

What are the environmental humanities good for?

Jon Christensen: [00:00:00] 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, and our guest today, LENS co-founder and UCLA English professor, Ursula K. Heise. Today we're here to celebrate you, Ursula, on the occasion of your election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

This is a really big deal. Congratulations.

Ursula Heise: Thank you.

Jon Christensen: For those who aren't familiar with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, what is it?

Ursula Heise: So the, American Academy is a national association that brings together researchers, public intellectuals, journalists, artists, writers across a lot of different areas of interest.

Many countries have associations a bit like this, although [00:01:00] some of them are more limited to academic researchers. The American Academy is quite, is quite inclusive.

Jon Christensen: And I, I'm thinking of the Royal Society in- Yeah ... in Britain, which I think that this academy was kind of modeled after or against, uh, r-

Ursula Heise: r- it- It was founded in 1780, so that's a plausible hypothesis.

And so what the American Academy wants to do is create dialogues between these people from very different spheres of work and influence, and also to set them collectively to work on shared problems. I attended an event on homelessness in Los Angeles just shortly after getting the notice about my election.

I know they're very interested in the development of artificial intelligence, climate resilience. I mean, these problems that cross a lot of different areas of work and research, and that need collaborative solutions. So, the American Academy organizes meetings and discussions between members [00:02:00]

from different walks of life, and I think that'll be a really fun part of being a member.

Jon Christensen: Well, I'm going to ask you that cheesy interview question that I happen to know you don't like but I'm going to ask it anyway. Ursula, how does it feel to be elected to the academy?

Ursula Heise: Surprising more than anything else, I think. You can't apply to the Academy, so somebody has to nominate you, and then it goes through some selection process into which I have absolutely no insight. I don't know who would make the determination as to whether somebody should be admitted or not, and what the criteria are.

When you get that email and then the, the letter inviting you to be a member, I mean, I think the reaction of a lot of people at first is, "Are you sure you have the right person and the right address? Weren't you planning to send this to somebody else?" But you know, that, that's sort of like, "Whoa I did not [00:03:00] expect this."

But it's of course, you know, a real pleasure and an honor to, uh, be elected a member.

Jon Christensen: It is a great honor, , and you were nominated to the Academy for the impact of your work in the field of environmental humanities, broadly speaking. I wanna dig into some of the specific areas of your work in that broad field: eco-criticism, your analysis of environmental literature and media across numerous languages and cultures around the world, and your efforts to broaden environmental justice with the concept of multi-species justice.

But let's start with environmental humanities first. Some of our listeners are likely immersed in the field too, but for many it may be a new concept. What do you say to someone who says Environmental humanities, what's that?

Ursula Heise: So environmental change is often presented, and environmental crises are presented as problems of science and [00:04:00] technology.

And, that is really sort of what environmental humanities wants to complicate. Often environmental crises and the perception of nature more generally have to do with culture. So with different languages, with different historical memories different just foundational assumptions about who should have power in a community and who shouldn't, what you should do or not do with, uh, specific types of animals.

For a lot of the world their perception of nature and environmental crisis is shaped as how they remember the colonial period and how nature was changed then, how communities were changed, how ecosystems were changed, what happened with land and with resources. So the environmental humanities look at environmental problems as social and cultural problems first and foremost, so questions of what we value and what we don't, and [00:05:00] how we express that.

So environmental humanists ask questions like, "What would need to change socially and culturally for us to create a sustainable world?" Or, "What do we know about cultural change? How it can be started, how it can be sustained? How can that knowledge be used to benefit humans and non-humans?" And that, um, comparative angle and the awareness that different cultures approach nature and environmental crisis in very different ways is I think really crucial to the environmental humanities.

And to me, it's also, ... it's a personal experience in some sense. I'm from Germany, and I, was born and raised in Germany and only came to the United States in grad school. And I remember being at first quite struck By some of the storytelling, some of the language that the American environmental movement uses, especially the, the emphasis on the attachment to place as a way of developing environmental [00:06:00] ethics.

That's not really emphasized in Germany very much.

Jon Christensen: Well, it's problematic in Germany.

