



148. Learning About Nature is in Our Nature with Jess Kaknevicus

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:00:00] How do you work with your local tribal communities to be able to tell that story and understand their perspective, and don't bring learning to them, but bring their learning to the communities that you live in.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:11] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host.

We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I am super excited because today we get to have a conversation that takes us back outdoors. And for our listeners, you know that I love anything that gets kids out of a building and into the world. So, I'm super excited to have joining us today, Jess Kaknevicus, who leads the Sustainable Forestry Initiative's work in education to advance environmental literacy, stewardship, and pathways to green careers, which is very exciting and, of course, one of the things that we want more and more kiddos to get involved with. And through that, she also sort of leads and directs Project Learning Tree, which we're going to learn a lot more about.

So, Jess, welcome to the program.

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:01:29] Thank you so much. Nice to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:31] Okay. And I think I pretty much butchered your last name. So, for our listeners, just say your full name for us.

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:01:38] All good. Jess Kaknevicus, VP, Education at SFI.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:42] Perfect. Thank you so much. And my apologies for that. So, Jess, you know, our listeners come to us from all over the world, so let's start with sort of the 100,000 foot view about Sustainable Forestry, and I guess the parent organization under which there are a number of different activities and programs that you're doing. So, let's just start with sort of what the mothership, if you will, so why, why this thing?

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:02:08] Yeah. So, SFI or Sustainable Forestry Initiative is an organization that advances sustainability through forest focused collaborations. And so, we're all about sustainability, but we do it through

that lens of forests. We've been an organization that's really been focused on delivering our work through a couple pillars of work. One is with standards, conservation, community, and then the work that I do is really focused on education and career pathways.

And so, if you think about the ultimate goal is to really just get people to act more sustainably and think about their connection with the natural world, and understand the role that forests can play in that sustainability piece.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:47] Yeah. And we know that, not only is it globally super important, but the other piece of it is kids love that. It is a very easy way to get children really, really engaged in the things that they're learning, you know, roll up their sleeves, get dirty, immerse them in the environment. And so, again, really excited about that. So, share with us a little bit about some of the specifics of the programming that you're doing.

And just for full disclosure, both to you and to our listeners, one of the projects that we do with the local school, we actually partnered up last summer with the Ohio regional affiliate, I guess, if you will, of Project Learning Tree. And they came out and they did some stuff with us. So, when my staff heard we were having this conversation, they were like, "Oh, my gosh. We know them. It's so awesome."

And so, help folks understand, dig in a little bit to the ins and outs about how you get access to this programming and how you sort of, as an organization, really sort of structured the way some of those components work.

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:03:48] Yeah. So, Project Learning Tree is a really well-known environmental education program. But what I also want to kind of start with is the idea that PLT offers a multitude of ways for people to engage with the outdoors. People are probably most familiar with our education work. And so, the workshop you mentioned, our state network partners, they help to deliver environmental education on the ground. And what we do at the national level is we develop resources, activities, curriculum that they can implement at that state level. And they work to train educators to become confident and being able to deliver those activities.

And so, I don't know what it was like for you when you were growing up, but for me, getting outdoors and having that teacher feel confident to get you outdoors and be able to do an activity out there was a limitation, I think, for some educators to take learning outdoors. Or for some non-formal educators to be able to, you know, engage with young people outdoors.

And so, Project Learning Tree provides educational resources and training to really make that easy so that students, not only connect, but they're developing really valuable skills that are critical for their development. And so, it's less about, "Here's the environment, let's teach you about the environment." But using the environment as almost like the platform to engage and build problem solving skills, exploration, communication, teamwork. It's the way to build different skills by using the environment as the platform in which you do that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:13] Yeah. And so, if you step back from it and sort of think about the bigger or the broader sort of impacts, this is an organization that's been around for a while, and it's not just been around for a while but it's seen a lot of changing trends as we think about environment and the role of environment in education, and even the way we think about the standards that are tied to environmental education. And you just don't work in the U.S. As well. So, as you sort of think about the longer term work that's happened, what do you see as some of the sort of keystones, I guess, that have really kind of informed the way the organization thinks about its role in the world of education, both formal or informal?

