Natalie Springuel: My name is Natalie Springuel. I am from Maine Sea Grant. This is Ela from College of the Atlantic. We are here at the National Working Waterfronts and Waterways Symposium 2018 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Why do we not start with you stating your name and then spelling it?

Matthew Preisser: Sure. Matthew Preisser. That's P-R-E-I-S-S-E-R.

NS: Great. Tell us a little bit about what you do.

MP: I work in the Michigan Office of the Great Lakes. So, we are a small state office within the State of Michigan. We're housed within our Department of Natural Resources Agency. What we do is we're a non-regulatory group that serves a number of functions, but we have our coastal zone management program within the office. We implement multiple federal – other federal programs under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement, which is a fairly large binational program within the region here that the other coasts, I guess are not aware of. We do a lot of work. So, those are both statewide kind of coastal efforts, but also regionally, Michigan is kind of at the heart of the Great Lakes region. If you look at the map, we have more shoreline than any other state in the region and take our role central to the region very seriously and try to provide leadership in a lot of different issues in governance, management structures, and discussions, and bringing people together. So, we do quite a lot of different things. When someone asks what do I do for a living? I'm still working on my elevator speech. I need to come up with that. We protect and restore the Great Lakes and the communities that depend upon them, I guess is the…

NS: You work at the statewide level. Is that right?

MP: We do, yes. We do it statewide and regionally. Sometimes you'll see, actually even at the event here, some individuals from my office. It'll say Office of the Great Lakes. We take that for granted that outside the region, not everybody knows what that is. Actually, even three of the states, two or three of the states within the Great Lakes have Offices of the Great Lakes. So, we're the Michigan office. We do focus on State of Michigan but again, recognizing that where we are within the region and that the activities that occur in the other states and the province and Canada affects Michigan as well. We're one of the few state programs that afford the possibility to work beyond our borders.

NS: When you think about working waterfronts, what is the geography that you are thinking of, and how would you characterize?

MP: That's interesting because I'm not a regular in the working waterfront arena. This is my first event.

NS: Welcome.

MP: Thank you. I've worked with Mark Breederland and a lot of the people that do this kind of work, the specialists. For me, even the term working waterfront is a bit of an ambiguous or a nebulous term. When I saw the announcement that the conference was coming here, the

handouts or the attachments that came with it were really helpful if you look at, "These are the types of topics we talk about." So, I think at a gut level, when you think of working waterfront, I think of Maine, lobstering, some of the larger cities with ports and big ships and industrial kind of things. But I've come to learn it's a lot more than that, that there's a spectrum of waterfronts. Michigan has some of those similar type – more heavily industrial places, but a lot of our shoreline is rural. Once you bring in habitat, wildlife habitat and water quality and those other types of components, and recreation and access, then it becomes almost the whole shoreline is fair game, as the way I see it.

NS: You are doing a session related to islands. So, can you characterize the islands that you work with?

MP: Yeah. So, when running into Mark, a couple years ago, he said, "I think we're going to get this national event in 2018." I said, "What about islands? Can we do something with islands?" We both kind of scratched our heads a little bit. There's something there, we're not sure what, but yes, let's try that. So, we came back to it this spring or fall or whenever it was, whenever they did the call for sessions. The reason we were able to do that is the Island Institute, back to Maine. We became aware of the Island Institute and the work that they do for the Maine islands and coastal communities, and amazing thirty-year history and all the different programs and the support they provide for those communities. In the Great Lakes, we don't have anything like that. We don't have an entity like that. We didn't even know that the island communities had no collaboration between them. They didn't know others existed for all intents and purposes. There was no one really bringing them together as unique places. There have been some environmental studies over the years, looking at biodiversity and islands as unique places for habitat and rare species and that kind of thing, but not so much the people on them and the communities. So, we spent a couple years kind of visiting and building this network of the communities in the Great Lakes, of islands, in so many ways as trying to replicate what the Island Institute does out in Maine and creating a network of Great Lakes communities. The argument being that they would benefit from talking to each other and sharing information, that they have more in common with each other than they do, many times, with the adjacent mainland. We're past year or two, been building this network and recruiting, if that's the right word, Islanders and trying to get people involved and understanding what are the benefits, what could this group do? So, this event became – back to why are we here – it became just another step in the process that, wow, this is another place where we can connect Islanders to Islanders. For me, an island community is 360 degrees surrounded by water. So, it is a quintessential coastal community. Mainland communities, yes, they are, but their back or half is to the mainland and all the access to the goods and services, the people that affords. Island communities don't have that. So, it seemed like a waterfront, a shorelines conference like this was an amazing place to elevate the needs of these unique communities. We said, "Well, how do we do this? Maybe we can bring some Islanders together." I'm not an Islander myself. I'm not going to begin to pretend to understand their challenges and what their needs are. So, we said, "Let's see if we can bring some Islanders together." Then that ended up with where we are with people from three islands in the Great Lakes. We've got a couple islands out in Maine and then down to Chesapeake Bay. Maryland, we've got a couple folks from there. So, for the first time, bringing people together. There are many things they have in common. There are many differences. Obviously, every community is different. But the idea being that we're going to

pose some basic questions and have some discussions, and they can learn from each other. I think the audience is also going to learn about these places. So, part of this is also to raise awareness or recognition of these communities.

