

Part 1 - The Urban Nature Agenda with Cristina Gomez Garcia ...

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SPEAKERS

George Benson, Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes

George Benson 00:25

Hello, and welcome everyone to threesixtyCITY, a podcast into the future of urban life. I'm today's guest host George Benson. I'm the co founder and managing director of the Climate Displacement Planning Initiative. And I'm also a member of the Global Commission on BiodiverCities by 2030, which is an effort of the World Economic Forum and the Government of Colombia. The Climate Displacement Planning Initiative is a Vancouver based nonprofit with a mission to ensure that those who have to move because of climate change impacts experience safe, dignified, and just mobility within and to Canada. I'm really happy and honored to be here today with NewCities and a dear colleague of mine from the World Economic Forum, in what is part one of a two part series on urban biodiversity. We're going to be looking at the World Economic Forum's recent report on this, talking about COP 15, the COP you might not know as well as those related to climate change, and generally speaking about the role of nature in cities. I'm really happy to welcome Christina Gomez Garcia Reyes, it's really a pleasure to have her today, here with us. She is the Lead on Urban Nature at the World Economic Forum and she is an expert in biodiversity and cities, among many, many other things. So Christina, thanks so much for joining us today.

Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 01:32

Thank you, George, for inviting me. It's a pleasure for me to be here sharing my passions.

George Benson 01:38

Wonderful. Well, why don't we start with your passions, Christina. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in biodiversity work overall? I think you've got quite an interesting and storied career in this space.

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 01:49

Yeah, it's a good question. And I have to confess that I am a biologist by heart, but not by title. I studied anthropology. But in my free time, I was always volunteering when I was young in the natural parks in every corner of Colombia. I'm from Colombia. I was born in Bogota, and I grew up there. So I was traveling around with my parents. And then when I was studying, I was volunteering, as I said, and also working in the Herbarium at the University, pressing all the plants that were coming from the biologists expeditions that were bringing all their plants from different parts of Colombia. So I was spending my afternoons there, and then not satisfied by that, I started to study biology. But as soon as I finished anthropology, I realized that I wanted to go to the field and work outside my academic bubble. So I left my second degree halfway and I worked for two years in the Orinoquía region of Colombia. So this is the eastern plains of Colombia, or savannas we can call them, where the savannas meet the Amazon rainforest. So this is truly a magical place, where I learned a lot, both from nature and from Indigenous families with whom I lived during that period. And then this is where all my passions grew. I worked in rural areas, in high conflict areas of Colombia, on the margins of one of our biggest rivers called the Magdalena River, and then a mountain range that is controlled with illegal armed forces. At that time, I was working with an NGO called Panthera, which is a conservation NGO devoted to the conservation of big cats, particularly with Jaguars in that region. So we were working on a project called the Jaguar Corridor. And by then I was doing some research about what the Jaguar means to our communities and more in terms of the historic communities of the country. As you may know, the Jaguar is a figure of power and respect, and a highly mythological or mythic figure. So we wanted to understand, basically, why rural communities were killing jaguars and working with them to address this conflict and protect jaguars. And then I continued to work in that region. And I came to the UK to undertake a Master's of Science in Conservation and Rural Development with that subject in mind. And I developed my thesis in collaboration with the Colombian Ministry of the Environment, tracking this kind of land use transformation, and why we as Colombians were affecting some of the most biodiversity rich regions in the country. While I'm speaking, I just realized that all these years I was seeking to be close to plants, mountains, communities and nature outside cities. And it's interesting because now I'm working in cities and advocating for cities to reconcile their relationship with nature, because they are also biodiversity hotspots, even though we might not be seeing that. So this is my new passion. My new undertaking, and this is what brought me to where I am now.

G George Benson 05:04

That's amazing. I think it's so important to understand the stories behind people for why they end up doing these big global initiatives, there's always a personal kernel or starting point to those. So thank you for sharing that, Christina. For something as complicated as this, you're talking about the interface of natural systems and human systems, the rural urban development nexus, there's so many components to this. And of course, we're talking about just a very large concept out of the gate: nature. And so even though it's kind of cheeky, I think it's important to actually start with understanding, when we're saying nature, that term, that word, it's a huge concept. But how do you look at that word? How do you start to think about what nature is? And how does that start to inform the work that you take on?