Jess Kaknevicius: [00:05:56] Yeah. And like I mentioned, at the national level, our role is really to provide the resources to be implemented at the local level. And so, because we have programs like Ohio, we're able to really take what we are able to develop but implement it to what's important to that community. And so, it's adaptable. It's made to deliver what's relevant for the community members, for the youth within that area.

And so, that's what's made PLT such an important program for over the past 40 years is that it creates that relevant piece. And so, what's happening in your community? What are the issues in your community? How could I use PLT to explore those issues? And that allows us to continue to be relevant decade after decade and into the future.

So, as we get into more issues around climate change, looking at resources that help people navigate that conversation at that local level, looking at things like diversity and inclusion, how do we use the environment and understanding our connection with the environment to build awareness there.

And so, our state programs really allow us to connect over 70 state partners that help us to deliver PLT at that state level. But we also have international partners. We're growing our work in Canada, which I'm based in. As well as we have partners in Japan and Mexico and Chile. And so, looking for opportunities to expand the work we're doing globally because, although, the resources help to focus on issues in North America because they're adaptable, you're able to really take and implement those key learnings in any part of the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:22] And that's one of the things that actually I like the most about the program and the way it's been designed and developed is the fact that it recognizes that just because we have this broad concept doesn't mean that we can deliver it as is, and it will be relevant to the community, or certainly even engage that local learner. So, the fact that, you know, teachers or informal educators can literally grab the materials, make it their own so that it works with their kiddos, I think, is an incredible benefit. And, unfortunately, we don't see that all the time in programming, but we do see in great programming. So, certainly appreciate that.

Jess Kaknevicius: [00:07:56] And just to quickly add to that, the benefit is, you know, the environmental issues can feel big to young people and they feel like, "I don't know what I can do." If you can make it relevant in their community and actions that they can take in their community, they're going to connect more. They're going to create that stewardship ethic that will last longer. And so, that's the great importance of having that community connection relevance and making it tangible for a young person makes them connect more to it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:24] Yeah, absolutely. Can you share just a little bit, just with our listeners, an example of one of the units? I want to preface this. This is an incredibly accessible program. It is amazingly easy to use it. You know, as we've talked about, it's highly adaptable, but more importantly, kids love it. I mean, that was one of the things.

As I mentioned, we engaged with the program last summer, so I went back to pull the materials just to sort of see ahead of our conversation today. And you can see the engagement in the photographs and the videos of the kids engaging with it. They are all in. And I do mean all in. And that is one of the things that we want to see happen.

So, could you sort of share with our listeners, just maybe give an example of a particular unit and why you love that unit or how you've seen students engage with it or even teachers engage with it in creative ways?

Jess Kaknevicius: [00:09:17] Yeah. So, we'll kind of use one that we just launched recently last year, it's called Trillions of Trees. And it's a compilation of three activities. And the story really tells the importance of

planting trees, why trees are valuable, how do we take care of trees, and then looking for signs of health of trees. And so, everything from how do you grow a tree, what are the things that trees need in order to grow. And that can be relevant to any community.

So, you can look at what's the tree in my community, what are the things it needs, how much sun does it need, how do things grow. All the way to understanding, you know, the lifetime connection, so how do we ensure that that tree continues to be healthy, what are the signs that we're looking for in terms of health. And so, it's that exploration piece working as a team to look at a tree and go, What are the signs that it's healthy or that it's not healthy? What could be impacting it? And then, really talking about the benefits of trees.

And so, trees and forests, whether you're in an urban community, whether you're in suburban, and rural community, they're huge benefits for health, reducing stress, increasing activity, reducing heart rate. They have everything to producing products that we use on an everyday basis. They produce food. They give habitat for wildlife. So, understanding that trees and forests play such an important role to our community, those are the types of things that we explore through our activities. And so, getting out, connecting it, writing poems, being able to touch and explore nature.

