

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

So welcome to our Earth Charter podcast. Today we have the pleasure of receiving Celine Cousteau for a conversation with us.

Celine is a filmmaker, environmental activist, and advocate. Thank you so much for joining us today, Celine. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you. So we haven't talked to each other for a long time, for many years. I'm very happy to reconnect through this conversation. And I would like to start by asking you if you can share with us about the work you have been doing over the last decade or two decades, and what really inspires you the most for the work you have been doing. Well, I've been working in documentary film and environmental advocacy for a decade and a half or more.

My family has been storytelling through documentary films for three generations. And I find that it's a very inspirational and effective way to share with people what's happening in the world, with the environment, with humanitarian issues, to be able to document the changes that have happened in the world. It's very important. We are at the base, all of us storytellers, and so I really feel that it's a medium that is effective in touching people's hearts. I think some of the challenges in creating films is not knowing what change it actually creates because we might inspire an audience, but we don't know what they're going to do with it.

And that's been something that for me has always been a question in terms of this kind of work, but I do believe that it's really important for us to share these stories. I've also been working as a public speaker, so I will be invited to different conferences, corporate events, universities, and use these stories really to engage the audience in making connections between themselves and the stories. So between us and them, between here and there. So if I talk about the Amazon or Antarctica, I try to make it not just interesting but relevant to the people I'm speaking to, whether it's a corporation or university, because it's really important for them to be able to see themselves in the story and understand why they're connected to it.

Absolutely. Yeah. Stories is really something we have been working quite a lot in values-based education, traditional stories or our own stories, because it illustrates sometimes abstract concepts in a very easy way. So it's wonderful that you are doing that. And you have been traveling a lot, right, in the past two decades. Antarctica, Amazon, what else? Madagascar, Isabel Coco, just all of these different places with really the idea of bringing stories back. And unfortunately, we often focus on the negative because it is a little bit what feeds the news.

Fear is also something that's used to control people. And that's not something that I really ascribe to. I think that there are so many examples of hope and joy and courage. So when you look at, for example, small organizations working in remote locations and they're

doing amazing work with very little, and they keep fighting day in and day out to protect people or to protect ecosystems, and they don't have a platform to talk about it, or they don't receive the praise or the accolades or the awards on stages.

They keep doing it because they have a purpose and they believe in it and because they have a passion and they see change. And that for me is the inspiration that I want to bring to the table to say, hey, it's not just the stories that you see and the people that are standing on stage that are doing the work. There is an army of people out there who are doing amazing work and they do deserve the attention and they deserve to be seen and supported. And this makes me think of a woman named Patty Webster.

She started an organization named Amazon Promise, bringing medical attention to remote communities in the Peruvian Amazon. And I joined her for a couple of weeks as a volunteer and I asked her, I said, how do you keep doing this? It's never ending. And she says, well, Celine, if I'm helping one person, 30 people or 100, at least I'm doing something. And I think that for me is the key. We know individual person is going to fix everything or, quote, save the planet. But every single one of us can play a role in bringing something to the table that creates positive change.

So those are the stories I want to tell. That's great. What drives you to do what you're doing?

I think what drives me is just that is just the, you know, the the inspiration I get when I'm out in the fields and I hear these stories.

And that has shifted also in the past years. I haven't been making documentary films for a while, partially because travel was restricted for several years, like everyone. But really what I am seeing is that the change that people see in themselves in the world is what creates an everlasting change and the joy that people have in doing good. Speaking to audiences also has been something that drives me because when I'm standing in front of a live audience and I can actually have a conversation in exchange, you realize that people are really thirsty for good information and positive information.

And so when you have those real conversations and you see that in them and they're thankful, not for me, they're thankful for that fuel, that energy, the goodness, the joy, the hope. Because so often that's not what is being fed to us. So that continues to drive me. And again, if I'm in front of an audience or making a film or having a conversation and they can ignite something in that person that's positive, then I'm doing what I'm meant to do. That's great. Yeah. And I can see and hear from what you said that one of your passions is to amplify the voice of those that are unheard.

Yeah. And that's a great way of saying it, Mirian, because a lot of people say give voice to the voiceless. And I think that's a terrible term. People have voices where just not listening. And I think part of our work is to have them be heard. Sure. And through the documentaries that you put together, you're making that happen. So can you talk about the human nature interconnection that you have been documenting through your work and about the interconnections that you see between the environment, different cultures, plants and animals?