C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 05:49

There is not a right answer on what does nature means. I would say that nature for me is like the system of all the living things. And what is important here for me is the vision of system and this interconnectedness. That has somehow, as I see it, been lost with modern scientific approaches where things are broken down into smaller and smaller components to be studied with incredible detail, which is very valuable. But perhaps, by taking that path, we have forgotten that all living things are interconnected in a global force that does not exist just for the use of humans alone. So I've been hearing recently some descriptions about nature as all the animal, plants, and living things in the world that are not made by people. And with that, I disagree as well, because I see humans as part of nature, and therefore, as an influential part of it, right. So I think that humans, we transform and influence all the living beings on the one side, and we describe them, but nature also transforms us and influence us. I've been both a beneficiary and a victim of this influence. And that is what makes me work so hard in this because it's a matter of reconciling and recovering that interconnectedness that we have with nature, and that influence and understanding. And accepting that we might have affected nature in negative terms, but we can also be the authors of this very necessary recovery.

G George Benson 07:32

The authors of a very necessary recovery. I love that, Christina. And you know, something that stood out to me, we were talking about before the show, there's a relatively new global effort, the task force on nature related financial disclosures, and one of the things that really stood out to me when I've been engaging with their work is that, like you just said, they include people and their definition of nature. And I don't know about folks listening to this podcast, but I don't necessarily think of bankers and financial experts as the most encompassing or thoughtful when it comes to these kinds of philosophical questions. But even they, in that effort are marking out and saying, first and foremost, nature is a critical part of everything we do, including our economy. Secondly, we as financial professionals, the financial sector need to better integrate nature into our decision making. And finally, when we talk about nature, we're part of it, we have an element, we have a role to play, we can be authors, as you say, Christina, in the destruction or the transformation or the growth or the prosperity, if you like, of natural systems. And I think that's a very optimistic take. One thing I'll throw in here that's interesting to consider, is that we also live in a moment where, myself as someone who's worked in climate change for a long time, I think we're finally starting to see a breakdown of what some people call "carbon tunnel vision". Where when we talk about climate change, it's not even about greenhouse gases necessarily in the holistic sense, but carbon. How do we reduce carbon? As someone who works in climate change, that's critical, we need to reduce that. That's a very civilization level goal we need to work towards but at the same time, as we're seeing through things like the IPBES and the joint convenings of the IPCC with other nature based scientific efforts, there's a recognition those systems all need to come together. We can't slice them out and silo them as you're saying. So I think it's an exciting moment scientifically, conceptually, in the policy world, where all these things are coming together. So I think it's a very timely conversation.

C Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 09:28

Absolutely, I think that also this tunnel vision comes into play in the way we've become illiterate, because of the distance that we assume from nature while living in cities, we lost the value system and we are far from understand all of the contributions that nature makes to us

and how fundamental it is for the sustainability of our lives. And so for me, if we really want to stop biodiversity loss, and we really want to address this complexity and this multi-layered approach to nature and climate change, we need to address the very root of the problem, which is the valuation of nature. And by that I'm not talking in pure economic terms. I'm referring to the way in which people perceive, experience, and interact with nature. And as our dear friend, Lena Chan says in every intervention, we cannot care, safeguard, or even value, what we don't see or understand. So every person in the world has a very different understanding of nature. And we need to understand that. But also, some of us or some of the people that surround us are not even aware of the values of nature, because they have been very distant to it. So this is where I like concepts like ecological or environmental amnesia, which has to do with the difference between just knowing and being superficially aware of some stories of extinction and nature loss, versus really sensing the catastrophic. And because we're so far from nature, in cities, we might not even be able to understand what it is and to compare the tragedies of losing that nature. So if you were born in a place with no trees, devastated or simply, concrete made, how would you see nature as something valuable or something that you must take care of? It's impossible, right? If we approach or if we bring people closer to nature, but also closer to natural disasters, I truly believe this could trigger behavioral change towards nature. And it's not just society, but high-level decision makers. And it happened to me, for example, in Poland, this year, I was invited to the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice. And while being there, I took a 40 minute drive to visit Auschwitz. And what happened to me is that even if I've read several books, and watched many movies and documentaries about the Holocaust, nothing touched me deeper than standing between those walls, sensing the rays of light entering from the little holes, the smells, the space between the bed bunks. The proportion of all of this compared with my immediate sense of well being. So this sensing, by contrast, is super powerful. And I think this is one of the steps forward in terms of the behavioral change needed to really understand and value nature. Even before the high level targets, I think we need to work on these behavioral changes through bringing people towards those natural disasters and tragedies to understand how tragic and how devastating it is and the real impact that it has on us.