And the benefit of PLT as well, there's scientific approaches you can take with some of the assessments. So, measuring and writing down, doing charts. There's also that artistic piece which is so important for some youth, and so writing down telling a story of the tree in your backyard or telling the story of a tree that maybe your family talked to you about and talking about that intergenerational transfer of information.

And storytelling is a really important aspect to a PLT, and that's what makes PLT so unique, is that while all the activities can be driven to different parts of the curriculum, so science, math, arts, learning, language, physical activity. There's so many different ways that PLT can be connected, and I think that's what makes it so relevant. It's not just one aspect of the curriculum or one aspect of the standards. It can be really driven across.

And, again, that's why it's so important for that state level connection, because they also have their own standards that they have to meet. And so, being able to pull that connection at that state level is what really makes it relevant.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:41] Yeah. No, absolutely. And, again, I just really love that. So, share with us a little bit about sort of what the organization is thinking from a sort of next or long term sort of standpoint. And I've been asking this question a lot of my guests, because we are all globally coming off - and I use the word off right now in sort of loose terms - this global pandemic, which we know is turning endemic, and we are still dealing with it in ongoing ways. Depending on where you are in the world right now, there's a variety of different surges still happening.

So, our environment is an intriguing and tenuous place on many, many, many different levels. And, certainly, many organizations coming off of the pandemic have seen a number of different shifts, some great, some not so great, some sort of in the middle. And I've been asking, you know, as you think about the work that you're doing and coming off of it - and I'm sure that you had to make some adjustments during the pandemic to be able to deliver. There's a lot of virtual stuff going on out there in the world - what from that experience, both the positive and the negative, as it relates to the way that your organization is thinking about its next steps or moving forward?

Jess Kaknevicus: [00:12:58] Yeah. I think the pandemic was interesting because I think what it exposed a lot of people to is the benefits of being outdoors. It was almost like the one safe place you could be for a little bit. And so, a lot of people got outdoors, a lot of people connected. For us, as an organization, we had to shift

because we weren't able to have those in-person workshops that we used to, so we did shift to virtual. Now, we're seeing that people now want to be in-person, but it still gives us that opportunity to look at that hybrid structure.

Virtual also allowed us to really expand our reach and our impact. And so, being able to really talk about the work you're doing at a bigger level, because everyone was able to do it, and teachers were now coming more online to look for resources. So, we were able to adapt and provide some programming online. And so, we look at that as still being something we offer moving forward. But that in-person connection is still so valuable through our estate programs, and teachers are looking for that.

And I think it really brought that environmental connection to a lot of teachers in looking for ways that they can bring that into their own classroom. So, being able to expand some of our in-person stuff through our partners, being able to continue to drive online learning.

But, also, for me when I think of it - I'm a new parent and so I was a pandemic mom - seeing that connection of my kid now with the outdoors, I go, "How do I spark that lifetime of curiosity and continue to have that connection with the outdoors?" And so, we look at early on, have an interest. There's this early experience that might get a young person to be curious about what is my connection, what is my role in this environment and sustainability. Then, driving through to how do we build that understanding.

For us, as Sustainable Forestry Initiative, we look at things through the lens of trees and forests, and so what is the role of forests in sustainability. So, looking at building tools and resources that help people to understand that connection to forest as a supplement. I understand environment. I understand sustainability. What are the role of forests?

And the ultimate goal long term is potentially sparking someone's interest in a green career. And so, you know, I myself am in a green career. I can think of moments in my early childhood when there was really impactful moments that drove me to get outdoors and connect. And it led me to the space in the sustainability world. And we want more people and more diverse people entering into those careers. And so, being able to drive interest and awareness of careers early on, and then driving the connection to careers and skills development to be able to build that connection.

