

# Making Peace with Nature

## Transcript

Dr Hugo Slim

Thank you very much. And it's lovely to be speaking at FoxDies. And Liz, thank you very much for inviting me. And also Liz has been very kindly because I did agree to talk about humanitarian action, but I've been talking about humanitarian action for about 40 years now. And I'm at the moment much more excited about nature and about the nature emergency and what I call the Earth emergency, the combination of a climate emergency and a nature biodiversity emergency. So Liz and Hannah would be very kind so I can talk about that. And I'm going to talk about making peace with nature. And I want to really talk today about the important obligation that we all have locally, nationally and internationally to make peace with nature and the other life around us. and to recognise nature more formally in our human politics. And I think this means 2 things. In our own lives, it means respecting and caring for nature in everything we do. Internationally, this means moving from simply being an international community of human states to a new sense of being an earth community of all life. And that is very much the idea of a wonderful American Catholic theologian called Thomas Berry. And I very much follow him in this respect. And so for our beloved United Nations, I think to take nature and the earth seriously and to think about thinking about international relations as an earth community of all life, For the United Nations, in my view, this means opening up the charter, reviewing the charter, which we can do if we get two-thirds of states agreeing to do that, and rewriting the UN Charter so that it is properly centered on protecting the Earth and not just humans, and therefore reorganizing UN agencies so that all their mandates value humanity and nature together in their approach to development and justice. And the term making peace with nature has emerged really from the United Nations and also particularly from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN, in Switzerland in recent years. And I think it's a good phrase for all of us in our everyday life. and in our political life and internationally. So I'm going to look at three aspects of this idea as we are beginning to explore it across the road from here at Blackfriars at the Ms Casas Institute for Social Justice. And I'm going to think about how making peace with nature relates to human consciousness, to international diplomacy, and the ethics of war. So I'm going to think about three things. Nature as a neighbour, nature as diplomat, and nature as war. And I'm going to start with nature as neighbour, which is the sort of umbrella term that we are giving to our work at Las Casas across the road. And of course, if we think of the last 4,000 years, probably one of the great moral achievements embodied in the United

Nations that we've made as a student is to agree the idea of humanity and of a common humanity, and to recognize, albeit in varying degrees, the moral equality of all human beings in this idea of humanity. And therefore, we have, in various ways, gradually and unevenly over time, and in the light mentions, coming to see each other as neighbours on the earth. And of course, for Christians, this is fundamental because it comes from, inevitably a question from a lawyer to Jesus, which is, who is my neighbour? And Jesus, of course, classically answers with the story of the good Samaritan, the good Samaritan, slip of the tongue, humanitarians are never good, and the good Samaritan, and that means any human. is the answer in a sense. But the price I think we've paid for this sort of elevated sense of humanity is to create this idea of us as a sort of super species that sometimes floats above the earth. And of course that is not true. We don't do that as human beings. We don't float free of the earth as a sort of separate single species, this thing called humanity. And this is what we have to rediscover today, that human life and humanity is always a hybrid existence, a coexistence. There is no human life without other life. There is no human life without water, without rocks, without soil, without the gases in which we live. So we are always a hybrid form of life. with other life, where water humans and meat humans and air humans and sandwich humans in this case today. And that's how we are. And Pope Francis in his great encyclical *Laudato Si* has really refined and I think explicitly extended our sense of labour to include all life on Earth. in our common home, as he calls it, on earth. And he called in that encyclical for an ecological conversion of the heart, which sees nature as our neighbour too, and therefore the subject of our compassion and our obligations. And therefore he talks in the encyclical about we don't just turn and cross the road, you look after a mounded humans, we are as much moved and responsible for our neighbour that might be a polluted river or a burning forest or dehydrated animals, etc. So I think this is a really important move in our sense of neighbour in the 21st century. And it's a really urgent one in the biodiversity crisis and the target crisis. So this new sense of nature as our neighbour ends the traditional ideas of domination and exploitation of nature that existed in some Catholic doctrine. And a conversion, of course, converso, is a turn towards, so a turn towards nature and a commitment to see other life around us as our neighbour with whom and in whom we are interdependent for life. So this conversion is of course, and quite obviously, a sort of return of modernism to a pre-modern human consciousness and ethics that's long been held by traditional and indigenous peoples. And in many ways, it's the diplomacy of indigenous peoples over the last 40, 50 years, actually probably 100 years, that has really kept that human consciousness of nature as a neighbor alive in international relations and centred it once more. So the commitment to nature is neighbour is a commitment to find a just and positive peace in the coexistence and mutual flourishing with other life around us. And in our domestic politics, This demands that we recognize nature as a political subject. And increasingly accorded political status, political representation, and rights. Countries like Ecuador have done this in their constitution in New Zealand, as we know

