

Story+World: What is LENS?

Liv Slaby: [00:00:00] Welcome to Story+World: Changing Stories for a Changing Planet, the podcast of UCLA's Laboratory for Environmental Narrative Strategies, or LENS for short. I'm Liv Slaby, Story+World's producer and a PhD student in the English department. I'm here with Jon Christensen, director of LENS and journalist teaching environmental communication at UCLA; Ursula K. Heise, LENS co-founder and UCLA English professor; Kat Hernandez, LENS lab member and PhD candidate in UCLA's Institute of the Environment and Sustainability; and Julia Awad, LENS lab member and undergraduate student studying English and environmental systems and society at UCLA. This episode marks the beginning of Story+World's new season, which will feature talks on environmental narratives and storytelling from a range of artists, writers, founders, and policymakers.

This event series at UCLA is in celebration of LENS's 10th [00:01:00] anniversary. So on the occasion of our decennial, we thought we'd reintroduce ourselves and reflect on the lab's origins, its current projects, and its future plans. So when someone asks you, "What is LENS?" what do you say? Ursula, do you wanna start?

Ursula Heise: Sure. I would say that it's a place that brings together people from different disciplines in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences that, work on environmental issues.

Liv Slaby: Jon?

Jon Christensen: You know, I, have a kind of a three-part answer to this, but I won't take too much time.

I said the first thing that we do is to study narratives and different narratives of different cultures, languages, histories. The second thing we do is we work with creators of environmental narratives and experiment with new ways of telling environmental stories, whether that's in film or video games or with novelists, and with journalists.

And then the third [00:02:00] thing that we do is to think strategically about environmental narratives, both for how we communicate the research that we do, in effective ways, but also how others in nonprofits or in government or even in businesses can think about, effective strategic environmental communications.

Liv Slaby: Julia?

Julia Awad: I like to describe LENS as a real community of scholars, creatives, scientists, writers, artists, and the like, who are really passionate about approaching environmental narratives from various histories as well as lived experiences.

Liv Slaby: Kat?

Kat Hernandez: Often it's other grad students who are asking me what Lens is, and I like to say that it's a group and a space that where all of us here understand that part of our understanding of the environment, how we define it, how we work at it, is in the way we tell it.

It's understanding that part of [00:03:00] the story is the study, and it also lets anyone who wants to be here to go beyond the boxes we kinda put in our scholarly spaces. Scientists are artists, artists can be scientists, and we experiment with that here

Liv Slaby: Ursula, what was missing at UCLA and in the relevant fields and disciplines more broadly that LENS was created to address?

Ursula Heise: Yeah, it's an interesting story. So LENS was the sequel to, a year-long seminar that was at the time funded by the Mellon Foundation. So, in the 2014, 2015 school year we brought together a lot of the people who are working on environmental humanities at UCLA, and then we invited colleagues from other schools and also other countries in some cases.

And everybody sort of brought in a draft of a presentation, then gave a-- when we discussed the paper, and that turned eventually into "The Rutledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities." It was really [00:04:00] fun. It was really interesting. Really brought together a lot of people who knew of each other at UCLA but, had not had the chance to really sit down and talk to each other.

And so once that seminar was over, a number of colleagues asked us, "Well, how do we continue this conversation in some form?" And so we thought about it for a while and, it was I think in the winter of 2015 that we came up with this idea of starting some kind of recognizable space with a name that could bring different, environmental humanities disciplines together from various schools and departments across the campus

Liv Slaby: How did you come up with the name, and why laboratory?

Ursula Heise: Yeah. We discussed that a lot, as you might imagine. I think it was a group of about 15 faculty who met in December of 2015, many of whom had participated in the seminar. And, we talked about what [00:05:00] to call this and how to continue conversations about humanities and the environment. And I was honestly a bit surprised that narrative turned out to be a central concept for a lot of people.

I mean, for me, it was obvious. I come out of the study of narrative in literary studies. But it turned out that, colleagues in geography at the time thought it was really important, too, for communicating their research to the public. So it was either people who were interested in narrative as an object of study or people who thought it was a really important vehicle for communicating with audiences beyond the university.

