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Peter Andrée (00:47):

Hello and welcome back to the Ecolitics Podcast. This is a podcast for students and researchers studying environmental politics. And I'm Peter Andrée from Carleton University. I'll be your host today. Ryan Katz-Rosene from the University of Ottawa will not be joining us for this episode. So this show's title is Becoming an Ecolitical Researcher, and I'm here in discussion with three researchers on that path. The first is Obed Asamoah. He recently completed his PhD and is now a postdoctoral fellow at Carleton University. So welcome to the podcast Obed.

Dr. Obed Asamoah (01:24):

Thank you, Peter.

Peter Andrée (01:25):

Great to have you here. And the next two are current PhD researchers. First is Devon Cantwell-Chavez. She's a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Studies at the University of Ottawa, studying under Ryan Katz Rosene. So welcome, Devon.

Devon Cantwell (01:40):

Thanks for having me.

Peter Andrée (01:42):

And finally, Kaleigh McIntosh is a PhD student in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies at Carleton University and she's also the producer of this season of the Ecolitics Podcast. So, thanks for joining us, Kaleigh.

Kaleigh McIntosh (01:56):

Great to be here.

Peter Andrée (01:57):

Alright, so it's great to have the three of you here today. And I want to start with you, Obed. You recently finished your PhD in Finland, but doing a study that took place in your home country of Ghana. So, that sounds like quite a journey. Tell us a little bit about your background and what brings you to the podcast today.

Dr. Obed Asamoah (02:19):

Thank you very much, Peter. I started my educational journey in Ghana, and I was born in a very small community in Ghana. My tribe is a minority in Ghana. So, when I was growing up, I saw the forest to be the home for us, but time came that there were a lot of people, a lot of timber industries coming in to harvest the forest. It got to a point that the forest could no longer hold the pressure from these people. So, there was a time that there were a lot of conflict between the local people and the forest industries. As a young child, I decided that okay, what can be my contribution in the future? So, I talked to myself that I want to be a forest manager, so I decided turn my life to the forest. So, after high school, I decided to enroll in the university, where I studied renewable natural resources and specialized in forest resource management.

(03:24):

After that, I got opportunity to go to the Czech Republic and also study international development and specialize in environmental science. It wasn't my plan that I have to get a PhD, but along the line, I decided that I have to still pursue to be a researcher. So, I decided to enroll in a PhD in Finland, where I enrolled as a forest science PhD in forest science. And after my studies in Finland, I got opportunity work at Carlton University as a postdoctoral research fellow, where I'm looking at the mountain pine beetle and it's effect on the forest ecosystem in British Columbia in Saskatchewan and then Alberta. So, my journey has been long but quite interesting.

Peter Andrée (04:13):

Yeah, that's quite a journey, Obed. And just tell us a little bit more about your PhD research if you can. We have a lot of listeners who are curious, what do PhD students do? What do they look at? And in your case, it sounds like you were able to go back to Ghana and do a project that really served the forest that brought you down this path to begin with.

Dr. Obed Asamoah (04:37):

Yeah, my PhD, I looked at non-timber forest product and how it can help improve the livelihood of the people. The reason why I chose this topic is that, like I said, my community was based in the forest, so we depend on the forest for everything. But as time goes on, I realize that if there is a way that we can sustainably utilize these resources and look at the kind of factors that can improve its utilization. So, I looked at climate change and how it has impacted on this non-timber forest product. I also looked at a perception of the people when it comes to value addition to this non-timber forest product and the commercialization of this non-timber forest product.

Peter Andrée (05:27):

Yeah, that's fascinating. Just to clarify, because you're talking about non-timber forest products, what are the non-timber forest products from Ghana?

Dr. Obed Asamoah (05:35):

Well, thank you. Non-timber forest product is any product that is being obtained from the forest apart from timber. So, mushrooms, honey, fruit, seeds, gum, resins and leaves are considered as non-timber forest products. These are the products that the local people heavily depend on. For example, people living close to the forest go to the forest to take the leaves, the bark of the trees, the roots for many other purposes. For example, most of these local communities don't have this mode in hospitals. So they heavily depend on this product to treat different kinds of ailments. So, that is the reason why I saw that it's something that is very important that we have to look at it. For ages, these products have been

taken, and each utilization has not been met. So people go, they take it, and if they are able to add value to it, if they're able to process it, it can increase its commercialization, which at the end of the day can also improve the lives of the local people. So, that was the reason why I looked at that and how it can be helped to improve the life of the people.

