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Q&A: Susanna Hecht

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**Author**

Hecht, Susanna

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**Susanna Hecht is Professor of Urban Planning at the UCLA School of Public Affairs. Her research interests include the political economy of tropical rain forest development; women in development; international environmental politics; and environmental history. Her books include *The Scramble for the Amazon and the "Lost Paradise" of Euclides da Cunha* and her prize-winning classic *Fate of the Forest*. She received a CSW Faculty Development grant in 2010 to support her research on Elizabeth Agassiz, Emilie Snethlage, and Odile Coudreau.**



# Q&A: SUSANNA HECHT

Your newest project, *Amazons of the Jungle: Three Nineteenth-century Female Scientists in Amazonia*, looks at the lives of three little-known female explorers/scientists in Amazonia, Elizabeth Agassiz, Emilie Snethlage, and Odile Coudreau. What sparked your interest in them?

Amazonia has been so much the realm of male explorers whose central focus was either biology or conquest that it has completely obscured, rather ironically given the name of the place, the role of women in the region in any capacity. A wonderful compendium of historical studies by Maria de Conceição Incão called “Do women exist?” (*A Mulher Existe?*) focused on the lack of attention to women in the economic and social life of the region. This was a landmark study since most of the other studies of women in Amazonia have basically been ethnographic studies of women

in tribal contexts, with very little attention to the sociologies and contributions of women. What is clear is that class differentiation was very important in terms of women’s roles. Indigenous groups, Detribalized natives, *quilombo* (slave refuge) dwellers, backwoods dwellers and urban householders—the lowest class echelons—had women who were carrying out key agriculture and landscape management tasks, who moved around quite independently, were themselves important practical (what we call “folk”) scientists and healers, and active in regional commodity markets. Elite women were maintained rather like hot-house flowers, barely literate, and basically in seclusion most of the time. For reasons of class, these three women, Agassiz, Snethlage and Coudreau would have had a lot of experience with elite women, and under most circumstances would not have encountered

women of different classes except as servants. It’s important to remember that servants were slaves when Agassiz traveled and were members of the household in the time of Coudreau and Snethlage with very defined domestic mores and tasks. Most women traveled little outside their social circles and limited geographies.

In their capacities as women under powerful male protection (husbands, in the case of Agassiz and initially Coudreau, and the Director of the Para Natural History Museum, Emilio Goeldi, in the case of Snethlage) and their scientific interests, they experienced a rare international mobility, one where Amazonian circumstances of many types would simply transform them. Agassiz and Snethlage were already proto-feminists, privately educated, monied and visionary enough to ultimately head up scientific and

educational institutions. Their explorations required that they depend on local knowledge of place, biotas and practices and much of what they studied, including in the case of Snethlage early ethnographic studies and research on ethnobotany required local informants. Rather than proving theories, as was the case for Agassiz and Goeldi, these women actually understood that the scientific advancements unfolding in the Amazon depended profoundly on transliteration of local knowledge systems. And their lives depended (especially Coudreau) on locals managing their transits of the rivers and their survival in areas completely unfamiliar to them. They thought people and women were important for the tropics, not just impediments to some better class (and race) of colonists.

*How does this project relate to your work on the Amazon and social/cultural life of forests?*

My interest in this topic comes from an analogous experience: the local knowledge and landscape management of Amazonians is profound, and women are active protagonists in many ways in indigenous, *quilombo*, *caboclo* (backwoods person) systems. I think this kind of knowledge and practice was also instrumental in shaping a lot of modern researchers on inhabited environments in tropical systems. The great work done by female Amazon scholars is probably not getting

the recognition it deserves, and because the institutional structures have blinded people to just how much stuff in the economies and the sciences is being carried out by women in Amazonia.