Ursula Heise: It is, because the attachment to place was, of course, appropriated by the Nazis for nationalist purposes. So in Germany, the-

Jon Christensen: The kind of blood and soil ...

Ursula Heise: The blood and soil, exactly. So in Germany, the green movement has not adopted that kind of language.

So that was sort of my first jolt into realizing that what from a scientific perspective look like the same issues biologically, ecologically, climatologically, are actually perceived and experienced and, talked about in really different ways. , Also basic phrases or terms like nature, like sense of place, once you translate them to other languages, they are often don't have an exact equivalent or they have different connotations.

Jon Christensen: So the title of this podcast episode, "What Are the Environmental Humanities Good For?" is a question that people might [00:07:00] ask in bad faith or in good faith. Mm-hmm. How do you respond when it's asked in bad faith, and what's productive about asking it in good faith?

Ursula Heise: Well, let me start with the second part of the question.

I think when it's asked in good faith, it's actually a really useful question because it makes, humanists think about and talk about how humanities research works and how e- environmental humanities research can help us think and talk about environmental crises in, the public sphere. And environmental humanities is also part of something that's come to be called over the last couple of decades, public humanities, so an effort to really make humanities Expertise, which can often be quite ivory tower-ish and sort of focused on its own goals and purposes and conversations to make it useful to the public sphere.

And there are a lot of people in the humanities who are very, very interested in this and have pursued [00:08:00] that with great success. When somebody asks a question dismissively or in bad faith, I think it's a bit of a harder question to answer because it usually means that they're skeptical of humanity's work in general.

So I think you have to start there. Oh, what good is it to think about history? What good is it to think about the way in which nature is represented on TV or in journalism or in novels, right? I mean, there's a lot of people who, who don't immediately see the purpose of that. So I think you'd have to start There.

So that would require a longer conversation, and if there isn't time for that, um, I think I would just say, "Hey environmental humanities helps you think from the perspective of the mountain lion that's about to eat you." It makes us think about the actual experiences with nature that we have. And with somebody who was dismissive of the humanities I think that's where I would wanna start. What are their experiences with nature?

And to probe [00:09:00] them a little bit on the assumptions that they have in those.

Jon Christensen: And there, it was actually a very good book, written from the perspective of a mountain lion in Los Angeles.

Ursula Heise: Yes. And, one of the colleagues here in the Department of English, Claire McEachern, has written a wonderful piece for the Los Angeles

Review of Books about her experience of evacuating her home in Malibu in 2018, and having to do that with her daughter, with a cockatiel, with several dogs and horses, and having to stay at the Ventura Fairgrounds for several weeks, and then experiencing enormous generosity in terms of, what people brought to help the fire survivors- Yeah

make it through that really difficult period. Yeah. I'm happy to say that her house, in the end, did not burn down. Her husband stayed behind. And, it was not, annihilated as a lot of other houses were- Yeah ... at that time. So that's a good example of somebody who writes very thoughtfully about that experience, and even though she's not per [00:10:00] se an environmental humanist, it's immediately obvious how the way in which she reflects on that experience and narrativizes it, and also reflects on the issues that arise when you try to talk about a really traumatic experience like this, are really, really interesting and complicated.

Jon Christensen: She is a humanist- She is a humanist ... a humanities scholar- She ... an English professor, and, and- She's a

Ursula Heise: Shakespeare scholar ...

Jon Christensen: and the, and the essay, is very much also in some ways a historical essay because of her husband's deep family history, in the canyon- Yeah ... above Malibu.

Where did the environmental humanities come from? And are there any particular intellectual or disciplinary genealogies and influences on the field that people should know about?

Ursula Heise: Yeah. So the environmental humanities, I think, arose as a way of thinking and doing research sometime in the early 2000s.

At that time, there were [00:11:00] established subfields of environmental research in various of the humanities disciplines. So environmental philosophy had existed since the 1970s, environmental history since the 1980s, environmental literary and cultural criticism had emerged in the 1990s, and by the early 2000s, these fields were very established and it became clear that it would be really useful to have collaborations between the efforts in these different fields.