So that was how part of the name came into being. And then lab came out of a shared interest in experimentation, the idea that in a lab you just, you try out things, you study the results, and then you change things around to see if it comes out some other way, right? We also thought that, maybe it would be a good idea [00:06:00] to place LENS in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, so as to have sort of a beachhead for humanities in an institute that, was very interdisciplinary obviously, but was definitely dominated by the sciences.

Lab, we thought would be a good way of making what we do a little bit legible to our friends and colleagues in the sciences. And lab was also, it's also a word that is used by quite a few artists. Some artists use studio, but it is a commonly used term for artistic experimentation, so we thought it was a good crossover concept.

Jon Christensen: We have a lab, too.

Liv Slaby: And Jon, why is strategies in the name and not just narratives?

Jon Christensen: We had a, not a real fight, but a kind of struggle over that, , Ursula and I co-founded LENS with Alison Carruth, who is, now at Princeton and had floated the idea, what if [00:07:00] it could just be the laboratory for environmental narratives?

One, strategies adds the S to the acronym, so it works a little bit better. But you could probably do that just ending it with narratives as well if you wanted. But I

think strategy is a really important part of what we do and what we think about, and it kind of has a double meaning. So the first one is to think about narrative strategies.

What are the different kinds of narratives? What are the different kinds of genres, of characters, of focalizers, and all of the things that, you know, narratologists talk about and think about as what are the strategies that you use in your narratives that are really important for how they're received and understood and communicate and are some beautiful or, expressions.

But also for me, it's really important to think about strategies in terms of what are the outcomes and the impact that we're looking for? What is [00:08:00] our theory of change, and how do narratives and communication strategies play out, in achieving those, i-i-important outcomes and impacts?

We talk a lot out in the world in terms of, organizing and theories of change, you know, that organizing it is an important part of it, policy change is an important part of it, but there are also strategies for narrative change.

Liv Slaby: Both Jon and Ursula, what was the initial reaction from your colleagues in the humanities on the one hand, but also on the other hand, your colleagues in the sciences?

Ursula Heise: So I think in the humanities, people were pretty excited about it. I mean, everybody who had knew already about the Mellon seminar that we had had was aware that there was really varied and important research going on across a lot of different departments at UCLA, so that already existed. And I think there was a lot of excitement about [00:09:00] bringing that together.

And the dean of humanities at the time was really excited about this as one of the emergent areas that was transforming the humanities, along with things like medical humanities and food studies and so forth. So I think on that side, there was a lot of excitement. I think, on the side of the scientist colleagues I think a little bit of bemusement, bewilderment at first as to what is this.

I mean, the question of what are the environmental humanities and why would narrative be so important caused a little bit of questioning, but that's all that I think was really positive 'cause it generates curiosity, and you can then launch into a conversation about how cultural approaches to the environment and scientific approaches to the environment, where they converge and how they conflict.

Jon Christensen: I think that's exactly right, and I think, that the scientists were kind of like, "Huh?" And then got intrigued . I think once you explain that, [00:10:00] environmental crises and the environment itself and nature, broadly, are perceived and talked about differently in different cultures, different historical contexts, different languages, and that it's really important to understand that if we hope to understand how people think about the environment or climate change, for example.

And particularly if we think about trying to change things for the better, it's important to understand, those different ways that people tell stories about it, think about it, communicate about it. And They get that. And are intrigued by it. And then I think there was also the feeling that like, "Oh, here's some people that we can go to to help solve our communications problems, that we're not always effective communicators about our science or, our engineering, and maybe these folks can help us."

Liv Slaby: Let's each share An example of a project that you'd mention to a stranger that illustrates what is interesting to you about LENS, [00:11:00] and let's go the other way this time, so starting with Kat.

Kat Hernandez: One project I really liked was, last year we got to host now Dr. Elijah Catalan, who then was a PhD candidate here at UCLA, and he shared with us his, ROM hack video game project, Pokemon Revolution.

And this was a piece where he essentially took the world of an older pixelated Pokemon, I believe red and blue, but one of the, the ones a lot of us who grew up on that remembered fondly, and he used that to talk about environmental justice and liberation through an Afro futurist and, anarchist lens.

And I really like this project for the project itself. It was fun to interact with and play and to see what he'd done. But I also find this a great example of lens because Elijah, he is an expert in eDNA, in marine environments, and that very much informed his work. But this wasn't done for a CV, for his research exactly, for a [00:12:00] conference.

