

CORH Values – Season 3, Episode 1

Randy Larsen on Fire and Native American Environmental Philosophy

Philosopher Dr. Randy Larsen, who fled the Camp Fire that devastated Paradise in 2018, talks to us about some Native American attitudes towards the Environment. We discuss how they have traditionally dealt with fire, and examine their conceptions of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Dr. Larsen also discusses the life of naturalist and preservationist John Muir and suggests ways that his insights are relevant to us today.

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Transcript:

Hello, welcome to CORH Values, the religion and humanities podcast produced by the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, California State University, Chico. I'm your host and chair of the departments. Daniel Veidlinger. This season. Our theme is going to be fire and all of its manifestations. Talking to you here from Chico, California, we've had a very difficult summer. One of the largest fires in California history. The Dixie Fire has been burning. It's still burning. And the skies have been filled with smoke. And the people had been filled with anguish having to deal with this. And of course, this is now the third major fire, at least in the last couple of years. And we're all worried that there's going to be many more in the future. So this season we're going to talk about fire in all its various forms, both physical manifestations of fire that we see in the various forest fires that go on. But we're also going to talk about myths about fire in various religions, ways of approaching fire in different cultures. So today I'd like to welcome philosopher Randy Larsen, and he has a PhD in environmental ethics and is the former host of Eco Talk, a nationally syndicated radio show on ecology that was on Pacifica Radio. Now he's teaching at CSU Chico courses such as Native American environmental philosophy, environmental ethics, good life, and ancient philosophy. So I'm really looking forward to our discussion with Dr. Larsen. Welcome. You know, it's interesting, Daniel, it seems. You were just saying, boy, it's been 3 summers in a row now that we've been dealing with fire and in this in this area and I you were saying we're all worried about like, how it might be in the future or whatever. But it seems to me that this, these are the good old days. We're going to look back on these days where you're only smoked out for two months and say, Oh jeez, I long for those days, if the world just keeps getting hotter, the fires are only going to get worse, right? I think that there's a lot I've read saying that even if we stop producing carbon into the atmosphere right now, it would still take decades and decades for the damage that we did to kind of slowly come back down. Some things are only going to get worse. It first. Yes. Even if we stop, they're going to continue to get worse. So it definitely is very demoralizing and it's a whole other topic this could be a whole show. Yes, indeed, I know it is important that we start out with just some sense of how serious this issue is. And if we don't get another good rain and snow season this winter, then we're really in trouble next year. That point, I don't even know where the drinking water I mean, they might have to stop trucking in water to some communities. At that point. You know, you mentioned the Dixie fire and just think about this in terms of restoration and the footprint of that fire. I mean, what is it now? How many how many how many acres is this thing like? God and the 990 is almost a million acres. We have no idea how to restore that kind of habit, I guess. I mean, just sit and we just don't we don't we've never had to try to do that. But of course, fire, what many people don't realize often is that fire is a natural part of the ecological cycle. So the raw fact that we're having fires, not necessarily such a big deal. It's the size of the fires, the frequency of them. And of course, the native peoples who've lived here for thousands of years also had fires when they were living here. And presumably they had their own ways of dealing with them and understanding the role that they play in the environments. Well, let's go back to the beginning and just talk a little bit about how the Native Americans did see themselves as parts of, of nature and how creation got to be a, can you say that there's a myth about the myth of the Sky Woman, commonly known. Maybe talk a little bit about that. Yeah, absolutely. I think that's a really good way to start. A Sky Woman is a, is, There's a lot of different versions of the Sky Woman myth. And depending on what camp fire you're sitting around and do the storyteller happens to be you maybe are any number of

