

# Reading *The Lorax* in an Age of Polarization

[00:00:00]

**Jon Christensen:** Welcome to *Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet*, the podcast of UCLA's Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies. I'm Jon Christensen, the director of LENS, here with our producer, Liv Slaby, LENS co-founder and UCLA English professor Ursula Heise, and our guest today, Jack Bobo, executive director of the UCLA Rothman Family Institute for Food Studies.

Jack works at the intersection of science, policy, and storytelling, helping leaders see that better communication is not just a skill, it's a strategy for systems change. He leads the institute's efforts to improve food systems communication, reduce polarization, and build a more sustainable, nutritious, and equitable food future, and advises governments, multinationals, and NGOs.

He previously served as senior advisor for global food policy at the US State Department, and is the author of *Why Smart People Make Bad Food Choices*, in [00:01:00] which he explores how psychology and culture shape our food choices and what it takes to change them. I gleaned these highlights of his biography from LinkedIn, where there's much more to learn about Jack Bobo's work, but what struck my attention was the headline, "The stories we tell determine the future we get," and the hashtags #FoodSystems, #Leadership, #Communication, #NarrativeChange, #FutureOfFood, #UCLA. Clearly we have a lot to talk about, a lot of similar interests, and it's going to be fun because we're going to focus our conversation on a children's book nearly everyone has surely read, *The Lorax*, a book that Jack, you say is among the most celebrated works of environmental communication ever produced, but you also say that it fails to communicate across the fault lines that matter most.

We're going to [00:02:00] get into why the success and failure of *The Lorax* are the same thing, as you say. But first, for listeners who have not read the book in a minute, uh, like me, I did before this, but I had to go back to it from, when I was, reading it to my kids, who are now adults or perhaps folks who are among those rare birds who have never read it, could you give us a high-level recap of the story of *The Lorax*?

**Jack Bobo:** Sure, and thank you for that introduction. Probably a little bit too kind. So I'd been developing this framework for a little while, and I was really surprised when I went back to read "The Lorax" at how much of the work that I'm doing came through in that book. And so I reread it just as you did, and the, the story is about a character who-- called the Once-ler, who in a sense represents capitalism, and he comes up with this new idea for...

and starts cutting down trees in order to make these new products. And when he does, he's visited by the Lorax, [00:03:00] and the Lorax is a character who tells us, "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for they have no tongues." And because of that, he really represents this particular perspective on the world, that the natural world has personhood, that they have a right to be known but they really can't speak for themselves. But there's also this aspect of the environmental consequences of what happened.

So it's not just the characters in the forest, but that capitalism run amok leads to destruction of the forest. Things get cut down. There's, pollution of the water, there's pollution of the skies, and by the end of the story, all of the trees are gone. And what you end up with, though, is the character, a child who is hearing this story after the fact, is left with a little monument that says that looks at, unless.

And so that statue is unless there's somebody who cares enough to do something. And so it's a [00:04:00] story of environmental destruction i-in one sense, but it's a story of hope as well at the end, because all of us can do something in order to set the world right. And I think that's why so many people are inspired by it, because despite the things we see around us, we should still have hope.

**Ursula Heise:** So thanks for reminding us. I think for all of us, it's been a while since we had read The Lorax. You argue that there's sort of different audiences or coalitions, as you call them, that really make very different things of that basic plot line, that are reading a different story out of it.

Can you tell us a little bit about who these different audiences are and the different narratives that they identify in the book? And then also speaking as a literary scholar, I mean, it seems pretty normal for different readers to see different stories or to highlight [00:05:00] different dimensions of a narrative when they read.

What's important to you about the different stories that readers of The Lorax take away from it?

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. So I'll start just by describing sort of these three narratives that I see recur all the time in our conversations about food. And the first is what I call the innovation narrative, the people who believe that science solves problems, and that's represented by many academic researchers and government researchers and companies and others.

But there's also a sustainability narrative that says we need to reduce our impact on the planet, and that's reflected in many conservationists, environmentalists, and others who feel like we really need to slow down. And then there's a third coalition that I describe as sort of food sovereignty or food justice that are primarily concerned about power and control.

