

Season 4, Episode 4: Building a Bridge between Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Neil Patterson

Neil Patterson: And I think sometimes being asked to do something, it's much different than applying for a job and it holds in our culture much more weight when an elder comes up and says, "Can you help out with this?" Somehow for some reason, indigenous people have stewarded the majority of the world's biodiversity with much less people and much less land under their control. Why is that? To acknowledge that indigenous sense of environmental justice is not human in its origin, it's about all of the natural world having the ability to fulfill their responsibilities.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome to season four of Campus Conversations, The Podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF President. I have the pleasure of interviewing ESF faculty members who are making a mighty impact here on our campus, in our local community and on our world. Today I'm happy to welcome Neil Patterson, Assistant Director for the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. Neil's work celebrates, restores and builds relationships between indigenous communities and their aboriginal territory. Thank you very much for joining me today, Neil.

Neil Patterson: Thank you. President Mahoney.

Joanie Mahoney: Or Joanie.

Neil Patterson: Joanie. Okay.

Joanie Mahoney: I think you are one of the people here that I knew before I came as president because of the work that I had done at the county. And we crossed paths on both the Onondaga Lake cleanup and the Skä•noñh Center and when that was transferred from the county to the Onondaga Historical Association in this partnership. And you were one of the names that kept coming up, so I knew who you were anyhow. So why don't we just start at the beginning. I have been told that you had an experience at Cranberry Lake at some point in your life that maybe led you to where you are here today. How did you end up here at ESF? Where was home for you growing up?

Neil Patterson: I'm a citizen. I'm from the Tuscarora Nation. We are currently recognized territories in Western New York and near Buffalo. And I just grew up loving to play in the woods, to go fishing, to be learning about plants and to be able to be taught by people in my community about our relationship with the earth. But I didn't like school and I did not really get that interested in western science until I came to ESF.

But prior to that, I told my mom, I said, "I'm going to drop out of high school. I don't like this whole sitting in a classroom learning environment." And she said, "Well, what are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm just going to hunt and fish for the rest of my life." And she said, "Well, you could do that, Neil, but it might be a little bit of a rough existence. Some of the luxuries of life might not come your way under in that scenario." And she said, "Why don't you go to school to learn about hunting and fishing?" And I said, "Oh no, I don't want to be a conservation officer. That does not sound appealing at all, and I certainly don't want to be a guide taking other people out." And those are the only two careers I have ever even heard about with respect to the environment.

Somehow for some reason, indigenous people have stewarded the majority of the world's biodiversity with much less people and much less land under their control. Why is that? And I read the majors and I think I saw a picture of Rainer Brock hauling in links to the Adirondacks on snowshoes, and it was over from that moment on, I knew where I wanted to be, what I wanted to do, and I applied to ESF under early admission and came here straight from the reservation. It was totally new to me. I had never lived or been really off the reservation in any substantial way.

Joanie Mahoney: That's an interesting story. Not entirely different than some of the faculty that I have had the privilege of speaking with on this podcast, just that wanting to be outdoors and having an appreciation for nature and not necessarily knowing how that passion could translate into a career. And it sounds like that was similar for you. I love that part about your mother hearing you and knowing what it was that you wanted to be doing and helping steer you in a direction that would make that possible. I love that. And I know from growing up around a reservation myself, the importance that women hold in these indigenous communities, and it sounds like it's for good reason, right? They're very wise. So I love that story. So, you came to ESF then as a first year student?

Neil Patterson: Yeah. It was actually the first year the college accepted freshman in some time. It used to be a transfer school I think up until... So, I entered in the class of '96. And so '92, I think it was a new part of the college's plan is to enroll freshmen at that time.

Joanie Mahoney: So you were the first freshman class after they changed?

Neil Patterson: That's correct.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay. So that orients us in time to when that was happening. And then you came here to campus and we did not have a Centennial Hall. We did not have a Gateway Building. Where did you live when you came here?

Neil Patterson: I lived in Sadler Hall, which I walk by every day on the way to work. And I lived primarily with students from Syracuse University, became lifelong friends with those folks. But when I came to classes like global environment that were just being taught at that time or genetics, I would notice other people who were wearing camouflage clothes and were clearly hunters and fishermen, and I was like, "Oh, yes, I'm in good company here."

Joanie Mahoney: I found my people.

Neil Patterson: Yeah, totally.