And even if someone doesn't end up in a green career, even building that understanding of sustainability or environmental understanding and understanding the role of our forests means that later on, even if they're an artist, even if they're a doctor, even if they're a politician, they understand the role the environment plays and that's within them within their own careers, and they're able to act more sustainably.

And so, that's a really long term projection for an organization, but that's what is really needed. So, when we're having conversations at the high level about sustainability, if everyone is already at this basic knowledge, we'd be further along. We wouldn't have to be having conversations around what do forests do for climate change, because people would understand it because of PLT early on.

And so, our ultimate goal is increasing that forest literacy, increasing environmental literacy so that people are advancing sustainable solutions earlier on would be our ultimate goal.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:18] Yeah. And, ultimately, you're creating stewards for a lifetime, and that's a really big thing. I bump up against this all the time in the various conversations that we have on this program, and I hear that repeatedly is, "We recognize that we're really lucky if we can get kids to be in X, Y, or Z career." But at the end of the day, just for them to understand what that career is, what that particular need happens to be,

they become a more educated adult population. And at the end of the day, those are the things that we need. So, I certainly am super excited about that.

I also always like to ask, especially programs such as yours that have been around for so long, 40 years, that's a lot of impact, that's a lot of work, that's a lot of learning as an organization as well as by the public that benefits from it. Along the way, and maybe that you don't necessarily have the long, long term sort of knowledge in this space, but even just in your own work within the organization, you know, I'm sure that you have heard from time to time, "Well, we can't do that" or "I just don't really see that that's going to be possible."

And I'm super curious about the conversations that you engage with, with educators or communities or organizations that say, "Oh. No, you know, our kids can't do that. Our community doesn't want to do that. That's not what it should look like." You know, our listeners are always looking for ways to go out into their community and marshal the forces and say that we should do this. So, how do you arm folks to go out and say, "Hey, let's bring this program to our community or let's bring this program to my individual classroom when there's a lot of pushback"?

Jess Kaknevicius: [00:17:52] Yeah. And I think it comes down to sometimes it's as simple as working with your state program or working with partners to make it relevant. And, for us, when you think about trying to increase the diversity of partners we work with, it's working with the people who are already in those communities that have those connections that, I think, is so important and so valuable.

As a national organization, we can play a national role. We can play that, bringing people together saying the same message. But if we want to reach into underserved communities, finding the right partner that's already there and working with them on what's right for that community. And, again, knowing that community level connection is so critical because they understand the issues.

And you always think of you don't bring in big issues to a community that might not be thinking of the environment. And I have a good example. Like, I live in Toronto and I work for an organization where we were trying to plant trees in a less affluent part of the community. And, you know, convincing them to plant trees was hard because they were worried about putting food on their plate. And it was like, you know, that wasn't important to them.

And so, relating in a way that says, this is the benefit of it, this is the health benefit, it can reduce your energy consumption, it can lower your bills. We're talking about it in a way that relates to that person also trying to make that environmental connection. Sometimes you just have to adapt the way that you're communicating, the work you're doing to make it relevant.

That's why PLT is so unique because you can create that community level story, but it's all about partnerships understanding the communities you're working with. And we've done some work with indigenous communities where it's working with that indigenous or that tribal nation and saying, how do we bring this into your schools or how do we modify these resources so that they're relevant to you, your community, and the youth that are being brought up in your community, and understanding the challenges they may have faced, and integrating that into the learning.

And I think that's what makes PLT unique and that's what makes any program successful is not coming in with your solution, but being open to adapting and being open to modifying what you need to do to tell your story but listen to their story, most importantly.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:03] Right. Right. And I actually really love the idea of you working with the native communities in particular, because, traditionally, in so many native communities, not just in the U.S. or Canada, but across the globe, they have so much deep knowledge historically and traditionally about their own environment. It is woven into their origin stories, their day-to-day beliefs, a lot of the things that they do.

