

Speaking of Research

Series 2 - Miranda Willis

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SPEAKERS

Catherine McDonald, Miranda Willis

Catherine McDonald 00:04

Hello and Welcome to Speaking of Research a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in the second series of our podcast, we're focusing on research that addresses global challenges. We'll be in conversation with doctoral researchers about their research, which global challenges they hope to inform, and how they hope their work will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Miranda Willis from the University of Southampton, whose research is exploring the relationship between people, animals and landscapes in the New Forest National Park. Miranda, can you begin by telling us a bit more about that?

Miranda Willis 00:46

Thank you. I'm so happy to be talking about my research, but I will just preface that I'm by no means an expert, because I'm just beginning my research. So please bear with me. I'm looking, as you said, at the New Forest National Park, which is in Hampshire/Wiltshire, in the South Coast of England, and its home to some really precious habitats and endangered species. And I look at how commoning, which is a centuries old tradition, is part of managing this landscape. And commoning, to put simply, is basically where locals, such, they're called commoners, have rights to graze their livestock on the on shared land, so free, open, shared land. And I'm looking at how these practices and also practices of care and stewardship and the work of animals, like the iconic New Forest pony shape management. And I'm particularly interested in kind of how this tradition is adapting to modern pressures like increased tourism, but also things like conflict with other stakeholders and house price changes and all sorts of things like that. And I'll be combining a few different methods to look at this, including ethnography, visual methods and mapping too.

Catherine McDonald 02:05

And what motivated you to do this research? How did you identify the need for it?

Miranda Willis 02:11

That's a really great question. So, I live local to the New Forest National Park, so a lot of my kind of inspiration is from living so close to it, and my actual experiences there. And I think what has inspired me is actually seeing that it's management of the New Forest isn't so much about rules and regulations or sanctions about how we use it, but more about how people live there and how they live together with nature and with other species. So, I think that inspired my research, because I want to shine a light to that, to the beautiful community, which is a really precious heritage practice, but it's also really important for conservation and biodiversity. So that's what inspired it.

Catherine McDonald 02:59

And so your focus for this particular research is the New Forest National Park, as you say, what's the global challenge that you're wanting to address with this research?

Miranda Willis 03:08

As you said, it's a case study, but I think it speaks to a bigger challenge of living well together, of sustainability and of mutual benefits, and how to flourish and not just survive on this planet. And I think the New Forest National Park is a great example of this, because it is a landscape where people and nature have been entwined for, well commoning began in the medieval period there, so we've been managing the landscape successfully and living there really intertwined with all the other species that live there for a really long time, but like elsewhere, it's under pressure from things like commercialisation and kind of top down management. So, I think the global challenge here is to rethink what sustainability and landscape management can look like as a question of coexistence, and not necessarily technical solutions, but more so just learning how to live well together. And I think the New Forest National Park is just one example of many places around the world. And maybe you could say everywhere, even urban places, we want to live well together.

Catherine McDonald 04:23

That's such a lovely picture that you paint. And surely that is the challenge, actually, isn't it, that across the world, we are dealing with so many different areas and so many different landscapes when you bring physical geography into it, human geography into it. So, what is it that you're on a global scale, looking to inform or change. So, I guess inform, I guess you've already answered that. What would you like to change?

Miranda Willis 04:47

Well, as I said, I'm still really, really early in my research, so I think the exact and precise things are going to change and evolve, and I'm really excited for that. But I think right now I can say I'm hoping to change how we think about governance and shift it about from focusing on ownership and control of land, and these kind of top-down focuses towards stewardship and relationships with the land. And that's definitely happening, and there's a lot more focused on indigenous practices, for instance, at least in literature. And I kind of want to bring that to England as well and shine some light on commoning. So, I really want to give voice to that practice, make it visible and show its importance. Not just as I said, as a heritage practice, which it is an important heritage practice, but more so it's also amazing for sustainability and just generally, somewhere we can learn about how to live better. So, I'm hoping to change how we think about governance, and hopefully translate that into policy in the future in ways that I currently don't know but hope to figure out.

Catherine McDonald 06:00

And great that you're so open to that as well. And what other international perspectives do you think you might want to use to kind of inform your research, you know, help youth with the research as you move forward.

Miranda Willis 06:12

I think just drawing on all these different people who talk about commoning as a practice, and more and more so commoning is being viewed as less of a kind of institution or management practice, as I was saying, and it's actually being used in social movements as a kind of anti-capitalist movement. So, I'm hoping to draw on all sorts of different conversations that are happening, like a question that I'm wondering myself right now, and I'm exploring through many different readings, is can we look at somewhere like the New Forest, which exists alongside capitalism quite happily? Can we also look at it as challenging to capitalism and some of the values that it might have? So, I'm really trying to draw on different literatures about different global conversations.

Catherine McDonald 07:00

I can really hear the excitement in your voice about being this early on in your journey, but with it all sort of open in front of you, ready for the taking?

Miranda Willis 07:09

Exactly. Yeah,

Catherine McDonald 07:11

Brilliant. Well, we wish you all the best with it. Thanks to Miranda Willis and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe

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