Beto O’Rourke Wants Us to Protect Our Natural Heritage – with Beto O’Rourke (Ep. 12)

https://houstonnature.com/12

Nivien Saleh: What should our common ground look like?

I’m Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature.

In 2017 and 2018, Beto O’Rourke challenged Ted Cruz for his U.S. Senate seat. And as some of you know, I volunteered in his campaign for one and a half years. Among other things, I created a video of him, which went viral and received – all in all – over 75 million views. I’ll link to it in the show notes, in case you’re interested.

Houston and Nature is a bit over a year old. So I thought this would be a good time to ask Beto for an interview. Not about his political plans – so before you get excited one way or the other, I have no idea whether or not he is going to run for office. Instead, I asked him about the Texas natural heritage: What it means to him, how he thinks we relate to the land on which we live, and how he would like us Texans to care for our natural resources from here on out.

I caught him in his car, doing what he does best: criss-crossing the state, talking to Texans of all stripes.

Nivien Saleh: Hi Beto. Welcome to the podcast.

Beto O'Rourke: Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be talking with you.

Beto O’Rourke on the Surprises of the Texas Landscape

Nivien Saleh: To my knowledge you've been the only statewide candidate in the history of Texas who during his campaign visited every single Texas county. And I think these are 254 counties. So that gives you a unique perspective, both on Texans and on the diversity of the Texas geography. How did the Texas landscape surprise you both in good ways and in bad ways?

Beto O'Rourke: Well, Nivien, as you know, I'm from El Paso. We are the Western-most of those 254 counties. Unlike so much of the rest of Texas, we're actually in a desert. We're in the Chihuahuan desert and also happen to be up in the mountains. I think that the base elevation of El Paso is something like 4,000 feet.

And so you're in the middle of this great mountain range, which is in part connected to the Rocky Mountains. Geographically and geopolitically, you're connected to Mexico and New Mexico. And it's just - in my opinion - staggeringly beautiful.

It's just the most amazing place I've ever been to in all my travels around the planet. So traveling to the other 253 counties was an adventure of discovery because they are all inherently different from El Paso, given how unique my hometown is. As you move East from El Paso, you know, what struck me first , being in a place like Midland or Odessa in the Permian basin, is just how comparatively flat it is. There's no mountain range to define the skyline. What you really have is the sky, you know, big, big, big sky. I actually happen to be in Midland today, as I'm speaking with you. And you look up in the sky and there's these beautiful big cloud heads. It's its own beauty and splendor - so different from El Paso. You move up from here to the panhandle. And what gets me every time I'm in the Panhandle is the, again, it's also pretty flat, lots of cotton and other kinds of farms. So lots of land that's undeveloped, that's being cultivated. And there's a stark beauty in that.

And then to have the skyline cut by these grain silos, which are really the only kind of defining feature on the horizon as you drive from town to town is beautiful, too. And then just the diversity in this state. You know, as you get into North Texas, what you see there is so different from so much of what preceded you. You get into East Texas, and all of a sudden you're behind the pine curtain. You've got these towering, giant trees that are like an arcade as you drive down the highway, logging trucks passing you in either direction. Coming through to Houston and the diversity in marine and bayou life that is there. Obviously a lot hotter and muggier compared to what we're used to in El Paso.

The Rio Grande valley, where you have this extraordinary diversity in bird, animal and plant species along the banks of the Rio Grande. Then back up into Central Texas and the Hill Country, where for somebody from El Paso, who's used to changes in elevation it's nice to have that diversity in terrain. It's so many different ecosystems and environments and even climates all rolled into one state. And it's just absolutely beautiful.

Nivien Saleh: Yeah, it's such a big state. I believe that Texas might be the same size as France.

Beto O'Rourke: I think roughly you're right. Absolutely.

What Insights Did You Gain into the Relationship between Humans and the Land?

Nivien Saleh: Yeah. As you did all your travels and you admired the landscape, what insights did you gain into our relationship to the land? The relationship between humans and the land?