Joanie Mahoney: That's terrific. Yep. I have a similar experience. I'm a little older than you, but I came to Syracuse University and I lived in housing with ESF students and I tell that story often and they were doing things on weekends, like going away for the weekend and birding, and they were out in nature and doing field work, and it really was a very different set of academic programs. But we came together and shared that information and I thought it was a good model. And I know Centennial Hall's been a wonderful addition to the campus, but it has prevented that real living interaction with SU students, certainly as a first year. Maybe as students get older and they choose off-campus housing, they pair up that way. But I think that the areas of study here at ESF and the students that come here and the faculty that teach here, I think that students that come to Syracuse University who don't understand what all of that means can really benefit from that interaction. So I'd like to do more of it.

I think I've mentioned on this podcast, but my own son graduated from Syracuse, but he got a minor here at ESF. He loved it here. He loved his teachers and I would like more Syracuse students to do that kind of thing. And it has led my own son to law school with an interest in environmental law, and that's after several years of not studying the environment. And then just a little while here with us at ESF, it really sparked his passion. He would describe himself like you, love the outdoors, love nature, appreciated nature, animals, but he never had a formal lesson really in the environment. So then you came here and what program were you in?

Neil Patterson: Environmental and forest biology.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, okay. So that name has now changed to environmental biology?

Neil Patterson: Correct.

Joanie Mahoney: And was it as a result of that program that you ended up at Cranberry Lake?

Neil Patterson: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. It was a required part of EFB curriculum at that time to spend the summer semester at Cranberry Lake, but I was fortunate enough to

get a job at Newcomb prior to that in the same summer. And so I spent an entire summer at Newcomb at our campus there and then Cranberry Lake doing the academic work that was required by the major. Even before that, I was fortunate enough to have a roommate who knew about the trails and the outdoor opportunities in the Adirondacks, and so was really freshman and sophomore year that I began to realize about this notion of wilderness in New York state. And it reignited something in me that I experienced as a kid, which is going to Onchiota up in the middle of the Adirondacks to meet Ray Fadden from the Six Nations Indian Museum.

And so when I was about six or seven my family, we loaded up into a car and drove up there. And I'll never forget the rivers and the streams and the mountains, but I didn't really know where that was just growing up on the reservation. It was just someplace we drove to when I was young. But when I got back to Newcomb and to Cranberry, it was just like being back home again. And I was sitting around a campfire, 1995 at Cranberry Lake, and somebody said, "Hey, Dr. Brock, who I had for ecology at the time, he's going to be retiring and they're replacing him with this Indian. Do you know her Neil?" Of course, and I said, "No, an Indian, like a native?" "Yeah, and she's a woman and I guess she's a real badass canoer." And I was like, "Oh, wow." And sure enough, a couple days later I met Robin. She had been hired that summer, I think, to teach ecology and botany and some of those basic course works.

Joanie Mahoney: How fortuitous that your paths crossed at that time.

Neil Patterson: So early, yeah. And she continued to just beat on much younger, stronger men in canoe races that whole summer. So I knew I was in good hands and around somebody who I identified, which is an indigenous woman, a mother, and I could just see it right away.

Joanie Mahoney: And that perspective that you have is so valuable because we talk about diversity and we talk about the importance of students being able to see people who they can relate to and look like their own communities. And you lived it. You're one of the few people who actually had that experience where you were a student here and then this indigenous woman is hired. And the effect that it had on you, that we can all learn from.

Neil Patterson: It's only happened twice in my life. The other time it happened when I was in second grade because all of my teachers have been non-indigenous teachers. In fact, I would say most of them have been white people. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Pollard, had a young native student come in as a student teacher. And I'll never forget that moment because I actually could see our people in these positions I never thought was possible. And that didn't happen again until I was a college student here with Robin.

