



Episode 55 "On Being a BI Pioneer Within an Organization"

with Sharilynn Wardrop, Protected Areas Ecologist with BC Parks

Sharilynn Wardrop returns to the podcast to share how she is using Behavioural Insights in a role and organization where BI is not the primary toolkit people reach for. We discuss challenges, successes, and strategies for weaving BI into projects in this context. We also reflect on the need to turn a BI lens onto BI itself to make it easy, attractive, social, and timely to use.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS. I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business and Society, or DIBS for short. Today we're calling DIBS on Sharilynn Wardrop.

Sharilynn is a Protected Areas Ecologist with BC Parks and she was formerly on a temporary assignment as a Knowledge Translation Strategist with the BC Behavioural Insights Group, which is where our paths crossed. And we had the wonderful opportunity to work together for about a year. And now that she is back with BC Parks, I've missed collaborating. So, I'm excited to have a little reunion today and hear what Sharilynn has been up to. So welcome back to the podcast, Sharilynn.

SHARILYNN WARDROP, GUEST: Thanks, Kirstin. I miss collaborating with you too. This is really fun.

APPELT: Yeah, it's nice to be back together.

WARDROP: It is. It's been almost as long back at Parks as it was that I was at BC BIG.

APPELT: Time flies. Well, so like we were just saying, last time you were here, you were wrapping up as a Knowledge Translation Strategist at BIG. So, can you fill us in a bit more on where you are now, and what is a Protected Areas Ecologist for those of us who don't know?

WARDROP: Yeah, I'm back in my role at BC Parks, like you said, as a Protected Areas Ecologist. And really that's just an ecologist that works in protected areas. And an ecologist is just someone who has an understanding of living things and how they interact and natural processes in the natural world.

And BC Parks itself is a provincial government agency that manages provincial parks. So, we manage over a thousand protected areas in BC that covers over 14% of the province. So, there's a lot to do. We have a team of us who work in Victoria just developing policies that relate to conservation in parks or building programs or working on provincial level partnerships, that sort of thing.

APPELT: Very neat. And so that does sound, I'm starting to hear inklings of how this could relate to behavioural insights when we're talking about how things work. And, you know, humans might be part of the equation. So

maybe we can get a little more granular and hear a little bit more about how you work and what you do. And maybe you can just set the scene for us about your work at BC Parks.

WARDROP: Yeah, absolutely. So, at BC Parks, we have a dual mandate and lots of people are probably familiar with the recreation mandate, but we're also an organization that protects a huge part of the province. And protecting land is also a really important part of how we respond to the environmental crises of today.

And, of course, I just want to recognize that all of that work we do is done with gratitude in the context of indigenous reconciliation and recognizing that the lands we are mandated to manage all overlap traditional territories of nations across what is now BC. So, there's a lot of forces that we're considering, and it's not uncommon for management actions that are best for one mandate to conflict with the other.

So, if we focus in on conservation, as you can imagine, we wouldn't really need a conservation program if it weren't for people. You know, it's people coming in parks and people love parks, which is wonderful. But that means that they sometimes come to parks in pretty high numbers in areas that are as valuable for wildlife as they are for people. And we know that human activities have a really big impact on natural processes outside of parks, and it's true within parks, too. I mean, so we have to manage the impacts of those activities and we need to be good stewards of the land that we manage.

And so I've noticed at my time at BC Parks, even before I came to BC BIG, in fact, noticing this was one of the reasons I wanted to come and spend some time at BC BIG, but I've noticed that a lot of the conservation challenges we work on have behavioural components, and so we commonly work on problems where we know that people understand and support the work that we do, but they don't behave in a way that aligns with that level of support.

We have research and surveys that tell us that people care about conservation and parks and they care about wildlife and they want to see these natural spaces thriving. But they don't always behave in a way that aligns with that. There's a clear intention-action gap.

So, for example, we know the public want to be safe from bears and that they don't want to see bears harmed, but they still often don't practice bear safe behaviours in campsites. So that's one big problem that we work on. And we also know from past research that people value the natural spaces in parks and the roles they play in conservation, but they still don't always stay on trails. And so we might have issues with trampling species at risk and that sort of thing.

APPELT: Yeah, those seem super relevant and I like how you brought that out as the intention-action gap and reminds me just of, you know, what we talk about with the System 1, System 2. And you know, most of us, we're hiking and were exhausted. Perhaps if we'd been going uphill a lot and like all of a sudden that shortcut looks so enticing and we often get on it.

But if we had had that moment of, hey, going into System 2 and saying like, you know, "There's a pro-con here, it's not just, oh, it's a shortcut on the trail and there's no downside". But, you know, we just don't get into that System 2 moment of thinking it through. It's just like you said, it's just the intention and action don't end up matching there.

