



Conversation with Luis Camargo

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Hi Luis, tell me a little bit about your background and what brought you to this work.

Luis Camargo: Hi Ashley. I'm really happy to be here. My name is Luis Camargo. I'm from Bogota, Colombia. I lead an organization called OpEPA, which is the Organization for Environmental Education and Protection.

I was brought into this work, and when I say this work, (it is) the work of reconnecting people to the earth in order to accelerate the transition towards sustainable and regenerative cultures. I realized 30 years ago that the environmental issues we were facing, and we are now facing still, because unfortunately, things have not changed that much — actually they have gotten worse — (were) not necessarily related to all the solutions that were being proposed. So I was seeing many solutions that were technocentric and, yeah, they made sense and they would fix some issues, but it was like putting band-aids on a person full of cuts. So I really went into the forest and thought deeply (about) what was happening, and my answer was quick to come.

I really felt that the issues we're facing are related to our relations and how we relate with the earth. When we're talking about environmental issues and a lot of planetary health issues, they're associated with our (relationship) with our planet, with nature, and the way we see ourselves as separate (from) nature.

So this is when I realized that one of my missions was really to work to try to re-establish and heal the relationship between individuals and nature, and help bring back the idea that we are nature. Actually, we're not anything else. We're mammals, we're animals, we are an intricate part of nature, and as such, we're part of an interconnected, interdependent system that's fully entangled.

But having forgotten that has made us act (unfavorably) and allowed us to create all these things without considering the relations, the energy flows, and the interactions in living systems. And I think that is one of the key root causes of our environmental predicaments.

So this is what brought me into what I'm doing. I started working with indigenous communities, with national parks, protected areas, but realized that we really needed to focus on children, on education, and on creating our capacity to learn how to relate and come into right relation, ultimately.

It's something that resonated from looking at eastern communities and philosophies, and indigenous and ancestral philosophies. It all resonates, because when you really speak with people that are deeply connected, you're speaking at a different level. There is no question about respect, there is no question about love, there is no question about abundance because those are essential principles...when we're thinking as nature, not separate from nature.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you feel is distinctive about your organization that sets you apart from the big conglomerate of organizations that are now bubbling up around environmental work?

Luis Camargo: (We are) trying to understand this issue of reconnection. How do we create spaces and opportunities for people to reconnect? And in that process, we knew that direct contact with nature was one of them, and learning about our situation and life was another.

We started working with outdoor and wilderness education, experiential education, environmental education — all of these approaches that were alive 30-35 years ago. But we quickly realized that it was not either/or, it was all. So we started creating an idea that is focused on how nature-based education becomes a unifying concept that actually enables all other methodologies and approaches to learning, especially active approaches. But what it really brings is relationships to the center. So our approach is focused on how we can reestablish and heal our relationship to ourselves, to others, and to nature.

The other thing is understanding that nature ultimately is not only a learning environment, which is what we would think of, but nature is also a teacher, and nature is knowledge and inspiration. If we look at learning, the people with (the) most knowledge (are) the ones that have had more time to gather that knowledge and wisdom. And if we look at the earth, there's over 13.8 billion years of knowledge gathering. So we really need to listen better to nature. Bringing nature into the center of education and taking learning out into nature are two qualities that are fundamental to this relational approach.

Understanding this really enabled something that now has grown to what we're aiming to launch: a global initiative on nature-based education, inviting governments, organizations and schools all around the world. (I'm leading) in my role as vice chair of the initiative in the IUCN, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

We found many people resonating with these ideas and understanding (that) we need to get together and learn to tell a story of learning, a story of learning with nature, in nature, as nature, in a fully interconnected sense.

The other component has to do with something we started really using as one of our north stars maybe 12 years ago, which is regeneration. Twelve years ago, regeneration was not something that was spoken (about), not even in environmental circles. When I spoke about regeneration in environmental circles, usually I would get a lot of mockery.