Beto O'Rourke: That's a good question. You know, in the Panhandle you're talking with cotton growers. And these women and men, obviously their livelihood is the land and everything that flows under the land. So water is such a precious resource here in west Texas, and there's an understandable tension between the oil and gas development, some of which depends on fracking, a procedure which requires a tremendous amount of water, this scarce and extraordinarily valuable resource. That's certainly a tension and something that you see in terms of the human relationship to the land in West Texas.

I mentioned the logging in East Texas and how what grows from that land is connected to the livelihood of so many people who live in that region. And then in the Greater Houston area was really struck by the work of environmental leaders who understand the precarious nature of this beautiful water system that is hosts to perhaps the largest petrochemical industry in North America, probably one of the largest in the world and what that means for marine life, what it means for terrestrial life, how there's got to be a better way to balance the needs of our economy and how we fuel our cars and our homes and our lives, and then protecting these critically important watersheds. Whether it's those farmers or those loggers or those environmental advocates, I see people who have a very close and connected relationship with the land. And the water, by the way.

Nivien Saleh: You have an almost poetic way of describing Texas, which is fantastic.

Beto O'Rourke Wants us to Discover our Common Ground and Care for It

Nivien Saleh: Are there things that we aren't doing that are necessary to do for the land?

Beto O'Rourke: I think there's a lot that we can be doing for our Texas public lands and also frankly for privately held lands. I mean, we're all connected to one another through land. You know, very often in politics, we employ a phrase, "common ground." if you're a Republican and I'm a Democrat, I might say that I want to find that common ground upon which we can stand in order to move forward on a given issue.

It could be healthcare or gun violence or climate change. But that metaphor extends to literally the land that we have in Texas and the common ground. It may be yours. You may have it by title and by right. Or it may be the public's. It may be owned by the state of Texas. But we're literally all connected by this ground or this land that we're on. And we all have a vested interest in terms of the stewardship of that land and the water in Texas for ourselves and certainly for the generations that follow.

So I think just being more mindful of our responsibilities as landowners. Certainly we should feel free to build on that land, develop that land, recreate on that land and enjoy the

possession of it. But we must also understand that the changes that we make to it alter what is possible going forward.

So my hat's off to those farmers and ranchers who long after their land becomes productive, at least from an economic sense, they really try to ensure that it won't be subdivided and developed and have housing and blacktop on it, because they understand how important that land in its natural contiguous state is. Another way to think about it is, in Texas, unfortunately we have hundreds of miles of border wall that had been constructed during the Bush administration, during the Obama administration, and certainly during the Trump administration. And what many people who don't live in Texas or don't live on the border don't know is that that wall is not built in Mexico and it's not built on the Mexico-American international boundary line. It is built sometimes miles into the United States on Texas land. And when we build those walls, not only is it unsightly and not only does it not really deter immigration or crossing attempts or make us safer. But it also inhibits the wildlife that don't know any political boundaries and inhibits what makes Texas so beautiful and so great in so many ways.

So the way that we treat the land has serious implications for all of us, no matter where we live in the state of Texas.

The Texas Land Distribution Affects How We Conserve the Land

Nivien Saleh: One animal that lives on the border is the ocelot. That's a beautiful cat which looks like a small jaguar. So if we had a wall where that cat cannot get through, it would be a big problem for the cat because its living space would be decimated. And that may apply to other wildlife as well.

I also want to point out that over 90% of the land in Texas is in private hands. Perhaps even over 95%.

That of course influences how conservationists or environmentalists or the government think about conservation, because it needs to be done with the land owners, using tools such as conservation easements and wildlife tax exemptions that organizations in Texas have been really good at figuring out.

Beto O'Rourke: That's a great point. It shouldn't be simply government-mandated. It should be all of us listening to one another. And I'd say, begin by listening to those stewards of land. That's the farmers, the ranchers, the folks who've been able to maintain this land in its somewhat natural and certainly contiguous state for a long time.

They're going to come up with some of the best ideas for how to do this. Texans are right to be a little suspicious of a government mandate or the government telling you what to do with your land.

I think when the government listens to those who are going to be most impacted or who best understand the issue, we get much better results.