NS: So, you said you are not an Islander yourself, but you have been connecting with Islanders for a while now. What have you been observing in terms of what Islanders value about being on islands, about being Islanders, about their waterfront? What are you observing?

MP: Like any small rural community, it depends on who you ask. But at least the people that I've been working with, the awareness of the national environment is really important to these places. In the Great Lakes in particular, many of our islands are dependent on tourism. People will either go visit or maybe buy a second home on an island. Generally they're pretty, not pristine, but fairly good condition in most cases. It's a place for solitude and to kind of get away from it all. Not all islands around are like that. But I have found that they've all expressed a recognition for wanting to grow in some ways. Maybe it's broadband or trying to figure out housing for seasonal workers, but at the same time, not neglecting what makes them unique in the first place, the natural character of it. So, there's a bit of a push-pull between that growth and development versus not too much. Again, that varies depending on who you ask. But that's up for them to grapple with within their communities, I guess.

NS: Could you name the islands that you have been connecting with, so we can get them on the map?

MP: Yeah. Let's see if I can do this off the top of my head. So, starting in Lake Superior, Madeline Island is in the state of Wisconsin, Lake Michigan, we have Washington Island, which is Wisconsin. Beaver Island is Michigan. Then heading east, we've got Mackinac, Les Cheneaux Islands, which is a group of islands, Boblo, Drummond, Neebish, and then Harsens Island is down close southeast Michigan, Lake Erie, there's, they're called the Bass Islands. Put-in-Bay or South Bass Island is the biggest or is the most populated. There's a Middle Bass Island and I think even a North Bass, which we haven't reached anyone there yet. Pelee Island is just also in Lake Erie, but it's on the Canadian side. So, the international border runs down that great lake, down the middle, basically. Then there's a handful more. So, those are the ones that we've kind of engaged with or have people that are interested in what we're doing and having those conversations about what it might become.

NS: Each of these islands have year-round population.

MP: Yes. So, literally, three years ago, there wasn't a list of populated – there's a Wikipedia page. I often joke about this, but to this day, still the best resource is a Wikipedia page, populated islands in the Great Lakes. There's about thirty of them. Now, many – well, I think about a third of them are close enough that they have a bridge, or at least in one or two cases. I think outside of Toronto, there's a tunnel. Twenty-ish, high teens are far enough offshore that they don't have a bridge. So, Manitoulin, I forgot Manitoulin, which is the largest freshwater island in the world, ironically, in Canadian water. So, Lake Huron is participating as well. There's kind of a discreet universe of sites, again, depending on how you define island. We've elected to be inclusive and say, "We don't care if you have a bridge or not. If you would find

value in this network, then come to the table." Generally, there are islands that are unbridged and have sizable year-round populations. There are some other ones that have small – there's at least one I'm aware of that has about forty people on it. There are others that are kind of more seasonal. So, again, we're kind of inclusive at this point. It gets harder once you loosen the definition because there's, overall, in the Great Lakes, there's 32,000 islands. Thankfully, most of those are just bird and habitat. That would be a little bit too hard to wrangle. But we've got a solid fifteen or so that we're working with and facilitating these conversations.

NS: Do you have a sense if there are trends related to what people who live on the islands in the Great Lakes year-round, do for a living? Their reliance on the fact that they are an island or that they have access to the water.

MP: Yeah. Anecdotally, we have lots of examples. I haven't even set foot on all the islands myself. That's on my to-do list.

NS: Sounds like a great summer project.

MP: Poor job, I have, huh? Poor me. We've actually started to find some additional partners. A lot of the Islanders, they've – one thing I've found is that a lot of the Islanders, they wear many hats. So, in a small community where you've got limited capacity to do things, almost all of the people that I've been working with are on a board or a commission. They've got a full-time job. They're coaches. They do four or five different things. It's pretty remarkable. So, we're bringing in some mainland organizations to help serve certain roles. If you cobble us all together, we're a poor man's version of the Island Institute, I guess. But to your point, there's a small college in northern Wisconsin called Northland College. They have a center for rural communities there. What they specialize in is data and surveys and indicators and things like that. So, back to the Island Institute, they've done a remarkable job with information on islands and setting up indicators, so you can assess the status and the trends over time for these communities. Great Lakes, we again, we have nothing like that. We have nothing. Complicating that is that our islands are in three or four different states and the province of Ontario, and so, two countries, multiple jurisdictions. The data is all over the place. In some cases, the census information is the island itself. Sometimes it's the island and the mainland. It's all over the place. So, our friends up at Northland College are starting to crack that nut to try to figure out what is known about the demographics, the economics, all of those things for these sites, and then that can help inform what the needs are.