We believe regeneration is not actually a place to go. It's a direction. We walk towards becoming more regenerative. Walking in that direction is walking in the direction of creating the conditions for life to thrive all around the planet, for all life to thrive together, which is quite revolutionary, curiously enough. And in that process, we realized a lot of people are really understanding regeneration as the practices and processes that need to change. So let's think about agriculture. We have green revolution agriculture and industrial agriculture; regenerative agriculture is agriculture that works in the flow with living systems thinking. It's a practice, it's a process.

But it made us really reflect on the process in nature-based education with children. What was truly significant was bringing wellbeing (and) changing the ways of thinking, the ways of feeling and the ways of being. And this is the level that I call the 'deep regenerative level.' Because if we don't work with how we relate, how we create our ways of relation, our ways of being, then we will not change anything. We need to reincorporate ourselves as nature into a living system as if we were part of a really vital living system.

We cannot judge people for where they are because, right now, we all live in contradiction. We have things that are definitely not regenerative, they're not in sync with the world, and they're in contradiction. They're part of the problem. I would say, it is impossible to escape that. So we need to accept we are in a contradiction that makes us part of the problem. Nonetheless, it's not where we are, it's where we're heading to.

So if we are actually becoming real activists and becoming people that are evolving and learning, we should align ourselves to becoming more regenerative in our ways of being, in our ways of thinking, in

our ways of relating, because in that way, we come into synchrony with living systems. And that is the true solution.

Ultimately, as a living organism, let's say, as a living system, the whole planet, everything that lives inside can become harmonious if we all act according to the flows and the needs of the system, not the needs of our egos.

So it's a different perspective. So that became really important, and understanding that we need to work both in practices and processes, so in the shallow end of regeneration, but also in the deep end. And this is where education became even more important for us, because realizing that we are born and we start learning and we learn, learn, learn.

Most children learn until their teens, and in their teens they start interacting and becoming active parts of molding their reality and their futures. But if they have not had the opportunity to deeply connect with nature, to feel themselves as nature, to understand natural environments as not only their home, as their deep connections to wellbeing, then how do we expect them to act differently when they're grown up?

So understanding these connections really has made us focus on 'How do we help shift the narratives, shift the mindsets associated (with) how we learn, the function of learning in terms of learning how to relate, learning how to be, in ways that aligns us and synchronizes with life itself?'

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you help people experience a mindset shift towards reconnecting with nature and nature-based education, especially if they didn't grow up with that philosophy? How do you know if they're experiencing that shift?

Luis Camargo: We've worked with over 130,000 students in our programs directly in wilderness settings. We've worked with all ages. Maybe the sweet spot is between eight and fourteen. I think that's the sweet spot because that's an age where thinking is already complex enough, but the sense of curiosity and exploration, and the sense of awe is still open. Awe is a really important part of all this because it allows (you) to create transcendent experiences where you actually feel you are nature, so I think that's something important.

But coming back to the indicators, I think with students, we see it not only in the short term as they learn. Having worked in this space for over 26 years — (there are many students who we've worked with when they were 10 years old that (are now) professionals, and we meet (them on the street), and they tell us how they were influenced by those experiences — A really good indicator is when you start

hearing individuals speak with more love, with more connection, respecting nature. (When the conversation starts expanding, you know something is shifting.

So, it's the stories you tell and the way you act, so those two things. Those are the big indicators. And if we look at our history, I remember myself talking about this 25 years ago, and it was very difficult for people to resonate, to understand, unless they were in a very small niche of the environmental community, not even the broad environmental community. It was maybe the earth-first-ers, the more Indigenous movements that resonated with this idea, because we were speaking about something more subtle.

So that brings a lot of hope to me. I think we are in a moment, maybe a moment of pain, especially after COVID and seeing everything that's going on, the extreme climate and events and the social unrest that we're seeing around the world, maybe that has softened a little bit our capacity to go deep.

But that generates a window that opens more resonant conversations, and maybe it opens the door to questions people are (asking) themselves, in terms of what is their purpose, what is being well, what brings them happiness, what is worth investing time in? Is it only accumulating money, or is it actually spending time with friends, with family, seeing sunsets, being able to drink a cup of coffee, feeling the wind hitting your face?

