

Episode 2: The Telling Life of Trees with Kate Hampshire

Lucie McNeil:

We all love stories, stories about ourselves, about how we live and what the future might hold. We know that's why lots of people, myself included, just love being part of book festivals, to explore the story behind that individual's unbelievable way of thinking up a book, right there up close. To try to understand a different way of looking, of being, from a different seat.

This is what anthropologists do too. Listening, learning, and holding a multiverse of other people's stories so that we can question often entrenched perspectives and think again, because we're still very new here on the planet. Anthropologists help us understand where our present day conditioning comes from to loosen its grip a little bit.

So, we took a tea break or two over summer in Durham University, one of the largest anthropology departments in the UK with six of their researchers. Researchers who are on vastly different journeys to understand many different groups and individuals' ways of being. Their stories can help us think about how we live now and next.

Kate Hampshire:

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Kate Hampshire talks to us about an unexpected art and wisdom found in tree cutting while on a chainsaw course in the northeast.

Kate Hampshire:

So, my name's Kate Hampshire. I'm a professor of anthropology at Durham University. It's funny, when people ask what my field of anthropology is, I never know what to say because it's been really eclectic. I've worked a lot on healthcare in Africa, in many, many different African countries. And now after 25 years of doing that, I find myself working with tree surgeons and foresters in Northumberland. So yeah, anything and everything that's to do with people and is interesting.

Lucie McNeil:

Hi, Kate. We are really glad that you could join us today. So, I'm going to dive straight in and I would like to know how chainsaws can be a beautiful, subtle tool? As I know that that's a key part of this particular research project.

Kate Hampshire:

Thank you. It's a good question and it's one that I wouldn't have thought of really until a few years ago. So, I'm an anthropologist. Actually, most of my work up until now has been in Sub-Saharan Africa working on healthcare. But a few years ago, I did a chainsaw course at Houghall College just down the road. And I did the course really because I have a small area of woodland next to my house and I thought, well, I want to know how to use a chainsaw safely.

So, I went along to this course expecting it would just be how to use a chainsaw safely and efficiently and actually, it opened up a whole new world to me that really challenged my assumptions about what a chainsaw is and does. So, like a lot of people, I guess I had thought of a chainsaw as a noisy, brutal, gas guzzling machine that's used to destroy, to destroy rainforests, to destroy ancient woodland, to make way for motorways and intensive agriculture and things like that.

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But the guy that taught me, Campbell is his name, I'll have to tell him about this podcast, the way that he used a chainsaw and what a chainsaw became in Campbell's hands was really something quite extraordinary. It changed from being something used to cut and destroy, and it became something that was almost an extension of himself.

Campbell really understands trees. He understands them in a deep and visceral way, and that partly comes through the act of working with living wood, working with living trees. So, Campbell showed me how the way that a chainsaw feels, the way it behaves in a tree, enables you to understand about the tree's past and actually also about the tree's future through how a chainsaw feels, how it sounds, the subtleties, the compression, the tension. And it suddenly opened up a whole world to me, really, where the chainsaw, as I say, becomes a sensory extension of the human and offers a very different kind of way of connecting with the world around us.

Lucie McNeil:

And people would never think of that. So, just to help give a bit more context, can you talk about our relationship with trees and how we can bring that and the way we use chainsaws and what you studied during that project together? I'm particularly referring to where you've talked about kickback. I mean, I almost saw that as a metaphor for how we've used and abused the living planet, the kickback piece of it.

Kate Hampshire:

Yeah.

Lucie McNeil:

So, could you talk a bit more about that?

Kate Hampshire:

Yeah, I mean, trees are interesting things. Trees in many senses offer us possibilities to connect with both the past and the future and in some senses maybe offer points of connection in a world that feels very uncertain at the moment. There are trees around that were there since the Norman Conquest and before. There are trees around that are going, hopefully, to last many generations beyond our own lifetimes.

So, trees offer this possibility of connection, and I think chainsaws clearly have the potential to disrupt those futures. Chainsaws can be used to hack brutally trees, and I've seen that, we've all seen that in the world, that chainsaws are used to destroy Amazonian rainforests, to destroy lots of forests, to threaten our world. And closer to home, I've witnessed examples where a chainsaw operator gets very distressed at the idea of having to prioritize the very transient whims of a human that wants a massive, beautiful old tree felled in their garden when they've only lived in the place maybe six months.

But I've also learned through working with foresters and tree surgeons, how cutting a tree also requires you to think about and imagine the future, because when you're cutting a tree, you're doing it for the future and it requires a really embodied understanding of how the tree will respond over your lifetime and beyond your lifetime. I've worked with old foresters, old tree surgeons that when we're driving around, point out to me a tree that they cut 30, 40, 50 years ago. And through watching how that tree has responded over time to the way it's been cut, has helped them to hone their skills and their, as they say, embodied understanding of what trees are.

