

Intimations of Integral Ecology: An Interview with Elizabeth Allison

On June 3, 2009, PCC doctoral students Elizabeth McAnally and Sam Mickey interviewed Elizabeth Allison, PCC's new professor. The interview took place over lunch at *César* in Berkeley, CA. In the interview, they talked about Professor Allison's background and her current research, and they discussed the emerging field of integral ecology. What follows is a transcription of the interview.

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Sam Mickey (hereafter, SM): Before we talk about integral ecology, maybe you could say a little about your background...

Elizabeth McAnally (hereafter, EM): ...some personal experiences or research or...

SM: ...a little about your path to becoming integral.

Elizabeth Allison (hereafter, EA): Where to begin? For me, this has been my lifelong academic path. It seems weird to say that now, and I didn't realize it until it all came together. In college I majored in religion, and I did a concentration in environmental studies. I was interested in how they were related, but nobody was doing that at that time. My college professors were like "yeah, okay, you can kind of explore that, and there's a little anthropology on that," but it wasn't this sort of field coming together. So after college I worked in non-profits, doing environmental education, environmental restoration, and working with at-risk youth, and I was still interested in how people's deep values and faith motivated what they were doing and how it could instill environmental values in at-risk youth and do that as part of their character development.

And then I read Mary Evelyn Tucker's *Buddhism and Ecology*, and I said "Wow, people are doing that!" It was published around the time I was finishing college, and that's why it wasn't being taught. I eventually decided to go get my master's degree where I would study both religion and environmental management. At that time, the field was starting to coalesce. I met with Paul Gorman of the National Religious Partnership on the Environment. I met with Martin Palmer of the Alliance of Religion and Conservation in the UK. I met with Tony Whitton who is working on religion and ecology at the World Bank. I met Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim during my master's work, and my master's advisor, a conservation biologist who always worked on human dimensions of environmental conservation, started to be more concerned about environmental values and the religion and ecology aspect. So it was all sort of coalescing. I continued that here in Berkeley, learned about CIIS, and learned that there was an actual job in this field, which was thrilling. I found more colleagues, and more junior level people who are doing similar things. There were a few at Yale. We started a group called FERNS: Faith, Environment, Religion, Nature, Spirituality Network. There were a few of us from the divinity school and the forestry school who were exploring this in an extracurricular manner as well as through our course work. It's a tradition at the forestry school to decorate the mortar boards when you graduate with your master's, and some people put all kinds of greenery. I had a potted fern on top of mine.

EM: How big was that fern?

EA: It was small. I went to the garden store and bought a potted fern. People who were studying industrial ecology put smokestacks and made little factories...it's fun.

EM: It sounds fun!

EA: As far as my research interest in how religious values affect the environment – during my master's I learned that the Bhutanese government says that religion protects the environment of Bhutan. So that seemed like a perfect case study to find out why they make that claim, what that means to them, what's going on there. Now I've been doing research in Bhutan for the last several years.

EM: How's that been?

EA: It's been interesting. It's nice to work in a fairly small, fairly homogeneous country, because it's easier to separate out the variables; whereas here we've got so many different things going on, their culture is still quite traditional. It's easier to see it in a simplified situation, but I think some of the lessons and methods can perhaps be applied here in the future.

SM: It was through your work in Bhutan that you first came into contact with Sean Esbjörn-Hargens [PCC graduate and co-author of *Integral Ecology: Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Shambhala, 2009)]. Right?

EA: Yes.

SM: It's interesting that, for you and Sean, your involvement with integral ecology is informed by research in Bhutan.

EA: We've never met in person, but we're old email buddies. I think he went there after I was there the first couple times, and people started telling him, Elizabeth just did the same thing, so you'd better get in touch with her. I shared with him a book chapter I'd written ["Spiritually Motivated Natural Resource Protection in Eastern Bhutan," <http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt/admin/pubFiles/22-Spdr&Pglt.pdf>], and I read some of his stuff, and we discussed it over email, which was great. As religion and ecology is not a huge field and Bhutan studies is not a huge field, there were not that many people to talk with. It was nice to talk with somebody who's very analytical and thoughtful and had been there.

EM: That's great. It seems that, throughout your whole academic path, you've been moving toward an integral approach to ecology. From your perspective, what would you say integral ecology is? In a nutshell, how would you introduce it to people who aren't familiar with this emerging field?

