

# A rainforest blessing: finding common ground

*Global solidarity in Cormanachan Community Woodlands as Liz Murdoch reports.*



The COP26 Coalition, the UK-based coalition of civil society groups and individuals mobilising around climate justice, has labelled the 26th UN Conference of the Parties in Glasgow in November 2021 "the whitest COP so far". Two-thirds of international participants the Coalition was helping to attend were prevented—by a combination of visa and accommodation problems, lack of access to Covid-19 vaccines, and changing travel rules. While public protests took place in Glasgow and across the world, I was very fortunate to attend an exception to the rule, a unique demonstration of climate advocacy at Cormanachan Community Woodlands [1] in South Argyll.

On 7th of November—a crisp, sparkling Sunday—five indigenous leaders from Brazil, swathed in coats and scarves, prepared for a public Rainforest Blessing Event to demonstrate solidarity with Scottish environmental activism, community collaboration and Scotland's own threatened rainforest habitat. Led by Raleigh International and Association Jiboiana, and supported by the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest, the event was hosted by Cormanachan Community Woodlands. Also in attendance were key advocates for Scotland's rainforest, including the Alliance for Scotland's Rainforest, accredited representatives from the COP's 'Blue Zone' and conservation volunteers from across Scotland who have been engaged with the restoration of

Cormanachan since 1988.

## Ceremonial blessings

The ceremonial event began in a clearing, overlooking the shores of Loch Goil, with a traditional song and dance performance for the benefit of the international media. There then followed a longer exchange of authentic spiritual blessings between the two continents and their fragile habitats, which involved prayers, spine-tingling ritual singing, rattles, drumming and the burning of herbs. The sacred ceremonies were led by the twin brothers Siã and Busã, spiritual leaders of the Huni Kuin people, while Scottish ceremonial culture and heritage was presented by Àdhamh Ó Broin from Dorlach, a charitable organisation which aims to preserve the dialects and heritage of Gaelic culture in Scotland [2].

Àdhamh offered traditional sung blessings, and the Amazonian guests were visibly moved to learn that he is the first person in 80 years to raise children fluent in the local Cowal dialect of Gaelic. The three teenagers were spontaneously invoked as lineage-holders to take part in the nature connection ritual. It was heartening to witness young people as active participants in a celebration of ancestral knowledge and indigenous wisdom.

The woodland rituals finished with the collaborative planting of a native oak tree, and a series of speeches, music and refreshments followed at the Lochgoilhead Village Hall. Jenni Minto (SNP MSP for Argyll and Bute),

Ariane Burgess (Green MSP for Highlands and Islands) and a range of conservation groups gave presentations and expressed their support for the campaign to save Scotland's rainforest. Phoebe Hanson, Raleigh International Trustee, spoke passionately about the importance of youth leadership in nature conservation. The Amazonian delegates, resplendent in feathered crowns, *urucu* face paint and woven smocks, each gave a speech in Portuguese about their experience of marginalisation and campaigning work.

## Learn to listen

It would be naïve to assume that the delegates in traditional dress were unfamiliar with the modern world. The internet (including social media, drones, mapping systems, and a host of other digital technologies) provides a crucial resource for threatened forest peoples worldwide. Each delegate was an international celebrity in their own right. Narrubia Werreria, an environmental and human rights activist from the Iny people; a law graduate who campaigns against the high suicide rates in indigenous groups. Thaline Karajá, singer and campaigner for the Karajá people; the first indigenous representative to have participated in Brazil's 'The Voice', uses her celebrity status as a campaigning platform. Val Munduruku, also a singer and from the Munduruku people; coordinator of indigenous women's associations and a LGBTQI campaigner. Siã and Busã Huni Kuin travel extensively around the world to advocate for Amazonian protection. Each leg of the group's journey



Far left: Twins Siã and Busã Huni Kuin;  
Left: Val Munduruku. Photos: Liz Murdoch.

from Brazil has been recorded for a documentary, *'The Ghost Rainforest'*, towards which Reforesting Scotland has made a financial contribution, and which will be released in time for the RS 2022 Gathering.

A fortnight of COP events—at every level—demonstrated that forest peoples and indigenous groups are continuing their struggle for recognition as custodians and holders of ecological wisdom, despite their lack of traction in the geopolitical arena. The Brazilian rainforest is approaching a tipping point, emitting more carbon dioxide than it is able to absorb, while its inhabitants are offered incentives to open their territories to mineral extraction or soybean enterprises by the Bolsonaro administration. But though their traditional livelihoods of hunting, fishing and gathering are increasingly mixed with agriculture, it is reported that the majority of indigenous groups remain united in their resistance to federal and corporate interference [3]. Women's position at the forefront of forest protection schemes and campaigning is changing traditional gender roles [4]. Association Jiboiana's mission during COP26 was to address as many world citizens as possible, directly and through the camera, not to negotiate with Presidents and policy-makers.

*"By listening wholeheartedly and learning consciously from those who have been living in harmony with Nature for thousands of years, we might be able to transform ourselves, cultivate resilience—thus mitigating climate change."* Leo Landon, Association Jiboiana [5]

Following a meeting between the Jiboiana delegation and Community Land Scotland in Tighnabraich, Calum McLeod observed that,

"...at first glance, the land issues facing these indigenous peoples are of an entirely different order to those experienced in Scotland; quite literally a matter of life and death for some campaigners courageous enough to take a stand to defend their peoples' land rights. ... But look a little closer and it soon becomes apparent that local communities in both the Global North and South are prey to the same market forces commodifying and financialising the climate emergency in the service of already wealthy elites. Land, as always, is the gateway prize leading to further riches." [6]

### Our role

*"Great changes won't come from the top but from the grassroots—meaning us, the people, activists, whistleblowers, and simple citizens."* Léo Landon, Association Jiboiana [5].

Although COP26 may yet deliver some modest improvements, it is clear that the global inequity of climate change is not of concern to the current UK Government, which holds the Presidency until COP27 later this year. Changes in weather patterns have continued to wreak devastation in the Global South. In the words of Val Munduruku, "we [indigenous peoples] have the smallest impact on the global carbon footprint yet we suffer the most." This is the essence of climate justice. Until the citizens, not just governments, of the Global North

and South work collectively, how can we expect to meet the de-carbonisation and de-contamination requirements of our planet?

Challenging current power relations and developing new accountabilities might help towards addressing assumptions embedded in our national policies. Reflecting upon how white supremacy culture works through Scottish society, and ourselves, and building new relationships of our own, is one way to dismantle the current dynamics between cultures, ecosystems and individuals in the climate challenge scenario. Can we work towards this?

In spite of a lack of shared vocabulary and the formality of the occasion, I had hoped to make a personal connection with at least one member of the Jiboiana delegation, to encourage them with their work. Pondering the obstacles of Covid-19 transmission, mutual awkwardness and sign language, I approached Val Munduruku, we shared names and had a somewhat stilted exchange. Ironically, we found our common ground in Google Maps. I pointed to the app on my phone, posed a query, and—success! Val took the phone, pronounced a name, and assigned a marker to a precise location in the Amazon Basin. A tiny red pin, on an enormous expanse of green. I thanked her, changed the motif to a heart, and we parted company laughing.

### References

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