

Season 3, episode 10 - Dr Vishnu Prahalad

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SPEAKERS

Dr Vishnu Prahalad, Lily Spencer

L Lily Spencer 00:15

Hey reMAKERS, welcome to the podcast. I'm your host, Lily Spencer, and I'm delighted to have you here today. Why do we value nature? Is it because of what it can do for us? Is it because of the money that we might make from it? Or is it because of the sense of just wholeness and even wonder that we might feel when we experience, connect to, are in nature or when we know that there are just billions of animals out there in the wild doing their thing? Our next guest is a conservationist, ecologist, systems thinker, and lecturer who is really about connecting the different fields that need to come together for humanity as a species to get better, but living on this planet in harmony and imbalance with the world around us. His name is Dr. Vishnu Prahalad. He's a Senior Lecturer in the School of Geography, Planning and Spatial Sciences at the University of Tasmania, and he's their course coordinator for really the only conservation degree in Tasmania. It's a flagship undergraduate degree called the Bachelor of Natural Environment and Conservation. He was awarded the Tasmanian Tall Poppy Science Award for his research spanning 15 years, research and community engagement into wetland conservation. His teaching, research and outreach he describes as mission-oriented place-based and interdisciplinary. Listening to him today is just the most beautiful taste of what it must be like to be one of his students, as we talk about really philosophy as much as ecology and conservation. We talk about politics and economics and the worldviews that drive what we do. It's really been one of my most cherished discussions that we've had on the podcast and all of the seasons that we've been going now. I hope that you get as much out of it as I did - here is Dr Vishnu Prahalad. Doctor Vishnu Prahalad, welcome so much to the reMAKERS podcast, it is a delight to be looking at you and looking at your beautiful backdrop - which I know our podcast listeners cannot see unless you're watching a clip - but, you've got this incredible image behind you. Can you describe it for us?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 03:12

Ah look, wonderful to be here Lily, thanks for having me. And the image I have behind me is one of my favourite natural environments in Tasmania. And it's a wetland in the far northwest of the state. It's quite wild in its character and wonderful biodiversity. So I quite like the place.

L Lily Spencer 03:31

It's just, I want to blink and kind of be there. Now, you are someone who has been recommended to me through multiple people in circles, you know Millie Rooney, my colleague and Co-Director at Australia reMADE - you guys worked together UTAS. But I was also surprised to see you pop up in a sort of lecture that you gave to Modern Money Lab, who we've also had on this season of the show. And you're, you know, you're talking about ecology and systems change and economics. It just seems to me like you're this really wonderful, multidisciplinary, kind of, systems thinker, who has obviously deep grounding in ecology and conservation and...but also can connect the dots in a way that a lot of people don't, to things like, you know, community organising politics, economics. So I was wondering if you could just maybe tell us a little bit about just your story. I've given people a bit of an introduction to you, but like, how did you come to be doing this work and connecting all of these threads so well?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 04:35

Well, hello Millie, if you're listening, and I guess, you know, to answer the question, none of this happened by design, right? I mean, there's a bit of a story in terms of how I got to where I am now. I mean, I was, you know, I did my undergraduate in engineering and like, you know, many people at that time in India did, that's part of the, you know, generation in India. That's you, your way to, you know, upward social mobility and so on. And I worked as an engineer for three years, right? And, and something inside me told me that that was not my calling. And I didn't know what my calling actually was. But I was not going to find out if I just stuck to my job. So I was lucky enough in that, in that, in that case, to try something different, just try something different. And that's when I came to Tasmania. And then, you know, did my Masters. And as I was doing my Masters, you know, you know, constantly asking the question, "why are things this way, and not another way?" And, and I was trying to get the answers wherever I could find them. And I was able to find them in policy analysis. Yeah, I did some studies on politics policy analysis. If I could do that through science, and I did science, and there was still not leading me to the answer. And then I thought, you know, branched off into economics and philosophy. And I'm still in this journey, right? And that, that, to me, is really exciting and exhilarating. And it gives me this energy every morning to go and, and keep asking this question "why?" and not be limited by a discipline or a domain.

L Lily Spencer 06:17

It's just the kind of thinking and teaching that we need today. And I'm so jealous of your students. I'm so delighted for them that they get, you know, to kind of sit and be the recipients and in that dialogue with you. So you're the course coordinator for the kind of flagship undergraduate degree at the University of Tasmania, it's a Bachelor of Natural Environment and Conservation. And really, you say that you're trying to help your students reframe what they are thinking about in conservation from saving a species to changing a system. Can you talk us through just a little bit high level what you mean there? Or how you try to explain it to an undergraduate who's sitting in front of you going "well, what does that mean?"

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 07:02

Maybe, you know, I should also mention that I mean, talking about disciplines, the discipline that I'm in, and all of our students are studying in, is geography. There are this...

L Lily Spencer 07:13

...which seems to be a hotbed for revolution, by the way, we had another person on the podcast who's doing economy, economics, rather - Tom Walker, at Think Forward - but actually, he said he learned all of his most useful things in geography.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 07:24

