



S U N Y College of Environmental Science and Forestry Campus Conversations: The Podcast

Episode 3

Doctor Robin Kimmerer, Distinguished Teaching Professor, Environmental Biology Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment

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Robin Kimmerer: I'm an alum. I'm a stumpy from way back. So as a young person, I was always fascinated by plants and by ecology before it really was known as such. I'm a member of the Potawatomi Nation, and our reservation is in Oklahoma. Our original homelands are the Great Lakes. And yet, we were removed in the history of the Removal Act and so forth. Because there weren't that many women in Forestry school at that time, although the numbers were growing and there certainly were no other Native students. And so, I felt very much at sea, especially because the things that have brought me here, my relationship with plants, I realized, in fact, was told pretty early that that's not the way Western science views the plant world.

Joanie Mahoney: Hello, this is Joanie Mahoney, and I have the pleasure of talking today with Robin Kimmerer. Welcome.

Robin Kimmerer: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Joanie Mahoney: This is a particularly exciting conversation for me to have because you are one of the people that is most associated with E S F. Your work has gone way beyond us here, and a lot of people know of you and know of your work. And I was looking forward to this conversation to talk about you as a person and things maybe that we wouldn't know just by reading your CV or your bio. I am very interested in how someone like you with your credentials and your background, how you ended up here at E S F, and how we have the benefit of your wisdom, and our students have the benefit of learning from you. So, let's just start with that. Where did you come from? Where do you consider your home?

Robin Kimmerer: You know, I grew up over in Saratoga County, in the foothills of the Adirondacks. And so, as a young person, I was always fascinated by plants and, and by ecology before it really was known as such. And so, there was no question that when I went away to school, I would study botany, and where else would you go? But the then College of Forestry as it was called then. And so, I'm an alum. I'm a Stumpy from way back.

Joanie Mahoney: I did see that. So, were you raised like what was your childhood like that you had this experience in nature and that you had this spark that led you to a career in botany and a degree here from E S F? Did you grow up as part of a native community?



Robin Kimmerer:

Thank you for asking that. I'm a member of the Potawatomi Nation, and our reservation is in Oklahoma. Our original homelands are the Great Lakes. And yet, we were removed in the history of the Removal Act and so forth. And so, I grew up a long way from our traditional people. But in a sense, in our traditional biome, in our traditional ecology. And the story there, which I want to share because it really threads through my work here today at E S F. How did a Potawatomi from Oklahoma end up in upstate New York? And it's the story of the boarding schools. My grandfather, as a kid of nine years old, was taken from the reservation to go to the boarding school at Carlisle Indian School, where, as you know, the mission was to kill the Indian and save the man. So, so much of our culture was stripped away, and that experience, and he tried to go back to Oklahoma, but he didn't speak the language anymore. He wasn't part of the ceremonial community anymore. And so he settled in upstate New York, and that's how we came here. But Joanie, a piece of that story is that as a young person, I wanted to know those very things that had been taken from him. And my parents couldn't tell me. But what they did say is, well, how did we learn these things in the first place? We learn them from the land. We learn them from our elders, the trees, and the birds in the rivers. And so I think that very much informed my growing up of looking at the natural world. Not only with the curiosity of a scientist, but with sort of that avid wanting to reclaim what had been taken from us.

Joanie Mahoney:

How extraordinary to have your family have that experience, and then have you come all the way back around to this expertise in the natural environment and ability to teach those things to both Native students and others. Have you gone back to Oklahoma, or I imagine you were too young to have gone back to the Great Lakes? I don't know when the time was that tribe was removed from the Great Lakes to Oklahoma. But have you experienced that now?

Robin Kimmerer:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I go back to our reservation in Shawnee, Oklahoma, because of family connections, because we still have our family land there on the reservation. But I also have been so privileged to be part of a Potawatomi Nation revival that the history of removal scattered or people all over from Oklahoma to Canada. And in the last 20 years, some of our most brilliant elders who've said, we were one nation, we need to be one nation again. So every summer, we have a traditional gathering that brings all Potawatomi people together to revitalize our language, our lifeways, our governance, et cetera. So the teachers and the cultural practitioners that have been wonderful teachers and mentors to me, I have found in those kinds of gatherings.

