



Julianne Geleynse

Julianne Geleynse: [00:00:00] We have almost 20 different kinds of scientists working in this national park, and that's just the people working in the park. This park has the most researchers of any national park in the country. And so, there is so much science being done in this park.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:16] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:51] So, on Learning Unboxed today, we are going back to the National Park Service, one of our favorite topics for those of you that are regular listeners on this program. Anything that has to do with getting more folks outside, and learning, and protecting our environment, we are all about that. So, we are very excited today to welcome to the program Julianne Geleynse from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. So, Julianne, welcome to the program.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:01:18] Hello. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:20] So, a little bit of background for our listeners, Julianne has been a park ranger since 2011, having worked in five different national parks throughout the United States, and has spent the last seven years working in education in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. And she is going to spend some time with us today talking about parks in the classroom, which is their signature program. It's also a program that can be found and accessed at a number of different locations around the US. So, Julianne, let's start for folks who don't know where the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is located, and sort of the national parks within the US structure in general. So, tell us about the Great Smoky Mountains.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:02:01] Absolutely. So, Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a southeastern park that is split between two states, Tennessee and North Carolina, and it's along the Southern Appalachian Mountains. So, we are pretty famous for our biodiversity. That's the number one thing that scientists study in our national park. We have documented over 20,000 different species and scientists actually estimate that there are about 100,000 species to be found in this national park.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:02:29] But of course, the species yet to be found are very small and they require very specialized scientists in order to identify them. So, we've identified a lot of the plants, the fungus, of course, the mammals, and birds. We're still kind of pioneering research in the smaller sort of fields, which is really exciting because we're finding species that are brand new to science every single year. We're also famous for our

scenic vistas. We have a road that goes directly up and over the mountain, through the park, and some of the most beautiful scenic vistas anywhere in the country right through this national park.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:03:08] And then, our last thing that we are famous for is our cultural history. We have over 10,000 years of human history here in this national park. And more history is happening every single day because we are the busiest national park in the country. We receive over 12 million visitors every single year. But some of the really iconic components of our cultural history is the history of the mountain people or the mountain settlers, where they built a lot of historic log cabins that were built usually in about the late 1700s, but most of them were in the early 1800s, and they're still representative of this park today.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:42] Yeah, and it's a beautiful park. I have been to not every US national park, but close to it. I'm slowly over the years ticking them off, and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is an all-time favorite and one of the other things that's wonderful about it is it's big. You get lots of visitors there, but the visitors can spread out. And there are so many different things to see and places to go within the park. So, it's a great place we encourage folks to go.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:10] One of the great things about the work that you've been doing there is the number of students that you have been able to directly impact. I think you said 18,000 to 20,000 students on a typical year. I would imagine we have exposure to the program, in particular the parks as a classroom program. So, share with us a little bit about what's the gist of that program and what does it look like specifically at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:04:39] Yeah. So, we serve our gateway communities on both sides of the park and we serve rural communities as well as urban communities. One of our missions is to get urban students, urban youth into the national park. And what that looks like is the students will come on a field trip, a day field trip to the national park and the national park becomes their classroom. We have kids that are coming into the park that have grown up right next to it and had no idea that there was a national park right next door.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:05:11] And we also have kids that really have not spent much time outside at all. I've even had students that have heard a stream running and have asked, what's that sound? They had never heard running water in a natural space before. So, we try to have place-based, curriculum-based learning experiences in an outdoor environment using the Smokies as a living laboratory.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:35] And again, there's nothing better than being able to actually go and do your learning out in the environment and the hands-on applied component, especially, to your point, for students who've never seen some of those things. And it is really quite wonderful. We do a fair number of outdoor education programs at the PAST Innovation Lab as well. And I'm always struck by the look of wonder and just the kids can be so mesmerized because so outside their traditional experiences.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:07] So, let's say I'm a teacher in one of your gateway community schools. We're going to have a field trip. We're coming. So, what does the prep look like for me? So, how, as an educator, do I make sure that my students are ready to take advantage of the content that's going to be delivered when we get there? Let's start with that. And then, I want to roll up our sleeves and actually talk about the program itself in terms of the way that it works.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:06:32] Yeah. So, luckily, we've been working with a lot of the same teachers for, in some cases, decades. And so, they know the ropes. But typically, what we have is a pre-site activity, the onsite activity, and then a post-site activity, because that's really what helps drive home not just the