Yeah, I'm not surprised. And I guess what geography allows us to do is to not be committed to a single discipline or an area of study. I guess the core of geography that we, that I would describe it is that it asks the question, "why?" And it's not just me, you know, one of the most prominent leading geographers, Professor David Harvey, he says the same thing - that the power of geography is that it allows you, it gives you the licence as a researcher, to keep asking the question, "why?" constantly. And then use whatever tools and methods you can lay your hands on to answer the question "why?" and get to another place, and then, you know, go on. And I guess that's what we're trying to encourage our students to do within geography, right? We get wonderful students who are all really committed to, you know, progressive social change, they want to be part of the change, be it in terms of sustainability, or in terms of saving species and ecosystems and conservation, and so on. So, so obviously, you know, they need to understand the system within which, you know, social change happens and conservation happens, and so on. But if you just teach them the science, and what that's, that's done so far, is that if you just focus on the science, yes, obviously, you know, if you just look at the, you know, our lifetimes, last 30-40 years, the number of scientific publications has skyrocketed now. You know, there's 1000s and 1000s of papers published every day. Almost inversely, the number of species ending up on the IUCN - the World Conservation Union Tracking List - is also increasing exponentially. I mean, it is, it is a remarkable, you know, conundrum, isn't it? Right? So if you're just teaching students the signs, you're almost setting them to fail. So that, so that, that's the starting point, is that, obviously, we need to understand the science - be absolutely competent in the science, we, you know, conservation science or social science. But what else do we need to do in order to actually achieve those outcomes and, and stem that loss of species that we've seen across the world? Would that be politics? Would that be economics? Would that be philosophy? And, and I guess, you know, would there be Indigenous Studies - which is increasingly becoming picked up for good reasons? Would that be foreign language studies - understanding different cultures from around the world? And that's all important for us to really get a sense of how we can actually make a difference in terms of social change or, or conservation.

L Lily Spencer 10:05

Yeah, reminds me of that now kind of famous quote from a climate scientist, going back a decade or more at least saying, you know, "I thought that the world's problem was a lack of information or the burning of fossil fuels. And then I realised it was greed, or it was the economic system that we're in." And it feels like the message that you're telling us now is one that we would want to just take back into the past, you know, 30-40 years and go "guys, like

this diet is not enough. Like we need you to be masters of it. Yes, we need you to be, you know, students and diligent with it. But it's not going to save us by ourselves if we can't take on these other or understand and engage with these other forces."

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 10:45

Yeah, absolutely.

L

Lily Spencer 10:46

Yeah. Wow. So, I was wondering if you could indulge us then, on a bit of a thought experiment. And really, this is something that I think is so helpful for us sometimes to kind of step out of the mire of what we are in right now, which can feel so intractable. So we're going to imagine that you've discovered a time machine or portal into the future, and you travel 30 years into the future, so 2053. And in that time, humanity has faced all of these challenges, you know, we often are talking about 2050 is the timeframe for net zero, and then that's not good enough. But let's say that in that time, we've gone beyond just kind of offsetting carbon emissions and getting to net zero. And we've actually changed our paradigm. And we are now living much more in harmony with nature, much more of an ecological rather than an industrial sort of civilisation. And our values, our structures - you don't have to swim against the sea, you don't have to go against the grain, you don't have to work so darn hard to be sustainable, or to make good choices, because the system is actually set up to support that. So you get out of your portal, your time machine, your wormhole, whatever it is that you've gotten in, and you walk around. What do you notice? How are things different? What are the politics of the day that people are talking about? Or how are businesses...like what are people doing? What's the, what are you noticing about this kind of semi-near future of ours, where we've actually kind of made this shift? How is it different to the world we're in right now?

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 12:26

Thanks Lily, that's a wonderful question. Although, can I say that, this shouldn't be an indulgence, this should be a necessity. And I'm not alone in saying this, right? So Rob Hopkins, the founder of the Transition Network. I mean, his recent book, which has been popular for good reason - I read it, it's wonderful. And the focus of the book is about imagination. And the title of the book is "From What Is to What If and the Power of Imagination." And what he's arguing, and a number of other people arguing, like Stephanie Kelton from the US and a lot of other people, is that we have an imagination deficit. And this also ties in with what we were talking about earlier is that, you know, there's no real science deficit or an information deficit now, so what what else is lacking? And I guess you can say, well, we need to understand economics and politics and culture and so on. But also, we need to give ourselves this, this licence and not think of it as an indulgence as a necessity to imagine alternative futures and different futures, right? So with that preface, you know, what I would like to see - and you know, thankfully, this is in my lifetime hopefully, I'll be able to live long enough to see this and experiences are real - is I get up in the morning and do my usual things and go out and, you know, smell the roses, literally and metaphorically. And then head to the City Hall or a conference centre, right? And I am one of the few hundred people randomly selected to be involved in this deliberative public discussion. And it's running for a few weeks, and obviously

we're not trivialising it by just having it for one or two days. And there are other members of the community, right, representing the cross section farmers and creatives and so on. We are in the space, it's quite comfortable. We're getting all this information from experts, who have been funded well, publicly, to research various domains of society, you know, all the way from demographics to conservation and public policy. They're giving us all the information that they're put together wonderfully, right. And then out of all that information, we then have questions to deliberate to imagine the future in 2090. Okay, so here we are imagining the future in 2050, almost in a bubble, being indulgent, to imagining where, what society would be if we did this as part of normal business as usual? That is the government's, you know, funding this, the Premier's there, if you like, the Prime Minister's there, all the ministers are there. They're saying, "well, you are the people, this, these decisions are going to affect you. Here are the experts here. Here's the best available information we have. Let us decide on this democratically, right." And there are various forms of decisions, citizen's juries are examples of it, People's Forum in another example, which we've just published on recently, where we give this opportunity for us to imagine a future. And because it's done democratically, and there's a lot of media around it, and we get those decisions out. And those decisions become objectives for us, wishes for our future, that are laid down, concrete that we can all put our hearts and hands towards creating this future.

L Lily Spencer 15:59

I love that so much. I want to be there in your wormhole with you.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 16:06

I would love to have this conversation with you across the table when imagining futures. Yeah.