Who decides for me what I get to eat, and who controls the seeds and other things? And so these three stories represent different [00:06:00] coalitions, and people can be between two coalitions. They can have two different perspectives, but they're very strong, and we see this reflected in the book itself. And in a s-

**Ursula Heise:** So you transfer these narratives from food studies to environmental-

**Jack Bobo:** Yes

**Ursula Heise:** studies?

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah, because I often talk about that intersection. You know, 40% of all the land on Earth is currently devoted to agriculture. 15... 20, 30% of, , greenhouse gas emissions are either directly or indirectly related to agriculture and 70% of freshwater, the things that you all know and probably many of your listeners.

And so there's this, this tremendous intersection. And so when I read the book, you can map some of these characters. And of course, the Once-ler, in a sense, represents capitalism and that idea of, using technology to make the world better, and that's what he thinks he's doing at the beginning, by making his product available.

And The Lorax, in a sense, represents that food sovereignty and justice Because he's speaking for the trees. He's not really an environmentalist. [00:07:00] He's representing their interest, that you can't just cut down the trees because they have sort of personhood or they have their own worth.

It's not because you're destroying the environment for us. It's because you're impacting them directly. And then that environmental group looks at it and sees the destruction of the forest, and of course they're moved by that. But you can see a little bit of the distinction, though, because for the sovereignty community, they hear, "I speak for the trees," and they take it literally.

But for the environmental group, they hear, "I speak for the trees," and think, "Oh, isn't that a wonderful metaphor for the value of the environment?" And so they're seeing it from different perspectives. And when you get to the end, this is where I think it diverges, so, that somebody who comes from that innovation perspective could finish the book and say, "We could have done things differently.

We could have measured the impact on the environment. We could have cut down trees at a rate that allowed for the replenishment." And, they could see how to fix that system. And but from [00:08:00] the environmental perspective, it- it's different that, we really need to regulate industry, and we need to do different things.

It's not about more science. It's about controlling interests. And then from that sovereignty or justice perspective, It's not just that we need to control industry. It's that we need to recognize the rights of those that are impacted. And I would say, in many ways, this is a food sovereignty story that's, in a sense, been co-opted by these innovation and environmental perspectives because those are the ones we largely hear about.

And then in the film that was made recently, it got a lot of pushback from those sovereignty and environmental communities because they felt like it reflected that innovation, we can do science better perspective. And so you see some of that tension in the movie because the book ends with unless, but the movie says, "Unless we do these things."

And then once you say what you do, that's when people start to argue because they disagree about what comes next.

**Jon Christensen:** So [00:09:00] we're not gonna talk about the movie too much. No. I'm glad that you uh, that you brought that up, and just to kind of underline in the book, the sustainability and sovereign coalitions could both see themselves while not really seeing each other.

While the innovation coalition did not see itself, because the book ends with that open-ended unless, and the unless is not answered. It's left, to our

imagination. So the innovation coalition had to wait for the movie, But it was that, for them, that the answer was to embrace innovation and technology capital and the market as the answer to the unless

**Ursula Heise:** I guess my question was when I read your analysis so what's wrong with that?

So different people will do different things, but if science comes up with better ways of studying how we can farm trees sustainably, and the [00:10:00] sovereignty people militate for more participation of certain communities in determining, you know, what is done with trees, with forests and the environmentalists the, the sort of deep ecology environmentalists advocate for recognizing that we know actually very little about the functioning of trees and that they might have value and do have value that should be independent from our uses of it, why is that a problem?

So they all do good things. They might be different things, but why doesn't that unless open up a wide variety of different responses that might all be valid? In other words, in your argument it seems like the different readings by the different audiences, is a problem, and I'm not sure that I see why it is.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. No, and, and it's a great question. I don't think it would have been a problem 50 years ago. I think it is a problem today. The World Economic Forum identifies polarization as the fourth [00:11:00] greatest threat to society, and I would argue it's number one.

