF THE VALLEY. THE LUCKY ONES WIND UP IN IRVINE WHERE, THANKS TO THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS, THE PELICANS AT LEAST HAVE A FIGHTING CHANCE.

LINDA EVANS>> WE'RE LOCATED IN A BUILDING AT AN ANIMAL SHELTER. AS YOU CAN HEAR, WE HAVE EXERCISING DOGS HERE. THIS IS THE WILDLIFE CENTER IN THIS BUILDING, SET ASIDE.

PHILIP>> THE ANIMAL SHELTER AND THE WILDLIFE CENTER ACTUALLY HAVE A LOT IN COMMON BESIDES SHARING THE SAME LOT. THEY'RE BOTH IN THE BUSINESS OF PROVIDING TENDER LOVING CARE TO INNOCENT CREATURES IN NEED.

LINDA EVANS>> I TELL ALL THE VOLUNTEERS YOU SORT OF GET TO KNOW DEATH ON A FIRST-NAME BASIS AND THE VERY BIRD THAT YOU GET ATTACHED TO IS PROBABLY THE ONE THAT ISN'T GOING TO MAKE IT AND IT'S HEARTBREAKING. THERE ARE DAYS WHEN YOU LEAVE IN TEARS.

PHILIP>> IT IS SHAPING UP TO BE ONE OF THE WORST SEASONS EVER, WORST THAN THE EARLY OUTBREAKS OF BOTULISM IN THE 1990'S. BACK THEN, IN ONE YEAR ALONE, 15,000 BIRDS DIED. ALL WILDLIFE MANAGERS COULD DO WAS GATHER THE CARCASSES AND BURN THEM. NOBODY REALLY KNOWS FOR SURE WHY BOTULISM INVADES THE SALTON SEA AND SPREADS THROUGH THE FOOD CHAIN, BUT WHEN THE PELICANS GET IT, IT'S LIKE A MASSIVE DOSE OF FOOD POISONING THAT CAUSES THE BIRDS' NERVOUS AND DIGESTIVE SYSTEMS TO SHUT DOWN.

LINDA EVANS>> LAST YEAR AND THE YEAR BEFORE, RESPECTIVELY, WE ONLY GOT A TOTAL OF APPROXIMATELY 300 TO 400 BIRDS. THIS YEAR, WE'VE ALREADY ADMITTED 700 BIRDS AND IT DOESN'T APPEAR TO BE OVER. IN FACT, THIS IS THE TIME OF YEAR WHERE IT'S USUALLY THE WORST.

PHILIP>> THE SALTON SEA, CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST LAKE, ACTUALLY BEGAN AS A MISTAKE NEARLY A CENTURY AGO WHEN ENGINEERS WERE TRYING TO DIVERT THE LOWER COLORADO RIVER FOR IRRIGATION. THEY GOOFED. THE RIVER JUMPED ITS BANKS AND FILLED A LOW SPOT IN THE DESERT. EVEN SO, THE LAKE THRIVED FOR YEARS. EVEN NOW, IT'S A HABITAT FOR THOUSANDS OF BIRDS. BUT THE LAKE IS DYING FROM THE POLLUTION THAT COMES FROM NEARBY FARMLAND AND POLLUTED STREAMS AND FROM THE GROWING SALT CONTENT WHICH IS ALREADY 25 PERCENT HIGHER THAN WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THE OCEAN. AND THEN THERE'S THE YEARLY BOTULISM PROBLEM THAT CROPPED UP ABOUT SEVEN YEARS AGO. THAT'S ABOUT THE TIME THE PACIFIC WILDLIFE CENTER CAME TO THE RESCUE.

KAREN SCHOENHOLDZ>> IT'S VERY SATISFYING TO KNOW THAT YOU CAN HELP SOMETHING THAT HUMANS HAVE DAMAGED TO BEGIN WITH IN THE SALTON SEA.

PHILIP>> THE PELICANS ARE HOUSED IN GALLEYS SIMILAR TO DOG RUNS AND THEIR CAGES ARE ARRANGED ACCORDING TO THE LEVEL OF SICKNESS. LOOK AT THE SIGNS TO FIND THE "SLOW EATERS" OR THOSE IN NEED OF ROUND-THE-CLOCK INTENSIVE CARE.

>> AND IF YOU LOOK AT THE TWO OUTSIDE ROWS, YOU KNOW THAT THEY'RE UP, THEY'RE EATING BECAUSE THEY'VE GOT THE NERVE DAMAGE OUT OF THEIR SYSTEM, I ASSUME. IN BETWEEN IS THIS. WITH THE NERVE DAMAGE, THEY CAN'T STAND UP.