EA: When I tell people that I have this position and they ask what it means, I've been saying that it is where ecology intersects with the humanities and the social sciences. People have been responding well to that. I think that integral ecology is a way of putting our ecological

understanding of the world or the universe into a social context through the use of the humanities and the social sciences.

I would say that my take is this: bringing in the biophysical factors that are out there, that we intersect with, and realizing that those aren't exactly given. They're also affected by the human and its political, social, cultural, economic activity, and there's a dialectic or dynamic between them. Through myth, story, culture, religion, we can gain better understanding and insight into the political, economic, and biophysical factors that we're working with.

Another thing I should throw in here is that I read Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* in college, which was profoundly influential for me at the time. When I was looking for a PhD program and found out that she was here [University of California, Berkeley], I thought obviously this is where I have to be.

EM: Was she the main attractor for you coming here?

EA: Yes, for sure, and Berkeley has good Asian studies and is on the Pacifica rim, which fit well with my work in Bhutan.

SM: Of course, there are important critiques of Merchant's work, including critiques offered by Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman in *Integral Ecology*, where they say that Merchant isn't clear on which "nature" died. Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman also recognize that Merchant is a precursor to their attempt to integrate multiple ecological perspectives.

EA: That's interesting. She is an important predecessor to integral ecology, and anyone who is a groundbreaking figure in a field will be critiqued through subsequent developments in the field. In 1980 [when Merchant's *Death of Nature* was first published], there wasn't much going on in that vein, and I'm sure there are gaps there and in her current work. For example, her latest formulation is the partnership ethic: humans and living diversity in partnership. I've asked her who speaks for living diversity. If we have a human speaking for them, then they'll have a political agenda, so how do we know if they're really representing them? And she said that was a good question. It's not fully worked out. So there's much more work for us to do.

EM: Yes, definitely.

SM: This resonates with Bruno Latour's work.

EA: Yes.

SM: In his *Politics of Nature* (Harvard University Press, 2004), he extends his work in the field of science studies [or STS, science and technology studies] to ecology. He makes the provocative claim that it could be a good thing that nature is dead. When Nature (in the singular with a capital "N") dies, it makes it more difficult for people to short-circuit politics with claims of "speaking for" nature, and it keeps the participatory process of representing living diversity much more open. With Nature dead, we can begin the work of constituting a collective or a partnership that embraces humans and the living diversity of the entire Earth community.

EA: It sounds like the same type of argument as "God is dead."

EM: Yes, Latour says that also.

EA: You can transcend restrictive conceptions of God and open up opportunities to get on with the difficult work of religion, faith, and spirituality.

SM: The deaths of God and nature make room for more creative engagements with religion and ecology and more creative possibilities for partnership between humans and the rest of the Earth community.

EA: A problem that could arise here is that, when embracing the death of nature, we might privilege people too much. There is a biophysical world that we don't fully control, and it's important to keep that in the picture.

SM: Right, so we need to make sure to avoid a strict social constructionism.

EM: Instead of reducing nature to human or social constructs, Latour wants an ongoing dialogue between human and nonhuman actors. The aim is to open up a more ecological democracy, a democracy that represents humans and nonhumans.

SM: And you'll be using some of Latour's work in your classes.

EA: In the class *Contested Knowledge(s)*, we'll look at Latour and other figures in STS to learn their method of tracing the construction of scientific knowledge and looking at how scientists and other scholars work through networks, peer-reviews, and collaborations. There is no knowledge "out there." It's all contested, constructed, and collaborative.

SM: Esbjörn-Hargens and Zimmerman draw out this point in their approach to integral ecology. They propose a radical constructivism for which nature isn't merely a human construct, but it isn't simply given either. In other words, humans and the natural world mutually construct one another. So this emphasis on constructed and contested knowledge could be an important overlap between their framework and your own approach to integral ecology.

EA: Yes, that's definitely an important overlap. I hope we continue to make connections there.

SM: Donna Haraway is another STS figure that promotes this sort of radical constructivism. Will you include her work in *Contested Knowledge(s)*?

EA: Yes, particularly her essay "Situated Knowledges," but maybe some excerpts from other writings as well. A lot of what we'll be talking about involves deconstructing the boundary between human and nonhuman life, especially when you have these hybrids we can get through technology, genetic engineering, and so on. What is human? What is not? What is life? What is not? Those kinds of questions.