versions of this, but it's, but it's a very common in Native American creation myth. And, and many tribes have some version of it. And the basic Sky Woman myth is that Sky Woman was falling from the sky. And the geese saw her. And bunch of geese came in and caught her. Soft they have down and all. But the geese realize that they, they couldn't hold her. So they, they call the council and all these other animals got together, try to figure out what they're going to do about Sky Woman and Turtle volunteers as you can place her on my back. And perhaps you've heard before that oftentimes Native Americans will call either the whole planet or just North America Turtle Island. So they land, they place her on the back of the turtle. But they realize that the turtle's back is not a very plentiful environment. She's not going to be able to flourish on a shell. So different animals. I guess I should point this out that the Earth is nothing but ocean at this point. So, so there isn't a land. So they were afraid when she fall, she's going to drown. So they put her on the back of a turtle. Dry. Different animals take turns diving to the bottom of the ocean to try to find some light. They could create a continent with sturgeon goes down, can't hold his breath long enough. The loon goes down, can't do it. The beaver goes down. All these different animals take their, take their turn and they all come back empty handed until finally the lowly Muskrat, who is on the bottom of the totem pole of animal virtue in these stories, decides to, to, to take a turn. Muskrat dives down, floats back up to the surface dead. But they notice. And muskrats, grubby little paw in some mud. So the muskrat made it, died on the way back up. So they, they take this mud and then they put it on turtle's back. There's a little piece. And what Sky Woman does is she starts to dance, the dance of gratitude. And as she is dancing, the Earth grows and grows and grows and grows and gets bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. But importantly, like any good guest, Sky Woman didn't come empty-handed. Sky Woman brought with her branches and fruits and seeds and put them on the ground. And then the land started to flourish and change and grow. And, and that's really interesting because it suggests that humans had a positive, beneficial role to play on the planet. She brought something to the party. And I think that party metaphor is a really interesting one because if you think about, you just, you just go to a party. Like what happens when somebody shows up late? Different people respond differently. Some people are like, I let the party begin. Other people just kind of listen and watch and try to find their niche and how it is that they're going to fit in. The latter is the American one and the formers, it's kind of more of the Western, kind of more of the Western perspective. There are certain virtues here which are, which are really important, that are brought up in this. Lot of scholars say that they are cultures of gratitude. And a culture of gratitude is a culture which not only is grateful, but it's a call and response. So the difference between say, being thankful and being grateful is that grateful implies that you want to give back which Sky Woman is exemplified. So she's grateful, she's doing the dance of gratitude, and then she gets to give her gift. So it's a relationship. How do I fit in? What is my niche? So you can imagine like the children of Sky Woman meeting that children of Eve, And these two different kind of creation myths and how the different world views can be conflictual. Because in the Genesis story about the Garden of Eden, there's a lot of discussion about the idea that God made a lot of the creatures there for Adam and Eve to use. And that he created these animals and let Adam name them even so that he would have mastery over them. Whereas in the native stories, it's much more of that humans are part of the destroying old world chronologically like when did God make the animals genesis, right? Well, there's actually two different stories that people sometimes Genesis Chapter 1. You have the simple animals first, like the birds and the fish, and then the mammals and then humans on the sixth day of creation. But Genesis Chapter 2, some readings of it suggests that God created Adam first, then he created Eve as a companion for atom, and then the animals as companions for Adam and Eve to help them make their way through the world. Different orders. I know that both are found in the Bible. Yeah, that makes a really big difference. Right for sure. Because if you if you if you come late, then you might look to the animals, As mentors and teachers, they've been here longer. They know the place. Yes, Right? Exactly. But I do know that this idea of gratitude and reciprocity is really interesting one because people oftentimes ask, what is it that I can do? Okay, I'm grateful. What can I do. And the answer in the Potawatomi culture at least is figure out what your gifts are. So the way that your grateful is, you figure out what your gifts are and you maximize those gifts. So let's say you loved the planet. You're grateful for the planet. You want to reciprocate your love and appreciation and respect for the planet. And you're an accountant. You have a gift with numbers that Randy Larson doesn't have. I can't speak for you. Or if you're a mechanical engineer, you have a different gap that different people have different gifts. And this ties in with that idea of figuring out what your niche is. Because the niche that individuals play and that different animals play in, the system creates a whole. And that is what's worth referencing. That's where you find value is in the holism. And if you're grateful, do your part well, that's a lot. You don't have to worry