PHILIP>> BROWN PELICANS ARE THE MOST COMMON VICTIMS BECAUSE THEY OUTNUMBER MOST ALL THE OTHER SPECIES THAT CONGREGATE AT THE SALTON SEA. WHEN THE SICK BIRDS FIRST ARRIVE IN IRVINE, THEY ARE FORCE-FED LIQUIDS TO FLUSH THE BOTULISM POISONING. FROM THERE, IT'S LARGELY A MATTER OF TRYING TO NURSE THE PELICANS BACK TO HEALTH. BUT AMONG THE TRAGEDIES HERE, THERE ARE ALSO PLENTY OF STORIES WITH A HAPPY ENDING. WHILE THEY'RE ALL BIRDS OF A FEATHER, THEY DON'T ALWAYS STICK TOGETHER. EVEN HERE IN PELICAN REHAB, THERE'S A PECKING ORDER.

LINDA EVANS>> WE HAVE "PESCI" BECAUSE HE'S A LITTLE BITTY GUY AND KEPT BEATING UP EVERYBODY ELSE IN THE CAGE, NO MATTER WHERE WE PUT HIM. AND THEN WE HAVE OUR VARIOUS LITTLE GANGS. WE HAVE ONE GROUP OF BIRDS THAT'S ALL LITTLE LIGHT BUFFY-HEADED BIRDS WITH A FEW LITTLE FEATHERS OUT THE BACK-END. WE FOUND THAT WE CAN'T PUT ANY OTHER BIRDS IN THERE THAT DON'T LOOK EXACTLY LIKE THESE BIRDS, SO THEY'RE KIND OF A LITTLE GANG.

PHILIP>> MOST OF THE PELICANS THAT ARE BROUGHT HERE WILL SPEND ABOUT A MONTH BEFORE THEY'RE WELL ENOUGH TO BE SET FREE. THE GOOD NEWS IS, EIGHTY PERCENT OF THEM ARE EXPECTED TO SURVIVE. THE BAD NEWS IS, DEALING WITH THE TWENTY PERCENT THAT DON'T CAN BE PRETTY TOUGH ON THE VOLUNTEERS.

PAT NAPP>> I JUST HAPPENED TO FIND THREE OR FOUR AND THAT'S ONE I PUT BACK AFTER -- I THOUGHT I COULD FIND A HEARTBEAT AND THEY TOLD ME IT ALREADY HAD RIGOR MORTIS. YOU JUST DON'T WANT TO GIVE UP.

PHILIP>> AS ALWAYS, THE CENTER IS DESPERATELY SHORT OF VOLUNTEERS, ESPECIALLY IN THIS CRUNCH PERIOD WHEN SO MANY NEW SICK BIRDS ARE ARRIVING. THERE'S NO QUESTION THAT IT CAN BE HEARTBREAKING WORK, BUT THE PAYOFF COMES WHEN THE PELICANS RECOVER AND ARE READY TO BE SET FREE, AS THESE WERE JUST TODAY. A SECOND CHANCE. A RARE AND BEAUTIFUL THING FOR MAN OR BEAST.

LINDA EVANS>> MOST OF THE BIRDS THAT COME IN GET TO LEAVE AGAIN AND YOU SEE THEM FLY AWAY. THEN WHEN YOU GO TO ONE OF THE RELEASES AND YOU SEE ALL THE BIRDS FLY AWAY, KNOWING WHAT IT WAS LIKE WHILE THEY WERE HERE AND THE KIND OF CONDITION THAT THEY CAME IN WITH, IT JUST MAKES YOU FEEL WONDERFUL. THEN EVERY TIME YOU GO TO THE BEACH, EVERY TIME YOU'RE AT THE HARBOR, AND YOU SEE THOSE PELICANS WALKING AROUND -- AND ALL MY VOLUNTEERS TELL ME THIS AND I DO THE SAME THING -- YOU FIND YOURSELF LOOKING FOR BANDS TO SEE IF THEY'RE OUR BIRDS AND YOU WONDER DID I HELP PUT THAT BIRD THERE?

PAT NAPP>> WELL, I'M SEEING ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SIGHTS IN MY LIFE. I'VE SEEN SEVENTEEN PELICANS THERE A WEEK AGO WERE NOT ABLE TO FLY ON THEIR OWN AND NOW THEY'RE TAKING OFF AND THEY'RE BACK IN THE OCEAN WHERE THEY SHOULD BE.

VAL>> YOU CAN CHECK THE PACIFIC WILDLIFE PROJECT WEB SITE FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE REHABILITATION PROGRAM. THE ADDRESS IS ON YOUR SCREEN NOW. AS PHILIP MENTIONED, EIGHTY PERCENT OF THE BIRDS CARED FOR AT THE CENTER ARE EXPECTED TO SURVIVE.

[WWW.PACIFICWILDLIFE.ORG]