Australian humanists, I think, were a bit of a model for that because they had collaborated already for a long time. In Australia, that, that field is called

ecological humanities and people from philosophy, anthropology, history, and literary studies had often worked together really closely. So I think it was that moment where these subfields of research in different disciplines were established, and you could start to look across the fence and, start to collaborate with people in other fields.

I think there's also other forces [00:12:00] that pushed us in that direction. So in the US, questions of environmental justice that had started to be raised in the 1980s had gained a lot of importance in environmental discussions by the early 2000s. And many of them, many of the questions that are related to environmental justice involve several disciplines to study.

So if you wanna understand how environmental risks and environmental benefits are unevenly distributed, it is useful to draw on geography, on sociology, on gender studies, and studies of narrative, for example. Or for thinking about our relationship to other species and multi-species justice so thinking justice beyond just humans, it's really useful to have legal thinking and philosophy and anthropology.

So that's one Important influence. I think post-humanism was also really influential, has been influential in the field. And by that I mean the idea that humans are [00:13:00] not as central as some cultures make them out to be, that we're really part of ecological as well as social networks, and that humans are not as different from other species as people, especially in North America and Western Europe, tend to believe.

So, what we like to call questioning human exceptionalism. So I think that was also an important influence and strain of thought that got taken up in various ways. And then another one that also sort of comes from the 1990s is new materialisms, so the idea that inanimate materials shape our thoughts, actions, and our collective life in really crucial ways that we're often not that conscious of and that our bodies are deeply entangled with these materials, all the way from the foods we eat to, the substances that a city disposes of to, you know, the oil that we need to run our economy and so on and so forth.

And so new materialisms were interested in how [00:14:00] these materials might have a life of their own. And then of course the interest and comparison between different cultures that I've already mentioned, I think was also-

Jon Christensen: Yeah ...

Ursula Heise: quite influential.

Jon Christensen: Well, your book, "Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global," which was published in 2008, is arguably a work of eco-criticism.

One of those fields like environmental history in some cases, that was on its way to becoming part of this larger field of environmental humanities. Then with "Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species," your book published in-- eight years later in 2016 that one I think is pretty squarely and fully in the environmental humanities.

2016, as it happens, is also the year that we founded the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies here at UCLA, which came out of our work together on the [00:15:00] "Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities," which was published a year later. How did your work and your thinking change in the process of the environmental humanities becoming more of a well-known disciplinary field when you had come out of literary studies, eco-criticism, English department?

Ursula Heise: I think one of the main changes was that when I was writing "Sense of Place and Sense of Planet," there was a really lively discussion around the reinvention of cosmopolitanism. There was a lot of literature in anthropology, philosophy, and political science about how we might be able to redeem cosmopolitanism from its sort of white male privileged connotations in the early 20th century, and turn it into a conceptual tool for thinking about solidarity in the face of increasing environmental crisis.

And so I, thought about eco-cosmopolitanism, as I called it in that book at the [00:16:00] time. I didn't, when I wrote that book, yet think very deeply about environmental justice, and I would say that that's probably one of the major changes that after writing that book, I read David Schlosberg, his book on environmental justice as theory and practice.

And that was a really, really illuminating book, and then a lot of, work, by environmental activists as well as academics. Questions of justice did come up in thinking about the relationship between the local and the global, of course. Um, but I think that that was one of the main changes that really delved into the literature on environmental justice, and that then started to inflect the research that I was doing on endangered and extinct species and storytelling about them that, resulted in Imagining Extinction.

But one thing that's remained constant about pretty much all of my work is the interest in narrative. Narratology was sort of, [00:17:00] the first academic field

that I fell in love with in graduate school, and, that has stayed with me, sort of these questions of, who tells stories, why, in what contexts, using what genres and strategies for what audience?

Jon Christensen: And who do we focus on- Yeah ... as characters or-

Ursula Heise: Exactly ... actors? How do, how do you construct characters? How do you structure the plot? And, who's the audience? What effect do particular stories have on audiences? That sort of runs through all of my work. And that's kind of what I'm interested in as, one part of the environmental humanities is what stories get told.

And that's not just in literature. I mean, I'm also very interested in journalism and film, in documentary film and, graphic novels, video games. There's a lot of different media and different ways in which stories about the environment are constructed these days, and so it's a really, really fascinating field of research.

