

Interview with Kirsten Vinyeta

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Meet Kirsten Vinyeta, an environmental sociologist specializing in qualitative research methods. She received her PhD in Environmental Sciences, Studies and Policy at the University of Oregon and her BS in Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research examines the social and political dimensions of land and fire management, federal-tribal relations, climate vulnerability and resilience, and multispecies dimensions of human social systems.

1. Could you start by telling us a bit about your background and what inspired you to pursue a career in environmental sociology? How did your journey lead you to focus on the intersection of federal land management, climate change, and Indigenous sovereignty?

As a kid I moved around a lot and had a bit of a chaotic childhood, so I found solace outside and among other species. When I first went to college, I thought I was going to be a vet, but a job in animal research quickly made me realize I was too soft for that, so I flipped through a college catalog and picked the first thing that caught my eye—landscape architecture. I didn't even know what a landscape architect did, but a quick search informed me that the career combined both art and nature, and I knew I liked both of those things. So, I graduated with a degree in landscape architecture with a specialization in ecological restoration and went on to work as a landscape architect for three years in Wisconsin. But as I often do, I got restless, and I felt I could expand my education to be able to make a bigger difference for the environment, so I ended up pursuing a master's in environmental studies at the University of Oregon. At the University of Oregon, a series of opportunities gave me the chance to work in service of Tribes. First, I was hired as a graduate student researcher for the Tribal Climate Change Project coordinated by Kathy Lynn. Through that project, I built a masters thesis in collaboration with the Coquille Indian Tribe of Oregon in which we explored the

value of photovoice (the combination of photography and storytelling) to convey Tribal concerns on the impacts of climate change on traditional cultural resources. Later, my professor Kari Norgaard—an environmental sociologist—would encourage me to pursue a doctoral degree and bring me into the fold of her long-term collaboration with the Karuk Tribe of the Klamath River Basin in California. Kathy and Kari's mentorship, my work with the Coquille and the Karuk Tribes, and my inspirational peers and friends at the University of Oregon, would greatly transform me as a person and set me on my current trajectory.

2. Your research often examines the intersection of climate change and Indigenous sovereignty. Can you discuss major challenges you've observed Indigenous communities facing in building climate resilience?

Each Tribe has a distinct history, set of cultural, spiritual, and ecological practices, and contemporary political and economic opportunities and constraints, so this looks different depending on the Tribe in question. But I think there are some common cross-cutting issues that tend to affect many Tribes. You can't talk about Tribes and climate change without talking about settler colonialism. Many Tribes' histories and cultural and spiritual practices are built upon principles of environmental stewardship, adaptability, and community resilience. Colonialism has not only been an instrumental cause of climate change itself, it simultaneously alters Tribal relationships with ancestral landscapes and compromises Indigenous peoples' ability to carry out resilience-building cultural practices. To begin to address colonial impacts upon Indigenous resilience requires, at the very least, the recognition and active promotion of Indigenous sovereignty as legally established in treaties. Tribes have the right to determine what programs, initiatives, and resources they need to address climate impacts in culturally responsive ways. Often, Tribes have not been adequately consulted—let alone invited to meaningfully collaborate or lead—on local, state, or federal climate change initiatives. As a result, these initiatives often miss the mark on what Tribes need, as well as on what Tribes can bring to the table when it comes to building climate resilience. Additionally, many Tribal governments are underfunded, making plans and initiatives harder to implement, especially if they require long-term funding

and staffing continuity. Finally, even when Tribes have the funding, staffing, and land base to implement resilience-building climate initiatives, they are subject to the “spillover” of decisions unfolding in adjacent private, state-, or federally-managed lands. Tribes can be impacted by past and present management decisions unfolding on adjacent lands even if the Tribe itself is implementing proactive, climate mitigation and adaptation measures on the lands they have authority to manage. This is true, for example, when it comes to wildfire management and the stewardship of climate-sensitive species, neither of which abide by the arbitrary lines of property ownership. And yet despite all these obstacles, there are Tribes really at the forefront of climate change mitigation and adaptation, which speaks to the resilience continuing to unfold in these communities against many odds.