Peter Andrée (06:52):

Fascinating. And I can imagine that implicit in all there is that some of that harvesting of non timber force products can be done within vibrant biodiverse ecosystems that the timber industry doesn't necessarily preserve.

(07:11):

So, let's shift to Devon. Devon, you're doing quite different research. You're working in various cities around the world, looking at how they are engaging with climate change. Tell us a bit about your PhD research and what you're finding.

Devon Cantwell (07:24):

Yeah, thank you, Peter. So, I researched four cities across the globe in particular. So, Buenos Aires, Ho Chi Minh City, Seoul, and Mexico City. And I'm really interested in two sets of questions. First is what are the norms that we actually have when it comes to urban climate governance policy, and how did we get those in the first place? The second big pocket of things that I'm looking at has to do with norm entrepreneurs and their role in those types of policies.

(07:54):

So, a couple of big findings that I've had on this: first is that oftentimes, we are getting norm entrepreneurs through a process that I'm calling hegemonic assimilation, which is basically a fancy term for cities that are interested in gaining power. So, they're looking to see what other cities in power do and trying to match that. The way that cities are doing this is through economic structures, through leadership roles in international organizations. And oftentimes norm entrepreneurs become specialists in a very particular issue. So, like transportation or green spaces, but maybe not something like water.

(08:28):

Additionally, a lot of the ways that we've talked about norms and urban climate governance and environmental governance in the past often lacks a kind of foundation in history. So, one of the things I'm trying to do is account for what the role of colonization is in terms of the modern existence of these norms and how they play out in the modern context. And I'd say one of the biggest findings, and this is where I'm going to end up taking future research, is focused on what are the actual impacts of these norms and these policies on everyday residents. Unfortunately, one of the big findings that I have from this project is that things that we often consider to be best practices in governance norms for cities often reproduce inequalities. And so, I think that's the next big puzzle that we need to tease out is actually how do we address those inequalities? How do we challenge these kinds of existing structures of norms? But yeah, the research has led me to some really interesting findings here.

Peter Andrée (09:21):

That's really interesting. Devon, I was just reflecting on how, for Obed, his relationship with the forest as a child affected his research trajectory. And I'm curious about yours. Why are cities important in general

and why were they important to you? What's the background that brought you to this as a research topic?

Devon Cantwell (09:41):

So, my time in graduate school master's and PhD programs combined is bookended by Trump administrations. Back in 2017, the US announced that they were planning to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. The next day we had about 200 plus cities show up and say we're still in and say that they were going to keep moving forward with Paris Agreement Goals despite whatever was going to be happening at the national level. And that piqued my interest about whether cities were actually capable of reaching the type of carbon drawdowns that we needed, whether they were capable of adapting communities in the way that were needed and doing that in an equitable way. I have had to think about what the next generation of city leadership in Trump 2.0 has looked like. So, cities are playing a really substantial role in this, but as I talk to folks both at the city, national, and international levels, unfortunately, one of the things is national level leadership really does matter, and there are limitations to what cities can achieve by themselves. But cities and their networks have come up with some really creative options to try to navigate that. So, it'll be interesting to see how that plays out, but that's kind of what drew me to that topic.

Peter Andréé (10:50):

Yeah, that's really interesting. And I know a regular conversation in our courses is about what actors need to take the lead, and the reality is often there's a whole bunch of activity going on different levels and intersecting and weaving together, and sometimes the nation-state is at the front, sometimes it's a laggard pulling things back, and then the states or provinces or other institutions or some cases civil society or industry is leading on certain issues and pulling other actors with them. So, these ebbs and flows of political engagement on these issues is fascinating.

(11:28):

And now I'm going to switch over to Kaleigh McIntosh who's doing, again, a different piece of research in her home community of New Brunswick looking at the Wolastoq River. But I might also start by asking you about your trajectory, Kaleigh, so that we can get a sense of how you came to the place that you are today.

Kaleigh McIntosh (11:51):

Yeah, for sure. It's been a bit of a winding road to get back to Fredericton, New Brunswick where I'm based now. In my undergrad, I was really interested in politics, so definitely on the politics side of Ecopolitics and did my undergrad in political science. And then, when I went off to do my master's, I was initially really interested in concepts of climate migration and what that would look like in law, but I ended up getting involved in that area of research and heading over to do my master's in Development Studies at York University where I later did my field research for that program in a country called Kiribati, which is in the Pacific and is a country made up of 33 atoll islands. What I was interested in there was understanding how communities were able to contribute to sort of the international development and national development work being done on in the country around climate adaptation, and specifically sea level rise. And how community organizations were working on those issues on their own. That took me about as far from home as I could have possibly gone. And when I came to do my PhD, which I think was definitely a bit of a, I wasn't sure if that was going to be the path for me, but I realized that a lot of what I

had learned from that experience in Kiribati informed what I wanted to think about even looking in my own backyard in New Brunswick. Yeah.