Jon Christensen: And it's part of what, led to the Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, [00:18:00] I, I think. Indeed, yes. And, and that, that, um, that field of narratology was also really burgeoning and exciting when you were in graduate school. You articulate one core claim of the environmental humanities in your book, *Imagining Extinction*.

You write that biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondarily issues of science. Have you ever gotten pushback on that? That, and, and what's the strongest argument you've heard against that claim that these are, you know, as much and maybe even more so cultural, issues and questions of what we value, stories we tell rather than, purely issues of science?

Ursula Heise: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I don't know that a lot of people push back on the basic contention that there are really important cultural [00:19:00] and social and economic dimensions to any environmental crisis you might choose to look at. And even hardcore scientists, I think have begun to see that over the last 15 years.

I remember, the climate scientist, Stephen Schneider, whom I got to know at Stanford, already in the 1990s and early 2000s had gotten very frustrated with the way in which the communication of science, climate science in his case in particular, was not actually catalyzing political change at the speed and at the scale that he had hoped for.

And so I think climate scientists in particular were beginning to say, "Okay, we need to look at culture and social structures more, and we need to sort of work with colleagues in the social sciences and the humanities to articulate that." I think what a lot of scientists are, skeptical of [00:20:00] is, and that I have heard a number of times, is that they say, "Well, but you bring in culture, then you make already complicated problems even more difficult to solve."

And there's a grain of truth to that. I mean, they're saying cultural change, oh my God- Yeah ... that's gonna take forever." And that's both true and not true. I mean, we've seen some cultural changes that, that happen quite quickly, and then others that take for a very, very long time. I mean, think about how long it took women to get the right to vote.

Think about how long it took gay marriage to be accepted and so on and so forth. And

Jon Christensen: then sometimes things happen slowly and then very fast.

Ursula Heise: Yeah. Yeah. Or think about the abolition movement, which, took , centuries to lead to emancipation.

Jon Christensen: Um- But maybe just the one that was quicker was like the kind of end of indoor smoking.

Ursula Heise: Yeah.

Jon Christensen: Which happened relatively quickly. Um- Relatively

Ursula Heise: quickly, yes.

Jon Christensen: Yeah. Yeah. That's,

Ursula Heise: that's true. Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, and I mean, gay friends have also commented to me on how for a long time, gay relationships, homosexuality were very hard to get socially accepted, and [00:21:00] then it flipped very quickly, around the turn of the millennium.

So it is true that cultural change is often hard to predict. It's not easy to manipulate. It often has unintended consequences. So I take that objection seriously that just pragmatically introducing considerations of culture does in a certain sense make things more complicated.

But hey, that's also democracy for you. I mean, if you don't just mandate certain changes from above but you really want to consult with a broad spectrum of people, things get more complicated and they get more conflictive often. That's democracy, but that, is a good thing, I think.

So I think that is the strongest reservation that sometimes people who are not in the humanities just rightly, I think, believe that, oh, we need faster solutions.

[00:22:00] And they see environmental humanities concerns as an obstacle on the way to fast fixes. But we've also seen that, to the extent that fast fixes have been attempted, they also have not always worked.

And in the interest of, cross-cultural understanding, cross-species understanding, and democratic decision-making, I think we cannot get around those complications.

Jon Christensen: It's interesting, I think that, it's really, as you mentioned about climate and climate communication, I, I think that the concerns about climate communication have actually driven a fair amount of interest of scientists in narratives, in storytelling, and which kinds of stories are effective or might be effective, and which-

Ursula Heise: Right

Jon Christensen: which are not. And then they sometimes turn to Lens or other scholars and say, "Help us solve our communications problem." Which in turn is complicated, because thinking in "Sense of Place and Sense of Planet," you write that [00:23:00] environmental novels mostly fail to accommodate both individual stories and planetary scale transformations like climate change.

Why do cultural representations of climate change struggle to bridge this gap, too? And what do you think are some solutions, and have there been any recent works that you think have accomplished it well?

Ursula Heise: It's not just climate change. I mean, biodiversity loss is another problem where it's not easy to tell good stories that go beyond one particular species that a community finds interesting or attractive, and to get to the larger panorama of lots of species, even a lot of species that we don't find particularly beautiful or attractive, going, extinct or at least becoming endangered.

