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Sound Ideas

“Sustainability” has become a kind of code for practices that contribute to the slowing of climate change in the Anthropocene. [Tim Cooley](#) would like us to think a little differently.

“Sustainability is social action, cultural practice, and relationships with other people, other living beings, and the environment,” he writes in the introduction to “Cultural Sustainabilities: Music, Media, Language, Advocacy” (University of Illinois Press, 2019). A collection of 23 essays edited by the professor in the [ethnomusicology](#) program of UC Santa Barbara’s [Department of Music](#), the book offers fresh thinking on the growing field of environmental humanities.

“Many of the chapters engage directly with the environmental impact of human cultural behavior,” Cooley said, “while others are about sustainability of human cultural practices themselves. The argument we’re making is these have to go hand in hand. We need to think about cultural practices as a question of sustainability. We also have to think about how those cultural practices impact other biological beings and the environment.”

Cooley noted that each of the essays owes a debt to [Jeff Todd Titon](#), a pioneering ethnomusicologist who helped develop the field of ecomusicology, an interdisciplinary exploration of the interplay between sound, nature and culture.

Titon, a professor emeritus of music at Brown University, has been enormously influential in ethnomusicology, serving as both mentor and touchstone for

generations of scholars.

“We collected together these authors who are responding to his ideas,” Cooley said. “I try to capture that in the first couple of paragraphs of the introduction where I suggest that if we’re in the era of the Anthropocene—which is pretty difficult to deny—then this is a human *culturally* created environmental crisis. Our response to the Anthropocene needs to be a human creative cultural response.”

Cooley’s own chapter touches on a bit of local history through Ben Finney, a member of the UC Santa Barbara anthropology faculty in the 1960s who co-wrote “Surfing: The Sport of Hawaiian Kings,” the first authoritative history of the sport. The book, published in 1966, was the public’s first peek at how the young scholar would transform the way we understand the connection between a people and the environment.

As Cooley recounted, Finney built a replica of a Hawaiian double canoe on campus in the mid-’60s. He was curious: Could these voyaging canoes sail upwind? Most people believed they could only head downwind. The implication: Ancient Hawaiians could not have navigated great distances. Finney would prove otherwise.

Eventually he disassembled the canoe and took it to Hawaii, where he became a professor of anthropology at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (1970-2000), and co-founded the Polynesian Voyaging Society in 1973. Three years later he sailed aboard the canoe Hokule’a from Hawaii to Tahiti, sparking a renaissance of Hawaiian language, music and culture.

In 2014 the Polynesian Voyaging Society undertook a three-year, around-the-world journey. At each port, where possible, the crew met with indigenous peoples to share songs, dances and prayers, Cooley said. They also traded traditional knowledge about taking care of the sea and the land.

Understanding ecological cultural practices is just one of the many ways we can begin to create a more sustainable world, Cooley said. Little changes can make a big difference over time.

“If we can get a few percentage points of human behavior change,” he said, “we can start turning things around a little bit and reduce the impact of some of our damaging human cultural behaviors. I want people to think, ‘OK, how can I increase my joy in certain human cultural practices while also being more gentle with the

other biological beings around me?’

“What traditional knowledge have we forgotten that might help us live more gently? This isn’t a Luddite movement,” Cooley continued. “No, it’s a highly scientific one. But at the same time, we need to remember some other ways of using resources that are in fact sustainable rather than looking at resources as something that we exploit in order to encourage new types of development. Sustainability is human cultural change.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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