Peter Andrée (13:18):

That's super interesting, Kaleigh. And so now you find yourself in your backyard looking at the Wolastoq River. And tell me just a little bit about your research there and so the listeners can hear a bit about what you've been finding.

Kaleigh McIntosh (13:32):

Yeah, so I'm focused, as you said, on the Wolastoq River Valley in New Brunswick, Canada. I'm focusing on three case studies of resilience projects, looking at the river led by watershed groups, which are sort of community organizations and NGOs, environmental NGOs in the province. I want to better understand collaborative relationships, how they can help us understand the resilience of a complex sort of system like the Wolastoq's socioecological system, and how can we build and maintain these resilience efforts in the long term. And what role do collaborative relationships play in that process? Really trying to open up the relationships that are involved to really see who is – thinking expansively about who are stakeholders, who are participating, why are they, or why are they not participating? And how do those relationships inform a dynamic process of building resilience and maintaining it in the long term.

Peter Andrée (14:32):

That sounds like exciting, maybe even complicated work. Can you just say a little bit, Kaleigh, but what does doing that research look like from day to day for listeners?

Kaleigh McIntosh (14:42):

Yeah, it was definitely a process of learning that even though I'm from here, you've got to build those community relationships, getting out there, getting involved in the networks of folks doing work in this space. So, that was sort of the initial part of it. And then coming to what exactly the research should look like with community partners, building relationships with these partners to form these case studies. And then the actual research of it is, I'm mainly focusing on long form interviews with all the stakeholders in each case study. So yeah, mostly, I'd say it's a process of building relationships, and it's definitely interesting how I'm studying relationships and also trying to build relationships at the same time. Yeah.

Peter Andrée (15:24):

That's really neat. One of the patterns that I noticed across all three of you is that you didn't necessarily expect to be doing what you did in your PhD work or are doing your PhD work. I know that some of the listeners may not even have imagined doing a PhD yet, so I'm curious: what's it like being a PhD student or a recent PhD student in the case of Obed? What words or phrases come to mind and why? Obed, do you want to try this one first?

Dr. Obed Asamoah (15:52):

Yes. The words that comes into my mind is knowledge acquisition and then knowledge utilization. As I've been able to – throughout the PhD journey, I've learned so many things. I've met so many people, different background, and I've learned so many things from them, especially when it comes to forest management. There were many other things that I thought that it was very normal when it comes to my country, but after interacting with people, attending conferences, presentations and meetings upon

meetings, this has really opened my mind. It has really given me the experience and the knowledge that is needed when it comes to forest management.

(16:46):

There is one funny thing that I've not been talking about it, but that was what really pushed me to go into research. The whole thing was that when I was in the university, I met one professor and that professor, I really liked him, but there was a time that I went to his house and how he has used carved wood to decorate his home and his office. I said, okay, I want to be like him because the way he has arranged his office, the way – he looks good. So, I asked myself, okay, how can I be like this man? Is it that I have to push to get where he is? So, that also really pushed me. He set as a role model for me to really go advanced myself in studies. But when I grew into research that I said, no, this was very funny. Why should this be my reason of going into research? It should have been something very important, but it was very important to me at that time. Which I see that anybody who wants to go into research should have some kind of focus, he should be well determined and have the resilience and resistance to all kind of pressure that may come by. Yeah.

Peter Andrée (18:10):

That's a great story. I hear you at the end. You're saying you need a good research focus and you need a reason for going and that determination, but having a role model and vision of where you want it to end up sounds like that's really important and that would be true for many different paths that the listeners might be going on. Devon, how about you? What words or phrases come to mind when you want to sum up this idea of being a PhD student – maybe unexpected? What was unexpected about it?

