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**Andy Huse (AH):** Introduce yourself, please.

**David Lewis (DL):** Yeah, absolutely. My name is David Lewis. I am an associate professor at USF in the Department of Integrative Biology. I am also a—so what I do in terms of my professional activities, I do research on ecosystem science. So we seek to understand the environment, how organisms interact with flows of water, matter, and energy through the environment. So we take a broad look at microorganisms, plants, animals, soils, groundwater, surface water, et cetera, and seek to understand how all of those things are integrated in ways that give ecosystems their properties. Such as how much biodiversity they have or how much biomass and carbon they store or how all of the components of the ecosystem interact with one another.

AH: Right. We're looking at the building blocks of the environment on a small scale, right?

DL: Well, we try to integrate across scales, so we will sort of look to finer scales to help understand processes and mechanisms, and we will look to broader scales to see what the kind of emergent outcome of all the processes and mechanisms are. I mean if you look—if you take a human body as an analogy, the emergent outcome is, you know, a healthy body, what a person looks like, et cetera. But all of that emerges from processes that are a variety of scales. How a person interacts with other people but at very fine scales, how all of their cells are functioning and how the parts inside all of their selves are functioning.

AH: Right.

DL: So you could take a similar view of ecosystems. I mean, ecosystems are situated in place and time and so they—so an ecosystem like the Forest Preserve, for example, or Behnke Lake here on campus, you know, they interact with their surroundings, their emergent properties. Sort

of, the big picture characteristics that we can observe, taken as a whole, are outcomes of the way those systems interact with their surroundings, but also outcomes of the way all of the little parts inside the systems interact with one another.

AH: Right.

DL: So the function in a computer at a macroscopic scale is how we experience it, but that outcome depends on how that computer interacts with the other computers in the network, it also depends on how the parts inside the box function. Well, we take that view of natural ecosystems and human dominated ecosystems, as well. But to pursue those activities, I do research, I supervise, or advise, I should say, not supervise, advise a great group of graduate students. Some who are immediate protégées of my own, others working in other labs around the university that I am sort of a committee member of. And then I also teach classes, you know, traditional classroom classes, to both graduate students and undergraduates, at a variety of levels: non-majors, majors, grad level, et cetera.

AH: Yeah. When did you arrive at USF?

DL: I got here in 2009.

AH: Okay. So tell us a little bit about— how did you get introduced to the Forest Preserve, and what's your idea of the, kind of the history of it, up until earlier this year, you know?

DL: Yeah. So my idea of the history of it will be second-hand from faculty who came before me. But the way I got involved in it is, it was a very appealing environment for me to be able to conduct the kind of research I do. Well, I should take a step back. I was first introduced to its existence by other people in my department. I found it a very attractive resource when I chose to apply here in the first place, it was evident from the website that it existed as a facility, and when I chose to take, accept, the job offer after going through the application process. And so other faculty and the website for the department kind of made me aware of the Forest Preserve, and then going out and visiting it myself, I became more enamored with it as a place that was both sort of wonderful in its own right, but also would really facilitate my role as a researcher and a teacher.

AH: Right.

DL: So that was all kind of early days. You know, back in 2009 and '10 and '11 when I first got here and I've continued to use it since. I have a couple projects going on out there right now, myself.

AH: Yeah, your department has been, specifically, pretty active on the site. I mean, one of the most active disciplines. You know, why is that, I guess?

DL: Right. So one of the reasons—

AH: Why was the site compelling?

DL: Yeah. So one of the reasons that, you know, the department, the website, and senior faculty in the department introduced me to the Forest Preserve is because our department has been tasked with managing it. And so this is where things get a little second-hand. I could put you in touch with more senior people, retired faculty, but still active. The department or the Forest Preserve, at one point, a university president, and I can't remember which one it was, several presidents ago, before I was here, tasked our department with supervising and managing the site. And the site has been used by people in a lot of different departments: faculty members, graduate students, researchers, and a lot of different academic departments at the University of South Florida. But our department has used it most heavily, and our department was tasked by some president, again, many presidents ago, with managing it.

