



## **Conversation with Ledama Masidza**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you start by introducing yourself? Tell me a little bit about your background and your love for the ocean.**

**Ledama Masidza:** Wonderful. I'm Ledama Masidza. I'm from Kenya. I grew up in Kenya, in Nairobi, but often visited my grandparents' place, which is far out, where there's a lot of wildlife, wonderful Savanna trees. I grew up with an absolute love for nature. That led me to studying geography, biology, and eventually environmental science at the University of Cape Town, along with geographical science and industrial sociology. So it's a mix of people and planet, and examining what it's going to look like when these two move together in the future, in a really changing world. That created a base where I just cannot stay away from nature.

Traditionally, a lot of Kenyan youth do not get the chance to explore much of the ocean, learn much about the ocean, or even know the beauty that lies beneath. But I had an amazing chance out of university to work with one of the longest standing locally managed marine areas in East Africa: the Kuruwitu Marine Sanctuary, established in 2003, in the face of a serious decline in fishery. Within this stunning space along the Kenyan coastline, there was a saying, "No fish, no village." So when there was this massive decline in fishery by almost 5,000 metric tons, it really affected so many other things in people's livelihoods, health and business. That balance really became so evident: what happens in the ocean, in the water, affects what happens in the land, and in lives and livelihoods.

The community came together in this space where they used to go fishing, and see so much life, and they used to hear stories from their grandparents of, "We saw this-and-this big fish and we caught this much." Now being able to see nothing, they decided to set up this traditional marine protected area, which has a traditional form of governance, and all agreed not to fish.

For something which is so key to the livelihoods of a coastal community, to all agree not to fish in one specific area, to see it bounce back—it's powerful. It shows true community. Shortly after that, the area had this massive bounce back, 400% fish biomass increase, 30% recovery in coral reefs, 17% recovery in seagrass, and it became a spectacle.

For me to come in after this success and join it, I can now look forward and ask, how can we share this to other neighboring communities? How can we scale this model, especially in a time where a lot is happening globally? Globalization is widespread, development is on many layers, and a lot of the time, coastal or local or indigenous communities can be overlooked and not have their say in this. Here's a solution which has shown massive impact, but it's being left behind.

After being brought into this story, it was so important for me to advocate for its place in the solutions that we have today in our world. We should not forget these traditional solutions which have shown such impact, and which bring people together and truly keep nature in balance with the lives that we live.

From there, I was able to advocate and help in scaling this 30-hectare community-protected area into a 12,000-hectare co-management area. It was first of its kind: we had the government sign off on it, so it's not something which we all promise, but now here it is, embedded in law. And it's beautiful, because it's a way that these traditions and solutions can be carried on in the future, being recognized in state law and shared with other communities.

It led me to speak at different stages in our country, and then nationally and internationally, at the World Conservation Congress — just spreading the importance of local solutions in the marine space driven by coastal communities.

It really proved to be a powerful avenue speaking about it, storytelling. And it led me to film as a form of advocating for this solution. From there, working in film and still working with communities, I got the chance to do a film with BBC on the solution, and was then taken up by the CNN Academy to do the same. It's become a really big part of what I do, being a filmmaker driving community conservation solutions.

And now I am very much looking to empower youth, at schools in areas which would not have access to conservation education, to know what's happening beneath the sea, and learn how to swim. That's where the education component came, and it's now driven by these three pillars: the social, the environmental, the educational, in different projects around Kenya, and also supporting ones in Fiji,

Nigeria, Canada, Brazil. I'm privileged to do what I do and create avenues for youth like me to do the same.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Amazing. Let's talk about the co-management of marine resources. What would you say was the key benefit of the involvement of the community and how did that actually work? What do you think were the pillars of success, or a strategy that actually was successful?**

**Ledama Masidza:** On land, the laws for ownership were established, but they weren't in the ocean. But the ocean is just as important of a resource for individuals, for communities, for families as land is. It's where we've got our fish for a long time. It's where we go and have seen so much beautiful biodiversity linked to our culture and our history. But to not have an avenue for decision making in the future of this space, it's risky. So it means that at any point someone can come and go trolling and take all your fish, or one day you can just lose it. So there's always that question over the future of something which is so important to you.

To be able to have the power to influence or to have the say in the future of a key resource which has been there for a long time and is important to your livelihood, it's powerful. That is the foundation of why this sort of approach was very important. Once you have that ownership, it's not only the county fisheries or state fisheries saying, "We're going to invest in the blue economy and we're going to put many big commercial boats and you have no say." But now being able to say, "Wait a minute, this is our space and you can't do that because it affects us like this." It puts your foot in the door, but also it means you can continue to invest in it. It also means that structures can be put (in place) for sustainable use and resource sharing. If you want to walk far, walk together, and collaborative management provides the structure to do that, where no one's left behind.