But I do think that for both of those crises as well as others there's been an incredible outpouring of stories over the last two decades. Especially, with regard to climate [00:24:00] change, which there were many fewer climate

change films and books when I was writing this, "A Sense of Place and Sense of Planet" around 2005, 2006 than there are now.

And I think both fictional and non-fictional storytelling now has succeeded in bridging that gap. And, I will just point to a couple of them. Karen Tei Yamashita wrote a wonderful novel in 1990 that is set in Brazil, but then branches out to Japan, to the United States, and really works out from one particular place in the Amazon rainforest to describe global, environmental crisis.

Jon Christensen: Through the Arc of the Rainforest.

Ursula Heise: The Thai writer Pitchaya Sudbanthad has written Bangkok Wakes to Rain much more recently. So that deals with climate change in the capital of Thailand, but then through diasporic characters, Thai people who live around the world in different other cultures, then gets a global perspective on these changes.

[00:25:00] The Argentinian novelist Samanta Schweblin has published novels and short stories that I think very successfully deal with the experience of pollution. There's an Uruguayan writer, Fernanda Trías, who's, written a wonderful novel about exposure to strange environmental changes in a city that's unnamed in the novel but is clearly Montevideo.

Kim Stanley Robinson's Ministry for the Future, to pick an example from the United States, has tackled climate change from a very explicitly global perspective. And I think journalists have also done a good job about linking local stories with global scenarios.

So I'm thinking of something like Jeff Goodell's The Water Will Come, where he traveled around the world, yes, Miami and New York, but also Jakarta, Venice, Lagos, to see how cities are dealing with rising sea levels and what kind of urban planning they're doing. And many other cities that he deals with.

So there is now, I think, a really abundant literature [00:26:00] that is able to make that connection from the local to the global very successfully. So I think in that sense, that, my concern back then, has been, I think, addressed. And I think- Mm-hmm ... one thing that's striking when you look at a lot of these narratives is that quite a few fiction writers, but then also journalists draw on the narrative strategies and some of the themes of science fiction, which is a genre that's always dealt with global issues and with entire planets.

Jon Christensen: Or sometimes galactic.

Ursula Heise: Or sometimes galactic. Yeah. Galactic issues, exactly. And so it's interesting how everybody from James Hansen, the climate scientist, to Bill McKibben you know-

Jon Christensen: Naomi Oreskes ...

Ursula Heise: Naomi, Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway, exactly, how they how they use select themes and strategies from science fiction or like Naomi Oreskes and David Conway actually write a science fiction novella to talk about environmental crisis.

So that's one that's I think a really interesting strategy. And then another one [00:27:00] that us literary folks have been really interested in is the use of multiple protagonists. So quite a few writers use protagonists from very different linguistic, cultural national geographic backgrounds that all experience environmental crisis in their own way, and that sort of the multi-protagonist novel has become another I think really effective strategy for showing how environmental crisis is not just a matter of the Global South or the Global North or of particular countries.

Jon Christensen: So a careful listener may have noticed among those recommendations, that you are also a multilingual scholar, a comparative scholar. Your first language was German. You speak French fluently, English fluently obviously, Spanish fluently, some Portuguese, some Japanese, um-

Ursula Heise: Much less, yes

Jon Christensen: you've [00:28:00] collaborated on a volume about Vietnamese environmental literature. I'd like to, in that multilingual, multi, disciplinary spirit, I'd like to unpack the second half of the environmental humanities too. It's humanities, plural. That is a disciplinary plural. There are many branches of the humanities, as you alluded to earlier, as well as some of the adjacent social sciences such as anthropology.

Have there been any difficulties in bringing these different types of research together under one banner?

Ursula Heise: Yeah, there have been endless fights and conflicts between, say, historians and literary critics who look at-

Jon Christensen: Oh, do tell.

Ursula Heise: ... history in, in very different ways, and political scientists, look at things differently from anthropologists.