Part of the reason that our department was tasked with managing it was that early conversations about developing it, and by develop it I mean, sort of land development, non-sustainable, non-conservation land development, some of those early ideas were responded to by people in our department saying that that would not be a good idea for this land. Partly because it's not really suitable for development, much of it is wetland, which wouldn't be effective to develop on, and other parts of it that aren't wetland are a very imperiled habitat type that includes a lot of endangered species, or species with some conservation concern status, endangered, threatened, et cetera. And so our department, because they raised those issues in response to early would-be development plans, we were tasked with managing the Forest Preserve thereafter. So my involvement in it, beyond the research and discovery of it in the early days of my faculty life here, also evolved into being a partner with other faculty members in my department in that management process. So I've been part of the Forest Preserve management committee, it's now referred to as the Forest Preserve Advisory Board, since about 2013 or 2014.

AH: Okay.

DL: I can't remember exactly what year, but I have it written down somewhere on my CV, I think. Yeah. So yeah.

AH: So it's given you some time to actually do some research there over the years too, then, obviously.

DL: Yeah, exactly.

AH: So tell us about—was there any indication before this RFI came out? I mean, was it really a shot out of the dark? Because I mean, really, you're supposed to be, you know, the advisory board.

DL: Right, so the advisory board, so it was a total surprise to us. And I'll just say one other, kind of, bit of history on the advisory board.

AH: Oh, sure.

DL: After our department was tasked with managing it, we even had an internal to the department committee, sort of in charge of, you know, managing. What that constitutes is really evaluating proposed uses of the Forest Preserve to make sure that they are consistent with the idea of preservation and conservation, publicizing the preserve and its values and benefits. We would play a role in representing the preserve to other entities on campus, entities such as people involved in getting USF certified as, kind of a, very sustainability merit badges, like LEADS Certification and that kind of stuff.

AH: Right.

DL: So those are the sorts of things we do as a management entity. But the management entity now, as I've said, is called the Forest Preserve Advisory Board, it's not just our department anymore. It's got representatives from our department as well as from a couple other departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. So it's a little, sort of, I don't know, more ecumenical I guess, if that's the right vocabulary term—

AH: Right.

DL: —in terms of management. So at any rate, that's the advisory board now, and even though our role is to represent the Forest Preserve in interacting with other entities on campus, we were, quite surprisingly, not informed of this request for information about development ideas. We learned about the RFI because some student had stumbled on an article in a Tampa Bay area media source and brought it to our attention. So not only were we not consulted, we weren't even informed after the fact. We found out by accident.

AH: Right. So immediately, I mean, there are—I think you have been instrumental in sort of leading an effort and being vocal about pushing back on this idea. I think a lot of people thought, They want to put a stadium there, or something. USF has since announced they have interest in putting a stadium there, but they didn't say what they're interested in putting there. But you know, if they weren't interested in putting something there, they probably wouldn't be asking for this information, right?

DL: Yeah. I mean, I'm not sure what their underlying motivations are, and I don't know if they know what their underlying motivations are now that two of the principal actors are gone, and that would be David Lechner and former President Currall, who is still at USF, but not in a president's role anymore. You know, the idea behind a request for information is that the developers would inform USF on their, the developer's idea, for what might go there.

AH: Right.

DL: So I mean, I'm not even sure if they had any idea, they being upper USF administration, had any ideas about what might go there, you know.

AH: Right.

DL: Asked them, and again, the central figures are now not even in those roles anymore.

AH: Right.

DL: And the person who's now in charge, I think, temporarily, is the provost, and the provost also had no idea about the RFI before it went out.

AH: Wow.

DL: So no one, in charge of anything now, had any clue about the RFI. They, yet were responding to it.

AH: Right. And still, still responding to it. Well, you know, and who knows? I mean, best case scenario, right, that this thing just kind of goes away with the players who sort of initiated it, but on the other hand I can't think of anything that would've brought more awareness to that piece of property. I knew about it quite well, and I won't go into detail, but from my years as a student and spending a lot of time around campus. So what's been really interesting is seeing the kind of snowball effect, so, you know, first it was some of your students, you know, have been very vocal and I've been just driving around and heard it on the radio, et cetera.

