



Don't step on the plants

A conversation between Olafur Eliasson; Dr Aspa D. Chatziefthimiou, Ecologist and Environmental Consultant, National Museum of Qatar; and Reem Al Sehlawi, Islamic Environmental Ethicist, Associate Director, Arab Youth Climate Movement, Qatar

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Olafur Eliasson: I am very grateful to you both for taking the time to speak with me after we met in Qatar not long ago, at the opening of my exhibition, *The curious desert*. I find it fascinating that our conversation has a timespan that will be much longer than the exhibition. The catalogue, too, has various temporalities built into it. It has a slow kind of life. It travels into the future. What we say now might be read in 20 years. Readers from 2043 may look back and ask themselves, what were they doing in 2023 in Qatar in terms of climate action? I can say that today, we know that ecosystems are collapsing. We have all this knowledge, and I embrace the incredible and complex responsibility we have. And so, one thought I have is, how can we be accountable to the future?

Reem, as an Islamic environmental ethicist, you're involved in various projects. You opened the Atlas Bookstore in Doha with your sister, which focuses on architecture, urbanism and ecological knowledge in the region, and you're deeply engaged in the Arab Youth Climate Movement, a 'think-and-do-tank' for environmental awareness. You have articulated very clearly the relationship between humans and nature as it is presented in the Qur'an as one that is not defined by domination but by respect. I am curious about this as someone from a different cultural, non-religious background. How can faith help drive climate action?

Reem Al Sehlawi: I think the question can be addressed whether we're talking about Islam or other faiths and spiritualities and can and should be argued from both a religious and non-religious perspective. Where we choose to pull our directions from is not the point. Today, there are many in the field of environmental science who believe that there is a need for reviving a comprehensive and multidimensional view of nature that incorporates the traditional and metaphysical teaching on the ideal relationship between humans and the natural world. An argument from the non-religious perspective is looking at potential in harnessing the unquestionable power faith has over the behaviour and morals of humans and the collective cultures we live in.

From an Islamic perspective, whether or not a person is a believer does not exclude them from the unity of creation, which is the bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam. This approach affirms the interconnectedness of the natural order, of which there is one Creator. It speaks to us as a species that is a small yet nevertheless integral part of a system. It is this principle of unity that necessitates respect, disqualifies any notion of dominion, and places responsibility on the human being to uphold its balance. And so, this responsibility is not just placed on me,

or to those who believe what I believe, or those who read the Qur'an the same way that I read the Qur'an, or who read another scripture or believe in another spirituality. Regardless of our beliefs, where we live or when we have lived on this earth, I hope we agree that restoring order to nature is a common goal.

OE: We can perhaps also agree on how tiny the planet is, how limited its resources are – and how inspiring its landscapes and ecosystems are. I grew up in Denmark and Iceland with the idea that culture and nature are separate, a view that is intimately tied to exploitation and extraction. But I've come to realise that this separation is a fiction and that we've been extracting as if natural resources were infinite. There is public recognition – at least partially – of the dire environmental costs of how we in affluent societies live our lives.

The challenge, I think, is to re-learn how we are connected with nature in order to find new ways of doing climate action – this is urgent, and this is my aspiration for the outdoor part of my exhibition, located in the *sabkha* habitat near Al Thakhira. I wanted to explore our relationships with our surroundings, with the planet and its weather systems, and with the sun; to work with how we orient ourselves and navigate in landscapes, among people, and more-than-human beings. We need skills to navigate today, skills to understand time, and skills to attune ourselves to the world around us. The pavilions in the *sabkha* are my attempt to address this idea of attunement to our surroundings. On your recommendation, Aspa, we actually moved the pavilions from where I'd originally intended to place them, based on your ecological assessment report, in order not to disturb the inhabitants of the site more than absolutely necessary. We achieved something in working with you, in thinking about the more-than-human life there. And I am interested in asking: How can we scale this process up?