3. Can you elaborate on your collaboration with the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources? What are the main benefits and challenges you’ve found in building trust with the Karuk Tribe? What advice would you give to researchers wanting to engage in this type of work?

I first started working in collaboration with the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources in 2016 under the tutelage of my mentor Kari Norgaard, who has been collaborating with the Karuk Tribe on and off for over a decade. Kari asked the Tribe if she could hire me to assist with the Karuk Climate Vulnerability Assessment, and so that was the first project under which I started working with Tribal staff as a collaborating researcher. Later, I worked as a researcher and illustrator for the Tribe’s Climate Adaptation Plan, Climate Transportation Plan, and would eventually build my dissertation project in collaboration with the Tribe as well. Today, I continue to collaborate with the Tribe, and have a research project underway documenting a Karuk-led NEPA process unfolding in the Klamath River Basin.

The benefits of building trust with the Karuk Tribe include getting to serve on Karuk-led projects that are incredibly inspiring and hopeful. The projects unfolding in the Klamath River Basin are powerful models of committed, place-based collaboration between the Tribe, non-profits, and federal agencies towards a more just and sustainable

future. Getting to learn from Karuk collaborators about Karuk approaches to land stewardship, and especially getting to illustrate Karuk eco-cultural relations and practices for Tribal reports, have been highlights of my career. But collaborating with Indigenous partners as a settler also comes with a lot of room for error. There is a long history of Indigenous exploitation and knowledge extraction among Western researchers. Even well-intentioned researchers have sometimes caused harm by lacking full awareness of Indigenous protocols, ethics, and traditions. To responsibly collaborate with Indigenous communities is to be willing to listen carefully, to recognize that you are seldom an expert, to commit to long-term relationship-building, and above all, to prioritize Indigenous timelines, priorities, research protocols, and community needs above your own research agenda. This last part can be especially challenging if, on the other end, you are feeling pressured by your university or granting agency to produce publications and deliverables within a tight timeline. But as with any community-based research, it is vital to remember that for community partners, Indigenous or otherwise, this is not some abstract research project—this is their world and these are their lives. To be trusted enough to be welcomed into other peoples’ worlds is at once a gift and a responsibility, so be willing to prioritize community needs and be prepared to stand firm and communicate clearly with your institutions as to why your collaborative work requires a different pace or process than might be expected in mainstream academic spaces.

4. Can you explain the concept of multispecies justice and how it informs your work?

Multispecies justice combines justice for people—especially politically marginalized communities— with justice for other species and/or the ecosystems. This framework has emerged in recent years and is informed by various preceding frameworks and concepts emerging within Indigenous, activist, and academic spaces, including political ecological frameworks, animal rights principles, critical environmental justice, and Indigenous ways of knowing that conceptualize other species as kin. I like this framework because it bridges the concerns of social justice scholars and activists with those of environmentalists—groups that have historically not always seen eye to eye but that really need to come together under a common set of objectives if we are to overcome some of the most pressing issues of our time. I am starting to use multispecies justice as a theoretical lens to examine research topics at the nexus of the human and more-than-human.

5. Can you share some examples of how traditional ecological knowledge and practices enhance climate resilience among Indigenous communities?

This question is context dependent and best answered by Indigenous knowledge holders themselves, but in general, Indigenous knowledges—traditional knowledges rooted in Indigenous communities—account for and are built upon Indigenous cultural values, are attuned to culturally significant species and landscapes, and importantly, depend on and simultaneously uphold Indigenous sovereignty. By employing Indigenous knowledges in climate change initiatives, Tribes ensure that mitigation and adaptation measures employ culturally relevant practices, prioritize the stewardship of culturally significant species and landscapes, and protect Indigenous peoples' ability to maintain sovereign and meaningful relationships. Western scientific and state-led initiatives that impose colonial values upon Indigenous peoples lead to culturally inadequate solutions at best, and disastrous maladaptation at worst. By centering Indigenous knowledges, Tribes and collaborating partners can develop climate approaches and solutions that protect Indigenous interests, practices, and relationships into the future.