It was a way that he was telling a story about the environment as he had learned it, lived it, and was communicating to us beyond discipline. I think that speaks to a lot of discipline when we think about the environment. It just connected a lot of people and was very fun to play and very intriguing

Julia Awad: Something that Lens does really well, I think, is imagining environmental futures.

So I'd be very keen to talk to a stranger about Grand Theft Eco, which imagines Los Angeles in the year 2050 precisely because it is really grounded in real tensions that we encounter every day, such as green gentrification or issues of technological access. So the ways in which those dynamics sort of unfold and how the characters begin to reconcile with them act as really great points of reference for how we might do the same.

Jon Christensen: For the [00:13:00] last couple of years we've been working very closely with, American Community Media, which is a consortium of ethnic media around the country. And we've been working with a couple dozen journalists, and, media outlets in Los Angeles in Spanish and, in Chinese and Vietnamese and Korean, and telling stories from those different communities' perspectives about parks and what parks mean to people in urban settings.

We have a sample of those, on our, Lens magazine, website, and it's just beautiful to look at because, like, you see all these different languages immediately. The most obvious thing of, like, how do people talk about parks and the importance of them in their communities and in their lives, and the different ways that they you know, experience them in different languages.

And so it's just a really great [00:14:00] example of the importance of understanding those different experiences and the different ways people communicate. And also, there's a strategy behind it. This fall, Los Angeles, voters are gonna be asked to double the appropriation in the city for parks, which have been stagnant since the Great Recession in 2008.

It's been flatlining. And so that's an illustration of how lining up narrative and narrative change with also making important, policy changes, and eventually when, the funding is restored for parks, improving people's experiences of life in LA.

Ursula Heise: One project that I really enjoyed was a series of short documentaries and essays that LENS did in 2018 with a local PBS, TV station, KCET.

At the time, they were trying [00:15:00] to sort of innovate in their coverage of environmental issues. And so while they were doing sort of the visual television part, they asked us to create visual and textual content to put on their website to go along with with the episodes. And I remember the one that I worked on, was a short documentary, just like 11 minutes or so, called "Urban Ark: Los Angeles."

And it was really fun. It was about a particular species of parrot, that has found a home in the eastern parts, of Los Angeles and that is endangered in its original habitat in Mexico. And so it was just a really interesting story that on one hand, allowed us to work with a fabulous documentarian from the Department of Film and Television, Kirstie Guevara-Fla-Flanagan and with a number of graduate students in film as well as in English to film those birds and then to think more generally about the role of species that are not native to Southern [00:16:00] California, but that have found a home here and that are endangered where their original habitat was.

So how should we think about conversation in the city? And that's where we also brought in a biologist colleague. So that was just, a really fun and interesting experience, and it was also really interesting to get feedback from the team at KCET. So to get feedback about things that to us were obvious sort of in the academic context, where they said, "No, but you got to change this.

See, now, this is not a graduate seminar. Make this understandable to a general audience." So it was a really great inter-

Jon Christensen: You're telling- ...

Ursula Heise: great interaction ...

Jon Christensen: you're telling a story. Could you just-- I, have always found moving what the, woman from Mexico said about the parrots, it, you know- Yes

in, in Altadena, I think it was, in-

Ursula Heise: In Pasadena.

Jon Christensen: In Pasadena.

Ursula Heise: This was in Pasadena. Yeah, so we filmed the parrots mostly at a particular intersection in Pasadena. There's an apartment complex there with quite a few trees [00:17:00] around it. And so, around sunset every day, about 300 or 400 of these parrots came in and roosted for the night, making unbelievable noise.

And so it was a predictable place to find them and be able to film them. But we were also interested in how the people who lived in that apartment complex, perceived them. And so some people really didn't like them. They thought they were too noisy, and that they were pooping on their windshields.

That was really kind of not pleasant. Other people loved to have that sort of presence, around them. And, there was one, elderly couple who had themselves, immigrated from Mexico, and We sat down and chatted in Spanish about how these parrots also originally had come from Mexico.