experience, but what the teachers are looking for, which is, of course, the standards. So, we have packets that have been sent to the teachers over the years.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:06:57] And of course, with the more recent development now, we have a lot of videos and those videos could be used to really get the students understanding the vocabulary and getting prepared for what they're going to experience while they're here so that there's a little bit less of an intro when they get here, and we can really maximize their time in the park, and get them out hiking, get them in the stream, get them in the dirt, get them a little bit dirty, and we'll get that hands-on learning right up, really maximize our time, because some of these kids, they're coming from Knoxville or Asheville, and that's a pretty long bus ride. And so, we want to make sure that they are in the woods as much time as possible. So, that pre-site stuff is pretty important.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:36] Yeah, absolutely. And how long do most of the school groups stay in the park? Do they come for a day, they come for an overnight, they come for several? What does it look like or is it varied?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:07:46] It typically is about a three to four-hour program in the park. So, we do not have a residential learning experience with the Park Service, but we have a wonderful partner in the park called the Institute at Tremont that does have a residential experience. And they gear a little bit more towards the out-of-town students in schools, so they're able to provide a different experience, a very immersive experience, which is absolutely wonderful, but they do have a slightly different audience and aren't catering as much to the local communities.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:17] Perfect. Perfect. So then, let's talk about the big giant elephant in the room for all of us over the last nine or 10 months has been this global pandemic and the impacts that the pandemic has had both on our national parks, because there was an impact, still, I assume, an impact as it relates to sort of what's going on with what you're able to do or not to do. But then, there's also that sort of transition or inflection point that provided an intriguing opportunity, because my understanding is that you've taken a lot of what you would have done as parks, as a classroom, and, now you've transitioned some of it to be online.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:59] So, let's talk a little bit about what your process has been, what's available, and now, who gets access to it because one of the big giant equalizing components is we've been talking with with parks all over the world. And one of the common themes is that, all of a sudden, we're no longer limited to visitors who are just coming physically to the park, which is wonderful, and we want everybody to do that. It is not the same by any stretch of the imagination when you can't do that. But suddenly, we are finding audience we've never had before. So, are you experiencing some of those same sort of phenomenons?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:09:31] Well, our process was a little bit bumpy to start off with because we've actually been pushed into distance learning sort of hesitantly leading up to the pandemic. And we always resisted it because we had a bigger demand of these in-person programs than we could provide. And so, we thought, well, we can't even meet the demand of the local community, how on earth should we be spending resources on this distance learning? Well, then the pandemic hit, and it was just like, you have no choice, you have to do distance learning.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:10:04] And so, all of us who had been resisting this digital transition are all of a sudden forced to become videographers and cinematographers. And so, we have an amazing partnership with the Institute at Tremont, Great Smoky Mountains Association, as well as the Friends of the Smokies and discover life in America here in the Smokies. Because we are a fee-free park, it means that we really can't

function without our partners. And so, together, the park and all these partners created a digital platform called Smokies at Home, and that's smokieees, with three Es, .org.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:10:43] And what it was, was a whole bunch of partners and park rangers who were pretty much at stay-at-home orders, some of them, of course, which lived in the national park that, all of a sudden, developed content to be able to reach all the students that were basically stuck at home. And a lot of that content led towards getting students to go and investigate in their own backyard, just a little grassy patch for those still able to go to school if they had even just a little spot in their school yard.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:11:15] And so, we were able to exactly start reaching some of those more distant audiences. In fact, I ended up teaching a couple Harvard classes, which was a little unique. I'd never been able to work much with college students outside of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. So, we started seeing very different audiences and we had to get really creative, especially when it came to tiny kids. Our niche market, especially on the Tennessee side education branch has really been geared towards younger kids. We probably get the majority of our students between kindergarten and fifth grade, and any parent out there probably knows that the younger the kid is, the less likely they are to sit still for very long.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:12:03] And so, a lot of our engaging digital programs had to involve movement, or art, or investigations. We couldn't just play a video for those kids. We felt that that was a little bit more geared towards the older middle school, high school, and even college-level students. So, we also learned some of the benefits in the sheer volume of students that we were able to reach. As you mentioned, it's certainly not comparable. An in-park experience is a memorable, very transformative experience for students. I often like to ask adults, do you ever remember the best lecture that you were ever given? And most of them are like, no.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:44] Why would I remember that?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:12:46] And most adults that remember at least one field trip, if not all of them. So, it's been different. But because we don't have to wait for a bus and only work with one school that entire day, I can reach three or four classes in one day from different schools. So, we're actually, in some cases, able to get 180 students in one day, which would never be possible with an in-person field trip. So, there are some benefits, but there's obviously the drop in in-person field trips I find our work meaningful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:24] Oh, sure. And I don't think anybody would disagree with that. But the flip side of it, I mean, I assume that the students or the classrooms that are coming in digitally are a lot of your local schools because they want to keep the relationship they're familiar with. But are you starting to see requests coming from greater geographic distances who would have never tapped into or is that just emerging still?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:13:52] It's still emerging. We have seen some mainly because we've gotten those requests all along. And we, most of the time, were unable to meet those requests because we already had our commitments of our local communities. And so, now, when those requests come in, we're like, well, now, we have this opportunity for you that's digital, and absolutely, we can serve you. So, in that sense, we are definitely able to serve that larger geographic audience.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:19] Yeah. And so, the sort of flip piece of this is we're all assuming that hopefully sooner rather than later, we can get back to doing outdoor, in-person, really, really robust programming with lots of kids running around and being explorers. But when that happens, does the park have a sense yet of the balance between the two or is there the expectation that the digital learning component will sort of fade away because we no longer need it in a pandemic or is it something that as an organization and as an institution,