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George Benson 12:54

Oh, that's so well said, Christina. I think it's a very powerful analogy. I'm thinking of, we'll come to this in a moment. But you mentioned Lena, one of the incredible leaders from Singapore that's driving urban biodiversity work. I was thinking of her preface to the report that we'll talk about where she says, I'm quoting here, "to many people biodiversity in cities is an oxymoron. But on the contrary, there is much biodiversity in cities essential for sustainability, livability, and ecological resilience in urban life, as today's major challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss are intricately interlinked, they must be addressed synergistically leveraging nature based solutions at the local, regional and global levels." And so I think, to your point, there's a recognition that we need to have just as a baseline that nature is in fact, in cities. Now, as you say, it may be suffering, it may be on the edge of catastrophe in some cases, but there is a presence there that I think a lot of people don't even realize. And I think that's so much the power of what the biodiversity commission is looking to achieve. And all of this work on nature and biodiversity in cities is, we need to one recognize that there is something here, that's already here, and in many cases, it's in danger. But in fact, it is a part of the urban fabric that we know and love. And I think some of the recent rewilding examples, whether that's daylighting creeks. We've done some rewilding work here in the city of Vancouver, for example. And it's amazing how tangible it is, people really get pulled into it. And I think that's a really powerful example. As you say, once you get there, people get really excited and they

dive in. So let's turn now Christina, to this effort that we've referred to. So I'm a member of this commission, you've been one of our primary interlocutors. And of course, you own a lot of this work within the Forum. Let's talk about the Global Commission on Biodiversity by 2030. What was the starting point of that, it's a unique partnership with the Government of Columbia and the Forum. What was the start of it? And then let's talk a little bit about what it started to mark out as its areas of work.

C

Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 14:52

Currently, I'm here part of the World Economic Forum in Switzerland representing this BiodiverCities by 2030 initiative. And this is an initiative that was born in Colombia. We build it from the ground up there with public leadership at the very highest level with support of a great research team of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute, which is the National Biodiversity Institute in Colombia. And with the commitment of more than 14 cities that have seen in their unique biodiversity an opportunity to be more resilient to climate hazards first. But they also saw an opportunity to generate new jobs after the pandemic, and before the pandemic even, we had a very difficult economic situation in some some of the cities that are aligned this vision. And also as an opportunity to design very unique development strategies based in tourism, based in new urban design that is not only inspired by nature, but also I must say, responsible with nature. And this is very important, because we've been advocating for nature to be something more than a cosmetic attribute, right? It's pretty and beautiful to bring trees to a park or to build green corridors. But nature is much more than that. And this is also something that we need to address, the distance between the concepts of nature and biodiversity. So biological diversity, per se, are we bringing more species to the cities? Or is this just a movement of greening cities, and this is different. So we need to be aware of that. And this is why it's so important to work with Institutes of Research, such as the Alexander von Humboldt Institute that guarantee what we call the ecological performance of these projects. And measuring how much we are recovering the diversity of species and with it the function of these ecosystems, or this network of living units in the city and also the capacity of this biodiversity to respond to some challenges and hazards. So this is where our project comes from. After that, in 2019, this project was presented at the Davos meeting in Switzerland with with the World Economic Forum. And there was a decision of making this initiative global, the president of Columbia and Professor Schwab, they understood this as a critical element to bring forward an agenda on biodiversity conservation from cities around the world. So not only focusing on the challenges of protecting half of the earth, and the intact lands, but also understanding what is the responsibility and the role of cities to protect nature, both within cities, but outside the cities. This is a bit how it was born, it was very important to build an initiative that was relevant at the global scale. So we undertook a mission oriented approach that was designed beforehand. And that is to work, as I've said, for the recovery of a positive relationship between cities and biodiversity with a framework of ambition for 2030. That came after the agreement between the Colombian government and the World Economic Forum. And this mission has as a three pronged strategy. First, for us, it was very important to bring to the table expertise. So what we did was to convene a group of experts from different countries and sectors that we call the Global Commission on BiodiverCities. Then we wanted also to work in the innovation side of it. This means to integrate a community of innovators who are already making an impact in the regions and areas of influence. And our role there was to elevate their experiences and make them known in order to increase the possibility of replicating their solutions in other cities around the world. And third, and last but not least for us, it was very important to bring together both the innovation side of it and the expertise of our Global Commission on BiodiverCities into a knowledge product that would serve for cities to

understand how they can move forward and transform the way they are planning their own development. So this knowledge product was published in January this year. It's called Biodiversity by 2030, transforming cities relationship with nature. It's an inside report that maps and compiles the latest arguments and information and data and insights around nature-positive cities, the impact and the urgency of addressing this broken relationship between cities and nature, and the opportunities that cities have if they do so. And then concrete ways for action.