I'm asking this because as you may remember, at the core of their shutter message, there's a whole notion of expanding our consciousness in terms of our sense of elonging and interconnectedness with a large living world. So what is that human nature interconnection that you have been seeing or documentary through the work you do? Well, what I have seen in a lot of societies that have, in essence, I believe, basically themselves from nature is a disconnect from the world. We become isolated within ourselves.

We become much more individualistic. And we don't see our connection with others, other cultures, other places, other ecosystems, nature, other species. The reality is, for me, everything is interconnected. And that's the way the planet works. And there's a saying by Chief Seattle, which is we are but one thread in the web of life, whatever you do to the thread you do to the web. If we can actually see that what's happening in the Amazon will affect us. If there's a continued drought, there's less waterfall in southern parts of South America.

If there's less waterfall, there's less water for agriculture. That agriculture is the food that gets exported around the world. We can take just that one example as an example. That's the interconnection of humans in nature. Our food system is nature. So we depend on nature for the very food that we eat. The oxygen we breathe is created by nature. The water that we drink is in itself nature. And so I take those simple examples not to diminish or make it small, but because those simple examples are very clear ways in which we're connected.

I think at the root of it, what is happening is that we are disconnected from ourselves. And when we disconnect from ourselves, when we don't understand our own internal ecosystem, it's going to be very hard to expand our understanding of connection outside ourselves. I think we're lacking, and this goes in a direction in which I'm heading now with my work, but I think we're really lacking a sense of self-love, of personal healing, a personal understanding. And the closer we get to having non-judgment to ourselves and having self-love and having real empathy, I think the greater opportunities we have to connect with everything outside ourselves.

So in essence, I'm going back to my psychology studies and human behavior and realizing I think the real suffering of this planet is the internal human suffering. Yeah. Yeah. I like the way you put it. And we've been saying here this to the current world, a significant majority of the current world population is urbanized. And with this urbanized living in different apartments, they're disconnected also from nature. It's not necessarily helping with our inner well-being. There's actually been a recent study that came out.

I think it was in Outside Magazine online. They did studies in the neurological effects of people's disconnection with nature. And people who have access to nature are actually more effective and efficient even in their work because that ability to connect with nature creates a calmer nervous system which allows you to focus more. So my message to corporations would be create an inner garden in your offices. You're actually going to have employees who are more focused and more efficient. It's neurologically proven.

So if we just want to take that one fact, I mean, I think that it's amazing to think about how our brain is actually doing better when nature is part of our lives. They've seen this

also with kids. The nature deficit disorder, there's a book written Last Child in the Woods by Richard Lou and you who are in education. I'm sure this touches exactly what you work on. Right? Is that like you see these kids who are disconnected from nature? We have increasing rates of ADHD. We have increasing rates of hyperactivity.

Why? Because we're an animal and nature is part of what we're supposed to be connected to. But we've lost it. Put trees, put plants in your schools, even if you can't get out of nature, do that. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, in our research here, we have also found out that we cannot teach or even cultivate care, respect for the community of life, which is core for their shutter and caring for nature without leaving an experience in being connected to nature. It's a different thing to experience it versus just learn about it in a theoretical manner.

So there's something else that is generated within us.

Now, if we look at over the past 20 or 30 years, there has been new technology, knowledge, policies at the international level that have been generated through the UN, different UN conferences and summits and new policies in international environmental law, new knowledge and technology. They are available.

To address many of these social and environmental problems we face. However, we haven't been able to make the shift. Why do you think that we haven't really been able to make this shift, given that knowledge is there, technology, more education, more policies, but still there's something missing to help us make the shift. What do you think is that missing link? I think it points back to what you just said, is that we can put all of this in books and on paper.

But we are sensory beings and not being able to experience nature ourselves makes it hard for us to completely understand and feel that connection.

I think technology can actually be used to our advantage in this case, because we can't ask all children to be able to have vacations in nature or go camping. We do understand that there are cities, it's where the majority of people live, and they don't necessarily have an opportunity to connect with nature. But technology is an amazing thing in that we are able to use VR and AR. We're able to have immersive exhibits and immersive events that allow humans who don't necessarily get out into nature itself to have at least some interaction with nature through those means. Is it ideal? No, but it's better than nothing. It's better than just having them read words on paper and expect them to understand and feel nature.

I think we can really use technology at the service of education, at the service of connecting humans and nature. I think we just have to be creative about how we do it and prioritize it.