Joanie Mahoney:

And do you feel a sense of belonging that your father wasn't able to feel, you know, having been taken away to the boarding schools?

Robin Kimmerer:

A more tangible, embodied sense of belonging. Yes. He always felt that he knew who he was. He knew who we were. He shared as many stories as he could. But yeah, I mean, my dad, now in his nineties, is pleased to be able to speak a little bit of our language. To be part of this, this revitalization of our lifeways and culture.



- Joanie Mahoney:** Isn't that great? And we are the beneficiaries of him and your mom encouraging you to learn those lessons from the earth and feel that connection to your culture and now share that with all of us here. So did you have siblings growing up? Are you all kind of the same kind of nature appreciators?
- Robin Kimmerer:** In any family, there is diversity. I have one sister who is a professor of Indigenous Environmental Studies at Trent University in Ontario. And so, yes, my other siblings are very much outdoors people. And so, the interests blossomed in different directions.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. And I'm one of nine, so there isn't a one-size-fits-all. I do know that, but I just wondered if that experience that your father had, and I can only imagine what it would be like to want that connection, you know. I mean, I am several generations into the United States. So I don't have that connection to the culture, but I have gone back to Europe and visited, and you do feel a sense of belonging. But that was a whole different kind of experience than as a young boy being purposefully taken out, and I can't even imagine what that experience must have been like. And when you were old enough to understand and be a mother yourself, how heartbreaking that must feel.
- Robin Kimmerer:** You're so right
- Joanie Mahoney:** I'm sorry.
- Robin Kimmerer:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And your dad's in his 90's. Is he still in the Saratoga area?
- Robin Kimmerer:** He is, yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And is your family mostly here in New York? There is one in Ontario I know.
- Robin Kimmerer:** Yeah. But most of us here in the Northeast anyway, yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** What was your experience like here? Was it men to women, native population? I mean, how did it feel to you as an undergraduate student here at E S F?
- Robin Kimmerer:** I felt pretty lost in the beginning because there weren't that many women in the Forestry School at that time, although the numbers were growing, and there certainly were no other Native students. And so I felt very much at sea, especially because the things that have brought me here, my relationship with plants. I realized and, in fact, was told pretty early that that's not the way western science views the plant world. And so I felt like, Oh, I have blundered into the wrong place, much as I love plants. The community that I encountered wasn't thinking about plants through an indigenous worldview.



Joanie Mahoney: And how interesting because you didn't blunder. Instead, you ended up at a place where you could teach all of us a different way to look at these gifts from the Earth and not simply in that Western science way that preceded you coming here.

Robin Kimmerer: Exactly. And it feels, Joanie, so amazing to be a faculty member here at a place where my experience as a college freshman was, was not open to these ways of knowing. Yet here we are. As I walked into campus today, and just observed the Haudenosaunee flag flying over my campus. That we have the Center for Native peoples in the environment. It fills my heart!

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, that is great. And as I told you before we came on, I've had the benefit of exposure to the Haudenosaunee my entire life. I grew up in the city of Syracuse, and with the Onondaga reservation so close by, we had interactions on an ongoing basis. I used to lifeguard at Valley pool, and it was very much a mix of people from the reservation and the city of Syracuse. And so there wasn't an unfamiliarity, but then as I became more involved in the community and had professional interactions with members of the Onondaga Nation and the Haudenosaunee and learned about the thinking about the idea that we receive these gifts from the Earth and our responsibility to the generations that come after us. I've repeated it so many times. And I used to say I make decisions through this prism of what's best for the next generation. But the Haudenosaunee go even further and say the seventh generation. And how much better we would be if folks who came before us did that. But now we're in a position as you change things at E S F, we're in a position right now to change that going forward. And I don't know how to get policymakers to embrace that thinking about these gifts from the Earth and our responsibility. Have you seen progress in that area where we have a respect for these gifts, and we see a responsibility to the Earth?