- Joanie Mahoney:** And that has certainly changed here at ESF. So when did you come onto the staff here at ESF?
- Neil Patterson:** So 2014 is when Robin said, "You know Neil, an associate director position is open and we'd love to have you." And I was living at Tuscarora at the time, and this sounds like something I need to do. And I think sometimes being asked to do something is much different than applying for a job. And it holds in our culture much more weight when an elder comes up and says, "Can you help out with this?" There was no thought of me maybe this is breaking the rules or whatever, but applying and competing for position, it was in service, that's what we do. It's hard to say no when somebody asks for help.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So then this is a perfect opportunity for you to describe what Robin was talking about when she said the associate director position is open. Tell folks about the center, so that was created before you came here.
- Neil Patterson:** That is true. And in fact, one of the really important aspects of the center's work is partnering with indigenous communities. And so 10 years before that, Robin and I had been working together all along because I was serving as the environmental director for the Tuscarora Nation. And so through my work with the Haudenosaunee Environmental Task Force and all Haudenosaunee local environmental leaders, we had been partnering on, in particular, Native Earth, which is a high school experience for native students in the northeast to better understand how scientific ecological knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge work together and cooperate. And so I had been coming up to camps prior to that and as a grad student here, there was a moment where Robin helped us utilize the Cranberry Lake facility in Wanakena to begin bringing students to the Adirondacks like I had done to reestablish relationship with place. And that was part of the reason why I was so eager and willing to honor Robin's request and come to the center.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I will just make one correction because you talked about not applying for the job.
- Neil Patterson:** Oh, yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You were applying for the job, but you just didn't realize it, right?
- Neil Patterson:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** All the work you were doing on behalf of the Tuscarora Nation with Robin is probably very valuable in this story because she got to see you in action and wanted you to be part of the team.

Neil Patterson: That is true. However, I will say that my real allegiance and alliance is to my community. And it's still a big part of what I do, and it was just this added capacity to do things with other Haudenosaunee communities that became very interesting. So Tuscarora first, Haudenosaunee second, and then the college, I would say.

Joanie Mahoney: So what does the center do? What is the work of the center?

Neil Patterson: The work of the center is focused on research, education and outreach in service to community. And so we have a minor in native peoples in the environment here at the college. We have a growing grad student program through our Sloan Indigenous Graduate Partnership in terms of teaching future environmental leaders here at the college. We also have a number of grad students and ongoing projects where we're engaging in research that's focused on the needs of indigenous communities. And so more recently we've begun working with communities to inventory the biota in places where they need us to do that and thinking about restoration and protection moving forward. And then finally the outreach piece, which is really where Native Earth lies, working with young native high school students in the Northeast and putting on workshops in communities. In fact, today we have three of our students and faculty down at the Onondaga Nation right now leading a plant walk for the kids who are on spring break this week.

Joanie Mahoney: So The Center for Native People and the Environment is the work you're describing, and you do it in partnership with Robin. And I understand that a cluster hire has been green lighted, and can you tell people what we're aiming for, and then what we envision that we'll be able to do when we fully staff according to yours and Robin's vision?

Neil Patterson: Sure. So across the United States, much of the work on indigenous environmental science has been taking place in the west, in areas where large tracks of land are still under control and under the authority of indigenous peoples. And there's no place in the east really to think about how indigenous environmental sciences is taught and is put into action on the land. And so at the end of the day, we would hope that ESF becomes the place for graduate students in particular and undergraduates, to build that foundation to be leaders in understanding the different lens at which people look at the world, in particular, and how those worldviews influence the way we take care of the earth. And so we're hoping someday grad students will say, "I'd like to get a doctorate in indigenous environmental science." And ESF is the place to go to do that. It's one of the few programs in the country that have been developing in that way with that goal in mind.

Joanie Mahoney: And these new cluster hires will make that possible.

Neil Patterson: Absolutely. So three new positions here, faculty positions between environmental studies, environmental science, and environmental biology. We hope to create a real interdisciplinary program drawing on the strengths of both environmental science and biology and really, at the end of the day what I hope is to train students to work in places where indigenous people are leading conservation efforts.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, we're well on our way. So it'll be interesting to see this vision come to life. But our provost, Dr. Sam Mukasa came to ESF and very quickly talked about the value of this interdisciplinary work and the sense that we weren't engaging it in a robust way here. We were, the term I think is silo, we were all in our own departments, and there wasn't a lot of that opportunity to cross pollinate. And these cluster hires are going to do that, and I'm really happy to know that the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment is one of the places that will really benefit from this work. So you talked about the graduate students and they come from the Sloan Foundation. So what is that partnership between the Sloan Foundation and ESF that results in us getting these wonderful graduate students here?

Neil Patterson: Sure. So the Sloan Foundation, I suppose probably a decade or more ago, began to support graduate students of color across the country. And at some point, folks had said, "Well, those programs are great for minoritized or people of color, but we need something special specifically for indigenous graduate students," for exactly what you're talking about, which is the ways in which we know the world. The many interdisciplinary lenses that indigenous people know the world in, which is talking about our mind and our body and our spirit. And so Sloan said, "That sounds great. Let's start a Sloan Indigenous Graduate Program, and we're going to work specifically with universities who would apply to be part of this program and will fund graduate students in STEM at those universities."