But there have also been very concerted attempts to really bring them together. Hannes Bergthaller, a German Americanist who actually teaches in Taiwan and, a number of collaborators from different disciplines wrote a very eloquent [00:29:00] manifesto about 10 years ago about how historians and literary critics might work together on environmental questions.

So there's certainly been disciplinary differences about what kind of archive you draw and how you deal with literature, say, as a very particular and arguably biased window on history more broadly understood. And how do you balance looking at representations versus looking at cultural practices in the field as anthropologists and sometimes sociologists do.

So, there are plenty of methodological differences and also differences of, theory, what kinds of theoretical paradigms you want to apply. But that's the stuff of intellectual discussion, so I'm not particularly worried about that. I

Jon Christensen: think- It makes the university interesting.

Ursula Heise: Exactly. It's what makes it fun. If you agree on everything, it gets boring very quickly.

Jon Christensen: Th-there is also, I think, a [00:30:00] gesture in the environmental humanities, not just to the varieties of disciplines, but also to the varieties of humanity. Often in the sciences, particularly in the environmental sciences, we hear humanity or the human treated as a generalization.

Climate change is human caused or anthropogenic, as they say. The environmental humanities challenge that assumption. Why is that important?

Ursula Heise: Yeah, I mean, for some of the reasons that I think we've touched upon, but that is one of the major points of disagreement often in discussions with scientists, where environmental crises are said to be caused by the human species or by humans.

And, humanists, This is the odd irony here, are actually post-humanist or anti-humanist in the sense that they don't believe as [00:31:00] firmly that we can talk about humans in general in that way, and that we want to emphasize both

cultural difference, what we talked about before, that different cultures actually think about nature very differently and use different types of language to talk about it language and storytelling that then in turn shapes perceptions and interactions with nature.

But also historically that, even Americans have not always thought that wilderness was the ideal kind of nature to preserve. The Puritans who arrived here thought of the nature that they encountered as the howling wilderness, as Cotton Mather said, and thought it had to be transformed had to be redeemed in some way.

And then since the 1980s, 1990s, there's been a real discussion about whether that notion of wilderness understood as nature untouched by humans is really that useful for the contemporary era. Those Are things that are very [00:32:00] culturally specific and that are also-- that have changed over time.

And so humanists actually tend not to talk about humans in general so much as about particular communities that are specifically located in place and in time, and whose knowledge is inflected by that. So that's, I think, one of the main points of friction, and it emerged with great force around that notion of the Anthropocene, which an ecologist, Eugene Stoermer, first used in the 1980s, and then it was published in 2000 and publicized by the Dutch scientist Paul Crutzen.

And from the humanities there's been, and also the social sciences, there's been a lot of pushback against that notion that we're currently in crisis because of what humans have done. Anthropologists and, science, technology, and society scholars like Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway have said, "Well, no, it's not the Anthropocene, and we should not [00:33:00] pin our current environmental crises, especially the climate crisis, on industrialization.

It really has to do with colonialism, so we should call it the Plantationocene." Or the sociologist Jason Moore has said, "Well, actually, mostly the current environmental crises go back to how we've structured our economy, and it's capitalism that is at the root of the problem, so we should call it the Capitalocene."

And all of them emphasize that calling it the Anthropocene understates just what groups cause which problems and who then suffers the consequences.

Jon Christensen: And where the responsibilities lie.

Ursula Heise: Exactly. Right. So it comes back to questions of environmental justice- Yeah ... and injustice, where, from that viewpoint you really-- it's becomes very hard to talk about the human in

general.

donna Haraway, the science, technology, and society scholar and feminist, has, also coined the almost unpronounceable Chthulucene. So there's a lot of cenes that we [00:34:00] could talk about.

Jon Christensen: Yes. More locally here, where we're sitting at UCLA, you've been reaching across the divide between the sciences and the humanities, and here at UCLA, it's actually a geographic divide.

South Campus is home to the sciences and engineering. North Campus is home to the humanities, arts, social sciences. You have a foot on both sides of the divide, with an appointment in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, as well as the English department. What's your advice for students eager to work across those divides, whether they come from the north or the south?

Ursula Heise: I think one of the most important things is listening carefully and trying to learn from people whose work is in fields that are not your most favorite ones. That's pretty hard to do, either because it's hard to understand people who speak [00:35:00] in a language that's not the language of the knowledge community that you're a part of or because you passionately disagree with some of the approaches that they're taking and some of the conclusions that they come to.