Robin Kimmerer: I think that broadly speaking, the consciousness is changing, especially in the last ten years. The consciousness towards understanding the preciousness of biodiversity, of clean water, of a stable climate. Yeah, I think people have certainly become more impassioned. I wouldn't say that that necessarily is manifest at the policy level, not yet, but the fact that the general population is demanding these things is thinking long-term, what world do I want my children and grandchildren to live in, will propel policy change.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, I think so too. And we're both mothers and have the benefit of seeing the generation behind us up close. And they get it to a large extent. But again, those policymakers, they're not filling those ranks yet. And we were also talking about how so many smart people came decades ago and talked about what the science is showing and where we're headed if we don't change our ways. But we had to see it up close and feel it in things like Hurricane Sandy and the remnants of Hurricane Ida that just came through the Northeast and flooded. It's a shame that it really takes seeing the damage that was predicted before a lot of folks have awakened to the idea that we have to change dramatically and quickly.



Robin Kimmerer:

Absolutely. And you point to this, such an important phenomenon that it isn't information that changes people. We've had, as you said, we've had this information about what was pointing to this moment for a long time. But it didn't, the information didn't change people. And that is very much associated for me with my shift from writing scientific papers, which is sort of expected of a faculty member, to writing stories, to writing creative nonfiction for the general public. Because that I think can have a much bigger impact on changing the story, on creating political will for the change that we need when people's emotions are engaged as well as engaging with the facts.

Joanie Mahoney:

I completely agree with that. And I've talked to young women who have read *Braiding Sweetgrass* and their reaction to it creates so much hope for me. And I just want them to translate that into at least enough political involvement that they will avail themselves of the information about the people they're voting for. Are these policymakers going to do the things that we need done? I have expressed, I suppose, a little bit of disappointment sometimes when I talk to all groups, I was going to say young people, but really all groups that the extra effort that it takes to make sure that we're electing the right people, were not always doing that work. So this creative nonfiction inspiring people. And then I want them to take that and say, What do you think about that, sir or madam? Before we put you into office. I mean, go to the community meetings, have these conversations, support the folks that are espousing these policies for us to make sure that we get the right people into office, and that'll be the next thing for you. I hope you walked into campus today and saw the Haudenosaunee flag. And we have the Center for Native people and the environment. And maybe not too far down the road, you'll be able to turn on the evening news and hear that the people who are really in a position to implement this change in thinking are part of the national conversation. I hope that that's where we're headed. But let me go back a little bit and ask you, so you earned your bachelor's degree here at E S F. But then you did leave for graduate school. Is that right?

Robin Kimmerer:

Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. Yep. Both my master's degree and my Ph.D. are in Botany from the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

Joanie Mahoney:

Was that right after your bachelor's, so you went as a 22- or 23-year-old to Wisconsin?

Robin Kimmerer:

I worked for a year in science and then went to graduate school. Yeah. And then after that, I actually taught in liberal arts college for, gosh, nine years before coming here. But when I was here, the Cranberry Lake Biological Station was so formative for me. I understood that as the place where so much real learning takes place that I thought I need Cranberry Lake in my life. Even when I was teaching in Kentucky, I came every summer. And even while I was not teaching on the E S F faculty, I had the great privilege of being summer faculty at the Biological Station. And so gosh, I've been teaching at the bio station for, you know, practically 40 years. And that experience helped bring me back to E S F as a faculty member.



Joanie Mahoney:

I was able to go to the Cranberry Lake Biological Station earlier this year and see the students in action because last year, due to COVID, we didn't have the programming there, and I'm only one year into being the president of this wonderful institution. So I was thrilled to go up there and see the students. They love it. The students love the program up there. Is it that they all come together and have this shared experience? Or is it the programming? Some of all of it? What is it about Cranberry Lake that's stuck with you like that?

Robin Kimmerer:

Well, certainly the fact that they're at Cranberry Lake, the land is really the teacher. You live in your classroom. And so it's total immersion biology. And it takes all of the conceptual work that we build in the classroom here on main campus. And I love those moments when I hear students say like, Oh, that's what they were talking about in this class. I see it right here in this stream. I see it right here in this bog. So suddenly, all the pieces of their E S F education come together in the reality of the natural world. So in terms of pedagogy, it's brilliant. But you know what? I think the other thing that is so magical at Cranberry Lake is that you only get there by boat, right? So you feel this sense of isolation in a sense which creates community. You realize that everything you need is right there on Barber point. And to see students come into community with each other, with the land to learn to live together, to problem-solve together is, I think, one of those intangibles about Cranberry Lake that certainly rivals the ecological education.