SM: Haraway is a special voice in feminism. She has integrated interesting aspects of deconstruction, Marxism, and other aspects of critical theory. How does feminism, and this sort of Marxist feminism in particular, play into your own work?

EA: It's an important part of where I'm coming from—a cult of patriarchy. All of my professors right now are women, which is really cool, and really unusual. In my whole education, I've never had that experience before. As for “Marxist feminist,” that says it exactly. That's the kind I've been brainwashed with [laughs]. I'm strongly feminist. Once you start to look at gender, you weave it into everything. Also, all the authors on my syllabus for Contested Knowledge(s) are women. It wasn't intentional, but that's who I've read and that's who I've been influenced by.

SM: That's excellent. Feminist perspectives are an important part of the Integral Ecology track and of PCC in general.

EM: Here's another question for you: If a PCC student works on the Integral Ecology track in their academic studies, how will that empower them to make a difference in the world? What kind of change or transformation can happen with integral ecology?

EA: I would hope that it would be a degree that helps to change both thought and action: working at the level of philosophy and ideas, and changing minds and consciousness, but also, through internships and practical experiences, learning how to connect that to praxis. Maybe graduates will go out to work for an environmental group, an environmental justice campaign, politics, and so on, in which case they'd be working both at the level of ideas and of practice. That would ultimately be my goal. My critique of some environmental programs is that they're too practice-oriented. Practice is necessary, but they don't think about the ideas animating these practices. If we can do both, then I think we're in a really powerful position for positive change.

EM: It's wonderful that you encourage PCC's integral ecologists to integrate philosophy and ideas with practices and activism.

SM: I have another question: Is there a particular field of study that you feel would help articulate an integral ecology? We've touched on a few areas of study so far (religion and ecology, science studies, and feminism). Is there another that you'd emphasize?

EA: The vein I'm working in right now in my department is political ecology. A lot of times studies of the environment get de-politicized, even though it's inherently political. Political ecology looks at the ways that political power and economic forces move through ecology. Political does not mean electoral politics and state government, but flows of power, which also relates to feminism. Without the attention to power and politics, there's a danger of romanticizing or idealizing the human/nature relationship. It becomes a lot more complex when you consider power, power between people, power between different groups, power between humans and the environment. And the human/nature relationship goes both ways: we're changing the environment, but we're not totally in control. Power is always shifting and circulating.

It opens questions about the construction of knowledge. Who gets to participate? Who doesn't? Why? These are all political questions.

SM: Absolutely.

EA: Who gets to say what integral ecology is? What viewpoints are incorporated? What is valid or not?

SM: This reminds me that one of the first uses of the phrase “integral ecology” comes from Leonardo Boff [Brazilian liberation theologian], and so the phrase has roots in the political context of liberation theology. Boff calls for an integral ecology that would foster concern for our evolutionary heritage and facilitate what he calls “socio-cosmic wellbeing.”

EA: I've been working with that lineage—a different, but parallel, lineage—of moral concern in political ecology. There are concepts of liberation ecology, moral economy, moral ecology, moral geography, and so I've been trying to trace that. They address a lot of morality and justice issues, but they don't always account for religion and spirituality, which is what I'm trying to do.

SM: I think this sort of integration of religion, justice, and ecology is one of the most promising aspects of the Integral Ecology track.

EM: I agree. That could be a good note to end on, unless you'd like to offer a few more words in closing.

EA: I just want to say that I'm thrilled to be coming to PCC and to CIIS. It's going to be great. I'm really thrilled to have colleagues with such an expansive and transdisciplinary vision. The time is right for change. This is definitely a moment we can seize and try to think differently and act differently, and move in a healthier direction for people and the planet. We're at an amazing moment of confluence, a moment of some old systems breaking down or being shown to be ineffectual, and an opportunity for some ideas that have been brewing for a long time to come into more fruition.... Let's hope.

EM: Yes, definitely. Let's hope.

EA: As my yoga teacher used to say, practice and all is coming.

SM: Excellent. I can't think of a better way to close than with this affirmation of hopeful practice. Thank you.

EM: Yes, thank you for sharing this time with us.

EA: Thank you.