My feeling is we haven't prioritized it globally. We've prioritized financial economic advancement. We've prioritized, yeah, maybe technology and AI for the sake of other things than for the well being of humans. But it's there. It's accessible. I think it's challenging to see a real opportunity for people between technology, education, and saving

the planet. But for me, it's right there. And we have to find the right, I'm going to say investors who understand that the safety of our future is in the hands of people who have access to the finances that could fund the technology that could help connect the people to the nature if they can't travel to go see it.

I just, I think it's all there. I think the missing link is our will to put our attention on that and to prioritize it. Now, over 20 years ago, you were somehow involved near the Earth Charter initiative and efforts. And you remember that a core pillar of the Earth Charter, where the heart of the Earth Charter lies an ethic of respecting care for the community of life. So I would like to ask you to comment on what's your understanding of it and how do you envision this happening in practice? In other words, how do you think we could cultivate, nurture a society that really respects and care for the community of life? But it goes back to something we were talking about earlier, and that's respect of self. I think we need to start there.

I think when we, you know, from the beginning of the day until the end of the day, how do we treat ourselves? How do we treat other people is a reflection of how we feel about ourselves. When we can start cultivating better self care, better self respect. And again, just the love of self, I think will continue to emanate out. When you have your basic needs met, let's just start there. If you don't have your basic needs met, it's hard to ask for more.

But when you have your basic needs met, what do you do with your rest of your time and energy? And the rest of that time and energy can actually be, you know, creating this relationship to yourself to then better the relationship with others. And that can be important. And that can be implemented in schools. You know, sometimes you see anti bullying programs. But are you actually connecting children to their own bodies to understanding how their heart beats to listening to their intuition?

When we look at how the environmental movement, for example, has used similar tactics that manipulate children into doing what we want them to do. And that's guilt and shame. Right. So the environmental movement using guilt and shame to get people to care about the environment for the sake of the environment is not long lasting. And that plays on human trauma. Well, we know that human trauma sits in the body as disease. Why would we want to keep feeding that? What we want to keep feeding is this positive side.

Positive side starts with the individual and that will emanate out. So I think schools working on even getting kids to meditate, getting kids to think about what their values are, what their beliefs are. If there is trauma, if there is difficulty, if all of that plays into how then that human being will behave towards the environment. So mental health, I think, comes into play. Wellness, mental health and self-feeling are all topics I think we need to talk about when we talk about the planet.

Great. Oceans. So let's talk a little bit about oceans. Maybe I'll like you to comment on your own experience, relationship with the ocean. How do you feel when you are in the ocean? And if you can comment on how what are the challenges you see currently for us to address in terms of ocean ecosystem restoration?

That was going to say, I just feel like the ocean is sort of the background to my life. It's just always there and people, you know, because of the family I grew up in, there's a lot of assumptions that I'm always in the ocean and I'm an oceanographer and I'm ocean specific. It's like, oh, it's always a piece of my life. Of course, I currently don't even live near it, but it's always very present for me.

Because I've had the opportunity of diving in different places around the world to, as partially and mostly for my documentaries, I get to see just amazing things underwater and it's mostly my interaction with animals that has just been a state of awe of what's there. Ocean for me also is a place of quiet meditation.

Because literally you can hear your every breath going in and out. You're very connected to your own breathing, to your own body, to your own life, right? That you're carrying on your back in your tanks. And it's a place, yeah, it's just always surprising. No one, you know, no two dives are the same. And I get to see what's underwater in a beautiful way and in a devastating way. And I think that that's, for me, one of the difficulties with getting people to understand what's happening in the oceans is it's such a vast area, right?

It covers 70% of our planet. And so you think about it. It's like, oh, well, how much of our oceans do people actually physically see? And a lot of times people only see the surface. They don't actually see what's underneath. And so it becomes this like far off place that's just massive. And so it can absorb everything, right? But we know there's, you know, overfishing and unregulated fishing and there's pollution in the oceans, an ocean acidification and sea level rise. And I mean, I can go on and on with the list, but they're pretty easy to find. And all those things do exist in the ocean at some point, just like I'm going to say any body, and I do mean that anybody and any physical body at some point, there's a tipping point.

Now, I'm not a scientist, you know, but I can bring up a couple of different points. But when you hear that about 70% of our deepwater fish already have plastic in their systems and some scientists are saying by 2050, there's more plastic in the ocean than fish, you start to realize like, well, wait a second, we put that there. And that comes back to us, right? Because plastics stay in the ocean ecosystem, even if it breaks down. And all of the chemicals within plastic ends up in our oceans. And that ends up back on our plates if we eat anything from the oceans.