Up until ESF began the program three or four years ago, there were no Sloan Indigenous Graduate Program schools east of the Mississippi. They were all in the west. Again, going back to that notion that a lot of this work has been advancing in the west, but not in the east. And so we became the first school in the east now. I believe University of North Carolina has been added to that list in the last year or so, but it provides a stipend and tuition waivers for indigenous graduate students to pursue their advanced degrees in STEM. And we've actually been fortunate enough to work with the Sloan Foundation and the folks who run it out of Purdue University to broaden their understanding of STEM because so many of our students are involved in policy and food systems and more of the social science aspects of ecological restoration and often fall outside of that STEM world.

Joanie Mahoney: The engineering and math and technology, right?

Neil Patterson: And so it's been great to even not only accept and work with the foundation to fund students and to support students here, but also to change the way they think about, especially environmental science, as being much greater than technology and strictly western scientific ecological knowledge.

Joanie Mahoney: And I think that in my experience in the last 20 years, we've grown by leaps and bounds in understanding that we would've been better off had we followed some of this traditional ecological knowledge earlier. But now to overgeneralize the goal of letting nature be nature and how do you undo some of the mistakes that we've made is very much in that STEM bucket. You were talking about the different lenses that the indigenous community looks through. The one that I've repeated the most and I think is the most meaningful is your long-term vision and that you do things today for generations out in the future. That seems to me as somebody who was involved in elective politics to be the single biggest thing that we fail to do. And it's because our political calendars are so short.

We're constantly in election cycles and people are trying to be elected. And that doesn't lend itself to taking on projects that you won't see the benefit of for generations down the road. And I don't know how we fix that unless we get people who understand that to get into the political arena. And we don't see a lot of people who understand that, throwing their hat in the ring in politics. We're graduating a lot of people that are going to inform policy makers, but if those policy makers need to get elected in six months, a lot of what we're telling them is the most meaningful thing they can do on behalf of our Earth isn't going to happen in that six month cycle. So I love that the indigenous community has ingrained so deeply this idea that the things that we're supposed to be doing are the things that are going to benefit the generations that are out further.

Neil Patterson: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I think it goes back to basic understandings and conceptions of time, that time is not linear from our perspective. Things don't happen now or in the future. They simply regenerate themselves. And I think that's what folks get a little confused about around this notion of sustainability. It's the indigenous way of thinking. Sustainability is very short-term the way we think about it. It's the regeneration that we're interested in. It's that intergenerational responsibility that people have with each other, with humanity on the earth. And I couldn't agree more. The system that we have now rewards short-term thinking, and it's so great to expose these concepts to students here at ESF who will be making decisions in the future.

Joanie Mahoney: Right, we hope, and it's solvable, but it feels daunting. And the mess that we've made seems like if I was a young person coming up, I don't think I'd be championing at the bit to jump into the fray of our political system. But when I had a chance to speak with a group of students and we had a wonderful conversation about the science and about what it's going to take to make the world a better place, we ended by saying, "How many of you might throw your hats in the ring someday and run for Congress and try to influence the direction

that we take?" There was none. There wasn't a person, and it might've just been shyness. But then I took the opportunity to say, "Well, if you don't, who will?" And you can see right now, who will.

And we have a few exceptions, but for the most part, we're not getting that long-term thinking that the planet needs, that humanity needs. So anything I can do to encourage people to just at any level, put yourself out there and be one of the voices, that's what it's going to take in my opinion. So I understand also that we have a pretty robust relationship with the DEC, the State Department of Environmental Conservation, and that runs through The Center for Native People in the Environment. What are we doing with DEC?

Neil Patterson: Well, for years, and for me, it goes back to when I was a kid hunting and fishing on the reservation and occasionally off the reservation. I grew up with this conflict between Indian nations in the state of New York and the attempt to regulate the environment and conserve the environment outside of those reservations that we grew up on. And so I spent a lot of time spearing fish and running from conservation officers, and I would think, "I shouldn't be ashamed to do this." And yet all of my family supported us and continues to support us to say, "These are cultural practices in the places of your ancestors. Do not be afraid to do this." And yet we continue to be ticketed by the DEC. So I grew up around this collision of world use.