about it. All right. Just do your part well, so let's bring it back to fire for a minute. What were their views on fire? Fire was completely and totally natural. It wasn't considered an enemy. And they would burn a lot of areas themselves. And I wonder how they prevented them from getting out of control. Well, that has to do with paying attention to the wind directions. It's like when are you going to burn? When you're not going to burn? What's that? What the down slope is like? It just has to do with observation and paying attention. And that Karuk's Tribe was consulted by the United States Forest Service last fall for help with dealing the wildfires. I noticed today I was reading the news and that General Sherman, what they think is the largest tree in the world down in sequoia family, wrapping it up an aluminum foil to protect it from the flames isn't that crazy. Yeah, that is really crazy. And imagine if that tree was felt by some sort of failure. Two-thirds of all giant sequoia Grove acreage across the Sierra, Nevada has burned in wildfires between 2015 and 2020. And these are giants, so old. So imagine that 3000 year old trees survived before the book of Genesis. Yes, that's right. They survived so much and seen so much and they burn too, but they managed to survive that often. You can see in the rings, right, that there was a fire here. But now the fires are just too big that they can't it's too hot. Although trees can survive by a remarkably well sometimes actually, redwoods are very, very like. You'll see the fire. They'll show you pictures taken from the helicopter and huge fires covering these areas. And then a few weeks later you can see that in fact the trees are not completely charred and falling down like they are kind of little bit still alive and then they can maybe grow again. Yeah, remarkable. Especially redwoods I guess they have an oil that is, yeah, they're really fire resistant they're water resistant also like that's why people use redwood I guess for stuff. They don't rot. Yeah, rot. Resistant super special trees and sequoias or are they related to these? Redwoods or It's a totally different thing. Well, there's, there's three types of what we call redwood trees. There's something called the dawn redwood, which is in China. We have one on campus. And then the other two are the Sequoia sempervirens. And the Sequoia gigantism, that sempervirens grow over on the coast like up in Humboldt. It's more kind of on the coast, but in the Sierra you have the gigantism. And that's the one that we're talking about here. So that the Sequoia Sempervirens is, I mean, they're both sequoia types of mass. One is a little bit taller, the sempervirens and the gigantisms are a little bit bigger. I've often wondered if trees have a kind of consciousness of some sort. They get some consciousness of some kind of. This is a really interesting discussion, Daniel, because sometimes the word intelligence people really want to cling to and grab onto and it has to do with human rationality or something similar to it. But then Daniel Goldman and those guys have written those books about emotional. And so the word is, it's got various meanings. But, but like maple trees. So they, they, there's a time of year when the maple sap runs at a particular speed. And they have, these trees have got to be able to sense how hot it is outside and how hot it is in the ground. And it has to be this perfect kind of we can't do it. We can't tell when it's time to like have the SAP run out. But the trees know this. They have this kind of ability to tell. I don't know what you want to call that. Right. You know, Aristotle says all arguments come down to a matter of definition to define. Yes, that's right. If you define consciousness broadly enough that they are conscious. I mean certainly there conscious in the sense that they they sense things and react to those things. Which is a kind of basic level of consciousness or sophisticated. You could be right, but maybe it's not so basic. And here's another interesting difference. So my house burned down the campfire, right? And before it burned down. And looking around thinking, Okay, what should I grab? Now this is a really interesting question about value. Okay, so you're probably like take me out of it so that any person right. What are you going to grab? Probably take grandma, right? Probably take the dogs, right? You would guess they have what we call in philosophy, intrinsic value, valuable in and of themselves, regardless of how useful they are for me, might not even like grandma, but you still are going to grab them. Yeah. So so the dogs probably count they matter, probably grandma probably matters. The fish and the aquarium. That's getting a little fuzzier. But we had a fire when I was in grade school and my dad ran into the burning house to save the gerbils. We 2 gerbils. He just couldn't bear it. So he went in there Yeah. And he came out yeah. Mammals may count more, right? Yeah. Is it because they're like metaphor metaphors of humans? They're like little humans and so they count? Yeah, because in fact we keep the gerbils in an aquarium right without water in it a terrarium yeah. you call it And then the firemen said, Hey man, forget about the stupid fish. And then my dad said it's gerbils. Oh, okay. We understand exactly right. Because there is this tribalism. Well, we're mammals, they're mammals and you feel right. Yeah, right. And so maybe we'll call him intelligent and we wouldn't call a plant intelligent but, well, you might say it's alive and life seems to count. I'm actually trying to get, I'm trying to work up to something here about Native American conceptions of value, right? So, however it is that we look at this, we have a tendency to say that thing, grandma has value, that thing, the gerbil has value. We might not call it a thing, but would still pointed out as an