WARDROP: No, absolutely. And maybe, maybe the trail's muddy. You know, you don't want to get your feet wet or, you know, maybe it's just a lot of work to put things away in your campground and you don't think the things you've left out are really going to matter. You know, it's not that people mean to create impacts. And so, if we understand that and find ways to make it easier, I think that we can make it better for everybody.

APPELT: Absolutely. So, it's interesting to hear about and what I have often thought about would be interesting to chat about with you is this idea that your position is similar to many people who are BI practitioners and enthusiasts, which is-- your role is not a role that has BI in the title or that is a quote unquote BI role. But it's very well suited to using BI because it's dealing with human behaviour. Does that seem like a fair description of your role to you or does that resonate with you at all?

WARDROP: Oh, yeah, definitely. I would say that it's there. You know, after spending more than a year immersed in at BC BIG, I have my behavioural lenses on and I can see now behavioural elements in all kinds of challenges we deal with. I'm seeing it all the time.

APPELT: And so, is that something where there's many folks in that position or are you more of a lone voice for BI? Or what's it like at BC Parks, is BI awareness high or low?

WARDROP: I would say awareness overall is quite low. There are definitely some people who are interested and you know, we have done some presentations and people know what it is and they are really supportive. I mean, there's a few people who are pretty familiar with it and have had experience and they've maybe even been to the BIG Difference conference before. But I don't think there's anyone who has had any targeted training in the field or has any real direct experience applying behavioural insights.

APPELT: So given that you're one of the, let's say, few folks who have more of a grounding in BI from your BC BIG experience, does that present challenges for figuring out how to incorporate BI into the work you do? And if so, what are some of those challenges?

WARDROP: Definitely. You know, when I went to BC BIG and then came back, I had really big hopes for how I could bring this new, new lens to our work at Parks. But there's a lot going on. I feel like people are really keen to apply behavioural insights, and I feel really supported when I talk about it. But things are happening fast and people are dealing with some pretty serious and real challenges.

I don't often get an opportunity to provide advocacy to think about human behaviour while we're working on solutions. I'm not always in the room or I'm hearing about something at a meeting, but work is happening fast and there's just not a lot of time. I sometimes feel like this work is like this train that's flying by me and it's already pulling different priorities and perspectives, and I find it really hard to get it to slow down enough for me to hitch my BI car to it, if that makes any sense.

APPELT: Totally. And to mix metaphors very messily, it also just reminded me of what we were saying about humans in the recreational, natural space, that this idea that, you know, if we were to sit down and ask people, would you like to use BI a lot of times they would say, of course, that sounds great. That would be very complementary.

But then in the moment, there's the rush to -- I don't want to say take a shortcut because that's not what it is. But just if we're using our trail metaphor, this urge to just do what works in the moment and often you don't have time because of situational pressures, budgets, deadlines to be able to take that BI lens and attach it on. So going back to your train metaphor, I totally understand the idea of, you know, everything is going so fast and how do you add BI in in a way that doesn't slow down the train but is able to make some kind of impact.

WARDROP: To just integrate, yeah. I noticed somebody at the BIG Difference conference during the BI work session asking, "How do you bring this in when we're also thinking about inclusion and accessibility and efficiencies and reconciliation and all those things that are super important?". And I realized that really

resonated with me. I think that's the thing, that people aren't experts in all of these things that are so important and they're learning about all the same time. And even if something comes in as a tool, that can be really helpful, it's just a lot of energy to figure out how to learn and bring it in. I understand that.

APPELT: Yeah. And it's kind of also, it's this idea of we're often telling people to make things "easy, attractive, social, timely" (EAST framework), but then not necessarily applying that to how we support people in doing behavioural insights. So, like what we're just describing is a situation where it's not easy, it may be attractive to use BI, but it's certainly not easy and timely to do so. So maybe that's a challenge for the field is how do we continue to create supports and processes where we can make BI easier and more social and timely to fit onto these running trains.

WARDROP: Absolutely. Yeah. I think we need to apply those principles to how we integrate into different areas of work.

APPELT: Absolutely. Well, I know that you've had, as well as challenges, some successes and starting to figure out how to use BI. So what are some successes you've experienced in using or sharing behavioural insights in BC Parks?

WARDROP: Yeah, it's definitely not that nothing is happening. There is a lot of interest and there's been some opportunities for sure. And like I said, I feel totally supported when I have an opportunity to talk about behavioural insights and where it might apply. And I do try to pop into conversations and just offer to provide some thoughts or advice connections.

I try to stay connected to the community, so that's one success, thanks to the BIG Difference Advisory Board that has allowed me to stay included in that work. So, I feel I still have some connection, which is wonderful. Probably the biggest success is a project that we're working on. It's our first attempt to apply behavioural insights to a conservation related problem. And so I can tell you about that project, if you like.