Dr Aspa D. Chatziefthimiou: The question of scaling up can be answered differently by each of us. You, Olafur, through your oeuvre, have a megaphone that spans the globe. Perhaps you may scale up through social media campaigns and more exhibitions that raise awareness. My sphere of influence is more localised. I scale up my reach by breaking through the silos that isolate professionals to their own fields. I do this because many brains of a multidisciplinary team need to come together to find creative solutions. The inner workings of nature are that complex, the environmental problems so pervasive.

My project with your studio and Qatar Museums is an example of this. Our shared goal was to preserve your artistic vision while shrinking the impact of the installation to preserve nature. Your studio, in collaboration with Qatar Museums and Applus+ Velosi, has been working on minimising the exhibition's carbon footprint, among other things. I work with all of you to limit the impact on the environment and the plants, animals and microbes that use the area as a food court or sleeping quarters and to minimise our interference in their daily life. There is the strength in unity, as Homer famously proclaimed.

As the importance of sustainability becomes more clarified and the necessity of including an ecologist in works around sustainability and the environment settles in, I find that my expert knowledge is more in demand. This fills me with hope and happiness. I also scale up through community outreach, the development of educational programs in nature, recounting stories of my adventures and discoveries in nature, and by being the personal ecologist of everyone I know!

OE: I love that. And we need this hope you're talking about. The behavioural psychologist Elke Weber has done research showing that while so-called 'doom-and-gloom' narratives have an instant impact but short lifespans, positive narratives have a slower impact but longer-term lives. Fear-based approaches tend to polarise. I think we have to avoid polarised discourses on the climate crisis.

RAS: That is why we also need to look at how to learn and unlearn. It is an emergency, so yes, we need to implement changes to the status quo with immediate results – but we should also consider how to unlearn this approach of changing only when things are really, really bad. We should learn how to assess issues and develop initiatives that may not seem critical today yet could have a long-term impact.

OE: Reem, you have said that ecological thinking is strongly embedded in the Qur'an. I want to understand, why is this not more present in religious practice today?

RAS: Going back to Islam specifically: over the years, it has been politicised and 'capitalised'. This, too, has been normalised, driving it away from its most fundamental concept, *Tawhid* (unity) – the recognition that there is only One, absolute, transcendent Creator of the universe and all that it contains. This is a testimony to the unity of all creation and to the fabric of the natural order, of which humankind is an inherent part. All created beings are given inherent and intrinsic worth, value and rights. Beyond its inherent value, every single thing has practical or instrumental value as a component of the ecosystem that supports life on Earth. They interact together, complete each other, and support one another in accordance with the balance of nature. Through their ordained roles, each being contributes to the welfare of the whole, an inherently environmentalist concept. This is clearly very far removed from the dominant systems at play today and thus is set aside for the welfare of a few as opposed to the whole.

OE: It makes so much sense. I'm curious, are people surprised when you speak to them about this?

RAS: The funny thing is, when you say that Islam is inherently environmentalist, the first reaction is: Oh, yeah, we know that. But then comes a very quick realisation: Why didn't I think more about it? And that is the shocking part. Luckily, people are starting to become aware of this gap in our knowledge or inquiry in Islam and are calling for more awareness through mosques and formal religious education. We are programmed to think about religion as a form of control, when, in reality, it is the opposite. That is what makes it hard to think about finding solutions here. Looking at any religion or spirituality, they all have a similar message: unity with the rest of existence. Any system that takes away this inherent right to exist harmoniously with every other piece of the universe is the kind of control we should be opposing.

OE: As a cultural practitioner coming from a secular background, I'm interested in this feeling of being motivated and engaged, in embodying one's beliefs or values – the notion that I can, in fact, do something. I just have to look down, look beneath my feet, feel it in my body. That is what I want to turn my attention to, also through my artworks. And if everybody did that, it would be quite something! This is my motivation for taking the artworks into the

desert. The desert is not empty, as you say. When you are in it, you are physically present, you become accountable to what is already there.

ADC: I appreciate that Reem is bringing up the inherent respect for nature in religious teaching. I really admire the 'eco-centricity' of Islamic environmental values, and I appreciate that these form the introduction to the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan of Qatar.