These things are starting to emerge. We see a whole counter-movement of young individuals and older individuals. Ultimately, it's in the moments where people are most reflective that bring different realities into being.

Ashley Hopkinson: What insights do you have from doing the work for this long that you think someone else can learn something from?

Luis Camargo: One is the power of silence. I think our current society is cluttered with noise of all kinds: devices, TV, media, things to do, work, school. It's incredible. We do not have space for silence. We need to recover space for silence. I would invite anyone to really search for spaces for silence.

The best space for silence is going out into nature, because nature is not necessarily silent, but it allows you to be silent with yourself and with life, to connect and to feel that flow. So, silence, and especially silence in education, (is essential).

I remember when we started working, schools would not allow us to leave spaces of silence within our programs because they would think that was unpurposeful. What we have learned is that every

program needs a lot of silence. People need time to reflect, to feel, to be able to meditate on the connection between their thoughts, what they're seeing and sensing and what they're feeling.

Another thing is creating spaces that are safe to talk about what emerges in silence. All experiences bring learnings, and learnings are only significant if we can bring them to the surface, acknowledge them and understand them.

It ends up all being connected because usually when you allow silence, you allow yourself to find and to experience awe as much as you can.

We really need to understand that as humans, we are built to be in awe of our world. And as we experience this, we really enhance our capacity to relate and to learn from the world.

The last thing would be our recognition (of) the role food plays in our lives, understanding that our most intimate relation with nature and with life is through food, every day. Every day you eat, but eating more natural foods is definitely a connection to life.

Just think about putting a drop of honey into your mouth. Honey is incredible, it's sweet, it's rich, it brings all these feelings, it enlightens. It really brings a lot to us when we consume it. But think about what's in that drop of honey.

It's the coalition, the radical collaboration of microorganisms in the soil with microorganisms, with nutrients, with the sun, with the power of the plant that grows the power of the sun to transform energy and create the nectar, incredible bees that are flying over seven kilometers to pick up drops of nectar and bring them home, using their wings to evaporate them and concentrate the flavors and save them. And you have beekeepers that, if we're talking about healthy beekeeping, it's an incredible labor of relationship where they're bringing honey ultimately to your table so you can enjoy it in your mouth and bring it to your body.

So we cannot assume that any type of food that we eat is independent. It is definitely dependent (on) a radical collaboration (and the) effort of millions of organisms and elements working together to bring the nutrients, to bring the life, to bring the flavor, to bring the smell. Food becomes a really important element that allows us to understand how much we are nature.

When we eat, the food goes to our stomachs, but our (stomachs are) full of millions of bacteria and microbes that are acting to help us digest, that actually (regulate) our emotional states. We are not individuals as we believe. We are actually a collection of radical collaborations. If we really understand our life through food and start acknowledging that, we will probably change the way we eat, and if we

change the way we eat, we change many of the issues that are affecting our planet, because a lot of the impacts are associated (with) food and the food system itself.

Also, we realize that when we thank our food, we are thanking millions of organisms and other beings that are being in service in creating that for us. Understanding that we are a part of this is fundamental, and food for me is that discovery, and it helps me every time I eat to remember that and really enjoy, with blissful joy, the food I'm eating, and with gratefulness because it is something that's coming from radical collaboration. That brings us to what we should do as human beings: start collaborating radically as all life does.

Ashley Hopkinson: Why did you find yourself trying to make sure you intentionally brought youth into the picture? Was that always a part of the purpose or a decision along the way based on what you were observing?

Luis Camargo: It was really a decision, a strategic or tactical decision. I do think we are all lifelong learners, so we can definitely reconnect independent of (age). We can engage ourselves to learn differently and to reconfigure our relations. Nonetheless, what brought me to the decision of children was food, again. I remember speaking with a child in Bogota and asking them about milk and the food they ate, and really, the only connection they had (was) supermarkets. They had no awareness of anything else, and I said, 'wow, if we really, truly believe as an individual that our milk or our wheat comes from the supermarket, there is no acknowledgment of that subject-subject relation or the radical collaboration around that element. There is no connection.' That made me really concerned and (made me ask), 'Why is this happening?' I figured out or concluded that...several things...were happening.

