



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **How Professor Kendra McSweeney uses Geography to Protect Forests in Indigenous Homelands**

For a lot of Americans, geography is just a middle school subject or a trivia night category at their neighborhood bar. But for Professor Kendra McSweeney, the “invisible field” of geography is a way to understand the relationship between people and their environment, from adaptation to climate change to how the drug trade impacts biodiverse forests in Colombia. In this episode, McSweeney highlights how her dynamic career as an academic has taken her from Canada to eastern Honduras, and talks about the thought process behind lectures such as “Viewing Political Ecology Through the Lens of the Tree of Heaven,” an enlightening take on the so-called invasive tree that is providing crucial shade in neighborhoods in the US.

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Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening. Hello and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about Visiting Scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today, I'm delighted to welcome Professor Kendra McSweeney. Professor McSweeney is professor of Geography at the Ohio State University, where she studies the relationship between people and nature with a focus on forested environments in Central and South America. She uses a combination of methods including long-term, ethnographic research, to explore the ways that indigenous peoples manage forests to build their resilience to climate change, and to defend their ancestral homelands. Most recently, she has revealed how the global regime of drug prohibition, otherwise known as the War on Drugs, is shaping the future of indigenous lands and forests across the tropics. At Ohio State, she regularly teaches courses on environmental society, geography and fieldwork. Welcome, Professor.

Kendra McSweeney...: Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Fred Lawrence: Lovely to have you here. I want to ask first about the very field of geography. For so many of us, geography was a topic in middle school or maybe primary school, but not beyond that and certainly not in university. So, let's start with, what is geography?

Kendra McSweeney...: I cannot thank you enough for asking that question because I think it's an important one, and it's a question that could only be asked in the United States because it is in this country that geography only really exists kind of patchily in middle school education, and maybe if you're lucky a little bit in elementary school. But it kind of disappears in high school, and that's not how it is in the UK, in Canada where I'm from, or anywhere else. And so, it's a great question, why is geography kind of this unknown? For a lot of people, geography is a category on trivia night on Thursdays at the local bar. But if you happen to be one of those people who haunts used bookstores, you will always find incredible textbooks on geography from particularly the pre-war period before the first war, but certainly before World War II, and I don't know if you've seen them, but they're just magnificent.

They were textbooks that were taught and used in schools across the country. There were kids' learning maps, learning about the world, learning about biogeographic zones, learning about climate, weather, culture, and so the United States used to have very robust education in geography, and then it disappeared. And it disappeared after World War II for a bunch of reasons, partly because the word geopolitics had become associated with the Nazis and so fell out of favor. Partly because for various reasons the Department of Geography at Harvard disappeared shortly after the war, and when there was some belt tightening across the Ivy Leagues in the post-war years, a lot of other Ivy League departments closed their geography programs.

That matters because when the Department of Education was looking for people to write those textbooks for the baby boom generation, there were no geographers at those Ivy League schools to step up and make sure geography was represented in the curriculum. So, it leaves a lot of people asking, what is geography? And if you ask this question pretty much anywhere else in the world, the average person could tell you.

But in the US, it's kind of a question mark. So, what is geography? It is the study of the relationship between people and their environment. It's the study of space and spatial relationships. So what history is to time, geography is to space.

Fred Lawrence: To what extent then has geography made a comeback in the American curriculum with a focus on environmental studies, environmental sciences as a field that transcends the natural sciences over to the social sciences and to a certain extent, even in the humanities? Henry David Thoreau certainly made a comeback in the '60s with *Civil Disobedience*, but subsequently with *Walden*, which is still on the shelves of most bookstores.

Kendra McSweene...: Yeah, that's a great point. I think geography content persists today in AP environmental studies. For example, in high school my two teens are taking that now, and really what they're learning is physical geography and human environment relations, but it's called AP environmental studies. So that content is there, but it's hidden in other classes. It's folded into social studies, for example. It's only in a few states that geography as geography is mandated at the middle school or high school level.

Fred Lawrence: You co-authored an intriguing piece last year on the experience of undergraduates in US universities, and I don't say American undergraduates because it's any undergraduate in a US university with respect to studying what you call the invisible field of geography. But tell me, in your experience, what is it that leads them to look for this invisible field and then find it?

Kendra McSweene...: Well, first of all, thank you for reading that paper. It's not every day that our academic work is read outside of the small world of academics. Even though geography was kind of purged from the Ivy Leagues, it remained very strong at the land-grant universities across the country. So, some of the strongest geography programs now are the Ohio State University, at Michigan State, in Minnesota, at Berkeley, and so on. And those programs existed and have thrived because state governments have always understood that you need people trained in geography to make the maps, to do the retail siting, to help with the census, to do all the things that geographers do to help with natural resource management, to plan where to put the national forest, how to make sure that people can access spaces of enjoyment and state parks and so on. We have this odd thing where there's no geography as such at the high school level, but then in these universities there's wonderful geography classes representing the depth and breadth of our field and all the contributions we're making to understanding climate change and human adaptation to climate change and so on.