DL: Yeah, they get a ton of credit. I mean, we, myself and the Forest Preserve Advisory Board, have done, you know, a fair amount of work and done, I think, to the extent of our authority or influence, working with the in-channels in the university, you know, engaging with faculty unions, faculty senate, upper administration and that kind of thing. But in terms of, sort of, more outward facing awareness and activism, that the community at large would see, our graduate students really deserve a lot of credit. All the credit, really, for taking the time and the energy and the effort and setting aside other priorities in their lives to really be vocal champions of this land. So kudos to them, and thanks to them.

AH: Absolutely. So tell us a little bit more about those internal efforts. You just described some of those, I just wanted to see if you wanted to elaborate on those at all.

DL: Yeah. So you know, we wrote a letter to the president that was—I mean, just to sort of walk you through all the nuts and bolts, I drafted a letter and got commentary back from other members of the Forest Preserve Advisory Board. You know, just sort of the standard, here's a draft in [Microsoft] Word, give me your track changes edits on it, kind of thing. And so, through

the sort of group editing thing, we put a letter together that we sent to the president and copied the senior advisor president for financial operations, whatever David Lechner's role is called, I can't remember. [We] copied the provost as well, where we outlined the values of the preserve, which are numerous, you know, they include both the sort of inherent value for biodiversity and habitat preservation, but it also provides PR value for the university, so we can sort of boast our stewardship role that we play. And it has value for the direct mission of the university, the teaching and research, because it helps a lot of classes and grant funded, extramurally grant funded research activity. So it described those roles, it sort of emphasized some of the potential legal considerations, not that any of us are lawyers, but sort of our lay understanding of some of the potential legal difficulties of developing land that has Native American artifacts on it and has endangered species. So there are statutes that cover those sorts of things. Oh, and wetlands too, so there re sort of Clean Water Act stuff as well. And you know, the letter suggested a few other considerations that the university might take. Rather than developing it, you know, they could instead invest in it as, you know, double down on its value that it currently has as a teaching and research place and formalize that. You know, make it a field site, that sort of thing. A field station, rather. You know, and then we could join, like, networks of university field stations around the country.

So we wrote that letter, that prompted a meeting that we had, that the provost—so we never once talked to the president at all. Like he just didn't emerge to interact with us in any way. But the provost did arrange a meeting among the Forest Preserve Advisory Board, the provost himself, the dean of College of Arts and Sciences, since the Forest Preserve Advisory Board is made up of faculty from CAS departments. And then senior vice president Lechner or Lechner, I apologize if I'm mispronouncing his name. And we, so we met with him and another sort of, VP I think, level person was there, Kim Hill from university communications and marketing. And we explained everything that was in the letter verbally and they essentially replied with a polite, "Thank you for saying all that." And then it kind of went nowhere. They persisted in leaving the RFI out there to receive feedback, and they tried to use placating words like, "Look, this is only a request for information, all we're doing is gauging interest." And our response to that was that that's just frankly a bunch of bullshit, if I can use that term.

AH: You can.

DL: I mean, you know, I don't understand what the word "only" functions in the sentence, "We're only gauging interest." You're gauging interest because you're leaving on the table the possibility of destroying this resource and developing the land. So you know, don't try to fool me by using a placating tone of voice with words like, "only". So—oh, and our chair, our department chair was involved in that meeting as well. And then you know, I also met with the faculty advisory committee. I met on two occasions with the faculties—I'm sorry, not the faculty advisory committee, the faculty union. I met twice with the faculty senate. One or two of those times was with Vice President Lechner in attendance. You know, I guest presented in a sustainability class in the engineering department, and just the litany of email back and forth.

AH: Right.

DL: I don't know what the effect of all of that was. The RFI stayed out there, developers did respond to it. I've seen their development plans.