One, urbanization really impacts (this connection) because it separates people. Unfortunately, Latin America, even though we feel it's a really wild place, is still very urbanized. Colombia is over 80% urbanized. We are at levels of urbanization that are similar to (those in) North America. So that was one of the things. If we are so urbanized, we need to get those kids out into nature. We need to break that bubble.

The other aspect had to do with technology and devices: how we spend our attention and how we learn. Kids are growing up connected. Maybe before (the) internet, it was TVs and other things, but we've been connected to devices for the last 25 years, almost 100% since we're born, instead of allowing ourselves to be outside. So cities that are safe (and) green become really important as spaces of learning.

But devices also become a challenge because if you look at the way education has evolved, it's really putting a lot of priority on technology. Then it brings another element which is standardized testing and competition to become the best and get these grades. It has really made education sequester children from learning and growing in an open space. And this really concerned me, and that's one of the reasons I said we need to work with children and youth. Because if we don't create spaces for them to live other experiences, they will miss that learning.

And when we're talking (about) children, if we look at statistics, right now, children spend eight hours in school, in their classrooms. They spend another one hour in transport (and) two hours doing homework. We're now at 11 hours. Then, (they play) video games and stuff, another two hours. That's 13, 14 hours. A day has 24 hours. They sleep eight to 10 hours.

So when are they playing with their friends? When are they playing outdoors? When are they having quality time with their families? When are they growing (relationships)? They're growing totally outside of (relationships), so that also explains why we're having such a deterioration in the social (fabric)...of society.

Mental health is also (increasing) significantly, and children are losing their purpose. They're getting disconnected, and it's part of the system. That made us really think and start programs working with schools to create sequential programs that actually create opportunities for children to spend prolonged times in nature doing something different, discovering different ways, learning how to be outside, (and) learning how to relate in different ways.

Ashley Hopkinson: For you, is there anything missing from the current conversations we're having about the environment? What would you like to hear more in the conversation around environment and wellbeing?

Luis Camargo: That's a difficult question. I think in (the conversation about) environment, obviously, we're at a critical point where we need to act and create solutions that are needed now because we haven't done it in the last 40 years. So we have failed. That is true. That creates the sense of urgency that we need to create solutions now, but ultimately, that's tricking us back into the same situation that created the problems.

So this is one thing, we do need solutions and we need to measure more wilderness and more restoration, more shifts toward regenerative practices, but let's go into the deep (so we can) actually create spaces to bring holistic wellbeing, considering nature as a subject in that relationship. This is a critical aspect.

(There are wellbeing spaces that are) very anthropocentric too, and that's not creating what I'm talking about. I'm talking about wellbeing where we actually become more eco-centric and we realize we are nature.

We have relationships that are critical, our relationship to ourselves, our relationship to our kin, our relationship to our community, our relationship to nature, our relationship to ancestry, our relationship to our capacity to act. Those relationships really frame our capacity to create communities of wellbeing.

And when I talk, for example, of ancestry, it's not just my relationship to my ancestors' past but also my relationship to myself as a future ancestor of future generations. So we're talking of expanding time in our concept. Our life is not finite, our life is also relational. It's relational through ancestry.

In this process of understanding this, everything changes because the conversation is 'How do we create conditions to foster communities of wellbeing, to foster regenerative cultures?' And it's really important to understand here that in both communities of wellbeing and regenerative cultures, I'm using a plural to express them because as there is diversity in the world, there is diversity of expressions of wellbeing and of regeneration. And we need to understand that they all have to emerge bottom-up from our inner capacities. So the deep process needs to be engaged, and that's (what's missing).

Actually most work and environment is being focused on measurable, quantifiable indicators. We're measuring carbon, we're measuring methane, we're measuring capture, we're measuring numbers of things, but are we really measuring if people are happy, if people feel connected, if people are (in) good relations with themselves, with others, with nature? We're not measuring that because it's not easy to measure. We cannot measure it with a number. It's much more subtle.

