**Edited transcript of “Connecting to nature with Dr. Sasha Kosanic”**

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[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath. Music volume fades as Áine talks]

**Áine** Welcome to Enabling Commons, a place for conversations with activists, experts and scholars at the intersections of disability and climate change. The podcast is produced by the Disability Inclusive Climate Action Research Program based at McGill University. I'm your host, Áine Kelly-Costello. Today I talk to Dr. Sasha Kosanic, an interdisciplinary, disabled scientist with a focus on climate change impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services, based at Liverpool John Moores University in the UK. We talk about Sasha's research in Madagascar and the bounty of ecological diversity disabled people should have equitable access to, as well as her advocacy as one of few disabled people in her field. Here is our conversation.

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**Áine** I'm talking to Sasha Kosanic. Welcome to Enabling Commons Sasha, I'm so grateful to have you here. Could you start off by introducing yourself?

**Sasha** Thank you very much for the invitation! So I'm Sasha Kosanic, I’m a lecturer in climate change ecology at Liverpool of John Moores University. Basically, I started my academic career as an interdisciplinary scientist, finishing my Ph.D. at University of Exeter, UK, on the topic of climate change and biodiversity. And later on, during my postdoc at Konstanz University, I kind of went into this interdisciplinary field of ecosystem services. So climate change impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services, which then brought me to people with disabilities and how environmental change impacts this minority group.

**Áine** And because you are also coming to that area sort of as a disabled person yourself, right?

**Sasha** Yes. So I have cerebral palsy, and, from that perspective, it was maybe easier to link the gap—what is missing in the scientific literature.

**Áine** Hmm. I'm keen to ask you about that in a bit, but first, could you tell me a little bit more about your field of research? So, what are cultural ecosystem services?

**Sasha** Okay, so we have ecosystem services in general : which are all the benefits that we, as a human species, get from nature. And they are divided into culture supporting, provisioning, and regulating. So, for example, provisioning hours—they are all important. Provisioning food, water—regulating, for example, regulation of climate [or] regulation of water. And my focus is on culture ecosystem services, because I think that in this area, we can really distinguish how these services impact disabled populations. So, for example, culture ecosystem services is recreation, is if you go to the nature inspiration. Cultural identity, which is culturally important, if we talk about about intersectionality so we can have indigenous people with disabilities and then in that way they will lose community identity as the impact of climate change and biodiversity loss or even personal identity which can impact their wellbeing. But also we need to understand cultural ecosystem services in a perspective. For example, how people perceive nature and how demand for this service depends on disability. For example, if you have a person with sight impairment, they will perceive nature completely different. For example, mountains—they will concentrate on different senses than people who have a mobility issue, for example. And this is why we need to take all [of] this into consideration when making conservation policies. And so far, that has not been taken into consideration.

**Áine** [00:05:08]You recently have been working on a project in Madagascar looking at climate change impacts on the cultural ecosystems services and well-being of older people, youth and disabled people. Are you able to tell me more about this project and what you're finding out? I know it's still kind of, in the pipeline.

**Sasha** Yes, I can tell you a bit, because it's still in review. I can tell you just an overview of the project. So basically, this project opened our eyes, basically, because when we started that project, we initially knew that there is not much research on people with disabilities or disabled populations in this area of research (climate change impacts and environmental change). But actually, when we started to search the literature for preparation for the fieldwork in Madagascar, we realized that there’s almost nothing there. Basically, what we wanted to see in Madagascarm [was] this intersectionality, because we went to four remote communities that can be impacted by climate change in a different way: so [a] coastal community, [a] mountain community, etc., in different regions of Madagascar. And, as we know, Madagascar will be impacted more by extreme climatic events because the frequency and intensity of climatic events is increasing. And we wanted to see how this might impact or whether the people there are aware of the impacts so far, and how this is perceived within different groups—so elderly children and disabled people. So we did a participatory workshop that was organized by [the] chief of the community, and we also did semi-structured interviews. Unfortunately, we did not have, as much as we [had] hoped, [a] turnout of disabled people. But we did find out that they have a really good perception of what is happening in relation to climate change and how they are losing the services—-in the last decades—-and how this, is in a way, [is] impacting their wellbeing.

