

CERES21, Oslo University

MAHB, Stanford University

## **Reclaiming Ecological Wisdom for the Crisis of our Time**

**Workshop 24-25 May 10-00-16.00  
Encina Hall, Stanford University**

Do we need to rediscover wisdom? Modern Western cultures have made a fetish of specialized knowledge at the expense of wisdom. Knowledge can free us from prejudice and trigger scientific progress – but it can also lead to disenchantment and relativization of truth. The combined forces of skepticism and specialization have discredited faith in the universally “valid” insights of sages. The result is a clash between our current distrust of universal values and a sneaking intuition that we urgently need to provide existential meaning, sustenance, and guidance for humanity and the planet in peril. The challenge of global sustainability leads us to reach for a global consensus about a universal principle that would mobilize behavioral change toward sustainability. Such a project comprises a number of questions that need fresh scrutiny: What is wisdom? Can we recognize it when it is present? Is it culture, class, and gender specific? And does wisdom hold an underestimated adaptation potential for addressing the sustainability crisis?

A collaborative “back to wisdom” undertaking proposed by the Oslo CERES21 project and the Stanford MAHB group is a post-Batesonian workshop. In the 1950s, while working at Stanford, Gregory Bateson defined ecological wisdom as a holistic awareness of the systemic interconnection between the human and biotic worlds. The Norwegian founder of Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, struggled further with codifying this holistic wisdom in order to “chart the way out of chaos.” The present sustainability crisis—the climate crisis in particular—is the most poignant testimony to this chaos—and to the lack of recognition that ecological folly is humanity’s self-harm.

The aim of the workshop will be to answer the question whether it is possible to reclaim wisdom in a world that has fixated on specialized, “silo-ized” knowledge and on cultural differences. While the natural sciences have tried to find common laws within the confines of their increasingly specialized disciplines, recent social science has obsessed about the cultural difference between a Samoan and a Norwegian. We wish to return our vision to the search for a common humanity. Is it possible to speak about a wise codex of conduct that a Samoan and a Norwegian—and even a Wall Street banker—would agree about? Can this transcultural wisdom guide a behavioral shift and nurture cultural innovation for designing a sustainable future? And do we need a new, “wise” vocabulary to combat the media discourse of the “civilizational clash” and the dominant perception of humans as driven by self-interest, profit, and power games?

***Workshop leader: Nina Witoszek FitzPatrick / University of Oslo / Visiting scholar, Stanford  
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**Monday, 24 May, 10.00-16.00**

***Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Ecological Wisdom***

This day features a “brainstorming session” with no formal presentations. Instead, invited discussants will be offered 5 min to pitch their perspectives on ecological wisdom. Thus we shall get glimpses of wisdom as viewed through the lenses of biologists, historians, literary scholars, cognitive and medical scientists, linguists, market specialists, etc.

***1. Session: Defining Wisdom***

***10.00-11.00***

**Nina Witoszek**, brief introduction

**Paul and Anne Ehrlich**

Questions and comments

**Stephen Schneider**

Questions and comments

**Ursula Heise**

Questions and comments

**Atle Midttun**

Questions and comments

11.00- 11.15 Coffee break

***11-15-12.30***

**Michael Shanks**

Questions and comments

**Ewa Domanska**

Questions and comments

**Tom Burns**

Questions and comments

**Eugene Rosa**

Questions and comments

**Robert Harrison**

Questions and comments

**12.15-13.30 Lunch /Faculty Club**

**2. Session: Responses and Reflections 13.30 – 16.30**

All participants are invited to come up with their responses to the morning session and their supplementary definitions.

**Concluding remarks: Doug Carmichael: Is Garden World the Answer?**

**Dinner: 19.00**

**Tuesday 25 May, 10-00-17.30**

***Cultural Perspectives on Ecological Wisdom***

This day will feature a set of short formal presentations by invited international guests (titles to be announced in the beginning of May).

**1 session: 10.00-11.00**

**Karen V. Syse:** Perspectives on Celtic Cultures

**Audrey Gadzekpo:** Perspectives on Africa

**James Miller:** Perspectives on China

**Discussion**

11.00-11.15 Coffee Break

**11.15 – 12.15**

**David Carrasco:** Perspectives on Mesoamerica

**Bron Taylor:** Perspectives on North America

**Nina Witoszek:** Perspectives on Scandinavia

**Discussion**

**Lunch: 12.15-13.30**

**2 Session: 13.30 -16.30**

**Shazad Bashir:** Perspectives on Sufi Wisdom

**William Elison:** Perspectives on Hindu Wisdom

**Daniel Contreras:** Perspectives on South America

**Discussion**

**16.30-17-30 Where do we go from here?**

## **Selected questions to be addressed by the workshop:**

### **Day 1:**

Is wisdom dependent on the eloquent encapsulation of durable truths? Or is it better expressed by ambiguity?

Do our cognitive and biological structures predispose us to wisdom? If not what can be done about it?

Why is human history a “march of folly”? (cf Barbara Tuchman)

Are our political systems and institutions – including the university - conducive to advancing wisdom? If not, how should they be re-imagined?

Is wisdom compatible with the dominant idea of the university?

Is wisdom compatible with the market? Is there such a thing as a “wise” Wall Street banker?

Should the social scientists and humanists continue to cultivate epistemological humility – or should they recommend a global (or local) philosophy, a theology, or a mode of conduct under the pretext of planetary emergency?

### **Day 2:**

What are the definitions and manifestations of ecological wisdom in various cultural traditions?

Who are the central protagonists and what narratives embody ecologically wise scenarios?

What are the bridging common motives in all traditions? A holistic conception of life? A “middle way”? An art of compromise? A dialogic imagination?

What is the relationship between wisdom and the conception of a “good life” and to what extent does it include nature?