Beyond that, obviously I'm talking (about) what we can see, but there's another aspect which is what we can't see, what I would call the invisible. When I talk of nature-based education, we actually have a process where we build a couple of elements. One is deeply connecting, when deeply connecting with ourselves, others nature. Then the second one is awakening the naturalist spirit, and this is (what) I call it.

If you look at the explorers that have made the greatest inventions and discoveries in our world, they had naturalist qualities. (They) were people that were always observing, they spent a lot of time in silence. They were looking at patterns, not only looking at forms. They were looking at relationships and interactions and trying to understand how those interactions shifted systems. They were looking

holistically. Awakening the naturalist spirit in this process means really enabling people to actually start sensing the visible and the invisible. Sensing the visible is learning about what's around them, learning to see those things that are there that you don't see, the flower in the crack of the pavement when they go to work. But sensing the invisible is sensing the quality of energy, the quality of interactions, the quality of energy (that) flows in a system.

This is really important because when you spend enough time in nature, for example, if you go to a forest, you can sense (whether) the forest is healthy or not. And it's not something that we're talking about with the forest, but we're sensing. It's a different way of communicating. Awakening the natural spirit is acknowledging the invisible and the subtle qualities of relationships in interconnected, interdependent systems and recognizing the entanglement of all these elements. Because it's not linear, it's entangled. It's actually very complex and very unorganized-organized. It's woven.

The last one is nurturing or nourishing, and this is where food comes in.

Learning is continuous, everything is in flow, and we need to understand that since everything is moving continuously, there's no absolute knowledge. Knowledge is constantly being created by relations, by interaction. So we need to flow into this capacity to nourish our relations, to nourish ourselves, to nourish our knowledge, and to nourish our bodies and to maintain our connection, to keep our sensing capacities to learn more, and act in a way that leads us in the direction of becoming more regenerative.

It's not necessarily the destination; it's the direction and how we move. And if we nourish this process, then we're able to keep on moving constantly towards creating more resonance with life on our planet.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it takes to demonstrate the value of communities of wellbeing to people who are disconnected from these ideas, especially when working with schools?

Luis Camargo: Something that has really helped, especially in the last 15 years, is research. There's a lot of research right now associated with the impact of nature on wellbeing, the impact of nature on learning, and the impact of nature on health. (These are) things that we knew but we did not have the evidence that some people need. Now there is the evidence.

So it's really important to look at the evidence, because the evidence says that if we bring more nature into cities, cities become more livable and better cities. If we bring more nature into people's

experience, people are going to be happier, learn more, have better health, etc. So I think that is really important: research and being able to look at research.

One of our colleagues and allies, Children & Nature Network, has a library of research that they have collected for a couple of years now, which is available to the public on their website. It's really interesting because you can go in and look and search for, 'wellbeing nature,' 'mental health nature,' or youth nature, whatever you want. And they have a whole database that's set up and searchable that will show you which studies exist that show those connections. So that's a really useful tool in that sense.

The other thing is direct experience. I think allowing people to experience is the most important. And I think that's where COVID became an amplifier, because people experienced the opposite. They experienced the absence of (wellbeing), so it made them realize in many ways that they actually needed something that they always took for granted. So it opened that little door.

So direct experiences are fundamental in order to awaken and to lead people in. When you have kids that actually are outdoors and are learning in a certain way, and they come back home, they are different. So we need to ask different questions about how they're feeling (and) what makes them feel like that. We can replicate a lot of those things within learning environments such as schools, for example.

In one of the workshops that I've done in many places around the world has to do with, 'How do we move from the ego to the eco ways of thinking?'

And one of the things I asked, and it's a question I bring to anyone who listens to this, is 'What disconnects you?' Really close your eyes and think deeply about yourself and what disconnects you from other people around you and what disconnects you from nature. Write all those things down. And then do the same exercise with the question, 'What connects you?' And write all those things down.