Joanie Mahoney:

I thought it was wonderful. And again, it was the enthusiasm from the students. And I think it's important as president here to have seen that because that needs to be a priority for us. And I think we can do better. Things like the fossil fuels that are being used at Cranberry Lake are disappointing, but it gives us something very clear to work on. I would like to make the experience even better for students. And that is, that's a priority, and it is born from just seeing that enthusiasm. And for you to say when you were here as an undergrad, you've carried that with you. That's what I saw. So I have a question. Were there mentors that you had along the way? You talked about how there weren't a lot of women at the Forestry School. Was there somebody that let you know that you could do this thing that was unusual for young Robin to do?

Robin Kimmerer:

Indeed. And I am so grateful for those mentors, especially because, as I said, I felt a little bit lost. And the then Dean of Students, Dr. Harry Payne, kind of took me under his wing and helped me navigate and helped me feel valuable. That my being different was something that could benefit the community. And that was so important for me. Having June Wong as a professor, the only woman on the faculty. And having her as a role model of this wonderful scientist, gifted teacher and somebody who really cared about her students. The few of us women students just gravitated to June's energy and guidance. I will also say that probably the most formative mentor that I had at E S F, and I'm not alone in this, is the great Ed Ketchledge. He was my professor for many courses. He's the one who introduced me to mosses. But even more than that, I saw that Ed Ketchledge was using his science to protect the Adirondacks. I followed him up a mountain to



do alpine summit restoration work in the days before restoration ecology was even a thing. And so he really inspired me with this notion of, yes, it's important to do good science. But you have to use that science on behalf of the Earth. And he modeled that, and I know it was very formative.

Joanie Mahoney: And I imagine Robin, that there's going to be a lot of students that have the opportunity to answer that same question. That are now going to point to you. And the inspiration they get from watching you take that science and do good with the science. And that is something I heard you speak one time about. Kind of the best of both worlds. This native knowledge about the Earth. And combined with this Western science, or informing Western science. How do you envision that if it was going as well as it could go, how do you envision that information being translated, and what does that look like at the end?

Robin Kimmerer: Great question. The model that we try to use at the Center for Native peoples in the environment is this notion of a knowledge garden. To say that there are lots of kinds of knowledge in the world. And each of them can be deployed and applied in different settings. And that in this knowledge garden, there is traditional ecological knowledge, like in a Three Sisters Garden. The center of the Three Sisters Garden is that corn plant. And I think of that as the values, the philosophy, the worldview of indigenous knowledge. And then, you know, we plant the bean and the bean climbs and is guided by the corn. I think of that bean as Western science, powerful, curious, but by its very design, not guided by values and ethics. That's not what science, science is about. Objective, rational inquiry, not constrained by social values. But when you, when you take those powerful tools and guide them by social values, then I think you have something really powerful. And then, in the Three Sisters Garden, there's the squash right at the bottom. And this squash suppresses the weeds, keeps the moss, the soil moist. What is the analog there? The squash creates an environment in which traditional and Western knowledges can grow together. And that's what I think our job is, is to be that squash. To create a microclimate in the classroom, in research, in community, where those two knowledges can grow together. The corn doesn't try to become the bean, the bean doesn't try to overtake the squash. They're sovereign, but they complement each other. That's what we're striving for.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, that is such a great way of describing it, and I will always see that now. And for those at home that are listening but don't have the benefit of seeing new winding that bean plant around that corn stock. I think that's a great way for us to all think about it. I was able to meet some of your students. How do they find you? How do you end up having this great cohort of Native students here at E S F?

Robin Kimmerer: Isn't it wonderful?

Joanie Mahoney: It is! We are so lucky you are here, Robin. I hope you feel the gratitude that we are trying to share with you because, I mean, it's not just that you're this famous. It's that you, as a person, have done this incredible work on behalf of E S F and brought this incredible group of young people here to study with us.