AH: Right. So yeah, what do you think of the development plans?

DL: They're all horrible. I mean, one of them doesn't propose development on the Forest Preserve, it proposes it on the golf course. When the USF upper administration put out the request for information, for development ideas, it lumped the Forest Preserve and the golf course, and I think even Riverfront Park, all into this generic catch-all, "northern property," category. The remit of the Forest Preserve Advisory Board and my own concern is the Forest Preserve itself, not the golf course or Riverfront Park. We recognize that the golf course, though not natural habitat, is green space that provides some buffer so that there's not, you know, parking lots and alleyways and apartment buildings and stadiums and whatever, immediately butting the west side of the Forest Preserve. So you know, it's a bit beyond my role to really be involved in conversations about development of the golf course, other than to say it would be my preference that it not be developed. But one of the—if I recall, it's been a month since I've looked at them, but if I recall one of the responses from developers was to not develop the Forest Preserve, just develop the golf course. Interestingly, another one of the responses to the RFI was from Hillsborough County, and this response was just to take over the land as conservation land. So I think the idea would be to fold it into their ELAPP program, which I can't remember exactly what that stands for. It's Environmental Land —

AH: Lands Acquisition and Protection Program. Right.

DL: So that would fulfill my, like, meta goal of preserving the land. It would potentially infringe on my, sort of, more immediate goal of keeping this space available as natural habitat for teaching and research, because if the county controlled it, you know, they could call the shots on—

AH: And really, it struck me just seeing that in the press, just like, isn't that, why can't that be USF's job? I don't understand why we have to pass it to the county to do the right thing, you know? So it was a little embarrassing almost, that at least if somebody had, you know, shame, they would be embarrassed because it's sort of, like, something that we should be considering anyway.

DL: And actually, mentioning the ELAPP does remind me of one thing. So one place where the graduate students outward facing activities and my internal, and the Forest Preserve Advisory Board's internal activities sort of overlap a little bit, kind of the grey area where we came together, was a conversation we had with an organization that holds conservation easements. So the graduate students, a graduate student representative from the Save the Forest Preserve Committee that the graduate students started, myself, and a lawyer, had a conversation just

discussing the principles behind conservation easements. So what that would be, is you don't transfer ownership, but you do cede, sort of land management and land development decision making authority to somebody who holds the conservation easement. And so there's an organization, probably more than one, that you can enter these agreements with. And private landowners will do it, because they get tax breaks on their land if they agree not to develop it. And the way to formalize your commitment to not developing it is to cede those rights to another party. So even though you own it, sort of, land use decision making authority goes into the hands of whoever holds the easement.

AH: Right.

DL: For a public entity like the Forest Preserve land, I'm not sure what the benefit is, because we're not a tax paying entity. And I'm not even sure who would have the authority to enter into that, because I don't think USF even owns the land.

AH: Okay.

DL: I think the ultimate owner is—aren't all state universities collectively owned in a sense by a corporation? Like an incorporated body, that state level.

AH: Yeah, I don't know. I'm not sure about that.

DL: I'm not sure who the actual owner of that land is, it's not my department. But I'm not even sure, even though we manage it through an informal agreement that a president made with some faculty members two decades ago. So that's sort of a wishy-washy arrangement. But I'm not even sure who owns it.

AH: Right. And most of those—Like, who owns campus? I mean, it's a plot of land that appears in the county's land surveyor map. There's a deed for it. Somebody holds it, I don't know who.

AH: Right. No, it's not the county. The county gave the land, most of it.

DL: They didn't give it to USF, right.

AH: Right, they gave it to the state of Florida. Yeah. So yeah, I don't know if it's the board of control, or, yeah, good question. You know, and most of the proposals just had hotels and restaurants and apartments, and it's like, we seem to have plenty of those around the campus to begin with, you know?

