

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #7

Phillip Schlies

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Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

To explore the topic of sustainability, the episodes will explore how each person being interviewed defines sustainability, how the success of sustainability initiatives are measured in their organization, the motivations to be sustainable, and how to have a positive impact in your career. The conversations also provide insights into topics such as, circular economy and recycling, innovation and technology in sustainability, as well as regulation and policy that are influencing this space.

On today's episode, our reporter Caroline Smith will be speaking with the founder of Sustain SC, Ethel Bunch. Ethel started the organization in 2021 to help South Carolina businesses meet their sustainability goals while also benefiting the economy, environment, and community. Tune in to hear about Ethel's journey with Sustain SC and her new venture, Global to Local, as she discusses how these initiatives are shaping the future of clean energy and sustainability. Let's get into it.

Script

Caroline Smith

Hi there, everyone, and welcome. My name is Caroline Smith. I'm your host. Ethel, would you like to introduce yourself?

Ethel Bunch

Sure. My name is Ethel bench. And I'm founder of Sustain SC. I'm also the CEO of Global to Local, which is my new LLC working in clean energy transition for the southeast

Caroline Smith

Most of my questions for you today are about your experience with Sustain SC, but first, can you tell us a little bit more about Global to Local?

Ethel Bunch

Sure, I have started a firm that we're really concentrated on creating the southeast as a global competitor in clean energy transition, that we're really looking at collective investment of the private sector and to some of these emerging innovations and technologies as it relates to clean energy. So diversifying risk, but also accelerating the transition that leverages federal incentives, and also understanding policy roadblocks and influencing business friendly policies for these investments to happen. I work with a lot of the private sector, you know, the companies that have big footprints in the southeast, and trying to, you know, start to accelerate clean energy transition, as well as opportunities for large investments and strong workforce opportunities.

Caroline Smith

That's really cool. Because I know that in, at least in my limited knowledge, clean energy, it seems so good, but then it's expensive to make these transitions. And that's like a limiting factor for a lot of companies. So you help them with this?

Ethel Bunch

Well, I think that the offtake expense is certainly going to be a factor. But I think when you have collective demand, so really understanding the aggregated demand for the end product, then cost starts to come down. But again, these are we're really looking at 5-10 years out, so things like we have solar, we have wind, we have some of these proven technologies, but what are some of those advanced technologies like hydrogen, that are kind of coming down the pipeline so to speak, so that we can be prepared. The southeast didn't get a hydrogen hub, but we still have a huge demand for hydrogen. So, and then we're looking at things like advanced nuclear, and other things that can really scale the clean energy transition. We're gonna have to have a very diversified portfolio to reach some of these Net Zero demands.

Caroline Smith

Right, right. Okay. Before meeting with you today, I did spend some time reading about Sustain SC- really cool company, super cool mission, and I'm so excited to talk to you more about it. Can you talk a little bit more about what led you to want to found your own South Carolina based sustainability organization?

Ethel Bunch

Sure, I am from South Carolina. Left when I was 14 years old, because I thought the grass was greener, everything was going to be bigger, better, faster. So I went off to boarding school, went off to college, lived out west. And then I came home when I was 25 and married my next door neighbor. I came back to the University, finished up college and got my MMC from the journalism school and have always had a passion for the outdoors. And look at South Carolina as

the mountains to the sea, and have the best of every world and having left and traveled a good bit, I realized what we have is pretty precious. And so I started this really as a consulting for a lot of the conservation groups and focusing in on bringing the private sector to the table as a funding source. So, I'm a fundraiser by trade. I was, you know, always the director of development and for multiple organizations coming along. And so, I always saw kind of that need for the private sector to be at the table. What really sparked Sustain SC was the large mitigation projects that were happening in the state, with Boeing, with Volvo, with SC Ports, where they were trying to avoid conflict and holding up permitting. So they brought the conservation groups in, and they were able to work through what could have been held up in a court room that accelerated manufacturing more planes, or dredging the port, or bringing Volvo to South Carolina, but at the same time, the mitigation projects were elevated to landscape-scale conservation projects. And that was the sweet spot for me. I was like, this just it's common sense, makes a lot of sense- good for the economy, making South Carolina a sophisticated place for manufacturing, but at the same time conserving the valuable resources that also drive our economy, right, forestry and Ag. Started it as a pilot in Charleston, it was an easy place to start it because of sea level rise and flooding was happening down there, so it was not a polarizing conversation. And so that was about a decade ago now, and then just saw a real need for a statewide focus, and what started happening in that period of time and what you're learning about is through the Darla Moore School and looking at the business argument or case is all the companies started really stepping up and saying you know what, we can't wait on government, we're the ones that are gonna have to lead, and you know, certainly the right thing to do but also- their consumers. Their employees, their shareholders were the ones that were putting some of that pressure on. And that's when the sweet spot happened for me in my career. It was being driven by the private sector, it was becoming an economic development conversation. Dollars and cents create common sense. Instead of, you know, it was the carrot, not the stick, right, and that works well in the southeast. That's where Sustain SC became super relevant.