And then, the older woman said, "Oh, they're like us. They've f- come here and found a home." And I just found that incredibly touching. So she made a connection [00:18:00] between human migrants and animal migrants. Now, yeah, look, it's not exactly the same story. People come of their own accord. The parrots were brought here and then escaped from captivity.

So it's in some ways a different story, but it is parallel in that you know, people of various species who can, for whatever reason, not survive in their original homes can find a home somewhere else.

Jon Christensen: And how did she say that in Spanish?

Ursula Heise: Se refugiaron como nosotros

Jon Christensen: They, have found refuge, like us ,

Liv Slaby: Jon, what is LENS's formal mission statement?

Jon Christensen: Well, I mean, following up on that, which I think while it might not be exact, is a beautiful metaphor and one way that narratives work to communicate in different ways.

I'm gonna read this so I get it right. Our formal mission statement is: The Laboratory for Environmental Narrative [00:19:00] Strategies, LENS, is an incubator for new research, teaching, and creative collaborations in storytelling, communications, and media that contribute to sustainability and environmental justice.

Environmental changes are perceived, understood, and experienced in divergent ways depending on different languages, social structures, cultural practices, knowledge systems, and historical memories. Our research often involves collaborating on media productions, exhibitions, communication campaigns, and convenings that enable scholars, researchers, practitioners, and students to investigate narrative strategies for engaging with the environment across differences and disciplines.

Liv Slaby: So I want to unpack each of those three sentences a bit. Julia and Kat, what does it mean that LENS is an incubator for new research, teaching, and creative collaborations? And what work has LENS enabled that is only possible in an [00:20:00] interdisciplinary setting?

Julia Awad: Two words stand out to me there, new and collaborations.

So LENS is not really interested in putting forth or regurgitating really traditional ways of thinking through environments. So I immediately think of utopian or dystopian narratives. I don't think LENS really subscribes to either. And so instead of that, LENS prioritizes new, diverse, and creative ways of thinking through environments.

I think of Kim Stanley Robinson's term optopia, which I think LENS resonates with. And in terms of collaborations, just to echo Ursula, I love Urban Ark Los Angeles that's my favorite documentary out of that partnership with KCET. I think just because it demonstrates that humans not only have to collaborate with one another across disciplines and levels of expertise, but also that we have to collaborate and [00:21:00] engage with other than humans as well.

Kat Hernandez: Yeah, I totally agree with that. And for thinking on those words in creative collaboration and teaching, it feels silly bringing out this example, but it's one I'm very grateful for, where because of LENS, we were able to host Dia de los Muertos last year, and I'm very grateful for it 'cause it started off as a passion project of mine that I pitched in the space, and through LENS support was actually able to happen.

We collaborated with groups of people like the Radical Imagination Coalition on, STEM campus, so the south campus, lots of different scientists like Elijah and others who wanted to be part of this to show their art. And, um, before I get further into collaborations with those who aren't familiar, Dia de los Muertos is a Mexican American, celebration of those who have passed.

It's a way of remembering and celebrating our lost loved ones. And for years before this event, I had thought about the idea [00:22:00] of who we remember, who we celebrate, of how we handle death, and where that aligns and doesn't align with the way we talk about death and extinction in the environmental spaces, and why that is and what does that mean for when we think about the future and the things we have lost or are bound to lose, how are we going to move forward and remember, and through that remembering and honoring, try to bring a better future.

And so that, like Elijah, had nothing to do with my dissertation, though it speaks to part of what I know, and through the collaboration of LENS, of other groups on campus reaching out to outside of UCLA community members, we were able to have this big celebration and people spoke, people shared their art, and I feel like LENS is great for having that because it doesn't need to fit in this idea of what can we catalog this as?

We are talking to each other as people, to environment, and seeing what new things we can create. And as far as teaching, Ursula [00:23:00] was teaching a class and we had her students, they were able to do a project around this, and it was great to see their own work and how they thought about their stories of the environment and death and what they want to remember of their home and their environment.

So that is something that's really near and dear to my heart, that event.

Liv Slaby: Yeah, it was such a pleasure to be able to support you on that event and also to host it in UCLA's Botanical Garden, which I think was like the ideal setting to contemplate different kinds of mourning and loss as well as celebration of different plants and environments across cultures.