DL: Yeah. That's another thing, too, is, I mean, any development that destroys that land, you know, I think some of the developers thought that they were, you know, being sustainable by not developing a wetland, you know, because there's this magical aura about wetlands. Florida's got no shortage of wetlands, not that I want them to be developed, but, you know, the real



endangered habitat out there is the uplands because they're sandhill scrub uplands and there's such little of it left. So any loss of that, I think would be bad. But to add insult to injury is the point you just made, there's very little of these development plans that serve any function for the university.

AH: At all.

DL: It's like, do we really need another, like, you know, strip mall with a convenience store, a couple carryout restaurants, a laundromat, and, like, a parking lot that's four times the size of the building itself.

AH: Right.

DL: You know, crappy weeds growing up between the cracks. I can drive down 56<sup>th</sup> and get plenty of that, I mean.

AH: Exactly. There's plenty of sites that could be redeveloped, you know, that have fallen into disrepair. There's no reason why you need to pour all the concrete to just fill in that area.

DL: That's the thing, the university wants to explore ways to develop. I mean, we got whatever's going on over at University Mall, I don't know. There's plenty of land on campus proper, that's already not really being used for buildings, but it also doesn't have a lot of conservation status. If you wanted to lease land to make—the university decided that landlord and rent collector was part of its mission, which sounds like a terrible idea to me, but they decided that that was part of their public mission. They don't need to pursue that by destroying the Forest Preserve.

AH: Right. Well USF's involvement in real estate over the years has been a little dubious, to say the least. So student government recently came out of the woodwork as well and they've come to fully support and everything, so that's another great layer of, kind of, support and activism that really adds more weight and hopefully gets more students involved.

DL: I should say, along those lines, that beyond the Forest Preserve Advisory Board, we have two bodies now with formal resolutions against development. One success that our internal machinations had was to get the faculty senate to pass a resolution in favor of preserving the land as is. And then also the student government is doing the same.

AH: Right, so that's great. So I guess the question is, I mean, what now? I think you've done everything that you can, and I think the university, to some extent, must feel like they've stepped in it.

DL: So the university—after, like, the last time I had any direct interaction with the upper administration, I guess it might have been one of the faculty senate meetings I attended. I'm not a member of the faculty senate so I was invited to attend to talk about the Forest Preserve,

because the Forest Preserve was on their agenda for the meeting. The last time I had an interaction with the upper administration, I think, probably, was at a faculty senate meeting that I was invited to attend that they were invited to attend as well. The communication I got from Kim Hill was that they're going ahead with leaving the RFI out there, and that once all of the responses were in, they assured us that the faculty, this was very nebulously stated, would be involved in evaluating these development plans.

And then I didn't hear much more until I got an email from the upper administration within my college, the College of Arts and Sciences administration, saying that they had been tasked by the provost, who had been tasked by the not-yet-resigned president, to put together a—so this is like this cascade of delegation of responsibility, with putting together a committee to evaluate. I mean, we already have a Forest Preserve Advisory Board, but they want to put together an advisory board to evaluate these development plans, and would I be interested in being considered for it. And if so, could I submit a bio blurb about myself and my CV. So I said yes, I'd be interested in serving on this, here's my bio blurb and here's my CV. So I don't know what happened, I mean, that's where we are right now. I don't know who the president, before he resigned, told the provost to then reach out to. I don't know if the provost reached out to lots of different academic units, or just the College of Arts and Sciences, or what. Provost is now the acting president as far as I know, so. I don't know if a committee is ever going to be put together, or if a committee has been put together and I didn't get selected for it, or if they're just going to bail on the whole thing all together. I mean, I guess they have some obligation, maybe they don't, to at least say at a minimum, to say at least, "Thanks, but no thanks," to the developers. I mean, I don't want any development to go on, but I recognize that those entities are acting in good faith to this RFI, devoted their staff time to putting together plans and, you know, my wife used to work for a couple architecture firms, I mean, I know, probably, these people put in a fair amount of effort to respond to this thing, so.

AH: Yeah, so while you know, right, but it may just die with a whimper and they say, "Thanks, but no thanks." It's hard—

DL: Yeah. I mean, I would rather not have to be on a committee, like I don't want to—I have grad students to advise, I've got research to do. I've got proposals to write to bring money to USF. Like, serving on another committee in which my sole mission would be to kill the *raison d'être* of the committee, that just sounds like a waste of my time.