Caroline Smith

A thing that you've been coming back to, something that I remember reading on Sustain SC's website, which is this combination of being conservation minded, but also commerce driven. And this is something that we talk about often in the class that I'm in, which is that a lot of people seem to think that these two are mutually exclusive, and coexisting would be really difficult. Clearly, you- you believe that these two things can coexist. What do you say to people who would disagree about that?

Ethel Bunch

Yeah, and know this, none of this is perfect. I mean, I'm not Pollyanna with rose colored glasses. I've been through a lot to get this organization started. So, I would argue, quite frankly, I'd argue that South Carolina is unique in this space, so this isn't going to speak to a broader, even regional, approach. I think currently, we have a governor who is very invested in conservation. I think everybody in South Carolina is you know, whether you're- I always say this- hunting and fishing and loving every minute of it, whether you're in forestry or Ag, what really drives the economy of South Carolina tourism and quality of life. I mean, I think that we're unique in that

we have the beaches, we have the mountains, we love our outdoors, we rely on our outdoors for economic development. We have a governor right now who is highly committed to conservation. I think that makes us unique. And I think it positions us to be able to talk about both, and last year, you had \$10.3 billion dollars of investment and the EV sector. And that's the largest investment in history, you know, so that, again, speaks to this, these emerging technologies, these innovations. You've got a big footprint here. You know, we've got the automotive cluster, the aerospace cluster, we're the largest tire producer in the country. You know, we've got this big manufacturing footprint. And so, you had the Industrial Revolution, now we're seeing the sustainable revolution. So, let's capitalize on some of this and reduce footprints, and at the same time, we haven't, we're not hitting that yet. But it's a strategy. So, when I would be questioned on commerce and conservation, is polarized. Why do you think- when we say we feel like South Carolina is, if not the intersection, then the future of commerce and conservation, and I think we work really well across those boundaries. And we're very, very deliberate on partnerships, and very diverse stakeholder engagement across all sectors. We're not afraid of disruptive conversations. And they're important. One of our biggest examples of success in this space is our sustainability Leadership Initiative. It's a partnership with Furman University, and it's 25 fellows a year. And the classroom breaks, it's extremely deliberate: six to eight private sector industry, three to four conservation groups, three state agencies. And then we bring in forestry, Ag, an environmental engineer, environmental attorney, and the first day of class, no one knows what to do. Everyone's in their corner, very uncomfortable, totally out of their comfort zone. And by the end of the six sessions, over eight months, three days at a time, they are best friends, they are moving mountains together, we now have 75 fellows across the state, and you're seeing these boundaries start to come down. And a lot of that is understanding perspective, understanding the vernacular we use, maybe we're saying the same thing. Maybe we're trying to get to the same space. What started to really happen in those conversations was: We all need the resource, so how do we come together to protect that resource for the benefit of everything? And that could be new technologies that recycle, refresh, or a data center to conserving your most valuable wetlands or aquaphors. I mean, where are the precious sites we need to conserve? You see what I'm saying, it's not perfect. None of that. Do not think I'm saying this is perfect, but if we're not trying to come together around how do we find solutions to big problems, because we all have the same ultimate goal, then we're just going to continue to fight sometimes.

Caroline Smith

Right Like, these are the conversations you get to have because you're so multisector.

Ethel Bunch

Exactly. And I just believe, if you just say, oh, well, we're polarized and we believe- and the world is very polarized, right now. You know, but if that's where we're gonna stand and I stand here, and you stand here, and there's- there's very much a space for that. And I do believe in advocacy and spaces that are extremely important for that. But that's not what Sustained SC is here to do. It's, okay, how can we find solutions with everyone at the table? It's not easy. But it is a safe space. And we hope that we're an honest broker to be able to have these conversations.

Caroline Smith

Right, yeah. Because without these conversations and you'll, you'll never find, you'll ever find a way to make goals and then you'll never work together to get those goals to fruition. Something that I'd like to go back to that you've mentioned, is this partnership that you have with Furman University, which is super cool that you're using this to further educate leaders about sustainability and plan more results and more goals and facilitate even more conversations. So, a question that I have is that Furman University is a private university here in South Carolina. Do you think that private institutions have a different ability than public ones to join initiatives about sustainability?

Ethel Bunch

What I'm finding is, Furman is smaller. Okay, so whether it's private or public, Furman has the Shi Institute of Sustainability. Furman also had their own sustainability goals as a university- being net zero, being water positive, being zero waste to landfill. So, I think that probably as a private institution, they have more autonomy and ability to move. And also, being a smaller university helps in that and kind of getting everyone on the same page.

Caroline Smith

You think it's more the size of the university and the goals that are already in place?

Ethel Bunch

I think you need to set goals. Yeah, you have to set the goals, the goals need to come first. If you want the companies to hire from the university, if you want the companies to invest, I would like to see a company or companies come in to an investment for a sustainability institute at the University of South Carolina.