Ursula Heise: It was also, that was one assignment that was really fun to grade. Yeah. 'Cause the students had to bring an object, or a photo of a place or a species that had either gone away or been radically changed. And so, they were really creative and then they wrote a short, a paper about it. It was just really, [00:24:00] really fun and interesting.

Liv Slaby: Ursula, can you share an example or two of how and why the same environmental phenomenon produced different stories across different cultures?

Ursula Heise: Yeah. Oh, there's so many of them. Let me start with something really simple, rain. So if you've been educated, you've grown up in sort of a Euro-American background, scientific background, rain is just part of the inanimate environment and, you know, it's a problem when there's not enough of it, , it's a problem when there's too much of it sometimes, and so forth.

For me it was really, illuminating to read, the work of Native American writers and, scholars who say, "Well, that's not how we look at rain. For us, rain is a person. And if there's a drought, that means that the rain is actually withholding its gifts to [00:25:00] humans because there's been some kind of mishap or shortfall in the ritual practices, and that has to be rectified."

So it's a completely different way of looking at the natural world, and I still have trouble, given my background, to think of rain as a person with whom you interact. It's, that's just really takes some mental acrobatics on my part. But that's that's a really different way of looking at something as simple as rain.

To pick a somewhat more complicated example, but one that is very, very widespread in different parts of the world, is conflicts over how particular animal species are perceived. So I'm thinking here particularly of the conflicts that came about as a result of different narratives when conservation organizations from the Global North, realized that there were a lot of species being endangered and on the brink of extinction, [00:26:00] and they went into, say, Sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America or certain parts of Asia and said, "Okay, so now we're gonna create a nature reserve here or a national park to protect these species And a lot of the local communities at the time were really upset about this.

They said, "Well, who are you to come in and tell us what to do with the land and to tell us we cannot go in and harvest certain plants anymore, we can't hunt certain animals anymore? Why is it your job to tell us who have lived here for centuries or even millennia to deal in that particular way with those species?"

And for many of these communities, it was actually sort of a repeat of colonial imposition. And so there were a lot of conflicts about that, especially between the 1960s and the 1990s. And particularly, if you think of, animals that are dangerous in a community, say Bengal tigers in India, they say, "Well, why do you wanna preserve tigers?

[00:27:00] Tigers kill people in our community. They're dangerous," right? So there's just very different memories and narratives associated with particular species and also with just the history of interactions between people from the Global North who come into communities in the Global South.

So those are two examples. I can give a third one if you want, which came, comes from my personal experience with German and American environmentalism. So when I first came to the United States as a graduate student, I was very surprised at how much American environmentalists at the time, this was in the '80s and '90s, emphasized that you had to develop a sense of place if you wanted to be an environmentalist.

To me, that sounded really weird 'cause the German Green Movement doesn't use that language, because in Germany that would be kind of perceived as right wing or even Nazi. So because of the, you know, historical memories of how

Nazis used attachments to the blood and soil, as it was called at the time as [00:28:00] a tool for nationalist politics and genocidal politics, frankly.

So I had to get used to that. And then I got interested in, well, why is there this difference? And it turns out that it has to do with very different histories. So those are just some really different examples, but all examples of how different cultures just come at environmental issues and languages and phenomena really differently.

Liv Slaby: Jon, can you tell us about who the audiences are for Lens' work? So whether that's its media productions, exhibitions, communication campaigns, or events, and also why it's important to communicate about the environment across differences and across disciplines.

Jon Christensen: Well, I think audiences is the right thing to be thinking about and thinking about it in plural.

So the audiences for all of these things are different, and we wanna think about those audiences carefully and listen to the audiences to understand how to [00:29:00] communicate with them. In my environmental communications course here at UCLA, I tell the students I teach empathy, narrative, and strategy.

Empathy for understanding your audiences. Narrative, the different kinds of narratives, how to tell stories, how to tell effective stories. And then strategies, uh, what are the outcomes and impact that you're looking for from your work. And so those are all different for different projects. Some of the projects that we've talked about have had different audiences, different strategies and had in mind very, very different kinds of outcomes and impact.

And if we think about back up and look at the big picture, the words the environment and climate change are two of the most polarizing concepts in the American political lexicon right now. So we're not doing too well at understanding and being able to communicate across across these differences.