individual. That individual has value. And that's super reductionist. That plant has value. So we'll break it down. We break down the world in the Western kind of European way of like stuff that has intrinsic value and stuff that has instrumental value, stuff that's valuable in and of itself, and stuff that's tool only valuable because it's a tool. A real standard Native American conception is stuff that's animate and stuff that's inanimate, stuff that has a spirit and stuff that doesn't have a spirit. And there's a distinction. Well, let me, I'm going to give you a quiz here Daniel, okay, so everything in the world is animate from this perspective except for one group of things, Any guess what it is. So maybe it wouldn't be stones and things like that because there are viewed as having a kind of spirit. and why. because they're natural? That's right. They're part of the natural world. So you and I might look at a rock and look at a plate, right? And see them as the same. Oh, I see. So man-made objects would be the one thing that don't have this kind of spirit. That's right, I see. And the reason is because they don't have a niche. They're not a part of the natural world. They don't play their role in at all. But even these things can be like re-animated Frankenstein, right? So if you take an old school bus and you park it in the ocean and you put it next to the coral reef to try to, you know, to, to re-establish a coral reef. And it works right All of a sudden it gets to be animate. I see. But the point is, is that is this eco holistic view of the world. So relationships matter. Not just individual things matter, relationships, right? And that's, that's, that's an ecological conception for sure. But it's not that typical scientific Western conception, although it is very typical Native American conception. And so fire, is it good, Is it bad? Does it fit into the system? Is it healthy for the ecosystem or is a not healthy for the ecosystem? That's the question. Is it helpful or is it harmful for the system? Right? And that would be the perspective. And if you stay on top of it, if you're managing fire, you manage it all along. Or like, is it good for the ecosystem? Is it not good for the ecosystem? Burn it, if you need some, put it out if you got too much. And of course, there's a philosopher well I guess a naturalists and thinker that you've. Written a lot about John Muir, and he was very interested, i, and I believe in the spiritual aspects of nature as well. So was he influenced by people like Thoreau and other American writers who wrote about the spiritual relationship I tell you who he really loved was Emerson. And he just idolized Emerson. And Emerson really loved John Muir to, Emerson had a list called, my men. A list of ten people that he admired that he thought were really important. And number 10, right at the very end, is John Muir, I see last person he added and Emerson acted actually asked Muir if he would edit Henry David Thoreau's Journals. Yeah, he Wanted that job. After Thoreau died. I see. Okay. In, in, in Muir's response to that was really quite beautiful. Basically saying, now, I know I have to stay in the mountains. So did he live most of his life in close communion with nature? You know, it's interesting with Muir. So he, he, he spent ten years in the Sierra. Okay. He didn't hardly leave. Okay. Then he got married. So ten years alone, pretty much. He was pretty gregarious. Uh-huh. Okay. But he but he let them and There's lots of stories about some dude with a big beard marching down the trail with lots of stories of people Who've he 'd never even seen before, would say, you must be John Muir. So it was kind of a famous guy that loved to talk about nature. But once he got married, he spends a good ten years on a ranch and Martinez tending a farm Uh-huh. An apple orchard and grapes. There's actually He made a type of grape, that you can now find in wine. But he hated it. And here's why his wife sent him away to go back into the woods. And that's when he founded the Sierra Club and became kind of an activist. He had different kind of stages of his life, right. Well, what I would like to point out about Muir, which I think is super interesting, is his list of animals and all the virtues that they had. So Native American, There's a Native American scholar named Dogen that, that looks at me or in the wave in your talks about animals. It's just being hand in glove. Native American philosophy. I see. So I mean, as an example, Muir loved porcupines. Yeah. Okay. And and say, well, why does ILA porcupines? And it's like because mirror would look at me, say Look, these little guys, they only move like maybe a mile an hour. They're super friendly. They're very curious. Like, what is it that we can learn from porcupines in terms of leading better lives, right? So right off the bat it and say stuff like, well, what I get from looking at a porcupine is that it's easier to be nice to others when you're not afraid of them. I mean, there's a lot of wisdom in that, absolutely. Yeah, no, that's right. And and mirrors journals are loaded with those types of observations about different animals, right? And what are the lessons that they're teaching? It totally ties into Sky Woman. Absolutely think that animals are here first. What can they teach us? How can we learn from? All right, So he had that real interesting kind of, you know, kind of native American band later on in his life, he spent a lot of time with Indians, especially up in Alaska. I think early on in Yosemite, it was pretty standoffish with the natives. Yeah, I read about that, that he wasn't necessarily full of brotherly love for the Native Americans from day one or anything like that? Yeah, At 1, there was a bit of a tense relationship. Over time. I heard that he cares, You know, and and his gregarious nature notwithstanding, here was a bit of