you're going to try to find a way to keep a balance of both? And how would you do that? What would that look like to you?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:15:03] I think we are, moving forward, always going to be able to offer these digital virtual programs. We didn't have them set up before and we didn't have an incentive to because we were so busy with the kids that were right in front of us. But after months in a pandemic, we have developed these programs and we've also made some of them available without needing a physical park ranger to be in front of a screen with a video camera.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:15:31] Some of them are on smokeees.org and are available to teachers and students at any time. So, they don't even need to schedule anything with us. There's definitely that opportunity there, but I don't think, moving forward, that it's just going to go back to the way things were. I think that we're always going to have some sort of virtual component just because we have the skills and the resources now to do that, and we didn't before.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:58] Right, right. Absolutely. I want to talk a little bit about sort of the questions or the concerns that you're seeing from students. Interestingly enough, even before the pandemic, there is a young woman named Greta out in the world who opened students' eyes to the bigger issues of climate change and the environment, right? And it was somebody that many students could identify. She's young. She sort of looks and feels like me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:31] And so, even before the pandemic, a lot of that, from a social media standpoint and from a media and marketing standpoint in general, might have had a little bit of a different sort of space in the thinking of the students that you're engaging with. And so, one of the questions my staff was like, hey, ask her this, was really around, are you seeing younger students asking different sets of questions then? I mean, you've been doing this for a number of years now in writing different parks. So, over time, are you seeing the kids' interest in the environment, whether it be climate change, or the Beatles, or whatever? Right? Locally, are they asking you a different kind or sorts of questions?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:17:15] So, I will say that the climate change curriculum only was implemented just a little bit over a year ago in the state of Tennessee. So, the younger grades, even in high school, it's just starting to emerge. And when I say that, it's pretty minimal. I am in Tennessee and most of the surrounding counties are pretty rural and socioeconomically depressed. So, that might give you an indication of how pressing that issue is or that demographic. However, I will say that in the college students that I worked with, as well as some of the Knoxville high school students.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:17:58] So, when you get into an urban environment, I get a different feel there. And they are incredibly active. I'm seeing leadership, especially at the college level that I did not see. Even just a few years ago, I got asked to do a climate panel at the University of Tennessee, and that's something that the students generated themselves, and now, they've been doing it for three years now. So, it is getting to be more active.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:18:24] And I'm getting a little bit more of a sort of what I got growing up, because, of course, I was 18 and I was charging forward like, I got to save the Planet. And I can't say I've met too many kids until recently that were a little bit more like that. And that's just because of where we live. I grew up in the Midwest, in Minnesota, and here, we're just, I like to call it a little bit Smoky slower. We're a little slow to change, and also, we just take life a little bit slower and we try not to worry about things as much. So, that's sort of the general feel in this region.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:58] Yeah. And I think it'll be interesting over time. As again, to your point, the curriculum is relatively new in the State of Tennessee. Other places, they've been doing and utilizing a climate change curriculum for a longer period of time, but as you sort of think about that component, and global pandemic, and a number of other stressors, whether they be socioeconomic, they be environmental, they be a whole host of components, I assume that as you in the park and the team that works with you are thinking about programming of the future, what are some of the changes that you're anticipating, or your expectations, or maybe even strategic direction that you're thinking about that you can see your programming shifting over time just because of the journey and the path that everybody has been on together?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:19:57] This is actually a meeting that's currently planned, which is a strategic planning meeting, because as of right now, we have more audiences that we can then we have the capability to serve, because not only is our park in high demand for visitation, but so is the education team. We have a lot of groups that want to utilize the park in an educational classroom way, and we just can't meet every single demand. There are only six of us. So, trying to serve that level of audience, it's not feasible. So, I don't necessarily know what audiences we're going to prioritize in the future.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:20:37] The direction that we have been moving is to really focus on Title I schools, urban schools, as well as schools that are really closely located right next to the park, because a lot of the children that grow up in this area, they eventually become leaders in this area. And so, getting them involved in the national park, which is, of course, the driver of the economy in this area, is incredibly important. So, I don't know if that means that we're going to keep reaching out to further distances and people who are located and maybe on the western side of the country or not, but we just know that we have a capacity, we just don't know which audiences we're going to prioritize just yet.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:21] Right. And that makes sense. There's a lot in motion and there's also so much unknown about what the world will truly look like and how it will function on the flip side of what everybody's experiencing. And so, it's good to be having those conversations now. And so, we'll all be watching sort of to see where you land. I'd be curious to sort of see how that all sorts itself out.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:21:44] I'm curious too. We're a collaborative bunch, and so we're all going to decide together. So, we'll see.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:49] Exactly. That's great. Well, I always like to sort of close our conversation with recognizing that we do have listeners from all over the world and we have a lot of education folks, but we also have a fair number of community and industry folks that listen to the program as well. And one of the questions that we often get as the follow up is, hey, that sounds really awesome, how could I participate or how can I get access to that?