**Jon Christensen:** After what?

**Jack Bobo:** Uh, yeah, I think it's, it's climate change and a f- a few other things.

**Jon Christensen:** Oh, okay.

**Jack Bobo:** But I really think it's number one because it's the threat that undermines our ability to do anything else. Like, you can't solve big problems in this world if you can't come together. And so that's where I see the challenge today is that the different perspectives on what comes next leads to outrage in a way that it just didn't quite do it 30 or 40 years ago.

And I think some of this comes from, in the '80s information became more widely available. Our view of authority changed dramatically. We don't necessarily look to judges and academics and government for the answer in the

same way we did, which democratized data and information, but it also meant that, we argue more over what needs to be done.

You know- But couldn't

**Ursula Heise:** one ar-

**Jon Christensen:** Could it... Yeah. So th- the I, I think, another sign of that is that, over those same [00:12:00] years, the words the environment and climate change have become two of the most polarizing phrases in the American political lexicon, You Call what you do this kind of narrative landscape framework, a tool of analysis to identify these different, we might call them, audiences or, coalitions or discursive communities or whatever, and in The Lorax, they each see The Lorax as their story And while not seeing the other coalition's narrative, and I think that's where I see you're saying that's where the failure is. It's both the strength of the story that it resonates so powerfully within these different coalitions, but they don't talk to each other.

They don't understand each other. You call this a coalition ceiling, and to me I think, okay, it's kind of like a glass ceiling, right? That they don't see from inside their own boxes, but that [00:13:00] prevents them from communicating with each other and building a bigger coalition with each other when they may have many of the same goals or at least overlapping or compatible goals.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah, I think that's exactly right. That the challenge of not understanding each other is that you think everybody must agree on what we need to do, and then at the moment that, it comes to a decision about a regulation or a policy or other things, it's like people are from a different planet.

It's like why in the world would you suggest that? And then they often feel like there's a backroom deal or something else is going on, that they're captured by industry rather than, well, maybe they see the world in a different way, and if I understood how they see it, maybe I could communicate in a way that would actually resonate and they would get it.

And that's part of what my framework, it's, it's to help us to understand others and help us to communicate in ways that don't create that outrage. Because too often, there's a conversation and, you know, [00:14:00] I, I worked as director of global food and water policy for The Nature Conservancy and, you know, you might meet with industry and you leave the meeting thinking, "Wow, those guys were closed-minded.

They just could not see what needs to be done." And seldom did we walk away from the meeting thinking, "Wow, I really closed their minds. I did not present that in a way that made sense to them," and blaming ourselves for those failures. And so that's what the frameworks are supposed to do, is to give us the tools in order to have better conversations.

And that idea of a coalition ceiling is that however an organization describes itself and talks about the issues that matter defines how many people can sign on and how many people are on the outside. And so by shifting how we communicate, we increase the coalition ceiling and allow more people to come inside. But that also creates tension because then you're not using the language that your core cares about, and they may feel like you're kinda selling out.

And so those leadership has, you know, a bit of a challenge.

**Jon Christensen:** There's, there [00:15:00] are trade-offs- Yeah ... between messages or narratives that motivate and make your coalition passionate, and those that might, bring in a broader coalition to a bigger tent, as we sometimes say. I've had, folks I work with sometimes, confronting that challenge and saying, "Well, maybe it's not a priority right now for us to make a bigger tent."

**Ursula Heise:** Specifically, I was wondering how you think in terms of defining these three different audiences or coalitions, how you think about the rise of something like the environmental justice movement, which came well after The Lorax in the 1980s. And that was a movement that I think in your categorization would maybe fall under the sovereignty coalition, but also came out of studying data.

Who is most affected by the siting of hazardous industries and toxic waste disposal? So it [00:16:00] was about data, and it was about science. And similarly from about 2010 onward, you had, the sort of movement toward multi-species studies and multi-species justice so as to fill in what some people felt was an excessive emphasis on just human health in the environmental justice movement.

So hasn't the environmental movement done these things? And aren't there constantly movements to cross over the different coalitions that you outline?