But also just a couple of weeks ago, I was talking with a really experienced forester based in Northumberland, and he was doing a thinning of a forest. And the way that he was thinking about it, he

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said, "Look, nobody in my lifetime or even my children's lifetime and possibly not even my grandchildren's lifetime will see the fruits of what I'm doing, but I'm imagining," and he said, "I'm imagining a forester in 100, 150 years ago that sees what I've done and appreciates what I've done, appreciates my forethought."

And it just really struck me that, yeah, chainsaws can be used for devastating purposes, but they require us to imagine and project into a future. And I think that's what's sometimes missing from the way we think about the futures. The futures are scary. I've got small children, the future feels uncertain. It feels like there's nothing to hang onto. And through working with skilled chainsaw operators, I've understood that you have to imagine a future and you have to imagine trees and people in that future. And you have to imagine how you create a habitable future. And that connection, for me, seems really important and really strong.

Lucie McNeil:

So, can you tell us how we should be teaching children about trees? I know we are doing that now a little bit more in terms of the lungs of the planet. What was the reaction of people who cut trees for a living when they were invited ... Were they overtly invited to take part in your research? How did you gain their confidence?

Kate Hampshire:

Well, I mean, I guess a lot of people do think about trees, but they tend to think about trees in quite an abstract, distanced way. People love trees, but people love trees often from a distance. And I guess what I've learned from the people I work with is that their love ... And they love trees. That's the first thing that's really ... I don't know why it surprised me, but you'd have thought that people that cut down trees might not love trees, but they love and understand trees and they do that through working intensely with them rather than just seeing them and admiring from a distance. So, the depth of knowledge they have is quite extraordinary.

I mean, I've learned so much. For example, there's a lad that I work with locally who taught me about the different kinds of lichens that grow on trees that are good for clotting blood. So, if you cut yourself while up a tree, he said, "If I have to cut myself, I'm glad if it's a sycamore tree because the lichen that grows on sycamore tree is particularly good for clotting." And people know about these different, just lots of subtleties that you wouldn't know, I think, from the outside.

And I think maybe our relationship with trees is too distant and idealized. So, we have this idea that trees are unchanging, that trees don't need to be managed. And I think the point is that we've always coexisted with trees. We're not separate from them. And I think those entanglements are what I'm interested in. It's not just like a tree's there and we're here and we can admire it from a distance. Our lives as humans have always been connected with trees and this is another kind of connection. And I think it's a connection that's been often not understood or misunderstood, because people just don't want to engage with the fact that trees are not just a distant thing. They are part of us and we're part of them.

And part of those connections involve working with trees and sometimes working with trees in ways that bring up all kinds of contradictions. And I'm not saying that all cutting trees is good. And many of the people I work with grapple with those contradictions on a daily basis. These tensions between something that's beautiful and something that's brutal, between caring for something and destroying something, between destruction and creativity.

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All of these things can coexist in quite uncomfortable ways, quite challenging ways, but ways, I guess, that force us to, I don't know, to really grapple with the way that our worlds and the worlds of the trees and all the many other organisms that live on and around and under and in trees and indeed, the way that we relate to the technological world, it's all entangled and we can't think about those things as separate from us or somehow idealized. If that makes sense?

It's those entanglements that I'm really interested in. It's the ways that our lives have always been entangled with trees and with the natural world and with the products that we make and we use. And I mean, one of the things I've become really interested in through working with chainsaw users is how people think trees should be, where people think trees should be, because there's actually almost no such thing, say in the country like the UK, as a natural environment. All environments are co-created, if you like, and we continue to co-create these environments.

So, I guess I want to get away from thinking that there's a pristine nature that needs to be preserved and instead we need to work with rather than against the world around us. And chainsaws are a odd way into that, but have been a really interesting, and for me, a very productive way about thinking about those entanglements really.

Lucie McNeil:

And I love that you keep saying the word entanglements because one of the things I always think about as a big forest, wood lover is in old forests, you see the naked entanglements of all the roots on the forest floor.

Kate Hampshire:

Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, think in terms of, you were talking earlier about education, I think there have been positive moves with things like forest schools to get kids in and around trees. And I think that's the thing to do. And also, getting kids to work with trees. There are lots of projects going on in Northumberland around coppicing, for example, at the moment.

So, I'm involved with one coppicing group that has volunteers that come along ... And in fact, I did some tree felling with them because they're coppicing hazel, which is very ancient craft, and they're regenerating some woodland for that. So, a colleague and I were felling some of the other trees to allow the hazel to grow. And again, if someone just comes along and sees us felling some trees, they think, "Oh, well, why are they chopping those trees down?" But actually what we're doing is allowing the hazel regeneration and then rekindling really, these many often forgotten skills. And that's something that kids and anyone can get involved with. Not the felling of the trees, but the coppicing.

Yeah. And I think just getting involved with living woodlands. That's the thing, they're living. They're not just living in the sense that trees are alive, but they're living in the sense that they're constantly changing. And we are part of that story. We're not something separate from it.