L Lily Spencer 16:13

Yeah, absolutely. And I mean, I know that in my kind of research, Wales has really shown as an example of a country that had these conversations of like, "what do we really value?" and did the deliberative democracy thing really well, and then enshrined it into, you know, goals that now all of society work toward with a Future, you know, Generations Commissioner thinking ahead and encouraging, cajoling people to kind of get them out of this short-termism and into that sense of, "what do we want?" But I'm also struck by your answer, like they're not sitting on their laurels, like, you know, frolicking around in the streets going, "yay, we've got universal basic income," or whatever it is, you know, they're actually sitting there still, still dreaming, still imagining, still co-creating together in a more deliberative, democratically, you know, informed way.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 17:05

Yeah, and that's adaptive management, right. And we teach this to students, and it's meant to be part of, you know, any form of management is that things are changing all the time. I mean, this is the indeterministic nature of reality, our grasp of reality is only limited in terms of our own knowledge and the tools we have and the current conditions that we have access to. And

that's always going to be shifting So, as that reality is shifting, we've got to keep up with it as best as we can. And that can only be achieved through a continuous process that is structured, and that has legitimacy, and has visibility as the example that I described. And there are other, other wonderful thought experiments and examples from scholars around the world, which we could very much imply, there's no reason why we shouldn't.

L Lily Spencer 17:53

Yeah, can you think of an example, in the real world of this kind of deliberative process that has stood out and led to a different kind of outcome than maybe we would have expected?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 18:05

There are examples of citizen's juries, and and I know some councils even in Australia have tried citizen's juries. And this is for complex planning decisions, you know, you have a public space, or we're going to put in a car park, or are we going to put in some form of sustainable transport - is very politically contentious, contentious. So how do you how do you get across that and, you know, we've tried citizen's juries to get across that. And I know Melbourne is also experimenting with citizen's juries. In Tasmania, also, we've tried a process called Tasmania Together, you know, a few years ago, and it just didn't have the political momentum or the investment to get where it could have gotten to. And right now, people are experimenting with it, right. So, you know, but the focus, the political energy towards is very limited. It's almost like a, an academic exercise on the side. Which is, which is interesting, and if you like, indulgent, while it should be, you know, the core of what democracy is about, right, and in a way, rather than spending millions and millions in terms of, you know, the political processes and elections and all of that, we could invest more in this space, so that we get these decisions that are democratically made by the people themselves. And the role of politicians would then be, how will we then take those decisions and then communicate that to the public at large and administer those actions, following those decisions, and so on.

L Lily Spencer 19:41

I can't help but think of the Voice referendum because at the time of this recording, by the time people listen to it, we'll know the result. But at the time, we're recording it right before the Saturday when people go and vote and I think it's gonna be really interesting to see the kind of fight for the control of the narrative after that happens. And I think one of the narratives that I'm worried about is "democracy's stuffed," you know, we can't. People are, you know, that if it doesn't get out that people will say "see, this is proof that there's this chasm between regular people and elites, and we can't trust the masses to make good decisions, because secretly they're all racist, or they're all this or they're all that." And I just think that would be really heartbreaking, when actually, you know, the questions of well, how do we do it? Well, and I think, as you said, we don't invest well. Like, we don't, we're not practised it this way of decision making. It's not, it's not really taught at school, like, you know, people are always lamenting the lack of even basic civics education in schools. You know, we don't have a real grasp of how to do this well. We haven't tried and failed and refined and gotten better at it. So we do these, like either big splashy, kind of, one off events with politicians, or these kinds of

interesting thought bubble side projects with academics, but we need to really, actually build this into the centre of our democratic infrastructure. And that will happen over time with I think, even people realising that this is just a better way to do things.

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 21:11

Yeah. And then there are good and bad ways too, right? And, and if you like, the more we do with the voting every three or four years and things like the referendum, is often, you know, showcased as forms of democracy, that everyone has a say in it. But is it really? I guess, you know, if, if you, if you were to give people a questionnaire, as a basis of entry into the polling booth, and the questionnaire asks really basic questions about, you know, "what's the policy of the person who you're going to be voting for? What do they stand for?" And then if they get it wrong, they won't be able to go in and actually pass the war. Right? If you didn't...

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Lily Spencer 21:53

You're such a professor, if you do the quiz "do you actually know what you're voting for?" Sorry, go back and do some more homework.

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 22:01

No, we do this with the teaching, you know, students won't be able to get past first base if they, if they don't get their facts, right. We do this in elections and call this the, you know, the voice of the people and so on, you know, like, this has been criticised by many people across many, many decades and even centuries...We just don't recognise the limitations of those forms of so called democracy. And precisely what I'm sort of envisioning for the future, which would probably be happening now is more involved forms of democracy.

L

Lily Spencer 22:40

And I liked how in your process that you're talking about, citizens are coming together, but they're also hearing from, you know, unbiased experts, hopefully, people who haven't just been sponsored by a corporation or something, but people who have done their work and can come and present the facts. And I know that there have been some powerful examples of that overseas, and Ireland, I believe, with the abortion debate and overturning that ban and interesting things like that. So we've been talking about the future, you also have through your expertise, you teach about different worldviews. And that draws, of course, on the past. And so I was watching this lecture that you gave with Modern Money Lab, and you were talking about how, you know, this sort of vision of the world or worldview philosophy emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe of kind of nature as a mindless machine. And so God was the watchmaker, God made the world and then God retired and went "okay, humans over to you. It's now your job to kind of manage this thing." Do you think that is still a fair description of where we are at in Western culture as a mindset? Are we still living with the inheritance of that worldview?