**Jack Bobo:** There aren't fixed coalitions. It's a landscape, and people can sit between two coalitions. They move over time.

So the Rockefeller Foundation, started with the Green Revolution, and it sat completely in that innovation space. We will fix food insecurity through science. But if you map their movement over time, they've moved towards the center, and food as medicine and a lot of things they do really speak to some of the [00:17:00] broken aspects of our system and the lack of recognition of seeing people and communities.

And so It's not fixed, but I do think that understanding where somebody sits by sort of mapping their, you know, and so the environmental justice, , let's say that it sits on that fault line between justice and environment, that it may be based in data, they may feel like we could fix it with a better chemical, or could we fix it by taking power out of the hands of industry.

And so that theory of change is different depending on where you are, what tools are available to solve it. And an example, though, like the, the lines that connect these, this triangle and landscape, so between innovation and sustainability, they tend to argue over data metrics and evidence, and that leads to claims of greenwashing because they're focused on different things, doing things better or ultimately reducing actual overall emissions.

But between [00:18:00] innovation and sovereignty and justice, they're arguing over power and governance. And they're looking at different things in the system, and then it has more to do between sustainability and sovereignty over participation and, who's at the table and who has a chance to, set the agenda.

So it's a little different.

**Jon Christensen:** If We go back to the book itself, I mean, you've talked here about how the Innovation Coalition, really values science and metrics and numbers and arguments about numbers and productivity and things like that. And so they're not really in the book so much.

And I w- wanna note, The Lorax was published in 1971 the year after the first Earth Day and the year after the passage of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act during the really heyday of the modern environmental movement. And the discourse, both the very sparse concise, succinct, language of Dr.

[00:19:00] Seuss in the text, and the Lorax himself, as you pointed out, is that moral argument of of representation, of rights and of justice. And the other argument about sustainability, while it's in there too, it's really powerfully conveyed through the visuals, where you go from a very green, colorful world to a completely gray and brown and, a uniform sort of, fallen world.

Which I think a lot of people could relate to in 1971. I remember coming to Southern California to visit my grandparents then when I was a young child almost. You know, you could be in downtown Pasadena and you couldn't see the San Gabriel Mountains, for days on end.

It was because of smog, you know, that we were actually living in that world that the Lorax portrayed. How do you think the reception of the book has changed over time? You talked a little bit about how the landscape has changed, but what about [00:20:00] the reception of the book?

**Jack Bobo:** It's more allegorical today than it was, really relevant to everything that people saw, you know, every day when we had rivers catching fire back then. I think people would find it hard to imagine a river catching fire today. So I think they read it in a different way.

And, it was more aspirational then. It's more inspirational now, like we can do even better. And so I think some of those things have changed as well.

**Ursula Heise:** So one other question that came to me in reading your piece and how I would use the narrative landscape framework in my own research was about cultural difference.

I do work obviously on Anglophone environmental storytelling, but I also do a lot of work on various European countries, especially by Iberian Peninsula and Germany and I'm currently writing a piece about Latin American climate fiction. And so one thing that, [00:21:00] is very obvious is that when you have this sort of comparatist perspective, is that in some sense, the configuration of the American environmental movement is an anomaly on the international stage, in the sense that environmental justice was a term that was coined here because struggles for the conservation of nature and struggles for social justice were quite separate initially in the 1960s, as Robert Bullard and others started to point out.

They didn't really draw in communities of color or poor communities very much. In other countries, that's not true. I mean, in Latin America, the struggle for conservation of nature has always been associated with indigenous rights, with the rights of women, the rights of campesinos, the rights of favela dwellers in the cities, and so forth.

So to what extent are the coalitions that you outline specific to the environmentalist scene in North America, let's [00:22:00] say, including Canada also? To what extent do you think they're international?

**Jack Bobo:** So I think that the coalitions exist internationally. I think the emphasis, changes dramatically.

And, for the point that you said, you know, in Ecuador where, rivers or, and forests are getting, personhood is, just hard to imagine. I was actually speaking to a student, last week about this question, and, she wanted to advocate for some of these things within our constitutional process.