Joanie Mahoney: Which explains why you didn't want to be a conservation officer.

Neil Patterson: That's true.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay.

Neil Patterson: That is true. And so for Indians in New York... Vine Deloria I think once said that the law pervades Indian life like no other segment of American society. And so I grew up knowing that this collision was happening, that there was not an agreement about how we protect the environment, about how we can conserve natural resources or treat our relatives in the natural world. But I had heard when I was young that there was an Onondaga chief, Irving Lyons, he passed away. And I had heard that he was going to the DEC Conservation Officer's Academy every so often to talk about our treaty rights. And I thought, "Come on, Irv, keep going because they're still harassing me. They're still giving us tickets." That's important work. And I was literally eight or nine years old at that time. So law had pervaded my own cultural practices growing up on a reservation in upstate New York.

None other of my classmates, especially when I came to ESF, the assumption was, well, we follow environmental conservation law and it's there and it's effective, and look, we're doing a great job. And so for about the first three

years of working with Robin at the center, we began to explore the idea, especially because we realized in my other role working for the environmental task force and our people, the DEC employees that came to the meetings to negotiate something like stormwater infrastructure, they were ESF graduates sitting across the table from me. I said, "Oh, ESF is really a pipeline for the DEC in some ways. What if we started teaching our students about treaty rights? What if we started teaching our students about worldview?"

Joanie Mahoney: What a captive audience that can have such a big impact on the thinking. And I know the intentions of the DEC were good, but they didn't have the knowledge that the center now can impart on the upcoming conservation officers. So is that the germ of what led to this partnership?

Neil Patterson: It is. It's the seed that... It's fortuitous. I don't know. It's amazing. It's serendipity, whatever you want to say, but it's the fact that I got to go in front of these officers over the past few years and talk about our treaty rights was a fulfillment of something. It's 40 years in the making for me.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, can you imagine going back and telling eight-year-old Neil that someday you are going to grow up and you are going to be telling them how this should work? And we have a terrific DEC commissioner right now, Basil Seggos, who is ex official member of the ESF board and has a representative on our board and has been just an incredible partner and wants to do the right thing. And I think you were in the room when the commissioner was here and we discussed the land back in Tully. What was your role in that conversation?

Neil Patterson: Well, it's funny because I think after one of those meetings, Robin and I looked at each other and said, "Okay, what do we really need to do here to convince the state to return land?" And we both looked at each other and said, "Oh, we just got to change the worldview, just change their worldview. Oh look, no problem, let's do that." But what we did was we really just broke it down and said, "Look, somehow for some reason indigenous people have stewarded the majority of the world's biodiversity with much less people and much less land under their control." Why is that? And we began to explain to DEC that indigenous access and care of place is compatible with environmental protection and conservation from the state's perspective. And we work together to explain very carefully what the public benefits of indigenous led care can be.

And I think that's what DEC and our politicians are always striving to do is to speak to their constituents, to show somehow that the care of place by indigenous people can also benefit the public. And we're finally seeing the scholarship around that all across the United States. And I grew up in the places where that contrast is stark when you leave the reservation, it's a different world today. And so even the small amount of land we have left, for my nation, it's 5,000 acres that is left in the world today where you can be a Tuscarora. That's where the biodiversity is in Niagara County today.

Joanie Mahoney: And I think you have a DEC commissioner that shares that worldview.

Neil Patterson: I hope so.

Joanie Mahoney: Maybe by just his involvement here at ESF for many years.

Neil Patterson: Right. Another piece of the DEC work is not just training future DEC and existing DEC employees in this kind of thinking, but it's also in service to our communities. And so a large part of our work is what we're calling our shared research agenda. And that is when communities come to us here at ESF and say, "We're interested in saving black ash because our basket makers are running out of material." It's an old practice of care, of tending to these trees so that our people can make our baskets. It's a really sacred cultural practice. And that was actually the first partnership that the college had with indigenous people that I'm aware of, is through Wanakena, through the Forest Ranger School and the work of Mike Bridgen with Akwesasne to reestablish indigenous access and harvest black hash on state lands.