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:14] And we will, of course, post the resources to the website with your program. But the obvious one obviously is, will you go to our website? You can download our programs. But if folks are sort of thinking about the, how I could engage at the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, what would your recommendation be to them? Or, if you're a teacher in Nebraska, or in Arizona, or New Mexico, or wherever, saying, hey, how can I best utilize something that's happening there to help my students locally, what would your suggestions be?

Julianne Geleynse: [00:22:48] Absolutely. So, what's awesome right now in our current climate is that we are available to schedule virtual programs anywhere, almost any time. So, emailing us is a pretty easy thing to do, that's grsm_education@nps.gov, and we'll get those teachers and their classes scheduled for a virtual program. If they don't have the ability, I know that connectivity is an issue for a lot of students that are working

from home and they have to only do homework or download lessons when they're at a library parking lot, that is where I would recommend them to go to smokieees.org because that's available any time and you do not have to have a pre-scheduled visit with a ranger.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:23:37] We also have a wealth of information on our website. I know that websites can be a bit overwhelming, but we've got 20,000 pages of science because we have almost 20 different kinds of scientists working in this national park, and that's just the people working in the park. This park has the most researchers of any national park in the country. And so, there is so much science being done in this park and there's actually a huge database. So, for high school students or college students that are interested in looking at some of the scientific papers that have come out of this park, there's this huge, huge database just full of resources for people who might want to investigate those.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:24:16] Now, scientific papers are for a specific demographic, I would argue, but there is a lot of really great stuff that scientists are producing out of this park. So, that's what I would say, is to just reach out, and we are happy to get in touch with those teachers all across the country because we want to reach as many students as possible. There are many kids that, of course, can't make it to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and I hope that they can one day, but maybe wait until it's a slightly better, safer time to travel, I would say.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:47] Exactly. Exactly. Well, Julianne, thank you so much for taking time out of your day just to share what's happening in the park with all of us. And for our listeners, I encourage you definitely to hop on the website, see what's going on in the park. And when it is safe, I echo Julianne's statement, please come, come see it. It's an amazing place. The national parks here in the US, as well as national government-based parks in other parts of the world, they are our opportunity to get out of what we know on our normal every day and to go see what the world has to offer. So, please do so. And thank you so much, Julianne, for joining us today.

Julianne Geleynse: [00:25:27] My pleasure.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:31] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media [@AnnaliesCorbin](https://twitter.com/AnnaliesCorbin) and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.