Beto O'Rourke on the Lessons of Hurricane Harvey

Nivien Saleh: Very true. Moving on to Houston. Hurricane Harvey struck Houston and neighboring counties in August 2017. And I remember that was the time when you had started your campaign, and you had just had a campaign stop in Houston and were on the highway, I think, to Columbus.

And when you realized just how seriously Harvey was hitting us, you decided to turn around and stick the hurricane out in Houston. Nobody expected you to do that really. And I remember that you called us asking, how do we get back into the city? What highway should we take?

And Terry and I, my husband, told you, "We don't know, we are surrounded by water. We can't get off our property." But somehow you made it back. And as a result, you have firsthand knowledge of the devastation we experienced. What has Harvey taught you about our relationship with nature? And what are the things that we should change and do better?

Beto O'Rourke: I remember that very well, just being astounded by the amount of water that had dropped from the sky. I think it was 48 inches over the course of, was it a day, two days? It was the greatest rainfall in the shortest period of time in recorded history in North America. And it all hits Southeast Texas. And it hit you, and it hit Port Arthur, and it hit Beaumont, sparing no one. And unfortunately far too many lost their lives in the midst of that flooding. Far too many lost their homes, property, cars and, and livelihoods in some cases. And I think if anyone needed their attention focused on the challenge of climate change, Harvey should have done that.

That's not the kind of storm that we have traditionally seen during our lifetimes, nor the lifetimes of our parents or our grandparents. What the scientists clearly say is that storms like these are going to become bigger. They're going to dump even more rain. They're going to become more frequent, and they're going to become more unpredictable.

As man-made climate change continues to effect these kinds of events, whether they're hurricanes, tornadoes, droughts or record rainfall, the old way of thinking about this, that somehow God did this, or it's just an act of Mother Nature over which we have no control, I hope is giving way to an understanding that we actually have a lot of control in terms of our emissions and what we put into the air. Whether it's methane - and you know, I'm talking to you now from the Permian basin ...

Nivien Saleh: yeah.

Beto O'Rourke: which is a significant emitter of methane into the atmosphere - or whether it's carbon dioxide.

What we do in Texas, what we do in this country, on this planet, as men and women, has an outsized impact on what others will experience. And as you and I know, as challenging as Harvey was for the people of Houston, it is going to get much, much worse for our kids and our grandkids and the generations that follow, especially if we don't change course now.

The positive way of looking at this, if there is one, is that we have agency in this. We are not bystanders, we are actors. The choices that we make in our personal lives, the choices that we make politically in terms of the policies that we adopt, all of that has bearing on whether we see more Harveys, worse Harveys for Houston and other communities.

Nivien, I think you all had something like three, 100-year floods in the course of three years. Is that right?

Nivien Saleh: That's right. Yeah.

Beto O'Rourke Has Faith that Houston Can Make It through the Energy Transition

Beto O'Rourke: Yeah, and it's just going to get worse going forward. But it doesn't have to, right. We have a chance to change. That's what gives me hope. And that's what gives me you and others, something to work towards.

Nivien Saleh: When I volunteered on your campaign in 2017-2018, there was another friend that I had. She no longer lives in Houston. Her name is Sandy. She was also a volunteer. Her primary concern was climate change.

And she told me that you were the only statewide Democratic candidate at the time who would talk about climate change when others wouldn't touch the topic - and I quote her - "with a 10 foot pole." Things have changed now, luckily.

So during your Senate campaign, you spoke openly about climate change. And a major contribution to climate change of course, is the oil and gas industry.

And Houston is a global hub of the oil and gas industry. And we Houstonians depend on our oil industry in a variety of ways. Number one, like all the other Americans, we consume energy. Number two, we work in the energy sector. Number three, our nonprofit organizations - and that includes environmental groups - receive donations from oil fortunes, which of course creates a sort of dependency.

And then you have income from oil and gas royalties that are a significant part of the endowments of many Texas colleges and universities, both public and private.

That kind of dependency might be a problem if you consider universities and colleges the reservoirs of re-imagining the future.

How can Houston, which is so wedded to the carbon combustion paradigm and which needs its industry and its oil industry, make the successful transition to a carbon neutral future.