APPELT: Yes, please.

WARDROP: This one is based in Cathedral Provincial Park, which is in the southern part of the province, right along the U.S. border. And it's an alpine park, so it's way up in the mountains. But it's one of these few exceptions where it's really accessible to a lot of people.

So usually, those higher alpine environments are more accessible to the hardcore recreation enthusiasts. There's not a lot of people that go there, but there's a few places where you can get a lot of people in an environment that isn't used to hosting that many people. Partly because there's a shuttle that goes up and then there's a lodge, people can stay up there and quite a number of campsites. And so, there's a lot of people that go up there. But it's also a place that goats love.

So mountain goats, which you might think, great. I'd love to see some mountain goats, and it is great. They're wonderful and they're lovely. But they are wild animals and they're big. And it's not ideal when people are encountering goats on a regular basis.

What happens in these campgrounds, which is a little bit funny but also a little bit serious, is that people, if they don't use the facilities the way they're supposed to, either to go pee, to be honest, or to dump their dishwater or that sort of thing, they create something that lures the goats into the campsites. They leave behind minerals and salts and nutrients on the ground that are hard for the goats to find elsewhere. And because there's a lot of people, that's quite a good resource source.

And so, the goats are now in the campgrounds in the summer. Almost every day. Where the goats would normally be is in these safe environments, up on the mountain cliffs where they're safe from predators and where their natural foraging environment is. So that's not ideal.

And also, they're encountering people. So, there have been incidents both where folks have been harmed or people have felt threatened. And although goats aren't like a bear in terms of danger, there is an example of somebody being killed by a goat in this kind of situation in Washington. It is something we're worried about. You don't want goats to be injured and we don't want anyone to get hurt.

Our intention-action gap is that people need to use the facilities to dump their grey water, to go pee at night. But it's hard to do, especially in the middle of the night. You can imagine it's not that we think people don't care. We, in fact, from research, we know that they do care, that they know the rules and they care about goats and they want to do the right thing. But, I don't know, like when it's dark and you're in the mountains in the middle of the night, maybe you're not someone who goes to the mountains a lot. It's kind of scary. And maybe there's going to be a goat out there. You don't know. I mean, I understand why people wouldn't go.

We actually hired a graduate from the certificate program, a recent graduate who is working on some ideas for how we might use behavioural insights to make those behaviours a little bit easier for people. This project is in progress. I can't tell you for sure what's going to happen, but I think it's going to be a mix of quite a few different approaches.

APPELT: Yeah. Oh, that's such an interesting one. And like you said, it's just such a perfect example of System One. You're waking up at 2, 3 a.m. you're not going right into system two and thinking, what are the pros and cons of where I go to the bathroom at this time? It's just I got to go and it's dark. Yeah, it's such a good example, and it's a really interesting one.

We'll have to circle back later when the project is further along to hear more about it because I'm very curious about how it unravels and what BI tools get used. Well, beyond what I like to call the "human-goat interaction", I picture mythological human goats, but beyond this project, going forward, how do you hope to use BI in your work?

WARDROP: Well, one thing that I'd like to do after we finish this project is see if we can, well, first off develop some more projects. So, we're about to launch into a really big project looking at human-bear interaction. So that's one I think people are more familiar with and minimizing those in campgrounds for sure. But I'd also just like to see behavioural insights being incorporated at a higher level and to some of our programs.

We have a lot of things where we could include our thinking into our interpretive signage program. And I have been sharing some ideas from the research about areas where we might want to shift the language that we use on signs or think about it, at least as a recommendation, before people create signage in parks, we might be able to integrate it into elements of the day-use pass system to make it easier for people to get passes or council passes or maybe our registration system.

So, I think there's places where we could use it at a higher level and integrate the thinking as those programs are developed. And I really, my hope is that we'll at least consider the relevance of behavioural insights and just human behaviour and how people's brains work into more of the initiatives we develop.

APPELT: Absolutely. And I'm curious, so that's kind of the some of the specific ideas, but I'm also curious about how. So, what are some of the models that you think, you know, if we're going back to our metaphor of the

train and you're hoping to hook the BI car, or maybe we even want to get some BI passengers inside the train, what do you think would be some ways of whether it's BC Parks or just other organizations where there is lower initial BI awareness, are there ways you think that those organizations can integrate BI? Ways we can make it easy and social and timely and attractive to do that?

WARDROP: Yeah, I mean, that's a hard question. Every organization is different and every train is a different length and has different things going on it. You know, I'm thinking a lot about Michael Hallsworth and his manifesto on the field and he-- Dilip Soman at the conference this year brought this up as well. But the idea of thinking about behavioural insights as a lens that organizations need to bring in and build experience and that's really resonated with me.