So, I love the fact that you are working diligently to try to incorporate those components in a meaningful way. And I would imagine that there is an exchange of knowledge and information that that you have learned a lot from that experience as much, if not more, than taking your own program into those communities. How would you translate that kind of experience into the broader program as a whole?

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:20:55] Like, when we think of sustainability, sometimes we think of those Western world of like, "Oh, sustainability. What a neat concept." And when you work with tribal nations, it's intertwined into the way that they work. It's their connection with the environment. It's the circular way that they approach life. And so, sometimes you have to step back and go, "We're not teaching them. They're teaching us about how they've always thought about this as part of their community.

And I think that that's so valuable to learn from indigenous communities is they've lived for centuries in a sustainable way, and how can we learn more from them and integrate their learnings and their connection to the environment. Like, when you hear about their stories and when you hear about their communities, environment is an integral part. It's not an outside piece. It's a part of how they live and how they love.

And, for us, we have so much to learn about that connection and so much value to gain from the importance of environment in our everyday lives. But living with the environment not separate from it, and being able to use it and being able to be sustainable with it is so critical. And so, integrating that into our own work, we're doing a lot of that at the state level, at the national level, is, telling those stories and saying, how do you work with your local tribal communities to be able to tell that story and understand their perspective. And don't bring learning to them, but bring their learning to the communities that you live in.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:13] Yeah. This is a complete segue, I suppose, on some levels, but I do think it's an intriguing opportunity for places that no longer have a tribal presence. The reality is back to our own collective origin stories, that was not always the case. And so, there was that connection to the earth, to that place where we are all now living today. So, it would seem to me an intriguing opportunity to be able to recapture pieces that have been lost in some places as well. I don't know what that would look like, but I think it's an interesting thing to think about, and how could we possibly bring some of those components back.

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:22:49] Yeah. Making space for that storytelling is so important and I think that that's a part of the work that we do, is, opening up space to have those conversations. And storytelling is such an important way to describe the connection with the environment. We always think about connection between animals, connection between trees and animals and water, and sometimes it's almost easier to tell it in a story than it is in a scientific way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:13] And, certainly, more engaging in many ways depending on your audience. I love that. So, one of the other questions that I have for you is with the ongoing and constant push around technology, new uses of technology, evolving technology, as we all know, it's just the rate and pace of change right now is just unlike anything we've seen in a very, very long time. Not from a sort of Zoom and bigger reach perspective, I'm thinking really sort of brass tacks or nuts and bolts, if you will.

As folks are thinking about, "Well, I need to be teaching my kids more about technology and getting them into sort of STEM careers that are based on technology." How does any of that then translate? Because one of the

things that I'm always trying or PAST, as an organization, is always trying to work on is to sort of show the broad implications of the ways that different industries and careers either overlap or that they're integrated across them.

And so, one of the questions, of course, is always going to be about technology. The program is talking about going back out in sustainability and being part of nature and the forest. But there are many, many, many technological sort of integrations or components to that, I have no doubt. So, how are you, as an organization, sort of thinking about that balance?

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:24:27] I'm a true believer that don't try to fight it, but try to integrate it into the work that you're doing. You know, I think in the environmental education world, we need to be open to including ways to integrate apps into your learning. And we do that through some of our resources now, is calling out what app is that in trying to make that connection, all the way to integrating technology into different parts of the learning.

And so, you might do an outdoor assessment, how do you bring it back, sit down, and drive it through a simulation, or drive it through an Excel sheet to drive some of those formulations. So, being able to integrate technology is such an important piece.

And I think that sometimes people assume that the environmental field, or especially for us, the forest sector, is not innovative and is not developing.

And there's so many different technologies that are being developed, whether it's new products that are being developed, and the technology that's needed, careers in GIS, being able to drive a drone, being able to do simulations to look at what is climate change doing to impacting our forests. There's such a role for technology and environment and coming up with potential solutions or seeing the impact. And I think that that's so critical.