6. Now that you are at Utah State University, some of your recent work centers around the Great Salt Lake, water conservation, and landscape conversion. Could you share some insights from your interview-based research with Cache Valley residents regarding their landscape and water conservation values, and their pursuit of water-wise landscaping? How will this research data be used?

In 2023, the state of Utah rolled out the Landscape Conversion Incentive Program, which offers a financial incentive for Utah residents that replace lawn with more water-efficient landscaping. As a former landscape

architect now interested in mechanisms to protect the Great Salt Lake, I was instantly interested in this state initiative. So, I reached out to the Utah Division of Water Resources to ask if there was interview-based research that I could carry out with the help of undergraduate students that would be useful for the agency. In the process of designing the project, they connected me with Scott Perkes in North Logan. For residents to be eligible for the Landscape Conversion Incentive Program, their municipality must first agree to institute water-efficient ordinances for new development within their jurisdiction. North Logan is one of a few municipalities in Cache Valley that are currently eligible, so Scott Perkes was a good addition to the project. We ended up developing a two-step project to generate data that will serve both the UDWR and City of North Logan. The first step was interviewing North Logan residents regarding their values regarding regional landscapes, residential landscapes, and water conservation. The undergraduate students enrolled in my SOC 4620: Environmental Sociology course carried out interviews for this part of the process. The second step was interviewing people in Cache Valley that have already willingly replaced part or all of the lawn in their residential landscapes. For this part of the process, I hired a summer undergraduate research assistant, Antonia George (Landscape Architecture). Antonia visited participants' gardens, noted what materials and or plant species residents had replaced their lawns with, and then interviewed residents regarding their regional and residential landscape values, as well as their experiences with and motivations for replacing their lawn. Antonia and my SOC 4620 students were vital to the success of this project. They collected data that will serve state and local agencies while developing qualitative research skills.

We are still in the process of collecting and processing data, but preliminary findings reveal that residents in North Logan and Cache Valley more broadly are keenly aware of the need to conserve water for the sake of everyone's wellbeing. Our respondents care deeply about the landscapes and wildlife that make Cache Valley what it is. When asked whose responsibility it is to conserve a healthy and abundant water supply in Utah, respondents overwhelmingly responded that it is "everyone's job"—government, farmers, industry, institutions, and individual residents. Those that have already replaced part or all of their lawn did so for various reasons, including to reduce watering costs, conserve water, reduce mowing, and diversify their residential landscape's plant palette. Crucially, there was extremely positive reception of the Landscape Conversion Incentive Program among participants, but very little pre-existing awareness of the program, so among our recommendations for our

community partners will be improving the program's visibility among eligible residents.

7. Among the various research projects you have undertaken, which one has been the most impactful to you personally, and why? Can you share a specific experience or outcome from this project that highlights its significance?

All projects are meaningful in their own way, and bring forth lessons and experiences that shape who I am as a researcher. But one that stands out to me as particularly impactful was my illustration work for the Karuk Tribe Department of Natural Resources, which started as illustration without a research component, and then became a chapter in my dissertation examining graphic illustration as cross-cultural communication and as a culturally valuable form of Indigenous story-telling. The reason why this project was so significant for me was two-fold. For one, it's not everyday I get to use my artistic creativity as a sociologist, so returning to my landscape architecture roots for this work was a welcomed change that allowed me to connect with Karuk ecologies in new and fun ways. But even more interesting was just how effective the process of illustrating was in helping me better understand the phenology of Karuk landscapes, and the eco-cultural relationships that make Karuk Ancestral Territory what it is. And to top it all off, these graphics have been quite useful for the Karuk Department of Natural Resources as well, which makes me feel good about being able to make a small contribution towards their immense efforts in fixing this broken world.