That's a tough hill to climb here in the US but it's very meaningful in other places. And in Europe, I would say that sustainability coalition is much more reflected in even governments and others, the Green Deal and in policy. But the coalitions are all still there. The farmers that were pushing back on the Green Deal felt like they weren't being represented in those decisions that were being made, and that it wasn't recognizing the role that they played.

You were outsourcing food production to other parts of the world. And, I think in the US and Canada, so parts of North [00:23:00] America, that innovation coalition is probably more deeply entrenched certainly at the government level. But then you see those coalitions, you know, within the university here.

So one of the really interesting projects I was just working on with a student who just graduated, Devin Clark, is for her capstone, we were looking at the bias of AI systems and using the framework as a way of understanding that. And so, we looked at six different AI models, and then we asked a question, "How do we solve food insecurity globally?"

And what you find is that the answers largely reflect that innovation and sustainability, but sovereignty and justice are just absent for the most part. But as soon as you-

**Jon Christensen:** Oh, wow,

that's interesting.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah, isn't it?

**Ursula Heise:** Yeah.

**Jack Bobo:** And then the different models did it in different ways.

**Jon Christensen:** Yeah.

**Jack Bobo:** Some emphasized innovation, some a little more sustainability.

But then if you said solve global food insecurity for people-" Immediately, governance started coming into it. And so very small prompt impacts-

**Jon Christensen:** It depends how you ask the question ...

**Jack Bobo:** depends on how you ask the question. It also [00:24:00] depends on your entire history of asking questions. So it will give you the type of answer that it does, has determined you are.

So if you sit in an innovation perspective and you say, four people, it will still give you an innovation answer. And if you sit in a sovereignty and justice world and all of your questions tell it that, it won't give you those other answers. And so part of the point of doing the research was that, we need to recognize how these models are inherently biased, but also that our own experience that we bring to it continues to bias it even when we tell it not to.

**Jon Christensen:** That's so interesting. I mean, because it it's like, oh, the narrative landscape framework, and the coalition ceilings apply to AI as well, and of course, AI has learned on all of human history and argument and, publishing, and so it's not that surprising, but it's really interesting.

But also that it, the tool that [00:25:00] I'm gonna hypothesize can help you get out of this and maybe get into a conversation to raise that coalition ceiling or, make a bigger tent, is how you ask questions. Yeah. Not just, like, the narratives that you tell, but how you get into conversation with others and thinking carefully about that language and how your assumptions or your narratives can be even built into the biases of your question, or that you can change that.

**Jack Bobo:** And that's where, paper's like this, you can just upload it into the AI and say, I wanna make sure that I understand other people's perspectives. Read this paper." And then it will begin to tell you how you're embedded in your own worldview, and, you can decide for yourself if that's helpful or, frustrating to hear what others think about it.

But, to your point about how these things are [00:26:00] trained, that's a big part of it, is that, it turns out that indigenous communities are not writing scientific papers about the environmental consequences of Western, societies.

**Jon Christensen:** And they're not represented-

**Jack Bobo:** Right

**Jon Christensen:** ... in the training, the literature that the AI- Exactly

is trained on.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. And there's also tends to be an academic bias, so the sustainability transformation community comes through more clearly depending on the types of conversations you're having, just because there's a lot of academic research, and researchers focus on problems. You know what I mean? That's what we do.

And so it also biases the kind of answers because, they're looking at literature of people who are identifying problems all the time.

**Jon Christensen:** It strikes me as i-interesting. I mean, another kind of fact I've heard, I don't know if these numbers are precise, but around 6% of philanthropic funding in the United States goes to the environment, and about 2% of that goes to environmental justice.

So you have these kinds of biases in representation in whose narratives matter, get distributed, are amplified [00:27:00] and all of that. And you found this I just wanna note and, we don't have to go into it, in too much depth unless you wanna say something about it, that the narrative landscape frameworks and these coalitions that you found in the reading of *The Lorax* were also in the scholarly literature on *The*

*Lorax*.