And so usually it's very rare for students to declare geographies as their major when they come into college because they're not aware of it, and then they end up taking maybe a general ed course in geography. Maybe a friend tells them that they're learning something really cool about urban sustainability in their geography class, and

then sort of through word of mouth, students take our classes, and a lot of our students who become our majors say, "I had no idea what geography was, but as soon as I took that class..." Whatever it was, human or physical geography, they say, "That's what I've always loved. That's what I want to do."

Fred Lawrence: You've been in the United States' higher education system for a while, but you're originally from Canada. Where in Canada you're from, and tell us a little bit about your childhood and growing up there.

Kendra McSweene...: I grew up in Kingston, Ontario, which is at the mouth of Lake Ontario where Lake Ontario meets the St. Lawrence River, and like all Canadians, I had to take geography in elementary and high school, so it was never a weird subject to me. And then when I was 15, we moved to Quebec, so I had to switch into a very different school system, but geography was taught there, and I ended up going to McGill University in Montreal for my undergrad in geography.

Fred Lawrence: So, when you went to McGill, where you got first class honors I might add in geography and environmental studies, was it to study geography or did you not yet have a plan for your academic studies when you arrived at McGill?

Kendra McSweene...: I'm not a big planner ahead. All I knew was that I was really interested in things like forests, but I wasn't so interested that I wanted to do ecology, and I was really interested in people, but I wasn't so fascinated by people alone that I wanted to do anthropology. It was very clear to me that geography would allow me to study both and really think about how people influence forests and how forests influence people.

Fred Lawrence: You ultimately get a PhD in geography from McGill, and that looks like a straight line, but in between there's a master's in geography at the University of Tennessee. How did that come to be?

Kendra McSweene...: In Quebec if you went to high school there, you only have to do three years of undergrad, and after three years of my geography degree, I wasn't done with school. I wasn't the classic burnt out senior yet. So, me and my friends at the time thought, because education is so inexpensive in Canada and none of us had any debt or anything, half of us decided to travel the world and just go and travel, and then others of us said, well, why don't we combine travel and doing grad school? And so I went to the library and found brochures because this was pre-internet. I found brochures for all the universities that were in the US in the Southeast, which I thought was an exotic and far away place. So I applied to them all, and I know this sounds silly, but I remember being very impressed by the sort of pamphlet from the UT Knoxville Geography Program.

And it seemed to have exactly what I was looking for, which was people who were really experts in biogeography like Professor Sally Horn and other people who were

doing really interesting stuff around the world, and so I was lucky enough to get a TA package and I moved down there sight unseen.

Fred Lawrence: And you'll be returning to Knoxville during your year as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa.

Kendra McSweene...: Yes. I'm very excited about that. That'll be great.

Fred Lawrence: Now, at the time you went to UT Knoxville, do you remember a point or a moment when you said, if I can make a living doing this, I don't just want to apply the skills I've learned as a geographer, I want to be an academic geographer.

Kendra McSweene...: That's a tricky one because even when I was doing my PhD and before I did my PhD, I went and lived for two years in Eastern Honduras in the Mosquito Coast region there in a very small indigenous community of about 500 people, and so living there for two years and being kind of culturally isolated gave me a lot of time to think about stuff like this. But one of the things that I decided was I would go back to Montreal because I was really missing my friends and good food and wine, and things that were not there in a village with no electricity or running water, and one of the things I realized was by doing a PhD, I could buy time. I still wasn't convinced I wanted to be an academic. But while I was doing my PhD, I thought I would try all the things that I was sort of interested in.

I was interested in doing kind of investigative journalism, sort of National Geographic style and sort of public education around geography. I was also really interested in possibly doing work in an NGO, maybe in a humanitarian or development capacity, and so during my time at McGill, unfortunately, Hurricane Mitch hit. As you know, that was devastating. It killed about 11,000 people in Central America, and I got very involved in organizing relief efforts to help the people in the communities that I had lived in who were really badly hit by that storm, and that gave me a taste of relief work. It gave me a taste of working in development NGOs. I wrote a couple of magazine pieces for the Canadian equivalent of National Geographic and another magazine, and that gave me a taste of that type of work.

And it eventually dawned on me that I like doing all of those things and I could continue to do them if I was an academic, and that has proven to be so because during the time that I've been an academic, I feel like I've had probably 10 different little careers because I've been able to, while doing research and teaching, be engaged in the world in various ways.

Fred Lawrence: Tell us a few of those that are particularly meaningful to you.