Being able to be involved in the decisions, it makes a big difference. Rather than something being dictated for you. It touches on dignity, it touches on your power, it touches on your rights as someone who's engaged with that space for a long time. With that, it also means accountability. It means you can be able to hold each other accountable. It means that you know we all have something to bring to the management of this, because we all have benefits from it as well. It provides a really great springboard for all that to happen.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I like what you said about accountability because there isn't someone to blame: 'Well, they gave us this law and this is the reason why we have no fish.' With a collective thing, it's collective accountability. Can you share a teachable lesson or insight that you can pass**

**on to someone who might be wanting another Kuruwitu within their own community, within their own geography?**

**Ledama Masidza:** So much. It was my first job. Having different stakeholders all with different interests in the resource, it makes it complex.

The most important thing even to just get started is having everybody get on the same page. It's pulling it from the 'me' to the 'we.' But that's not always easy, especially if some people benefit more than other people. It's really being able to get down to the roots of what binds us. So what is the thread of common benefits between all the stakeholders here, but also what is the domino effect if one of us does something which goes against or compromises the ecosystem, and it just tips on and affects all of us? Once we can foster that understanding of how we all benefit, this is how we all stand to lose out, and this is now the part that each and every one of us plays in seeing that we keep this balance—that's when we could move forward.

It was a process and a half. A process and a half, over the course of around one and a half years. And the founder, Des, has been in these community engagements for even longer...going to up to 38 community engagement meetings, in a year. Many people by the beach are under different meeting rooms: you've got the state, you've got the fishermen, you've got the women's group, you've got the youth. It's a lot of perspectives to consider and to be able to get them on one page, it's something which it almost feels impossible sometimes. But that time building trust and establishing tangible outcomes together, it builds a snowball, and the more you move and get steps together, it gels. It gels, but always coming back to: what are we bonded by? It's the ocean. If this goes tomorrow, I'm not only going to suffer, you're going to suffer. There's no other way to look at it.

Being able to foster that, but also to really understand how to engage different perspectives. It's wonderful that we all think differently, but to get people to think together, you have to understand how and why they're thinking differently, and channel it to the common goal.

That was a massive lesson and that just takes listening, understanding, contextual background, and time. If you're really committed to bringing people together, you actually have to go and grab the hand and say, "Come, let's go." Really understand where they're coming from and you can't rush that.

The incentive needs to be something more than just monetary. It needs to be something which genuinely touches and affects their lives. That was one of the biggest lessons I learned: we need to be able to run a thread through where everyone can see how they all benefit from being together, but also how they all lose out.

The other thing which really worked for us is it's a six-step process whereby initially, to start, you need to understand the rights, and you need to enact your rights. And that's by coming together as your different legal entities. You've got the beach management unit, which is the body of fishermen registered under state fisheries. You've got your different community groups who are all registered under the social act. But it's realizing that we're not just a registered group for the sake of having a certificate, but there are certain rights that we can call up on, encoded to us by the state. Once we're there, we're a legal entity. It means that we are able to get into agreements; we are able to be able to fight legally as well. A lot of people oversee that aspect, but it's very strong.

Then after that, it's knowing your jurisdiction. It's knowing exactly the space in which we want to enact the change, the space in which we want to sustainably manage. Knowing that jurisdiction is very important. This is our space and we know the boundaries of it, because if it's unknown, a lot of conflicts come up. It can be very tricky.

The third one is knowing, what is the current status of our marine area? Are the coral suffering? Are the fish on a decline? Do we have lots of, let's say, turtles? It lets you know the things that are on the plus (side) and the things that are on a negative, so in a couple of years time you will be able to compare and see that we're moving in the right direction. It also lets you know, this is one of the things that's a benefit to us. Let's take advantage of it. We have many awesome turtles. We can set up an initiative for people to come and see turtles. It can help us gain traction. Having that, knowing the status of your marine area, it helps you not only establish the baseline, but start to create vision.

The fourth thing is the plan. How do I work with you? How do you work with me? What do we need to do? And it's something which very much needs to be established together. Getting down into the nitty gritty from the vision into what needs to be done to enact the vision.

The fifth thing is, what are the common values that we all abide by? We're not going to step on the coral in this area. We're not going to fish in this area because we've seen this before. We're not going to do this because we've seen this before. We're going to ensure that we keep a clean beach. Why? Because we take pride in it. Those common values really get everybody together, and it's a code which binds, and it really brings up a sense of ubuntu.