**Jack Bobo:** Right. Yeah. I didn't know, Ursula, if you had something you were gonna say earlier, though. You looked like you were, might be ready to jump in. I,

**Ursula Heise:** I do have a couple of other questions- Yeah ... but, um, but go ahead.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. Well, I think it's just briefly that, you know, I think people that come to that book come to it with a perspective, and they find what they're looking for.

And in academic circles that's an empty signifier, right?

**Jon Christensen:** Sometimes we do the same

thing, right?

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. All the time, you know. And that's one of the things that AI can help you do, is to remind it from time to time that I want you to give me... tell me the truth. That I don't want you to tell me what you think.

It's like, clearly I'm not as smart as you're telling me I am, so I need you to go back and level set here.

**Ursula Heise:** Yeah. I had another question just from the point of view of [00:28:00] literature, which was that I'm interested in the question of what you consider success and failure in environmental communication in general terms.

But specifically, I mean, when I think of texts, narratives that I would consider successful in environmental communication, I think of things like Silent Spring, Limits to Growth the film An Inconvenient Truth, some of Greta Thunberg's speeches in the 2010s. Why did you choose a children's book?

Coming from a literary scholar's perspective, it's a very specific genre with very specific conventions of storytelling.

**Jack Bobo:** Yeah. So for a couple reasons. One, I think the stakes are lower for a children's book. And so people can have a conversation about it in a way that they're, it doesn't produce the same outrage.

If I looked at An Inconvenient Truth, and it's a story that's based on heroes and villains. And within my framework when you name somebody as the villain of your story, you [00:29:00] automatically become the villain of their story, and now you've mobilized somebody to ensure that you fail. And so if I were to analyze those, it would come across as critical because the people who need to change are not the one who are mobilized by that story.

And you've actually deepened the moat between you, and to me, that's actually problematic. And so if I were working with those organizations, it would be do you want to speak truth to power, or do you want power to change what it does?" Because they're not necessarily the same thing. When somebody says, "I want to speak truth to power," they know they're gonna be ineffective, and then they say it anyway.

Whereas within my framework, it's like as soon as you know something won't land, we need to think about how to communicate it differently. And I'll just give you one example. I was working with an international NGO, and they often talk about our food system being unfair, so we sort of analyzed all their communications.

And of course it's unfair. There are people who are hungry, there are bad labor practices, animal welfare. But when they say that in a [00:30:00] room of 1,000 industry people, everybody becomes defensive because they expect to be blamed for that injustice, and that's often what will follow. On the other hand, if they stood there and said, "Look, our food system's done some amazing things, but it's left too many people behind," well, now the audience is thinking, "Wow, that's unfair."

We should probably do something about that." So y- that's an example. You give them the mindset of problem-solving or you close their minds to that. And that's that space that we're trying to work in, is to help people so it's like, "Oh, if I said it differently, I would actually accomplish my goals." I'm not trying to get them to believe what I believe, and there's no right or wrong place on our map, you know?

It's just understanding the map is what's important.

**Jon Christensen:** But I think also helping people think carefully and critically about how they can communicate across those differences and build a, if it makes sense in that [00:31:00] moment, build a broader coalition to achieve good outcomes for-

**Jack Bobo:** If that's what they want

**Jon Christensen:** for people and the planet, which I think we badly need. And so I'm, glad to have that. And I think "The Lorax" is, for the reasons that you've said, is a perfect, beautiful example. You can read it, I think, in about 20 minutes or maybe, maybe less-

**Jack Bobo:** Right

**Jon Christensen:** depending on how much time you spend on the artwork and revisiting how it affected you perhaps as a child. And so I think we have a good reading recommendation for today, "The Lorax," whether it's your first time or it's been a long time. And Jack Bobo, thank you for joining us. And thank you, Ursula, for joining us in this conversation today.

And as always, thanks to our producer, Liv Slaby, and to all of you for listening in.

**Liv Slaby:** This has been *Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet*, where we explore environmental art, activism, policy, and imagination in California and beyond. It's the podcast of the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, or LENS, at UCLA. Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll join us in our next story world.