**Sasha** And we also touched upon something that is called “ecological grief”. So ecological grief is quite [a] novel term and basically it takes into account impacts on human wellbeing [and] mental health with the loss of ecosystem services, culture—but more specifically way of life, species, nature. So it has been perceived in Inuit populations in Canada, but also in farmers in Australia—they lost their crops due to drought. Inuit populations needed to relocate, but also they needed to change their ways of life, and that impacts personal identity in a way that can actually create quite severe mental health problems for people with disabilities, but for Inuit people as well. So we can touch on this intersectionality here.

**Áine** [00:09:18] Yeah, thank you for raising the intersectionality aspects because yeah, it is so important to be doing and researching communities which are impacted in multiple ways. So just to expand on a couple of things: one is just to draw out what types of cultural ecosystem services disabled people are losing with climate impacts. So is this about how people access the outdoors? Is that kind of the focus?

**Sasha** Well, we are trying to ask—when we have the semi-structured interviews— we try to ask about diverse culture ecosystem services. So, as I said: spirituality, inspiration, recreation, a sense of place, sense of belonging—

**Áine**Right.

**Sasha** —how do you connect to the community, so different types of services to see whether they're losing them first because the services are not accessible, but also whether they are losing them because we are losing biodiversity—as we are losing it because of climate change and other anthropogenic impacts. And this is important because understanding of which services are important for different types of disabilities, [means] then, we can bring this into the conservation policies and make accurate conservation policies because now, in the moment, all conservation policies are based on able-bodied population—so non-disabled population.

**Áine** My confusion was possibly around the word “services” as well—maybe it has just a much wider definition in terms of anything that would involve living off the land, for example. Right? Or people who are being displaced due to climate impacts or all of these kinds of things. So it's not just about being able to go on a hike, like it's a lot more holistic than that, if I'm understanding correctly.

**Sasha** Yes, but we [might] also not be able to go to the hike; we need to have access to the nature. So whether this access, it has to be physical, of course, we need to get to the nature. But then, if we are losing nature, this access can be much further—we are losing the access. If we go to one spot in the mountains, some of the people can get there. Some of the people with different disabilities cannot get there. Whether we are enjoying the view, or we’re enjoying the smell, or we’re enjoying the sound of the birds, we should be able to be there. Right? All of us. So, all of us should have primary access to nature, in order to build this relationship with nature—this is also very important. So we need to have [the] ability to build up [a] relationship with nature.

**Sasha** Recently, someone told me that many kids with disabilities in Germany [have] never been in the forest, and I couldn't believe that. So they [have] never experienced the forest—like hugging the trees, or experiencing the smell of leaves in autumn. And, you know, if they don't have access to forests, they don't have this basic relationship with nature. And when we create relationships with nature or anything else, we care for this object—nature or person. And to be able to care or to advocate for environmental change, we need to have this relationship. So we create a relationship with nature, then we are able to care for nature more and make more adequate conservation policies.

**Áine**For sure. How do you think that being disabled yourself has informed your approach to research, in particular working with marginalized communities? Obviously, this kind of imperative for access would be super deeply felt because you would feel that yourself. But I wonder if there are other ways as well?

**Sasha**I think it allowed me to spot the missing gap in scientific literature because I don't think that otherwise, although this was not my area from the beginning—Madagascar project opened our eyes—maybe I would not support it if I had not had cerebral palsy in the first place. So, that was a big advantage. Now, I think advantages also to understand, because I've been around different types of disabilities, and I think—although I don't have a full understanding of each particular disability—I have much more [of an] understanding than someone who hasn't had my experience. So also, when I'm creating the project and when I'm going into the field to talk to people, hopefully this fact that I have CP (cerebral palsy) can give them more relaxation and they can be more approachable. So, I definitely think that that's the plus and that they have different eyes on the topic.

**Áine** Mm hmm. For sure. Yeah. I think sometimes that's called having a “disability lens” on something, or being able to use that lived experience to build relationships and build trust is so valuable. I also wanted to pick up on, you were mentioning in Madagascar it was quite hard to reach disabled people for the research. And I think that this is quite a common theme, that when communities have been marginalized for so long, then actually figuring out where they are and reaching out is quite a challenge. So I wondered if you wanted to talk a little bit more about what you've learned from that experience?