Maybe this will surprise you coming from an ecologist, but I don't consider exposure to nature to be the single most important or only buy-in when it comes to willingness to protect nature, live sustainably and adopt sustainability in your profession. Nor do I believe that in order for a connection to nature to be had, one has to be educated from a young age. It may also surprise you to know that, at this point in time, the majority of ecologists do their ecological work behind a desk, not out in the field, like myself.

So, exposure or attunement to nature is not a must. Finding your buy-in is the must. Islamic environmental values may be the buy-in. Ethics may be another. Both these help one realise that we have equal rights with all other living species and that interfering with their life cycles or destroying their habitats is ecocide and quite unethical. Many parents I know adopt sustainability because they want to better the life of their kids. Please notice that I use the term sustainability rather than a fight against the climate crisis. This crisis is only one of the five threats to biodiversity. The most grave one is habitat loss, and the other three are pollution, invasive species and disease, and species over-exploitation.

The diversity of the buy-ins is quite beautiful as well, since it makes apparent how many ways there are that can be part of the solution. My advice is to find your favourite way to be a steward of nature. As a case in point, you, Olafur, being an artist, help with your art. You, Reem, help with your work at the Arab Youth Culture Movement. My godkids and nephews help by donating to wild animal rescue clinics. Other kids in Qatar are part of habitat restoration or zero-plastic campaigns, etc. What do you two think about people saying that educating kids from a young age is the only way to connect them to nature?

RAS: I think it's about how we educate them. We can't explain to a two-year-old the science behind climate change or the loss of biodiversity. But we can reintegrate a young child's psyche back into nature. In thinking about how a child builds an understanding of the world around them, what are they exploring, interacting with and reacting to? Art and literature, as well as physical immersion, are some of the most powerful tools we have.

OE: Yes, there are many ways to connect to nature. I used to walk a lot in the Icelandic highlands when I was younger, for instance. I got very good at evaluating distance by reading my walking speed and progress. Maybe it's similar in the desert. Sometimes when I'm standing in the highlands, looking around – there are no roads, no cars, no cows, no cameras – I ask myself, is it a 20-minute hike to get from here to there, or will it take two hours or two days? When I stand still, I have only my eyes to rely on. But then, I see things change as I start walking. A rock that approaches quickly isn't such a big rock, whereas a rock that doesn't seem to get nearer at all is probably really big. I've developed a kind of applied spatial knowledge that sensitises me to the scale

of the landscape. And by sensitising or attuning myself with a landscape, being physically present in and with it, I slowly become accountable to what is already there and who is already there. I get better at entering that dialogue with the landscape, with other species.

ADC: I remember the first time I felt humbled by nature. It was during my master's in environmental microbiology. I discovered that bacteria – so tiny that you cannot see them with your naked eyes – are able to produce vitamins! But we, the 'superior species', the ever so intelligent and powerful species, are not able to produce them. We rely on our gut microbiome to do this work for us. Since this realisation, I feel that not only is my worth not greater than that of other humans but of anything that exists in the world. We are all interconnected and equally important. I believe that one can cultivate humility and respect for nature and the more-than-human beings through time.

It is of course a struggle at first to make people understand that we are of nature and that we belong in nature. We do need someone to take our hand and train our eyes to see the invisible. I experience that in real life in my interactions with the community. And I saw that in my interaction with your studio as well. It makes a difference, you know, if you go to the desert by yourself as opposed to going with a person who knows how to unravel her 'secret' life.

OE: Exactly. There's a lot to being in the company of others who can open your senses to things you might otherwise not perceive on your own. This idea of sensitisation through being with others, through shared engagement, is something you're involved with as well, Reem, through your work with the Arab Youth Climate Movement.

RAS: Yes. The Arab Youth Climate Movement is a civil society environmental organisation focused on grassroots education and awareness, capacity development, community building, policy and advocacy. We work to bring more people into the environmental movement, specifically those outside the often siloed groups from which action stems, and working with youth does just that.

