

THE PBJ INTERVIEW

'Radical listening' delivers radical results

HEALTH IN HARMONY'S CHIEF ON SAVING RAINFORESTS AND IMPROVING LIVES

boundaries has been really successful in Borneo. It improved the people's health and wellbeing, the integrity of the rain forest ecosystem. This is a lung of the planet. Because it's healthy, it's pulling carbon out of the atmosphere and contributing to the mitigation of climate change.

What is radical listening? We go into the communities, understanding that they're the experts, understanding if they're deforesting to survive, they are best placed to understand solutions to stop. Most development organizations don't operate that way. Typically, the outsider expert comes in, does their needs assessment and defines for the community what needs to be done.

We tell them, "You're the guardians of this precious rain forest. Your health and mine depend on the quality of the rain forest. You're the guardians of the lungs of the planet – what can the rest of the world do to say thank you for stewarding this?" They came to a consensus, 40 villages around the national park, that they could stop illegal logging if they had access to affordable, quality health care and training in alternative livelihoods, specifically organic farming.

How successful was your effort?

Ten years later, we've been able to



Jonathan Jennings, executive director of Portland-based Health in Harmony, said villagers in Borneo stopped logging illegally when they had access to health care.

CATHY CHENEY

JONATHAN JENNINGS

What drew you to humanitarian and environmental work? I grew

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It's a stark example of how poverty and climate change are linked.

Enter Health in Harmony, a Portland-based nonprofit that stepped in to address the root cause of deforestation. While the results of that work have delivered considerable benefits to the people of Borneo, Health in Harmony has mostly flown under the radar in its own hometown.

The organization was started by Dr. Kinari Webb, a Reed College graduate inspired by her work studying orangutans in 1993 at Gunung Palung National Park in Borneo.

Webb brought in Jonathan Jennings as executive director about two years ago. Jennings, 45, had a background in international aid, including a decade-plus with Doctors Without Borders.

Health in Harmony held "radical listening" sessions to develop solutions with local communities, including a health clinic and teaching local residents sustainable farming techniques. The group's work yielded huge declines in illegal logging and infant mortality, according to data analyzed by Stanford University. Some 50,000 acres of new growth occurred, mostly from seedlings planted by patients who bartered for their care.

Health in Harmony launched a second program in Borneo and hopes to take the model to rainforest sites in Madagascar and Brazil.

We talked to Jennings about his background and Health in Harmony's next steps.

What drew you to humanitarian and environmental work? I grew up mountain biking and fly fishing and was an outdoors kid, so environmentalism was in my DNA. The last few years with Doctors Without Borders, three of the humanitarian crises I was on the front lines of were directly or indirectly caused by global warming and climate change – the drought migration of rural Serbians into urban areas, which exacerbated ethnic tensions; famine in the Horn of Africa; and the spread of Ebola from Central Africa. I woke up every morning dealing with the humanitarian fallout of a sick planet. I needed to be part of a real solution and harken back to my environmental DNA, and Health in Harmony gave me the awesome opportunity to do that.

What is Health in Harmony's niche? In the last three or four decades, you had the conservation aid industry and the foreign aid industry. Typically, they weren't speaking to one another. Kinari's vision 20 years ago is because we have never lived in a world where you can address effectively the health and wellbeing of humans and the ecosystem of the rain forest in silos. We're waking up to the fact our planet is the patient. According to hundreds of scientists, we have 11 years to decrease by 50 percent the amount of carbon dioxide humans are putting in the atmosphere in order to avoid driving off the climate cliff.

Tell me about your work in Borneo. The unique way we work with communities to deconstruct those false

stop illegal logging if they had access to affordable, quality health care and training in alternative livelihoods, specifically organic farming.

How successful was your effort?

Ten years later, we've been able to decrease households participating in illegal logging by 88 percent and decrease infant mortality by more than 50 percent. We've been able to effect a complete halt to the loss of primary rain forest. We've been able to regenerate regrowth of 50,000 acres of this rain forest. It's a biological treasure trove – you've got orangutans, cloud leopards, sun bears and a diversity of plants that's enormous. This is a hot spot of diversity of life on our planet that we're assisting communities to protect. They told us they're forced to log and sell trees to put food on their table and pay for medical emergencies. Poverty is forcing ecosystem degradation.

What most excites you about this work? Empathy for the other. The biological roll of the dice put me with parents in Virginia with no problems or challenges, relatively. There are so many people on the planet for whom the roll of dice puts them squarely behind the 8-ball that I'd like to spend my life trying to remove for them. One human's life is as valuable as the next, regardless of religion or creed. Biological life as we know it is about to change irretrievably. We are one species about to screw it up for millions of others. The planet will go on and survive, but a lot of these species won't. The diversity of life is spectacular. Let's do what we can to preserve it.

– Elizabeth Hayes