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George Benson 20:53

Lots of juicy stuff in there. And so for listeners, some of the key recommendations of the report and the case studies, we'll get into those in part two. What I want to talk about now is just some of the really high level messages that come out of the report that really speak to the nuances of what you were just saying, Christina, in terms of, we have lots of cities who want to know what to do. They're trying to understand the level of risk they face, they're trying to understand not just the role of nature in a general sense. But, what does it do to advance their objectives from a policy perspective? How does it help their citizens? All of those kinds of questions are answered quite beautifully by the report in many ways. The why, why care? Why is this relevant? Cities have so many things that they're responsible for. We know that in most countries, cities have a very small share of national revenue, they're being asked to do a lot of things with relatively few resources. But the why of this report, I think, has really hit home. The first key takeaway of the report is that we live in this urban era. Cities are accounting for 80 plus percent of global GDP, they'll host about 75% of the global population by 2050. And so urban leaders, as we've heard in the climate change world for many years have this critical role to play. And I think it's the tying in of that, and it's the second key takeaway, which I'll just reference is that the exponential growth of the global built environment is undermining nature's critical contributions to our societies and to our economies. I've done a lot of economic development work in my career. And the number that I think that should really scare a lot of people and drive us towards action is that there's this estimate that 44% of global GDP in cities is estimated to be at risk of disruption from biodiversity loss. That's astounding. That totally reframes this very extractive relationship we've had with nature for many years, oh, it's always there, we're always going to have a chance to use it, when in fact, it's clearly very much at risk. I'd like to turn to you, Cristina. There's nine key findings from the report that are communicated at the high level, which of those is most important to you? Which messages in the report really stand out when you're talking to a mayor or you're talking to the senior urban leaders around the world? Which one are you really hitting home to them first?

C

Cristina Gomez Garcia Reyes 23:07

I'm not sure if we can say that there's one that more important than the others. But it's understanding, as I said, these three key messages that we want to convene. First, the urgency, so this report clearly outlines the urgency of addressing cities untenable relationship with nature. And by that what we do is to show things like how much the rapid expansion of the global built environment is affecting natural areas and biodiversity hotspot, as you say, how much of cities global GDP is at risk because of affecting those natural areas. And also in terms of risk, not only economic risk, but for example, figures like more than 1.4 billion people living in the world's largest largest urban centers are threatened by natural hazards. Flooding is one of them. And one of the most common natural hazards we saw a devastating situation in

Pakistan this year. But before that happened, because we published this report in January, more than 5000 deaths were caused just in 2019. And more than \$46 billion in economic losses were caused by flooding alone, not to say heat islands, not to say wind and lowest temperatures. So it's a matter of understanding the risk. It's also a matter of working on the literacy of the urgency, in which we are now in and then not only be catastrophic, but then showing the opportunity of acting towards the situation or address the situation. And by that we mean, how can cities reconcile their relationship with nature? One of the options clear and the first option for us is to reintegrate nature in the built environment. There are other ways as I was saying, measuring our impact in nature outside our limits. But if we just start by reintegrating nature in the built environment, we can increase city resilience, we can generate new jobs, we can also have co benefits such as less pollution or more clean air, we can increase both mental and physical health. So we outline all of these co-benefits. And this is what we call the added value of investing in nature, within their limits and bringing nature back to the cities, which means into the built environment. So we made an economic case for increasing investment in nature, within cities limits and within the built environment, by showing that nature based solutions for infrastructure and green infrastructure is 50% cheaper than traditional grey manmade alternatives. And it's not only cheaper, or the most cost effective way of building our cities and growing our cities, but it also delivers 28% greater added value. And by this I mean, co benefits such as increased tourism and attraction of investment, better health, both mental and physical health, and other benefits that we also describe in our report. And I invite you to read it, it's on our website. And it's a short and clear and sharp description on how we can act towards bringing more and better nature to the cities and how can we reconcile our relationship with nature.

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George Benson 26:48

I feel like that's a spectacular point to end on. Christina, you've given us a great cliffhanger for part two. So in part two of this, we're going to go deeper into the recommendations of the report, we're going to talk about some of the case studies, and really dive into the outcomes of what a nature positive city really looks like on the other side of that journey. So Christina, I want to thank you so much for giving us that initial overview and answering some of the sort of philosophical questions. I'm really looking forward to our second part. And so if you've enjoyed this conversation, we really encourage you to stay tuned for the second half. We will be on air next week. And thank you so much. My name is George Benson. I'm with Cristina from the World Economic Forum, and we'll talk to you soon.