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 23:53

Quite so. And I guess, thinking about worldviews is fascinating. But also, perhaps disturbing, if we, if you do get get to the bottom of it, right? So, you can, you can think of this in the context of an iceberg or a pyramid where, you know, at the top of the water, in the iceberg, we see, you know, everyday events, and you know, often that's what the news reports on on a daily basis. But then, just below the surface of the water, you can link these events in a sequence over time, and observe patterns and say, well, there's a, you know, increasing trend in violence, and so on. And below those patterns...and you start questioning, you know, why are these patterns apparent? And, and why are other patterns aren't apparent, like more toward sustainability and conservation? And then you get to system structures in terms of taxation arrangements and how banks operate, how politics is captured by private vested interests and so on. Do you see those structures? And then you say, well, "could we take this even deeper?" And if you go deeper to the next level, rock bottom, you get to worldviews. And worldviews are, like you say, is nature is the a mindless machine. So you know, nature has no agency, no purpose. Who has agency and purpose is humans. And specifically, some, some humans over others. And again, you know, look at developed countries and some section of the population, and there's gender, and race and all sorts of things dive into it. So they have authority, they get to determine, they call the shots, and, and determine what happens to nature and create those structures, rules and regulations and monetary processes that, you know, then create those patterns of events at the end of the day. Well I didn't have a sense of this, right? So you know, early part of my life was in India, and I had a access to a worldview. Like, you know, you're a fish and you're in water and the waters just water, right. And then obviously, having moved to Australia all those years ago, and you see the daily life, operating completely differently. Different values driving decisions and judgments. And you go, I mean, this is the same world that we live in. And it's almost like, you know - going back to your idea of a time machine - it's almost like you're taken a time machine from one worldview in one part of the world and come to another world in another part of the world. I still feel this every time I go to India. And I guess, I feel this strongly because I know the Indian culture intimately having grown up there. And sometimes people might have an insight into this or a sense of this, when you go travelling to, you know, radically different cultures. You go to Japan, and you're like, wow, you know, things are different. Especially, you go out of Tokyo and the big cities, and you're like, this is, this is and that's that's what excites us about travel too, is we get, you know, it's like a taking a time machine to go and observe a different worldview, and see how those worldviews create those structures they have, and how the structures, you know, create those patterns of everyday life. And then the events that people do, you know, what they get up to in the morning? And then how do they work? And how do they eat and then go to bed and so on?

L

Lily Spencer 27:24

So what was the worldview that you are immersed in growing up? And how is that different to what you feel here?

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Dr Vishnu Prahalad 27:31

Right, so now, because, you know, I'm a geographer, I'm able to sort of look at this in a bit more in an academic way, if you like. But I guess I'll explain my thinking in terms of examples. Growing up, I remember my grandmother telling me not to hurt the ants. What, you know, why? They're just ants. And she told me "ants have a right to life." Okay, I was like, oh, that,

that's interesting. All right. And 10 years ago, I travelled back to India, to this conservation forum, and they had this presentation on why it's important to conserve vultures. Okay. And, and, you know, I was listening to the presentation, there was all about, you know, do this to vultures, do that to vultures. There was one fundamental piece of that presentation that was missing for me, which I would have seen in Australia. And that's what I do all the time. Right. When I talk about why it's important to conserve wetlands, I start my presentation, and indeed, most of us do, with the argument in terms of why wetlands are useful for us. See what I mean? That that is the worldview here is that we protect something because it is useful to us and the more useful it is to us, and the more useful it is the less in economic terms, the argument for the protection is greater. But going back to this vulture conversation in India, there was no effort to make the argue for the use of politics, it was just assumed that vultures had a right to life. And this is actually crystallised - I was surprised to learn this - in the Indian constitution. If you, if you read the Indian constitution, what it says is that "it is the duty of the citizens of India" - or something along these lines - "to look after the natural environment and have compassion for living creatures." So my Grandmother was indeed practising the Indian constitution. And the speaker who was talking about vultures was, I guess, embodying it in a way. And that's all part of the worldview. No one talks about it, it's just the way life is.

L Lily Spencer 29:53

It's assumed, it's just part of the air you breathe.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 29:55

Yeah, it's just, it's just what it is, right?

L Lily Spencer 29:58

How do people reconcile that with eating meat, if they're not vegetarian, or is vegetarianism just the norm and you don't, you don't have to tell people you're vegetarian, it's assumed you are?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 30:09

I mean, this is where you have subcultures and they're all got different worldviews.

L Lily Spencer 30:13

I know, I'm asking a big general question like, "there's billions of people tell me what it's like?"

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 30:15

And one interesting aspect of that, maybe, you know, worth sharing here is in some subcultures in India, they eat fish, and they make an exception to eat fish, otherwise a vegetarian. And they

call fish jalapushfrom, which is, the flowers, or the vegetables of the water. In a way you, so you know, considering fish as a vegetable or a flower.

L

Lily Spencer 30:16

I think it's Annabelle Crab in Australia who talks about, she doesn't eat things with legs. They're different categories and kind of ways of looking at that. But I love that idea of something just has, the ant has a right to exist, the vulture has a right to exist. And, look, you've just recently published a paper where you talk about market driven environmentalism and how ecologists and conservationists haven't kind of questioned the fundamentals. And so, in a sense, are kind of almost not perpetuating, but unintentionally, not necessarily challenging this idea that we have to put a monetary value on nature. And therefore, if we lose this bit of nature, you know, maybe there's a section of high value land, wetlands, biodiversity, if we lose that, or damage that we've got to offset it over here somewhere else, and that these is basically like neoliberal thinking, kind of colonising or shaping how we think about conservation and ecology. Is there starting to be a pushback from that? Are we starting to transform how what we, what we challenge or what we argue for? Are there ecologists saying, "no, this wetland has a right to exist? And it's not about, you know, the value of it, that it brings in the work that it does for our air and water and whatever?"