And so the research that went into doing that, the research about emerald ash borer that's ongoing are some of those shared research needs. And so the DEC has been providing the college with the ability to address those shared research needs. And in this case for Onondaga, they've asked us very specifically to say, "When we get this land back in Tully, we want to make sure brook trout can fulfill their responsibilities to creation. How do we do that?" And so this begins a whole nother effort to go down to Tully and to engage in some of the western science tools that we have to be able to someday say, "Yep, brook trout are doing great in Tully."

Joanie Mahoney: Isn't that great? And when you talk about the baskets and the brook trout and you bring it to such a specific example, it's easy for people to understand why this center is so important because we need that to come together. And it didn't before, in my experience, before this center, certainly here as you said in the east, and it's work that is going to live for generations.

Neil Patterson: It is. And there's such exciting potential because ESF is a big place in terms of land and water. And so we think the college is going to be the premier place also to demonstrate how to do biocultural restoration on the land, 25,000 acres spread across Haudenosaunee territory today. Let's take a little bit of that acreage and demonstrate what indigenous access and care can mean to protecting and improving your world. And I think that's where also it ties in with the work of our Sloan students, our graduate students, and for the community to say, "Honor these original responsibilities we have. And you will see what happens when that takes place on college property."

- Joanie Mahoney:** That's terrific. And having that opportunity to show people in the real world how great it can be.
- Neil Patterson:** Yes, especially because it's just beginning. For so long, indigenous access and care of lands has been stymied, has been suppressed. And now with a new Secretary of Interior and a different way of thinking, these opportunities have increased quite a bit.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And how much celebration must there have been when the new Secretary of the Interior was confirmed?
- Neil Patterson:** Yes. I think some of us are reserving judgment because it's great to have an indigenous woman taking care of land. Just in class today talking about who makes decisions about the lands from Haudenosaunee perspective, it's the women. That's a very simple basic concept about Haudenosaunee land care because they are the ones who know how to give life and to take care of life. I wouldn't trust land with a man.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You said that, Neil. So just briefly, I don't want to put you on the spot, but for people who don't know about the Secretary of the Interior, this is the first indigenous person to hold that role, is that right?
- Neil Patterson:** That's correct. Deb Haaland has been in and around our communities for years, and that's exciting is that this person was not drawn up from outside of community. She has real connections with her people and her lands, and she was serving food at Standing Rock. And so that's important, that's an important piece of representation for our young indigenous environmental leaders to see, so important.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And maybe we can get her here to ESF someday.
- Neil Patterson:** It would be great. It would be great. I know there's lots of ongoing talk within the Confederacy working with her around issues of the return of land in upstate New York too.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Is that return of the land in Tully the first example that you know of or... It's the first one I know of and it was really an honor to sit around the table with the state and with the indigenous community and solve that problem that's going to result in the HUD waters of Onondaga Lake, which is so sacred to the Haudenosaunee, to be returned to the native community. Is that the first example of that that you know of?
- Neil Patterson:** It's the first example where a state was involved in making that happen. There are some other examples with land trusts, but I'm glad you asked that question because right now we're putting together a history governance and current day

work on indigenous land justice in the state. It's been a big part of the work of the center, consistent with this notion that indigenous access and care results in biodiversity. And so we have this great partnership with DEC, with the Nature Conservancy and with other partners about thinking about land justice and addressing the historic injustice of the theft of land in upstate New York, but also justice for the land, the agency and standing of our natural beings and our relatives of all the biota on the land and where's the justice for those individuals and those communities and those species and those rivers and those lakes? So it's been a great way to acknowledge that indigenous sense of environmental justice is not a human in its origin. It's about all of the natural world having the ability to fulfill their responsibilities.

Joanie Mahoney: It sounds a little bit like the, I don't know if prayer is the right word, that when Sid Hill gets up before a meeting and talks about the air and the water and the land and everything that's living on the land, and that brings me to there's a couple things I want to ask you before I let you go, but one is that ESF before we begin any activity here when we gather as a group, we acknowledge where we stand. And I want to just ask you, do you know the origins of that and can you tell folks why it's important for us to say out loud when we gather for commencement or convocation or any kind of event on our campus that we take time before we begin to acknowledge where we stand?

Neil Patterson: I think land acknowledgement has been growing in popular culture in the last 15, 20 years. It began in the art world actually. And it goes back to, I know your son is studying now in South Korea, and one of the first things I'm imagining your son does is to understand about the people and the culture of that place. But that doesn't happen in the United States. It happens in a very perfunctory, very past intensified sort of way when you're in fourth grade and you build a little longhouse and you say, "There were once indigenous people here." And then you move on. And so an acknowledgement is a reminder. It's a fairly gentle reminder from my perspective about indigenous people of place because we're trying to really undo decades of miseducation that's happened about indigenous people in the American lexicon, in American history. And so I think what happens over time is people end up thinking about this as territory or property and can be misconstrued in that way.