So again, I brought this up earlier, but if you look at our food systems, it's a very easy way to connect people to the oceans.

And it's a huge economy. I can't remember the exact numbers, but the the actual numbers attached to the value that the ocean ecosystem brings to us is in the, I think, 2.3 or 2.7 trillion euros. Don't quote me because I'm not a data person. But but you think about it, right? All of our cargo that goes across oceans, all of our fishing fleets. And then let's talk about tourism. Tourism is a huge world economy. And if the oceans are actually not healthy the entire tourism ocean system is going to collapse, which means that all of those communities that are dependent on the oceans as the backdrop to their economy are going to suffer.

So we can talk about it in environmental and ecological terms. We can talk about it in humanitarian terms. And we can talk about it in economic terms. If the ocean isn't healthy, neither are we. It either one of those scenarios. And I don't mean to be a down on all of this because just as many bad stories, there are amazing stories. And this is, you know, again, we go back to all of those just amazing heroes on the ground. Cabo Pulmo in Mexico is a perfect one. For those people who are divers, I would definitely recommend going there, but it's a beautiful story of officials.

What's the name? The name of the place? Cabo Pulmo. Cabo Pulmo in Mexico. They were seeing that their fishing economy was on the brink of collapse, small little artisanal fishermen. They asked for support in protecting an area around their village. They created a marine reserve, a no touch zone. Ten years later, it is one of the most dense areas of fish population because that was its natural baseline. So the fishermen can still fish what's outside the reserve. They can fish inside the reserve to feed their family that day. And the new economy that they brought in is tourism because divers like myself would go there. And so the local operators are from the fishing village and now they have another economy.

Everybody wins the environment and humans. That's a great concrete example of what can be done.

But I would like to highlight what you start when you start talking about oceans. And I think it goes from that angle of beauty. Probably one of the things we need the most is not to address all of this, not from the angle of challenges and problems and very strategy angle, but more let's look at the beauty. Let's feel the beauty. Let's experience the beauty and be aware of the beauty of the oceans or the forests or an animal or a cow. Because by looking at the beauty, we can see cultivating us this sense of care.

I think you started sharing about your experience with the ocean from that angle. So I just wanted to highlight that. Yeah, thank you. Now we hear that you're working on transformational leadership. Am I right? Yeah, it's in the making. From the beginning? A little bit. It's in the making. I'm these past couple of years because I have not been working on documentary films because of no travel. I've started shifting back into human behavior and psychology. And so I'm taking a lot of different workshops around self-healing and to be able to support individuals and groups in working and looking at their perhaps a negative core belief.

And how they define their identity, how they see themselves in the world. And the idea of transformation is really to shift from what we see now as either corporate or not. But what does leadership mean and how do you shift that leadership into something that's more all-encompassing? The idea also is to support advocates.

Because as I have done myself as an activist and advocate, I brought myself to the brink of complete exhaustion and burnout. Because I was fighting for causes.

You too, I see. And relate to this? Yeah, and I think that that's something that is beautiful within each one of us, but it's not sustainable. And as we talk about sustainability, we need to shift to regenerative, not just for the planet, but for ourselves. And I think this again goes back to this notion that we care so much for things outside of ourselves when

we are activists and advocates. We forget to self-care. And that's actually not good. It's not good for us. It's not good for our families.

It's not good for our work and our causes. So I am really interested in heading in this direction to help support activists and advocates to actually be more self-sustaining and regenerative. To really care for themselves and actually be able to stick around for longer without burnout. I think the passion that fuels us can also exhaust us.

Where do we regenerate? And that's taking this transformational leadership to transformational advocacy. So it's still a thought in progress, but it's something that I want to add to what I'm doing next in my work. That's very interesting. So you were really, so can you comment a little bit more on this idea of how transformational leadership is linked to this idea of examining our values and beliefs?

So I mean each person walking into a room is going to walk in with their entire life story. So if you're, I'll just take a very simple example. If you're going into a meeting with your staff, whether it's nonprofit organization, which I don't like the term nonprofit, by the way. I think that's it's a very scarcity based term. Let's for purpose your for purpose organization or your corporation.

Every person in that room is walking in with their entire life story. And if that is not acknowledged somewhere in the back of your head, you're not actually looking at the whole human. You're looking at the piece of the human that you're wanting to focus on, which might just be the employee that you need to get to do a certain thing.