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 32:11

Yeah, look, I guess that that is a good illustration of how we, ourselves in our, in our daily work, as experts often don't have the time, or the capacity, or the energy to go down and delve into the role that worldviews play, or, or be political and say, you know, let's change our structures, right? I mean, why should we monetise something in order to protect it? And if, you know, there's legislation or policy can be questioned that and change those structures, and then question those worldviews, and so on. So we don't do that, because our remit is just to do the science and trying to sort of protect a few ecosystems or species here and there. So, for me, I haven't seen hope that in my own field, in terms of the transition or the questioning, but where I've seen hope is in my field is our recognition of the importance of Indigenous worldviews, Indigenous knowledge and collaboration with First Nations people. Because for them, this is their worldview - again, talking about worldviews and so on - is this country, you know, Country and people are not separate. You know, Sea Country, Land Country are not separate, although, you know, conversation, you might want to call them different. And that's, that's their worldview. If we are to have this reconciliation here and with the Indigenous community here and indeed in other parts of the world, we need to be able to speak the same language and have similar understandings and, and challenge our worldviews and kind of relate to other worldviews. And that's where I see the hole, in terms of trying to protect habitats and ecosystems, because they're country and that's part of who we are and what we are, and not because the Great Barrier Reef is worth x billion dollars or something like that. I mean, just think about it, right. So if you say the Great Barrier Reef is x billion dollars, and hence we need to protect it. And this is supposed to sort of, we have some resonance with the public, how many members of the public have seen x billion dollars or, you know, even X million dollars? I mean, it's just something that no one has any access to or can relate with. Still, we using it as a blunt instrument, dollar figures as a blunt instrument, to argue one way or the other. And that's driven by the worldviews and structures neural structures that we have.

L Lily Spencer 34:44

Yeah. I've also heard the, well, he's not Tasmania-based, but he's in Canberra, the economist Richard Denniss, who we've had on the podcast talk about, "don't say that we should protect Tasmania's old growth forests because of all of the tourism values they bring, the dollar. Because if, because that's not actually the reason, like it's intellectually dishonest. And if one day logging is worth more than tourism, or toilet paper rolls, or whatever it is, like, we wouldn't actually turn around and be like, 'oh, okay, well, it's now worth more so, you know, I guess logic demands that we go in and cut that down.'" It's like, we make our arguments in these economic terms, trying to appeal to decision makers and decision makers make them in economic terms, thinking that that's how they're going to appeal to the public. And we're all caught up in this thing that, you know, it's like, I was at the beach the other day, we're just doing a Nippers thing with my, my youngest, who's six, and there's this other Mom on the beach, and we're just having a chat about how great it is to be outside. And she says to me, "you know, I just feel like, you know, the main problem in the world today, it's just capitalism is ruining everything, and nothing is sacred." And she totally took me by surprise, like, I just couldn't believe that I was having that conversation with a fellow Mom on a Sunday morning who I'd never met before, you know, and it's like, I think we don't give people enough credit for the fact that we see the issue here, that we see that there's something hollow and it's hurting us.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 36:10

Yeah, yeah. And there's a lot of research on things like what do people value, value, when it comes right down to it? Do people value money? Or do people value nature? Or even on a more fundamental level, do people value a sense of wonder and excitement? Encountering nature and wild things in their place, doing their wild thing? And the answer is overwhelmingly, "yes." And this is the argument of framing. And if you if you follow the argument for framing for nature, we frame conservation in terms of how it brings us a sense of, you know, being complete, whole, because we share this wonderful planet with these wild animals, who, you know, really want to do their thing on a daily basis.

L Lily Spencer 37:08

Yeah, that's beautiful. Ah, so I love this idea of, you know, the the iceberg and the thing at the deepest level. And that is actually the most powerful thing you know, that we can shift. We shift that, we shift kind of the goals of the systems and the laws and the rules and the structures and everything else can kind of follow. I'm curious, in your, from your perspective, are there things that we could learn from nature, right, about how to live better in harmony, with nature about how to be better citizens of the planet, or part of the web of life, but not the thing with agency that's just coming in and manipulating everything else to suit the ends of the powerful who among us? What can nature teach us about how to be better humans? How to be alive, better, better animals?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 38:10

Yeah, look, I guess this is an interesting space where we are reimagining the future and inventing, reinventing worldviews, and relearning some of the things that we used to know. We used to know when we had this daily intimate access to nature. we observed nature. and we

... saw all the wonderful things that nature did. And we applied that in our own systems. And, and if you're a gardener, you know, we do mulching and because mulching, you know, like in forest systems, the thick litter layer, the bottom of forest is wonderful for a range of things, and we learn from that to mulch in our gardens. And we, you know, have plants that attract pollinators in our garden. So then, you know, we get the benefits in terms of pollinating our tomatoes, and fruits, and so on, again, learning from nature. I guess we're starting to integrate this and more and more you get terms like nature-based solutions, or working with nature, and so on. So the argument here from me and many researchers is that we need to upscale that. And and there's two ways of doing this, one is a bottom up approach, which is all the example that I mentioned. But what we haven't done enough is the top down approach, is how can we envision whole cities, whole regions that would work like nature, that will work like a large forest ecosystems that, that, that have managed to sustain themselves in the face of adversity over millennia. They've managed to do that, so that's what we want to do in the context of sustainability, live forever, and sustain ourselves forever. So what can we learn from those systems that have done that? So that we can do it ourselves? And and that would involve thinking around the context of bio regionalism and local living economies and so on. Because, if you think about nature, a lot of the processes in nature happen locally. Of course, there are global transfers in terms of the carbon cycle, the hydrogen cycle and so on. But most of the energy and matter is transferred locally. Right? And that's managed to sustain life on the planet for for a very, very long time. Our economic systems, you know, how can we create our social economic systems that will function in a similar way, so a lot of our energy matter is transferred locally, through local economic exchanges, and the concept of bioregions and so on. While we still have that international transfer in terms of learning about cultures, learning about technology and science advances in other parts of the world and be travelling to other parts of the world and experiencing these firsthand, so having the best of both.

L Lily Spencer 40:58

I find this utterly fascinating, and I just, where can people who want to dive more into this, because I don't hear about this, and I'm trying to learn about this? So you know, like, where can we start to...who's doing this? Who should we be looking at, reading, following, finding because it feels so hopeful to think that we could actually apply this and learn, learn how to live a lot, a lot better life, here on Earth through these, you know, lessons from nature.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 41:31

There's a lot of work being done around bioregional economies. And there's a book by Bioregional Economy, written by a Green politician in the UK.