And as [00:30:00] another recent guest on our podcast, Jack Bobo, who is in food studies in the Food Institute here at UCLA, pointed out also the language that you use and the stories that you tell can either be used to energize your base or your audience for a particular outcome, or impact that you'd like to see, or it can be used to try to broaden the tent.

And both of those are completely valid strategies, but you wanna think carefully about them

Liv Slaby: One of LENS's goals is to mentor diverse future sustainability writers, artists, and communicators. LENS recently launched an undergraduate journal. Julia, as co-editor-in-chief, can you tell us about your work on that project?

Julia Awad: Absolutely. As

editor-in-chief, and with the incredible support of our advisors, Jon and Ursula, I wanted the inaugural issue of LENS, the Journal of Environmental Narratives, to be as [00:31:00] non-restrictive as possible so that we were able to receive a wide range of submissions from students across North and South Campus.

And I'd say we were very successful with that. Out of roughly 40 submissions, we've curated a really rich journal of 15 pieces featuring works of multi-species relations and trash narratives in science fiction, as well as AI in the environment and Indigenous knowledge systems. So they're all very unique in that sense, and at the same time, and this was especially important to me, was they all reflected the various environments that we inhabit as opposed to circulating more insular narratives of the environment.

But the journal will be published early on during fall quarter, and I am so excited for everyone to have it.

Liv Slaby: Awesome. I look forward to reading all those pieces. Another type of project that LENS [00:32:00] undertakes is adapting environmental narratives to new media. Ursula, you co-lead a team with UCLA English professor Danny Snelson that's modding "Grand Theft Auto V."

So Julia already gave us a great introduction to this project, but can you tell us a bit more about Grand Theft Eco?

Ursula Heise: Yes.

That's a project that came out of an idea years ago that, came out of analysis of existing stories about environmental futures, the overwhelming majority of which are either disaster-focused or downright apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic.

But they're generally mostly pessimistic about environmental futures. And so, our idea, and our was a group of graduate students from a variety of departments, was how can we tell stories that are not sort of Pollyanna-ish and blue-eyed at all, that acknowledge the reality of environmental crisis, but that

try to take a different tack and try to tell, somewhat more [00:33:00] optimistic or more mixed stories about the future.

And so we focused on, environmental futures of LA and originally the project was called LA 2050. So we started scripting different episodes that we wanted to film eventually. So film was our original medium, but then once we had finished a couple of the scripts, we asked some people in the television sphere, "So okay, if we have three episodes of 20 minutes in live action, how much would that cost us?"

And they said, "Well, about a million dollars." And we were like, "Oh my God, this is-- We can't do that. We're a public university. There's not that kind of money." And so, my, wonderful colleague, Danny Snelson, who, works in the digital humanities and, regularly teaches video games suggested that there was another way of doing film, that's called machinima and that consists of taking the story world and the game engine of a [00:34:00] particular video game, and then introducing modifications into it and filming that.

And as I found out to my surprise, I had no knowledge of this before, Danny introduced us to, this whole sphere. This is actually a thing that is very widespread. A lot of people do this with different video games. And Danny was the one who suggested "Grand Theft Auto V," which is set in a city called Los Santos, that is obviously a version of Los Angeles, so it has a lot of recognizable neighborhoods and buildings that we could use.

And So we, finished filming the first episode in 2024 and, screened the first episode, which is about the revitalization of the LA River in 2025. And the plot is about two girls who chase after a lost electronic object along the LA River showing how the LA River has actually been beautifully [00:35:00] revitalized but how different approaches to that space and different uses of that space persist because of persisting inequalities in terms of socioeconomics, racial differences, and so forth.

So that was that was the first episode. We're currently working on the second one, which is called "Coyote Heist," and was actually based on the, dissertation research of a PhD candidate in the IRES Chase Neisner, who was studying coyotes in an urban environment. So, this is an episode that is about coyotes, but about, also about homelessness and the question of who belongs and who doesn't, and who decides who belongs and who doesn't in an urban space like Los Angeles.