Beto O'Rourke: I'm confident, because of everything you just described, that the answer to this question will come from Houston and Midland Odessa and from Texas because as you just made the case, we are the energy capital of North America. We've secured this country's energy independence from the Middle East, from Venezuela, from so much of the rest of the world.

We've innovated the next generation of energy extraction technologies. Fracking is one of them, pioneered right here in the State of Texas. Whatever we think about the future of energy, the current situation of energy is that I'm driving a Toyota Tundra truck, and I just drove it yesterday from El Paso to Midland.

I've got all my gear in the back, it's burning gasoline. And I love the idea that we can produce it and we can refine it here. But you also are begging the next question: What role will Texas play in the transition?

I was pulled aside yesterday by a really fascinating guy here in Odessa named Jean Collins.

He's president of the NAACP chapter in Odessa. But he's also a leader on energy in this very energy-rich part of the state. And he was so excited to tell me about an innovation that he's part of bringing to market that will take methane, which - as we all know - is many more times as dangerous as carbon dioxide in the short term in terms of its impact on climate and is often released or flared off in the energy extraction here in Texas. They're going to take that methane that is now wasted and exacerbates the climate change that we have, and then refine it right here in our state. So this is Texas born and bred and owned, with the jobs and the revenues returning to the state. Now that's a transitional technology that lessens the negative impact on our climate, creates more jobs, and continues this energy proud tradition here in Texas.

I think it's that same know-how and ingenuity t hat will allow us to expand our lead on wind energy. Texas produces more wind energy than any state bar none. And that's not thanks to Democrats. That's thanks to Democrats and Republicans who both invested in the wind energy infrastructure necessary for us to take that pride of place.

We could soon be the largest solar producer in the United States of America. And the great thing about this is that the fastest growing jobs in America right now are in solar and wind

energy. So sometimes folks will make this a zero sum game, you know: Texas loses oil and gas jobs; or if we transition from oil and gas to other energy resources, then we're not going to have an economy in Texas.

And that's just nuts, because Texas is, if anything, unafraid of the future. We can win that future, if we are smart about what we do now in the present. And I see that in Houston, I see that here in the Permian basin, I see that across the state. But much as in terms of your question about land and our relationship to land, I think it's incumbent upon the federal government, especially, and the state government here in Texas, to listen to those oil and gas workers, those who work at refineries, who've made us energy independent, and ask them the questions: How are we going to make this transition? How do we use your expertise and your know how to get it done?

Nivien Saleh: While I really know very little about the oil and gas industry, I did listen to a webinar offered by the Baker Institute with representatives of the oil and gas industry, a few of them. And it seems to me that they're thinking about these issues. The webinar was not about how could these companies get away from producing oil and gas industry, but how could they be less wasteful and have less leakage of methane while they're producing the fossil fuels that we need for our cars. That's a step in the good direction and I hope there will be a lot more.

Beto O'Rourke: Me too.

Nivien Saleh: Well, thank you, Beto. I know that you're on the road, and you've got a very busy schedule. I'm so excited that I got the chance to connect with you. And, you know, I was reminded why I was so enthusiastic about you in 2017 and 2018. I wish you all the best on your journey through Texas. And Cynthia, who helps you, too.

Beto O'Rourke: Well, it's so nice to hear your voice again. And it's also really nice to know that this is in part, what you're working on, sharing these stories and your interests in this state, in our natural heritage, and what the future might look like. It doesn't have to be as bad as it could be.

But being clear-eyed about what we're up against and clear-eyed about what it'll take to overcome that, that's what we have to do. I get that very strongly from you and from this podcast. So I'm grateful to be a part of it. And so happy that you reached out to me.

Nivien Saleh: Thank you Beto.

This is it for today's episode. For the show notes, go to https://HoustonNature.com/12. That's HoustonNature.com, slash, the number 12, for episode twelve. On that page you'll also find a transcript of today's episode. And you'll of course be able to sign up for the Nature Memo. This way, you'll get a notification whenever a new podcast episode is ready.

As you know, I don’t have a regular posting schedule. I simply put interviews out when I’ve got them.

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Wishing you all the best,

I’m Nivien Saleh, with Houston and Nature