I feel like we need to have this BI lens even more so than those individual experiments. Those are great and important, but having that lens on the work we do would be really helpful. And I think it aligns with our desire as an agency to be inclusive and consider the impacts of what we do on people and on nature. How exactly we integrate that is really tricky.

One thing I'd like to do is to sort of see more projects get off the ground. So even though those individual projects may not be, you know, the thing that will create a big shift, it gives people more experience with the concept. And so, I'd love to have a supplier list that we could draw from where we bring in experts to work with different people across organizations.

It isn't just me or few of us who can see where it can, how it can help people's work and that it can actually help your work. It can make it easier for you. If people are staying on trails more just because we've made it easier for them to do so, then we don't need to do things like compliance activities or, you know, put in more signs.

All these things that are expensive and time consuming and not the way we want to be managing in parks if we can avoid it. Beyond that, I'm not really sure. I think it's about exposure and it's about starting to find ways to weave it into programs and demonstrate that it's actually creating efficiencies and making things better for everybody.

APPELT: Absolutely. And your idea of the pre-qualified supplier list or a similar model to that just seems like it would be such a win-win because we have more and more folks who have BI skill sets and are looking for projects and then there's all these projects out there. And so maybe that's where we can start to make these matches where people are getting opportunities to apply BI and people with projects that have BI elements to help getting that expertise on board.

WARDROP: There's a lot of learning that happens from doing, I think, and, and we'll move forward when we start to do more.

APPELT: Yeah. Yeah. And this isn't quite where you were going with it, but that just made me think of when we have the capstone projects in the certificate and people are like, "Oh, but this project is complicated". I'm just like, "Every BI project is complicated". Like you said, you learn a lot by doing because they're all complicated. Humans are complicated.

WARDROP: They are. Yeah. I think that's why the BI lens is so important because people are complicated and it does take a lot of different tools to problem solve. BI is just one of them, but it can really bring in a new way of thinking and a new approach.

APPELT: Absolutely. And then just because people are complicated, even if it's not a randomized controlled trial, but we just have an eye to what we planned, did it actually work and have the intended impact or did it just mean that people interacted with goats in a different way or it had some other impact? So, the idea of socializing both the BI solution piece, but also, the data collection piece and what whatever way it is happening, I think is really important.

Well, it's been really interesting to get this little dive into how you're doing BI at BC Parks, but I know we're coming close to the end of our time, so I'll do our traditional question of whether you have a message for our BI practitioners in training.

WARDROP: Yeah. I just wanted to say that there really is a huge interest in behavioural insights expertise, and a real demand for the skills the students are developing. I mean, I just shared my own interest in building relationships with more people with that training.

And so, I'd say that for me, even though I'm not a graduate, but with sort of a similar experience of having some immersion in the field, it's really rewarding to be able to apply that work. But it can also be hard to find your own way to make an impact, and we were talking about that a little bit today. So, my advice is definitely to stay connected to the community because together we'll figure it out. I'm just excited to see the community build.

APPELT: I love that and I think that is a really important piece and something we're still, as a community, grappling with some of our ways of navigating connection in a post-pandemic and current pandemic, or wherever we are in the world. How do we build those connections and all continue to work together? But I am seeing more and more inroads into navigating that. So, I'm excited for what we can do all together, like you said. And any last thoughts, questions I should have asked and didn't? Anything else you wanted to raise?

WARDROP: I didn't have anything else, really, I wanted to raise but I just wanted to thank you for inviting me here again. You know, given that I'm in this really funny space where I'm just trying to bring these tools into a new space that has potential to benefit, but there's not a lot of success stories yet, I appreciate that you were interested in hearing this sort of in-progress journey. That's, you know, even for me at this point, it's hard to articulate, but I hope that somebody hears it and feels like, oh, yeah, I can relate to how that feels. And I think that at some point we'll be able to get together again and it'll feel a lot more mature where I am. So thanks so much for checking in.

APPELT: Yeah, well, thank you. I think, I mean, that was the whole, my reason for checking in. Beyond just the personal wanting to check in, but just the idea that I think so many of our certificate students and graduates and just other folks that we've connected with over time are in this position of being excited about BI and seeing all these opportunities, but then working through that, how do we actually use it in the various different ways it can be used? So, I think this episode will really resonate with folks.

So, thank you for taking the time, even though this isn't part of your normal job as it was with Knowledge Translation Strategist, I appreciate you taking the time and it's been so nice to reconnect and hear about what you're doing, and I'm eager to hear all the ways BC Parks uses BI with human-goats and human-bears and all the other interactions we can tackle.

WARDROP: There's so much potential.

APPELT: Thank you.

WARDROP: Yeah, thanks.

APPELT: And thanks to our listeners for joining another episode of Calling DIBS.