up. He didn't really like people very much. She thought they were destroying the planet. Hey, even back then. Yeah. Yeah. Wasn't it wasn't that again, specifically not like natives. He didn't like people. He was really torn about visitors coming into Yosemite and kind of just destroying the place. So that was still happening back then? Oh, absolutely. Okay. Yeah. So what I mean, she was active during the latter part of the 19th century, right? So after Darwin, did he say much about evolution, that he's right, I hope you liked this because I knew who was also quite religious. Yeah, I'm embedded classical Christian religious, right. And one points, right? Well, that's the way it was brought out. He had the Old Testament completely memorized and about two-thirds of the New Testament. And mostly memorize because his dad was just a real fundamentalists Lutheran. Okay. And just like use a wet like to get the guy to memorize is less I see. But if you read Mueller's writings from his early journals until the very end, you can see this a little shift where the language seems almost exactly the same. But he stops using the word God and starts using the word nature with a capital N. Whereas a beautiful story of John Muir hiking with a little dog needs to be seen. Be read. One thing by NMR this is and recommended short story called sticky. Okay, it goes on a trip with this little dog and a glacier up in Alaska. And they get stuck on this glacier and they almost die. And, but at 1, they make it across this little ice river bridge. And the celebration that the dog has the excitement. Dog has opened up your eyes to this idea of kinship with animals. I see, yeah, but if a dog had real wise fear, right? Hadn't real deserve a joyous celebration beings. And so all of these emotions and the way the dog responded, here, we are at a completely different relationship with animals after that. Well, I certainly think that we have a lot more in common with animals than people who normally realize. And we probably perceive the world in ways that are similar to animals. We process it in ways it is similar to animals. And really endlessly fascinated by how similar we really are to our animal friends. Are you familiar Daniel, with the color wheel? And so if you have gold and purple, they're complimentary call, yes, right? So they are opposite on the writer will. So asters and golden rods generally grow together an article and you know, like why would ask theirs in Goldratt's, grow together? Because the asters make the golden rods more brilliant. It just so happens, our eyes are entirely different than b's. Then the one part of our eyes that are like bees is we see yellow and purple is complimentary. And so to the b's, right to what an interesting thing that we share in common. We see the same thing as beautiful. And that type of ecological holism I think is just right at the, at the, at the part of Native American environmental philosophy. And, and that philosophy as at the heart of how they want to deal with fire and the forests part of a relationship. So to conclude, I mean, to bring it back to fire. Yeah, how could we see these ideas? Helping the future a fire in California? Well, I do think that we need a new epic. We need a new way of understanding the world and our role in it. Learned to be grateful and learn to reciprocate, and learn that you're not alone when you give your gifts. That's a lot. That's what you can do. Really don't have to be crushed by the weight of the world. You can recognize that you're a part of the team, a huge team called Gaia, right? So and like even with talking to different people, like I can't get through to some people and you could write languages and different relationships. Well, let's hope that the people listening to this will take some of these words to heart and see themselves in relationship to their environments, rather than as owners efforts or possessors of it, who are free to do as they wish, wish with this thing that sustains them. This thing. Yeah, That's the right to think of it as a thing it up. Yeah. And not appreciate how much we are sustained by the environment of which were apart. And not only that any, you don't even digest your own food. Yeah, right. Right. You got all of this this flora in your stomach? Yes. Right. That digests that we aren't ecosystems as well as a part of it. I mean, one does see a danger in ironically, many of the Eastern countries like China and India, the traditionally had a more holistic understanding of human's relationship with nature. As they model. They want a piece of what America has gotten. There's the danger that they will try to wrap, tried to grab it in the same instrumental way that the western powers have done over time to try to rewire its western tech. Yes, that's right. Western technology, Western ways of thinking. And with such enormous populations, if their populations were ever to get all the stuff that we have, it would really damage the environment in a way that I think there'd be no coming back from. Well, let me say one last thing about that. So I do think one of our big issues is to learn not to have an abiding faith in technology. That science has always been really good at answering the questions that we put before it, that those questions are questions of value and were participants in this. And so often we feel like, well, whatever the problem is, climate change or whatever, that technologists will take care of it. They'll figure out a new technology shifts. And that in a way it's kind of similar to apathy. You know, and, and, and the scientists know that that's not true. They know that, that the world, that the relationship that we have with the world is the one that determines the type of technologies that we create. So we're all a part of that. We're not helpless and we have power. And we just need to see our

connection in at all. All right. Those are wise words to finish up with. Well, thanks, Daniel. I appreciate it. Thank you very much, Randy Larsen, talking to us about a variety of things, nature, Native American approaches, what the future of our planet will be. So thanks a lot, I appreciate it and all the best. Okay, Thanks for listening. If you'd like to learn more about the Department of Comparative Religion and Humanities, please go to our website at [CSU Chico.edu slash CORH](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). That's [CSU CHICO.edu slash C O R H](http://CSUChico.edu/CORH). I want to point out that the opinions expressed here and do not necessarily reflect those of the faculty and staff of our departments. I mean, I can't remember the last time it rained. Do you remember the last time it rained here? Actually, Yeah. Another week or two ago. Oh, wow. that's right, yeah. We had an hour in the morning.