

Focus Pulling: How the Arts Can Inspire Citizens and Society to Interact with the Natural World (DRAFT)

Interactive Dialogue of the General Assembly on Harmony with Nature

21st April 2017

Esteemed members of the General Assembly and dialogue participants, on behalf of my colleagues whom I have had the privilege to work with in the Knowledge Network I wish to express our sincere appreciation for participating in this dialogue. I am encouraged, as are many others within and outside of the dialogue that it is taking place here at the United Nations and we wish that it may long continue until the fruits of its vision are borne in meaningful action.

I am here as a British Film & Media Producer and to represent the findings of the Arts, Media, Design and Architecture Group in relation to Earth Jurisprudence within the Harmony with Nature Virtual Dialogue. This involved insights from an international group of participants working across diverse creative disciplines to answer the 4 questions posed by the UN about how our fields of expertise can contribute to shifting worldviews towards earth jurisprudence in practice. There is a lot more that we feel can be done within the arts, design and media than is being done today.

The first of our core findings was that these interrelated fields of artistic endeavour are complementary and can act as transmitters of the underlying principles upheld in the other HwN disciplines of earth centred law, ecological economics, education, holistic science, philosophy/ethics and theology. That is why this field is so important as it can share principles and best practices around the world. In fact, few other disciplines carry this ability so well. Therefore, the arts and media can directly transmit a more holistic, earth centred worldview both locally and internationally and this is something that we should find a way to do, urgently and consistently, incubated through this HwN programme as quickly as possible. A partner network around the world of practitioners of this approach both individuals and organisations should be established and harnessed in order to help realign our focus. This must mean a whole new wave of productions focused on this message, whilst artistically and stylistically ensuring audience appeal.

Pope Francis in his Encyclical on the environment and human ecology *Laudato Si* showed just how powerful this shift in focus could be, and necessary. But it also demonstrated how much more is needed to 'continue the push' towards change. The arts, design and media fields offer such a significant opportunity for the widespread communication, dissemination and engagement in this subject and it should be prioritised and supported as a means to foster effective understanding and a movement towards implementation. Stories are part of our social fabric, we love and respond to them and so they must be harnessed as part of our work towards a collective shift towards Earth Jurisprudence approaches.

The embodiment of these ideas and ideals through the arts, the stories we tell and designs we produce is one that is able to share ideas of balance, responsibility and integrity across generations and international borders. However, although the potential is positive the second of our core findings is that we do have a real concern that there is a prevailing stronghold on content creation and design practices that is driven by commercial considerations so that distribution, education and design principles are generally politically or populourist defined by the latest fashions and tastes and the bottom line, leaving little room for 'visionary approaches' such as those connected to Earth Jurisprudence. As this subject is greater and more urgent than any one agenda it is unfortunately in our experience that existing approaches reinforce the anthropocentric mindset. This needs to change.

The third of our findings is about the role of the media and arts in creating inspiration and a hunger for positive change. This raises the question: How could more meaningful media and design be perpetuated? What would a non-invasive, non-combative, nonviolent, non-pushy media landscape look like? Well, probably very different from today, but not altogether out of reach either. Presently, professional practices are not only anthropocentric, they are also North and Eurocentric, urban centric, white, male and heteronormative, and this concentration of accreditation, prestige and power is self-fulfilling: paradigms that might institute collaborative, Earth centred design and media are denigrated and excluded. This also must change.

The cult of the individual and a prevailing "me me me" culture is a key part of the propagation of this worldview, and it has had a devastating effect in the world of the arts, media, design and architecture where the work of humankind is always considered to be superior to the work of nature, and the work of the individual is glorified, thus amplifying tendencies towards hedonism over communal or global wellbeing.

Experts asserted that these disciplines must move towards a collaborative paradigm rooted in and driven by collective practice, a model that is more reflective of the common good and imagination "as part of an interconnected whole". Indigenous led projects across all the disciplines should be actively encouraged as this would allow more deeply Earthcentric societies to set an example for the rest of humankind and also encourage a culture and practice of community led arts, media, design and architecture. In my own work in Colombia and the Indigenous groups there, these worldviews offer insights and benefits to their region, nation and the entire world, which should be celebrated, protected, and heard.

The great children's author Roald Dahl famously said "if you listen to nature she will reveal her secrets to you." But how many of us stop to listen. To deeply contemplate nature?

It is vital for all of us that we reestablish connection with nature, that we see ecology as being intrinsically linked to wellbeing, spirituality and a healthy society instead of only a resource. Rather than focusing solely on human dramas and themes, projects should explore and celebrate the natural world and our role as part of it. Including the natural cycles and rhythms and working in accordance with them. The specialist fields of the arts, design and architecture connect us to meaning and creativity and this should be highly encouraged. There's a myriad of ways and stories to tell and the right framework and structure should be supported even if in small ways.