Kendra McSweene...: Well, for example, I've continued to be involved with the Tawahka Indigenous Group who I lived with in Eastern Honduras, and they're a very small group, and they've been very active in trying to ensure that their homelands are recognized and

protected and that they're able to continue to live in them as they wish. They have needed international allies to help them in that struggle and I've been happy to be able to be responsive to their requests, such as, could you help us write a grant? Or could you help us bring a legal case against this multinational firm that has done us wrong? Or could you help publicize our efforts to defend our land against drug traffickers? Stuff like that.

Fred Lawrence: So this kind of work sounds very adjacent to anthropology. How would you distinguish what your disciplinary skills and background and training bring to bear on these problems as opposed to what an anthropologist might?

Kendra McSweene...: Well, I'm trained in a field of geography called the human environment tradition, and it's one where we really do not make a distinction between nature and culture in the way that anthropologists do. We understand those as so inextricable that there's really no point in debating that divide. We understand that concepts of nature are fundamentally human concepts, and we understand that in almost every part of the world, so-called nature has been profoundly influenced by human activity. So we're not particularly interested in those hard and fast distinctions, and I think that separates us a little bit from anthropologists, although there is the overlapping field of political ecology where there are a lot of geographers active and a lot of anthropologists who are quite active in that field.

Fred Lawrence: One of your lectures as a Visiting Scholar talks about the connection between the war on drugs and climate change, and that seems to be a pretty good example of the kind of breaking down of disciplinary barriers that you're talking about. How in your view do these relate and for that matter, how do you connect them in your lecture?

Kendra McSweene...: One of the hallmarks of our approach is that we think across scale. I, as I mentioned, was working for a long time in this region of Eastern Honduras, which is part of the most bio diverse and intact rainforest north of the Amazon, so incredibly important both in terms of cultural diversity but also biodiversity, and it's very important not just to the people who live there because the forests provide ecosystem services and so on, but also because the forests there are fundamental to the planet's ability to respond to climate change because those forests have traditionally been very important carbon sinks, taking up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They also have been really important in buffering people in Central America from the effects of warming oceans and hurricanes. So Hurricane Mitch, for example, would've been much worse if Central America had been as deforested then as it is now.

So when I was last doing intensive fieldwork there in 2011, I saw patterns of forest loss in the region that really shocked me. I'd never seen the intensity of deforestation and so much forest, incredible biodiverse forests rich in all the species that we think of, like the howler monkey, the tapirs, the jaguars. These forests were being transformed into cattle pastures and what local people told me was that it was drug traffickers who

were doing this, and that didn't make sense to me. I've pretty much spent a good chunk of the past decade understanding that process, and I can sum it up as basically cocaine produced in Colombia has to make it to northern markets like in the US, Canada, Europe, and now increasingly, actually Asia, has to make it out of Colombia somehow. And it mainly is trafficked through Central America and from there into Mexico, and then it moves in container ships around the world, and a little bit of it goes over the US-Mexico border.

That transshipment of cocaine ends up generating a lot of cash for people in those transshipment spaces, and the transshipment spaces are usually in remote areas that are far from US intelligence assets and the Coast Guard and other things. So traffickers tend to launder their money by turning forest into pasture. It makes a lot of economic sense for various reasons.

Fred Lawrence: So it's not just an investment, but a way to launder funds that have disappeared out of the international monetary system?

Kendra McSweene...: That's right. You can only launder so many \$20 bills through the banks in urban real estate. Eventually there's a demand to invest in basically a speculative land market on the forest frontier. But they're also consolidating their power and their territorial control in those areas. So they have many reasons to want to basically transform indigenous and protected areas into land that they control.

Fred Lawrence: What are the solutions to this?

Kendra McSweene...: The first part of our work was to kind of point at the narcos and the drug traffickers, the very people that get highlighted on all the Netflix shows and say, they're the problem. They're the ones destroying the forest. But the more we looked into it, the more we asked ourselves, well, what are the traffickers doing in the forest in the first place? Why aren't they just moving these drugs through the Caribbean or the Eastern Pacific more directly? And the answer is, they're moving the drugs through these remote areas because US-funded counter-narcotic activities are pushing them into those places. And then we asked, why are they making so much money? Well, because drugs are illegal and therefore there's a price premium on them. And why are they so violent? Well, because drugs are illegal. They have to enforce contracts between themselves with violence and they can't go to the courts.

And why are these places so corrupted? Because that's the tax that traffickers pay to move their product through. And so ultimately it became so clear that the prohibition of drugs is kind of the root cause of a lot of these problems. So that's how I make the link between the war on drugs and climate change. And a lot of people say, "Wow, that's really connecting the dots that seem pretty far apart. How can you make that case? Well, 10 years of research, I feel pretty confident that we've made the case

because it's very compelling and it makes a lot of sense to people who are affected by these processes.