The sixth step was engaging the states, getting the states to recognize the power in this collaborative group that's come together and that it cannot be fully done unless they're involved. A lot of time people may see the state as a barrier in some scenarios, especially to resource management if they've been overlooked for many times. But to truly embrace the collaborative approach, we've got to also

include the state as well, because they ensure that we can enforce what we've planned as well. So it comes to that big aspect of protection which contributes to sustainability in the long run.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Right, because they're a part of the governance, right?**

**Ledama Masidza:** Yes.

**Ashley Hopkinson: So it's a challenge, especially if you felt like you've been harmed or you have been harmed, but that that's a part of the governance structure in the work.**

**Ledama Masidza:** Yes. And so those are both the theoretical and the heart-driven things that I learned in it.

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's so valuable. I wonder if you can share more about some of the challenges of doing work in marine conservation and sustainability. How are you actively working to overcome some of those challenges, especially when it comes to doing work collectively?**

**Ledama Masidza:** Yeah, it's very tricky because, first of all, the ocean is big. It goes all the way around the world. Fish don't stay still. Turtles don't stay still. Whales don't stay still. It flows, which also means that trash on one end can flow to another end.

The ocean is so interconnected, which is both the beauty and the danger of it, because one thing tipped off in a different space, which you may not even be aware of because it's far away, can end up affecting you. Temperature increase in one place affects the sea levels in our place, and if it goes up, it causes floods.

It's not only a collaboration within our locality, but it's all over the globe. All over the globe. And sometimes because of that extensive nature of that interconnectedness, it makes it very difficult. We can do something here because I can tell my neighbor, "Hey, doing that is not right because you can see how it's affecting us." But someone in a completely different continent on a completely different beach, how do you walk together with them on that? And that's where I saw storytelling and advocacy as a very important tool because a story allows people to engage at a deeper level. Being able to tell someone, say, from India, how things are changing the tuna fishery, and we used to get this, but now ...we're getting less and less, and the size of the fish is getting smaller. And they will be able to read that, and it's like, "Oh wait, we are doing more and more fishing of tuna. Oh, there's a link."

When the link becomes apparent—because a lot of these links are overlooked or they're not seen—but when you bring it to the forefront, that's when we can be able to think through that. "Wait, this is affecting someone like that." When I throw trash off the ocean here, it ends up somewhere in Zanzibar and it's flooding the sea farming area. Once it left my beach or my ocean, it left my mind. But if someone comes and says, "Hey, you know this has been happening," it gets me to think, and I can't easily ignore that.

This speaking out, this telling your story, this being able to share how things are going, not just within your community but also wider...It helps really bring these connections to the forefront and when they emerge at the forefront, we can now have dialogue. We can now set a platform for this global approach to tackling this issue. It does take a global approach. Because at the end of the day, we can set up this beautiful co-management area, but still if something happens at a different place in the sea, it can end up affecting us here, and what would it have been for? It's not only creating community in our local regions, but how can we create community at the global scale around something that connects us all?

**Ashley Hopkinson: I truly appreciate the perspective in that question: what happens when you can make the links apparent? You just spoke to the whole reason I'm a journalist: how can you take what is an untold story and make it a told story and then allow people the opportunity to really expand their horizons? For you, what do you think it's going to take to get people to really see the inter-connections and value the work?**

**Ledama Masidza:** I am an optimist, so I'll start with my optimist answer and then I'll give you the reality of what we're about to face.

My optimistic answer is, ideally we can only manage what we know. If you are not aware of the information, you cannot act accordingly or you cannot make an informed decision. So the more we create awareness and strengthen education around marine ecosystems, the more people will be aware and say, "Hey, now that I'm aware that this has this impact, now that I'm aware the increasing level of microplastics in the ocean, now that I'm aware of the increasing sea temperature and what it's doing and that these are what influence it, I know that it's bad. I know that this action is bad, this action is good." **Fostering an informed base, an informed population, is so key, because then the decision becomes a little bit more clear in terms of the knock on effects.** So very much my optimistic answer is, let us increase the awareness and strengthen the education, not only on the coastal populations and coastal areas, but even inland.

Some of the things we do inland end up affecting the ocean. From the kids, the youth, the elderly, and the private sector, we've got to increase the information on what these influences are on the ocean. And even just knowing about the ocean.