Through diverse projects we design and implement programs that strategically engage young participants to immerse themselves, contemplate, engage and connect with the natural world around them. The aim is to condition them to respond to the environmental issues around them, so that these issues register as a stimulus for action rather than the status quo. One such example is our citizen science program in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, which invites, trains and encourages participants to document cases of marine life that wash up on the shores of Qatar. Participants document and register their sightings using photographs, GPS points and a short description of their observation. This encourages not only contemplative and critical analysis of the natural world but also a creative, even artistic snapshot of what they found to be worth drawing attention to.

OE: I'm excited to hear that. It's such important work and seems to complement what you, Aspa, are doing. And it testifies to the importance of finding many different ways to address sustainability and implement change. My own more open-ended artistic approach to doing so is yet another way.

What also becomes clear is that attuning yourself to nature doesn't have to be based on spiritual enlightenment. It can be just a simple reminder, such as don't step on the plants! That's what the environmental report you produced in advance for this exhibition did, Aspa. The hospitality of the site was made explicit through your science and attunement to the particular conditions there. You made what was invisible to me visible.

ADC: In an amusing way, this phrase, 'Don't step on the plants', has become synonymous with my work in Qatar. Recently, I was advised by my educator colleagues to spin it positively and encourage people to 'step around the plants'. I agree with you that just such a small reminder may help attune oneself to nature. I stress and emphasise this every time I interact with school students and the community. A person can connect to nature by observing a lone tree, or an ant running with purpose on a paved road, or a bird flying over their head. Wondering about how the ant and the bird experience life, how they spend their daily lives, will get you even more connected. This is the reason we love books so much. Because by reading the stories they recount, we step into the shoes and thoughts of people who are not us, who have different circumstances and views. We expand our horizons and understanding of our inter-connectedness.

Making the invisible visible is another thing I am known for. I bring awareness to the environmental and ecological happenings, if you will, to people who are unaware. I was that person once as well. I knew nothing about the desert and her inhabitants. I educated myself through readings, experimenting, exploring, and spending long, wonderful hours in the desert. That is how the ecology unravelled for me. How I am now able to see animal movement in the absence of the animal, through footprints or grazing patterns on a plant, or to know how limited natural resources are in the desert, or which plant and animal communities were displaced due to development or destructive activities in a given place.

Of course, the transformation I am describing is the mental shift we wish and strive for everyone to achieve. Travelling from the basic awareness to a more intimate understanding of nature is what increases our willingness to live sustainably and incorporate sustainability into our professions, a life-long process. I learn new ways to be more sustainable everyday.

RAS: Whether it's cultures, traditions, faiths, spirituality, religions – the narrative is a fundamental tool not only for preservation, but also for transmitting ethical principles. In his work 'The Narrative Quality of Experience' Stephen Crites explains that a religious symbol becomes fully alive to consciousness when a sacred story dramatically intersects both an explicit narrative and the course of personal experience.

What's important today is that, yes, we're looking back at traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous ecological knowledge and trying to revive them. But we also have to understand how they can be revived today in a system that is very different to what existed when they were developed. While we look back at these traditions, we shouldn't apply them blindly or ritualistically. Rather, we try to apply the purpose and understanding of why they were used at the time and be aware of how the setting is different today. How can we portray these ethical principles for future ancestors? This is an issue that we face here in Qatar, of applying traditional ecological knowledge.

OE: Yes, there's a need to update our values regularly, so that they are in sync with the times in which we live. I am particularly inspired by the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer, who is a plant scientist and a member of the Potawatomi Nation, in North America. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she says don't ask the tree what it is, but rather, who are you, and what can I learn from you? It's like a cognitive correction – the tree is no longer considered an object but, instead, a being. The tree is living; it's doing its tree thing. Kimmerer works both with Western science and indigenous wisdom, and that makes the book such a fascinating read.

ADC: I am proud to say that my team and I harness, employ and merge traditional knowledge into our ecological work in Qatar! We did so during our survey for the outdoor exhibition in Al Thakhira. Though we did not see the Arabian fox, we read the signs of her activity in footprints, scat and den. And in these areas, with our non-invasive scientific methods, we captured her nocturnal activity on camera. We are following the same protocol to determine the distribution of the sand cat in Qatar for another research project.