Fred Lawrence: Another one of your lecture topics as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar that caught my attention is Viewing Political Ecology Through the Lens of the Tree of Heaven. So, I have to ask first what the tree of heaven is? And then how is it the right lens or a helpful lens through which to view the subject of political ecology?

Kendra McSweene...: Thank you for that, and so we're pivoting to the US now. So, we're leaving Central America and we're going to the US. If you live in pretty much any part of the Eastern US from Niagara Falls down to the US-Mexico border, there is probably a tree of heaven within a five-minute drive of your location. The tree of heaven otherwise, the scientific name is *Ailanthus altissima*, is a tree that's native to East Asia and China, and it was planted widely in the US starting in I think around the 1850s, and it was sold in seed catalogs as a tree that looks very nice and tropical. It kind of looks like it has leaves that sort of look like a walnut tree, beautiful trees. It grows very quickly. So it was spread widely as a tree that you could plant in your yard and within 20 years, you'd have a beautiful tree.

And it's, for example, the tree in that book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, where it's a metaphor for the scrappy immigrant who thrives despite the impoverishment of the neighborhood in which they grow up, and the trees of heaven are amazing. You're not going to find them in your local park. Where you are going to find them is in alleyways, in all those little places next to highways, all the little inconvenient spots where nobody's paying attention. They're the tree that grows up literally between the rock and the cement that often has the imprint of a chain link fence on it. These things, nothing will keep them down, but they are invasive. They are non-native and female trees can produce 20,000 seeds a year. So if you are a forester in the US and have seen these sorts of invading the Eastern forests and outcompeting native species, they're really frustrating.

They're a frustrating tree to eradicate. But one of the basic tenets of political ecology is to ask questions about the narratives we use to describe our relationships to nature, and to ask who wins and who loses when we talk about nature in particular ways. And so I take a political ecological lens to the idea that the tree of heaven is this terrible thing that we have to eradicate, and I don't dispute that it is a problem in forested areas. Where I want us to think about it differently though is in cities. Since the arrival of the spotted lanternfly, have you heard about that?

Fred Lawrence: Mm-hmm.

Kendra McSweene...: Everybody's been freaking out about the recent arrival of the spotted lanternfly in the US because it threatens fruit trees and grapes and other agricultural crops. It also is the host species, or it works well with the tree of heaven. So, this has led to a sort of



renewed urgency and interest among urban arborists to get rid of trees of heaven that are within cities. And that sounds great, let's get rid of the invasive species. But what I encourage people to do is look around the neighborhoods, where is the tree of heaven the dominant tree? In cities that desperately need tree cover, where in a warming climate, we experience many more days of heat stress in urban areas than we did before, where tree cover and shade from trees is really precious. Where are those trees providing shade or what trees are providing shade in poor neighborhoods? And the answer is it's the tree of heaven.

And so I would encourage people who are listening to think about the role of this so-called bad invasive tree, the role that it plays in helping to keep our cities cool. Until we plant enough trees in cities to replace the hard work that the trees of heaven are doing, I suggest we not cut them down because they're the only things that are growing in some of the poorest neighborhoods that most need shade.

Fred Lawrence: This is Phi Beta Kappa, after all, and our listeners tend to be readers, lots of readers and we like to help them build their bookshelves, build their reading lists, build their curricula, if you will, for lifelong learning. So I wonder if you can help us with that. For some people listening to today's episode, I'm sure this is the first time they've thought about geography since primary school or maybe middle school. So for those people, maybe a suggestion or two for the grown-up study of geography, and then I'm sure that some of our listeners have a fair amount of experience in the field, and for them perhaps something that takes their reading and their considerations to a higher level.

Kendra McSweene...: Well, I'm going to suggest two books that are not written by geographers. One of them is a book called *Narconomics* by the British journalist Tom Wainwright, and it's an excellent introduction to the way in which the drug war is the wrong way to go. And then another great book and very readable, is one by the historian Lisa McGirr called *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State*, which for those of you who are historians, it's really interesting story about alcohol prohibition. It started about 100 years ago, and the links to the current moment are obvious.

Fred Lawrence: You have certainly shown us that what for many of us was an area of perhaps great interest early in our academic lives in the United States here, is an area that anticipates interdisciplinarity across fields as well as a wide range of subjects that it brings to bear. I'm not surprised that students at the Ohio State University are interested and are the beneficiaries of your teaching in this, and I'm delighted that we at Phi Beta Kappa get to be the beneficiaries of your energy and passion and wisdom this year as a Visiting Scholar for Phi Beta Kappa. Thank you so much for sitting down with me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Kendra McSweene...: Thank you, Fred. It's been a pleasure.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Tashiro is lead producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is editor and co-producer, and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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