Now, what was really remarkable about that process was on one hand it was technically quite difficult, and, various generations of students really did an amazing job of learning how to do the modding, and how to introduce elements that don't form part of the original game. The other [00:36:00] thing that we found ourselves confronting was not just pushing against disaster stories in terms of the environment, but also Grand Theft Auto itself which has a very bleak view of what urban spaces are. It's about car chases and drug dealing, crime. It can be quite racist sometimes. It's quite, sometimes quite misogynistic. So we also found ourselves, even as we were working with the game, we also found ourselves working against it, and that turned out to be a really interesting experiment in storytelling.

Liv Slaby: LENS also practices adapting environmental narratives to new media through its podcasts. So LENS Cast, produced by Dr. Spencer Robbins, a recent graduate of UCLA's English PhD program, explored sonic storytelling about environmental issues in Los Angeles and beyond. Now, Story+World shares conversations between scholars, writers, artists, activists, and scientists that involve exchanging [00:37:00] ideas across disciplines and that share academic work with a wider audience.

Jon, would you like to add on?

Jon Christensen: Liv, the only thing I would like to add on right now is to thank you for your tremendous creative leadership of Story+World.

Liv Slaby: Oh, thank you. It's been such a pleasure working with you so far. Um, another goal of LENS' work is to research the impact of environmental media and communications.

Kat, can you share about your work on P22, as well as your work on bobcats and human stories and cultural narratives shaping the lives of wild animals?

Kat Hernandez: Yeah, so my dissertation research and my broad interest in research overall is looking at how hearing stories, our understandings of environment, how we perceive the natural world around us is connected quite physically to that natural world itself, mostly looking at wildlife movement.

So thinking a lot about how [00:38:00] animals are moving around us in the shared space, how that is connected to the way we have created our space by how we view the world, what we think nature should be around us, what it is. And so I came to UCLA with the idea, and since then it's become a few

different projects two of which you've mentioned, the P-22 project and a bobcat project.

The bobcat is a more spatially focused one, thinking about how do we put these ideas of people's abstract, more deeper narrative views of ways to live amongst bobcats, what is it like to have them as neighbors of the natural world? How do we put that on a map that can also speak to where these bobcats are moving, where they're struggling to move, and what does it mean then to create more space for them and more coexistence than conflict in this area where we're all running into each other?

The P-22 project for listeners who don't know, who this very famous cat is in LA, for those of us who are looking at animals in LA a lot P-22 is a mountain lion [00:39:00] that was found via camera traps in Griffith Park in 2012,

and when the story broke out, it essentially snowballed, became more famous, murals came up. It also brought in more this discussion of connectivity for wildlife in Los Angeles, specifically for pumas that have been struggling for a while as they are separated by roads and can't really interact with each other and running out of space.

And so 10 years later in 2022, P-22, 'cause he was old and had injuries, was humanely euthanized, and in that same year, the now Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Bridge broke ground over the 101, and when it's done this December, it's going to be the largest wildlife bridge over a highway in the world. And so I was really intrigued of the way we see this celebrity cat and how he's deemed a celebrity, how that story and these adjectives around him came to be.

It seems so cool even for those of us on the outside and seeing the story that, oh, that helped create this landscape change, this behavior change. [00:40:00] But because that itself is a story. So we were telling ourselves a story that this happened around the story of P-22. I was really curious how accurate that was, how it manifested.

Are there ways we can look into it to see how that came to be? And is this something we can also think about for how we tell stories in other places in the future, or the assumptions we made or things to learn? And so that's that project. It's coming to an end. Writing it now, so hopefully I can share those results with everybody in the next couple months, depending on how fast publication will be, hopefully.

Liv Slaby: Ursula , I want to reflect on what's changed since LENS was founded in 2016. What ideas or projects did LENS put forth or work on in 2016 that were, in your opinion, especially prescient and are especially valuable now?

Ursula Heise: I think

what's changed is that LENS started out on the basis of conversations between [00:41:00] faculty and graduate students about environmental humanities research.

And I think in the years since, it's really shifted to not just discussing existing work and engaging with it but, moving into creative work. You know, various of the things that we've mentioned fall into that category, the documentaries in 2018, and along with that, a number of photo essays and essays that graduate students wrote for the KCET websites, the work that, Jon is spearheading with journalistic storytelling.

And then the move into other media, I mean, first into film, then podcast now video games. I think all of those are things that have evolved. I think there is A changing university environment.