L Lily Spencer 41:43

Okay, we can find that link to it.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 41:45

Yeah. And she's a Professor in economics. And yeah, and I think it's called Bioregional Economy. Yes. Mulla. Centre in business. And there are other books. British Columbia's... that

Economy. Yes. Molly Carto is her name. And there are other scholars, Patrick Salles is one who's been writing about this for many, many years. And there's, there's also a group called Economics of Happiness. And their whole objective is to create these local living economies, and they have conferences around the world every year, and they've got a number of scholars who are looking at how we can create these structures, you know, going back to the importance of structures, that then have the patterns that we want. So how do we create these economic structures, production structures that can operate locally and improve ourselves efficiency and sustainability at a local level?

L Lily Spencer 42:37

Okay? So localism is obviously a big theme or a bigger guiding principle of what we can learn from nature, right?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 42:44

And this is also very much part of the the global degrowth platform. Yeah, and I guess my response to your question there is that there's, there's a lot of different people and movements, sort of exploring this space in terms of how we can create thriving local economies and cultures. But I guess, to the extent that they've related this to natural systems, is not as much as I would like to see.

L Lily Spencer 43:14

Yeah, it seems like it's a real potential for, you know, kind of burgeoning exploration and scholarship and hopefully talking outside of our bubbles to, you know, to the wider world. And that, you know, it just strikes me to that, like, most of what I think the average person has heard about over the last decade has been climate change. And so we're talking about the environment on this very global scale, you know, tonnes of emissions. And yes, we talked about individual country targets, or we might talk about, if you live in a particular region that is coal or fossil fuel dependent. But, in general, part of what's been so disempowering is, you know, someone just says, "well, it doesn't matter, Australia could stop emitting tomorrow, and you know, we'd be overtaken by these other..." It's like, there's this sense that we're doomed because we can't get everybody to change. It's just too big a scale and going local, might make us feel nice, but it won't actually change anything. So I'm quite intrigued to hear you say that there's a real sort of scientific basis for this idea of a localism that is healthy and integrated and natural in the world. And we don't just have to think on this global scale in terms of trying to solve our relationship to nature, for example, or to transform our relationship to the rest of the natural world.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 44:30

Yeah. And this goes, this is not necessarily a novel idea, right? I mean, it's not at all novel, if you include Indigenous thought and cultures around the world. I mean, look at the map of Indigenous nations of Australia. And there's a strong correlation with the bioregions of Australia, as opposed to the random boundaries we've drawn around states and territories.

Right? So they've always understood this and the efficiency, if you like, of organising communities and nations around those nature's boundaries and nature's limits, okay? And other people, you know, prominently Gandhi, that was his vision for India, that India will be a country of a million villages or something like that. And in his mind when he said religious, he probably wasn't thinking of primitive people who were sort of, you know, not technologically advanced and so on. In his mind, he was thinking of possibly, you know, people who are self sufficient, and have the freedom and respect and autonomy that they deserve, as we all do, as humans, are able to look after themselves locally and still have these, you know, cross regional exchanges. Another prominent person who has written about this recently is Nicholas Taleb, and is especially anti-fragile. He talks about the importance of local and the light. And another scholar is Nicole Boss, a systems thinker from Canada. She's written stuff around this as well. But this is, this has also been part of the political thought and scientific thought going back in time. Thomas Jefferson, and is this vision for America - he was one of the founding father of the US, President and so on - was that it would be an agrarian society and an agrarian democracy, right? And Alexander von Humboldt, again, you know, he, you know, one of the most leading scientists of that generation. And, again, his view was that, you know, we will have an agrarian society that will allow people the freedom, movement, and political thought and so on, and make them self-sufficient in terms of all of their needs, and enjoy life.

L

Lily Spencer 46:50

Yeah, yeah. So, all right, stepping up a level of the iceberg into systems and structures, what are some of the systemic changes or structural changes to policy or to law that you think we could start to enact today, that would help get us on that track toward our, you know, desired 2053, or whatever timeframe we're looking at? You know, that would help help us to kind of reorganise - and I know, it's connected to the paradigm - but like, shift in the direction of what you're talking about? Because also unusually for someone in conservation ecology, I know that you have opinions about things like, you know, the policy and the politics of where we're at.

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 47:32

Yeah, definitely. And this is a tricky question to answer, but a very important question to talk about. And by that I mean that when we are thinking about solutions, we have a sense of what solutions are useful, given our limited understanding of the system that we work in, and so on. So in systems thinking, we think of solutions across the whole iceberg. So you have solutions that produce a lot of change, everyday behaviour, that level of events, and you have solutions that really challenge worldviews and get people to think about, you know, how to shift values and worldviews and so on. And you have solutions aimed at structures, you know, changing legislation, for example. Or bringing in new policy for renewables, and climate mitigation, and so on - as an example of sort of changes and structures. The argument is that we need solutions across the board. But the problem is that most of our solutions right now are focused on events. And this is a this is an argument made by Donella Meadows, who's one the prominent thinkers in the field, in a book, *Thinking in Systems*, she argues that almost more than 90% of our solutions are focused on events, but very little attention given to changing patterns, let alone changing structures or worldviews. So I guess, in my own work, and in the way we teach students, we get them to think about solutions across the board, that, that solutions have to be proportional to where we are in that, in that iceberg level and be synergistic. So we might end up you know, choosing vegetarian meals, if you like, going back to