But it is also fun when you take it seriously. It is that constant process of learning that I think is one of the great pleasures and privileges of the university, and it does end up changing you over the long run. I mean, it ends up you asking questions a little bit differently and doing research differently.

It doesn't mean that you have to change your mind wholesale or adopt somebody else's point of view. But just listening to other people and trying to understand how they frame particular questions, I think is the most important move. Not just at the beginning, but also later on. I just find myself having to do this again and again and just trying to understand where somebody from engineering or somebody from law comes from and how they look at a particular problem like biodiversity loss.

Jon Christensen: It's one of the things I try to, teach my students [00:36:00] that communication starts with listening.

Ursula Heise: Yes. I would endorse that.

Jon Christensen: I wanna circle back to your election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. What does that signal about the state of the environmental humanities or the status of the environmental humanities today?

And what do you hope to do with this honor?

Ursula Heise: I think it does mean that work in environmental humanities is being recognized now, in a way that it perhaps wasn't in the 1990s. So that's a really positive and encouraging sign. Having said that, I mean, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has a lot of really distinguished ecologists and biologists, among their number, and also a number of people who work in sociology and political science on environmental issues.

The number of environmental humanists is still pretty small, so, one hope is that we can talk about environmental issues more from the [00:37:00] viewpoint of the humanities cultural study, broadly understood. And one thing I also really look forward to is the networking. I mean, it is sort of casting the net a little bit wider than between different departments and disciplines and schools at UCLA, and at the university, but also including artists journalists and researchers, that are not necessarily affiliated with the academy.

So I think that'll be really fun to discuss issues with people who are really not at all from your own background, geographically institutionally or disciplinarily

Jon Christensen: Let's end with some recommendations for our listeners. What are three books, articles, or other media that you would recommend for someone new to the environmental humanities to get a sense of what the environmental humanities are good for, as well as the range and impact of the field?

Ursula Heise: [00:38:00] Yeah. I mean, if you just wanna get a sense of what the environmental humanities are, there's an article from about 10 years ago by three Swedish researchers, Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Åsberg, and Johan Hedrén, that is, I think, a really good introduction to what the environmental humanities are.

It's, I think, called "Four Problems and Four Directions for the Environmental Humanities." So that's if you wanna, from an academic viewpoint get into it, I think that's a really good start. I think, the Native American biologist and plant expert Robin Wall Kimmerer's "Braiding Sweetgrass" is a wonderful book that talks not only about her experience of working at the interface of traditional ecological knowledge and natural science but also at the interface of different types of storytelling.

So she delves very deeply into the history of Native Americans, in North America and how they have lived through the destruction [00:39:00] of their ecosystems, their communities, have lived through displacement and relocation. So she delves deeply into history and how then that history also becomes environmental history in that traditional ecological knowledge had to be dynamically adapted to very different environments.

And she talks about, storytelling about origins, comparatively. So it's really a wonderful book, and it's very accessible. She is not somebody who indulges in jargon. In terms of visual media a TV series that came out on Apple TV+ in 2023 called "Extrapolations."

And it is mostly about climate change, also a little bit about biodiversity loss. It's science fiction and, covers in its, I think, eight episodes, covers decades from starting in the 2030s to the 2080s with some overlapping characters and then also standalone stories. And I think it's an anthology type of TV [00:40:00] series that hasn't gotten quite the attention that it deserves.

It's A wonderfully different look at the scenarios that arise as climate change progresses over the decades. May I add a fourth one?

Jon Christensen: Oh, okay.

Ursula Heise: If you just wanna have fun, the video game Terra Nil is really fun, It's a little bit like Minecraft or Animal Crossing, where your task is to restore different ecosystems.

It's a lot of fun to play and not too difficult even if you're not an experienced video gamer.

Jon Christensen: Ursula, thank you for joining us in conversation today, and once again, congratulations.

Ursula Heise: Thank you for having me.

Jon Christensen: 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 [00:46:00] UCLA. Thank you for listening, and we hope you'll join us in our next story world.