

Nina Laurie

School of Geography and Sustainable
Development

University of St Andrews



Nina Laurie is a Geography and Development professor at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. She obtained her undergraduate degree from the University of Newcastle (United Kingdom), her masters' degree from McGill University (Canada), and her doctorate from University College London (United Kingdom). She worked at the University of Newcastle from 1992 to the beginning of 2016, where she was a professor of Development and Environment, as well as founding director of the Centre for Latin American Studies. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of Otago (New Zealand), Queen's University (Canada), the University of Illinois (United States), and the postgraduate school Universidad de San Simón (Bolivia). She has also coordinated Higher Education liaisons between the British Council in Bolivia, Chile, and Peru. In 2020, she received de Busk Medal from the Royal Geographical Society for her contribution to social inclusion, international development, and environmental sustainability through fieldwork and research. For the past three years, she has been developing research projects with the IIAP on indigenous communities in the Loreto region. She answered our questions from the beautiful town of Saint Andrews, where she currently lives and works.

- **The results and achievements you have obtained throughout your professional career are motivation for many young female researchers who face multiple obstacles when working in a society where science is imbued with a patriarchal ('machista') tone. What motivated you to dedicate yourself to the world of research and what advice would you give to young women who are starting their research careers?**

As a geographer, I never stop observing things – my family and friends sometimes complain about me when we are on holidays because I am always questioning if our destination would be an appropriate site to take my students, and I always photograph strange things thinking of them. I believe one should never lose this type of passion. The will to observe and reflect on what is happening around you – including racist and patriarchal exclusions – is a deeply-rooted passion of mine and also a personal compromise.



Mi advice is that they should value, enjoy, and act on curiosity, rather than focusing intently on 'shaping their careers'. With passion and personal politics, the career will find you.

- **Among the topics of research, you are currently pursuing, there is one which advances the traditional knowledge of the Urarina people, located in the Loreto region in the middle of the Amazon forest. Could you explain the challenges you faced in having to develop research in such a complex and diverse area?**

The University of St Andrews is a public university located in the small town of St Andrews in the department of Fife, Scotland. It is Scotland's oldest universities and one of the oldest in the United Kingdom, it was founded in the 15th Century, between 1410 and 1413 and remains one of the most prestigious universities in the country.

In all honesty, I do not like the peat bogs much – the area itself is very hot and there is an abundance of insects and mud. Regardless of this, I had to face my personal fears of getting sick and accept that I would not be able to walk as far as the rest of my colleagues. Few challenges arose related to the research, as we were working in a team and my colleagues from the Research Institute of the Peruvian Amazon (Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonía Peruana, IIAP) have so much experience that I only had to follow and support them as much as possible. The trip along the Chambira river to visit the Urarina communities lasted many days and was one of the most unforgettable experiences of my life. The contrast between the beauty of the natural wildlife and the community life with the permanent impact of the oil industry was significantly profound and I could not help but feel rage.

- **How has the multidisciplinary work developed by your University with the IIAP unraveled? Do you consider that the future of science depends on the capacity to integrate different scientific disciplines and visions of development?**

Yes, we definitely have to learn to listen to one another. We have to make a large effort not to separate "indigenous knowledge" with 'knowledge itself' – we do not talk about "mixed-race (mestizo) knowledge" and, although we sometimes speak of the "West", we do not usually refer to "Western knowledge" but rather "occidental philosophy", as if it were something more important and as if "intellectual territory" is exclusive to occidental people. We cannot, however, always integrate everything. There are visions so vastly different that it is better to discuss the contrasts by means of dialogue which accounts for and respects different points of view. In the research team from St Andrews, we are starting to discuss the ontology used between different branches of science. One must be confident in order to participate in these conversations, as they reveal vulnerabilities within existing hierarchies of knowledge in academia.



- **You were recently awarded the Busk Medal on behalf of the Royal Geographical Society of London. What does such a distinguished award mean to you?**

I am from Southampton, a large port in the South of England. My parents worked on cruise ships as butler and stewardess, which is why I always say I was born a geographer. I was the first person in my family to have the opportunity to attend university. My mother raised us alone, facing the harsh stigma of being a divorced mother in that time period. The medal is a confirmation that she did a good job. She finally acknowledges it! On the other hand, the Busk Medal reflects the community which surrounds me and is already like family. Being granted the medal highlights my permanent collaboration with colleagues in Latin America and in rural communities, many of which are marginalised in their societies. We have worked hard with them over a long period of time. I am very proud to be sharing this acknowledgement with those who have committed so much of their personal time and strength to try to build something new.

- **The COVID 19 pandemic has triggered a profound impact on different levels in the Amazon. Have you planned to develop a research topic which could strengthen the capacities of indigenous communities to face these impacts and other new threats which will certainly appear in the near future?**

As of now, I have not yet developed fixed research topics. We are living very difficult times, still in such fragile conditions, that I believe it would be unwise to quickly land on a fixed plan. What is clear is that it will be a challenge for work in the long-term, so we must not forget the lessons learned throughout all these years. As academics, we need to listen to the voices of indigenous communities, while also accounting for the limits to what they want and do not want to share of their experiences with the pandemic, which reflections are open to being shared with the world and which ones are not. We need to respect their decisions about their participation in future dialogues about the construction of new knowledge in a new and shared post-Covid world.