Where the work is most seminal is in human manipulation of landscapes. Christine Padoch, Katherine Kainer, and Elaine Elizabethsky—ethnobotanists all—have documented just how significant the knowledge systems are and how profoundly different the epistemes are about uses, medicines and practices. My work on the Amazonian Black Earths (high fertility anthropogenic soils) was carried out with Kapayo women agriculturalists and showed—what had been the big mystery about these soils—how they were produced. Women scholars have been especially curious about human uses and manipulations of landscapes—the way of looking at the ecological systems and useful plants, and how places are shaped to accommodate them. They are able to bring all the tools of science and social science to bear on the ways landscapes are configured in complex ways, so that while we may see them as wild, they are “domesticated” in the emic Amazonian way. Partly this is a feature of style: tropical scientists often have a jungle boy, big shot western explorer approach to the tropics; they may not know the language and may be brusque to those around them.

Women can certainly behave badly too, but if you want insight, rather than just “service”—handle a boat, run a transect—a curious rather than curt approach is much more rewarding, and if you are interested in how people can sustain and use the forest, then being able to blab about gardens, fruit trees, animals, cooking and babies builds a lot of bonds and discussions about how actually the landscape works for them and how also it could work over the long term—and what its adaptive capacity might be in terms of climate change, new economies, and so on. What are the forms that resilience takes in these systems whether these are social or ecological? What enhances or undermines these? The social lives of forests has to be explained by the people who live there. I don’t want to make an essentialist argument, but women scholars have played a significant role in understanding inhabited environments and the political ecologies of tropical development because they are less caught up in the imaginary of pristine systems, and primal jungles as the *sine qua non* of tropical landscapes. What archeology, anthropology, agroecology and ethnobotany increasingly reveal is that “untrammelled” forests often have a human handprint somewhere in their past and often their present.

So to get back to my three Amazons, they “saw” women doing things in these landscapes

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and economies and having agency and full lives in a way that the wives and daughters of the elite did not. Each of these women carried out extraordinary expeditions in the Amazon, all were shaped by and derived considerable authority from these experiences, and all made durable contributions to tropical literatures either as traveler documents or scientific reports. All three were seminal in ways that transcended their science and all insisted on better scientific training for women. Agassiz' Brazilian time made her adamant about the necessity of formal educational institutions for women outside the home and matching the rigor male training. Her observations on Amazonian nature and society made her book, *Travels on the Amazon*, a durable classic. Her rural sociology is insightful: She was aware of the implications of the expanding rubber economy and the military impressments for the Paraguay war left many enterprises under the management of women. She was especially struck by the capacities and freedoms Amazonian women had compared to their upper class counterparts who lived in domestic seclusion.

Emilie Snethlage, (who has a seat at Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party") was an ornithologist who, under the patronage Emilio Goeldi came to the Amazon in 1905, and at the age of 37, began her tropical research career. She carried out remarkable travels for her avian ecological studies on the Xingu, Tapajos, and

Tocantins and died in 1929 while collecting on the Madeira River. She also published early ethnographies. Snethlage was the first women to hold a scientific directorship in Brazil when, in 1914, she became the head of the Para's Goeldi Museum. She worked also at the Natural History Museum in Rio de Janeiro, where she met, influenced, and sponsored a young female scientist, Berta Lutz. Lutz is considered the "founder" of Brazil's feminist movement and, with Snethlage, lobbied relentlessly for women's rights and suffrage. Lutz became the first woman federal deputy in Brazil. Nationally, Snethlage was engaged with access to scientific education for girls, echoing the concerns of Elizabeth Agassiz (who cofounded and was the first president of Radcliffe College).

*Your new project seems to be about how the forest changed/affected these three women. Did visiting the Amazon change you? How did you get interested in studying this region in the first place?*

I was profoundly influenced by the Amazon, and it has become a kind of parallel life that I live. I go almost every year and have taught at Brazilian institutions as well as Amazonian ones for extended periods of time. It changes a lot every time I go and my questions differ as well. It's an Amazon life: as the great Brazilian writer, Euclides da Cunha wrote: "It's the last unfinished page of Genesis."