NS: I was going to ask you, what do you think the needs are? What are the potential challenges coming down the pike? But you guys are sort of assessing that now, it sounds like.

MP:
Yeah. A lot of it, well, as a network, we're still storming. There's the storming, norming. There's that thing. We're still figuring out who we are and what we can do with that kind of capacity. So, we're going to be, I think, starting small and growing over time. But there's interest in trying to tackle everything from environmental protection to housing. I mentioned healthcare. Education, we've got about half of the islands have schools on them. All really important things, all have really underlying challenges to them. By training, I'm a biologist. So,

I tend to think of some of the environmental stressors that are in the Great Lakes that are affecting the islands. Some of the things here, I think there's some transferable ideas with resiliency of coastal communities and just clean marinas, as a specific example of trying to – I don't know how many marinas are on the Great Lakes Islands. I don't think anyone's ever asked that. If there are a suite of certified marinas, why not island communities? In my mind, 100 percent of them should be certified green, clean. These are places that are more vulnerable as far as the coastal community than anyone else if you ask me. They stand to lose more, I guess.

NS: Is there anything that the network could do to support your work? Are there particular tools that you – in terms of moving forward with trying to support the islands?

MP: You mean the working waterfront network?

NS: Yes. Sorry, I should have said something.

MP: Well, no, because what I'm forming is a network too. So, part of the network concept, and I'm by no means an expert on it, but what we're doing is we're connecting networks as part of it and finding people that can bridge those gaps and bringing experts and find opportunities. So, yes, I think tomorrow's discussion will hopefully yield some more concrete ideas. That example of the clean marinas as one program, that could be – that we could help facilitate to reach island communities as a unique audience. I think we could do that for a lot of the different types of subjects that are covered in these next couple of days.

NS: Great. As we wind down, is there anything else that you would like to share? Any thoughts either about the work that you are doing or the islands or the network?

MP: I think it's such an exciting – I feel really fortunate that I get to do this because it's interesting. It's challenging. It's fun. I'm learning. It's all that rolled into one, which is excellent. For me, the biggest challenge is trying to – I want do it all, but we can't, so, trying to be strategic. Back again into the network concept, I think being able to tap into other networks and find like-minded people that can think big and can bring ideas or resources to bear, to work with us, and vice versa, actually. That's kind of my big takeaway. I'm really excited to have, frankly, some of the Islanders here because my sense is that events like this, you get a lot of agency people and consultants and sea grants obviously and those types. It's nice to have the people that are living on that waterfront. Because in the end, we can preach and advise and suggest all we want, but in the end, they're the ones that have to make it happen at the local level.

NS: Great. Ela, do you have any questions?

Ela Keegan: I do not think so at the moment.

MP: Spelling for all of those names?

EK: I can Google them up and find them that way [laughter]. It is great. I am learning so much US geography.

NS: That is great.

MP: Well, we talked a lot about this event and how people are coming from – I haven't seen the attendance list, but I've seen name tags and people coming from everywhere that – I'm not from the Great Lakes. I'm from New York State which is a Great Lake state, but we didn't learn – where I grew up, we learned more about the East Coast and the colonies and things that we take for granted. People in the Great Lakes assume that the rest of the country knows about us. John Allen, in the morning, he did a good job of – there are some basics that people don't know, but even homes. So, Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior, I don't know if you've heard of that, but when you have to name the Great Lakes, it spells homes. As an anecdote, we had some Main Islanders a couple years ago come visit. We were driving up the coast of Michigan. It was in the spring, spring or fall, but either way, the boats – we were going by a marina, and all the boats were out, dry-docked, kind of wrapped up. One of the Mainers asked, she said, "What happened? Was there a spill? What was going on here?" We were all really confused. We're like, "No." She's like, "Why are they all up?" "Well, it's ice. The lakes freeze in the winter. So, in September, you take them out for the winter. You put them back on Memorial Day." She's like, "Oh." We were like, "Oh?" So, it didn't even dawn on us that you have to have that Great Lakes 101. It's fresh water. It could freeze. So, when I was actually visiting Maine, we were just like, "Wow, this is amazing that this ferry runs year-round." Our ferries for our islands they're – maybe I should have said that – they're locked in several months of the year where the ferry doesn't run. If they don't have a plane, some of the islands will have a bridge. When the ice gets thick enough, they will line it with Christmas trees. Then you can drive on the ice. When it warms up, they have to stop that. So, there are regional differences that we sometimes take for granted. There are no sharks. There's no salt. That's our other thing.

NS: Great. Well, thank you so much.

MP: Thank You.

NS: Great stories that I did not know about that.

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