Robin Kimmerer: Joanie, the other day, I was sitting in our indigenous students seminar with nine different native people around the table, all talking about their science and their communities and how they were going to bring these things together. So much passion and drive, and creativity. I am so grateful to our students. I learn from them every day.

Joanie Mahoney: How do they find you?

Robin Kimmerer: Well, I will say that Braiding Sweetgrass has been part of that for sure because it's been so widely adopted in traditional communities and, as well as in other universities. But we're also fortunate to be members of the Sloan Indigenous Graduate Program, which is a nationwide consortium of universities dedicated to indigenous graduate education in STEM disciplines. And so, our ability with a partnership between E S F and the Sloan Foundation to offer support and fellowships has certainly helped in that regard as well.

Joanie Mahoney: And I have heard such great things about that partnership with Sloan, and now we have a new partner in the Nature Conservancy, which has come to the Center for Native people and the Environment. What is that partnership going to bring for you?

Robin Kimmerer: So exciting. This partnership with The Nature Conservancy grew out of a meeting that we had in the Adirondacks a few years ago, bringing together private conservation like Nature Conservancy, and land trusts, and others. Public conservation through the D E C and indigenous environmental leaders to say, how could we do conservation in a new context which not only protects land but kind of decolonizes conservation, to bring in indigenous perspectives and to serve land justice. Can we benefit both land and indigenous cultures at the same time? And I think the answer is emphatically yes, that we must do this. And that's what the partnership with the conservancy is really grounded on.

Joanie Mahoney: And I know from my own experience that we will be much better off if we can bring that together. Because our example here in our own community with the cleaning of Onondaga Lake. The guidance that the native people brought to that every step of the way made things better. And we didn't always meet the expectations of the native population, but they always made it better. Listening and striving for that purity. That's how I kind of described it. I remember being in a meeting and Oren Lyons, who's probably a friend of yours too. I am a big fan of Oren Lyons. I remember being in a meeting with him and saying, I really want you at this table even though sometimes it's difficult conversations because that purity that you bring and that clarity about how we need to be with nature. And this idea that we have to protect seven generations from now. That is such a valuable part of every conversation. It's always, I'm grateful that he would kinda put up with us and continue to take a seat at the table because it always made everything we were doing better. So that partnership with the Nature Conservancy, bringing that native voice to that conversation. I think it's only going to bear fruit.



- Robin Kimmerer:** And we hope that it not only bears fruit for the land and for the Conservancy, but also for indigenous peoples. Because when we realize that Nature Conservancy and other land trust properties in this country, how to hold the same acreage in land trust as is in reservation land in this whole country.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Really? I had no idea.
- Robin Kimmerer:** Yeah, that's a lot of that is being conserved and managed for goals other than the goals of the original stewards of those places.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Very interesting. So let me switch gears one more time before we have to go. How about your own family, you're a mother, I saw that in your bio. Were your children raised here in central New York?
- Robin Kimmerer:** Yes, they were
- Joanie Mahoney:** Okay, and are they still around?
- Robin Kimmerer:** Yeah. I'm lucky enough to have my daughter's family and grandkids right here. They live in Lafayette. So what a joy to be. Nokomis is our Anishinabe word for grandma, to be Nokomis to them, so close by. I have another daughter who lives in Colorado. Her career and passions took her there. And so it's a great place to visit.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I was just thinking that when you said that, I mean, what a place to visit out in Colorado. But what a gift you must be to your grandchildren. Are they old enough to understand how lucky they are to have this very wise grandmother?
- Robin Kimmerer:** Oh, I hope that every child has that view of their grandma. But it is delightful to see my grandson learning a little bit of Potawatomi language too. He's learning his plants. Which ones you can eat, which ones are for the birds. So that it really does my heart good to see that.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I can only imagine, and I hope that maybe that inspiration leads him here to E S F someday. And I hope you're still here with us. So this has been a fascinating conversation. I feel like, I'm sure everyone does, I could talk to you forever. There's so much about you that is interesting and inspiring. And I can learn a lot from you, so don't be a stranger, but thank you for sharing a little bit more about who you are with the folks that get to work with you here at E S F that maybe didn't know your story before this conversation.
- Robin Kimmerer:** Thank you for asking and for listening.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Thank you. See you soon.