Caroline Smith

And this seems like something they might be at least trying to start to do, because you know, we have this minor in the business school for sustainability in business. So then a few think that, well, companies in Colombia and throughout the state will start to hire students who graduate from this program. And then now we've got, then we've got the loop going.

Ethel Bunch

Got that loop going. And then if we take it a step further, because I mean, I want a standalone institution, I mean, connected to The Moore School. But like, in order for these companies to truly start to invest, like financial aid and building out something like that the university is gonna have to have goals.

Caroline Smith

Yeah, I agree with you, we're going to have to have goals to achieve anything. And while we're on the topic of goals, another thing that Sustain SC does that I've seen on their website, is this partnership with EY, to draw up a roadmap of seven sustainability goals for South Carolina. Can you elaborate on why you believe this list is necessary, and what led you to write it up?

Ethel Bunch

Absolutely. The seven accelerators came out of a six-month study with EY around the sustainable development goals. So, those are the 17 goals that had been adopted by the United Nations, you know, the global goals. They're very data driven. We selected the SDGs that really relate most to our mission- so think clean water, life on land, industry, innovation and infrastructure, and dug into those goals and localized the data. And we had 44 Ambassadors, again, very cross-sector, come around each of the SDGs. After six months of localizing that data, assessing that data, and understanding why South Carolina was falling behind in certain areas, these were the accelerators that were developed out of those indicators and targets. We now have what we are calling our roadmap to Sustain SC, a very data based and instrument that also is easily communicated. Where sustainability can be squishy sometimes and gray, this is a very firm actionable strategy, a strategic plan that beneath each of these seven accelerators have very specific goals and indicators and KPIs that will allow us to follow a strategy and elevate the sustainability if it's not our ranking, because right now, we're 37th out of 50 states, but certainly start to elevate or kind of transition us forward towards the state's sustainability goals.

Caroline Smith

Right, so just an even clearer way to communicate, "This is what we need to do."

Ethel Bunch

Exactly. And so, it's a much clearer way to say, "This is what we need to do as a state." And it also allows us to be very clear in, if it doesn't flow, these three, these seven accelerators, then we have to put it aside. So that we are very, very specific, very targeted, and we're taking all of our stakeholders towards those same goals.

Caroline Smith

This roadmap was drawn up in 2022. And now that we're early in 2024, are there any accomplishments of these goals that you're especially proud of?

Ethel Bunch

We started it in 2022, but we launched it just this October and our symposium. But, we have had an invest like for the Land and Water Action platform. We gave a million dollars to help protect Waites Island, which is the last privately held barrier island in the state. And we've just launched a \$4 million campaign to continue to help protect that island. We have gone into an MOU with the South County Office of Resilience as part of the Land and Water Action platform, really bringing the private sector to their table to establish new investments in flood resiliency. We are getting ready to launch a litter study under circularity, so we really understand the litter in this state and you can really develop that whole economic analysis of trash is now treasure, right? So this end product that we're finding, whether it's plastic, or whatever that is, we bring back into the circular system as part of a economic development strategy. So that is something we're getting ready to launch. We just completed Orbitz sustainability reports for all of our major corporate members, which- this is really cool. I just got back from Germany a few months ago.

And so I was able to take reports to BMW and Mercedes and ZF and Sheffler and show them quantitatively, what are they reporting out to whether it be the SDG, CDP, Science Based Targets Initiative, and how our accelerators are going to really take those global goals down to the local level, we have the indicators that align with their needs. And so we can quantitatively drive from South Carolina back to headquarters, and drive these initiatives to help them get to their goals. And so those studies, those corporate sustainability reports will be published annually each year showcasing what we've accomplished, and how what we've accomplished is pushing these companies forward with their own global goals. So that's been really, really cool to see little South Carolina sitting in the headquarters of Mercedes with the chief sustainability officer and showing what we're doing. That's cool.

Caroline Smith

That is. Would you like to make one last statement on why it should be important to everybody else too?

Ethel Bunch

Yeah, I think, you know, I've always believed in the theory, we should leave the world in a better place than we found it. But to me, I think that it's certainly a legacy we need to leave to the next generation. But I think we're in a fortunate time where we really can make an economic case out of sustainability, while the reasons for it are to protect our environment, protect drinking water, and mitigating flood risk, and heat hazards and all of the things that we've created along the way, we're trying to dial this back in and turn it around. There's never been a better time to argue the economic value of doing this as well.

Caroline Smith

There's definitely no time like the present to take environmental action, to care for our climate, to protect our resources, especially here in our beautiful state of South Carolina. Ethel, thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for all your insight on sustainability. And thank you for all your hard work with Sustain SC.

Outro

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Ethel and learning more about Sustain SC. Their efforts in blending conservation with commerce are helping South Carolina become a leader in sustainable practices and economic growth. However, that's all the time we have today. Tune in next episode to hear our guest from the GEL Group discuss how their company addresses multiple sustainability concerns of businesses. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

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