The day I found out ... I remember the first day that I went diving and I saw a whale shark, and I'm like, "Wow!" I kind of had an idea they were in our ocean, but now that I've seen it and now that I'm aware, I'm like, "Wow, we get whale sharks coming here." And then I'm able to go and see what time of the year are they coming, or, are they passing the Kenyan ocean? Where are they before they travel from the southern part of Africa? These are the challenges. Being able to create spaces and access to that information is key.

But realistically, what may push us to do something and get more involved are some of the negative impacts that are coming with the degradation of our ocean ecosystems. By 2050, we might not even have healthy coral reef ecosystems, or any at all. What does that mean? It means no fish. As soon as we're getting less and less fish, it leads us to thinking, "Why is that happening?" Because it's affecting our state. As soon as we're seeing more floods happening, it pushes us to be like, "This is bad. We're in a negative space. Why is this happening? We've got to know."

There's that other negative component where from all these impacts, we're pushed to do something, but that will be too late. That'll be too late. I'm a big believer in, let's improve and create more accessibility to information and education on our ocean. And we can foster generations who can do something. We can foster more informed decisions not only by individuals, but by states, by companies. It can give us the basis on which to set up a more positive path.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you hope that you can do around youth engagement? You talked a little bit about moving this work through the generations. Is it education in schools? What does that look like from your perspective?**

**Ledama Masidza:** Very much education in schools, but also mentorship and exposure. It's one of the projects that we do that I love. I always make an excuse to go to these different schools and join these activities, because it's powerful. Because that's where this belief truly is drilled into some of your beliefs, some of what you see is possible for you to do.

Education in schools is very important. And the truth is not every school has access to such education, be it the resources may not be there, or it might be understaffed. There's so many components that are sometimes taken for granted, and us realizing that it's not a given in every school. We need to be very driven, seeing that and not giving up on that effort, but also [not giving up on the children].



I remember as a kid watching *Our Blue Planet*. That changed me. It changed me a lot. I'm like, "Wait, this is out there? This is out there." So it's now in my mind, and I'm curious. But having that around, let's say I am a Kenyan from inland, and for the first time I'm seeing a film from the Kenyan Ocean, and it's like, "Wow, in the Kenyan beach, we've got this, we've got this, we've got this." That can do a lot to open people's minds.

Opening these barriers to expose different environments, opportunities, people. Being able to interact with leaders who have walked a journey from where you are, but gone and pushed the barriers. Always just being able to break those barriers of, "My world is limited here, but now that I've talked to this person, I know this person, I know that that's possible. I know that this is happening now that I've been exposed to this film or this book." I'm flipping through this book and I'm seeing very interesting fish. It's like, "Oh wait, this is not fish. This is a jellyfish." Even just that, it changes a lot. But then also creating the spaces for exploration to happen.

I'm very thankful to my parents for being able to allow me to just go explore. Which also means that these spaces need to be there, need to be protected. Otherwise what are the next generation going to explore, going to get to know? How are they going to create this genuine link between them in a marine ecosystem if it's not there? When it comes to that education aspect, that's my kind of view.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow and expand when it comes to marine conservation?**

**Ledama Masidza:** I would say education. Education centers are the foundation because if you educate a generation on the status and the need and the importance of the marine ecosystems, by the time they're leaders, they'll be making decisions to ensure that (work) continues, and they will (have) ideas which are in touch with the situation. They will have the drive in their heart to know that...this balance matters. From that (generation's) education base, the innovation, as well, will also be tailored in a way which is informed by these components, these dynamics which are very delicately balanced.

Because I've seen what a lack of understanding of a marine ecosystem can do in terms of overlooking solutions or things that should be factored into solutions, I say that base is so important.

From there, I also believe that, on the private side of things, looking at the businesses and the industries around the ocean, if I had all the resources, I would really push to see them be more in touch with this delicate dynamic. It's a give and take. It's a delicate system. If you extract it past a certain limit, it tips. And when it tips, it affects all of us, not just in one place, but in many different areas. So really driving and pushing for considerations in, be it blue economy businesses, blue food companies,

industry in the ocean, mining...How (these) business models work or operate needs to be more in touch with the delicate balance of the ocean. With more resources, I would put a lot into coming up with these innovations.

How can this be done differently? How can we say, "In a world where this happens in balance, what are the compromises that need to be done there, but what are the benefits that we get in it? How could we look at it in a different way?" We need to very much have these considerations in mind. [The ocean is] degrading very fast, scarily fast, but at times it's business as usual.