Devon Cantwell (18:41):

Yeah, so I think a little bit of context that helps here is that I'm a first-generation college student. So, in the US what this means is I am the first generation in my family to go to college. My parents don't have a four-year degree. My brother has an MBA, but he's about eight and a half years older, and it's a very different ballgame. And so, what that means is there's a lot of what's called hidden curriculum and there's a lot of folks that have done writing and written books about this and things like that. So, one thing about the hidden curriculum is that you're running into stuff that you didn't know about all the time. So, every time you think that you kind of understand how something works, there's a new twist to it. And so, the hidden curriculum can be really frustrating to navigate. Folks have done some recent research about what the composition and demographics of PhD and faculty members look like, and there is a shocking number of people who are not first-generation. Not only are they not first generation in the traditional sense of the definition I gave, but they have parents who have PhD members and are faculty members. And so, what that means for the kind of type of navigation of resources during grad school could be quite tricky.

(19:51):

So, a couple of things that I've drawn from this. First is that community I found to be incredibly important. So whether that is community with graduate students or community within your university environment or your discipline or in the cases that we've all kind of talked about community within your research and field sites. So, I think community is really, really critical for navigating this. Relationships matter so much in the research sense, but also in terms of navigating your program and navigating hidden curriculum.

(20:20):

The other thing that I think really makes a big difference is a lot of my experience has been framed in humility and reflection. You will navigate things sometimes that you look back and you're like, it's maybe not the way I wanted to do that, or that interaction could have been different. And reflecting on that and learning from that and building new practices in your research or new practices and how you are engaging in coursework. And so, I'd say those are the things I think that have been defining characteristics of my experience through a PhD program and are oftentimes like the cornerstones of advice that I give to folks considering PhD or graduate school.

Peter Andrée (21:03):

So, community as a really important resource, self-reflection as kind of a key skill in adjusting over time as you learn. And that all relates to this hidden curriculum that you're talking about. Kaleigh, what are some words that come up for you when you think about the PhD experience?

Kaleigh McIntosh (21:25):

Yeah, I mean, I definitely connect a lot with what has been said. Certainly, I know I think the road really started for me when I ended up doing my master's, but ultimately, my supervisor just said to me one day, have you ever heard a Kiribati? And then it really tumbled from there. There is always a lot of in that element for me, so I echo that as well. I think, as well, the skillset that I knew I had in undergrad and masters did not lead me to really think I would be very good at doing a PhD. I think for me and my research, I feel like a researcher is really part of the research that I'm doing. I'm in this community and playing an important role for actors in there. So, grounding the research, maybe not being outside looking in, but being a part of it for me, has been really valuable. Especially, I think, and I'm sure it's true for many of us on this podcast I started during the pandemic. So, I think a PhD can be a bit of an isolating process in general. And then sort of furthering that by having done most of my first year remotely – all that coursework. So, I think really seeking connection within the academic community and being really active in that was important to me. But also seeing that for me, a researcher has, especially in the context of ecopolitics, I think, has a really important role in the communities and the work that they're doing and is playing a role on the ground. And I hope and I think I am playing a role in the capacity of the people that I'm working with.

Peter Andrée (22:55):

Cool. Thank you, Kaleigh. One of the things that I want to comment on that I'm hearing from all of you is self-confidence growing over the course of this experience. And I can hear it in your words now that you've learned a lot; you've come a long way. You know that there's still more steps to go, maybe to where you want to be, but you have been learning a lot. And I want to pick up on the last point that I heard from Kaleigh around seeing the effects of your work contributing to something larger. And I wonder if we could just maybe do a round. I'd love to hear your reflections on what you've learned about where the kind of research you're doing, ecopolitical research, fits into the broader challenges that we're all facing, which is listeners to this podcast know that biodiversity threats and climate change and there's so many challenges, changing political landscape. What have you been learning about the place of research and researchers in confronting and addressing those challenges today?

Kaleigh McIntosh (23:56):

Yeah, I've seen, for me, I think the role of a researcher has really been, and I know maybe as a PhD candidate, I don't always feel this way, but my time and capacity is very different than the people who

I'm working with. I don't know that none of them could have thought of the things that I am thinking of or asked the questions that I'm asking, but the work that they're doing does not lend itself to having the time to address it. And in many cases, I've gone to talk to them, and they're like, yeah, we were hoping that maybe we could ask a researcher to look at this thing, or we just can't take it on, but we'd point you in this direction. So, I think in a lot of ways, the way that we are able to take on questions and think about things and the way that we maybe want to think about things is really valuable. Especially in my area where they're looking at a lot of lab work, a lot of fieldwork, monitoring water quality, for example, that's demanding work, but it can be very day to day, week to week, month to month, and doesn't necessarily lend itself to sort of connecting knowledge between different communities, between different organizations. And that's a skill set that I can bring and a capacity that I can bring. So there's definitely a role that the time and capacity of being a PhD candidate brings.