**Sasha** Well, as I said, it's a quite a novel field, and I think it's going to be challenging. And now we [are] also starting a new project in Germany and Slovenia, looking at Biosphere services and disabled populations. And I'm in the process of contacting disabled organizations in order to see how will I get a better access. But yes, when populations are historically marginalized—as is the case with the disabled population—they sometimes don't feel comfortable, or sometimes they don't feel that they have importance to say something. Although in Madagascar, I was not in the field, but my colleagues who were there told me that people who were disabled were quite happy to participate. And we had, of course, colleagues from Madagascar because we do not speak Malagasy. So they did the primary research on the field. And yes, they were they were quite surprised that people who had disabilities—different types—were very, very keen to participate.

**Sasha** But of course, I'm positive they were among this group because now, we need to take intersectionality here. You know, if we have an Indigenous community, women and girls with disabilities who don't have a role in the community per se—because of the structure and the cultural rules in the community—it's very difficult to give them a voice. And I think here, something like education and empowerment, in particular of girls with disabilities, it's it's a very important thing.

**Áine** Yeah, totally. Speaking of education, and switching gears a little bit, I wonder what you found to some of the systemic issues that exclude disabled people from studying and pursuing careers in STEM subjects.

**Sasha** Well, I think the main problem is that in STEM projects—STEM science—there are lots of difficulties, because many of the labs are not accessible. For geography, which was my main field, it's always clear how you will do the fieldwork. Because there is always fieldwork in geography. And some departments really try; Liverpool John Moores really tries to make this fieldwork accessible, even sometimes online, if it's necessary and needed. If we are at the field, we are try to be sure that walking distance or something—the place where we do the fieldwork is accessible for everyone who we have in the whole cohort at the time. And this is the thing that we really need to work on: making science more accessible. But for that, I think it's also a problem that there are not enough role models. And I think every one of us who has any kind of disability and perceives themselves as a disabled person, it's always easier if you are 17, 18, 19 and you have a role model in this department who you can turn to and say, “Okay, I have this problem.” You are kind of assured that someone else, who is a disabled person—maybe not with the same disability—can understand you better and even will try to make [the] accommodations that are necessary for you to pass this module.

**Sasha** So I think this is the main problem: that at the moment, we really have very little staff with disabilities in universities. And then, that's the cycle: because universities actually should promote diversity much more. They should promote, on their sites, that they are open for inclusion and give real examples—not just words on a paper.

**Áine** Mm hmm.

**Sasha** So, yes, I think that would make teenage kids who are thinking about going to university more open [and say] “Okay, this university is really open; they already have staff with disabilities, so maybe this is the place for me to be. I will feel safe. I will feel that I am supported, and my life will be much easier, because, as you know, going to another country or [even] going to another town, [as] someone who has [a] disability can be a really hard and, you know, how will I move? Who will help me there? What services do I have?” [These are] lots of questions that someone who doesn't have disability doesn't have at all. To have this anxiety of “I'm going to a new environment. How will I be perceived by my peers?”. But someone who is disabled has so many other questions in their heads. And if universities take the initial steps to provide this from the beginning, then this transition, is much, much more easier.

**Áine** Mm hmm. Because you speak from experience there as well, right—

**Sasha** Yes. Yeah.

**Áine** —having yourself gone through those transitions? And now you are a lecturer and you can be that—a role model for other students, which is just really cool. Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about? Is there anything else you want to bring up?

**Sasha** Ecosystem services; all of ecosystem services are super important for our wellbeing, and we really need to focus on preserving the nature. We are trying, as a collective, to adapt and to mitigate climate change. But to understand what is happening with environmental impacts of climate change or biodiversity loss, we need to really empower disabled people. So we need to get to the fact that in terms of environmental justice, people who have disabilities are at the table, so that they are in the segment of procedural justice where the policies are made. And I think this is one of the crucial lackings of the moment. So something that we really missed, and of course, we need to get there with more science, more data, more education, but after all, more empowerment, more advocacy for disabled people.

**Áine** I completely agree; that's a very strong note to finish on. Thank you so much for your time and insights, Sasha.

**Sasha**Thank you so much for the invitation. I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

[Lightly rhythmic major key guitar music, with watery/peaceful nature sounds underneath, same as intro. Music volume fades as Áine talks]

**Áine** Please help us spread the word about Enabling Commons. Share it with a friend or link to it in your organisation's newsletter. With thanks to Rose Paquet for producing transcripts and podcast promotion. The music is composed and produced by Sam Morgan. Audio production and hosting is by me, Áine Kelly-Costello. To find out more about the intersections of disability and climate change, visit disabilityinclusiveclimate.org

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