If you look at the answers, what disconnects you ultimately are the barriers you need to reduce, and what connects you are the amplifiers and enablers you need to enhance to bring wellbeing to yourself.

Because you'll see, and curiously enough, if I look at the aggregated data from Asia, Europe, Eastern Europe, both North and South America — even Africa, we did it once — what aggregates is that what disconnects us is fear and what connects us is love.

Well, (to break the cycle of fear), we have to accept that love is the answer, love, not in the romantic sense, but love in the sense of abundance, happiness, awe, joy, sharing, collaboration — of being, the

social, living organisms that we are, of being nature. So for me, that is a critical aspect, understanding what disconnects, what connects, and how we can shift that to bring more love into the world.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the challenges that you've faced in doing this work, and how have you worked to overcome them?

Luis Camargo: The main challenge is understanding the speed of change is slow and subtle. It's not easy to (prove in terms of value). The metrics are not there.

If schools want a program that changes the grades of my students, increases their performance by 15%. You can do a program in one month and do a test and measure that, but how do you measure other things that are more like my sense of connectedness, my sense of being in good relation, my happiness with others and with nature? These things are not easy to measure. That's one of the biggest challenges I've had.

Something that is enabling this work is new ways of understanding measurement that can bridge the language between people who need to measure and the things that are unmeasurable. There's more ways that we can start looking at this type of information. The work, for example, of Nora Bateson on warm data is really important because it (acknowledges) systems from a relational perspective and an energy flow perspective and a subtle perspective.

I think another challenge is the sense of importance and value. In our current world, money has taken such an important role, and understandably, you do need resources to move beyond certain pains and certain difficulties. And that's how the system is made, because it's made to self-reinforce.

But breaking that self-reinforcing loop and allowing people to be vulnerable enough to ask themselves what brings joy and wellbeing to them and then realign their ways of being to what brings joy and wellbeing (is essential). It allows us to slow down. It allows us to open spaces of silence. It allows for other types of interactions. But I think that is a big challenge we have.

The question is, what is good quality of life? We need to ask more questions instead of bringing more answers. What do you mean by success? What do you mean by quality of life? What brings you joy? What brings you awe? What will make you a good ancestor? These are all questions we need to ask.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does wellbeing mean to you?

Luis Camargo: Wellbeing for me is definitely multidimensional. Wellbeing for me is being in resonant synchrony with life around me. Wellbeing for me is that capacity to just be still and feel resonant with

everything around me, feel that I'm at peace—at peace in the sense that I am bringing vitality and enjoying vitality. I am part of the economy of abundance that's around me, of life and love and joy.

Finding wellbeing for me would be being able to feel that all the time and be in that space where I can acknowledge when that is getting offline and I can adjust it and come back.

I absolutely am convinced and now certain that there are no absolutes, so you cannot be happy always, you cannot be in resonance always, because everything in the world is moving by cycles and is vibrating and is in constant motion.

So, we just need to learn to flow with the vibe, let's say, and be in synchrony and in resonance with the vibe that's around us. So for me, wellbeing is that state. Obviously we can bring that down to more specifics.

I think the conditions that will bring wellbeing to me are being surrounded by people that are openhearted, loving, and collaborative, (people) that allow diversity to increase potential and not create conflict. That's one of the barriers I see that's huge in all senses.

We need to look at the most important forests like in Chocó, in Colombia and the Pacific coast. This is one of the richest forests of the world and it's mega diverse. And this is why it's so rich, because it has the capacity and the potential to do millions of combinations. But in between the differences, there's no conflict. There's actually always collaboration on the commonness, on the common essence of creating conditions for life to thrive. That's where the principles of regeneration come from.

So, for me, wellbeing is being able to live in a world where all that starts happening: where we start synchronizing, where our food becomes our joy. But we become the joy of the plants that give us food (because) there is reciprocity and abundance and vitality in the system, and we can really enjoy just being alive in such an intricate web of life. Because it's incredible. If we look at the billions of organisms that exist, and we are connected to all of them, it is just incredible.

And for me, wellbeing is being conscious and living in that good relation.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful. Thank you Luis.

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.*