And so, I don't think you fight it. I think you bring it in. And, let's be honest, young people are going to have a connection to their phone and it's going to be, "How do you bring that?" So, take pictures of nature. Go look it up. Bring out that app that picks up the bird sound. Tell me what it is. Work with it. See how they can actually drive that connection, and what they might end up putting it down, and looking away from the phone just because you were able to drive that connection for them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:01] Yeah. I think that's very true. And I think that all the different, you know, sort of sensor-based monitoring systems. I mean, there is so much technology all over. But I do know that that's one of the things that people will sort of wrestle with as they're trying to balance out the different standards that they need to teach. You know, "Hey. I've got all this technology stuff." And I would say, "Oh, great. Why don't you use your local park, your local forest, your local whatever to be the actual topic or the mechanism that you drive to teach those standards over there."

And I guess that's part of sort of what I love about the conversation we get to have on the program is that we do get to sort of help people think about, I don't have to do this in addition to, but I can swap pieces out to really get to that local relevancy around whatever topic I'd really just love to engage my kids in. And I think one of them is finding ways to engage you in your local forest. And a million different ways is awesome for kids and for our community.

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:26:53] We recognize that. Like, moving forward, it's understanding the role of technology and the opportunity of technology.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:59] Exactly. Exactly. And I love the way you put that. The opportunity of technology. That's fabulous.

You know, I always like to sort of think about closing the conversation with recognizing that people are listening to this program from all over the world, and some of them are just an individual teacher or an individual person in their local community center, or a parent even, in a variety of different places that are like, "Oh, my gosh. This is so amazing. But I don't even know how to get access to that. Well, what it look like if I were to do something like this program in my own community?"

So, in addition to just getting a hold of your state rep and, as you mentioned, there are 70 different sort of affiliates or representatives across the U.S. in particular. But how do you go about if you don't have that local access? What would that look like?

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:27:45] So, I would say 100 percent start at our website, plt.org. There's free resources on there for families. There's ones that people connect to or can bring to their own communities that are free. We also have resources that people can purchase online, but really it's starting there. There's great blogs where we post the STEM connections, where we post, how do we make this easy for families. So, even if you don't have that state level connection, there's ways for you to use PLT in your communities just by starting at our website.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:13] Yeah. And I certainly appreciate that. So, last question. Are there great modules or ideas or topics that you guys are working on that you just feel like are going to be kind of the next thing we should really sort of be zeroing in on with kids as it relates to long term sustainability in a forest? What are you working on?

Jess Kaknevičius: [00:28:33] Yes. So, there's two big pieces that I'm most excited about. One is our work in climate change and being able to drive that forest to climate change connection. And so, being able to develop resources and tools to educate teachers about bringing this into the classroom. And, also, easy to use tools for kids to understand what's the role of forests in climate change, and how can we elevate that role to really drive solutions.

And the second is diversity, how do we bring more diverse and underserved communities into the environmental world. And so, whether that's through career pathways, whether that's through driving and being able to deliver PLT programming in that community, I think those are the two big pieces. So, one is more content-based and one is more reaching new audiences.

And, for us, we're really focused on working with our state partners and building national partnerships that help us to reach underserved communities. And so, I'm most excited about those two pieces, because those two connected as well, I think, is really important, too, in understanding what's relevant in the communities, but also how we can really increase the reach of PLT and make that environmental connection in the communities where people live.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:42] Yeah, absolutely. I love that. Jess, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with us. And more importantly, thank you for the work that the organization is doing. Sustainable Forestry Initiative's work is amazing. And like I said, just full disclosure for our listeners, at PAST, we've used the program, we've loved it, the kids have had an amazing experience. So, it's not just a fun conversation, but I can actually advocate it.

I hope that folks reach out through the program. We will post all of the resources. This is an amazing thing that you can, in fact, do in your community and you should. So, super, super excited about the work that you're doing, Jess, so thank you so much.

Jess Kaknevicius: [00:30:24] Awesome. Thank you for having us on.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:28] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.