

Episode 1: Jamaica Bay Featuring Adam Parris (AP)

Hosted by Helen Cheng (HC)

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Imagine an urban place: towering skyscrapers; hard asphalt streets and concrete sidewalks; sirens whirling, vehicles honking. Imagine a wild place: blue waters; sandy beaches; vast marsh islands; majestic birds soaring through a blue sky; fish swimming in waters; diverse wildlife crawling about. Now imagine these two places existing alongside each other. No need to imagine. Welcome to Jamaica Bay.

-Music Interlude-

Thank you for joining us on our very first episode of our new podcast series, Jamaica Bay, where we bring you stories of the people that work, live, and play in Jamaica Bay, New York City. I'm your host, Helen Cheng, and I'm with the Science and Resilience Institute at Jamaica Bay and New York Sea Grant.

-Music Interlude-

If you asked a random person from New York City where or even what Jamaica Bay is, it's most likely that they wouldn't know or would think of it as an afterthought.

AP: "It's that body of water that most people think of when they take off from or land at JFK."

I got a chance to sit down and grab a perspective from a person whose work revolves around Jamaica Bay - [HC: "Okay, I'm more nervous than you, I think"] - and which so happens to be a person I work for.

AP: "I'm Adam Parris, the Executive Director of the Science and Resilience Institute at Jamaica Bay, which is based out of Brooklyn College."

Adam has witnessed a lot of change in coastal areas. Throughout his career, he's worked at a local, state, and federal level and has done a lot of work on climate, sea level rise, and coastal communities in estuaries and coasts across the nation.

AP: "What struck me about Jamaica Bay in comparison to those other areas is the density of population, the level of urbanization, and yet the really strong identity of the coastal communities in and around Jamaica Bay."

Jamaica Bay is a small body of water in New York City surrounded by the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. It's about 10,000 acres of parkland and natural areas, jointly managed by the National Park Service and the City of New York. In fact, it is the only nationally recognized natural and recreational area that you can get to by subway.

AP: "From an environmental standpoint, there are hundreds of species that use Jamaica Bay: plants, animals, birds, fish, invertebrates. From a social standpoint, you have people of different faith, you have people of different lifestyles, you have a tremendously diverse social population around Jamaica Bay, many of whom work at JFK which is of course important from an economic standpoint. Millions and billions of goods moving through JFK, which is part of what makes New York City an economic engine for the nation. So this is a really

important landscape in New York City from an environmental standpoint, from a social standpoint, and from an economic standpoint.”

In the midst of changing urban metropolis and even a changing world, it remains a place that is unique and special.

AP: “It represents opportunity. We’ve had a lot of impacts in Jamaica Bay from urbanization which has caused impacts to the environment. We’ve had tremendous impacts to the communities because of Hurricane Sandy, and because of problems of social justice and equity - issues that the Mayor and the Mayor before him have put in the foreground as major priorities for the next 10, 20, 30 years. So this is an important priority area, a special area, within the city landscape, not just from the standpoint of all these different species, people, transportation and development, but it’s also a place where we can try to envision how to meet the challenges of tomorrow, things like sea level rise and climate change, things like population growth, and things like sustainable development.”

We reflected on our experiences of Jamaica Bay. For me, it was a warm sunny day in mid-September; Adam and I along, with co-workers and interns, immersed ourselves in Jamaica Bay.

HC: “So I just want to add that we had a staff retreat out on Jamaica Bay, we did some kayaking, and I gotta say, being out on the bay and seeing the New York City skyline, that was a treat. It was like such a surreal experience to be out there on the water, so that was a lot of fun. Other than from that experience, can you describe a personal and significant experience in Jamaica Bay?”

AP: “Yea, well you stole my thunder, I was going to talk about the kayaking trip - [HC: Sorry] – No, that’s okay but you know I could still talk about the kayaking trip - you described it really well and I’ll just add, within the first couple of months ... “ (fade out)

Adam reflected on an experience, not with nature but with people. Within the first couple months of taking his current job, he introduced himself at a community meeting in Jamaica Bay.

AP: “And I was struck by the passion of the response. People wanted my phone number, they wanted my e-mail, they wanted a direct line of communication with someone who would pay attention to what they want to see for the bay, what they think are priorities for research, what the history has been; there is such a real passionate emotion surrounding the history, and not just because of Hurricane Sandy, but really this pattern of development and conservation that’s happened out there. So that was a really formative experience.”

Being the Executive Director, I asked Adam what the Science and Resilience Institute is and their role in Jamaica Bay.

AP: “We’re many things to many people. Most importantly, we are a catalyst that produces integrated knowledge that can be used to increase biodiversity, increase well-being, and increase adaptive capacity or flexibility to meet the demands of tomorrow in Jamaica Bay. And then hopefully if we learn how to do all that, we can help New York City at large, and also other cities around the world to figure out how to become more resilient and adapt to the challenges tomorrow.”

The Science and Resilience Institute is a partnership between the New York City, the National Park Service, the communities in and around Jamaica Bay, and the scientific community,

AP: "So to scientists, we help them design their research in ways that involve communities and public agencies which makes their research more relevant."

Adam highlights a project working with researchers who are figuring out how water quality, coastal flood risk, and ecosystems have been impacted in the past, and predicting how they will change over time.

AP: "And we're bringing public agencies and communities into that conversation"

By bringing different people into the conversation, they can understand what the scientists are trying to do, and also influence the questions that the scientists are trying to answer.

AP: "And that makes the results more useful for planning interventions for flood protection or control, more useful for managing natural areas, and it makes it more useful for figuring out how to maintain water quality and even improve it over time."

The Science and Resilience Institute also works with communities and students of all grades and ages.

AP: "For communities, we provide a neutral space we provide ways to experience the bay, and ways to educate themselves about the bay, make sense of all the information that's out there. Also we provide a means for students to be able to take classes and formal experiences where they become more aware of the bay and also understand the issues."

In addition to working with scientists and the communities, the Science and Resilience Institute works with public agencies

AP: "For public agencies, what we do is create processes that support their decision making, in the case of some other projects, we try to distill 30 years of data that's been collected on water quality and understand how has water quality fundamentally changed over time which for agencies like the Department of Environmental Protection who have to maintain water to a certain standard under the Clean Water Act really can use that information to adjust their strategies with the waste water treatment plant or with how they distribute storm and waste water throughout the city in ways to maintain the health of the bay"

With all the work that the Science and Resilience Institute has done so far and all the partnerships it has fostered, my next question was a simple one.

HC: "Where do you see Jamaica Bay 10 years from now?"

AP: "Ten years from now in Jamaica Bay, we hope the water is a little cleaner, we hope that the many hundreds of birds, and amphibians, and other species that inhabit the bay are still there, and maybe we have more, not just more of the species that we exist now but more new species that spell a healthy ecosystem and hopefully we're starting to pave the way towards sustainable communities and resilient communities, communities that bounce back a little bit quicker from disturbances. And that we're shifting this paradigm of industrial progress and economic development to sustainable development."

[Music outro-lude]

AP: "Jamaica Bay is symbolic of the challenges we face on the coast all across the nation, whether in coastal cities, or even in somewhat more remote areas. It is also a tremendous opportunity for what we can do to

reshape the legacy of what we leave behind for future generations of coastal communities, both human and natural”

[Music outro-lude]

Thanks again to Adam Parris, and thanks to Catherine Caruso and Dr. Miguel Macias for tips and advice on podcasting.