Devon Cantwell (25:11):

A lot of what Kaleigh had mentioned resonates with me as well. But I want to extend on two things here. First, I have the benefit of having a 30,000-foot view, if you will, of what is happening around urban climate governance. Oftentimes, when I am doing interviews with different interlocutors, they have such deep knowledge of their very particular context. And oftentimes the question that I'll get is actually, we're kind of curious about how this compares globally, or we're kind of curious what's happening on this other part of the world. And similar to what Kaleigh had mentioned, some of that's the capacity piece, I think some folks would be honestly shocked to learn that some of the big megacities, global cities that we might think of as leaders on climate or might think of as having big climate issues, have very, very small staffs. In some of these cases, there's maybe less than 10 people working on climate or sustainability issues.

(26:05):

And so, while they're doing really great at tackling these issues at local levels, and they might be tied into big networks like ICLEI [Local Governments for Sustainability] or C40 [Cities Climate Leadership Group Inc.], sometimes they don't have the capacity to really understand what's happening at that 30,000-foot view, even though they really want to have those types of connections. So, I think researchers offer an opportunity there to help collect some of that information and help distribute that information. But the other piece is, and I've been thinking about this in recent weeks is, especially, I think looking down the next four years where I'm from in the US, I think, we are really going to see some challenges with national level actions around environmental issues and climate change. And so, I've thought about ways that I can translate some of the knowledge that I've had and gathered through this process to help folks feel like they have more agency within their own communities, that they're not just here waiting for the climate apocalypse to happen, but that there are actual real substantive things they can do to help their communities become more resilient or adapt. And those are lessons that we can bring from other authoritarian contexts. We can bring those lessons from global south countries. And I think this is really a moment for the US to be humble about this. And I'm hoping to connect some of those lessons for folks in my own communities back home.

Peter Andrée (27:23):

Thanks, Devon. Yeah, a couple things really resonate. That big 30,000 foot view is something that researchers sometimes can offer back to the communities and context they study. That just kind of gives a new perspective. And I also hear what you're saying at the end here about sharing what you're learning, sharing the knowledge in ways that allow actors who are trying to move forward progressively

on these issues to keep moving despite some of the setbacks that are coming into place right now. Obed over to you. What have you been learning about the place of ecopolitical research, the kind of research you've been doing in addressing these kinds of issues?

Dr. Obed Asamoah (28:02):

What I've seen and what I can say about this is through research, we have been able to identify some environmental challenges. Through research, we realize that there is a high rate of deforestation both by the local people and then by the forest industries. And through research, we realized that the local people have the perception that the industries are taking what belongs to them, and they have to also find a way to also take some of these resources. And throughout the research, we were able to also come out with a solution where we realized that there are other ways that we can help these local people by the government giving them some kind of grant where they can be used to shift the processing of this non-timber forest product into a modern way. So, I see research to be very important in everyday life, and I will always encourage people to go into research.

Peter Andrée (29:14):

Thank you very much, Obed. And that's a good way to kind of close it out today with an invitation to listeners that if you also want to play a role in research moving forward, there can be room for you just like there is for Obed and Devon and Kaleigh. And one of the things that I'm hearing is that each of you are both studying in these areas, but then becoming part of the networks of change, of solution building in your different areas, Obed for you in the forestry area. Devon, for you in the climate change space where what I was hearing is not only are people talking to you, but you also become a connector, part of that connective web. And I heard that with Kaleigh, as well. Relationships are so central to her research and now she is one of the nodes in that relational map that's working to build resilience in the Wolastoq. So, it's really exciting to see how you reach developing skills and capacity. You have things to offer, and then you're taking on roles in those networks. Hopefully also roles that may lead you to being either professors in these fields or to work in other ways to kind of keep moving change forward in positive ways.

(30:28):

So I want to thank you each for being here with us today, Devon, Obed, and Kaleigh. I'd also like to just take this moment as we close to thank our season's producer, Kaleigh McIntosh, who is also here on the podcast today, along with our editor Nicole Bedford and our technical and artistic design guru, Adam Gibbard. Thank you as well, Adam, for the amazing graphics and visuals that you do for the Ecopolitics Podcast. So, thank you to each of our speakers today and to our audience for joining us, and we look forward to speaking with you again in our next episode.