When you actually shift that, so transformational leadership a little bit more and actually look at the whole human, you can start addressing people's strengths. So perhaps somebody got hired for a job and their strengths lie in a piece of their job, but you also see their potential somewhere else. Why not highlight that potential for the benefit of the individual and the corporation or the organization?

When you can start helping people understand their own their own values and their own identity, they actually thrive. And if they're thriving within your organization, the organization is going to thrive more. So I think taking a step back and gaining a bit more perspective and somewhere humanizing the humans, right? Acknowledging the whole human is actually beneficial for the whole organization. It takes time, you know, and sometimes maybe it means putting a, you know, a meditation pod somewhere in your office and allowing people to actually be grown up humans.

And when they need a break because they're burnt out or they're tired or their kids kept them up on light and they need to go in and meditate 10 minutes or nap, allow them the humanity of that moment because they will come back stronger. When you are in full appreciation of the person in front of you as a whole human, you're going to be a better boss and colleague and a better organization. And I think this is where we are.

I think we're misstepping and thinking we have to skip all of that and let people take care of themselves at home. You have no idea what they go home to. So why not make your work environment a place that they want to come home to? Because then I think they'll



stick around longer and they'll just be better at what they do. That's true. I see that also through the lens of a learning environment in the school or university to be that safe place where learners can feel they are respected, recognized as a whole human.

Not that they are there just to learn something. Yeah, that they are an individual human being going into your classroom and learning from you a piece of life. I have chosen very specifically the schools my son goes to based on the teachers and how they approach the children and see the children as human beings with their own selves. Walking into that space and with the respect to that any individual human should receive. Absolutely. A key element for the learning process.

Okay, let's move to our last question. Ecological civilization. How do you envision an ecological civilization? And what do you think would be the key ingredients and elements to make that happen?

So an interesting term because I don't have a perfect definition for what an ecological civilization is. But the moment you say those words for me because I'm very visual, I bring nature indoors where we can.

Again, because assuming not everybody has access to nature in cities but bringing more nature indoors into classrooms and into work situations and actually having those spaces be spaces of nature in as much as possible. I think again that brings that connection we were talking about earlier of the human nature connection.

That is undeniable if you really look at how we are created and the things that we depend on.

Environmental education without it being fear-based, I think would be obvious in all the schools. Just the inspiration and understanding of simple basic things. How does your pineapple grow and where does it come from? How is it transported? How is it packaged? Whatever the topic would be but actually understanding it within the context of the natural world.

And oddly this is coming up in my mind but teaching history through many different lenses and not just the typical ones. Because I think you can teach history through a relationship with the environment and how that relationship has changed over time in different countries. How are different cultures including their relationship with the natural world? How do different religions include their relationship with the natural world? I think all of that is really important. I'm sure there's much more. I think for me like those would be very basic. It's just starting with the kids and starting with bringing nature inside.

And perhaps you know instead of I don't know that this would work but somehow that there would need to be a contribution towards the environment for the services that she provides us. And whether that would be supporting organizations that work in the environment and supporting humanitarian causes planting trees. But somehow the giving back to the earth for all of the services she provides us with. That would be pretty cool. Yeah, thank you. I'm really envisioning that we need to figure out ways to invest more in terms of amplifying our consciousness to the fact that we are not yet there in in a civilization that is ecologically literate.

But we can make concerted efforts to move towards or to build a more ecologically literate civilization. But for that to happen we need to invest to be very to invest in concerted efforts to really envision first, envision an ecological civilization and move towards that of course through a educational efforts political decisions and in a sort of coalition of government private sector education and civil society organizations. But anyway, it's certainly a a major challenge that we all have in our hands. We do and it's a collective it's a collective challenge and what's at stake is collective as well. It's not about any individual place when we see what's happening.

In ecosystems and the imbalance in our even just our weather system you start to understand this isn't it just about developed versus developing countries or north versus south or the haves and the have nots. This is this is a collective happening.

And I really have a positive outlook on this. I really have hope in it and I've been asked before how do I stay optimistic and I said well, I think it's it's just a choice.

I choose optimism. I mean, I have seen so many amazing examples of the goodness that we are able to do. How can I not?

And so that's that's how I function. That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much Celine for your time and good luck for your efforts in filmmaking and transformation or leadership and so on. And I'm very happy to reconnect actually. So am I, Mirian. It's been a few decades. Thank you and good luck. Thank you so much.