This message is a rallying cry for help from member states around the world you hear these words signals for a better future. The arts can and must respond to help reorientate understanding towards more long lasting and holistic ways of living. This is

something that needs to be proliferated through our education systems and practices, especially those we provide access to young people. The Government of Ireland has recently launched their new campaign for all children to have access to creativity in the arts, more so than ever before. Such approaches are to be encouraged and should also be focused on the Earth Jurisprudence practices we are talking about today.

A new design and media movement is required in the same way that the environmental lawyers and economists have risen to the challenge. That is the call and the cry. Will you hear it and take action? Within our group we realised that we are at a critical crossroads in the crisis of consumption, which is also fundamentally a spiritual crisis, a search for meaning, and as the arts, design and media can speak of these elements, and it can offer part of the solution. Through education. Through increasing awareness and through advocacy.

It is sad but true that the virtual monopoly on content creation by large corporations makes it extremely difficult to popularise alternative worldviews, especially when commissioning editors or boards of directors at broadcasters do not support this paradigm shift. This was at the heart of the concern is within our group. There continues to be a widespread use of sustainability that poses the question “how can we sustain our level of consumption?” rather than “how can we sustain the entire biosphere?”, which is a major barrier to deeper understanding and awareness of the subject. That said the work of antropologists and broadcasters such as Sir David Attenborough were recognized as having significantly furthered the appreciation and wonder of the natural world.

Creating more alternative content, programming and education is crucial to this cause. As a part of the political economic system, these disciplines have maintained aesthetic and commercial considerations as measure of success, but there will have to be a change. “Edutainment” must replace the current fare presented as entertainment in mass communication, and artists and producers must be aware of the needs of the community and the planet.

BAFTA in the UK have made efforts to educate broadcasters and production companies about their carbon footprints and this is now extending for the first time, in 2016, into on screen story narratives, which is where the real opportunity exists. If through this work at HwN we can encourage national and international broadcasters, production companies and those engaged in the arts and design to get involved in this type of storytelling then we are truly planting the seeds for a more balanced future.

While such a transition may be easier in the arts and architecture, which are rooted in celebration and ritual, change is also needed in the field of media and design, which are vital expressions of human culture and meaning. Stories and reestablishing a “new story” for our time was seen as necessary. This new level of storytelling must find the necessary support to enable it to contribute to the paradigm shift in thinking and behaving in the world. Strongholds of support at the UN and elsewhere could be a vital link that is needed to establish, to nourish and enable an international network of this type and a move towards “kind and compassionate design & broadcasting”.

Experts advanced the inclusivity of an Earth centred approach to these disciplines. While traditional media will continue to play a role, technological advancement can also be harnessed for social and planetary good: computer games, television, radio and the Internet (including social media and online news) often the view or theory that the self is all that can be known to exist and have the ability not only to be collaborative, but also to be profoundly global, drawing humanity together and making us aware, as a species, of our role on the planet.

We can draw humanity closer to Nature through the use of the media on local as well as global levels. Examples of such practices are included the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Soundscapes project, which explores the creative possibility of acoustic ecology, and exemplified in the work of Tim Collins and Reiko Goto, environmental artists whose “primary focus is on natural public places and the everyday experience of the environmental commons”.

In summary, only through this visionary exemplary initiatives such as HwN can we think long term enough, collaboratively enough, compassionately enough and wise enough to care for our common home. We must create pockets of best practices capable of inspiring and stimulating others to do the same and the media and design disciplines should be harnessed to do this. We must bring forward new alliances and networks that bring ecology, spirituality and practical application together, and encourage indigenous production and sharing of worldviews that embrace more holistic approaches and then to help make this content available and then distribute it globally.

We must seek out the solutions and best practice examples then consistently present them to society. But the solutions must be borne from a harmonious relationship with nature, not ideas or practices that work against or to dominate it.

A real reinvention of our principles is necessary it starts here. With awareness of the need. With strong willed intention and action. We have here within the HwN program an exemplary group of experts in their fields. Committed, strong and determined leaders capable of instigating change individually and collectively. We encourage members of the GA to use them, their expertise and recommendations. Access their materials through the HwN website. This is the next step in the HwA programme. In so doing I also urge you to keep it applicable and I sincerely hope and pray that you will take action along these lines, not only tomorrow but today for the sake of your communities and those you care most about.

We, the experts on Earth jurisprudence and members of the Harmony with Nature Knowledge Network, take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the General Assembly once more for entrusting us, to address Earth jurisprudence and to present the findings in our summary report to the Assembly.

Given the fundamental interconnections between humanity and Nature, the urgent need to inspire citizens and societies to reconsider how they interact with the natural world it is our view that Earth jurisprudence principles should be included and applied in the implementation of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

In the words of Pope Francis:

“Let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan, inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment”

Pope Francis

And hopefully this will help us move beyond a “throwaway” culture that has brought us to the brink of collapse.

Thank you.