famously, one of the great rivers there. has been given 5 guardians in Parliament to act as the human face of the river in the New Zealand Parliament. And this kind of work, I think, is very important, and we need to do it. It's crucial to that part of making peace of culture, bringing it into our politics. And we need to move this way in the UK too, so that nature in the form of ecosystems species, natural formations have a seat at the table in local and national boards and institutions. And so that our governance becomes not simply democratic, but much more biocratic too. So that's this idea of nature as neighbour, which I think is the first big shift in human consciousness and political approach that we need to take that sees nature as a neighbour and a political subject around this. The second dimension of that is this idea of nature as a diplomat, which we're also working on. So if nature is our neighbour, what does this mean in international relations? It means that nature needs to become more diplomatic too. And this is why we're researching the idea of nature as diplomat. In the earth emergency of the 21st century, multilateralism must also involve multi-species representation and inter-species diplomacy if we are to take nature and the earth seriously in global politics. Of course, for hundreds of years now, most certainly 70, 80 years now, we've had the pioneering role of the great nature organizations like WWF, Greenpeace, Global Witness, and the IUCN, the umbrella group of nature organizations. They've led the way of bringing nature to the table in some way and into politics. And they secure a real stake for nature in international environmental law in many treaties, not least the which we open mention on biodiversity, but many others are following as well. But I think we need to go further in the play scene. I think we need more than experts and lobby groups persuading politicians about nature. I think we need innovative new forms of diplomatic representation for nature, for oceans, for rivers, for soil, for ice, for particular species. The human sphere needs to listen much more to the cryosphere, the biosphere, and the pedosphere. And this means that these spheres meet embassies and ambassadors of some kind. So how can we do this? And we're working at the moment with the Graduate Institute in Geneva exploring different models of this. And we're having a roundtable next month in Geneva where we're bringing nature activists and academics together with diplomats in Geneva to explore the idea of nature as diplomat. What does it mean? How could we do it? And pilot some experiments in Geneva. So much is already underway, as you'd expect, because people have been innovating around this for some time. We have river representation in politics, as I mentioned. We're getting more of that in the UK with recognition at council level of the rights of certain rivers. We have the Dutch organising a very innovative way of working on what they call the Embassy of the North Sea. So they try to represent the interest of the North Sea politically and diplomatically through various methods. We have a wonderful woman in Exeter who's an Aussie, actually, who is the first UN ambassador for Migrative Species. And she flies with migrating geese and all sorts of vultures and things around Africa in her little diary pocket thing and flies with them and brings their interests to the table in Geneva and New York. And of course, we have a very interesting

campaign and we welcomed them at Blackfiles last year and they've been in Geneva with us. called Antarctic Rights, who are some Sahafricans and others who are arguing that Antarctica should be the first nature sovereign at the UN and that it should be recognised with a seat at the UN as Antarctica. And these ideas are extremely interesting and I think we need to keep working on them to make sure that we include nature in diplomacy in a subjective sense and not just talking about it in some way so that somehow we can give nature a diplomatic political voice. And this all becomes a tussle about sovereignties, of course, as you can imagine. But I believe that human sovereignties can coexist and do coexist every day. And they can coexist and negotiate with overlapping nature sovereignties. Archbishop Rowan said, this morning that diseases and things don't see borders, they don't have passports. And that's totally obvious. There's a wonderful French philosopher who works with wolves. And you can see all the maps of what is Wolverine, a wolf's territory, and it completely crosses human borders. But we can inspect that sovereign wolf territory or whatever, at the same time as we can respect ours, we can operate with an idea of multiple and overlapping interspecies sovereignties. And we can talk about that at the UN. And in my garden, which is a very small little garden, I'm always interested that, of course, in my garden, I think it's mine. But of course, if you watch the birds there, it's quite clear that it's part of their territory. And if you watch the sails and the slugs, it's very clear that it's their territory as well. And so with the insects and the plants and everything. But our sovereignty overlaps. We can pool our sovereignties in my back garden up to a point and that will be the rub for real politique. But I think we can do it. Then we need to be creative and imaginative about it. We don't have to apply a Westphalian system anymore to the whole Earth in that way if we believe in that Earth community of all that. So as in my garden, so it must be on Earth, I think, in recognition of Multiple sovereignties overlapping sovereignties and all life representation. And before I die, I would love to see a new form of multinationalism in Geneva, where there are diplomats speaking from forest embassies covered in tumbling greenery over their buildings, where there are ocean embassies with spokespeople speaking for oceans, and where animal embassies like the Bird Lady and others are representing the interests of various animals and insects and all sorts of things around the world and negotiating the best ways to co-habit the Earth to keep it as the beautiful blue planet that humans have now seen from space in the last century for the first time. And there's precedent for this because if you look at the 20th century diplomacy and Geneva in particular, which is the place I look best, Diplomacy expanded during the 20th century, extraordinary to welcome and let in of all sorts of new political subjects into diplomatic institutions, diplomatic representations, international law of all kinds. So first of all, we have the inclusion of independent states who were previously colonised. These new sovereignties were recognised. But then we have women being recognised in institutions and international law and diplomacy. children, refugees and civilians in war. So we have been innovative about new political subjects of international