that example. And, and yes, that's important, because it's sending market signals to restaurants and supermarkets, the more people who do that, then you make it easier for us to, you know, or vegetarian food and more options. And again, with restaurants there, you know, supermarkets, there are more options for us. So that's important, right? But that in itself is not important if you're not then changing the system structures and looking at you know, how are these foods produced? Are they still produced through a system of agriculture that is heavily reliant on mechanisation, and high inputs of energy, specifically through fossil fuels and global, you know, forms of exchange and previous and agreements and so on. Well, that's, that's not a solution for anything, right? So, so I guess, you know, yes, you can change those events and try to push for more a plant-based diet or a locally sourced diet. But then if you're not then coming down to the structures, our global structures in terms of our food production systems globally, then I guess we'll be missing the point. And as we're doing that, also, why not have a conversation about food and culture, which is about worldviews, right? And, I mean, you know, it's very powerful. Think about how little we think about foreign culture, right? I mean, when we, when we ask people to name, you know, five vegetables, you know, we generally, you know, name the five vegetables that are always available in the supermarket no matter the season, you know, your carrots, brassicas and so on. But then if you look at our closest relatives, like the orangutans and look at their diet, and then it is staggering, they can recognise and they feed on over two hundred or so vegetables on a regular basis, or, you know, foods on a regular basis. And there's no reason we can't do that. It's just that our worldviews have been so constricted to the extent that when we think of food, we think of it in a certain way. Right, and that then creates those structures that, you know, tie us to, you know, just, you know, focus on those three or four vegetables. And this is also, you know, filtered through to rice production, for instance, in India, where, you know, there are over, you know, I don't know how many rice varieties there are. And all of the diversity is now being lost, because we can only recognise two or three different rice varieties - Long Grain, Short Grain and maybe Basmati, right? But there's more to it. And, and so I guess, that's an illustration of how it's really important for us to think about solutions across all of these different levels, and especially make sure that they're synergistic.

L Lily Spencer 52:12

And so what do you say to the student that says to you, "that's great Professor, but God, that's hard?" Because I feel like, I mean, I was expecting you in that last question, for example, to say like, well, you know, I think we could have a four day work week so that people could have more time to engage as citizens and their communities, or I think we could have a Jobs Guarantee so that people could be employed by the Federal Government to do useful things or have a, you know, expanded public sector. And I love that you didn't go there and that you went to into like food and recognising the variety of, you know, the fact that we're eating a limited range of things is based on the five things that we see all the time in the supermarkets and in the shops. I think one of the things that I encounter and I think a lot of people feel is this sense of if we have to change everything. we're, like ugh. So what do you say to that 19 year old, who goes, "but my goodness, like, it's hard enough to get the little thing at the top of the iceberg changed. There's a whole discipline of people doing Behavioural Economics, trying to nudge people in the right direction to make better choices, and now you're telling me that if we don't operate on all levels, and make sure they're synergistic, that we're missing the point, and we're doomed." Like, what do you do, maybe I should ask is like, when you're feeling overwhelmed by the, by the sheer scope of the sheer challenge of that what gives you a sense of hope, or action or direction?

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 53:34

I get asked this by students as well, in terms of, you know, where I see everything going. And to this, I turn to, you know, one of the things I learned as a child, but I never understood the importance until, until obviously, in my more recent life as a Geographer and a Lecturer, it is Karma Yoga or insistent stance, it is the focus on the process, and the acceptance of the outcome, because we only have access to the process, and not the outcome. The outcome is, is what it is, right? It's based on all of the other feedbacks that are happening in the system, just the indeterministic nature of reality, is that it's always surprising, sometimes it's good, you know, we submit a paper, it gets accepted, it gets published, yay. But, you know, that, sometimes, you know, the outcomes are not predictable, and you get different responses and so on. So I guess the, then the focus there is to focus on the processes and enjoy the processes. And then not to be too caught up with your content, obviously we need to have a sense of where we want to go, but if we focus on the process, I think that's, that's better.

L

Lily Spencer 54:57

I feel like that is just the perfect segway to, so, my last question for you, for you before we get to kind of land the plane and wrap it up a little bit, which is, you were named from Vishnu, Hindu God, of really sustainability, of balance of... So as I understand it, the maintainer who keeps the universe in balance in this Divine Trinity, along with Brahma, the creator and Shiva, the destroyer. Now, as a mother of young children, can I just say that I love that there is a God that maintains because I feel like this is what I do with 90% of my life, my waking hours are just spent doing work that, that it's not tada! You didn't create, you know, we celebrate creation, we celebrate the person who creates a book or a thing or in that, and as we rightly should. And the destroying well, at least that's cathartic, you know, that can be really satisfying to go in and just "out with the old," but the God of balance, of maintenance, like recognising that that is real work, and a real third force that must be kind of honoured in the universe. It's like you were born to be a conservationist.

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 56:12

I guess, I guess I got to thank my parents for that. And yes, it is, it is a really wonderful way to think about the balance in nature. And I guess the importance to recognise maintenance, the processes that we were talking about, as being, you know, very much part of our life. And again, if we look at Indigenous cultures, you know, other cultures like Tibetan cultures and Buddhist cultures around the world, a lot of daily life is dedicated to maintenance, right? I mean, you can see it, and like, you know, I know exactly what you mean, I've got a little one at home, too. And I've got a garden and, and there's a lot of administrative work, and let's start maintenance. And there's good and bad things about it. But is very much an important part of what we do. In fact, a lot of what we do between creation and destruction - and creation is inevitable creation and destruction, you can't have creation without destruction. And different people have theorised differently, and Shimpota, for instance, called it the process of creative destruction, economic process of creative destruction. So I guess that that's very much there. But what, what often tends to get missed is this importance of maintenance. And, and we don't value it, right? So in economics, we can prove it right. In economic terms, we don't value looking after ourselves, it's sort of meant to be done in the mornings and evenings and, and

you don't get paid to do it and working your clothes and so on. And looking after our young ones, and our old ones are often, you know, poorly paid, you know, like early career educators, or both most poorly paid people in community, despite the important role they do in that stage in people's lives.

L Lily Spencer 58:07

As well as nurses as well, like, yeah. And those are the people that are being paid. I mean, most of the work that happens in the home isn't paid. Yeah.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 58:15

Yeah. And, and David Graeber, if I could use a reference here, he's been very prominent in writing about this. And the role of care work, in terms of that maintenance that we all need to do in our lives, is not well recognised. And in turn, we have what he calls as bullshit jobs. These other other words, especially with lawyers, and so on, where they get paid obscene amounts of money. And, yeah, and that, I guess, another indictment of the kind of system that we currently have.