So around the same time that LENS was created, the English department created a minor in literature and the environment, And I found a lot of crossover and uses of what LENS does [00:42:00] in actually classes that get taught as part of that minor. In 2018, the IOES created the PhD program that Kat is now part of, and as she's already explained, you know, there's a lot of synergy there between doing research on one hand and then the creative, sort of public-facing products that come out of LENS.

Liv Slaby: Conversely, did LENS have to course-correct at any point in the last 10 years, and what did the lab learn in that process?

Jon Christensen: I don't know that there was any major kind of course correction except for a very positive one. We had a really close relationship with a devout and very active Bruin alumna named Marsha Howard, who, was also a great animal lover.

And when she passed away, she left a small endowment for LENS, because she [00:43:00] believed deeply in what we were trying to do. As I was thinking about your question, that sort of course correction and challenge has been a little bit about embracing a small measure of abundance.

You know, when we started out, we were, like, scrappy. We had no money hardly at all. We were trying to raise money for individual projects and things like this. And Marsha, bless her soul gave us the freedom to think a little bit more capaciously and bigger and about taking the initiative to create our own projects, responding to undergraduates and graduate students and saying, "Yes, we can do that.

We can find a way to do that." And we've sort of had to learn how to do that. Again, it's a small endowment, but it has enabled us to be able to think just a little bit more freely and generously, I think, and that's been a really wonderful course [00:44:00] correction.

Liv Slaby: Both Jon and Ursula, how do LENS scholars think differently now than in 2016 about the phrase environmental narrative? What has changed in our media and narrative landscapes?

Ursula Heise: For me, what I include a lot more when I teach narrative in general and then environmental narrative in particular is two things.

I mean, one is obviously the vastly increased importance of social media in any kind of storytelling. I mean, that's become a whole environment for storytelling that, we had traditionally not looked at in English literary studies. But, now there's a lot of interest in it, and there's a lot of interest on the part of narrative theorists and just researchers of narrative in how narrative unfolds and works across social media, when there's multiple authors, when it evolves over time and so forth, and when it evolves [00:45:00] as a matter of sort of a statement and then a response and then a counter-response and so forth.

So that's been just a very, very interesting new medium. And of course, it's not just about the environment, but it has become a really important way in which environmental narrative gets relayed. So that I think has been a crucial change in how we think about environmental narrative.

Jon Christensen: And then there's AI, which we're struggling with at the moment, so I don't have an answer to to that one. But what I think has changed, and is still, an ongoing change, is we've gone from, I think, arguing about one narrative. So like, what's the right narrative to tell about the environment and the crises we face and humans' role in that?

Or two narratives, so arguing about is scaring people with dystopian futures the right way to get them motivated, or do we need to tell hopeful stories? There was, for a [00:46:00] few years, a big debate about that.

Ursula Heise: It's still going on.

Jon Christensen: It's still going on, but I think we've come around to, or I hope we come around to thinking about different narratives, the different stories that people tell, the different roles that those stories play in people's lives and communities and movements and change for different audiences and for different outcomes and impact.

And I think that's a really positive change.

Liv Slaby: Jon, what opportunities to collaborate does LENS offer, and what's the first step in getting involved?

Jon Christensen: Well, reach out. We're easy to find at ioes.ucla.edu/lens. And send me an email. My email address is very easy to find online. It's jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu, and reach out.

That's how Julia and I decided to create LENS, the Journal of, Environmental [00:47:00] Narratives, and it's how so many projects and collaborations and really interesting conversations have, started. So send me an email, and let's chat.

Liv Slaby: And lastly, this anniversary year will have a different event with different speakers for each month of the academic year.

What are the through lines?

Jon Christensen: So I'm really excited about this 10th anniversary celebration. A series of events, as you said, every month with, conversations and events and film showings and music about environmental narratives in different genres and media, from journalism to history, science and policy, online discourse and misinformation, and how do we deal with that to, institutional, communication for sustainability to novels and films, and a big celebration at the end in May with some music and dancing.

So stay tuned and check [00:48:00] us out at, again, at ioes.ucla.edu/lens. Sign up for our newsletter there so you can learn all about it.

Liv Slaby: Ursula, Jon, Julia, and Kat, thank you so much for sharing your insights. To our listeners, we hope to see you at our upcoming events