Our original acknowledgement is exactly what you just shared, which is we acknowledge all of creation. There was no time, at least that I'm aware of, where Seneca people met with Onondaga people and they said, "We acknowledge that we are on your land. This notion of property and ownership and territory-

Joanie Mahoney: Borders.

Neil Patterson: Yes, totally colonial. And that experiment is still going on. And so people's perceptions of land acknowledgements are so different because of worldview.

And I often like to say our real acknowledgement beyond the Thanksgiving address is one we call the three bear words, which is something that happened right over here at Le Moyne and something that continues today in our culture and that is when people journey to a place, they experience a loss because they've left their family and homes behind and they may have had somebody pass in their community, but when they reach the edge of that clearing, it's our job to acknowledge the grief of those visitors who come to that space.

And I think it's a great metaphor for something we don't do in environmental science, which is to acknowledge the grief and loss that we're all working from in trying to protect and restore going forward, but we don't take time to really remember. And that's what the Thanksgiving address is all about. That's what this edge of the woods ceremony is all about. So land acknowledgements allow me to talk about those other things, those cultural protocols for me that were born from the land here. They're not necessarily a statement that somebody came up with.

Joanie Mahoney:

I think it could be so valuable for people to hear you because it's not about the humans exclusively, and it's not about the borders and the territories. And when you stop to think about what it is that you're asking people to honor and care for, it is so clearly something that we're all in together. And if we could hear each other and understand, I think it would put a lot of the bad will down and understand we're all in this together. So my last question because I'm going to take advantage of having you here and you taking time with me is I get to be the president here at ESF where we're doing this incredible work that will change the planet and change the lives of the people and all of the beings. What would you do if you were in my role and you could be doing something to support the work of the Center for Native Peoples in the Environment or more broadly, the work between scientific knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge?

I'm very, very lucky to be sitting in this position where I can have some influence, and maybe I'll leave you with the question unless you have an immediate answer, but it's an open invitation to say, "If I was President Joanie, these are the kinds of things I would be doing," because I'll be better in my role if I get advice from people like you who have lived this work your entire life. You've intersected with so many different places, the work that you do with the DEC and the other indigenous groups and the state. And I would love for you to say, "This is something that you could be doing to make things better for us."

Neil Patterson:

Well, thank you for that. Yeah, I have a long list, but I remember a few years ago as part of our Native Earth program, we visited a Nature Conservancy property in the Adirondacks, quite a large one. In fact, the property's larger than what my nation has under its control, almost double what we have access to today. And they said, "What can we do to improve our relationships?" And a Mohawk lady from Ganienkeh said, "Give it back." "Oh, oh, wait. I don't know if we want to go that far here." But I would seriously consider real restorative acts of justice

being a large landowner in upstate New York. That is something to me that, again, we talk about grief and loss, those are the things that need to be healed. And you see now in Canada, a wide scale effort to return land and territory to indigenous people as a result of things like boarding schools and residential schools in Canada.

And so establishing indigenous protected areas has been part of that reconciliation. It's a small part, but it's an important one, and I think that needs to happen here. I also think that short of actually returning stolen land, I would say that ESF has so many great facilities that I've been part of at Cranberry Lake and at Heiberg and at Newcomb, where we're able to teach young people about being a steward of the environment. And I'd love to see the day where part of this restorative acts include a home for native earth, a place specifically dedicated towards working with and alongside communities to restore relationships with place. I know we're talking a little bit about that as we move forward, but ESF does such a good job at these visitor interpretive centers and at all of our remote campuses, we should find a place for Native Earth. Those are two quick ones from the list.

Joanie Mahoney: Let's plan to continue the conversation.

Neil Patterson: Yeah, yeah, good.

Joanie Mahoney: That is a very interesting response. So I would like to work with you to explore both of those things further.

Neil Patterson: Good. Great.

Joanie Mahoney: And I just want to thank you for taking time to stop what you were doing and sit down and share your experience and your knowledge, your expertise with the broader community. And I look forward to working with you down the road. Thanks, Neil.

Neil Patterson: Thank you, Joanie.