L Lily Spencer 58:53

Yeah. And I mean, that book was, made a really profound impression on me, and that his definition of bullshit jobs was jobs that the people doing believe are bullshit, you know, like, they don't assign, they know that there's not actually a lot of intrinsic value to what they are doing with it. That doesn't mean their job is easy. Their job might be very highly paid. It might require a lot of thinking, but it doesn't actually have the value to themselves or to society.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 59:21

You would never feel that when you're packing your kids lunch, school lunch.

L Lily Spencer 59:27

Yeah. And he talks about that, too. Like there's almost this compensation of like, well, but if your job's meaningful, why should you get paid well for it, you know, like, your concession is that you're supposed to feel good about how meaningful you know you're supposed to get the warm fuzzies therefore, you don't need the big paycheck. It's like, yeah, yeah. So how optimistic are you personally that we might look at 2053 and the way that you described to us at the start, do you think humanity is going to get it back to either and it transform through all these crises that we're facing in the right direction? Or does it depend on the day and what's going on in the headlines as to how you feel?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 1:00:09

I, you know, we talk about nature and nurture. And I guess, you know, I think of myself as an optimistic person. And I guess I'm wired that way, which probably helps, given the job I do. But I also fuel that and feed that on a daily basis, and, and not so much from the big things. And you know, sometimes the big things are, you know, really encouraging and optimistic when they do happen. But I also find them on a regular basis, on the small things. Observing nature, and, and wonderful things in nature, which fills your heart again, with that sense of wonder, and joy and and fuel-centred optimism, which other parts of your job sucks out. And I guess this goes to, you know, why people say it's important to connect with nature. Because it's, we don't think of it as filling us with optimism. But to me, I think of it that way.

L Lily Spencer 1:01:15

That's beautiful. I mean, this conversation has filled me with optimism. So thank you for that. Do you have any final recommendations that you'd like to offer to people? You mentioned a lot of wonderful books and, you know, things that we will link to in our show notes. But if there's a television show, or a podcast, anything that you think our audience who've enjoyed this conversation should maybe go and check out? I'd be happy to add that too.

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 1:01:39

Yeah, look, I'll keep it simple and say that, I think if we all understood that systems model of the iceberg, and systems thinking and the need for us to work across the iceberg in a synergistic way, I think we can all get further, more. A lot of what happens in sustainability and conservation is one step forward, and two steps back, or maybe five steps back sometimes. And that's because we're sometimes working cross-purposes, and not, not, you know, working across the system and trying to be synergistic. And I think if we can all consciously make an effort to find those synergies - and if you're not working in the field, you know, find other people who are working in other parts of the system, and create these networks and partnerships. I think we can scale up our effects a lot more.

L Lily Spencer 1:02:34

I love that. Thank you. And we'll, we'll see what we can link to on the iceberg model in our in our show notes. And now, where can people find and follow more of you and your work? If, I mean, I think you're gonna increase enrollments to the university in Tasmania on the back of this conversation, at least, I certainly want to go and enrol in the group. But is there other places where people can find and follow your work?

D Dr Vishnu Prahalad 1:02:57

Yeah, look, we're happy with the sustainable steady state, and to give credit to other wonderful universities and departments around Australia, they're doing a lot of this too. So, so discerning students should look up what you know, all the universities offer and where they would like to live and study. And we'd love to see you here, if you do make that choice to come and live in

wonderful lutruwita/Tasmania. And in terms of my work, you know, I've got a university website, which is publicly accessible. And I haven't done any other promotion of my work, really. So yeah, just Google, I guess, on a search engine.

L

Lily Spencer 1:03:42

No worries, we'll certainly link to the website and to, you know, the work that you have published up there. Doctor Vishnu Prahalad it has been just a delight. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us today and to, I guess, inspire us with even just to taste, you know, the thinking and the work that you're doing and the way that you're framing what we can achieve in this, in this world if we take our cues from nature and challenge our worldviews and learn to think across the different systems and layers of the iceberg. I've learned a lot talking to you. Thank you so much.

D

Dr Vishnu Prahalad 1:04:16

Thanks, Lily, it's been a pleasure.

L

Lily Spencer 1:04:28

I loved that, in Vishnu's thought experiment about 30 years into the future, he didn't describe a utopia of arrival. He didn't describe an outcome. He described a process. He described a process that we're doing today and that we could scale up today. And that was really such a theme and the whole conversation focused on the process. Learn, look around, you know, look at the different layers of the iceberg and enjoy the journey. Get joy from the small things. Reconnect to nature. To me, this was just a beautiful conversation that does give me a sense of hope, as well as real gratitude and appreciation for the way that different worldviews are starting to be heard and listened to, again, in countries that have had the, you know, neoliberal economic paradigm that people are so excited in all these different spaces and sectors to be learning from Indigenous thinking and Indigenous worldviews right here, at home in Australia. That's something that I would like to feature on our podcast very soon. So thank you again to Dr. Vishnu Prahalad. We'll have links to all of the things that were mentioned in your show notes for you. I hope that you enjoyed this and we'll see you next time over on the reMAKERS. Thanks for listening to the reMAKERS. I'm the host, Lily Spencer, and I record my part of these conversations from the beautiful Gubbi Gubbi country on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. Just want to honour the incredible elders of these lands and waters - an Aboriginal culture 60,000 years is the oldest continuing civilisation on earth. I also want to pay shout out to our producer and AnnaWilson, to my colleague and sometimes co host Dr. Millie Rooney. You can learn more about Australia reMADE and everything we're about over on AustraliareMADE.org And in the meantime, thank you for sharing. Thank you for listening and subscribing, sending us your thoughts. We really appreciate all the support that you give the podcast. We'll see you next time over on the reMAKERS.