AH: Yeah, right. Well that was my first impression when I heard of the invitation to be on the committee at all, was to say what, to say no? I mean, yeah, how many ways, you know, could you just replace me with a "No", how about that? Anyhow, so is there anything that we haven't covered about this whole kerfuffle?

DL: I guess—

AH: Not to minimize the thing, but—

DL: No, I think we've covered, like, everything that's sort of off the top of my head. I think if I were to double down on any point that's been made, is your point that it's certainly really raised the profile, in a community at large, of the Forest Preserve, and I would just like to reiterate both my gratitude and the degree to which I'm impressed by the work my graduate students did. You know, they worked hard, they're very creative in the ways they reached out and who they reached out to and how they partnered with people outside the university while we were working through kind of internal channels and that's hard, time-consuming work, and first and often doesn't even know where to begin. Like, who do I talk to? Like which rich person do I go talk to, to like, get them to tell the university that it's a dumb idea? But, you know, they did all that stuff.

AH: Well, beyond that they were very influential, I mean, the way they talked. It's hard to argue with those non-off putting, or anything like that.

DL: The one other person who deserves credit is an undergrad who had, I can't remember his name, even off the top of my head, but he's the one who started the original petition. I don't know if you saw that. That shot up to like 20,000 signatures overnight and he had nothing to do with me and the Forest Preserve Advisory Committee. He had nothing to do with the graduate student group that started the Save the Forest Preserve foundation or organization. He just saw this terrible thing in the press and started the petition.

AH: And that was early on in this whole process, right? Because I remember that early, it was, like, boom, that was enough for a good press story. Just a petition alone.

DL: Oh, yeah. A lot of news outlets picked that up.

AH: Right. Yeah, that's great.

DL: I just, I guess, you know, what I would say to you, in terms of, if there is anything we haven't covered, is just to double down on being grateful for all the grassroots stuff students did, undergrad, grad alike, beyond, kind of the more formal, internal thoughts we tried to function through.

AH: Yeah, well if you look at an early aerial photograph of campus, kind of looking north, you've got this little isolated campus and this vast green forest behind it. And I just wish more people stood up for, you know, for that land before it all got gobbled up too, but.

DL: That's the other point I try to make, is that this idea of compromise, like, yeah, we need to protect nature, but we also need to, you know, use nature in a way that fuels human endeavor and the machinery of society. Okay. Well, that compromise has already played out. Like you said, there used to be a vast forest north of campus, and it's gone except for this little bit. So if the compromise is, Okay, we'll set aside half for nature and half for development, okay. Twenty years later we look at the nature and we say, Let's compromise, let's take half of that for

development and half for preservation. And then twenty years go by and now it's a quarter of what it started, and we say, Let's compromise. And you keep compromising half of it away until there's nothing left. And my response to all that is, No, we draw the line in the sand now, we draw a line around the sandhill scrub, if I can butcher a pun, because the compromise you're asking for has already played out. You got what you wanted, it's the apartments along 42<sup>nd</sup>. I'm sorry if you don't like those, you were given that, you being all the people that would destroy natural habitat, were given ninety percent of it. You don't like the malls and apartments? Tough shit, you got way more than, you know, was left behind for the natural capital, that we now call the Forest Preserve.

AH: Well, I mean, twenty years ago, that Perkins's restaurant that just got torn down was brand new, brand new. You know, and now it just got torn down. We can redevelop those lots over and over again. We don't have to pave over a new one.

DL: Right, exactly.

AH: Well, you know, I want to thank you for talking with me today, it's actually really, I'm really glad that I waited a little while because it's a much more upbeat conversation than it would have been in April. It's cool that that works out that way sometimes.

DL: If you want the names of, like, some of the retired, old timer faculty that would maybe be able to fill you in on a little bit of backstory on sort of the deeper—they might not be able to speak to the current situation—

*End of Interview*