Yes, it trickles into law, but at the end of the day, you don't have police at every corner. A lot of the responsibility is on you as an entity, as a company, as an industry, to do the right things and to push yourself to innovate in the right way. So it very much comes to the innovations around business in that space and holding each other accountable. But in an ideal world, hopefully a couple of years.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think people are not talking about? What do you think is missing from the conversation? You're in a lot of spaces, you're listening to a lot of people talk about this area that you work in. What do you not hear coming up enough that you're like, "We should be talking about this," or, "We should be talking more about this"?**

**Ledama Masidza:** Very much around the policies which govern international maritime law. There's a lot of work put into how they're tailored, but it's often very top-down, and it needs to be in touch with the reality of how things are. But there's a lot going on out there that we do not know.

I would love to see more effort that goes into these policies and accords, and countries keeping each other accountable to abiding by them. Because we can set up the most beautiful policy, but then once again, if we go out there and everyone's doing their thing and not holding each other accountable, it'll just end up in the same direction. So we need to have these accountability measures, that when we get together and agree something, we do stick by them.

There is so much happening out there. There's some apps which show you how many boats are currently in the ocean at the moment. You look at it and it is shocking. There's so many industrial shipping boats. There's so much out there. But because we can't see them, it doesn't bother us too much. I think that needs to be addressed.

And then something which is coming up, this may be a little bit controversial, but this is something that I believe needs so much more thought, because once these gates open, it's just going to rush through, and that's deep-sea mining.

We've seen what's happened when we've compromised or gone over the balance of extraction in many other ocean and marine resources. We've seen the impacts. Very much we need to consider what happens with ocean mining as well, extracting at a certain level. Because once it's a business, once the doors are wide open, many people are going to rush with it. So it's just being able to ask, have we truly thought about the implications around it? Have we truly spent enough time in the laws which will govern, and structures which will guide people in terms of how they interact with it? Just before stepping into it, we need a little bit more time, a little bit more thought.

A lot of my question marks are about so much happening out there. We're on land. Because we can't see it, it means that it can create a little bit of a free-for-all, and we need to get in-the-know. And when we get in-the-know, we need to create policies which we can all abide by, to at least see it be safer, see it be more sustainable. Because what happens in there trickles to the coasts, trickles to the inland, trickles through me, trickles to you. It's this ripple effect. It's real. It's real. And it's a very delicate ecosystem, and we need to get in touch.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you measure progress? Is it when you see something happening with the community? For you, what are the markers that we're moving in the direction that is better than where we were a year ago or a few months ago?**

**Ledama Masidza:** First thing is being able to go swimming in the Kuruwitu Marine Sanctuary and see almost a completely different world from when I first visited it. The colors, the amount of fish, the size of the fish. Coral restoration is a long process. It takes time. Coral can grow from 0.3 centimeters to 1 centimeter a year. And that's your boulder coral. It's a long time.

To be able to see the life, it's so refreshing and it blows me away every time, every time. There's this one turtle, a hawksbill turtle, an endangered species, which towards the end of 2022, shows up in the marine sanctuary. One hadn't been seen for a long time, and now here it is in the sanctuary, just swimming and doing its thing. And every day we see it again, see it again swimming.

For me, it's like this is a safe place. The work is truly paying off. Even though the project is very much on the long-term, on the short-term, to be able to go through a program with the school. And from the start, when you start the sessions, there's questions, there's a little bit of, "Hmm," but at the end, kids bringing their parents to beach cleanups, kids saying, "Oh, what's this?" Being able to know this is this kind of coral, this is a triggerfish. They're excited, and you can already see in their mind, this barrier of what was unknown before, it's opened, and that comes with all the opportunities.

For me, that is very inspiring because I know they're going to carry on, with the mind very much aware of some of these things and engaged. They're going to carry on and they're going to influence someone else, and they're going to do something, because you can see it in their hearts. That's another way that is not exactly a hard indicator on monitoring metric, but for me, that's something which can go even beyond. Because you get two or three, which in the future can end up doing big things, just from creating these spaces.

The third is the science, being able to measure. Seeing that this ecosystem is recovering. Looking at the coverage of the seagrass wheat, coral reefs. Looking at the biomass of fish, how it's increasing, how it's decreasing. Why is it? The resilience of certain ecosystems. Looking at the increase in mangroves.

There's the science of it, but I'm very much of the belief that that can go hand in hand with the social or long-term metrics, because people drive change. People drive change, and it takes action. It takes action to see things go.

I can do something myself, and I can measure the indicators and the metrics for a long time. But if I can inspire 10 other people to do things and be inspired and inspire other people, it can be exponential. It can be exponential. For me, I never want to lose sight of that, that people drive change, so we need to be able to inspire people and nurture spaces that create that.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Ledama.**

*Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.*

*\* This conversation has been edited and condensed.*