Lucie McNeil:

And so, where do you think the challenges are? Because there is more awareness in schools and in teaching, and probably younger kids probably in some ways know more about it than us, than other age groups. Where do you think the challenges are, and what can anthropology really offer? Is it more awareness? Is it the language we use around non-human animals? Where do you see the intersections being both most challenging and most positive?

Kate Hampshire:

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So, I think as an anthropologist, what I'm interested in is how humans interact with the world around us. That's basically what anthropology is. It's that study of humans. And increasingly, it's a study of not just humans, but humans within the wider context. So, over the last 10, 20 years, anthropologists are becoming increasingly interested in these inter-species entanglements.

And I think one of the key threads of that is not always putting humans first. Realizing that our future is something that we can't fully control and our future absolutely depends on our relationships with other species. And that's not about dominating other species, it's about working with them. It's also not about being dominated by them necessarily. It's about working with them.

And I think the whole rewilding thing is part of that. So, 10 years ago, if you went to a nice garden, it would have everything mown, everything completely controlled. And now there's a much greater move to having things that are not always controlled, allowing plants to grow that want to grow in places rather than forcing plants to grow in ways and places that they don't want to grow.

And so, I think that's a key message really from this multi-species anthropology, is to recognize that our future as humans is inseparable from the futures of other species around us and we need to work with rather than against them. And I think we can encourage that in all kinds of ways. And as you say, it often starts with children, with allowing children to get dirty and get involved really closely and viscerally.

I mean, that's the thing I've learned with chainsaws. It's about the visceral connection. It's about the embodiment of working with something that's beyond you, but it's part of you somehow. And I think even just getting dirty with insects, bugs, just working with things rather than keeping our distance. Yeah.

Lucie McNeil:

So, Kate, how did you get into it? How did you gain the trust of the people that you were working with?

Kate Hampshire:

It was a slightly slow process at the beginning. So, I mean, basically I'd done my course at Houghall College. So, I had the very basic chainsaw qualification and not much experience. And starting with Campbell, the guy that taught me, he very kindly took me along on some of the jobs that he was doing. And basically I've done it through working physically.

So, we went along to Gosforth golf course. That was the first job we did together. He was up the tree cutting stuff off and I was dragging brush, I was chipping, I was working physically, and it was fantastic and I loved it. And so, I thought, I could do more of this. I could do more of this. So, I got in touch with a firm that I knew in Sheffield, and I got in touch with some other arb companies based around here in Durham. And I just wrote to them and said, "Look, here I am. I'm a 50-something-year-old female professor without much experience, but with some qualifications. And I'd be really keen to do some work with you."

Because that's one of the things about anthropology is we work not just by talking to people, but by doing the stuff. So, you may or may not have heard of this concept of participant observation. So, participant observation, it's the idea that you can only learn so much through just talking to people. At some point you need to be actually doing stuff with people. And I've done some interviews, I've talked to lots of people, but actually where I've learned more than anything is through grafting with people.

So, I go out. So, I don't know if I'm allowed to say the companies I've worked with, but I'm going to, Oliver's Tree Services here in Durham and Arbor Division in Seaham. They've given me the opportunity. I've turned up in the morning. We get in the van with our chainsaws and we go and we work. And it's really hard and I find it physically really hard, but I've also ... Again, it's that embodied understanding of

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what people do. It's more than you can just talk about. I feel exhausted. I'm sweating. I've got the smells of the sap and the chain oil, and it's that whole experience. And I come home at the end of the day exhausted, but having understood something that I couldn't possibly have understood just from talking to people.

And what I was saying earlier about that visceral connection, that's what I get through working with trees. And I must say, I completely love it. And I think going forward, I'll continue my job as a professor in the department in anthropology, but I don't want to stop working with trees because I get something from that connection with trees, with working manually, that I don't get just through talking to people and sitting in front of a computer. It's fantastic.

Lucie McNeil:

And that's such a great message for everybody because it gives you that lovely balance. I mean, we need that, as you were saying before, we need the balance of both.

Kate Hampshire:

Exactly. And I don't think we're cut out just to do one thing or another. And for me, the balance of working intellectually at a university and then working in a very different kind of way, and it's also an intellectual way, but it's a different kind of intellectual way. So, I've had to learn to read trees and it's really hard. And I've had to learn to work with machines and it's really hard. It's felt like I'm using a bit of my brain that hasn't been used for very, very long time. It's less abstract and it's more, I keep using this word, visceral.

You have to look at a tree and you have to think, "What's going to happen if I cut that bit? What's going to happen? Where's the tension? Where's the compression? How has that tree grown?" And it is a very, very different way of thinking. So, it's not just a manual pursuit, it's an intellectual pursuit, but it's very different from the stuff I do at university. And I love that combination.

Lucie McNeil:

And it's taken us back to First Nations, thinking about how we think about the natural world through their eyes too. So, I mean, it's almost full circle to how we maybe need to think about the future.

Kate Hampshire:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. The future is ... Well, as I've been saying all the time, our future is connected with things and we get that connection through working intimately with the things around us, not just thinking about them or seeing them from a distance. And so yeah, that connection is everything for me. It's really hard work, but it is fantastic.