diplomacy and international law many times before. And now we need to include nature as well. Finally, I'm going to talk about nature, war and peace. And this is the third aspect of nature we're looking at Las Casas at the moment. And this question of nature, war and peace, I think takes 4 forms. Nature as civilian, nature as victim, the weaponization of nature, and nature in peacemaking. And I'll whiz through them quickly. So nature is civilian. The great news is that nature already has legal personality in the Geneva Conventions because the environment is recognized as fundamentally civilian. And immune from deliberate attack, like human civilians. So we see the precedent from the Geneva Conventions of legal personality for the environment, for nature in that way. But of course, as we know, nature is a huge victim of war, prompting a much greater loss of life in nature than humanity in every war there is. Whenever you see an explosion, the death of other life is quite phenomenal across multi-species and everything. So nature is a final victim of war, not just from the emissions of all the war machines which go on building up global warming and emitting fossil fuels, et cetera, but the shared destruction and pollution of war in every war. We've seen it in the last few weeks, graphically again, that nature is in a sense the supreme casualty. And the next thing is the weaponization of nature. And since kind of memorial, nature has been used in defence and attack as a weapon, in a sense. It's the most ancient human practice. So ever since the first person cut a branch off a tree and decided to use it as a club or put it as a flint on a thin, we can use it as an arrow or a spear, we have in a sense weaponized nature. And for me, ourselves, our nature as humans, we weaponize ourselves as nature through our minds and through our bodies to become weapons bearers as nature, if you like. And of course, the ultimate form of that is to split the action, one of the fundamental building blocks of the natural physical world and creating the problem. There is also not just the creation of weapons from nature, but there is also deliberate strategic weaponization of landscape in war. And we've seen this all through history in the terrible policy of scorched earth, where you burn an area of crops or forests so your enemy is deprived of it and use that as a weapon of war to starve and displace your enemy. But we see it also in, you know, the tactics to lure people into dangerous nature like swamps or deserts or water where you lure them in and then once they're there, they're stuck. and suffer. And of course, the great Sumasu, the great original, most ancient written military tactician we have, was a great advocate of let the landscape beat your enemy, use nature to defeat your enemy and win in a war without a fight, that sort of logic. And we see that today. We're going to see it a lot more, kind of think. We see it in the states of Hormuz today, where you have a pilot, in a sense, weaponizes a natural formation as a choke point of global trade. That is, in a sense, using a natural formation as a weapon. We're going to, I worry, think, see it in hybrid warfare. If we had heat waves here, which suits the old arsonists to start a forest fire, we could see hybrid warfare and nature being used as a weapon in that way. And we can see Dan's birds to flood cold territories to use that water as a weapon as well. And these are all ancient traditions of weaponising roadshow and they pose a big challenge

to us. And they are covered to a degree in the Geneva Conventions. But again, as others have said this morning, we need to, as the French should say, precisely these areas like drones and air and environment and water and probably geoeconomic warfare too more specifically. Finally, nature is peacemaker. The good news is there are some signs from important peace mediators like the Centre of Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva and Conciliation Resources in London that people can and must come together through nature to make peace. And there are community initiatives of everyday peace, or as was said today, good enough peace all over parts of the Sahel and others. around worlds and pasture and land and sea in which nature is at once the incentive for making peace because we need access to this nature, but also the means of making peace because you make deals through agreements of share in nature that are imperative for you. And this environmental mediation, this ecological decemaking is really coming up the agenda fast now, which is important. So I'm going to stop there and just conclude by, in a sense, what I've been trying to say are some of the ingredients I see in our need to make peace with nature in the 21st century. First was recognition, recognising nature as our neighbour, our ecological conversion to a sense of earth community beyond international community. Secondly, conversing with nature as a diplomat in some way in new forms of multilateralism where nature has diplomatic presence and voice in some way at the table. And then thirdly, focusing on the role of nature in war-making, regulation and in peacemaking practice. So thank you for listening to me about nature, not humanitarian.