For the most part, traditional ecological knowledge is passed down or transmitted through the art of storytelling! For another mostly ethnographic project, we are seeking traditional stories to determine the migration paths of Bedouins in the desert. It is fascinating to me to see and learn how they read nature. How they conserve resources. The traditional knowledge doesn't deviate too much from our scientific knowledge. It just lacks the rigour of experimentation.

In other countries, traditional knowledge is already more integrated in ecological and conservation research, with dedicated research centres and indigenous people who have studied western science. Maybe similar to what Robin Wall Kimmerer does.

OE: Reem, I think it's interesting that you bring up the transition that the Qatari population has been through, which has been driven, not least, by the discovery and extraction of oil in the country.

RAS: As a millennial, and a Qatari, I – we – did not live through wars, we did not live through hardship as our predecessors may have done. But what we did live through was, first, in 2017, a blockade from our neighbours and then the COVID-19 crisis. Those were two events that really changed the way we think about how to deal with things around us.

Before that time we looked at things very, very optimistically, and for good reason, but we do need to be critical and not passive. Things were happening around the world, and we were not reactive to them. But then we lived through these two instances where action had to be taken, whether it's through the blockade, where we realised we need to learn to be self-sufficient specifically when it comes to securing our own food sources. And then during the pandemic, again, the main change is to really react and take aggressive action.

I'm a realist. There's optimism, but there is also pessimism. I mean, you can't see everything that is happening around the world and still be only full of hope. Even when we have the best intentions and think we are changing for the better, we could still be changing for the worse. But nothing is going to change unless we keep carrying that hope.

OE: Hope again. I agree! Not naïve hope but hope while acknowledging the complexity of the situation and of how our efforts play out. Hope conjoined with responsibility and accountability. Our responsibility, not least toward future generations of humans and more-than-human beings.

ADC: Yes, ancestry is a term being used often by climate activists and artists in relation to the degraded planet we are leaving behind for future generations. I have to admit that I never thought of ancestry in this sense before. For one, my natural inclination is to wonder whether I am a good descendent of my ancestors. I think: 'Would my grandparents and dad be proud of the work I do? Of the person that I have become?' They were amazing ancestors. They loved us, and fought for freedom in the war, and my dad was working on renewable sources of energy. Based on the information available to them at the time, they led the most ethical and sustainable life they could. They are my role models.

Secondly, I see ancestry as being in the now, not in terms of what world I am leaving behind. We are all equally responsible for the world and have the same stakes in the present tense. I also think of us all as being 'ancestors of knowledge' to one another. Our role is to find ways to empower not only the younger generation but everyone who lacks the necessary knowledge. Empower and create opportunities for one another to effect change in our sphere of influence.

OE: Exactly. We are ancestors today. Our actions shape the futures ahead. A few years ago, I was in Iceland for a funeral that was held for the glacier Ok. Geologically speaking, there's an exact moment when a glacier is considered to have died. I believe it is when it produces less new ice than what melts. A lot of people went to this funeral, to the site where the glacier had been, far away in the highlands of Iceland. It was quite a journey. There were speeches and funeral music. The whole thing was organised by Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, two anthropologists from Rice University – absolutely wonderful thinkers and scientists – with Andri Snær Magnason, an Icelandic writer and climate activist. Andri wrote a text for a plaque to commemorate the death of Ok: 'This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it! This notion of being accountable to future generations, I remember getting goosebumps when I read it!

RAS: To add to what Aspa was saying, the question of ancestry must be situated in a time and place: the here and now. Who are the people we are trying to talk to? Who are the people we are trying to engage with, to communicate with? And that goes back to not only applying traditional knowledge, but also to thinking about the culture in play today. What are the actions or methods that make a difference in this specific cultural context? It might not be 'the right way' to go about it in another part of the world or another time in history, but it is the way that works for that specific situation, and which will get us the result we want.

Specifically in Qatari culture today there seems to be an adverse reaction to too loud and confrontational activism. This type of activism does not seem to harness or get the right reaction. But there are other forms that have proven to be more effective, that resonate more deeply . . . soft forms of activism if you will. Art is definitely a route that has proven to really make a difference and start conversations that have otherwise been shut down many times.

